

The Partnership Quilt: An Interactive Living Archive of Sex Worker Voices

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Introduction

The Partnership Quilt is a collaborative project that combines traditional craft techniques and do-it-yourself technologies to develop a living archive of stories and experiences related to a charity in the North East of England. Researchers, professional quilters, charity staff, and 'charity service users' came together to develop this participatory, collaborative, crafted living archive. It is embedded in local histories and contexts of craft, as

well as service delivery of the charity, and interdisciplinary research. Collaboratively, we augmented localised quilting techniques with flexible, low-cost, do-it-yourself technologies in the shape of FlexE-Touch capacitive touch sensors⁴. The addition of these quilted capacitive touch sensors turn the traditional quilt into a contemporary piece of interactive art: by touching some of the rosettes on the quilt a voice is activated to tell a part of the story that lies in the folds and seams of the quilt.



The Partnership Quilt

TOUCH
ME!

Work

The quilt is made up of multiple layers of diverse kinds of work. For example, we used English Paper Piecing techniques to create rosettes, applied these onto backing fabric, and continued to work towards the production of the final physical artefact that is the quilt. On top of this sewing work, much hidden labour went into organising the collaboration to create the living archive: there was work involved in the organisation that was necessary to be able to create the living archive during drop-in sessions, in the two 'Quilting Extravaganza' ses-

sions where we spent the whole day quilting, or even in the collection of free fabric and other materials to make the project possible. As one of the case workers involved put it: "we just kind of cracked on with it and were just sewing. We never expected it to really turn out to be a quilt, did we?" Through this process, we learnt that the work involved in the making of the quilt itself was also incredibly important. As we were sitting around the (almost) finished quilt, reflecting on the integration of the digital technology into the final interactive archive, one of the researchers reflected on the tangible interaction with

the quilt: "I mean, there's so much more, like, effort in it. manual effort. so like actually by touching the quilt, you have a far better connection to what has been done and it speaks more to the senses rather than, you know again, just looking through a screen." It is the manual effort and labour that has gone into the quilt that makes it meaningful; and this should not be hidden by digital technologies. Instead, we see the technology as part of the experience involved in the interaction with the quilt; an element that enhances the work involved in its production.

TRY
ME!



Context

Due to our close collaboration with local professional quilters (Six Penny Memories) and a local charity that supports sex workers and people who have been sexually exploited (Changing Lives) The Partnership Quilt is contextualised in multiple practices. For example, we used quilting techniques that are based in local histories². For the mining communities, which were at the heart of the areas' development in the 1930s, "quilting was seen as the respite from work with the

warmth and companionship and the gleeful delights of conversations".³ Furthermore, the quilt is contextualised in everyday service delivery of the charity: the project was started during one of the regular drop-in sessions, and grew from there as new collaborators brought in novel areas of expertise. On top of this, this project is contextualised in Angelika's interest in designing technologies with charities to further justice for sex workers and Janis' interest in using 'making' as a tool for empowerment with diverse groups.



TOUCH
ME!

Learning

Throughout the process of making this living archive, everyone involved was a learner as well as a teacher. Changing Lives staff and service users, as well as the professional quilters from Six Penny Memories, and we as researchers learnt new craft and mindfulness skills, and were able to pass on our "little bits of knowledge" to work on, learn from, and complete The Partnership Quilt. Through the organic process of the growing network of people who were involved with the

project, the scope changed as well. For example, the techniques used in the quilt were increased from English Paper Piecing to include appliquéing the separate rosettes onto fabric with embroidery thread when Six Penny Memories got involved.

Six Penny Memories taught us all tips and tricks for quilting (even if some of us already knew how to quilt), service users shared their experiences with us and shared local stories of the histories of sewing in their own families, Changing Lives staff taught us all lessons about mindfulness and service delivery, and we as researchers were able to teach others about do-it-your-

self capacitive touch sensing and its potential for integration with traditional craft techniques. One case worker made the value of learning skills through this project clear to one of the service users: "but you'll always have this skill, and you're already thinking about other sewing projects aren't you?" On top of this learning process, and similar to the women who used to make quilts in the region in the 1930s, the "creativity and imagination also provided for additional levels of satisfaction"³ among those involved in the process.

A Living Archive

We see The Partnership Quilt as a living archive of stories, experiences, and voices associated with the service delivery and activities organised by Changing Lives in the region. When we had almost completed the quilt, we audio-recorded a conversation where many of those who put a stitch into the quilt discussed the stories and meanings behind the quilt. This conversation was then used to curate the first iteration of the archive: 12 short audio clips were

curated and cut from the 30 min. recording, to be embedded in the quilt. The materials we used allow us not only to continue to share the story of the quilt through exhibitions, but they allow Changing Lives staff to (re-)curate the audio recordings and easily exchange the voices that are shared through the quilt. The adaptability of the quilt allows for new curations by staff that can be used at exhibitions, but also in training with staff and volunteers, as well as one-on-one reflexive interactions with service users. Since it is a 'living' archive rather than one to which more content will be added to in the future, new content can

only be embedded in the physical artefact if some of the current content is removed – if the stories evolve into new ones.

Interacting with the Quilt



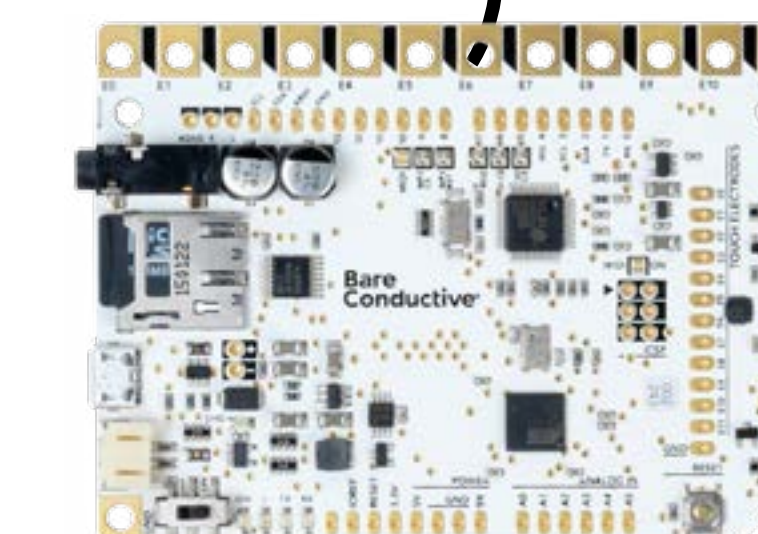
Experience

Oral evidence collected by Freeman provides the view that "crafts' formal and technical properties are a means of expressing group or community experience."³ Based on this, our quilt is in and of itself a means of expressing experiences of the group who took part in crafting and making it. Through this it is not only the tangible interactive quilt itself, but also the tacit experiences embedded within this (eg. the stitches in and buttons sewn onto the quilt) that are part of the experience of its creation. With this we mean that the work involved in

its making has supported learning processes, which are part of the experiences shared through the "little community link [...] that's kept us together" that is the quilt. Furthermore the curated audio clips that have been embedded and interwoven with the fabric of the quilt are audible manifestations of the materiality¹ of the tacit experiences involved in the making of the quilt. Adding to this, the recording and sharing of this information was only possible through the shared and organic development of experiences in the project. Similar to those who made quilts in the pit villages between 1870 and 1930, the quilt was "a way of dis-

tracting yourself [...] It's sociable. If you're not feeling a hundred percent, if you're poorly, down" (professional quilter during reflection) as well as a source of enjoyment, "achievement and dignity"³. Looking beyond the immediate making of the quilt as an experience, we also see that through the sharing of this project with those who were not part of the makers (for example through exhibiting the quilt, or even through interactive posters such as this one) the use of oral experiential materials enhance the artistic and aesthetic materiality and meaning of the quilt in a legitimate and valuable form².

TOUCH
ME!



LEARN
MORE!

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tinyurl.com/thepartnershipquilt

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