

Making Meanings in Metaphors: How makers used craft materials to explain their practice, and its place in maker culture.

This paper presents research from a series of creative workshops that took place in 2016. A broad range of makers took part in workshops that explored their creative practice and motivations for making, as part of a EU Horizon 2020 research project: Digital DIY. These workshops were run by the University of Westminster at host venues in different parts of England. The 95 makers who took part in the workshops were guided through a series of creative exercises, using LEGO and simple craft materials to make models that described their practice in metaphors, explaining how it relates to the world, to digital technologies, and finally exploring collective visions of maker culture by thoughtfully putting together the different things that they had made

The workshops took place in nine locations associated within local making communities, such as hackspaces, makerspaces and collective work studios. Participants included makers from hobbyists through to small business entrepreneurs. The results demonstrate the spectrum of motivations and diverse approaches to making that underlie practice. The multi-faceted nature of practice undertaken for a wide variety of reasons emerged strongly but, as makers described the benefits to themselves as individuals and for wider society, common themes also emerged. Narrative analysis of participants' views and of the large number of models made has been distilled into fourteen 'archetypes of making' that serve as a device to understand and communicate common patterns of practice.

For example, 'The Fish Thing', shown in Figure 1, is a model that celebrates creativity for the sake of it, exuberant and fun, made as a deliberate counterpoint to the everyday work experience of the maker. It encapsulates how making for many participants functioned as a foil for modernity. At other times practice was strongly identified with creative problem-solving, a way to reflect on and search for creative solutions, including solutions to societal problems. Another strand was the role of making in personal well-being, this was expressed in a number of ways: from seeing making as a relief from everyday stresses and a way to re-connect with playful creative experiences of childhood, to valuing the self-confidence that comes with acquiring skill, or seeking out a sense of 'flow' and absorption in practice.

Making emerged from this research as anchored in collective practice conducted through platforms for creativity, online and offline, and facilitated by extensive digital engagement. Creativity and sharing reinforced each other, with connectedness permeating making experiences. Makers described how this dynamic of sharing and creativity was magnified by digital capabilities and internet-based activity. The forward-thinking integration of digital capabilities into practice when they were regarded as having welcome pragmatic usefulness sat more-or-less comfortably alongside a rejection of overarching digital imperatives or one size fits all digital solutions, returning a sense of human-scale and negotiated creative agency to the maker. Making was valued as both a component of individual well-being and as a route to collective and societal renewal. This presentation will draw on these accounts of individual making experience and present a forward-thinking vision of digitally-integrated maker culture that emerged from this research.

Figure 1: The Fish Thing, MakerLab workshop model, 2016.