“Asking for help instead of permission”: An Exploratory Study of the Sharing of Information in a Community Cooking Program

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Abstract

Building on current literature on information activities associated with cooking, this research focuses on cooking at the community level. In my study, I examine the information behaviours of a participatory community cooking group, exploring the nature of information in the program and the ways that information is shared among participants. Through a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with diagrammatic elicitations, I identify key informational resources at play, the role of embodied information in the space, and group representations of information practices.

Keywords

ethnography, information behaviours, cooking, collaboration, embodied information

Introduction

As an inexperienced but eager-to-learn cook, I was excited to hear of a free cooking program in my neighbourhood. Described as a participatory community cooking program where everyone is invited to cook and enjoy a meal together, it is offered on a weekly drop-in basis. The emphasis on community intrigued me, and I wished to see how this dynamic could impact the information behaviours in the space. For my ethnographic project, I focused on two main research questions within this cooking program: the nature of information in the program and how information is shared among participants¹. I was particularly interested in the forms of embodied information and group interaction, which I used as my sensitizing concepts. While conversations throughout the duration of the program each week ranged across a wide variety of topics, I looked solely at those related to the cooking activities in order to constrain the scope of this study.

Literature Review

Cooking has remained largely unstudied in the field of information science. Hartel's (2007) dissertation and subsequent research on the information behaviours involved in the hobby of gourmet cooking opened the door to further research on cooking as leisure and the information activities associated with it. Still, there are many areas yet to be explored within cooking, especially in moving beyond serious leisure activities to those of more casual or less experienced cooks, as well as cooking in a group setting.

There has been a growing amount of research on collaborative information behaviours within project-based settings (Foster, 2006; Shah, 2013). While these studies have recognized the collaborative nature of people involved in such activities, they have been primarily industry and web-focused, almost solely within professional and academic contexts. However, this is not to say that community spaces have been entirely left out of the literature. Fisher (2007) has done considerable work on the concept of information grounds – places of unintended, spontaneous information sharing that arise from people coming together for some unrelated purpose. While she has found this concept at play in many areas of society, community spaces and otherwise, her work has inspired others to examine spaces outside the workplace and home (Fisher, 2007). Prigoda and McKenzie's (2007) work ties in information grounds with library programming, as they look at the information behaviours among participants of a knitting group. While in my own study I am more focused on cooking-related information activities than these spontaneous forms of information, the knitting group offers a starting point in demonstrating how such information may be involved in similar activities (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007). With my research I hope to bridge these different areas of study in the current literature in building on what we know about information behaviours in relation to food and community.

¹ For clarity, the term 'participants' in this paper is used for those who take part in the cooking program, while the individuals I consulted in my research will be referred to by pseudonyms or as informants.

Research Methods

The community cooking program I looked at, referred to in this paper as the Cooking Club, is based in a university community centre. The centre offers the program weekly on a drop-in basis with no obligation to attend each session; and participants range in age from late teens to thirties. While the program is organized by the community centre staff, participants are invited both to make meal suggestions for subsequent sessions as well as to lead the group in a recipe of their choosing. The 'leader' guides participants in a variety of tasks so that each person contributes to the group meal, which everyone is then invited to share in.

For my study, I used a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Since the Cooking Club is a public program, I was able to gain access as a participant. My observations, which drew on the methodologies of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) and Spradley (1980) as frameworks, took place over two sessions, each lasting from three to four hours. I also conducted interviews with two individuals from the program, one -- a regular attendee and the other -- a frequent session "leader". I used Sonnenwald et al.'s (2001) Information Horizon Interview (IHI) methodology as guidance in structuring the interviews, pairing the questions with a diagrammatic elicitation of the participant's information horizon.

I provided an ethical statement to the informants and read it aloud to each of them prior to the interview taking place. Recordings of interviews were made and later destroyed upon being transcribed, and all names and identifying information have been removed. The staff of the community centre were also informed of the project and I received approval for the study after submitting a summary of the research proposal. All parties also consented to the publication of this research.

Findings and Discussion

Extended Family

In talking with my informants about the Cooking Club, they explained that it was the community that kept bringing them back to the sessions, rather than the food. This strong sense of community is a key element in fostering information sharing among participants. Vicki, a regular participant in the program, spoke about this in her interview, contrasting the environment of the Cooking Club to her past experience working in a school cafeteria:

In the cafeteria it was different because the chefs, they hold more authority over the students and so it was like we had to listen to them constantly and asking for permission. But in Cooking Club, it was more asking for help instead of permission because the process in which the recipes have been created is through contribution from every member. So in that sense this process demonstrates that everybody's opinions are equal in Cooking Club.

As Vicki explains, the lack of hierarchy in the program creates a more open, welcoming environment. Her point about the leaders "asking for help instead of permission" highlights how everyone is encouraged and invited to share their own knowledge and experiences. In my observation, often-times the leader would ask participants for feedback or suggestions on various parts of the recipe, perhaps recognizing their own lack of experience in certain areas while also seeing the opportunity for engagement with the many sources of information in the space.

Awa, who has served as a leader in the program, offered similar thoughts on the environment in my interview with her:

It's a safe space in general for anyone and it's a nice place to learn how to cook and eat other people's food [laughter]. It's more so community than food in my opinion, like I like the conversation. It's a place where people can converse, maybe share certain ideas, share their backgrounds in terms of education or experience, and then I find that that helps build relationships.

Here, Awa explains that the environment not only contributes to more free-flowing and perhaps personal forms of information sharing but leads to the development of deeper relationships as well. Participants in the program have described the Cooking Club as similar to an extended family, a view I share from my own experience there. This familial environment allows for more open channels of communication, encouraging back and forth information sharing rather than a top-down exchange. Thus, the program and space are information-rich, in terms of both the forms and the sources of the information.

Cyclical Nature of Information

One of the main features of the nature of information in the cooking program is its cyclical pattern. Participants share information with others using the same methods through which it was shared with them, thus repeating and continuing the pattern. This can be seen in Awa's IHI map in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Awa's IHI map

Her main informational resources, shown on the left of the map, have been the internet, past informal teachers, such as her mother, and personal experience with cooking. As she described, Awa often draws on the information gained from these sources when guiding a cooking session. For example, she will teach others a method of chopping that her mother taught her, saying it has “become natural to me to teach someone how to chop something a certain way”. As she illustrated the right side of the map, she explained the ways in which she passes on information:

I guess how people have taught me, I'm teaching them ... that's how I would pass information, verbally and through showing, and then they take those experiences, they take these two things that I've experienced and they carry that with them when they share it with other people or if they do it themselves.

Awa has been taught to cook through verbal instruction and demonstration and now she uses these methods in her role as a leader of the Cooking Club. Since these techniques have been successful for her, she sees value in sharing information in similar ways and continuing the cycle.

Sometimes the methods that participants bring into the program are not accepted by the others. Vic-ki spoke about one example:

I already know we'll be chopping a lot of garlic ... but to me when I cook I do all of the work by myself so I have to do everything really fast ... I can't help but wondering, what if we used my methods to speed up this process and then I talked to Melanie, another member at Cooking Club, and I said what if we used some kind of food processor ... And she said she thinks people like to do the slower way because it's more fun. I was like okay [laughter] I can respect that.

Here, Vicki is drawing on a method she has learned through her own experience with cooking. However, within this different context, and with many more hands available to chop garlic, the others choose to continue with the traditional methods they are familiar with. This can relate back to the first theme I identified, that of the welcoming environment: even though the methods and experiences people share are not always approved by or taken up by other members, sharing is always welcome. Vicki recognizes this, still feeling comfortable in sharing her own knowledge of cooking, though understanding that some methods will find more success in the program than others.

“Go by the feeling”

Cooking is a very sensory activity and so many of the forms of information activities in the program are embodied. In her interview, Vicki spoke of how her mother taught her to cook, to “go by the feeling, so it's a pinch of this, a pinch of that”. She has found this approach difficult, trying to understand exactly what steps are involved, but by experimenting with recipes and “revising them to [her] own liking”, she has found methods that work for her.

Awa discussed a similar approach of learning by doing:

It was really a trial and error thing, like have I made things completely salty? Yes. I've made things completely bland, I've made things too spicy, so a lot of it was also trial and error and then with the trial and error I knew that next time this feels like enough or next time I'm actually going to taste it, wait for it, and then see how it is.

Awa used experimentation to develop her knowledge of cooking, and while it sometimes turned out well, she used her less successful attempts as learning opportunities. Her experimentation has given her the ability to judge the spice level by what feels right to her based on her past experience, or at times based on its look or taste. She trusts her body in making these decisions and interpreting the information from the food.

An example from the field illustrates how sensory information can provide additional cues to participants beyond a reliance on experience. In the excerpt below, Awa has asked another participant, Nadine, to help with cutting parsley:

Nadine: Do you want to use the whole thing?

Awa: Just the leaves.

Nadine: Why?

Awa: Okay you can cut all of it.

Nadine: You can get a stronger taste if you use all of it.

[Awa moves to the stove to assist Lana, then returns to Nadine at the table]

Awa: The parsley smells good.

Nadine: [stops chopping] Oh is this parsley?

Lana: You thought it was cilantro.

Nadine: I thought it was cilantro. I wouldn't have done the roots.

Food provides much of the information to the participants in the program. In a previous week, Nadine had chopped cilantro and, seeing a leafy green bushel at this session, had mixed the two herbs up. However, the smell of the parsley made it more clearly identifiable than its initial appearance. Awa used sensory cues to signal to the other participants where the mistake had been made. Her comments were necessary as the smell, though very strong, was only evident once it had been remarked upon. The body thus serves a very important role in the exchange of information, both in the moment and in storing knowledge for future sessions.

Bon Appétit

An important part of cooking is enjoying the meal that you have made, and this is no different at the Cooking Club. The final meal produced each week is recognized as a culmination of everyone's efforts and serves as a representation of this collaborative information exchange. Vicki considered the meal as a group project in her interview:

Cooking in Cooking Club is more fun than cooking for myself because by cooking with others I learn to work with others and then I learn to give back, to contribute to the project ... Some connections were built through that process when we work together, and then after the work is done we appreciate the results together, by eating food and talking.

Awa offered a similar response in sharing the part of the process she enjoys most:

I know it's cheesy but probably the part I feel best about is when we get to eat it and know that everybody made it. Kind of like you're capable of that ... And even when I feed my friends, the best part is when everybody gets to eat and know that I either made that for them or we all made that together.

With these comments, both informants express pride in the work that they have done, both individually and in the ways they have been able to come together as a group. While the information aspects of this meal are not explicitly recognized by the participants, by acknowledging everyone's contributions, they are also inadvertently acknowledging all of the different sources of information they drew on throughout the cooking.

From my experience in the field, this final time together each week was also a time of reflection, when we would go over the cooking process, discuss any issues that arose and how they were resolved, and make suggestions for the next session. While this reflection was more focused on the physical and tangible aspects of the meal itself, underlyingly it was an examination of the success of the exchange of information that took place in the program.

Hektor's (2003) research on information activities can offer some additional insight here, specifically the activity of 'dressing' which he defines as "putting words and pictures to thoughts and ideas" (p. 137). Hartel, Cox, and Griffin (2016) define this more broadly as "when thoughts and ideas are given physical expression" (para. 35). Under this second definition, the meal that has been produced by the Cooking Club can be seen more clearly as a form of dressing, as the various information behaviours mentioned above have all found form through the creation of this food. It is through the sharing of information that we end up with this final product, thus a physical representation of the information at work in the space.

Conclusion

With my research, I looked at the information behaviours at work among participants in a community cooking program. I found that the community aspect of this program plays a key role in how information is exchanged, as all participants are invited and encouraged to share their own experiences, contributing to a rich information setting. As well, they tend to share the methods that have been most successful for them, producing a cyclical pattern of information as these techniques continue to be used in broader contexts.

The food within the program also has important informational value and participants most often engage with it through embodied forms of information. Different sensory experiences from the smell to the taste or feel of an ingredient or meal can aid the participants in understanding how to use it in their cooking. The body can be used as a sense-maker, relying on these sensory clues as well as past experiences in determining what "feels" right. This interpretation is subjective and imprecise and so participants often rely on trial and error to better hone these skills.

Finally, Hektor's (2003) work on information activities was drawn on for analysis of the meal itself, the final product that the group creates. With this framework, the meal can be seen as a form of

dressings information, where the varied forms or sources of information in the cooking program have been brought together for a collaborative project. While the participants are not explicitly aware of the underlying informational representation of the meal, they still celebrate and recognize each person's contribution towards their shared enjoyment.

An additional area of interest within the Cooking Club concerns a cookbook that has been created by participants in previous years of the program, including recipes from each week. While it has not recently been updated, it currently serves a role within the program as more of a memento or scrapbook of previous programming, though participants mentioned plans to start it up again. Time did not permit an analysis of the cookbook but this could be viewed as another form of dressing, as it is a collaborative project that again represents the information in the space. Further consideration of how Hektor's (2003) work fits into the context of the Cooking Club and a closer analysis of this more permanent form of dressing, as compared to a short-lived meal, may offer deeper understandings of the nature of information in the program through future study.

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