

Two Examples of Online Communities

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As more and more people have access to the Internet in their homes, online communities have become quite common. These communities allow participants to share a common interest without gathering in a physical location. This paper will present a brief overview of two exemplary online communities. It will look for similarities and differences between the groups. Finally, it will describe my own personal description of a community.

DCP Parents Group

The first community to be considered is the DCP Parents Group, dcpparents.com. This is a community established by a group of parents, to help others navigate the experience of having a child in the Disney College Program internship. The group was established in 2013, and currently has 3,468 members. In order to join the closed Facebook group for the community, you must prove that you have a child who has applied for or is currently a participant in the DCP. Most of the activity in the group takes place on the Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/disneycollegeprogramparents> which contains a vast amount of helpful information, from the mailing addresses of the dorms to local car repair shops that are reliable. There is a limited amount of merchandise available to help members identify each other on move-in day or when visiting their children, but other sales items are banned. One unique feature is a forum for “mamarazzi and paparazzi” who are visiting the parks and are willing to get a photo of other members’ children at work in their costumes.

One aspect that sets this community apart from others is their willingness to mobilize in the event of an emergency. On more than one occasion in the past year, a member’s child has been hospitalized due to sudden illness or injury. In each of these cases, a member who is in the Central Florida area has dropped everything and become a surrogate parent for the injured child, staying at the hospital with them until the parent can fly in to care for their child. Even if it is not your own child who is hurt, it is comforting to know there are other members who are willing to help when you are many miles away.

Hooked on Sunshine

Hooked on Sunshine, <https://hookedonsunshine.co/>, is a community of crochet crafters devoted to completing the designs of South African designer Vanessa Smith. The website itself is primarily the sales page for yarn kits that Smith creates, and for downloading the patterns for her extremely complicated designs. The online community is based on Facebook, in a closed group that currently has 32,546 members <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1370975902929963/>. The group’s purpose is to allow members to share photos of their work-in-progress, test color combinations, and receive feedback. Posts are limited to remarks about the specific designer’s work, and no sales from outside sources are permitted.

The majority of the members of the group are not actively involved in posting, but they also benefit from the advice and support of the more active members. One notable feature is that if a member is stuck on a challenging part of the pattern, they need only post a photo of the work, along with the pattern name and row number, to get personalized assistance. A member of the designer’s team, another group member, or the designer herself will reply very quickly to help resolve the problem. Volunteer translators from all around the world also translate the patterns into more than a dozen languages to assist members. The availability of such assistance can help a reluctant crafter try a complex pattern and create an intricate work.

My Definition of a Community

I once thought of a community as a place: one lives in a community, goes to the community pool, attends meetings at the community center. As I became more familiar with the Internet, I found many groups focused on my diverse interests. At various times, I have followed forums regarding sports, Girl Scouts, and Star Trek. Even though I enjoyed the content of these groups, I would not characterize them as communities. For the most part, the content on these sites is controlled by one individual or a small group of individuals. Because members are mostly passive, they do not develop a sense of belonging.

On further reflection, one aspect that makes a group a community is a sense of belonging. This can be established by having strict criteria for participation. In the case of the DCP Parents group, you have to prove your status as the parent of a participant to the moderators before you are permitted to view the group's resources. Even in the less restricted Hooked on Sunshine group, you must agree to post only about the work of the designer who created the group.

Another aspect of community is the voluntary nature of membership. There is no cost to participate in the community, and there are no required purchases in either of the two groups discussed above. Tee shirts and hats are available for parents in the DCP group to identify each other, especially at move-in. Parents are not permitted at orientation, so the group holds informal meet-ups to wait together before they help their kids move into the dorms. There is no purchase required in the Hooked on Sunshine group, even though yarn bundles are available. These prepackaged kits make the daunting task of choosing colors for specific projects very easy.

In order to become a community, participants must see value in their membership. This value can come from having access to restricted information, seeing colors chosen for other member's blankets, or receiving a photo of a camera-shy cast member. If one joins a group and does not find such value, there is little reason to stay. All groups thrive on active participation, but there are many members who choose to be quiet in both of these groups. Known as lurkers, these participants benefit from the contributions of others, but do not give back to the group. In a thriving community, there is sufficient membership and participation to meet the needs of all members, and the number of lurkers does not become an issue.

Last, but not least, is the sense of service to the community that exists in both of these groups. DCP parents are available to help members find the least expensive shoes that are acceptable in costume or a local chiropractor. Just as important is the emotional support offered to parents who are dealing with limited information coming from their children, and the feelings of sending your baby into the world of working full-time and paying their own rent. As a two-time veteran of the program, I can attest to the benefit of having other more experienced parents available for questions and reassurance. Even though my daughter has graduated from the program, I am still quite active, trying to help new parents navigate the complexities of Disney.

The topic of Hooked on Sunshine is not as serious, but the level of support within the group is still significant. The materials cost of completing one of the designer's typical blankets is over \$100, so it is important to believe that one can accomplish the goal of completion. In addition to the personalized assistance noted above, other members have created tutorial videos and photo tutorials, which are extremely helpful when mastering a new stitch or sequence.

In order to truly become a community, a group with a common interest must develop a sense of its own identity. Its members must feel that they belong, and that they value in their participation in the community. Participation levels may vary. Perhaps most significantly, members must believe that the community will assist when needed, with advice, information, or physical assistance.