

Crafting Communities of CARE

By Mary Loveday Edwards
Deirdre Figueiredo, Craftspace
Fiona Hackney.

This paper presents some of the findings resulting from the AHRC-funded project Co-Producing CARE: Community Asset-Based Research and Enterprise, which explored how craft processes might build community assets and agencies. It focuses on the second phase of the project: Making Things Together, which involved groups located in The Wesleyan Community Care Project, Birmingham (using Soho House Museum as a resource) and in Dublin Castle who collectively crafted items in response to their respective heritage sites, and collaborated with Makernow, the digital fabrication studio (FabLab) at Falmouth University to develop prototypes; on community groups in Falmouth who worked on skills-based meetings and on ethnographic embroidery; and on the digital platform Making Things Together, which attempted to make a digital meeting space for crafters. A central finding is the ways in which co-creative crafting produces a safe space in which participants can connect, communicate, take risks, challenge themselves, work out differences, voice views and become active in new ways. The CARE model, which essentially pays attention to and values the often difficult but extremely valuable processes of cooperation that emerge when people make things together, is flexible and may be adapted to fit the specificities of different groups and their circumstances. We argue that the messy processes of collaborative making not only parallel but can also materialise the ‘messy’ nature of community with its disjunctions and disruptions. Far from smoothing out difference, we found that the communities of interest that form around creative making find ways of materialising and transposing those differences through the making process itself in different ways. The CARE model, as such, is predicated on the creative tensions and difficulties that emerge when people encounter difference, because we believe that this is where innovation happens; where new discoveries occur, new perspectives and experiences arise and new understandings emerge, all of which drive new initiatives and support new agencies.

The craft activities were the impetus for us all to meet up, but these gatherings amounted to much more. Apart from renewing, strengthening and acquiring new skills, they were occasions for conversation, confidences, relaxed banter and laughter. Everyone has benefited in different ways, whether it be self-belief, sense of purpose, companionship, or just plain fun...I never expected to get so much from the project... In actual fact, I have benefited hugely from taking part. (Viv Wilson, participant)

Richard Sennett has had quite a presence in the craft world for the past few years: firstly with the publication of The Craftsman (2008), which looked at what craft was, from its history to an expanded field; and then more recently with Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation (2013). In the later book, Sennett contends that cooperation itself is a craft, and that it requires practice and skill just as other crafts do. He says that cooperation in our current society has become weak as we have been enabled by the prevalence of online and short (term) labour conditions and interactions to avoid engaging with people unlike ourselves; we connect only with our own “tribe” and avoid the challenges of living with people who differ from us ethnically, religiously, economically. Similarly, life lived like a series of internet exchanges allows us to debate but not so much to listen, which is where, he argues, the development of real cooperation lies. Interestingly, the trajectory of the CARE project - concerned throughout its lifespan with the interactions between craft and communication - in many ways mirrors the development of his arguments throughout these two books, with the first part of the project (Hackney 2013) chiefly examining craft and its properties, and the second part (examined here) becoming increasingly interested in exploring the communication that occurs through craft.

CARE stands for ‘community asset-based research and enterprise’. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), as part of its Connected Communities Programme, funded the Co-Creating CARE project, a partnership between Craftspace in Birmingham, Voluntary Arts England, Bealtaine Festival in Dublin, and Falmouth University. CARE brought together an interdisciplinary team of academics, practitioners and community researchers to work with crafters in Cornwall, Birmingham and Dublin to explore collaborative engagements through making. The project ran from January 2013 to August 2014, and aimed to test and develop a methodology for co-produced community learning through creative practice, skill-sharing and storytelling that built dialogue and promoted confidence, self-reflection and reflexivity.

The background to the project included both theoretical and practical histories, interests, and ventures, including an interest in the idea of quiet activism – that you can shift or change things through embodied practices of making things; being interested in people’s motivations as well as their skills; and the idea of recognition for things you are not paid to do; in skills share and skills transfer, working with communities of place; and of interest in a range of social ecologies.

The initial, pilot phase of the project paired crafters inter-generationally in a ‘buddying’ system. Buddies brought a range of knowledge, expertise, enthusiasms, ambitions, desires and creative capacities. They were asked to share the experience of making – firstly through the actual making process and again by reflection. The system was asset-based: each buddy made an object (or started an object) based on their existing skills and this was passed to their partner buddy, to respond to. In this ‘call and response’ mode that was conducted principally, but not exclusively, through making things, all participants were both makers and responders, engaged in creative making practices and giving supportive reactions, helping people recognise, reflect on, value and develop the skills and aptitudes they had. Everybody was both a mentor and a mentee. The project presented opportunities for everybody to learn and teach, give guidance and experiment. Bringing people together to explore the exchanges that happen through collaborative making allowed us to question and examine what the distinctive benefits of learning through creative making might be.

There were many positive experiences of these opportunities that were shared, both in the first stage’s knowledge exchange event and right throughout the whole project. Additionally, there were aspects of the project that we felt needed further addressing, and into phase two we worked with groups to address these. We were very aware, for example, that the second phase would contain differences in priority, a main example being between academic and community partners, with variances in expected outputs – could we either find outputs that would work for both, or all, or could we find ways to extract the required outputs from the same experiences? This was not only a practical issue but an ethical one – in co-creation it is important to not make one set of views dominate over others. Differences inevitably arose, and understanding why and how these emerge and are dealt with was not a by-product, but rather a central part of the project.

Similarly there was a need to make sure that participants were not simply involved in the project to be “acted upon” but could find something of meaning within it. While we needed to frame the project in some ways in order to know what we were researching, the first part of the projects showed us that we needed more flexibility to allow participants to take control and ownership of what they were doing. We hoped that we could co-create structures within which participants could indicate what they had to offer and what they wished to gain, and how they might do this. And there was the issue of inclusion: making sure everything was accessible, from access to tools and equipment, to the language in which meetings are held.

We were still interested in the idea of how crafting affected communication, whether there was something that affected how people communicated if they were communicating via craft. Some of the participants from the first phase were keen to carry on and progress the project further, while we felt that there was an opportunity to start new environments and settings as well. To this end we developed, alongside our partners, several arms of the experiment, trying to examine different ways craft might be implicated in communication.

There were four main areas of the project that continued evolving the CARE methodology and project:

- Making Things Together: Co-Creating Heritage, which involved groups located in The Wesleyan Community Care Project using Soho House Museum in their locality, and in Dublin Castle who collectively crafted items in response to their respective heritage sites, and collaborated with Makernow, the digital fabrication studio (FabLab) at Falmouth University to develop prototypes;
- community groups (based at the Uni in Falmouth) who worked on skills-based meetings;
- another group in Falmouth who looked at what we began to call ethnographic embroidery; and
- the digital platform Making Things Together, which attempted to make a digital meeting space for crafters

Co-Creating Heritage: Craftspace in Birmingham was the CARE project community partner. During the first part of the project, inter-generational partnerships occurred with members of groups that were already linked with Craftspace, and this continued into the second phase. Craftspace ran this craft project, exploring the possibility for creative enterprise as we age, skills exchange and local heritage, for participants in Birmingham aged 50 and over. The project was inspired by the collections at Soho House Museum in Handsworth (Figure 1,2) as a starting point to source ideas, and then participants worked together to create crafted artworks.



Figure 1: Soho House exterior



Figure 2: Soho House interior

A professional designer maker, Natalie Cole, facilitated workshops over 7 days from the end of March to the end of May 2014, with a celebration event and mini exhibition at Soho House Museum at the end. The makers collaborated with a related group in Dublin in which an artist and product designer collaborated with local older people to produce artwork inspired by Dublin Castle and by the lives of the surrounding community. Textile artist Liz Nilsson had previously worked with a group of local older people in Dublin Castle, on producing artwork for exhibition managed by Craftspace for the Bealtaine Festival. Participants drew on the location, contents and archives alongside their own memories and stories (Figure 3). For the CARE project a collaboration was developed with Craftspace in Birmingham and Makernow in Falmouth, allowing for cross-pollination and development ideas across social and cultural settings and introducing digital possibilities to traditional methods of making. Because both groups were using the impetus or inspiration of heritage buildings for their making, this part of the CARE project became known as Co-Creating Heritage.



Figure 3

In Dublin the lead artist Liz Nilsson worked with the group in the following way:

My ambition...was to encourage the group to move away from individual making towards collaboration. I hoped to encourage the participants to think that the sharing of experience, skill, history and stories are all integral parts of craft making... to stimulate interactive communication between the participants through shared craft activities... actively encourag(ing) the exchange of personal stories, ideas and skills...

I believe this activity both stimulated the sharing of ideas and broke down boundaries about ownership as all work had been co-created. The atmosphere was almost meditative at times. Conversation drifted across the table now and then and someone burst out in spontaneous laughter; but it was mostly quiet and reflective...I asked everyone in the group about what they were good at. Some answered readily but others found it hard to think about something that they were good at in relation to craft. We extended the word craft to cooking, baking, writing and skills relating to problem solving. This session stimulated the group dynamic and we really got to know each other better.

During our first session of the project we had a tour of the building. Everyone was intrigued by how the carpet designs in the castle were inspired by the ceilings' intricate plasterwork... we explored the possibility of making two long collective prints and hanging them beside the ornate entrance staircase. We decided that the inspiration for the panels was going to be the shapes and pattern structure of the stair carpet; hexagons and diamonds. We asked Justin in the Makernow Lab (Falmouth) to laser cut multiples of these shapes in plywood as printing blocks to use in the fabrication of the panels.



Figure 4



Figure 5

A few mistakes became apparent and this dismayed the participants. I reassured them that when the whole print was finished those mistakes would not be visible... one participant expressed the notion of mistakes like this: "A team of four printing the panel. The first person makes a mistake. " Oh, heavens, how terrible!" The second person makes a mistake. "Oh, dear!" The third person makes a mistake, "it doesn't matter". When I make a mistake, nobody notices!!!

Both groups worked really hard and it was clear that they were both proud and surprised about the end-result seven hours later. If a single individual working alone had block printed these long panels it would have taken several days. The speed of producing something in a group is one advantage of collaboration. I believe that the interaction and discussion between the group members refined and improved the resulting artwork. As in all collaboration there were moments of both frustration and euphoria, but on the whole I think this approach worked really well. Some members did more observing than actual printing, but when it was finished they took as much ownership over the finished pieces as the more active members.

Participant Noreen wrote, "Each person has experienced the design process, from struggling with it, and from having to compromise with others. We have made design decisions, we have learned about colour, repetition, contrasts, balance, and harmony and especially about negotiating agreement. I think for the future, we will look at the world with more of a designer's eye."

And fellow participant Marie wrote, “There was some banter and a bit of competition between the two groups, which added to the fun...there was a great feeling of support from the team members. This support was carried forward into individual projects, where many offers of help were received...Working with five other people I found a bit frustrating at times. I had certain ideas and of course I felt they were the best ones. Then I reflected that the others also felt the same...”

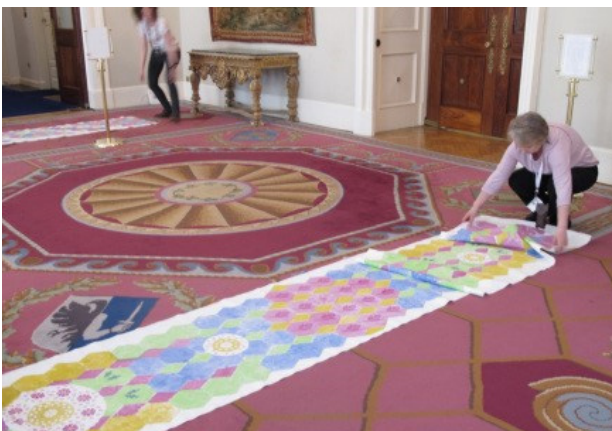


Figure 6



Figure 7

In Birmingham, the Co-Creating Heritage project was hosted at The Wesleyan Community Care Project in Handsworth with used Soho House Museum in the locality being the resource for inspiration. A group of elders from The Wesleyan Community Care Project formed the core group of participants, however the project was also opened up to others aged 50+ from the local area and to previous participants in Craftspace projects.

Different participants had differing reasons for being initially interested in the project: one man joined because his mother is Irish and he was interested in the connection and his own history; he was keen to exchange with people in Ireland and make that connection real again.

In both groups, Dublin and Birmingham, the artists used several activities to foster creativity and collaboration (people introduced themselves to others by choosing an object and talking about themselves in relation to it, for example), and there were Skype exchanges between the groups. This led to some interesting discussions: the Birmingham group became very interested in the techniques used by the Irish group to stimulate creative collaboration and so they decided they would do the same activity the next week. In this way they responded to a new stimulus (broader than just having the artist in Birmingham) and co-created the next session. Both groups wrote and drew on a tablecloth as a means of recording first thoughts collectively and this continued to be added to at end of each session. These cloths become a shared document of the process.

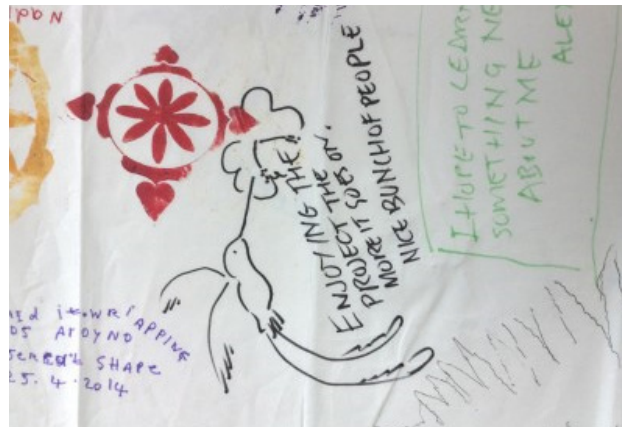


Figure 8

The Makernow workshop in Falmouth became an important resource in the project. Initially the Birmingham and Dublin groups had a Skype introduction to Makernow with a virtual tour of the workshop and then sent CAD files and received samples by post, with great enthusiasm. The participants' experience of seeing the workshop via Skype and sending files and receiving samples prior to the visit had enabled them to establish a language that they could build on further in the workshop itself; in May 2014 each group sent a small number of participants to work with Justin Marshall, Katie Bunnell and the Makernow team.

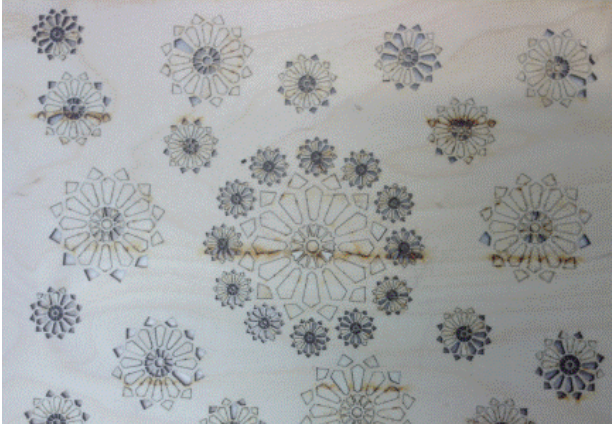


Figure 9



Figure 12

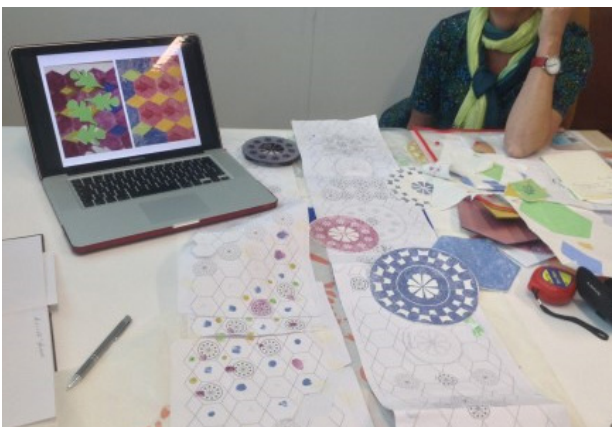


Figure 10



Figure 11

The Birmingham group arrived first and worked on individually co-working with Katie, Justin and Natalie, exploring alternative materials, functions and possible contexts for their work. Robin was initially working with fabric but found herself working on a brooch prototype, excited by the range of samples that she was able to produce relatively quickly using CAD software to laser cut plywood and Perspex. Viv worked in CAD to create a series of wooden base structures for brooches with a design derived from a plasterwork ceiling rose from the interior of Soho House. She would later embellish these with hand stitching, introducing an organic handmade element to contrast with the laser cut plywood. Alex worked with Justin on developing a kit for making a lampshade using a range of leaf patterns cut out in vinyl that could be arranged onto a sheet of semi translucent material. Later on they were joined by the group from Dublin, Liz Nilsson the artist and Shay and Yvonne, participants. Before the visit Shay and Yvonne were both struggling with the concept of digital fabrication; they found it too technical, and too far removed from their own experiences. With the one-to-one mentoring from the staff they were encouraged to explore milling and laser-cutting at a pace that suited them. Everyone developed ideas and objects for a range of outcomes. However, when they talked about product development, participants were clear that this was not really their main interest in being part of the group: personal expression, sharing and chatting were their real motivation for coming together.

Comments on their experience showed them reflecting on the making and on the sharing elements: “It’s certainly shaken me out of my bed...I had no intention of doing jewelry at all...It was seeing this (laser cut samples) and everyone else seeing it too...”; “when we get back it means we’ll all be coming from a similar knowledge point and can help inform each other – being together in the space is very important”.



Figure 13: Viv’s final embroidered brooches

In this workshop everybody got into pairs and one person showed the other a skill. The second person then attempted to write the instructions down. Then the instructions were given to another pair to try to complete (figures 16, 17). This showed in a very visceral way both what the limitations of written instructions were, and flagged up what might be good or better ways to write instructions. It made it very clear that teaching is the best form of learning; but also that some forms of instruction/ways of instructing are more equal than others. It is very hard, for example, to translate a set of written instructions into something that you do with your hands. But then diagrams themselves can (interestingly) lead to just as many misunderstandings as words can.

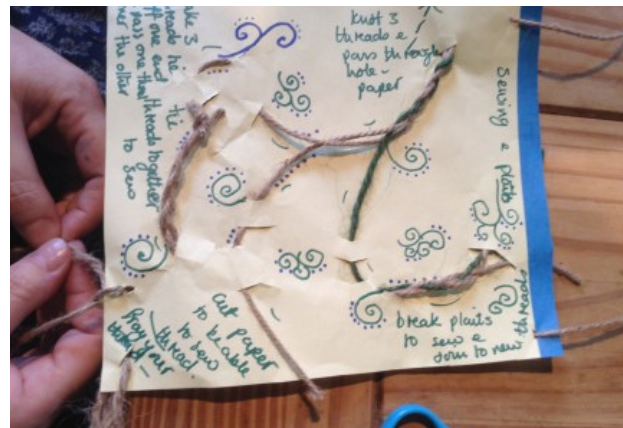


Figure 16

Falmouth Poly group initially arose from a co-creation workshop meeting led by designers who were looking to develop the digital platform; some of the attendees liked the ambience and the idea so much that they decided to organise a series of workshops to be held at the Poly in Falmouth, each led by a member of the group, and attended by whoever wanted to come along. A list of workshop leaders was established and Shane Waltener’s was the first in a series of workshops being run (Figure 14, 15).



Figures 14 and 15



Figure 17

The next workshop was led by Jo McIntosh, a textile artist who taught rag rugging, quite a simple single technique which only involves one specialist piece of kit (but a crochet hook can be used instead); it uses up scraps and old hessian sacks; it can be as simple or as complicated a design as desired; and can be picked up and put it down as needed. Participants found there was a relaxing, chatty atmosphere in the room in this workshop; people in small or large groups just sharing what they were doing, in the room or in their lives. Participants found it easier to talk when doing something with their hands, and easier to sit somewhere in companionable silence when others can see that others are thinking something out or just looking at what they are doing.

By the third workshop, Sue Bamford's 'Bunny Love', a sense of group identity, of people who were comfortable with one another, was starting to emerge; people had started bringing friends and family members in. Sue introduced the concept behind the 'bunny project', which began when she was working at the Eden project and was amazed by the large number of garments that had gathered in lost property and never been reclaimed. This provided some discussion about waste and re-use. Sue initiated her 1000 bunnies (www.bunnylove.co.uk) project, a response that combines the politics of ecology and sustainability with the fun of creative making, and reflecting through doing. She began by reminding us about the significance of the date, 24 April 2013, when the Rana Plaza textile factory collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh causing the deaths of 1,129 people and injuring thousands more; she drew our attention to ongoing efforts to commemorate the day worldwide. Sue's workshop was part of a larger project that aims to raise consciousness about waste while taking part in a fun activity and sharing skills.

After the flurry of activity involved in selecting sewing pieces, a hush of concentration and what Sue remarked the "soft noise of scissors" descended over the room. A group discussion about the time involved in making the 1000 bunnies developed. Reflecting on the time and effort involved in making things, and the real life cost of cheap textile goods is an important part of this activity, and something that people were keen to discuss. Sue remarked on how often 'ugly' garments are transformed when the scale changes and take on new appeal.

Stuffing the bunnies with the fillings from old duvets was next, and then people started the design process – sewing buttons for eyes – riffing through the button boxes produced the sound of shells on a beach – embroidering faces onto the bunnies and creating their personalities; or rather letting their personalities emerge. This led to great hilarity and much laughter as the bunnies took on a life of their own and people's 'inner bunnies' emerged: 'Lodge a complaint bunny', 'rock chick bunny with piercings and tattoo', 'constructionist bunny – complete with a Bauhaus label', were a few of the many bunnies named. Discussion ranged from current textile exhibitions and museums to visit to stories about teaching crafting and sewing skills to others and the pleasure and fulfilment this brings, particularly when people take things further using their own ingenuity and creativity. Laughter filled the room as people started 'bringing the bunnies to life' and wandering about to see what others had done. The variety of bunnies that emerged from one simple pre-cut pattern was fascinating, reflecting how this was so different to the 'choice' (no-choice) of consumerism.

This group had begun to use doilies as a way to reflect on and record the reflexivity brought out in the sessions. For this session the doilies were pre-prepared with questions written in them: "what have I learnt?" was answered with, "ways to reuse stuff in fun ways"; "Mottainai – Japanese term for the sense of grief over the waste of resources"; "that there is no 'away'"; stories always get told/made/created when a group of people get together, no matter the context; aesthetics define an item's level of 'acceptability'; "value of fabric and how many lives it can have; working in a group creates a relaxed shared atmosphere; to experiment without any fear of failure; re-cycle or more importantly reduce consumption; the concept adds value and context to finished bunny; the group encourages experimentation by seeing what others have done; the fun of being in a group that fosters creativity". Responses to What Have I Shared? Included "time with like-minded people"; "stories about emotional attachment to objects; past sewing history; my 'bunny' history"; "people ideas; people designs"; "laughter, memories, a happy atmosphere". The doilies began to take on a greater significance as they were a non-threatening way to reflect that allowed participants to perhaps articulate what they would not otherwise have acknowledged consciously. The doily method began to be shared throughout the other groups in the project (the tablecloth used by the Birmingham and Dublin groups, for example, was a variation on the doilies).

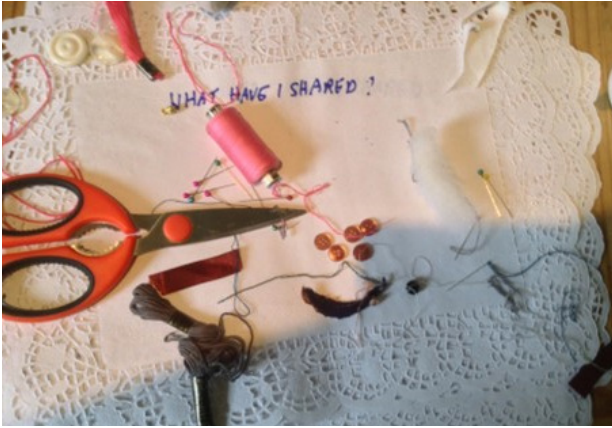


Figure 18: doilies

The next session was how to make i-cords, a simple knitting technique that creates a narrow tube of knitting that looks a bit like French knitting. It is a very ancient textile technique and the workshop leader Christiane Berghoff had prepared three ways of making i-cord: knitting, crochet, and the lucette. However the point of the workshop was not just to learn a technique but then to teach it to another person. This workshop was specifically directed, not only at learning a process, but at examining responses to learning and teaching (specifically in regard to craft). It felt very different from learning a process – maybe because the thoughts, emotions and actions involved in trying to learn were under the microscope. In any case participants felt they learnt at least as much about themselves as about i-cords, and continued the journey of thinking about what learning about and doing craft did to and for them.



Figure 19

The last session to be run at the Poly was run by Irene Griffin. As with Christiane's session, this was about more than learning or practicing a skill – it was also about examining what happens when people are doing something with their hands. In this case, Irene's focus was on the stories people tell when they are crafting. She brought along a circular tablecloth and a selection of embroidery yarn, and a selection of diagrams showing embroidery stitches. Each participant had to choose one stitch, and one colour. All the participants then sat in a circle around one table, and each began to stitch – freely, but only using the one colour and the one stitch. Irene introduced the idea of a historically-connected practice of people sitting, embroidering, telling stories, and asked for stories. She asked several questions to bring out the stories connected with making, perhaps from the past, or that made participants think about why they make, while they were stitching. Then after a short time, the tablecloth was turned so that in front of each person was the stitching that the person next to them had been doing. Using the stitch and the colour that each person had used before, they then added to the stitching in front of them, and then after a little while the cloth was turned again.



Figure 20

It was obviously metaphorical in several different ways. Interestingly some of the participants fought quite hard against the strictures/structures of the task, finding the insistence on the single colour and stitch frustrating, finding it irritating to have to add to someone else's work or to pass their work on rather than to create something of and for themselves.

In contrast to the calming and relaxing energy of some of the other sessions, there was a palpable sense of friction in the group this time, and some rather funny exchanges as those who were aware of, for example, the game of one-upmanship that is often played in groups by some people being gently (or not so gently) challenged to perhaps not monopolise the talk, or to be a little more open to new experiences or group dynamics. Clearly for some group members who wanted to define themselves in a hierarchical way it was very frustrating to participate in a group activity in which the aim was to subsume the self, to be known for stories rather than for skill. And yet there was skill – some of the participants being particularly adept at showing others how their communication style enhanced or hampered the group experience. So there were a number of levels of skill and activity happening at the same time, crossing and subsecting making, self-expression, storytelling, manipulating (or being affected by) group dynamics, self-awareness, generosity, openness, and probably many more. The making was happening, above that the storytelling carried on, and above that the energy ebbed and flowed.

It was very interesting to have this as the final workshop for this iteration of the CARE project at the Poly, as it brought up some of the points that had been so interesting in Phase 1: that not everybody finds group work interesting or edifying; that even when proposed outcomes are clearly defined there can be dissent or misunderstanding; that group work is messy and sometimes uncomfortable; that things don't always turn out the way you plan for a myriad of reasons. It was very important to be reminded that this was not merely all about doing "feel-good" activities but was about exploring ways to communicate – that might not feel good but that might be significant. Whatever the discomfort, the co-creative crafting remained a safe space in which participants were connecting, communicating, taking risks, challenging themselves, working out differences, voicing views, and becoming active in new ways.

Ethnographic Embroidery: Hannah Maughan headed up the Ethnographic Embroidery group of embroiderers. Hannah works at Falmouth University and proposed to work with a small number of her mixed media graduates who were local and working part time as self-employed practitioners. The group was not an established one before the project and the participants not all known to each other, though they shared a common history and experience and, of course, an existing interest and practice in embroidery. Hannah was keen to explore the transition from supported university community to solo self-employment and to explore this in relation to motivation and creativity. In an informal, relaxed environment, Hannah proposed to focus on the "Small Stories" of making and to record this research through embroidery, capturing elements of the conversations through stitching text; producing a series of stitched ethnographic pieces that visually captured the narrative of making, the shared conversations people have when engaged with craft, the incidental and subtle nuances that emerge when involved in a communal practice.

The group decided together what each session would focus on, though the sessions were designed to encourage certain topics of discussion. Conversation evolved away from these issues, though, and Hannah decided to abandon the notion of each session being led by theme, letting exchange emerge naturally rather than trying to steer and direct conversation.



Figure 21

Conversation covered lots of ground, ranging from the pros and cons of being within creative communities during and after university, how to keep motivated in creative practice, how skills are shared, and the relevance, perception and value of embroidery in contemporary life. It had been agreed that participants would work collectively and learn a new technique together. The group all found working in some form of community productive and motivating, especially when comparing it to times of forced isolation. However by sharing experiences participants learned how different this was for each of them. They concluded the sessions by writing reflective responses to “what have I learnt” and “what have I shared” on paper doilies.

Hannah found that motivation and creativity levels have increased since the group stitch-togethers. The overall positive response was unanimous. All agreed enthusiastically about the benefits of the group in relation to their work and mindset from the practical making side to the positives of the shared experience. The encouragement and opportunity to gain insightful feedback from respected others raised confidence, and allowed for personal and creative growth. All the participants wanted the group to continue beyond the parameters of the research project, and began to discuss meeting on a monthly basis, exploring what the format would be. Ideas included revisiting stitch life drawing, the adventurous sounding “wild embroidery”, (stitching out on location), public stitching, (on similar lines to guerilla knitting), stitching on a massive scale, natural dyeing and stitch consequences (stitch and pass it on). Having missed the creative and peer support of the university environment most felt they had been out of step with the wider creative world but coming together in this social environment, sewing and sharing the love of stitch, had reignited and revived passions.



Figures 22-25

Making Things Together: 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 in Phase One. There was general agreement that the ‘call and response’ method created an unpredictable and imaginative space akin to Gilchrist’s (2000) intermediate zone of ‘untidy creativity’, between rigidity and randomness in thought and action, which would benefit further investigation. We had already observed that people communicate differently when they are making; listen more and with concentration, take care about what they say and how they say it, take time and reflect, open up, become absorbed, form connections and sometimes even share very private memories, thoughts and aspirations.

We used the term ‘small stories of making’ to describe these interactions, which meant not only spoken and written exchanges, but also how these are intertwined with our shifting thoughts and feelings about the processes of making and sharing, and the objects that we make. We thought that there was something distinctive about this, and Making Things Together aimed to help creative makers explore, capture and reflect on the ‘small stories of making’ and the various ways in which these might help us better communicate and connect, with others and ourselves. We thought an online version of the small groups we were simultaneously working with might allow us to track and capture exchanges as they were happening (due to the usually written nature of online exchanges, though we intended to have other capabilities for communication inbuilt, not just writing/typing). We also wanted to absent ourselves as “leaders”, the online medium being a medium which facilitated without presence in a way. The platform comprised of a public platform, where photographs, thoughts, questions and so on could be posted to all the members of the group, alongside a private exchange area for the buddy system where, for a number of iterations, participants were paired up and asked to play “material consequences”: to create an object and then to, for example, post photographs, converse about the object with their buddy, or even swap the object with their buddy – perhaps sending it to be continued by their partner.

(Obviously the current state of scientific development does not yet allow for this to happen via the internet). Each would be doing this at the same time as their partner, so that participants were simultaneously maker and respondent, mentor and mentee. We envisaged that participants might want to share skills, to teach their buddy, or to learn, or to develop new skills, or to just see what happened to an object they had begun.

We spent a long time in development of this platform, and some of our participants were keen to join up and test the concept with us. Unfortunately the tension between rigidity and randomness, in the form of controlling the frameworks between relatively private and relatively public exchanges, and between the stages we desired participants to stick to (both so that there could be a group showing at the end of the stages where nobody felt they were the only one doing anything, and as a kind of encouragement to keep going in the face of all the other minutiae of life that gets in the way of making) and total freedom to just come and go and make or not make as the feeling struck, was continually having to be refined. This of course is the nature both of designing and of co-creation. Dorst (2015) conceptualises framing (and reframing) – seeing a design issue as something that needs a different framework of thinking as one of the primary activities, if not the hallmark, of a designer, and in this project we were all co-creating the design – but we lacked the skills to know how to change anything. It became cumbersome to try to go back to the designer with each time something went wrong – and we lacked the skills to understand precisely what was going wrong. When one is paying every time one visits the website designer to change something just to see if the reframing works, this approach of co-creation becomes prohibitively expensive.

So why not just a private Facebook group? A good question only really answerable by the fact that we wanted to use the data for a research project rather than selling it to advertisers. We still believe the “call and response via online platform” to be an interesting idea, perhaps awaiting a digital designer who was truly involved in co-creation and who could commit to the continual reframing that comes along with it. The two skills, of designing online platforms, and of the continuous reframing that is required of designers working in co-creation settings, is what is needed to make this initiative work.

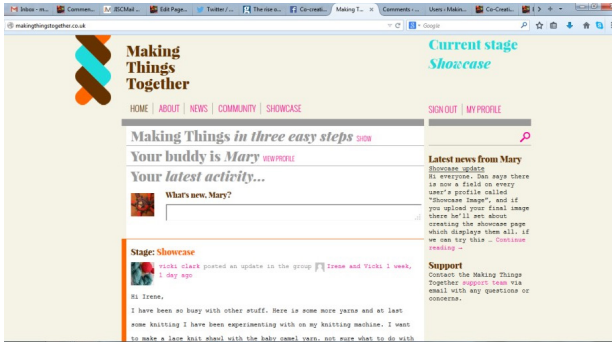


Figure 26

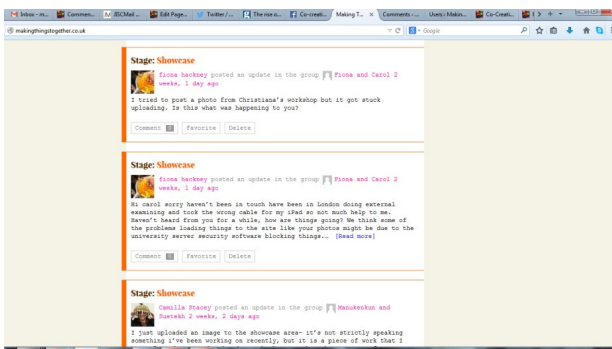


Figure 27

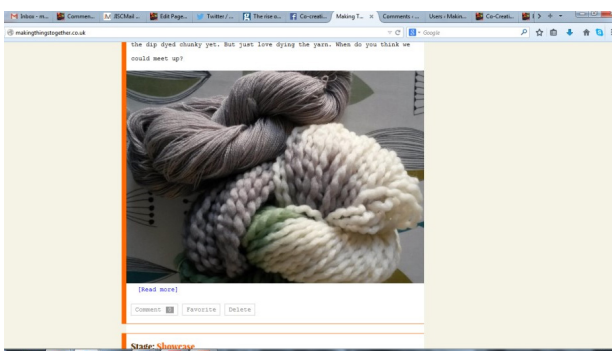


Figure 28

Creative collaboration and co-creation are warm and innocuously positive sounding words. It cannot be denied that the impulses to these processes arise out of a desire to build something. However, as with most building experiences, the project experienced conflicts, gaps in mutualities, moments of head-scratching leading to necessary reframings and reformings, and the need for contingency plans.

Power relations are embedded in the mildest scenarios; they cannot be ignored or b/rushed over. And it was exactly this that we were trying to observe, capture, and examine. The CARE model pays attention to and values the often difficult but extremely valuable processes of cooperation that emerge when people make things together and when people encounter difference. Sennett's (2012) 'fraught, ambiguous zone of experience where skill and competence encounter resistance and intractable difference' (Sennett 2012: 336) is where groups and individuals build dialogue with one another and gain insight into themselves. The small group settings we developed encouraged discourse; however, it was this discussion alongside and within the experience of making, creating, crafting, seems to add something more, even beyond Csikszentmihayli's (1979) enhanced trust and absorption. The "shoulder to shoulder" nature of talking or narrating whilst working separately-but-together on something seems allow people to connect, facilitate leaps across prejudices, and to have something around which differences can be explored. Importantly differences are not buried; group decision making is not always necessary even when a shared outcome is developed. In fact the ability to make one's own decisions and reflections within this small group making environment gives individual agency and empowerment, while skills sharing and skill extension with group encouragement leads to greater confidence and sometimes the development or extension of communities of interest. Participants might use the group, alongside other resources along with a new positive evaluation of their own skills and abilities, to professionalise their practice, find new value(s) in their amateur practice, or negotiate new capacities in between the two (Wenger 1998).

All of this is not to say that the model is easy for anyone to achieve. We needed to continually consider what constitutes and creates collectivity; and we were always mindful that the trust we hoped to build in our groups of participants is conditional, modal, and quite delicate. Working in this way requires a sense of responsibility from most if not all group members. It also requires constant attention and reframing, entailing a level of critical response that not all potential participants are initially open to, aware of, or able to achieve.

Those signing up to be participants in the project needed to be interested in a number of things that collaboration involves, such as learning through doing, being willing to share knowledge and ideas and learn from others, being open to confronting their own assumptions and to sharing outcomes, being able to work with others who may have very different perspectives. They needed to have attributes such as adaptability, flexibility, risk taking and generous natures; they needed to be able to be supportively critical. Indeed we would say that critical response is itself a form of creative practice involving “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’ through exchanges of difference (dialogic cooperation) or the location of common ground (dialectic cooperation) or, most often, a combination of the two.” (Hackney 2013) The messy processes of collaborative making not only parallel but can also materialise the ‘messy’ nature of community with its disjunctions and disruptions. Far from smoothing out difference, we found that the communities of interest that form around creative making find ways of materialising and transposing those differences through the making process itself in different ways.

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