

What It Means to Be a Patterns Community

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Abstract. With the 30th anniversary of EuroPLoP, we are taking the opportunity to take a look at the patterns community using Charles Vogl's Seven Principles of Belonging as a lens to understand the central values and characteristics of our community. We briefly look back at what some initial expectations for the community were and reflect on some challenges that we see. This paper is not about the future of patterns, but about the past and present patterns community. It is also an expression of the authors' curiosity and concerns about the future of our community.

Keywords: patterns community, communities of practice, PLoP

1 Introduction

What triggered us to write this paper? The year 2025 marks the 30th EuroPLoP conference. We felt it to be a good time for us to pause and reflect, and share our thoughts with the broader patterns community. We also offer our reflections to current and aspiring community leaders who are responsible for how this community will function and might evolve in the years to come.

Writing this paper, we draw upon personal experiences as well as glimpses into the past gleaned from talking with a few patterns community old-timers. We in no way claim to be unbiased. Nor that our interviews have been exhaustive, our history thoroughly researched, complete or comprehensive. These are *our* impressions and *our* observations. However, we invite you, the reader, to engage in and reflect on our observations. We want to hear your voice and engage in meaningful dialog. We intend our discussion of the patterns community to be provocative and inspire you to think and act to shape its future.

Where do *you* think our patterns communities should be headed? What things might you want to change? What are your aspirations for the patterns community?

Full disclosure:

I, Rebecca, attended my first PLoP in 2006. Prior to joining the patterns community, I was “pattern adjacent.” I had written two books on object-design and focused on practical software methods. I also was actively engaged in several software design and development communities. I hadn’t seriously considered writing patterns. Not until James Noble offered to help me co-write a paper on Problem Frame Patterns [1] which was presented at PLoP 2006, held in my

hometown of Portland, Oregon. After that experiment I was hooked on collaborative pattern writing and has participated in every PLoP conference since then. I have also attended three AsianPLoP conferences, one SugarLoaf PLoP conference, and three EuroPLoP conferences.

I, Lise, initially attended EuroPLoP in 2001 driven by my interest in organizational patterns. Most of my career I have been involved in how people effectively work together to develop software (governance, compliance, team practices, soft skills, trust building, etc.). In 2000, I was lucky to meet the Organization Patterns authors [2] and host their analysis of teams inside my company. This naturally led me to the patterns community, where the openness, friendships, and most importantly the interactions with other people interested in the same topics quickly convinced me to become a member. I wrote my first paper for EuroPLoP 2004 [3], and have attended several EuroPLoPs. After moving to the US in 2002, I joined and actively participated in the Hillside Group and PLoP conferences.

We both became deeply involved in the Hillside Group patterns community over several years. We started by attending PLoP conferences. We became pattern authors. Eventually we became shepherds, members of program committees, moderators of writers' workshops, and conference organizers. Together, we've co-authored patterns papers on managing a product backlog and recently wrote an essay on pattern generativity. Rebecca served several times as PLoP conference and program chair and co-led several pattern bootcamps. Lise has served as program and conference chair for both EuroPLoP and PLoP. We have served on the Hillside Board, the organization that sponsors PLoP, for many years. Rebecca still is a Hillside Board member. Although we both *feel* like latecomers to the patterns community, undoubtedly we are viewed as tribal elders by others who joined our community later, not least because of our roles as organizers. Hopefully we are insiders enough to share some thoughts and ideas that prove valuable to the community—a combination of positive feedback and constructive ideas for improvement (or at least food for thought) for future.

In 2019, the Hillside Board held a workshop before the PLoP conference outside Ottawa where Rebecca introduced the board to a book about community building by Charles Vogl, *The Art of Community* [4]. Vogl shares a framework of core community fundamentals and lays out “Seven Principles of Belonging” that help create and improve strong communities. We find this small book is a thoughtful and insightful guide for people who are actively building or maturing various types of communities.

Although we had some good discussion about the book’s contents, there was no tangible outcome from the workshop (possibly because these thoughts need time to mature). However, Vogl’s ideas have stayed with us and have led us to scrutinize our own roles in the community and how well our community functions. Consequently, we decided to use Vogl’s work as a lens through which to examine the strengths and weaknesses we find within the patterns community. To gain a broader perspective, we also reached out to several long-term members and asked them to share their experiences and retrospect.

2 What is Community?

Before discussing the principles for community building found in the *Art of Community*, let us be clear about what “community” means to us. In the article, *What Is Community Anyway?* [5], David M. Chavis and Kien Lee give a great introduction to community that resonates with our experiences in the patterns community:

“It’s about people. First and foremost, community is not a place, a building, or an organization; nor is it an exchange of information over the Internet. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other. That treasured feeling of community comes from shared experiences and a sense of—not necessarily the actual experience of—shared history. As a result, people know who is and isn’t part of their community. This feeling is fundamental to human existence.”

We have chosen to use this as a foundational definition for our examination of the patterns community as we seek to better understand what makes it tick, what makes it unique, and where it might be headed. As we explore our past and speculate on its future, we’re also inspired by Margaret Wheatley [6], who asserts: “There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

There are several characteristics of communities to consider:

People belong to multiple communities—to their university alumni community, to their neighborhood community, to the 7:30 train commuting community, to their quilting community, to their book club or running group. For most people there are several communities they partake in with varying types of involvement and degrees of personal engagement. Some communities are tight, well-defined, and longstanding (they may survive for a very long time); others are more loosely organized or transitory.

There are communities within communities—for example, the neighbors on your street within the community of your overall neighborhood, within the community of your town or city.

Communities can be formal or informal—there is a wide range of formality running from very open, informal communities such as the people you meet at the dog park, to the group of parents on your kid’s soccer team, to your software architects’ guild at work. But even if the degree of structure varies, the basic criteria for knowing whether you belong and that you share a common goal or interest is clear.

Communities can be created intentionally or emerge more organically—the intention, purpose and leadership is often less explicit in emergent communities than in planned ones. Emergent communities tend to be rather informal about communicating their purpose, and likely go through more changes as they mature and grow. The feeling

of friendship and the mutual support between members does not depend on how the community starts.



Fig. 1. PLoP friends on a hike at PLoP 2011. From left to right: Lise Hvatum, Chris Kohls, Rebecca Wirfs-Brock and Ademar Aguiar (photo courtesy Ademar Aguiar).

Communities have a purpose—the community has a clearly established vision and mission shared among the community members. The benefits of being a member are clearly understood. A thriving community adapts to its members changing needs and aspirations. Building a long-lasting community can be hard work and may require dedicated effort. For a community to continue to thrive, there is a need for both succession planning and ongoing/evolving support for the engagement and enrichment of community members.

Communities have shared values and rituals—these values and rituals are what defines the culture of the community. The values are tied to ethics and behavior like not bringing an aggressive dog to a dog park or making sure to contribute a nice dish to a street potluck party. Trust and sharing are important community values.



Fig. 2. The authors at PLoP in Portland, OR USA, 2017

2.1 Communities of Practice

So far, we have discussed communities in general. A community's purpose could be anything that people who belong to it care about. But for the patterns community, we find it fruitful to look at a particular type of community that comes to life around a shared domain with shared practices—a Community of Practice (CoP). CoPs' can be quite diverse: they might be a woodworking group, people restoring antique cars, or professionals applying a certain technology.

CoPs are more specific than other kinds of communities. They tend to have a clear focus because they, “share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” [7] This focus typically makes it easier for people to know if they belong and how they can participate.



Fig. 3. An early PLoP at Allerton when the focus was on software architecture

CoPs, of course, can be formal or informal even within the context of an organization or a company. They can be nested and may intersect with other CoPs. And people can belong to multiple CoPs. As an example, consider the User Experience (UX) community within a company. There may be a formal CoP for various UX roles like UX Researcher or Visual Designer—membership in these CoPs require the employee to have a particular UX function. In a global company there also may be local CoPs that are part of global CoPs. And likely, there are also local and global CoPs for everyone in the company who is interested in UX and/or involved in UX activities. All in all, these CoPs are instrumental in driving the improvement of UX practices within the company.

We found some insights in the article, *Communities of Practice: Definition, characteristics, and distinction from networks* [8]. The authors systematically go through different aspects of a CoP versus a network (a more transactional and less deep concept). One particular statement seems particularly relevant to our patterns community: “CoPs have a sense of shared identity and collective purpose that binds individuals together.” We will come back to this idea later.

2.2 A Single Pattern Community or Multiple Pattern Communities?

We find that defining crisp boundaries around the patterns community is rather difficult. Should we include authors who have written patterns and, more specifically, presented their work for review at one or more patterns conferences? Should it only include those who are currently active and participating? Might we also include patterns enthusiasts who may or may not have attended any patterns conference? Do we consider

people who promote patterns to their respective communities (whether or not they have been exposed to PLoPs and their culture)? What about those who are invested in related CoPs (for example software design, or organizational development, or team dynamics), who write and share ideas in books, blogs, podcasts, or conferences but don't emphasize patterns?

After careful consideration, we have decided to limit our observations about the patterns community to what we know best and have directly experienced: PLoP conferences and the Hillside Groups.

The Hillside Group is the non-profit organization that sponsors the PLoP conference. It was founded as an educational non-profit in 1994 and held its first conference in the fall of 1994. According to Ward's Wiki, "We wanted something really wacky and unusual, but most of us felt (and were willing to take) the risk that goes with new things. That was Richard Gabriel's first time with us. He exhorted us all to go into PLoP with confidence and act as though we knew what we were doing." [9]

As an experiment, Richard Gabriel introduced writers' workshops—a peer-based forum for discussing and critiquing pattern papers.¹ Gabriel [10] views writers' workshops, "as an alternative to presentations and standard scientific workshops: a way to improve patterns and pattern languages, a way to share knowledge and experience, and a way to convey beauty, quality, and craftsmanship in all kinds of design/build contexts." Gabriel has written a book [11] and a pattern language [12] on writers' workshops. Today, writers' workshops are central to PLoP conferences.

Since those early days, the Hillside Group has sponsored the annual PLoP conference and supported several other PLoP conferences. Hillside Europe was formed in 2001 as a non-profit organization based in Germany that runs the annual EuroPLoP conference.

Many other pattern enthusiasts, organizations, and non-profits are devoted to Christopher Alexander's writings and improving the world through patterns. And we recognize that the collective communities fostered by the Hillside Group (and PLoP) and Hillside Europe (and EuroPLoP) have a lot of overlap. But they have important differences. Where relevant in the following discussion, we'll highlight what we see as intriguing distinctions between them.

In 2003 (the earliest) bylaws, the Mission of the Hillside Group [13] was focused on improving the quality of life of those whose lives are affected by software:

"The mission of the Hillside Group is to improve the quality of life of everyone who uses, builds, or encounters software systems—users, developers, managers, owners, educators, students, and society as a whole."

In recognition of its broadening interests, in 2024 the Hillside Board decided to rename our conference from "Pattern Languages of Programs" to "Pattern Languages of

¹ The writers' worship format that Gabriel introduced to the patterns community was based on his experiences with peer reviews from the poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction writers' communities.

Programs, People & Processes" (keeping PLoP as its moniker). The mission statement in the bylaws [14] was revised to reflect this:

"The mission of the Hillside Group is to improve the quality of life and society as a whole. This includes architects, developers, managers, owners, workers, educators, students, and more. Understanding and helping the human element is critical for achieving success. The Hillside Group believes in making processes and design more humane by paying attention to real people and existing practices."

The mission statement for Hillside Europe [15] reflects its focus on capturing expertise for practitioners and academics alike. Although its primary focus is on computing related patterns, it encourages patterns on other topics:

"The aim of Hillside Europe is to help authors learn about patterns and their writing. We do this by providing expert feedback and peer discussions, and we offer a platform for authors to disseminate their work. We add to the body of knowledge by bringing in new patterns containing expert advice for practitioners and academics, primarily in the field of computing. Apart from computing, Hillside Europe also promotes the use of patterns and pattern languages in other fields. We sponsor a variety of activities to achieve this mission: hosting EuroPLoP and other pattern conferences in Europe, organizing workshops, and producing publications for discussing, recording, and documenting successful practices."

In particular, both Hillside Groups are Community of Practices, with sub-communities (nested and overlapping) for the various roles that require specialized practices like being a shepherd, a program committee member, or a conference organizer.

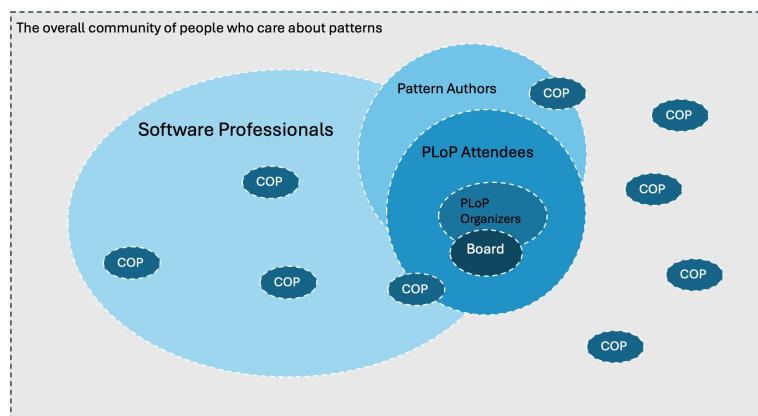


Fig. 4. Overlapping and nested communities related to PLoPs and the Hillside Groups

In Figure 4 we see the various overlaps between different sub-communities in the Hillside Groups and PLoPs. People frequently participate in both PLoP and EuroPLoP. There is even (by design) some overlap on the boards of the Hillside Group and Hillside Europe.

2.3 What Might be Next for our Patterns Community?

Until now, the Hillside Group's focus has mainly been on organizing the PLoP conferences and the publication of the completed patterns papers workshopped at conferences. This is also true for Hillside Europe. From time to time, authors submit papers to both conferences on pattern history, philosophy, reflections on the writings of Christopher Alexander, or essays exploring the nature of design. But the main focus is on writing patterns papers.

It is notable that software isn't mentioned in the Hillside Group's current mission statement. The mission statement is broad and inclusive, and could potentially support many activities outside of organizing patterns conferences. This might include outreach to others not currently in the patterns community, pattern education, pattern cataloging, knowledge sharing, active discussions about Christopher Alexander's writing, support for initiatives aimed to improve processes and design, etc. The possibilities are endless.

But as a non-profit organization, the Hillside Group has limited monetary and human resources. Acknowledging this reality, we believe that the Hillside Group is a community whose purpose is to support authors who primarily write papers about patterns and pattern languages.

This could change in the future.

Furthermore, we think of the community of active conference participants as those who currently or recently contributed to the PLoP conferences. There are others who, although they may not come to the conferences or are active pattern authors, still stay informed and feel part of the community. But there are many others who are no longer involved.

At the conference, being part of the PLoP community and its various sub-communities is clear—if you are an author, if you are part of workshop 3; if you did shepherding, you are clearly in that community and there is a feeling of shared purpose in providing the support to authors to improve their work.

Membership in the Hillside Group (which was chartered as a non-profit membership organization) is fuzzier. In fact, many PLoP attendees aren't aware that they became Hillside Group members nor understand what benefits membership entails.² Although there is a ritual for becoming a member, the difference between being a member and not being one is so unclear that in reality there is no current value in membership. One

² As stated in the Hillside Group bylaws, “Application for voting membership shall be open to any person who supports the purpose statement in Article I, Section 2 [the purpose and mission statement]. Membership is granted after nomination and second by any current member of the Hillside Group followed by acknowledgement by the prospective member and payment of annual dues.” Currently there are no annual dues. There never have been annual dues. The stated benefits of membership are: “Members shall be eligible to participate in members-only mailing lists and to attend the annual meeting of the full membership.” [14]

might question whether the Hillside Group actually functions as a membership-based community.

Furthermore, there isn't an obviously visible mechanism for ending one's membership.³ Once on the membership mailing list, you will likely stay there for a long time even if you only attended a single conference and were granted membership not quite knowing what it meant.

2.4 Patterns Community Values

Members of the patterns community share a value system that, although implicit (or not consistently documented), has been carefully designed and groomed over many years. The fundamental or core values are to be found in the mission statement; many additional values, as well rituals and symbols can be traced back to it. We will discuss our understanding of the core values here, but revisit the effects and side effects of these values when we discuss Vogl's seven principles for belonging, in context of the patterns community.

The first impression we think newcomers have (at least we felt that way and friends in the community say the same) is how open and welcoming the community is. There are newcomer bootcamps that orient newcomers to our values and practices and give a glimpse at our history. Community members, including the tribal elders, are not only friendly and accessible, but actively mentor and support newcomers.

It is a very safe place. Any nerdy, socially awkward, introverted and shy person can feel at home at a PLoP conference. Strong friendships are quickly extended to new members, and everyone is listened to. Newcomers are encouraged to share their opinions. They are encouraged to have a voice without feeling questioned, put down, or belittled. This value probably has its foundation in the strict rules for giving feedback to papers both by shepherds to authors before the conference, and to writers' workshop attendees: always be constructive about how a paper might be improved; don't offer harsh criticism. Offer advice in a way that is encouraging. Shore up ideas, ask for clarification. Offer suggestions for improvement; but do so with respect. Have a primary goal of helping the author tease out the important aspects of their work and better explain their ideas. And at the conference, writers' workshop participants are guided by the workshop moderators to share both positive reactions in addition to constructive advice for each paper that is workshopped.

For this to work, trust is fundamental. For open exchange of ideas—not least being able to absorb and take to heart the constructive improvement ideas for your paper—you need to believe that those offering advice have the best of intentions. You need to trust that your peers want to help you create something better.

Closely related to trust is respect. In the circle of the writers' workshop, we want every participant to be heard. Participants are encouraged to listen to what everyone

³ Interestingly, the Hillside Group bylaws allows for members to ask to be removed from membership by sending a written request to the membership secretary. It's not clear that the position of membership secretary has ever been filled.

has to say with an open mind and hold the belief that all feedback is valuable and meaningful. That same mindset is expected in any spontaneous discussion or interaction, whether at the dinner table or at the evening socials.



Fig. 5. A patterns workshop circle at PLoP 2006

Strong friendships are formed within the community. Many return to the PLoP conference on a yearly basis. It is good to see old friends and enjoy stimulating intellectual conversations. These conversations are open for others to join in. Generally, there is a welcoming attitude and a desire to pull others into conversations rather than exclude them. Discussions and interactions are important for the development and refinement of patterns. These conversations work their way into revised patterns papers as well as ideas for new patterns.

Trust is further demonstrated by an eagerness to converse with others having different views and experiences, and then to subsequently revise your work to reflect new insights found during these discussions. This openness to constructive advice also demonstrates a level of humility and desire to learn from others.

Sometimes conference participants find themselves at odds with the Hillside Group values. This can manifest in them not being open to feedback on their paper (becoming argumentative), not participating in but being straight out negatives about rituals (games), or entering discussions with an intent to push their agenda rather than share ideas. Throughout the conference, these participants receive careful advice and feedback typically from the tribal elders. By the end of the conference, they may realize that this is not a place for them and they do not return the next year.

In a couple of instances, we have had more severe issues/breaches of trust. They were dealt with by the board (a private reprimand) but to our knowledge our community has never gone as far as to expel a member. According to the Hillside Group bylaws [14]: “Members can have their memberships terminated by a two-thirds vote of those members who respond to the call for online voting on termination.” So, removing a member is a very public event based on a membership vote and not a board action. This is very difficult territory for the board of the Hillside Group—past friendships and negative publicity may hold us back from taking necessary actions in order to uphold our values, and the trade-off between possible future problems from a member versus the hurt and healing of other members affected makes for difficult decisions with long lasting effects in a small community. That said, moral proscriptions and the ability to act are integral aspects of a strong community that respects and understands its values.

2.5 Patterns Community Purpose

As previously stated, the primary purpose of the Hillside Group is to provide support to pattern and pattern language authors who attend PLoP conferences. From a professional domain perspective, there are several active Communities of Practice at large who regularly bring their work to PLoP conferences: *Software design, architecture, development and deployment* (with an increasing interest in AI technology); *human interactions and quality of life* (characterized by the work of Takashi Iba, his students, and his colleagues [16-18]); *organization design and human-centered processes* (characterized by Fearless Change Patterns [19-20] and Scrum patterns [21]); and *education* (pedagogical patterns) [22].



Fig. 6. Illustration of workshop circle from the Iba Lab

Members of the various CoPs within the patterns community care deeply about their work and about improving their domain practices. This is no surprise—it takes a lot of time and energy to write a patterns paper. The act of writing, in itself, is a form of natural selection. Furthermore, members also care about the quality of all papers. They are willing to spend time and energy helping fellow authors get their best results possible, too. Members care about sharing their knowledge with others within their domain (not only within the patterns community but in their larger professional circles).

While there is clear purpose within each of these CoPs, we are more concerned with the shared purpose and focus of the overall PLoP community at the conference in general. It's great that we encourage diversity. But at times, this conflicts with the need for participants to interact with others who share their same interests (domain). The original PLoP conference was started by people who were passionate about the works of Christopher Alexander and how it related to software architecture and design. Every paper submitted was meaningful (given it had enough quality) to all participants. In the early days, there were fewer sources of information online than there are today. And hanging out with other committed and knowledgeable people within your field was an amazing opportunity to learn and discuss topics that deeply interested you.

More recently, PLoP and EuroPLoP have had somewhat different attendee profiles. Most papers presented at EuroPLoP are about software design, development processes and practices, management, and technology. In contrast, what loosely unites PLoP participants is reflected in the Hillside Group's new mission statement: processes and design about anything.

With the PLoP conference's increasing diversity, it has been challenging to organize writers' workshops with papers on closely related topics. Consequently, writers' workshops are often patched together based on other criteria: having a balance between experienced and new authors, having not too many lengthy papers, etc., having papers with a mix of authors (instead of the same set of co-authors on multiple papers workshopping each other's entangled work).

The purpose of the writers' workshops is to provide constructive feedback to the authors, and authors are coming to the conference with expectations of useful feedback to improve their paper as well as to interact with other people sharing common interests. Because of this diversity, the reality has become that often papers at PLoP are grouped into a workshop having topics that we know nothing about or have little interest in.

There are many challenges in running effective writers' workshops at PLoP. Reading and critiquing 5 or 6 papers requires a commitment. First, you must read all the papers in your workshop. Then you've got to learn (if you don't already know) something about the topics (or good pattern form or the structure of each paper). Finally, you have to reflect on what you've read and anticipate some useful observations you might share in the workshop discussion.

We give the best advice we can as experienced authors, moderators, shepherds, and readers of patterns papers. But we can only go so deep. And it can be frustrating to have our own work workshopped by other authors who struggle to understand what we are writing about. Even so, new friendships are still forged but they are not based on shared interests.

The expectation that each author participating in a writers' workshop should be prepared to offer their personal opinions during the workshop discussions can seem daunting—especially for newcomers who are tossed into a workshop with a variety of topics. Newcomers may worry about what they could possibly contribute. Or be uncomfortable sharing their thoughts on the spot. All writers' workshop sessions are conducted in English, which comes with even more challenges. Following the flow of the conversation can be nearly impossible if you are not fluent in conversational English spoken by people you don't know or if you are hard of hearing. Especially if they are excited about an unfamiliar topic and speak rapidly. Sometimes participants go on and on about a topic they delight in, interrupting each other and leaving no space for others less familiar with the topic to contribute. Or to think a bit about what is being said. The magic of a writers' workshop session happens only when discussions flow in a way that encourages all to participate and feel comfortable voicing opinions and discovering new insights together.

We fear this lack of cohesive focus is causing some passionate people to seek other venues that provide opportunities for more tangible connections. For companies, spending money to send someone to PLoP or EuroPLoP it is hard to defend, unless they are cool with the main benefit being their employee gets to hang out with nice people for a few days.

3 The Art of Community and the Seven Principles

Charles Vogl's *The Art of Community* [4] provides inspiration, information, and advice to community builders as they form (or reform) communities that are “connected, durable, and fulfilling.” As a young man he actively tried to find a community where he belonged. Instead of finding one, he ended up creating a new community: a weekly dinner for students at Yale university who felt overwhelmed and insecure. Since that early experience, he has actively helped community builders to build strong communities. The advice in his book is based on his personal research and experiences.

Vogl writes about the importance of being part of a community. Being part of a community reduces loneliness—a serious issue in today's society [23]. Moreover, being part of a community helps people feel connected, safe, and appreciated. Communities support the growth of their members both socially and technically. Communities encourage sharing knowledge and developing ideas through discussions and interactions. Not least, participating in a strong community makes life more fun and interesting.

Vogl defines a community as “... a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare.” He states that a community is based on four fundamental features: *shared values*, *a membership identity*, *moral proscriptions*, and *insider understanding*. These features are strongly connected—shared values enable the insider understanding, membership identity supports the moral proscriptions, and membership identity reinforces shared values.

The essence of a thriving community is captured in Vogl's Seven Principles of Belonging. These principles are handy tools in a community leader's toolbox. Most communities will partly implement some principles; it is not necessary for a successful

community to apply them all. But these principles are important for community leaders to understand, and then to use them as they to grow and mature their communities.

After briefly summarizing each principle, we critically examine how we see each principle currently operates within the patterns community, and offer recommendations for improving our community practices. As we do, we will also closely examine membership and insider identity. And if a principle doesn't seem particularly relevant to our community, we won't dwell on it.

3.1 Principle 1: *Boundary*—the Line between Members and Outsiders

Having a clear boundary between insiders and outsiders makes insiders feel more secure in that they share the purpose and values with other community members. Guests will understand when they cross the boundary and become insiders. People will recognize newcomers and help them to thrive. This is important for nurturing trust and a feeling of belonging. Without a boundary and a defined way to cross it, there really is nothing defining a community and it really does not exist.⁴

Analysis. As stated earlier, we found it hard to define crisp boundaries around the patterns community. However, some sub-communities nested within it are clearer. There are people who promote patterns and even write patterns but who do not know about The Hillside Group or PLoP. There are authors who joined PLoP once or twice but then never returned. Or who were deeply engaged in the early days but now have moved on to other communities where they are active. Certainly, there are many others who share a common interest in patterns, but they are disconnected from our community.

In the end, we decided to draw a boundary around our community to include all past and present PLoP conference attendees and participants (this includes program committee members and shepherds) although that isn't exactly the same as Hillside membership. We ended up drawing this boundary because we had experience both within and outside of this community boundary. Another possible (more exclusive) boundary would have been to include only those invited to become Hillside members. Membership is granted when PLoP participants express interest in future engagement with our community. While there may be other ways of joining the Hillside Group, we are not aware of them.

The Hillside Group community boundary we drew is perhaps tighter/more exclusive than we might aspire to when considering The Hillside Group's mission statement, but we think it is realistic. We also want to further distinguish between The Hillside Group community at large (broader and more informal) and the sub-community formed by the Hillside Board (more formal and defined).

⁴ One of our EuroPLoP writing workshop participants, Dmitry Ledentsov, suggests the idea that another metaphor (in lieu of rigid boundary) is a membrane. Membranes could have criteria for easy entry/contribution, but those inside the membrane should always feel free to leave or contribute less. A membrane might act as a welcoming filter without a high price of commitment which many may not be able to bring.

We see definite problems around the way the Hillside Group currently recruits and supports members. Except for being invited to the annual members' meeting to hear about the Hillside activities (that are mostly limited to organizing PLoPs) or to vote for new Hillside Board members, there are no clear benefits to or expectations of members. And since the annual member meeting is held at PLoP, PLoP attendees who hang out as visitors to this meeting are asked on the spot if they want to become members. If they seem positive, they are seconded by an existing member and accepted.

This results in members who are somewhat unaware of why they became members and who may never attend another PLoP. They are simply put onto our mailing list. A few years ago, we looked into cleaning up membership rolls, and sent an email to members asking them to confirm if they wanted to continue their membership. We got so few answers that this clean-up effort was abandoned. Similarly, the number of members who respond to any email request to vote for new board members is minuscule. So even though there is a pathway to membership, membership criteria is ill-defined, there is no distinction between active and inactive members, and membership benefits are unclear.

During the PLoP conference, new writers and first-time attendees are well supported. But when the conference ends, there is no follow up or ongoing social support. As a consequence, we continue to struggle to support too many one-time participants with writing support and constructive critique of their work. That places them as visitors only, but they are visitors who drain resources from our community—including the time of shepherds, conference organizers, and those responsible for publication—without ever contributing anything back to the community.

On occasion, there have been sub-communities that have self-organized and have been active outside of the conferences, perhaps collaborating on book projects. But we believe that a lot more could be done throughout the year to keep CoPs within the Hillside Group active and provide additional support for sub-community leaders (if these sub-communities were to have recognized leaders). This could include an ongoing shepherding effort for authors who are engaged in book projects—only getting shepherding associated with the conferences is very (too) slow for the typical process of writing a book.

Also, practices like shepherding and workshop moderation need new blood, and new energy devoted to evolving current practices. It is great to stay true to traditions and rituals, but eventually, lack of investment in improvements, changes, or experiments, will make the PLoP community stale and boring, even to long-time members.

Recommendations:

- Look into more formally defining a membership that has recognizable benefits (perhaps a lower cost to attend PLoP or to be able to host a Hillside sponsored online discussion of their work) and criteria for membership (perhaps attending at least 3 PLoP conferences or having participated at least once as an author).
- Consider establishing clear and explicit guidelines for visitors and a meaningful path from visitor to community (or the Hillside Group) member.

- Experiment with ways that sub-communities and book projects might be better recognized and nurtured. Experiment with how specific practices might evolve, specifically writers' workshops, and shepherding. Perhaps program committees or other "elders" or past active contributors could be invited to play a leadership role in these efforts.

3.2 Principle 2: *Initiation*—The Activities that Mark a New Member

This is an action that is a clear recognition and welcome of the new member. The communication must be to the person joining the community as well as to the others within the community to inform them of the new member. New members must feel welcome and safe in belonging, and it must be clear to them what is expected of them as a member. There is an added benefit in that visitors will not need to be worried about being seen as a member before they actively join the community.

Analysis. We conduct a Hillside members' meeting typically towards the end of the PLoP conference. At this meeting, members report on the status and future plans for various conferences, the board president and treasurer provide information about the operation of Hillside, and conference participants are invited to join Hillside. Someone makes a list of new members and they are added to the member mailing list.

To be effective at joining, a new member must feel welcomed and wanted. We're not very good at that. We don't send out notices to our mailing lists welcoming and introducing new members. We don't identify concrete next steps a new member could take to become more involved in the community. Someone may invite a new member to participate in running next year's conference...or to become involved in some initiative...but there aren't clearly identified paths to deeper engagement.

Recommendations:

- Provide visibility for new members of other members, and of new members to existing members. Introduce new members to the Hillside Group patterns community at large (perhaps through a newsletter or online chat channel or web page). Provide an online space where members (new or old) can express their interests and connect with other members; not just with the members who attended the most recent conference. (This probably should be done after establishing a more meaningful membership). The member initiation ritual could be improved if it were based on an up-front decision for someone to join rather than the current "on-the-spot" practice that takes visitors by surprise.
- Provide a visible means on the Hillside website inviting those who are interested to join Hillside and become members. Provide information that explains the benefits of membership.
- Consider defining different kinds of memberships: perhaps one without membership dues (the current membership model), and another (supporting member?) which has modest annual dues and additional benefits (perhaps reduced conference rates or Hillside Group hosted online pattern sharing opportunities, etc.)

- Develop a system of mentors and coaches for new members. Provide for active engagement of members throughout the year. Help new members find ways to become more involved by creating and running Hillside-sponsored activities or initiatives that pique their interests.
- Consider adding (non-conference and post-conference) ways to extend a welcoming hand to visitors and entice them to stick around and meaningfully participate on an ongoing basis our community (for example consider PhD students who use PLoP as a way to publish but are otherwise likely not going to be repeat participants. Might they want us to publicize their ongoing research results or have us highlight how their PLoP publications have found their way into their larger body of research?).
- Alternatively, consider abolishing membership—how might that work?

3.3 Principle 3: *Rituals*—the Things We Do that Have Meaning.

Rituals strengthen the feeling of belonging. They are not mere actions but are meaningful as they integrate the past and the future and create a feeling of stability. Community rituals are often informal. They may not start as rituals but become ones as they are repeated and will be missed if they are not done.

Analysis. Rituals have always been a Hillside community strength at PLoP conferences: games, gifting, common ways of speaking to get others' attention (1-2-3 Group Sneeze), to agree with what others are saying ("gush"), and a closing yarn game to make visible the connections people have made at the conference. There are many others. All rituals are designed to make participants feel comfortable, to get them to interact with strangers, to feel part of a group, and to, well, have fun.



Fig. 7. Outside games at EuroPLoP

Rituals make sense when people gather together.

But we do have one important ritual outside the conference: that of shepherding. All papers submitted to PLoP to be reviewed in a writers' workshop are also shepherded before the conference. A shepherd, typically (but not always) someone inside the patterns community, is assigned to shepherd each paper. The shepherd generously offers constructive feedback and encouragement to the author as they go through several iterations refining their paper before submitting it to be workshopped at the conference. Shepherds are also recognized at the conference for their unique contribution. EuroPLoP gives a "best shepherd" award each year to a shepherd that has been nominated by their author and recognized by their peers and program committee for their contribution.

In the past, shepherds have been recognized at PLoP plenary sessions, but PLoP does not consistently recognize their contributions. With its increasing diversity of papers at PLoP, and a dwindling list of active shepherds, PLoP has had difficulty finding shepherds for some authors.

Recommendations:

- Survey recent conference attendees about the rituals/traditions/conference activities and their value. Keep the conference rituals that make sense and offer value to attendees; but don't hold back—try new things.
- Recognize on the Hillside Group website current and past shepherds.
- Profile shepherds and share some of their stories with the Hillside Group patterns community at large (perhaps through a newsletter or online chat channel or web pages).
- Survey the PLoP shepherding community on their pattern experiences and expectations.
- Recruit more shepherds. Gather data for each potential shepherd on what types of works they are willing to shepherd. Offer them guidance/training on what is expected of a shepherd.
- Provide greater visibility on our website of the shepherding process. This would be valuable information both for authors who are more familiar with academic conferences where shepherding is a rare occurrence (intended to help those whose papers didn't meet specific review criteria) or non-existent.
- Create an informational video or podcast about shepherding and how it has impacted authors and their writing.
- Perhaps experiment with some Hillside Group rituals outside of the PLoP conference, e.g., recognizing significant shepherd contributions, summarizing highlights of a PLoP conference, etc.

3.4 Temple—a Place Set Aside to Find our Community

This is the place where rituals are performed and where members know that they can find each other. It may be virtual. Inside the temple, rituals that may feel strange elsewhere are meaningful and create a bond between the members.

Analysis. The Hillside Group was founded to explore how the ideas of the architect, Christopher Alexander might relate to software. PLoP conferences have traditionally been held at venues that exemplify Alexander's *A Pattern Language* [24], and that one must undertake a journey to get to. Allerton is a beautiful, peaceful, isolated, quirky and unique site located in the Illinois prairie-land. For many years it was the only place where PLoP conferences were held. EuroPLoP is always held at Kloster Irsee, a former Benedictine monastery in the heart of Bavaria, Germany.

However, unlike EuroPLoP, the PLoP conference doesn't have a permanent venue anymore: PLoP has been co-located with other software conferences (OOPSLA, SPLASH, Agile), and, more recently, at venues that echo some of the natural beauty and architectural qualities of the Allerton site, while offering easier access. At these locations, conference organizers balance trying to translate some of the qualities of an Allerton-like temple, while conforming to and recognizing the conference site's unique qualities.



Fig. 8. Rebecca and the “Sun Singer” on the grounds at Allerton in 2023

What we do not have is an online temple where we can meet between the actual conferences. We do not have a good way to find each other outside the scope of the conference. We miss a forum where one can bring up ideas and questions and start discussions with like-minded people and learn from others like we do at the conferences. Some of us are lucky to find partners to work with but even then, it is mostly in pairs and not larger groups.

Recommendations:

- Experiment with online spaces (temples) for non-conference related community interactions where ongoing, active discussion is welcome.

3.5 *Stories—What we Share that Allows Others and Ourselves to Know our Values*

Stories are how members learn the true purpose and values of the community. They are a powerful tool for knowledge sharing. Like rituals, they tie together the past and the future, and convey the values of the community in ways that can be deeper and more profound than any vision or mission statement.

Analysis. When COVID prevented us from having in-person events, we turned to online forums and conferences. In addition to holding virtual PLoPs, in 2021 (because board members had enough energy and desired connections with the broader community) we conducted a number of free online PLoPourri events on a variety of different topics including pattern mining, a campfire to discuss Fearless Change patterns, and Agile practices and patterns. In 2024, Eduardo Guerra, a Hillside board member, conference organizer, and long-time pattern author and enthusiast, started a Hillside sponsored PatternCast (podcast) [25] where pattern authors and friends are interviewed.

Such events require ongoing commitment, and people who are dedicated and committed to making these events happen.

Recommendations:

- Actively support, recognize, and promote the current PatternCast initiative. Use it as an example of what Hillside can do to promote patterns.
- Solicit ideas for new initiatives from the members and support them (provide them with a board member/champion/shepherd, promote them and give them visibility).
- Consider starting an initiative where we share stories about how views on patterns, pattern languages, pattern sequences, and other of Christopher Alexander's works have influenced us (or may have influenced us in the past).
- Collect and disseminate stories about the community: shepherding experiences, stories from early Hillside organizers, people who have spent significant time curating their patterns and pattern languages, pattern elders.
- Revitalize year-round PLoPourri-like events—perhaps with an emphasis on storytelling/sharing of how patterns and our ideas about them have evolved and continue to evolve.

3.6 ***Symbols—the Things that Represent Ideas that Are Important to Us***

Symbols are meant to convey values and identity, and are often used in rituals. They are preferably not too literal to allow for members to associate their own experiences with the symbol. They are usually not valuable but can be mundane tokens that represent value to the receiver.

Analysis. There are not really many symbols that bind the members together and remind them of community values. For longtime members who visited Allerton it might be that they see the Foo dogs (the blue Chinese dogs in the garden) or the flute player (another sculpture in the Allerton garden) as symbols of PLoP. The snippets of yarn tied in a string that we take home—representing the connections made at the conference—is another vivid reminder. It is an established practice at PLoP to bring token gifts to present to other participants. However, this gift giving is a ritual rather than gifts being symbols. Gifts can be anything that is meaningful to the giver.



Fig. 9. A Foo dog at Allerton (Photo courtesy Richard Gabriel)



Fig. 10. Maybe the yarn from the final game is our best symbol

3.7 Principle 7: *Inner Rings—Paths for Growth as We Participate*

Most people want to join a community for stronger connections, more wisdom, and maybe for more power to enact change. The concept of inner rings is one where members can safely become more engaged and active in a community, progressing from a newcomer to a wise elder. The progression towards inner rings reflects growth and maturation of a member. In healthy communities the journey means a growing concern for others in the community. It is not a way to gain personal power, influence or recognition. Mature communities often create different levels of inner rings that members can enter (not to be superior snobs but to serve the community differently).⁵

Analysis. In 2019, we held a Hillside board meeting prior to the PLoP conference where, among other topics, we discussed the ideas in *The Art of Community*. Rebecca offered a first cut at the rings she saw within the Hillside Group for discussion.

Here is a simplified view of rings that someone unfamiliar with the workings of the Hillside Group and conference might infer after attending their first conference:

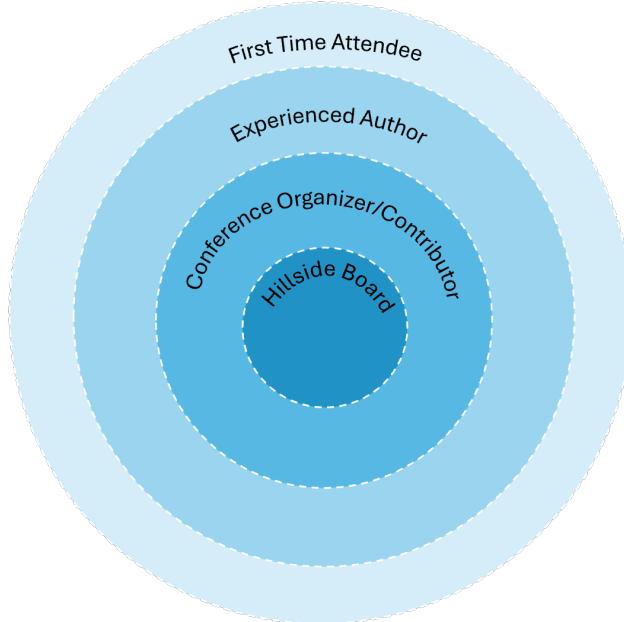


Fig. 11. A simplified view of rings of the Hillside Group / PLoP Community

⁵ At our writers' workshop at EuroPLoP the suggestion was made to draw ring boundaries with dashed lines indicating that ring boundaries are porous. It isn't that you always move inward. At various times your involvement may lead you to move between rings as you are more or less actively in the community. The goal of any community participant isn't to find and stay within a particular ring, but rather to contribute in ways that nurture the community and themselves. Moving between rings should feel natural.

And here is a more detailed view of rings that shows more detail about organizing PLoP conferences or running the Hillside Group, along with a brief description of each role:

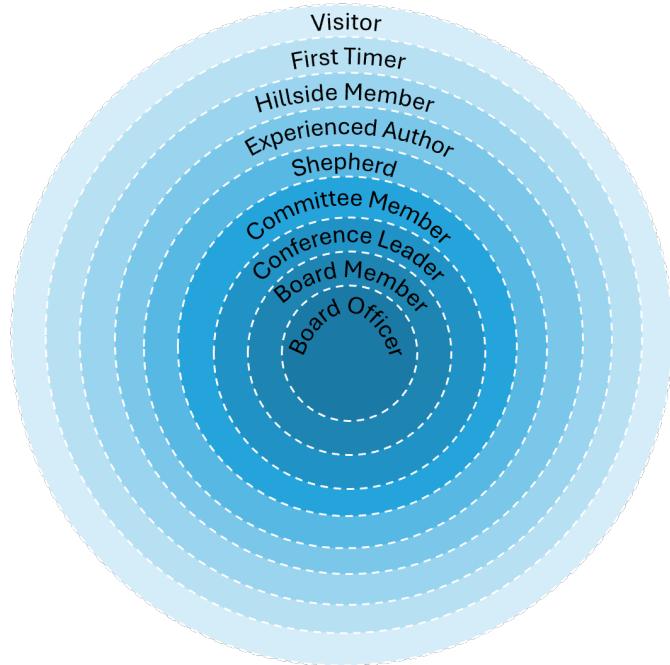


Fig. 12. A more detailed view of the Hillside Group rings

- *Visitor*—someone who visits our website perhaps to find out about patterns or our conferences and mission and/or look at past conference proceedings
- *First time pattern author/conference attendee*—most likely an author, but could be a student, or someone interested in patterns, likely presenting a special topic in a session or focus group (it is rare for newcomers to attend without having some submission).
- *Hillside Member*—If a conference attendee expresses ongoing interest in working on patterns/attending PLoP, they may be invited to become a member of the Hillside Group community.
- *Established/Experienced Pattern Author*—Someone who has attended multiple PLoPs and/or gone on to write patterns on their own.
- *Shepherd*—someone who guides/offers constructive advice to a pattern author on their work in progress.
- *Conference Committee Member*—Someone who is recognized by the conference organizers as having enough stature/credentials to review and comment on conference submissions.
- *Conference Organizer or Leader*—Typically, pattern conferences have conference chairs (concerned with the overall structure of the conference and ensuring

it runs smoothly/meets fiscal requirements), program chairs (responsible for structuring the contents of the conference, such as accepting papers, forming writing groups and/coordinate other special topic sessions). Additionally, writing groups are moderated typically by someone experienced in running writers' workshops who also may guide and instruct new authors as they practice that role.⁶ In the past, experienced patterns elders have also conducted an introductory workshop (Patterns Bootcamp) introducing new comers and first-time authors on the history and practice of pattern writing, shepherding and reviewing.

- *Board Member*—Responsible for planning Hillside activities. Attends monthly meetings.
- *Board Officer*—Responsible for conducting Hillside business, running board meetings, ensuring fiscal integrity, and following through on board actions.

In addition to these roles, *Hillside Fellows* are individuals recognized by The Hillside Group who have made lasting, substantial contributions to Hillside and its mission. (We have five fellows—Richard Gabriel, Ralph Johnson, Linda Rising, John Vlissides, and Joseph Yoder). While they may not be considered to be in an innermost ring, their contributions were and are significant. The two Hillside Fellows that are still active (Joseph Yoder and Richard Gabriel) contribute to the Hillside Board—Joe currently is president; Richard a Board Member Emeritus.

Another role, *Initiative Leader*, takes responsibility for directing an initiative on a topic they are interested in. In the past we had published pattern journals and books with editors leading those efforts. More recently, Eduardo Guerra, a board member, created a monthly pattern podcast.

One thing that has become clear to us, upon reflection, is that while we can both now “see” these rings we progressed through, it wasn’t always obvious at the time when we moved inward to a *next ring*. For example, it was unclear to us what it meant to be a Hillside member (we’re unsure when we became Hillside members). Neither of us remember the event that marked that entrance into that ring. We were on a mailing list that reminded us to submit contributions to PLoPs... but there was little else to remind us of our membership.

Another step towards an inner ring was shifting from conference participant to conference leader/organizer. Rebecca was unclear why she was asked to be conference chair in 2009...she suspects it was because she had demonstrated experience organizing other conferences and had authored two books on software design. But she also suspects it was partly because of connections she had with the agile software community and the Agile Alliance (PLoP was co-located at the Agile conference that year). She was able to secure space to hold PLoP and entice other agilists who were also within the patterns

⁶ Writers' workshop leaders can differ dramatically in the level and depth of engagement they bring to the workshop. Richard P. Gabriel in “A Pattern Language for Writers' Workshops” (<https://dreamsongs.com/Files/WritersWorkshopPL.pdf>) labels patterns describes one end of the spectrum of engagement as “Traffic Cop” and the other as “Teacher Directs the Workshop.”

community to stick around and participate at PLoP (something they would not normally consider doing if PLoP were held elsewhere). To Rebecca, it felt natural becoming a shepherd and a workshop leader as she had extensive experience organizing shepherd-ing for OOPSLA experience reports and helping new writers find their voices through leading the Agile Alliance and XP Conference experience report programs. Being invited to join the Hillside Board in 2009 seemed like a next logical step. By agreeing to this role, she made an even bigger commitment to growing and nurturing the patterns community.

Lise was initially moving through the inner rings at EuroPLoP and thinks she was invited to be a member of Hillside Europe and then to be a program and conference chair because she was consistently participating as a practitioner and author and had organizational experience working in a large company. She also thinks it has a lot to do with friendship. For EuroPLoP, the next year's chairs are selected by the group (community!) of previous and current chairs who participated at the conference that year. She really did not feel that she was moving into inner rings, but more that she was growing friendships and contributing more to the community. It was a gradual process that started with being part of the program committee. With the community overlap that exists between EuroPLoP and PLoP, it was a natural path to become more engaged in The Hillside Group after she moved to the US. When possible, she would attend both conferences in the same year and stay in touch with participants. She thinks she was invited to the Hillside Board through Linda Rising who was creating a path out of the board by making sure succession was taken care of.

This brings us to a very important responsibility for the community leadership—succession planning. We think we have not done this well enough as a board and as conference organizers. When looking for new board members it appears to be a hasty consideration of possible candidates rather than deliberately growing potential future board members over time. The same goes for conference leadership: chairs, program chairs, shepherds, and program committee members (there is a big overlap between PLoP organizers and the Hillside Board).

EuroPLoP appears to have a better articulated and executed plan for growing conference leadership (pairing an experienced chair with a new one, and a succession from program committee to program chair to conference chair). This can be an effective way to transfer implicit community values along with practices.

We should be more intentional about growing future contributors whether they are shepherds, workshop leaders, chairs, or board members. The Hillside Group board having a more or less permanent inner leadership circle (we even changed the bylaws to remove time limits for board members) may have led us to be too relaxed about ensuring we have new blood and encouraging new ideas.

In 2023, the board revised the Hillside mission statement to reflect changes in the community (in the wider scope of the sub-communities). From one perspective this is good—it adds diversity and potentially increases participation. But as we know from software architecture, all design involves trade-offs. One effect of such diversity is that it has gotten harder to create writers' workshops having related papers. This lack of workshop cohesion and focus may have turned away some participants because they no longer get the kind of feedback they were hoping for on their work. If a paper is

grouped with others that are peripheral to your interests, you are less motivated to spend time on them (Lise and Rebecca have both struggled with this for some time now). While the early papers were “hardcore” software architecture and design, and most papers were of great interest to the majority of the participants, the CoPs today have little or no overlap.

Another topic that has repeatedly come up is the lack of balance between papers authored by practitioners and those authored by academics. Academics who consistently participate tend to write papers that also appeal to practitioners. Consequently, there can be a blurry line between academic papers that are practical and highly interesting to practitioners and non-academic papers. To practitioners, this is a good thing, but to academics, this lack of distinction can be problematic. What is a touchy subject, are papers that are “researchy” in nature and either difficult to access for many, or written by people with limited specific CoP experience. Such papers are of limited interest to practitioners. It is a delicate balancing act to try to be inclusive and supportive of new authors, while at the same time creating value for more experienced ones.

Recommendations:

- Community leadership should have a 5-year (at least) succession plan (with backups for key roles as plans are not always feasible) and identify possible future leaders that can grow in these roles over time.
- Community leadership should consider a more detailed analysis of the purpose of the Hillside Group and the PLoP conferences. Consider breaking down the mission statement into strategic goals (for instance use the Lean Value Tree [26] as a methodology) and derive appropriate actions and remedies based on that analysis.
- If growing our patterns community is determined to be a strategic goal, it needs to be backed by concrete actions and activities that lead to membership growth. Continuing with the status quo will likely not keep the Hillside Group alive for long.

4 Some Conclusions

We find the framework of the Seven Principles of Belonging to be helpful in defining and discussing the Hillside Group community, and to help formulate ideas for the community leaders to consider as they plan for the future.

We feel that the most fundamental issue that needs to be addressed is to create a solid understanding of the purpose of the community and the Hillside Group as an organization. Communities *can* be powerful forces for positive change. The current mission statement is very broad. More specific goals are needed to direct concrete actions.

The community has changed over time to be more diverse. Is this where the community wants to go or is it too diverse meaning that over time the community will likely break up and form new communities? A community must have a purpose that unites the members, that creates a place where people know if they belong and how they can participate. A thriving community adapts to the changing needs and aspirations of its members.

We need to seriously consider whether we are adequately meeting the needs of the members and what we can do better. People read less printed materials today than they did 30 years ago, in the early days of the community. They write less lengthy content but many write a good amount of shorter content. They have more of an online presence. AI is influencing their work and their approach to acquiring information and gaining knowledge. People like short write-ups. They like content that is active and funny. The context for pattern consumption is rapidly changing. In an invited talk at PLoP 2023, Alistair Cockburn characterized pattern literature as “write once, read never.” At the time, his pronouncement seemed harsh. But the reality is, most consumers of patterns are not hardcore readers of pattern literature. Maybe we should rethink our various pattern formats? Patterns could have a short form to convey the core concepts and a longer form as a reference for implementation, a bit like the thumbnail and the full pattern. But a thumbnail may be too short in many cases. Might storytelling be a way to convey the patterns in a form that fits with audio books? How might we utilize short videos or demonstrations?

Most communities eventually end. It may be that their purpose is reached and there is a natural closure. It may be that enough of the members have moved on to new endeavors. It may be that there is a lack of resources to continue. Some communities last for a short time (the group of parents on a kids’ soccer team), while others last for decades. In *The Living Company* [27], Arie de Geus describes the characteristics of companies that last more than a hundred years (most do not survive more than a maximum of 60 to 80 years in the best of situations). What is a common thread of the survivors is that they share a strong value system, and that even if the products or services change, the fundamental values and principles of the organization do not. The Hillside Group community is built on a strong value system. Maybe it should continue to live on; maybe it can grow, evolve, and thrive for many more years. We challenge the community leadership to consciously examine and reconsider who we are, why we are, and where we should be going.

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