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Craft Learning at Home

experiences of learning to make clothes using on- and offline resources

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Sewing, amateur craft, video elicitation, tacit knowledge, embodied knowledge.

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a practice-informed, participatory textile craft research study focusing on the experiences of people learning to make clothes for themselves at home. Necessitated by the social distancing restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the study used a combination of journaling and video elicitation methods rather than the in-person workshop-based methodology originally planned for it. While these remote methods limited the community aspect of learning, they also provided an authentic insight into practices undertaken within the home, where both on- and offline resources are used to support learning. The hybrid nature of the research, which involved embodied material craft practices being captured and relayed by participants via digital means, mirrored the way that much contemporary home sewing practice is conveyed. Along with other amateur and textile crafts, the popularity of home sewing has been greatly amplified online over the last twenty years. The resurgence of interest in sewing has been associated with a new generation of sewing patterns and instructions as well as a vast array of amateur and professional online content from which sewing beginners glean inspiration, information and instruction. This paper elucidates what happens when sewing beginners encounter these resources and try to make sense of them in material form in relation to their own bodies, emerging skills and material surroundings. The limitations of video in relaying craft practices and the challenges of conveying embodied and tacit knowledge between individuals are highlighted as a result.

Introduction

This paper is based on PhD research exploring how beginners learn clothes making skills at home and what resources help them do so (Cooke, 2024). The overarching context for the research is the unsustainable nature of the dominant fashion system of the global North (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Payne, 2019) and the coincident popularity of amateur clothes sewing. Although associations are popularly made between home sewing and sustainable fashion practices, there is limited academic literature to substantiate this connection (Fletcher, 2016; Twigger Holroyd, 2017). There is however a growing literature linking the conservation and progression of crafts with sustainable practices, which combines research, education and digital innovation (Neidderer & Townsend, 2020). In the UK (as in many other Euro-Western countries), the sewing of clothes at home and the teaching of clothes sewing skills in schools declined during the 1970s and 1980s (Martindale, 2017). The subsequent resurgence of interest in sewing, along with other amateur crafts, has been linked to enhanced digital connectivity and the advent of social media (Bain, 2016; Gauntlett, 2018; Kouhia, 2020).

Interviews with an ethnically diverse group of recent sewing beginners (five women and two men) in Phase I of this research, highlighted the hybrid (on- and offline) nature of the resources used by amateurs to support the learning of clothes sewing skills. Phase I interviews were conducted to inform the design of the main participatory element of the research at Phase II, for which a new group of participants was recruited (see below). This paper is based primarily on findings from Phase II of the research, in which participatory methods were used to gain a more detailed understanding of the hybrid digital/material learning experiences of beginners' trying to learn to sew clothes for themselves at home.

Research methods

Due to the social distancing restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the main participatory element of the research (Phase II) was redesigned to be conducted remotely. Journaling and video elicitation methods were used in place of an in-person workshop-based methodology. This shift to online methods reduced the social aspect of the research – which had been a feature of the studies informing my intended workshop approach (Twigger Holroyd, 2017; Hackney et.al., 2020) – but offered an authentic insight into experiences of craft learning taking place within the home, which Phase I interviews suggested were common. The five Phase II participants (Rasa, Steph, Wendy, Jenny and Sophie) were all beginners who wanted to make their own clothes but had no prior clothes sewing experience. All were white European women aged between 22-43. In this, they were typical of the wider group of potential participants who responded to an open call (circulated online via Instagram and Twitter) and attended an information session about the research. The final five participants were selected on the basis of locality, age range and their expressed interest in learning to sew clothes specifically, rather than a more general interest in learning sewing skills. After an initial one-to-one online workshop, each participant engaged in three periods of making activity during which they used beginners' sewing patterns and/or online resources of their own choosing. Each making period was followed by an online ViEW encounter with me (see below).

ViEW Encounters

During each making period participants were asked to keep a short journal of their sewing experience and to make three short (5 minute) video clips of their sewing activities in progress. These journals and video clips were shared with me before we met online. In each of these online encounters participants were asked to reflect on their sewing experience so far and to talk through their video clips as we screen- shared and watched them together. During these conversations the participants were also asked about the resources they used to support their sewing activities and had the opportunity to ask any sewing-related questions they had, before we discussed what they might do in the next making period. Having

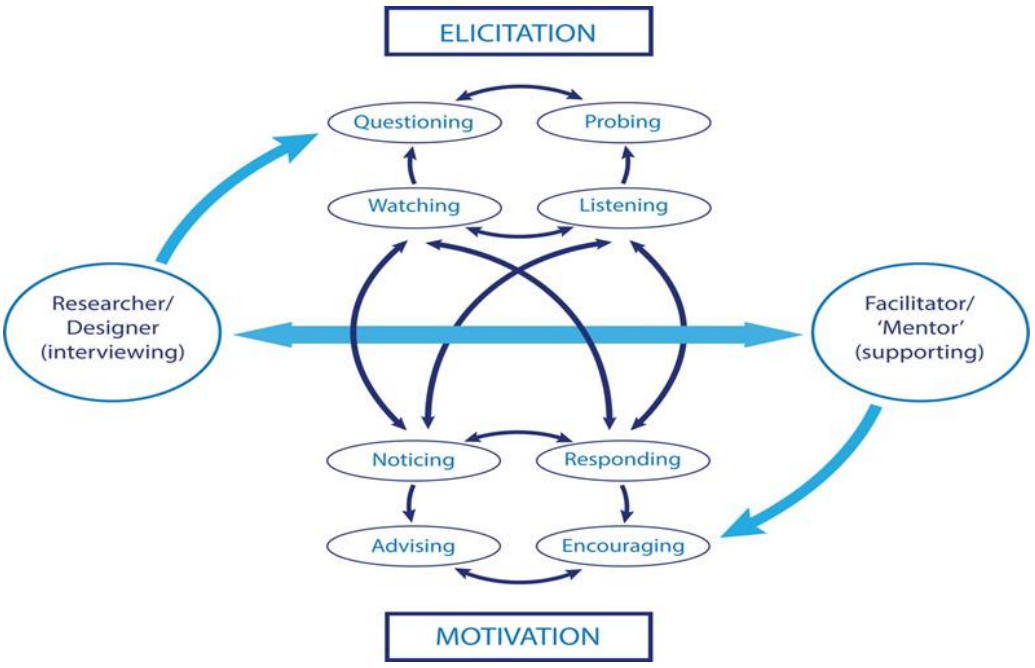
initially thought of these encounters as video elicitation interviews (Pink et. al., 2017; Rana & Smith, 2020), I realised after running the first two that the format for these digitally mediated encounters was more complex. Firstly because of the additional effort required to develop and maintain rapport with participants when working online (Howlett, 2022). Secondly, because we were discussing tactile material craft practices. And thirdly, because the participants, while experts in their own experience, were beginners at the activity being discussed. I reconceptualised the interviews as Video Elicitation/ Workshop (ViEW) encounters, in which the experiences participants relayed to me, my questions about the resources used and what they were doing in the videos, and their sewing questions became more entwined. This placed me in a complex researcher/facilitator role (Figure 1), simultaneously interviewing participants about their sewing experiences and supporting them in their sewing practices – although it is important to note this research was explicitly non-pedagogic. The participants were largely directing their own learning and were aware before becoming involved that my role in the study was as a researcher, designer and sewist and not as a teacher of sewing skills.

Interpretative Thematic Analysis

Each ViEW encounter was recorded and transcribed. A process of interpretative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to generate three overarching and interlinked themes from the data. These themes address: the affective dimension of craft learning, the 'wearability' of home-sewn clothes, and the materialities of digitally mediated contemporary home sewing practices.

Figure 1.

Dynamics of the online ViEW encounter, illustrating the complex researcher/facilitator role (Cooke, 2022).



Findings

Phase I research emphasised ways in which contemporary sewing resources used by people seeking to learn to sew clothes for themselves differ from those used before the advent of the internet when sewing skills were more commonly passed on in-person. The new generation of sewing patterns, produced by independent ('indie') brands, are frequently provided as print-at-home PDF files rather than pre-printed paper pattern sheets. These patterns, nonetheless, offer contemporary home sewists garment templates in much the same way as the commercially printed patterns of the more established ('commercial') pattern brands that pre-date the internet. Beginners who use indie patterns often identify them as being more supportive, easier to comprehend and more visually appealing than commercial patterns. Part of the visual appeal of indie patterns is in the use of photographic images rather than diagrammatic illustrations to accompany written instructions, which are also favoured by many beginners for assuming less prior knowledge than their commercial counterparts. Contemporary sewing patterns (both indie and commercial) are also supported by online resources. Some indie brands, in particular, provide online 'sewalong' tutorials to show the process of making garments from some of their most popular patterns step-by-step. These indie patterns also have hashtags to link to social media content where other home sewists share their experience of using the relevant pattern, the garments they made, and tips about aspects of the making process, like the fabric used or pattern alterations made. Some of the more experienced beginner sewists in Phase I explicitly sought out patterns with sewalongs and/or searchable hashtags when choosing what to make. The findings below relate to the experiences of participants in Phase II of the project, some of whom used sewalong videos to support their making activities, but who mostly turned to online resources when struggling to make sense of the illustrated pattern instructions they were trying to follow.

Using video content to support amateur sewing

My analysis of the affective dimension of craft learning in this study identifies positive affective experiences linked to the learning of new skills and the materialisation of 'wearable' garments, and negative affective experiences linked to decision making from positions of uncertainty and material aspects of practice that were (presently) outside the participant's control. YouTube videos were used often to inform aspects of learning (associated with positive affect) and to reduce uncertainties (linked to negative affect). One participant, who referred to herself as 'part of the YouTube generation', expressed how important video was to her being able to see how sewing is practiced.

> But I also find that I learn best when I can hear and see physically how things fit together, especially when it comes to structural things. Hence why even when I messaged the group, I mentioned that I use video because reading words, even seeing a diagram next to it, for me, this

> doesn't make as much sense as seeing somebody actually fold it together. Show where you pin, which side you pin. It translates a lot better to my brain, because I just see it. Then I can feel like I can definitely replicate it myself because it's a 3D experience of, you know, seeing everything. (Rasa)

However, as Ingold (2013) and O'Connor (2017) both emphasise, with reference to Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge, there is a great deal more to craft learning than simple observation and imitation.

Seeing what you need to see

Another participant spoke about watching videos to try to gain insight into how certain processes were performed, like pinning fabric or using scissors to cut fabric. Jenny would watch videos several times to '… glean as much information from what I was seeing, as much as just from what … [the person], in the video, is actually saying'. What Jenny describes here, is an attempt to *see* the tacit haptic skill of the sewist in the video. While some video (sewalong) tutorials offer 'bridges' (Wood, 2006) – or experiential insights – to support beginners in the development of their own tacit knowledge these are not always present or picked up by beginners. Participants not using pattern specific sewalong videos for guidance would often watch more than one video to inform an aspect of their sewing project. These videos might demonstrate a process of garment construction on a similar (but not identical) item to the one they were trying to make. These videos sometimes offered conflicting advice, not aligned to the written instructions they were being used to supplement. This mismatch required participants to discern and distil the information they felt they needed to proceed with their sewing project, with little experiential or embodied knowledge (Groth, 2022) to help them assess the quality of the information or the implications of their chosen approach.

With so much to observe, in terms of procedural steps and the tacit aspects of practice, it could be difficult for beginners to see what they needed to inform their actions, as one participant found when trying to make a pair of pyjama trousers from a pattern for which she had no written instructions. Steph viewed several YouTube videos for guidance, each of which emphasised slightly different aspects of the making process and used a slightly different trouser pattern to the one she was using. Having watched the videos, Steph mixed up the inside and outside of the trouser legs at the cutting out stage of the project, which resulted in a pair of unwearable trousers. In the absence of written instructions or step-by-step images to inform her actions, Steph had missed some vital information from the videos, including the look of the cut fabric pieces and their positioning before being sewn. Gustav Thane (2021) demonstrates the possibility of conveying procedural instruction and tacit aspects of craft practice via video simultaneously. By overlaying video footage of craft practice (in his case forging metal) with diagrammatic illustrations, the viewer's attention can be focused towards the aspects of practice that

need to be observed during the making process. This approach offers a view of the 3D material practice in action (that Rasa found so useful), a purposive 2D illustration to focus attention on what needs to be observed when performing a given step (which Steph had missed when making her trousers) and the opportunity to see some of the more action-specific tacit aspects of practice that Jenny had been trying to glean.

Visualising clothes and sewing processes in 3D

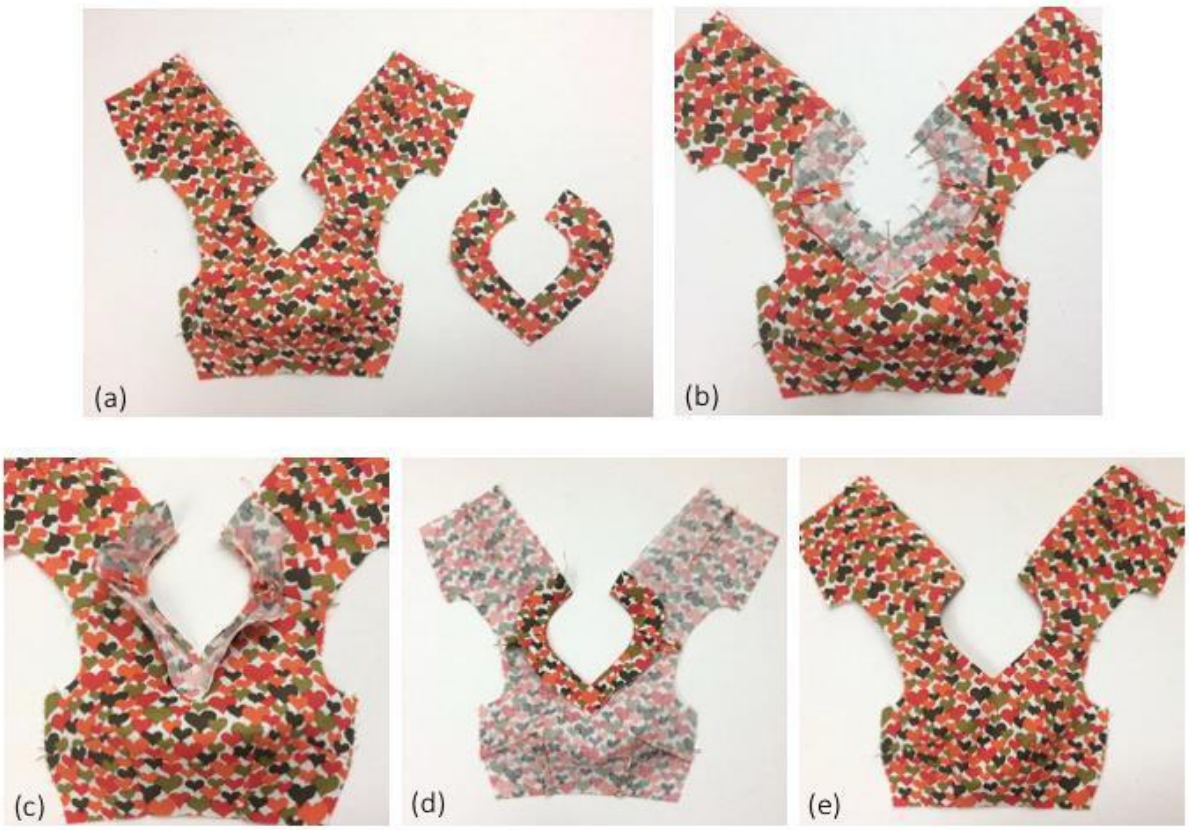
A common challenge encountered by beginner sewists is the difficulty of visualising steps in the sewing process, particularly where flat pieces of fabric start to be brought together to form a garment in three dimensions. The knowledge behind this process is embedded in the 2D paper patterns that home sewists use to guide the making of garments in 3D. The expertise encapsulated in these patterns (like the skill involved in sewing seams) is all but invisible in a culture reliant on industrialised overseas clothing production. When beginners first encounter sewing patterns, the shape of the pieces to be cut from the fabric make little sense and can consequently be paid too little regard, in favour of shapes or approaches that beginners imagine will result in the garments they have visualised. Some video 'tutorials' posted by amateurs on YouTube – which are attractive to some beginners as an alternative to using professionally designed patterns and instructions – also reflect this disregard and can easily direct inexperienced sewists towards making garments that turn out to be unwearable. For those following sewing pattern instructions, it is the steps where pieces of the garment come together to be joined in 3D that can be counter-intuitive (e.g. the bodice of a dress and the facing at its neck or the skirt at its waist – Figures 2 & 3), especially if the garment is visualised only in two dimensions.

All the participants who encountered facings in the garments they made during the project struggled initially with this step based on their pattern's illustrated instructions alone. The pliant nature of fabric and the way it falls, means that photographic images and video showing the making process do not easily direct the beginner to see how the garment as a whole takes shape. While video gives the impression of a 3D experience it does not allow for a 3D view of the maker's actions or the object being made, especially when shot from a single camera angle. My discussion in one ViEW encounter with a participant about inserting a neck facing in a dress, highlighted how difficult it can be to convey such techniques when not physically co-present and with the materials 'at hand'. As we tried to relay understandings and misunderstandings to one another using words, hand gestures and garments and pattern instructions held up to our respective laptop cameras, I became acutely aware of the limitations of the digital screen in conveying the material practice of garment construction at full scale. The images in Figures 2 and 3, showing procedural steps at different stages in the construction of a dress made in quarter scale, were an attempt to illustrate these steps, and

the orientation of fabric pieces during garment construction, more clearly in 3D following this ViEW encounter.

Figure 2.

Images depicting procedural steps to add a neck facing to a dress.



Note. Demonstrated at quarter scale – (a) bodice and neck facing (b) bodice and neck facing aligned right-sides together and pinned (c) facing stitched around neck line (d) facing turned through to the inside of the bodice (e) bodice with neck facing added and pressed to the inside around the neck.

FIGURE 3.

Images depicting procedural steps to join the bodice and skirt of a dress.

Note. Demonstrated at quarter scale – (a) bodice and gathered skirt both inside out, (b) bodice right side out and skirt inside out (c) bodice to be inserted inside skirt so that the two pieces are right sides together, (d) bodice and skirt pinned together around waist seam (e) bodice shown inside skirt resting on the stitched waist line (f) skirt lowered to show bodice and skirt fully joined at waist seam.

Discussion

Unlike other crafts, such as pottery, glassblowing, basket weaving, forging or pocket-knife making (Groth, 2022; Ingold, 2013 & 2021; O'Connor, 2017; Thane, 2021; Wood et. al., 2009) the process of making clothes is not one in which the maker sees the finished object materialise before their eyes or take shape in their hands. Instead, when sewing clothes, the maker works mostly from the inside of a garment that will only take its full form when worn on the body. Consequently, clothes making tends to be especially reliant on pattern templates and procedural instructions. Contemporary sewing beginners, many of whom have no direct contact with anyone else who sews (like most Phase I & II participants) make extensive use of video to inform their sewing

practices and to see how sewing actions are per- formed. Online sewing communities can be a helpful source of additional information and advice for those who engage with them (Bain, 2016), although the beginners in Phase II of this study mostly did so as outsiders looking in, rather than as active participants seeking answers directly for their specific sewing questions (Torrey et al., 2009). Sewing's current popularity and presence on social media make it look, as Rasa had thought, like 'a nice slow fashion way to make some pieces that I can actually like and can fit me better'. However, for those starting out with little prior knowledge or direct experience of seeing clothes sewing in practice, it can be hard to discern how to proceed with a project, even with video offering a view of the relevant practice in action. The haptic skill and tacit dimension of the making process is not evident in the step-by-step instructions that accompany sewing patterns and can be difficult for beginners, with limited embodied experience or hands-on support, to discern from video content showing sewing processes in practice. The vast quantity and variable quality of sewing-related videos available on YouTube means beginners can find themselves working with disparate sources of relatively decontextualised information which are limited in their portrayal of the materialities of the sewing process, including the materials used, the space and time required or the level of expertise of the person delivering the online content.

Conclusion

Online video has seemingly revolutionised home sewing – at least for Ingold's 'generation now' (2021) – enabling people to learn to make clothes for themselves at home alone. Indie sewing patterns and YouTube videos add to the impression of home sewing as an easy, fun and more sustainable alternative to shop-bought clothes. The making of wearable (and therefore materially sustainable) garments is the ambition and motivation of those trying to learn to sew clothes at home. When achieved, the wearable garment is a source of joy and pride for those learning to sew. Access to contemporary on– and offline resources draws people to sewing but also reflects a culture sometimes blind to the skills and materialities of clothes making – from the engineering of clothes in 3D (encapsulated in the design of sewing patterns), to the haptic skill involved in each step of the construction process. The difficulties that the participants encountered in seeing and understanding what they needed to see from the videos they watched highlighted some of the limitations of video in relaying embodied craft practices to those with limited prior embodied knowledge of the craft they are seeking to learn. The experience during ViEW encounters of trying to communicate about aspects of the making process that had been misunderstood further illustrated the challenges of relaying clothes making practices at full scale within the confines of the video screen. This research also adds an amateur textile craft perspective to discussions about embodied knowledge and the challenges of conveying craft skills and knowledge intergenerationally or between individuals via virtual means.

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