

MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS: using video elicitation and journaling techniques to understand the hands-on experience of beginners learning to sew clothes for themselves during a global pandemic

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Abstract

This developmental paper focuses on an innovative multi-method approach adopted for a practice-informed participatory craft/design research study undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. The context for the study is the unsustainability of fashion as we know it and increasing interest in amateur textile crafts as tactics within a panoply of potentially sustainable fashion practices. Amateur clothes sewing has found renewed favour in the 21st century, supported by a new generation of paper patterns and an abundance of online resources and social networking opportunities. Covid-19 enhanced the visibility of sewing as a valuable and desirable skill. While some people turned their hands to the production of face coverings and even scrubs for medical professionals in response to the pandemic, others, finding themselves with unexpected free time at home, took up clothes sewing as a new hobby. This paper is based on PhD research which seeks to understand the experiences of people learning to sew clothes for themselves, the resources that help them do so and the difference this makes to their relationship with clothes. The main participatory element of this study, devised to account for Covid-19 restrictions, combined journaling and video elicitation techniques to gain insight into the experiences of five sewing beginners as they attempted to learn to sew clothes for themselves at home. Participants recorded their sewing activities in short video clips and in written journal entries which were then used as prompts for subsequent online ‘elicitation interviews’ where participants talked through their learning experience. This combined method provided a ‘near present as possible’ insight into the experience of the sewing beginner and allowed both participant and researcher to reflect on this experience at each stage of the project before agreeing the next stage on an individual basis. In this process, participants became both the self-directed learners at the heart of the study and co-designers of the study itself and the researcher navigated multiple roles as researcher, designer/maker (experienced other) and facilitator with shifting orientations towards elicitation, motivation, empathy and knowledge sharing.

Introduction

This paper will consider the pros and cons of a combined journaling and video elicitation approach adopted to research the hands-on experience of amateurs learning to sew clothes for themselves at home during a global pandemic. The research forms part of a PhD study. It was preceded by a series of seven interviews with people who had recently learnt to sew clothes.

In the UK, clothes sewing skills, once commonly passed on between generations of women within the home, declined significantly in the latter half of the 20th century (Burman 1999) before seeing a resurgence in the 21st (Bain 2016). Home clothes sewing in its contemporary guise is underpinned by a new generation of paper patterns and an abundance of online resources and social networking opportunities across multiple platforms.

The motivation for the study is the unsustainability of fashion as we know it and the urgent concomitant need to re-evaluate our relationship with clothes (Fletcher 2016). In focusing on the hyperlocal, uncommon (yet increasing) case of those wishing to make their own clothes I have two intentions. Firstly, to shed light on contemporary would-be home sewists' experiences of learning to sew clothes for themselves. Secondly, to identify anything from this experience that is of use in our attempts to reimagine the fashion practices of the global north into something altogether less destructive.

I come to this research as someone whose own experience of sewing straddles the period of home sewing's decline and resurgence and as a maker and designer with particular interests in materiality and craft skills.

Research Design

This is a participatory textile craft research project conducted from a feminist perspective. The knowledge generated is both about, and elicited through, active engagement with the highly gendered practice of sewing clothes at home. The mode of analysis is interpretative.

Participants in the research are all UK based sewing beginners recruited via an open call on Twitter and Instagram, which was further circulated by two social enterprises in the north of England with interests in clothing sustainability (Zero Waste Leeds and Leeds Community Clothes Exchange).

Of 100 potential participants, 30 attended one of four online information sessions about the research early in 2021. From the 22 people expressing continued interest following these sessions, five were selected based on convenience (locally based) and purposive (mixed agebrange) sampling criteria (Braun & Clarke 2013). Subjective judgement was also used to select those expressing strong intrinsic motivations for wanting to learn to sew clothes for themselves specifically, as opposed to a more general desire to learn sewing skills.

Participants' orientation to issues of sustainability did not form part of the selection, although all were aware of this as the context for the research. The final group of participants were all white European women aged between 22 and 44. In this, they were typical of the wider group of potential participants responding to the call.

Each participant took part in an introductory one-to-one online workshop and three subsequent elicitation interviews, between which they undertook clothes sewing activities at home in their own time. In each case, these activities took place over a period totalling 5-6 months during 2021. Echoing the experience of people interviewed in the earlier phase of research, participants were first asked to try making a simple garment using resources described as 'easy' or 'beginner'. Subsequent making activities were agreed on an individual basis following each elicitation interview.

Participants recorded their making activities through short video clips and written journals (Images 1&2). Journals and videos were used to inform the interviews that followed each iteration of making activity.



Figure 1. Example video still, participant cutting out fabric pieces for a skirt

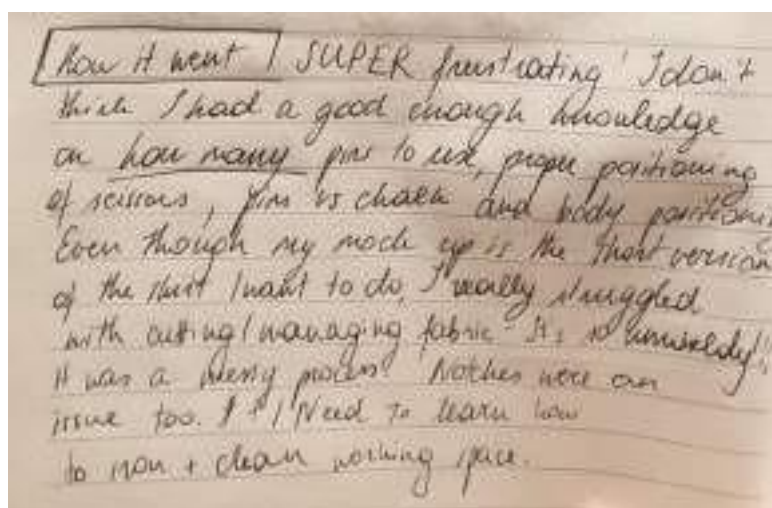


Figure 2. Example journal entry, participant reflecting on the challenges of working with fabric

Each interview followed a similar format combining four elements (Table 1). Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate an inductive process of thematic coding and analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Table 1: Elicitation interview format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recap - Participant reflects on their sewing experience to date and how it has gone - supplementary questions/discussion may follow as in a semi-structured interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elicitation - Participant asked to talk through the experience shown in their video clips which are screen-shared, played and paused to facilitate reflections and discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q&A - Participants given chance to ask any sewing related questions they might have – conversations, illustrations or short demonstrations may follow using a webcam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Next steps - Participant and researcher discuss what the next making activity will be – these may include trying a new garment style, pattern or instruction format or other short making exercise designed responding to participant’s interests/experience so far.

All workshops and interviews were held online using Zoom. The Iriun webcam app was used to make the researcher’s hands visible – screen-shared from a second (phone) camera – where it was helpful to demonstrate or illustrate an aspect of sewing practice in response to participants’ experiences.

Discussion

The methods used in this research were combined in response to the challenge of conducting participatory textile craft research under the social distancing restrictions of Covid-19. In this section, I explain the rationale for adopting these methods and reflect on the experience of using them in practice.

Near real-time

Before the pandemic, it was intended that participants’ home sewing activities would have been interspersed with in-person workshops in which experiences of sewing could be shared, practised and observed. In this ‘live’ scenario, observation and interaction with and between participants would have been key sources of data from which to understand beginners’ clothes sewing experiences. Sewing activities undertaken within the workshop would have allowed for direct observation of participants’ engagement with sewing as an embodied craft practice. As in-person workshops were not an option, alternative methods were required.

The diary-interview method introduced by ethnographers Zimmerman and Wieder as an ‘approximation to direct observation’ (1977 p.494) was initially considered. This was felt to be insufficient for research seeking to foreground the material and embodied nature of learning a craft skill in practice. Diaries would bring me closer to beginner sewists’ subjective experiences of learning to sew, by reducing the retrospection to which interviews alone can be prone (Bolger et. al. 2003) but would not *show* me anything of the experience itself. Video was introduced as a way to enable ‘the body as sense-making subject’ to be accounted for in the research (Rana & Smith 2020, p.53).

In combination, participant journals and video clips offer near real-time reflections on experiences of learning to sew (journals) and real-time footage of sewing in practice (video clips). Journal entries give insight into what has been done and how it has been experienced and understood. Video clips augmented this with a rich picture of the embodied and material experience of this ‘doing’ in practice.

Reflective

Journals and video clips had multiple roles in the research. Both were vehicles for reflection on the part of the participant/learner (Schön 1987). The guided journal entries (Bolger 2003), which offered participants’ subjective reflections on their experiences of learning to sew, set the tone for the interviews. The video clips, which provided ‘live’ footage of participants’ making activities, acted as ‘reflective artefacts’ (Toraldó 2018) for discussion within the interviews. In this sense, journal entries and video clips were forms of data in their own right and also ‘data-generating device(s)’ (Zimmerman & Wieder 1977) which opened participants’ experiences up to further reflection and questioning during the interview process.

As videos were replayed in interviews, participants were asked to talk through what they were seeing on screen. Some participants were more spontaneous and forthcoming than others during this process. It sometimes helped if I reiterated that my interest was in *their* experience of learning to sew and that in this experience *they* were ‘the expert’ (Braun & Clarke 2013). It also helped to remind them that I was particularly interested in what they were doing with their hands and in the decisions they were making as they sewed. I often asked participants to clarify what they were doing in the clips so that I could ‘see it better through their eyes’. Sometimes I asked participants how something they were doing felt, or how they felt about it, to elicit their reflections on the physical or emotional aspects of their experience.

Dialogic

While the interview format (Table 1 above) provided a structure for the online interview, in practice it was extremely difficult to keep the four elements of this conversation separate.

Participants understood from the outset that my role in these interviews was primarily that of designer/researcher rather than teacher, but they were also aware that I had more experience of

sewing than they did. This meant that their reflections on the sewing experience and their questions about how else things might be done were often intertwined.

Similarly, my questions about what they were doing and how it felt would bring to light what had been experienced and understood, but also what had been misunderstood along the way. This insight presented an ethical dilemma about when, whether and how to address such misunderstandings. I opted for an empathic approach (Braun & Clarke 2013). In doing so, I aimed to replicate the kind of dynamic that would occur more naturally in an in-person workshop, where participant questions and facilitator observations would be a part of the discussion around the activity being undertaken in real time.

This made my role in these interviews a complex one, alternating between that of researcher aiming to elicit participants' experiences and that of facilitator trying to support and encourage them in their making and learning activities (Image 3).

While I did not always feel I got the balance of these two roles quite 'right', I would align the approach taken with an 'ethics of care' that is flexible to individual circumstances (Kara 2018, p35) and appropriate to the reciprocal nature of participatory research (Twigger Holroyd & Shercliff 2020). Taking a dialogic approach to the elicitation process allowed conversations to develop and flow more naturally and helped mitigate some of the unfamiliar intensity of the one-to-one online interview format.



Figure 3. Rough sketch: complex roles of researcher/facilitator in the online elicitation process

Remote material methods

The use of journaling and video elicitation gave presence to materials and the materiality of the process of learning to sew clothes despite the research being conducted remotely. Video is frequently used to elucidate and celebrate craft practices (Knott 2019). Furthermore, the medium is central to the popularisation of amateur craft and the sharing of craft know-how (Orton-Johnson 2014; Torrey et. al. 2009).

Video clips brought to life the situated and embodied nature of learning to sew clothes at home. These clips enabled me to observe and talk to participants about their interactions with tools, materials and other resources while watching them in action. The combination of journal entries, video clips and interviews helped to illustrate the degree to which these material objects were active rather than passive in participants' experiences of learning to sew (Woodward 2020). Together, these methods convey a strong impression of the hands-on embodied experience and thinking with and through material things.

Participants in the research were extremely generous with their time and with the recorded material they shared. The request to capture their activities in both journal form and through video clips undoubtedly introduced additional complexity to the already complex task of learning to sew clothes. The individual preferences, life circumstances and domestic situations of participants all impacted on what they recorded, making this uneven between participants and for individual participants over time. Across the three data elements (journal, video and interview) and the three iterations of making activity, a rich picture of each beginner's experience of contemporary home sewing practice was achieved.

Conclusion

Initially inspired by the work of others exploring the intersection of amateur craft practice and clothing sustainability (Twigger Holroyd, 2013; Saunders et. al., 2019), I had understood participatory workshops as a way to elicit a live and lively insight into textile craft practices (new and old) as encountered by 'ordinary' people in 'everyday life'. The methods described above were initially adopted and adapted as a substitute for such workshops.

In practice, combined journaling and video elicitation methods provided a 'near present as possible' insight into the experiences and material interactions of sewing beginners. These remote methods precluded the social learning aspect of the in-person workshop and amplified the presence of the researcher, in what became a series of one-to-one rather than one-to-many encounters. However, by allowing participants' sewing practices to be seen in situ, these methods were in some ways truer to the experience of contemporary sewing beginners, who engage in craft learning that is often digitally mediated and undertaken within the home.

Instead of creating a co-design space in which alternative resources or activities could be developed and explored with a group, the one-to-one nature of these research encounters allowed multiple activities to be explored based on participants' individual experiences and interests. In this way, participants became both the self-directed learners at the heart of the study and co-designers of the study itself.

The research methods discussed here have proved successful in elucidating the digitally entwined contemporary experience of people learning to sew clothes for themselves at home, including some of the contradictions between how these practices look online and how they are experienced in real space and time. This has opened up home sewing to further critical reflection as a practice in its own right and as one of many tactics in a panoply of potentially sustainable fashion practices.

There are many benefits to in-person workshops as the means through which participatory textile research is commonly conducted. The remote methods discussed are *not* presented as a substitute for that but rather as an alternative that is particularly well suited to participatory research relating to activities undertaken within the home.

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