

Social learning in a contemporary arts and crafts environment

Abstract: *Social learning is a set of principles, activities and behaviours, relating to how people collaborate and co-operate to learn in a variety of situations of institutional and organisational structures. This paper explores the principles and activities in the arts, where individuals or small organisations interact in an informal way, and how they might be practically applied.*

1. Introduction and Situation of Concern

This paper explores social learning in micro-enterprises concerned with contemporary arts or crafts; retailing items from local crafters, organising and curating exhibitions or events, running workshops, creating physical and digital art, or crafting art-related content and items for exhibition and/or sale.

The situation of concern relates to whether, how and why participants in those enterprises might more effectively learn through collaboration and co-operation, so that they might become more effective at operating as a collective. Whilst some systems design principles have been used in the establishment of a management structure, the micro-enterprise owners have no discernible social learning system and operate in a fragmented way, governed by a few contractual and ad-hoc oversight mechanisms. This situation is important as it represents, in microcosm, the way that many arts and crafts practitioners connect with each other, having little focus on social learning, although the framework used is potentially applicable to groups of interconnected individuals and organisations.

The situation is framed as one requiring an improvement in [social learning](#), to explore opportunities to extend the approach from arts and crafts domain; to apply them across a wider set of micro-enterprises.

2. Concepts and Principles

Key concepts used in the design and progression of this inquiry draw upon approaches that should have a positive impact on social learning for the micro-enterprises in focus. This starts with the concept of a Design Turn (Ison, 2017b); design of a systemic inquiry, to incorporate stakeholders, approach, social technology factors, current situation, goals and purpose. This also entailed making choices about boundaries, in this case the location as an enterprise and arts projects that benefit beyond the location.

A further key concept is the relational dynamic of: practitioner; frameworks; methods; and the interaction with: a 'situation of concern' (Ison, 2017a); its stakeholders; and relevant systems. This can be usefully combined with Ray Ison's 'juggler isophor', hence being, engaging, contextualising, and managing practice.

In terms of setting out key principles for the inquiry, and making its outputs useful, it was useful to take on board a number of perspectives: from the site owner; micro-enterprise owners; and contributors to community of practice and artistic endeavours. The inquiry needed to consider: the system(s) of operation and the social learning praxis of owners and participants, as part of a social learning system, and, in particular, how relationships were impacted by organisational and commercial factors.

Setting up and sustaining social learning can be difficult; this is my perception having managed a multi-organisation community of practice relating to systems thinking, as well as establishing and supporting a corporate process governance community. Within those situations, a key aspect of the challenge relating to social learning systems was keeping initiatives fresh and stimulating participation. Organisations lacked the

necessary structural redundancy to allow for learning activity; everyone was busy, and this seems just as relevant for micro-enterprises, so any to-be design needed to consider such factors.

Despite limited history within the situation, my practice is inevitably affected by bias and preference, so it was useful to engage initially with the site owner, to understand the situation, relevant systems, and who to engage with; to invite them contribute, and that all understood my role and accountability.

3. Inquiry Process

The systems map shown in Figure 1 below, derived from interviews, revealed that the functional structures within the situation of concern had been to a large extent emergent.

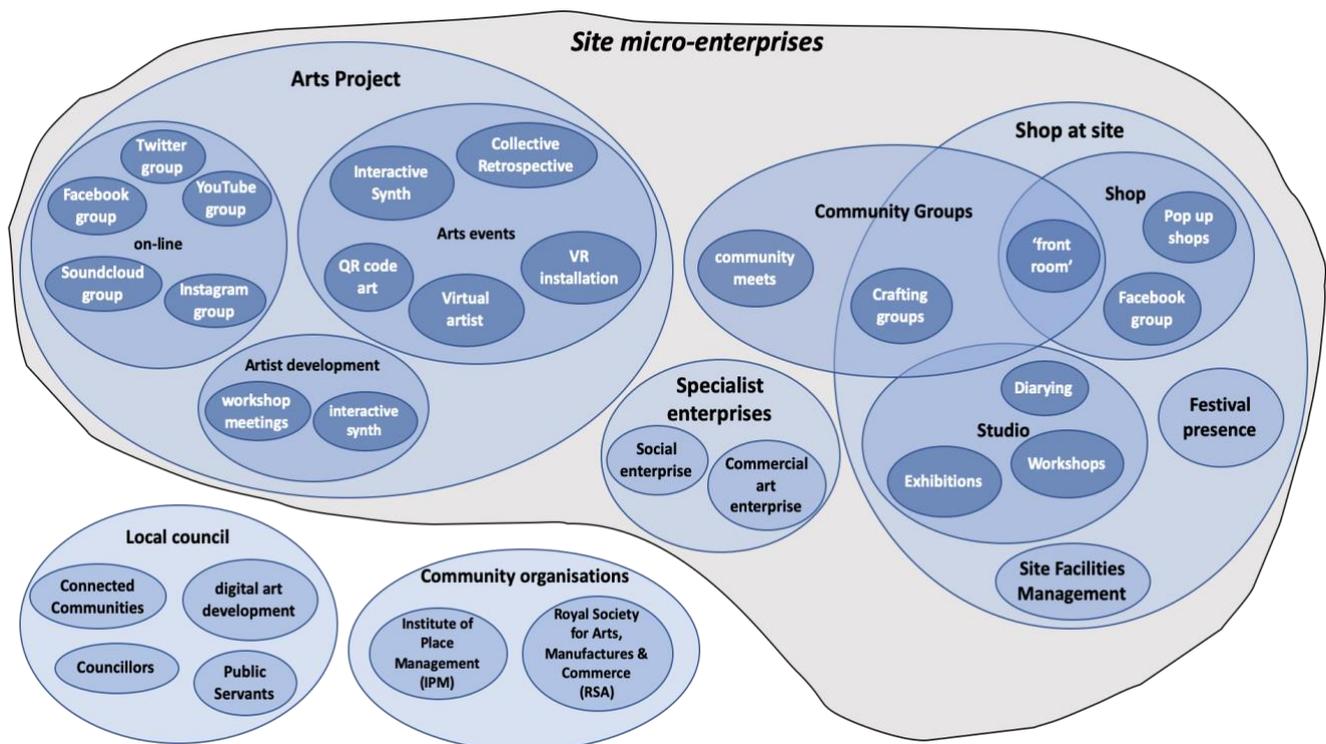


Figure 1: Systems map of site micro-enterprises and related entities

There are four functional activities associated with the site:

- The shop, including a display studio, and workshop space, which undertakes site facilities management, and hosts community groups. The shop also has an off-site festival presence.
- Two specialist micro-enterprises, the first a commercial art business and a social enterprise.
- An arts project, made up of events, online activity and artist development, most, but not all of which, takes place at the site.
- Community activities, including crafting groups and activities, some hosted within the shop, or studio/workshop space within the site.

Micro-business owners and project leads had relationships with local council and 'useful' national institutions in pursuing their aims, but those boundary relationships were carried out by isolated individuals, with little sharing of learning to other parties. Also, although the site was clearly established as a shop, exhibition and workshop space the arts project had only tenuous connections to the specialist enterprises; there was little evidence of cross-promotion, or collaborative learning.

Even though a commercial arts specialist was involved in art creation, this was done informally, and the embryonic 'community of practice' group, though well organised, was not explicitly connected, other than through the site. Some of these co-ordination gaps reflect a lack of participants perceiving of themselves as a system, and there was little exploration of whether the entities could more productively work together, e.g. how artist development and community activity might inter-relate and learn from each other.

Of particular value in this situation are two approaches, the first being critically assessing the situation using landscape 'themes' for social learning system praxis (Blackmore, 2010a), which are detailed in Table 1 below, from interview feedback and systems mapping, then reviewed with my colleague to identify gaps between as-is and ought-to-be situations.

Social Learning praxis theme	As-is assessment in situation of concern	Ought-to-be in desired system(s) of interest
1. institutions, organisations and institutionalising	It's not clear how the micro-enterprises involved in the systems map illustrated in Fig.1 are conceived as a coherent structure, or how systemic factors are incorporated into policy development or implementation.	Effort expended and focus on power and control is balanced with a need for social learning, so micro-enterprises are mapped as learning systems, including influences, processes, and communities of practice.
2. ethics, values and morality	Ethical aspects are understood and evaluated superficially, although there is recognition and concern about health and care for contributors and enterprise owners.	There is clear understanding and ownership for ethical aspects of how welcome, wellbeing and boundary issues are managed, shared values and purpose monitored.
3. communication	Whilst there is some communication and control, this is no evidence of appreciative system evaluation to identify emergent qualities relating to the operation(s).	Cybernetic triple-filter measures , that help distinguish between 'actuality', 'capability' and 'potentiality', are used to create a healthy, ethical approach to control, as well as a structure of social and technical networking, to encourage learning.
4. facilitation	There are no defined approaches for facilitating knowledge development across groups or for the premises, specialist enterprises, or arts project.	Brokering of learning operates across of groups, and new or evolving groups are supported to become defined communities of practice.
5. managing interpersonal relationships and building trust	Whilst there is evidence of trust and reciprocity, there is little recognition of the value of 'non-economic professional capital', or of key enablers or potential hindrances relating to social learning.	The emotional and communal value of non-economic social capital is understood in groups or defined communities of practice; with responsible individuals for relationships across groups.
6. communities and networks	There are numerous groups, especially in the crafting/arts domain, but only one recognised by its owner as a community of practice, so it's not clear how the groups are community-minded or pursue learning.	Groups should have at least some 'domain' definition, and more formal communities of practice given visibility within authorised Internet presence, to support the sense of community across relevant networks.
7. levels and scale	There is only ad-hoc learning, and no meta-level or epistemic learning, and scant engagement with wider communities relevant to the domain of the site, specialist enterprises, or arts project.	Learning, as well as brokering, is built into the expectation for communities and groups, with meta-level learning the responsibility of enterprise owners, and engagement with professional networks.

Social Learning praxis theme	As-is assessment in situation of concern	Ought-to-be in desired system(s) of interest
8. boundaries and barriers	Groups and networks appear to be emergent with no evaluation of fit or co-ordination, and are supported by few artefacts or evidence of interactions relating to the activities of various participants.	Boundary artefacts and interactions are designed into creating, sustaining efforts and retiring learning groups or communities, integrated with brokering and relationship-building, for 'owned' or external groups.
9. conceptual frameworks and tools	There is little understanding of what constitutes a social learning system, or of distinctions between experiential and inspirational learning in the relevant crafts, arts and management being practiced.	Micro-enterprise owners at the site are supported by education, artefacts and approaches, to enable practice of social learning, and to assist communities of practice or groups within their domains.
10. knowledge and knowing	There are no designed or self-organising groups for promoting learning beyond individual craft or art disciplines. No formal mechanisms exist to share, capture or promulgate the use of knowledge.	Dialogue is facilitated and valued, hence occurs on a periodic basis within normal management interactions, to capture, share and increase the knowledge base across micro-business owners.
11. transformations	There is a lack of clarity relating to the structure of operational systems and underpinning roles have no notion of the nature of social learning systems. This affects the attention awarded to learning.	Learning is defined as an intrinsic aspect of all roles, so there is a line of sight from social learning systems 'operation' to the transformation of all roles into 'learning experts' in their own right.
12. time lag and dynamics of praxis	Emergence at a systemic level is not systematically considered, so there is not an interconnected intent across micro-enterprises, or how they learn socially.	The time aspects of emergence, the ideas of feedback and feed-forward, are used in considering the trajectory of micro-enterprises, and their inter-relationships.
13. design for learning	There has been no attempt to design any social learning, so what has evolved is informal, low priority and barely discernible.	A design for learning incorporates board structures and relationships, as well as stakeholders and defined groups.
14. stability, sustainability and overall purpose	There is no stewardship of learning in micro-enterprises or as a whole; as such social learning is 'not owned'.	Clear stewardship roles are embedded into key roles, to make clear what is expected of enterprise owners and contributors.

Table 1: Assessment of social learning systems praxis

The critical evaluation above highlights the need for social learning at the site, and across the plethora of crafters, artists and other contributors connected to those enterprises. Whilst creating a management intent for such an approach is critical to success, the integration of social learning systems into micro-enterprise operations at the premises and its connected individuals, is also key to supporting social learning, so it would be seen by stakeholders as effective and value-adding.

It was useful to create a designed system of interest to address issues raised via interview, feedback and assessment against the landscape of practice criteria. Figure 2 defines a set sub-processes, controls and information flows, to allow a social learning system to be integrated into daily work and governance, and a clear flow of influence can be seen from the enabling activities to desired outcomes.

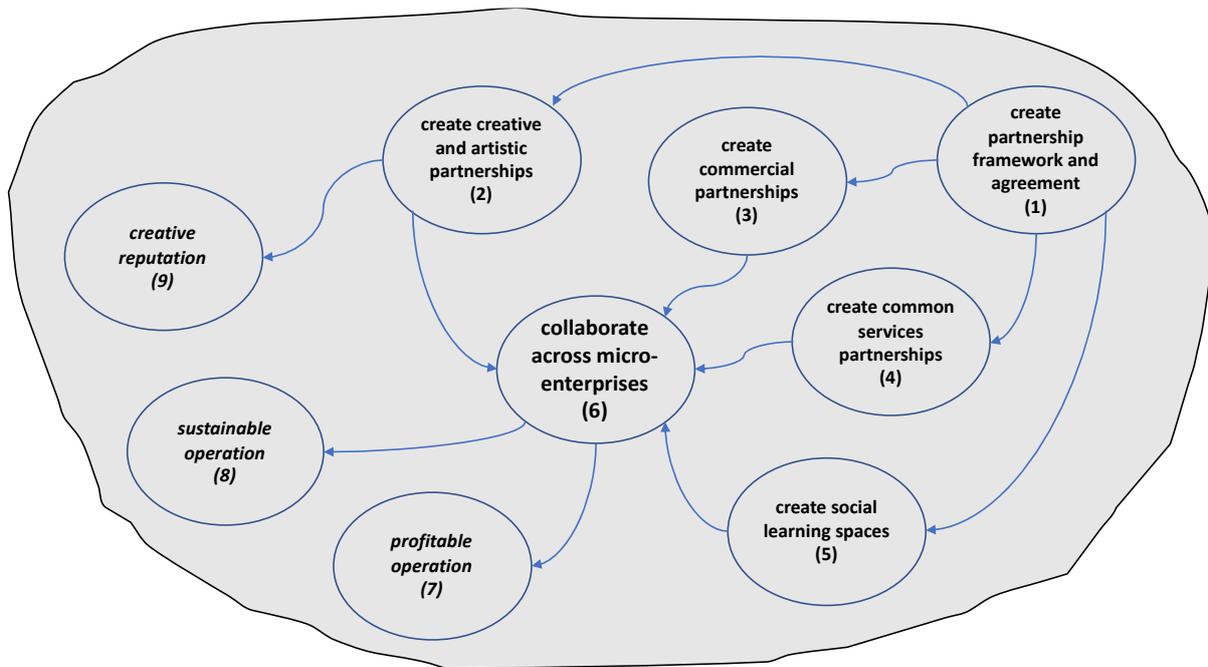


Figure 2: Designed system of interest to establish 'processes' across micro-enterprises

Three crucial points are illustrated; a) that organising and guiding partnership activity, commercially and artistically, needs to be supported by common 'services', b) that learning needs a partnership framework, and c) that social learning 'spaces' need to be established and supported, whether physical or virtual.

A second valuable approach relating to social learning systems concerned arriving at an understanding of how people could apply different kinds of learning distinguished by de Laat and Simons (Blackmore, 2010b), to systems and participants in the situation of concern, summarised in Table 2 below:

	'Creative Learning' Outcomes	
Processes	Individual	Collective
Individual	Learning for artists, crafters, or musicians contributing products, ideas or works for either the site or arts project. Learning derives from praxis in the personal execution of a contributor's craft and art.	Learning from artists, crafters, or musicians contributing products, ideas or works shared via social interaction; either through artist development at workshops, or via feedback and discussion in any on-line forum, e.g. Facebook or Soundcloud.
Collective	Learning from social interaction in workshops, or via feedback and discussion in any one on-line forum, e.g. Facebook, that's reflected in the work of artists, crafters, or musicians contributing products, ideas or works to the shop, arts project, or events.	Learning from social interaction in workshops, or via feedback and discussion in any on-line forum, e.g. Twitter, that's reflected in collective efforts of workshop participants, collaboration towards arts events, or in the overall management of activities at the site.

Table 2: Assessment of learning outcomes in the designed situation of interest

This was drafted as an ought-to-be design, focusing on the creative aspects of micro-enterprise activity at the site, relating to activity (5) in Figure 2, to detail how social learning space 'processes' might work in practice for different learning needs. Reviewing this with my nominated colleague uncovered a number of useful areas for intervention and improvement.

4. Conclusions

Systemic inquiry into the nature of social learning systems around micro-enterprises that occupy and collaborate at a site, reveals some usable and practical pointers for improving learning, from professional experience in a corporate environment, different as it was from this situation.

It was essential during the inquiry to employ basic system mapping to understand the situation, as well as positioning social learning as a designed sub-system for collaboration, so that stakeholders in the situation could see how social learning could be part of an overall system of operation and management.

As a result of this inquiry a number of recommendations could be considered by my colleague to create a social learning system relevant to his own and dependent micro-enterprises:

- i. Improve understanding of social learning, covering benefits and approaches for first-order learning about situations or tasks, as well as 'meta' learning, relevant to enterprise and community owners.
- ii. Define social learning systems enablers, that work for micro-enterprise owners at the site, and also for the plethora of crafters, artists and other contributors connected to those enterprises.
- iii. Design social learning into the system of interest processes defined in Fig.2, so that owners would see this approach as part of the overall method for managing enterprises and related projects at the site.
- iv. Create the necessary partnership framework agreement and use this to define critical aspects of collaboration, as well as how to create, support, and own physical and virtual social learning spaces.
- v. Build within management oversight mechanisms relevant monitoring and co-ordination for social learning, so that capture, evaluation and outcomes are owned and collaboratively progressed.

A key challenge in using the social learning systems themes framework (Blackmore, 2010a), was recognising and managing my role as 'practitioner'; providing consultative insights, and balancing learning interests, whilst also accepting the reality of being part of the situation myself, through involvement in the creation and presentation of contemporary arts.

However, it was clear that the landscape of social learning systems themes (ibid.) provided a useful approach for evaluating the nature of the social learning system needed, and for critique of ought-to-be versus as-is factors in an amorphous and informal situation. It could and should be applicable in more formal organisational and institutional structures, especially where there already is formal co-ordination to manage relationships within the situation.

References

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