Weaving and Flying: Fusion, friction and flow in collaborative textile research

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Abstract

Anthropological research is qualitative, emergent, even intuitive. As Ingold proposes, in this regard, it has much in common with arts practice. Anthropologists often follow 'foreshadowed problems', joining in with the mundane, interconnected tasks of people's daily lives in the communities where they are based. Textiles, like other crafts, fit well here, often bringing in 'women's work', domesticity, stories of everyday life, and extending across the traditional, the popular, the modern. What this brings (we hope) is texture, quality, a rich description, and the voices of our field companions.

Collaboration brings an extending and questioning of the boundaries. Where does standard participant observation end and collaboration and making textiles begin? When does practical engagement constitute an intervention? And does intervening, and thus changing local practices in the field, matter? - How can collaboration affect the field-site, the textiles, and their limits? Who writes the results, whose voices are heard? In my case, early fieldwork ranged from making felt textiles to mundane domestic tasks such as cooking and washing up. But as collaboration, it expanded into sending letters, making work together, cultural exchanges, even symposia. In this article, I draw on case studies from research in Kyrgyzstan and Scotland to explore how collaborations through textile work may (with rigour) enhance inter-community knowledge and communication and produce growth and cumulative understanding.

Keywords: weaving, flying, accumulation, attention, fusion, serendipity, analogy

Introduction

> Riddley says,
>
> "How dyou do that kind of gethering what youre going to do? Do you all set down and pull datter or dyou jus think to gether or what?"

> Lissener said, “We do some poasyum.”
>
> Riddley said, “Whats poasyum?”
>
> He said, “It aint jus poasyum you always say *some* poasyum …. We do it all the many rubbings up to 1 a nother skin to skin and talking vantsit theary. Which is a kind of telling and trantsing…The strong and the weak inner acting and what happent in the cloudit chamber.”
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> Hoban 1982, 103

Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* is a dark but vivid account of post-holocaust life, set in a remote future near Ramsgate, where people speak in a curious and poetic mix of half-remembered language from long ago. For Walker and Lissener, the point of ‘some poasyum’ was to understand change, all change, following the Master Changis which had changed the world into a dark and cloudy place. Their approach was intuitive, done through ‘telling and trantsing’, through listening and moving, or ‘roading’, which Walker did along with a pack of dogs. Hence their names, Lissener and Walker. The understanding and ‘telling’ of change was articulated through a series of improvised, unscripted puppet shows, or riddles, as Riddley Walker travelled.

Participatory textile events may not be quite so intimate as Lissener’s magical rubbing up to one another, but such collaborative gatherings, from knitting bees, to community projects, to textile symposia, often across disciplinary boundaries and with people of different life experiences from our own, do evoke similar emergent and responsive qualities, acting as both means of study and communication. In working and making together with others and learning from each other, we too have to listen and be responsive. As Glaros describes for making collaborative music in Greece, we too ‘turn the song’ of our textile conversations and our textile practices, repeating, building on, copying, adapting, and even reversing, each other’s refrains reciprocally (2013, 136). And we do move, or travel, working and meeting with people who are not like us, with different agendas and backgrounds, bringing different skills and knowledge together, with no script to follow. Everyone has different aims, experience, power, and what results are kinds of collision, unexpected meetings with uncontrolled outcomes, fusions, and unanticipated, or sometimes simply new, results.

In this vein, this article intends to provoke thought, more than give answers; to help pull things together and explore ideas, rather than to make profound conclusions. My concern is how one might see participatory and collaborative textile research

benefitting and changing researchers and our communities *alike*, most particularly through learning and skill, using practices which cut across the social and the physical, across anthropology, art and design, the past and the future, bringing the rest of the world with us in the process.

I focus on three emergent themes, illustrating these with case studies from fieldwork and other research sites, including symposia and public events, from Central Asia to Scotland, all grounded in both practice and collaboration.

My first theme is how collaboration can produce *cumulative results* and accumulated knowledge. My second is how participation and collaboration involve work, and how *working together can enhance attention, cross boundaries, creating new perspectives, enhancing focus, and fusion of ideas*, while pushing us to the limits of our individual knowledge. The process of collective action can enhance and elaborate the working process and its outcomes, working up to the limits, in the company of others. Finally, I am concerned with the role of *serendipity* in participation. With new juxtapositions of collaborators, there will be new outcomes. I set these themes within more familiar features of collaboration – negotiation, repayment, materials, feedback, differing cultural valuations of textile products (whether for gifts or trade), considerations of authorship, acknowledgement and clashing political and economic agendas.

Accumulation

In *Why we cooperate*, Michael Tomasello (2009) argues that the advantages and the value of participation and cooperation have a particularly human distinctiveness, in that, he suggests, working together can provoke altruistic concerns about learning and educating others, leading to an accumulative kind of knowledge and growth which we, as humans, constantly build on. This ability to accumulate what we have learned and to develop it through collective endeavour, he argues, distinguishes humans from other animals. Furthermore, he suggests that without working together in an altruistic collective way, our so-called human progress wouldn't happen. Cooperation and building on past learning, he says, explains human development and the great advances that humans have made, in contrast with other non-human inhabitants of our environment.

My first case study is taken from my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, at a time, in the early 1990s, of the break-up of the Soviet Union, when meeting and learning from within and outwith the Union had a powerful draw in all directions. Western and post-socialist peoples had hardly encountered each other, our lifeways or experiences within 70 or so years, so collaboration cut across cultural and political boundaries. In Kyrgyzstan I worked with women, learning how to make Kyrgyz felt textiles in rural areas through a kind of apprenticeship. As a novice anthropologist, yet also a mature student of 40 years, I wanted to learn within a domestic environment, participating in all the domestic activities that this entailed, and to explore Kyrgyz social life through one fabric of society, felt, which was, and to an extent still is, very much used there.

Felt-making is, of its nature, a collaborative textile process *par excellence*. To make felt carpets requires huge quantities of heavy damp wool and team effort to roll and transform the material from fleece to fabric, enticing in helpers with reciprocal offers of food, fermented mares' milk to drink, promises of assistance at future weddings, and general conviviality. I had not planned this to be a one-way learning experience, which was just as well because it wasn't.

Work with my field companions was infinitely enjoyable. Kenje, my teacher, worked incredibly hard. It was exhausting and physically demanding work, often tedious, and a great shock to me. I had to keep pace as a fledgling, not bilingual, anthropologist. Through making felt textiles together with Kenje and her friend Guljan, I learned not only how to make felt the Kyrgyz way, but how Kyrgyz aesthetics are structured into a 'positive and negative' balanced style, linked to both an economy of materials and to people's relations with their environment. I learned how making fits in with the daily routine of working with children, the annual routine of keeping animals and a garden, and how collaborative work is almost festive in its hospitality to helpers. I also learned Kenje's ideas about what the patterns and the motifs meant, and later, working on cooking as well as felt-making with another family of great Kyrgyz felt-makers, I learned of the connections between Kyrgyz ideas about environment, land, animals and the balance humans must keep in this multi-species relationship, how this balance informs their aesthetic and their ideas of how to live in the world, participating with all its inhabitants. All this came about through doing quite mundane tasks together, beating wool, pulling out burrs, stitching, quilting, and often failed attempts at activities such as twining wool. People sang, children played noisily around us, offered us food, and were intrigued.

The exchanging, participatory nature of our joint work meant that Kenje, my teacher, also quickly learned my British version of felt-making knowledge. Collaboration, it seems, causes significant change, and usually in both parties (see Ravetz et al. 2013). Aside from our daily communication of specific felt-making knowledge, the wider implications of this exchange became evident when I asked Kenje if it was okay to feature her work in a book that a friend, Anne Belgrave (1995), had written for felt-making European textile artists. At the time, 25 or so years ago, felt-making was growing in popularity among European and American textile artists, and there was a lot of interest in this work. I sent Kenje a copy of the book once published. She did not just keep it for her own posterity but studied all the other felt-making techniques in the book, in a language she could not read or speak, learning from the images, and quickly began to make three-dimensional felt for artefacts such as hats or slippers. This involved a moulding process completely unknown at that time in Kyrgyzstan, where makers always cut and stitched their felt into three-dimensional forms.

Thus, Kenje began her own felt slipper-making business, making all manner of three-dimensional felt shoes, boots and slippers for wearing at home. At the time, I was questioned about the ethics of possibly ‘changing’ ‘traditional’ Kyrgyz textile practice, and I had my own doubts too. But I could not see any rational reason why our learning from each other and sharing ideas could be a bad thing. Fieldwork, after all, is always a kind of collaboration - we want to learn from our companions, and they also want to learn from us, according to what we both need. This reflects a very human curiosity and a will to develop through sharing ideas. 25 years on, Kenje and

many others have developed this new skill to make new kinds of slippers and other garments, vastly increasing their income, selling them at home and to European and American tourists.

With independence, the accumulated exchanges of knowledge from localised participatory making in Kyrgyzstan were expanded at a more global level through international workshops and training encouraged by NGOs and organisations such as UNESCO, encouraging Kyrgyz practitioners to make work for sale. At that time in post-Socialist history, because of the new and interested meeting of eastern and western cultures, there was an explosion in the kind of techniques used, and a huge amount of innovation. There were also cultural clashes with misunderstandings of value, since Kyrgyz felt was traditionally made for gifts, at weddings and for family members, never sold, and the transition to making for the market brought many disadvantages, including homogenization of design.

This example provides concrete illustration of Tomasello's argument about how our distinctively cumulative way of learning through working together can play out. It shows how learning is forever social, between people. Along with fostering learning between each other and communicating it to new generations altruistically, however, people also learn from each other through imitation, curiosity, taking inspiration and running with it, intentionally building on what others bring, 'extending the parameters of craft' (2009, 2).

Fusion and practice

My next case study discusses how, when practitioners and scholars with similar interests come together in collaborative textile activities such as symposia or a working bee, talk and thought becomes harnessed and focused through practice. For research, this means the scholarly outcomes can be enhanced. Including practice, action, or movement, alongside debate can act as a mechanism for developing and promoting thought and talk. At such events, although working on similar themes, people may have different agendas, approaches and backgrounds. Some may prioritise practice, others prioritise ideas or scholarship, some art, some science. So how can practicing together enhance outcomes within such contexts?

This case study comes from *Woven Communities*, a sustainable basketry heritage project collaborating with members of the Scottish Basketmakers' Circle. This project produced many unanticipated results. One was from the interdisciplinary symposium we were obliged to run as part of our AHRC-funded project. My basket-making collaborators were singularly not impressed with taking part in this event and it required some negotiation. "We can't speak easily with all these academics around." "How can we talk about the sorts of things they talk about?" But one said, "Well, I will come to your symposium, Stephanie. But only if I can bring my basket with me and work on it".

So, rethinking the symposium a little, and after talking with textile artist Caroline Dear, I wrote to all the participants, international scholars and basket-makers alike, and said "Sorry, no technology, no mobiles in the lecture theatre; but would you please mind if we ran basketry sessions during the symposium, and people make baskets while you give your paper?" The participants agreed.

What happened was quite magical. Almost as good as Lissener's 'some poasyum'. Many scholars became obsessed with the basketry skills they had learned and carried on with them through the lectures. They were frequently so busy hand-making that it was difficult to stop them. I had to physically detach our keynote speaker from her basket to get her on to the podium. But it also produced the kind of focused and insightful discussions you rarely achieve and often only hope for at such events. One participant said, "What's going on here? What are you up to?" The symposium became the fieldsite.

This kind of practice, talk and thought did produce particularly focused discussion which was frequently constructive, synthesising ideas, rather than analysing them into constituent parts. But it also came out of the difficult process of learning a skill,

which required persistence, effort and also patience, yet was compelling and rhythmic.

I am suggesting that, through practice, collaboration between thinkers and practitioners affected participants' attention and also broke down boundaries between different ways of considering the process. It helped thinkers develop more focused, productive kinds of thought which were constructive, while making connections, analogies with their subject, and synthesising ideas, rather than analyzing them. As an anthropologist, I have been struggling to find the kind of approach to help this 'make sense'.

Here, I make a brief digression into neuro-science, for which I am grateful to advice from PhD student Murillo Pagnotta. - A classical, perhaps clichéd and simplistic, neuro-science approach might suggest this apparent synthesis of debate was due to the combination of left brain/right brain activity that one achieves through working with both one's hands while talking. Hence the similar success of knitting bees, and such events. But it seems there is more to it than this, linked to the very actions, movements and rhythms that are involved in practice. Two schools of neuro-scientists working on similar themes provide illuminating perspectives.

The first, ‘Enactivism’, is a kind of neuro-phenomenology, which explores engagement in joint attentional scenes, joint sense-making. It follows the work of Varela, Evan Thompson and others (1991; 2006). This approach entails a coupling of organism and environment, not dissimilar to Jacob von Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt* and ecological psychologist James Gibson’s notion of affordances in the environment (von Uexküll 1957; Gibson 1986). In such views, the world’s affordances cannot be understood in isolation from the sensory-motor capacities of the organism, and vice versa.’ And thought and communication arise from action or motion. In regard to community and cooperation, the complexity of human needs, communicative acts and values which arises from our socio-cultural worlds and practices clearly goes well beyond simple bodily needs (Caracciolo 2011, 368-370).

Caracciolo, for example, explores exactly how interwoven narratives, stories and webs of social significance arise in group interactions, such as social and patterned practices like basket-work. Here, as each basket is woven, so practitioners’ discussions and narratives are also interwoven. Given our human propensity to make metaphor from social and bodily practices (Lakoff and Johnson 2008), or as Turner (1970) proposed, to fuse symbolic and bodily experience through ritual practices, one could argue that there is a kind of resonance, a counterpoint of interweaving of practice and thought, which as Merleau Ponty (1962) might suggest, develops a kind of attunement as people work together. John Blacking (1988) called this ‘thinking in motion’, arguing that such intersubjectivity of conversation-in-action can surprise us all with the production of bright remarks.

The second, a closely related approach, is the ‘radical embodiment’ of thinkers such as Chemero (2013). In learning a skill such as basket-weaving, there is also a kind of contradictory dynamic, where on the one hand, as Heidegger (1962) describes, as we become experts, the process of weaving in basketry becomes ‘ready to hand’, and we become unaware of our technique. And yet, at the same time, even as we lose this conscious need to monitor technique, to ensure the success of our project, we are making adjustments, decisions and solving problems from moment to moment as we deal with the ‘variation of variables’ (Deleuze and Guatarri 2004) of our materials and the changes in tension required to make the basket hold together. As expertise grows, even making these adjustments become a part of the basket-maker’s tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1967). Is it then possible to consider that the kind of distributed focus and extended attention to materials produced by such tacit interaction extends to the discussion at hand? As Ravetz says, in relation to craft, following Ruskin, “Skilled making and skilled thinking are not distinct activities, nor

should their separation be encouraged" (2013, 1). Again, we were all changed and we all benefitted.

Serendipity

This case study explores a different kind of working together. It could be seen as an example of 'auto-ethnography', except that, in my view, we are never alone. Our thoughts are always products of our interactions with others. The case study here was a dialogue between two ostensibly different kinds of thinkers, those whose work is meant to speak for itself – artists – and those whose work is meant to explain or interpret – anthropologists.

About six years ago I was invited to Ghent, to Luca School of Art, to take part in a public panel, peopled mainly by artists and me, an anthropologist interested in textile practice. I was asked to bring along two artefacts which had inspired me, one from my research, and another piece of work by a fine artist whose work I admired. So, I took this to mean 'Bring a piece of work that I'd done some research on; and bring a second piece of work by an artist whose work I admire.' I took two pieces. A Shetland *kishie,* or back creel made by hand from straw, not willow; and a painting by the artist Mary Newcomb. The painting is called *The entire goldfinch flock* (1977).

What I didn't quite grasp was that there was intended to be a connection between these two pieces of work which I had to make explicit during the panel. When I was asked about this, just before the event, I was really stumped, because as far as I was concerned there hadn't been any. I'd just selected two of my favourite pieces of work in what I considered to be different spheres of my life in an enthusiastic kind of way. So I was in danger of looking quite foolish. And experienced here the absolute impasse of understanding one reaches at such kind of limit… and then its breakthrough.

I described the *kishie*, and why it impressed me.

Very fortunately, the artist Mary Newcomb kept a diary during her life, mostly about her work. She had had no formal training yet was a lyrical painter who moved in the circles of Ben and Winifred Nicholson, and others in the 1940s onwards. Yet through her diaries and observations, she was also somewhere between a natural historian and an ethnographer. About the goldfinch flock she wrote, "I wanted to say… how birds appear fragile in structure, yet strong, and fly with powerful upthrusts and twists, pushing out enormous bursts of energy, their heart pulsating wildly, as anyone will know who has held a small bird in their hands" (in Andreae 1996, 19)

Now, if I was to try to write about the experience of weaving a basket I would struggle to convey a better image, or sense of what this process feels like than this description of the fragile, yet strong, bird in flight. Creating a basket is creating a quite fragile, light, yet strong structure, in that if you dropped a ton weight on it, it would smash, yet its tensile strength means that if it is dropped or lands on the

ground from the sky, like a hot air balloon basket, for example, it'll just kind of shiver and be okay.

There is also the condensation of strength into one small point of focus where hands meet materials which takes the materials on a flight around the centre-point of action, swooping and diving around the maker, or where the beating heart of the bird exults as it launches itself into swoops and dives of flight. You may or may not agree with me, but I think that what arose, through this serendipitous juxtaposition, arising in a moment of crisis, was a kind of insight, and it came about through what Arthur Koestler, and my colleague Peter Gow, would describe as 'an analogy'.

In their active engagement both basket-weaver and bird are putting all their force and attention into the activity that is going on. The movement of the weaver with their materials is light, fragile, flexible, yet the tension of their engagement together, which makes the basket take form, gives it strength, and hence creates a strong, light artifact in the real world. It has come into being through a sweeping movement of human hand, and materials. The result of the force of the bird in flight, also something light yet strong, with wings which are flexible yet tense, and the counterpoint between these forces brings flight, something we cannot hold onto any more than we can hold onto a sprint or a marathon, yet still it comes into being through movement, a bird, its wings, and a current of air, and that is its flight. Emma Shercliffe notes, *"*We also can't grasp and hold onto the action or force of making (a textile), the gesture is swift, elusive, indescribable, yet results in something flexible, strong…" (pers).

For Koestler, the juxtaposition, or combination, of two hitherto unrelated kinds of knowledge, which can result from people from different spheres of life working together, can be immensely productive, creative and inventive. Writing in the *Ghost in the machine* (1967), he sees these as forms of associative thinking, where one idea leads to another. But, he argues, the kinds of connections we obtain depend on the kinds of thinking we are engaged in at the moment. Each kind of thought has a different canon of rules or frame of reference. For example, logic and linear thinking will produce different kinds of thought from thinking in opposites.

But if you combine two kinds of mode of thought, then you are combining two sets of rules, a process which he calls bi-sociation, 'combining two hitherto unrelated cognitive matrices in such a way that a new level is added to the hierarchy' (Koestler 1967, extract from Bruner, Jolly and Sylva 1985, pp 643-649). He cites the discovery

of a German astronomer realising that the moon affects the tides, where knowing the rules of the motion of the moon and of the motion of the tide was familiar in Medieval societies and probably long before this, but putting the two together and fusing them, seeing them as one process, and thus enhancing knowledge took until the 17th century.

So bi-sociation can lead to invention and new knowledge. It can also lead to humour. And so can participation and collaboration. Nothing is created from nothing, these are re-combinations. The kinds of serendipitous outcomes which can result from this approach are generative, producing synthesis rather than analysis, not breaking the unknown into elements which are known, but synthesising new knowledge from new perspectives and engagement. And we receive a flash, a kind of gestalt, when we put these together, an experience we might call insight, or new understanding.

I am not sure I exactly got this flash when I put my basket-maker and my bird in flight together, but I could see a connection. It may be of little significance, but there was, and is, a resonance between the act of flight and the capturing of light-weight strength into a structure through the tension of weaving. Nevertheless, I am convinced of the soundness of Koestler's argument, and for this reason, and those of the two previous case studies, will continue to support acts of working together as profoundly important for human development, learning, design and the generation of our future.

In many ways, my case studies overlap. The first case study also illustrates serendipity, the second illustrates analogies. All case studies illustrate Tomasello's ideas of cumulative knowledge-making. So, let's keep participating, collaborating, and making together.

In the meantime, I leave you with an interesting example of yet another small serendipitous moment, a condensed act of energy or power which also links together weaving and flying. This time on the part of the Mason bee. Mason bees build their nests in walls or, in the case of the Osmia Mason Bee, they make their nests in snail shells, and then weave a little grass roof to go on top. Please look at the film, entitled *Osmia bicolor thatching her snail shell* nest[i] (see endnote). It lasts about 1½ minutes. You can hear the bee biting the grass with its mandibles and if you focus and concentrate also see it weaving…, and then flying…, and then weaving.

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[i] www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-mAM0P5SrA

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