

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
Edinburgh College of Art



## Rural Crafting Communities in the Digital Age: Final Report

August 2015

Contact: Leanne Townsend (Principal Investigator)

[l.townsend@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:l.townsend@abdn.ac.uk)



### *Executive Summary*

Rural Crafting Communities in a Digital Age', a seed project carried out at the dot.rural Digital Economy Hub, University of Aberdeen, was a partnership between dot.rural (Leanne Townsend and Paul Gault), Edinburgh College of Art (Debbie Maxwell), Scottish Sculpture Workshop (Nuno Sacramento), Talk About Local (Mike Rawlins) and Make Aberdeen (now 'Peacock's Digi' of Peacock Visual Arts – Iain Gildea). It supported a group of rurally-based craftspeople and makers in Aberdeenshire to engage with digital technologies in new ways. The following research question was addressed: **How can we co-produce digital practices which empower rural craftspeople and promote their professional and creative practices?** We engaged with a total of 12 craftspeople over the course of three participatory workshops, using storytelling methods to encourage practitioners to co-produce practice-based narratives and share these with wider audiences online. By the end of the project, our participants had developed the skills to engage with wider networks through Twitter and through creating effective blogs/websites. They had also taken part in a workshop introducing them to digital making tools, during which they produced artefacts relevant to their ongoing practices.

### **Introduction**

'Rural Crafting Communities in a Digital Age' was carried out between April 2015 and July 2015. The project was funded through the CCN+ and the dot.rural Digital Economy Hub at the University of Aberdeen. It developed a partnership between dot.rural (Leanne Townsend and Paul Gault), Edinburgh College of Art (Debbie Maxwell), Scottish Sculpture Workshop (Nuno Sacramento), Talk About Local (Mike Rawlins) and Make Aberdeen (now 'Peacock's Digi' – Iain Gildea). It supported a group of rurally-based craftspeople and makers in Aberdeenshire to engage with digital technologies in new ways. The work stemmed from prior work carried out by the Principal Investigator Leanne Townsend, along with work carried out by Nuno Sacramento at Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW) in which it was found that rural creative practitioners often lack the skills and confidence to fully embrace the potential of digital technologies. Through conversations with craftspeople, the following research question was developed: **How can we co-produce digital practices which empower rural craftspeople and promote their professional and creative practices?**

## **Research Aims**

In order to address the research question, the project outlined the following broad set of aims:

- To explore the value of digital engagement for a community of rural craftspeople.
- To identify areas of value to our crafting community to develop in a larger project, for which we will seek funding from the AHRC (potentially through 'Digital Transformations' or 'Connected Communities').
- Through exploratory workshops, identify effective co-productive methodologies for digital engagement with rural craftspeople, to take forward in the future project.
- To establish our partnerships with the crafting community and the seed project partners, all of whom will be partners on the future project.
- To digitally connect our community with other relevant communities of practice e.g. in Portugal and Brazil, in order to establish the value of remote connectivity for communities of practice.

These research aims were met through the delivery of three participatory workshops with our group of craftspeople and arts practitioners. The group, totaling 12 practitioners, encompassed crafts and making broadly defined, including ceramics, jewellery making, textile design, glass work, photography and visual poetry. Our intention was to introduce the practitioners to new digital tools in a non-threatening way, simultaneously helping them to broaden their engagement online whilst also identifying areas of need and value for a future larger project.

We did this across three exploratory, 'playful' participatory one-day workshops. *Workshop 1 – "Twitter Storytelling"*: taking place in the community space at SSW, and led by Leanne Townsend and Debbie Maxwell, this workshop utilised a variety of community-led methods, for example participatory mapping and graffiti wall exercises to understand areas of value and need for the practitioners. We then drew on digital storytelling methods to co-produce collective/individual narratives for engaging with Twitter, to enable the participants to connect with wider relevant networks and audiences. *Workshop 2 - "Branding and Blogging"*: (also at SSW) this workshop aimed to build digital skills and further explore storytelling for practice-based narratives, and was delivered by Paul Gault, Leanne Townsend and Michael Rawlins. We delivered some training in setting up a Wordpress blog or website. The training was interactive and hands on, with one-to-one support given to the craftspeople as they worked through setting up their sites. We then carried out participatory activities with the group, using storytelling to help them to articulate their brand values, and populate their new websites or blogs with meaningful content. *Workshop 3 – "Digital Making"*: delivered by Iain Gildea, Leanne Townsend and Paul Gault, this workshop introduced digital making tools at Make Aberdeen, in a supportive, playful context. The group explored creative applications of the technologies (3D printers, digital laser cutters, digital embroidery machines) and walked away from the workshop with a variety of artefacts relevant to their crafting or making practices.

## **Key Findings**

The project aimed to explore the value of digital engagement and develop skills and confidence around the use of digital technologies amongst a group of rural craftspeople and makers. Furthermore, we aimed to develop effective methodologies for the co-production of meaningful online narratives.

## 1. Exploring the value of digital engagement for craftspeople and makers

During the first workshop, we carried out participatory mapping exercises to explore feelings around the use of online tools such as social media – both in terms of the challenges and opportunities that these bring. Participants brainstormed their ideas using postit notes, and then worked together to cluster the postit notes into thematic areas. A number of themes arose. *Community/engagement* included the



benefits of interacting with new networks and opportunities, seeking peer critique of works in progress, and “keeping up to date with the scene”; *ownership* concerned issues around copyright and “having your work copied” when uploading images to the web; *promoting and selling* mainly referred to the benefits of social media in terms of selling more work, and promoting one’s practices, as well as giving others an insight into one’s work and approach; *learning* referred to the benefits of gaining information and inspiration from the work of others online; *skills* referred to a range of skills that the participants felt that they would need to develop to get the full benefit of online tools, from using and understanding all the features of a social media site, to taking decent photographs of one’s work; *time* included concerns around a lack of time to participate, needing to respond to a high frequency of posts, and a worry that “it makes life too fast”; *social skills* included concerns around “getting the tone of voice right” and knowing when to sell versus when to interact, ; *representing self* mainly concerned the need to represent your own practices well online, and concerns over negative feedback; *fears*

included concerns around isolation, feeling a “pressure to participate” and a recognition that “all developments are not good”. Clearly, some of these benefits and challenges are applicable to a wider range of entrepreneurs and small business owners, however, some areas are particularly relevant to those working in the creative industries, for example concerns over copyright and having one’s work copied or stolen.

## 2. Developing skills and confidence

The workshops were incredibly successful in developing our participants’ skills and confidence in the use of digital technologies. Our participants typically described their digital skills as “poor” or “lacking” and felt that they had not embraced the opportunities available through online media. Most of the participants did not have a Twitter account – this was the focus of our first workshop, and by the end of the day all participants in the workshop had created a Twitter profile and had begun to create tweets and find relevant people to follow. During the workshop one participant said: *“I’ve tried out different medias which I’ve not tried before, and the medias I’ve tried before I’ve got stuck in and not seen a way out, which I do now. I’ve found both information and also the confidence to use them.”* Many participants have since reported that they are finding Twitter incredibly valuable, both in terms of marketing their practices to potential clients, and in finding relevant other practitioners and organisations to network and collaborate with. The second workshop focused on giving the group the skills to build a Wordpress website or blog, as well as using storytelling to help them to narrate their practices and create meaningful content for their sites. Participants started to create their websites during the workshop and have since gone on to develop them further and fill them with





meaningful text- and image-based content. These skills have been useful to the practitioners because, as they have pointed out, small-scale businesses and entrepreneurs can't always afford to pay an external agency to do these tasks for them. Furthermore, this approach allows the practitioners to continue to update their site with relevant information, again without relying on an external agency in this regard. Further, engaging in storytelling activities to narrate the practitioners' brand values has allowed them to create a distinctive identity on their sites. The final workshop was focused on introducing the participants to digital making tools, as a means of exploring their applications in a crafting context, and as a way of exploring engagement with such tools in a group who have previously had limited engagement with technologies. Some of the participants arrived at the workshop with ideas about what they wished to create – for example the

photographer was keen to produce a tactile wooden cover for a 'look book' (or portfolio) that she was creating for an upcoming exhibition. Others came with very open minds and began to experiment with the equipment, although there was always a good deal of support provided by the staff at Make Aberdeen. The participants all produced artifacts that they valued as being relevant to their practices – for example, the visual poet produced three-dimensional poetry using the digital laser cutter, the ceramicist produced a 3D model of a Norwegian troll that was integrated into an upcoming exhibition and formed the basic idea behind further sculptural works. Two of the participants took out annual memberships on the day itself, and others have expressed the desire to return. Participants also linked their activities in this workshop back to the activities in previous workshops – for example the visual poet has used a photograph of her work in the digital making workshop as the main image on the website she created in Workshop 2, and other participants have shared images of their artifacts through social media channels developed in the project.



### 3. Developing effective methodologies for co-producing online narratives



During the first two workshops in particular, we developed a number of experimental methods to help participants develop an online identity. One need that was identified in the first workshop was the development of meaningful online narratives and materials. The practitioners explained that even if they were able to use the features of social media sites such as Twitter, or create a basic web page or blog, they did not always know what to talk about on those platforms. As such, a storytelling approach was tailored to this need, in order to help our participants to

develop a consistent and distinctive online identity, or brand. In the first workshop, we created a *Twitter storyboard* (Appendix 1), borrowing from the idea of the storyboard and applying this activity to our 'Twitter storytelling' session. This activity helped participants to map out a several-part Twitter-based story outlining their craft or making practices. In addition, we asked participants to bring along to the first workshop an artifact that represented their practice. The artifacts were then passed around the table, and

other people tried to describe practices based solely on the artifact. The activity was fun and engaging, and led to revealing discussions on the nature of one another's practices. The storytelling activities allowed participants to think about their digital strategy in new ways, and importantly, in ways which were meaningful to them and their practices. During the second workshop, we further developed the storytelling theme, returning to the Twitter storyboard approach to encourage participants to articulate the *brand story* for their websites. We also engaged participants in an activity in which they had to identify the top three or four values important to them in their practices – their *brand values* (Appendix 2). The resulting narratives from these activities were incorporated into the websites of many of the participants.

### ***Key Issues***

Being a community-engaged project working with a relatively small group of participants for three full days guaranteed a good degree of engagement with the group. Relationships were built – between participants and project partners, between project partners, and between participants. Potential was developed to continue to engage and provide support to the group, as well as to learn more about the impact of the project over a longer term. Being a seed project, the project was small in scope. This meant that as the project came to an end, engagement with the group could not continue, at least to the same level. This leads to concerns around pulling out of community work too quickly, and not providing ongoing support. However, a number of steps were put in place to counter for this outcome. Firstly, one of the partner organisations on the project (SSW) already supported a number of the participants through their role as an arts organisation working with local artists and craftspeople – they will continue to engage with the group in future projects and activities. Secondly, there is the option for all participants to return to Make Aberdeen (now 'Peacock Digi') to further develop their skills with digital making tools. Finally, the researchers are still active in their roles at the University of Aberdeen and Edinburgh College of Art, and are open to providing further ad hoc support if needed, and as long as their positions and responsibilities allow. In fact, the participants created their own Facebook group (and invited the PI to be join), in which they provide peer support to one another and share ideas and opportunities with the group, another means of maintaining a degree of engagement between stakeholders of the project.

A further issue identified is the lack of support in digital skills that is provided to creative practitioners. Although generic training courses are offered through business support agencies such as Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, these are often felt to be unsuitable, and practitioners can fail to identify with the approaches used. For example, a heavy focus on branding and logo design can put practitioners off – some participants had attended such a course but come away feeling uninspired and none the wiser regarding the use of social media, or how to design a website for example. Such training and support needs to be better tailored to the sector it is aimed at. We are hoping to begin to address this issue through meeting with national arts organisations including Creative Scotland, CraftScotland and the Craft Council to make some suggestions around how to engage creative practitioners with social media.

### ***Next Steps***

Project partners are currently working together with some of the project participants to develop a funding proposal for a larger project. In this project we would digitally connect communities of craftspeople across different nations, based in either rural or peripheral situations. In so doing we will extend some of the

storytelling methods as a means of developing a common (visual or verbal) narrative between communities. The project aims to interrogate notions of community and peripherality, whilst exploring the potential of digital technologies to extend the reach of those in geographically or socially peripheral situations. If successful, the project would enable continued engagement with our participants, especially those who have expressed an interest in being involved in further activities.

### **Impact**

*Academic impact:* For the academic researchers on the project, the research brought new insights into the peculiarities of digital engagement for rural craftspeople and makers. We have developed new methodologies for digital engagement, which although developed with and for creative practitioners, might be applicable in other contexts (see Appendices). A storytelling approach can be engaging for people from all walks of life – for example some of the project partners are currently working on a project using storytelling as a route to compiling a community website in a rural village (*Storytelling Lumsden*).

*Non-academic impact:* Project participants have expressed a number of impacts stemming from their involvement in the project. Many have now developed websites which they are happy with, and are engaging with broader networks through social media channels such as Twitter and Wordpress: “*The Wordpress workshop provided me with new information, courage and confidence to create my own website and realise I can do it on my own*”. Further, the project brought together members of different practice-based communities into one group: “*it’s a varied group of different people... it’s quite interesting to hear from different sides how they would go about doing it, and then put that into practice in your own work*.” Strong ties have been formed within the group which have led to mutual benefit between members, for example in collaborating in the recent North East Open Studios (NEOS) – for example by sharing venues and exhibiting spaces. These ties are maintained and developed through a Facebook group for participants, which was created by participants after they had the idea at one of the workshops. Our non-academic partners (SSW, Talk About Local and Make Aberdeen) gained a deeper understanding of the ways that social media and digital technologies can support the practices of craftspeople and makers – something that they will use to inform their work with practitioners in the future: “*people at the end of [the workshops] were very, very interested. It obviously struck a chord, it’s something that’s needed in these rural environments, and people are super up for it because they see there is an impact for their work – be it through the selling of jewellery production, or through the engagement with communities further afield*.” (Nuno Sacramento, SSW). There are other potential stakeholders that would find the process and findings of our work of value, particularly other organisations that seek to support creative industries on a larger scale, such as Creative Scotland and local authority departments supporting the creative sector. We have a number of engagement activities planned with relevant stakeholders from some of these organisations (see *Dissemination* section). We hope to find routes to impacting policy which at the moment does not adequately emphasise support and training for rural creative industries.

### **Dissemination**

We have taken a number of routes to dissemination, with further dissemination activities planned. To date, the project has been presented to a large audience of academics and small rural business owners at a small conference held at the University of Lincoln, “Competing in the Digital Age”. This presentation

was received very well, especially by entrepreneurs and business owners who felt that some of the ideas (particularly around applying storytelling to developing online content) would be applicable to their own practices. A small 'outreach tour' has been organised in which the PI will meet with members of the teams at CraftScotland and Creative Scotland (29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015) and The Craft Council (later in the year). These meetings will be used to communicate the important insights and findings from the project, in relation to how to overcome barriers to engagement for rurally-based practitioners hoping to embrace digital platforms in their work. We also hope to build longer-lasting connections with these organisations which can benefit future projects in this area.

We had originally aimed to construct a website for the project: instead we decided that a short film might be a better way to communicate the work: the film can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/140078711> (subtitles can be turned on; it was felt this would be helpful in terms of accessibility). The PI also disseminated the work through a post on her blog: <http://leannetownsend.com/2015/09/28/rural-crafting-communities-in-a-digital-age/>

In the short time scale of the project we were unable to identify a relevant international conference for dissemination. However, we have submitted an abstract for the MeCCsa, January 2016. We intend to engage in any other opportunities that emerge between now and Spring 2016.

### ***Funding***

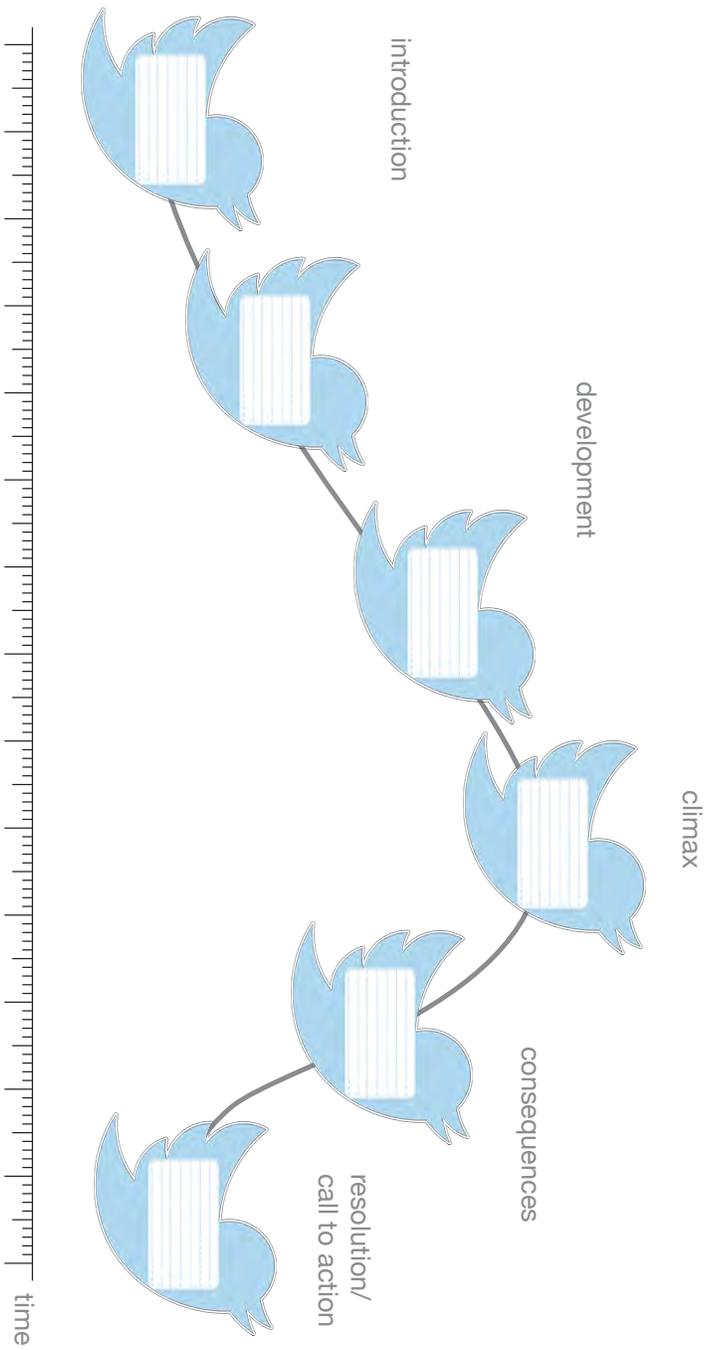
As mentioned in "Next Steps" we are preparing a proposal to seek funding for a larger project expanding on some of the themes explored in this project. We will seek this funding from AHRC, either through the Digital Transformations theme or the Connected Communities theme open calls.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: 'Twitter Storytelling' storyboard

# Twitter Storytelling

Choose a story to tell in six bite-sized tweets (140 characters). Remember to consider the flow and pacing of your story. You can use the framework below to storyboard and map out scheduling.



## **Activity 2: Identify values**

- Draw 3 circles inside each other and consider the most important values for your practice

