**Maker of things**

I have worked for 20 years as a designer maker, making craft related visual artwork to sell both to commission, for the retail sector and to shops and galleries. Running a craft workshop/ business is a quite isolating endeavor and the landscape of practitioners is very fragmented. However, there is a landscape of practice that exists of smaller CoP that share contacts, information on applying for commissions, information on the best shows to sell work at and advice on promoting and running your workshop.

The way to access these CoPs is by participating in the selling events. These events run regularly throughout the year to promote, sell and collect orders for artwork, examples include the Country Living Fairs and the Crafts Council run events. Important information gets shared over coffee or conversations between members, usually when the events are quiet in the morning or late in the evening.

There was a hierarchy within the various CoP, even though newcomers were welcomed, the ‘Oldtimers’ were positioned centrally and were assigned this role when described as having been “on the circuit for a long time”, marking their expertise and status.

There was a shared language between members that took many years to understand such as SOR (sale or return) and nicknames for shows. The events happened every few weeks and were held across the country, these touring communities of practice evolved within a larger landscape of artistic practice and developed a body of shared knowledge through their socially reinforced learning interactions.

My main role was as a member within these CoP, however as time went by, I moved to the position of ‘Oldtimers’. Many people came to me to seek advice and I acted as a recruiter for the CoP and as a signpost to other members.

There was a fluidity regarding participation and membership within a core groups of artists who attended all the shows and other members having a more haphazard attendance record. The group kept in contact informally via email discussing or sharing work in progress and information about new techniques or interesting opportunities.

The fascinating thing about these encounters were the boundary objects used to initiate conversations. Mostly it started with new members asking established members about their artwork and finding common ground regarding working methods. Newcomers would approach longstanding members with comments of ‘I love your work’ and ‘could you come and see what I am doing’.

The Oldtimers would establish their knowledgeability and defined their role within the CoP through their public relational interactions, on the first day. These being how confident they were exhibiting their work, if they knew the organisers, and by how many established artists they were friendly with whilst setting up.

Over the length of a show these relationships with the newcomers would develop and usually the relationship was cemented by the exchange of artwork. A huge amount of time was invested in these exchanges and the knowledge gained. The artwork exchanges could be positioned as boundary objects negotiated and reinforced knowledgeability and tacitly invited membership into the group.

It was a subtle process, and I can remember a newcomer saying to a member once time “can you give me all your contacts; I need to be part of the group”, they had not attended many shows and the result being they were isolated a little within the landscape.

There was an unspoken shared knowledge within the landscape that equal participation and commitment to the aims of the group were required for sharing of knowledge, especially exhibiting contacts, all this was orchestrated socially over years.