

Kevin Edwards
Sara Lund
Michelle Massero
Gabor Por
LIS 510 Section E—Journalist group
Assignment 1

The Lobby of the Tucker-Maxon School as an Information Ground

INTRODUCTION

An information ground is an “environment temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behavior emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information” (Pettigrew 1999, p. 811). In order to gain a deeper and wider understanding of the above concept and information behavior in general, we visited four different types of potential information grounds: a school lobby, a musical instrument shop, a museum, and a café. We chose the school lobby as the focus of our paper, because it best exemplifies the above definition of an information ground.

To begin with, we have provided a quick overview of the other three. Michelle conducted her research in the Washington State History Museum, downtown Tacoma. She visited the museum on two separate occasions to observe different types of patrons: those who visit on week days and those who visit on the weekend. She observed the patrons’ actions and how they interacted with one another. A key observation was made of four men, with badges designating them as chaperones, discussing the inappropriateness of middle school students being punished less severely than primary school age children. She concluded these men were fathers and were in attendance not to learn about Washington State, but to enjoy the company and conversation of

other men with similar interests: for example, parents of school age children. Interviews with volunteers revealed their observation of and participation in a variety of information exchanges. The front desk person proved well equipped to size up patrons and dispense information accordingly. The interviews and the observations affirmed that people are drawn to the history museum because they trust they will find themselves in an environment with others, who have similar interests. They may not be there to discuss history, but they sense a connectedness with others who come to enjoy it. This commonality makes it easier to begin a conversation and eventually exchange information. Thus the museum “fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information” (Pettigrew, 1999).

Sara compiled her observations over an extended period of time spent at the Trade Up Music shop in Portland, Oregon. She noted how the casual and convivial atmosphere of the shop resulted from three factors: 1) because the employees do not work on commission, the shop cultivates a low pressure retail environment; 2) there is a large community of regulars who come in to browse and try out gear, but mostly to socialize with each other and the staff; and 3) the interior layout of the shop is conducive to socializing. One of two observed methods of information exchange occurs when someone comes in with a specific information need they intend to discuss with the staff. Often other patrons will become engaged in the discussion if they have anything to add or if they find the topic of interest. In other cases, an individual comes without an explicit purpose in mind—simply to “be around instruments” and to socialize. While the purpose of patronizing the shop would be to purchase instruments, often the flow of information develops in a spontaneous way and in a variety of directions. The information shared

is either formal (i.e. specifically related to an item in the inventory) or informal, such as suggestions about restaurants, insurance agents, or upcoming performances.

Gabor monitored Café Levine, at the University of Washington's Hillel, Jewish student union. The cafe serves food and beverages in a relaxed atmosphere, decorated with posters of past art shows and pastel colored furniture. Out of the six successful interviews, two were with salespeople. From a social network analysis point of view, the salespeople were the center of a star configuration, introducing people to each other and answering information seeking questions. Besides talking with the vendors, three information exchanges were observed: a male student, who was studying, invited a female student to view his pictures of Israel on his computer; a 25 year old male conducted a job interview with a younger student; and two female students came to study Chemistry. The people at this information ground were part of a community whose shared Jewish background enabled and encouraged them to enter this cafe. This social context (what Elfreda Chatman might call a shared “worldview” (Chatman, 8)) underlies and fosters the spontaneous sharing of information at this specific information ground. The temporary setting, on the other hand, freed them from most formal rules of a work environment.

METHODS

Kevin went to Tucker-Maxon School of Oral Education in Portland, Oregon, to observe how the parents and school staff share information. The school's current mission is to develop the speech and language skills necessary for deaf children to lead successful and independent lives in a hearing and speaking world. Kevin elected not to perform any interviews, believing such an

intrusion would interrupt the activity of the information ground and would preclude witnessing the way information is typically shared.

RESULTS

First we need to describe the physical details of the location and the general demographics of the participants. Because it was raining heavily outside, people gathered inside the school lobby, which is adjacent to the library. Inside the lobby, there were two chairs and one small couch. Most people, however, elected to stand in order to mingle with the other people present. Along the wall beside the library entrance was a school community post board, where different classes posted information on their latest projects, up-coming field trips and events, as well as fundraising materials and announcements. Kevin learned that the location of the information ground does change depending on the weather. For instance, when the weather is nice, it is not unusual for the parents to meet and gather outside the front of the building. As is suggested in Fisher's first proposition of the information ground framework, the existence of the information ground is based on the individuals present and suggests location plays a secondary role (Fisher 2).

As more people arrived, the participants naturally began to break into smaller groups. Most people seemed familiar with one another, as no introductions were made. They greeted each other as if they had known one another for an extended period of time. The general atmosphere of the information ground was convivial. All the participants appeared to be familiar with their surroundings and comfortable with each other. In total, there were twenty or twenty-five people who came and went between 2:45pm and 3:15pm. The overwhelming majority of those people

were parents, with most of them ranging in age from their mid-20s to their early 40s. There were an equal number of men and women, and everyone dressed casually.

During the investigation, several exchanges of information were observed, including exchanges between parents as well as school staff. In one information exchange, the participants consisted of one mother (let's call her Kathy), a younger couple, who seemed to be new to the area, and the school librarian (let's call her Cheryl). Their conversation was already in progress when Kevin arrived, thus he was unable to witness who initiated the exchange. During the observed exchange, Kathy talked to the younger couple about local hospitals and OBGYN clinics. She discussed which of those in particular she thought were best and why. The younger couple then asked about their locations and for directions. The librarian, Cheryl, joined in the discussion and talked about her daughter's OBGYN experiences at Good Sam Hospital. Cheryl also recommended this particular hospital, as well as specific doctors who work there. Kathy also mentioned that most crime victims are sent to Emmanuel Hospital.

In general, everyone involved in this exchange of information seemed convivial and open to such discussion and information flow. The younger couple also suggested they would make use of this information by "look[ing] into it." We suspected that the younger couple might have been involved in a sort of Batesian "berrypicking" model of information seeking behavior, in which they were drawing from many different sources and compiling "bits of information at each stage of the ever modifying search" (Bates 60) which eventually may satisfy their need, or, if not, may lead them to modify their search. However, any such conclusion would have to be substantiated with further investigation into their specific information seeking process.

ANALYSIS

The lobby of the Tucker-Maxon School meets Karen Fisher's seven criteria for an information ground (Fisher 2) in the following ways. First, the parents and school staff gather there for a temporary period of time (typically for an hour a day, beginning fifteen minutes before, and ending fifteen minutes after school lets out), satisfying the "temporal setting" criteria. Second, the "primary, instrumental purpose" of gathering there is not to share information but to wait for the students to be let out of school. Third, the lobby is "attended by different social types", including parents and school staff, who come from a variety of different backgrounds and who also perform different roles in the information flow. Fourth, "social interaction is a primary activity," which is common among all those present, and information flow is a spontaneous result of such activity. Fifth, the information flow travels in many directions (sometimes between parents, sometimes from staff to parents, or from parents to staff). Sixth, information sharing is beneficial, e.g. in our example the younger couple will "benefit along physical and social dimensions." Finally, many sub-contexts also exist within this information ground, for example: sub-contexts are built around the parents whose children have the same instructors, as well as within the staff who regularly interact with parents.

In general the types of information needs commonly addressed at this information ground are centered around medical issues (such as information about current studies and treatments for children with hearing impairments), parenting issues (such as how to discipline a child with hearing impairments, how to help their children develop a healthy self-esteem, and what kind of fun activities there are on the weekends, etc), and school-related issues. These issues are

generally brought up and resolved among small groups of parents and staff (if they are brought up at all). In some cases—especially those concerning sensitive information needs—the normative behaviors (resulting from the social roles, social norms, and worldview of the participants in particular) that are perceived to be appropriate for this setting may limit the kinds of information needs that are addressed for fear of public scrutiny (Chatman 6-7). That is, even though the information ground triggers and facilitates the flow of information, it also limits the kinds of information to what is socially acceptable.

CONCLUSION

The Tucker-Maxon lobby may be the location where the information ground takes place, but the people, who inhabit that space, are the ones responsible for the information behavior (the information seeking, use, evaluating, and giving) that occurs there. The parents' reason for going there may be (on the surface) to pick up their kids after school, but they didn't wait outside or stay in their cars. They came into the school and participated in the information sharing they've come to expect from that activity. Part of what contributes to this phenomenon, we believe, is a perceived or actual sense of a social network (even if, as in this case, they're all strangers). Since the parents perceive themselves as belonging to this small, connected group of parents with hearing impaired children, such information behavior sharing activities may naturally result from both the place (or "space") as well as this sense of connectedness, which has taken root there.

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