

C J Sams MA

Crafting communities; How creative textiles can be used as a platform to develop meaningful communication and foster wellbeing.

Creative textiles workshops can act as an inclusive and welcoming space. The soft familiarity of textiles is universal, offering both physical comfort and emotional support. These qualities can be utilised within the realm of textile craft group activities. The domesticity of textile crafts engenders a sense of calm, security and belonging which is imbued onto the creative space. By building a supportive environment to practice fibre crafts, participants improve their wellbeing whilst learning and developing skills in a nurturing space.

As a textile arts educator I facilitate creative arts activities for all ages and abilities. Working to create collaborative or individual artistic projects within schools and community settings. The accessibility of textiles can be used to encourage dialogue on sensitive subjects, as it offers familiarity and comfort within its realm. Participants working in simple stitch or yarn techniques can quickly and confidently build their own ideas and use textiles as a platform from which to voice their views and their identity.

Skills based learning and teaching needs to recognise the prior experiences of all participants. The idea of 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1967, Gascoigne and Thornton 2014) and 'experiential learning' (Kolb 1984, Moon 2004) recognise the restrictions of language as a method to evidence knowledge and comprehension. Jubas and Seidel (2016) discuss the concept of knitting as metaphor, how the language of the craft is used within academic discourse in terms of research and critical analysis. They practice knit as an activity to interpret their own learning and teaching, offering an alternative space for reflection and development of ideas and understanding. This space recognises the wellbeing of the participants in part fostered by the activity of hand knitting (Corkhill et al 2014) and creates an inclusive space for students to learn.

I strive towards an inclusive approach to learning and teaching, inspired by Hooks' (1994) theories on creating a welcoming space for the student voice in the learning environment. My methods when teaching fibre-based crafts allow space for the individual to utilise prior knowledge and nurture self-expression through creativity (Sams 2016). Activities are designed that are accessible to beginner level participants, but can be adapted to allow more complexity and creativity depending on individual need. This strategy promotes inclusivity as individual participants can enjoy the textile activities at a level which is both enjoyable and stimulating for them.

The concept of 'knitted geographies' is explored by Price (2016), the idea that the act of knitting has the potential to shape and develop supportive spaces. Through the activity of knitting in a collective space people can feel a sense of community and safety, which can be utilised to foster wellbeing and social cohesion. Knitting and other fibre crafts have qualities of domesticity, protection, and comfort which imbed the space with a welcoming and nurturing atmosphere to allow people to feel safe and supported.

Pérez-Bustos et al (2019) explore ways of teaching textiles by developing 'careful pedagogies that decentralize classic forms of education' recognising the physical and political realms of learning. Their use of textiles as a pedagogy when working with craftswomen in South America included broken threads and flaws as a symbol of the fragility of the work being undertaken. This idea of imperfections being a part of the work that has its own meaning and value can help to build a sense of self-worth and validation among vulnerable communities.

Focusing on experiential learning via tactile processes may encourage reflection on other aspects of participants' life and experiences. The theory of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1967), that we know more than we can say, offers a rationale for using a physical action to imbed more intellectual concepts. Participants building confidence and expertise in a textile application can then begin to improve their self-worth in a much wider context.

Corkhill et al (2014) expound the idea of the rhythmic and repetitive processes involved in knitting can help to improve mood and foster a sense of wellbeing. Combining the differing aspects of learning craft skills may foster opportunities for self-reflection and personal development in a cohesive way. The idea of knitting as a way to improve wellbeing is also discussed by Matthews (2017), that through meditative, repetitive actions both physical and mental health can be supported. Developing creative workshop-based activities can serve as a space for wellbeing, tactile learning, and a nurturing supportive environment where participants can feel safe and supported.

Case studies

Kew Gardens Knitting nature group

The Knitting Nature group is a valuable part of the community learning offered by Kew Gardens (Kew 2022). The initiative offers local residents access to creative learning activities at the botanical gardens. The sessions are free to vulnerable adults living in the area, and offer skills-based activities to improve wellbeing in the community. Working with the learning team I help to develop effective online and in person learning experiences for the Knitting nature participants. The group have a range of specific needs and levels of knitting expertise, so each session must be curated mindfully to include activities which can be enjoyed in a range of ways by the group.

During Covid restrictions in 2020/21 I developed visual resources of knitting instructions which participants could follow to create plants or flowers at home. Live video was also created which participants could follow along to on Microsoft teams, with a Q&A feature to afford a more interactive element. Each month there was also a Zoom meet up, where myself, the learning team, and participants could gather online in an informal, relaxed virtual space. This was a place where the group could share knitting projects and offer creative advice in a nurturing environment. This three-strand approach afforded a range of opportunities for engagement which helped to increase the accessibility of online community learning. Although the space where the group met was virtual, the attributes of textiles crafts still allowed for a comforting and supportive space for the participants which they looked forward to coming into each month.

The summer community open week was my first opportunity to meet in person with the team and the Knitting nature group participants and volunteers. The event was well attended and it was wonderful to be able to work together at Kew, to facilitate the activities and to support the group face to face. Meeting in person to share the knitted outcomes of the plants it was apparent how the group have developed meaningful and supportive relationships, where craft is used as a platform for both creative learning and emotional wellbeing. Currently the group are working on a collective project to learn about food security and the research done by Kew to support this. The project has afforded a space to discuss social, cultural and environmental issues, through the supportive platform of a communal knit and crochet group.

Overall the project has been a journey of being adaptive and creative to develop new ways to facilitate community learning. The Knitting Nature group is such a supportive community which the participants clearly look forward to attending each month. It has been a privilege to be welcomed into this community and to be able to support the group in learning about the valuable work that Kew does.

Jaywick under sea

During the 'Tides of Tendring' project in the summer 2019 at Jaywick Martello tower, I was invited to facilitate a workshop celebrating the unique architecture of the area. The work was created using sustainable recycled materials and accessible techniques using stitch and fusible adhesive. The workshop acted as a conduit for discussion on living in Jaywick, and participants freely discussed what had brought them to the area and also what made them want to stay. Working together in a supportive environment towards individual creative outcomes helped to foster a space for deeper and richer communication on participants experiences of living in the area. Jaywick is one of the most deprived places in the UK (BBC 2019), with high levels of unemployment and poor housing, so creating safe and inclusive spaces for communication was an opportunity for residents to feel valued.

The workshop led to a wider project and an exterior textiles installation 'Jaywick under sea'. This project explored the threat of rising sea levels for the people living in this deprived coastal area, and imagined what would be left of the village once it has been reclaimed by the sea. Applied signs depicting local businesses were strung like a high tide watermark around the historic Martello tower. The project had a collaborative element, whereby Essex residents could stitch recycled fabric oyster shells which were later incorporated onto the banners (fig 2). The idea was to give the works the appearance of the signage being encrusted with ocean life, as if they had been sunk under the sea. The exhibit was on the exterior of the tower, so was fully accessible to the community and holiday-goers alike (figure 4). The work recreated signage from businesses in Jaywick, with messages of positivity including 'Wonderland' and 'Rainbows End', both seaside entertainment centres, and 'Never Say Die' (a public house) symbolising the resilience of the residents in this humble village against the dual challenges of deprivation and flood prone homes.

Knitted Genetic landscape

Kings College London developed the 'Knitted Genetic landscape' project as a way to educate families on inherited genetic diseases (Kings College London 2022). I was invited

to develop a series of activities on this theme to increase understanding and promote dialogue among affected families. The aim was to create a nurturing environment where families felt at ease to discuss genetic illness in an accessible way that was both fun and informative.

There were three aspects to the project; an interactive social media campaign, and informative artwork, and hands on activities during the family event at Kings College. The social media campaign invited participants to crochet DNA spirals using a free crochet pattern. These pieces were then posted online to promote the project. These spirals were collected and delivered to Kings College and helped to form the second aspect of the project. A soft sculpture depicting the likelihood of genetic disease inheritance was created in textiles, to make a colourful and informative display. This installation was then displayed during an event, where families could learn about the topic in a fun and inclusive environment. The crochet DNA spirals were used as wayfinding in the building to help visitors find the activities easily (Figure 5).

During this event there were craft activities, information stands, and medical experts to talk to informally. A range of accessible and inclusive activities were offered, including finger knitting (figure 6), crochet, and corn puff chromosome pictures (Figure 7). Finger knitted chromosomes were added to the textile installation throughout the day to foster a sense of ownership and belonging in the space, and to build an environment which would nurture conversation around the subject of inherited genetic diseases in an accessible and inclusive way.

Conclusion

The case studies show how textile crafts can be used to support wellbeing whilst developing a platform for meaningful communication. The project at Kew facilitates vulnerable adults in skills-based activities, but in doing so it fosters a much richer communication amongst the participants. The act of coming together to knit has unified a group of diverse participants, who nurture and support each other both creatively and emotionally. The 'knitted genetic landscape' project at Kings College London offered families a unique opportunity to develop meaningful dialogue on this challenging topic. Through the familiarity of textile crafts and other creative activities sensitive subjects around inherited disease were supported in a nurturing environment. The topics explored in Jaywick offered the local community recognition of the difficulties faced by this deprived coastal village. The textile collage project was a celebration of the unique architecture in the area and gave the local creative group a sense of pride and belonging. The collaborative exterior installation offered a broader platform for communication on the difficulties that the flood risk community faces.

Creative textiles can be used as a platform to develop meaningful communication and foster wellbeing. The nature of fabrics created from textiles is soft yet supportive, and these qualities are replicated in the realm of textile craft group activities. There is a familiarity of textile crafts which fosters a sense of calm and belonging and this atmosphere is imbued onto the space to build a supportive environment. By creating crafts together, participants improve their wellbeing whilst learning and developing skills in a nurturing space.

Artist Bio

Sams' arts practice has three distinct strands; fine artist, academic lecturer, and textile skills based educator. As an artist their practice is within constructed textiles, creating narrative pieces on themes of society and environment, with an emphasis on sustainable materials. The work focuses on textile-based narratives inspired by real life events which have an emphasis on subjects including environmental pollution, human effects on natural habitats, home and belonging, and life on the fringes of society. The works take the form of both 2D collages and tapestries and 3D soft sculptures and interactive installations.

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