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THREADS OF CONVERSATION: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPATING  
AND LEARNING ABOUT KNITTING IN AN UNSTRUCTURED SETTING

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experience of participating and learning about knitting in a drop-in knitting group that meets in a public library. The study was conducted in the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research and data was collected through interviews and participant observations. Data was analyzed using constant comparative analysis through the theoretical lenses of social capital and the sociocultural learning theory. The following themes arose: 1) conversation and interaction among members are cherished, 2) primary identities define the degree and kind of knitting-related teaching and learning that takes place 3) the diversity and high turnover of fringe participants in the group has consequences for teaching and learning needs, 4) the public library has a constant presence in the life of the knitting group, and 5) knitting with the group provides a sense of community. Analysis showed that the library's social capital played a bigger role in members' participation than vice versa and participant identities were important in shaping an unstructured experience.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines the current perceptions on informal learning in public spaces and theoretical frameworks driving their research, followed by a description of the problem statement and purpose of the current study.

Formal learning has a long history of research and a longer one of practice. Education in a structured environment with a didactic set up and well-established norms, roles, expectations and assessment strategies has the attention of many a researcher, educator and policy-maker. Learning that takes place in such an environment – whether in pre-school, middle school, college or beyond- is visible, controllable, measurable and reproducible. The informal learning that takes place on a daily basis by virtue of being active in the environment around, however, is an invisible iceberg. Not only media and first-hand experience, but relationships and networks too, inform and educate us as a part of routine life.

Sharing information and informal learning – whether self-directed or incidental (Schugurensky, 2000), are two powerful ways in which resources are shared or accessed within a network or a community. In addition, interest in the learning that takes place in a variety of contexts and in a variety of ways is increasing: informal learning centers, in a network or a community defined by practice, interest, or geography and through informal interactions - either intentionally or unintentionally. The workplace and the labor market are prominent areas of research where the everyday transfer of resources is being studied. There are numerous studies about the way members of an organization learn to garner the



information they need through informal channels (e.g. Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr, 1996; Kilpatrick and Bell, 2001; Tsai, 2001; Knight, 2002, Wenger, 1998, etc.). Others have focused on informal meeting places, where the venue brings a relatively diverse group together and turns into a location for civic engagement (Oldenburg, 1997) or information sharing (Pettigrew, 1998). Fisher's (nee Pettigrew) research on social interactions in public places takes her to locations on a university campus (Fisher, Landry and Naumer, 2007), new immigrant population (Fisher et al, 2004), the general public (Fisher et al, 2005) and public libraries (Fisher, Saxton, Edwards and Mai, 2006).

Libraries have been the focus of some research as theaters of social interactions, without a focus on informal learning. Academic libraries, e.g., have lately been getting some attention as public places where students and faculty converge for a variety of purposes - some of them social (Antell, and Engel, 2006; Bryant, 2009; Ludwig and Starr, 2005 and Stephan, 2005). Au (2005), e.g., investigated how an academic library helped local entrepreneurs build social capital. Public libraries, however, are not getting the same kind of attention. Given and Leckie (2003), Kretzman and Rans (2003) and Gong, Japzon and Chen, (2008), among others, have looked at it as a space for meeting and social activity, while Fisher et al (2007) are the only researchers to see the public library as a space where these interactions turn into opportunities for information sharing and informal learning. A public library is a civic institution which belongs to a specific geographically defined community and as such is a landmark. It's a venue where people from several different neighborhoods come together and possibly interact (Swinbourne, 2000). In addition to chance interactions, public libraries offer space for several leisure and learning activities such as hobby clubs, story-telling activities, book clubs, homework help, etc., thus creating a space for patrons to

interact on a regular basis. These interactions and conversations potentially build relationships and informal learning situations, similar to the ones in the research mentioned above.

Research has several ways of looking at the dynamics between relationships and learning. One of the prominent and relatively recent approaches to of studying these dynamics is the sociocultural learning theory. The theory has its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about linguistic development in children and its central tenet is that learning is a matter of dynamic interdependence between the individual and his/her social world. This implies that the context – the 'what' - of learning is as important as the content or the 'how' (Sawchuck, 2003). In this sense, for instance, learning in a particular public library is unique and the learning experience of each individual learner is unique. Lave's (1991) situated social practice and Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice view toe the same line. They go on to suggest that learning is a matter of participation in human activity or a community of practice more than either acquisition of knowledge or its construction. Relationships, activity and social interactions are prime players in one's learning experience (Roth and Lee, 2007). The core concept of this approach requires that the distinction between formal and informal learning take a back seat to interpretation of the experience itself (Eraut, 2000).

There is a dedicated body of research about social interactions that is not necessarily related to a learning theory. Some of this research is from the point of view of the social capital of communities. Social capital is a concept with a burgeoning research literature concerned with the way communities built around a common focus share norms and resources. Courtesy the academic disagreements, it is referred to in terms of its many different features including mutual trust, an expectation of reciprocation, social norms, ties

and resources (McLennan, 2000). At the core of social capital theory are relationships (McLennan, 2000) and the resources inherent in them. However, it is fraught with challenges and disagreements about many of its characteristics starting from its existence, its value and the role of trust in accessing those resources, and theorists from a variety of schools of thought have attempted to define it (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, etc.). As of now, it is a nebulous concept that may very well prove to be a highly contextual as well as multifaceted one. As an idea that refers to many different features of human relationships, it may be a piece of the sociocultural puzzle that explains learning.

### **Problem Statement**

Research on informal learning within networks is primarily focused on the outcomes of information transfer in the workplace; research conducted in other settings scores a distant second. Informal learning is an everyday, everywhere, phenomenon (Schugurensky, 2000) and regularly occurs at home, in school, during chores and at leisure. From the point of view of the sociocultural learning models- directly or indirectly- learning arises out of all human activity – be it current or historical- (Eraut, 2000), thereby eliminating the need to emphasize the distinction between formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, an estimate of the extent of informal learning that individuals engage in pegs it at up to 15 hours per week, and the proportion of formal to informal learning is 20/80 (Tough, 2002). That is a vast amount of learning that is neither planned nor accounted for and ripe for exploration and understanding.

Casual, non-professional and non-academic interactions are of special interest, especially those that take place in a unique context that is likely to be a meeting ground for weak ties or our acquaintances, and may lead to new learning (Granovetter, 1983). Public

libraries may be one such meeting ground. Public libraries in the U.S. have existed for a very long time and they have been studied extensively for their social impact. In a previous day and age they were silent repositories of information, but they have changed into much more active learning spaces now. They offer many programs such as classes for ESL learners, senior citizens, young children, youth, and hobbyists of all ages. Through these programs, members of a community get a chance to meet in a low-intensity meeting place (Aabo, 2005), interact and converse. Depending upon the demographic and socio-economic background of the community, there may be a corresponding variety and/or similarity in the background of patrons who frequent the library and engage in informal interactions with the staff and other members, creating a unique sociocultural context for informal learning experiences. The public libraries branch of the State Library of New South Wales commissioned a report (Swinbourne, 2000), which studied the role of public library as a place that generates and supports such interactions. The focus of this study was on the frequency and purpose of library visits, affective responses to the same and the people encountered - not specific to library *programs*. To the best of my knowledge, interactions generated by participation in such programs have not been studied for their content.

According to thinkers such as Aabo (2005), Audunson (2005), Hillenbrand (2005), Johnson (2009), Rosenfeldt (2005), and Varheim (2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009) another by-product of using public libraries is the creation social capital. Compared to the fervor of opinion, empirical research supporting it (Audunson, Varheim, Aabo and Holmes, 2007; Report by the State Library of New South Wales, 2000; and Johnson, 2010) is fairly insufficient. Although the goal of the present study is not to provide support to this literature, it is instructive to note that the impact of public libraries is seen in terms of community

building and building relationships within the community. The literature making this case does not primarily speak in terms the mechanisms of everyday social interactions, although it does refer to the library as a public room (Aabo, 2005), a meeting place (Audunson, 2005), community collaborator (Bourke, 2005), a front porch (Cart, 2002) and so on.

Much of the research on networked learning is quantitative and statistical in nature, with relatively little qualitative research focusing on the nature or manner of the interactions that give rise to this learning. On the other hand, research on public libraries as social spaces creating social capital has a healthy balance of both qualitative and quantitative strategies, but its focus is not on patrons' interactions.

### **Purpose of the study**

The present study aimed to reduce the sizable gap in the literature regarding the social life of a community as played out in the public library, in terms of learning and social capital. It will simultaneously add to the research on public libraries, social interactions, and informal learning. Researchers and academic institutions have started seeing academic libraries as place (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007; Bryant, 2009, Stephan, 2005). Their findings indicate that modern academic libraries are taking on the garb of social spaces, and that elements of the Third Place (Oldenburg, 1997) have started creeping into their form and culture. Public libraries, too, offer their patrons amenities for non-solitary activities and for the resulting congregation and conversation around them. At least in ideology, if not always in practice (Pateman, 1998), they are egalitarian institutions that welcome one and all. Not being commercial establishments they treat their patrons as citizens, not consumers (Aabo, 2005 and Report by the State Library of New South Wales, 2000), further underscoring their attractiveness to large sections of society.

## **Research Question**

Participating in library activities is one of the many ways a community member may make use of this institution and the characteristics mentioned above make it a unique social and learning experience. Knitting as a popular social activity (Ruland, 2010) has found a place in the public library programs and has been studied in this role to a small extent (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007 and McKenzie et al, 2007), with the goal of studying information transfer and the way library space is transformed by participants in the activity. Although there is research and data on library usage (both numerical and qualitative), to the best of my knowledge, there is little by way of an empirical account of the experience of participating in a library activity such as knitting, particularly in terms of learning and social capital. The goals of the present study are to understand the lived experience of participating in a library knitting program, including the learning opportunities and resources that arise from the interactions within. Therefore, the research question for the proposed study is: “What is the lived experience of participating and learning about knitting within the context of the knitting program of a public library, as seen from the perspective of the sociocultural learning approach?”

This chapter identified the gap in current research on the social nature of public libraries and the justification for adding to the pool of knowledge about it. The answer to my research question may add to the growing literature on informal learning environments, increase the visibility of libraries as social spaces, add to the fund of knowledge about social learning and potentially may contribute to the lifelong learning literature.

## **Definitions**

**Informal Learning:** Informal learning is a process of change in a participants' knowledge, attitude or behavior by virtue of participation in an unstructured activity.

**Community:** A community refers to a collection of individuals who belong to the same geographical area and are members of the public library.

**Network:** A network refers to a group of individuals who claim to be acquaintances or more and who participate in one or more shared activities.

**Social Interactions:** Social interactions or Interactions refer to a verbal or non-verbal transaction between one or more adult members of the public library.

**Social capital:** Social capital refers to the collection of resources (physical, cognitive and/or emotional) that the network holds and that members of the network potentially have access to.

## **Chapter 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter covers some of the theoretical and empirical literature about public library as place and the nature of informal learning and social capital situated in such a place. This discourse is discussed from the sociocultural learning perspective. This review of literature establishes a case for studying a knitting program offered in a public library, as a venue and activity-context for the informal learning that takes place, from a sociocultural learning perspective. Social capital is treated as a potential piece of the context.

#### **The Public (and Academic) Library and Social Space**

Public libraries were established in the United States with the intent of educating the immigrants and for adult education (Stone, 1953; Audunson, 2005). In the U.K., they were assigned the responsibility of distracting the populace from anti-social activities, helping it cultivate 'acceptable' pastimes and introducing it to literature (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1998). Morris, Hawkins and Sumsion (2001) list the number of benefits a public library offers. According to them, libraries support literacy and imagination, empower citizens and encourage a sense of ownership, and their electronic and print resources are essentially public goods. In addition, they often complement the municipality's efforts toward its population, develop services for every age-group from the kindergarteners to the elderly and invite its patrons in as citizens, not consumers (Aabo, 2005). A report (1998) by Pennsylvania's Department of Education on library usage in the state identifies the many ways in which libraries serve its populace: support the community's economic productivity, provide easily accessible services and programs to all age groups, improve the overall quality of life, promote individual well-being, support social service agencies and supply customized



information services to individuals. In the words of Bundy (2003, p.6) “....no other agency in society has the breadth of role, the user range and diversity and the potential impact.”

Public libraries were established with the goal of wide-ranging social impact and they may still hold sway over the populace in three ways: impact on their community - by supporting its identity, cohesion, culture and information needs, impact on the economy - by encouraging local economic activities, and impact on education - by supporting skill development, democracy and collaboration between communities (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1998 and Morris, Hawkins and Sumsion, 2001). With reference to their impact on education, Alvin Johnson recommended as far back as 1938 that public libraries and educational institutions should create a sense of community in order to secure the greatest buy-in into a “program of education”, such that the members collaborate and realize that they have shared values.

Given and Leckie's (2003) study was an attempt at understanding the ways in which space in public libraries is used in the contemporary North American culture, especially against a backdrop of widening globalization, privatization and information revolution. They found that patrons used the library for many social activities which the libraries did not encourage or intend to offer their space for- such as eating, sleeping, drinking and showing affection- but which clearly underscore the social nature of the libraries and the patrons' comfort in availing themselves of it. The researchers urge librarians to be mindful of these behaviors and of evidence that libraries are constructed “socially by the myriad of (*sic*) activities and interactions taking place within them” (p.384). The nature of a particular public space, including public libraries, can determine the individuals who frequent it, the norms of the emergent network and the kinds of resources getting exchanged. Ray Oldenburg's (1997)

idea of the 'Third Place' (the first two being home and workplace, respectively) is an interesting way of looking at social interactions in public libraries. Third places are locations where people in a community or neighborhood may gather informally for conversation and coffee, food or more. He identifies the functions that third places perform as follows:

1. Bringing neighborhoods together
2. Helping newcomers navigate their way around the community
3. Sorting people
4. Bringing youth and adults together
5. Helping care for the neighborhood
6. Encouraging political debate
7. Reducing the cost of living
8. Entertaining
9. Building friendships
10. Serving senior and retired citizens

All of these functions are ways in which community members come together and interact.

Several of the functions Oldenburg (1997) identifies relate to a community or neighborhood's identity and self-reflection, including bringing neighborhoods together, helping care for the neighborhood and encouraging political debate and democracy. These functions are not dissimilar from those a public library performs, as suggested above.

Oldenburg (1997) writes from a sociological perspective while Pettigrew's (1998) 'information ground' perspective gives us a more specific way of looking at third places. It refers to everyday life settings, which are points of focal activity around which information is shared. She defines (Pettigrew, 1999, in Fisher, Landry and Naumer, 2007) information

grounds as “‘synergistic' environment[s] temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information” (p.811). It implies that the sharing of information is not predetermined or the central focus, but arises out of the coming together of actors in a common space. She proposes the following processes as characteristics of Information Grounds:

1. Those who gather differ from each other in important ways and play expected roles in the flow of information.
2. The major activity is social interaction, and information sharing is a by-product.
3. The modes by which information is shared are both formal and informal, and the direction varies.
4. They may take place anywhere and only require the presence of individuals.
5. The information gained at these 'grounds' is put to use in many ways and may offer social, emotional, physical and/or cognitive benefits.
6. The grounds exist in many sub-contexts, which together form the grand context.

Fisher, Landry and Naumer (2007) suggest that the venues themselves have the following features to some degree, influencing the information flow: focal activities, conviviality, creature comforts, location and permanence, privacy and ambient noise. They tested the propositions of the Information Grounds perspective with several populations and venues; two were in the context of public libraries- baby story times in Canadian libraries and the Seattle Public Central Library. In addition, Fisher, Durrance and Bouch Hinton

(2004) used the information grounds perspective to study how immigrant workers benefit from the grand context of the Queens Borough Public Library literacy and coping skills program. The institution of public library fits the bill of an information ground (Pettigrew, 1998) where people might come together for a focal activity, such as homework or literacy learning, and where social interaction and information sharing emerge as by-products. In addition, these interactions may not be sporadic and irregular but may be repeated over days, months or even years, thus helping those who participate to build relationships. Pettigrew (1998, in Varheim, 2008) states that public libraries help create the necessary conditions- including equal status in the group, shared goals, co-operation within the group, and established norms- in order for interactions between individuals to be colored with generalized trust.

Although a lot of attention has been paid to library usage in terms of information behavior, more research is necessary about a side of the public library not often in the limelight- the public library as a social space (Given and Leckie, 2003). Happily, 'library as place' is a growing field of research, which looks at patrons' use of the physical space of a library. Much of this research looks at academic libraries, (Ludwig and Starr, 2005; Stephan, 2005; Antell, and Engel, 2006) and some at public libraries (e.g. Given and Leckie, 2003; Fisher, Saxton, Edwards and Mai, 2006). A report by the Council of Library and Information Resources (2005) is dedicated to an exploration of the 'Library as Place'. Of its many contributors, Christina A. Peterson (2005) reveals the details of a library-planning experiment in which the San Jose State University and the City of San Jose opened a joint-use library in downtown San Jose. Four of the eight floors of this library have open activity spaces with no quiet zones. Library planners designed the new building to support five

different ways patrons might use the space: information seeking, recreation, teaching and learning, connection and contemplation. Except for information seeking, which involves accessing print and electronic resources, and contemplation, which necessitates a *lack* of interaction, every other kind of use may – and according to Peterson (2005) does- involve interacting with other members of the library. Although the goal of these changes is to make libraries more current, there are voices of caution too (Gayton, 2007) against mistaking the need for a 'communal' space in the academic library for 'social' space.

### **Social Interactions in a Public Library**

Goulding (2004) recognizes the fact that formal associational bodies such as parish councils and tenants' associations provide an arena for community members to regularly engage in social interactions, but believes that informal arenas -such as libraries- also help build a thriving civic life, especially when those people hail from different walks of life. Audunson (2005) agrees, stating that public libraries function as low-intensity, cross-cultural meeting places where people who may not share interests and values meet each other, as opposed to high-intensity meeting places where we spend most of our lives and meet people similar to us. Public libraries serve the community by acting as social spaces, encouraging a discourse between different members and supporting democracy. In addition, an absence of such places can lead to fragmentation in a society, especially a diverse society (Bourke, 2005). Cart (2002) chimes in by calling the public library the 'front porch of America', which allows a community to engage in informal social interactions.

Simmell (1949) in his essay on the sociology of sociability commends pure sociability for its democratic and egalitarian nature, free from the status-dependent roles and expectations, which dominate our social lives in other situations such as the workplace or the

family. Public libraries are one of the places that provide their patrons the ability to engage in such pure sociability. To quote from a report by Swinbourne (2000) for the State Library of New South Wales,

Library users will often share the space with groups they do not usually encounter. In the sharing of the resources and physical space, people will meet others outside their close circles and recognize both commonalities and differences in familiar surroundings, which are seen as safe space. (p.4)

This report attempts to focus not only on the economic impact of public libraries but discusses their impact on social relationships, especially among diverse populations. It makes several suggestions regarding the use and research of the physical, social space of a public library in view of its ability to support interactions and trust-building within the community.

Peterson's 2005 study refers to the use of a public library to connect with fellow students and members of the community:

Providing a neutral place where groups can connect is an important function of the public library, and one that benefits university students as well as members of the public at large. Civic programs, major displays, and public meetings provide forums for the open exchange of ideas students have read about or discussed in class. The library is a place where patrons meet in a highly accessible environment, where information and services are free of charge, and where all feel welcome. (p. 60)

McCabe (2001, in Hillenbrand, 2005) recommends underscoring and developing the social nature of the public library, “offering educational projects in a social setting and utilizing the library as a place for formal and informal social interaction” (p6.)

### **Social Capital as a Context for Learning**

The development of social ties is a potential outcome of regular social interactions between two or more individuals in either a private or a public space. These ties are generally divided into weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1983) and may have different resources to

offer. One way to discuss these resources is in terms of ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 1995). There is a movement gathering speed in the current literature on public libraries which claims that they help build social capital for their communities (e.g. Aabo, 2005; Audunson, 2005; Hillenbrand, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Rosenfeldt, 2005; Varheim, 2006, etc.). According to the social capital theory, while *individuals* possess other forms of capital (e.g. human, financial, cultural etc.), social capital resides in their *relationships* with other individuals; mutual trust and an expectation of reciprocity are important characteristics (McLenaghan, 2000). Looking at relationships in terms of resources is really at the core of social capital theory (Ballati and Falk, 2002) and many scholars – primarily Bourdieu (2001), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) - think about social capital in terms of the resources available to the members of the network. Coleman (1988) attributes the development of social capital, in a general sense, to changes in the relationship between actors. When Bourdieu (2001) talks about capital, he places his actors in their social space depending on their economic, social and cultural characteristics. Therefore, he defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition... which provides each of its members with the backing of a collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (p.51). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998, p. 243) define social capital ‘as the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit’. They believe that there are three dimensions of social capital: the structural dimension, the relational dimension and the cognitive dimension. Structural dimension refers to a network of relationships, which help individuals find support and partners in

collaboration. Relational dimension refers to feelings of trust in those relationships and the cognitive dimension refers to shared mental qualities such as interests or hobbies which bind the group together. Pretty (2003) discusses the three kinds of social capital generally agreed upon in literature based on three kinds of social ties; bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to associations at the local level between people who share certain key interests and attitudes. They are manifested in a variety of kinds of organizations, such as country clubs or women's micro-finance groups. Bridging social capital refers to the capacity of these groups to build associations with other groups (similar or not), perhaps outside the community. Linking social capital is the ability of networks to connect vertically with other institutions or organizations, e.g., in order to influence policy.

The potential relationship between social capital and educational outcomes is receiving a significant amount of attention (e.g. Carbonaro, 1988; Coleman, 1988; Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry, 1996; McNeal, 1999; Morgan and Sorenson, 1999; Glaser, 2001; Ecclestone, 2004 and Helliwell and Putnam, 2007). Ian Falk has written extensively (Kilpatrick, Falk and Harrison, 1998; Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk, 1999; Falk, Ballati and Golding, 2000; Falk, 2001, and Kilpatrick and Falk, 2003, etc.) about lifelong learning in the context of social capital. For instance, Falk and Harrison (1998) investigated the relationship between the knowledge and identity resources that members of a rural Australian community draw upon in their interactions with each other and the way their learning interactions are connected to the development of social capital. Falk's research focuses on small businesses, rural populations and the under-served urban population, in order to investigate the manner in which social capital helps his participants learn. Such attempts include learning to read, changing business practices, improving agricultural practices and more. He asserts that the



relationship of social capital with the quality and effects of learning warrants both research and the development of theory (Ballati and Falk, 2002).

Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk (1999) believe that both social capital and learning have roots in the interactions between individuals, groups and organizations. According to the social models of learning they cite (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991 and Kasl and Masnick, 1997), learning within a community means learning the community's behavior, its processes, its attitudes, values, language and ways to access its knowledge. In other words, learning in a community implies learning its shared norms, or becoming socialized. To the extent that social capital is generated by a participation in a set of shared norms, learning in a community may be directly related to developing social capital in that community. Moreover, according to Eraut (2000), it is socialization in the form of observation, induction and participation that helps learners understand their context and the organization they are a part of, rather than any formal procedures. Thus, the same behaviors that help participants build social capital in a community may support informal learning and achieve outcomes which formal procedures may not.

The preceding review of literature showed the role of the public library in creating a space that facilitates social interactions and possibly social capital. Eraut's (2000) claim bears comment on informal and non-formal learning procedures, particularly as they relate to such a space.

### **Informal Learning and Social Capital**

Individuals go through learning experiences throughout their lives, either in a formal or an informal manner. There is some research about the impact of the strength of social ties on learning in terms of sheer access to information. Fisher, Naumer, Durrance, Stromski and

Christiansen (2005) found that strong ties and the internet are the two primary sources of information for people. On the other hand, according to Granovetter (1983) weaker ties are more important for learning new information than stronger ties because weaker ties bridge the gaps between 'socially distant' parts of the network, which may have new information and therefore present new opportunities for learning. It is possible that different social ties help us access different kinds of information and consequently learn different things. In fact, Granovetter (1983) argues that “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (p.202). Although this opinion belongs to the pre-information explosion age, Field and Spence (2000) do suggest that dense networks solve people’s informational needs, which prevent them from participating in formal adult education. The results of Field’s (2003) survey led him to redefine lifelong learning as informal learning because the participants in his study gained a lot of knowledge through their strong network ties, rather than the formal learning process. In his own words, “learning is one of the goals that may be facilitated by co-operation with others.... we might hypothesize that people use their social capital to increase their access to learning.” He goes on to claim that drawing on one’s social capital may not only increase one’s access to learning, but the mere act may add to one’s social capital. Kilpatrick, Falk and Harrison’s (1998) study of a rural Australian community of small business owners led to this understanding of the development of social capital:

We suggest that learning occurs not only through this sharing of resources, but also as community members reconstruct their identities and the identities of others, and extend their knowledge resources during interactions which use social capital. Thus, social capital is dynamic, and is both used and built through learning processes.

Lesser and Storck (2001) argue that the social capital which a community of practice shares leads to change in the community's behavior, knowledge sharing habits and, ultimately, performance. Learning and identity have a close relationship for the community of practice perspective and, indeed, to other sociocultural perspectives as well. According to John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), current research echoes its claims about the connection between cognitive and linguistic development and social relationships. The implication in terms of resources accessible through one's social relationships is that such a development benefits from a robust social capital. The sociocultural perspective will be discussed in further detail later.

According to Coleman (1988) one of the many forms of social capital is the information potency in social relationships - more specifically the ability to access information which bears no direct connection to these relationships, but which goes on to facilitate a certain action. Gopee (2002) conducted a qualitative study of nurses' perceptions of lifelong learning. He found that much of the professional learning takes place in an informal manner and through informal means – not only via colleagues in the workplace, but other non-professional ties such as family, friends and significant others, who provided support in various forms. Some of this may take place in 'mini informal networks'. They recommend that employers and organizations recognize and support this form of lifelong learning due to its potency. However, informal learning is notoriously invisible to those who engage in it. Livingstone (2001) cites several studies which show that much of the informal learning that happens in workplaces goes unidentified, the workers take it for granted, the management does not comprehend it and it takes place collectively rather than individually. Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) - belonging to the sociocultural perspective-

beginning with Leont'ev (1978, 1981 in Sawchuck, 2003) states that learners are typically unaware of both the many operational conditions and responses that are involved in the learning process and cannot be relied upon to generate a definition for it. In addition, they are normally oblivious to the broader structure ('motive' in the parlance of activity theory) of their practice. Individuals are not used to discussing their learning experience and when they do they are more likely to discuss formal rather than informal learning (Eraut, 2000). Eraut et al (1998, in Eraut, 2000) found that people were able to talk about their informal learning in the workplace when there was a) a mediating object they used to discuss it, b) a habit of describing one's knowledge during consultation, c) an expectation of explanation as part of one's job profile, d) informal work-related discussions which led to unauthoritative off-hand remarks, or e) a critical situation that necessitated conversation. In addition, work-related continuing education also helped participants talk about the informal nature of their workplace learning.

### **Defining Informal learning**

Scholarly agreement about the definition of informal learning is difficult to come by. The classic view of informal learning defines it as that which does not take place in formal institutions of learning with a definite structure (Smith, 1999, 2008). In Europe, the most commonly used definition is the one proposed by the Commission of the European Communities (2001, in Zürcher, 2010):

Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or "incidental"/random).

This definition, too, seems to use formal learning or structure as a reference point to define informal learning. Eraut (2004) talks about informal learning in terms of the greater freedom

it offers in contrast to formal learning. For Hohenstein (2006), two of the important distinctions between informal and formal learning are that it is difficult to identify what comprises informal learning and it is difficult to evaluate informal learning, because its goals are not identified in advance. Hodkinson, Colley and Malcolm (2003) survey the research on informal, formal and non-formal learning to find that the distinctions as they appear in much of the literature are exaggerated and that there is no ideal-type of each kind of learning for the purpose of illustration. Folkstead (2006) reviews literature on formal and informal music education, to look at four criteria of formality/informality: the situation, ownership, intentionality and the learning style. He describes informal music learning situation as unplanned, steered by working, playing or composing, and generally interacting and self-chosen or voluntary. This finding is in keeping with Wenger's (1998) idea that learning is integral to practice, not external to it. Schugurensky (2000) accounts for intentionality and awareness of learning to create a taxonomy of three forms of informal learning – self-directed learning (intentional and aware), incidental learning (not intentional but aware) and socialization (not intentional and unaware). He states that informal learning can take place individually or in a group, in any space, at any age, from multiple sources, may bring intentionality and awareness to socialization through retrospective recognition, can be additive or transformative, complement or contradict other forms of learning or even other categories of informal learning. Eraut (2000) suggests that informal learning be called *non-formal* learning to avoid the many implications related to the word 'informal', such as "dress, discourse, behaviour, diminution of social differences, etc." (p.114), which may complicate an understanding of the phenomenon. He identifies implicit, reactive and deliberate learning, which lie on a continuum of intentionality, awareness and the time of

events; timing is the factor which determines the kind of intentionality and therefore, of learning. He claims that implicit learning takes a long time and prolonged observation to be identified as such, while recognizing reactive and deliberative learning in oneself is only possible in case of a memorable outcome. According to Livingstone (2001), “incidental or tacit learning in which we engage individually or collectively without direct reliance on a teacher or an externally-organized curriculum can be termed self-directed or informal learning”. It is debatable whether informal learning never has predetermined goals, whether all informal learning is 'incidental and 'tacit' and whether it always takes place without direct reliance on a teacher. This is especially so in light of taxonomies by Schugurensky (2000) and Eraut (2000). A more liberal definition of 'teacher' than the one used in formal education blurs the distinction as well. However, setting the criteria of no external curriculum is more palatable given the general understanding of the phenomenon as an unstructured experience.

Foley (1999) believes that most of everyday learning is tacit, informal, incidental, action-related and is often not recognized as learning at all. Given the ubiquity of such learning, the debate about the distinction between formal and informal or the definition of informal may be a moot point (Smith, 1999, 2008). Much of human behavior is based on tacit knowledge and unless recognized, it may lead to self-perpetuating knowledge and inappropriate behavior (Smith, 1999, 2008). As Tomlinson (1999, in Eraut, 2000) tells us, pre-service teachers imbibe a lot of tacit knowledge from their own learning experiences about the way teachers work and may sidestep formally acquired knowledge that goes against it, when faced with the necessity to play the role of a teacher themselves. Bateson (1972, in Engestrom, 2001) refers to this tacit learning as the ‘hidden curriculum’ in the classroom, which is learned along with the recognized and accepted formal curriculum.

In keeping with this idea, Jeffs and Smith (1990 in Smith, 2008) suggest that discussions of informal as well as formal learning need to focus on the manner and experience inherent in each rather than simply the context. They argue that informal learning is largely dominated by conversation with some formal episodes, while formal learning is large dominated by a set curriculum with some informal episodes. The context remains a part of the puzzle, because each context supports different affordances, thus generating a variety of learning opportunities and corresponding expectations. In line with this thought, Hodkinson, Colley and Malcom (2002) suggest that we focus our attention not on the boundaries between formal and informal learning but on the context-specific interplay between dimensions of each.

### **Sociocultural Learning Approaches**

It is evident from the discussion above that trying to define informal learning is a thorny issue - with regards to identifying its presence as well as distinguishing it from formal learning, or even the need to do so. Eraut's (2004) discussion of informal learning acknowledges its social nature, its relationship to spaces surrounding formal activities and events, the variety of settings it may take place in and its role in supporting personal, experiential learning. Elsewhere (Eraut, 2000), he recommends that in order to understand a learning situation that involves more than one individual, i.e. a social interaction, we use two complementary perspectives. One would be to think about the situation itself – its history, broader context and its continuing interaction with its environment – and the participants' interactions throughout it. The second is to identify individual learning trajectories within the same situation. In essence, he takes the situated view of learning (Lave, 1991). This and other views of learning, which think of learners and their social, cultural, and/or historical context

as equally important and inseparable parts of a learning situation, belong to a school of thought commonly referred to as the sociocultural perspective of learning.

An understanding of the proposed relationship between an individual's sociocultural context (or human activity) and his/her learning benefits from a look at the origins of the school of thought. Development of social learning theory and its affiliated approaches can be traced back to the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian scholar who put forth ideas about child development and learning which were at odds with those of Piaget (1923/2002), his contemporary and later, those of Skinner (1965) too. Piaget offered the idea that learning follows cognitive maturation, while Skinner equated learning with the relationship between stimulus and response. Vygotsky on the other hand, offered mediation through cultural artifacts as an explanatory principle for the relations between the subject (the learner) and the object (Engestrom, 2001). For Vygotsky a child's learning and behavior are in a two way relationship with the social world (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective bears some resemblance to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model of development, which divides the child's or person's environment into micro-, macro-, exo- and chronosystems. Each of these systems is progressively farther removed from the child/individual who is at the center. The microsystem refers to the home/family, workplace, etc., the mesosystem is a system of microsystems, the exosystem is the link between the settings of the micro and mesosystems, the macrosystem includes the large institutions of the culture (social, political, formal as well as informal) in which the micro, meso and exosystems exist and the chronosystem refers to the change and consistency in the person and environment over the course of a lifetime. This model hypothesizes that an individual is a member of each of these systems and the activity in each of these has a varying degree of impact upon the individual's



learning and development. Bronfenbrenner (1994) describes the ecological environment as “a set of nested structures each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 39), such that the closer a system is to the individual, the more direct and unique its impact on his/her development. The ecological model attempts to explain the variety of social, cultural and historical forces that act upon an individual’s development.

### **Dynamic Interdependence of Social and Individual Processes**

While Bronfenbrenner discusses development in terms of an environmental impact at various levels, Vygotsky believed that development is “the *transformation* of socially shared activities into internalized processes” (p.192, John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). One of Vygotsky’s prominent contributions to the field of learning that arose out of this belief is the concept of a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development refers to the difference between an individual’s mental processes and the external social processes of a task. According to this concept, “external social processes become internalized to serve in a mental capacity, thereby raising the level of individuals' cognitive performance to one they could not have reached on their own” (p.7, Saloman and Perkins, 1998). The zone of proximal development may be crossed with the help of another, more experienced learner or a teacher until the learner can be responsible for his or her own learning and participate in an activity more fully (Lave and Wenger, 1991 in John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996).

Vygotsky (1978) discusses learning processes as the outcome of a two-way interaction between social and individual processes. In the words of John-Steiner and Mahn (1996, p.192), “the power of Vygotsky's ideas lies in his explanation of the *dynamic interdependence* of social and individual processes”. Underlying these ideas and supporting

them is a dialectical frame of reference, which allows for contradictions, conversation and inseparable connections between different parts of the system, such that analysis of a single component acknowledges the other, related components (Roth and Lee, 2007).

The sociocultural approach is not one theory but a collection of many interpretations and applications, and this fact bears testament to the active research interest in it (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). Of its many interpretations include the cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), situated social practice (Lave, 1991) and the communities of practice perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Each of these perspectives offers a view of learning rooted in social interactions as they occur in the midst of ongoing activity of the social world and situates the human mind in a state of development and participation in the social world, while giving interpretation a key role in explaining the outcome. Semiotic mediation and cultural scaffolding are a part of this system (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996 and Saloman and Perkins, 1998) and support learning in the form of computers, language, mnemonic devices and statistics. According to Vygotsky, (1978) such tools help learners transform overt actions into internal processes, transforming their minds in the process. In addition, knowledge is neither 'gained' nor 'constructed', but changes and is changed by the sociocultural and historical context (e.g. Engestrom, 2000). Learning, thus, is in an intricate relationship with the structure and progress of the system and processes that the learner is a part of, including social, historical, cultural as well as material processes, e.g. brain activity (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). Engestrom (2001) summarizes five principles of activity theory: the activity system is the main unit of analysis, the system is a multi-voiced community, its history is of crucial importance, contradictions within the system support innovation and over long periods of time the activity system can go through widespread metamorphosis.

That this approach has such an earnest focus on context implies that the ‘what’ of learning is as important as the ‘how’; i.e., we are “always learning something somewhere rather than simply learning" (p. 303, Sawchuck, 2003). Roth and Lee (2007), for instance, discuss the use of CHAT in a study conducted with a middle school science class. The context of the study was a real world environmental science project for a seventh grade class, which also involved the surrounding community. Using CHAT, the learning outcome for students who participated in this project could only be understood in the context of the entire experience and not simply in terms of the information students had gained and memorized in the end. As a particularly striking example of the importance of context and activity, the authors point at the dramatic difference in the behavior of a student previously diagnosed with ADHD, who was prone to disruptive behavior and poor performance in the traditional classroom. Changing the structure of the activity surrounding the learner changed his interactions with it and therefore his learning.

Lave (1991) reminds us that psychological perspectives regarding the relationship between the environment and the individual lie on a continuum that ranges from behaviorism to models of sociocultural learning. On one end of this continuum is the purely behaviorist ‘cause and effect’ perspective. Next come the social learning models inspired by Bandura (1969), then the cognitive perspective which emphasizes human agency in the learning process, followed by the interpretive perspective which refers to language as a sense-making tool to understand and create the social world, and finally the situated social practice, which seems to agree with behaviorism in that the human being is a social construction. The difference, however, is that the situated social practice view of learning “emphasizes the *relational interdependency* of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition,

learning, and knowing” (p.66, Lave, 1991), that is to say that the individual both creates and is created by the social world. There is a mutually supporting relationship between the activity of individuals and the social world; in effect the sociocultural learning approach upsets the pedagogical/andragogical boat by turning conventional understanding about power relations in education on its head. According to Sawchuck, (2003, p. 304) “If authoritative sources of knowledge such as experts or established canonical texts are not necessarily required for the learning process, then we establish a significant opening for and intellectual awareness of, learning that can transform rather than merely reproduce social life ... it can be seen as a potentially open process, and in some senses, fundamentally democratic”. Sawchuck (2003) claims that establishing and overcoming the zone of development may not even require a more experienced other. He conducted an ethnomethodological/ conversational analysis of the interactions between two participants learning the same computer-based task and concluded that two novices can set up their zone of proximal development together through informal learning.

### **Participation and Identity Formation**

Since the focus of sociocultural learning theories is on activity, participation is a key concept. In particular, the arguments put forth by Lave (1991 and 1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991) in their ‘communities of practice’ view suggest that learning is a matter of doing more than knowing. As a consequence of participation in a community of practice, where practice refers to “ a patterned form of action”, (p. 190, Roth and Lee, 2007), learners develop an identity and learning becomes intimately connected to this identity; who you are is directly related to what you know and this identity motivates, shapes and makes learning meaningful. Consequently, learning is not a matter of acquisition of information through

relationships and structure, but being participants in the relationships and structure; to learn is to be a member of a community of practice (Smith, 2003). Lave (1996) for instance, studied the education of tailors in West Africa by means of apprenticeship and participation in their respective communities of practice and concluded that ‘knowing’ tailoring is related to one’s role (or identity) in the community. In fact, Lave (1996) gives primary importance to identity-creation, “learning to be some kind of persons” over the knowledge ‘gained’ by the learner. Identity produces and is produced by activity (Roth and Lee, 2007). In line with this school of thought is the approach that treats social mediation as participatory knowledge construction. Similar to Lave’s (1996) claims, supporters of this approach (including Cole, 1995 and Greeno, 1997 in Saloman and Perkins, 1998) emphasize knowledge in terms of participation over acquisition. Saloman and Perkins (1998) suggest that the individual is firmly embedded in a complex system of social mediation, which serves to channel thought between the actors of this system. All the components of this system together are part of the learning. “Cognitive activity, goal, social interactions and learning materials are seen as a merged unit uniquely situated in a particular context.... the unit of analysis is the interpsychological functional system composed of interacting individuals, situations, activities, contents and meanings...” (p. 9, Saloman and Perkins, 1998). Roth and Lee (2007) offer that CHAT too, sees cognition as distributed across a variety of contexts and related to a dynamic set of cultural-historical tools. Consequently, any gains in knowledge are spread throughout the system and are not restricted to the individual in question.

The sociocultural learning approach envisions a vast system of relationships, personal and collective history and cultural artifacts along with the learners’ participation in it to explain the learning process. Social capital may be considered a resource arising out of the

activity in this system. Previous discussion has shown that learning to be a member of a community can both be a source of social capital and the very process of learning that which the community offers. The situated learning approach suggests that learning is inherent in the situations and conversations that people have and does not reside in individual brains, that teaching should aim at making learners participants in their communities of practice and that knowledge and activity are intertwined such that learning is inseparable from daily living (Smith, 1999). Consequently, this approach breaks the traditional boundary between formal and informal learning and imposes new definitions and structure in the form of interactions between these components of the system.

### **Conversations and Informal Learning**

One of the many ways in which human activity takes place is through conversation and therefore conversation has a central place in the sociocultural approach to learning. Informal learning through everyday conversations is ripe for being studied as one of the ways the dynamic interdependence of individuals and their social world is expressed. Research investigating conversations in learning environments is on the rise, fueled by the belief that learning and conversation have a relationship (Hohenstein, 2006). Some of this research (e.g. Allen, 2002; Ash, 2003; Folkstead, 2006; Nardi, Ly and Harris, 2007 and Whittaker, Frohlich and Daly-Jones, 1994) has used conversational analysis to gather data about the content of such learning and the venues for these interactions include the workplace, museums and massively multi-player online games. Allen (2002), found five different categories of learning talk among museum participants: perceptual, affective, conceptual, connecting and strategic. Ash (2003) studied conversations among families, using a combination of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and dialogic inquiry. Brown and Issacs (1996) see

workplace learning from the communities of practice perspective and state that conversation is central to people's learning, 'as they work and practice together' and that it is a social rather than an individual process. Important innovations at the workplace get generated through shared ideas and questions. De Carteret (2007) looks to contemporary scholars who believe that informal learning, which takes place through dialogue, relationships and friendships, can overcome the commodification of education and adult learning. Hohenstein (2006) wants to "identify how people learn in conversations so that we may plan for maximally effective informal learning environments that generate the kinds of conversation most likely to aid learning."

Missing from the research on conversational learning in these venues is a mention of the public library. If learning and knowledge are as intimately connected to activity and context as the sociocultural models of learning suggest, then the experience of participating in library activities and learning from them should be unique. As seen earlier, public libraries are distinctive in their ability to be egalitarian and to serve their community's social, informational and leisure needs without being commercial enterprises. Today, American public libraries function not only as repositories of audio, video and text collections but also as places of informal activities, non-formal learning and recreation. For instance, the Schlow Center Region Library in State College, PA, offers multiple programs including book clubs, drop-in knitting groups, chess clubs, 'baby and me lapsit' sessions, games club, etc., besides presentations, talks, tutoring and tax assistance to its patrons. In addition, the library offers its community rooms for activity-driven social interactions. It would be a wonder if such a hub of activity and interactions did not lead to participants' learning and, according to the

proponents of sociocultural models of learning, it surely does. However, literature about the learning that takes place through such social activities and programs is sparse at best.

Much library research refers to statistics about patrons frequenting libraries and accessing their collections (Given and Leckie, 2003 and McKenzie et al, 2007). Part of the reason behind a dearth of more research about activities in the public library may be the unwillingness of library patrons to participate in research studies (personal communication Pat Griffith, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010). Another may be the traditional image of the public library as a quiet place for individually conducted learning. A notable exception is the study of a knitting group in a public library (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007), which is one of the kinds of activities supported by the Schlow Center Region Library too. The authors applied a collectivistic theoretical framework to examine human information behavior and meaning making. In a related study, McKenzie et al, (2007) investigated the way female members of a knitting group in a public library transformed its social space. Both these studies follow the conversations and activities of their participants. However, neither study focused on the learning experiences of their participants. The focus of the former study was on information behavior as a collective, while that of the latter was on the use of space.

There has been a recent resurgence of knitting groups in urban areas (Ruland, 2010) and there is literature about group activities related to many handicrafts, including knitting (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001; Pentney, 2008; Gainor, 2009; Myzelev, 2009 and Ruland, 2010). Some of it relates to these activities as they take place in a public library, but the focus of much of this literature is on the use of knitting or other handicrafts as a means of self-expression or serious leisure. After studying an embroidery guild, Fischer (1995, in Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001) identifies three different purposes fulfilled by



members' participation in the guild; it nurtured their self-esteem, helped them share their skills with others and helped them practice their skills in the company of others. Similar purposes may be fulfilled by other socially practiced handicrafts, including knitting. In addition, the previously reviewed literature gives us reason to believe that there is a vast amount of learning taking place in these situations through conversations, and collaborative, communal and social activity. However, there is a gap in the literature examining the learning experience of individual members of a leisure activity group without a formal agenda. Also, as shown earlier, the social space of the public library as another potential element of this experience has been under-researched. The current study aims at addressing these lacunae by investigating the learning experience of members of a drop-in knitting group as they come together within the context of a public library.

This chapter looked at the nature of public libraries, the idea of social capital, the sociocultural view of learning, informal learning and the need to tie these pieces together. 'Library as place' is an upcoming area of research interest. As places that create a unique context and shape the activity within their walls, public libraries need to be looked at for the conversations and social interactions they engender and the learning that arises from the same. The sociocultural approaches to learning and social capital, as part of the context/culture, are offered as a viable lens with which to view such an experience.

## Chapter 3

### METHOD

This section details the method employed for conducting the study including strategies for data collection and analysis and descriptions of the venue, sampling method and participants.

The focus of the present study was on understanding the experience of members of the public library as they engaged in social interactions in a drop-in knitting group. The review of literature showed that there is a lack of understanding about the manner in which public libraries function as public spaces, in the theoretical as well as empirical literature. There are methods to address this in a way that leads to a numerical or statistical picture of the same. Although a valid strategy, it would not have garnered the in-depth look into a participants' experience that a qualitative study did. Debono (2002) quotes several researchers who recommend and have used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather rich data and documents the various methods of data collection they used for assessing the impact of public libraries. Quantitative methods do not shed enough light on the social impact of public libraries (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1998), and according to Usherwood (1999) exploring the perceptions and experiences of patrons to understand it is a more valuable proposition. These scholars advise using qualitative methods to study library *usage* - one way to define the goal of my study. In addition, a qualitative research approach supported efforts at investigating the complex sociocultural activity of this knitting group better than a quantitative approach could have. As a final argument in defense of the use of a qualitative method a question such as, 'what are library patrons experiences of using a library

program?' may be best answered by asking them to recount their experience, rather than trying to gauge it from aggregated numbers.

The aim of qualitative research is to reach the heart of the experience and gain rich and thick descriptions of the subject matter under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). My intention was to understand an adult's experience of interacting in a public library while engaging in a drop-in knitting group. It was to gain an in-depth understanding of the resultant social interactions - their substance, their manner and their meaning to those who participate in them.

To achieve this purpose, my general methodological orientation was phenomenological. Phenomenology aims to understand an experience "as it occurs in a person's consciousness" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.46; also Husserl, 1910-1911/2006). "Phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a world view" (Patton, 1990, p.69). Its focus is on the 'lived experience' (Creswell, 1998) of the phenomenon, the structure and essence of the experience of a given phenomenon (Patton, 1990). With regard to the present study, this translated to an investigation of the experience of participating in a knitting group in a public library. The goal of phenomenology is to *describe* and not to explain the whys of the phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). The assumption that phenomenology functions on is that there is a shared experience with a core essence which can be found by rigorous analysis and that bracketing individual experiences will help in this analysis (Patton 1990). Bracketing one's suppositions is a major caveat for the phenomenological researcher (Moustakas, 1994) before starting the process of data collection. In other words, the researcher aims to keep his/her experience of the phenomenon out of the picture while

interviewing participants or observing their behavior as an outsider in order to avoid diffusing the focus of the study. The focus on participants' experiences and worldview necessitates that phenomenology (and in fact qualitative research methods) create a receptive environment for data collection by using open ended responses without using pre-determined categories of questions as in the case of survey research (Patton, 1990). Given the exploratory nature of my study, a phenomenological approach was a perfect fit. My goal for this study was to create a picture of what it is like to participate in a drop-in knitting group in the public library and convey the same to my reader. A possible alternative could have been an ethnography of the knitting group, however the primacy of core individual experience in my research question made phenomenology the superior choice.

### **Participants**

In 2007, 24, 619 members attended Schlow Center Region Public Library's programs, almost a third of the 79, 406 members belonging to the Center Region. Participants of the current study were adult members of this public library located in State College, PA, who participated in the 'drop-in knitting group', which is a library program, on a regular basis. The group meets every other Monday in the public library's Sun Room for 2 hours in the evening, unless the library's schedule does not allow that. Together, members constitute an informal network brought together by an interest in knitting, crocheting or other fiber related arts.

Participants in my study were all Caucasian females and six of the nine were senior citizens. Two were in their late 20s and one was in her mid-40s. At the time the study was conducted, all of them had been participants of the group for extended periods of time beginning from at least a year to two and a half years, which was the age of the group.

## **Sampling**

The sampling of participants for interviews was purposive. It was restricted to those members who are regular visitors and participants of the drop-in knitting group, who consider other members their acquaintances and have a history of multiple conversations and interactions with them. The aim behind purposeful sampling was to select information-rich cases, i.e. participants who could provide a great deal of information about my central research question (Patton, 1990). During the pilot study (as well as during data collection), I was a member of the knitting group and familiarized myself with members and their activities. This helped me when explaining my study and approaching members for participation. Initially I planned to use the snowball sampling technique (Patton, 1990), whereby I would ask the previous participant to introduce me to other participant/s who may be good candidates as information sources for the study's purpose. My aim was not only to find participants, but also to understand the nature of the network and the relationships between my participants, which I thought would be pertinent and instructive information for this research. However, as a result of my initial participation I became familiar with the entire 'core group' - the regular and stable members of the group - such that I did not need an introduction to them through someone else. Also, the member who is 'in-charge' of the knitting supplies and participant logs declared my study intention to the group, effectively acting as a gatekeeper to all my participants.

## **Data Collection**

To understand people's experience and how they see the world is the focus of a phenomenological question (Patton, 1990) and interviews can serve this purpose very well. The goal of interviews is to gather accurate descriptions of participants' experience, without

any interpretation on their part or explanations in the form of theory (Polkinghorne, 1989). Given that the goals of this research tradition and this strategy of data collection are in tandem, the major tool of data collection for phenomenological research is a semi-structured in-depth interview (Creswell, 1998). The focus of the interview is on understanding the meaning of a phenomenon as it is experienced in the context of the life world of the interviewee, it is a kind of human interaction where dialogue may help generate knowledge and a mode of data collection whereby the lived experience of a participant may be communicated to the researcher through words as well as non-verbal communication (Kvale, 1996). These features make it an appropriate tool for a phenomenological study. Interviews for the present study were semi-structured and followed an interview protocol. The goal was to cover the same topics with every interviewee while conducting an informal conversation about the questions at hand (Patton, 1990). Kvale (1996) suggests that the choice of method be inspired by a theoretical knowledge of the topic to be studied as well as familiarity with the environment in which data will be collected. The preceding review of literature, my active participation in the library and the pilot study all contributed to my method related decisions. The average interview lasted between half an hour and one hour, depending upon the experience of the interviewee and the degree to which they reflect upon the nature and activity of the group. It covered several topics including the group and library in participants' life, their current situation in life, knitting experience, their experience of active participation, teaching and learning, and other outcomes of these experiences and corresponding conversations (Appendix A).

Data collected via this method was supplemented with participant observation in the group. Participant observation is, quite literally, observing an event while participating in it

or *experiencing* the phenomenon directly (Wolcott, 1999). As a method it typically belongs to Ethnography, which is the study of the culture of a group (Creswell, 1998). However, I included it in a phenomenological study due to its ability to help the researcher appreciate the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, which is the end goal of phenomenology (Ashworth, 1995; Aspers, 2004; Lester, 1999 and Polkinghorne, 1989). According to Patton (1990), the only way to understand someone else's experience is to experience a phenomenon yourself, making participant observation an important tool of phenomenological research. He reminds us that although this seemingly contradicts the mandate to understand another's worldview, the two approaches can co-exist in phenomenology, because the goal is to understand this worldview as an insider. In fact, Becker and Geer (1970, in Patton, 1990) suggest that participant observation is the most comprehensive research strategy. For me, it entailed knitting with the group; this gave me a chance to observe activity that participants described during interviews and to watch their dynamics with each other in a group situation. In addition, I used data from my initial participant observation to design an interview protocol for my first interview. I used data from both these sources to drive the second iteration of my interviews. I interviewed seven of my nine participants twice. Of the two participants I interviewed only once, one suffered from aphasia and her ability to reflect on her experience with the knitting group and verbalize her thoughts about her experience was restricted. I interviewed the other participant while she attended the drop-in knitting group's meetings for a short period after a long break of 16 months. Soon after this, she stopped attending altogether. In addition, by her own admission, she was a fringe participant; she primarily attended to accompany her young daughter. While data from her first interview was

valuable, I realized that her limited participation and my lack of an opportunity to observe her in the group would limit her ability to add to that conversation.

One potential issue that I had to be watchful about in combining the two methods was losing my identity as a researcher, or polluting my participants' interview responses by leading them. Smith (1997) suggests that participant observers maintain an optimal distance from the phenomenon under observation so that they neither 'miss the woods for the trees', nor compromise their ability to be participants. I believe I was successful in maintaining my identity as a researcher by the simple act of taking field notes. Although I did not take field notes during my participation, I jotted down notes as soon as possible after every meeting I attended and later expanded upon them with details and comments. In addition, my participants were aware of my research and often inquired after my progress. Also, I was introduced to newcomers to the group as a Penn State student conducting a study about the knitting group. Thus, my researcher identity was never obscured even when I actively engaged in consulting with the core group members about my knitting project or was used as a motivational model for newcomers wary of their ability to learn to knit.

Interviews and observation together supported two parts of the triangulation process (Fontana and Frey, 2003), whereby multiple sources of data bear each other out. The third source could have been document analysis, however the situation under study was informal and did not produce any documents other than monthly meeting schedules. One of the possible outcomes of using these two forms of data is that they may lead to contradictions and looking for an explanation for those may lead to further insights about the phenomenon (Kratwohl, 1993). Kvale (1996) discusses the role of contradictions in interview research. Contradiction is considered a necessary state of the social world and therefore an essential



part of data collection according to the dialectic traditions. In such a tradition, knowledge and action are intrinsically related – an idea that is an integral part of the sociocultural outlook on learning.

Data collection continued until saturation was reached, (Kvale, 1996) i.e. no more new categories of data appeared. Estimates of when this could happen vary widely; however following Patton (1990) and Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) I estimated that my data collection would include 10-12 participants. The number of regular and active participants in the group is 12, although I reached saturation with 9.

### **Data Analysis**

"The analysis of qualitative data is a creative process" (Patton, 1990, p. 281) and takes place throughout the interview study (Kvale, 1996). In the present study, I transcribed the audio-recorded interview data. Next, I expanded upon the field notes from participant observation to reflect as many events and as much of the conversation as possible. The post transcription process involved coding and indexing or labeling passages or parts of textual or transcribed data for categories, ideas and themes (Patton, 1990 and Kvale, 1996).

Phenomenological analysis begins with 'Epoche', whereby the researcher becomes aware of and eliminates preconceptions that might interfere with the analysis and therefore the results (Moustakas, 1990). In terms of my data, it meant linking the social-psychological identity of each my participants (as it emerged through their interviews) to each of their interview verbalizations. In other words, I consciously identified the experiences of each my participants as arising out of their own identity. This process helped me separate my own observations and experiences in the group as a researcher-participant from those of my interview participants.

The first stage of analysis was identifying pertinent units of data or ‘meaning units’. Meaning units are “words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other through their content and context” (Graneheim and Lundman, 2003, p. 106). The meaning units I identified were typically one sentence long and referred to an idea, the significant portion of a recounted story, or other forms of verbalization referring to an attitude toward or perception of activity in the drop-in knitting group. The subsequent analysis in this case did not take the traditional phenomenological route, but followed the trail of constant comparative analysis as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1999) for grounded theory instead. “There is the constant comparative analysis... which is primarily (probably entirely), a data analysis strategy in which the analyst constantly compares responses within and between subjects and across responses” (personal communication, Dr. Ian Baptist, April 20th 2010). In the process of analysis, meaning units were first condensed (Graneheim and Lundman, 2003) such that the gist of each meaning unit was preserved, and then coded. These codes were compared within and between interviews and collated until categories emerged. (See Appendix B for an example transcript). This was the heart of the process and I spent considerable time reading through my interview and observation data. This process continued until categories were exhausted and themes emerged (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). This process was both creative as Patton (1998) describes as well as firmly tied to the data. Themes were analysed to reduce overlap and facilitate description. Finally, writing the results became the last phase of the data analysis process as it helped me to continue reflecting on the data and themes. It helped me identify previously missed incidents or see a meaning unit in a new light, creating a more complete theme.

The analysis of this data was done through the theoretical lens of sociocultural learning, where learning refers to a process of change in a participants' knowledge, attitude or behavior by virtue of participation in an activity. I looked at participant responses and my observations in terms of the group's activity, participants' past experience with knitting, the current nature of their participation in the group and in their larger social world. The previous review of literature about informal learning has shown that it can occur both intentionally and unintentionally, implicitly as well as tacitly. Eraut's (2000) discussion shows that identifying it is far from an easy task. Therefore, the primary goal of data analysis was to identify the learning process as identified by my participants. My analysis of instances of learning was related to participants' own descriptions of the same and not to observed behavior which may be characterized as learning. A second and equally important part of the analysis was to describe the context and activity within which this learning takes place from a theoretical perspective. As a consequence, I focused on the potential social capital within the group, i.e. access to resources by virtue of participants' social ties within their library network, the role it plays in participation and the outcomes of using these resources (e.g. social, economic, emotional, educational, etc.), if any. Given the nature of sociocultural learning perspective, my focus on learning experiences also brought in participants' teaching experiences; activities involving the two and the larger context in which they took place became a unit that demanded analysis as a whole.

### **Researcher Identity**

Colazzi (1978, in Polkinghorne, 1989) suggests two ways in which the researcher can generate interviews for a phenomenology: self-reflection and a pilot study. The first of these is a continuous process and led me to this topic of research. It was generated from the

numerous observations and regular participation in social interactions with one or more members of the various networks that I am a part of (workplace, family and friends). My own transactions have led to exchange of information (of a variety of kinds) and informal learning that arose out of that exchange, which, in part, made me curious about the social interactions of others. Pettigrew's (1999) idea of 'information grounds' put these experiences in a different perspective. The pilot study was an attempt at building rapport with my future participants, gaining validation for the context of the study and refining my interview protocol.

Although an initial understanding of the phenomenon of learning through social interactions arose out of my own social interactions - whether outside the public library (as in the case of self-reflection) or in participant observation (as in the case of the pilot study) - the goal of the present study was to understand the experience as it unfolds *within* the setting of the library programs. Having had no previous experience of using the public library for anything other than checking out materials, my notions about what comprised the experience of participating in a library program were limited, which worked to my benefit. Over the course of the study and through my participation in the drop-in knitting group, I have come to develop a different mental model of what transpires in a public library. However, I did not participate in any other library program and continue to use the library in a traditional way as well. This and my previously discussed attempt at maintaining my researcher identity prevented me from becoming a true insider to the culture of public library programs.

This chapter described my methodological orientation, my proposed mode of data collection and analysis; I believe that my findings based on the interviews and observations of patrons will be rich additions to an otherwise barren research area. Libraries are re-inventing themselves to be a part of the community and are expanding their scope to invite

more and more people into their fold. Anecdotal evidence of the importance of libraries as social spaces abounds, but a qualitative study such as this one is able to create a composite and thorough picture of the experience- particularly the teaching/learning experience- of a library program member.

## **Chapter 4**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter gives a brief overview of each my participants and identifies themes arising from the data. The themes are 1) conversation and interaction among members are cherished, 2) primary identities define the degree and kind of knitting-related teaching and learning that takes place 3) the diversity and high turnover of fringe participants in the group has consequences for teaching and learning needs, 4) the public library has a constant presence in the life of the knitting group, and 5) knitting with the group provides a sense of community. Results are presented along with relevant participant verbalizations and notes from my participant observations.

#### **Participant Biographies**

**Jenny** has been a resident of State College for almost 3 decades. She has been a retiree for a long time and is a lifelong knitting hobbyist. She describes herself as an introvert who needs social contact. She volunteers at the Red Cross and in the past has volunteered in the public library's knitting room. She was the first participant to suggest to the library that it start a drop-in knitting group. She believes that the library space should be used as a social space for the community.

**Lori** worked as an employee of the public library until recently, when she retired. Along with Jenny, she is among the first members of the group. Also like Jenny, she is a lifelong knitter and teaches beginners. She is seen as the person 'in-charge' of the group.

**Cece** was raised in State college and worked for Penn State for more than 2 decades. She has been a retiree for more than a decade. She is a lifelong knitter and spinner. She

described herself as an avid reader. She lives very close to the library and is involved in many library activities, besides the knitting group.

**Yvonne** is also an ex-employee of the public library until she was let go. She is a lifelong knitter and has worked in the past in a professional capacity as well. She took up knitting once more after she lost her job and had more time.

**Harriet** is a novice knitter. She is a senior citizen who has suffered from a brain disorder in the past and now suffers from aphasia brought on by a car accident. She lives independently, but complains of forgetfulness and trouble concentrating on her knitting. Her knitting progresses slowly and she depends on the group for direction. She seems to enjoy the opportunity to socialize.

**Sabrina** is the sole crocheter of the group. Like all the core group participants in my study she has practiced her craft much of her life. She is one of two youngest participants. She is a relative newcomer to the Schlow Center Region Library. She is a Penn State alumna and currently works as an administrative assistant for the university and teaches adult art classes too. She crochets as a hobby and sells some of her projects online.

**Maya** is a mother of five who home-schools her children. In the past she has worked as a pastry chef and has lived in State College for the past two decades. She is a regular user of the library, since her children are home-schooled; they have volunteered in the library and participated in the chess club. She is, like Harriet, a novice knitter. She started knitting as an activity to do with her daughter.

**Jane** is a senior citizen who has worked in several different positions. Currently she works at the Shaver's Creek environmental center. She is also a lifelong knitter and has designed children's clothing in the past. She spends her summer at the Yellowstone National

Park. She is a proponent of the continental style of knitting and participates in the knitting group with her granddaughter.

**Karina** is the youngest of my study participants. She is originally from Michigan and is a staff member at Penn State. She, like Sabrina, is a relative newcomer to the Penn State community and to the library. She is a lifelong knitter and participates in her church-based knitting group too.

The following section discusses the five themes arising from my data. Subthemes help explain the nuances of each.

### **Theme #1 Conversation and interaction among members are cherished**

Seven of the nine interview participants declared that a primary reason they keep coming back to the meetings of the drop-in knitting group is socialization and conversation. In fact, during participant observation I saw that conversation and knitting continue side by side, until sometimes the balance tilts in the favor of one of the two. In cases where conversation is sidelined in favor of knitting, some members will attempt to jump-start the conversation by bringing up topics of interest and interested members may join in. On the other hand, when knitting is sidelined and conversation dominates members' attention, individuals may either continue talking or choose to knit or both, without any other member suggesting that they knit more. For instance, for Karina, conversation was the main reason she joined the group:

I wanted to get out and actually have a conversation with somebody out of work. So that is why I originally joined.

Jenny, too, claims that socializing is as important to the group (including her) as knitting.

...we're not there to learn to knit and crochet. We are also there to socialize.



I observed that a few participants almost never knit, but continue to talk either by telling personal stories or asking questions and engaging other members in conversation. Interview participants suggested that this was perfectly acceptable to them.

**Much sharing accompanies the conversation:** Conversation often dominates the activity, but it is accompanied by knitting-related display and sharing with attending members. Lori gave some examples:

Sometimes other people start making hats, you know, for the same cause or they share yarn or... somebody brought in patterns for washcloths... like knitted washcloths or crocheted washcloths.

Part of the conversation consists of sharing knitting techniques, ideas, anecdotes, resources and demonstrating and discussing each other's work - including work done outside the group. Resources include knitting patterns, information about knitting events, tips and books. Most group members, including those who do not contribute to the conversation very often, will take part in this sharing and trading. According to Karina, conversation of this nature is a source of information and ideas:

...people talk intelligently and answer questions. Or you can get new ideas, see different projects.

Members ask about each other's work, comment, appreciate or ask questions. As mentioned by Karina, such sharing leads to learning opportunities. Members may or may not be inspired to use a shared pattern or follow someone in knitting more socks, but given that participants choose to join a common interest group, such topics of conversation are welcome.

However, not all conversation is about knitting. Cece and Sabrina talked about what the rest of the topics can cover and how they feel about them.

I'd say it is pretty general and some really far flung from knitting. But that's okay. But then somebody will bring it back down to... (*Cece*)

Like, you can tell me that you like purple dragons and I'll have to be like, hmm. Okay... or I like purple magic dragon too. It's just about having a general conversation about people and just sharing your personality. (*Sabrina*)

Topics often move away from yarn and needles to travel, health, cats, e-readers, books, the weather and so on. There are no limitations on the topic, "except maybe politics" - Yvonne. Some of these topics may be neutral or innocuous with little value to the listener, such as the one quoted above. When asked about their feelings about conversation that is unrelated to any yarn-based activity, all participants commented that they enjoyed it, thought it was okay to talk about unrelated topics and believed that many such conversations served an educational/informative purpose. Some of these topics were a source of inspiration and information to my participants. Sabrina recounted how she was inspired to listen to books on tape- since she has a reading comprehension disability- when she listened to group members who are avid readers discuss the latest books they read. On the other hand, Karina, who was a relative newcomer to town, used the conversation to gather information she needed about living in this town.

When I was new in State College, I used to have questions about resources..... They were able to pass their knowledge of the city along... to me.

In fact, knowledge gained about the community, e.g. about the university, schools, Halloween, planting a garden, etc., by participating in the knitting group is of greatest value to her. Since most of the participants have lived in the community for a very long time, she finds that she has much to gain by asking questions about and taking part in conversations about it. This is an outcome of participation in third places as described by Oldenburg (1997). In his account, third places (the first two being home and workplace) are cafes, bars,

diners, etc. and they function as gateways of information for newcomers and visitors to a community. Conversation with old and knowledgeable members of the community help them get acquainted with living there and slowly become a part of it themselves. In a way, they create learning opportunities for the newcomers as they imbibe the local knowledge and participate in local social, cultural, economic activities. In Oldenburg's (1997) thesis, third places are often commercial enterprises, but - as my results show- public libraries perform much the same functions.

Conversation is also a way for members to share and listen to stories about important life events, tragedies, sickness, etc. and offer verbal and emotional support. According to Maya:

...people who had gone through a hard time, we were able to offer them encouraging words. So, that touched my heart, you know. I know for a little while, one of the women there had cancer. And we were able to get some cards and offer an encouragement, support that way.

Such conversations support many of my interview participants' belief that the members care about each other. Such caring may also be characterized as social capital (Putnam, 1995), the fund of resources - in this case, emotional support- that individuals are privy to by virtue of being members of the knitting group.

**Conversation changes according to the make-up of the group:** Substance and flow of the conversation depends upon the attending members, with the frequency ranging from little conversation and focused knitting, to little to no knitting and much conversation. In fact, the unstructured nature of the group rises to prominence through the conversation. In the face of a lack of official agenda, attending members have the freedom to drive the activity in the group as they wish and often it can mean a complete lack of that activity which is the declared purpose behind the existence of the group - knitting. Sabrina described an instance:

Nobody else was here one night. And Lori brought out wedding pictures from her daughter's wedding and that's what we did instead of knitting or crocheting.

The fact that all of the current group members - including those who infrequently attend- are women, and that most of them are middle aged, likely plays a role in the conversation too.

None of the participants in my study commented on this as a factor; two of them suggested that men- or even boys- attending the group's meetings was a rarity. None attended during the period of this study. In the words of Jenny,

Young boys are very talented at learning to knit, but they don't maintain the interest. They like the mechanics of it. Some boys. And they catch on very quickly, you know. But it is not something that is that acceptable in their world.

As a result of this and/or other reasons, male voices in the conversation are usually missing.

This is a telling example of the role of culture and identity in shaping who participates in the group and how its activity is shaped. Bronfenbrenner (1977), Vygotsky (1978) and Engstrom (2000) have all identified the influence of culture in shaping our activities and learning. Although beyond the scope of this study, studying the larger sociocultural context in which the knitting group met might elucidate participants' experiences even further.

**Conversation makes knitting difficult:** Conversation and knitting often compete for members' attention, creating unique problems. Lori explained the difference between knitting alone and knitting with the group:

Well, one of the problems about knitting with a group is that.. alone you might be working on a really complex project, with lots of directions and counting and everything.... (with the group) it might not be how much you get done but it's just that you have fun together.

In the interviews, every core group participant except Sabrina identified the need to knit simple projects while working with the group and complex ones while at home, because it is difficult to concentrate on the task at hand while simultaneously holding a conversation. In

my participant observation, I noticed several members either not knitting at all or knitting relatively simple projects, even as they displayed and discussed far more complex projects they were simultaneously working on outside the group. Participants identified another reason behind knitting simple projects with the group which was that those allowed participants to help and teach others without losing track of their own work. For participants such as Jane, knitting with the group has a special significance for the kind of satisfaction it provides.

Knitting by myself is sort of restorative. It is relaxing. There is a sense of accomplishment. In a group like this, I think the satisfaction comes from the need to share.

Knitting, when it is done with other group members, is not simply communal - it is social. These behaviors underscore the importance they give to conversation and interaction with other members, even at the expense of not working on attention-hogging projects. Both participant verbalizations and my observation have underscored the prominent place group members give to conversation and interaction with other members. In addition, the variety of topics their conversations touch on as they come together in a knitting group brings to fore the fact that they do not limit their presence to their identity as a knitter, but choose to - and feel free to - bring several different personas along and join the conversation, enriching it in the process.

Conversation as activity and as the context for learning is a fundamentally Vygotskian view (Vygotsky, 1978). It is the basis for negotiation, participation and transformation of external knowledge into internal processes. The dialogic activity uncovered through this theme is of crucial importance for it shapes the nature of participants' experience and its historical outcomes. In addition, members' participation in the group is related to their identities in the

group and therefore to learning (Saloman and Perkins, 1998; Lave, 1996). Thus, for example, when learning about *knitting* in the group, members identify themselves as knitters (of varying levels of expertise), practice knitting and engage in conversations about knitting. Consequently, ‘conversation leads to learning’ is an incomplete truism without acknowledging the kinds of identities which generate that conversation. Conversation as a mode of informal learning has been well studied in a variety of spaces - both public and private (Allen, 2002; Ash, 2003; Boud and Middleton, 2003; Hohenstein, 2006 etc.) In fact, Jeffs and Smith (1990, in Smith, 2008) refer to informal learning as that which is heavy on conversation. As is evident from the discussion above, conversation is a very important reason for members to keep participating in the knitting group’s meetings; sometimes it is a bigger reason than even the opportunity to knit. Members share different kinds of information - personal, trivial as well as knitting-related- with other members. Some of this is goal directed, such as asking for yarn-related help or asking questions about the town, while some information is generated from discussions about current events, books, etc. It was beyond the scope of this study to determine which conversations led to learning and which did not, however it was evident through participant observation and interviews that group members both asked and encouraged questions, which may have led to learning.

**Theme #2 Primary identities define the degree and kind of knitting-related teaching and learning that takes place**

Two of my participants are novice knitters and remained so throughout the length of the study. Both of them have been unable to progress in their learning and projects, for entirely different reasons.

**Novice knitters:** One of the novice knitters, Harriet, suffers from a mild memory disorder and needs significant support. She wanted to learn to knit at the beginning of winter. According to her own account and my observation as well, she has real limitations of focus and therefore of accomplishments. She was primarily dependent on Lori for her learning and progress. As a consequence, she established a strong tutor-tutee relationship with Lori. In her interview, she emphasized the self-directed nature of and intrinsic motivation behind her learning:

um... you don't have to prove anyone else (*sic*), you can make what you want. And you can prove it to yourself.

In addition, she appreciated the amount of support she received - both from other members and from the library's resources- as she worked on her knitting projects. Being a novice knitter and suffering from a reduced ability to concentrate, she never knit at home and continued her project only every two weeks as the group met. Thus, her learning and progress were entirely dependent upon her interactions with group members. My observation showed that much of her participation was characterized by conversation unrelated to knitting. However, like every other participant, she described group members as acquaintances, not friends because -

Well, not everyone is like my pharmacist... and my doctor. So when I make mistakes they (*the pharmacist and doctor*) understand.

Harriet is quite aware of her disability and often talks about it. In fact, I noticed that she introduces herself to new group members (including me) by telling the story of her accident 8 years ago, which left her with the disability. Her primary topic of conversation is her health. Nevertheless, her interview showed that she had reflected on her learning process and the benefits she had gained by knitting with the group.

The other novice participant (Maya) was a mother of five who wanted something to do with her daughter. She referred to the group as ‘class’ indicating that she attended the group’s meetings for an educational experience. She came to the group with a failed attempt at learning to knit using books and the Internet. Over the course of the group’s life she became a fringe participant such that her identity as “definitely a learner” (Maya) became cemented in the group. Her daughter, however, progressed and could teach and supervise her mother’s work over the same period of time. She indicated that being a mother of five children she home-schools leaves her with little time to be a regular participant in the group.

Both Harriet and Maya have strong novice identities and limited knitting participation. This was especially true for Maya who spoke of her participation in terms of non-knitting conversations more than the learning or the practice of knitting. Her identity as a busy mother seemed to dominate her experience with the group. Harriet’s participation is limited after she achieved her goal of knitting something warm for the winter. She continues to attend the group’s meetings, however I rarely observed her knit and her primary activity is socializing.

**Expert identities:** Seven of my nine participants have been lifelong knitters and crocheters. All of them claim a passion for passing on a skill they are ‘quite gungho about’ (Jane). Not all of them have a passion for teaching; Jenny and Lori take the lead when beginners join the group. However, even those who do not want to take teach have identities as experts and professionals. All of them can both knit and crochet and two design/have designed yarns themselves and not simply the product. As a consequence they know more about yarns, knitting and crocheting than most individuals who join the knitting group at one point or another. Among new members/visitors, whether at the beginner’s level or an



advanced level, there seems to be an expectation that one or more of the attendees will be able to teach them or solve their problems with their project; this is almost always fulfilled by virtue of the “hundreds of years of collective experience in the room” (Karina). This influx of people who need help also contrasts with and reinforces the identity of many of my interview participants within the group as experts and teachers. Conversation with beginners may begin by one of the ‘teachers’ in the drop-in knitting group asking them what they would like to knit, as Jenny describes here:

Uh... sometimes we ask them what they are interested in making, what kind of clothing or article or whatever it is... you know, are you interested in socks or scarves or something.

Jenny and Lori have identified teaching beginners as a favorite activity, both as a way to help others and to encourage them. Jenny indicated that she has developed a scaffolding technique and motivational strategies, which set simple, achievable goals for the beginner—suggesting that she has learned to teach. Her knitting and teaching were affected for a period of time two years ago when she was diagnosed with cancer. Her quality of life, as can be imagined, was dramatically lower then. However, she chose to continue to join the group’s meetings and teach “because I knew it was important.” I believe this conveys the strength of her identity as a knitter and a teacher.

Lori was referred to as ‘the person in-charge’ by several participants and herself. This is almost entirely attributable to the fact that as an ex-library staff member, she is seen as a representative of the library. She keeps a visitor/member log and gets the box of donated knitting supplies at the start of every session. She also enjoys teaching and sees that as one of her primary roles:

Well, because I am one of the - sort of - people in charge of the group, I do help teach people who are beginners that I can when I know what they are doing and what they need to learn.

In contrast, those who are not able to help or teach generate a different in-group identity. Sabrina is a crocheter and has admitted to seeing herself in a secondary position as far as teaching is concerned. This is because other core group members know crocheting as well and therefore do not consult her when they need help, and others who join the group most often wish to learn or solve problems related to knitting, not crocheting. However, as the sole member who does not knit but still is an active member of the core group, Sabrina's identity in the group draws upon the contrast her craft of choice provides.

I'm gonna be, you know. I'm gonna fight the system here. I am crocheting.

She is in the unique position of being a core group member *and* a fringe knitting participant. In her own words,

Last time I was here I know the girls were talking about how to make toes of socks. If they should go up from the toe up, from the heel down... I mean, I don't know what it meant... It's like being inside of a conversation and speaking a different language.

When asked whether beginners had something to gain from this group, the interview participants spoke of the way beginners benefit and learn. When asked the same question about experts, most told me about the ways in which *they* benefit and learn. Having mastered the mechanics of knitting long ago, most of my participants looked to the group for support, encouragement and inspiration. Nevertheless, many of them had instances of learning where they knitted socks for the first time in their life or saw a new way of casting on (although this participant said that she found it harder to learn than to teach) or learned to knit for the first time after a lifetime of crocheting. Jane learned a new way to 'purl':

I mean, even myself, as much as I've been knitting... the girl who was sitting across from me showed me to do a purl on Monday night that I had never heard of before, so....

All of them strongly believed that knitting for years did not make them immune to mistakes or to further learning. Except for the crocheter who confessed she was not excited to pursue knitting because she has “500 crafts under my belt - no more”, every other expert and lifelong knitter enjoyed the prospect of learning more about knitting.

One way that experts' learning is facilitated is not by being taught, but by the very act of teaching. According to Karina, this kind of learning works in two ways: it reinforces her own knitting skills by having to explain the mechanics of a knitting pattern, and by observing the way someone else helps or teaches an individual in need. Both methods help her reflect on and assess her own knowledge and techniques, potentially helping her improve them. Such learning is largely covert and therefore escaped my observation, and no other participant identified this as a way they learned. This finding is in keeping with Eraut et al's (1998 in Eraut, 2000) observation that learners find it difficult to identify instances of informal learning in the absence of specific conditions, such as the presence of mediating objects. This may have led my participants to only identify overt instances of learning such as learning to knit socks, while neglecting to mention others, such as learning that occurs through reflection.

The role of identities in learning a skill or behavior is given a place of prominence in the literature about sociocultural learning (Lave, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Roth and Lee, 2007; Smith, 2003). This perspective sees learning as a matter of participation and identity as some kinds of individuals within a group or organization. Thus, for instance, Sabrina's identity as a crocheter and Maya's identity as a busy mother prevent them from

participating in knitting and developing corresponding identities. On the other hand, Jenny and Lori's identities as expert knitters who want to teach put them in the forefront of the group's teaching and learning activities.

**Theme # 3 The diversity and high turnover of fringe participants in the group has consequences for teaching and learning.**

**Core group and the fringe participants:** The participants I interviewed are all females, Caucasians and six of the nine are senior citizens. Seven of them are lifelong knitters/crocheters; three of them have worked professionally. Most of them constitute the 'core' group - they are active participants who attend almost every meeting, most of whom knit at every meeting and some of whom proactively take on a teaching role when someone needs it. As Jenny says,

But oftentimes there are maybe ten or twelve women who regularly come. And we sort of know a little bit about each of them.

Diversity is often introduced by fringe participants- participants who either attend very infrequently (including just once) or although often present, participate in knitting or teaching only infrequently. Lori, who maintains a log of individuals who join the group's meetings, had a list of almost 80 participants (10-12 of whom are core group members) at the end of 2 ½ years of the knitting group's existence. Some of these fringe participants have the same demographic characteristics as the core group, while a majority of them differ from the core group in significant ways - such as age, skill level and nationality - contrasting every aspect of the demographics of usual participants who make up the core group, except gender. For Sabrina, the comings and goings of fringe participants solidified her identity as a core group member because, as opposed to a fringe participant, she attends the meetings in a

stable and frequent manner and knows the other regular participants, whom she refers to as 'girls'.

I love coming in and meeting everybody and we are starting to know each other more. I mean, yes. We are happy when new people come in.

Frequency and degree of participation created an 'us and them' division for her.

Although no other participants articulated this division, seven of them discussed the presence of sometime-participants as an important, yet distinct component, of the in-group interactions and experiences. On the other hand, each participant agreed that members of the group - core or otherwise - were acquaintances, not friends. Thus, their identity as members of a stable group does not extend to emotional proximity with other members.

**Most fringe participants learn and leave:** Several individuals who visit the group are learn-and-leave participants. They arrive at the meeting with a specific question or a simple goal such as learning the mechanics of knitting, learn from one of the regular members and leave, often with their problem solved. Many of them rarely or never return.

Lori talked about them:

Some people come when they are stuck with something. Or when they wanna learn something... and we've also had people come who uh... were visiting and wanted something to do or... we had one woman who didn't really speak English very well, but she knew how to knit.

In their interviews, many of the members confessed to a love of teaching. It is due to the diversity and high turnover of knitting enthusiasts that the core group members field a constant supply of beginners or erstwhile knitters who need their memory refreshed with the help of a teacher. Consequently, these beginners and erstwhile knitters become an important part of the teaching and helping behaviors of the core group. Wenger's (1998) concept of 'duality' in communities of practice is good way to understand the dynamic and dialogic

nature of such a situation. Roth and Lee (2007) suggest that a learning system is understood in terms of the relationship between its different parts. My study did not look at the system, but one component of it - the core group members. However, their relationship with fringe participants/newcomers is an important part of their experience of the knitting group. This is true both for those members of the core group who teach or help newcomers and those who choose to simply participate in conversations with them. In either case, as seen in theme #1, social activity changes as a result of their presence.

Being a drop-in knitting group implies that it is - at least in theory - open for anyone to join. Participant interviews support this theory and suggest that there is a wide diversity of people who attend the group's meetings. The diversity as well as the freedom of participation it implies, in turn, underscore the 'drop-in' nature of the group to both frequent and infrequent participants. As my interview participants observed, a craft group encourages participation from people who would otherwise not use the library, including some who cannot speak English, but want to knit. Consequently, frequent participants who know each other often expect to socialize with strangers who may or may not go on to be a part of the group. In the words of Lori,

Some people come frequently. And then we sort of have a core group and other people come and drop in and it's just kinda rewarding to see what other people are making or what they are learning or what their interests are.

Such visitors only relate to core group members as a source of knitting knowledge and do not socialize any further. Members I interviewed do not mind this and welcome the opportunity to see others' work. It adds to the learning opportunities of all the participants by exposing them to different techniques, ideas, etc. For instance, Jenny, who plays the teacher

to beginners more often than not, admired a fringe participant's knitted vest and then had the opportunity to learn a new technique of casting yarn on the needle from her.

**Diversity of ages supports the desire to both teach and learn:** Most of the core group participants are senior citizens, have been knitting all their lives - sometimes in a professional or semi-professional capacity- and as a consequence bring a lot of experience to the knitting group. In addition, all of them have indicated that they enjoy helping or even teaching. Thus, age, experience and the willingness to teach or help coexist in the core group. Public libraries are one of the few institutions where both children or young adults and senior citizens are frequent visitors (Swinbourne, 2000). This creates the possibility of activities which involve both age groups, especially in a knitting group. As Cece said, mixing the age groups in a common setting was beneficial.

... so much of our society is blocked off by ages. And I found that was really nice to have all ages included and all levels of skill. I mean, people kinda learn.

This is another instance of the public library acting as a third place (Oldenburg, 1997), where community members of different ages not only share a common physical space but a common activity space as well. Many of the participants who are senior citizens discussed the presence of children in the knitting group in very positive terms. I observed several children attend the meetings and knit or learn to knit during my days of participant observation. Two of my interview participants brought their daughter and granddaughter along. Jenny and Lori took the lead on teaching these children, like other beginners. Several other participants engaged them in conversation, encouraged them and appreciated their progress. In her interview, Maya (whose daughter always accompanied her) speculated that the presence of younger participants might help fulfill the roles of family members in the minds of the older participants. Conversely, she identified these older ladies as mother and

grandmother figures otherwise missing in their lives. Since none of the other participants echoed these sentiments or even hinted at such an identity, I did not pursue this line of questioning. However, many of my participants did expressly declare children's presence as a positive feature of the group's activity. For them, this reinforced the inclusive nature of the group as well as gave them the satisfaction of passing on a beloved skill to a new generation.

**Cultural differences fuel a different kind of learning:** Meetings of the knitting group are hosted in a public library in a college town with a substantial non-American population, most of them students. Some of them approach the group either to learn to knit or to solve a problem. Almost all of them have been fringe participants. Being from different cultures, they add another dimension of contrast to the core group demographic. My participant observation showed that most other members' conversation with them does not focus on their foreignness, but they interact with them according to the merit of their need or problem. Jenny, however, enjoys conversing with them about their culture and country and identified her desire to do so during her interview.

My main interest is more in learning about the international students. Because that is an entirely different culture... for me. And I find that fascinating. So, if you tell me you are from such and such a place I might look it up when I go home.

She sees international students as sources of information about their cultures, just as many fringe participants seem to see core group members as sources of information about knitting. In the process, she asks questions and brings up new topics of conversation and continues her learning at home. As discussed in the earlier theme, topics of conversation are only limited by the number of identities which participants bring to the table, and Jenny encourages those that arise out of the identities of some as 'international students' or 'foreigners'.



#### **Theme #4 The public library has a constant presence in the life of the knitting group**

**Accessibility and familiarity with the public library:** Some of the dominant characteristics of a ‘third place’ (Oldenburg and Brisset, 1982) are that they are public places which are accessible to those who use them and have been “appropriated by them as their own” (p.270). It is not seen as a special place and it is useful to the degree that it is well-integrated in daily life. In other words, it is a very familiar, ordinary space. My participants’ view of the public library corresponds with this understanding of a third place. All the participants identified the location of the public library and its dependable schedule as an important factor in their continued attendance. The library is centrally located in the middle of downtown State College and is easily accessible. It’s schedule is regular, decided in advance and is published on its website, making it very easy to determine when the knitting group will meet next or the library’s closing dates and times. Participants appreciate the regularity of it, which also contributes to disciplined knitting.

Five of my participants describe themselves as avid readers who often access the library’s collections. Every participant I interviewed has a relationship with the library outside of the knitting group. For instance, two of them are members of the book clubs and one is a friend of the library, Jenny has volunteered in the past in the library’s computer room, two of the participants are ex-employees of the library, etc. Thus, participants are very familiar with the library space. In addition, many members access other parts of the collection or return checked-out material while they are attending the meeting. Thus, participating in the knitting group encourages the use of library materials by making the transactions very convenient. As a craft group which meets in a building that primarily serves readers, it sees books as a frequent topic of conversation. In the words of Sabrina,

Like, we'll talk about the books because we are here at the library. Or we'll talk about the movie. Coz we get it from the books.... Somebody asked about the Nook or Kindle.

As seen earlier, such conversations can be an inspiration for others to follow through on recommendations and access the collections, encouraging their use.

**Using the library as a community space:** Among the participants I interviewed, Jenny was the first to suggest that the library start a drop-in knitting group, “because that was the time of knitting groups starting all over”. Thus, the origin of the drop-in knitting group may, at least partially, be in a social wave of knitting activity. The group was inspired by and situated in a larger cultural change in the perception of knitting, i.e. a change in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Jenny thought of seniors living in the apartments next to the library as a potential community that might benefit socially from their proximity to the library (another value it offers as a third place), if it offered a dedicated space and time for social knitting. Although the knitting group failed to attract the population she originally wanted to target, it attracted many other library patrons as well as members of the State College community. She believes that the library space should be used as a community space for people to come together, socialize and learn as the following two quotes show:

And uh... I just thought it was, as I said, necessary to pass on the craft and be able to have a group of people who wanted to talk about knitting or about school or... whatever... why... why can't we do that?

I think communities should encourage groups where people can go and socialize- strangers can go and socialize.... where people can get together and be with other people. Or if you want to learn something there's a place to do that....very important.

From the previous themes it is clear that this idea bore fruit through the knitting group. The near-constant inflow of diverse participants - both by virtue of the unstructured nature of the group and the diversity of the town's population - ensures that strangers

socialize within the context of the group's meetings. This is an idea that resonates with those who credit public libraries with creating social capital, as well as those who credit it with supporting democratic discourse. Although I did not notice any political or governance related discussions and one participant claimed that those topics were off limits, members are often privy to the likes, dislikes, beliefs and opinions of strangers. Cart (2002) called the public library the 'front porch of America' for this very reason and it seems that the knitting group is contributing to the kind of atmosphere which supports this aspect of the public library.

Although measuring learning outcomes was not a goal of this study, observation and participant verbalizations made it clear that many participant interactions are directed toward asking and answering questions, sharing information and teaching the mechanics of knitting, crocheting and other fibre crafts - thus fulfilling another idea behind the existence of the group. As discussed earlier, learning opportunities arising from the conversation are a natural outcome of this process. Several members, especially those who rarely participate, join the group's meeting with the goal of getting a problem solved (or learning how to solve a problem). As later discussion will show, even regular participants find learning opportunities in the conversation.

Not only Jenny, but the library too had a similar idea. One of its reasons behind offering to host the knitting group was to involve more of the community in the library.

According to Lori, who was an adult services librarian in the past:

It was part of our mission to get more community people into the library....  
And we had been talking about doing something of a community nature  
in our group. You know, donations kinda thing.

The drop-in knitting group initiated and led a community knitting project for charity, which was supported to a great degree by the public library. The ‘Afghan Project’ involved other library patrons and other organizations as well, viz. the Friends School and the Senior Center. Group members selected patterns, printed and posted fliers showing them in the library and asked library patrons to submit knitted squares to them. Besides library patrons, members of other community organizations participated and submitted squares, expanding the scope of the project by involving the wider community. Some members of the core group then sewed the squares together to create Afghans and donated them to a runaway shelter, women’s resource center and a hospice in the community. The public library supported this endeavor by providing a venue for the life of the project, supplies and access for the participants who submitted squares for the Afghans.

A large numbers of thinkers about the place of public library in the community (Aabo, 2005; Audunson, 2005; Boadem 2005; Stone, 1953, etc.), have suggested that libraries involve members of the community in its activities-whether to increase social capital or to make better use of public space or for adult education. This is especially so in the face of increasing digital connectivity and ubiquitous information that seems to reduce the need to access its collections. Essentially, these thinkers are asking libraries to change the activity within their walls, in order to change their meaning to the community and potentially improve their currency. By initiating the Afghan Project, the knitting group may have offered the community a convenient, if small way, in which to involve themselves in the library’s activity.

This project was completed before I interviewed my participants, so I did not have a chance to observe it. In any case, studying the collaboration with other patrons and

organizations would have been outside the scope of this study and the motivation of donors is open to speculation. However, it bears mentioning that such collaboration may be a result and an example of bridging social capital (Pretty, 2003), connecting the institutions and the people who belonged to them, which helped the knitting group access their resources. In addition, it potentially built a connection between the donor organizations (including the public library) and the charities which benefited from the Afghan project.

According to Lori, another reason the library decided to start a knitting group was the vast quantities of resources it had available. These included books and other collections as well as computers. In addition, the group now has a collection of knitting supplies donated by-

...all the members of the group or people that have heard about our group or maybe a neighbor who knew somebody in our group who gave them yarn to bring in.

Being a public library, these donations are treated as public/community assets. This makes it very easy for beginners as well as regular members to access both supplies and resources if they do not have any. If a member needs help or is looking for a pattern or tip, it is equally easy to access the collections which sit right outside the knitting room and start or continue the knitting. I observed that this is a very common practice. As previously discussed, participants share many knitting resources with each other, some of which they own. On the other hand, many of the resources are accessed from the stockpile that the library owns/offers. This makes working with the drop-in knitting group an especially resource-rich experience. On the other hand, new learning in the library led at least one member, Yvonne, to recommend related books to the library, furthering the symbiotic relationship:

Well, lately since I have been doing socks I looked around at some good sock books that I recommended the library get.

Yvonne learned to knit socks, supported her own learning by looking for resources (viz., books about socks) and created a scaffold for herself and potentially others by recommending that the library acquire those books. Her learning (and that of every other participant) is situated within the context of the public library and all that it offers, and is characterized by a dynamic interdependence with it (Lave, 1991; Sawchuck, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The collections, resources, donated supplies and teaching/help are sociocultural tools (Engestrom, 2000; John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996; Roth and Lee, 2007) which support and mediate group members' learning and practice of knitting.

In addition, the resources offered by members to those who join the group - even for a single meeting- in terms of physical resources or help/teaching are emblematic of the social capital that a community may offer its members. According to many scholars of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Falk and Harrison, 1998) these resources are for the taking when trust has been established among participants and there is an expectation of mutual reciprocation. However, my results show that they are available to anyone who 'drops-in', without any previous knowledge or acquaintance of the group members and therefore without any opportunity to establish trust. There may be an inherent expectation of social etiquette or pro-social behavior as a pre-condition to having access to them. My observation did not show any instance that defied such an expectation and my participants conveyed the idea that they had not observed anyone "getting a cold shoulder" either. This raises one of two possibilities. One is that the interactions I observed in the drop-in knitting group cannot be characterized as members accessing social capital. The other is that, as Bjornskov (2006) insists, trust is not a crucial aspect of social capital. If the latter is the case,

then the lack of a need to establish trust seems to *facilitate* entry to the knitting group or the library. In other words, trust is not a barrier to entry to the group's or the library's resources, making them more accessible to patrons and visitors.

**Psychological accessibility of the library:** Although patrons do not seem to establish trust before entry, it is *their* trust in the library that encourages participation. The library is seen as a safe public space, as mentioned by Maya:

It's a nice, safe place- the library, you know. Having the rules that they would have. So... it was good.

In a report for the New South Wales public library system, Swinbourne (2000) found that one of the greatest points of consensus among users is that libraries are safe places, even with few security measures. So it may be argued that, at least in the case of an institution like the public library, it is not the borrower, but the lender of the social capital who needs to be seen as a trustworthy and reputed source.

Some of the interview participants have previously participated or concurrently participate in other knitting groups which meet in cafes or churches. All of them appreciate the amenities and the psychological accessibility that the public library provides, "even though it may not be as cozy as a cafe" (Karina). Two of the participants appreciate the lack of food. All of them like meeting in a public library more than in someone's home. One of the strongest reasons for preferring this is that members do not need to know anyone in the group to join it, underscoring the idea that libraries are egalitarian places that welcome everyone. This, again, suggests that the library caters to individuals who want to join the knitting group but lack the social capital to do so. This is a drop-in knitting group open not only to library members, but to anyone walking through the doors. Such a welcoming attitude has invited and helped teach participants as diverse as a visitor from China on a one day visit

to State College or members of the larger Penn State community who may have heard of the group but are not members of the library. Karina puts this succinctly:

And it's also a great place to promote the knitting group. You see so many people coming through. People of all ages, people of all backgrounds.

It is "not intimidating" (Karina), "and if you find it a friendly group, stay and if you don't, there's no pressure to join or pay a fee..." (Cece). That individuals who join the group for any period of time feel so, is evident from the number of learn-and-leave and fringe participants. In fact, meeting inside a public library, in a very publicly visible part of the library, has a big role to play in the ease of access new participants have to the group. As discussed earlier, the core group members - who really maintain the stability and existence of the group- can welcome and invite other participants by virtue of the open and porous nature of the group, which in turn is by virtue of being situated in a public library.

### **Theme #5 Knitting with the group provides a sense of community**

Some of the participants identified Monday nights as the time they look forward to.

For instance, in the words of Sabrina,

But for me, it can be a place like, this is what I do here and now. I don't have to talk about work coz nobody knows who I work with. Nobody knows me from work. So that's what it is. It is my vacation from (*sic*) the group.

Knitting with the group for many is a period of escape from both work and family, as well as normal routine. They enjoy the opportunity to work on something for themselves, even if the item will be a gift. This is an especially pleasant prospect because the activity is creative as well as social. However, it is also a time for my participants to sit down for a dedicated period of knitting. Such a time is often denied to them due to the demands of work, family or other commitments. Jane talks about the benefit of working in the group:



Sometimes I have to set... I have to set myself apart from day to day activities to get much done..... So, it (the group) gives me an opportunity to just sit for two hours and do nothing but knit.

Harriet, who is a novice knitter and suffers from aphasia, can only knit when she is working with other group members. Although other participants indicated that they can work with the television on or while holding a conversation with others (as they often do in group meetings), she needs support as well as a dedicated knitting space to work in. According to another participant, attending the Monday meetings in the library imbibes a discipline that does not transfer to a knitting session at home, even if it is on the same day of the week and the same time. One of the powerful reasons this is so is because watching others around you knit is motivational. According to Jane,

And the enthusiasm that you pick up from people who are knitting and doing projects, kinda keeps you going sometimes.

As discussed earlier, a lot of sharing takes place in the group's meetings where members show each other resources they are using as well as display the item they are working on. Members derive satisfaction from the fact that they are working with people who all share the same or similar interests. Except for a couple of them, most members regularly knit or crochet during group meetings. As a result each member is surrounded by others who are working on their own project, asking questions about their own or others' work, learning, sharing books or tips and teaching and helping those who need help. Nasir, Rosebery, Warren and Lee (2006) identify this situation as a scaffold for participants and learners in a community, especially for novices who can observe experts' processes. For this reason, Sabrina, who teaches a Penn State's adult art class on crocheting, recommends her students to join this group for further support. Although she crochets and often has projects of a different kind than almost every other member, she appreciates the ability to use others

as a sounding board, especially since many of them know crocheting too. In the words of one of the participants, “it’s just a collection of people who enjoy working with fiber”, and they feel a sense of community being active members of the group. According to Lori, some members in the past have cross-stitched with the group and that was acceptable as well.

I know there are other groups that are much more intense knitting groups that... everybody’s an expert. Everyb- then they challenge each other and something but we’re not really like that. We are more of a community group. And we are just kinda there to support and provide a place for people to come in with common interest.

Besides supporting each other and sharing a space dedicated to a common interest, members have also underscored this sense by leading endeavors such as the ‘Afghan Project’. This ‘collection of people’ also offers a piece otherwise missing from the puzzle for many members. In the words of Sabrina,

... it used to come natural to a lot of people, you know..... But so many people have so many different interests now that it’s like I had to find a way to get out of my circle.

All the lifelong knitters and the crocheter I interviewed learned to knit or crochet from their family members. Not having access to them any more either because they have passed away or live too far away, members depend upon the group - namely, each other- to ask for and receive support, feedback, appreciation and motivation. This may be the clearest indication that members create and draw upon social capital by virtue of their network; they step out of their old networks when those do not serve their knitting-related needs, to seek a network that does and use it draw inspiration, motivation, ideas and feedback. They suggest that this is a very important service to have, for experts as well, but especially for early knitters. The participant who suffered from aphasia received a lot of support from the core group. She recounted how her accomplishments, although modest, were soundly applauded

by the members. They not only encouraged her, but also identified her limitations, scaffolded her learning and set achievable goals for her.

Karina identified two of the specific advantages of being part of a face-to-face support group 'over learning from Google'. One was in-person tutoring. The instant feedback and encouragement from a tutor, and the ability to display a mistake, have it assessed and corrected were invaluable to her- something that videos could not support. Nasir et al (2006) identify this as a feature of everyday learning communities such as candy sellers, domino players and track athletes. The second advantage was the ability to touch and feel others' yarns and learn about them. Given the number of projects going on in the group at any point, there is large variety of yarns being worked with. Members discuss their suitability to a particular project and vice versa, give and receive advice about which kind to choose and suggest yarn shops to newcomers, creating unique learning opportunities.

Members also derive a feeling of belonging from participating in the meetings. Two of my participants indicated that they get 'funny looks' when they knit outside, which they know they will not get when they knit with the group. Jane brings her grand-daughter along to help her be with fellow knitters and give her the sense that knitting is an okay thing to do. As seen earlier (theme #3), members welcome all skill levels, different kinds of yarn-work, different ages and other forms of diversity. As a result, members see it as a very inclusive and friendly group. For Cece, in particular, this inclusiveness is a big draw. She approaches this group with a previous experience contrary to this sense of inclusion and therefore is especially appreciative of it. As a corollary to that, she also appreciates that it encourages tolerance and patience, or at least provides an opportunity to learn to practice them. This perspective and experience echoes the idea in the literature that public libraries create

opportunities for members of a community to learn tolerance by bringing people of diverse backgrounds together (e.g. Aabo (2005), Audunson (2005), Cart (2002), Debono (2002), etc.).

The sense of support, community and belonging members derive from the group may be seen as the bonding social capital that Pretty (2003) describes, or an expression of the structural and relational dimensions of social capital as Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) describe. It is generated from the relationships within the group based on regular participation, common interests and the discipline that the knitting group provides. Eraut's (2000) understanding of informal learning in an organization and the sociocultural view of learning (such as CHAT - see Roth and Lee, 2007; also Lave and Wenger, 1991) both suggest that learning in a community is directly related to learning about a community's behavior and norms. Such learning helps shape individuals' identity as members and practitioners of the community, furthering their knowledge of the practice. This implies that the support and community that my participants experience - besides having emotional benefits- benefits the learning of knitting as well.

A composite picture of the lived experience of my participants shows that it arises out of the conversation, the diversity, the setting as well as the identity and community they create. These five components interact with each other in an inseparable manner, each bolstering the others and gaining strength from them as well. Conversation is probably the most visible facet of this experience – indeed an honorable *raison d'etre* along with fiber work. However, participants are also aware of other influences on their experience, right underneath the hubbub of activity. In-group identity is in an intimate relationship with their behavior and, along with a sense of community, is a product of sustained participation, both

of which are likely not available to the occasional participant. On the other hand, everything that the conversation, diversity and the setting have to offer may be available to all who join the group, barring stumbling blocks such as speaking a different language. Despite the possibility of such a division between regular and infrequent members, it is far from true that the experiences of all of my participants are homogeneous. Their goals and expectations regarding the drop-in knitting group interact with the themes discussed in this chapter in manifold ways to create unique striations in the collective experience, enriching my findings.

This chapter presented brief biographies of my nine participants. It also identified five themes arising out of my interviews with them and the participant observation I conducted while knitting with the group, and discussed these by supporting them with participant verbalizations and relevant literature related to public libraries, informal learning, social capital and the sociocultural learning perspective.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings from chapter 4 in terms of my research question, “What is the lived experience of participating and learning about knitting within the context of the knitting program of a public library as seen from the sociocultural learning perspective?” In addition, I will present my findings as seen from the lens of social capital. The specific ideas of import in this discussion are the participation of the core group members in the group, its relationship of mutual dependence with their in-group identity, subsequent learning and practice, and the larger context (the setting and its resources) which houses this practice.

Social capital was of interest to this study as a separate yet related idea to the framework of sociocultural learning. I treated the idea of social capital as a part of the context in which participation and learning may take place.

Although social capital is a highly contested idea among scholars (see p. 20-23 for a discussion of the multiplicity), at a bare minimum, it refers to resources available to individuals through the social relationships that they are a part of or *participate* in. Social capital is thought to beget itself through positive resource-based interactions (Field, 2003). Seeing this self-sustaining relationship through the lens of Wenger’s (1998) thesis on communities of practice implies that social capital is the reified set of resources, which is in a mutually supportive relationship with one’s participation in a community. To interpret my findings from such a perspective, the knowledge, tips, techniques, patterns, books and knitting supplies which members share with others in the group support their participation in

the group. Their participation, in turn, shapes the kind of resources they share. This should be a continuing cycle as long as the drop-in knitting group attracts members.

The origin of the knitting group was as much in the library's resources in the form of collections, knitting supplies and meeting space, as in its desire to offer these to the community to encourage participation. In other words, the library wished to establish a participatory relationship with the community. Being a trusted public institution that enjoys the goodwill and trust of the community (as seen in the literature as well as data from my participants), its gesture could re-characterize the resources it offers as social capital. It is interesting to note that the two group members who are most willing to teach are those with the strongest association with the library. One of them is an ex-employee who managed the library's resources and helped patrons access them. The other is a library volunteer who originally suggested the idea of a library-based knitting group and has expressed a strong desire that the library offer opportunities for active participation to the community. Thus, they may approach the knitting group as a means to employ the library's social capital. Many members of the group continue in this spirit by offering help to beginners and newcomers, by teaching them, displaying their own work and collections. In addition, they engage in behaviors that suggest that they care about the lives of group members outside the knitting group, strengthening the feeling of association.

Such sharing, teaching, helping and conversations are not only instrumental in creating an access to resources inherent in the group, but also organize the practice within the group and nurture a sense of psychological safety and accessibility crucial to participation, practice and learning (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren and Lee, 2006). My participants identified both the public library and the knitting group as places where they feel safe and accepted. In

addition, shared practice seems to create “a rapport that is dedicated” (Karina) and affirms the idea that the bi-monthly scheduled time and place of the knitting group is a reliable, legitimate and agreed upon situation in which to knit or crochet.

Besides a feeling of psychological safety, Nasir et al’s (2006) answer to the question, “What characterizes learning in the varied repertoires of practice in which people routinely participate as they go about their everyday lives?” (p.491) identifies three other features which my participants reflected upon in their interviews. Both Jenny, an expert teacher and Harriet, a novice learner recounted the way teachers scaffold beginners’ learning and thereby “make visible the structure of the domain” (p.492). Another way in which participants benefited was by observing the work of others - both experts and beginners - by virtue of regular participation and sharing. This created a different kind of scaffold by delineating “trajectories for competence” (p. 492). Karina suggested that access to “timely and flexible feedback” (p. 493) was another way in which participation and interaction in the group were beneficial. To summarize, members’ routinized and engaged participation creates a space that feels safe and accepting, where members’ learning is scaffolded through one-on-one interactions as well as observations of others’ practice and where immediate and adaptive feedback is available.

The different kinds of interactions discussed previously create an in-group atmosphere that members appreciate. Beyond serving members’ learning in several ways (discussed above), the people who join the group’s meeting characterize it in a specific way; this is another resource members share. As discussed in chapter 4, the conversation (and the experience) depends upon who is attending the group’s meeting. Except for the meeting time and place, the knitting group is unstructured by nature and accepts any individual who



decides to join its meeting. As a result there is a great degree of diversity among the participants. On the other hand, there is also a kind of homogeneity which arises out of shared interests and a shared practice. This is expressed as disciplined participation, a sense of belonging to the knitting group and a sense of community. Much of the social capital literature (Coleman, 1988; Bjornskov, 2006; Glaeser, 2001; Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000, etc.) identifies a sense of homogeneity as an important characteristic of social capital, by virtue of supporting the shared norms and values necessary for its development and sustainment. The regularly scheduled meetings have become a part of the lives of core group members, offering them the benefits of a dedicated knitting space, a “contagious enthusiasm” (Jane) that moves their project forward and camaraderie. Arising out of a long term association and established habits - if not norms- these benefits may add to the social capital that furthers members’ participation.

The mutually supporting categories of an experience are of concern to models of social learning and sociocultural learning (Engestrom, 1999; Roth and Lee, 2007; Vygostky, 1978; Wenger, 1998, etc.). Therefore, their analysis recognizes the separate but mutually supporting components of a practice experience. According to Wenger (1998), both diversity and homogeneity are important to make “engagement in practice possible and productive” (p. 75). The in-group participation of my participants testifies to this idea in many ways. While participation in the knitting group is largely characterized by a diversity of age, skills and cultural background, among others, the most obvious homogeneity across membership is of gender; skills are fairly homogeneous in the core group. All the members of the core group have been lifelong knitters and this homogeneity contradicts sharply with the skills of the occasional participants who constitute diversity. This contradiction sets the stage for

teaching and learning activities, with (generally speaking) members of the homogeneous, expert group teaching or helping members of the diverse, relatively novice group. This is not a result of pre-determined structure or reluctant engagement, but a spontaneous matching of the need to learn and the need to teach, shaping in-group participation and activity. Such contradiction also throws up many novel learning opportunities for members of either category, about fibers or otherwise.

Where learning is not separate from practice, but practice itself (Wenger, 1998), members of the homogeneous group - the experts- integrate opportunities to learn something new by sharing, observing, reflecting and even teaching. Another way such opportunities help shape the experience is by changing the very meaning of the group. As members choose to knit or crochet or cross-stitch or simply talk, the constructed meaning of the drop-in knitting group is created and re-created (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Packer and Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998). This is very evident in my participants' perception of the knitting group as a place to socialize, as much as to knit - with either becoming the dominant activity on any given day.

Contradictions in collective participation strengthen member identities by throwing their participation into relief against those of others. Truly speaking, sociocultural perspective situates the practicing (and therefore, learning) individuals in the larger social world in a way that acknowledges the larger institutional, political and cultural forces which shape their identity (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000). However the scope of this study was limited to my participants' account of their in-group activity and some biographical, historical information about them. As mentioned previously, most of my participants were experts, lifelong knitters and were enthusiastic about helping others practice something they

loved. Their participation in the group can be broadly categorized into avid knitter, teacher, crocheter and novice knitter. In addition, those who did not have a primary in-group identity that was related to knitting differed in the nature of their participation in the group as well as their perception of the practice of knitting.

The sociocultural idea that individuals are not only created by their social world but create it as well (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996; Roth and Lee, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998) finds an almost expository expression in the drop-in knitting group. The public library did not create the group with a structure or a hierarchy, it is a 'drop-in' knitting group implying that there are no gatekeepers to cross before joining the group's meetings and no tabs on participation. Being housed in a public library makes it free and therefore eliminates any economic barrier. According to my participants, being a craft group it might attract individuals who otherwise do not use the library, which is traditionally a readers' space. In short, there are few institutional barriers to participation (albeit there may be social and political ones- Pateman, 1998).

In such a seemingly horizontal activity setting, structure is created by members' identities and goals. As discussed in chapter 4, the degree and frequency of participation, previous knitting experience, immediate and long term needs as well as spontaneous interactions with other members create an activity space that serves different members differently. Some identities neatly fall into one of three needs categories: teaching, learning and socializing. Some straddle one or more of these by responding to the surrounding activity at a given point in time. In addition, non-knitting related conversations allow members to give each other a peek into the greater social world of fellow participants, no doubt shaping and re-shaping personas. As seen in my findings, members respond to such conversations as

well. Cumulatively, such conversations and interactions color participants' constructed meaning of what to expect from the knitting group and the way they fit into the ongoing activity.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

This study aimed to understand the lived experience of members of the drop-in knitting group through two ways of looking at the experiences of community members – social capital and the sociocultural learning theory. Of these, the idea of social capital is problematic, for it does not enjoy a consensus about its definition, causes, ways of manifestation or components. As such, using this idea as a theoretical framework was an undertaking that demanded more theoretical support than current research and literature offer. I focused on the resources available to my participants as a consequence of their continued, beneficent membership in the knitting group, especially with regard to the way they facilitated practice. This discussion was the strongest in instances where tangible resources were added or created by group members, or where the public library's gestures toward the community were an impetus for patrons to partake of its resources. However, discussions related to the role of relationships as characterized by trust and mutual reciprocity were limited. Data from interview and observations showed that these characteristics were not prerequisites to sharing. They may be a consequence, but establishing such causality was not a goal of this study. In addition, norms of the group are critical to a social capital perspective, but identifying the norms of the group in question may require a different research question and a method that supports more elaborate data collection.

As mentioned in my review of literature, the idea that public libraries and social capital seem to have a causal connection is discussed by many thinkers and researchers of public libraries. It is possible that the situation under study was not the ideal instance of the existence of this relationship. However given that social capital is mediated through social interactions that may take place within the communal spaces of a public library, a more compatible setting is hard to imagine. My data showed that participants approached the public library with trust and accessed its resources freely. However, their verbalizations did not suggest that the relationships they built in the library added to their social capital. In fact, all the participants clearly identified the limitations of their relationships with other members of the group in a way that did not reflect the opinions found in literature. To put it simply, when seen only through the lens of social capital, the experience of my participants makes some degree of sense, but a majority of that experience escapes meaningful theoretical reflection.

The second perspective – sociocultural learning - worked better at unpacking the data from participant interviews. Many of the findings were especially pertinent from a communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) point of view. Although not all who join the knitting group constitute a community of practice, the core group participants seem to do so. However, my research question and the time spent collecting data both were not conducive to solely using this analytical perspective. An ethnography or a case study may do better justice to a research question dedicated to understanding the drop-in knitting group as a community of practice. Such a research method, in the tradition of Roth and Lee's (2007) cultural historical analysis, may also help in further understanding the learning outcomes for this community – a finding that has limited voice in the present study since its focus was

restricted to the activity within the bi-weekly meetings and did not cross over into other spaces of my participants' lives.

Another way in which such a community of practice perspective may be used, especially one based in the public library, is to study other groups such as book clubs, gaming clubs, chess clubs, etc. Given the focus of this perspective on context, participation, practice and the learning inherent in it, the activity in these settings may yield entirely different kinds of data. Claims regarding social capital aside, public libraries house several different kinds of interest-related communities which have, as yet, escaped the attention of most informal learning and sociocultural learning researchers. Shedding light on their cultural and learning processes may help develop an understanding of the social dimension of a public library's life.

Another interesting perspective to study learning in this group may be that of situated learning (Lave, 1991). The focus of my study was on the lived experience which constituted members' participation in the group's activity without focusing on the construction and use of knowledge within this activity. In particular, Harriet, a novice learner who learned to knit in the group and practiced in the group itself may be a good candidate for a single case study design. Such a study, with its unique context and a unique participant may add rich data to the situated learning literature.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of participation in the drop-in knitting group is largely a factor of members' attributes related to their knowledge, identity and goals which are in constant interaction with those of others. Consequently, these attributes help define what they bring to as well as derive from the group. As a learning situation, this experience easily falls within

the realm of informal, everyday learning where learning is not always a primary motivation. Such interest-based, unstructured participation as a learning model is far removed from the formal structures of education and professional activity. The drop-in knitting group is sustained through the public library's hospitality, the sheer presence of individuals, dialogue and communal work. Its continuation depends on the same. Activity and interactions in the group carry forward some age-old fiber-related techniques, members' history with them and the products of that history, both tangible and intangible. Individuals define the idea of membership differently, selecting the extent of their participation and taking advantage of the freedom the group offers. On the other hand, there are shades of formality in this situation, seen in the tutor- tutee relationships that form over a problem – some continue and some subside as the problem is solved – or in the discipline that uses the group to make progress on one's projects. The freedom to participate organizes participation and activity in ways that touch upon different points on the spectrum of formality and motivation, creating an oft changing kaleidoscope of experience.

This chapter discussed the findings of my study from a theoretical perspective, specifically the way the context, participation and identity come together to create a meaningful experience for members of Schlow Center Region Public Library's drop-in knitting group. It also identified the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research. A major limitation was the way social capital proved an inadequate theoretical lens. However, there is much to study about the activity and resources created and shared by learning communities, especially those situated in a unique public institution such as the library.

## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

Tell me a little about yourself.

What do you typically use the library for? Activity/ reference/ check-outs, etc.

How long have you been a member of the knitting group?

Tell me in your own words about this group?

What is the conversation in this group like?

Does any sharing or trading taking place? If so, could you elaborate?

Do you derive any value from this experience?

As a member, what role do you think you primarily play?

How would you describe this group to an outsider?



### Appendix B: Sample Transcript Analysis (Karina)

	Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit
(2)* 18**	I like it. It's a good (garbled) to come and talk and craft and nobody gives you funny looks if you're knitting.	'Safe' place for knitting
(2) 18	... people talk intelligently and answer questions. Or you can get new ideas, see different projects	Intelligent conversation; exposure to new ideas
(2) 18	I haven't... connected with anyone outside of the group.	Just acquaintances
(2) 22	I mean I appreciate looking at other people's pattern but I don't think I've ever said, oh I really like the sock pattern that you are using. I am gonna knit my next pair of socks with it.	Appreciate but not inspired by others' work
(2) 24	I'm really more of a teacher, since I've been knitting for so long. I can answer people's questions.	Teacher
(3) 26	People sometimes poke their... they don't poke but they look in the window and (garbled) and we wave them in. or sometimes they will venture in on their own.	People 'drop-in'
(3) 26	I'm not usually the first one to jump in. Like I said, it's usually Linda... meeting the person with the yarn box, sitting down with needles, showing them the basics that... I am happy to work with the person sitting next to me and any questions that he or she may have.	Not an eager teacher
(3) 26	If someone is frustrated with something then we all look at it and make a suggestion and I think a lot of people (garbled) they come in and start their projects and when somebody poses a question they are more than willing to answer. So, sometimes it takes a little initiative from the learner. They have to say, okay... how do I do this or I want to do this and then people jump in and start...	Helping hands; learner's initiative
(3) 28	Umm...it's harder to focus on complex patterns in a group. (garbled) talk and knit at the same time. If I'm knitting by myself, I am usually doing something else... I'm watching a movie, I'm listening to a book on tape. I am... there is something going on with one of my other senses usually. Or I knit on my commute or there are other distractions around. Unless it's really complicated in which case I (garbled). But	Simple patterns while working in the group; ready to talk and help others

	with here... with a group, there is conversation... more likely to make (??) mistakes than (garbled) allow. So, when I am with the group I work on simple projects (??) that I can talk and knit or sit down and help somebody else and pick it back up easily	
(4) 32	Umm... I like the sense of community.	Sense of community
(4) 32	And the idea that I can sit down and knit or sit down and craft without getting too many funny looks or if do have a question, I can ask the group and get a group feedback and I don't think I have another venue for that.	'Safe' place to knit and get feedback
(4) 32	In the quote-unquote olden days, you would have family members who knew how to knit and they would answer questions. My family doesn't live with me and most of my friends don't knit. My friends from other... my friends from other groups or other organizations don't knit. So it's a good resource if I do have questions.	Family and friends don't knit.
(4) 34	for a beginning knitter or beginning crocheter... I mean who's just starting a lot (??) {garbled} hundreds of years of {garbled} around this table!	Lots of expertise in the room.
(4) 34	And there are lots of people willing to be patient, take the time to show the newbie step by step what needs to be done	Patient teachers
(4) 36	K: the knitting group can produce results faster than Google. And it's that interaction where... if there's a mistake and you can't figure out what's wrong... if you don't know what's wrong you can't Google to find out the answer. But if something's wrong and someone's sitting next to you who's been knitting for twenty years, then he or she can look at it and find mistakes pretty usually.  R: Um hmm.  K: There's a cache of knowledge, you know... the helping hand sitting next to you	Interactive learning, adaptive feedback; helping hands in the room.
(4) 36	Then with more experienced knitters- just because you've been knitting for twenty years doesn't mean that you know everything or that you can do everything. Maybe somebody always knits socks from the top down and all of a sudden someone shows up to the group, who knits socks from the heel up. So... new perspectives, new ways of doing things.	Always something new to learn

	Maybe the experienced knitter has the same way to cast on for fifty years.	
(4) 36	The opportunity to learn new skills, new techniques.... good ideas, observe other people, see what they are doing, learn about new resources... online knitting shops, e.g. online.... sources for patterns or try...	Exposure to different resources;
(4) 36	It's an opportunity to see other people's yarn. If you're buying online you can't always tell how a yarn's going to work. Or when you see it in the store you can't tell how it will knit up. If someone is working with the yarn can tell you about it.	Touch and feel new yarn
(5) 38	The conversation depends on who is there. There are some people who are very open about their personal life outside of the group. And so they have stories to share of injuries and family surgery and life happening.... Sometimes people think of more neutral topics that aren't related to knitting, like, gardening or the weather or vacation schedules. Sometimes the conversation's all about knitting. And... sometimes when there's just a couple of quieter people then conversation stops and everyone's just knitting.	Personal stories, neutral topics, knitting talk
(5) 38	Sometimes there's show and tell, there's lots of explanations	Show and tell
(5) 38	Oh isn't that pretty type comments.	Encouraging comments
(5) 40	When I was new in State College, I used to have questions about resources. I had a garden in the first {garbled} and so there were other people who were living here for a long time who could tell me about the seasons and when you're supposed to plant spinach and when to plant tomatoes and... They were able to pass their knowledge of the city along... to me. Or if I had questions about resources – like, where the local yarn shop is, or where.... What about... how does Halloween work in State College? There's a special night for trick-or-treating, a special night for the Halloween parade... umm... staying out of the way of drunk students, yeah	Information to a newcomer to the town
(6) 46	it's a great place to be and it's certainly a lot of wisdom and knowledge being shared about knitting and other topics	Wisdom and knowledge sharing
(6) 48	It's primarily a female group, an older group	Female, older

(6) 48	it's a dedicated group. There's a rapport that's very dedicated.	Dedicated group
(6) 48	It's flexible. You don't have to be... you don't have to have a certain skill level	Flexible; unstructured
(6) 48	It's welcoming. I've never seen anyone get a cold shoulder. It's successful and open, knowledgeable.	Welcoming, open, knowledgeable

\*Number in bracket refers to the page number

\*\*Number outside bracket refers to turn number

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