

PATTERN LANGUAGE FOR ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Ofra Homsy

Amir Raveh

tngt@netvision.net.il

amirr@netvision.net.il

Copyright Ofra Homsy and Amir Raveh © 2006

To the reviewer:

The following pages are the preliminary version of our work.

Introduction

There are times in your life where you entertain a passion and you want to find other people who share the same passion, are troubled by the same concerns, active in the same domain. They will understand your passion, will be glad to wage profound discussions on the finer points and angles of your shared issue of interest.

Among one's direct circle of acquaintances one can find a few friends who share this interest, of course there is a great joy in meeting many more, but those are a little harder to find or meet – sometimes there are conventions or clubs or gatherings dedicated to the topic of interest, (sometimes there are none), but even they – joyous as they are – are ever limited by mundane concerns such as time and distances...

The electronic communication that developed immensely during the last decades can provide a wonderful solution to all these by platforms of synchronous and a-synchronous communication where enthusiasts from different locations, some far away or even on different time zones, discuss the topic of their interest, create co-operation or simply in other words: create online communities..

By overcoming these problems of time and location, online communities allow for wonderful synergy between people who would not have been able to hold discussion and be enriched by each other with the same comfort and ease.

The pattern language *XYX* by Till... describes the technical side of this realm of possibilities which technology provides

The following pattern language describes the “human” part of this cooperation, focusing on issues and points requiring attention unique to the use people make of electronic platforms.

Dating way back to the first Electronic Bulletin Board Systems – online communities are a great solution to finding people who share your passion and join forces with them towards creating a virtual space where people come together for knowledge, discussions, value and fun.

This pattern language is about making this magic work...

Background and Terminology

Person With a Passion

Suitable Platform

We all share the desire to enhance the body of knowledge accumulated and created regarding our shared domain of interest.

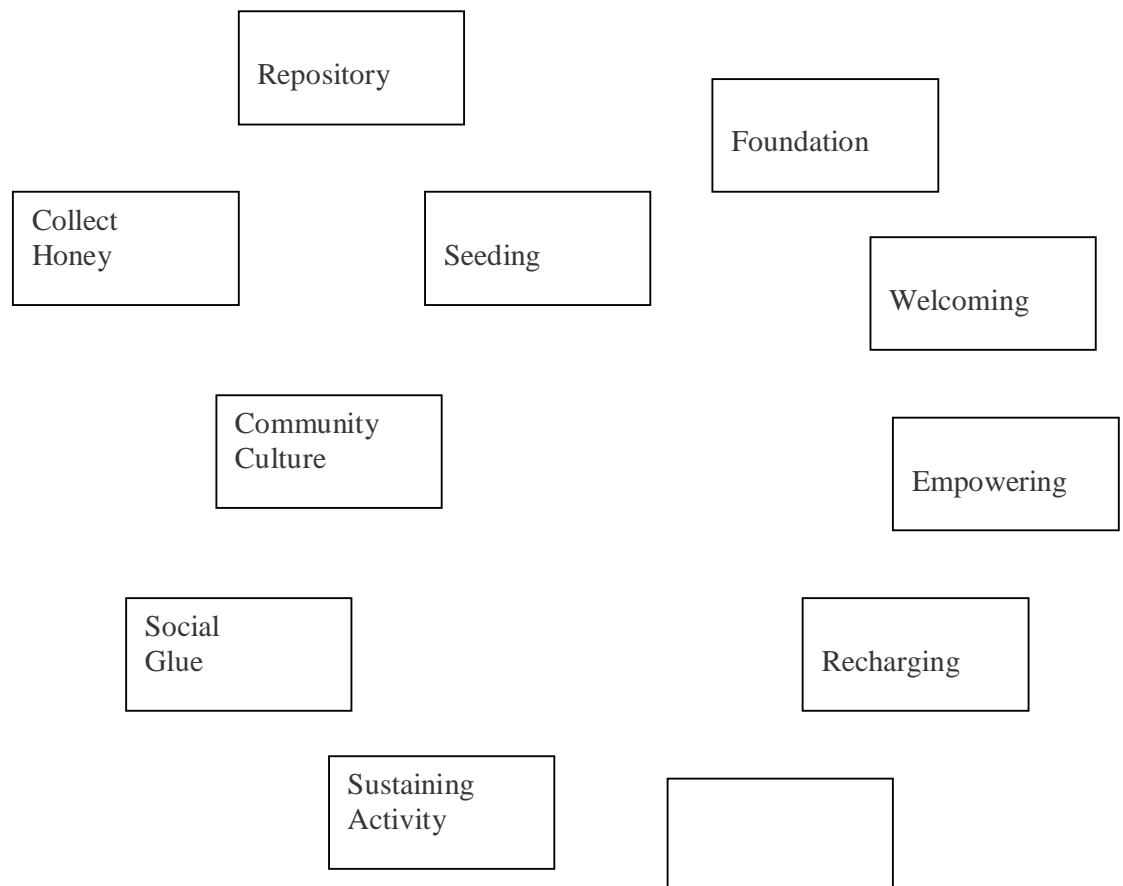
How do you turn your community site to an attractive, interesting and useful site?

Other knowledge repositories can also collect and present information – what makes your community special?

Identify a need, interest domain or an angle to an existing domain that is of real interest to you, the **Person With a Passion**, to other people and no other online community works on.

Foundation (Go Online) **Seeding** **Welcoming** **Reception** **Empowering** **Contributors**
Knowledge Repository (Collective Wisdom, Waterhole) **Collecting**
The Honey **Sustaining Activity** **Community Culture** **Social** **Glue** **Recharge**
Giving

the shared domain of interest



Name

Foundation (Go Online)

Context

Getting started.

Problem

You are interested in a certain topic; you even have friends who share this interest. It could be so much more fun to meet many more people like us, talk with them, hold discussions or argue over the finer points of our shared domain of interest. Problem is, such enthusiasts are scattered all over the country - or even live abroad, and meeting them once a year is just not enough

Forces

- There are many enthusiasts in the domain of interest but they live far away
- Geographical or other dispersion may make it difficult to allow people to meet and interact.
- People have social need of being together with other people who share their interests
- Critical mass makes it easier for people to join and interact

Solution

Locate a **Suitable Platform** for hosting your community online and Start the community online presence and give it backbone by **Seeding**.

Resulting Context

Fellow enthusiasts will find a flag, motto and vision they can share and use to collaborate and interact

This initial presence allows adding more people to create a critical mass

Known Uses

Related Patterns

See in Fearless Change E Forums

Name

Seeding

Context

Getting started.

Problem

When starting a new online community, you want to create the feel of "real substance" to it, so people who will happen to visit will not dismiss it as a wannabe effort or a waste of time, but will want to stay and even contribute

Forces

- People tend to judge a new online project according to criteria such as structure, seriousness, and organization of the site.
- Uncertainty regarding the nature of the site – “does it fit me and my needs”
- People prefer to wait before they contribute to a shaky project.
- People are more willing to cooperate and put effort into a project that feels creditable.
- People create an opinion on most issues within a few minutes of first impressions.
- You want to catch people’s attention and interest.

Solution

Create an initial structure and form to your online community by declaring purpose and/or vision, establishing ground rules, placing initial content of value to people who share your interests and **lures** such as questions, polls, information of value about the shared domain of interest. All those will hopefully catch visitors’ attention and make them want to respond and join in.

Create also “places” and **tools** to be used in the future of the community, they will serve both as a way to convey expectations and real help in using **Collecting The Honey** pattern

Create also places for future use, both as a way to convey expectations and (these places will be used later with the **Collect The Honey** pattern

Place the purpose and/or vision, and ground rules in easily accessible locations, so that throughout the community life people can find and use them and you will be able to refer members, new participants and visitors to them.

Resulting Context

By presenting a creditable, inviting, structured online space combined with valuable interesting content you shorten the time people take about deciding to join in and respond, share, or participate in the activity.

However don't overdo your personal contributions as you risk creating an autocratic atmosphere or nurturing a "feed me Seymour" mentality perpetuating the need for your contribution at the cost of other people’s interaction and input.

Continue to update the rules (maybe even the purpose and/or vision) as needed according to the nature of activity and participants – chances are that participants will present (intentionally or by accident) angles you have not anticipated at the beginning.

Known Uses

In one of the largest online forums portal in Israel – Tapuz – when a new forum is opened there are several tools provided automatically (such as Links section, Articles section, Polls tool, etc.) and there are a few more optional tools ready for activation by the forum manager according to the nature and needs of the community (such as Terms Dictionary, Photo albums, Event Board etc.)

Related Patterns

Collecting The Honey

See in Fearless Change "Ask for Help" p104 and "Involve Everyone" p173

Name

Welcoming Reception

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

People arriving at a new place or considering joining a group usually face fear, uncertainty and doubts. They are unsure they are welcome and if they have a voice in this new place. You want to encourage them to step in, present themselves and be accepted as members of the community.

Forces

- An already formed cohesive group may give the impression of a closed society
- Few people considering joining a group feel uncertainty and doubts.
- It is important to have new blood flowing into the community
- The first reactions a new participant receive, form part of the factors in creating the first impression and decision whether to stay or surf on
- More participants widen the variety of opinions, information and interaction in the community

Solution

Place a welcoming message in response to the first posting of each new person. You can use this welcoming message to convey the community ground rules and values and voice expectation for future contributions from the new member.
Make sure your message does not scare people away by placing too much on their shoulders...

Resulting Context

New people visiting or joining the community receive encouragement that their presence is approved and welcomed, that this community cares about people and as a result they are heartened in posting more contributions or questions thus enriching the interaction in the community.

A welcoming message that gives too much emphasis on rules and expectations may intimidate and also, since this message is repeated every time a new person joins the community, become dreary and spiral energies down instead of be a boost. The best would be a message that concentrates on the joy of reception, gives a hint at future possibilities and points to the community rules.

As you referred new members to the community rules in the very first message you sent them, you can later on use this if the need will arise to monitor negative or unwanted activity or correct misbehavior.

Known Uses

life cycle of newsgroup

<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html>

<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/lifelist.html>

Related Patterns

Min Awal

Name

Empowering Contributors

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

If you become the single contributor in the community you are most likely to either dry up or create a feeling of an autocracy in the community. You also want to make members of the community to *àü÷èò*.

Forces

- Being a sole contributor you are likely to dry up of ideas and energy as time goes by
- A sole (or too few) contributor(s) may create a feeling of an autocracy in the community
- It is easier for people to receive more than to be active and give effort
- Some people may feel they have no worthy contributions to offer
- Praise is motivator for people [**Gold Star**, J. Bergin]
- Appreciation can increase self esteem of members in the community and motivate them
- Appreciation of contribution and respect also motivate people

Solution

Start the culture of appreciating and acknowledging contributions made by community members. Make sure you acknowledge not just the experts for sharing their insights, but also the newbies for contributing their questions, the skeptics for their doubts, and the adversaries for challenging the complacency.

Resulting Context

Expressing appreciation and acknowledgment to people for meaningful contribution to the community are rewarding people, which both refuel their energy (see **Recharge Giving** pattern) and cause them to continue to put in their contribution and others will be inspired to do so too. You also give people reasons to stay in the community and contribute to it and the community becomes a place where people share a culture that acknowledges and celebrates interaction by any of its members and guests.

Also some people who may have felt they cannot offer worthy contributions, as they see other people's efforts are appreciated, may be encouraged to contribute even at a small scale at the beginning or increase their contribution if it was small at first, maybe become strong contributors in the community.

Overdose Effect

Overdoing may cause participant to feel patronized

Inconsistent recognition for contributors may cause people to feel prejudiced

Page 9 of 22

Known Uses

Related Patterns

See "Just Say Thanks" in Fearless Change p180

Name

Knowledge Repository (Collective Wisdom, Waterhole)

ùàìáú ùì ìúçèìéí

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

As the community becomes more active and known it draws outside people interested in its domain of interest – either as a passing need for information or as possible new members. This may reflect in the form of a few repeating questions posted for the community members, but while these questions present a real need of the visiting people, they become a burden to the community members and to the ongoing interaction. This may result in either ignoring the questions or replies that are less than polite or too short to be helpful. But while those questions present a real need, the less than polite replies can scare away possible new members or create bad name for the community,

Forces

- Visitors present questions that express a viable need
- Repetition of the same questions tend to tire and irritate people
- Being able to provide for a viable need helps turn your site and community important
- A visitor who got answer to their need and was left with a good feeling is a possible future member of the community.

Solution

Create and collect data and items of information or interest in the community space that answer these viable need and present it in an easily accessible location. Monitor and refer the people who visit and ask those repeating questions to this location, while leaving room for future interaction.

Resulting Context

Having a way to give answer to those questions that represent a viable need can reduce the interruption to the interaction and the burden on the constant members of the community and also help turning your site into a known location to seek information in the domain of interest, so that any person who is interested or has a need of knowledge in this domain will arrive to your site. This gives it a prestige that your members share.

By leaving room for future interaction in referring visitors to the repository you increase the chances that some of these people will stay and join the community or return in the future to become members of the community.

Not only this, amassing significant and useful knowledge in the repository contributes to the reputation of your site – which in turn also can bring in more people.

However, pay attention that referring to the Knowledge Repository is done in a friendly way, such that also leaves room for further questions and clarifications (maybe even a

hint of future participation in the community) so it doesn't not become a rude setting aside of non-members. That will not encourage them to either visit again nor recommend you to others.

Known Uses

Usenet FAQs www.faqs.org/faqs

Related Patterns

See "Personal Touch" in Fearless Change p198

Name

Collecting The Honey àîàîéí

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

The people in your community have been seeking and collecting information in the shared domain of interest for some time. Each person provides additional perspectives, insights, experiences and healthy curiosity. These contributions trigger contributions from more community members.

Problem

The interaction in an online community produces discussions, brain storming, the bringing together of knowledge view points and insights from many people all versed or interested in the shared domain of interest. The unique input of knowledge, insights, integration of information, the results of the synergy between participants, all will be accessible to all for some time and then be moved on to the archives (in the better case) or be deleted to save space for new data (in the worse case), and will no longer be easily retrievable for fellow enthusiasts or researchers.

Forces

- The coming together of people versed and interested in a certain domain of interest is unique and cannot easily be re-created.
- This coming together can produce exceptional results – the collection of knowledge, opinions discussions and insights.
- Since online discussions tend to accumulate and disappear into archives, this entire unique outcome may lay in oblivion, or at least unused.
- The results of contributors' efforts', activities and the ongoing synergetic interaction are worth preserving.
- Over time information and information sources disappear or grow out of date

Solution

Continuously monitor the community space and collect information generated during the interaction among community members, adding it to the Knowledge Repository. Give credit to each of the contributors (see **Empowering Contributors** pattern)

Resulting Context

By collecting the resulting data and contribution you increase the affectivity of your site as a source of knowledge in the domain of interest, thus attracting more people. By acknowledging the contributions and encouraging future contributions from them and from additional community members as you can see in **Empowering Contributors** pattern.

However, using this pattern takes rather a lot of effort and time on your part both in following what is going on in all the interactions and in collecting from the ongoing activity in the community space and then placing it in the **Knowledge Repository**.

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Name

Sustaining Activity

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

How do you keep the community from falling asleep – which usually leads to abandoning the site?

Forces

- Participation in online communities is voluntary and based on will and interest.
- People may be timid about posting questions / topics for discussion
- Many people are more willing to respond rather than initiate.

Solution

Monitor community activity and make sure that new stimulus arrive at regular intervals such as observations, discussions, questions, hosting specialists, so that people who are familiar with the site – will find something new for them.

If you see that there are no spontaneous stimuli coming from participants – you need to trigger them by presenting lures (questions for discussions, invite specialists, post polls, present new links or news stories related to your domain of interest, and so on).

Make sure you present these lures at intervals that are not too frequent as to “overfeed” (thus leaving less enticement for other members to contribute stimuli) but also are not too far apart, so as not to let the activity “die out”.

Resulting Context

By keeping a minimal level of activity and interest in the community space, you provide both a stimulus for community members to participate (maybe even encouraged and/or inspired to post their own stimuli) and make sure there is new content to interest visitors and members checking in to see what’s going on (since members cannot participate continuously and take breaks for such trivia as work, food or even sleep).

However, the user of this pattern will need to commit his/her time to monitor community activity and energy to think up ideas for questions and other stimuli. A solution for that can be to have a reserve of questions you put down whenever they occur to you to be used in those instances of need.

Overdose Effect

Too many threads initiated by a single person land the site with an autocratic atmosphere and reduces interaction

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Empowering Contributors

See "Sustained Momentum" in Fearless Change. p231

See "Step by Step" in Fearless Change may provide some insight too. p224

Name

Community Culture

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Sometimes communities deteriorate into competitions among community members on issues such as respect (such as expertise, knowledge, authority) or resources (customers, knowledge, self-advertising).

Forces

- Even when working in a community people still may get into ego quarrels
- When people perceive resources to be scarce they may try to fight over them
- Some individual needs (“what’s in it for me?”) are to belong to a viable community
- Shared values and codes of conduct contribute to community cohesion
- Shared values and codes of conduct reduce the need for police activity on your side
- When an online community leader has to use too much policing it tends to create a feeling of

Solution

Establish a community culture that values and rewards sharing insights, knowledge, experience, resources and mutual support among community members by applying the patterns: **Seeding; Welcoming Reception; Empowering Contributors; Collecting The Honey; Social Glue; and Recharge Giving**

Resulting Context

Seeing what community culture and values are presented, praised, expected and encouraged helps people to learn and absorb them, act accordingly and expect others to act similarly, in fact this creates a process of socialization into the inner-culture of the specific online community.

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Name

Social Glue

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Relative anonymity sometimes causes people to feel uncomfortable, encourages flame wars and prejudices and assumptions about other faceless participants. These in turn reduce the willingness to contribute and raise people's fears, uncertainties and doubts.

Forces

- The relative anonymity of the medium
- People seek a comfortable level of social cohesion
- People have a need to be unique and appreciated in their community

Solution

Introduce activities and games for getting more acquainted with each other.

Such games and activities can be one or all of the following: short light questionnaires that help learn more of each participants who answers them, Stage Center Guest where one of the members is the guest and everyone can ask them questions [see appendix for details of these games].

When introducing such games, it is advisable to declare rules and examples that will keep the game non-intrusive, polite and humorous, to avoid hurt feelings or even damage.

Resulting Context

Creating a feeling of a community and not a collection of individuals

Could reduce the risk of bickering and flame wars in the forum/space

Improves social glue

It carries the potential risk of uneven exposure of some members

However, since it may be that not all people will feel comfortable with such ideas, you may want to consider how you want to present these to the community members – for example call them “games” if community members are amenable to levity, or – if community members are a more serious people - call them “activities” and also consider when to present them (the order of games and the stage of life of the community).

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Recharge Giving

Name

Recharge Giving

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Studies show that normally there is a bigger percentage of people asking questions than people answering them, this creates a situation of single sided energy sapping, and could exhaust the active members of the community.

Forces

- Contributing requires resources from participants such as time, knowledge, activity
- Continuous depletion of resources causes people to reduce their giving to the community

Solution

Introduce ‘giving games’ whose’ purpose is to refresh the giving in the community and recharge it’s members with renewed energies. Such games can be one or all of the following: Giant/Dwarf, Attention Giving, Search Tag, etc [see appendix for details of these games].

Resulting Context

By

Rediscovery of the joys of giving and receiving

Restoring the sense of fun and reinforcing the value of having fun in the community

However, Some people do not like games or may think playing games is childish and therefore inappropriate, these people can (in the better case) not participate or (in the worse case) express resistance, both these reactions might spoil the fun or even ruin the affectivity of the games.

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Name

C

Context

.

Problem

Forces

Solution

Resulting Context

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Appendix

Following are full descriptions and rules of the Games discussed in the patterns.

Note, we give these games names that are mostly descriptive, they have other names in different languages or you can give them a name that can use slang, child idioms etc.

Indeed some we even know of different names that were given to the same game to help it fit better to the nature, needs and/or interests of the different communities in which it was played.

Giant/Dwarf,

Attention Giving (tzumi)

Search Tag

Stage Center Guest

light questionnaires

Page 21 of 22

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in online communities we have worked with – it is through their perspectives and experiences that we have learned.

Pool

I want our community to be respected and valued amongst our domain practitioners and enthusiasts. I want it to become the place people want to be associated with, and to be the most referenced online source. I want to be the first site Google brings up whenever someone is looking for something in our domain of interest.

? want to capture/grab people's attention (by tugging at their needs) ?

ìòðíéí ÷ãä ùìðãðáí îâéðéí îúððééðéí çéöâðééí ùîöéâéí ùàîä ää ùúééí ùçãæøú ää íáèàú öãøê äçãæø òì òöîä

These provide the needs of people that share this community's interests => ??

úùääáú ùàìáú äãñéñéáú áéáúø áúçáí ùè îàðùðáú îäðâê áú ääúø îí÷áí ùàìéâ ôâðéí ìçòù úùääáú áúçáí âîððé÷ ôøñèéâ ìçáøéí ää

Useful substance visitors or those arriving through search engines decide to stay.

Useful substance will put you on search engines.

÷éúâø îîâîø òì îçãâø çééí 17/07/06 23:06
http://www.tifaq.org/information/archive/mailling_list_lifecycle-sep98-Kat_Nagel.txt

âùðé î÷ãðáú ðãñðéí - èääéí éáúø 17/07/06 23:12
<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html>
<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/lifelist.html>

ðèé÷ä - àéú÷ä áøùú 17/07/06 23:16
<http://archive.mail-list.com/shoptalk/msg00001.html>

ñ÷ø áðâùà ÷ääöáú ãéâí äèâ 18/07/06 00:15
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/surveys/responses/358>

âàú æä, ëáø ùìçúé? 18/07/06 00:20
<http://digital.net/~gandalf/trollfaq.html>

Developing Personal and Emotional Relationships Via Computer-Medi 18/07/06 00:21
<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1998/may/chenault.html>

References