Affinity Online

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Welcome to the magical school of *Hogwarts at Ravelry*! Here you will find many aspiring witches and wizards using wands, role-play, and knitting needles to craft a magical world based on the *Harry Potter* universe. You won’t need a magical train or even a flying broom to access this magical castle, though. A simple casting of the “internet” spell will teleport you to this school. After you arrive, prepare to be sorted into a house, attend a welcome feast in the Great Hall, and get ready to craft!

The *Hogwarts at Ravelry* castle is bustling with activity, and ways to participate in the group are numerous and conveniently located on the group’s discussion board. You can chat with fellow students in their house dormitories—named after the houses in *Harry Potter*, of course—or in the common area of the Great Hall. Mostly, though, you will find students attending classes. These are the same classes that Harry Potter attended during his time at Hogwarts, but students at *Hogwarts at Ravelry* complete their assignments a bit differently. They not only research and write about magical topics, but also use fiber crafting skills to produce something related to those topics (see figure C.4.1)! Between classes, you can find students playing the magical sport of Quidditch (with a crocheted beater stick, of course!), lounging by the lake, or even spinning yarn as decorations for the Yule Ball. You don’t know how to knit a dragon, spin yarn, or use the bobble-stitch to represent that useful little gillyweed plant? Fret not; just ask your fellow students! They are always willing to help each other learn new crafts or techniques. One professor even leads a beginner yarn-spinning class in a corner of the castle, and another has useful video tutorials on her blog. So don your robes, untangle that yarn, and let’s get started!

*Hogwarts at Ravelry* is an affinity network centered on the shared interests of *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting. The *Harry Potter* series is a popular young adult book and movie series about a boy wizard who
attends the magical school of Hogwarts. While aimed at young adults, the series’ story line, characters, and morals resonate with all ages. The rich fantasy world of the series—including supplemental works and websites from the author—enticed readers to envision and explore the details of the characters, school, classes, sports, and shops. The series garners a passionate fandom, through which fans write fanfiction, roleplay in the magical world, advocate for real-world causes, and create or remix media related to Harry Potter.

Equally important to Hogwarts at Ravelry is fiber crafting, including knitting, crocheting, weaving, and spinning yarn. Fiber crafts date back thousands of years as a form of material production and social opportunity, such as knitting circles, and have recently experienced a surge in popularity. This popularity is attributed partly to the do-it-yourself movement and the ease of access to resources and communities that online tools and digital tools have provided.

Hogwarts at Ravelry was founded in 2009 by a 10-year-old girl as a space to combine the interests of Harry Potter and fiber crafting. Hogwarts at Ravelry is one of more than 30,000 groups on Ravelry.com, which describes itself as “a community site, an organizational tool, and a yarn & pattern database for knitters and crocheters.” Ravelry.com was founded, in part, as an online social hub for fiber crafters and offers its users forums and member-created groups through which they can share
their fiber crafting and other interests. Like all Ravelry.com groups, Hogwarts at Ravelry is built on a message board platform, through which topics are split into conversation “threads.” The group is international and multigenerational. Members range in age from 11 years old to their mid-70s. Members come from all over the world, although most live in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. When I began fieldwork in 2011, there were more than 850 members of Hogwarts at Ravelry, and by 2013, at the time my fieldwork concluded, there were more than 1,300 members. All active members were female, although there were a few active men in the group before 2011. The group comprises members with varying levels of experience, from novice crafters and those just starting to read the Harry Potter books to advanced crafters, pattern designers, and Harry Potter aficionados.

The shared purpose of Hogwarts at Ravelry is providing members a Harry Potter–based fantasy world through which they can pursue their Harry Potter and fiber crafting interests. The affinity network uses role-play, narrative, crafting, and elements of the Harry Potter series to build a fantasy world that parallels the magical school Hogwarts. Members role-play as students, teachers, or staff of this school and are sorted into the four houses of the Harry Potter series. The main practices of the group are competitions and challenges. The overarching competition of the group is that of the House Cup, an end-of-the-year award given to the house with the most points. Members earn points for their houses through Harry Potter–based classes and challenges. In these practices, members are asked to research an element related to Harry Potter, craft an item representing the topic, and write a narrative tying the crafted item to what was learned. Other activities include the magical sport of Quidditch, wizarding tournaments, and role-playing games in which members fight for or against the evil Death Eater wizards. Through these practices, members delve into their Harry Potter interests by researching topics in the books and on fan-created websites devoted to the series. Furthermore, these competitions and challenges motivate members to further their fiber crafting skills and knowledge by offering compelling reasons to craft more, learn new techniques, and take on new crafting challenges.

Hogwarts at Ravelry members are organized into three distinct roles that are intertwined with their status in the group: leaders, staff/teachers,
and students. The leaders run the group, the staff and teachers are in charge of the practices, and the students participate in the group. While the roles are relatively fluid, in that students may become teachers or staff for a class rotation and then become students again, the roles are also a marker of status, as it is the more active and most helpful of members who are generally promoted to the role of teachers or staff.

The group places high value on providing members with a friendly, fun, and supportive community in which to pursue their *Harry Potter* and fiber crafting interests. In the General Rules for the group, members are directed to provide only positive feedback and support for members’ projects: “**Be nice** in general. It is not appropriate to speak poorly of anyone else’s projects, nor their choice of projects. Everyone has varying levels of experience.” Help and support are encouraged and are considered an important social practice in the group. More experienced and veteran members offer resources or their experience in helping out members who ask questions or run into difficulties with a project. Encouragement is pervasive in the group; when members discuss projects they are working on, other members will cheer on their progress with comments such as “You can do it!” When members submit class assignments, the teacher and other students in the class will offer verbal compliments about the work (“I love it!”), nonverbally “love” the post, or offer detailed positive compliments about the difficulty of the project or the techniques or colors used.

Members use, share, and create a variety of resources related to their interests. One member, Jen2291, a 49-year-old white woman from Arizona, created instructional blog entries and videos about crochet techniques or projects. Class teachers may link to *Harry Potter* wikis or other online resources to help students learn more about the class’s topic. Members share links to knitting websites or YouTube videos to help others learn a technique. Members also routinely use and link to patterns in the Ravelry pattern database as suggestions of things to make.

As part of the group’s mission to be friendly and supportive, the “**be nice**” rule of the group is formally enforced. The leaders and staff of the group are tasked with encouraging a social atmosphere as well as moderating posts to make sure that members are being positive, friendly, and supportive to each other. Negative comments and those that go against the “friendly and fun” atmosphere of the group are reprimanded.
in the discussion thread or through private messages. Members strive to create and sustain an atmosphere that is supportive of all members’ crafts and levels of experience in crafting and *Harry Potter*.

**Learner Story**

Mary’s story helps us see the powerful combination of family support and affinity networks in supporting connected learning. Mary is a white 21-year-old knitter from Canada who was exposed to fiber crafting at a young age. Her mother and her sister were both knitters, and at the age of 9 or 10, Mary asked her mother to teach her to knit and crochet. She had “liked watching [her] mom make things with yarn.” After her mother taught her the basics of knitting, Mary began a knit scarf. Her interest in knitting was not very strong, however, and she felt “allergic” to crochet because she had a difficult time learning it.

At about the age of 15, Mary became interested in knitting again. About the same time, her mother found and joined Ravelry and gave Mary some yarn. That motivated Mary to join Ravelry as well. This combination of events provided a gateway into a passion for knitting and an entrance into the fiber crafting affinity network:

> My mom was on Ravelry back when you had to request an invite—I think she’d heard about it from a knitting e-mail list or Yahoo group, but I can’t remember for sure. So after she’d been on for a few months, I decided to request an invite, because my mom had just given me a lot of yarn she didn’t want after she’d done a clear-out of her stash—she’d tried to sell it when we’d had a yard sale, but there weren’t any takers. So after a couple of weeks, I got the e-mail from the Ravelry staff with my invite, and I signed up.

On Ravelry, Mary found a community of fiber crafters with whom she could learn and pursue her knitting. She joined and eventually became a leader of Knit Teen, a knitting group for teens. She also found groups that tied her knitting to other interests, including a group dedicated to fiber crafting fans of the gaming series *Final Fantasy* and three groups dedicated to fiber crafting and *Harry Potter*, including *Hogwarts at Ravelry*. 
Participating in the Ravelry groups challenged Mary to advance her knitting as she found new techniques to try or must-learn techniques for a group challenge: “I see a lot of people trying a technique or a pattern, so it gets me interested in trying it as well—like cabling. Being in the Harry Potter groups help me step out of my comfort zone, too, because the prompts for assignments can be technique-specific.” Mary recounted one particular class assignment that asked her to learn about gillyweed, a magical herb in the *Harry Potter* series, and to craft an item representing it. Challenged by the class assignment, Mary used a book to teach herself the stitch but also solicited her mother’s help in troubleshooting the pattern that called for the stitch. Mary’s efforts at learning the stitch, despite her not completing her project, were rewarded with points from the group and a nearly finished pillowcase. “One thing I remember having to learn for a specific assignment was bobbles. The assignment was about gillyweed, and one of the options was to craft bobbles, so I started a bobbled pillow using a pattern from the book *Stitch N Bitch Nation*. I figured out the bobbles myself, but I’d asked my mom for help when I noticed that I was short a stitch in one of my rows.”

When Mary was struggling with a cardigan pattern, she found troubleshooting advice from another group member. The pattern instructed Mary to construct the cardigan “in the round,” meaning it was constructed as one seamless item. A group member who had experience with that pattern, however, told Mary that the cardigan should be constructed “flat,” meaning the back and front should be created separately and then seamed together. This personal experience and specialized knowledge helped Mary to learn how to approach the pattern differently in the future and saved her from further frustrations.

Participating in Ravelry also pushed Mary to overcome her “allergy” to crochet. Through participating in the groups and seeing patterns in the Ravelry database, Mary found many crochet patterns that she wanted to make. Although she would initially see the patterns and think, “Argh, I can’t crochet . . . but I’ll add the pattern to my favourites, because I would learn crochet to make that.” During our interview, Mary said, “Recently I borrowed books from the library and asked my mom for help with learning crochet—she taught me about controlling the yarn, letting the hook do the work of picking up stitches, and so forth.”
By joining Ravelry and participating in group challenges, and through the support of her mother, Mary has advanced her knitting beyond basic stitches and an unfinished scarf. She has become a leader of a teen knitting group and found support for her gaming, *Harry Potter*, and fiber crafting interests. The social supports, challenges, and sharing of crafted items have supported and motivated Mary to learn new techniques, troubleshoot erroneous patterns, and even overcome her “allergy” to crochet. When interviewed, Mary said her next goals included connecting her interests to economic opportunities through designing knitware, a possibility enabled by Ravelry’s allowing users to sell patterns. For now, though, Mary wants to focus on improving her craft: “But right now I still have to learn about constructing garments—especially seaming, which I’m not very practiced in.”