

---

# Identifying Indicia: Exploring the FIUTS Wednesday Lunch

## Jared M. Scott

The Information School  
University of Washington  
Box 352840  
Seattle, WA 98195-2840  
gecko@u.washington.edu

## Abstract

I build upon Karen Fisher's theory of information grounds – focusing on “place” and social interaction – to examine information flow within the *international community* at the UW Foundation for Understanding through Students (FIUTS) Wednesday lunch. The FIUTS Wednesday lunch is a 2-hour weekly free event; anyone may come to eat and talk. To investigate how (if at all) the lunch functions as an information ground, 15 hours of observation, 15 interviews, 20 surveys, and other documentation was collected. Results showed that (1) FIUTS volunteers and organizers did not regulate information flow; (2) information targeted toward participants was negligible; and (3) most interviewees' primary motivation for attending the lunch was to interact with others in the international community. In addition, seven non-mutually exclusive role types were identified: Sages, Adventurers, Wallflowers, Tourists, Organizers, Ambassadors, and Socialites. Findings support the Wednesday lunch being an information ground.

## Keywords

Information Grounds, International Community, Context, Information Behavior

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.1 Systems and Information Theory: User Studies

---

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).  
*CHI 2009*, April 4 – 9, 2009, Boston, MA, USA  
ACM 978-1-60558-246-7/09/04.

## Introduction

Since Karen Fisher's (written as Pettigrew) seminal paper on contextualizing information within the concept of an information ground (IG)[8], modern research within the topic of information behavior (IB) has begun to take a more focused approach in accounting for the social context in which information flow takes place. Information grounds refer to environments that are created when individuals gather for a common purpose which, in turn, leads to a spontaneous sharing of information. Considering this relationship between information and context, Pettigrew et al. re-define IB as, "how people need, seek, give, and use information in different contexts" [2]. The Information Behavior in Everyday Contexts (IBEC) research program has cataloged a number of formal research studies on information grounds as well as collected many anecdotal accounts of information grounds [4]. These research studies have focused on various types of information grounds; from those created by immigrants' use of adult learning programs in Queens, New York, to those of college students at the University of Washington. Karen's research identified seven key concepts for information grounds (table 1).

The study of information grounds is not wholly an academic pursuit; there is a pragmatic motivation as well. By defining information grounds, interested parties are positioned to tailor information specific to those ad-hoc communities [2]. Take for instance a bus stop in a rural community: by understanding how an information ground works, community leaders can take steps to disseminate relevant information to the community members – thereby making use of this gathering place.

### INFORMATION GROUNDS: SEVEN KEY CONCEPTS

1. Information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals.
2. People gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing.
3. Information grounds are attended by different social types, most if not all of whom play expected and important, albeit different roles in information flow.
4. Social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information flow is a by-product.
5. People engage in formal and informal information sharing, and information flow occurs in many directions.
6. People use information obtained at information grounds in alternative ways, and benefit along physical, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions.
7. Many sub-contexts exist within an information ground and are based on people's perspectives and physical factors; together these sub-contexts form a grand context.

Table 1: defines Karen Fisher's Seven Key Concepts for information grounds.

### Related Works

The research reported here relies heavily upon Karen Fisher's work on information grounds [1] as well as Oldenberg's outstanding book on third places titled *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* [5]. Oldenberg's research is fundamental to understanding the role of place within an information ground. Others included research related to information flow; particularly Wayne Zachary's often cited paper, *An Information Flow Model for Conflict Resolution and Fission in Small Groups* [9]. Zachary's insights into weak and strong ties within communities have been particularly useful.

### IG's and International Communities

Although a fair number of information grounds have already been explored and defined, no research as of yet has explored information grounds involving the *international community*. The decision to focus on the international community was motivated by an observed lack of useful information targeted towards this community [6]. This research hopes to explore how (if at all) the international community functions as an information ground.

The definition of an international community as provided by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary is "a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests" [10]. However for purposes of this research the term international community refers to a group of people who have interest in foreign cultures, concepts and ideas; membership is defined neither by race, culture nor ethnicity. The international community is a unique construct within society in that the process of

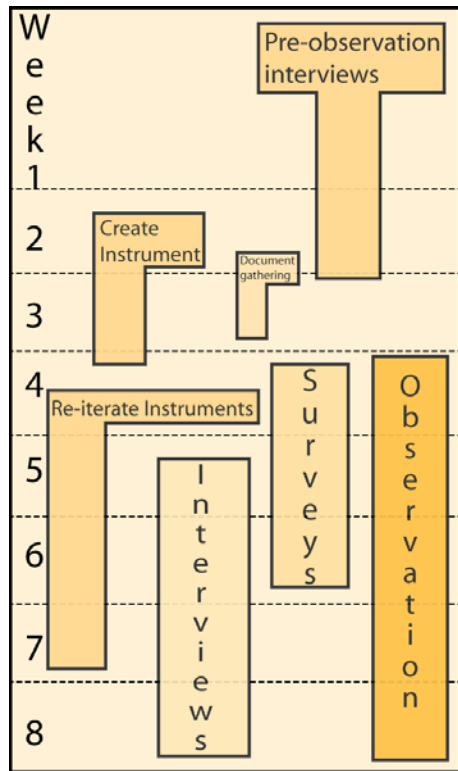


Figure 1: the timeline of when data collection methods were carried out

transferring information from one individual to another requires both participants to be mindful of each others' language, culture, and level of comprehension. As such any information that is targeted towards this community needs to have the ability to transcend the above factors.

#### **Research Site: FIUTS Wednesday Lunch**

This research focuses on members of the international community that participate in the UW Foundation for Understanding through Students (FIUTS) Wednesday lunch. The FIUTS Wednesday lunch is a 2-hour weekly free event; anyone may come to eat and talk. Approximately 250 people attend weekly however this number can vary widely from 100 to 400 attendees depending on the time within the quarter. Although there are many viable international events and communities on campus (including a number of other FIUTS events)[7], this group was chosen for many reasons including (1) the event has been held consistently every school-week for over 25 years which demonstrates its stability; (2) the participants represent a wide spectrum of personalities, customs, and social classes, this allows for an interesting mix of communication; (3) the event is open to anyone who is willing to attend and is advertised in a way which promotes the attendance of only interested individuals; and (4) the organizers of the event require only that the participants maintain a friendly and open atmosphere and otherwise remain unobtrusive during the event itself.

#### **Data Collection**

In order to explore the FIUTS Wednesday lunch as completely as possible within the 8-week timeframe, a rigorous schedule was established (figure 1).

Permission to study the FIUTS Wednesday lunch was received from the FIUTS executive director. During the research process a communication link was kept between the director and the researcher. The data collection began with 3 pre-observation interviews with senior staff members of FIUTS and others who organize the event. These interviews helped set the stage for developing a process to study the FIUTS Wednesday lunch. All pre-observation interviews were documented with notes and audio recordings. The nature of the pre-observation interviews was to gain background knowledge on FIUTS and to begin building an understanding of how it operates as an information ground.

The pre-observation interview period lasted for two weeks and allowed enough time to build a plan for how the rest of the research would unfold. Next a week was spent obtaining any documentation that was available. During this period the initial instruments to be used for the surveys and interviews were created (based on a previous instrument by Karen Fisher [1]). Finally the observation period began; surveys and interviews were also conducted at this time. The instruments were modified to take into account language comprehension barriers (simplified sentence structure and vocabulary) as well as to improve the rate of response (rephrased questions such as, "what kind of information do you seek?").

#### **Documentation**

No records concerning the FIUTS Wednesday lunch were kept by the organizers; the only figures given by staff prior to the observation period were estimates of attendance based on subjective guesses and indirect

observation (the number of nametags used; the amount of food eaten).

#### *Observation*

15 hours over 5 weeks were spent observing the FIUTS Wednesday lunch room and participants. Observation was achieved through visual observation, video documentation, and audio recordings. Detailed measurements of the room were taken; participants were observed for extended periods of time (in order to detail their activities); and population data was collected by statistical sampling.

#### *Interviews*

Fifteen interviews were conducted in-situ during the Wednesday lunch, each lasting about ten minutes. All interviews were done anonymously and were audio-recorded with expressly given consent. Observation notes were taken on the backside of the interview paper before starting the interview and after the end; this was done in the hopes to specify role-types for the FIUTS Wednesday lunch. Interview questions were a mix of 27 open-ended, grouping, and demographic questions. Questions such as, "What brings you to the Wednesday lunch?", "Can anyone come?", "Do you actively seek out people to talk to?", "How are you most likely to encounter information at the Wednesday lunch?", and "How old are you?", were asked. Each question was evaluated for its effectiveness in eliciting informative responses.

#### *Surveys*

Forty anonymous survey papers were handed out by organizers at the check-in table and twenty were collected. A free pencil was offered as compensation for filling out the survey. The written surveys were a slight

modification of the interview instrument. The questions overall stayed the same however prompts were removed in certain sections. Most returned surveys were only partially complete.

## **Results & Analysis**

The analysis was done in parallel with the data collection; this allowed for the quick testing of new hypothesis and a method for refining the interview questions (old questions were not removed in order to keep the integrity of the data).

#### *Observation Findings*

Observation began with taking a detailed sketch of the layout of the room used for the Wednesday lunch (figure 2). The same room has been used for the last seven years. Within the 1500 square-foot space there are approximately 68 chairs set up for the participants, ten tables (four for food in the middle, two for drinks in the back, and four used by the organizers in the front), two coat racks (not drawn), and an information booth set up outside the main doors where participants receive nametags. The nametags identify their name, country of origin, and a fun fact about themselves. It was observed that on average 250 people attend the event; 25% American, 60% Asian (Japan, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and South Korea), 8% European, and 3.3% African (with another 3.3% as other or unidentified). Participant's age ranged from 17 to 75 years-old. Within the lunch, group sizes tended to be anywhere from two to five people with the average around three people. While the lunch is 2 hours long (from 11:30 to 1:30), it was noticed that the average person only stays for about 30 minutes to an hour.

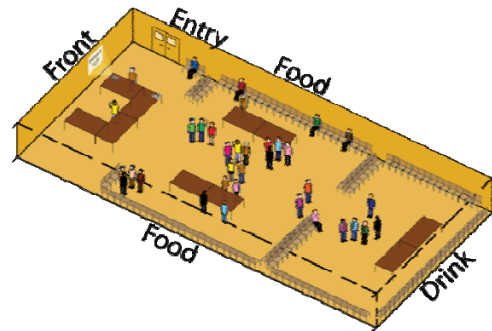


Figure 2: General layout of the room used for the FIUTS Wednesday lunch

### *Wednesday Lunch as an Information Ground*

Fisher describes information grounds as comprising seven key concepts (see table 1) [2], these concepts can be tested against the data collected from the FIUTS Wednesday lunch to determine the validity of the event as an information ground.

1. The lunch by definition is a place where people congregate.
2. Interview responses indicated that the primary motivation for participating in the Wednesday lunch was for the social interaction
3. Many different social types (in this research, roles) were defined through the collected data
4. Referenced in 2
5. Observation and interviewee's responses showed both formal (nametags) and informal (asking about a favorite coffee shop) sharing
6. Interviews responses to the question, "How useful is what you learn at this place", were varied, this shows the many uses of the information.
7. Small dynamic groups were observed during the Wednesday lunch.

### *Information Actors*

Key concepts three and seven for information grounds hint that there are different social types (or actors) that participate within information grounds. By taking an observational approach and studying the individual movements of participants, it is possible to see distinct differences in how participants interacted within the context of the Wednesday lunch. Through the interview process it was established that these characteristics are intrinsic to the lunch itself, meaning that the participants enter and leave the roles just as they enter and leave the lunch. The following non-mutually exclusive actors have been defined:

ORGANIZER	Hosts the event or has an administrative role
SAGE	Older members who are knowledgeable, have traveled before, and are interested in teaching those around them.
ADVENTURER	Seeks out specific information about people, places, or events.
WALLFLOWER	Passively sits off to one side and doesn't seek anyone or anything in particular.
TOURIST	Dines and dashes and can find themselves engaging similar to other actor-types.
AMBASSADOR	Acts as ambassadors for their country, conversations tend to be about philosophy, religion, politics, etc...
SOCIALITE	Jumps from group to group interacting with many people. They help drive the intermixing of groups.

### *Information Flow between Actors*

By imitating and expanding upon the ethnographic approach laid out by Zachary [9], the observations of the movements of the actors within the frame of the Wednesday lunch led to a new understanding of how information flows through the organization. It was observed that an individual can switch between roles at will and is not restricted to any one role; for instance an individual might first show up to the lunch as a tourist, but over the course of their interactions they may develop an information need similar to one expressed by an adventurer or may be willing to share information similar to an ambassador. This unique switching of roles allows for a dynamic atmosphere, allowing an individual to interact within many sub-contexts. The switches between roles can be observed through visual cues (a participant position in relation to those around them), social cues (a participant listening to a conversation joins in), and stage cues (a



Figure 3: Commonly observed groupings. Socialites act as the information pollinators, thus do stay long in any group

participant leaves/enters a group); they can also be discovered through the interview data (participants with an information need were categorized as adventures).

### Conclusion & Further Work

This research was motivated by a need to further the understanding of the interactions between people, place, and information within an international context. This research has showed that: (1) the FIUTS Wednesday lunch acts as an information ground for the international community; (2) there are at least 7 observable actor-roles within the context of the lunch; (3) information flows in all directions through these actors; (4) an individual may switch roles at any time; and (5) The defining of role-types could lead to better targeted information. I hypothesize that adventurers and ambassadors combined typically consist of 60% of the entire Wednesday lunch population with the remaining roles splitting the difference evenly (around 8% each). This can be tested by refining the interview instrument and interviewing a statistically significant proportion of the population.

Future research will include an investigation into virtual information grounds within the international community, such as the FIUTS Facebook page. Doing so would provide an opportunity to compare with this research to see how participation changes.

### Acknowledgements

Warm thanks for everyone who helped further this research, to Batya Friedman for taking on the mentor role, to Karen Fisher for helping to define the research goals, and the Information school for making this all possible.

### References

- [1] Fisher, K. E., Landry, C. F., & Naumer, C. M. Social spaces, casual interactions, meaningful exchanges: An information ground typology based on the college student experience. *Information Research* (2007).
- [2] Fisher, K. E., et al. Information grounds and use of need-based services by immigrants in Queens, NY: A context-based, outcome evaluation approach. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 55.8 (2004), 754-766.
- [3] Girvan, M., Newman, M. E. J. Community Structure in Social and Biological Networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 99.12 (2002), 7821-7826.
- [4] IBEC Website  
[http://ibec.ischool.washington.edu/ig\\_anecdotal\\_studies.php](http://ibec.ischool.washington.edu/ig_anecdotal_studies.php)
- [5] Oldenburg, R. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. NY: Marlowe (1999).
- [6] Official FIUTS Website  
<http://www.fiuts.washington.edu/>
- [7] Office of ISS. International Scholars Profile 2008. <http://iss.washington.edu/about/stats/> (2008).
- [8] Pettigrew, K. E. Waiting for chiropody: Contextual results from an ethnographic study of the information behavior among attendees at community clinics. *Information Processing & Management*, 35.6 (1999), 801-817.
- [9] Zachary, Wayne W. An Information Flow Model for Conflict and Fission Small Groups. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 33.4 (1977), 452-473
- [10] Community. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community> (2009).