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The designer collective as a social system of professional learning and development

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Abstract

This study examines designer collectives as social systems of professional learning and development. Based on a qualitative single case study of a contemporary Danish designer collective, the study analyses seven core members' experiences of participation through the lens of Wenger's framework of communities of practice. Eight distinct themes of participation are identified and described as accounts of Wenger's modes of belonging as engagement, imagination, and alignment. These findings provide rich contextualized descriptions of experiences of participation, illustrating how designer collectives are conducive to both practice development and identity formation. Contributions to design practice and design education research are discussed concludingly, highlighting the role of designer collectives in fostering designers' transformative learning beyond formal educational structures.

Introduction

Research in higher design education has extensively analyzed and discussed the didactic structures and curricula needed to prepare students for professional practice with both competence and resilience (Brosens et al., 2023; Meyer & Rowan, 2019; Price, 2022). However, little research has explored the structures and conditions that support designers' learning and development throughout their *professional* lives. This article addresses this gap by advancing the knowledge of professional learning spaces in contemporary design culture beyond the institutional structures of formal education. This exploratory research agenda focuses on the largely overlooked phenomenon of collectives. While collectives can take many forms and resemble traditional professional networks among peers, this study explores their potential to function as spaces of (non-formal/informal) learning and identity formation, akin to Wenger's (1998) concept of *communities of practice* (CoPs).

Throughout history, humans have formed diverse forms of communities "from a tribe around a cave fire, to a medieval guild … to a street gang, to a community of engineers interested in brake design" (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). Similarly, numerous historical examples exist of designers coming together around shared interests, visions, or beliefs. For instance, the now-defunct Parisian graphic design collective "Grapus" consisted of publicly espoused communists who collaborated to promote their political ideologies (see Edwards, 2016; Poynor, 2009). Another example is Droog, a collective of mostly young Dutch designers in the early 1990s who organized exhibitions to express a design ethos characterized by playfulness and humor (Ramakers & Bakker, 1991), which some scholars have later linked to the rise of the critical design movement (see, e.g., Malpass, 2012).

Across the domains of design, art, and craft, various branches of social research have examined collaborative configurations, including craft marketing networks (Torres, 2002), university makerspaces (Bergman & McMullen, 2022), creative hubs (Flego & Tei, 2024), collaborative circles (Farrell, 2001), and creative collectives (Docherty et al., 2019). These studies primarily focus on mapping and analyzing the entrepreneurial and cultural impacts, historical development, and collaborative activities of such groupings. While some research has investigated social learning and professional networks among design, art, and craft educators (Brodshaug & Reitan, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023), no explicit studies have, to the author's knowledge, explored such collaborative configurations as spaces of social learning within professional practice domains of design.

To address this gap, this article presents a qualitative case study of a contemporary collective established by and for independent self-employed designers in the field of product design. Using Wenger's (1998, 2000) social learning theory, the case is studied as a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) through analysis of seven core members' experiences of belonging situated in time, place, and contemporary design practice.

In the following section, CoP theory is outlined, with a focus on three modes of belonging (MoBs) as a guiding framework for empirical analysis (Yin, 2009). This is followed by research perspectives from various fields of social research, mapping existing knowledge on collaborative configurations as systems of social learning with the potential to shape professional designers' practices and identities. The empirical findings are then presented, structured around Wenger's (1998, 2000) three MoBs: *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. The results provide rich insights into how these modes shape and develop participants' professional practices and identities. Finally, the article concludes with remarks on the study's implications for professional and educational learning in design.

Collectives in design as communities of practice?

Wenger's (1998) influential social learning theory of CoP offers a valuable yet underutilized framework for exploring designer collectives as social learning systems beyond formal education. A foundational aspect of Wenger's (1998, 2000) theory is the dynamic relationship between competence and experience. In conceptualizing CoP as systems of social learning, Wenger (1998) builds on Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on legitimate peripheral learning, emphasizing the potential for mutual learning among group members with varying levels of proficiency. For novices in a designer collective, this implies that understanding what it means to be a competent professional designer is continuously (re)negotiated through interactions with past and present peers: "Knowing, therefore, is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities" (Wenger, 2000, p. 226). As

such, social learning commences when one's personal experiences do not immediately align with socially defined competence. In other words, when we experience what we do not yet master, a learning path presents itself that we may choose to follow in the hope of realizing future experiences of enhanced mastery. Similarly, seasoned members may experience learning when they encounter unfamiliar, unexpected, or challenging perspectives that differ from established norms and practices ingrained in the set boundaries of a community (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

Compared to informal social networks, work groups, or project teams, CoPs revolve around a *shared domain of practice* in the sense of its members sharing an interest in certain propositional knowledge (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how) (Lave & Wenger, 1991); the above perspective on competence is conferred as a social construct. As such, compared to more loose and self-serving interactional structures of networks (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), CoPs build on a shared domain of practice and sense of competence as a structure for learning. Second, while CoPs may start out as informal networks, they rest on *active mutual participation* to foster a sense of and grow into a community over time. Members do not merely exchange information (as in many business networks) but actively engage in discussions, share experiences, and collaborate within their shared domain as a process of collective learning around a *joint enterprise* (Wenger, 1998). Third, CoPs cultivate and develop a shared repertoire of practices (shared perceptions of the world [images], myths, tools, artifacts, stylistic values, etc.) through dialogs and other types of social actions. Lastly, in contrast to the often very instrumental and teleological nature of traditional work groups and project teams, CoPs build on a sense of community and belonging that transcends static individual or collective goals (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Through participation, the meanings of practice, goals, values, or participation are continuously negotiated. As such, members of a CoP may not merely learn in the sense of how to reproduce practice (competence development) but also in the sense of transforming their identities. This process occurs as multiple meanings of how to be a "professional designer" are continuously negotiated (Wenger, 1998).

As self-organizing systems operating with dynamic boundaries and complex stakeholder relationships, CoPs arise out of learning with emergent structures. This suggests that when studied within a certain period, many collectives may be in the process of becoming or eroding as CoPs. However, the key to developing and sustaining a CoP is the ongoing negotiation of competence, identity, and cultural meanings (Wenger, 2000). In facilitating the formation of CoPs as social learning systems, Wenger (1998) introduced three MoBs: engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1998). These MoBs are described as different types of participation that require different types of work—distinct types of participation that each contribute to learning as practice and identity transformation:

- *Engagement*: Belonging as engagement describes individuals' active participation in, for instance, dialogs, debates, meetings, operational tasks, the assistance of others, and the production of community artifacts. Such direct social interaction with other members "(…) shape our experience of who we are. We learn what we can do and how the world responds to our actions" (Wenger, 2000, p. 227) as we negotiate shared goals, repertoires, knowledge, and means and methods of practice.

- *Imagination:* Belonging as imagination describes how individuals and communities construct images of themselves, of their (local/global) communities, and of the world. Such imaginaries play the role of navigation tools that orient members' ways of situating their knowledge and competence (in the present) and guiding their explorations of possible futures, for instance, through the building of stories or scenarios. "Imagining ourselves as part of larger local/global communities (…) are essential to our sense of self and to our interpretation of our participation in the social world" (Wenger, 2000, p. 227).

- *Alignment:* Belonging as alignment describes individuals' participation as action that coordinates community activities and processes with shared goals "… so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement (…)" (Wenger, 2000, p. 228). Viewed as mutual processes of negotiating, for instance, how to achieve certain goals as a community may play a critical role in forming our (professional) practices and identities.

Perspectives on collaboration, collectives, and circles across fields of creative practice

As a rare yet valuable contribution to our understanding of collaborative social units among contemporary creative practitioners, Docherty et al. (2019) studied several collectives in a Scottish context with members across practices of design, art, and craft. As distinct models of collaborative work in creative industries, such *creative collectives* are "… group[s] of like-minded people with shared values that work together towards a common goal" (Docherty et al., 2019, p. 284). Docherty et al. (2019) observed that such collectives may be temporal in duration, event-specific in their common goals, or spatially or virtually tied together as either a type of loose network or a more formally defined organization: "There's no one-size-fits-all" (p. 284). As such, collectives, in this view, do not necessarily constitute CoPs. People may share certain values and goals but not necessarily a certain practice. Consequently, such a lack of shared practice implies that collectives may operate with loose social ties as types of collaborative networks or groups, which, according to Wenger (1998), do not constitute a genuine CoP that fosters the development and transformation of members' practices and

identities. While this study's insights into the perceived benefits of membership are valuable, we do not learn about how practices of participation unfold or whether such participation may take on a transformative nature.

Docherty et al.'s (2019) descriptive markers of creative collectives are also echoed in kindred studies within the field of small group sociology (Farrell, 2001). Grounded in multiple case studies of historically prominent groups of creatives, such as the 19th century's French Impressionists, Farrell's (2001) *collaborative circles theory* (CCT) maps and describes the life cycles and stages of how social patterns of collaboration in such circles evolve and eventually end. Compared to Docherty et al.'s (2019) definition of creative collectives, Farrell (2001) came close to Wenger's (1998) CoP in framing collaborative circles as follows:

> … peers who share similar occupational goals and who, through long periods of dialogue and collaboration, negotiate a common vision that guides their work. The vision consists of a shared set of assumptions about their discipline, including what constitutes good work, how to work, what subjects are worth working on, and how to think about them. (p. 11)

While Farrell (2001) uses occupation (not practice) and focuses on collaborative dynamics (not social learning), his CCT stresses, in line with CoP theory, dialog and negotiation of visions as important to practice development (e.g., the practice repertoire of the impressionist painter), as well as how artistic outputs may be (socially) assessed as competent or not (e.g., good or bad reifications of impressionism). Inspired by Farrell (2001), some research in the field of (design and innovation) management has analyzed and discussed the phenomenon of radical circles (Dell'Era et al., 2018; Verganti, 2016), described as "…individuals that join in a closed network of people to collaborate outside formal organizational schemes on developing and promoting a new and shared radical vision" (Verganti 2016, p. 113). In this literature, the learning of members of such radical circles is not foregrounded. Rather, from a firm innovation point of view, the focus of this literature is placed on the value of the radical circle's visions as resources for firms to acquire in pursuit of (radical) product innovation (Nedergaard, 2018).

In the same vein as Weber's (1922/1978) seminal work on mapping and describing the formation of interest groups as a community-based strategy for acquiring or maintaining power and legitimacy, the above works agree on a "shared yearning for rebellion" (Dell'Era et al., 2018) as formative to the rise of collectives or circles, their negotiations of shared visions and goals, and their shared views on competence. For instance, shared feelings of marginalization in a professional field, such as when faced with precarious work conditions (Docherty et al. 2019) or when not controlling the means necessary to achieve one's

professional goals, may leave (creative) actors to "…turn to their friends and peers and develop an alternative subculture" (Farrell, 2001, p. 271). In design practice research, Malpass (2012) also found that groups of peers "… such as Archigram, Superstudio and Archizoom were formed out of disillusionment with the modernist ideals that had dominated thinking in design since the early 1900s" (p. 20). Other studies, such as Lee's (2017) and Buchanan's (1985) analyses of the now defunct Milanese unit, the Memphis Group, also suggest that the group took form in opposition to the mid-20th century's dominant modernist product design ethos.

All the above-cited works either implicitly or explicitly draw from social exchange theory as "an analytic approach to social interactions resulting in the exchange of resources or services and behaviors of mutual value" (Cook & Hahn, 2021, p. 179). For instance, Bourdieu's (1993) theory of (economic, social, and cultural) capital is used by Farrell (2001) to stress how collectives are more likely to thrive when they build on fair capital exchange among members. This attention to how different kinds of capital (e.g., knowledge and know-how) may flow (fairly or unjustly) among members elaborates important points in relation to Wenger's (1998) ideas of mutual engagement as imperative to CoP. However, the explicit question as to whether and how collectives in design may be understood as social spaces of learning in the shape of CoPs is left only vaguely answered.

In the following section, the study's research methodology is outlined. As elaborated, each of Wenger's (1998) MoBs constitutes a certain type of participation that may guide a context-rich analysis of the conditions, or lack thereof, conducive to processes of practice and identity formation taking place in a contemporary designer collective.

Research methodology

This study sets out to contribute to the scarce literature on collectives in design with regard to building a stronger understanding of the learning role that such social configurations may play in the (work) lives of professional designers. The study was designed as a qualitative single case study of a contemporary Danish collective within the domain of product design. It focuses on seven core members' experiences of participation as (embedded) units of analysis (Yin, 2009). Informed by the social learning theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), the study departed from the following explorative research question: How do independent professional designers participate in a collective through the lens of modes of belonging as conducive to practice and identity formation? The case study methodology was chosen because it aligned with the research ambition to study such participation in a real-life contemporary context bound by time, place, and practice (Yin, 2009).

The case of Danish Design Makers

The case of Danish Design Makers (DDM) was selected as a representative case of a collective formed by and for professional designers, thus allowing for studying a collective as a social system of learning exclusive to the domain of product/furniture design. Second, this selection was strongly motivated by access granted to individual members, along with opportunities to observe key events. Such access was of critical importance to the case study's internal validity, as investigating experiences of participation depends on the participants' willingness to share both their experiences and reflections (Yin, 2009).

Next, grounded in the collected data for this study, a brief narrative of the collective's rise and development is provided, along with descriptions of key social (organizing) structures, goals, and events. This narrative serves as an important contextual background and setting for reading the study's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 206), as presented in the following section.

Case background

> … it's something very personal, not only business-wise, but in a social sense. (Finding Board Member 2 [FBM2])

Emergence and joint enterprise

DDM was founded in 2013 in Copenhagen, Denmark, by three friends and professional peers, each making a living as a self-employed design studio owner. The three friends had decided to pursue a trade fair exhibition together to "stir things up a bit" (FBM2) and ended up being offered a chance to exhibit with the IMM interior trade fair in Cologne in 2014. However, this offer from the fair would only stand if the founders could fill a 100 m2 stand space. This opportunity was pursued by recruiting peers in the founders' professional networks to join the IMM exhibition. This initial networking eventually resulted in the first group exhibition at IMM in 2014.

The first exhibition was a success. As such, during the following year, the founders became more organized, and a formal name for the emergent collective was coined: *Danish Design Makers* (DDM). This name came about as a friend of the founders observed that the interrelated questions of "what characterizes Danish design in the present day, and what might characterize it in the future?" often seemed to catalyze very heartfelt discussions among the founders and their peers. An early founding purpose of DDM was thus formulated as a collaborative space of mutual help and inspiration around a shared passion for Danish design (archival data).

Maturation: Initial contours of a shared repertoire

The bourgeoning collective then went on to be formally registered as a nonprofit association. This registration allowed the group to successfully apply for funds from Danish industry and cultural foundations in support of the collective's goal to promote contemporary "Danish Design" on the international scenes of product/furniture design. In communicating this purpose and goal, the collective openly espoused a design practice ethos reflecting the (mythological) era of Danish mid-century modernism with defining traits of Danish design as anchored in superior craftmanship (hence, DDM*)* and values of honesty, simplicity, and functionality (archival data).

In 2016, the three founders began to experience a pressing need for more help in the ongoing work of running the collective. They decided to invite select peers who had all shown great interest in the collective work to join them as board members. This resulted in a new and expanded inner circle of nine core members (Wenger, 1998), of which seven were interviewed for this study (see Table 1). From here on, the collective evolved into a more mature state of community as structures of roles and procedures started taking form (Wenger 1998).

Figure 1
Kickoff event in the fall of 2019 for the NeoCon trade fair.

Note. A retired design studio owner and a retired industry design manager share insights into US contract market structures and demands in dialog with participating designers.

Structures of mutual engagement in the pursuit of shared goals

Ever since its establishment, the collective's activities have been organized around the shared goal of realizing a yearly international trade fair exhibition. At the time of this study, this goal resulted in exhibitions in Denmark, Sweden, China, and Germany. Each year, the board members would discuss and decide on an exhibition theme. Such themes were intentionally agreed on as a sort of unifier of the designers included in the collective's trade fair presence. In addition to the inner circle of the nine board members, the collective would make official "calls for participation" and invite selected applying designers to join the exhibition. To participate in the collective, all exhibiting designers were encouraged to write a short story for the exhibition brochure stating how their respective prototypes reflected the collective's exhibition theme. Prior to this study, such themes included "Please do touch" (2014), "My story" (2015), "Made here" (2016), "Extremely" (2017), and "Tribute to everyday life" (2018).

Each year, when having decided on the following year's exhibition theme and international venue, the members would work on their exhibition pieces (individually or in duos) and physically meet up in different studios to critique each other's works in progress. Moreover, depending on the geography and market focus of the upcoming exhibition (i.e., contract and/or consumer market trade fairs), kick-offs or study trips would be arranged for exhibiting designers to explore, socialize, discuss, share, and learn something new. Such events typically revolved around how to cope with issues such as new market trends, new materials, new production technologies, or specific legal requirements to the end of enhancing the chances of exhibiting pieces of perceived value to industry stakeholders (see Figure 1).

Towards the end of this study, plans were made to participate at a contract market trade fair in the United States under the theme of "In Union," which, due to the Covid outbreak, was postponed until 2022. Waiting for the US exhibition to open, DDM did a retrospect exhibition in 2021 in the center of Copenhagen under the Danish title "Tilbageblik" (Retrospect).

Table 1

Descriptive overview of participants.

Participants (Interview ID)	ROLE(S) IN THE COLLECTIVE	PRIMARY DESIGN DISCIPLINE(S)	FORMAL EDUCATION(S)	PRIMARY (AND SECONDARY) OCCUPATION(S)	YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
Founding Board Member 1 (FBM1)	Trade fair design and liaison	Furniture	Cabinet maker and furniture designer	Studio owner (part-time teacher)	15+
Founding Board Member 2 (FBM2)	Cashier/Funding	Industrial/ Furniture	Autodidact	Studio co-owner	15+
Board Member 3 (BM1)	Funding/Press	Textile	Textile designer	Studio owner (part-time teacher)	15+
Board Member 4 (BM2)	Miscellaneous	Furniture	Trained furniture designer	Studio co-owner	3+
Board Member 5 (BM3)	Funding/Curator	Furniture/ Light	Trained furniture designer	Free-lance designer	3+
Board Member 6 (BM4)	Miscellaneous	Furniture	Trained architect (furniture design)	Studio owner (part-time teacher)	25+
Board Member 7 (BM5)	Miscellaneous	Furniture	Trained industrial designer	Studio owner and free-lance designer	5+

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study consisted primarily of in-depth semi-structured dialogical interviews with seven core members of DDM during the spring and fall of 2019. Each interview lasted an average of 1.5 hours. The interviews were all digitally recorded and fully transcribed, which amounted to 273 double-spaced pages. In addition, the data collection included notes and photos from observations of membership events and a workshop in late 2020. Lastly,

archival data on past communications and exhibitions (images, video, and texts) were collected to complement observations of events as sources of data triangulation (Yin, 2009).

As the purpose of the study was to explore whether and how the participants' experiences of participation in the collective supported social learning, interviews made use of open and probing questions, which allowed the participants to articulate their unique experiences and reflections on, for instance, key social activities and events in both the far and near past (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Initially, each interview explored the participants' backgrounds, everyday practices and challenges, and aspirations to gain a deeper understanding of the individual. Subsequent inquiries were then made into themes of how the participants' memberships of DDM came about, reasons for sustaining their memberships, their (in)formal roles in the collective, and reflections on how their active memberships were related to their otherwise independent work lives as self-employed professional designers.

Data analysis followed a thematic data analysis and representation strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018) loosely informed by Wenger's (1998, 2000) three MoBs: engagement, imagination, and alignment. As such, the analysis applied a quasi-inductive approach, allowing theory to guide an interpretive and reiterative analytical process of arriving at themes of participation. First, to gain a descriptive overview of the dataset, all interviews were read and re-read to re-engage with the participants' experiences, check the accuracy of transcriptions, and take initial notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following this, initial coding was pursued by applying the strategy of *lean coding* using descriptions of Wenger's (1998) MoB as shorthand coding themes and an interpretative lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, while a wider set of initial codes was developed, only codes that contributed analytically to the development of central themes were reported. Table 2 presents curated illustrative lists of these codes, chosen for their relevance to the research aim of the study. Initial coding was then followed by an iterative process of comparing and grouping the codes into *emerging categories* of experiences of participation. This resulted in 8 (aggregated) themes of belonging. While the eight themes are represented as modes of engagement, imagination, or alignment, they reflect various interdependencies. See Table 2 for an overview of the analytical process and findings. In the following section, the eight themes are described using the richness of verbatim quotes (translated by the author from Danish into English) to underscore the empirical grounding of the findings.

Ethical considerations and validation

In line with the research ethics guidelines of the author's workplace, all of the participants in this study were informed both verbally and in writing about the aims of the study and approved of all selected quotes used in the article's findings section. The participants were

also given the opportunity to discuss and question the findings as a member-checking strategy, which resulted in no need for revisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Notably, while the participants saw no need for anonymity, their identities were disguised to underscore the main analytical focus on the *shared* themes of participation MoBs.

Findings

Themes of belonging as engagement

The following three themes describe how the collective fostered mutual care and support in coping with the isolation and challenges of self-employment. Through informal peer exchange, members co-navigated the business aspects of design and shared insights often absent from formal education. They also actively supported each other's commercial development, balancing individual ambition with a strong sense of collective success.

Mutual care and support

Many participants talked about building and sustaining a livelihood—as a self-employed designer—as a rather lonesome and uphill struggle. Feelings of insecurities were not uncommon with participants in the early stages of their careers: "…bottom line it [my membership] is the thing about collaborating… altogether, it is a mixture of sometimes being a bit scared of doing things alone, making decisions all by yourself… being the only one with the responsibility" (Board Member 3 [BM3]).

> a very lonesome profession being self-employed, and you get a lot of noes [from manufacturers], so it's also this personal and professional sparring in some way that makes it easier to cope with the noes… because you then know that you are not the only one [getting noes] and you may feel that way sometimes. (BM2)

> As a designer in this industry, you are often very much on your own. So just getting out every now and then to meet others, and say, "how's it going?" and "can you help me with this?", can make a big difference. Being part of DDM gives a sense of belonging. We are like a big family, and the social aspect is just as important as the professional one. (FBM2)

Against this backdrop of human needs for socializing and coping with insecurities or professional frustrations, sheer access to a community of peers (and friends) was highly valued. To sustain the psychosocial benefits of membership, the participants emphasized the importance of committing to physical presence and reciprocating support. Aligned with DDM's founding purpose and values as a space for alliances, collaboration, and mutual helpfulness, the ability and willingness to engage in collective activities with care and

support shaped their views on proper engagement. This stood very clear when outsiders—invited to join an exhibition—did not truly enact these values: "Some have demanded a lot but given very little in return (…) it's not enough that you are a skilled designer, you also must be a good friend and colleague" (BM4).

> It has been quite clear that some [invited outsiders] have been left out... I mean, you know, they haven't been re-invited, you could say, when they applied again. Because they didn't participate in the work. They haven't been there to build up the exhibition stand or take it down. They have sort of… just run their own show. And that doesn't really work in this community. (BM3)

The respondents' experiences of such nonparticipation, mostly on the part of invited outsiders, made clear the kind of engagement and being in the world that they collectively wished to oppose. Such experiences provided a trajectory of reactive identity transformations, as they contrasted themselves with peers who did not uphold values and practices of mutuality and reciprocity.

> It's the thing about sparring and inspiring each other…I mean you really must contribute… some [invited outsiders] have joined, and they are like…well, then you learn if it's something for you or not… and perhaps this is not for everybody. (BM3)

Co-navigating the business of design

Experiences of active engagement in dialogs around best practices, such as contract negotiations, also stood out as an important MoB. These dialogs would take place during, for instance, board meetings, trade fairs, midway critiques, or informal social gatherings. Such engagement reflected ongoing negotiations of what it means to interact competently with industry actors as a process of shaping participants' identities as *professional* self-employed designers.

The participants in the earlier stages of their careers highlighted the value of having access to seasoned peers as a way of informally talking things over and learning how to navigate the business of design.

> We have talked a lot about economics and what one actually gets, what one can charge, when to say it, and how to negotiate a contract – a whole lot of those things that are difficult to understand unless you have a few years of experience. (BM4)

Table 2

Overview of theory-driven codes, emergent categories, and themes of modes of belonging.

Mode of belonging	CODES	EMERGENT CATEGORIES	THEMES
Engagement	• Physical presence • Connecting • Meeting • Helping • Interactions • Capital • Knowledge-sharing • Social events • Networking • Mutuality • Practice	• Physical togetherness • Caring relationships • Managing boundaries • Non-participation	Mutual care and support
		• Dialogues around client negotiations • Dialogs about industry workings • Sharing of network contacts	Navigating the business of design
		• Co-opetition • Stand in for each other • Sharing client information • Participation	Collaborative business development
Imagination	• Vision • Identity • Mindset • Feelings • Local/Global • Ecosystem • Playfulness • Inspiration • Perception	• Self-directed projects • Maker identity • Experimental practice • Feelings of professional autonomy • Perceptions of industry actors' business strategies	Bounded experimental imagining
		• Speaking up • Desires for change • Transforming the industry of furniture design • Preserving design heritage • Danish design values	Expressing critical imaginaries of industry
Alignment	• Membership • Goals • Purpose • Boundaries • Rules • Roles • Methods • Shared needs	• Collective visions • Local community of peers • Global community of peers • Perception of competitiveness	Transforming communities of design
		• Achieving market exposure • Negotiating exhibition themes (goals) • Operational tasks • Yearly trade fair exhibition tasks	Shaping market identities, together
		• Danish design heritage as source of professional identity • Market-oriented design • Multiple purposes • Divergent design values	Balancing multiple identities

… the more experience you get, the better kind of professional talks you can have, talks about the hassles in dealing with manufacturers or suppliers…but that of course depends on having your own experiences with these things. (BM5)

When asked about the value of sharing knowledge and experiences, younger participants reflected on how the business aspects of professional design practice had been somewhat overlooked in their formal design education. Conversely, the more seasoned members also expressed meaningful experiences of being enriched through engagement in such conversations, equally shaping their repertoires and identities.

I think it gives me something … some [members] are 24 and others are around 50 [years of age] so there's a big spread… and that exchange is fantastic … saying "this [insight] is everyone's knowledge now" … I just like being part of that. (BM1)

It also gives us the opportunity to know more about people who are working on something [interesting], and they're doing their own thing, like new 3D programs, new ways to make prototypes, all these things, new ways to look at design …. I think it gives me a lot. Right now, I'm working in a shared office, but most of the people I'm with are graphic designers, and their work is more about things like layout and stuff like that ... it doesn't give me as much as does meeting with other product designers. (FBM2)

I've been doing this for many years (furniture design), that's what I do … it can be sort of nerdy and that's what so cool about meeting someone who is younger … or a bit quirky… who can pull you out of the track you're on … that's so exciting. (BM6)

Collaborative business development
Belonging as engagement was also evident in the participants' shared experiences of mutually beneficial efforts to support one another in developing new commercial contacts and relationships. As BM5 explained, such mutual engagement in business development is defined as a key trait of the collective's joint enterprise. Compared to past memberships in other collaborative configurations, efforts to help one another succeed supported both individual and collective learning about different business approaches and ways of promoting different kinds of design in the marketplace.

Other platforms for exhibiting may also act as playground for experimentation, but in this case it's also about sharing the load… I mean with all the things around the design like "I know this manufacturer, who might be into your thing"… that's where the value is. (…) I think it's appealing because it's more than just exhibiting, it's about

> making new contacts to new business partners and getting your things produced. (BM5)

> Something we also typically do is that we organize a tour of the stand once we're ready, which include all the exhibited works. Each of us talk about our furniture, so that everyone at the exhibition knows something about each piece. That way, if the person responsible [for a piece of furniture] isn't there, others can still talk about it. (FBM2)

A consensus existed among all the participants that the success of the collective—rather than the individual—was important in the sense of helping each other and taking joy in each other's successes.

> Of course I would like the contract, so I am not going to give like an advantage to some of the others. I will fight for having them [manufacturers] choose my design, but at the end of the day it's the manufacturers' decision what suits them best, and I am still delighted for the other's successes because it's a community and we know each other (…) that's why it's so important that we socialize. (BM3)

However, some experiences of feeling troubled about how to deal with often conflicting collective and individual goals also surfaced as identity-transforming reflections. Some difficulties of having to accept varying degrees of ambition and competence stood out, with those participants focused on the business potential of their memberships. Having to ultimately express and present oneself as part of a group also came with some anxiety as to how trade fair audiences would perceive the exhibition's quality altogether. A few "rotten apples" could spoil the overall impression. However, the individual work processes were important to preserve, as they supported valuable community processes of sparring and critiquing works in progress:

> … the process is very important and the way we help each other out… you don't enter the [exhibition] process with a [finished] design, which means that we can't really be sure about the outputs… this may perhaps sometimes lead to less quality of the exhibition, but perhaps also to the very best processes ahead of the exhibition. (BM5)

> When we designers meet... there's a lot of fun and excitement, right. So, we have a good time ... but the cool thing is that it's very professional when we're doing midways [critiques]; people are really serious, and there are interesting things happening, and so on. (FBM2)

Themes of belonging as imagination

The following two themes describe how the collective enabled playful, self-directed experimentation through lightly bounded exhibition themes that supported creative exploration and identity development beyond commercial aims. Through these shared formats, the members also expressed critical imaginaries, challenging dominant industry narratives and advocating for values such as craft, locality, and honesty.

Bounded experimental imagining

As reflected upon by nearly all the participants, the individual commitment to participate in the collective's exhibitions with a finished prototype led to many experiences reflecting the value of acquiring new knowledge and skills of importance to developing a shared repertoire of practice and shaping identities. These learning paths were tightly linked to the experimental setup of having all designers negotiate an exhibition theme and subsequently work individually (or in pairs) on their subjective interpretations of the theme. The individual creative processes of imagining—conceptualizing and making a design—were, however, very loosely bounded by the themes. In the 2017 theme of "Extremely," which grew from a constructed image of Danish design as somewhat traditional and less daring in a global context of design, *belonging as both personal and collective imagination* played a key role in shaping both practice and identities in the nexus between self-directed experimental work and an individually negotiated sense of upholding one's belonging to the group (exhibition theme).

> It's liberating to also work on something where I don't have to discuss things with others … but other times … I think it's interesting with this variation (…) Personally, I really worked with the theme [Extremely]. We had many discussions about working with extreme materials, something extremely strong… something used in extreme cases. We then decided to work with sheet metal, which is used for building bridges… and airplanes as well, I believe… however, we wanted to try to challenge that material to the extreme. (BM5)

> I tried to make this floating chair... So, it was extreme, crazy, until we found out what the costs would be, and then it became so extreme that we couldn't move forward anymore, but it turned into something else...it was interesting because the challenge of thinking as extremely as possible has shifted my mindset. Suddenly, something happens, so I found it very exciting learning from that process. (FBM1)

Some participants used the exhibitions more as opportunities to play with their professional practices and identities in the marketplace rather than purposively pursuing new client contracts. For instance, the self-proclaimed *black sheep* of the group, BM1 (the only textile

designer of the group), reflected on valuable learning experiences of how her identity in the market was transformed through publicity by disregarding images of specific market needs.

> I have chosen to do some rather crazy stuff you know… it was not like I aimed for anyone to go: "Oooh, we need a weaved tent in Damask", but I got a picture of it into one of those fancy interior magazines…but it's not like I am going to get this in production….this is the fun place, where I can do something for myself… with no specific audience in mind. (BM1)

Expressing critical imaginaries of industry

Several participants talked proudly and passionately about their experiences of expressing a critical collective attitude toward certain dominant and emerging industry structures and conditions. Many accounts reflected how past exhibition themes had been intentionally constructed as critical images of the local/global field of design to provoke attention and stimulate critical reflections with designers and manufacturers. For instance, with the exhibitions "Made here," the collective work was guided by images of industry manufacturing structures eroding the very foundations of *Danish design* as internationally renowned for its craft heritage and quality.

> We can express our attitudes through these themes. It may be political, or design related (…) because we are in fact criticizing our own industry for taking their production abroad… many people [at the trade fair] came over and said: "what are you designing that you think may still be manufactured in Denmark?", so some provocation also generates some attention. (FBM1)

> When we did the "Made Here" exhibition, we experienced that the few manufacturers left [in Denmark] really wanted to participate (…) I am quite sure that besides the commercial aspects, DDM has major importance in terms of sharing experiences…also amongst designers. (BM4)

While the above experiences were nested in images of unfavorable industry structures, values, and conditions, other accounts touched upon unfulfilled desires to use the collective to speak up about the real facts of making a living as a professional designer. For instance, the most seasoned member reflected on the importance of the collective refraining from reproducing public images of design as a carefree profession devoid of work-intensive processes.

> We could help each other more in being honest about [the work] … that it can be rough and dirty… and that it's okay for it to be dirty (…) because it's really not all red

wine and fairy dust… and that's the story we should be telling much more…in a constructive way. (BM4)

Themes of belonging as alignment

The following three themes describe how the collective served as a space for negotiating shared values and challenging the norms of competition and individualism in the wider design community. Through joint efforts to shape visibility and quality in the marketplace, the members aligned individual practices with collective goals. At the same time, they navigated tensions among personal expression, professional ambitions, and evolving ideals of Danish design.

Transforming communities of design

Belonging as alignment was evident across participants in accounts of detecting and reacting to participation that did not align with collective ideals of helping each other succeed. Occasional experiences of acts of self-interest, such as reluctance to share the exhibition workload or share knowledge and ideas, reflected the kind of selfish practices in misalignment with the shared vision of realizing more collaborative identities and practices in the (local/global) design community.

> … the culture of design can be somewhat closed, and there's a bit of a tendency to sit and keep your drawings to yourself… and all that. Sometimes we still experience that someone in the group might be working for a Danish company or some other company, and then if others have created something for the exhibition that fits well with that company, they are still reluctant to just share their contacts. I think that's something we need to get past. That's one of the things I think DDM helps with… transforming the field of design so that designers work more collaboratively. (FBM2)

Several accounts illustrated continuous negotiations of how to balance one's own goals with those of the collective as processes that shaped the respondents' identities and practice development. In particular, the collective vision to transform what was perceived as a general lack of mutual trust, care, and reciprocity in the Danish design community (at large) drove reflections and efforts to align community activities in support of this vision.

> You don't have to be competitors. You can get much further if you work together on some things. We just need to remember to give each other some space (…) Now that we get along with each other, and we've tested our strengths, we can come together again and get more out of this. (FBM1)

> … in a professional field characterized by so many sharp elbows, I like to be in a place [DDM] where it's helpfulness that counts. It's a place where we do a tremendous amount of work for something that I think is valuable… I mean, I could probably join some other platform where I would possibly fit more seemingly in and perhaps gain more from it in terms of new [textile design] skills, but because this is also my friends here, and that I can tell that what we are doing is working, I keep going. (BM1)

Such negotiations not only affected new ways of approaching one's development of practice but indeed played a role in shaping what kind of professional designer one desired to become.

> I loved when BM1 wrote that "we want to promote collaboration rather than competition". I mean, the field of design is very much "me, me, me". People are very concerned with being copied, it's a competitive thing… so it was so cool to try to…uhm…do something new in the field (…) I really like that and would love more of that feeling of being able to change something (…) when people get energized and want to meet up again because they are so happy to be part of our collective… that's what it's all about…building something together. (BM3)

Shaping market identities together

The collective's annual participation in international trade fairs was seen by all participants as a line of valuable experiences that clearly shaped individual designers' identities in the market through collective visibility. The respondents emphasized how genuine mutual engagement made collective exhibitions an effective strategy for engaging in a highly competitive marketplace in search of industry awareness, recognition, and new contacts. Such benefits, all in accordance with DDM's purpose of promoting Danish design(ers) internationally, were, however, clearly reliant on aligning every exhibiting designer's participation in realizing *the power of many*.

> It's about visibility when you stand together as a group. We also have an Instagram account, which I don't manage much myself, but others take care of that. We are a group, so we become more visible you could say, and perhaps also more accessible to the manufacturers (...) what makes us unique is that we come together as a network and do it as a community, because there are so many contributions at such fairs. (FBM1)

> As a community we are larger than the individual, right… and we help each other, we participate at trade fairs that you otherwise might not have attended. We are talking

> about a fair in the US, and they [trade fair managers] are really interested in the process—"but … are you really doing it together?", they often ask. (BM4)

For some participants who focused on the business aspects of their membership, challenges related to accepting varying levels of ambition and competence within the group surfaced when the structure of each exhibition cycle was discussed. Once accepted into an exhibition, designers were not later excluded, even in cases where their work was agreed to be of poor quality. In this way, a few "rotten apples" could risk spoiling the general impression among trade fair audiences. Consequently, this posed the risk of a negative spillover effect on the perceived quality of individual work. However, while such concerns were reflected among some members and frequently re-negotiated, preserving individual work processes, along with optional midway critiques, remained important pillars. By emphasizing the quality of the process over output, this community practice helped align both valuable individual and group learning with the ideal of downplaying competitiveness in favor of inclusiveness.

> … the process is very important and the way we help each other out… you don't enter the [exhibition] process with a [finished] design, which means that we can't really be sure about the outputs… this may perhaps sometimes lead to less quality of the exhibition, but perhaps also to the very best processes ahead of the exhibition. (BM5)

Balancing multiple identities

Compared to their everyday solo or duo studio work, the individual self-directed design processes leading up to each exhibition stood out as an opportunity to "…sort of do the solo album" (FBM2). Thus, membership in the collective was perceived as a way to break away from routine client work and nurture individual values and aspirations: "It's a way for me to maintain my practice, not being managed by a client manufacturer" (BM3). However, as a process of identity development, the very boundedness of the work within the (local/global) contexts of the collective's purpose, goals, and repertoire, such as the craft heritage of Danish Modern as well as industry structures and demands for innovation, clearly shaped ongoing inter- and intrapersonal identity negotiations. The respondents continuously navigated how to align individual work with these multiple and often ambiguous sources of professional competence and identity.

> Surely there is always an amount of experimentation to every project, but then again, it's freer than projects with a client... but we [BM5 and his exhibition partner] try to challenge each other and turn things in a direction where our showpieces are more realistic in terms of [mass market] production compared to more crafty stuff (…) I've been a member since 2015 and I can tell that in that time I have developed my

practice away from the artistic... It's a duality … so in that way I have developed as a designer, which makes it more and more interesting to be a member of DDM. (BM5)

We discuss that a lot [the balance between heritage and commercial novelty] because the purpose of the exhibitions is to show what we can do, so that we can engage with manufacturers. It's very rare that the things we've made for the exhibition actually go directly into production, it's more common that we get to talk to people who are interested in it. (FBM2)

Ongoing negotiations of how or whether to align one's work with images (stories and myths) of "Danish Modern" clearly reflected a tension within the group that was highly conducive to learning. Some of the more seasoned members, such as FBM1, spoke passionately about aligning collective themes and goals with the preservation of Danish design's craft heritage. However, other members downplayed the imperative of this image of professional identity and competence. These members pursued a more loose and intuitive approach to heritage in favor of images of market novelty and relevance. Such belonging as ongoing efforts to align both collective and individual sources of identity and competence arguably shaped valuable learning in terms of how to develop one's professional practice and identity.

With "Made here" we wanted to focus on the fact that a lot [of designs] used to be produced here in Scandinavia. That's also why we wanted to learn a lot about woodworking and the many traditions that Danish design is now known for. We also know that much of this is being outsourced and produced in places where it's cheaper to manufacture (…) If the production is gone, you still buy a piece of [Danish] design at a relatively high price, which is produced outside of Denmark… at best, it is designed by a Danish designer. So, it has become a brand [Danish design] but disconnected from our traditions. (FBM1)

It's hard to hold anything against them [values linked to Danish design] … but they don't mean that much to me in my process... I mean, all of us are already a part of that culture… no matter what we will never entirely escape it … so perhaps it may also limit us… there also must be something new to what we are doing. (BM5)

Concluding remarks

This study explored learning and development among professional designers outside formal education structures. Drawing on Wenger's (1998, 2000) CoP theory, it examined the participation of members of a Danish designer collective with analytical findings that support the role of designer collectives as potent systems of social learning.

Presented as eight intertwined and interdependent themes of belonging—spanning engagement, imagination, and alignment—these findings contribute to design education research on communities of practice among professional design education researchers and teachers (see, e.g., Brodshaug & Reitan, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023) by extending the CoP focus to the domain of design professionals, providing multiple empirically grounded perspectives on their learning within the nonformal learning space of a designer collective.

Notably, several of the study's findings portray the collective of DDM as a self-organized educational space in which participation transcends mere instrumental practice development in the sense of opening and transforming members' identities (Illeris, 2014; Wenger, 1998). Jointly, the findings also suggest that participation in a designer collective is highly conducive to the valuable development of competence through multiple accounts of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For instance, younger members acquired knowledge and skills essential for succeeding and making a living as independent designers through engagement in discussions on how, for instance, to navigate the commercial challenges of negotiating client contracts. Moreover, illustrating the mutually beneficial dynamics of legitimate peripheral learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), more seasoned participants also gained from their engagement. While learning driven by a lack of practice competence was less pronounced, experienced members benefited not only from pooled resources that facilitated international exposure and shaping of market identities but also from exposure to alternative ways of being a professional within the broader design community, emphasizing care and reciprocity as identity shaping ideals.

Based on the study's findings, self-employed design professionals should consider establishing or joining a collective to support continuous learning and development as professionals. However, the collaborative structures of DDM arguably also provide provisional insights of relevance to the ongoing task of aligning industry demands and higher design education programs (Brosens et al., 2023). In particular, the collective's use of exhibition themes, coupled with self-directed creative processes and goals of direct market engagement, may help inform new experiential ways (Kolb, 1984) of aligning learning activities and assessments with teaching objectives of facilitating students' identity formations in ways more attuned to emergent industry expectations. For instance, the use of shifting exhibition themes served as the backbone of a program-experimental structure of transformative learning (Bang & Eriksen, 2019) by fostering highly formative social and intrapersonal negotiations and entangled explorations of:

- *design practice* (What is competence as defined by certain peers?)

- *professional identity* (What kind of designer do I strive to become vis-à-vis peers in my (local/global) professional community?)

- *market identity* (What is competence as defined by the needs and desires of certain market actors? And how do I, as a designer, relate to and engage with such needs and desires?)

While beyond the scope of this study, further research into how formal design education might be shaped by experiential and situated learning structures could open up new ways of addressing the gaps between graduates' competencies, professional identities, and industry expectations. For instance, students might be invited to co-develop a shared vision of their future professional field—potentially radical (Verganti, 2016)—and then explore this vision through individually interpreted contributions to a curated industry-facing exhibition. Midway critiques and assessments involving industry representatives could further help students reflect on how their practices align with, challenge, or extend prevailing professional norms, thereby deepening both practice and identity development.

In conclusion, while the findings of this study are not to be viewed as readily generalizable to other collectives across different geographies or time periods, they do serve to delineate the kind of spatially and temporally bound competence development and identity formation that participation in a collective may afford professional designers. Thus, this study aims to inform professionals across fields of design practice about the potential value of opting for membership in a collective as an integral part of their careers. Additionally, it may serve as a source of inspiration for design educators in shaping courses or program structures and conditions that foster community-based learning (Thamrin et al., 2019) at the intersection of practice development, identity formation, market dynamics, and community values.

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