Chapter 17

Patterns of Social Practice: A Psychological Perspective

Katrin Wodzicki
Knowledge Media Research Center, Germany

Johannes Moskaliuk
University of Tuebingen, Germany

Ulrike Cress
Knowledge Media Research Center, Germany

ABSTRACT

In the past decades, a collection of widely accepted (design) patterns has been developed, as descriptions that externalize and document the implicit knowledge of experts in the domain of software engineering. The idea of using patterns to describe complex software problems, and to offer an analytical framework to solve these problems, seems to be a good way to transfer and discuss social practice as well. Recently, some efforts to use patterns in the field of e-learning and education have been shown.

In this chapter, the application of patterns in the context of social practice will be considered from a psychological point of view. After briefly introducing the history of patterns, this chapter will discuss the specific conditions that apply for formulating and using patterns of social practice, as well as the benefits and challenges of their application. This discussion will result in four main challenges. In order to address them, the chapter presents psychological approaches that deal with the relevant issues and help to understand potential benefits of patterns of social practice. It concludes with some remaining open questions for future research. The entire chapter focuses on the structure that patterns provide, and how this structure supports the communication, exchange, and learning of social practice. The discussion

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The idea of using patterns is based on the theory of architecture (Alexander et al., 1977; Alexander, 1979), in which patterns of successful solutions of previous problem situations are used like a model in order to solve recurrent problems in similar contexts. Beck and Cunningham (1987) transferred the idea of a “pattern language” to the domain of object-oriented software programming. A few years later, the book of Gamma, Helm, Johnson and Vlissides (1995) provided some standard design patterns for object-oriented software programming. In March 1995 Cunningham created the Portland Pattern Repository wiki to store design patterns and create new patterns in a collaborative process. The concept of using patterns to store and transfer knowledge has also become popular for some other technical domains, for example, the design of human-computer interaction (Tidwell, 2005) or programming Web 2.0-sites (Mahemoff, 2006).

From Design Pattern to Patterns of Social Practice

But in non-technical domains, patterns have also been discovered as a powerful method: Manns and Rising (2005) describe a pattern to introduce new ideas into organisations. Coplien and Harrison (2005) address the human and organizational dimensions of software development, and provide organizational patterns of agile software development. Mader (2008) offers a toolbox of patterns and anti-patterns for the adaptation of a wiki. Patterns have also found their way into education and e-learning: To name only a few, Schümer and Lukosch (2007) have written a book about patterns for computer-mediated interaction, Kohls and Wedekind (2008) describe how patterns can be used for documenting successful e-learning arrangements, and Derntl and Motschnig-Pitrik (2004) focus on successful blended learning processes. Eckstein (2000) has described five connected patterns that portray the process from starting a course to re-running it. Abreu (1996) has introduced two patterns to support the “learning from others’ experiences” effect and to connect academia with the rest of the world. On the Pedagogical Pattern Project (http://www.pedagogicalpatterns.org/) platform, many designers from higher education and industry collect and present their well-tested patterns (Bergin, Eckstein, Manns & Wallingford, 2001).

A similarity between all of these non-technical applications is that they assume that patterns may be used to share procedural knowledge about social practice as well. But there is a big difference between design patterns and patterns of social practice. In the following paragraph, we will highlight this problem by pointing out what we mean by social practice.

Patterns of Social Practice

We use social practice as a term for (1) social activities that are (2) well-established and (3) shared socially in a (4) given context.

1. Social activity means any form of activity that involves interaction between two or more people.
2. An activity is well-established when it has been performed several times.
3. An activity is shared socially when those people who are involved in the interaction perform the activity as a routine.
4. A specific social practice is tied to the context in which it is performed, because any context...
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