

**Supporting a Community of Practice Online:
Lions Gate Quilters' Guild**



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Introduction, Audience & Problem Statement

Through quilting, women make meaning in their own lives, preserve and transmit quilting heritage, and secure historical markers that represent them, their life events, and their families (Stalp, 2007, p. 117).

This project proposes a virtual community space to support the Lions Gate Quilters' Guild (LGQG), a community of 180 quilters who meet 9 times a year in North Vancouver. Members of the guild are dedicated to promoting the growth and appreciation of quilting, improving quilting skills through learning opportunities such as workshops and meetings, and providing service to the community (*Constitution and Bylaws*, 2009). The guild provides a community with natural boundaries, since membership is based on payment of a membership fee.

Quilting is a tradition that can trace its roots back to thirty-fifth century B.C. Egypt. Quilting techniques can be found in the artifacts of early Chinese, Japanese, and European cultures; they were carried to the New World in the eighteenth century by European immigrants, who gifted friends departing for the western territories with a friendship quilt (Stalp, 2007).

The most recent revival of interest in quilting, experienced during the 1970s and continuing to the present time, marks an important shift from quilts largely produced as practical objects to quilts created as works of art (Hall-Patton, 2005).

With this shift in approach toward the craft comes a need for documentation. Many quilters maintain a record showcasing the breadth and depth of their skill as a quilter, much as an artist uses a portfolio (Stalp, 2007):

Individually, women simply remember quilts and the process of making them in their heads, and some actually assemble scrapbooks or photo albums to document their quilting activities. Collectively, quilt guilds and groups record quilts made by individual members through guild photo albums, and also demonstrate the group's creative work in local and regional quilt shows. Such quilt records reveal important aspects of the meaning of quilting in women's lives (p. 112).

These individual and collective documentation practices are problematic for several reasons: (1) photographs document the product but cannot adequately capture the process, which is essential to becoming a quilter; (2) documentation such as the photo albums described above is location-bound and an impractical medium for sharing with large numbers of people; (3) guild members who are unable to attend a meeting or quilt show reap limited benefit from these activities; and (4) many of the activities that take place at meetings, such as informal

networking, guest lectures, and “show and tell,” are rarely captured or have limited collective benefit, as the documentation resides with the individual.

Stalp (2007) observed that quilters rarely measure success by economic or objective means (selling a quilt or teaching a class, for example), but by subjective measures such as “learning new techniques, building skill sets, [and] making connections with others who quilt” (p. 57).

The current LGQG web site (<http://www.lionsgatequiltersguild.com/>) does provide some archival functions, such as photographs of prize-winning quilts from quilt shows and back issues of the newsletter, but it is poorly organized and executed, the information is incomplete, and it offers no opportunities to learn, to build skills, or to connect with other quilters.

According to Cambridge, Kaplan and Suter (2005), the technical architecture – the platform for communication and collaboration – must be married with an appropriate social architecture to in order to support a community of practice, whether virtual or not.

An online community – even one exhibiting a perfect marriage of architectures – could never adequately replace the experience gained by attending meetings and other location-bound guild events, but it would provide an additional community space where more permanent and accessible records of individual and community activities could exist, where individual members could record successes and contribute to a rich, collective record. Because the proposed online community is built upon existing relationships and practices, my hope is that many guild members will be able to see the potential benefits and be more inclined to participate than not.

Analysis of the Current State of Affairs

Established in 1994, the Lions Gate Quilters' Guild (LGQG) is a mature community of practice. It has approximately 180 members, many of whom are long-time quilters and guild members. According to the membership roster, more than two thirds of members live in North Vancouver, West Vancouver, or communities along Highway 99 to Whistler. The rest of the members live in communities around the lower mainland and on Vancouver Island.

The 2006 Quilting in America Survey describes the dedicated quilter as female, 59 years old, and affluent, a quilter for about 13.5 years, spending an average of \$2,304 per year on quilting. These demographics are consistent with those of LGQG members. The guild attracts several new members each year; it is not unusual to welcome at least one new member at each meeting.

Quilters practice their art both privately, in the work spaces they have created within their home, and socially, in small, intimate groups or during guild-sponsored work days and retreats. Quilting “on the move” involves carrying equipment (such as a sewing machine), tools, and supplies. It requires space to spread out, with areas for sewing, cutting and pressing (ironing).

The guild revolves around two kinds of activities: regular meetings, held 9 times a year, and special events.

Monthly meetings offer regular activities, including: “show and tell,” where members display their finished quilts and describe their experience in the creation of the quilt; a program, where guild members or invited speakers share their evolution as a quilter by offering a more extensive show and tell; and opportunities for informal networking. A library provides members with one avenue for learning new techniques or trying out new patterns.

The guild also organizes special events, some that take place throughout the year, others that are offered annually or biannually. For example, the guild organizes a biannual public exhibit of members' quilts. At this event, one guild member is named the featured quilter, while others provide demonstrations of quilting techniques. In opposite years, the guild offers a 4-day conference, or seminar, offering a variety of workshops from local, regional, national and international instructors.

The guild is also a service organization, and provides more than 300 quilts each year for community organizations. While most of these quilts are completed by quilters on their own, a two-day workshop each year offers members an opportunity to finish the quilts collaboratively, much like the quilting bees of the past, where friends and family would gather to collaboratively create a quilt. The concept of the quilting bee is perhaps a precursor of the community of practice that characterizes the guild.

According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), a community of practice is a group 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” (p. 4). Communities of practice are defined by three characteristics: domain (or development of identity), community, and shared practice.

Domain

An important aspect of domain is that of identity, both personal and collective. Stalp (2007) observed that

Once women identify themselves as quilters, they take on additional behaviors related to quilter identity. Quilters mentioned repeatedly that they began to think mostly in terms of quilting (e.g., their heads would swim with ideas for new quilts, they envisioned quilt patterns everywhere including in nature and architecture, and they would solve problems with their quilts while engaging in other activities) (p. 61).

Collectively, quilters have a strong sense of identity. While they have borrowed some language from other disciplines (many call their workspace a studio, for example, or audition fabrics for

new quilt projects), they have also developed language unique to quilting. Most quilters understand – or quickly come to understand – terms such as “fat quarter” (a cut of fabric), “feathered star” (a quilt pattern) and “sashiko” (a quilt stitching technique).

Quilting is often divided into two schools of practice: quilts that use traditional quilting techniques, patterns, materials, and construction methods – these quilts often have a discernible grid pattern with no raw edges; and contemporary or art quilts, which employ much less structured patterns or eschew patterns altogether and use a wide variety of materials, construction methods, and techniques, such as thread painting. In reality, many quilters, including those in LGQG, fall somewhere in the middle, employing techniques and methods from both schools, depending on the context.

Community

Interviews with guild members (see Appendices A and B) revealed that the activities that are most valued are show and tell, the library, and the informal networking that takes place at meetings and helps to create community. As one member described it, “social life and friendship first, followed by the inspiration of show and tell.”

Interviewees also noted the value they get from the ongoing and special community-building activities, including workshops, Creative Ongoing Projects (COPS) days, an annual weekend retreat, and the annual community quilts workshop. Each of these offers a setting that promotes social learning, fosters a sense of belonging, provides opportunities for informal networking, and, in some cases, great food. In short, they feed the heart, as well as the head.

The intimate setting offers guild members an opportunity to observe other quilters in action, as well as a safe place in which to ask questions and share ideas. Members who might hesitate to ask questions or approach other members in the large guild meeting, for example, may find it easier to ask their question of a group or individual where everyone is engaged in some aspect of quilting.

Shared Practice

Quilters are adept at adapting common tools for their own practice – a safety pin becomes an expedient way to baste the quilt sandwich, and metal hair clips hold the binding in place so that it can be hand sewn. Others develop their own tools, patterns, methods, or fabric lines, feeding new ideas to a multi-billion dollar retail industry (Quilting in America Survey, 2006). Quilting software, for example, helps quilters design quilt patterns, audition fabrics, and view a representation of the finished quilt, all before making a single cut of the fabric.

Guild members document and share their practice when they display their quilts during show and tell and share the story of its creation. They also do so when taking part in workshops and other learning opportunities – it is not uncommon, for example, for a participant to pose a

question of another guild member, even though the instructor is in the room, or to compare results with other guild members, or even to share a discovery with others. But most of these moments are transitory in nature; this aspect of community of practice, in particular, could be enhanced by an online community.

Design Specifications & Prototype

Prototype Web Site:

<http://www.transplantedgoose.net/gradstudies/educ893/cop/>

This web site uses a clean, uncluttered design, with only four graphical elements: the guild name; a background pattern that evokes a traditional stitching pattern; the Lions Gate Bridge, which is an iconic image identified with the guild; and the background of the sidebar, which evokes a contemporary interpretation of the traditional quilt block and separates the sidebar from the main content area.

The colour palette is clean as well. The blues and greens reflect the colours of nature that surround the bridge, and the red provides a complement to the blues and greens.

The goal of the web site is to create a “sense of place” that complements the face-to-face meetings and interactions of the guild. The primary navigation evokes this sense of place by evoking the regular activities and workspaces of the guild and its members, while the sidebar content creates “a predictable ‘rhythm’ that sets an expectation around how and when to participate in the community” (Cambridge et al., 2005, p. 2).

The following key design principles for communities of practice are at the heart of this design:

Principles for Cultivation (Wenger et al., 2002)	Technical Conditions for Online Community (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design for evolution• Open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives• Invite different levels of participation• Develop both public and private community space• Focus on value• Combine familiarity and excitement• Create a rhythm for the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authoring• Boundaries• Engagement• Periodicity• Tracking• Archiving• Warranting

Home Page [index.html]

The home page is where most visitors – both members and non-members – to the site will begin interacting with the community. The content of the page is intended to create excitement around guild activities, to provide a sense of vibrancy about the community, to encourage

participation from members, and to focus on value. Many features of the web site build upon existing resources and relationships, a key aspect of designing for evolution. To accomplish this, the home page offers a number of features:

- **Information about guild meetings**
Most guild members will know when the meetings take place, but potential members might not. The information includes a special invitation to visitors, inviting participation of non-members in face-to-face activities.
- **Featured event: Album of Quilts**
The guild holds two biannual events, in opposite years, each of which requires more planning and assistance than usual from guild members. Highlighting this item on the home page keeps it in the foreground for guild members and offers easy access to the necessary forms, policies, and deadlines.
- **Featured content: Show & Tell**
The prototype design features Show & Tell, but could also feature other user-generated content, such as library book reviews or web resources. Highlighting these contributions from members serves as encouragement to participate, and brings out content that is otherwise buried in the site. Because this is prime real estate on the web site, this space could be used to highlight more active members of the online community.
- **Calendar of events**
Providing easy access to upcoming events encourages participation in guild activities. Content will initially centre around face-to-face activities, but the potential for planning and highlighting online events exists. The colour coding presents a visual distinction between regular member events, such as the guild meeting, and other guild events. This calendar is reused on other pages of the site, such as the Workshops page, where highlighting periodicity is appropriate.
- **Guild news**
This news feed is conceived as a Twitter feed to which members could subscribe separately from the web site. Because Twitter posts are limited to 140 characters, it forces the authors to be brief and to the point. It is easy to imagine incorporating these news items into the monthly newsletter (removing expired items, of course). Another advantage to a news feed such as this is that it can be delivered to members (“push” technology) at an interval determined by the member.

Security and Privacy

This space appears on every page, in the upper right corner. Initially, this space displays a login box, but once logged in, it displays a welcome message, a link to the member’s profile, and a logout link.

Most of the content on the site is available to non-members, but logging in is necessary to view member profiles, contribute content such as Show & Tell items and book reviews, and view user-generated content that is designated “members only.” Members control which of their contributed content is visible to the community and beyond, and in this way the site achieves a measure of authoring, or control over the configuration of the space.

Since membership in the online community is restricted to guild members, boundaries are immediately established and identities are warranted.

Show & Tell [show_tell/index.html]

Quilting can be viewed as a form of storytelling. Every aspect of the quilt, from the choice of materials to the layout and design is a piece of the story. Quilters most often relate these stories in relation to the recipient of the quilt or to the personal experiences of the quilter during the quilt's construction. Stories generally include details of the process, often in terms of a new technique, the materials used, challenges or struggles – details that other insiders will appreciate (Stalp, 2007).

Sharing these stories is an important element of the social learning that takes place within the guild. Whether the show and tell takes place formally in the guild meetings, or informally in the more intimate setting of a workshop or retreat, this is one of the activities that brings value to guild members – its importance is evident from interviews with members, as well as in the time devoted to this activity in the meetings. However, these stories are rarely recorded, and any value is lost over time, and not available to members who were not present.

There are several ways to access the Show & Tell contributions from members:

- Browsing a list by the member's screen name
- Browsing a list by the descriptive title assigned by the contributor
- Browsing a chronological list
- A Surprise Me! button, which displays a random story
- Searching keywords in associated text

Members contribute to Show & Tell in one of two ways: through words, or through video. The submission form and video recording tool are visible only to members who are logged in.

Members have the opportunity to share their stories, or to keep them private. In this way, members can use the web site to build a portfolio. While insiders generally know the kinds of details that other quilters will appreciate, the form provides several question prompts to guide the contributor, if she chooses.

Outsiders, along with community members, are invited to participate by leaving comments for the contributor. Contributors are able to reply to these comments. In this way, insiders

potentially can benefit from an outsider's perspective, and peripheral members can participate with little risk.

Library [library/index.html]

The library is another aspect of the guild that is highly valued by members. Some quilters prefer to explore and learn new techniques on their own rather than through a workshop, and the library represents a key resource to support this activity. Features that focus on value to the community include:

- **New books list, Reviews and ratings of library items**

These features generate excitement and enables resource discovery. The option to view a random book review, rather than browse the collection, may bring renewed excitement around "forgotten" items.

- **I own this | I've read this | I want to read this**

This is an important feature related to tracking, allowing members to tag items in the library as ones they've already seen, or ones they'd like to see. Wish lists can then be printed out or emailed to a friend prior to the guild meeting, aiding in retrieval of the items.

My Studio [studio/index.html]

This area of the web site that is available only to the individual member. It serves as a virtual studio, archiving a member's contributions to the community and creating a private space within the site for each member. Two unique aspects of this feature are the stash and the design wall.

The stash feature allows members to integrate fabric swatches online (or scan them and upload them) and to track the fabrics they have available. The design wall gives a member the tools needed to experiment with quilt designs and audition fabrics from her stash in the quilts. Quilt designs can be saved in the member's design gallery.

A community version of these tools would be available within established Quilting Circles (in the My Community menu). While this feature has not been addressed in the prototype, these Quilting Circles would provide semi-private spaces for small groups of community members to collaborate and share resources. Many guild members are also members of small quilting groups, and this feature could provide a resource for them. Some of these small groups include quilters who are not guild members, so some ability to sponsor non-members into the Quilting Circle could be developed, thereby encouraging participation and perspectives from outsiders.

Quilting Q&A (in My Community) [forum/index.html]

This feature takes on the form of a traditional discussion board or forum, in which members can direct the focus of the discussion. This provides opportunity for newer members to help the site evolve, by generating discussion around new topics. It invites participation at different

levels by giving peripheral and active members an opportunity to try out core leadership roles (Wenger et al., 2002). The forum would include tracking of member activity, and archiving of contributions.

While creating new discussion areas and topics would be limited to community members, anyone can reply to postings, providing yet another opportunity for outsiders to participate in the community.

Context of Use & Evolution over Time

This web site is intended to be used by an existing community of practice. Because it features some of the most valued elements of the guild's activities – Show & Tell, the library – the potential of creating excitement and interest among current members is high. It's possible that current peripheral members, especially those members who are unable to attend meetings, might find value in the online community, especially if currently active and core members also embrace it.

Guild members who regularly use the web – through surfing, social networking, or maintaining their own web site – will probably find it easier to conceive of a practical use for this site. Those who are not regular members will need to be given a reason to come to the site.

One of the initial challenges of any web site that relies on user-generated content is creating enough initial content to enable users to get past the “blank page” syndrome. Another challenge for the guild will be finding volunteers to oversee the administration of the site – the guild is already stretched to find volunteers to fill the executive positions.

One enhancement that could conceivably evolve out of the current features is the ability to create an exhibit of members' quilts, which could then be shared and perhaps featured on the home page. An online image editing tool would help members create high quality exhibits. Or perhaps members would appreciate the ability to create a digital portfolio that can be shared publicly, or with invited members or visitors.

Regardless of how the site develops, even initially, guild members would need to be involved in the decision-making. It will be important for the designer to listen carefully to the needs and desires of the members, and to design accordingly.

Assessment & Reflections

One of most obvious measures of success of any web site is use – how much is it being used, how many people are using it, and, in the case of an interactive web site, how much content is being generated. But as a quilter, I also rely on subjective measures, and part of any assessment would have to include conversations with guild members about the value they find (or do not

find) in the site. What are their goals and expectations of the online community, and are they being met?

Because of the time and specification constraints of this project, it has not been possible to engage in a user-centred design process. The site functions as both an informational site and an interactive site. Informational aspects are a reorganization of the existing web site, but the interactive features are new, and in a user-centred design process I would have carried out additional interviews, including interviews with members who cannot attend guild meetings regularly. Interactive features would have been based on the values expressed by a broader survey of members, and would probably be added gradually, one at a time, rather than all at once.

This web site is much more complex and sophisticated than the current web site, and relies extensively on dynamic content; it's possible that the technical requirements are beyond the guild's current capacity, in terms of both technology and skills needed, even if the guild were to implement a content management system. Some of the features – the design wall, the web-based video recorder – are just pipe dreams at this point, and would require development that is surely beyond the means of guild members.

But one can always dream...

References

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Appendix A: Recruitment of Interview Subjects and Informed Consent

Interview subjects were recruited via an email message to the Guild president. There is no mechanism (other than the newsletter) for communicating with all members, but the Guild president forwarded the request to executive members, who were invited to pass the request along to other Guild members.

The email message was designed to explain the project and act as informed consent, although each interview subject also gave verbal consent after a reminder of the details contained in the email message, duplicated below.

Three Guild members consented to be interviewed, although one of these members was subsequently unavailable. Two Guild members were interviewed, and their responses to the interview questions (see Appendix B) were very similar. If this had been a more formal research study, an interview with at least one Guild member who is unable to attend meetings regularly might have provided some valuable information.

Email Message

Fellow guild members,

I'm sorry that I haven't been able to join you this fall, but I'm a graduate student at SFU and I have a class on Tuesday nights. However, I haven't forgotten about the guild - in fact, it's featuring in one of my projects this semester.

For this course project, we have been asked to build a web site that would support a community of practice, which is simply a community of people who share a common passion or interest and support each other in developing a shared practice around that interest. The Lions Gate Quilters are one such community of practice, and I thought it would be interesting to create a project that had to do with one of my non-academic interests for once. This web site would not be the same as the guild web site - it would extend opportunities to learn, share, and interact with each other, much like we do at our guild meetings.

I'm looking for about 5 quilters who would be willing to answer a few questions about the value of guild membership and about how you develop your practice/craft as a quilter. This informal interview would take no longer than 15 minutes over the phone. Your participation will remain anonymous, and the information you provide will inform me about what members of the guild find most valuable, so that I can design online activities around them. I will be more than happy to share the results of my project with you.

If you would be interested in helping me out, please email me at seabelle@gmail.com with your name, phone number, and a good time to contact you. The project is due Nov. 24, so ideally our conversations would take place in the next week.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a member of this guild?
2. Are you a member of other guilds? If so, which ones?
3. Do you attend Guild meetings? If yes, what do you find most valuable at these meetings? In other words, what would you miss if it were no longer part of the meetings?
4. Do you participate in Guild activities? If so, which ones?
5. What do you find most valuable about Guild membership?
6. Do you ever visit the Guild web site? If so, what do you use the web site for?
7. What resources, strategies, etc. do you use to develop your practice as a quilter? (In other words, how do you learn more about quilting?)
8. Do you ever look for resources on the web? If yes, what are your favourite web sites/resources?
9. Do you participate in social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace? What features do you appreciate most?
10. How would you describe your quilting style?