Crafts Council
Make:Shift:Do Case Study
Little Sandbox, Liverpool

Crafts Council's Make:Shift:Do programme works with makerspaces and Fab Labs to engage a diverse audience with cutting-edge approaches to making, changing perceptions of the meaning of 'craft' and revealing its real world potential.

In 2019 Make:Shift:Do delivered three mini action-research projects exploring how makerspaces and community groups can work together to co-produce projects. We think that, when projects are led by the passions, interests, and concerns of the communities involved, exciting applications for new craft technologies will emerge.

We're interested in learning from the process of delivering these projects in order to develop and test co-creation models which we can share with the wider makerspace community.

THE PROJECT

Little Sandbox is a community makerspace housed in Norris Green Library, Liverpool. Having run groups and activities for children and young people since 2016, Little Sandbox wanted to develop an activity group for adult members of the community.

Their Make:Shift:Do project aimed to establish a fibre arts group, initially based around knitting and crochet. By fostering an inclusive, welcoming environment, co-managing director Chris Huffee and volunteer Snoof hoped to gradually introduce the group to the technology and tools available in the makerspace. Their work aimed to create a group with a shared identity and

sense of community, foster peer-learning and boost the confidence of the group's members. In the following Q&A Chris describes their experience.

Key themes: community building, peer-learning, inclusivity

How was your project co-produced?

We set out to establish a group in which members determined what they wanted to learn and achieve on their own, and which was as community-led as possible. Community building is important to us as an organisation, and important in providing a service to a community which is already fractured.

'Craft' provided a great way in, allowing us to engage with potential members in a way that feels non-threatening—even though the wider crafts and art community can feel intimidating to the group.

We provided the space, basic equipment and guidance on how to use it, but most importantly our role was to facilitate our participants' use of the space. We succeeded in achieving regular attendance from women of various ages, with or without children or grandchildren, as well as a few men.

Our approach grew organically out of the initial few sessions. Members would bring their own project and ask for help with things they couldn't figure out. For example, one of the participants taught several of the others who were initially struggling with how to crochet in the round. They shared patterns and taught each other little tricks or borders.

Peer-learning has been the bedrock of our group, developed partly by giving attendants ownership over the space and the group and partly by having extremely outspoken attendants. We would also ask for help and sought to learn things from our attendants, which we found made them feel respected, valued and gave them confidence to participate in peer-learning and peer-teaching. While this has been a brilliant way to approach learning, it does present the challenge that when asked to participate in a larger project, participants initially expect someone else to know what to do.

The funding we received from the Crafts Council was spent entirely on necessities—the space, an initial set of materials, the hours required for preparation/clean-up and the group itself. The group had no input in managing the budget, but we would love to help them decide how to spend future funding for increasingly complex projects which require more expensive materials.

What were the challenges?

Our biggest challenge was showing our participants that they could use 'futuristic' tools such as laser cutters, vinyl cutters, and so forth. In the end, we only really had to show them the possibilities, and how the machinery worked at the most basic level, to ignite their imaginations.

In the future we will do much more hands-on learning rather than starting with nebulous explanations. We initially tried to introduce new tools to the group collectively, but this approach led more to polite interest than active participation. Working on a project and letting people be led by curiosity and ask questions proved a much more successful way of understanding the tools.

Another challenge was boosting the group's confidence and showing them that they can do everything 'proper artists' can. There is a pervasive sense that the group's crafting isn't overly impressive and that they must defer to others for larger projects. As a group we have agreed to create work to be exhibited at Makefest Liverpool in June—the group were keen to be involved but don't yet have the confidence to suggest their own ideas. 'You tell us what to make and the girls will make it,' is a common response. We also found that a lot of our participants prefer to have guidance when using equipment, they already know how to use, for fear of breaking something expensive.

Learning to walk the line between encouraging participation in new arenas and leaving the group to run itself is an ongoing process. This is a theme that runs throughout our work, even outside the fibre arts group, as we are a community space which seeks to make equipment and expertise freely available to the local community. We have already found that the group is becoming more confident in using new equipment and we will continue to foster this while remaining on hand to provide guidance to those stretching their skills into new areas.

What elements of the project were the most successful?

The community building was by far the most important and successful component of the project. We learned that ultimately, if we provide a welcoming, friendly environment, the community, more or less, builds itself to suit its actual needs, and if you actively listen then they will let you know how best to support them.

In the future, we'd like to perfect the level of input from us, minimising it in favour of letting the community shape itself. In some ways that happens organically; the group grows because people bring friends and family members, and while the library continues to bring us new members our main source of growth is the social circle of our existing participants. We have weekly regulars as well as people who bob in and out, and we have some people who have suggested we open on other days to accommodate their schedules. We're really happy that we've formed a group that will continue to meet and make without needing any encouragement from us!

We have found that some members have taken on more of a leadership role, but this too remains fairly low-key and there is no sense of overarching hierarchy among members or even between members and staff.

What tools, techniques and infrastructure have you developed to enable communities to continue to play an active role in your organisation?

We primarily developed our people skills and an atmosphere in which we could approach people who might feel apprehensive about the concept of a makerspace, and who need to feel, not only welcome, but also like they can belong in a space which they hadn't previously considered to be available to them. While these concepts feel nebulous to describe, they have nevertheless made a huge difference in terms of how we approach new arrivals.

Previously, this was something we had achieved with children—up until now our primary service users - so expanding this to a point where we're able to make adults feel just as comfortable on their first visit, makes a world of difference to us. We measure it in cups of tea; our original participants didn't start making their own until they'd been in five or six times. Our latest recruit made her own brew on her second visit!

Our method for welcoming people into the space is quite simple, but very effective. First, we are friendly, and whenever possible we give people our full attention. We try to listen to what the person is telling us before we launch into an explanation of what's available, so we can tailor our tour of the facilities to what the person in question needs or wants to do. Of course, we will also show other equipment, but if someone says, for example that they'd like to look into laser cutting, we'll focus on the laser cutter first, show some examples, and address their needs for the space before we start talking about

the 3D printers, the vinyl cutter, the heatpress, or the sublimation printer. We will make them a hot drink, but we also let them know that people are welcome to make their own.

We treat all attendees immediately and on an ongoing basis as equally important. We try to impress on them that their projects and needs are as important as our own. We try to work with what they want to achieve together with the skills they already have, while building on the latter, so the attendees feel like their new skills mesh with the ones they brought into the space.

It's also very important to us that people know we're there even if they have to ask the same question multiple times; some of the software we use is complicated due to the types of projects we make with them, and we don't want people to be put off because they might not remember exactly how they did something the first time. For us, the first thing is to build the attendees' confidence in asking for help; second is their confidence in using the equipment itself. We find that people learn better and feel more welcome when they know without a doubt that help is available whenever they need it.

Our approach to people attending the space is one of respect and interest, rather than a hierarchical one. While, of course, all of us have different skillsets and we remain in control of the actual space and equipment, we

believe that everyone has something they can bring to the table. As such, we listen to what attendees tell us and we ask for their input, and when they have a skill we don't have, we ask for their advice in learning it. This has contributed to creating an atmosphere in which everyone feels valued and which leads directly to them valuing others.

As always, you reap what you sow. If we found the group was being unwelcoming, we would investigate as to why this was the case. We are an inclusive space, so if someone was being bigoted and this made the group uncomfortable, we'd address the bigoted behaviour first and then take it from there. We have found that while everyone is friendly and welcoming to everyone else, there are groups which form naturally. As such, we might consider shaping those groups in such a way as to make sure nobody was left out.

How has delivering the project allowed you to reach out to new audiences?

We've primarily used Instagram and Twitter, as well as Facebook to promote the group. We've had some takers through these channels, but we primarily get new participants from word of mouth.

Linking in with the library has been invaluable in this regard. Word spread around the community of library users so most of our members have been joining through this channel. We're working on another project to create community reporters, learning media skills while reporting on their community. Techstyles will be one of the initial stories that they make a video of. Taking the group to Liverpool Makefest will be a great opportunity to start conversations and show how we're using making to bring people together and teach digital skills in a non-threatening way.

Our hope is that reporting on the news in their own community, while using the space to turn that news into digital content, will provide extra ownership of the space while also creating more of a cohesive community among both members and non-members. We're not sure what form this will take yet, because we intend to let the community reporters lead this project as much as possible.

What tips would you give other makerspaces looking to develop co-created projects?

I think co-creation is something makerspaces and community organisations have at their core. We have learned a lot from DoES Liverpool, borrowing their idea of a Wiki—an open resource anyone in the space can contribute to. This came about because two of our original members quickly became the go-to people for vinyl-cut t-shirt printing. Having a place where they can write

down their process, in their words, is a really valuable way of sharing knowledge.

Don't be too rigid with your expectations; when people feel like their input is valued and an effort is made to incorporate it (even when that means they don't always get exactly what they want), they'll feel ownership and be invested in the outcome.

Time is the most important resource you have. In our first few meetings participants were looking to us to direct activity, gradually, the fear of doing the wrong thing subsided and the idea that the space was as much theirs as ours came through. It's an ongoing process, becoming comfortable within the space and then starting to take ownership of the process.

Don't put pressure on participants, and don't push your expectations on them. This has been invaluable as it has given people a sense that they are shaping and creating the space they need as they use it. It has been an unmitigated success, and the group we created using the Crafts Council funding is our pride and joy.

Anything else you'd like to tell us?

We've really enjoyed this process and are very grateful to the Crafts Council for its support. We're confident that the group will continue and grow and we're looking forward to discovering what other hidden talents exist in this community.

Step-by-step: how was the project delivered?

	Number of participants	What took place
Week 1	3	During our first session, we merely introduced ourselves and explained the concept of the group to our initial 3 participants, who found us through Norris Green Library where we are located, and to whom we provided posters and flyers. Two of them very clearly informed us they would not be participating with lasercutting or other technological equipment. We ensured everyone was clear that they were welcome to attend solely on a knit and natter basis. Our group meets from twelve noon until 2 pm on a Monday afternoon, often running over a bit when people aren't finished yet. We have an open-door policy for the children of our participants, to ensure that parents can attend even if they have children at home during the day, which allows us to provide a more inclusive space. For the most part, our attendants are retired women who like to socialise with others and to share their skills.
Week 2	3	We taught the attendants how to crochet as they were all experienced knitters but none of them had accomplished crochet before. They showed us the work they were knitting at the time, and dedicated part of the session to simply knitting and chatting.
Week 3	1	Only one of our attendants was able to come this week, so we had a relaxed session during which we discussed crochet in more depth and did more work towards making this attendant comfortable in the space.
Week 7	2	Our volunteer, Snoof, has been working on a virus shawl, and the participants would like to learn how to crochet this. Snoof taught them how, and they rapidly picked it up.

Week 8	3	The participants were still working on the virus pattern, but also remained involved with their knitting. Baby blankets in chenille are the current project.
Week 9	3	The husband of one of the regulars attended this week and engaged with the laser cutter. This opened up new vistas as the regulars had previously shied away from all technology in that sense. He made a wooden birthday card for his father.
Week 10	3	This week, we lasercut some buttons to show the participants the possibilities the laser cutter could hold for knitted and crocheted garments. We had some questions from participants about how laser cutters are used, which we answered, and which removed a bit of the mystery.
Week 11	6	During this session, one of our participants showed us the fingerpuppet she is working on, and the hearts she makes for Easter, and to raise money for her church. We are still working on the virus pattern as well, and some more laser cutting happened in the corner.
Week 12	8	We had a sudden influx of local participants, including some who have been knitting and crocheting for a long time; the local library where we are located has consistently helped by alerting local knitters and crocheters to the presence of our group. We also introduced the group to the possibilities inherent in sublimation printing.
Week 14	11	The two sisters who, during our very first session, informed us they would not be partaking of the digital making devices, have dived head-first into vinyl-cutting and created some yarn-bags with knitting jokes on them. While the rest of the group knitted, crocheted and nattered, they got to grips very quickly with the intricacies of vinyl pressing.

Week 15	16	The group is now well and truly beyond our control. While one participant teaches another how to crochet a square, there is more vinyl cutting and laser cutting going on. Another participant is using conductive thread to sew LEDs into a sublimated panel, which she intends to turn into a cushion.
Week 16	14	T-shirts are being made and one of the participants has mastered the waffle stitch and is teaching it to others. One of our newer recruits shows off his cross-stitching project. We chat with everyone and help where it's needed, but we no longer have to nudge anyone or remind them of the technology they could be using.
Week 17	15	One of our dyed-in-the-wool knitters is sanding and waxing a laser cut nametag; she slots in neatly into the circle of chairs where everyone else is crocheting shawls and cardigans. The participants are starting to accept the technology as a simple part of the world they understand. They're comfortable enough to take the mickey out of the organisers.
Week 18	10	One of our most outspoken participants is teaching another how to use an over locker, while others carry on with vinyl cutting, laser cutting and traditional crochet.
Week 19	9	More than one of our participants at this stage has learned knitting or crochet solely from other participants. Different styles and skillsets are now beginning to grow into one repository of knowledge. New members remain new for approximately ten minutes, after which they are considered permanent group members. Some are producing cardigans or blankets for each other or each other's families.

Week 20	9	Our participants are preparing to sell some handmade goods at a market stall in order to try and raise money to keep the club going after the Crafts Council funding runs out. In that spirit, one of them has made a doll, and intends to clothe it as well. Another has discovered a time-consuming but beautiful new crochet project and is teaching another.
Week 21	10	Some time ago, one of our participants came in for the first time. She could neither knit nor crochet, but she had an excellent attitude. Today, we got to see an amazing granny square blanket in shades of yellow which she crocheted from start to where she is now. Everyone is amazed. The sense among the group is one of incredible support and everyone is keen to encourage each other.

We also had a visit from the leader of the group who yarnbombed Liverpool Makefest 2019, and have been asked to help them yarnbomb it again this year. We've identified a disparity in how our group experiences art, versus the way the yarnbombing group experiences it, primarily in the sense that our group feels excluded from the 'artist' label due to the societal devaluing of artforms that have been deemed to be 'female', such as fibre arts. On top of that, our attendants are working class and have never felt like the target audience for artists; certainly they haven't felt sufficiently talented to consider themselves a part of that group. As such, while they might consider someone else's work art, they do not consider their own to be such.

We are discussing ways to address this in order to make the yarnbombing accessible to our participants without making them feel alienated. While we haven't come up with a concrete plan yet, it seems likely we'll start by having a brainstorming session and building on the ideas they come up with to turn them into a cohesive whole, whilst building their confidence in their skills and in the public's interest in their work. |

Week 21 | 4

A couple of our regulars, the two who told us during our initial session that they would not be using the tech, have been absent since mid-March due to health issues in the family. As they have been unable to attend on a Monday, we told them they were welcome in the space whenever they were able to make it. Today they arrived, complete with the husband who started the group off on the laser cutter and one of their grandchildren. The feeling is very much one of belonging, and they make themselves a brew while they settle in to cut some vinyl unicorns out of iridescent vinyl they've bought somewhere, and heat press them onto t-shirts. As a space, we're always open to children, but we would also like to run skill share sessions wherein older generations teach younger generations about more traditional skills, in exchange for the younger generation sharing skills with electronics and digital equipment.