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Unraveling Hogwarts: Understanding an Affinity Group through the Lens of Activity  
Theory

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Rachel Cody Pfister

Committee in charge:

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Professor Stefan Tanaka  
Professor Olga Vásquez

2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated three ways:

To Amaya and Eris, for context.

To Jacob, for change.

To the Wizard, for zoped.

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## VITA

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Unraveling Hogwarts: Understanding an Affinity Group through the Lens of Activity  
Theory

by

Rachel Cody Pfister

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Michael Cole, Chair

This dissertation uses the framework of activity theory to understand the development and evolution of Hogwarts at Ravelry (H@R), an online group devoted to the interests of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting (knitting, crocheting, weaving, and spinning yarn). The organization and practices of H@ are inspired by the popular *Harry Potter* book series, and members role-play as students of their own fiber crafting version of the magical school of Hogwarts. They take classes on *Harry Potter* topics, write reports, take tests, and craft items to submit as assignments.

I argue that H@R is both an affinity group and a wildfire activity. It is an interest-driven community with particular characteristics that foster learning and production. It has a membership that is diverse in members' individual needs and goals, but who are united through the shared values and collective object of the group. A core value of H@R is supporting individual members as well as the shared collective object.

The dissertation takes as its moment of departure a series of events in H@R's fifth school year, when participation declined and H@R leaders used role-play to reorganize the group's practices and rules. Drawing from three years of participant observation, interviews, and archival research, I then trace H@R's development from its creation through the end of its seventh school year. I argue that the participation problems of Year 5 were due to underlying contradictions that gradually shifted the system of activity away from the group's original collective object to a new object that failed to support all members. Collective discussions about this shift resulted in an expansive cycle of learning, through which leaders and long-term members successfully analyzed and rectified the accumulating contradictions that were destabilizing and threatening the future of the group.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in the possibilities and outcomes of affinity groups such as H@R, but there is little understanding of how these groups develop and are sustained. I address this gap by making visible the process by which H@R's developed, evolved, and was sustained over several years despite tensions and changing members and needs.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Dolores Umbridge invaded Hogwarts in Year 5. Umbridge said she was there to teach, but the officials who sent her had ulterior motives. Once in power, Umbridge wreaked havoc at the school. She announced that “Changes are coming to Hogwarts” and with a “hem hem” told the students, “Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.” During her tenure, Umbridge canceled the magical sport Quidditch, closed areas for magical creatures, fired faculty, and changed the way classes were run. By the time she left, Umbridge had completely changed Hogwarts and things would never be the same.

Readers familiar with the *Harry Potter* series will recognize Umbridge’s story from J.K. Rowling’s (2003) book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In this case, however, Hogwarts was Hogwarts at Ravelry (H@R), an online group devoted to the interests of fiber crafting and *Harry Potter*. H@R combines and supports fiber crafting and *Harry Potter* interests through collective tasks that are designed to foster collaboration, learning, and production related to the interests. Specifically, the group offers members a rich fantasy world inspired by the Hogwarts School of the Harry Potter book series. In H@R, members can role-play as students of their own fiber crafting-based Hogwarts. Members take "classes" on *Harry Potter* topics and submit crafted items as class assignments. Through these classes, they research and write about topics like astronomy, mythology, and history. Assignments encourage students to advance their fiber crafting skills and use creative writing to tie their research on



*Harry Potter* topics to crafted items. Challenges are designed to encourage members to develop affinity members opportunities to connect their *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interests to civic and economic possibilities outside of the group.

This dissertation will use the framework of activity theory to look at the development of H@R in order to understand why events like Professor Umbridge's invasion and subsequent changes illustrate a productive process of development. I argue that H@R fits the category of an affinity group, a type of interest-driven community with particular characteristics that foster learning and production (Gee and Hayes, 2010). Its membership is diverse, shifting in their individual needs and goals, and a core value of H@R is supporting all members in their needs and goals. When participation declined in Year 5, leaders and long-term members sought to identify and analyze the problems that had arisen in order to create and implement a solution. Professor Umbridge's entrance and subsequent overhaul of H@R in Year 5 was a carefully-coordinated effort by the leaders and long-term members of H@R to use the narrative of the *Harry Potter* books to restructure the group so that it could better support all members. Umbridge's invasion truly sought a "new era" of "effectiveness" that was "intent on preserving what ought to be preserved."

This dissertation uses activity theory as a lens to understand the dynamics of H&R in order to understand Year 5's participation decline and subsequent overhaul. I argue that the participation problems were due to underlying contradictions within H@R's system of activity arising from a gradual shift away from the group's original collective object to a new object that failed to support all members. Using Engeström's (1987, 2001, 2008) works on expansion, this dissertation will argue that

Umbridge's actions were the result of the expansive cycle of learning, through which leaders and long-term members sought to understand, analyze, and rectify the accumulating contradictions that were destabilizing and threatening the future of the group.

Elsewhere, I have written about the robust learning, civic, economic, and production outcomes of H@R and other affinity groups (Cody, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Pfister, 2014). These groups have diverse communities with a large range of ages, experiences, and skill sets that helps propel member-to-member mentorship, inspiration, and learning. Through its organization and its community, H@R members are encouraged to advance their knowledge and skills related to Hogwarts and fiber crafts, produce crafted items or creative writing, and even connect their interests to outside academic and civic opportunities (Pfister, 2014).

Researchers have become increasingly interested in the possibilities and outcomes of groups like H@R, but there is little understanding of how these groups are developed and sustained (Gee and Hayes, 2011; Gee, 2013; Ito et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Pfister, 2014). This dissertation seeks to address this gap by looking at how H@R and its leadership structure developed, evolved, and was sustained over several years, through multiple generations of members with diverse individual motivations and objectives. The dissertation draws from three years of participation in, and observation of, the group. I argue that a key to the group's longevity is that the composition of the group's objectives allows the it to transform itself in a manner that ultimately promotes self-renewal.

I intend this dissertation to make several contributions to existing fields of research. For researchers who are looking at affinity groups and their outcomes and possibilities, this dissertation will provide long-term observant participation data with a group that has produced robust learning, academic, civic, and economic outcomes (Pfister, 2014). H@R's story provides insight into how these types of groups develop practices, rules, and tools to provide a means towards their collective objectives. Furthermore, the dissertation will highlight the maintenance work and ongoing negotiation that must happen for this type of group to be sustained over multiple generations of members through conflicts that arise and the constitution of new expansive practices.

I also hope to contribute to the development of cultural historical activity theory. The third generation of activity theory (Engeström, 2001) points to the need for research that takes into account multiple interacting activity systems, and more recently Engeström has pointed to the possible contributions that affinity groups can make to activity theory as a category he identifies as “wildfire activities” (Engeström, 2009). Wildfire activities and the groups that engage in them are not like traditional forms of production, institutions of mass production, or even types of craft production. While other forms of peer-based production, including mass collaborative productions like those of Wikipedia have challenged activity theory (Engeström, 2009), affinity groups like H@R are not only grounded, in digital or knowledge production, but also hybridize traditional material production, digital tools, online capabilities, social collaboration, and collective production. These types of groups are characterized by

high levels of motivation; members expend large amounts of energy, time, and resources towards participation in the group as a means of pursuing their interests.

Finally, I believe the findings reported on here will be of interest to educators who are seeking to develop social affinity-based learning environments, where students are encouraged to become passionately engaged with their subjects and take on leading roles in their own educations.

The remainder of this chapter will offer a deeper discussion of affinity groups and activity theory. I will first offer an overview of the academic literature regarding affinity groups and the activity theory framework that will be used throughout the dissertation as a lens to aid in understanding H@R's development and evolution. Chapter 1 concludes with a broader discussion of what an analysis of groups like H@R contributes to both the practical side of understanding the working of affinity groups as well as the conceptual side of activity theory, and provides an overview of the remainder of the dissertation.

### **1.1 Education and learning interests in affinity groups**

Affinity groups like H@R have evoked the interest of many researchers, parents, and educators because of their promising learning environments and their academic, economic, and civic possibilities. Within these activities, multigenerational groups work together to collaborate, produce, learn skills, and connect those interests to other areas of life. Participants often are highly motivated and passionate about their interests and the community with whom they share these interests. Members may invest an astounding number of hours, resources, and labor towards collaborative production or shared goals, and they typically do not receive material rewards for

these efforts. The groups cultivate self-directed learning, collaborative and cross-generational engagement, and meaningful production (Gee, and Hayes 2011; Gee, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Ito et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2013; Nardi, 2010; Parker, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2004; Taylor, 2006).

The learning environments and possibilities of affinity groups appear particularly powerful for those in the field of education. As worries about formal schooling are growing, some educational researchers and educators are looking to affinity groups for insight into alternative means of learning and educational pathways. In many ways, these peer-driven and interest-based groups embody what many hope classrooms will achieve: passionate engagement that is socially embedded and “oriented toward expanding educational, economic, or political opportunity” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 42).

In their work on connected learning, Ito et al., (2013) argue that today’s “educational institutions are struggling to fulfill their mission of providing pathways to opportunity for all youth” (14). There is growing concern over both educational experiences within schools as well as the extent to which schools are preparing youth for life outside of schools (Duncan and Murnane, 2014; Martinez and McGrath, 2014).

Over the last century, formal public education has been a battleground for parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers. Concerns over mediocrity, performance in an international landscape, and disparities in opportunity and achievement between classes within the United States, have initiated several waves of educational policy change. In 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education released “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. An

Open Letter to the American People. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education” that became a widely circulated landmark on the dire state of education in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This report warned that “educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling” (p. 13) and the “mediocre educational performance” (p. 13) threatened the United States’ performance in a global world. Despite three decades of attempts to reform the educational system, Arne Duncan addressed the National Convention of the Parent Teacher Association in 2014 and said that parents were worried when they saw “children in places like Germany and Korea and China racing past ours educationally, and they suspect kids from those countries will be better positioned than ours in a globally competitive economy. These worries are my worries, too.”

For several decades, these concerns have generated a series of educational reform policies in the U.S. including changes in standards, testing, accountability, teacher training, and even parent choices regarding schools (Martinez and McGrath, 2014). In the wake of these policies, overall test scores in reading, math, and science have somewhat increased and dropout rates have declined (Pascal, 1998; Snyder, 2014). Students in the United States still perform below many other industrialized nations, however, and other countries “appear to be improving at a faster rate” (Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessman, 2012, p. 4). Without change, these educators believe U.S. education will likely fall further behind in an increasingly competitive global world.

Beyond test scores and ranking, however, educational stakeholders continue to be concerned about the educational *experience* of formal public schooling and the

extent to which formal education is preparing students for life beyond the classroom. Dewey (1938) stated that the main purpose of school “is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skill which comprehend the material of instruction” (loc. 122). There is concern, however, that classrooms are failing in this purpose and that there is a disconnect between what is learned in a classroom and what is needed to succeed in life outside the classroom. Despite policy changes and increasing test-scores, the disconnect remains. Parents, educators, and researchers continue to worry “that a great many U.S. schools are failing our youth and that decades of attempts to fix the problem have in many ways made it worse” (Martinez and McGrath, 2014, p. 4).

One set of criticisms leveled against our current system of education pertains to the educational experience of students while they are in the classroom. Over 75 years ago, Dewey (1938) argued that teachers should aim to provide quality experiences because “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (loc. 153). Sociocultural theories of learning also recognize the importance of hands-on experience, and stress that learning and development happen through joint-engagement in meaningful practices (Cole, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). Despite these views, classroom instruction often takes the form of “passive education” (Martinez and McGrath, 2014; p. 26). The content is usually fixed, driven by teachers and curriculum, and firmly situates the student as the consumer. Students have little opportunity to be experts of the material, as the teacher and text hold the role of expert (Gee and Hayes, 2010). Furthermore, often the content

that students are expected to learn is abstract and removed from every day or meaningful experiences. History often becomes the memorization of dates and facts, rather than a meaningful story with which to engage (Gee, 2013). Math and science are abstract, separated from students' daily experiences with values and calculations. This makes it difficult for some students to have "prior knowledge that they bring to bear on those problems" (Saxe, 1988, 1416). For many classrooms, this situation seems to result in teachers and parents being more invested in learning than the students (Martinez and McGrath, 2014). For students, the result is that learning in formal education "often remains inert" (Pugh and Bergin, 2005, p. 21).

Another set of criticisms of formal education is the extent to which it is - and is not - meeting the goal of education: preparing young people for success in a globalized world. As Dewey (1938) pointed out, education should provide "present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (loc. 230). Despite educational reform policies and the concerns of educators, researchers, and teachers, many schools are failing to present such experiences. Many jobs are requiring "digital age skills, including the ability to think critically, collaborate, and work independently" (Martinez and McGrath, 2014, p. 3). These are skills that many classrooms are not yet designed to deliver, and consequently skills that many employers are seeking, but not finding, in their incoming employees (Beck and Wade, 2004; Gee, 2013; Martinez and McGrath, 2014).

In their work on inequality and education, Duncan and Murnane (2014) present a particularly bleak picture for many lower income youth coming out of today's schools. Although overall testing scores have increased, basic skills, such as math, "of



low-income students have kept pace neither with the skills of children in higher-income families, nor with the skills demanded by many jobs paying middle-class wages” (loc. 580). Lower-income children are acquiring fewer skills, college costs have doubled in the last twenty years, and the job market is increasingly shrinking for those with only a high school diploma. Traditionally working class jobs, such as factory work, are increasingly being outsourced to other countries. Other jobs that previously only needed a high school diploma, such as secretarial work, often now require more computer, research, and training skills. Whereas previous generations have looked to public schools “to help level the playing field for children born into different circumstances,” (loc. 51), Duncan and Murnane worry that public schools now exacerbate inequality, particularly as neighborhoods have becoming increasingly economically segregated and fewer resources are allocated to low-income schools.

There have been several responses to these concerns. In some areas, charter schools built around “deeper learning” have emerged. Deeper learning is “the process of preparing and empowering students to master essential academic content, think critically and solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, have an academic mindset, and be self-directed in their education” (Martinez and McGrath, 2014, p. 3). Over the last several decades, there have been concerted efforts to create after-school programs to provide more meaningful learning opportunities (Cole and the Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Kearney, 2006). Some of these after-school programs are aimed at creating partnerships between university students and communities to provide joint activities that connect experiences in the program

and in children's daily lives to enrich learning - for both the children and the university students (Cole and the Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006).

Some researchers are also looking to what youth are doing on their own with digital media, and what formal education can learn from these youths' practices and communities (Gee and Hayes, 2010; Gee, 2013; Ito et al., 2010; Ito, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Parker, 2010). Of particular interest are affinity groups where members form a collective around a shared interest. Gee (2004; 2013) is a pioneer of the terms "affinity space" and "affinity groups," but research on interest-based groups goes back over twenty years (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Fine, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). Gee and Hayes (2010, 2011) define an affinity group as a space (virtual, real, or a mix of both) where people come together and organize around an interest, share resources related to that interest, and foster the general and specific knowledge related to it. The members of such a group have "an affinity (attraction) to the shared endeavor, interest, or passion first and foremost and then to others because of their shared affinity" (Gee and Hayes, 2011, p. 69).

Affinity groups are a particular breed within the larger category of interest-driven groups. Although there are other types of interest-driven groups that foster members' learning, advancement in, and production related to interests, affinity groups have specific characteristics that make them unique. Within affinity groups, members may participate in the group in varying ways, roles are often fluid, expertise and knowledge are distributed amongst members, and everyone has the opportunity to produce - not just consume - related to the interest. For educational researchers and advocates, affinity groups are often comprised of practices that are seen as fostering

“deeper learning,” including self-directed learning, sharing of resources and expertise, and fostering both general and specific knowledge (Gee, 2013; Gee and Hayes, 2010).

### **1.2 Interests, communities, and online technologies**

This research with H@R began as a part of the Connected Learning Research Network (Ito, 2012). It was designed to better understand how groups like H@R support learning, production, and civic outcomes. The connected learning model seeks to address educational concerns by offering insight into the digital practices and possibilities of young people and how the three spheres of young people’s lives - academic, peer, and interest - can come together to support learning. Within the connected learning model, learning is considered a lifelong pursuit, integrated with a “diverse and evolving ecosystem of learning resources, institutions, communities, and outcomes” (Ito et al., 2014, p. 4). Under this model, groups like H@R can provide insight into how diverse, and often disparate, intergenerational communities are united under a shared interest and purpose to foster learning and connections to outside opportunities.

While use of the concept of affinity groups is a relatively recent attempt to understand and characterize these particular types of associations (Gee, 2005; 2013; Gee and Hayes, 2010; 2011), research on the larger field of interest-driven and interest-based groups goes back nearly three decades and has long shown the potential of these groups as spaces of learning, creative production, and activism. Many of the early studies centered on interests that were not culturally valued, such as popular media or tabletop role-playing games. These case studies challenged many popular ideas about how people engaged with media by giving voice to their creative,

productive, and participatory activities. Some of the earliest works were on fan communities and gamers. In the work of Bacon-Smith (1991) and Jenkins (1992) on fandoms, for example, they documented the social, production, and participatory practices of fandoms. Fans shared VHS tapes, create fanzines they would mail across the country, and meet in local groups or larger conventions to discuss their fan interests. Fine's (2002) work on tabletop role-playing gamers documented the social intricacies of this stigmatized subculture; his work highlighted the collaborative play, learning of skills, and creative production related to their games. These works challenged the general portrayal of fans and gamers as socially-isolated, outcast subcultures by revealing the elaborate social networks and participatory activities of these groups. Members are socialized into fan and gaming communities, collaboratively or individually produce content, share resources, foster self-directed learning and specialization, transform media content, and may promote activism related to their interests.

As online access and digital media became more accessible in the 2000s, researchers became increasingly interested in the new forms of social interactions and how issues of identity, law, cultural rules, community organization, and social experimentation could be informed or challenged through these new virtual communities (Dibbell, 1998; Miller and Slater, 2001; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 2011). For interest-driven communities, online and digital technologies offered many affordances. Online, people of all ages and backgrounds could more easily find others who shared their interests, allowing more intergenerational and diverse memberships than was typically seen in offline interest-driven communities (Gee and Hayes, 2011;

Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2006). Additionally, online and digital media lowered the barrier to entry for many interest-driven communities, particularly those with highly technical specializations or practices (Postigo, 2010).

Online resources - from how-to guides, to mentorship, to videos – have become increasingly abundant and accessible as people freely share resources or offer their expertise (Ito et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2013). For example, Ito (2010, 2012) explored anime music videos to document how new media have lowered the bar for access to, and learning with, technologies and interests. She argues that the internet has cultivated the learning, creation, and distribution of anime music videos - something that was once a niche activity with high technical and economic barriers to access, but has now become much more accessible to anime fans of all ages and technical capabilities.

Recent research on affinity groups documents the ways in which personal interests are combined with online and digital tools for learning, production, and civic engagement opportunities that intersect with the participants' offline worlds. For example, fan fiction communities are providing useful tools for identity management and second language learning (Thorne, Black, Sykes, 2009). *Harry Potter* fans interested in podcasts are collaboratively learning to record, edit, and distribute podcasts to discuss and analyze the *Harry Potter* narrative (Herr-Stephenson, 2010). Fans of the television show *Survivor* use online resources to gather, process, and collate information to create databases and knowledge communities related to what has previously happened on the show, and make predictions about what will happen in future episodes (Jenkins, 2006). Members of the Nerdfighter community work to

“decrease world suck” with minor or major acts of civic engagement, such as making videos to raise funds for charities. (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013).

Case studies on gaming communities highlight how learning is fostered when it is motivated by interests and cultivated by communities (Gee, 2003; 2005; Steinkuehler, 2004; 2006). Just as in other interest-driven communities, player communities encourage “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) through which novice players learn and advance skills by participating with other players in the game tasks and community practices. These player communities offer resources - including more experienced peers - to help solve problems and scaffold the abilities of less experienced players. Players may also form short-term “knots” to work together on a problem. (Cody, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Nardi, Ly, and Harris, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2004, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Furthermore, some players expand their interests from the game to connect to academic or offline interests, such as history, literature, writing, and mythology (Gee and Hayes, 2010; 2011).

Research has demonstrated the academic, civic, and economic possibilities of interest-based groups. Affinity groups in particular offer insight into the benefits and opportunities provided when an interest-based group fosters multiple forms of participation, resource sharing, dynamic roles, and production (Gee and Hayes, 2011). Educational researchers have started to use the lessons of these groups to implement changes into classrooms (Parker, 2010) or even in the design of schools (Sims, 2014). Other researchers are interested in the ways in which these lessons can be harnessed to better connect youth to resources. While many researchers, educators, and even parents are gaining insight into the possibilities of these groups, important questions

remain: How do affinity groups come into existence, how do they develop and change, and how are they sustained?

### **1.3 Analytic framework**

Much of the recent research on interest-driven groups uses sociocultural theories to understand the practices and learning outcomes of the groups being examined. These research projects draw upon multiple sources, including, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work with communities of practice, Hutchin's (1995) work on distributed cognition, and Rogoff's (2003) understanding of development as a cultural process involving changing modes of participation in activities that are themselves changing. These conceptual frameworks shed light on the ways learning may occur in interest-driven groups (including affinity groups) as members jointly engage in meaningful practices to collaborate, produce, scaffold each other's abilities, form knots for problem-solving, and move from legitimate peripheral roles to more central roles of expertise (Hutchins, 1995; Ito et al., 2013; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Nardi, Ly, and Harris, 2007; Nardi, 2010; Rogoff, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2004). However, while work in this tradition has proven useful in understanding the practices and outcomes of these types of groups, there is a need to understand how these groups develop and are sustained over shifting and diverse generations of members. Not only is this understanding of group development important to those who wish to better understand affinity groups, it is also important for those who wish to apply or connect this research to education, economic, civic, or other areas.

Like other sociocultural approaches to learning, activity theory understands learning as an outcome that happens through meaningful joint-participation in

mediated activity. Many existing works on affinity and interest-driven groups tend to present the groups as relatively stable, but activity theory seeks to make visible the organic and ever-changing nature of group activities. Activity theory provides both a framework and toolkit through which to understand the larger sociohistorical context of activity systems, and the influence of that context on the development and transformation of these systems. Engeström's (1987, 2001) concept of an expansive cycle of transformation looks at the development of activity systems and "puts the primacy on communities as learners, on transformation and creation of culture, on horizontal movement and hybridization, and on the formulation of theoretical concepts." (Engeström and Sannino, 2010, p. 2).

I will first present an overview of what is referred to as the third generation of activity theory and then take a moment to expand on a key concept in activity theory and in this dissertation: the object. Next, I will discuss "wildfire activities," a particular type of collective activity system that challenges traditional conceptualizations of the flow and relations of elements in activity systems. Finally, I will argue that H@R and other affinity groups are examples of what Engeström (2009) refers to as wildfire activities

### **1.3.1 Activity theory**

Engeström (2008) defines activity<sup>1</sup> as "a collective, systemic formation that has a complex mediational structure," (p. 26) that is motivated by, situated around,

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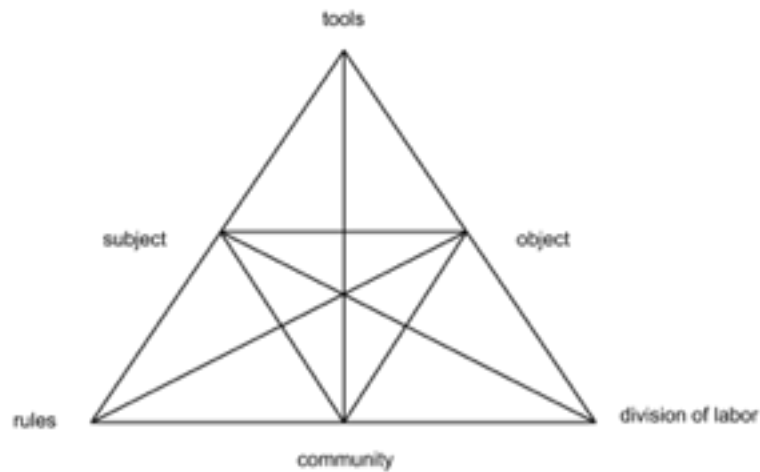
<sup>1</sup> While this dissertation only provides a brief overview of activity theory, a more complete history and description of the concepts of activity theory can be found in Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006).



and working towards a shared *object*. The object of the activity of a school, for example, is the children's education.

An activity is comprised of actions, each with their individual goals, which work together towards the larger object of its parent activity (Leontiev, 1978; Nardi, 2009). Although many depictions of activity systems present them as straightforward, activities and their activity systems - the collective groups or organizations that carry them out - are not static. They are organic. They can “produce events and actions and evolve over lengthy periods of sociohistorical time” (Engeström, 2008, p. 26).

Engeström (1987) begins by identifying an activity system as the central unit of analysis. Figure 1.1 represents an individual activity system as a triangle with six nodes, or components with the multiple relations among them represented by the criss-crossing lines, each of which itself is triangular.



**Figure 1.1 An individual activity system and its six constituent components (From Engeström, 1987).**

Considering first the nodes of the triangle, the *subject(s)* are the individual(s) (or collective) whose perspective(s) are adopted in the analysis. The *object*, (usefully thought of as the overall objective) motivates the participants. The *object* is the reason the activity system exists and is central to the all of the subjects' pursuits within the system. The mediating artifacts are the *tools* and symbols that are used by the subjects as they pursue the object. The bottom of the triangle includes the other mediational components of the system: rules, community, and division of labor. The *rules* govern and regulate interactions (social and material) within the activity system. The *community* is the group of individuals who share a collective object. The *division of*

*labor* is the allocation of roles and tasks between community members. When broken down into smaller triangles, these components become mediational means for each other. For example, the division of labor becomes a mediational means between the community and the object; the rules become the mediational means between the subject and community. The system itself provides a rich source of contradictions, the resolutions of which are engines of change.

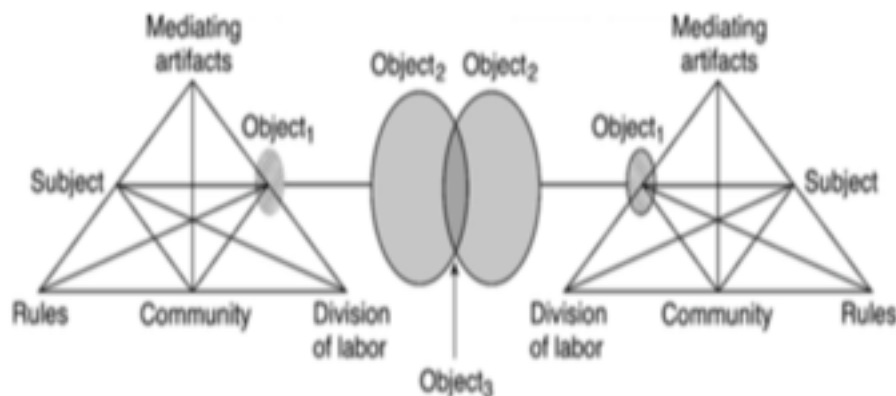
In recent years, Engeström formulated what he calls third generation activity, which builds upon ideas developed in earlier generations of activity theory. It is in the context of this line of theorizing that the analytic lens through which I interpret the processes I witnessed and participated in was formed. To better explain and understand the third generation of activity theory, I will discuss each of five principles explicated by Engeström (2001): (1) the unit of analysis is a collective activity system within a network of other activity systems, (2) activity systems are multivoiced, (3) activity systems must be understood historically, (4) contradictions are a source of change for activity systems, and (5) activity systems have the potential for expansive transformation.

*Prime unit of analysis: interacting activity systems*

The third generation of activity theory, expands on Leontiev's (1978) concept of a collective activity (diagramed in Figure 1.1). Rather than consider the activity in isolation, it is now studied as a part of larger network of activity systems within which the system of interest interacts. Engeström explains the change when he writes of a new unit of analysis that is "multiple interacting activity systems focused on a

partially shared object” (2009b, p. 307). It is not enough to look at activity systems in isolation, he argues; they must be considered within their contexts. The activity system of doctors, for example, interact with the activity systems of patients, hospital administration, and even policy makers. This focus on interacting activity systems also accounts for the reality of individuals, who are often part of multiple settings and activity systems simultaneously (Cole and the Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006). By taking the network of interacting activity systems as the unit of analysis, activity theory recognizes the importance of looking at these layers of influential context and interactions to better understand the “dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

The simplest example from which to start such an analysis is a system constituted of two, interacting activity systems. Engeström diagrams this situation in Figure 1.2.



**Figure 1.2** The third generation of activity theory, led by Engeström, takes interacting activity systems as its primary unit of analysis (from Engeström, 2001).

As we can see in Figure 1.2, multiple interacting activity systems introduce complex dynamics. Although each individual activity system has its own object (O1), or object 1, interacting activity systems may share or jointly construct a secondary (O2) or tertiary object (O3) between them. Thus, just as multiple individuals may work under a collective object within their activity system, multiple activity systems also may work towards or under a shared objective. For example, students in a classroom may have the individual object (O1) of getting a degree, and teachers may have the individual object (O1) of making an income. They have a shared secondary objective (O2), however, of education.

Engeström (1987, 2001, 2008) also noted that there can also be multiple levels of objects. When activity systems interact, they may share or jointly construct an object between them. Engeström (2001, 2008) represents this multilevel object as the object of each activity system at the start of the interaction (O1), the collective object (O2), and the potentially shared object between interacting activity systems (O3) (See Figure 1.2). These second and third level objects are also collectively constructed, with the collective - and multivoicedness - growing with each level.

### *Multivoicedness*

A collective activity system is necessarily comprised of many voices. Participants in the community have their own traditions, interests, and diverse histories. Although a community shares a common object in an activity system, the individual members also have their own differing individual goals (Cole, 2006). Each participant interprets the shared object differently in light of their own histories and

motivations. The artifacts and even the activity system itself also have “multiple layers and strands of history” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136) that lend their voices to the greater heterogeneity. Within the activity system, members are positioned differently due to the division of labor, which means their voices come from different levels of involvement. These multiple voices and layers can create innovation, and inspire collective achievement, but they can also create conflict (Engeström, 2008).

### *Historicity*

Just as it is important to understand an activity system’s context in the present, it is also important to understand its history. Activity is not short-lived and activity systems are not static. In order to understand an activity system, its problems, and its potentials, one must also understand the layers of its history leading up to the present (Engeström, 1999; 2001). Components of an activity system and relations between them evolve over time (Kaptelenin and Nardi, 2006). The relationships, tensions, and cohesions between components of an activity system may cause transformations within the system and between or within neighboring ones. “The activity system incessantly restructures itself” (Engeström, 2008, p. 26) and a historical analysis helps acknowledge the fluidity and ever-transforming nature of an activity system. Looking backwards can shed light on the present state of an activity system.

It is important to note that I did not begin my research with H@R by using the framework of activity theory. I started the research hoping to better understand an affinity group’s current design, practices, community, and the opportunities it provided members to connect their interests to other areas of their lives. I knew in

principle that it is important to understand the history of the phenomenon under study. However, it was only after being in H@R for nearly a year, gaining experience in the group, and witnessing a series of disagreements and Professor Umbridge's overhaul of the group that I knew I needed a toolkit and framework that would help me better understand why the changes happened and the role they played in the group's development. It was at this point that I turned to activity theory as a tool for structuring my thinking about the group's changes. As I looked beneath the surface of the group and began to familiarize myself with the group's early history, activity theory provided a valuable framework for understanding the group's development.

### *Contradictions and change*

Contradictions are an essential feature of activity theory because they are the source of change and development of an activity system (Engeström, 1999, p. 20). For researchers, contradictions provide insight into the micro and macro level interactions of an activity system (Engeström, 2008). Contradictions are connected to Bateson's (1972) psychological concept of a "double bind," where a participant "receives two messages or commands which deny each other" (Engeström, 1987, p. 148).

Within activity theory, contradictions are defined as "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). All activity systems contain contradictions, which may be built into an activity and may accumulate when changes in components are not synchronous across the system (Engeström, 2008). Contradictions also may arise out of interactions with other

activity systems. As activity systems interact, one system may adopt an element of another system, creating a contradiction between old and new elements.

Engeström (1987) lists four types of contradictions. The primary, or basic, inner contradiction pervades capitalistic activities; it is the “inner conflict between exchange value and use value within each corner of the triangle of activity” (102). There is a contradiction between goods that are needed at a societal level but are profited from at the individual level (Miettinen, 2009). Importantly for digital media, this primary contradiction even persists in “high-technology capitalism” (Miettinen, 2009, p. 172) where knowledge, a public good, is becoming increasingly marketed. The other three types of contradictions exist through the interactions within and between activity systems. Secondary contradictions are those that exist within and between components of an activity system. A contradiction between the rules and the tools would be a secondary contradiction. For example, a system may establish a rule stating all activities should be universally accessible, and yet offer instructional materials only in English. Tertiary contradictions appear when a more advanced form of the object is introduced to an activity system. An example would be the introduction of a competitive game to a cooperative community. Quaternary contradictions are those between an activity system and its neighboring and interacting activity systems (Engeström, 1987).

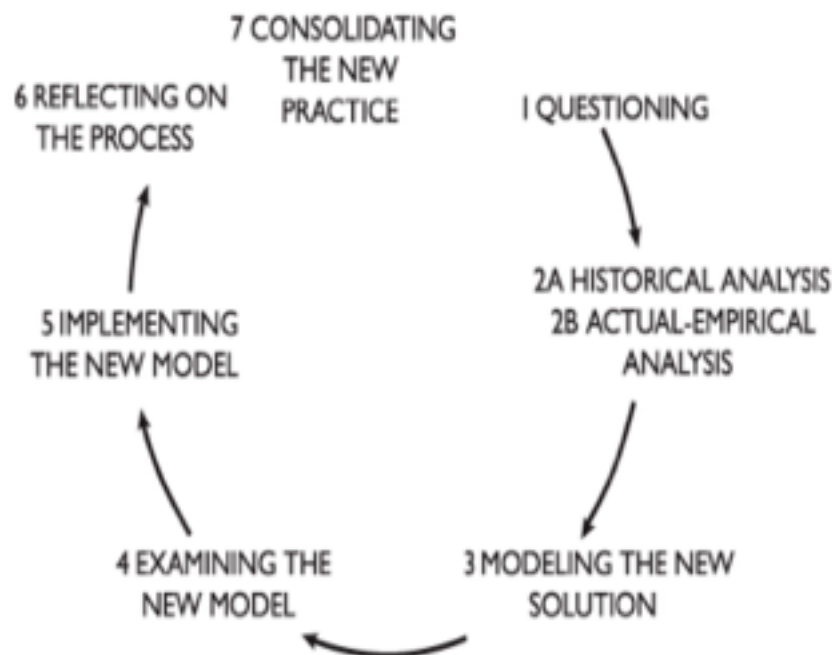
### *Expansive Transformation*

Contradictions create tensions and disturbances in activity systems, but they also serve as a catalyst for change and transformation. Often, activity systems address



the disturbances by rearranging the existing system components. This approach is called single-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Sometimes, however, contradictions become so aggravated that a collective may enter double-loop learning where they go outside of the existing activity system for solutions. This is the expansive cycle of learning, where there is a “collaborative envisioning and deliberate collective change effort” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) to transform an activity system.

Engeström (2008) represents the six stages of this expansive cycle in an ideal-typical model (Figure 1.3) through which a collective: (1) questions existing practices, (2) analyzes the history of the tensions, (3) models their findings and proposes new solutions, (4) examines the new model, (5) implements the model, (6) and finally reflects on the process and new object that has resulted from the transformation.



**Figure 1.3 The six stages of the expansive cycle of learning (From Engeström, 2008).**

As Engeström envisions it, the expansive cycle involves a reconceptualization of the activity system's object, allowing for "a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137).

### 1.3.2 Object

As noted above, the object is central to the functioning and analysis of any activity system, and more needs to be said about the importance and fluidity of this component. Understanding the object is important to understanding the development of affinity groups like H@R as wildfire activities. This topic will be further addressed in the next section.

An activity cannot exist without its object (Leontiev, 1978). As we noted the object is the "motivating force that gives shape and direction to activity" (Engeström, 2008, p. 89). The actions that constitute the activity are determined by the object, in that the actions are the means towards the attainment of the object (Engeström, 2008; Foot, 2001; Nardi, 1996).

The object does not exist *a priori* to the activity system, however; it is constructed and understood through an interplay of the components of the system. The collective subject constructs the object in the process of figuring out how to meet current needs; it becomes more a "'problem space' at which the activity is directed" (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006, loc. 1576) than a clearly defined outcome. The anticipation that the object will meet the needs of the collective subject motivates participation in the activity system.

Because activity systems are ever-changing, and these changes are associated with shifts in the overall structure of the system, this result is an object that also shifts,

evolves, and transforms. When contradictions accumulate or there are shifts in needs or motivations, the entire activity system may expand or transform to organize around a new object (Engeström, 1987). We will see this process quite clearly in the events recounted in Chapters 4-6.

In summary, the object is the central component of an activity system, but the object is neither static nor unitary. The object is collectively understood and collectively constructed. Understanding the multilayered, multivoiced, and shifting nature of an object is essential to understanding H@R.

### **1.3.3 Wildfire activities**

Much of the existing work in activity theory has focused on formal organizations and institutions such as healthcare, courtrooms, classrooms, and television broadcasting networks (Engeström, 1987, 2001, 2008). For these organizations, processes are “relatively straightforward” (Engeström, 2009b, 309) and the units within these activity systems (managers or workers) tend to have a unidirectional relationship. Rules flow from managers to workers. Content flows from producers to users. There have been notable works that challenge this unidirectional flow, discussing how units co-configure to create third spaces outside of the formal scripts (Gutiérrez, Baquedano- López, and Tejeda, 1999), but these instances of knot working (Engeström, 2008) neither challenge nor reconceptualize the traditional model of activity systems.

These activities include new forms of social and peer production, through which members participate in decentralized, collaborative, and distributed forms of production around a common interest (Benkler, 2006; Engeström, 2009, 2009b; Ito et

al., 2010). Online and digital technologies have made these forms of production more accessible, but these types of collective activities also pre-date the Internet and continue to exist offline. Engeström (2009, 2009b) refers to these as “wildfire activities,” which present challenges to the traditional understandings of activity systems.

Wildfire activities are mobile in the material and virtual world, and this mobility “takes the shape of expansive swarming and multidirectional pulsation, with emphasis on sideways transition and boundary-crossing” (Engeström, 2009, p. 4). Whereas traditional organizations have identifiable boundaries, wildfire activities are more fluid. Movement between units is multidirectional and criss-crossing; there is no unidirectional flow. There also is no center of a wildfire activity. Motivated by and pursuing their own individual goals within it, individuals often disperse outward, extending the activity as they do so. This outward extension may overlap with activity systems of other wildfire activities, institutions, or organizations. Even though wildfire activities do not have a center, there is a connection amongst participants, who cross paths, connect, and knot-work in pursuit of the collective object. Knot working, or short-term collaborations to problem-solve, is a common way of organizing in wildfire activities (Engeström, 2008; 2009).

Engeström (2009) offers skateboarding as an example of a wildfire activity. The community interested in skateboarding is a heterogeneous mix of skaters, media, sponsors, law enforcement, and inhabitants or owners of spaces used by skaters. Each of these subjects have their own individual goals, but they are all connected by the shared object of skateboarding. The community is unbounded and often shifting as

people join or leave the group. Because many spaces are made inaccessible to skaters, the activity is mobile, cropping up as new spaces are found or old ones are lost. Subjects may conflict with each other, or they may come together to knot-work a particular problem related to skating. Like other wildfire activities, skateboarding is “dispersed and distributed, yet well-coordinated and aware of the global whole in each local node” (Engeström, 2009, p. 5).

Participants of wildfire activities are “extremely highly motivated” (Engeström, 2009, p. 5) and invest a lot of time and energy into these activities. The community is often diverse and made up of participants with varied motivations, but who share a common object. Because of the varied motivations, there are many different expanding “trails” of actions or interests that participants can take within a wildfire activity. However, trails criss-cross, are multidirectional, and come together to work towards the common object. The more participants converge upon one trail or point of intersection, the easier it becomes to exchange resources, draw upon more experienced peers, and participate in a zone of proximal development (Engeström, 2009, Vygotsky, 1978). These points of connection also offer opportunities for knot working and learning. As more participants converge, there may be collective attempts to better conceptualize and stabilize the trails of a wildfire activity. While still fluid, the wildfire activity’s structure becomes more stabilized and defined. This conceptualization often occurs through analyzing, debating, negotiating, and reconceptualizing the activity; this is similar to the expansive cycle of learning.

Although the works and discussions on wildfire activities are still recent and limited (Engeström, 2008, 2009, 2009b; Engeström and Sannino, 2011), Engeström

argues that this new form of production and activities offers significant challenges and transformations to traditional views of learning and activity theory. It may even “prompt us to rethink the shape of activity systems” (Engeström, 2009b, p. 309).

#### **1.4 H@R and wildfire activities**

Now that I have laid out the conceptual framework for the dissertation, I argue that H@R and other affinity groups are usefully conceived of as a type of wildfire activity. Affinity groups, like wildfire activities, predate the Internet and continue to exist offline. However, as discussed earlier, online capabilities have increased access to these types of groups as well as offered unprecedented opportunities for learning, mobilization, and production. More importantly, the organization of groups like H@R share the key qualities of wildfire activities. There is a collective object that provides a common framework for shared actions and collaborative tasks, but the diverse individual motivations draw members and expand the system in multiple directions. The group attracts and supports a diverse membership by fostering many different types of participation, or trails (Engeström, 2009; Gee and Hayes, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; 2013; Pfister, 2012; 2014).

A notable difference between H@R and Engeström’s (2009) wildfire activities is the structure of the group. Whereas Engeström (2009) argues that wildfire activities are primarily offline and have a swarming, multidirectional, and fluid structure, H@R exists primarily online, though many of its practices (fiber crafting, reading) are offline (Pfister, 2014). Furthermore, H@R, while fluid in many respects, is a bounded by Ravelry.com. Ravelry does not pop up for short durations in different locations like wildfire activities.

Rather than use this difference to exclude H@R and other bounded affinity groups from the wildfire definition, I argue that this difference is due to the lens and level of analysis. If one were to look at *Harry Potter* fan interests or fiber crafting more generally, both interests would follow a similar boundlessness and typical “wildfire” behavior of cropping up in various locations. This macro level view would reveal a very dispersed wildfire activity that criss-crosses online and offline spaces as well as the manifestation of varied types of interests (podcasting, writing, social activism) ( Herr-Stephenson, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013; Pfister, 2014). Zooming in on any of these wildfire location spots, however, one would likely find more bounded groups such as H@R. For example, when Prior and Schaffner (2011) interviewed birders, they found different types of groups devoted to birdwatching, including one online group that had characteristics of a bounded affinity group.

While Engeström (2009) suggests that wildfire activities may require a fourth generation of activity theory, I hope to show through this dissertation how the third generation of activity theory can continue to provide useful insight into the activity system of H@R. Engeström’s (2001) unit of analysis of interacting activity systems is crucial to understanding these types of group formations. H@R is different from more formal organizations, but it still interactions with other the activity systems where a jointly constructed and shared collective object is created in those interactions. Activity theory can provide insight into how this collective object is crucial to balancing and supporting the multi voiced activity systems necessary to sustain an affinity group. Activity theory provides a lens that accounts for H@R’s

multivoicedness and multi-directionality, as well as the contradictions that arise from the interaction between them. Through this framework, researchers can better understand how H@R and other affinity groups develop, evolve, and transform as activities.

While I believe that activity theory can provide useful insight for researchers interested in learning and affinity groups, I hope this dissertation will also contribute to the conceptual framework of activity theory. Wildfire activities do have significant differences from traditional activity systems, and Engeström (2009) argues that more research needs to be done to better understand these activity systems as well as the learning possibilities. This analysis of H@R provides an insider's account of the collaborative efforts and negotiations of members to collectively construct, not just an object that motivates all members, but an activity system that supports that object, and lends important insight into the interconnections and network of activity systems.

In sum, the dissertation will focus on two research questions:

1. How did H@R members collectively construct an object that supports the multivoicedness of its members and fosters a diverse membership?
2. How does activity theory and Engeström's (1987, 2001, 2008) expansive cycle of learning help us understand how affinity groups develop and are sustained over generations of members and changing needs?

### **1.5 Overview of chapters**

The remainder of the dissertation will explain the methods of research and the development of H@R. Chapter 2 historically situates the interests of H@R and my research with the group and the manner in which the group has been organized.



Chapter 3 looks backwards at the first three years of H@R, before I joined the group. This chapter will chronicle H@R's origin story as well as the collective discussion through which H@R's activity system emerged. Chapter 4 is focused on Year 4 of H@R, the year I joined the group. This chapter will discuss the new generation of leaders who came into H@R, the changes they implemented, and the tensions that arose in response to these changes. Chapter 5 will discuss Years 5 through 7. This chapter will discuss two periods of time during which H@R saw significant declines in participation due to accumulating contradictions, and the collective's approach to resolve the disturbances through the cycle of expansive learning. These multiple cycles of disturbances highlight H@R's ongoing need for repair and self-renewal. Chapter 6 will conclude this dissertation by discussing the insight that H@R provides to both affinity groups as well as activity theory.

## **Chapter 2: History and Methods**

A central tenet of activity theory is that the systems under investigation are situated and need to be studied with respect to their historical contexts. This same principle applies to the methods that are used in the research. I will first situate the research with H@R as a case study within a larger research project. Then I will explain more about the interests that form the basis of H@R and the design features of the group. With this background context in mind, I then discuss the research methods used, including my role in the group and my shifting, nonlinear approach to understanding the group's development.

### **2.1 H@R as a case study**

My research with H@R did not begin with activity theory. I was a year into my research with H@R before I turned to activity theory as a framework to try and make sense of the changes I was witnessing in the group. I started the research with H@R to understand it as a connected learning environment.

The research with H@R began as a case study conducted by the Leveling Up Team, which is part of the Connected Learning Research Network, funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The research sites of the Leveling Up team were chosen to give insight into the framework of connected learning and “how young people learn in highly networked and interest-driven settings” (Ito, 2012). H@R and the other sites were chosen for this purpose because they exhibited properties of connected learning environments and each offered a unique view into the ways in which young people are engaging with digital media, peers, resources, and connecting these interests to other areas of their lives.

The connected learning framework argues that connected learning is the tying together of three spheres of learning —academic, peer, and interest—to support young people’s learning in a way that is “socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4). By tying together these three spheres, connected learning environments help cultivate learning that is empowered, relevant, and resilient. There are core properties that support learning. These properties include design features such as production-centered activities, openly networked lines of communication, and a shared purpose (object of activity). Furthermore, within these environments, participation is open to everyone, participants are constantly challenged in their interest or skills, and learning happens through participation in meaningful activities.

H@R was chosen as a case study because it seemed to embody the characteristics and principles of connected learning. The group emphasizes research, advancement of skills or knowledge, production related to *Harry Potter*, and fiber crafting. Members work together to craft items for charities, critically discuss the *Harry Potter* book series, research topics that relate to the *Harry Potter* world, and learn new crafting techniques. The group also fosters and offers opportunities for members to connect these interests to other areas; members use these skills to open their own craft businesses, participate in social activism,, and communicate their interests and identities (Pfister, 2014).

H@R is valuable as a case study for an additional reason. Most research on interest-driven communities, networked publics, participatory cultures, and affinity groups has focused on male- dominated and/or the highly technical and “geek”

communities of games, modding, and fan remixing (Gee and Hayes, 2010; Ito et al. 2010; Nardi 2010; Pearce and Artemesia 2009; Taylor 2006). H@R offers insight into a networked, intergenerational community that is both female dominated and also focused on the low-tech production of fiber crafted goods and *Harry Potter*-related essays. I have documented H@R as a connected learning environment elsewhere (Pfister, 2014).

## 2.2 H@R interests

H@R combines two shared interests: *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting. As Engeström (2001, 2008) points out, activity systems exist within a larger context, but the elements comprising an activity system also contain their own sociocultural histories and lend their voices as well. For H@R, it is important to understand the interests that are foundational to the group as well as the interest-driven communities that exist around those interests.

### 2.2.1 Harry Potter

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is a popular young adult book chronicling the adventures of a boy wizard named Harry Potter. There are seven books in the series,, and each book is set during a year of Harry Potter's time at the wizarding school of Hogwarts<sup>2</sup>. The series follows Harry Potter as he discovers he is a boy wizard and that his parents were killed by the evil wizard Voldemort. Harry is then accepted to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he befriends two other students. He and the other incoming students are sorted into four separate dormitory-like houses and begin attending classes on magical topics, such as Potions,

Herbology, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. In addition to Harry's adventures in school and magical learning, the books also chronicle Harry's quest to overcome Voldemort and forge his own identity. The *Harry Potter* movie series parallels the books, and the supplemental works released by J.K. Rowling add depth to the storylines, characters, and magical elements of Harry Potter's world.

The *Harry Potter* series has been immensely popular. Although the series is aimed at young adults, the series' storyline, characters, and themes resonate with all ages making it a favorite of both children and adults. The series also has a devoted fan following; there are numerous *Harry Potter* fan groups, conventions that bring fans together, and fan-made productions. Fans write fan fiction, produce podcasts, role-play, advocate for real world causes, and create or remix media related to *Harry Potter* (Herr-Stephenson, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013).

The series may be finished, but the popularity *Harry Potter* continues. The last *Harry Potter* book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was published in 2007 and the last movie was released in 2011. J.K. Rowling, however, has continued to publish supplemental material related to the series including *The Tales of Beedle and the Bard* (Rowling, 2008) and short stories on her website Pottermore.com. The popularity and impact of the *Harry Potter* series and its fans has led to a prediction that the series will persist as a classic and that "Harry will take his place with Alice, Huck, Frodo and Dorothy and this is one series not just for the decade, but for the ages" (Fox, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> The last book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, takes place during what would have been Harry

### 2.2.2 Fiber crafting

Fiber crafting can be traced back thousands of years and includes the crafts of knitting, crocheting, spinning fibers into yarn, and weaving. Through combining different colors and stitches, fiber crafters are able to turn yarn into a wide variety of material goods, such as clothing, household items, toys, or even works of art. Not only is fiber crafting versatile, it is also portable. The two most popular fiber crafts of knitting and crochet only require yarn and a needle or hook. Through this combination of versatility, freedom of expression, and portability, fiber crafting has long provided a hub for crafters to socialize and share interests (McDonald, 1988; Parkins, 2004; Wills, 2007).

Historically, the main use of fiber crafts has been to create material goods for wear, but it also has been an important means towards economic, social, political, civic, and artistic objectives as well. Knitters and crocheters have crafted items to sell, to support soldiers or political protests, for self-expression, and to participate in civic events (Lionheart Project, 2013; McDonald, 1988; Rutt, 2003; Theaker 2006; Wills 2007; Wrenn, 2012). Industrialization and mass production decreased the material need for people to craft goods at home, but the crafts have persisted even as they have waxed and waned in popularity over the last century.

Currently, there is a revitalization of interest in fiber crafting, particularly amongst younger generations. There are numerous reasons for this surge - an increased awareness of fiber crafting, “greener” lifestyles, Do-It-Yourself motivations, artistic expression, financial necessity brought on by the economic recession, and the

popularization of knitting as a “hip trend” (Abrahams, 2008; Hudson, 2010; Parkins 2004; Lee, 2005; Stannard, 2011; Wills 2007).

Online and digital media also have played a role in the revitalization of fiber crafting in general and the interest of younger generations in knitting in particular. Social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest have increased the visibility of fiber crafters and their works. Online resources such as tutorials, instructional videos, and communities of experts have made the crafts more accessible to many people (Ashbrook 2011; Dorrheim 2011; Huffstutter 2000; Torrey, Churchill and McDonald 2009). Furthermore, the rise of online craft stores such as Etsy.com, an online store for vintage and crafted goods, have made visible the economic potential of fiber crafting. Using online craft stores, crafters can sell patterns and crafted items from their homes (Davis, 2013; Schulte, 2002; Thomas, 2012).

Importantly, online and digital media have enabled crafters to connect and share resources with others who share their fiber crafting interests, regardless of location. Fiber crafting sites become social hubs for crafters, paralleling offline knitting circles. Ravelry.com, the home of H@R, is the most popular of these crafting sites.

### **2.3 Site overview**

H@R is one of more than 30,000 groups on Ravelry.com, a site founded in 2007 as a free database and social network for fiber crafters. Jessica, the founder, envisioned it as an online central hub that would “help enthusiasts ‘keep track of their yarn, tools, and pattern information, and look to others for ideas and inspiration’” (Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2010, 297). On Ravelry, users are able to connect with other

crafters, seek advice, find crafting patterns, sell patterns, and keep track of their own products. The site has been a success. It currently has four million users of all ages from all over the world, with 30,000 groups related to fiber crafting and other interests, and over 120,000 patterns in its database (Ravelry, 2014).

fresh discussion threads start a topic | more... | subscribe

topic	activity	unread	posts	
📌 Potions - Y1, R2	24 mins ago	<b>288</b>	901	
📌 Weekly Challenge, Year 1, R2	44 mins ago	<b>196</b>	835	
📌 Gobstones Club - Year 1	4 hours ago	<b>191</b>	193	
📌 Gamekeeper's Hut - Year 1	5 hours ago	453	453	★
📌 Library Y1	6 hours ago	<b>128</b>	919	
📌 Diagon Alley Yr 1 Rt 2	6 hours ago	103	103	★
📌 Charms - Y1, R2	7 hours ago		591	
📌 🏠 Hogwarts Announcements--Year One	7 hours ago	58	58	★
📌 Quidditch Match 2: LET IT SNOW!!	7 hours ago	46	46	★
📌 Platform 9 3/4 - Y1	10 hours ago	<b>440</b>	465	
📌 Hogwarts Historical Society - Year 1	10 hours ago	<b>866</b>	878	
📌 Hogwarts School Store	1 day ago	<b>277</b>	285	
📌 Study Hall Yr 1, Rt 2	3 days ago	<b>154</b>	157	
📌 🏠 Marauder's Map- Year 1	8 days ago	4	4	★
Ravenclaw Common Room - Year One	<1 min ago	<b>1</b>	3452	
Slytherin Common Room - Year 1	2 hours ago	2467	2467	★
HUFFLEPUFF Yr1 Rt2	2 hours ago	3745	3745	★
Cauldron of Crafts--Year 1	4 hours ago	65	65	★
Charity Crafting for Hogwarts - Year 1	6 hours ago	129	129	★
Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Sock Along- Rotation 2	6 hours ago	<b>81</b>	264	

**Figure 2.1** H@R's message board has threads for different Harry Potter-related classes or locations.

Like all Ravelry.com groups, H@R has a message board format (see Figure 2.1). Conversation threads (hereafter known as threads) are created for different topics, and members can post to threads. Members can enter text, images, and website links into their posts. The content of H@R is drawn from the *Harry Potter* series, fiber crafting, online resources, and members' creative productions. Through this combination of media, H@R offers members a fantasy world that parallels the



Hogwarts of the *Harry Potter* series. Threads become classrooms, house dormitories, magical sporting matches, general discussion areas, magical creature pens, role-playing games, and book read-alongs.

While H@R is a bounded group on Ravelry.com, its boundaries are fluid. Members are often members of multiple groups or sites, and their discussions and crafts may cross several sites or groups, including blogs or social media. Members develop relationships with each other as well, contacting each other through other mediums such email or even meeting in person. Within H@R, members often exchange resources such as links to patterns, guides, and videos. H@R members have also formed teams in events outside of H@R, including a Ravelry-wide Olympic craft-along. Furthermore, H@R often encourages members to participate in their local events or charities (Pfister, 2014).

H@R is organized primarily as a fictional fantasy school. The group operates on a school schedule, with three to four classes being offered in each “class rotation,” and five rotations making up each “school year.” Each rotation lasts approximately six weeks. The school years parallel the *Harry Potter* books. For example, Year 1 parallels the first book, Year 2 parallels the second book, and so forth. Members are cast as students of this magical school. They are sorted into houses (sub groups) and attend *Harry Potter*-related classes. There are also non-class challenges that relate to *Harry Potter*, including the magical sport of Quidditch, weekly challenges that work through each book’s plot, and larger challenges based on longer plot events of the books, such as the TriWizard Tournament of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Rowling, 2002). Each class or challenge offers assignments or tasks that generally

ask students to research a topic, craft something that represents that topic, and then write how their crafted item is related to what they have learned about the topic. The H@R staff grade each submission according to crafting difficulty, and those points are then awarded to that student's house. At the end of the school-year, the house with the most points wins the House Cup award. This House Cup competition is also drawn from the *Harry Potter* series.

There are four ranks of members: waiting-to-be-sorted, student, staff, and leader. The waiting-to-be-sorted group are members who have joined H@R but who have not yet been assigned to a house; they can submit items to some challenges but cannot earn points for a house. Most H@R members are students; they have been sorted into houses and can earn points by participating in classes. Staff include teachers and house leaders (head of house and prefect). They conduct the challenges or lead the houses; they also moderate the content of these areas to make sure members are following group rules. Leaders are those who run the group by tracking points, organizing schedules and challenges, and sorting new members..

H@R has a diverse membership. When I joined in 2011, membership totaled over 850. By 2013, it had more than 1300 members. Presently, there are nearly 2000 people who participate. In her interview with me, the headmistress, or leader of the group, estimated there were approximately 200 members actively participating in the group at any one time. The group includes members from across the world, although they are mostly located in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Almost all conversations are in English, although leaders explicitly encourage other languages. A few men participated in the group from 2009 to 2011, but by the time I

joined the group it was entirely female. During my research, the women ranged in age from 11 years old to their mid-70s.

## **2.4 Research methods**

The research at H@R began in the fall of 2011 and it continued until the spring of 2014. Data were collected through participant observation, fieldnote writing, screen captures (images), archival searching, and semi-structured interviewing.

### **2.4.1 Participant observation and fieldnotes**

My primary means of data collection was participant observation, which I recorded in fieldnotes. As Boellstorff et al., (2012) note, “ethnographic research is fundamentally about understanding a culture from the inside out” (p. 168). Although an ethnographer is different from an insider because of their reflections and observing role, an ethnographer should strive to be a “consequential social actor” (ibid, p. 65) and who shares practices and engages with the culture. Researchers in virtual worlds have found immersive approaches to be useful and necessary to understand the member cultures (Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce and Artemisia, 2009; Taylor, 2006).

There are no “natives” in online spaces (Boellstorff, 2008). Researchers look like, and go through similar learning curves as, other members (Nardi, 2010). For example, a gaming researcher must experience the game in order to understand it. She must learn how to play, master the language of the community, gain experience in order to access other areas of the game, and acquire the technical skills or team strategies necessary to coordinate with her group of interest (Nardi, 2010; Steinkuehler, 200x; Taylor, 2006). This level of deep engagement allows the

researcher to better understand the emotional connections linking the players to their interests and their communities.

I joined H@R in 2011 and began participating in the group as both a member and as a researcher. Initially I spent most of my time reading through threads and learning how to fully participate in the group. Fortuitously, I joined H@R during a “break” week and was immediately sorted into the Ravenclaw house as a student, allowing me to begin participating right away. When my research began, the leader of the group directed me to create a thread that informed members about my research. This thread was also used to invite members to participate in research interviews. For the most part, my participation in H@R was similar to that of the other members. I logged into the group several times each week, participated in classes, and discussed *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting with other members. I was promoted to Ravenclaw prefect approximately four months after I joined the group. I was later promoted to Head of House for Ravenclaw for one class rotation while the former Head of House was on leave. For both promotions, the leaders gave me instructions about my new rank and role, including how to track Ravenclaw’s points on a Google Document, moderate Ravenclaw to insure members followed the rules, and help new Ravenclaw members. The H@R and Ravenclaw leaders exchanged private messages with me during this time, alerting me to concerns and administrative discussions about the group. Eventually time constraints required that I relinquish my position as Ravenclaw Head of House and return first to my prefect rank, and finally to my student rank. Altogether, I spent two years actively conducting research on H@R, and I have continued to participate as a student since the completion of the research.

Over the course of my research, I wrote 160 fieldnotes documenting my observations, interactions, and reflections on H@R. My observations were guided by the larger questions of the Leveling Up team and the protocols developed by the Digital Media and Learning Hub (2010). From these questions and protocols, I looked at design features of the H@R and the roles, interactions, participation, learning trajectories, and resource sharing of its participants. My observations were also guided by the connected learning framework, looking for practices or opportunities where members connected their interests or learning inside H@R to events or aspects of their lives outside the group.

#### **2.4.2 Interviews**

To complement the participant observation, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews to hear the members' reflections on learning in H@R, and to better understand their experiences in H@R, systems of support, and personal goals. The interview questions were developed in connection with the Leveling Up team, and designed to reveal the family and peer interactions of the interviewees, their use of media, their histories and their engagement with the *Harry Potter* narrative and fiber crafting.

It is important for an interviewer to understand cultural norms and linguistic practices of those being interviewed (Briggs, 1994), and to this end I spent several months with H@R before I began interviews. This experience helped me in several ways. It helped me shape and contextualize questions appropriate for the group's community, language, and practices (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Relatedly, this experience helped me jointly construct meaning with interviewees during the

interviews and better understand their responses when analyzing the interviews afterwards (Mishler, 1991). Furthermore, the time spent with the group allowed me to develop rapport with the interviewees, which I hoped would help them feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives with me (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Spradley, 1979).

At the direction of H@R's leader, I included a request for interviews in the initial thread about my research. Almost half of the participants interviewed had responded to this thread. These interviewees referred their friends to me, and I sought out less active and younger members to individually ask for interviews.

There were challenges to recruiting interviewees. Although many members visited and chatted on H@R frequently, relatively few responded to the general or private request for interviews. Finding less active members to better understand all types of H@R members faced the same difficulties. Several of those who initially agreed to do an interview did not complete consent forms and did not respond to follow-up communications. Two members agreed to be interviewed, completed consent forms, but had technical difficulties or time constraints that prevented them from being interviewed.

The interviewees ranged in age from 17 to 49 years old. Nine of the 24 interviewees were between the ages of 17 and 25, nine were between the ages of 25 and 35, and six were older than 35 years old. All of the interviewees were women. The women were located in the US, Canada, the UK, Vietnam, and France. English is the second language of two of the interviewees. I encouraged all interviewees to choose the communication medium they were most comfortable with, resulting in interviews

being conducted via Ravelry private messages, phone, instant messaging programs, Skype, and email.

A year after their initial interviews, I did follow-up interviews with two participants, the leader and one of the most prolific members of the group. Follow-up interviews are a useful tool for a researcher (Quinn, 2005). They allow an interviewer to explore topics more in-depth, refine questions after reflecting on an initial interview or data, gain insight on changing perceptions, or see how the interview has changed over time. Since I conducted the follow-up interviews a year after the initial interview, the follow-up interviews let me see how the members or their experiences in the group had changed.

### **2.4.3 History**

In addition to the interviews I used the group's archives to learn the history of H@R. While this is a common way to get at the history of a virtual world or online group (Boellstorff et al., 2012), it can be problematic. Threads are saved, allowing a glimpse into the social interactions of the past. However, those with administrative abilities can delete threads, determining which aspects of the group's history they would like to keep. The only record of deletions is within existing threads, where there are empty messages that read "removed by administrator." As tensions, conflicts, and changing membership happened over H@R's history, the archives were pruned to best reflect the version of history that the group wished to keep and pass on. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand the larger context of the conversations that do remain. Conversations may cross or reference multiple threads, and these threads may be separated by a dozen or more other threads.

Even while taking account of the intentionality of H@R's memory, the archives provided insight into H@R's history. When I began using the framework of activity theory to understand the group's development, I knew I needed to understand its past. The archives were valuable. They contained many early conversations from the group's founding. I also was able to interview several early members of H@R as well as the leaders who inherited the group at the end of Year 3. I combined data gleaned from the archives and from interviews with members to assemble what I believe to be a comprehensive account of H@R's origin story and to track the first two years of the group's development.

#### **2.4.4 Data analysis**

Although the chapters in this dissertation are laid out as a linear story of H@R's development, my understanding of this development was not linear. When I was first doing research with H@R, I was primarily focused on the group's design, practices, social interactions, opportunities and outcomes. In Year 5 (Year is the H@R designation for the time period of a fictional *Harry Potter* school year; a Year generally lasted nine months), the Ravenclaw prefect, Myriam, alerted me to a conversation between the leaders about participation concerns. This conversation and resulting overhaul of H@R helped me realize that while it is important to understand the current practices and outcomes of groups like H@R, it also is important to understand the ways in which these groups develop and evolve to sustain those practices. Through the framework of activity theory, I began looking backwards, not just at the history of H@R before I joined the group but also at my previous fieldnotes and interviews. Things that I had recorded, noted, and even reflected on as they



happened took on a new light when I viewed them as part of H@R's development. In this way, fieldnotes are an invaluable tool for researchers, allowing different interpretations and deeper insights with each reading.

As can be ascertained, much of the data analysis methods were adopted *during* and *after* fieldwork with H@R. The research was organic, emerging, evolving, and coming together as I progressed in H@R's story. This is common in ethnographic work, where the data and story are "culturally situated" and "the value of the data is linked to the contexts of its collection" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 160). Many ethnographers do not know what they are seeking it "until we find it" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 161), and this was true with H@R as well.

After sorting through the data to reveal emerging patterns, I used the larger lens of activity theory and the more precise lens of Engeström's (1987, 2001, 2008) theories of expansion and transformation to make sense of the points of connections, histories, and linkages. In his work on a television production team, Engeström (2008) traces through disturbances to look at the different ways in which the activity system manages the disturbances. I used a similar approach to understand H@R's development. I located instances where members and leaders noted innovations or tensions in H@R, and I looked at the ways in which the tensions were resolved by the leaders or by the community.

The following chapters will trace through this story.

## Chapter 3: Beginnings

H@R's origins had several important features that set the stage for the group's future development. This origin story highlights the importance of other Ravelry groups, member multivoicedness, and collective discussions on the development of H@R's activity system.

### 3.1 Founding of H@R

H@R was founded in July of 2009 by Susie, a 10 year-old, who was a fan of *Harry Potter* and a knitter. Susie wanted a place where she and others could role-play as students in the *Harry Potter* world, attend their own Hogwarts, and combine fiber crafting and knitting. She started the group with a thread asking members to choose which of Hogwarts' four houses, (the competing sub-groups of J.K. Rowling's fictional Hogwarts) they would like to affiliate with. "Lets get started," Susie wrote, "name two houses you would like to be." In another early thread, Susie told members they would be starting classes soon and asked for volunteers to teach those classes. From the start, Susie invited members to role-play in their own Hogwarts.

Before Susie could accomplish much in the group, however, Ravelry's rules regarding group administrators required Susie to step down as the group's leader.

Holly, an early H@R member, described these early days:

Holly: Yes. What happened was the little girl who started Hogwarts-- and it was a little girl, I think she was, like, ten--Ravelry had an issue with her being the leader of a group.

Rachel: Oh really?

Holly: So she gave the group to Merida. And that's when Merida started kind of putting it together and really getting things moving. And so that's when I came in and I was one of the founding people, and we

just all kind of got together, and that's actually how Merida and I became very close friends is through that.

Rachel: So how did the little girl know Merida?

Holly: You know, I'm not sure exactly. I think they just kind of met, like, Merida had joined H@R and she was just somebody that the little girl really trusted and kind of felt comfortable giving the group to. Because Merida's actually, like, kept her on as one of the founding people, you know, she was kept on as an administrator, I guess. Not the moderator, but administrator (personal communication, March 20, 2012).

Merida started "really getting things moving" to build and carry out Susie's vision of Hogwarts; she took over sorting members into Houses and assigning teaching positions. Although Susie had ideas for the fantasy world of H@R, Merida turned to the H@R community to help create and implement plans.

### **3.2 Collective discussions**

Within a day of Merida taking over the group, a separate thread was created for the collective discussion and planning of H@R. Pattie, who had been promoted to assistant leader by Merida, attempted to help members understand the future role of teachers:

Allison: What is required from the teachers? What sort of duties will apply to this growing school of ours?

Pattie: Teachers will decide on assignments for their class, and post links to patterns. Obviously, this is a bit understated, but we will work on getting that all ironed out soon. :) We still need to have a meeting of Professors to discuss how we will work things out.

Harriet: I've started collecting ideas. But a few question have arose. I think a staff meeting is a great plan.

Pattie: And probably a thread where we can collect our thoughts. We need to figure out a schedule, we can't have every class going on at once or people may have to choose. Does that make sense?

Sylvia: Makes complete sense.

Pattie: I've made a thread for discussions. Let's bounce around ideas there.

Although Susie was already working to recruit teachers for H@R classes, the role of teachers was largely undefined. Pattie created a thread called Staff Room to serve as a central hub where members could “bounce around ideas.”

The Staff Room became a central organizing place for creating the H@R's activity system. In her interview, Holly recalled the early stages of H@R when the group's structure and modes of participation were determined in those collective discussions, “well those who first joined, we all started off with just one big chat room. We just kind of bounced ideas back and forth, and that's how we started with the classes” (personal communication, March 20, 2012).

### **3.2.1 Defining H@R**

Although initiated by a discussion of teachers and classes, the first topic of the Staff Room thread tackled a larger question of H@R: how would the group define itself on Ravelry.com?

Pattie: I'm curious.... in what ways do we want to be similar to other Harry Potter related groups on ravelry, and what ways do we want to set ourselves apart?”

Merida: It's also about the harry potter series, but it's different in maybe we coordinate projects with years in the school. So first projects should be from the first movie or books. Just a thought.

Pattie: I was thinking the same.

Holly: I like that! I can do a lot with this in my class!

Susie: That's good.

There were other groups on Ravelry.com dedicated to *Harry Potter* interests, but Merida suggested H@R distinguish itself from other groups by coordinating the group's practices with events in the books. Crafting assignments for the first year would be based on storylines, clothes, spells, foods, creatures, or other elements from the first book. Although Merida phrased it as "just a thought," other members immediately agreed and this became a defining aspect of H@R. Susie had already established that the fantasy world of H@R would be based on *Harry Potter*, and this decision to closely parallel the books established the centrality of the books' narratives to the structure and content of H@R's classes and role-playing.

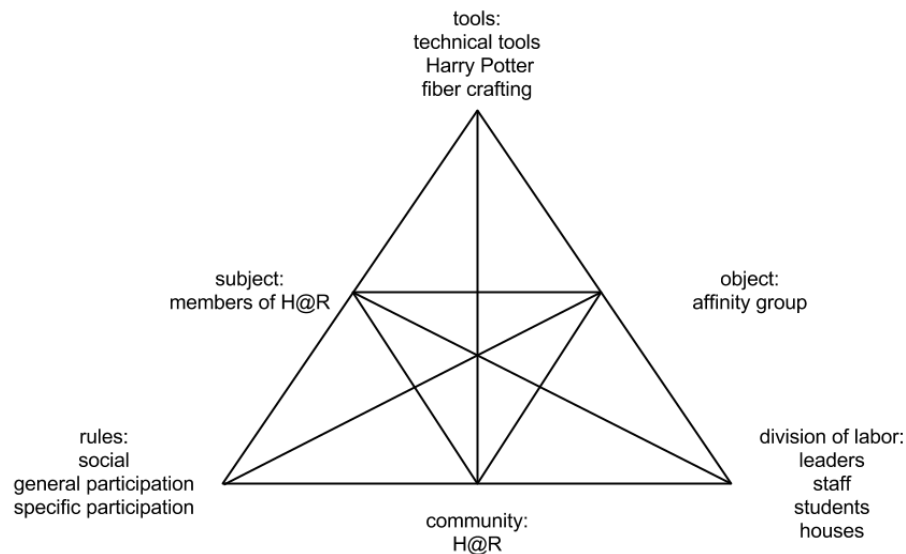
Members were particularly concerned with how H@R compared with the group Durmstrang, which also was founded in the summer of 2009. Leaders of Durmstrang had plans similar to H@R for their group's structure: it was to be set up as a fantasy school where members could take classes and craft *Harry Potter*-related items. Furthermore, both groups planned to have a House Cup competition where the house with the most points wins. Several H@R members belonged to both groups, and some had started to ask how H@R would be different.

Distinguishing themselves from Durmstrang became a guiding force behind the development of many aspects of H@R. In addition to the fact that H@R coordinated explicitly with the *Harry Potter* volumes and Durmstrang did not, the groups differed in their shared values regarding their communities. Holly described Durmstrang as "real competitive. And they expect you to participate, it's a huge deal. People have said that it's very stressful, where our group is more laid back. It's a very fast pace over there" (personal communication, March 20, 2012).

The contrast with Durmstrang helped shape and solidify the shared values of H@R members. Merida stressed that members were in H@R “to have fun!” Pattie asked members to help keep H@R “open, friendly, and nonexclusionary.” H@R members wanted a “laid back” atmosphere that valued friendliness, inclusivity, and fun. The group would have contests and challenges, including a House Cup competition, but these were not H@R’s main focus. Holly recalled that when one early member suggested a Quidditch challenge inspired by the magical sport in the *Harry Potter* series, other members worried that it was “too much like the other group, Durmstrang. So we backed off from doing that kind of thing.”

### **3.2.2 Building a collective activity system**

The Staff Room served as the hub to build the basic elements of the group’s activity system, including identification of the collective object and the rules, tools, community, and division of labor that would mediate members’ pursuit of that object. After tackling the issue of the group’s identity, the Staff Room discussions turned to other elements of the group’s future. Although Susie laid some foundations for the group, much of the resulting activity system was built through these discussions. The guideposts that informed the development of H@R’s activity system were: (1) the *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interests that were foundational to the group, (2) Susie’s vision of a role-playing and fantasy, Hogwarts for fiber-crafters, and (3) the shared values of fun, friendliness, and inclusivity. H@R is represented as an activity system in Figure 3.1



**Figure 3.1 H@R represented as an activity system.**

The collective **subject** of H@R was the collection of members seeking the object. The collective **object**, as we have seen, was more difficult to define because it is composed of so many voices, which Powell (2013) usefully characterizes as “a coordinated heterogeneity” of “collective meanings and interpretations” (p. 66-67). Susie’s early threads indicated that she intended the group to be about the collective pursuit *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interests in a role-playing game. Was the interest in HP and fiber crafting, the game playing, the community-building or something else that Susie intended as the collective object? In the Staff Room discussions, the early H@R members sought to define the group’s object by using their individual goals to reference all of these aspects. Holly posted her excitement about crocheting *Harry Potter* toys. Pattie asked members to suggest patterns that

“involve a knitting technique you don’t know yet” so they could learn together.

Harriet referenced the game by saying she did not “want to let my house down” in House Cup game. Calia was excited about the “really cool different approach to” role-playing. Each post referenced a different aspect - *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, the community, the game. Instead of members arguing that the group was about just one or a few of these aspects, however, there seemed to be an understanding that the collective object would encompass all of them.

The collective object was not the singular pursuit of *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, or the game. Rather, H@R was about combining the three into a particular type of interest-based community and fantasy game world. The collective object was multifaceted and aimed to encompass and support the diverse interests and individual goals of members for *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, the House Cup game, and community-building. Using Gee and Hayes (2010) definition, this multifaceted object could be understood as the defining characteristic of an affinity group, a particular type of interest-driven community that supports varying levels and types of participation related to a shared interest. While describing the object as an affinity group seems paradoxical, it offers the best description to encapsulate the specific ways in which the group wanted to collectively pursue their interests in *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting.

“Fun” became a term that encompassed all the diverse motivating reasons members were there. Regardless of whether members were more interested in the *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, or the role-playing game of the group, all members were



motivated by fun. “We are here to have fun!” said Pattie in the conversation about defining H@R. “Make this fun!!!” Merida cheered in a discussion on classes.

There were three categories of **tools** for H@R: technical tools, the *Harry Potter* narrative, and fiber crafting. The technical tools included the digital media and online technologies that enabled H@R to exist and members to access it, such as computers, mobile devices, internet, and the host site of Ravelry.com. *Harry Potter* included the narrative of, and media related to *Harry Potter*. Fiber crafting included the materials, skills, and resources related to the four fiber-crafts of Ravelry.com: knitting, crocheting, weaving, and spinning fibers into yarn. Mastery of these tools enabled members to understand and access the content of H@R and participate in its role-playing world.

I found only one explicit mention of the tools of H@R, probably because the tools were assumed by the group’s description and location on Ravelry. About a week after the group was founded, Merida listed the “supply list” that students would need for upcoming classes. This list included a “variety of yarns, knitting needles or crochet hooks, a sense of fun and adventure, a smile, and patterns and spells.” Using the tools of role-play and the *Harry Potter* narrative, she instructed students to find these supplies at Violetta’s Fibers, Spells, and Sticks store in Diagon Alley<sup>3</sup> to find these supplies.

The **division of labor** was based on the one at the J.K. Rowling’s fictional Hogwarts and was established by Susie when she set up H@R. In Susie’s initial post, she referenced the roles of teachers, the division of students between houses, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Diagon Alley is an area of wizard shops in the *Harry Potter* series.

leadership role of the headmistress. When Merida took over the group, Pattie and Susie were promoted to Merida's assistants, creating a secondary level of leaders. Eventually labor was distributed among leaders who helped organize and moderate the group, staff who would teach classes and lead houses, and students. All members were also assigned to houses.

There were several kinds of **rules** that were collectively discussed: social rules, general participation rules, and specific participation rules related to classes or challenges.. The social rules related to member-interactions and social participation in the group. Pattie had asked members to help keep H@R "open, friendly, and nonexclusionary," and these values became a core part of the collective object as well as the foundation for the social rules of the group. Merida pointed to the open and inclusive nature of the group when she asked members to keep posts "G-rated." Pattie enforced the friendliness of the group by stopping members' complaints about each other. "I want it to stop now," she said to a member who complained about another. At some point, these shared values were put as explicit rules on the group's main page:

1. Please keep the conversation (and projects) "G" rated.
2. NO FLAMING<sup>4</sup>! This includes not only people who post in this group, but other people and groups on Ravelry.
3. Be nice in general. It is not appropriate to speak poorly of anyone else's projects, nor their choice of projects. Everyone has varying levels of experience.

General participation rules were those that determined what behavior was considered a legitimate form of participation. Through her early posts, Susie

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<sup>4</sup> Flaming is an internet slang term that refers to hostile or insulting interactions.

established that role-play, socializing, topic-specific conversations, and out of character discussions were all valid forms of participating in the groups. All forms of fiber crafts also were valid to submit to the group for crafting projects. Finally, to foster participation and insure an active group, Merida and Pattie created a rule that students had to take at least one class. Pattie explained that because H@R had a limit on the number of members [Susie initially had capped the group at 140 members to insure an even distribution of members across houses.], members needed to engage with the group's classes and challenges. Members should not just "kick back in the dormitories the whole time!"

Specific participation rules were those tied to class content, challenges, or assignments. These rules determined what would be accepted as an assignment or how many points a submission could be awarded. Initially, discussions about assignment rules echoed the shared value of inclusivity. For example, when one member asked how she would connect projects to *Harry Potter* in assignments, Susie responded that she felt the connection could be "out of your head. So the crafts have to have something to do with it. Like a sock you would name 'Narcissa'<sup>5</sup>." This rule would have allowed students to use their imaginations to tie projects to the *Harry Potter* narrative. Instead, the collective discussions decided that there would be a standard format for classes, but teachers would have authority over their class assignments and rules. Merida summed up this rule as "teachers will decide on assignments for their classes."

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<sup>5</sup> Narcissa is the name of a dark witch in the *Harry Potter* series.

Members seemed excited about the developing activity system. There was little overt discussion of the collective object, which appeared to be assumed and agreed to by most members. Similarly, the division of labor, tools, and community were accepted amongst members. The largest discussion was devoted to the rules, but although members asked for clarifications there was relative agreement that these rules supported the type of H@R that members envisioned. Members were particularly excited about the rules that fostered the shared value of inclusivity. When it was confirmed that all fiber crafts would be represented in H@R, one member said, “it’s always so much better when both crafts are represented!” and another added, “it also makes it so more of us can participate and have fun.” Pattie agreed, “No point in being exclusionary, right?”

The Community of H@R includes all of its members, conceived of as the embodiment of the object. Individual voices in the collective subject consistently refer to an “us” and a “we” that references H@R as an entity that is “the voice of the community.”

### **3.2.3 Supporting actions of H@R**

Activities are supported by a variety of practices, and from the start Susie intended the school game to be one of the central supporting practices of H@R. The game was primarily organized around the House Cup competition between the houses. In the *Harry Potter* books, the four houses compete against each other, vying for points that are awarded for behaviors, deeds, and academics. At the end of each school year, the house with the most points wins the House Cup.

H@R's House Cup competition paralleled the inter-house competition of the books, and included the actions of the classes, houses, and challenges of the group. These actions supported the collective object by providing members a means to collectively pursue and advance their fiber crafting and *Harry Potter* interests as well as build affinity with other members. The goal of the classes and challenges was to earn points for the House Cup competition. Although the House Cup was the overarching competition of the group, most of the focus of the early days was on the classes.

Class format and content were also topics of Staff Room discussion. Initially, these discussions focused on assignments, with members wondering how projects could coordinate with the first book.

Merida: first year ideas - scarves, Wingardium Leviosa<sup>6</sup>, something orange for pumpkin juice, Harry's wand...

Diana: House colors to show house spirit while we earn points!  
Scarves, mittens...

Pattie: Something owl-related. Harry gets Hedwig<sup>7</sup> his first year. Ooh Norbert the dragon! Fluffy the dog.

The discussions soon turned to the format of the classes, however. Within three days, there were over 80 posts in the Staff Room related to class structure, length, difficulty, and schedules. Should all classes of the *Harry Potter* books be offered in each rotation, and could members make their own schedules? Or should only a few classes be offered in each rotation to “allow for the excitement of the ‘newness’ factor” and better concentrate the energies of those “who are slower or are busy.”

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<sup>6</sup> Wingardium Leviosa is a spell for levitation.

Class assignments would coordinate with the topics that Harry and his friends learned about at Hogwarts, but should teachers assign patterns or allow students to choose their own patterns for the topics? Should classes start with easy patterns and “get progressively harder” with subsequent rotations, or should each class have both easy and difficult options?

At the root of these questions, were concerns about making the classes accessible, challenging, and enjoyable for *all* members. H@R’s membership was diverse, with members of varying levels of time commitments and abilities. How might H@R meet the needs of such a membership? Members continued to brainstorm and “bounce around” ideas, until one novice crafter worried “this is much more involved than I realized.”

At this point, Merida reminded everyone to “step back to the basics” of what H@R was supposed to be about - fun and inclusivity - and create the classes from that foundation. Using Harriet’s suggestions, a simple class schedule was created with three to four classes in each six-week rotation and three class rotations in each school year. At Pattie’s suggestion, teachers were in charge of creating their own syllabus, assignment topics, and suggested patterns. Merida, however, insisted members be able to choose or suggest patterns and level of difficulty to “make this enjoyable” for them.

With this simple framework decided, Holly declared H@R ready for a “first go at” classes, and Merida encouraged everyone to “Make this fun!!!” Merida then listed the first four classes: Divination, which tries to predict the future; Transfiguration, or

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Potter’s owl is named Hedwig.

the study of transforming one item into another; Defense Against the Dark Arts, or defensive magic; and Care of Magical Creatures.

### 3.3 First classes

The first rotation of classes started less than a month after the group was founded; between 30 and 33 H@R members participated in each class. The class with the most submitted assignments was Care of Magical Creatures with 100 submissions, and the class with the least number of submitted assignments was Divination with 60 submissions. Assignments referenced elements from the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1999). Holly's Care of Magical Creatures class, for example, included assignments that read:

**Project 1 - Owls for the Owlry.** Some may already have an owl as a pet but it is a good student that helps care for and train the new recruits to help with the mail.

**Project 2 - Trolls.** A nasty sort of magical creature that requires a special hand in the care. Never know when you might run into one (like in a bathroom for instance!)

**Project 3 - Fluffy the 3 headed dog.** Fluffy has the important job of guarding special things at Hogwarts therefore he needs special care!

Although Holly did not ask students to research or write about the topics, the assignment descriptions referenced the first book's storylines, including the three-headed magical dog who guarded a secret chamber and a troll that Harry and his friends fought in the bathroom. In Divination class, students were asked to learn, practice, and write about divination and fortune-telling techniques. For example, one assignment asked students to have a "cuppa something" and use a website to interpret the tea leaves. The website offered guidance to interpret the readings, such as "Any

distinct drop of tea or coffee that remain in the cup....represent tears. A very large clump of tea leaves indicates trouble” (Serena, 2014).

Assignments also asked students to craft something. Holly asked her students to craft magical creatures like owls (see Figure 3.2), dragons, unicorns, and trolls. Divination assignments suggested patterns with stitches that represented the divination techniques, such as the “lacey stitch” for tea leaf readings, the “bobble stitch” for orb readings, and “edge stitches” for aura readings.



**Figure 3.2** Care of Magical Creatures asked students to craft magical creatures of the first Harry Potter book, such as owls.



Through feedback, advice, and discussions, the classes also helped build affinity between members and create a sense of community. Members complimented each other's finished projects, with statements like, “I think he is just amazing! Love the wings and the eyes” and “Your cowl is just brilliant, the colours you have used are knock out!!” Members also offered their experience and advice to students who were struggling. For example, when one student had trouble getting a centaur toy’s body to stay upright, Holly told her “One tip I can give is to take an unsharpened pencil and use it as a spine going into the horse body chest and up into the head. Helps keep that part upright.” In another exchange, three students in Divination helped another student learn a lace knitting technique, including offering instructions on how to wrap the yarn around her knitting needles. Holly promoted these exchanges by saying, “student collaboration is encouraged!”

### **3.3.1 Early tensions**

While many students were able to successfully complete assignments and even full classes, other students had a difficult time participating. Susie had initially envisioned the classes as allowing all types of items that members could tie to *Harry Potter* through a name or description. According to Holly, however, the teachers of the first classes required students to “make something special for the group.” Holly explained that in Care of Magical creatures, “we actually made the creatures, not something that represented the creature” (personal communication, March 20, 2012).

Teachers had intended the assignments of “something special” to enrich the fantasy world of H@R by creating crafted representations of the *Harry Potter* world, but the rules restricted participation to those who had the time, ability, and interest to

craft those special projects for H@R. One member foreshadowed this problem even before classes began, “I really hate being told what to knit, or crochet, and when.” Another student told Holly that she did not feel “confident enough in my knitting skills yet to try my hand at the stuffed toys” of Care of Magical Creatures. Toys are time-intensive and require small, tight stitches that can be tedious even for experienced crafters.

The problems continued once classes began. Three students asked Holly if they could make items other than what was on the syllabus. Georgia wanted to knit an image of a creature onto a washcloth. Another student wanted to craft a penguin instead of an owl. A third student asked if she could submit three separate dog golf club covers, rather than a three-headed dog. The students planned to use these items for purposes outside of the classes, such as gifts. Holly told the students she would rather they make the items on the syllabus, but she would accept alternate items “if you can come up with a terrific story” of how the item fit in with the assignment prompt. “I mean this stuff is for you and what you want to do with it,” Holly told her students. By the end of the class, Holly had accepted and given full credit to several items that were tied to assignments through creative stories, such as a penguin who thought he was an owl.

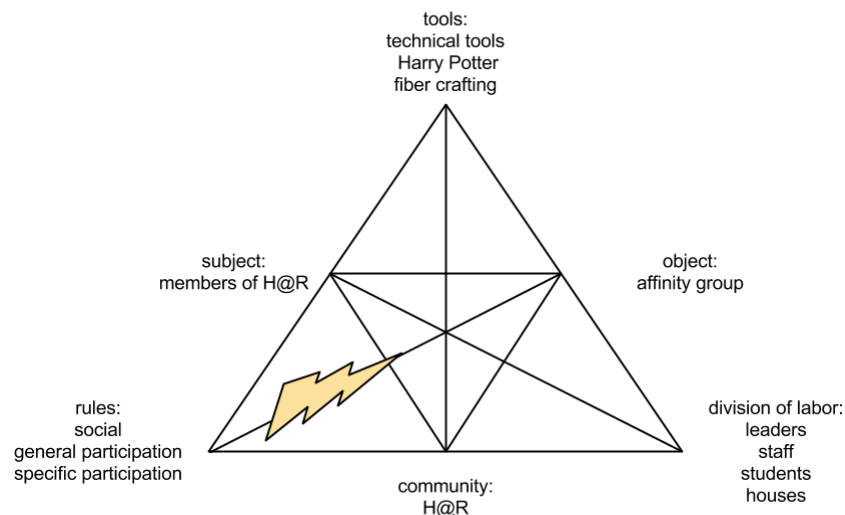
The rule requiring students to sign-up for classes created other problems. Some students missed the deadline to enroll and were frustrated when they could not participate. Other students did enroll in classes but were not submitting assignments. Holly brought up these problems in the Staff Room to try and figure out what to do.

### 3.3.2 Resolving tensions

The problems of the first rotation were tensions of the activity system, and these tensions made visible the challenge H@R faced in supporting the diverse membership. While members shared a common object, they had their own individual motivations and goals. Like all activity systems and affinity groups, H@R was multivoiced. This had been apparent in the early collaborative discussions around the collective object, but the first rotation made it more clear how difficult it was to have not just a collective object shared by such a diverse group but also an activity system and actions that would support that collective object and the diversity. Some members were more interested in fiber crafting, while others were more interested in *Harry Potter* or socializing. Even amongst those who were interested in fiber crafting, there were differences. Members like Holly wanted to craft *Harry Potter* items. Members like Georgia wanted to play the game of H@R but wanted to craft items that were not tied to *Harry Potter* for a variety of purposes.

When Holly brought the tensions to the Staff Room, members identified the rules as the main source of the problems. H@R's collective object was a particular type of community - an inclusive and supportive community founded on common interests, but the assignment rules contradicted the shared values that were central to this type of community. Rather than encouraging inclusivity, the rules restricted participation to those who knew what they wanted to do and had the interest, time, and ability to make "something special" for the group. This created a secondary contradiction "*between* the constituents of the central activity" (Engeström, 1987, p.

104) so that the rules did not support the object. This contradiction is depicted in Figure 3.3.



**Figure 3.3 H@R's activity system with a contradiction between the rules and collective object, symbolized with a lightning bolt.**

Holly said that in deciding what to do about the tensions, “we kind of said, ‘You know, let’s make this more easy for people to participate’” (personal communication March 20, 2012). Their response to the problems was guided by the shared value of inclusivity. Members first discussed the participation rule requiring members to sign up for classes. Georgia said, “While I think being sorted is important, requiring participation perhaps is not as much.” Pattie agreed and suggested H@R follow the approach of other groups, including Durmstrang, which did a “follow up” approach to participation. In this approach, members did not have to decide classes ahead of time. Instead, at the end of a rotation, any member who submitted

“something by the end of the time period” was considered active. H@R members agreed that this approach made more sense for H@R, and the new rule - an innovation from other Ravelry groups - was implemented.

The Staff Room also tackled the specific rules regarding assignments. The three students in Holly’s class who submitted alternative crafted items offered support for Susie’s original suggestion of allowing a wide range of crafting assignments that could be tied to the *Harry Potter* narrative in different ways. As the students’ use of creativity to turn penguins into owls demonstrated, this flexible approach to assignments could both facilitate different types of participation and enrich the group’s fantasy world.

The flexible rules would become standard, fostering different types and levels of crafting and encourage more members to participate as students. Members were told to “work smarter, not harder” and think of ways that they could use items they were already crafting for H@R assignments. For example, members were encouraged to turn hats upside down to become cauldrons.

Using activity theory, we can see that the group resolved the tensions by working within the existing activity system; they used a single-loop approach. They implemented innovations using the original rules that Susie had devised and also introduced rules for participation from the activity systems of other Ravelry groups. The Staff Room discussions about the tensions aimed to better support the collective object of an inclusive affinity group by making “this more easy for people to participate.” Pattie told H@R members that the rules would better support the “fun” motivation of the diverse members: “If you feel motivated by the project, then please

participate. However, please do not let the projects stress you out. It is about having fun.”

### **3.3.3 Continued development: A period of continuity in the building of H@R**

The first year of H@R established a strong foundation for H@R’s activity system and a collective approach to the building, refining, and repairing of that activity system. Collaborative discussion became central to the group’s development. In his work on wildfire activities, Engeström (2009) notes that wildfire activities begin to stabilize their trails and modes of participation when members cross paths and “engender debate, analysis, and negotiation” (p. 15). H@R’s Staff Room became a space through which members began collectively conceptualizing (Engeström, 2009) H@R as an activity system. They used the space to debate, discuss, and negotiate about the “trails” or modes of participation, elements of the activity system, and the supporting actions. Importantly, H@R’s development did not stop after the first rotation of classes; instead, the first rotation made visible the need for the members to continually build, reflect on, and revise the group to continue supporting the collective object. This is the process that Engeström (2015) refers to as "expansive learning."

H@R members continued to add to and to refine H@R between Year 1 and Year 3. Many of these additions were aimed at enriching the fantasy world of the group by introducing more elements from the *Harry Potter* series. For example, in Year 1, Merida and the staff introduced seasonal challenges like Hagrid’s pumpkin patch and decorations for Christmas. “Owlery” and dragon nursery threads were created as ongoing challenges for students to craft owls and dragons. Monthly and

weekly challenges were created as spaces for students who wished to more closely follow the non-class storylines of the books.

The organization and content of the classes were also refined. By the end of the Year 2, the H@R school year included five rotations of three to four classes. Class assignments moved from providing short descriptions of topics to asking students to research and write on topics related to *Harry Potter*. For example, Year 3's arithmancy class asked students to learn more about divination using numbers. One assignment asked students to use a website to convert their name to a number, interpret their personality using the number, and then compare their personality to what J.K. Rowling had written about the founders of Hogwarts. Assignments became more involved, and students used the new rules to write elaborate stories tying all types of crafted objects to *Harry Potter* topics.

The community of H@R developed as members built affinity with each other, developed friendships, and became more involved in the House Cup competition. Holly and Merida became close friends outside of the group, members collaborated in craft-alongs outside of the classes, and some members even coordinated to craft and send a blanket to Merida as a gift. The threads for houses grew busier, with members chatting about *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, H@R classes, and their daily lives. The House Cup competition gained a more prominent role in house discussions as members began earning points; housemates would cheer each other on and collaborate to earn more points and increase their house's standing in the competition.

At the end of Year 3, H@R was a vibrant community of over 800 fiber crafters and a lively school game that paralleled the *Harry Potter* books. Having helped

establish the activity system and fantasy world of H@R, Merida stepped down as leader at the end of Year 3 for health reasons. KnittingPrincipal became the new leader of H@R, ushering in a new generation of leaders and members who had new ideas on how to carry out Susie's vision of a fiber crafting Hogwarts. Chapter 4 will begin with this moment of transition and continue H@R's story of development.



## **Chapter 4: Transitions and New Tensions During Year 4**

The advent of Year 4 brought major changes and disturbances to H@R. With respect to changes, the group gained new leaders, new ways to participate, and new members. In many ways, these changes were positive for the group. KnittingPrincipal and the other new leaders brought with them fresh ideas about how to enrich the group's fantasy world and increase participation. The addition of novel challenges and new ways to participate in existing challenges helped increase participation. In response, H@R membership rebounded from its Year 3 decline and the activities carried on with new vigor.

While the changes were meant to help enrich the group, they also created and exacerbated tensions within the group. Increased membership meant increased multivoicedness, while new challenges and participation options made participation in the group more complicated. Members struggled to co-construct an activity system that supported and was supported by a harmonious understanding of what the group was all about. Two major tensions erupted towards the end of Year 4, making visible the contradictions that had been built into H@R's activity system and collective object. Members found themselves in a double bind, and leaders struggled to resolve the tensions that arose. This chapter will cover this period of growth, change, and disturbances within H@R.

### **4.1 New leadership and growing activity system**

Towards the end of Year 3, Merida announced she would be stepping down from the role of headmistress and invited members to apply for the position. At Holly's encouragement, one of the people who applied for the position was

KnittingPrincipal, a 49 year-old woman and school principal in Idaho.

KnittingPrincipal was new to knitting and had only been in H@R for a few months, but Holly liked KnittingPrincipal's interactions in H@R and felt her experience as a school principal made her uniquely qualified to lead the group.

KnittingPrincipal became the headmistress of H@R during the break between Year 3 and Year 4. Two other members, Knitreaver and Jen2291, also moved to leadership roles. Holly (personal communication, March 20, 2012) said that the incoming leaders "had these great ideas and a lot of enthusiasm," and members were excited about the energy and ideas the new leaders brought with them. Merida and the first generation of leaders moved to advisory roles at the conclusion of Year 3, and the new leaders took over the group.

#### **4.1.1 Honoring the old**

In taking over H@R, KnittingPrincipal felt it was important to keep the overall structure of the group consistent through the change in leadership. She told me,

I spent a lot of time looking back through previous classes and threads. I knew that I didn't want to come in and just start changing things for the sake of changing things - the year before I became principal of our school, the guy hired to be principal did just that and it was the most miserable year I had ever spent there! I didn't want to do anything to make Merida or Holly feel like I was throwing out their "baby" by altering the overall structure of H@R (personal communication March 6, 2012).

The structure of H@R had been successful, and KnittingPrincipal felt that any substantial changes would have been "changing things for the sake of changing things.". KnittingPrincipal kept the existing structure of H@R with its houses, school

schedule, and division of labor. Most of the staff also stayed on, including the teachers and Heads of Houses. The classes continued as usual, and the group continued offering weekly, monthly, and seasonal challenges.

#### **4.1.2 Adding the new**

Although the new leaders did not change the structure or existing challenges of the group, they did add new tools and ways to participate in the group. The leaders hoped the new practices would provide incentives for participation as well as enrich the group's fantasy world.

##### **4.1.2.1 New tools**

KnittingPrincipal introduced two new tools to H@R: the St. Mungo Award and badges. These tools both drew from the *Harry Potter* narrative and were aimed at honoring group values and member participation.

The St. Mungo Award, named after the hospital of the *Harry Potter* series, honored members who participated in, or organized, charity work. It was the first award in H@R outside of the House Cup competition. KnittingPrincipal created it “because charity is so important to Merida, I wanted to honor and encourage that.” KnittingPrincipal created a thread announcing St. Mungo Awardees, detailing their charitable works, and presenting them with the award graphic, as shown in Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1** The H@R St. Mungo Award was given to members who were prolific in charity crafting

KnittingPrincipal also added badges as a new tool that would reward members for participation or challenge accomplishments. Badges were *Harry Potter*-related digital graphics overlaid with text. KnittingPrincipal got the idea of badges from the group Durmstrang, where she was also a member. She reported (personal communication, March 6, 2012) that in Durmstrang, members “**love** badges” and KnittingPrincipal thought H@R members would be similarly excited. The badges started in KnittingPrincipal’s classes, but she said soon other staff began “jumping in and making badges for their threads, too.... So I guess with badges it’s been kind a free-for-all-HEY! That needs a badge - I think I’ll go make one!” (ibid). The idea spread quickly. As Figure 4.2 shows, most classes awarded badges for class

accomplishments by the end of Year 4.



**Figure 4.2** A badge awarded for completing the Muggle Studies class.

The St. Mungo Award and badges provided new types of incentives for members to participate in classes or support the shared values of the group. The St. Mungo Award aligned to the group’s “friendliness” shared value, encouraging members to connect their interest in Harry Potter to outside civic causes. While Merida had previously organized charity events, the St. Mungo Award offered the first ongoing form of recognition, encouragement, and mobilization of this shared value.

Badges also became something to “collect.” Hmltwin (personal communication, March 3, 2012) told me, “I love the badges! Anything like that appeals to me and makes me work harder.” In her interview, Alyssa (personal communication, April 15, 2012) told me that she was “addicted” to badges and found

them to be “a fun reward for meeting a goal that you set for yourself.” While points were associated with houses, badges represented personal accomplishments.

#### **4.1.2.2 New ways to participate**

The new leaders also added new ways to participate in the group to encourage participation, support the more casual members of the group, and enrich the group’s fantasy world. The first addition, added by KnittingPrincipal before Year 4 began, was a challenge called WIP (WIP is a fiber crafting acronym meaning “work in progress,” or an incomplete project.) to allow members to submit and gain points for items that were not finished during a class rotation. KnittingPrincipal explained that this challenge filled an important gap to support the slower, less experienced members and those who preferred larger projects, or who needed “encouragement to finish WIPs.”

After Year 4 started, KnittingPrincipal and Knitreaver also created new challenges to more closely parallel the narrative of the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The fourth book centers around the TriWizard Tournament, during which three wizarding schools compete in challenging and dangerous magical tasks. To parallel this storyline, KnittingPrincipal created a TriWizard Tournament for H@R, challenging members to take on large projects that required over 800 yards of yarn. Tournament projects were awarded a larger amount of points than other classes or challenges. Also in the fourth book, Hogwarts hosts a Yule Ball for the three competing schools, so KnittingPrincipal and Knitreaver created a one-month Yule Ball challenge where members could craft dress and accessory items and role-play in an H@R ball.

Members self-organized their own intrahouse challenges called House Unity Projects. In these challenges, house members would collectively decide on a theme, a deadline, and a location in H@R's fantasy school for a role-played prank or demonstration of house pride. For example, Ravenclaw members crafted fireworks to "set off" in the Great Hall general discussion thread; they posted images of their crafted fireworks and a role-playing description of their mischief. Hufflepuff "attacked" the headmistress KnittingPrincipal's office thread with breakfast items.

Finally, Knitreaver created a role-playing game called the Dark Mark Game several months into Year 4. This game did not have a crafting component. Instead, members co-created a story through role-play. Knitreaver, a well-regarded storyteller and role-player at H@R, played the role of game master and moderated the game (see Fine, 2002).

The WIP Challenge provided a space for members to participate in the group even if they were slower crafters or finished items when classes were finished. The House Unity Projects helped members build affinity within their houses and helped new members feel more comfortable with participating in the group. The Dark Mark Game provided a non-crafting way for members to engage with each other and the Harry Potter universe. The TriWizard Tournament provided not only a new way to engage with the narrative of the fourth book, it also gave members the opportunity to participate in a longer challenge using larger projects for more points. In addition, Year 4 classes included more non-crafting assignments such as researching, writing about, and taking quizzes on *Harry Potter* topics. For example, see Figure 4.3 for an astronomy test that asked students to identify constellations and stars on a star chart.

Some members, such as Alyssa, who had surgery on her hand and was unable to craft much, appreciated that the group offered many ways to participate and earn points for the House Cup.

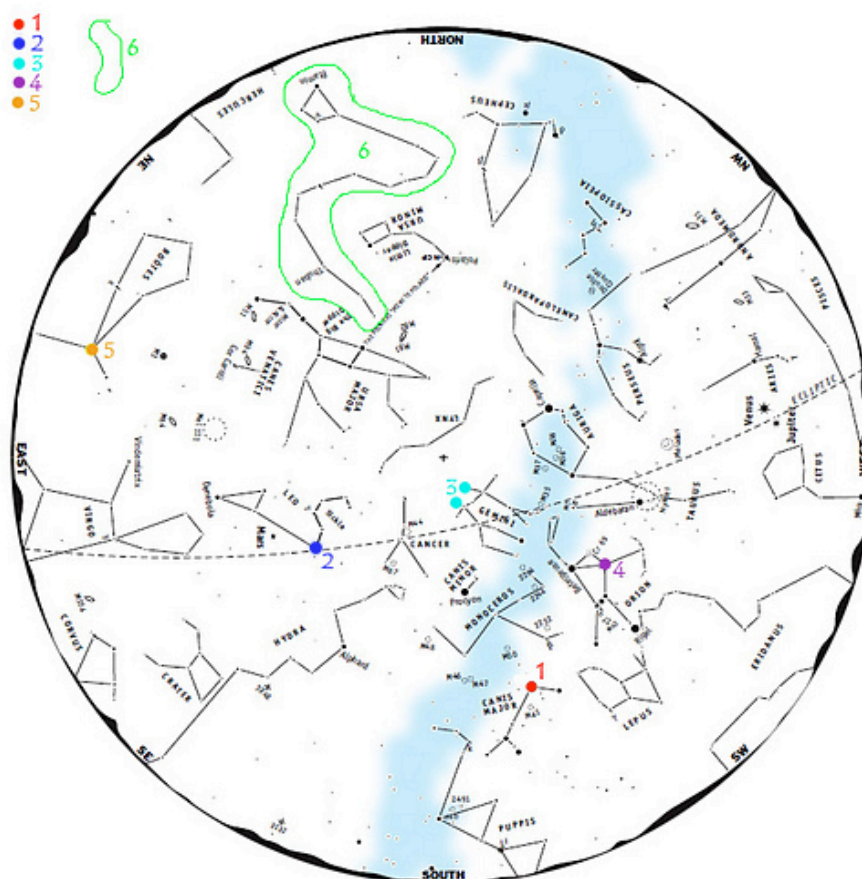


Figure 4.3 Year 4 included more non-crafting assignments, such as this astronomy test.

#### 4.1.3 H@R reinvigorated

I had joined H@R just before Year 4 started and did not have any previous experience to compare the current state of the group to, but other members seemed pleased with the additions and with the new leaders. Holly shared, “It’s been great what everybody’s done, and the changes that they’ve put in,” (personal



communication, March 20, 2012) and Hmltwin told me Year 4 was “a lot of fun” (personal communication, March 3, 2012).

The new leaders had hoped that the additions would provide more ways for members to participate in H@R, and staff members commented on the surge in participation for Year 4. Holly agreed, “I think it’s helped the group continue and grow and not become stagnant.” (personal communication, March 20, 2012) Class enrollment paralleled the increase in participation. The History of Paranormal class, for example, grew from 16 students and 30 assignments submitted in Year 3 to over 48 students and 200 assignments submitted in Year

## **4.2 New tensions**

The new H@R additions were popular, but they also exacerbated existing tensions and contradictions of the group. Towards the end of Year 4, the accumulated tensions created two disturbances, or incidences of conflict.

### **4.2.1 Competitive community**

The first disturbance focused on the competition of the House Cup and made visible the contradiction in H@R between its emphasis on community and its competitive-driven challenges.

At the start of Year 4, Rotation 5, the Ravenclaw Head of House welcomed members to a new class rotation and encouraged them to “get busy!” earning points through the various challenges. She pointed out that Ravenclaw was in a “solid second” place in the House Cup competition and needed 7,000 points to take the lead over Gryffindor house. Although all houses wanted to win the House Cup, Ravenclaw had consistently taken first place since the founding of H@R. Kina, a long-term

member of Ravenclaw, had been focused on Ravenclaw's position throughout Year 4 and had reminded members several times of the house's proud history of House Cup wins.

After Jonah posted the House Cup standings for the fifth class rotation of Year 4, Kina again brought up Ravenclaw's House Cup position. She then added, "Have to say it, the way to win is to make a zillion teeny tiny crochet things, and shoehorn them each into every slot. And give some away for charity."

H@R leaders and staff tried to create a point grading scale that was fair in crediting the effort, time, and difficulty required by different fiber crafts and projects. Despite these attempts, there were still imbalances in the point scale, and some fiber crafts and projects had an advantage. Crocheting is faster than knitting, and smaller items were given a disproportionate number of points compared to larger (and more time consuming) projects. For example, a 30 minute crocheted hat could earn 20 points, whereas an 8-10 hour knit sweater might only be awarded 50.

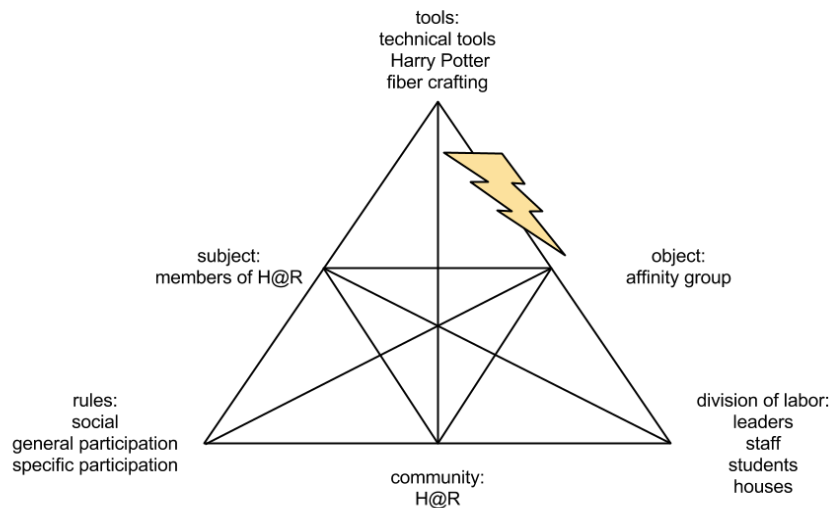
Kina pointed out the ways in which members could use the point system to help Ravenclaw win the House Cup. She also suggested that members could benefit from the point bonuses awarded to charity donations, and she reminded the Ravenclaws of the group rule allowing the same project to be submitted to multiple challenges.

#### **4.2.2 Contradictory wildfires**

While H@R members encouraged their housemates to earn more points and offered suggestions of where things could be submitted, Kina's suggestion went against the shared values of the group and H@R's collective objective of a fun, casual,

collaborative, inclusive community. However, Kina's suggestion *did* support the goals of the House Cup game: winning. The House Cup game was competitive, but it drew from the *Harry Potter* narrative and offered a shared framework through which members could collaborate and build affinity. The House Cup game both supported and contradicted the collective objective. In participating in the game, members were caught in a double bind. They were encouraged be non-competitive, supportive and inclusive in all of their activities, and at the same time they were urged to compete for points in order to win the House Cup game.

In this double bind, we can see both Engeström's (2001, 2008) contradictions as discussed in the third generation of activity theory and the contradictory nature of wildfire activity systems. Using Engeström's (2001, 2008) framework we can understand the double bind and contradiction that Kina and H@R members found themselves in. Within H@R, the tools contradicted the collective objective. As Figure 4.4 shows, the *Harry Potter*-based point system that was the main tool of the House Cup game ran counter to the collective objective of a casual, collaborative, and inclusive group. The point system shifted the focus to winning, and the awarding of points favored some members over others.



**Figure 4.4** There was a contradiction, represented by the lightning bolt, between the tools (points) and the collective objective.

We can also see through H@R's double bind the tensions inherent in Engeström's (2009) notion of wildfire activity systems. Wildfire activity systems attempt to collate and bring together individuals who have diverse individual goals that share a common interest. In a wildfire activity system like H@R, the collective objective is not just the general pursuit of the shared interest but also recognizing, supporting, and uniting the diverse individual goals to create a collective. Yet as Kina demonstrated in her post about how to get a lot of points for a small amount of effort, wildfire activities may struggle to equally support those individual goals. In H@R, many of the actions and ways to participate in the group criss-crossed the pursuit of the *Harry Potter* competitions and the more benign fiber crafting arts. Through her

post in Ravenclaw, Kina made visible the imbalance of the group and emphasis on competition.

Recall that the foundations of H@R, well before Kina's arrival in the group, were built in opposition to the competitive atmosphere of Durmstrang. The H@R collective objective and activity system were built around the shared values of an inclusive, collaborative, and casual community through which members could pursue their interests. The House Cup game was supposed to be a means to this objective. The game was not supposed to be the object of the activity. Yet, Kina's post on how to exploit the point system indicated that the activity system may have a tertiary contradiction, wherein a new object is introduced to - and creates a clash with - an existing activity system. Kina - and possibly other H@R members - were experiencing a shift in their interpretation of the collective object of H@R.

#### **4.2.3 Work and play**

The second disturbance happened the day after Kina's post in Ravenclaw and revolved around the complexity of participating in H@R. At the time, the new class rotation had just started and members were chatting about the class assignments. Mindy, who had joined H@R two months earlier, posted that she was anxious and confused about how to complete assignments in the new classes. "Really I just don't get it," she said.

In particular, Mindy was stressed about the arithmancy class. In the *Harry Potter* series, arithmancy involves using numbers to interpret the world and predict the future. At H@R, the arithmancy class assignments asked students to translate different names or topics into numbers and interpret their meaning. One assignment read:

**Essay #1**

a) Find your Character, Heart and Social numbers for your Ravelry name. Compare their meanings to your H@R character's personality: similarities, differences, ...

The assignment included a link to a website where students could convert their name into numbers and interpret the findings. Previously, most H@R assignments had asked students to write about a *Harry Potter* story line or topic and craft an item that represented what they had learned. Arithmancy and other classes now included non-crafting assignments that required multiple steps and written essays. Mindy's confusion echoed the feelings of other students.

Prompted by Mindy's concerns, another new Ravenclaw, Nalia, worried that the increasingly difficult assignments were indicative of a larger problem at H@R:

Mindy, you are not alone... Please, teachers, don't take personal offense because my next comments are meant to apply in general to our classes here at H@R and are in no way saying that I don't appreciate the obvious time and effort that you have gone to

What I am seeing happening (and I've been looking at the archived subjects from classes too) is that many of the classes really are becoming more 'work' that needs to be done before you can start to actually 'craft'. I personally find that some of this 'work' is fun and entertaining, but I've also looked at some of the class requirements (past and present) and said "awe, crackers, I don't have time to knit let alone do this too... sigh....".

I completely understand that all of the teachers are putting a HUGE amount of time and effort into setting up their classes. I'm quite sure that tons of their own personal time has gone into researching the subjects and coming up with ways to put the class together that doesn't follow a previous rotation's class too closely. But what I think we all might consider is immortalized in the words of Scotty from StarTrek

“the more you over take the plumbing, the easier it is to stop up the drain”. In this case, the stopping up of the drain comes down to the number of students who may not participate as much as they would have because they don’t have the time to do the ‘work’ part, or they don’t want to do the ‘work’ part, as well as the number of lurkers who instead of saying “holy smokes, what an awesomely fun group, I want to join!!” say to themselves ”I’m not going through all that just to participate” and then they don’t come back.

I think that perhaps the focus of classes has started to focus in the wrong direction and that maybe we need to bring that spy glass back full on to the crafting part, making the classes in such a way that it is easier and faster to get from the ‘work’ to the ‘crafting’ (and the fun story telling!).

Please remember I’m not picking on any one class, I’m just making a general observation on the direction that classes seem to have been evolving since the beginning of this group. And, again, this is all just my own personal 2 cents, so everyone feel free to tell me I am just a nutter who hasn’t had enough coffee yet today! ;-)

Nalia had been a member of H@R for only a few months but had noticed the same issues that were causing Mindy stress. She had compared the current classes to previous rotations and years and worried that the new types of assignments were becoming increasingly time-intensive for students as well as the teachers who had to create the curriculum as well as grade all of the assignments. Assignments now required students to conduct research, calculations, and write essays before crafting an item related to the topic. Nalia worried that the goals of the classes had shifted away from the fiber-crafting aspect of H@R’s collective objective, and that this shift in focus would affect existing members’ participation as well as deter prospective

members from joining the group. At the end of her post, Nalia linked the H@R teachers of current classes and the H@R leaders, alerting them to the conversation.

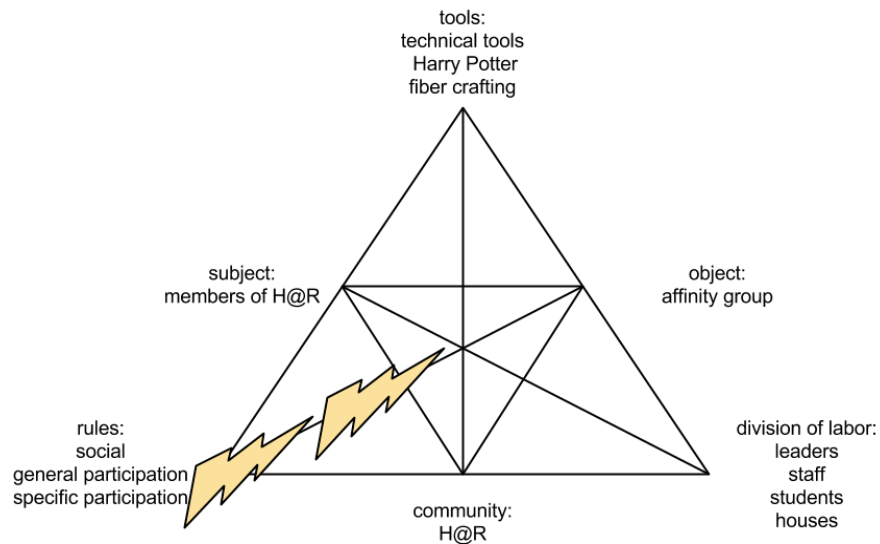
#### **4.2.4 Contradiction of options**

In her lengthy post, Nalia pointed out that the additions of Year 4 offered new ways to participate, but they also came at a cost by shifting the focus away from the crafting aspect of the group, creating stress among participating members, and possibly discouraging new members from joining the group. The changes of Year 4 had been successful if measured quantitatively. Compared to Year 3, a larger number of members were participating in classes, more items were being submitted as assignments, and members were earning more points. Looking beyond the scores, however, the additional options were also increasing tensions within the community and decreasing the qualitative experience of individual H@R members. Not all members were having fun.

The disturbance arose out of the challenge that many affinity groups seen as wildfire activities face: how to support *all* members all of the time. In Gee and Hayes (2010) research on affinity groups, they point out that one feature of such groups is that they allow for and support multiple types of participation, better enabling members of all levels of experience and types of interest in the shared purpose to participate in the group. It is an essential aspect that fosters the diversity in these types of groups and distinguishes them from other types of interest-based groups. However, as Nalia and Mindy demonstrated in their conversation, adding new ways to participate alone is not enough to fully support all members. New additions can shift focus away from the shared purpose or can make other members' participation more



difficult.



**Figure 4.5** There were two secondary contradictions, one within the rules of H@R and another between the rules and the collective object.

There were also two types of contradictions that Mindy and Nalia made visible in their comments about the group. These are depicted in Figure 4.5. The first was a secondary contradiction involving the rules of H@R. The general rules regarding community atmosphere and values conflicted with the specific rules requiring participation. The general atmosphere rules also conflicted with the rules of individual challenges and assignments, requiring students to complete certain steps before they could finish an assignment. Furthermore, there was a secondary contradiction between the rules of H@R requiring specific types of participation and the collective objective of H@R, which emphasized supporting all members.

There also was a tertiary contradiction in that many of the additions were introductions from other activity systems. KnittingPrincipal and Knitreaver belonged to other Ravelry groups and had existing interests in *Harry Potter* and role-playing. Some of the new participation options were inspired by those other activity systems. As practices were imported from other activity systems, contradictions often accompanied them.

### **4.3 Resolving disturbances and tensions**

Disturbances and tensions give us important insights into the workings and understandings of an activity system, and the ways in which those disturbances are managed or resolved are also revealing. There are two approaches that activity systems use to manage disturbances: single-loop learning and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Engeström, 2008). Single-loop learning involves repairing disturbances within the existing activity system, and double-loop learning involves extending outside of an activity system to innovate or change the norms of the existing activity system.

#### **4.3.1 Managing through authority**

For Kina's disturbance, where her suggestion of point exploitation made visible the contradiction of a "cooperative/competitive" community, the leaders used the single-loop approach to address the contradiction; they did not import a new kind of solution from outside. Instead, Holly and KnittingPrincipal responded to Kina in Ravenclaw, but neither response invited a public conversation about Kina's suggestion, motives, or the contradiction that Kina was making visible. Instead, both

responses simply reminded Kina of the group's values, rules, and collective objective.

Holly was no longer an official leader of H@R, but members still respected her.

Holly posted the first response to Kina's suggestion that members maximized points by crocheting "teeny tiny" things to donate to charities:

I'm sorry but I take offense to this comment.

First off winning isn't everything. We are here because we all love Harry Potter and our fiber craft whatever that may be and have found a wonderful group of people to share it with.

Secondly I am really sick and tired of crochet being treated as the evil stepchild to knitting. It is difficult, has intricate patterns, and takes as much talent as knitting.

Third as for the teeny tiny comment it's perfectly acceptable to craft whatever someone wants to and submit it. If someone wants to make amigurumi that's fine and more than welcome and if that's what brings in the points and that's important to them then good for them for figuring out a way that THEY can earn the points and participate. The main goal here is to have fun and if that is what let's them have fun then so be it! How dare you put down someone's choice in participation?!?!

Lastly yes we give extra points for charity. I think especially in these times if someone is able to help those in need it is wonderful and deserves an extra pat on the back.

I am very upset by this post and would hope that you would rethink what you are saying.

Shortly after Holly posted, KnittingPrincipal added:

I have thought long and hard about what to say regarding the comment that was made about how to win. First of all, I am with Holly 100% regarding crochet, tiny projects, and charity. However, the most important thing to stress here is this:

Winning isn't everything.

Seeing your house name on a virtual trophy at the end of 5 rotations isn't everything.

Hurting people's feelings by putting down their choice of crafting, even in a general manner, is unacceptable.

If you read the overview of our group, it states  
 "Be nice in general. It is not appropriate to speak poorly of anyone else's projects, nor their choice of projects. Everyone has varying levels of experience. Admins reserve the right to edit or remove any posts that do not meet these guidelines."

I will be holding everyone to that standard, and the other standards and expectations of the group from here on out.

I love Hogwarts - I love all four houses - and I want to play. I want to play with my friends and have a fun competition for points. I am not here to win. If winning is everything to you, then perhaps this is not the group for you.

This conversation needs to end here. Anything further can be said privately to me.

Headmistress KnittingPrincipal

Following the reprimands, Kina publicly apologized, "I wish to apologize publically. Anyone offended by my comment, please forgive me.... None of that was intended as a slam in any way." The conversation ended, and Kina left H@R at the end of Year 4. A single-loop solution "worked" only in the sense that it restored order by the voluntary exclusion of one of its participants, in contradiction to H@R's valuing multivoicedness. But it did nothing to resolve the underlying contradictions.

### 4.3.2 Managing the second disturbance

It is important to note that the second disturbance happened just one day after Kina's disturbance. During this second disturbance, Nalia worried that classes were requiring too much work, deterring current and prospective H@R members. While Nalia's post was polite and even used references to *Star Trek* to add humor and keep the tone light, the group was still tense from the disturbance with Kina. Possibly because it came on the heels of the first disturbance and tensions were still high, the attempted management of Nalia's disturbance started by avoiding conflict, moved to other management techniques, initiated discussion, and then, finally, used innovation.

#### 4.3.b.i Avoiding conflict

Although Mindy wrote that her initial response was just "whining," Nalia explicitly hoped for a conversation about the changing workload for members of H@R. Nalia linked several of the teachers and leaders in her post, alerting them to the conversation. She also attempted to avoid confrontation, using a single-loop approach to resolve disturbances within the existing system (Engeström, 2008). Nalia complimented the teachers for their time and creativity in her post, asked that teachers not take personal offense, and reiterated at the end of her post that she was not "picking on any one class." Nalia also used humorous references to Scotty of *Star Trek* to diffuse tension around her post. Finally, she used self-depreciation by telling everyone to "feel free to tell me I am just a nutter."

The initial responses to Nalia's post followed the "avoiding confrontation" (Engeström, 2008) approach to resolve the disturbance. Holly responded to Nalia to correct her by saying the "'work' part is optional" and downplaying Nalia's concerns because the work "only takes 10 minutes on google if that." One teacher responded to tell Nalia "I am sorry you feel that way" without any further action.

KnittingPrincipal also downplayed Nalia's concern, saying twice that the work was optional, and that even the essay writing did not require much time. She said, "I give the same number of points to those people who write 1 paragraph or more as those who quickly jot down a sentence." KnittingPrincipal said she hoped teachers would think of Nalia's concerns, but she did not offer future changes. Instead, KnittingPrincipal closed her post with another downplaying of Nalia's concerns, "this past rotation had a phenomenal amount of participation...so I am confused."

Intermixed with downplaying Nalia's concerns, KnittingPrincipal also reminded Nalia of the authority of teachers to create their own syllabus. This use of authority was not meant to end the discussion, as in the case of Kina, but rather KnittingPrincipal reminded Nalia of the time investments and responsibilities of teachers that came with their authority. She urged Nalia to be empathetic to "where current professors are coming from" in trying to create a syllabus that met the needs of all members, including "those who just couldn't craft."

#### **4.3.b.ii Continued avoidance**

Undeterred, Nalia persisted in her concerns. Using humor and compliments, Nalia agreed that the teachers had done an "amazing job" with "interesting classes!"

She then invoked role-play to further diffuse tension by asking KnittingPrincipal to “whisk” the conversation to an area where it could be collectively discussion.

Nalia then reiterated her concerns that the assignments “might discourage some from participating or joining the group.” She acknowledged the “optional” aspect of work but pointed out that “perception is everything, and I know many will look at some of the class material and feel overwhelmed.”

To support her position, Nalia reported that she had local friends who wanted to join H@R but who all said, “some of the classes seemed like too much work to get to crafting.” Nalia said she knew 10 people who agreed with her concerns, and that she was “just the one who opened the discussion.”

Nalia ended her post with more compliments, telling the others that she was “not at all wrong in thinking” that they could have a pleasant and respectful conversation about her concerns. “We all get along very well here,” she said, “That’s what I love about this group - when someone is bothered, it’s OK to bring it up.”

KnittingPrincipal moved Nalia’s conversation to the Staff Room so that it could be collectively discussed, but she continued to avoid the conflict. This time, however, she used Durmstrang as a point of comparison and show that H@R’s assignments were not stressful. She asked Nalia to talk with those 10 people and find out whether they “think Durmstrang’s way of doing things is better.” This suggestion was not an invitation to brainstorm or negotiate but rather to point out there were other groups that were more strict than H@R. This acknowledged the concerns of members without offering any changes to H@R.

#### 4.3.b.iii Negotiating and Innovation

Although silent for several days, Nalia eventually returned to the Staff Room and reported on her friends' responses to KnittingPrincipal's question. The friends all preferred H@R. Instead of ending the discussion, however, Nalia then tried a new approach for her concerns.

Nalia reiterated the leader and teachers' position that the "work" of classes was optional, but she suggested that the group be more transparent to new and existing members about it being optional. Nalia had switched the conversation from criticism of classes to clarity of existing elements. This switch was in line with the "negotiation approach" (Engeström, 2008) to resolving disturbances, and it was immediately embraced by KnittingPrincipal, Knitreaver, Alyssa, and other H@R members.

Everyone conceded that they could make the rules more clear about non-crafting work being "optional," and members began seeking a solution. In this moment, members looked for innovations to implement in the existing activity system. Inspired by guides to other groups and the maps that students use in the *Harry Potter* series, the disturbance was ultimately resolved through the innovation and implementation of a new tool: the Hogwarts Map, which would offer a guide to the challenges, classes, rules, and expectations of H@R. Alyssa offered to collaborate with KnittingPrincipal, Knitreaver, and Jen2291 to create the Hogwarts Map.

For Nalia, KnittingPrincipal, and the others involved in the conversation, the Hogwarts Map innovation resolved the disturbance around the "perceived expectations" of H@R. It would clarify to novice members that all levels of interest and participation were welcome and supported at H@R. While a new tool in the



group, the Hogwarts Map did not change any existing aspect of H@R's activity system. The new tool remained a single-loop approach to the resolution; it only served to clarify the existing rules. The disturbance was resolved, but the contradictions again remained.

## **Chapter 5: Years 5 - 7: Crisis and Expansion**

This chapter will follow H@R from Year 5 through the end of Year 7 to look at moments in the group's history when contradictions accumulated to the point where an expansive change was necessary for the group to survive. Thus far, H@R's history has shown that the group engaged in ongoing reflections, adjustments, and sometimes innovations in order to support such a diverse membership. In Years 1 through 4, as I highlighted at the end of Chapter 4, the adjustments made were examples of single-loop learning. The disturbances were managed by rearranging elements within the existing activity system.

In Year 5, and again in Year 7, a single-loop approach to the disturbances no longer sufficed to stabilize the group. In both years, contradictions accumulated to destabilize the system and create an imbalance with respect to its objective of supporting all members. The approach to resolving the contradictions was quite different in the two cases, but both resulted in a transformation that sought to realign the activities to the original object of inclusivity and support.

### **5.1 Year 5: Umbridge and changes**

Year 5 started normally enough. Like previous years, its classes, challenges, and role-play paralleled the corresponding *Harry Potter* book. For Year 5, this meant the group was paralleling *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, a book that becomes a turning point for young Harry Potter. At the beginning of the fifth book, the evil wizard Voldemort has returned to life. Rather than organize a defense against Voldemort, the minister of magic denies that Voldemort had returned. The minister accuses Hogwarts's headmaster, Dumbledore, of lying about Voldemort's return. In an

attempt to control Dumbledore, the minister deploys a ministry official, Dolores Umbridge, to Hogwarts to supervise, spy, and take control of the school. As Umbridge gains power, she issues decrees to tighten control over students, dismisses professors, and cancels many of the school's practices.

For H@R, the school year began as usual, with classes paralleling the classes that Harry took in his fifth year. Members could also participate in the non-class challenges of Quidditch, the Weekly Challenge, the Monthly Challenge, the Owlery, and the Basilisk and dragon nursery. New practices also were added to parallel the book: a decree-based challenge and a role-playing game that focused on The Order of the Phoenix, the adult wizards who organized to fight Voldemort in the fifth book.

The first rotation of classes progressed smoothly as members were excited about the new book and its challenges, but participation began to decline in the second rotation and members began to notice the decline.

In the middle of the second rotation, KnittingPrincipal started a discussion on the The Hog's Head discussion board about an H@R member's lack of participation. The Hog's Head had been set up as a discussion group for Durmstrang members but had become mostly a discussion space for members who belonged to both Durmstrang and H@R. All Ravelry members could read the conversations at The Hog's Head, but it seemed few H@R members knew of and used the group.

KnittingPrincipal's discussion started by voicing her frustrations. Only five Hufflepuff members were participating in H@R, and KnittingPrincipal was frustrated that one member often chatted in the house's discussion thread but did not participate in classes to earn points.

KnittingPrincipal may have wanted only to “vent” her feelings, but the conversation quickly grew. Other members, including Jen2291 and Knitreaver, were sympathetic to KnittingPrincipal’s frustration but pointed out the lack of participation was a group-wide problem and not an isolated incident. Fewer members from all of the houses were participating in challenges and classes. Within challenges and classes, submissions were repetitive, minimal, and lacked the enriching creativity and narrative that helped foster the group’s fantasy world. Participation had declined in both quantity and quality

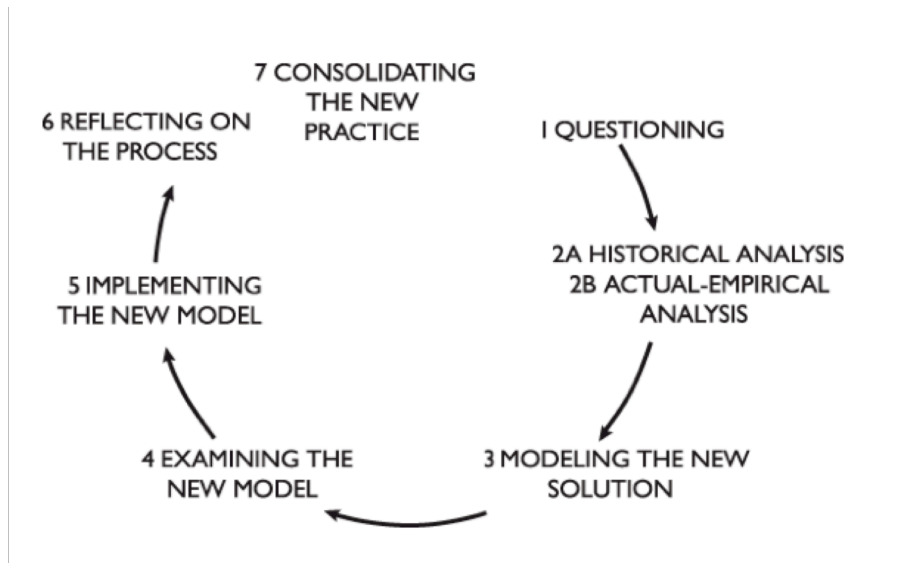
The conversation grew from venting into a reflection upon and analysis of H@R’s participation problems. The conversation was mostly made up of H@R leaders and veteran members, but they also shared with each other the concerns they had heard from other members. Although the conversation started with just a few people, more H@R members were invited to share their thoughts. Most of the concerns focused on the amount of “work” and competitive atmosphere of the group. Members felt overwhelmed and stressed by the number of challenges and the pressures of the House Cup competition. They were not having “fun” as the social, fantasy world, and shared interests of the group deteriorated.

After identifying the problems that were diminishing H@R’s membership, the conversation shifted to creating and implementing solutions that would to realign the shared values and objectives of the group. KnittingPrincipal, Knitreaver, and Jen2291 came up with the idea of using role-play and the *Harry Potter* character Dolores Umbridge to introduce and implement the changes.

The resulting interventions eliminated several challenges, simplified classes, and changed the rules of the group to decrease the amount of time needed to participate. The use of Dolores Umbridge provided an intuitive means to draw from the *Harry Potter* narrative as a way of explaining the changes that were to take place within H@R. This procedure perfectly paralleled many aspects of what Umbridge did in the novel when she took control of Hogwarts. This transformation was accomplished in less than two weeks after the initial Hog's Head conversation that initiated the intervention.

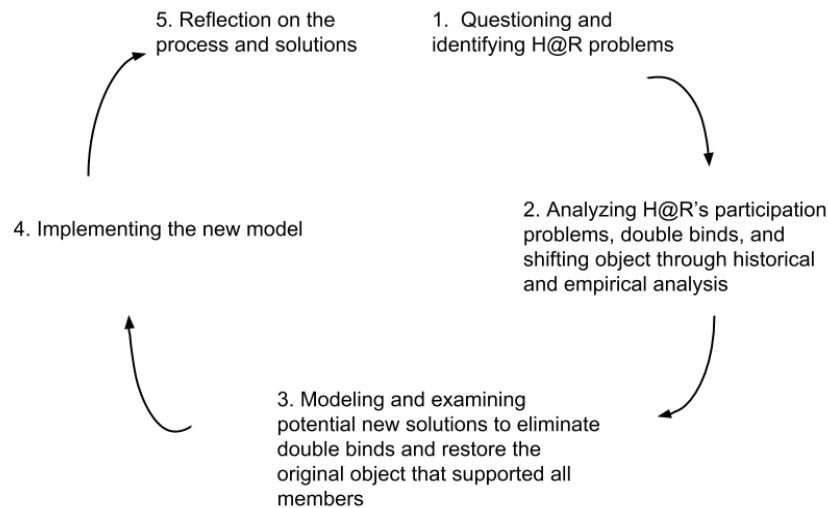
## 5.2 Cycle of expansive learning

From the perspective of activity theory, the backchannel conversation of The Hog's Head provides a window into the workings, conflicts, and collective attempts to sustain an affinity group, conceived of here as a wildfire activity. In eleven days, the H@R activity system was overhauled in an attempt to increase participation and make the group experience “more fun” for the members. Using Engeström's (1987, 2001, 2008) cycle of expansive learning, we can trace how the overhaul happened, from the first questioning and challenging of the group's status quo to the implementation of and reflection on the new model of structure and practices.. In the Hog's Head discussion between H@R leaders, we can see how the actions of the leaders moved from an abstract “vent” to an exploration of problems, and eventually to the more concrete implementation of rules and changes in practices.



**Figure 5.1.** The cycle of expansive learning (Engeström, 2008, 131).

Engeström (2008) lists six stages of an “ideal-typical sequence” (130) through which activity systems expand. (Although he acknowledges that no learning process exactly follows the ideal model.) As shown in Figure 5.1, these stages are questioning, analysis, modeling a new idea, examining the new model, implementing the model, and reflecting on the outcome.



**Figure 5.2. H@R's cycle of expansive learning (based on Engeström, 2008).**

By looking back at The Hog's Head discussions between H@R leaders, we can see the leaders' movement through a cycle of expansive learning. Using Engeström's (2008) diagram, I have organized H@R's cycle in Figure 5.2. It has five stages: questioning, analyzing, modeling and examining potential new solutions, implementing the new model, and reflecting on the process.

### **5.2.1 Questioning**

KnittingPrincipal's vent about a singular member's lack of participation was not intended to start a conversation about the larger participation problems at H@R, but her colleagues responses to her comment initiated a period of questioning and analyzing that proved to be the beginning of H@R's expansive cycle of learning. As you can see in the diagram above, this questioning and analysis represent the first two steps of Engeström's cycle (2001, 2008).

KnittingPrincipal started the discussion:

Can I vent just a bit here? Someone posted in Hufflepuff, ‘Oh I finished this owl cozy - didn’t take pics’... Same person who occasionally chats but never participates. Then say she actually made something, but couldn’t be bothered to take a picture of it? Sigh... guess it’s just a game and all, but sheesh!

Jen2291 responded to first sympathize with KnittingPrincipal’s frustrations but then “think out loud” about the larger problems she saw at H@R regarding participation:

I know what you mean though - If you’re gonna play, PLAY.  
I’m not sure what the deal is, is it that everyone has decided that those of us who go overboard kind of override the folks who just do one or two projects a rotation, so why bother?  
Classes seem to get more and more involved too. I like options, but between assignments, quizzes, extra credit it ends up being 8 projects. I can see how some people just look at that and say “yeah right!” before they ever begin.  
or is it just summertime blues and kids are at home, or vacation plans are being made, or whatever?  
Just thinking out loud... I don’t know that there’s actually a real answer! lol

Bobbi, a member of both Durmstrang and H@R, told KnittingPrincipal “that sucks” about the member but admitted she would not be participating at H@R in the next rotation. She said that in addition to working a lot in real life, “I’m finding it hard to fit what I have made into a class.”

Knitreaver, the leader of the Weekly Challenge, pointed out there were prolific players at H@R, but there were not many in each house:



I'd say you've got six Puffs that rarely, if ever, miss a beat. Ravenclaws have been a bit sporadic, though there are those who are shockingly prolific to make up for it. We Snakes are definitely giving the rest of the Houses a run for their money (go us!). We have a few, *ahem*, prolific players too.

The conversation had shifted from venting to questioning of H@R.

KnittingPrincipal at first seemed doubtful there was a problem with H@R's challenges, "Do you think it's too much? Personally, I like a lot of options... I mean, you can fit stuff into a bazillion different places for points..." As the others seemed in agreement that there was a problem, however, KnittingPrincipal changed her approach to welcome other perspectives: "if my desire for more options is intimidating people, then I should back off..." She conceded that "participation is down lately."

### 5.2.1 Analyzing

With the problem in participation acknowledged, The Hog's Head conversation shifted its focus to analysis, or trying to determine the "why" of the problem. KnittingPrincipal admitted "I'm honestly confused about the whole situation. And I don't know if there is something that can be done." She ended her post by soliciting members' thoughts, "Feedback over here would be super." Jen2291, Knitreaver, Bobbi, and others began adding their experiences at H@R and sharing other members' concerns with the group.

Through the collective discussion, members identified two main issues creating the participation problems at H@R: the work required to participate was excessive, and too much emphasis was placed on the acquisition of points. . Once these problems were identified, the group engaged in a bit of historical analysis,

concluding that the tensions and contradictions they were now experiencing were the same as those the group had encountered in Year 4.

#### **5.2.1.1 Too much work**

One of the first issues identified was the number of practices at H@R; many felt there were too many options for members to submit fiber-crafted items. Jen2291 took on the responsibility of adding up these options and determined that, between the assignments for classes and other challenges, competitions, and role-playing games, there were potentially 25 different options. “Thinking out loud,” Jen2291 says:

How many activities for projects are there. Monthly, Weekly, Owlry/Dragon Pen, VWH, Decrees, DA, OoTP, and 3 classes with 4-6 options each. Thats 22 -25 options. I like opportunity... but you have to admit that's a lot for a game. lol Durmstrang has 11, and I think that's a lot. I don't know how Geeknits works, but it seems to be intense for a short period and not ongoing. Just thinking out loud again... but I can see how Hogwarts might sound like too much work by comparison... and that means its not fun for some people. We remind everyone it's casual but it does give the impression we are about overachieving. lol

After listing all of the potential options for submitting a project, Jen2291 compared H@R's activity system to those of other groups, particularly Durmstrang and Geeknits. Both of the other groups were considered more competitive and strict than H@R, but Jen2291 pointed out that both groups had fewer challenges and did not have lengthy class-rotations or multi-month challenges.

Bobbi agreed that H@R required too much work:

I have no problem posting in Durmstrang, because it's one thread, but once I post at H@R, I feel I have to put it everywhere it fits. I feel I'm letting my team down, cuz I'm not really posting much, and not reading

in that group either. I'm on a design kick right now too, and am doing sample knitting too,'that is enough deadlines, per project, without the added deadlines of trying to fit it into the Durmstrang AND H@R. It's the fact that you are expected to turn things in in multiple places, was what made it so overly busy for me. I am not really sure what to do, but I will help with any ideas, I can, even if I stop playing, I still like to hang out.

Bobbi was referring to the “work smarter, not harder” rule, which allowed members to submit each crafted items to as many challenges as they wanted. However, as Bobbi pointed out, this rule had created an expectation that H@R members post their items everywhere, creating an “overly busy” feel for members. This rule, coupled with the House cup competition, even had led to guilt, with Bobbi and others feeling they were “letting my team down” if they did not maximize their points. Additionally, Bobbi pointed out that H@R was just one of many interests, but it required too much time.

Knitreaver and Jen2291 both added that they too felt stressed by the “work smarter, not harder” rule and expectation to submit projects everywhere:

Knitreaver: I'll admit, it takes a long time to post a project everywhere it needs to go.

Jen2291: I will admit that the idea of posting a project in all those places is a large part of my procrastination and why I tend to post everything at once. It takes more time for me to figure out how to connect the same project to all those different prompts as it did to make the darn thing. lol (It doesn't stop me, and its part of the game, but, there is just a little 'oh, it's posting day' slump to my shoulder. lol)

Outside of the stress on members, Knitreaver and Jen2291 also pointed out that the “work smarter, not harder” rule was affecting the quality of participation at H@R:

Knitreaver: We've also been having a bit of an issue with very, VERY tenuous connections between projects and prompts in some cases. Maybe limiting the places where a thing can be posted would alleviate that a bit, so if you make something that's inspired by a particular prompt, you don't wind up squeezing it all out of shape to fit somewhere else.

Jen2291: That is an excellent point! The tenuous connections... I bet they happen most at the end of a posting marathon. Lol

Knitreaver: I used to get excited to see new posts in the class threads, but I recall thinking it was rather boring to see the same project posted in five (or ten) different places.

In trying to maximize their House Cup points, members' "posting marathons" would create a deluge of the same item in many different challenges. This approach earned members points, but the "squeezing" of the item "all out of shape to fit somewhere else" was diminishing H@R's fantasy world. A plain dishcloth was submitted as a map, for example, and a lion bonnet was submitted to represent "Hagrid's gorgeous mane of hair." These submissions were a far cry from the several-paragraph long stories of previous generations and those of members who had more time or energy to write longer project narratives. This deluge of simplistic posts discouraged members from engaging in more complex and creative projects and made the audience experience in the classes less exciting; instead of a rich fantasy world, members just found the same project submitted multiple times with different effortless supporting stories (see Figure 5.3). The classes had become boring to collaborate in and read through and were primarily filled with members posting their own projects for points and not interacting with others.

#### Assignment 1

Babies can grow hair in it, so I'm pretty sure screechsnap can grow in it too! The yellow color happily takes up the sunrays and keeps even the grumpiest of herbology student in good spirits. And the tufts of the mane help keep away little creepy crawlies that may want to get into the screechsnap!



5/2 - 5/2

#### Crafting assignment 2, #1

Representative of Hagrid's gorgeous mane of hair and his skill of his love of animals and creatures - great and small :)



5/2 - 5/2

#### Assignment 2

While researching constellations, I discovered Leo - or "The Great Lion." It lies between Cancer and Virgo (also constellations). And one of the stars it contains is Regulus, so perhaps it was inspirational for a certain Black family member.

So for such a lion, a lion hat!



**Figure 5.3.** This same project was submitted to Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and Astronomy on the same day, with only short descriptions of how the project tied in to the assignments.

### 5.2.1.2 Emphasis on points

The second issue that members identified at H@R was the increasing importance on points and the resulting competitions. When the first H@R classes began, the House Cup game already existed, but emphasis was placed on participation, camaraderie and mutual support, not on amassing points or being competitive. Over the years, as houses began winning the House Cup and members had more opportunities to earn points, the emphasis had shifted. Knitreaver shared that her participation had changed as she became more competitive.

Knitreaver: But I'm thinking back to when I was a new. I used to get excited to see new posts in the class threads, but I recall thinking it was rather boring to see the same project posted in five (or ten) different places. And I was originally planning NOT to do that and to only post each thing once. But that idea went right out the window in the face of MORE POINTS! Slytherin glory!

KnittingPrincipal agreed that her participation has also changed. She felt guilty repeatedly submitting the same objects with short descriptions, but "I mean, that's 40-50 points every time..." if she did not submit them.

The conversation also addressed the impact competition was having on the community. There was a growing disparity between casual and prolific players, and the group's actions and support were increasingly aimed at prolific members. Jen2291 hinted at this problem in her first post to the conversation when she said: "I'm not sure what the deal is, is it that everyone has decided that those of us who go overboard kind of override the folks who just do one or two projects a rotation, so why bother?"

After examining the changes in her own participation style, Knitreaver wondered if the "work smarter, not harder" rule exacerbated the problem:

Knitreaver: Does the idea of posting as many places as possible give even more advantage to the prolific students? For example, some can make a shocking number of hats and booties in a week. That's an advantage to their house. If they can post say, 10 projects in all the places that multiplies their advantage. And that applies to many of us.

Jen2291: Yes.. that's it exactly. I think it does give the advantage to prolific students... and since we are 'everywhere' I think it might be a little intimidating to those that can't keep up. We aren't purposely setting the mark high, but we do by example. I'm not sure what the answer is, but I'm feeling more strongly about why some may not find it as fun as we do! ... I've had more "Seriously, you did that in two days? Gah!" comments this year than last.... may mean nothing, may mean the onset of a 'I can't compete with those people' mindset."

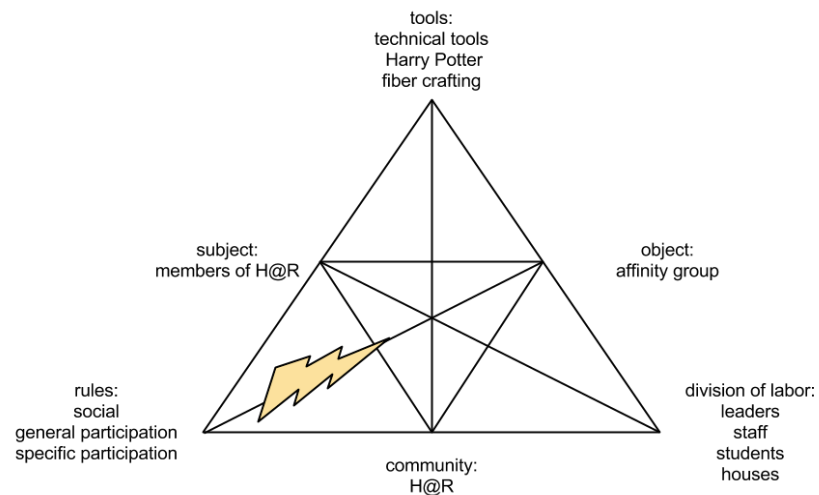
By the time of The Hog Head's discussion, the growing divide between the prolific and more casual members had reached goliath proportions. Some members were earning hundreds of points with each assignment they submitted. One member in Ravenclaw house had 8,000 points, compared with only a hundred points of a more casual member who only submitted a few items each class rotation. Slytherin house had a 10,000 point lead over the next house in the House Cup standings. To put this in perspective, a crocheted hat usually received between 20-30 points.

### **5.2.1.3 Shifting of the object**

The questioning and analysis revealed that there were multiple interlocking issues at H@R that were causing disturbances. On one level, members were caught in a double bind. The group was founded on and had a stated object of the collective pursuit of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interests, and the group's stated values emphasized a fun and supportive experience for all members. However, the group's

atmosphere, community, and rules heavily encouraged competition and prolific participation.

The “work smarter, not harder” rule had been built into H@R during Year 1 to better facilitate diverse types of participation, allowing crafters of all interests and skill levels to fully participate. The Hog’s Head discussion acknowledged the contradiction between the implicit rules and expectations of competition and the collective object of a fun and supportive community (see Figure 5.4).

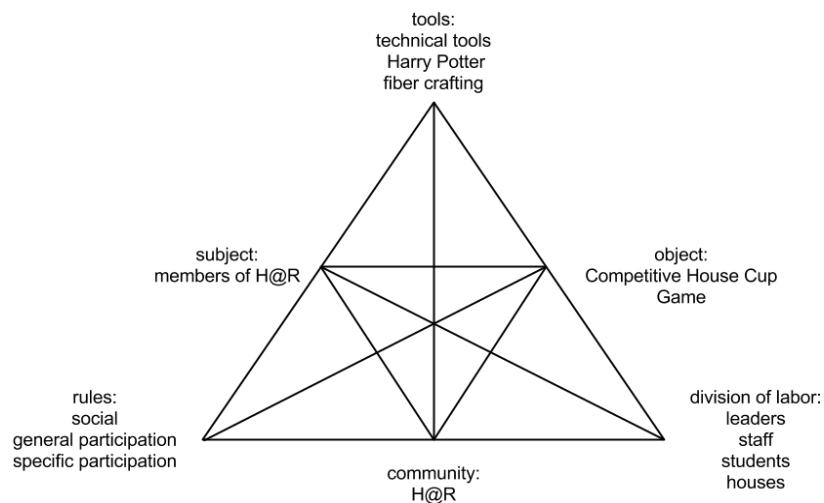


**Figure 5.4.** There was a contradiction, symbolized with a lightning bolt, between the rules and collective object.

More troubling, The Hog’s Head discussion revealed that the collective understanding of H@R’s shared object had shifted. The diverse membership had been united under their shared affinity for *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting, and the collective object was a particular type of community that pursued those interests: an affinity group. However, as the group’s rules and actions increasingly supported only a subset



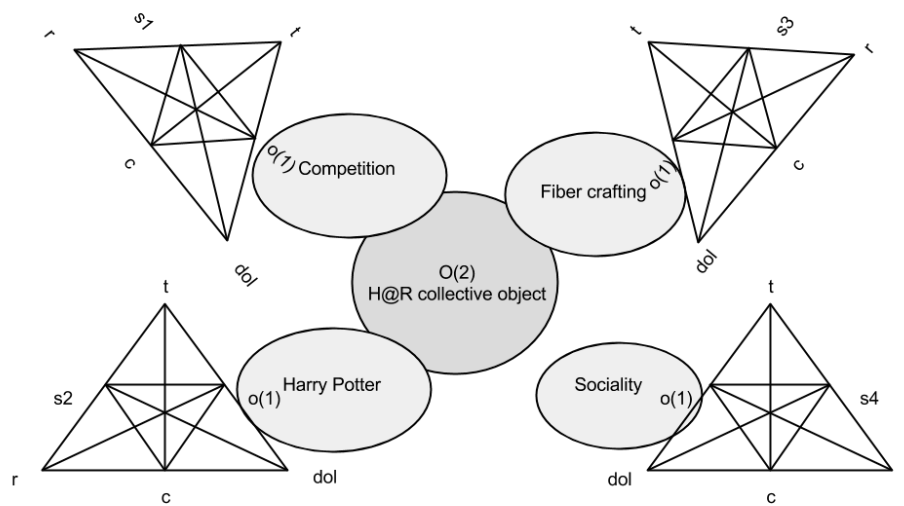
of the membership - the competitive and prolific members - the balance had shifted in the group. While the stated object of the group continued to align to the affinity group that supported all members in “fun,” the functional object had degraded to become about winning (see Figure 5.5). The House Cup had moved from an action to become the group’s activity, and as a result affinity within the group was declining.



**Figure 5.5. The object had shifted to become the competitive House Cup game.**

As the accumulation of points became more important in Years 4 and 5, heads of houses started new class rotations emphasizing the House Cup, and announcements throughout H@R routinely reminded members of point opportunities or point standings. Knitreaver commented that she measured participation levels not by community participation but by members’ participation in the Weekly Challenge. Even The Hog’s Head discussion was initiated by KnittingPrincipal’s complaint about

missed points from a Hufflepuff member. The “work smarter, not harder” rule as well as the multitude of options further pressured members to spend “more time” submitting an object than “it did to make the darn thing.” KnittingPrincipal and Knitreaver admitted their participation revolved around points, not the fantasy world or community. Bobbi pointed to the stress and emotional toll of this shift, expressing her guilt of “I’m letting my team down, cuz I’m not really posting much.” Those members who were unable to craft much or spend the time submitting items were “overwhelmed” and “overridden” by the more prolific members. The casual, novice, and peripheral members had feelings of “why bother” or “I can’t compete.”



**Figure 5.6.** The collective (o2) object had shifted to primarily support competitive H@R members, leaving the more casual and sociality-oriented members less supported.

The shifting of the collective object, from shared interests and mutual support to winning and competition, deeply divided the H@R community. The group’s new

collective object and actions supported competitive members much more than it supported those with other motivations and goals, including casual crafting, reading *Harry Potter* books, or socialization (see Figure 5.6). In a wildfire activity like an affinity group, the collective object must be able to anchor the swarming and pulsing individual trails dispersing outwards. H@R's new collective object no longer provided an anchor for many members. Jen2291 summed up this problem, "We remind everyone it's casual but it does give the impression we are about overachieving."

### 5.2.2 Modeling and examining the new solutions

H@R had become a different activity system, and members were unhappy when they realized this. Knitreaver summed up matters: "It's more fun for me if more people participate." Even those with competitive individual goals found it to be more fun when the group's collective object balanced the diverse membership.

The Hog's Head discussion shifted beyond questioning and analysis into problem solving. More members were invited to join the conversation, including Jackie and Jonah, to identify, model, and examine potential solutions. KnittingPrincipal encouraged everyone to voice their thoughts and ideas for solutions, inviting members to give ideas for a "more active group," and ending posts with "what do you think?" Jen2291 further encouraged modeling and examining by pointing out that the stakes of joining the conversation were low; there could be no wrong answers. She told the others that brainstorming is "always a good thing, regardless of what you decide!"

One of the first to offer a solution, Knitreaver suggested an innovation taken from the Durmstrang activity system: a rule where each crafted item could only be

submitted once. She said, “I think we should limit to one project, one points-earning opportunity. I still like the idea of having plenty of options in the classes, and the option to do each option more than once.”

KnittingPrincipal imagined how such a change would be received in H@R, “modeling” the solution. She worried about changing the rules and structure of H@R in the middle of the year:

KnittingPrincipal: I’m wondering if starting with the next rotation would make people go, “Great, Slytherin is so far ahead, and now we’re limited on how many points we can earn to try to catch up?”

Knitreaver: Hmmm...are we that far ahead? I didn’t realize. The flip side is that if we continue this way, no one will EVER catch up!

*Mwahahahaha!*

KnittingPrincipal: Slytherin has over 28,000...2nd place is 18,000, so yeah, there is a big difference. However, as you said, with things the way they are now, there’s little chance of catching up.

Hmmm...what do you think?

Knitreaver: I don’t know...I’m guessing that keeping things the way they are will only allow us to widen the gap. If all the Houses are held to the same rules, I think all’s fair. Other houses would be able to earn more points if we keep the status quo, but so will we. Changing will likely even things up a bit from here on out, since the advantage of having folks who craft a lot won’t be so huge if each project only earns points once.

KnittingPrincipal worried that members would feel angry that the rule change would guarantee Slytherin a win. Knitreaver, however, modeled what would happen if the existing activity system continued: the gap would continue to grow. Even potential solutions were caught in a double bind. While neither woman had a suggestion of how to level the playing field once the changes were implemented, Knitreaver felt that the solution would offer the best chance to “even things up a bit.” Jen2291 concurred,

adding that the leaders needed to think of how this would affect all members, not just the competitive ones. The solution would “even the playing field for those who can’t craft a bazillion things.”

The benefit of Knitreaver’s solution was that it would simplify participation for all members and decrease the daunting point disparity between casual and prolific members. It would still, however, offer a means for prolific and high-achieving members to continue to be acknowledged and challenged. KnittingPrincipal pointed out that the new solution might even offer a new challenge to prolific players since it would be more difficult to earn a completion badge for a project.

Without formally deciding on a solution, Knitreaver suggested an alternative innovation that would better suit H@R’s “laid back” and less rigid group: crafted items could be submitted only once to a class but multiple times to extracurricular challenges like the New Wizard’s or Quidditch challenges. “Is it confusing to allow exceptions?” Knitreaver wondered.

KnittingPrincipal: My initial inclination is to make New Wizards Hall the exception...it does seem like maybe blanket squares should be able to be used elsewhere...but then does that open a can of worms for everything else? But then what about the Owlry and the Dragon Pen? Do you think that those will eventually die out from lack of use? If I make a dragon for a class and I want to earn the class-finishing bonus, then I’m not going to submit it to the Dragon Pen - it’s going to go in a class. More things to think about - Jackie, what are your thoughts on this one?

Jackie: Considering you are changing the rule that projects can only be posted once, I feel that should go for everywhere also. Keep it simple for the new students coming in and us SENIOR witches and wizards.

Jackie argued for a blanket rule change, examining the rules for simplicity and ease of understanding and compliance - for “new students coming in and us SENIOR witches and wizards.” This discussion that modeled how the rule change would look at H@R resulted in a unanimous decision for a blanket rule change of – each item could only be submitted one item to all of H@R.

KnittingPrincipal offered a second solution to help with the “work” stress of H@R: reducing the number of challenges. Taking up KnittingPrincipal’s suggestion for limiting options, Knitreaver and Jen2291 hypothesized how the pared down challenges of H@R might look. Knitreaver imagined how it would be if the Quidditch game could only take place between class rotations, pointing to the fifth book’s narrative as support for this move. She suggested the role-play she could write to carry out the change, saying “we can gather to play in secret while Umbridge is enjoying her holiday away from school (or some such).” Jen2291 suggested that the magical creatures be consolidated to a singular “Hagrid’s Hut.”

The leaders also examined several other extracurricular challenges, such as the Educational Decrees, Order of the Phoenix, and Dumbledore’s Army. Part of examining these challenges was looking at what they contributed to H@R’s collective object and how they would function after the rules and other elements of H@R were changed. While the Year 5 extracurricular challenges added more “work,” they also enriched the group’s fantasy world by more closely tying the group’s actions to the fifth book’s narratives. The Educational Decrees, Order of the Phoenix, and Dumbledore’s Army all played important roles in the fifth book. Once the new rule, allowing each item to be submitted only once, was implemented the extracurricular

challenges would no longer cause stress but would offer members more ways to engage with the book's narrative without increasing their workload. It was decided that those extracurriculars would remain intact.

As KnittingPrincipal summarized the new solutions, members enthusiastically gave their approval:

Jen2291: I like it. It still gives folks lots of options as to where they want to post a project (even size based options), but only one post to worry about."

Knitreaver: Looks great to me!

Jackie: I like it.

Joan: Looks 100% AOK to me!!!! YAY!

### 5.2.3 Implementing the new model

While KnittingPrincipal worried about how such massive changes to H@R would be implemented and received, Knitreaver suggested that the timing of the changes might be fortuitous. Knitreaver suggested that the changes could be implemented using the narrative and characters of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In the book, the Ministry of Magic sends Dolores Umbridge to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to supervise and control Dumbledore. Umbridge begins Year 5 with a speech about the dangers of progress and eventually takes over the school, changing the rules and eliminating extracurricular activities. The H@R leaders would use Dolores Umbridge to implement and explain the changes in a way that strengthened the fantasy world of H@R. Knitreaver suggested:

You know, since it IS Year Five, if you want to thin things out a bit while still keeping with the plot of the book, Umbridge could come along and shut things down. She could disband the House Quidditch teams, declare the monthly challenge is interfering with homework

production, and perhaps the OoP headquarters could be infiltrated and the student missions shut down. Anything you wanted to trim from the list of activities could be handled that way, and then if you want to bring back any activities, they could have applied for and received approval. If you want any dramatic scenes written, I'll be happy to oblige.

The use of narrative and role-play were designed to make it likely that the changes would be well-received at H@R. Members might even expect the group to undergo some type of overhaul since it was Year 5. Indeed, Umbridge had already shown up in H@R in the first rotation of Year 5, creating the Educational Decrees challenge for students to craft banned items. Umbridge (role-played by KnittingPrincipal) had even started to post in H@R, making sarcastic comments in various areas of the group. For many members, it may only seem natural that Umbridge would step up in the middle of the school year to eliminate practices, change rules, and revamp the group.

In The Hog's Head, members agreed that Dolores Umbridge would provide great means to implement the changes. They decided Umbridge should first appear in Quidditch, where a competition was about to end, and KnittingPrincipal would create an Umbridge thread to announce "Changes are coming to Hogwarts..." Outside of its title, this thread included no text. It had only a single image of Dolores Umbridge from the *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* movie (see Figure 5.7).





**Figure 5.7.** KnittingPrincipal posted a single image of the malicious character Dolores Umbridge in the “Changes are coming to H@R...” thread.

Dolores Umbridge’s invasion of H@R started quietly and ominously. First, Umbridge shut down Quidditch after Hufflepuffs accused Slytherins of cheating and a fight ensued. Knitreaver provided a lively narration of the fight:

Now Headmistress KnittingPrincipal has arrived on the scene. Has anyone ever seen her look this angry? The two Slytherins have drawn their wands! And the Hufflepuffs are following suit! What’s that KnittingPrincipal is saying? Hufflepuffs can beat the Slytherins blindfolded and confunded? Yikes! It’s hard to tell who cast that hex, but the Headmistress has a bloody nose! And now Jackie has joined the fray. She seems to be attempting to tackle her two Prefects. but Knitreaver and Jen2291 are putting up quite the fight. Hufflepuff Prefect Mahala is attempting to subdue Janie. Ouch! Someone had better send for Madame Palfrey! It looks like Coach Knitreaver is going to need a new broomstick! Who will put a stop to this?

KnittingPrincipal responded with role-play, “I am disgusted with this behavior...all of you! Accusing my house of cheating...and giving me a bloody nose?!?!?!?!? *Raises wand threateningly at the Slytherins...*”

H@R members eagerly added their own role-play. Alissa walked “onto the field, pulls out her wand and yells ‘stupify!’”

As other H@R members laughed at the exchanges, Knitreaver introduced Umbridge,

Chaos reigns. Knitreaver draws breath to cast some sort of spell, but she gets no further than “CR...”

*“Hem, hem.”*

The combatants stop mid-fight, horrified. Professor Umbridge, her arms crossed over her bosom, watches them with an unbearably smug expression.

“Oh, yes, *Headmistress*. I believe all of you should retire *at once*. The game, naturally, must go on. *I* will referee from here on out.”

Umbridge, role-played by Knitreaver now, continued referring to the Quidditch match as Ravenclaw and Gryffindor members cautiously resumed submitting crafts to score points for their team. Once the match was finished, Umbridge gave a small “hem, hem!” and banned Quidditch entirely. The dragon nursery and owlry were also closed to future posts.

A few days later, Umbridge (role-played by KnittingPrincipal) reappeared in the Changes are Coming thread to issue a teaser for the next day’s announcement:

*Professor Umbridge sits back in her chair, sipping one last cup of tea before retiring to bed...contemplating the wonders of power and the greatness of Cornelius Fudge...ah, yes...change is good...I hope my speech goes well tomorrow...perhaps something like this...*

***Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.***

*Yes, that will do nicely...*

In the announcement, KnittingPrincipal pulled from the same speech that Dolores Umbridge had given in *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling, 2003). Members, unaware of the impending changes, responded enthusiastically to the book tie-in. Holly laughingly responded, “This scares me!” and another posted humorously worried, “Now I’m in trouble!” Two days later, in response to members’ posts of humorous panic, KnittingPrincipal added, “Pssst...please don’t worry! There is a plan in the works to simplify our game a bit more and increase participation.” She did not elaborate on what the plan was, however, or where members could find more about it.

Finally, ten days after discussions started at The Hog’s Head and six days after the “Changes are coming to H@R...” thread was created, Dolores Umbridge (role-played by KnittingPrincipal) made the following announcement:

*Hem, hem...*

Dear Students and Staff of Hogwarts at Ravelry,

It has become increasingly apparent to these eyes (which, as you know, have been placed here by none other than Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic) that it is time for changes to be made. In order for H@R to continue being a first-class choice for magical education, we feel (Cornelius and I...giggle) that it will be better to “prune practices.” And also to prune down some activities. It appears as if HaR is growing so rapidly that many students are finding it difficult to keep up, and we also don’t want our staff members to feel completely bogged down in their daily duties.

Effective immediately, the following changes will be made to Hogwarts at Ravelry:

1. The biggest change is that projects may no longer be submitted to more than one place in the castle. YOU will have to choose which class or activity you wish to post your project in. Please continue reading to fully understand this major change.

In addition to the rule change regarding submissions, the changes included the practices that would stay (classes, weekly challenges, Year 5 special challenges), the new Hagrid's Hut replacement of the owlry and dragon nursery, the new scheduling of Quidditch between class rotations, and the elimination of the monthly challenge.

KnittingPrincipal ended the note "out of character" to explain the changes:

Thank you all for helping us make Hogwarts at Ravelry our Home. These changes came about due to various discussions in last year's Staff Room, as well as comments and suggestions that have been made to me via PM. We don't want anyone to feel like it is "too much work" to play at HaR, and I am confident that this will help us all balance our H@R time with actual crafting and family time! :)

Importantly, KnittingPrincipal acknowledged that while the changes seemed to be implemented in a top-down manner, they were the result of collaborative discussions with members through private messages, Year 4's disturbances and discussions, and the collective discussions with other leaders. The goal of the changes was for the group to find more "balance."

#### **5.2.4 Reflection on the process**

The changes were well-received. Many members were excited to have their participation simplified. The leaders and veteran members who had participated in The Hog's Head led the responses to the changes:

Joan: Thank you to our HM for instituting these changes! I am very excited at how this will make the game even more fun, and simplify it for everyone. We all appreciate the time, discussions, and effort you have put in to come up with these specific changes. Its a new dawn for Hogwart's, with a lot of fun things on the horizon! I feel this will just enrich the experience of the game for everyone. Hurray!!!!

Knitreaver: I'm so excited about these changes! I second the thanks to KnittingPrincipal for all the hard work she'd putting in to make sure Hogwarts remains a fun, challenging, and excitingly magical environment.

Jackie: I ABSOLUTELY LOVE THE CHANGES!!!!!!!

Although the leaders led the responses, other members quickly joined in. Interestingly, their responses echoed the conversations that had happened in The Hog's Head, including identifying the same problems and hypothesizing the same outcome for points and status:

Kina: ***Waves Ravenclaw pom-poms for the Changes!!!***

When we were new, small, and just starting out, the work smarter-not harder practice was a fun way to encourage imagination. With all the new slots it became a terrible guilt-ridden burden, and I was avoiding the forum too. Hooray for brilliant adaptations. How the teachers will now manage classes under this new rule will be another interesting evolution. Can't wait to see the new classes!

Jonah: Change can be intimidating, yet I agree this will be good for the game. I know I will be reading all the threads more closely since there won't be repeats everywhere. It puts the emphasis more on crafting awesome things to share.

Nalia: I like it - I think these changes will make it:  
So much easier for staff members to keep up with things (I sometimes think that it is easy for non-staff folks to lose sight of how much 'work' the full time staffers put into making this a fun place to be).

Will make it easier for students as they will only have to come up with one story per project, which, IMHO, I think will lead to a lot more fun and imaginative stories because we won't need to wrack our brains for a quick way to make a project fit into 3, 4 or more places at once :-)

It will make it quite an accomplishment (mind you, not to imply that it wasn't before!) when a student completes all projects for all classes because every single submission will be unique.

I really think that these changes will make it better - and since HaR is already absolutely the most fun and fantastic group ever (I may be a bit biased lol) -

Amazon: Agreed. There was so much to do, I raised my hands to it all and just focused on the DA. It will be good to be able to handle the classes again.

Vivian: I love to see all the projects - but not so much seeing them over and over again, in every possible class. Projects might more likely get the response, attention, praise they deserve if they only occur once around Hogwarts. The difference between those who do enter a lot and those who can only afford so many hours crafting will still be there, but not multiplied by multiple entering. Who would have thought the Year of the Pink Dragon might bring something good? Not this Gryffindor, for certain

Although KnittingPrincipal had been fearing a backlash of criticism to the changes, (Many posts in The Hog's Head discussion did revolve around the inability of the other houses to catch up to Slytherin in the House Cup game.) the H@R membership was generally enthusiastic about the changes. Interestingly, two of the members who had been at the center of tensions in Year 4 (Kina and Nalia) both made sure to voice their approval of the changes and what they would mean for H@R.

### 5.3 Year 5 completion of the cycle

Within two weeks, H@R had completed an expansive cycle of transformation. What started as a simple vent turned into a larger discussion of the contradictions that the leaders and veteran members could no longer ignore or smooth over by rearranging the activity system. The resulting analysis looked both backwards into the history of the problem as well as empirically at the experiences of current members. Through analysis, the discussants were able to better understand the underlying contradictions that had created the participation crisis, enabling them to hypothesize solutions that might address the contradictions. The solutions, however, were not a simple rearrangement of the activity system as had occurred during previous disturbances. Instead, innovations were taken from Durmstrang, analyzing how their community interacted with rules and hypothesizing how H@R members would react to those same rules. Using their understanding of H@R's members and history, KnittingPrincipal, Jen2291, and Knitreaver were able to model, or hypothesize, potential solutions. This modeling did not just examine how the solutions would address the underlying contradictions, it also imagined new problems the solution might create.

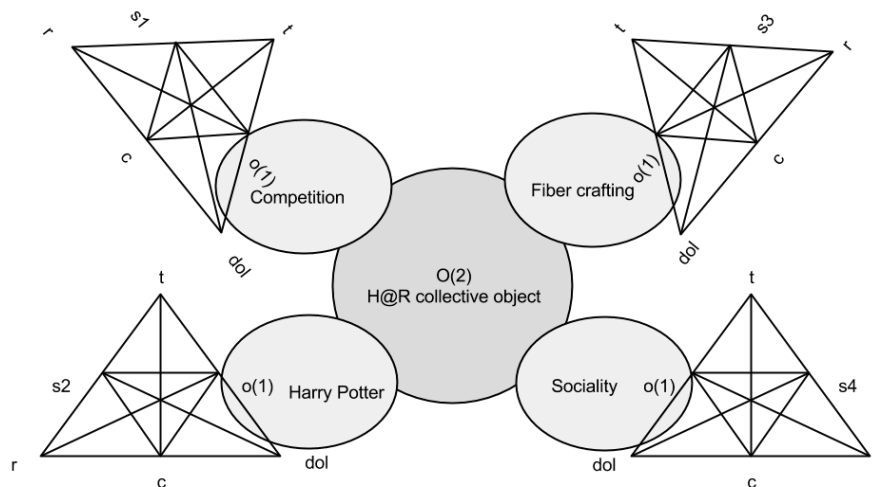
Importantly, the discussion did not move through the cycle unidirectionally. There was back and forth movement through analysis and the modeling of solutions, sometimes within the same post. Knitreaver, for example, began suggesting solutions while Jen2291 and KnittingPrincipal were still analyzing and identifying the problems. Even during the implementation of the solutions, other H@R members

responded with identification of problems and hypothesizing how the solution would address those problems.

In his work on wildfire activities, Engeström (2009, 2009b) wonders if a new generation of activity theory is needed to understand these new forms of activity. Yet as H@R's story has shown, the third generation of activity theory and the expansive cycle of transformation continue to provide a useful lens through which to understand how contradictions are a catalyst to an activity system's change and development.

H@R's history does offer one significant challenge to the traditional conceptualization of the expansive cycle of transformation, however. Engeström (1987, 2001, 2008) argues that an expansive cycle of transformation results in a new *object*. In H@R, the expansion was not quite that simple. Instead of restructuring the activity system around a new object, and thus new activity, H@R members instead sought to realign the activity system to the *original* object. This original object - an affinity group that supported *all* members in their pursuit of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting - became the north star, in a sense, that provided a directionality to all of the discussions. It became the point of comparison for the current activity system as well as the desired outcome of the expansion. Perhaps in affinity groups or more generally in wildfire activities, what sustains the group is an object that carefully balances the needs of its multi-voiced membership (as shown in Figure 5.8) and generates tools and activities that genuinely infer and reconstitute the object. Within such a system, contradictions between the various constituents are readily apparent and can be addressed before irreparable damage is done.





**Figure 5.8.** The original object of H@R's activity system provided a balance for its multivoiced members.

#### 5.4 Year 6 Status quo and changes ahead

The changes introduced in the Dolores Umbridge intervention were well-received by the H@R membership, and seemed to be successful in increasing both the quantity and quality of participation. Another 150 members joined H@R by the end of Year 5 and class participation increased. For example, in Year 5, Rotation 2, there were 50 members who submitted 273 projects to Herbology. In Year 6, Rotation 2, there were 89 members who submitted 224 projects to Herbology. More students participated in the class in Year 6, and although the number of projects in Year 6 was lower than Year 5, it is important to remember that the projects submitted in Year 6 could only be submitted *once*. So each project was unique to Herbology. In Year 5 they were also being used for multiple other classes. Participation rates and member

satisfactions remained high during Year 6, and I did not experience or become aware of any tensions or disruptions.

During Year 6, however, I again interviewed KnittingPrincipal and found out that H@R would be undergoing major changes in Year 7. There would no longer be a House Cup competition or points. She explained these changes were necessary due to the group paralleling the seventh book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This book takes place during what would have been Harry's seventh year at Hogwarts, but Harry has left Hogwarts to seek out Voldemort. Most of the book's plot takes place outside of the Hogwarts school, where there were no House Cup games. Instead, the plot follows Harry and his friends as they seek out the tools needed to destroy Voldemort. The story follows the characters through forests, wizarding towns and cities, and their eventual return to Hogwarts for a final battle against Voldemort. In keeping with this plot, no classes, points, or competitions for the House Cup would be introduced at H@R, and the separation of houses would be downplayed as students of all houses would work together against Voldemort.

H@R's Year 7 would "really delve deep into that book and to follow the storyline from start to finish, going chronologically through the entire thing . . . The book is so firmly about trying to find those horcruxes, that all of those school-time fun things are set aside" (KnittingPrincipal, personal communication, April 18, 2013). Year 7's challenges would focus on delving into the book's storyline. Members would earn badges, not points, for participating. KnittingPrincipal planned Year 7 to be "the perfect time for us to just spend a year playing and working together - and earning badges - there will be lots of badges to earn!"

As an outside researcher and as a participant in H@R, the plans for Year 7 seemed to me like they would be successful. The group's activity system would not be fundamentally changed. The collective object of participating in an affinity group grounded in *Harry Potter* and fiber-crafting interests would persist. The challenges and role-playing would continue supporting the collective object. Even the format of the challenges was going to be the same: Students would craft an item and use creative writing to tie the item to the challenge's prompt. The only difference was the elimination of the "game" aspect of H@R's fantasy world where houses competed against each other for a House Cup.

### **5.5 Year 7**

As it turned out, Year 7 was not successful in terms of membership. H@R experienced yet another dramatic decline in participation. Only 26 people submitted 47 projects to two of the final storyline challenges. The third challenge was even more dismal: only 17 members submitted 26 projects. What had happened to participation? I searched the group's discussion areas, but I could not find any indication of tensions or conflicts that would explain this drop. Finally, I reached out to KnittingPrincipal to ask her what happened.

By way of explanation, KnittingPrincipal sent me a link to a conversation in the Staff Room about the drop in participation. The conversation was short; only five posts discussed the drop in participation. Thelma, a staff member who was tracking participation, gave her thoughts on the decline:

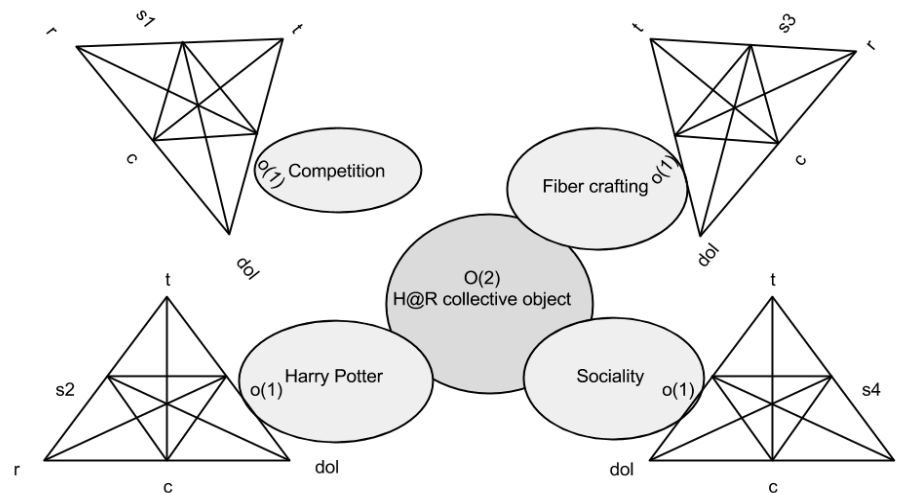
I think there are different types of players...ones who enjoy trying for badges, ones who enjoy trying for the house cup and ones who just enjoy HP no matter where we are at in the books... Book 7 is very

difficult and can be emotionally draining for some..even depressing.. At times I think book 7 sort of weeds out the kiddos from the adults, so to speak. :) Not in age, but in maturity levels and ability to face up to growing up and doing things because that's how life is and it dictates it, and not purely because it's 'fun'. It's almost like, if we were actually characters in the book...we are the few who would be left to stand up against Voldemort..those of us still following and working through book 7.

KnittingPrincipal told Thelma that she “hit the nail on the head,” and the conversation shifted to discussing the atmosphere of the seventh book. There was no further discussion or hypotheses about the decline in participation, and nobody suggested changes be made to increase participation. Outside of noting it, the leaders seemed largely unconcerned with the drop in participation. Leaders seemed to accept that the dwindling of H@R participation as an expected consequence of paralleling the seventh book.

### **5.6 Year 7: Cycle cut short**

The short conversation in the Staff Room seemed to initiate another expansive cycle, as Thelma sought to identify and explain the reason for the participation decline. Thelma identified the problem as the group being comprised of “different types of players.” H@R's Year 7, however, only supported one type: the “ones who enjoy HP no matter where we are at.”



**Figure 5.9. The Year 7 activity system had again become imbalanced, offering little support for competitive members**

Thelma immediately recognized and acknowledged that H@R's activity system had again become imbalanced (see Figure 5.9). Instead of favoring the competitive players like it had in Year 5, however, the activity system had swung in the opposite direction. The group primarily supported the book fans, specifically the "mature" book fans who had the "ability to face up to growing up and doing things because that's how life is and it dictates it, and not purely because it's 'fun'." Thelma attributed this imbalance to just "how life is and it dictates it" due to H@R's paralleling of the *Harry Potter* series. The stated collective object still supported an affinity group of all types of members, but the functional collective object had once again shifted. The collective object of Year 7 had become the serious delving into the seventh book's narrative, and this left out many members.

Instead of analyzing the problem or offering solutions, however, Thelma suggested that the cycle of H@R would provide its own remedy. “When book 1 comes around,” she said, “I suspect we’ll gain a new crowd or renewed crowd with some filled with new hope and excitement for playing out the chance to win the House Cup or others who are just wishing to start from Book 1.”

Here we finally find the explanation behind the justification of the participation decline and the lack of attempts by the leaders to remedy the problem. Members never intended the H@R group to end with the last book. It was generally assumed that the end of Year 7 would follow the same routine as previous years at H@R. There is not an eighth *Harry Potter* book. This meant that after Year 7, H@R would begin again with Year 1 and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998).

It is through this lack of concern about the participation problem as well as confidence in the group’s ability to repair itself that we see something important in H@R: It has an expansive cycle *built into its structure*. Because it was organized as a fictional school, H@R started and finished a cycle with each school year. If one school year was not successful, the group only needed to wait for the school year to end to reflect on problems and make changes as necessary. The group had a period of reflection and repair built into its structure. Furthermore, the fact that the *Harry Potter* series does not continue indefinitely, provides H@R with a larger cycle and opportunity for complete overhaul while remaining true to the narrative of the *Harry Potter* world. After Year 7, the group could reinvent itself entirely if it wanted; its story was beginning anew with Year 1.

Of course, through activity theory, we understand that the group does not actually begin *anew*, as it is still influenced by its history. Thelma, KnittingPrincipal, and Knitreaver found this history to be useful for understanding and addressing H@R's participation problem in Year 7. Year 1 would reinstate the balanced activity system and supporting actions that had proven successful for the second half of Year 5 and all of Year 6. The reboot did not require a reinventing of the wheel; it just provided a prime opportunity for replacing it.

### **5.7 H@R Anew**

On August 23, 2014 - five calendar years and seven school years after the initial founding of H@R - H@R did reboot. As Year 1 began, the House Cup competition and point system were reinstated, and the balanced activity system that Professor Umbridge put in place remained. Staff and announcements referred to members as if they were brand new to the group, welcoming to their first year at Hogwarts and sorting them anew into houses. Over 300 H@R members looked at the initial welcoming post. Participation went up as members - old and new - signed up as "new students."

## **Chapter 6: Hogwarts Unraveled**

As I write this final chapter, it is 2016. H@R is still thriving as a group, and I continue to participate from time to time as a student. The group is in Year 3 of their magical school year paralleling the third *Harry Potter* book. There are nearly 2,000 members, more than double the number of members when I first joined the group. Knitreaver is the new headmistress, though most of the other staff remain unchanged.

The group has shown the ability to survive changes in leadership, the organization of their activity system, and membership. It has more than survived; its members are busily engaged in completing challenges, classes, and many group discussions. Members continue to craft for charities, teach each other about fiber crafting, and read the *Harry Potter* books together.

Now that I have followed H@R's story from beginning to end and a new beginning, I want to take a step back and reflect on H@R as a whole through the lens of activity theory. How has activity theory contributed to the understanding of affinity groups, and how has H@R contributed to activity theory?

### **6.1 An affinity group and wildfire activity**

I began H@R's story by arguing that H@R can be viewed both an affinity group as well as a wildfire activity. In this final chapter, I return to this topic in light of the events I have been chronicling.

#### **6.1.1 H@R as an affinity group**

Considered as an affinity group, H@R is a space where participants come together around a cluster of shared interests. H@R members find and join the group because they share common interests in both *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting.



Combining these shared interests enables the formation of a community that is diverse in age, backgrounds, areas of expertise, skill level, and even level of passion in the shared interests. *Harry Potter* and fiber-crafting bridge these differences by providing members with a common framework through which to work together. The diversity becomes an asset as members collaborate, advance their skills or knowledge, produce, or share resources related to the interests (Pfister, 2014).

H@R has the design features of affinity groups that make them a unique type of interest-driven groups (Gee and Hayes, 2010; Gee, 2013). It supports members of all ability levels and levels of passion for *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting, regardless of whether they are a novice or expert *Harry Potter* fan or knitter. The group fosters a general shared knowledge around *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting, but specialized areas of expertise are valued as well. Members frequently offer feedback, advice, and resources related to the general interests. Some members also have expertise in specific types of crafting, designing, pattern writing, or even media production skills that are used to create badges or graphics.

Other design features focus on the interaction between members to the content, design, and roles of the group. In H@R, the group emphasizes production, not just consumption, around the shared interests. Members do not just read books or learn about fiber crafting. They discuss, analyze, and debate the *Harry Potter* universe. They craft, spin yarn, and dye fibers. They even craft the fantasy world of the group. The crafting of the group also is a collective endeavor; members can easily shift between roles, and members of all ranks help create the group's organization, content, and practices.

An important feature of affinity groups is that they support such wide ranges of members by offering multiple ways in which to participate and be recognized within the group. In H@R, members can chat or socialize, role-play, participate in read-alongs, or they can of course participate in any of the multiple classes or other types of challenges through crafting, researching, or writing about a topic. The welcoming of multiple types of participation also extends to what members produce. Regardless of skill level, members' crafts are welcomed, cheered, and given feedback.

### **6.1.2 H@R as wildfire activity**

I also argue that as an affinity group, H@R is an example of a wildfire activity characterized by a high level of mobility (Engeström, 2009; 2009b). While H@R members come together under the shared interests of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting, they are diverse in their individual motivations and goals related to these shared interests. On the shared landscape of the common objective, the diverse individual movements function similarly to trails (Engeström, 2009). They may expand outwards, overlap, criss-cross, and converge. These junctions and intersections offer valuable learning opportunities as members come together to form short term collectives, problem-solve together, exchange resources, and participate in zones of proximal development. In H@R we see this process at work as members, despite different goals or specific interests, come together to craft, read, and role-play. The classes and challenges provide intersections or points of convergence for the diverse pathways, encouraging members of varying experience and levels of expertise to exchange resources to support a fellow house-mate earn points or lend motivation to a classmate who is feeling discouraged.

Importantly, H@R and wildfire activities are gift economies; they share resources that have a strong object and use-value orientation” (Engeström, 2009, p. 5). Within such activities, participants volunteer time and energy towards that provide little or no monetary reward. Rather, the free exchange of information and ideas are valuable because they support both the common object and individual goals. In H@R, leaders and veteran members have volunteered excessive amounts of time to organizing and running the group. All members contribute time and energy to crafting the group’s fantasy world through their role-playing, creative writing, and fiber crafting. For example, Jen2291 has written thousands of posts in H@R contributing to the group’s challenges, offering feedback to other members, and sharing her experiences and resources around *Harry Potter* or fiber crafting. She has created instructional videos for fiber crafting techniques, and she has written blog entries with *Harry Potter*-inspired recipes. The volunteering of time, energy, and good will are essential to the creation and maintenance of such groups, but also distinguishes them from other forms of collective production.

## 6.2 Applying the principles of activity theory

While existing writing on affinity groups have offered valuable insight into their potentials and outcomes, current research has offered little insight into how these groups develop and renew themselves. Similarly, the understanding of wildfire activities is only in its early stages. Engeström (2009, 2009b) recognizes the potential of wildfire activities for learning, development, as well as for informing activity theory. However, there are few works that offer insight into such activities through the framework of activity theory (for a partial exception, see Prior and Schaffner, 2011).

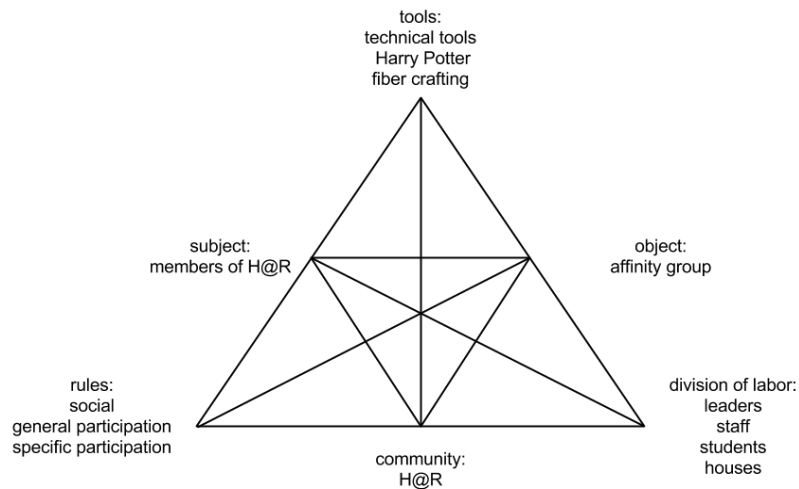
I have argued that the two bodies of research have much to offer each other; activity theory provides a useful framework through which to understand the processes involved in an affinity group's development as well as how it is sustained through time, diverse memberships, and conflict.. In the following sections I return to this issue, re-viewing each of the basic principles of third generation activity theory promoted by Engeström in light of the evidence provided by H@R.

### **6.2.1 Principle 1: Activities in their network of relations**

The first principle of activity theory is that the prime unit of analysis is an activity center “seen in its network relations to other activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). In addition to focusing on H@R's community, its practices, and even its outcomes, activity theory directs us to understand these as interconnected components of a larger activity system.

Existing works on affinity groups already look at the participants (subject) of affinity groups, and they understand the importance of the shared purpose (or object) in uniting diverse members by providing a shared framework for collaboration or joint participation (Gee and Hayes, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins, 1992; 2006; Nardi, 2010).

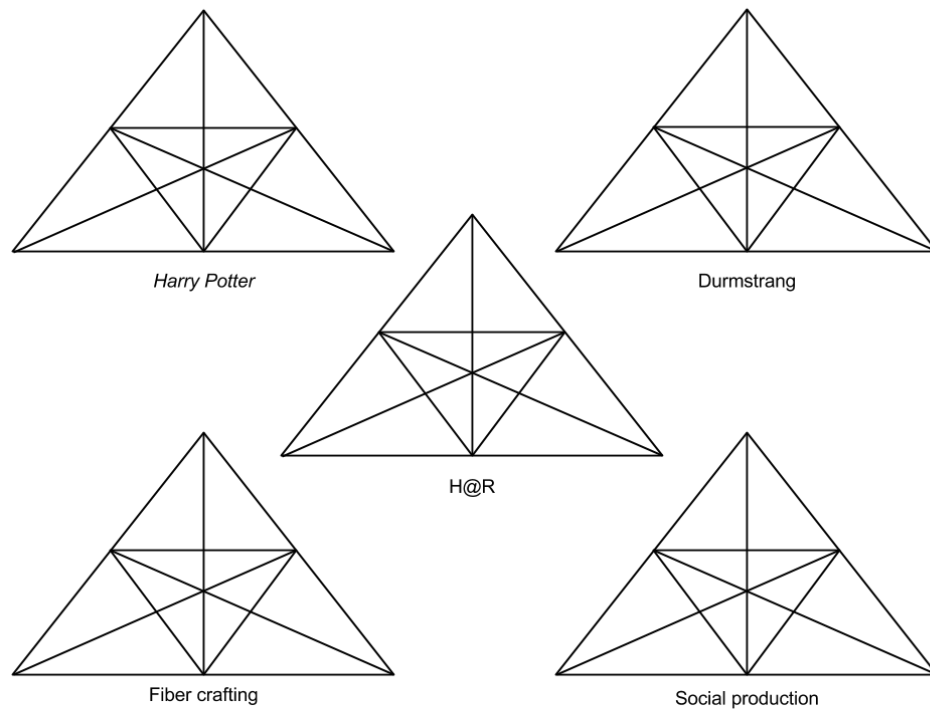
Third generation activity theory makes it possible to analyze how the subject and object are mediated by the other components of the group and by the interactions that occur between the central activity of interest and the networks of activity of which it is a part.



**Figure 6.1. H@R as an activity system.**

Seen concretely as a representation of H@R as an activity system, Figure 6.1 is a reprise of Figure 3.1, identifying the interconnections among components of the entire the group's activity functioning as part of a single system. The prime unit of analysis is not H@R's activity system alone, however. Engeström (2001) stresses that activity systems do not exist in isolation, and we have seen that H@R's activity system has been informed by and defined against other activity systems.

H@R is one of thousands of groups on Ravelry.com, the shared interests of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting are situated in their own sociocultural networks, and H@R's members participate in many activities outside of, but connected to, the group in some fashion.



**Figure 6.2. H@R's activity system interacts with many other activity systems.**

Understanding this larger network that H@R exists within (see Figure 6.2) sheds light on the development of the group's components and actions. Many of H@R's rules, tools, and even its division of labor were adopted from, and map on to, the fictional *Harry Potter* school Hogwarts. The fiber crafting tools were brought in from the existing fiber crafting groups. Other tools, such as instructional resources, are part of other forms of social production, such as peer-based knowledge-sharing communities.

From H@R's earliest days, we also saw how another Ravelry group, Durmstrang, was instrumental in creating H@R's identity, shared values, and even its specific practices. Many H@R members belonged to both groups, and some of the

earliest questions concerned how H@ would “set ourselves apart” from Durmstrang. The contrast became important to H@R’s creation and remains so to the present. In contrast to Durmstrang’s competitive atmosphere, H@R members established their shared values around fun, inclusivity, and the support of all members. Both groups had school-based actions, but H@R members wanted their fantasy world to be unique by closely paralleling the books. There were also actions that were excluded because of their similarity to Durmstrang. Quidditch, for example, was initially rejected as a type of challenge because H@R members feared it would be “too much like the other group” (Holly, personal communication, March 20, 2012).

Years after its founding, the need for a sharp contrast between the groups had lessened, but the interactions between the two groups continued to inform H@R’s development. Innovations were even brought in from Durmstrang, such as the badges and Quidditch. When tension were high, Durmstrang became a point of comparison for the severity of problems within H@R. For example, when Nalia worried H@R required too much work, KnittingPrincipal asked her to compare H@R’s workload to that of Durmstrang. During the Year 5 discussions about H@R’s participation problems, several members referred to Durmstrang to support their arguments in defense of H@R’s activity system, as a reason to simplify the participation structure, and as a source of ideas for overhauling H@R. The two groups were still interacting, but the relationship had changed from strict contrast to one that allowed for incorporations, innovations, and reflection on the status quo.

Throughout H@R’s history, its identity has been heavily informed by and constructed through interactions with other activity systems. This was only visible,

however, when the unit of analysis moved beyond just H@R. Tracing through H@R's story, we can see how understanding H@R as an activity system that interacts with other activity systems is useful for understanding the creation and development of the group, as well as key to understanding how the group adapts and evolves.

### **6.2.2 Principle 2: Multivoicedness**

The second principle of activity theory is multivoicedness -- the assumption that the collectives of activity systems are comprised of many participants with their own diverse histories, interests, goals, and even understandings of the collective objective (Cole and the Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Engeström, 2001). (Multivoicedness pervades so many aspects of H@R's development that it will appear in later discussions as well.)

Research with affinity groups has already established that such groups value that participants have many different voices. People find and join affinity groups first and foremost because of a shared interest; this takes primacy over race, age, educational level, experiences, areas of expertise, and even level of passion in the shared interest (Gee and Hayes, 2010). Memberships are diverse; H@R was founded through a collaboration between a 10 year old girl and a middle-aged doctor. This diversity is considered an asset; individual members and the collective benefits when members of different backgrounds and areas of expertise collaborate (Pfister, 2014). The diversity is understood to be a key part of how affinity groups “build, transmit, sustain, and transform knowledge” (Gee and Hayes, 2010, p. 115).

All of these points apply equally to an activity theory approach. In addition to recognizing the value of diversity for learning and outcomes, activity theory offers



additional insight into how this multivoicedness informs and propels the development of the entire group. It is assumed in an activity theory perspective that participants arrive not only with diverse experiences and abilities, but they also have diverse individual goals and motivations for participating (Engeström, 2009). They also have diverse understandings of the collective objective (Foot and Groleau, 2011). This diversity can create conflict and disturbances, but it can also propel innovation and expansion.

The principle of multivoicedness is pervasively evident in my attempts to understand H@R's creation as well as its continuous, if uneven, development. The foundation of H@R's collective neatly illustrates what it means to speak of "textures of criss-crossing" voices (Engeström, 2009y, p. 9).

In his discussion of wildfire activities, Engeström (2009) uses the analogy of trails to represent the individual interests, goals, and motivations that make up the landscape of a common interest. He argues that when trails converge, participants may collectively attempt to conceptualize the activity that they are engaged in at that point of convergence. H@R created, and was created as, a point of convergence. Susie created the group as a place to combine the interests and voices of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting. Merida joined in Susie's enterprise and brought the experience needed to create the Ravelry group.

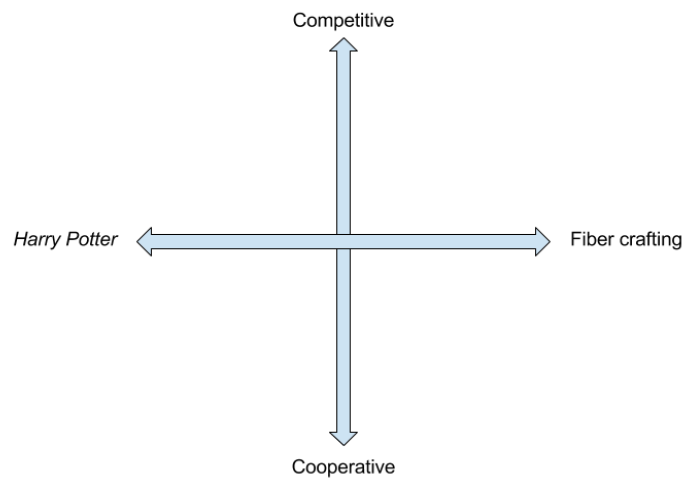
H@R as an activity system continued to develop through the collective conversations that took place after the group's creation. There were many trails converging within the *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interest landscapes, and H@R's

Staff Room was established as a space for those trails to come together and collectively attempt to conceptualize what the activity of the group would be.

The Staff Room was created as a centralized space of discussions around the group's activity and actions, and it was here that the early diverse voices sought explicit agreement in understanding the collective objective and creating an activity system that supported it. "Let's bounce around ideas," Pattie encouraged. This bouncing around of ideas made visible the different voices as different members emphasized *Harry Potter*, fiber crafting, the community, or the Hogwarts role-playing game. This multivoicedness found harmony through the shared values that were established for H@R: support for all members, an emphasis on fun (for everyone), and inclusivity. The term "fun" came to encompass the diverse motivations and individual goals. The collective objective, in affinity group terms, the affinity created through the collective practices, was established as balancing and supporting all of these diverse voices. Through trial, error actions were created, tried out, and when successful, added the group's repertoire to better support the multitude of individual goals, their passions. H@R's activity system was established as a unifying point of convergence for the multivoiced members.

However, as we saw in Years 4, 5, and 7, the multivoicedness both manifested and created conflicts and imbalances. H@R and its supporting components, had been established with the intent of supporting the people to continue their numerous trails, not to merge them. But the contradictory proclivities of different participants to favor one or another aspect of the collective object led to inevitable tensions. Some members, like Kina, voiced more competitive aspirations. Other voices, such as

Nalia's and Mindy's, emphasized the more casual and cooperative aspirations. Year 7 revealed that some influential members were focused on delving into the *Harry Potter* narrative with other group members. If we map out some of the more common voice types, we would get a diagram similar to Figure 6.2. While many H@R members overlapped multiple aspirations, others, like Kina or Thelma, fell at more extreme ends.



**Figure 6.3. Mapping out the different voice types in H@R.**

H@R's offered members multiple ways to participate in the group to support these multiple voices. However, as Year 4 and Year 7 made visible particular categories of voices were more emphasized than others at different times in H@R's history. In Year 4, for example, members could role-play, chat, or participate in the challenges or classes. Under these conditions, an emphasis on points and the

competitive House Cup game developed; house discussion areas prominently posted point scores. Class rotations began with house leaders encouraging members to earn points. Rewards were primarily given to those who had high points. Despite the shared values emphasizing inclusivity and cooperation, many aspects of the group emphasized competition. Having multiple ways to participate in the group alone was not enough to create balance and support for all voices.

When the balance shifted in H@R to support one category of voice more than others, conflict and disturbances arose. When the rules and practices in the activity system primarily supported competitive players, Nalia, Mindy, Bobbi, and other casual players who were more interested in cooperative play no longer felt supported. Overall participation decreased as a result.

This imbalance represented more than a shift in the support of particular forms of participation, also reflected a shifting understanding of the collective object. The collective objective applied in principle to all four quadrants, but as members came or left, various rules and associated practices were added or increasingly emphasized tipping the balance of the system.

The imbalances of Year 4 and Year 5 were addressed by returning to the multivoicedness that was characteristic of Year 1. A significant indication of the value of multivoicedness occurred in the approach exemplified in The Hog's Head discussions in Year 5; the discussants did not seek to shut down the individual voices or aspirations as previous attempts to resolve disturbances had done. Instead, The Hog's Head discussions opened a cycle of expansive learning with the goal of realigning the group's collective objective and supporting its multi voiced

membership. The Hog's Head discussions were a collective attempt to again find harmony and co-construct a collective object that supported everyone.

Year 7 echoed problems that were similar to those seen in Year 5. In both cases, a focus on one voice and exclusion of another occurred. Significantly, this problem was identified by the group, but it failed to cause the consternation that occurred when participation had dropped during Year 5. When Thelma explicitly noted that there were different "types" of players she seemed to accept it as a given that some types of participants would not be supported if the decision was made to have the activities of the group parallel the narrative of the book. However, because this was book 7, and because it was assumed by all that the activity would begin again with book one "next year," the decrease in participation was now seen as part of a natural cycle.

Throughout H@R's development, we see that multivoicedness plays an integral part in the dynamics of the group's development. The group was created as a convergence point for the diverse voices interested in combining *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting, and those voices found harmony through the shared values and collective object that emphasized inclusivity and support. As we saw throughout H@R's history, the multivoicedness could also create points of tension when the activity shifted emphasized one type of voice over others but it also allowed collective discussions to resolve tensions and evolve the group.

### 6.2.3 Principle 3: Historicity

The third central principle of activity theory is historicity, which stresses the importance of looking at the historical context of an activity system in order to understand its present dynamics.

Much of my account of H@R would not be possible if I had not investigated its origins and early history. However, when I began this research I had not adopted activity theory as a theoretical framework. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, it was not until the difficulties the group encountered in Year 4 and the events of Year 5 that I was driven to incorporate the principle of historicity as a critical tool of analysis.

Much of the research on affinity groups, including my own, tends to focus on individual development and collective practices during the period of time the researcher is working with the group (Cody, 2012; Gee and Hayes, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Pfister, 2014). I started my research with H@R during the break between Years 3 and 4, focusing on present practices and seeking to gain acceptance in the group. I documented the conflicts in Year 4, but I did not analyze them. I saw them as momentary hiccups in a group with a large membership.

When the leaders role-played as Umbridge to overhaul the group in Year 5, however, I recognized that this was a significant turning point for the group. I read the conversations in *The Hog's Head*, and they provided more insight into how the leaders identified, analyzed, and sought to solve the issues - but I was still unclear how this all happened to begin with. Why a crisis *now*? The group had maintained the same rules since the day I joined, so why were they only now problematic? Why were the number of challenges only now seeming like too much work? I remembered the tensions of

Year 4 and thought they might give insight, but they still offered only an incomplete understanding of why such a significant overhaul of the group happened when and as it did.

After the changes were implemented and participation began to increase, I suspected that the overhaul of Year 5 might offer a key piece to the puzzle of how affinity groups are sustained in the face of such basic disagreements. Activity theory offered me a framework and tools through which to understand that development.

To understand this key moment in the group, activity theory's principle of historicity again directed me to look backwards, to the time before I joined. The further back I went, the more I understood the activity system that I had entered and the underlying contradictions that had been *built into* the group through the unusual combination of interests that were conjoined in its hybrid object and the contradiction between cooperative shared values and the competitive practices. This history also helped me understand how the change in leadership, the increasing focus on the House Cup game, and the addition of more challenges had exacerbated the accumulating contradictions.

As a result of this journey backwards, I began to understand Year 5's changes as just one more chapter in a much larger story that is still being written today. It is a chapter that cannot be understood without an understanding of the preceding chapters. (I also recognize that H@R's history even predates the group's beginning, as the shared interests and members also have their own histories. Unfortunately, this dissertation cannot address these much larger histories, but it is my hope that by

looking backwards at H@R, we can see the value in the understanding that the history provides.)

Research on affinity groups has revealed them to be valuable spaces of learning, connections, potentials, and outcomes. Understanding the value that these groups offer to members, businesses, researchers, educators, and others is important. But if we hope to fully understand *why* these spaces are what they are, we must understand where they came from.

#### **6.2.4 Principle 4: Contradictions and change**

The fourth principle of activity theory identifies the contradictions that are a part of all activity systems as a catalyst for change. Disturbances happen in activities because of underlying contradictions, and the accumulation of contradictions can propel changes to the activity system. For this reason, contradictions are a “driving force of transformation” (Engeström and Sannino, 2010, p. 5). While some works on affinity groups have discussed the impact of conflicts and the ways in which conflicts were resolved (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2006), activity theory helps shed light on how conflicts offer researchers the opportunity to better see the underlying activity system. By looking beneath the surface of an activity at the underlying activity system, researchers can better understand how and why conflicts happen, the interactions within and between activity systems, and how contradictions propel the changes that are essential to the development and sustainability of an affinity group.

Drawing upon the principle of historicity combined with an analysis of the role of contradictions in change, we are better able to understand the tensions and disturbances that happened at H@R. Secondary contradictions, that is, contradictions



within H@R, created tensions in both Year 1 and Year 4. In Year 1, a tension arose when students were unable to participate in classes because assignments were restrictive, requiring students to craft specific representations of *Harry Potter* topics. Looking beneath this tension, we see there was a secondary contradiction between the rules regarding assignments and the collective object of a group that supported all members. In Year 4, contradictions between components within the activity system gave rise to two more tensions. In the first case, Kina suggested Ravenclaws exploit the group's point system to win the House Cup game. This suggestion, and resulting reprimands, revealed a contradiction between the competitive tools (points) and the collective object of a cooperative community. In the second case, Nalia worried that class assignments required too much time and energy, discouraging existing and potential H@R members. This tension revealed a contradiction between the group's existing rules regarding the nature of assignments that were exclusive and a collective object that focused on inclusivity.

Digging deeper, these tensions reveal another set of secondary contradictions - contradictions *within* the collective object of activity. As noted earlier, H@R has a multifaceted object; the object is not simply fiber crafting, *Harry Potter*, a role-playing game, or even a cooperative and inclusive community. H@R's collective objective is comprised of *all* of these components, and components of the activity system that may support one aspect of the object may contradict another aspect. In Year 1, and again in Year 4, rules for assignments were created to support the *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting aspects of the collective object. Yet the implementation of these rules also contradicted the inclusive community aspect of the collective object.

The tensions brought to light by Kina revealed how a collective object is contradictory when it includes both a competitive role-playing game and the goal of a cooperative community. Importantly, these tensions made visible how certain contradictions, particularly those within the collective object, were *built into* H@R's activity system.

In Year 5, the tensions accumulated into a full crisis as participation declined and the future of the group was threatened, and in this crisis a tertiary contradiction was made visible. A tertiary contradiction involves the introduction of another form of the object. In Year 5, this contradiction happened through an accumulation of the secondary contradictions and the multivoicedness that were discussed previously. The actions, rules, and tools increasingly emphasized the competitive voices of H@R members and the game aspect of the collective object, while contradicting the cooperative and inclusive shared values and aspect of the collective object. As the contradictions accumulated, the activity system became imbalanced -- the collective object shifted to emphasize the competitive game.

If we shift our analytical lens to look at the different types of subjects of H@R, defined by their relation to the object, rather than a uniform collective subject, we see that there also was a quaternary contradiction. A quaternary contradiction is a contradiction between neighboring activity systems. Within the collective of H@R, the multiple subjects included those who emphasized goals of competition, cooperation, *Harry Potter*, or fiber crafting. Breaking the collective down into these different types of subjects, we can envision H@R being comprised of the multiple interacting activity systems corresponding to the subject-objects of the different voice types. To some degree, these different activity systems shared the parts of the

collective objective and the same mediating components that comprised H@R.

However, their individual goals were different and contradicted each other, creating a quaternary contradiction between these sub-activity systems.

### **6.2.5 Principle 5: Expansion**

When contradictions cannot be resolved through the rearranging of the component constituents of an existing activity system, the collective may engage in “collaborative envisioning and deliberate collective change effort” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) to transform the activity system entirely. Engeström (1987, 2001) links such changes to “expansive learning.” In the examples given, this change involves going outside of the existing activity system, using a cycle of expansive transformation to analyze the activity system, proposing new solutions, and then implementing a new model. Such transformation results in a new objective for the activity system, which allows for “a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137).

A focus on efforts to deal with contradictions helps provide insight into the collective efforts that members put forth to transform and sustain their affinity group. During Year 4 as various tensions began to manifest themselves, they were addressed in only a superficial, somewhat ad hoc fashion using single-loop problem solving solutions. However, when the contradictions accumulated to the point of threatening the future of the group, the leaders and veteran members worked collectively to address the underlying issues in an explicit way, bringing about the expansive transformation of Year 5. Interestingly, this cycle of expansive learning looked similar in many respects to to of the initial collective conceptualizations that founded the

group. There was no single leader in the discussion and there also were no heated arguments. Instead, The Hog's Head discussion took on a cooperative feel as veteran members and leaders collectively attempted to identify and address the problems.

While H@R's cycle of expansive learning followed almost identically to the ideal cycle that Engeström (1987, 2001) laid out, there was an important difference for H@R's transformation. In his works on expansive learning, Engeström emphasizes how transformation results in a new object for an activity system, thus allowing the activity to expand in ways it previously could not. However, in H@R's case, we saw the transformation result in a reinstitution of the *original* collective object. The contradictions had accumulated because the shifting of balance in the support for the multivoiced membership. The object of the group had shifted imperceptibly at some point toward the end of Year 4 or early Year 5. Rather than the collective objective of an affinity group that sought to combine the shared interests and support all members in a collaborative community, the objective had shifted to align primarily with the competitive game goals of individual members. The activity had shifted from the collective pursuit of the combination of shared interests to become the House Cup game.

Rather than a new objective, however, The Hog's Head discussions heavily focused on a return to the shared values upon which the group had been founded, thus a reinstating of the original collective objective. Leaders and veteran members argued that *all* members should be supported by the actions, rules, and tools of the group. "It's more fun when everyone participations," Knitreaver noted. This statement emphasizes the point that even the "fun" motivation of competitive players is tied to

the participation of an entire community, not just prolific members. In their work on expansion, Engeström and Sannino (2010) point out that contradictions “become actual driving forces of expansive learning when they are dealt with in such a way that an emerging new object is identified and turned into a motive” (p. 7). In H@R, there was no “new object,” but the original collective object was identified and became the motive behind the cycle of expansive learning and transformation. It became the driving force, and the destination to which the rest of the discussions, analysis, and modeling of new solutions were aligned.

Year 5’s transformation of H@R, or the overhaul of the group as I have referred to it, provided valuable insight into how affinity groups are able to adjust to the influx of new members and evolve to continue supporting new generations of members, multiple passions related to the shared interest, and the shifting needs of a community. While for H@R, a reinstitution of the original collective object brought back the balance the collective was seeking in supporting all members, the cycle of expansive learning in other affinity groups may lead to a new object entirely, propelling the activity system in a new direction that better suits the existing members.

There is one last important note about expansion and H@R. While Engeström (1987, 2001, 2008) discusses the expansive cycle of learning as something relatively rare and transformative for activity systems, H@R’s Year 7 reveals something unique about an affinity group analyzed as an activity system. Recall that in Year 7, participation had started to decline, and leaders recognized that the decline in participation was the result of the decision to focus the activity on deep reading of *Harry Potter*, a major element of the collective object that was heavily valued by a

relatively small set of the community. However, after identification of the problems, the leaders seemed unconcerned about the decline in participation and confident that the problem would continue until the end of Year 7 and then resolve itself with a return to the first *Harry Potter* book. Unlike Years 4 or 5, there was no attempt to manage the tensions or enter into a cycle of expansive learning. Instead, the leaders stated matter of factly that participation would increase when the group started over again, with the first book and with Year 1.

It is through this lack of concern about the participation problem as well as confidence in the group repairing itself that we see something important with H@R: It has an expansive cycle *built into its structure* in the form of a mechanism for self-reproduction. Even after restarting the activity with book one, if a school year was not successful, the group only needed to wait for the school year to end at which point the group now knew how collectively to repair the system and reboot.

### **6.3 Reflections**

This research has been quite the journey. This dissertation started with a “hem, hem,” the realization that there was more to a group than met the eye, and the search for a framework and toolkit that could help me make sense of changes unfolding in H@R. In the fiber craft of crochet, we take wound fibers and use a hook to form the fibers into knots, and we work knots into knots until a material emerges. This dissertation has aimed to reverse this process, using activity theory as the framework through which to unravel H@R in order to understand its development and how it is able to engage in “self-renewal, innovation, and expansion” (Engeström, 2009, p. 4).

Activity theory provided a useful lens through which to look at H@R's development. It moved beyond focusing on individual design features, actors, or even the community to look at the way in which they all made up the larger activity system. This framework situated the Year 5 changes in the larger context - historical and current - that created them. And rather than frame the changes as a flaw in the activity system or indicative of impending failure, activity theory provided insight on how the changes are a normal and necessary part of activity. They are what allow the activity to grow and transform. In a group like H@R, the contradictions and changes are what enable the group to repair and renew itself. They are the key to its self-renewal.

When I asked KnittingPrincipal how she felt "things are with Hogwarts" after the changes in Year 5, she responded, "I think they're good. It's so weird because it ebbs and flows so much that it's hard to always have a firm grasp of how things really are...if that makes sense" (personal communication, April 18, 2013).

KnittingPrincipal's response succinctly summed up what I had witnessed over three years at H@R: affinity groups are dynamically changing activity systems. While members - or researchers - can give a general depiction of an affinity group at any one point, "it's hard to always have a firm grasp" because they are in constant flux. Members join, members leave, needs change, and goals shift. Throughout these changes, the group must adapt and grow with its members or perish. Change is its life-force.

H@R also provided support for Gee and Hayes's (2010) argument that cultural values are an integral feature that defines affinity groups. The shared values of fun, inclusivity, and support for all members were foundational to H@R; they were

collectively established as the foundation of the group's shared objective. They were integral to the type of community that the collective desired. In Year 4, Holly said, "We are here because we all love Harry Potter and our fiber craft whatever that may be and have found a wonderful group of people to share it with." H@R was crafted to be a fantasy world where people could pursue their interests together; community was as important as the interests.

The shared values and the collective objective provided the directional north for the group's development. They informed the creation and implementation of rules and actions. They motivated reflection and revisions when elements of the activity system contradicted them. In Year 5, when The Hog's Head discussions revealed that the group had become imbalanced and the collective object had shifted to become the competitive House Cup game, the ensuing analysis and suggestions for changes were all aimed at realigning the group to the original shared values that were foundational to the group. For H@R, having shared values that emphasized supporting all members, inclusivity, and fun for everyone motivated a continual reflection on the group's support for all members. It also motivated the changes, repairs, and transformations necessary to realign the group should it lose the balance of supporting all.

In addition to arguing that activity theory provides a useful lens through which to understand the development of affinity groups, this dissertation has also argued that affinity groups provide insight into wildfire activities. Engeström (2009) wrote that wildfire activities could provide useful contributions to activity theory by lending insight into a paradoxical activity where participants are highly motivated to volunteer



excessive amounts of time and energy towards an activity in which they receive no monetary reward. H@R's story supports Engeström's (2009) description of wildfire activities, demonstrates the value that the third generation of activity theory continues to provide in understanding the development of this type of activity, and provides important insight into the ways in which these types of activities self-renew and transform. H@R and other affinity groups are wildfire activities, where "[t]ransformative learning is not imposed upon the participants, but built into the very operating principles and everyday social textures of these activities" (p. 5).

H@R's organization as a fantasy school makes it particularly valuable as a case through which to understand development of affinity groups and wildfire activities. To parallel the *Harry Potter* series, H@R is broken down in six week class rotations, and there are five class rotations in each school year. The breaks between class rotations and school-years provide built-in periods of reflection and repair. Finally, the group is set up to parallel the *Harry Potter* books, restarting when they finish the last book. This means that after seven H@R school years, the group completely reboots.. Furthermore, although the group has reboots built into its structure, the collective remains. This means that the memory of previous versions of the activity system hold strong, and repairs and even full expansions are able to draw from this collective memory.

While this cycle of development is not unique to H@R, the frequency of the cycle makes it a particularly strong case through which to observe development. In my three years with H@R, I participated in 15 class rotations, 3 smaller reboots during year changes, and one full reboot when the group shifted from Year 7 to Year 1.

It is important to note that H@R's story is still being written, and its future is unknown. The group is based on one shared interest that has persisted for thousands of years, but it is also based on a shared interest that is just now being tested by time. On the one hand, the *Harry Potter* books predate teenage members now. On the other hand, fan communities have persisted in their love of *Harry Potter*, the books are still popular with young people, and J.K. Rowling has kept the *Harry Potter* universe alive through her supplemental materials. She is even releasing a new book, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016). Despite the new materials and the ongoing popularity of the *Harry Potter* series, however, it is unknown if H@R will persist as an interest group through future school-years or future Hogwarts cycles.

There also remain questions of how to translate the lessons of H@R. While businesses and educators recognize affinity groups as valuable for their learning, economic, and civic outcomes - attempts to intentionally create such groups have been unsuccessful (Gee and Hayes, 2010). This dissertation hopes to demonstrate the value of using activity theory as a lens through which to understand the developmental processes of these types of groups, which may better enable connections between affinity groups and other types of organizations. The Connected Learning Research Network (Ito et al., 2013) in particular has sought to better understand and foster such connections, and I hope that this dissertation will contribute to that ongoing research.

...*Mischief managed.*

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