Reading Notes: Social Capital

- Use of emoticons provided by the system does nothing more provide a generic expression, fixed, the same for you as it would be for me, nonspecific and clichéd. Now, we all use clichés in everyday life, but by furnishing online community members with emoticons, system administrators do nothing more than provide a more diverse character set. I see nothing gained in attaching an emoticon, or using IMHO as linguistic shorthand, precisely because those signs are fixed.
- Social capital seems to be a slippery term. I'm tempted to think of the term "civic society," which would combine not only the health of social relations, expressed in a population's reservoir of good neighborliness, with its sense of a common good. In other words, not only the acts of generosity, but a shared set of values—and healthy ones.
- Then again, it seems that some definitions focus more on one's social network. Here, the definitions tend to emphasize the "asset value" of social capital.
- Which is it?
  - Something spent, like money? Fungible, like currency? And bankable? Capitalist's capital, in other words?
  - Or something proffered, as a gift, out of generosity and a commonly shared sensibility that what I do for you will come back to me. And that what I do for you is simply the right thing to do.
- Either way, it does seem that social capital has little to do with software…. "The second is to ensure that the software also supports sociability, that is, effective social interaction online (Preece, 2000)." Preece mixes the two: social interaction and social capital.
- My sense is that social capital has to do with the degree of concern we feel about others, and the degree to which it can be mobilized if called upon. If we count a social network of 200 friends, none of whom would come to a birthday party, are we rich or poor in social capital? I think poor…

- The confusion stems from terminology: capital, when accumulated, counts as wealth. Well that's not how interpersonal relations work. In order to "spend" social capital, one would have to be able to move people (to do something on one's behalf).
- I see this as an attribute of communication then, not of assets. A rich man may be alone; a poor man, among friends. The rich man's social capital may in fact be poor if they desert him at the witness stand.
- Because it takes communication to bind people, and to move people to act on matters beyond their own immediate personal concern, it's in the health of communication that real (authentic) social capital is found.
- For that, even the most transparent software only plays a role in facilitating interactions. Two people can hate each other and communicate this with utter clarity….
- The relationship between what binds people, their communication (in terms of content), and a society's well-being are all much more complex than is suggested by the simple equations:
  - Social capital = Number of friends
  - Social capital = Sociability of software
  - Social capital = Trust in a network
  - Social capital = Degree of Collaboration
- It is worth considering the relationship between trust and social capital separately. For trust in an individual is not the same as "trust" within a group, or in a social network. I often find that these attributes of "sociability" are drawn out of interpersonal interactions and pasted onto a groups, companies, crowds, networks, and other collectivities AS IF there were no difference between the emotional commitments people make one-to-one and those they make to groups, etc. We all know that the psychology of interactions changes from, say, a couple to a crowd. Why then do we assume that if a number of people who trust one another as friends, and who set themselves up as a group online and count themselves as a network, share that same trust as a group that animates their paired relationships? I bring this up here only because I sense that it's trust that's behind the term "social capital."

Introduction Supporting community and building social capital

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Excerpts:

> "According to social scientists, the glue that holds communities and other social networks together is called 'social capital'. A key ingredient for developing social capital is trust. Social capital is the social equivalent of financial capital – and like financial capital, social capital is a resource that helps sustain community.

"How might the Internet better support all these communities and encourage others in a way that would increase social capital locally, nationally and internationally?

"Novel forms of communication are emerging for expressing emotions and conveying the equivalent of non-verbal cues (i.e., body language) that help to make these systems more effective. For example, clever users are inventing linguistic shortcuts, such as the now familiar smiley faces and abbreviations like IMHO – 'in my humble opinion'). Ingenious designers, like the contributors to this special edition, are also raising the quality of users' experiences by creating visual representations and tools to support social interaction (see also Preece, Rogers and Sharp, 2002).

Definitions of Social Capital are collected here: **What Is Social Capital**

"The value of social networks that people can draw on to solve common problems. The benefits of social capital flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks.

"…by analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital--tools and training that enhance individual productivity--**"social capital" refers to features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust** that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital."
http://www.senscot.net/LD/Articles/Glossary.asp

These reading notes were taken while researching source material and conceptual frameworks of potential use to *social interaction design*, an approach I'm developing for use in the development and design of social software, interaction tools, communication technologies and their applications.