Fiona Hackney

Taking CARE: Building Community Assets through Collaborative Creative-Making

A third of the world population is now connected through social media and the internet yet, as Sherry Turkle observes (2011), the more connected we become, the less we seem to engage and interact. This paper argues that connecting and sharing through crafting and making can forge deeper, more meaningful relationships that combat isolation and promote individual and community agency. It focuses on amateur crafting practices to explore how handicrafts – the purest form of hobby activities according to hobbies historian Steven Gelber (1999) – might offer opportunities for an integrated participatory methodology for connecting and learning through making and sharing that both grows from the grassroots and has the potential to be scaled up and applied to other communities of interest and practice such as sports clubs, business groups, dance enthusiasts or gardeners (Wenger, 1998). The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Co-Creating CARE project, a partnership between Craftspace, Birmingham, Voluntary Arts England, Bealtaine Festival (age and creativity), Dublin, and Falmouth University, which works with crafters in Cornwall, Birmingham and Dublin to explore collaborative engagements through making, is the central case study for research: http://cocreatingcare.wordpress.com/the-project/

Millions engage in creative hobbies each year, activities that are undertaken voluntarily for pleasure and involve high levels of ingenuity, competence and creativity. Often dismissed or devalued, the knowledge, skills and expertise embedded in hobby craft activities could be developed and applied through, for instance, volunteering, training, community activism, small businesses or social enterprise. As a medium and a process, craft has unique potential to engage individuals and communities, and bring them together in dialogue through making, bridging differences of culture, age and identity (Sennett, 2012). The diverse ways in which community knowledge, potential and agency can be maximised through genuinely collaborative co-designed projects, which engage all participants in some or all of the design process, and the role of creative practice in this, is an additional concern (Light et al. 2013).

CARE stands for 'community asset-based research and enterprise'. It aims to test and develop a methodology for co-produced community learning through creative practice that builds dialogue and promotes self-reflection and reflexivity. The research focuses on such activities as knitting, crochet, embroidery, paper-cutting, quilting, woodwork and lace-making. Having confidence in one's own abilities is a powerful position from which to take on new skills, and a belief in the value of intergenerational and cross-cultural skill-sharing through applied learning (learning through doing) between community participants and the project team underpins the project's co-creational ethos. An initial pilot project (P1) has been completed with community participants in Birmingham and Cornwall, and the results recorded in a series of short films (a film summarising the project is available at: http://vimeo.com/69686569).This paper focuses on the methods and outcomes of this study and considers how learning will be applied in the second phase (P2).

Project partners are central to the evolution, dissemination and impact of CARE, and their close involvement ensures that research is embedded in, and connects with, existing community activities, interests and concerns. Deidre Figereido, Director of Craftspace (http://www.craftspace.co.uk/) has extensive experience working with craft and social engagement and is actively involved in the project as community co-researcher, facilitating research, co-design workshops and project activities in Birmingham and Dublin. Craftspace has strong links with Bealtaine Festival. The two organisations developed the Wandering Methods project with a craft group in Dublin (http://bealtaine.com/wandering-methods). Connecting this group with a Fab Lab in Cornwall, CARE aims to help build skills and capacity through collaboration (www.makernow.co.uk). Voluntary Arts' recently completed Hand on Crafts research project (http://www.voluntaryarts.org/take-part/hand-on-crafts/), which explored skill-

sharing through craft and digital practice, provides important qualitative data about creative making and intergenerational sharing, and informs the project. The Crafts Council is a CARE collaborator and will help disseminate project outcomes to the wider crafts community.

Taking CARE: Theory and method

Before considering the outcomes of the pilot in more detail, it is useful to outline the project's theoretical and historical underpinnings: the ideas and arguments that informed our thinking and helped us shape what we did. What we understand as craft has changed beyond all recognition in recent years. Terms such as crafting, craftivism (craft activism), manbroidery, counterfeit crochet, net craft, 'stitch 'n' bitch', guerrilla knitting, yarn bombing, Punk DIY, subcultural and indie craft signal a new energy in the craftworld (Adamson, 2010): a will to re-engage with craft agency, its political heritage and the counter-cultural radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s (Buszek 2011; Greer 2008).This re-emergence of craft is generally associated with a younger generation of activist, technology-savvy makers (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007; Von Busch 2010). Craft as socially engaged practice, however, also provides a lens through which to view home and hobby crafts and reconsider the agencies it affords in the context of everyday life. The apparent cultural invisibility, domestic, gendered and amateur constituents of home and hobby crafts provide a starting point to explore 'other' forms of social engagement, agency and community activism; a mode of 'quiet activism' perhaps, that embodies and enables 'the ability or capacity to act' (Bratich and Brush 2011; Hackney 2013a).

Perceptions of crafts practice as political, however, are neither new nor uncontested. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch use the term 'craftwashing' to describe instances when a craft aesthetic is used to market fashionable goods whose desirability often obscures the 'sticky ethical, environmental, and economic questions around their production' (Burisch 2013). A recent event hosted by Norwegian Crafts at Toynbee Hall – the historical heart of British socialism – was more optimistic about the role of craft as an agent for social change. Simple solutions to questions about the political efficacy of craft remain allusive, yet having these debates is vital; they contribute to the often highly charged discussions about the meaning and value of craft, particularly in the light of DCMS proposals to remove it as a category with the creative industries (*The Guardian* 2013). These are challenging but also exciting times. Commentators write about plurality, process and an expanded notion of crafts practice that includes processes of conversation, questioning and thought formation (Ahl 2010; Gates 2013). Craft historian Paul Greenhalgh (2002) draws attention to the 'persistence' of craft in a wide range of activities in science as well as the arts, although he remains dismissive of amateur practice, while Glenn Adamson (2010, 2013) identifies crafts' political and post-disciplinary aspects as the twin tendencies defining the future of the discipline. Both argue that in a period of unprecedented change historicising contemporary crafts and their political and social underpinnings is essential in order to reach an understanding of craft beyond the boundaries of prescribed genres.

Current interest in the socio-cultural aspects of crafts, how they function in wider society as a means to connect or enable groups and individuals, informs the sociologist Richard Sennett's recent publication *Together, the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012). Sennett proposes that making things together promotes modes of social cooperation and can generate new ideas about how society might work. He argues that by isolating people modern society not only breeds anxiety but also de-skills individuals and communities. Defining cooperation as an exchange in which participants benefit from the encounter, achieving what they can't do alone, the challenge is to forge new forms of meaningful collaboration, a process fraught with difficulty but which, if achieved, could help groups and individuals build dialogue with one another and gain insight into themselves.

Any project exploring creative collaboration must consider how communities work and the power relations embedded within them. Alison Gilchrist's (2000, 2009) notion of the 'well-connected community' as an integrating mechanism that 'tolerates difference, celebrates diversity, promotes equality and acknowledges mutuality', and my recent work on the activist elements of historical and contemporary hobby crafts (Hackney 2013a) provide a framework for thinking about the forms of agency associated with creative making and the nature of hobby craft groups. Gilchrist (2000, 2009), who has been involved in community development for over thirty years and acts as a consultant on the CARE project, draws on complexity theory to map out a model of 'community' as an integrated and evolving system of networks comprising diverse and dynamic connections. Communities, nevertheless, she reminds us can function in positive *and* negative ways. So while informal networks function as a

collective resource – a repository of common sense, experiential knowledge and shared wisdom, often mediated by women – they can also be oppressive and exclusive, preventing the community acquiring new insights or learning from experiences that challenge assumptions. Gilchrist proposes an 'edge of chaos' model; an intermediate zone between rigid and random modes of action and thought in which forms of 'untidy creativity' might operate.

This conceptualisation helped us think about a typology of different crafting groups, from long-established groups with a relatively rigid set of shared attitudes and beliefs about the value of making, to the more transient nature and loose affiliations of those who come together sporadically, but whose main commitment is to their individual practice. It also made us think about the process of collaboration and how practices of 'untidy creativity' and new forms of collaboration might result from introducing elements of randomness in the form of uncoordinated acts of creative-making. The participants, whether trained or not, might be perceived as a new type of amateur practitioner who, informed by a wealth of online and offline resources as well as their life experiences and expertise, open up an alternative space between professional and amateur practice, forging new channels of value and 'quiet activism' through exchange (Hackney 2013a). Paying attention to the 'small stories' (Gates 2013) of creative exchange, moreover, provides insight into how agreement is, or is not, achieved; the struggle that occurs as participants' ideas and values are challenged or reinforced (Hackney 2013b)

Working with crafts hobbyists is an ideal means to engage with older people's creative practice and its potential when increasing numbers face long periods of retirement on limited incomes, or have to deal with significant life changes in their middle years. Apprenticeships focus on younger people, while all ages participate in hobbies and possess hobby-based knowledge, networks and competencies, and handicrafts have an established history of social inclusion, crossing boundaries of class (Gelber 1999).The therapeutic aspects of making, moreover, have long been debated and recent evidence confirms the benefits to health and wellbeing of structures and process that offer creative challenge and control (Reynolds 2010). For these reasons, CARE's pilot study focused on intergenerational exchange between a small group of older (fifty plus) women crafts practitioners and younger (under fifty) textile students, and a member of staff. The decision to include students and a member of staff was largely pragmatic (a matter of access within the time limitations of the project) and to some extent introduced underlying tensions due to differing perceptions of amateur and professional practice, and the power relations associated with these positions. The different ways in which participants positioned themselves in this regard, however, was illuminating. Several of the older women, though working principally in an amateur context, had professional arts training and aimed to take their practice onto a professional footing. The students, meanwhile, elected to work with unfamiliar techniques, viewing the project as an opportunity to learn new skills and experiment beyond the boundaries of their normative studio practice.

Drawing on action and participatory research methods, CARE developed a research framework with participants, which was intended to encourage reflexivity and explore processes of shared learning through making, exchange and skill-sharing, at a distance and face-to-face (Crouch and Pearce 2012). As such, the research feeds into debates about alternative modes of education, apprenticeships and online learning communities. The methodology foregrounds 'doing' and is organised around a series of actions and processes of making, narrating, sharing, responding, connecting and reflecting, which were captured on film and orally.

'Call and response': Pippa's story

Six intergenerational 'buddy partnerships' consisting of one older Creative Practitioner (CP) and a younger Creative Respondent (CR) were established with community participants in Birmingham and Falmouth. A 'show and tell' method, which we came to describe as a 'call and response', for sharing was established whereby the CPs told their 'making story' through a short film and the exchange of a 'making box' (containing a few representative items) and the CRs created something in response: a crafted item, a sketch book, a short film, etc. The buddy partners then came together to record a 'buddy exchange' to discuss their responses to each other's work. Everyone came together for a Knowledge Sharing event at the end of the pilot phase to reflect on their experiences, view the films and discuss the materials produced. The six participants used a range of craft mediums from embroidery and sewing to lace-making and paper-folding. Each had a distinctive story to tell, but common experiences and motivations emerged. The Cornwall CPs, Linda, Jane, Barbara and Pippa, were filmed by Bryony Stokes and, in Birmingham, films about Elsie and

Myrtle were made by Joseph Potts. This section will focus on the Cornish participants' 'making stories', and Pippa's film in particular. These, I argue, voice craft narratives that are often overlooked in films that develop what could be termed a community craft aesthetic in a particularly compelling way (http://cocreatingcare.wordpress.com/projects/).

The CPs tell their crafting stories in first-person narratives, using selected craft items and tools (a sewing machine, a spinning wheel, an embroidery hoop, for instance) as props that demonstrate the sights and sounds of the making process. Linda, whose film is a riot of colour, talks about the addictive – even compulsive – and therapeutic aspects of crochet, spinning and felting: 'if you're creative and you're busy then it also helps you to be happy', she observes. For Linda, as for many if not all the women, it is the 'creative process' that drives her. She explains how crochet set her on a path that led to art college as a mature student and work as an abstract painter. Whereas Linda valued the speed and ease of crochet, others describe the time and patience their craft involves. Jane, who originally trained as a fine artist, took up needlework more recently and is a member of an embroidery group in Helston, Cornwall; she combines her stitching and fine art skills to produce mixed-media pieces – responses to landscape – that are proving so successful that she is currently embarking on a 'second career' as an artist/maker. In her film, Jane stresses the conviviality and comradeship of the Helston group where there is 'no stitching and bitching. There's stitching and chatting and laughing and joshing. But actually the focus for everybody is embroidery and it's an exchange of ideas, and skill and experience. It's *so* good for the soul' – a sentiment her colleagues endorsed. Barbara, another member of the Helston group who works in stitch and lace, relishes the process of hand-making: 'the longer it takes the better I like it. I like the detail, which can be a blessing and a curse.' In her films, she displays the first piece of lace that she made and demonstrates working with bobbins, commenting on both the beauty of the imperfections and the potential of the process, reflecting that 'the only limitation is your imagination.'

Pippa, the last of the Cornwall CPs, discusses the difficulties involved in being creative and making sewing pay. I will analyse her film in more detail in order to consider the relationship between form, content and narrative. The film opens with a cropped shot of Pippa's hands at work on a red garment (putting a zip into someone's much-loved cardigan) as, against the background hum of her sewing machine, she explains how her business gradually snowballed from home dressmaking activities to more ambitious projects. The camera moves between close-ups of Pippa working to shots of her in her workshop and ends with a still of her standing outside her shop front with the title of her business 'Make-Do & Mend' prominently displayed. This series of shots provides a backdrop for Pippa's narrative of her 'making journey'. She describes how she learnt to sew at home from her mother who was a dressmaker and needlework teacher, and how she learnt the economic value of her skills, making additional income when training to be a teacher and when her children – she has five – were young. The story of how the business grew with the support of her local community is told against a sequence of stills: cloth, cotton reels, order books, clothes, pins, even a cat, which convey the intimacy of work in a family/domestic setting. The shop is located in part of the family home (although it was originally a shop) and the business employs three full-time and two part-time staff including her husband (after he was made redundant) – he does the canvas work – and one of her daughters. They do repairs and alterations, tailoring and dressmaking, make curtains and soft furnishings, upholstery and canvas work: 'you have to be adaptable', Pippa reflects. She is eloquent and adamant about the real need for this kind of service at a time when a lot of people don't even have thread in the house:

> I feel these skills need to be continued. People need to do them for pleasure but also to see them as an opportunity to earn money, to make a job from it. And they are quite undervalued skills, I think, because they are craft skills and people see them as just hobbies now rather than a way of earning a living. The main satisfaction, I think, at the end of it is that you've got something that is absolutely unique and is yours. You've got that ownership of it haven't you and the pride, and that I think is the thing that is very difficult to instil in people, the pride [pause] of creation perhaps [laughs].

The camera returns to shots of Pippa working on the red cardigan, returning the viewer to the task in hand as she voices her major concern: the 'big divide between doing something as a hobby and thinking of it as a profession'. The difficulty, that is, of combining creative projects with the more mundane jobs that bring the money in – a dilemma that sits at the heart of this project. In the closing shot, Pippa talks about the satisfactions of running a crafting business (see quote above), affirming the significance of ownership

(of one's work and one's business) and the creative fulfilment to be had from working in this way.

A montage of close-up and contextual shots, action, narrative and carefully observed stills of the tools of Pippa's trade, the visual aesthetic (colour, texture, decoration, pattern and attention to detail) of the film communicates the importance of 'small things'. The movement between hand, face and object establishes a slow, deliberate rhythm that echoes the sound of the sewing machine and conveys a mood of calm, concentration and absorption. The sense of specificity, value, excitement and intimacy underscores and reinforces Pippa's narrative about valuing skills and competencies that are often dismissed as unimportant, domestic or hobbyist, and how these might be transformed into something more 'serious'. 'It is a question of having the confidence in your abilities and valuing what you do and then other people will value it', she declares: a mantra that bookends the film being delivered at its start and end. Pippa's film depicts a quietly confident, highly articulate woman whose attitude and achievements represent a form of quiet activism – an inspiring example of resourcefulness and resilience that exemplifies how undervalued, amateur skills can be transformed into a creative, fulfilling job.

The Cornish CRs, Mia, Hannah, Kathleen, and Zoe, used a variety of methods and means to respond to, and reflect on what they were given, including sketch and scrap-booking, collage, embroidery stitching, digital sketch books and digital embroidery, and examples of work can be seen on the project website. Time was limited and they could not produce finished pieces, but this enhanced the freshness and immediacy of work such as a lovely short film that Kathleen made in response to Jane's work and her feeling for colour in landscape. The resulting 'buddy films' are available on the CARE website and while there is not space to discuss specific outcomes here (more detail is given in the section below) there was general agreement that the 'call and response' method created an unpredictable and imaginative space akin to Gilchrist's intermediate zone of 'untidy creativity', which would benefit further investigation.

'Material consequences': Making, sharing and reflecting

Three major learning points emerged from the Knowledge Exchange event at the end of the pilot phase. Firstly, everyone agreed that the films, particularly the first set in which the CPs talked about their work and motivations, had great presence as *things*. Participants found them inspirational and enjoyed watching each other's films, while several reflected that their films caused them to view their own work in a different light. However, concerns emerged that, although beautiful, the films were overly mediated and that the second set of 'buddy films' were descriptive rather than reflective. A process of sharing, connecting and reflecting was needed which allowed participants greater control over the process in a less stage-managed, time-limited manner, with opportunities for further 'call and response' iterations. Secondly, the degree to which participants invested in CARE depended on the extent that the project corresponded to their needs, interests and aspirations; what they had to share, for instance, or what they wished to learn. Some found immediate points of correspondence with and/or interest in their buddy's work while others were less satisfied, feeling that their work had been misunderstood or misinterpreted. More flexibility was required in the CARE process to allow participants to shape their 'call' and take ownership of the project, signalling what they had to offer, what they wished to learn, or to achieve, and how they wished to do this.

Thirdly, tensions emerged around different concepts of craft, skill, learning, amateur and professional practice, hand and digital making, and the complex notions of identity bound up with these. Generational differences emerged here and were particularly evident among those with a strong sense of community identity who, for example, felt that the project pushed them into new, unfamiliar territory but did not fulfil their primary aim of passing on information about traditional skills and techniques. To some extent, these points of tension were the most productive things to emerge from the pilot because they signalled where learning/change was taking place and, crucially, how this might not always be a pleasant experience. Acknowledging that moving out of one's 'comfort zone' can be difficult, explicit protocols are needed to ensure that participants are prepared to encounter unfamiliar approaches to creative making while asserting their own views; to be ready, in other words, to seek a means of compromise. The pilot suggested that compromise is bound up with the ability to recognise change when it occurs and reflect on it. One participant, for instance, felt that she experienced a revelation about her work – she went so far as to describe it as 'an epiphany' – but didn't reflect on this within the context of the engagement process. Additional 'call and response' iterations would have enabled her to share this experience with her buddy, opening possibilities for deeper reflection through collaboration.

The pilot project helped the team to identify some of the shortcomings, but also the strengths and real value involved in a 'call and response' method for promoting collaborative learning and self-reflection through making. Issues around the power relationships involved in exchange, differing values and identities (group and individual), aspirations, needs and skills that arose, however, suggested the need for a project framework that was more interactive. The idea of a digital platform to develop the 'call and response' method as a form of 'material consequences' by introducing chance elements of interaction and capturing the 'small stories' of collaboration emerged from discussions at the Knowledge Sharing event. The title signals the playful aspects of collaboration as well as the importance of material making as a process. The digital platform will include members of the project team to ensure a more inclusive approach to research and will be developed through community co-design workshops with participants. Digital workbaskets will serve as a place to store (and share) products and reflections from the 'call and response' exchanges (stories, video, patterns, instructions, poems, images) and basket interactions will be captured in a series of micro-blog posts.

Conclusion

The idea that seeing oneself through another's eyes could unlock unrecognised potential, and that collaboration, co-operation and exchange through creative making might offer a unique way of achieving this, which emerged from discussions with project partners and participants, was an important starting point for the CARE project. We have not yet fully tested this precept, but the pilot project provided insights and pointers, and illuminated many things, not least the value of film for communicating craft and its potential for developing a visual rhetoric for telling the largely overlooked stories of those working outside mainstream craft networks in compelling ways. The CPs' making stories, moreover, demonstrate the fuzzy distinctions between amateur and professional practice, suggesting a creative space in which these 'new amateurs' might re-imagine their practice untrammelled by professional dictates in distinctive ways. To return to Sennett (2012), achieving cooperation (not collusion) is a difficult and demanding process. He describes a 'fraught, ambiguous zone of experience where skill and competence encounter resistance and intractable difference' (p.336), something that both echoes Gilchrist's notion of an intermediate zone of 'untidy making' and captures some of the tensions experienced in our buddy exchanges, when different generational and/or community-located notions of creative making clashed and/or found grounds for compromise. Sennett argues that the trick is to respond to others on their own terms. This involves such skills as: the ability to listen well, behave tactfully, find points of agreement, manage disagreement, avoid frustration and achieve interactions that are 'knitted together' though exchanges of difference (dialogic cooperation) or the location of common ground (dialectic cooperation) or, most often, a combination of the two, observations that will be foremost in the CARE team's mind as we move forward to phase two.

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Dr. Fiona Hackney is Associate Professor, Design of Cultures & Community Engagement, Falmouth University, Cornwall.