COMMUNITY ARTS & THE INTERNET // FIELD GUIDES //

Co-Creating Knowledge Online

THEORY SNAP SHOTS

FOR CULTURE MAKERS

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Created by **Pip Shea**

Inspired by **CuriousWorks**

About Community Arts & the Internet Field Guides

Community Arts and the Internet Field Guides have been developed to nurture critical Internet practices among culture-makers.

The guides outline conceptual and practical ideas to use as critical **points of departure** in projects that involve the Internet and other digital communications networks.

Pitched at community artists, cultural development workers, and educators, the guides explore the idea that being a critical cultural producer in the Internet era involves more than learning software and making content, it demands an understanding of how to contribute and respond to **emergent modes of participation and connection**.

Community Arts & the Internet Field Guides are the work of Pip Shea and form part of her PhD inquiry. The examples offered in the booklet were inspired by the practices of CuriousWorks, an Australian organisation working at the intersection of emergent network technologies and creative learning.

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Author // Pip Shea
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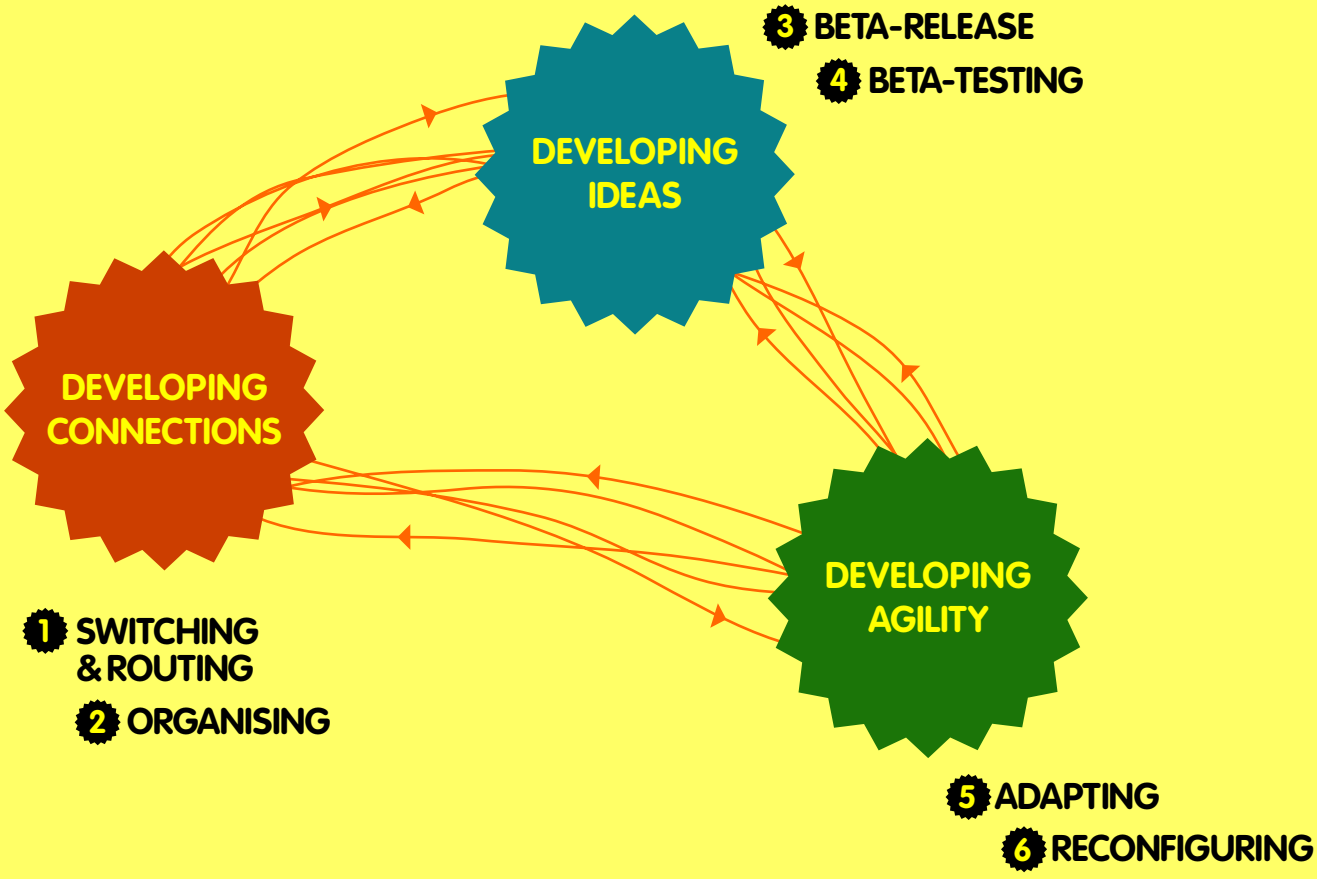
creative commons

Introduction

Forming peer alliances to share and build knowledge is an important aspect of community arts practice; however, different methods are required to foster the **sharing** and **organising** activities that underpin online knowledge co-creation. This booklet is offered as a guide for practitioners who are interested in better utilising the Internet to **connect**, **share** and **make new knowledge**. It builds on the premise that people have become increasingly networked as individuals rather than in groups[1], and that these new ways of connecting enable new modes of **peer-to-peer co-creation**.

The booklet suggests 3 development phases that do not occur in any particular order – developing **connections**, developing **artifacts**, and developing **agility** – to ground the 6 activities below. I hope it helps!



1

Switching & Routing.

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Exchanging small trades of ideas with networked individuals.

An **example** might be:

Community artist Felix is frustrated with the continuously changing interface and terms and conditions of a popular social media sharing network. He decides to seek out alternative solutions and finds three free media sharing community platforms. Felix sends out three Twitter messages to his followers asking for reviews and use cases. He makes sure to add the hashtag #communityarts to his tweets to distribute his call-out beyond his own network of followers.This action offers new information to some, and to others it poses an opportunity for dialogue, or to feed back their own experiences.

Theory snapshot:

Networks of individuals are well positioned to trade knowledge. They share ideas and resources in the hope that they will receive something of value in return: more ideas, new feedback, or stronger connections with other individuals.[2] It can be helpful to think about these trades in two ways: switching and routing. Switching describes informal, peer-to-peer communications, over social networks. Routing describes finding new routes for new systems and ideas to encourage knowledge spillovers in to new networks. Switching and routing activities develop connections, and highlight opportunities for future interdisciplinary co-creation.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. What information do I want to communicate?
2. Which networks of individuals am I communicating to?
3. How can I trigger a knowledge spillover in to a new network of individuals?

2

Organising.

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Co-ordinating networked individuals and their data.

An **example** might be:

Suki has an idea to highlight the geographical connections between grassroots arts projects. She plans to make a website that plots different projects and related content on to a Google map. She doesn't want to ask people manually upload content to the map, as she feels that practitioners are too time-poor to continue the practice. Her idea is to encourage practitioners to add geotags to the content they are already publishing online. This way, material from any number of practitioners and participants will automatically appear in her map. She posts instructions on how to add geotags to videos and photos on her blog, then organises a coffee meeting with 3 practitioners she knows to pitch her idea.

Theory snapshot:

Digital communications networks offer us opportunities to organise ourselves, and our data in new ways. Knowledge has the chance to grow and develop exponentially through new configurations of people designing new configurations of information. Networks offer 'communities of promise':[3] networked individuals who can adjust their systems to collaborate in the authorship of futures. Social momentum helps sustain these new organising activities, as networked individuals work with people where they are at, on their own terms.[4] 'Fleshmeets' – face-to-face gatherings – help "maintain momentum, revitalize energy, consolidate old friendships and discover new ones".[5] They offer opportunities for ideas to be recast before more activities are planned.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. How might I reorganise existing data to reveal new connections?
2. At what point do I organise a fleshmeet to discuss new projects?
3. What are the expectations of my collaborators?

3

Beta-Release.

DEVELOPING IDEAS

Offering 'beta' artifacts as knowledge trades.

An **example** might be:

Orlaith has designed a workshop plan for a project she is running in her local community theatre. Before running the workshop, she decides to post her planned activities on her blog, to see if she can gather some feedback or modifications to her design. She offers the workshop plan as a free PDF and asks for feedback in return for its use. Orlaith specifies that if people give her feedback, she will acknowledge their contribution on the project website by linking to their site or blog. Orlaith also uses the feedback and analytics data in her project acquittal, to make the claim that her project contributed to her field of practice, in addition to being beneficial for project participants.

Theory snapshot:

Releasing knowledge artifacts in 'beta' is a method of online co-creation that solicits feedback from networked individuals. It is another way to trade ideas online. The process should aim to offer networked individuals something of value – a new tool or resource – in the hope that they will review or modify it. Making things to share online is a craft process that situates artifacts in a social dimension. Making, therefore, is a process of connecting in and of itself.[6] The beta-release establishes rules for participation, and specifies guidelines for attribution.[7] This process helps frame the knowledge offering as a trade – for feedback or modification – rather than an unconditional gift. It replaces notions of best practices with 'beta' practice.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. How can my beta artifact offer value to beta-testers?
2. How can I garner specific feedback from beta-testers?
3. How can I make it simple for beta-testers to modify my artifact?

HALF

WAY

4

Beta-testing.

DEVELOPING IDEAS

Trialing and modifying other people's 'beta' artifacts.

An **example** might be:

Community artist Peter, finds a YouTube tutorial describing how an infrared gaming remote has been used to simulate the experience of painting with spray paint. Peter decides he will teach young people how to make the devices in a community art project. He registers that the original creator of the video tutorial has asked for people to make and upload response videos to YouTube if they go ahead and use the technique. So at the end of the project, Peter cuts together a video that documents how he has applied, and modified, the original infrared spray painting idea. He then alerts the original creator that he has uploaded his response video. The original creator posts Peter's video on his blog, then messages Peter to let him know.

Theory snapshot:

Beta-testing describes the process of offering suggestions for changes, or directly changing, a beta-release. Beta-testers are hackers, disruptively innovating to embrace the right to manage their own development. Beta-testers understand the value of trading knowledge, and revel in establishing new and unofficial narratives.[8] They take pleasure in tweaking ideas and customising artifacts to make alternative viewpoints visible. Beta-testers are scavengers, gleaning the web for experiments that might prove useful for their purposes. They do this while respecting the boundaries established around the beta-release.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. How can I develop methods to glean the web for 'beta' artifacts?
2. How can I appropriate 'beta' artifacts?
3. How can I feed my findings back to the original creator?

5

Adapting.

DEVELOPING AGILITY

Responding to technological disruption.

An **example** might be:

Community artist Sean, was about to start working on a project that would see him away from the company office for 3 months. He was keen to find a way to communicate, and co-create with his co-workers while he was away. He decided to use Posterous, as his company was already using this blogging platform as a communications tool. The system worked well for a while – the company co-authored grant applications, acquittals, and workshop plans – until Sean discovered Twitter had purchased Posterous. He anticipated Posterous would lose many of its developers and suffer as a service. Sean began migrating their data to a new service; and when Posterous announced it was shutting down, his company was not affected.

Theory snapshot:

Free social networking and media sharing platforms have already proved invaluable to the under-resourced community sector. However, using these services requires anticipating the inevitable disruptions that are bound to be caused by changes to the ways they are organised and controlled. By developing peripheral vision for these emergent dynamics and by consciously registering changes to things like software interfaces, and terms and conditions,[9] community artists can anticipate when technology is shifting from being appropriate, to inappropriate. This need to maintain agility in proprietary web service environments, creates an argument for keeping digital data agile.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. How might my tools be disrupted by the company who owns the service?
2. Have my tools become innappropriate for the given context?
3. How can I keep my communications data agile?

6

Reconfiguring.

DEVELOPING AGILITY

Embracing opportunities offered by technological disruption.

An **example** might be:

Collaborators Katie and Fiona have been asked to present some of their recent projects at a community arts conference. They decide to begin their co-creation process in Google docs, making notes in a shared document. They have spent roughly 3 hours each writing notes for the presentation. One morning Fiona and Katie realise their Google accounts have been hacked, and that they have lost the record of their collaboration. Over email, Fiona suggests they change their co-creation tool to Prezi. Niether of them have used Prezi but Fiona has heard positive accounts of others collaborating with the software. They eventually see their data loss as a blessing in disguise, as their new tool allows them to share ideas in a non-linear format.

Theory snapshot:

Perplexing situations provoke innovative inquiries,[10] and technological disruption is one such beast. So instead of avoiding it, or feeling beaten by it, we may think about the opportunities technological disruption affords us: it may help us re-think ideas, re-evaluate methods, and re-make artifacts. These processes of reconfiguration are the challenging tasks of ongoing innovation, and action is often made possible precisely because of unstable ground: the fertile ground of ongoing innovation.

Questions to **ask yourself:**

1. Is this disruption an opportunity to re-configure my methods or tools?
2. How might I reconfigure my methods or tools?
3. Did the reconfiguring process produce better methods or tools?

Open Conclusion...

Culture makers can tune their online knowledge co-creation activities through developing new ways of connecting, new modes of developing ideas, and new methods for designing artifacts.

Through trading knowledge, and organising networks of individuals to establish rules for participation, collaboration can traverse new ground through beta-releases and beta-testing. Co-creation processes can also undergo incremental development if new agile approaches are configured as a result of technological disruption.

These networks of cooperating peers also route new knowledge beyond their own networks of peers to re-cast ideas into new contexts.

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Community artists must be vigilant in regard to the hidden biases of technical processes. They should be prepared to change these processes and the art forms within which they use them; to mutate them until they better suit our purposes.

Owen Kelly (1984) Community, Art, and The State: Storming the Citadel

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QUT
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

CURIOUS WORKS

CCi arc centre of excellence for creative industries and innovation