LET'S GET MORE POSITIVE ABOUT THE TERM 'LURKER'

Lurking from a Legitimate Peripheral Participation perspective...

CPSquare Class Project – June-July 2003

Project Leader: Jacquie McDonald

Members: Wendy Atkin, Frank Daugherity, Heather Fox, Alice MacGillivray, Doris Reeves-Lipscomb, Poonlarp Uthailertaroon.

Goal: The project idea was to explore what it means to have 'legitimate peripheral participants' in a CoP, and strategies to promote this idea when establishing a CoP - to overcome reluctance to commit because of fears of increased workload, and also to explore the literature in this area.

The project ran over a three-week period as one component of a seven-week online workshop on Foundations of Communities of Practice, second trimester 2003. The project leader initiated the project topic and members of the workshop were invited to join the project team and participate in the planned activities and goals. Each team member contributed to the discussion (which was open to all workshop participants) and nominated to prepare final summary documents. Bronwyn Stuckey facilitated the project operation and also took part in the finale preparation of the project report. A project summary was prepared by the project leader.

Project Goal and Tasks

Explore what it means to be "legitimate peripheral participants" (LPP) in a Community of Practice (CoP).

- Promote LPP approach/level of participation when establishing CoP
- Explore and document literature on lurking
- Interview non-posters in class to investigate reasons for non-posting
- Develop other terms for lurker
- Consider linking lurker project with SNA results and/or with the CoP Startup Kit (a separate workshop project)

Context of the Project Discussion

1. Project Summary – Jacquie McDonald
2. A synthesis of the discussion - Doris Reeves-Lipscomb and Frank Daugherity
3. A summary of suggested terms to replace lurker - Wendy Atkin
4. Resource list - Bronwyn Stuckey
5. CoP Levels of Participation graphic (jpg file)

Workshop Course Leaders: Etienne Wenger, Bronwyn Stuckey and John Smith. Details of the next CoP workshop to be offered in October 2003 workshop can be found at http://www.cpsquare.org/edu/foundations/index.htm

Foundations of Communities of Practice Workshop – some further details The workshop is taught in a seminar format by Etienne Wenger, a leading thinker and practitioner in the field, in collaboration with John Smith, a community builder and technologist and Bronwyn Stuckey, a educational researcher and online facilitator. Guest speakers and mentors augment the conversation, extend the network and deepen the connection with actual practice.

Schedule: The workshop is held over the course of seven weeks, varying in intensity and focus, as suggested below. As it simulates participation in an active community of practice but compresses the experience into a short period of time, most participants spend between 30 and 50 hours over the course of the 7 weeks reading, writing, and collaborating with other participants. Some people find themselves spending more time than that. The overview of the workshop schedule suggests the range of activities that go on during the workshop.

Project Goal and Tasks

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The project titled *"Let's get more positive about the term 'lurker'"* aimed to explore what it means to be 'legitimate peripheral participants' in a CoP, examine possible alternatives for the term 'lurker' and to explore the literature in this area. The participants in the discussion reflected on the positive connotations of legitimate peripheral participants (LPP) in view of the negative sense captured in the term 'lurker.'

LPP - as presented by – John Seely Brown, implies a positive role, i.e., *The culture of the Internet allows you to link, lurk, and learn. You can move from the periphery to the centre safely asking a question—sometimes more safely virtually than physically, and then back out again. It has provided a platform for perhaps the most successful form of learning that civilization has ever seen.* This idea is picked up in the CoP literature as a legitimate role for members. The project participants considered this positive LPP approach in view of the negative connotations implied in the term 'lurking' - where participants are viewed as non-contributors and a source of frustration for the visibly active participants.

The lively discussion presented a range of viewpoints. It was agreed that it is valid for participants interact at different levels, depending on the context of the CoP (or discussion) and their learning needs. However, concern was expressed while that non contributors may be meeting **their** learning needs, the wider group needs active participants to 'value add' for all members in order to support the long term sustainability of the community. It was suggested that expected roles and contribution levels be discussed in the initial stages of the CoP, and renegotiated during the life of the CoP.

Discussion Synthesis

Discussion Contributors

Facilitator: Jacquie McDonald
Contributors: Anne Acosta; Bobbie Allaire; Wendy Atkin; Claire Brooks; Frank Daugherity; Jeff DeCagna; Charlotte Holmlund; Shelley Hourston; Alice MacGillivray; Barbara McDonald; John Morrison; Nick Noakes; Doris Reeves-Lipscomb; David Sieja; John Smith; Bronwyn Stuckey; Poonlarp Uthailertaroon
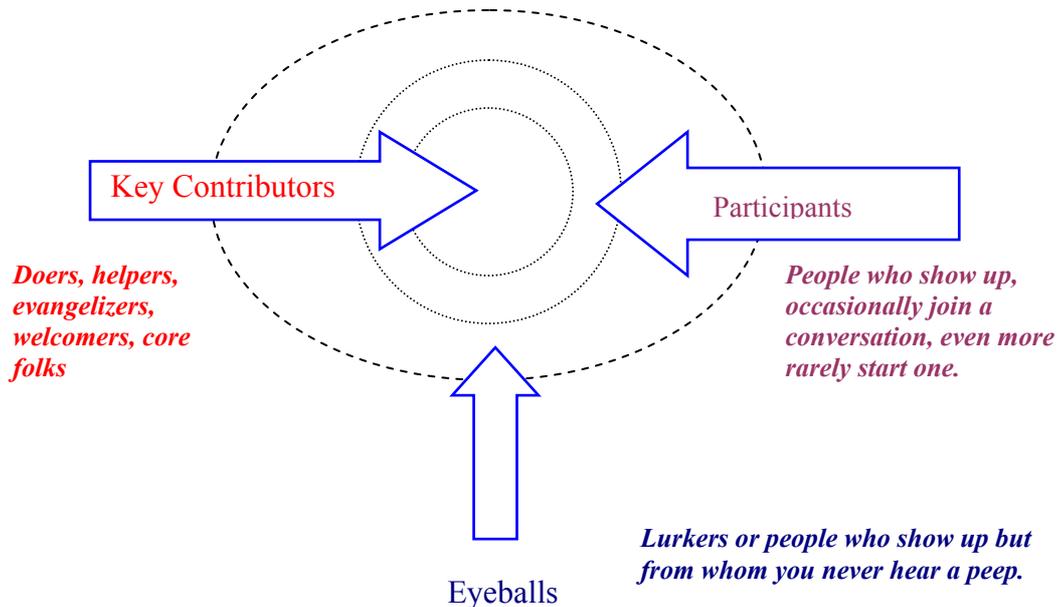
Organization of Synthesis

Key Learning Points are distilled in the first discussion. Because the dialogue produced so many unique and wonderful insights, direct quotes are organized under the following headings:

- The Value of Lurking
- Resistance to Lurking
- Why *Lurkers* Lurk
- The Importance of CoP Context
- Methods for Helping CoPs and CoP Members Flourish
- Measuring and Defining LPP: Questions and Ideas

In addition, several participants identified excellent learning resources which are offered in the end section on *Lurking Research and Resources*.

CoP Levels of Participation

Key Contributors

Participants

Doers, helpers, evangelizers, welcomers, core folks

People who show up, occasionally join a conversation, even more rarely start one.

Eyeballs

Lurkers or people who show up but from whom you never hear a peep.

http://www.onlinecommunityreport.com/features/design

Key Learning Points

- *There is a tension between our wanting to respect lurking as LPP, engaging in lurking ourselves, but also questioning the value of a lurker's participation.*

- *Dr. Wenger's perspective is that lurking is legitimate, therefore can be classified as legitimate peripheral participation.*

- *We may not be able to change the terms lurker or LPP because of their wide use, but we can help people understand what social dynamics are at work.*

- *We wish to help people on the periphery understand two important aspects of participation: that they are free to lurk (listen, eyeball) and that there are a variety of forms of participation.*

In face-to-face or team settings, "lurking" or sidebar conversations are discouraged but successful online communities build benches for them. There is an ebb and flow with core members drifting to the sidelines as topics change. Peripheral members drift into the center as their interests are stirred. Successful communities create "fires" in the center to invite involvement. – McDermott, R. Building Spontaneity Into Strategic Communities

The Value of Lurking

Lurking is a form of cognitive apprenticeship which can be seen as legitimate peripheral participation in discussion-oriented CoPs. The culture of the Internet allows you to link, lurk, and learn. You can move from the periphery to the center safely asking a question—sometimes more safely virtually than physically, and then back out again. It has provided a platform for perhaps the most successful form of

learning that civilization has ever seen. –John Seely Brown as reported by Wendy Atkin

Lurkers or peeps prefer not to dive, digress, embellish, debate or argue without position or purpose, it is not simply in fear/risk of showing their ignorance in haste of dialogue…but rather PEEPS try to remain back, distill many opinions and learn via cross-osmosis (peeping without stopping to speak) and using their "listening engagement" as strategy and learning perspective.

Some of us have to be IN the debate to understand, but a LPPer can HEAR the debate, then speak with clarity and precision. This individual constructivist approach—that is, how each of us makes meaning in our own heads, based on what is happening, and our past experience—is used to sum up the approach of the CoP ecology or system. So one person may be LPPing, then feeds the ideas and summaries back to the group, which then triggers further group thinking, hence the ideas (systems) keep growing, something like a spiral approach. –blended quote of several class participants

I love observing a lot of things and then reflecting something back that I hope will provoke more questioning/probing on the part of others. This mutual sharing can, I hope, lead to new thoughts and innovation… Lurkers might be like the so-called 'butterflies' at an open-space facilitated meeting, who flit around, observe, and light where they seem to be needed.

Sometimes persons at the edge of the systems are in the best positions to interact with persons at the edges of other systems, and progress can leap forward as a result. The anthropologist learns from the physicist, the philanthropist learns from the entrepreneur…

…Whether lurkers participate or not is less important than leveraging the collective knowledge of the organization to move the corporate yardsticks. We need answers to problems, solutions to the issues. The browsers often come up with the bright ideas, after the fact and perhaps one-on-one. Lurking is another dimension of CoP diversity.

In terms of peripheral participation, I learn by observing (lurk) on a number of email discussion lists that are peripheral to my main work. I do this because they create an opportunity for creativity for me, as an idea or practice occasionally can be transferred to my context in a novel way.

Advantages in weaker community ties lead to bridging between networks, providing social capital without huge personal investment and a focus on pertinent information.

Peripherality provides an approximation of full participation—one that gives exposure to actual practice.

Resistance To Lurking

- My personal ideal is to have everyone participate in everything at all times… mental equation: no written contributions=no participation=activity has generated no net value=it [I?] is/am a failure.

- A community thrives on "giving back" behavior and widespread participation in community building efforts. "The power of silence" by a majority of participants could distract the active participants from doing what they need to do.

- The law of reciprocity applies to lurking, learning, and linking to more lurking and learning. One can be a recipient for only so long. Fairness dictates that one needs to give back something of comparable value. The giving back does not have to occur in the original forum.

Why Lurkers Lurk
(a list of possible reasons – not true for all lurkers)

- They are generally happy with outcomes and are likely learning/sharing in their own ways
- They wish to hoard their information, fear to lose face or let their colleagues down or mislead them
- They are most likely in the listening and learning stages
- There's an old lesson we could all relearn in life. We once had it down pat when we "knew nothing important to say" and could only listen
- It's not polite to interrupt or to "speak and run"
- External time constraints
- Absences from the CoP lead to the "train has left the station" barriers to re-involvement
- It meets their learning needs, their level of commitment, and schedule needs
- *Keeping relevant requires recent involvement in online dialogue, so sporadic attendance or absence leads to lurking*
- Some people are naturally cautious or slow to react
- Participation is not a priority
- A genuine invitation has not been extended to allow them to participate at the core
- Some may struggle with language
- Some may be lost and overwhelmed and don't want to say so
- The CoP may be fairly impermeable
- The practice may be too hard for just anyone to master
- The lurker may just want to check out the community
- The lurker may have had off-putting experiences when first encountering the community
- There may be cultural or personality issues at play that are not visible even to the lurker
- Some folks just shy away from any responsibility
- There may be a failure or inability to identify with the CoP members
- Not everyone will be on an inward trajectory
- Inadequate brokering has been done at the periphery of the community

The Importance Of CoP Context For Lurking/lpp

- …for a lot of situations, lurking isn't enough to define legitimacy in the eyes of the core group. Going back to judo, you have to at least put on the gi and start practicing. You are not legit if you are just a spectator.

- The lurker/noncontributor level of participation can be an excellent learning experience but can be viewed as selfish and non-reciprocating. If the CoP's purpose is to be a learning community, one should not assume that learning only occurs with written contributions to a forum space.
- Some organizations are emphasizing the groups as being about knowledge, while others may be choosing to emphasize the learning side through the term. Maybe the organizations with a knowledge focus are keen on managing that knowledge and 'doing': therefore, a lurker would be seen as not contributing to the group enterprise, while a learning organization would find lurking an acceptable learning approach.
- CoP design may communicate acceptance of speaking and running.
- It is important to lower boundaries to encourage participation. CoP context defines whether <u>lurkers</u> are legitimate. Expectations for participation need to be spelled out.
- Organizational context-setting strategies: Implement a set of institutional norms promoting trust including the premise that knowledge sharing is a norm of the organization, employees are trusted, and sharing is a moral obligation. Build multiple face-to-face communities of practice which provide a foundation for knowledge-based trust that could evolve into virtual communities. Provide a set of clear norms and standards for sharing knowledge.
- …[there's a] choice between making everyone key contributors and recognizing that lurking is a legitimate learning strategy.
- The Seely Brown quote is a powerful positive statement, referring to learning on the Internet. In that context, learners are 'invisible' (unless they join the discussion) so it seems that there isn't the pressure or expectation to 'perform/contribute' that is created in face-to-face contexts. Therefore, one can lurk without finger pointing.
- …about enticing lurkers into active participation, that feels a bit like the "father knows best" school of homogenization. In a project team or a course, visible participation is required. In a community of practice, there is more emphasis on the goals of the community, the goals of each individual, and what will support those goals and facilitate their alignment.

Methods For Helping CoPs and CoP Members Flourish

- Take the pulse of the whole group at frequent intervals to distinguish between those who lurk for 'good' reason and those who lurk because of a lack of brokering or other 'fixable-community shortcoming' reason.
- Create periodic opportunities for novices and newcomers to join conversations
- Summarize and tease out still-pending and intriguing questions in ongoing conversations
- Determine what the quiet members can contribute and connect them to tasks to be done – this is part of the function of the facilitator(s)
- Keep the importance of "community" in the foreground (A covenant separates a community from a crowd.)
- Back-channel to engage folks in community development
- Understand and apply the difference between "manage" and "cultivate"
- Make it easier for lurkers to join by giving them multiple ways to interact as CPSquare does. But the weaving together of domain, community, and practice takes time, persistence, and good content.

- Having multiple cores is another area…the more cores there are (connected in a constellation of CoPs), the more likely it is that the peripheral people can find a core to move forward.
- Perhaps looking at what lurkers do would provide some other clues. Do they connect what they see in one environment with other environments where that may be more meaningful? This might provide more credibility for the CoP. In this context, they would be community liaisons.
- An optimal situation for a CoP would be to create an environment where the participants are motivated perhaps by a problem to be solved, to pull specific information to themselves, but at the same time have some "outsiders" lurking in the background providing information that may come from a different view. When this new and different information is inserted into the CoP, the participants will analyze it and determine its usefulness. This may be an important role that the often under-appreciated "lurker" can play.
- …let members know that different levels of participation are welcome and acceptable.

Measuring and Defining LPP: Questions and Ideas

- I exercise my PEEP rights in the most respectful sense. What I offer is simply that no matter what name/context is found it may not suffice the entire class for they are more than "one peep species." Along the great lurker debate is a vain attempt to encapsulate what is best left open—that inclusive domain of all "those not counted by their metered engagement, interactions, contributions in number of quality of posts or interactions". Yet, they perhaps are the future, albeit silent, sustainability of the community.

- If PEEP engagement is defined in virtual environments along physical participation parameters (commenting, debating, scoring posts) where listening is "counted less" (i.e., not monitorable), then any hope for measuring growth along e-communities may be lost.
- Who determines legitimacy and with what criteria? Does legitimacy have to do with learning or wanting to learn for whatever purpose?
- Is periphery determined by number of posts? Frequency of posts? Number of frequency of hits? Time online? Ratios of above?
- Is it determined by quality of contributions to community? Who judges? Do criteria have to do with others' learning?
- Is periphery defined through network analysis?
- Does the person have a say in whether she/he is peripheral?

LIST OF SUGGESTIONS FOR 'A TERM TO REPLACE LURKER'

1. Here is a catch-all list of all ideas put forth in this project work – I make no attempt to sort, evaluate, or explain….

Virtual participant	Sympathizer
Marginal participant	Supporter
Passive observer	Leader
Potential member	Listener
Tacit member	Activist
Proximate member	Participant

PEEP	Eyeballs
Sympathizer	Moocher
Silent majority	Cruiser
Vicarious learner	Browser
Peripheral participant	Reader
Invisible learner	Observer
Groupie	The gallery
Onlooker	Onlooker
Peripheral visionary	Community liaisons

2. And seriously folks…
A few people posted key phrases that are action-oriented, explaining more about what it means to lurk – it may be worth capturing these meanings here in the list:

'the culture of the Internet allows …movement from the periphery to the centre…' (John Seely Brown)
'lurkers are 'eyeballs' in some sense, but from whom you will never hear a peep…' (Dan Shafer)
'the persons at the edges of systems are in the best positions to interact with persons at the edges of other systems, and progress can leap forward as a result…' (Alice MacGillivray)
'lurking is a systematic and idiosyncratic process, with well-developed rationales and strategies' (Blair Nonnecke & Jennifer Preece)

Lurking Research

Archichvili, A., Page, V. and Wentling, T. (2003) Motivation and barriers to participation in virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 7(1), 64-77.*
- Research Question One: What are the reasons for employees' willingness to contribute their knowledge to virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice.
  - Reasons: Knowledge is public good. Need to establish self as expert and mentor others.
- Research Question 2: What are the barriers to employees contributing their knowledge to virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice?
  - Barriers: Personal include information hoarding, fear to lose face, fear to let their colleagues down or mislead them, contributions may not be important or relevant, of fear of criticism. Organizational include inconvenient procedures and security considerations.
- Research Question 3: What are the reasons for employees' willingness to use virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice as a source of new knowledge?
  - Reasons: Information source, problem solving tool, keeping informed of general developments for their profession, a tool for managing works and replacing meetings. Other benefits include integrating new people into work environments, greater productivity, a way to unite geographically dispersed work units, and access to best practices.
- Research Question 4: What are the barriers preventing employees from using virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice as a source of new knowledge?
  - Barriers: People prefer face to face. Online answers require verification.
  - Strategies for enhancing CoP participation: Implement a set of institutional norms promoting trust including the premise that knowledge sharing is a norm

of the organization, employees are trusted, and sharing is a moral obligation. Build multiple face-to-face communities of practice which provide a foundation for knowledge-based trust that could evolve into virtual communities. Provide a set of clear norms and standards for sharing knowledge.

Preece, Jenny, *Shedding Light on Lurkers in Online Communities, www.ifsm.umbc.edu/~preece/paper/ 16%20Shedding%20Light.final.pdf*
  "Lurkers are reported to make up a sizable proportion of many online communities, yet little is known about their reasons for lurking, who they are, and how they lurk. In this study, interviews with online community members provided a formative understanding of these and other issues. We discovered that lurking is a systematic and idiosyncratic process, with well-developed rationales and strategies. All interviewees lurked, but not all the time, and several developed a sense of community through their lurking."

McDermott, Richard, *Building Spontaneity Into Strategic Communities,* Knowledge Management Review, January/February 2003. Most community members rarely participate but they are not passive. They apply their own insights from the discussion in private conversations. Some feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole or they don't have enough voice to contribute. In face-to-face or team settings, "lurking" or sidebar conversations are discouraged but successful online communities build benches for them. There is an ebb and flow with core members drifting to the sidelines as topics change. Peripheral members drift into the center as their interests are stirred. Successful communities create "fires" in the center to invite involvement.

Some Relevant References on the concept 'lurking'

Ardichvili, A., Page, V. & Wentling, T. (2003).	**Motivation and barriers to participation in virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice.** Journal of Knowledge Management, 7(1), 64-77. www.emeraldinsight.com
Erickson, T. & Herring, S. (2000)	**Persistent Conversation: A Dialog Between Design and Research** Thomas Erickson *IBM T. J. Watson **Research** Center* snowfall@acm.org Susan Herring *Program in Linguistics University of Texas at Arlington* susan@ling.uta.edu http://www.computer.org/proceedings/hicss/0493/04933/04933029abs.htm?SMSESSION=NO

IFETS email list	Although not exactly a community the conversation has many aspects of being a community of practice and for the recent feedback survey they received 5 respondents out of > 3000 members! If you want to read the ideas that group had see http://ifets.ieee.org/discussions/discuss.html
Lave, J & Wenger, E (1991)	**Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation**
McDermott, R. 2003	**Building Spontaneity Into Strategic Communities** Eight tips to put excitement into management-created CoPs. January/February issue of KM Review http://www.computer.org/proceedings/hicss/0493/04933/04933029.pdf

Peripheral members: Most community members rarely participate. Instead they stay on the periphery, watching the interaction of the core and active members. But they are not as passive as they seem. They apply their own insights from the discussion, having private conversations about the issues being discussed in the public forum. Some feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole. Others feel they don't have enough voice to really contribute. In a traditional meeting or team we would discourage such "lurking" and "sidebar conversations," but because communities draw people with different levels of interest, successful communities build benches for them. They make opportunities for lurkers to have a semi-private space on the Web site, a community event. This keeps the peripheral members connected. Surrounding the community are people interested in it, though not direct members, such as customers, suppliers, and neighbors. Community members change levels of participation. Core members often slowly drift toward the sideline as the topic of the community shifts. Active members may be deeply engaged for several months, then disengage. Peripheral members drift into the center as their interests are stirred. To draw members into more active participation, successful communities create a fire in the center of the community interesting enough to invite involvement

Nonnecke, B. & Preece, J. (2001)	**Why Lurkers Lurk** AMCIS Conference, Boston, June http://snowhite.cis.uoguelph.ca/~nonnecke/research/whylurk.pdf

'*lurking is a systematic and idiosyncratic process, with well-developed rationales and strategies*' (Blair Nonnecke & Jennifer Preece)

Nonnecke, B. & Preece, J. (2000)	**Lurker demographics: counting the silent** Blair Nonnecke, Jennifer Preece: CHI 2000: 73-80 http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=332040.332409
Nonnecke, B. & Preece, J. (2000)	**Persistence and Lurkers in Discussion Lists: A Pilot Study** Blair Nonnecke, Jennifer Preece:. HICSS 2000 http://computer.org/proceedings/hicss/0493/04933/04933031abs.htm
Nonnecke, B. & Preece, J. (1999)	**Shedding Light on Lurkers in Online Communities** Final Draft available at: http://www.ifsm.umbc.edu/~preece/paper/16%20Shedding%20Light.final.pdf

Preece. J.	**Usability & sociability in online communities:** A framework for research & practice Jenny Preece Prof. & Chair of Information Systems UMBC, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA preece@umbc.edu www.ifsm.umbc.edu/onlinecommunities
Preece, J. Online lecture (2000)	**Interaction Design for New Media: A Pattern Approach** (University of Maryland Baltimore County) Stanford University 10/13/2000 4:10 AM (Pacific) 60 minutes Human-Computer Interaction Seminar 2000-2001 http://murl.microsoft.com/LectureDetails.asp?743
Salmon, G. (2000)	**E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online** Open University Publushed Kogan Page London p79-81 http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating
Seely Brown, J.	**The Social Life of Information** John Seely Brown, Paul Duguid **Learning, Working & Playing in the Digital Age** John Seely Brown http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/sci_edu/seelybrown/ '*the culture of the Internet allows …movement from the periphery to the centre…*' (John Seely Brown)
Shafer, D (2001)	**For Whom Should You Design Your Community?** by Dan Shafer, Sr. Co-Editor Online Community Report http://www.onlinecommunityreport.com/features/design '*lurkers are 'eyeballs' in some sense, but from whom you will never hear a peep…*' (Dan Shafer)
Taylor, J.C. (2002)	**Teaching and Learning Online: Lurkers, Shirkers and Workers** http://www.ouhk.edu.hk/CRIDAL/cridala2002/speeches/taylor.pdf
Wenger, E, McDermott, R., & Snyder, B. (2002)	**Cultivating Communities of Practice** Harvard Business School Press p.56
"Invite different levels of participation" that a large portion of community members are peripheral and rarely participate".	

Types of participation

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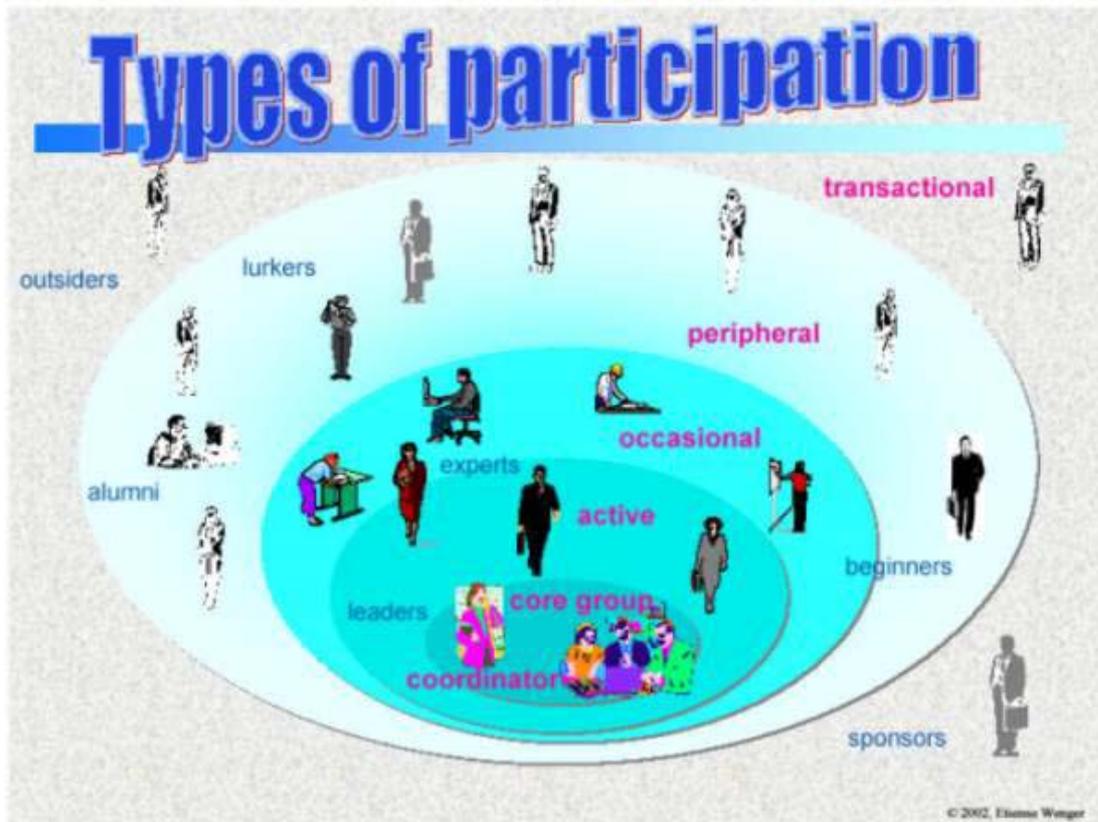
If referencing this document please use the following

MacDonald, J.., Atkin W., Daugherity F., Fox, H., MacGillivray, A., Reeves-Lipscomb, D., Uthailertaroon, P. (2003) Let's get more positive about the term 'lurker', CPsquare Foundations of Communities of Practice Workshop http://www.cpsquare.org/edu/foundations/index.htm