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FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Textile Trajectories

How can textile making enhance the employability of homeless and vulnerably housed residents?
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Abstract

This paper discusses how textile community activities can enhance the employability of homeless and vulnerably housed residents as well as their mental health and wellbeing. The author uses the London-based 'Home and Belonging' textile programme as an action research case study to explore new methods for design engagement activities. As part of the two-year project a group of homeless and vulnerably housed residents took part in a number of bespoke textile and art workshops to support their personal development. The author initiated a new textile / arts programme in collaboration with the Crisis Skylight Centre in the London borough of Brent, based in Harlesden, one of the United Kingdom's (UK's) most economically deprived areas. The project included 35 Crisis members who have been affected by homelessness over the past two years. Participants reflected on their personal journeys of belonging and responded to the diverse findings through textile making. All participants are local residents who took part in a series of textile workshops between Spring 2017 – Summer 2018 developing a collection of T-Shirts and bags, upcycled tapestry designs, and embroidery badges as well as textile animations. The communal making activities were mapped through data collection, which demonstrates the increased self-esteem of the participants, leading to enhanced team working and communication skills, as well as creative and employability skills. The paper analyses the specific benefits of communal making and reviews existing methods. The author's conclusion is to recommend the value of creative activities as part of life-long adult learning in order to develop transferrable professional and specific textile skills as well as increasing the well-being of inner-city communities.

Keywords: community engagement; employability; transferable skills; mental health

1. Introduction

'Home and Belonging' is a textile-based programme delivered in partnership with Crisis Skylight Brent (CSB) – part of Crisis UK, one of the biggest charities addressing homelessness in Britain – and Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London (UAL). The project was funded through the Brent Council Voluntary Sector Initiative Fund and ran from October 2016 to September 2018. The author will analyse project outcomes applying a lens on employability and life-long learning to complement an earlier paper which evaluated new methods for place-based textile activities to enhance the social capital of urban neighbourhoods (Marr 2018).

The project was originally set up with the aim of improving the lives and wellbeing of homeless and vulnerably-housed residents by introducing them to wide-ranging creative activities, rather than developing specific 'hard' employability skills. The purpose of the programme was to reduce isolation and increase the participants' confidence and self-esteem through textile making as a vehicle for

purposeful learning and self-expression. Additionally, the project's aim was to build the participants' resilience whilst supporting them to engage in wide-ranging, local community activities to give homeless and vulnerably housed residents a voice to respond to the changing nature of their neighbourhood, bringing greater arts provision into the Borough and promote creative approaches to community cohesion. As the project developed it became clear that this was also an effective opportunity to introduce a wider range of soft employability skills into the programme and generate a closer dialogue with Crisis progression coaches – especially as the regular textile workshops took place on the same premises as the coaching sessions.

Over a period of two years the Home and Belonging team set up weekly textile, art and drama classes tailored to the needs of homeless and vulnerably-housed residents in Harlesden, Brent (figure 1). Additional events such as exhibitions, drama performances and textile pop up shops complemented the programme.

Figure 1: Crisis Skylight Brent textiles workshop.

During the first year, textile activities engaged participants in college visits, weaving, printing and drawing, adopting environmentally-friendly ideas and showcasing their work in order to test out different place-based neighbourhood activities. Throughout, the second year participants took part in hand stitching and digital embroidery classes as well as textile film animation workshops to broaden their textile skills. Different types of artwork were shown in a local cinema as well as exhibited at CSM (Brock et al. 2017), Harlesden Library and the University of Bolton (Downs 2019). Textile activities were complemented by other arts classes in painting and photography as well as drama sessions. In total about 150 homeless and vulnerably housed beneficiaries and 500 local residents engaged with the community events whilst the public exhibitions and screenings had a footfall of over 35 thousand visitors.

2. Background

The following gives an overview of the different Home and Belonging project partners as well as the current context of homelessness in the London Borough of Brent.

2.1 Crisis Skylight Brent

Crisis is an UK wide charity organisation which offers education and training about housing, employment and health for people who are currently homeless, have experienced homelessness in the past three years or are in immediate danger of losing their homes. CSB was funded in April 2016, when it evolved out of a previously existing local self-help group called LIFT. CSB had no experience in delivering art and design classes and the project co-ordinator had to set up new art workshop facilities to house the project.

2.2 Central Saint Martins

CSM is a multi-disciplinary art college located in central London and is part of the UAL. The author of this paper and initiator of the Home and Belonging project is the Programme Director for Jewellery, Textiles and Materials as well as a design researcher based at the Textile Futures Research Community (TFRC) at CSM. The project was conceived as part of the TFRC Urban Fabric research area, which explores sustainable and innovative textile design to enhance urban environments and their positive impact on daily life.

2.3. Local Context

The Home and Belonging project took place in Harlesden which is in the top 5% of most deprived areas in the UK and part of the London Borough of Brent. Brent is in the national top 10 local authorities for the number of rough sleepers and has the second highest rate in London. There are currently 3,000 people in temporary accommodation in Brent and there was a large growth in homelessness acceptances (amongst the highest levels in the country) with an increase from just over 300 acceptances in 2010/11 to around 850 in 2014/15. The London based CHAIN (2016) database shows that London rough sleeping levels have risen by 104% to 8,096 since 2010 (Annual Report 2015/16) and the projected figures for 2019 indicate that this situation has worsened over the past three years.

The employment rate in Harlesden is 59.3% which is significantly lower than the London and National levels which are 70%. The proportion of those claiming Job Seeker's Allowance is particularly high at 18.3% compared to 3.6% nationally in 2014 (Office for National Statistics 2011). Like many London neighbourhoods, Harlesden is experiencing constant urban development changes resulting in increased property prices and shifting demographics, and its population has increased by 40.43% since 2001 (Office for National Statistics 2011). Whilst Harlesden has many economic and environmental challenges, at the same time it has a lively community, which manifests itself in the diverse small businesses and cultural folklore of its High Street.

2.4 Health and Wellbeing

Being well is a fundamental requirement to full engagement and developing employability in order to take an active part in supporting oneself. Research indicates a strong link between homelessness and ill health as well as substance abuse – with poor mental and physical health being both a cause and a consequence of homelessness. People who have experienced homelessness are over twice as likely to report a physical health issue then the general public. 44% of homeless people have a mental health diagnosis, in comparison with 23% of the general population (Homeless Link 2016). Additionally, 41% use drugs and alcohol to cope with mental health issues (Homeless Link 2014). In 2015/16, 45% of

the people who accessed Crisis services identified themselves as having or having had mental health issues, a figure echoed at a local level at Crisis Brent.

3. Research Methodology

This project was set up as an action research case study in order to explore the participatory and experimental nature of the project and generate an open dialogue amongst participants and facilitators as well as acknowledging the limitations of this specific local setting, based on the Reason and Bradbury (2001) theoretical research methods framework. Action research is appropriate for this study because of its focus on social interaction and experimental approach. Utilising qualitative measures, data for this study were collected in the following ways:

- written and photographic diary
- interviews with project participants as well as progression coaches
- visual check in/out data during workshops (figure 2)
- questionnaires
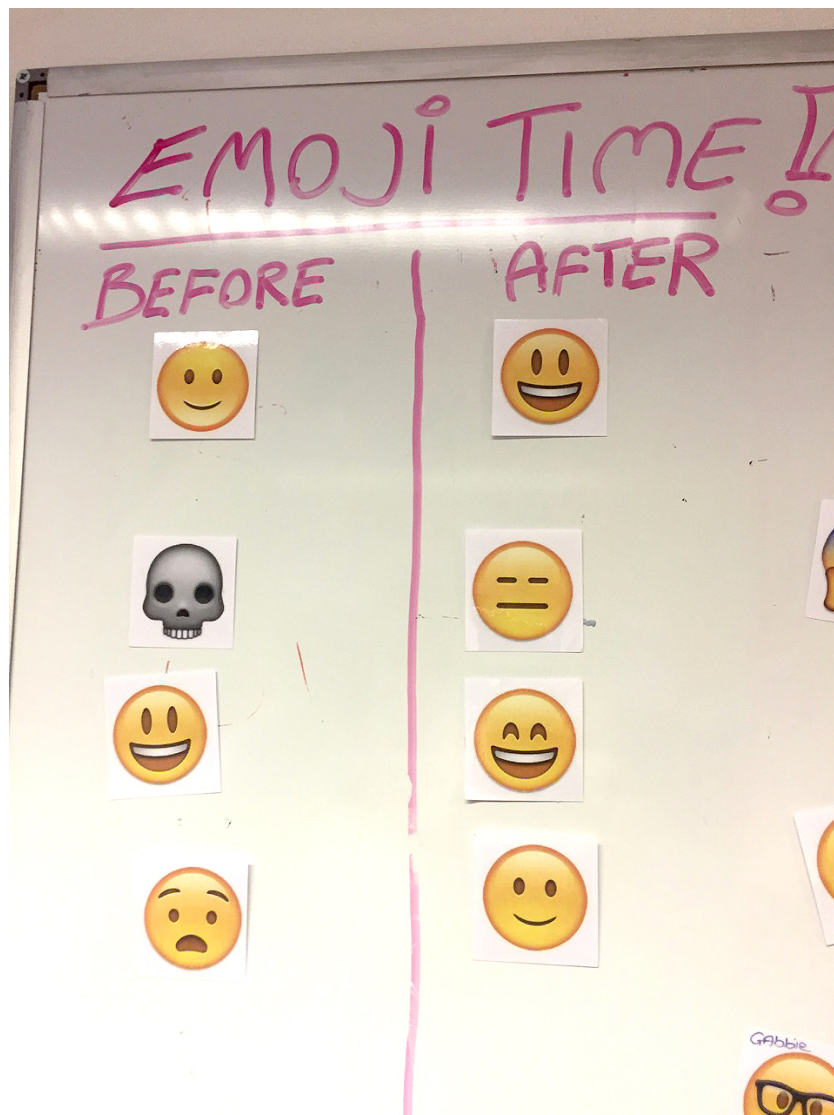- Reading review of contextual information and literature.

Figure 2: Emoji check in as part of the data collection.

4. Understanding Employability – Review of different approaches

During the Home and Belonging project the author tested and developed some Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning methods in the context of adult education in order to stimulate additional creative approaches to improve the well-being of Crisis clients. During the project it became apparent that the new textile classes also had the potential to impact positively on the progression of the participants by enhancing employability skills.

This section reviews existing frameworks around 'Employability' to get a deeper understanding of this widely used term in order to map which Home and Belonging activities were specifically relevant for homeless and vulnerably-housed residents to develop enhanced employability and creative attributes. Employability is currently viewed through a number of different lenses relating to the needs of different stakeholders such as the government, employers, employees and students. The term is commonly used in HE as well as in adult education and the HE Academy has recently published a thorough review of existing definitions as part of the HEA Employability Framework (2015).

The most widely used definition has been developed by Knight and Yorke and defines employability as: 'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.' (Yorke and Knight 2006: 8). This definition does not characterise employability as exclusively developed in HE and Yorke (2006) makes an additional case that employability is a work in progress throughout one's working life. In the context of the Home and Belonging project it is particularly useful to define employability not only in relation to the workforce and economy but also to understand the personal benefits as well as positive change for communities.

Rich (2015) draws out the important distinction between employment (labour market status) and employability (skills and preparedness) ensuring that graduates are employed and that their skills are effectively used and therefore keeping a balance between employers' and graduates' needs. This reframes employability as enabling citizens to have access to satisfactory livelihoods rather than generating short-term economic growth. There has been a subtler discussion around the notion of 'identity' in which employability becomes not simply about encouraging the acquisition of skills, but also as a tool to encourage identity transition towards becoming a graduate worker and citizen. Schmidt and Bargel (2012) discuss a close alignment between employability and wider questions of personal efficiency and citizenship – which is particularly relevant in the context of creating opportunities for marginalised communities.

The following short overview will analyse which achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes specifically relate to creative learning and textile design, summarising the HEA Employability Framework, the UAL's Creative Attributes Framework (CAF) and Braggs et al. (2018) as well as the more generic UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) framework.

In 2009 the UKCES developed a new framework for the skills it considers important to employability: The Employability Challenge. These include a broad range of sectors and related abilities – not specifically highlighting creative skills – with an emphasis on:
- developing a positive approach to work and employment;
- using numbers, language and IT effectively;
- self-management;

- thinking and solving problems;
- working together and communicating;
- understanding business.

In contrast the UAL Creative Attributes Framework (CAF) was developed by the UAL Teaching and Learning Exchange in 2016 to recognise, endorse and support the value of enterprise and employability in creative higher education, to enhance teaching and learning and share good practice. The CAF defines enterprise and employability within creative education as about integrating practices, behaviours and qualities that empower students and graduates to develop and sustain a rewarding professional life. A clearly defined structure of attributes enables students and graduates to find, make and take opportunities to meet their aspirations as successful creative professionals. CAF identifies the following attributes as key to creative employability:

Proactivity – the initiative, hard work and passion required to make things happen in society, in the community, and in the workplace.

Enterprise – the mind-set that takes measured risks and that perceives and creates opportunities, and the resourcefulness to pursue these opportunities in an ethical and sustainable way.

Agility – the ability to embrace rapid change and retain an open mind.

Communication – the skills needed to present themselves, their work and their ideas, to inspire others and respond to feedback.

Connectivity – the ability to collaborate with others, create networks and develop and contribute to communities of practice.

Storytelling – the ability to demonstrate their unique talents, abilities and experiences to others in an engaging manner.

Curiosity – the enthusiasm to seek out new perspectives, to create and build on existing knowledge.

Self-efficacy – confidence in their abilities, and the ability to respond positively in various situations. Resilience – the willingness to adapt and remain motivated, overcome obstacles, and deal with ambiguity, uncertainty, and rejection.

The HEA Framework for Embedding Employability into Higher Education (2015) focuses on the different stages of the educational journey, from introducing skills into the curriculum to work experience as part of a HE curriculum. This does not specifically mention creative attributes and instead visualises learning as an ongoing circular development (figure 3).

Figure 3: HEA framework for embedding employability into Higher Education (2015).

1. Defining Employability: Specialist, technical and transferable skills; Knowledge and Application.

2. Auditing and Mapping: Behaviours, qualities and values; Enterprise and entrepreneurship; Career guidance and management.

3. Prioritising Actions: Self, Social and Cultural Awareness; Reflection and Articulation; Confidence, Resilience and Adaptability.

4. Measuring Impact: Experience and networks, Attributes and Capabilities.

Additionally, Knight and Yorke (2006) evaluate what employers are understood to see as key employability skills. Here the focus is on personal character such as reliability, personality, self-awareness, common sense, the ability to listen, flexibility, adaptability, an understanding of the organisational culture, good manners, being well-presented, punctuality, positive engagement, integrity, motivation, enthusiasm, loyalty, and dedication – noting that confidence was mentioned repeatedly.

Vocational skills that scored highly were: technical proficiency, relevant work experience, commitment, hardworking, professionalism, oral and written communication, as well as all the standard transferable

skills such as team-working, independent working, basic IT and numeracy.

Some of the identified skills were relating to creative attributes such as: imagination, clear communication skills, individuals prepared to push themselves and work outside their comfort zone, analysis and decision making.

And finally, Braggs et al (2018) identify in their research the following top five employability skills: communication, team-working and independent working, analysis, decision-making and adaptability.

By comparing the above four frameworks the author has mapped different understandings of employability relevant to the Home and Belonging project. In conclusion there is a focus on the following key attributes, which have featured in all of the above frameworks and bridge both desirable generic and creative characteristics:

- Confidence and self-efficacy
- Positive proactivity
- Agility and Adaptability
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Self, social and cultural awareness
- Resilience
- Team-working and independent working

However, in this context it is also important to recognise differing cultural expectations, diverse industry requirements as well as specific local eco-systems and different generations of learners – which require a holistic approach to understanding employability. Kolb (1984) looks at learning as a process, not in terms of outcomes. This is especially the case for the Home and Belonging participants who have a wide range of cultural and professional backgrounds as well as very specific personal skill levels.

5. Findings
5.1. Enhanced Wellbeing
The project had a very high retention rate with eight members attending 85% of workshop sessions, demonstrating a strong commitment to the project. This was particularly supported by the locally based arts co-ordinator whose continuous positive presence acted as an invaluable gelling agent for the group. Additionally Crisis members met their progression coaches on average once per week to identify their progress through the Crisis Outcome Star questionnaire. This is an evaluation of personal development and features mental health as part of a general track record.

Throughout the Home and Belonging project qualitative and quantitative data about the participants was collected in form of attendance records, visual emoticon sign ins and sign outs as well as questionnaires. The project team also used a learning tool evaluation to record interpersonal, social and practical skills. Average results from the participants demonstrate that the workshops scored highly, particularly in enhancing motivation, confidence, resilience and organisation:
- Motivation: 8
- Self-confidence: 8
- Self-awareness: 7
- Relationships with others: 7

- Being organised: 8
- Learning new skills: 7
- Resilience and problem solving: 8

(Average out of 10, and 10 being high the highest score)

Participants' qualitative feedback was very positive when asked about how they have used or will use their new skills in their life:

'I now use my new skills and experience of drawing and painting in my spare time in my hostel' Participant A
'Very happy about my development and confidence – I really needed it' Participant A
'To help me go self-employed' Participant B

People cited building a new community of practice, less isolation, confidence and new skills as most beneficial:
'The Home and Belonging project spawned me' Participant A
'Loved everything and in particular all the Home and Belonging classes and visits' Participant B
'Hope for the future' Participant C
'Meeting new people and learning new skills I never thought I would have' Participant D

The results of the questionnaires and feedback demonstrate the highly positive impact the Home and Belonging classes had on the Crisis clients, especially in building up their confidence. This improved mental health led to enhanced motivation and confidence and created an affirmative foundation for the development of employability.

5.2. Developing Making Skills
Creating a nurturing environment welcoming different skills levels and peer support was key to the positive effect of the programme. Beginner taster sessions explicitly communicated 'making with no expectations' to reduce the fear factor for new applicants to engage with creative activities and join the group. Beginners often valued repetitive activities to be absorbed and calm the mind as a welcome change to an otherwise restless day. Here a pre-selection of available materials, ready-made components such as the prefabricated templates for the embroidered badges, helped to build confidence that it is do-able to create and complete a 'successful' creative outcome.

Providing clear methods to gently build up skills as well as the possibility of personalising the outcome and including individual narratives proved to be effective methods for establishing an instant connection with participants. Playful and open approaches are key to engage and retain participants as well as providing materials and colours that reflect the diverse backgrounds of all participants.

Social skills improved throughout the programme and clients became less disruptive and noisy as a result of continuous group self-regulation – telling each other off, to "focus", "be quiet", as well as praising creative ideas and encouraging more design development (figure 4).
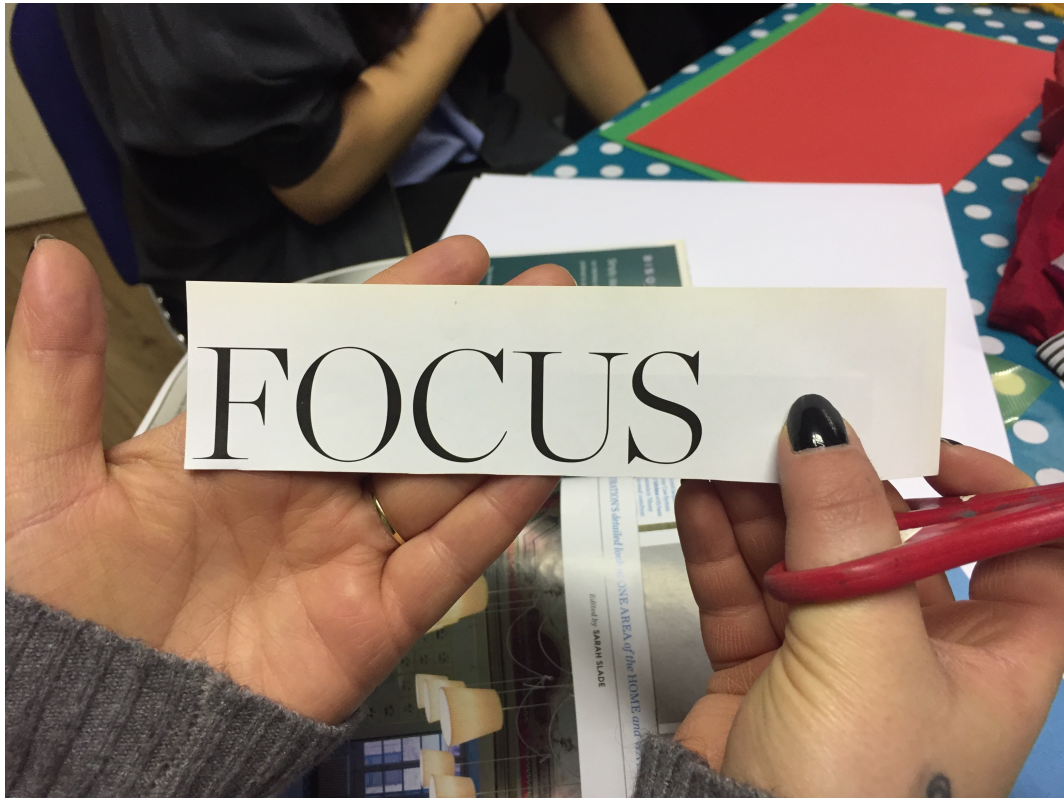
Figure 4: Self-reflective message as part of a collage.

Attendance records evidence an even gender balance in the Home and Belonging classes. This had a positive impact on female Crisis clients, who in the past had less presence in the facilities – whilst male clients were often visible in accessing the communal computer area. Intermediate participants were able to focus for a longer period of time and engaged with more complex tasks such as the textile film animations and voluntarily took on homework with evidence of improved dexterity. A core group attended most of the classes throughout the two year period, developing from beginners to advanced level: being able to critique work, to produce more complex designs over a longer period of time and to finalise projects on time (figure 5).

Figure 5: Textile animation workshop.

5.3. Making Impact

Whilst not all Home and Belonging participants have found permanent employment yet, new jobs have emerged in the form of part-time work in a local art materials shop, office work and working in hospitality as well as becoming a coach for other Crisis members. Having built new confidence, participants were able to showcase and sell their work in three different external exhibitions as well as a local pop up textile shop. Through the sales of their T-Shirts, bags and artwork they generated income for Crisis and volunteered for the Harlesden Neighbourhood Forum.

Frequent visits to CSM to meet students and create a connection to an established creative learning environment, as well as the awarding of 'Certificates of Excellence' to the participants, nurtured the aspiration of the group as learners (figure 6). After attending two years of the Home and Belonging programme 7 participants applied to the Fine Art BTEC Course at the Westminster Adult Education Services – where they successfully obtained 5 places in level 2 and 2 places in level 1.
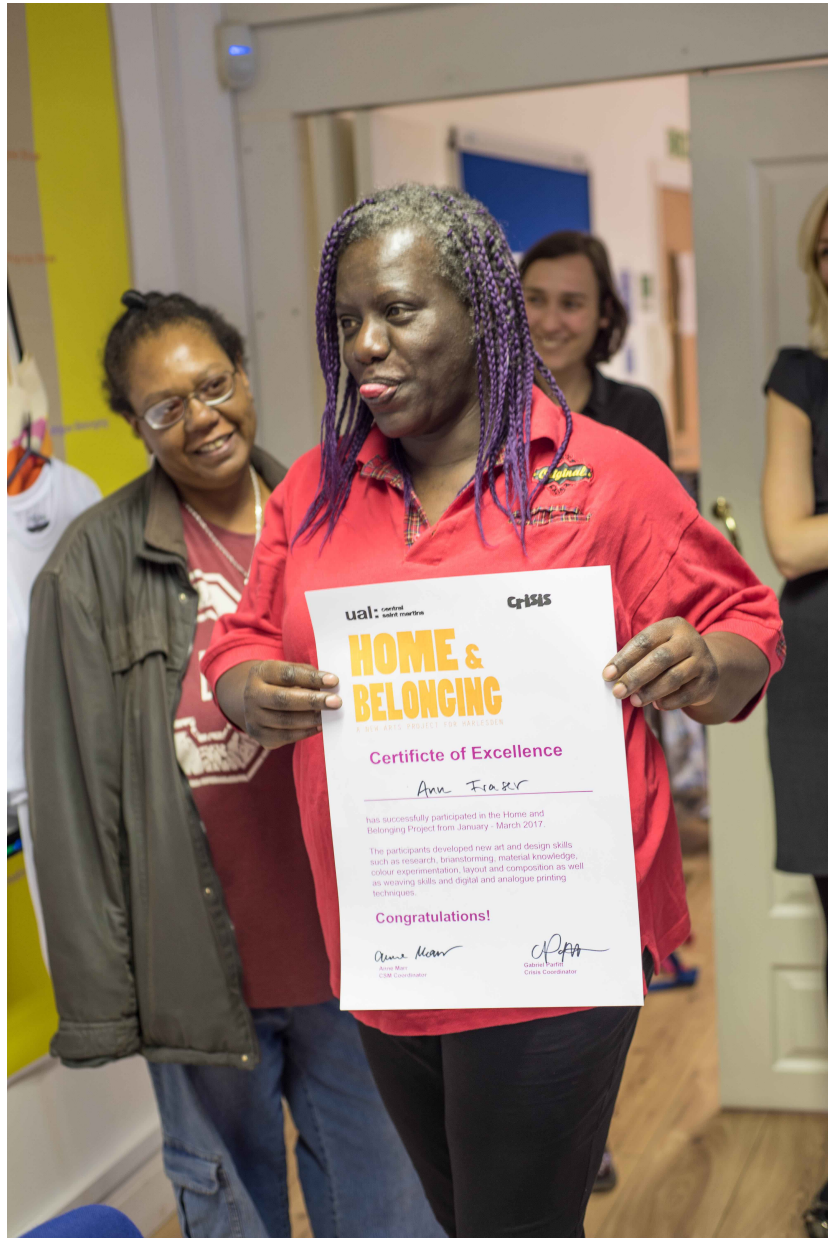
Figure 6: A participant receives a Certificate of Excellence.

As the Home and Belonging programme was the first creative activity to take place on the Crisis Brent premises there was some scepticism about the benefits of introducing softer skill sets into the engagement activities. The 'messy' workshop room raised some eyebrows in the beginning, but photography and computer aided design were soon recognised as helpful in building digital literacy and making online applications. The holistic benefits to Crisis clients became evident very quickly and persuaded progression coaches to value arts activities as an integral part of the development of clients. There was one participant who attended 24 Home and Belonging classes before agreeing to meet a Crisis progression coach. It took a long time to build up trust in the official side of the Crisis 'authority' and take first steps to attend more practical every day support. This led to the introduction of a new internal Crisis referral system which enables a joined-up approach between coaches and the arts co-ordinator to target progression opportunities for participants. Additionally, Brent Council has also recognised the positive affect and communal benefit of the Crisis textile and arts programme and has offered additional funding to continue the weekly drop-in sessions beyond the two year time period.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Textile Attributes

The project findings have highlighted how textile specific activities can enhance well-being and support the development of employability skills. This paper argues that the communal textile activities such as researching, drawing, weaving, printing, and digital embroidery can, as well as presenting and promoting textile work, be powerful creative agents to increase employability beyond the parameters of craft and design. Whilst imagination and intricate making skills are traditionally associated with textile employability – other overarching attributes such as building confidence and communication skills have a real significance to the wider economy and are intricately linked to the social capital of communities.

Home and Belonging participants demonstrated that, despite challenging life circumstances they managed to build the following universal attributes through creative textile engagement activities:

1. Confidence and Self-efficacy: being part of a nurturing communal learning environment and receiving positive peer feedback were essential to build up confidence through a series of manageable tasks which gradually increased in complexity.

2. Positive proactivity: signing up to the programme, participants already demonstrated a capacity for proactivity. During the programme members were encouraged to suggest new textile activities, bring in their own materials and chose to give themselves additional homework.

3. Communication and interpersonal skills: Through the weekly project presentations, the development of T-Shirt slogans, and writing the narratives for the animation film the group expanded their communication skills. At the same time communal working, peer interaction and group activities challenged all participants to listen to each other and develop their interpersonal skills.

4. Self, social and cultural awareness: The project encouraged the participants to express their own personal voices in relationship to the local environment through textile and art activities. The diverse voices in the animation 'Harlesden – it's a state of mind' represent rich story-telling and a deep understanding of different cultural identities through the use of pattern and textile materials.

5. Resilience: Participants demonstrated a humbling strength in resilience, not only by attending the classes despite extremely challenging life situations, but also in not giving up on achieving their creative goals. The programme was designed to challenge positively whilst at the same time nurturing resourcefulness in finding creative solutions to overcome difficulties such as designing a mirrored image for heat-transfer printing.

6. Team-working and independent working: The project introduced different types of working – for example individual hand-crafting as well as co-designing the animation scenes. Both types were demanding for different reasons: to develop personal ideas, being able to make a judgement as well negotiating different contributions in a group outcome.

6.1. Barriers and Opportunities

It is difficult to evidence all the benefits of the Home and Belonging project in terms of 'hard' employability successes as it is only the beginning of the participants taking first steps towards a more independent and creative life. Clare Archibald, the National Co-ordinator of the Scottish Homelessness Employability Network (SHEN) emphasises the importance of valuing the journey towards work and

not solely focussing on gaining and sustaining employment itself: 'Creating a culture of employability is an important step in seeking to address the barriers to employability.' (SHEN Report 2011: 11)

As adults, Crisis clients bring with them a valuable range of different experiences in formal education and employment. One participant had previously been on a BA in Fine Art, whilst another participant was trained as an air traffic controller and had never done any artwork in his life. Many of the participants were less aware of different types of life-wide learning such as informal learning and soft skills. Minton (2005) notes that life-long learning often becomes life-wide learning – with a breadth of embedded learning experiences, whilst Squires (1981) analyses informal adult learning as indistinguishable from everyday experiential learning.

In 2017 the UK Government Office for Science published the Foresight report about future skills and lifelong learning, detailing cost and lack of time as common barriers to adult learning for individuals of all skill levels. However, the report also recognises that individuals with no qualifications are more likely to cite attitudinal barriers including lack of confidence, lack of interest, and feeling too old to learn. At the same time low skilled individuals or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups, reap the greatest rewards from learning. The report predicts that older and lower skilled individuals will be especially vulnerable in a future labour market that is likely to place a premium on lifelong learning.

At the start of the Home and Belonging project the Crisis team did not see much potential for the creative workshops to lead directly to a progression into employability or further education. Lack of funding means that there is a great pressure for the Crisis progression coaches to show quick 'results' to get clients back into the workforce. This paper argues that a more joined-up approach could lead to a wider range of potential directions. There are currently 3.12 million jobs in the creative economy in Britain, which increased by 80K jobs in 2017 (Creative Industries 2018) and with 58% of employers expecting creativity skills to grow in importance in the next three years. With a forecast on the economic importance of originality, fluency of ideas and active learning (Bakhshi et al. 2017) this is a good time to re-think opportunities and develop a broader understanding of employability – particularly developing creative attributes as well as specific textile skills.

Jessica Gerrard (2015) acknowledges that education, learning and work can be powerful tools for developing economic independence, a sense of belonging and social recognition. However, there is also a danger of glossing over the broader circumstances of homelessness. She concludes that '…understanding and responding to homelessness, therefore, must recognise the diverse and shifting dynamics of structural inequality – class, race and gender – which underlie the experiences of homelessness, poverty and unemployment.' (Gerrard 2015: 77).

'What does the formal education system do for the unskilled factory worker? For the unemployed? For the neighbourhood?' asked Thorpe et al. (1993: 102). Inclusive opportunities for learning give valuable impulses to break through existing barriers and build up employability in a life-wide trajectory that nurtures individuals and re-connects communities. At the same time this does not address the many factors that have led to the current rise in homelessness in the UK, such as availability of social housing and changes to the welfare system (House of Commons (2016)). Turning HE inside out and making it more accessible and affordable is an important first step in paving the way to a more socially sustainable future.

HE courses and the creative industry can make a meaningful contribution to paving this way to establishing a broader culture of employability: improving the well-being of marginalised communities, establishing a sense of identity and building up the confidence to break through attitudinal barriers such as lack of entitlement as well as benefiting the economy. Anchoring the Home and Belonging programme at CSM meant that Crisis outreach did not take place in isolation in potential breeding grounds for negativity such as hostels, but instead took participants out into the community, meeting students and makers as well as promoting aspiration and positivity. And vice versa: the project took academics and students out of their isolation – developing a better understanding of the breadth and potential of communities. External screenings and exhibitions increased the visibility of Crisis in the local community, across London and the UK with the participants voicing their attributes loud and clear (figure 7).

Figure 7: Digitally embroidered badge with message.

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