

# Communities of Practice

**LBSC 708P-0101 / INFM 718J 0101**

**Spring, 2008**

## **Instructor**

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**Classroom location and meeting time:** HBK 0115, Wednesday 6:00 – 8:45 pm

## **Course Overview:**

Communities of practice are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, et al. 2002). Advances in information and communication technologies have transformed the ways in which people interact with one another – enabling the formation of virtual communities, as well as reshaping geographically-based communities.

This course is intended to help students analyze and develop communities of practice (both virtual and geographically-based). Specifically, we will relate social science theories to the goals of community leaders and with social and technical design alternatives available to them. Students will be exposed to numerous examples of communities of practice that are using innovative methods to meet their goals. Students will also have the opportunity to perform an in-depth analysis of a community of their choice that they will follow throughout the semester.

The master’s version of the course prepares students for roles as online community designers and moderators. The doctoral version of the course prepares students to conduct research on communities of practice.

## **Course Goals:**

Master’s students

- Identify the major social and technical design elements used to support communities of practice and understand the implications of specific design choices
- Recognize potential problems and common to communities of practice and strategies for overcoming them
- Be comfortable getting a new community of practice started

Doctoral students

- Have a grounding in research on online communities and some relevant underlying social science theories
- Understand who some of the key researchers are in this area, what research communities are interested in communities of practice, and why
- Be able to form a research question about communities of practice, select an appropriate method to answer that question, and know where to publish the results of your research

**Note:** Thanks to Paul Resnick for letting me pattern this class on his eCommunities course.

### **Course Prerequisites & Related Courses**

This course does not require any prerequisites. We will assume some familiarity with information technologies, but the course is not focused on technical skills. Instead it is focused on the social aspects of community building, as well as how to effectively use existing technologies in community building. Students interested in community-related technology development and customization may want to take INFM 741, Social Computing Technologies and Applications, which complements the content in this course nicely, or other advanced Information Technology INFM courses such as Content Management Systems, Building Human Computer Interface, and Development of Internet Applications.

### **Course Textbook & Readings**

Required Textbook: *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Etienne Wenger. 1998.

Other non-required textbooks (we will be reading some chapters from these and you may want to purchase them, but will not need to as they will be made available via the course website):

- Wenger et al., 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice*.
- Preece, 2000. *Online Communities: Designing usability, supporting sociability*.
- Kim, 2000. *Community Building on the Web: Secret strategies for successful online communities*
- Powazek, 2001. *Design for Community*.

Other course readings will be linked to from the course website. They will be available for free through the University electronic reserves or via the University of Maryland's subscription journals and databases.

### **Class Activities**

Each week there will be approximately 3-4 readings and one online community site to browse through. We will begin our discussion of the readings online before the class sessions for which they are assigned and continue the discussion in class. We will engage in four ways:

- Description: statements or questions about the authors claims.

- Critique: arguments about whether the author is correct or what the author has left out.
- Connections: how the claims or concepts relate to those in other readings
- Application: how the readings apply to the communities we are studying

The first three will occur as a threaded conversation on the course website. Students will take turns starting the conversation and others will join in. Everyone should post at least once by Monday evening and the conversation can continue until class starts on Wednesday evening. The fourth bullet will be addressed in a blog entry that each of you will post tying one (or more) of the readings to the specific community you are investigating. This will also be due by Monday evening.

### **Assignments**

The following assignments will be due throughout the semester. Details will be provided at least 1 week prior to the assignment.

- Weekly discussion post and blog entry (see above) [15% of grade]
- In-class technology presentation [5% of grade]
- Wikipedia Edit assignment (Feb 13<sup>th</sup>) [5% of grade]
- Descriptive summary of community you will study (Feb 27<sup>th</sup>) [10% of grade]
- Three short papers (3 pages single spaced) relating a social science theory that we have read about to your community
  - a. Paper 1 (Mar. 12<sup>th</sup>) [15% of grade]
  - b. Paper 2 (Mar. 26<sup>th</sup>) [15% of grade]
  - c. Paper 3 (April 16<sup>th</sup>) [15% of grade]
- Design a rollout plan for a new community. 5-7 pages single spaced (due May 7<sup>th</sup>) [20% of grade]

Doctoral Students papers will differ, but the due dates and page requirements will be similar. They will include writing an article review, proposing a research question and methods to address it, and other customized assignments as determined with the instructor (e.g., progress towards an actual research project).

### **Academic Integrity:**

This course follows all University policies and procedures, including adherence to the Code of Academic Integrity (<http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/code.html>).

### **Students with Disabilities:**

Please let me know at the beginning of the semester if you have any kind of physical or learning disability that will affect your coursework. I am happy to work out appropriate accommodations for you along with the University's Disability Support Services (301-314-7682; <http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/>).

### **Attendance policy**

Attendance is extremely important in this course, as much of the learning that will occur is based on in-class activities and discussion. As such, attendance will be taken and will influence each student's class participation grade. Allowances can be made for special circumstances such as illness (self or dependent), religious observances, and other compelling circumstances beyond the student's control (see the University's attendance policy at <http://www.testudo.umd.edu/soc/atedasse.html>). Please contact me as soon as you know (or suspect) that you will not be able to attend. When the university closes due to inclement weather we will not meet (see the campus website or snow line 301-405-SNOW if there is a question). I will email the class to clarify any changes in assignment due dates and re-scheduling.

### **Late Assignments & Grading Procedures**

It is important that assignments are turned in on time since we will typically be discussing them as a class once they are submitted. If there are extenuating circumstances that make it impossible to turn in an assignment please let me know ahead of time (i.e., before the assignment is due) so that we can make appropriate arrangements if possible.

If you believe an assignment has been graded unfairly, you may send me an email outlining the reasons why you believe the assignment grade was inappropriate. I will re-grade the assignment taking into consideration your additional comments. However, this does not assure that the grade will increase. In fact, I will grade it as consistently as possible to those that I have graded from other students, making it possible for the grade to go up or down.

### **Student Expectations**

As graduate students, you are expected to fully participate in all class activities. Although grades are an important indication of the effort that you put into a class, a good grade should not be the end goal of a course. Instead, the goal should be to internalize the skills and concepts covered in the course and learn to apply them to real-world settings – both current and future.

Unlike some undergraduate courses, you should not expect that I will re-hash all of the same material in the readings. Instead, it will be used as a starting point for a discussion that will only be meaningful if everyone is well prepared for class and has read AND thought about the material ahead of time. You should be prepared to answer questions about the assigned readings and participate in activities related to them. In addition, I highly encourage all of you to introduce the class to your own experiences and relevant readings and continue conversations and debates concerning the course content outside of the classroom. I believe that as you take a shared ownership in your learning you will be richly rewarded.

Finally, if you have any recommendations on how to improve the class, I am always interested in your feedback.

### **Schedule**

#### **Week 1 (January 30): Communities Overview**

*Readings:*

Preface: Everything I Needed to Know about Web Community I Learned in High School Algebra Class, p. xv-xviii in:

Powazek, D. M. (2002). *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*. New Riders.

Chapter 1: Communities of Practice and Their Value to Organizations, p. 1-21 in:

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Chapter 1: Getting Acquainted with Online Communities, p. 5-11 in:

Preece, J. (2000). *Online Communities: Designing Usability and Supporting Sociability*. Wiley.

*Topics:*

Overview of the course

What is a community of practice?

What are other related, but separate concepts? (e.g., social networks, information grounds)

**Week 2 (February 6): Ethics**

*Readings:*

Chapter 1: Is This Trip Really Necessary, p. 1-15 in:

Powazek, D. M. (2002). *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*. New Riders.

Chapter 2: Communities of Practice and Their Structural Elements, p. 23-47 in:

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Kraut, R., Olson, J., Banaji, M., Bruckman, A., Cohen, J., & Couper, M. (2003). Psychological Research Online: Opportunities and Challenges. 1-36.

Please also read this brief article in preparation for the Wikipedia edit assignment:

Durova. (2007). The Right Way to Fix Inaccurate Wikipedia Articles. Available at <http://searchengineland.com/070807-085103.php>

*Topics:*

Ethics of studying an online community

Basics of creating a community

**Week 3 (February 13): Communities of Practice Framework**

*Wikipedia Edit assignment due*

*Readings:*

Vignette II, Coda O, & Intro I, p. 35-50,  
Chapter 1: Meaning, p. 51-71, and  
Chapter 2: Community, p. 72-85 in:  
Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

*Topics:* Communities of Practice and the Negotiation of Meaning

#### **Week 4 (February 20): Intergroup Relations, Subgroups, and Network Effects**

*Readings:*  
p. 99-128 in:  
Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 9: Subgroups, p. 309-350 in:  
Kim, A. J. (2000). *Community Building on the Web*. Peachpit Press.

Network Effects, Wikipedia. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network\\_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_effect)

Internet companies: Social graph-iti. (2007, October 18). *The Economist*. Available at [http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9990635](http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9990635).

*Topics:* Boundaries and intergroup relations  
Subgroups  
Network effects

#### **Week 5 (February 27): Activities, Rituals, Events, and Infrastructure**

*Description of community due*

*Readings:*  
Chapter 7: Events, p. 233-276 and  
Chapter 8: Rituals, p. 277-308 in:  
Kim, A. J. (2000). *Community Building on the Web*. Peachpit Press.

Hansen, D., Ackerman, M., Resnick, P., & Munson, S. (2007). Virtual Community Maintenance with a Collaborative Repository. *Proceedings of ASIST 2007*.

*Topics:* Activities and rituals  
How the underlying infrastructure affects interaction

#### **Week 6 (March 5): Governance**

*Readings:*

Chapter 6: Etiquette, p. 201-231 in:

Kim, A. J. (2000). *Community Building on the Web*. Peachpit Press.

Chapter 7: What Things Regulate, p. 85-99 in:

Lessig, L. (1999). *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. Basic Books.

Kisler et al. Norms in Online Communities (Unpublished Draft). 1-26.

Also, please read the following suggestions for community leaders by Howard Rheingold (one of the first authors about virtual communities with several interesting books):

<http://www.rheingold.com/texts/artonlinehost.html>

*Topics:* Governance policies, practices, and social norms

**Week 7 (March 12): Identity and Roles**

*Paper 1 due*

*Readings:*

Intro to Part II on Identity, p. 145-148,

Identity in Practice, p. 149-163, and

Participation and Non-participation, p. 164-172 in:

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 4: Roles, p. 115-153 in:

Kim, A. J. (2000). *Community Building on the Web*. Peachpit Press.

*Topics:* Identity and membership

How individuals relate to communities of practice: trajectories and roles

**Week 8 (March 26): Welcoming Newcomers and Lurkers**

*Paper 2 due*

*Readings:*

Chapter 8: Barriers to Entry, p. 167-190 in:

Powazek, D. M. (2002). *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*. New Riders.

Bryant, S.L., Forte, A., & Bruckman, A. (2005). Becoming Wikipedian: transformation of participation in a collaborative online encyclopedia. *Proceedings of the 2005 international ACM SIGGROUP conference on Supporting group work*, November 06-09, 2005, Sanibel Island, Florida, USA.

Preece, J., Nonnecke, B., & Andrews, D. (2004). The top five reasons for lurking: improving community experiences for everyone. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 20(2), 201–223.

*Topics:* Newcomers and lurkers

### **Week 9 (April 2): Keeping People Around**

*Readings:*

Chapter 8, p.173-187 in:

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

O'Reilly, C. (1989). Corporations, culture, and commitment: Motivation and social control in organizations. *California Management Review*, 4, 9-25.

Ren, Y., Kraut, R., & Kiesler, S. (2007). Applying Common Identity and Bond Theory to Design of Online Communities. *Organizational Studies*, 28, 377-408.

*Topics:* Keeping people around  
Creating strong cultures in communities

### **Week 10 (April 9): Motivating Contributions**

*Readings:*

Ling, K., Beenen, G., Ludford, P., Wang, X., Chang, K., Li, X., et al. (2005). Using Social Psychology to Motivate Contributions to Online Communities. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4). Available at <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue4/ling.html>

Beck, R. C. (2003). Rewards as Reinforcers. In *Motivation: Theories and Principles* (pp. 178-200). Prentice Hall.

Flow (Psychology), Wikipedia. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_%28psychology%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_%28psychology%29)

For doctoral students:

Chen et al. (2003). Designing Online Communities to Enhance Participation: Bridging Theory and Practice. National Science Foundation research proposal.

*Optional:*

You may also consider playing Luis Von Ahn's ESP Game (<http://www.espgame.org/>) or watching his presentation (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8246463980976635143>). At around minutes 20-25 he provides anecdotes of why people like playing the game.

*Topics:* What motivates people in various contexts?  
Motivating people to contribute to communities

### **Week 11 (April 16): Community Design**

*Paper 3 due*

*Readings:*

Epilogue: Design, p. 225-240 in:

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 3: Seven Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice, p. 49-64 in:

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Chapter 7: Community-Centered Development, p. 203-232 in:

Preece, J. (2000). *Online Communities: Designing Usability and Supporting Sociability*. Wiley.

*Topics:* Design as related to communities of practice or other social settings  
Design process

### **Week 12 (April 23): Starting and Ending a Community**

*Readings:*

Chapter 4: The Early Stages of Development, p. 65-91 in:

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Chapter 11: Killing Your Community, p. 243-261 in:

Powazek, D. M. (2001). *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*. New Riders.

Read **one** of the following two interviews:

Joi Podgorny, Ludorum, Inc. Available at

<http://www.onlinecommunityreport.com/archives/257-OC-Expert-Interview-Joi-Podgorny,-Ludorum,-Inc..html>

or

Bill Binstock, CBS Interactive. Available at

<http://www.onlinecommunityreport.com/archives/224-OC-Expert-Interview-Bill-Binstock,-CBS-Interactive.html>

Read **one** of the case studies in Chapter 11: Development Case Studies, p. 346-373 in:

Preece, J. (2000). *Online Communities: Designing Usability and Supporting Sociability*. Wiley.

*Topics:* How to start and end a community

### **Week 13 (April 30): Social Capital and Maryland's iSchool Community**

*Readings:*

Resnick, P. (2001). Beyond Bowling Together: SocioTechnical Capital. In J. M. Carroll (Ed.), *Human-Computer Interaction in the New Millennium* (p. 247-272). Addison-Wesley. Available at <http://www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/stk/index.html>.

Maryland's iSchool 2007 strategic plan. Available at <http://ischool.umd.edu/pdf/StrategicPlan07.pdf>

*Topics:* Social and SocioTechnical Capital  
Application to the iSchool (Dean Preece will attend)

### **Week 14 (May 7): Case Studies**

*Community rollout plan due*

*Readings:*

Burkhalter, B. (1999). Reading race online: discovering racial identity in Usenet discussions. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace* (pp. 60-75). London: Routledge. Available at [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/kollock/papers/communities\\_03.htm](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/kollock/papers/communities_03.htm)

Library 2.0 Squidoo Reading List: <http://www.squidoo.com/library20> - read entire page and hunt down at least one of the readings that are quoted/pointed to.

*Optional Readings:*

Fisher, K. E., Durrance, J. C., & Hinton, M. B. (2004). Information grounds and the use of need-based services by immigrants in Queens, New York: a context-based, outcome evaluation approach. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 55(8), 754-766.

Lankes, R. D., Silverstein, J., Nicholson, S., & Marshall, T. (2007). Participatory networks: the library as conversation. *Information Research*, 12(4). Available at <http://informationr.net/ir/12-4/colis/colis05.html>

Presentation on BiblioCommons:

Tiburce, F. and Giansante, P. (2007). Forget the Lipstick. The Pig Just Needs Social Skills. Available at <http://code4lib.org/2007/tiburce>

*Topics:* Race in online communities  
Libraries and communities of practice  
5 minute presentations on community rollout plans  
Course wrap-up