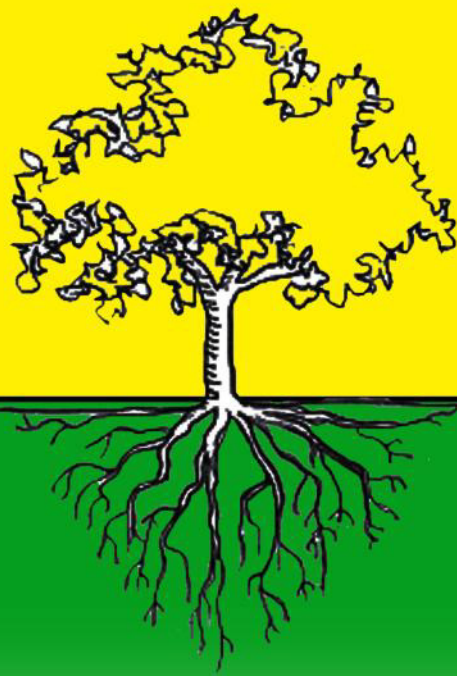


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# ADULT LEARNING, EDUCATIONAL CAREERS AND SOCIAL CHANGE



**ESREA**

European Society for Research on the Education of Adults



SHARON BAINBRIDGE

## 8

### **FROM FIBRE TO FABRIC CREATING INNOVATIVE LEARNING PERSPECTIVES ON YORKSHIRE'S WOOL HERITAGE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE**

#### INTRODUCTION

West Yorkshire's history is steeped in cloth manufacture. Some of the earliest farming of sheep in the county was at Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds which was established by monks in the 1150s. Arable farming was difficult in the locale; to sustain them they bred sheep. Wool was the foundation of the medieval economy. Their successful farming meant they had wool to trade, which with dispensations from the government regarding taxation helped generate income for the church.

West Yorkshire's natural resources of millstone grit, plentiful soft water and harsh geography were the reasons for its continued development as a woollen cloth manufacturer. In the fourteenth century, work was often within family groups, working with their own wool or that supplied by a journeyman. Daniel Defoe when compiling his third volume on the tours of the British Isles noted that when he came to the outskirts of Halifax the houses were built in clusters in valley bottoms and on the hill sides all actively engaged in the business of cloth production.

“We could see that at every house there was a tenter, and almost on every tenter a piece of cloth, or kersey, or shalloon, for they are the three articles of that country's labour...We could see through the glades almost every way round us, yet look which way we would, high to the tops, and low to the bottoms, it was all the same; innumerable houses and tenters, and a white piece upon every tenter...” (Gregory, 1982).

In 1711 the *First White Cloth Hall* opened in Leeds, a place of trade for undyed cloth; other local towns had their own trade halls. The Piece Hall in Halifax still stands in its original form. The shift from domestic manufacture to the industrialisation that we have remnants of in today's landscape was gradual. During the Eighteenth Century clothiers had developed into collaborative groups so that cloth production could be greater. There were 3,500 broadcloth

manufacturers in West Yorkshire. (Hudson, 1986) By the end of the century 60% of national cloth output in England was from Yorkshire. (Deane, 1957) The first introduction of machines was Hargreaves' Spinning Jenny, adapted for wool, (Reckendrees, 2006) this was utilised as part of domestic manufacture. The move to greater industrialisation occurred as the ability to harness power increased. The landscape of West Yorkshire changed rapidly; villages such as Bradford had an influx of new wool and worsted manufacturers and the people to do the work. There were high levels of migration from local areas and from other wool districts within England such as Suffolk and Gloucestershire. This furore of new factories and new patents and inventions confirmed West Yorkshire as a vital hub in the industrial successes of Great Britain. Larger than life characters such as Titus Salt, Samuel Cunliffe Lister and Jacob Behrens made enough money to retire many times over, creating legacies that we see in today's landscape with the World Heritage site of Salts Mill and the majesty of Manningham Mill Chimney that can be glimpsed from all over Bradford. These great entrepreneurs traded throughout the world.

Local academic institutions in Leeds, Huddersfield and Bradford started as a means to educate the future textile workers and leaders. Leeds University still bears this heritage with the Cloth Workers Guild Hall and the buildings commemorating Edward Baines a renowned textiles academic and dignitary.

The Twentieth Century brought many changes to the Yorkshire Woollen manufacturing industry. Wool wasn't in such demand with the advent of post war synthetic fabrics, better heating in homes and improved transport. The early stages of wool processing moved overseas to Australasia and South America where the wool was produced. (Smith & Howarth, 2006) The larger worsted manufacturers survived a little longer as they supplied big high street companies such as Burton's and Marks & Spencer. With the advent of shareholders and the desire for cheaper more affordable cloth and clothing, manufacturers went east. Local manufacturers closed and their

Hattersley looms and other equipment were shipped overseas to new manufacturing sites.

Any ideas that the majesty of Yorkshire's Textile Industry could be returned are unrealistic, when in forty years combing mills have declined from over 60 companies to just one (Smith & Howarth, 2006) yet there are opportunities to promote niche products and welcome new creativity.

Campaign for Wool began in 2010 as an initiative developed by HRH, the Prince of Wales to raise awareness amongst consumers of the use of wool and its sustainable benefits. The project has seen collaboration internationally between wool growers, fashion & interior designers, retailers and educators and has been instrumental through its Wool Week and other related projects in highlighting the versatility of wool for the twenty first century.

Whilst textile manufacturing in West Yorkshire has declined significantly in size since the 19th and early 20th centuries, today's industry is still respected around the world and the region is seen as the birthplace of fine woollen and worsted manufacturing. The businesses of West Yorkshire, and indeed SIL brands such as Charles Clayton, John Foster, William Halstead, Reid & Taylor and Joshua Ellis, are recognised as producing the finest cloths for the suits, jackets and coats by some of the world's finest fashion houses and designers. The current climate of industry returning to the UK and the shift in consumer behaviour to artisan and bespoke goods away from the world of fast fashion seems the perfect juncture to once again promote the cloth and yarn of Yorkshire

## THE PROJECT

The Wool Yorkshire project was initiated by SIL Holdings Ltd, as a means of promoting the importance and continued success of the wool textile industry in West Yorkshire. With a breadth of textile interests in worsted manufacture, fibre trading, yarn trading, woollen upholstery fabric manufacture and weaving, dyeing and finishing, the SIL Holdings group uses the phrase 'Textile Excellence' to communicate the skills, heritage and experience their businesses possess. Jenni Nickson from SIL Holdings upholstery business, Abbotsford, proposed that the group be involved with the Campaign for Wool's Wool Week and the idea for Wool Yorkshire was born.

LCA alumni and employee of SIL Holdings, Sara Duxbury contacted Sharon Bainbridge, her former tutor, to discuss the idea of the collaborative project. The proposal was to invite students to not only exhibit work but to be involved in the creation and curation of the event. After several after work meetings, a brief was created, to present to students. A formal briefing occurred at the College in April 2013 presenting Communication and Exhibition briefs. In hindsight the timing was not ideal as students were nearing their final deadlines and the project was an extracurricular project. Important considerations for future collaborative projects.

### *The Briefing*

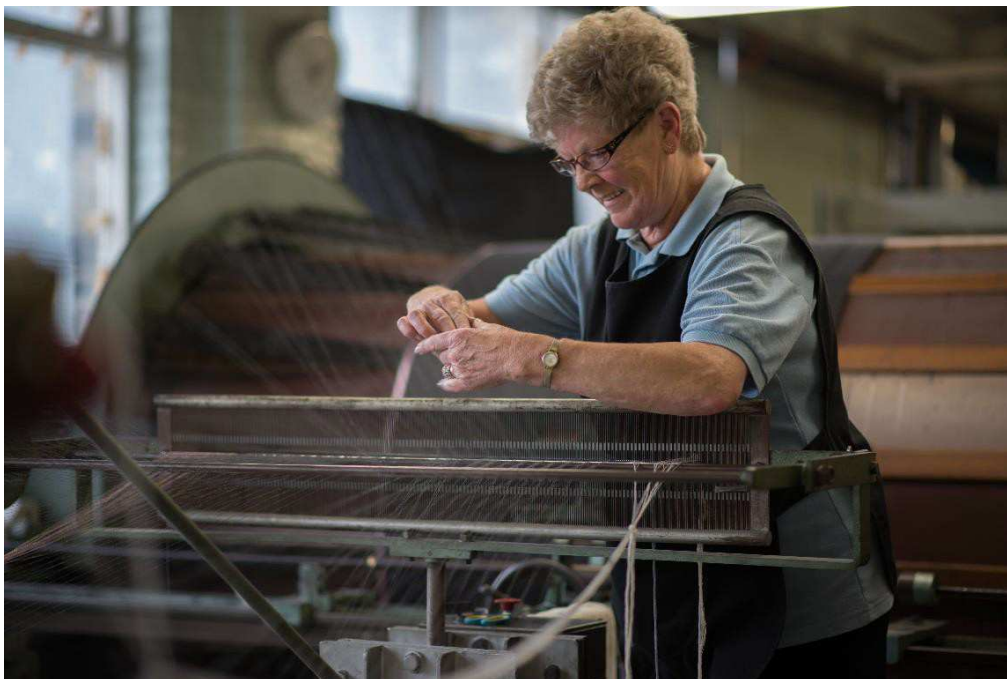
The aim of the project was for students to create innovative pieces of work that would engage the public and illustrate that 'Textiles in West Yorkshire is alive and well'. The initial briefing attracted 100 students; further briefings were conducted by Sharon Bainbridge to specific student groups.

The briefing and supporting documents gave the history of SIL Holdings, an integrated group of textile related businesses spanning the whole spectrum of production from raw fibre to finished fabric. Located in West Yorkshire, the cradle of fine woollen and worsted fabric production, the group started in the 1970s.

SIL Holdings is the modern face of textiles with group companies trading fibre and yarn as well as weaving, finishing and marketing woollen cloth to every corner of the globe. The fibre division businesses combine as one of the largest speciality fibre merchants in the world, supplying cashmere, mohair, camel hair, angora, alpaca and silk to a diverse customer base. MBA Yarns is one of Europe's leading stockists of woollen and worsted yarn for apparel and upholstery. Fine woollen, wool/cashmere and 100% cashmere cloths for jacketing, coating and scarves are created in Batley by Joshua Ellis (SIL Brochure: 2012).

These businesses are supported by a range of other operations delivering fibre processing, spinning, weaving, dyeing and finishing. The opportunity for students to access so many different areas of regional manufacturing and gain and understanding of industry as opposed to artisan craft was invaluable.

Figure 1. Worker on loom, Abbotsford.



### *Student Interest*

Expressions of student interest were requested. Students had the opportunity to visit the factories within the group to assist in their research and design process. A range of group visits were organised. In the Luxury Fabrics factory a tour was given by Managing Director, David Gallimore, whose grandfather was John Foster of Back Dyke Mills. Students were given a tour and the opportunity to speak to employees at Abbotsford, the Furnishings Fabric division in Keighley. A small group of students visited the fibre mill in Bradford. SIL provided samples for students to

examine the nature of materials and set up a remote file with all collateral information and logos to support the communication brief. Participants were given a site plan of the VQ and Harvey Nichols window and invited to visit to assess the viability of the space.

Students submitted an A4 written proposal with supporting diagrams or photographs to the LCA and SIL panel. They were then invited to pitch their ideas in person, in 20 minute presentations, to the four leads on the project. The panel were impressed with the quality of the presentations and ideas, most pitches were exhibition installation pieces with just two presentations for the communication aspect. The process was an excellent opportunity for all students; many had never completed a proposal or pitched an idea. This developed skills to interact with an external body and time manage a project. The students selected were asked to complete an assessment of their materials needed and submit this to SIL. They had six weeks over the summer holiday to complete work with a deadline for photography of pieces in September.

#### *Student Work*

Several students used this work as a summer project that would feed into their Professional Practice module for the following year; others used it as a testing ground for dissertation ideas or preparation work for their Masters Studies. Those who had just graduated saw this as an ideal process to ease them into being independent artists and help them generate PR for their future ventures. Whilst completing the installation pieces, students were also involved in the project planning of the installation of the exhibition. Attending meetings in the factory and health and safety briefings at VQ, helped the group understand the complexity of putting on such a project and issues they would need to consider if they were to undertake similar projects in the future.

All exhibition pieces were to be photographed in the LCA studio in September, to enable the Communications team to use them for marketing, the blog and information stands for the exhibition. Most of these were completed on time, but with students having left and living away from Yorkshire this posed certain problems as did a student who had changed their work drastically from their original submission. This confirmed how important the continued communication with students was, as it was vacation and a project away from the curriculum checking points were more problematic. Future projects would need a Project Manager appointed and ground rules clarified.

At this junction we realised that there were some problems with the communication package that had been promised by the students who had taken this on. There was little completed that would meet the plan and there was only four weeks left to the deadline. This confirmed the point noted above that when a project is external to the curriculum and without the constraints of grading, managing the

work output can be more problematic. Jenni from SIL was happy to take on aspects of the work and we were able to source two Graphic Design students to complete the brochure, this was all being done whilst we were undertaking our normal ‘day’ jobs, so there was a lot of extra work to make the project the success it was.

### *Installation*

The VQ is a very grand Victorian shopping mall with high ceilings and a high footfall of visitors throughout the day and night. The group had planned all locations and we had been fortunate to be offered the VQ’s installation team to assist on the Sunday evening prior to wool week. Considerations had been made for health and safety and to ensure that theft of objects would be diminished considering the openness to the general public. Installation began at 5pm and was completed at 3am. Students in the main were really helpful and we would have not been able to complete without the cherry picker and advice and help with lighting and floating of objects on wire structures down the corridor etc. from the installation team.

Figure 2. Promotional leaflet



### *The Opening*

The opening event on Monday 14th October was supported through financial help from Campaign for Wool and Harvey Nichols. The PR activity was also supplemented financially by Campaign for Wool. SIL and LCA also conducted PR and promotion of the event. The event secured radio and television coverage. Having a small flock of sheep on the main shopping area leading to the exhibition generated a great deal of interest. There was local, national and international press interest and a high degree of social media coverage at the opening and for the week of the

exhibition. The opening had over 150 in attendance of textile industry personnel, members from SIL and LCA and the students and guests. The response to the work produced was highly complementary and there was a degree of surprise that the work was accessible, innovative and engaging.

As wool week is just a week, all pieces then had to be taken down the following Sunday, this was a little more problematic to get support from students and staff to remove all parts. This was shorter than installation and flagged up the importance of project planning all aspects and creating designated installation and take down teams.

## STUDENT CASE STUDIES

### *Bolaji*

Bolaji was approaching his final year on the BA Fashion programme, he was a student who needed a degree of support and assistance in developing autonomy in his practice. His first ideas were to deliver a collection of garments reflecting the landscape surrounding Leeds and Bradford. Initially within the project he lacked professionalism being late for deadlines and being unaware of how best to communicate with external parties. Through the project he developed the skills to push his work further, be consistent in his approach, request guidance and advice in an appropriate manner. His initial manufacturing skills lacked the ability to manifest his vision, so it was a great learning curve to understand where he would need help and how to increase his own skills.

Bolaji's final three garments used the materials from the furnishing company Abbotsford, as these best reflected his colour palette. The elements that made his work so distinctive were the experimentation with the waste selvedge that inspired many of the students. Through laborious stitching he created a fake fur like material from the waste, which was used as an accent on garments.

Two of the final garments were featured in the Harvey Nichols, Campaign for Wool window in the Leeds store. His other was worn during the open evening to great acclaim. The process greatly improved Bolaji's confidence and awareness of industry and his own strengths and weaknesses. The garments were used in a film by his fellow final year Fashion Communication student Britt Lloyd, with a student modelling them, animal like amongst the moors. He also received sponsorship from SIL for his final collection. Bolaji's tutors confirmed the positive impact the project had had on his work ethic and approach and the confidence that the experience had brought.



### *Dita*

Dita was a mature student from the Czech Republic; she was in her first year on BA Interdisciplinary Art & Design course when she submitted her proposal

At the beginning of the project I had so many ideas except the one of the actual outcome. It was a process of dynamic development and a few turning points. Sharon's positive approach and not giving up, has helped make the project what it became. As we met as a group several times for factory visits and exhibition planning we became a strong collaborative group, friendships and encouragement a really positive experience. As the work I was doing meant I spent the summer in the fashion workshop I made new links which have helped my progression in my degree and helped me see how other disciplines work. Meeting the SIL people was a lovely new and positive experience and as a student cohort we had a lovely spirit of excitement and very interesting opportunity to represent the woollen industry and link it to our range of practices.

My two different installations had similarities as they were mobile in nature and worked with pieces from the factory. The piece in Harvey Nichols window 'reflecting on past traditions' had bobbins and spools suspended over mirrored Perspex, with cloth and fibre integrated into the work. The second piece a large mobile installation hanging from the ceiling at VQ, celebrated the colours and vibrancy of the industry and reflected the glass colours in the ceiling at VQ, and became integrated in the building. As a site specific piece it has become as one with its environment.

I was possibly expecting some new opportunities after the work was exhibited and this hasn't happened, however in an indirect way this project has fed into my practice. My experimentation with textile shapes and forms in the Wool Week work has fed into a project looking at lost umbrellas, an installation at the Corn Exchange, Leeds for 'Le Tour' and my sustainable design work. I have begun to explore negative space from this work and experimenting so much for the project has given me confidence to push boundaries in my work. The project was great and although time consuming, I really enjoyed it and was very happy to be part of that team, I learnt a lot from it and would look for similar projects in the future. (Student evaluation)

Dita grew professionally through this project. Her design ideas occasionally seemed unrealistic, her affinity with engaging an audience and natural curiosity around the wool production generated innovative, humorous work. In a similar way to the outdoor art company Artichoke who produce Lumiere and have the mission to invade public spaces with extraordinary and ambitious art.

### *Karen*

Karen was a second year mature student on the BA Photography programme, she already worked in a voluntary capacity for local children's' charities. Her skills and

approach definitely brought the project together in a cohesive manner as she was able to engage with all involved, at all times highly professional and organised.

Wool Yorkshire was a speculative bid to provide documentary photography for a cross college project, but resulted in much wider photography brief involving studio fashion and event photography. My responsibilities included documentary photographs of the textile environment and of fellow students creating their art work using textile materials. I also became involved in studio photography for student portfolios, press releases and event photography of the launch night. My photographs appeared in print and online publications, websites and the media. In addition to specific photographic skills across the genres, I also developed professional skills in dealing with clients and agencies and had to consider the professional side of my work in terms of legal and copyright issues. Contacts I had made with the textile industry through the Wool Yorkshire collaboration, provided me with an invaluable basis for my final year project, and the resulting photographs were selected to feature in a regional exhibition 'One's to Watch'. My completed final year project was also featured in the Guardian's Graduate selection of 2014. More recently, I submitted the photographs I had taken in the textile factory to a national print competition and was successful in being awarded a £750 print bursary. Awareness of my photography via the project, also led to further professional photographic work with the College's marketing department. When I made the initial proposal to the project team, I could not have imagined that the project would provide me with so many different professional and vocational opportunities, in addition to developing project management, communication, presentation, team work, legal and financial skills. (Student evaluation).

Karen brought direction and openness to take calculated risks to the project with her photography work. Showing the importance of shared collaboration and giving autonomy to students and practitioners.

Sarah a BA Interdisciplinary Art & Design student, had previously completed her Access course at the college; she was a first year student when applying for the project.

I took on the Wool Week project mainly to stay match fit over the summer and to put what I'd learned in the first year into practice. It was a big chunk of work that went towards PPP (Professional practice) but more importantly it was the insight into my practice that has been useful. I learned a lot from the project in ways that I didn't expect. I expected to gain in experience from working on a live brief and a public exhibition, which I did but I also learned about myself and my practice. How I think about what I do and how other people see what I do and how different those points of view can be. Specifically, I saw the hats as a conceptual art piece, the overwhelming majority of feedback I received was hugely positive, but

saw the work as a fashion/accessory, as something commercial, saleable. I saw connections between material, place and history – other people saw nice hats. I think with hindsight it made me feel a bit misunderstood, and that has made me explore questions surrounding how work is put before an audience, how meaning can be developed through display, to think more deeply about what the conceptual content of my work means to me and how that is presented to an audience.

Sarah's installation piece also featured at Sunny Bank Mills' *Ones to Watch* exhibition 2014.

I'm starting to think now about what happens after college and it is frankly terrifying, but I feel much better prepared to take on those challenges, having been involved with live projects like Wool Week while I still have the support of College.

#### *The Millinery Collective*

This was a team of seven graduating millinery students who had come together and devised an aspirational and challenging display of nine large lit frames that would hang from the ceiling displaying their headwear designs within. They were a group who had successfully worked collaboratively whilst students and anticipated that this would be the case in the project. Initially they all shared the workload and developed their pieces off site, they were actively involved in site meetings and were present for the photo shoots etc. The actual installation and take down were more demanding and two members of the team shouldered most of the work, with others less engaged. As the work was not part of their qualification it didn't hold the gravitas and responsibility.

Feedback from one of the collective who was very engaged highlights this: The only way I used the project afterwards was at the exhibition at the Knit and Stitch show. The image of my crown was also used on the cover of a local Stockport paper when they were advertising the 'Making Headway' exhibition at Hat Works. I wouldn't say it impacted on my work afterwards in a direct manner. I believe it went some way to help with my application to the 'Making Headway' project. I did not find it helped with further work with local industry. I would work with local industry again if the opportunity arose. I would however be very careful about whom that business was and would make sure everyone's roles and responsibilities were clearly defined. (student evaluation)

Negotiating a joint enterprise gives rise to relations of mutual accountability among those involved. (Wenger, 1998)

#### *Jess*

Jess had graduated from BA Printed Textile, about to embark on the MA Textiles at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her final collection work examined the skyline and built environment in Yorkshire so the Wool Yorkshire project created

an opportunity to take this further. Her four metre lengths were hung from the balconies at the cross roads in VQ.

Wool Yorkshire was a project which, for me, worked as a catalyst within my practice of textile design to encourage the pursuit of further collaborative ventures with working textile mills and museums. Throughout my degree I developed a keen interest in textile heritage and my studies in Yorkshire led me to explore the woollen industry specifically. When the opportunity came up to be involved in a project with a mill still producing woollen goods I could see the potential it had to work alongside my studies in a very exciting way.

The project came about at the time I was spending between finishing my printed textile degree and beginning my textile practice Masters so it was a stepping stone between the two. On completion of the project it gave me the confidence to approach other companies and heritage institutions with design proposals. Following Wool Yorkshire I knew that there was a place within heritage for textile design and have made it the aim of my MA studies to continue exploring how. I am currently in the final stages of a print design project with a Textile Museum in Lancashire and am hoping to participate in another one with a different museum at the end of this year.

Keeping our textile heritage alive and continuing it through future generations is growing in importance and contemporary textile design is just one way in which we can engage this generation with it. Heritage and the Arts are both experiencing cuts at present, but so is education. This seems to open the door to possibilities which connect all these aspects of culture. Getting artists, makers and designers involved in projects which publicise and celebrate our heritage and using it to teach younger generations the value of its continuation.

Networking museums and working mills in a way which allows them to support and encourage each other.

We have such a wealth of heritage available to us and I believe the arts are an avenue which could make it accessible to all. (student evaluation)

### *Lilli*

Lilli was a graduating Fine Art student, had experimented with yarn bombing and similar installation pieces in her own practice. The Wool Yorkshire Project developed this further with more illustrative pieces using the yarns manufactured by SIL.

Wool week was the first exhibition I exhibited in after my degree in fine art. My artwork in my final year of my degree predominantly involved using wool. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to work with people in the local community, use locally sourced materials and have my work shown in the town centre. Out of the people in the exhibition it was great to see how one media could be used in so many different ways. In the future I definitely would want to get involved in making art

work in the local community. This work has helped on my PGCE course as well over the last twelve months.

## CONCLUSION

This project was an immense amount of work. Speaking about it recently to an external colleague from the Inclusive Arts Education Forum, they asked how we had managed to get away with taking such risks. We had taken a huge leap of faith that it would all work out, that all parties would deliver and taken on a vast amount of work to get there. Much of the work was done without remuneration or as additional work to full time day jobs. Support from the organisations and management was varied and occasionally the project was seen as an inconvenience and unnecessary.

Bringing such a disparate group of students together who in the main had not worked collaboratively and many were about to graduate brought its own issues which at the time we had not considered. Wenger notes that people who have related backgrounds will probably be able to form a community of practice with less mutual engagement than people whose prior practices are more distant to start with. (Wenger, 1998).

The students shared a context of practice from being within a specialist art College and the fact that they had autonomously chosen to be in an external project added to this shared notion. The staff from the institution and industry also had art school backgrounds creating further shared understanding. The range of communication tools helped support the disparate nature of the group, though on talking to participants it was the face to face meetings and factory visits that brought the most effective experience within the project. Communities of practice are important places of negotiation, learning, meaning and identity. (Wenger, 1998)

The project generated a lot of media for all parties within the project. The College had four regional print articles, one radio interview, one regional television news (Calendar), twelve web news articles. On social media it had over 1,000 Facebook hits and reached an audience of 102,000 on twitter. This was the most PR that any project the College had been involved in had reached. Also the footfall that occurs within the Victoria Quarter is far greater than any that would happen at End of Year Shows, so the number of people engaging with the students, the College and SIL Holdings was vast, approximately 6-8,000 daily. In conclusion the first step in building confidence in the textiles industry and developing joint partnerships with education and industry had successfully begun. Many lessons were gained from the project and if we were to begin again a structured project team would be in place and a more effective and accurate time line with time out from the day job. We

would also need to consider stronger support from line management whilst still retaining the opportunity to work laterally, between the lines.

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