

*'Hello who ru?! 🤗\*\*big welcome hugs\*\* I'm a newbie 🌐'*

## *Teenage Identities and Connections on-line*

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### **Introduction**

Digital technologies enable young people to keep in permanent contact and to demonstrate that they share the same life rhythms, offering them opportunities to experiment with voice and identity.<sup>1</sup> In this article I provide evidence of this from two teenage on-line communities and use the frame of 'communities of practice' to consider both groups' cultural practices. I also explore the ways in which the lives of interactants are enriched by their Internet activities and how they negotiate relationships and skills which benefit them in both their 'off-line' and 'on-line' worlds. I begin with an introduction to the notion of 'communities of practice' before illustrating its applicability to the apprentice learning I have observed in on-line communities.

### **Communities of Practice**

Lave and Wenger propose a conceptualization of learning related to participation in communities of practice. These they define as 'a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 115). They describe a process of enculturation where learners are not formally instructed but learn through being part of a group. This mirrors the way in which so many of the on-line teens operate in the groups I have studied. Newcomers are apprenticed into ways of relating to other community members and acquire shared understandings of concepts, terms and values. They develop a sense of self as part of such groups and exhibit, through their web blogs ('blogs'), web sites and message board interactions, a determination to be consistent in their behaviours. As I shall illustrate, this identifies them as strong and 'worthy' members of such groups. Individuals construct on-line identities which help them retain membership, as observed by Wenger:

building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other. (Wenger, 1998: 145)

Listed below are features of on-line communities of practice that I have observed and that Lave and Wenger also describe. These communities culturize newcomers, apprentice learners with experienced practitioners, facilitate communal activities, encourage a shared history, develop shared meanings, build identities in association with a specific community, and enable members to benefit from the empowerment of group values.

Cultural and social values are acquired through apprenticeship to the group and membership of the group requires an acknowledgement of declared values; in the meantime, practices reflect these values whilst not necessarily explicitly articulating them.

### **Community One: *The Magic Web***

Members of this community declare themselves to be teenage witches. The sites I describe here reject affinities with television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, *Sabrina the Teenaged Witch*, or *Charmed*. Interactants claim not to represent this type of popular cultural phenomenon, rather declaring associations with serious religious books, pagan beliefs and historical events. The community unambiguously determines who are ‘insiders’ and who are ‘outsiders’ and articulates a shared code of conduct. One aspect of this code is ‘The Wiccan Rule of Three’:

Bide the Wiccan law ye must,  
In perfect love and perfect trust.  
Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfil,  
An it harm none, do what ye will.  
What ye send forth comes back to thee,  
So ever mind the Rule of Three.  
Follow this with mind and heart.  
Merry ye meet and merry ye part.

(<http://www.dreamwater.net/bluemoon/wiccanlaw.html>, accessed July 2003)

Induction into the community includes warnings to ‘newbies’ about being superficial, for example, about the need to follow the Wiccan code, to learn about the culture and the beliefs. One site declares on its homepage that:

this is a web site for serious teen witches. If you are just into witchcraft as a teen rebellion thing, this ain’t your kind of web site. Not trying to discriminate against anyone, just trying to be clear about intentions. .... No spell begging.

(www.teenwitch.com, accessed 13 September 2004)

Moreover, many sites give lengthy lists of books to read and information about different ‘paths’ to take.<sup>2</sup> Cultural values are also expressed implicitly, however, through language and intertextual references. Specialist terms are used, such as ‘besom’ for broomstick and ‘A Book of Shadows’ for a spell book, while ‘magic’ is spelled ‘magick’ to mark it as Wiccan. Ritual language provides the community with territory markers: the frequently-used salutation ‘Merry Meet’ and the parting words ‘Blessed Be’ both denote membership and frame exchanges in such a way that any content is imbued with Wiccan connotations.<sup>3</sup>

Many items on web sites illustrate the ways in which Wiccan teens’ lives are embedded in the Wiccan culture and, as mentioned above, links to on-line blogs or diaries within the sites reveal a perpetual consciousness of all things Wiccan and occult. Diaries pose as windows on to teenagers’ worlds and typically present lives that are entirely consistent with their professed beliefs. Attempts are made to saturate all discourse with references to Wiccan beliefs and all experiences appear through a Wiccan lens. See, for example, Hannah’s diary:

I’m re-reading ‘Witches night of fear - Silver Ravenwolf’ its a follow up to ‘Witches night out’ there are three books in the series ....I’m waiting for my ‘witchfest 2002’ tickets to come through, its only been a week but i’m so excited. I think i’m going to meet julia (wildfyre) at witchfest to which will be

great because we have been 'Internet' friends for about three years.  
(<http://www.dreamwater.net/bluemoon/october.html>, accessed October 2002)<sup>4</sup>

There is a sense that this individual needs to prove that the values of the community have an existence beyond her own web-based declarations. The diary gives references to a Wiccan festival 'Witch fest', and to attend this reflects membership of an inner group which does more than simply talk on-line.

Within this on-line community there are a number of sites, in which key individuals seem to take the lead. Hannah mentions one of these: 'Wildfyre'. Her own site, (<http://www.dreamwater.net/silvercobweb>), was originally set up by three teenagers, including Hannah herself, who had only met in cyberspace when the site was first established. A prominent feature of it was their diaries, and (as seen above) accounts of their lives revealed how their on-line and off-line activities were deeply connected. The site started a petition to protest about a Channel 4 documentary on the lives of teenage witches.<sup>5</sup> This challenge to what they saw as undesirable representations of Wicca was brought to the attention of the BBC, and there were plans to base a programme around their response. In this sense, the Web may be said to allow the young 'a strong agency as producers of culture' (Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 181).

### **Community Two: The AYME Message Board**




In the next part of this paper I look at data from the message board of a site set up by The Association of Young People with ME (Ayme.org.uk). Access to this site was gained via specific permission from The Board of Trustees and throughout the time I was researching an alert to my presence was signaled on the board. Those who wished to do so e-mailed me, and helped me to develop a questionnaire to which more than SIXTY people responded.

The message board is used largely by teenagers, although some 'AYMERs' are in their early twenties. For many AYMERs the Internet is their main means of maintaining a sense of self and making new friends. It is clear from questionnaires that these young people use the Internet to create a peer network which replaces previous social interaction; their web-based activities become for many a primary means of

communication with their peer group.

Many AYMERs use the Internet to discuss their sense of loss, to discover and redefine themselves as members of a new group, and to recreate social aspects of their former lives. They use the group to explore and gain a new sense of power. Despite the special and unfortunate circumstances that have brought them together, they share much in common with other Web communities. Take for example the way this 'newbie' makes her entry to the board,





Author	aya im new
tutti cuti	☐ Posted: 2004-04-28 21:35
From: tutti cuti (Jaynie)/f/11/glossop/10%	aya im new n i'd like 2 make sum m8s plz im 11 n i cum from northampton  cheerz hugs n more hugs jaynee
loonie	☐ Posted: 2004-08-29 04:44
From: manchester/aged17	Welcome to AYME 😊
rockman	☐ Posted: 2004-08-29 08:10
	hiya im 12 and my names daz i would love to chat to you pm me

From: yorks/ age 12 yaaaaa	<p>Speak soon daz</p> <hr/> <p> profile    edit    quote</p>
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Unlike in the Wiccan on-line community, where credentials need to be proven over a period of time, membership to this board implies that credentials have already been accepted. This is because access requires prior membership of AYME, which is available only to sufferers of the illness.

In the example below we see AYMERs cheerfully establishing themselves as a group which clearly identifies outsiders:

Author	black holes and non m.e. believers hehehehe *cackles*
ScottyMcMad	<p>☐ Posted: 2004-03-16 20:16</p> <hr/> <p>Lois and I have decided to stop hijacking r's post and continue our mayhem here *laughs evilly* 🤪</p>
From: Place of Riddles	<p>We are having a sponsored (sp) 'Throw non m.e. believers into a black hole day' Lois has already rounded up a bunch of people, but if you have anyone in mind that you think would be perfect for being thrown in, please drag them along and we'll throw them in for you 🤪</p> <p>Lois - how would it be best to mention the book?? As that was your idea, so thought you might like to think it yourself - I am bound to get it wrong! 😊</p> <p>😊</p>

	<p>Many thanks, Lois and Rachel</p> <p>[ This Message was edited by: Scottie McMad on 2004-03-16 20:18 ]</p> <hr/> <p> profile  mail    edit  quote</p>
<p>Maeve x</p>	<p>□ Posted: 2004-03-16 20:39</p> <hr/> <p>I can think of one person i'll throw into the black hole!! actually make that two... my brother and the ex-lodger xxx</p> <hr/> <p>From: Norfolk (age: 20)</p> <p> profile  mail  home  people    edit  quote</p>

Within this piece ‘non M.E. believers’ are ‘othered’ and a sense of security between the friends is demonstrated. Rachel, alias ‘Scotty McMad’, refers to Lois several times, almost as if she were in the same place. However, other parts of this thread reveal that they are not together but involved in an Instant Messaging chat which allows them to talk ‘backstage’ together. This use of the technology to have different types of conversation for different purposes and audiences reveals social and linguistic awareness, as well as a firm understanding of the resources of technology. They begin a charade here in which people are thrown into a hole – a scenario which another AYMER quickly accepts and builds on, so that the thread develops into a long piece with nine contributors imagining the black hole and who they would throw into it. The charade allows an opportunity to share aspects of their lives in an upbeat way and forms part of a series of vignettes which together build up a cultural history for regular ‘boarders’. In this section, we see the convention of asterisks around present tense verbs to mark paralinguistic features. This is

something common across boards on the Internet, but is used by AYMERS very often, bringing much needed drama to their lives.

The discussions are usually upbeat, linguistic jokes are common, and screen names tend to be elaborate and witty. The fun is often by way of complex and absurd role-play discussions and the board chat frequently involves the joint composition of narratives as a way of sustaining interaction. The interactants tend to bring all they can to the screen, for a great number rarely leave their houses.

This piece reflects a rather fast-paced absurd piece of drama.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the interactants are jointly envisaging a scene of farce:

Ringyding	<p>☐ Posted: 2004-03-04 16:29</p> <hr/> <p>hiiii jet - here, have a new spoon</p> <hr/>
DicsrdedLozenge	<p>☐ Posted: 2004-03-04 16:29</p> <hr/> <p>can I have a spoon?</p> <hr/>
Author	
Ringyding	<p>☐ Posted: 2004-03-04 16:30</p> <hr/> <p>no. they are reserved for jet and jet a lone. here, you can have a nice plastic fork instead.</p> <hr/>
DiscardedLozenge	<p>☐ Posted: 2004-03-04 16:31</p>

	<hr/> <p>but I dont want a...wait! I will have that, it'll make a very good wepon! 😊</p> <hr/>
Tricksie	<p>☐Posted: 2004-03-04 16:33</p> <hr/> <p>Hi, Roberta. *offers tissue and disposable fork*  EVERY NEW MAMBER GETSA PIECE OF CUTLERY- NEXT PERSON TO JOIN GETS AN EGG CUP (ok that doesnt count as cutlery but near enough - kitchen type supllies then!)</p> <hr/>
DesertedLozenge	<p>☐Posted: 2004-03-04 16:33</p> <hr/> <p>*claps* well done, the hardest part is over, now we can have FUN!</p> <hr/>
facecloth	<p>☐Posted: 2004-03-04 16:34</p> <hr/> <p>*takes fork and hides in a corner*</p> <hr/>

Note the use of asterisks to mark off ‘actions’ and the use of capitals for emphasis. The present tense is used, and there is a sense of real-time hesitation implied: ‘but I don’t want a ..... wait I’ll have that’. Here DesertedLozenge asks the others to imagine that she

is reacting to something she can see. The narrative takes on a deeper dimension and draws the group closer together. The joke continues over time and these AYMERs repeatedly refer back to this charade, thus constituting it as part of their own social history.

Screenagers like these take part in supporting newcomers, often explaining how to use the board, for example, the meanings of acronyms, how to get MSN accounts or share web addresses. The interactions are frequently designed purely for fun, whilst others help to resolve problems concerning medical support, acquiring benefits and where to buy useful items. Within these communities of practice members construct narratives together which form a social history and reflect shared values through their collaboratively constructed texts.

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### **Web addresses**

[www.ayme.org.uk](http://www.ayme.org.uk)

<http://www.angelfire.com/hi/teenwitch/info.html>

<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>, 2003

<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 2001

<http://www.draknetfree.com/wiccanpath/misc/scdiarymay03.html>

<http://www.dreamwater.net/bluemoon/october.html>

<http://www.dreamwater.net/silvercircle/messageboard>

[www.diaryland.com](http://www.diaryland.com)

<http://www.expage.com/page/teenwitches>

<http://silvercircle.threefolded.com/aboutus.html>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A revised version of this paper is forthcoming in the proceedings of the Digital Generations Conference, July 2004. See [http://www.ccsn-line.org.uk/mediacentre/Events/conf\\_info.html](http://www.ccsn-line.org.uk/mediacentre/Events/conf_info.html).

<sup>2</sup> On this see <http://www.witch-crafted.com/map.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> An example is 'Merry Meet. Welcome to the Purple Raven site.' <http://arianwitch.tripod.com/thepurpleraven> (accessed September 2004)

<sup>4</sup> Spelling and punctuation are as in the original.

<sup>5</sup> On this see [www.dreamwater.net/silvercobweb/teenagekicks.html](http://www.dreamwater.net/silvercobweb/teenagekicks.html).

<sup>6</sup> As evidence of this pace, note the timing of exchanges.