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# UNSPUN HEROES: AN EXAMPLE OF INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY ACTION

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## Abstract

*Grassroots organizations have a critical role in supporting learning within many urban communities (Sobeck, Agius, & Mayers, 2007). Unfortunately, many informal organizations are short-lived as funding disappears and volunteer participation wanes. The Unspun Heroes, an informal fibre arts group committed to learning and developing skills related to local fibre arts culture, has been in existence so long that when queried, the members could not easily determine its origins. Through an exploration of 16 Heroes' experiences over the course of one year, it was determined that the Heroes community is sustained, supports learning, and survives at least in part because its organization mirrors that of an informal community of practice (CoP), which supports local community cohesion, intergenerational learning, and positive community action. In this research, the roles and responsibilities of the members within the CoP, as well as the characteristics of the CoP, are discussed with the aim of presenting key factors that support sustaining CoPs for informal learning and well-being. We identified six factors characterizing the CoP that contributed to its longevity: adherence to tradition, stress-busting, social connections, mentoring space, belonging to something bigger, and sharing. Each of these is discussed in relation to the current literature and community context. Finally, from these factors, we share three important considerations for adult learning design for well-being.*

## Résumé

*Les organismes communautaires jouent un rôle essentiel pour soutenir l'apprentissage dans de nombreuses communautés urbaines (Sobeck, Agius et Mayers, 2007). Malheureusement, plusieurs organisations informelles ne sont que passagères, car le financement disparaît et les bénévoles perdent intérêt. Les Unspun Heroes, un groupe informel d'arts textiles voué à l'apprentissage et à l'acquisition de compétences associées à la culture locale d'arts textiles, existent depuis tellement longtemps que ses membres*

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*avaient de la difficulté à déterminer ses origines. En explorant les expériences de seize membres du groupe au cours d'une année, il a été déterminé que cette communauté est durable, peut soutenir l'apprentissage et continue de survivre, au moins en partie, parce que sa structure ressemble à celle d'une communauté de pratique informelle qui favorise la cohésion communautaire locale, l'apprentissage intergénérationnelle et l'action communautaire positive. Dans cette étude, les rôles et les responsabilités des membres de cette communauté de pratique, ainsi que les caractéristiques de cette dernière, sont discutés avec l'objectif de présenter les facteurs clés pouvant soutenir les communautés de pratique en matière d'apprentissage informel et de bien-être. Nous avons déterminé que six facteurs caractéristiques de cette communauté contribuent à sa longévité : l'application des traditions, les activités de réduction du stress, les liens sociaux, l'espace de mentorat, l'appartenance à quelque chose de plus grand et le partage. Chacun de ces facteurs est abordé dans le contexte des recherches actuelles et de la communauté. Pour conclure, nous nous inspirons de ces facteurs pour présenter trois considérations importantes pour la conception de l'apprentissage des adultes axé sur le bien-être.*

Grassroots organizations (aka community groups) have a critical role in supporting learning within many urban municipalities (Sobeck, Agius, & Mayers, 2007). Unfortunately, many of these organizations or activities survive only as long as funding for them is available (Walker & McCarthy, 2010). Alternatively, participation wanes as interests, volunteer capacity, and legitimacy of the organization decrease over time (Hamilton, 2006; Walker & McCarthy, 2010). Supporting healthy sustaining community organizations is both simple and complex (Merriam & Kee, 2014). Simple, in that we can all distinguish between unhealthy and healthy groups relatively quickly in our own minds, but complex, because the factors supporting healthy group development are difficult to define and bring together. Current research indicates that organizations founded in relationship-building toward a sense of interconnected community are more likely to maintain long-term membership activity (Field, 2009; Merriam & Kee, 2014; Milbourn, Black, & Buchanan, 2018). With this research, we set out to examine the factors contributing to the longevity of an informal community group in Cape Breton. The community group consisted of an informal collection of fibre artists known as the Unspun Heroes located in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality. What was the community group offering its members to support their ongoing participation? The selection of the group for this investigation was based on the researchers' (also members of the group) initial observations of the shared learning practices and sustaining relationships that had developed within the informal space. The research questions that guided this analysis were (1) how do adult learners organize themselves within an informal learning community? and (2) what factors contribute to positive informal learning and cohesion in this community of practice?

## Literature Review

### *Lifelong Learning and Non-Profit Organizational Health*

Grassroots organizations are important to supporting lifelong learning informally within urban communities (Sobeck, Agius, & Mayers, 2007). Although research tends to focus

on the economic benefits of adult learning, the evidence that lifelong learning promotes well-being is significant (Brookfield, 2012; Field, 2009; Formosa, 2010). Within the Brookfield (2012) model, the organization of adult learning that supports health of individuals is divided into three critical tasks: learning collective identity, developing agency, and developing community structures. At the heart of Brookfield's model is the reconciliation of personal identity within the group identity—in simple terms, finding a home within the group. From there, learners move to a transitional space where they learn to support one another in learning. Finally, the group members coalesce and develop a group identity with identifiable norms and develop a sense of belonging. Formosa (2010) identified a similar pattern of individual development within continuing education, and through analysis of interviews from France in the 1970s made the claim that for many learners, the social supports and friendships are the primary benefit, rather than the outcomes of the program. In parallel, Milbourn et al. (2018) outlined that participants begin to disengage from community organizations when the work of supporting the organization is too great; there is a loss of individual autonomy; cliques form, which leads to a sense of exclusion; and a disconnect develops between individual motivations and organizational goals. Much of the research about lifelong learning is centred on learning opportunities for the elderly, retired, or underemployed through university continuing education programs, community colleges, or government/non-profit organized programs within community centres. For the purpose of this research, the aforementioned structured learning programs, be they for credit or not, centred in for-profit or non-profit organizations are all considered formal education programs because they are externally organized by a specific designated entity underpinned by specific regional goals. Due to their formal structures of enrolment and monitoring, these programs have been criticized for being elitist, middle-class-biased, and female-dominated (Formosa, 2010), and it has been suggested that greater benefit from continuing education would arise from more informal structures, such as those provided by grassroots, participant-driven collaborations (Serrat, Warburton, Petriwskyj, & Villar, 2016). Such collaborations, or informal organizations, are often characterized by mixed groupings; therefore, an examination of intergenerational learning may provide insight and a deconstructed hierarchy of learning as appears in informal communities of practice, which will also be discussed in subsequent sections.

### ***Intergenerational Learning***

Brown & Ohsako (2003) defined intergenerational learning as an educational program where two distinctly different age groups share learning experiences and training activities designed to develop academic and social skills. In the late 1970s, formal intergenerational educational programs emerged as social planning models to support cohesion to fill the growing geographic gap between young people and their elderly parents/grandparents caused by a more mobile workforce. The primary challenge of these programs was how to create meaningful connections between these non-biologically linked groups that would promote social growth, learning, and emotional stability (Buffel et al., 2014). An OECD (2001) report directly linked quality of life and well-being to the development of a network of social supports, which the report suggested can be facilitated through formal and informal lifelong learning opportunities. In Cape Breton, as in many small and rural communities, intergenerational socialization is so ingrained as a norm that the

concept that groups might be dominantly homogeneous in age is resisted. Interestingly, at the time of writing, there are no formal intergenerational learning programs in place in Cape Breton public schools. However, the research from school-based intergenerational learning programs in other regions offers insight into the role that intergenerational or heterogeneous age-grouped learning plays to support community health and learning. Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako (2000) outlined that intergenerational learning (1) supports a foundation for a lifelong learning culture for young and old; (2) develops positive attitudes between generations; (3) offers social and academic benefits for children, youth, older adults, schools, and communities; and (4) contributes to societal social inclusion, cohesion, and solidarity. Intergenerational learning models represent a form of social capital in which the individual resources (the learners) are working with a system (school, community) toward a common goal (OECD, 1999).

### ***Communities of Practice: A Community of Learners with Purpose***

A community of learners involved in shared learning over time is defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a community of practice (CoP). The rules and structures of CoPs vary, with some being formal and structured within an organization, and others informal and fluid, emerging spontaneously from a shared need. CoPs, according to Wenger (1998), are bound by what they are about (joint enterprise), how they function (how members agree to work together), and what capability has been produced (the shared repertoire of resources/knowledge). In order for a CoP to form, the enterprise must be important to the members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From this position of shared enterprise, a culture of “ways of doing and knowing” (praxis) develops, which can involve tool use, documents, routines, vocabulary, and symbols that reflect the accumulated knowledge of the community. Learning within this community is self-directed and flexible within the group. Most commonly, new members learn at the periphery of participation, and as they become more and more competent, they move toward the centre of the community. Essentially, the more expert someone is considered to be, the more interconnections they have within the group because of their support role to others (Wenger, 1998). When the CoP begins to outlive its purpose, members disperse, but often stay in contact as a bank or repository of shared memories and preserved artifacts.

### ***Grassroots Arts Communities and Knitting Circles***

From a knitter’s perspective, the most important bank of artifacts exists as patterns and techniques, stored and shared. The rise in popularity of knitting and fibre crafts has in part been attested to via social media and the Internet, which are claimed to have been catalysts for (re)learning traditional crafts (Lewis, 2011). According to Lewis (2011), long-time (older) knitters are discovering sites such as Ravelry, a social network dedicated to sharing fibre arts knowledge, as a means to connect with other knitters, while younger, newer knitters are rejuvenating the craft with modern approaches to pattern design and creation. Those who enjoy fibre arts also participate in informal social face-to-face meetings, such as regular open “knit nights” where there is no need to register and no membership fee (Dodd, Graves, & Taws, 2008). In some cases, formal knitting courses can act as a springboard to informal knitting circle membership. Research from Rosner and Ryokai (2008) claimed that the individual motivation to join knitting circles is the creation of gifts and working

on shared projects, as well as the ability to socialize in a variety of locations as a group due to the portability of knitting materials. Knitting and knitting circles have been attributed to promoting stress reduction (Phillimore, McCabe, Soteri-Proctor, & Taylor, 2010; Vercillo, 2012, 2015), while Riley, Corkhill, and Morris (2013) identified knitting circles as a means to allow more self-identified introverts to socialize comfortably in a group. In Sweden, where there is a national strategy for elderly adult education, a comparative study between the benefits of formal adult learning and informal knitting circles illustrated that the benefits to members was the same in both conditions (Bostroem, 2017). However, the bureaucratic parameters of the formal programs diminished to development of free-flowing community (Bostroem, 2017). Additionally, grassroots artistic groups have been evidenced to support well-being of individuals through arts and community development and fostering social cohesion, and even offer economic benefits to the municipality (Ramsden et al., 2011; Stickley, Hui, Souter, & Mills, 2016; Vercillo, 2012). The benefits of grassroots arts communities have been well documented in supporting neighbourhood regeneration (Martinez, 2008; McCabe & Phillimore, 2017; Taylor, 2008), supporting knowledge generation and transfer (Howard-Spink, 2005), promoting positive social action (Bishop, 2013), and even supporting participants' connections with the natural environment (Ramsden et al., 2011).

### **The Formation of the Unspun Heroes as a Grassroots Arts Community**

It is important to note, as I begin to describe the history of this informal group, that no formal records have been maintained. To the best of the research participants' knowledge, the Unspun Heroes was a loosely grounded group of spinners or want-to-be spinners who started taking lessons from one of the founding members (CT) in 2005 at the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design. When CT stopped officially teaching scheduled classes in 2008, she and her former students banded together to continue meeting and working together informally. CT began to loan her extra spinning wheels (which were offered for rent during formal classes) to new members to allow them to test and learn on the equipment. The original members would gather with their spinning wheels on a rotating schedule at members' homes and often shared potluck meals. The spinners connected with other spinning groups in Atlantic Canada in 2008 when they acted as the local host for the Maritime Spinners Retreat (an annual event founded in 2000) held in Cape Breton at the Gaelic College. Inspired by planning the retreat, the spinners decided they needed an official name and logo, and they became the Unspun Heroes. This same year, in addition to the rotating meetings, new meetings were established in the university lab space managed by one of the members (AH), which allowed the group to accommodate everyone in one room more comfortably and for completing messier tasks such as dyeing wool. In 2014, members of the Unspun Heroes, in partnership with a local fibre arts shop, hosted the Maritime Spinners Retreat a second time. Also in 2014, after an ebb in regularly scheduled meetings of spinners, the Unspun Heroes added a weekly meeting focusing on knitting and more portable fibre arts crafts. At the time of writing, the knit nights have continued almost uninterrupted on a weekly basis, alternating between meeting at the local fibre arts shop or pub.

### **The Members of Unspun Heroes**

There is no official registry or list of Unspun Heroes, although if membership in the closed Facebook group is used to determine numbers, there are 48 Heroes whose ages span a sixty-year range, from their 20s to 80s. Invitation to participate in this research was distributed via the Facebook group as well as during two face-to-face spinning days. Sixteen self-selected participants volunteered to be included in this research: four between the ages of 30 and 40, seven between ages 40 and 50, four between ages 50 and 60, and one over the age of 70. Fifteen of the 16 members who agreed to participate would by Cape Breton community standards be considered "people from away," or those not born and raised in the region, though many have lived more than 10 years in Cape Breton. Twelve Heroes were not originally from Nova Scotia, two were returnees (people originally from Cape Breton who had been living off island long enough to be considered from "away"), and one was from Nova Scotia but not Cape Breton.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

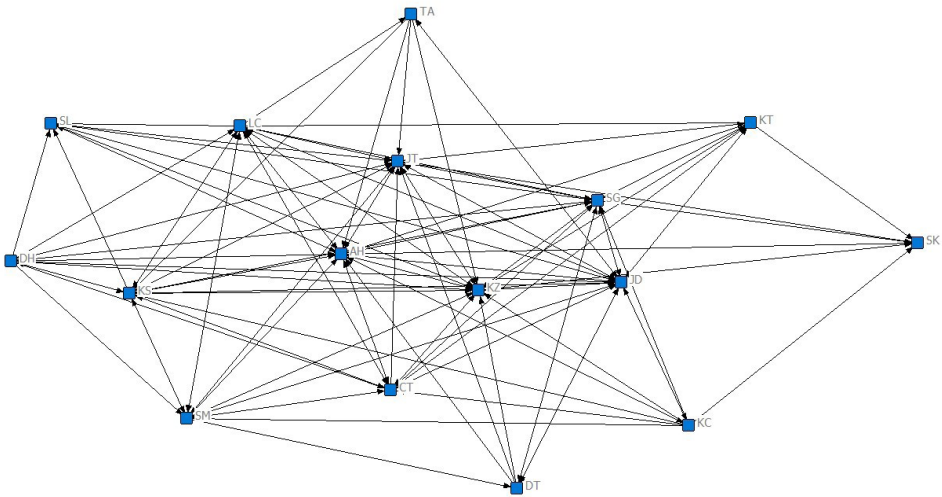
The research was conducted as a mixed-methods ethnographic study with the members of the Unspun Heroes fibre arts group located in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. All three of the researchers associated with the project were also members of the Unspun Heroes, and therefore, prolonged engagement and social observation predates and extends beyond the research period. The ethnography was delimited by the group activities during the 12-month period of the research in an effort to reduce bias arising from what the researchers knew about participants outside of the Unspun Heroes group. However, as the researchers were active members of the community, they each participated in the study, sharing reflections through interviews, which are included in the research. Trustworthiness was supported by this prolonged engagement, frequent member checking, and triangulation of methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethics approval for the project was obtained from Cape Breton University's Research Ethics Board in May 2016, prior to the commencement of data collection. Three different sources of information were used to investigate the experience of participants in the Unspun Heroes group: in-depth interviews of approximately 60 minutes, using a standard question set; participant-created contact maps, which are best described as reflective visual mapping of the frequency of interactions among group members (De Laat, Laly, Lipponen, & Simons, 2007); and observations of interactions on the Unspun Heroes closed Facebook group during the period of June 2016 to November 2016.

Analysis consisted of thematic coding of interviews using cyclical iterations as outlined in Saldana (2013). Both contact map data and Facebook data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and social network analysis and primarily used for triangulation of participants' self-descriptions of roles and relationships within the functioning of the group. Initially, it was anticipated that postings and comments in the Facebook group might provide an additional source for analysis of the actions of the group; however, the limited number of the posts and their nature as primarily sharing information about upcoming meetings of the Heroes made them minimally useful for this purpose. Participants refer to the Facebook group in their interviews as a positive connection point, but do not regularly post.

## Findings

### *Roles and Relationships*

To collect relationship data, which were used to create the social network analysis array (Figure 1), each participant was asked to record, from memory, who they spoke to and evaluate the frequency of contacts as daily, weekly, or monthly. The number of connections to others are indicated by the number of lines or edges attached to each node (participant). The arrowheads found on the edges illustrate the direction of the relationship; a double-ended arrow indicates that both participants acknowledged each other as contacts within the group. The distance from the centre of the figure indicates frequency of contact; those who were listed as daily or weekly contacts as opposed to monthly contacts are located closer to the centre. For example, member SK was recognized by six members of the community as a contact, but listed as a monthly or infrequent participant; therefore, SK is observed to be distant from the centre.



*Figure 1.* Social network analysis array of recalled contacts within the participant group, illustrating directional communication by members, centrality of members' connections, and group cohesion.

Based on social network analysis of the frequency of contacts among the participating Heroes, three community members (AH, KZ, JT) emerged as central nodes in the community, as illustrated by the large number of bidirectional connections. There was no central leadership role. The group displayed a high level of cohesiveness, as illustrated by the web of edges joining all members; there were no subgroups or cliques found. Despite the centrality of the three key nodes, the network illustrated a robust set of interconnections—or more clearly stated, there were no members that would lose connection to the group if one or two people were removed.

Participants were also asked to describe how they decided who to identify and what their experience with these contacts was. This illustrated important information about the



evolution of the group and perceived roles of individual members. For example, DT, who did not participate in any face-to-face meetings during the course of data collection, was highly regarded as a community member and well connected to members. Both DT, who lived outside of Sydney, as well as KC, who moved away from Sydney, maintained contact and, therefore, moved closer to the centre in participants' minds based on connections maintained on the Facebook group page. CT and DH, both very long-standing members, who for different reasons did not participate online or face-to-face as frequently as some of the central figures, were identified as important sources or banks of knowledge in participants' narratives. KZ was identified by the majority of the participants as the expert or fixer of knitting problems. Additionally, AH and JD were identified as key connectors for bringing new members into the group; they were frequently cited as the first point of contact.

### *Characterization of the Community*

**Adherence to tradition.** One of the central themes emerging from participants' characterization of the community was a commitment to traditional tools and practice of place. Learning and rediscovering traditional practice of fibre arts in Cape Breton served as the central "problem" or issue around which activities and learning were organized. Participants outlined their motivation to use traditional tools and techniques to create products from the beginning of the process, from sheep to sweater, or felt the need to justify not using traditional techniques, as one participant stated:

It's cheaper to buy a dirty fleece and do all the processing yourself...for some people starting with the pretty stuff is a time thing, it's much faster to skip all that and jump to the end. But I think that...for the folks in the Unspun Heroes,...it's more of a personality and temperament thing..., for some people possibly kind of a scientific thing what happens if I do X, Y, and Z. (JD)

Another participant new to the area became interested because of the cultural relationship of the craft to Cape Breton/Celtic culture:

I didn't know very much about this area, but the whole culture of weaving and fibre (I don't know why) is associated with Celtic culture and I thought there's probably a lot of people that do a lot of knitting out here, so this would be the place that I'd hewn that skill, so to me...it's very traditional. (TA)

Finally, adherence was expressed in the need to carry on the tradition of learning. The majority of the participants identified being taught their first fibre art craft by their mother or grandmother. Though the language of adherence to tradition was not used in these descriptions, participants spoke with a sense of honouring the heritage of the teachers and their tradition of the craft. In speaking about her start in spinning, one participant stated:

It was the hobby aspect of it but it was also learning something that people did all the time...maintaining the heritage, and the more you got into it the more you'd want to learn about what women used to do and how this craft was part of their lives. (CT)

Other participants referred to authenticity in this way as being “links in a chain,” carrying knowledge of tools, traditional techniques, and family knowledge with a shared sense of purpose.

**Stress-busting.** In discussing her return to spinning upon moving to Cape Breton, one participant specifically stated it was a “stress-buster” and outlined how she discovered fibre arts as a means to both maintain social connections and escape from the pressures of daily work:

The reason that I had the spinning wheel in storage was back when we were undergrads a group of us, about 10 biology honours students, thought perhaps we'd give our livers a bit of a rest in terms of down time, we were mostly just going to the pub and that kind of thing...we thought we'd find something that we'd all like to do so we can get together and socialize, so spinning turned out to be the thing. (AH)

All other participants discussed some form of stress-busting as a motivation to either participate in the craft or participate in the Unspun Heroes group. Other participants described the act of working with fibre arts as “soothing,” “meditative,” and “therapy.” One participant (SK) outlined how she started knitting not only as a way to keep her hands busy as she waited for her husband in the hospital during his cancer treatments, but also as a break from the routine of the home, stating: “When my husband was sick that was my place to go to just get out of the house.” Most participants cited going to meetings with other members, and the conversations and relationships built out of these meetings, as a means to reduce stress of daily routines.

**Social connections.** All participants interviewed stated that the primary focus of the group was social, though they also all identified it as a critical space for learning and developing skills. As noted earlier, most of the members interviewed were not from Cape Breton, and the opportunity to meet and socialize with other women in the community was an important connection for many. As SK stated: “I get to be with other women who like to do what I do but I also benefit from them because I get to learn from them.” Another participant (JT) mentioned just being in the company of others, watching them work on projects even if she personally was not working on anything, as a reason to attend the face-to-face sessions. Two of the 16 participants specifically named taking “a night out” as an important social aspect of the group. As we have heard in relation to stress-busting, participant DT decided to start a fibre arts craft to get a regular social event beyond her parenting routine, stating explicitly: “I started 30 years ago because my daughter had just been born and I wanted a night out to do something.” In describing the weekly meetings, KZ stated:

I'd really miss it if I didn't get a chance to go and...I don't really have other people in my life of sort of a similar age that I have so much in common with...because you don't know what the conversation's going to be about or you know people have things to share and stuff and it's really enjoyable.

Participants highlighted laughter and the quirkiness of group activities that go beyond the learning and working together on fibre arts as important parts of the social aspect. As KT stated:

I enjoy the conversations whether they're fibre-related or not because there's just really interesting talk, like SK is still all about...that weird bird that was in her backyard and how excited everybody was about that. I'm terrified of birds but even still, that was a really interesting conversation. When you [AH] talk about the stuff you're doing out in Bras D'Or with the biosphere stuff, half of that goes over my head, but it's always still interesting....It's really just more listening to what people are talking about because it's such a, I don't want to say weird, odd little group of people to come together with such different experiences from different walks of life that there's always something interesting that someone is talking about.

**Mentoring space.** Participants described relationships within the group as flexible mentoring. Relationships need not be deep friendships; though in some cases they were deep, or grew deeper within the group, they could also remain limited to group interactions around fibre-related arts, and were described as "friendly," "helpful," and "caring," with the overall sense that participants were supportive with one another in this space. In describing learning and support for learning, participants outlined four key reasons why the Heroes was a positive learning community: positive reinforcement, inspiring ideas, network of helpers, and modelling.

Using an example from past experience to highlight what Heroes were not, one participant stated:

If I were to post something...I think that people would see only the good in it...the other example is one person that was part of the class...had been to another sort of type of class at a different store in town and she said that people were really nit-picking at the size of her stitches and her gauge was off...so she was plainly discouraged to...one of the big things at least at JD's store was that the people that were there didn't do that and so she felt a lot more comfortable showing up. I think it's the same case with the Unspun Heroes group...I feel happy every time I come out from any sort of hang-out session whether it's Sunday at the lab or at JD's class, doesn't matter even if the entire class of JD's is just me going backwards over my project because I have to go backwards if I messed up. If it was like a solid two hours of doing that I still come out kind of like happy, you know. (TA)

Another described the support she felt when learning a new skill:

They told me like don't get discouraged...it does take a while to learn so I just made myself, I practised like I said for an hour every day just to try to get it faster so I could stop cursing at poor Lady Evelyn [name of spinning wheel]. (SK)

In another anecdote, a participant described the group celebration upon completion of a scarf she had been working on for several years:

I think the funniest was the people who missed the day that I finished the scarf because when it came to finishing it off I had watched a YouTube

video...on how to cast off so that I could just quietly sit there and I took it off the needles and I just kind of laid it down and it was done right and so there was no great [fanfare] and then people were like oh my God it's done. And I remember JD, JD was very disappointed that she has missed it and you know KT missed it as well and they wanted a re-enactment because they had missed the great event. (JT)

The group was frequently described as a place to find inspiration for new ideas, new techniques, and a network of helpers, as exemplified by the following participant statement:

I think it's just, uh, a bunch of us getting together to do the same thing, you know, share ideas, see what other people are doing, and share patterns and, you know, for the ones like even me that don't spin all the time just, uh, ask somebody like how would you do this or, you know, where would you find that and they're always good to say well look at this. (DT)

Because of the diversity of interests in the group, participants identified that a variety of expertise could be found there to help develop skills:

I like that when I go and I want to learn how to dye I've got someone I can ask. When I go and I'm having spinning issues I've got someone I can ask...I didn't think it would be as much fun as it was to be honest. (KT)

Additionally, the mixed age of the group was highlighted as a benefit, as one of the younger participants stated:

The openness, all the different types of subject matter that's been brought up in this group, and I like that even women that are more mature and older, have children, great grandchildren, they're still able to kind of let it loose and I think for me...it's really humbling because I would aspire to be like that when I get older. (TA)

**Belonging to something bigger.** Participants identified the concept of belonging as important to group membership. Though some referred to this simply as the pride of membership in any organization, most rooted the sense of belonging within the community as a sense of being connected to something beyond the group. They identified the importance of the group as an activity that gave purpose for self and others beyond simply a hobby or personal entertainment. The bigger purpose of the group was described within three subthemes: providing history of place or continuity of tradition, supporting others through funds raised or products, and public engagement in education.

As with adherence to tradition of techniques, the motivation to carry knowledge forward so it would not be lost was identified alongside the need to share this knowledge with others:

I'm interested in natural dyes because I teach a course on the ecosystems of Cape Breton and one of the things that I want to explore a little bit is the local plants that are used for actual dye. I talked to various people about what Mi'kmaq used to use for dyeing and I got some very interesting answers there, and as I find out more and more about the plants that are living in different eco-zones in Cape Breton, I look more and more for plants that might have been used for dyeing, so I've done a lot of research

there and I've run a couple workshops on natural dyeing which usually are a lot of fun, messy but a lot of fun. (AH)

A large number of the Heroes also participated in public education of their fibre art through public demonstrations, “knitting in public” days, and workshop and lesson development, most offered free to the public. In describing a learn-to-knit club established at her workplace, one participant stated:

One girl came, she was worth [keeping the knitting program] going because...towards the end of the school year when things got busy she was the only one who kept showing up and we kept it open just for her... she's on the spectrum somewhere. Not really verbal, not vocal, doesn't really talk and she started coming. She would kind of just sit there with her head down and she was knitting these amazing things. She would just knit and the first few weeks you'd ask her a question you'd kind of get a—you know she'd kind of mumble at you from the side of her mouth and by the end of it we were asking about her patterns and she was talking, she was verbalizing a lot more with us, so that was worth it. You know that was worth the hour and not eating lunch that day all on its own. (KT)

Finally, the destination of products, or the purpose of their creation, was diverse. Most of the products created were given as gifts to friends and family members or charities. Four members regularly sold products, but of them, two (JD and CT) outlined the importance of relationship to customers and products above financial return. They cited their customers as friends or took pride in the fact that their products were travelling the world, representing Canadian traditions. Only one member (KZ) strategically planned products for profit maximization, while SG sold primarily to cover the costs of the hobby (to purchase more supplies). Only one member (SK) did not produce products for charity, because she felt her products were not high enough quality yet due to her novice status. The group was involved in many collaborative charitable activities both as regular annual events or single occasions based on community calls. This included, for example, both supporting the organization of and participating in the annual library-sponsored knit-a-thon for many years, where participants gather cash sponsors to support children's programming at the library and then meet for a full day of knitting. The knitters donated the products of the day to various charitable organizations collecting knitted items for underprivileged groups. As well, the group supported Knitted Knockers, a breast prosthetics campaign, and a “hats for Syrian refugees” project when the community became aware that a group of new immigrants arriving in winter were not prepared for Cape Breton weather. The Heroes also spun and wove a milling blanket to be used for an authentic milling frolic for the North Shore Gaelic Heritage Society in Cape Breton. The charitable work was highlighted as a positive motivator and pride boost by all members.

**Sharing.** The participants outlined aspects of sharing as critical to the functioning of the group. Sharing was centred on three forms: sharing resources, sharing knowledge, and sharing food. With regard to resources, the group had fundraised and obtained two pieces of equipment critical to processing fibre (a drum carder and picker) that were outside the normal budget for many of the membership. The sharing of this resource allowed all members to learn to use the equipment and to access a resource that they might not have otherwise been able to use. Other resources that were shared were consumables such as

fibre or balls of yarn if a particular dye lot or material was needed and in short supply. However, with regard to personal tools and equipment, such as spinning wheels and needles, participants were hesitant to share. All participants appeared comfortable with allowing others to test-drive personal items for short periods, usually under supervision of the owner, but actual loaning of tools to others was limited. One notable exception was CT's spinning wheels, which members could borrow based on availability.

Food was regularly shared, and although the original intent of meals was to allow participants to spend more time together, either by arriving directly from work or lengthening a spinning day, several participants highlighted the importance of "breaking bread together" as a process of bonding within the group. For some participants, the potluck events were stressful because they did not have the time or skill to prepare items to bring, but on reflection they stated that there was no judgment among the group about the types of things (store-bought or homemade) contributed, as long as something was brought, because everyone was understanding about different personal circumstances.

**Technology usage in supporting the community.** The group maintains a closed Facebook group for communication within the membership. According to the moderators, to become a Facebook group member, participants must participate in at least one face-to-face event; however, membership is not removed should a person move away from the region. A thematic analysis of Facebook posts made during the six-month data collection period showed that participants' interactions were dominated by scheduling information—when and where group meetings would be, confirmation of attendance, when reservation of seats was needed—or logistics of a potluck and who was bringing what. Few participants beyond the technical moderators posted new information into the group. The messages posted by non-moderators were rare and predominantly related to nearby events that might interest others, the occasional meme or joke related to fibre arts, and images of completed work/stages of progress on projects. On a few occasions, members solicited advice or technical support through this medium, which is in contrast to the face-to-face meetings, where participants regularly "saved" problems to bring to the group for advice and assistance. In describing online support for learning, participants more frequently cited YouTube videos, where they could watch demonstrations of particular techniques. They also cited other Facebook groups and websites they used for learning support, but the Unspun Facebook group was not cited in this capacity.

### Discussion and Analysis

The Unspun Heroes exemplified three key aspects of informal adult learning that support sustained or long-lived learning communities. The claim for longevity is justified in the Heroes history; the group, though it has varied cycles of activity, has been in existence for more than ten years and remains active. First, the Heroes are an example of a cohesive CoP in their organizational structures of roles and relationships, shared purpose of transferring traditional knowledge, and collaborative approach to tools and materials sharing. Secondly, intergenerational learning supported cohesion through mentorship, socialization that led to stress reduction, companionship, and a sense of belonging in the larger community. Finally, the Heroes group was sustained through civic engagement dedicated to supporting those in need with products created. If we unpack each of these claims in turn, we can garner insights into the development of both formal and informal adult learning design.

The sense of community and the ties between the Heroes are tightly knit. Unlike the traditional classroom structure, or those found in institutionalized informal learning such as informal community schools found in many provinces in Canada, there is no central teacher among the Heroes, and the learning period, or cohort of learners, never ends. Within this community are many teachers, and many members fill varying roles normally associated with teachers: there were recruiters, those who helped new members settle into the group, those who organized events and shared organizational information about upcoming events, those who located and procured resources and materials for the group, and many subject area experts who shared knowledge of specific skills and techniques. The flattening or decentralization of the roles within the group created redundancy, so the group functioned well regardless of who turned up on a particular day. In the language of Lave and Wenger (1991), this group represents almost an archetype of a high-functioning CoP. However, it differs from the classical CoP description in that the central purpose of the group was different for different members. For many, the central purpose of the group was maintaining craft traditions, teaching others about them, and serving the community through education and product creation, while for others it was about self-improvement and social connections. However, unlike the current trend in “makerspaces,” which offer an interesting parallel to informal learning communities, Heroes felt loyalty to one another and were more likely to collaborate than cooperate even when objectives for participation were different, pointing again to the importance of the interdependence of the CoP to sustaining membership.

With respect to intergenerational learning, the Heroes offered benefits to both younger and older members that parallel those outlined from the formal intergenerational programs of Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako (2000). Given the nature of the learning—traditional fibre arts—the older members of the community were positioned well to be teachers as well as engaged learners. As paralleled by Formosa (2010), Heroes offered a social restoration by bringing together multiple generations who alternatively modelled learning and teaching with one another in an equitable manner with patience and kindness. At the same time, many of the younger members identified mentorship that moved beyond fibre arts skills development into life skills and ways of being in the world as modelled by the older members, which is a key component of formal intergenerational learning programs (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Prigoda and McKenzie (2007), in a discussion of participant behaviour in knitting circles, claimed that the relationships and friendships developed within the circle among the members offered empowerment and support to individuals, and this was also observed in participants’ descriptions of their motivation to attend or their purpose of participation.

This leads us to the final thoughts on the factors sustaining the community for self- and group development. It is not insignificant that the majority of the participants were not originally from the region. It is common in small towns in eastern Canada for immigrants (people not from the province or town) to be labelled as “come from aways” or outsiders and viewed in that regard for decades. The learning community provided a connection point for many participants who did not necessarily have deep-rooted community relationships in the region. The collaborative efforts at supporting the community through events and products instilled a sense of pride and belonging for members both within the Heroes group and in the community. This does not mean that you had to be “from away” to gain the benefits of the social community, but the Heroes provided a

safe and supportive regional integration space. As paralleled by the work of Melville and Bernard (2010), the group functioned to support community integration and relationships that were multi-generational. All participants in some way highlighted the group as important to the fabric of their social connections, which started because of a shared interest in fibre arts but developed due to the informal conversations that occurred around the learning and work. As eastern Canada and Cape Breton in particular is working to support new international immigrants, the significance of this type of community for learning and social integration in contrast to formal language or “newcomers” courses should not be underestimated. In moving into the informal and self-sustaining space of adult learning, there are three key guiding factors evidenced in this work:

1. Creating space for informal conversations and learning beyond the target objectives: Meals and informal conversation while working at the regular face-to-face evenings were viewed as important aspects of supporting the sense of community. It was the informal relationships developed in these times and spaces that led to the sense of community membership.
2. Deconstructing the formal teacher-student class structure: As several members began their membership to the Heroes community through a formal class, the sustaining or lifelong learning process was supported by the transition of these students into teachers and by a network of experts found within the CoP. The ability for participants to find just-in-time help from experts, allowing them to progress their learning at their own pace, was important. A novice participant might ask another novice participant for assistance rather than an expert because it felt less intimidating. As well, multiple voices on approaches and techniques were shared, allowing for autonomy in decision making and development of skills.
3. Ensuring the context of learning is supported by a deep sense of purpose: The Heroes provided evidence for problem-based or inquiry-based learning approaches for adult learners. Participants may have joined initially to learn a specific technique, but they stayed because they were motivated by a sense of self-directed learning with individualized goals for learning within a community that worked toward solution development through mutual support.

### **Conclusion**

In considering policy that could better support lifelong learning and engagement in formal continuing education, this research supports the adoption of the successful practices from informal CoPs. This includes consideration of social cohesion through mixed generation/intergenerational learning, rather than discrete age cohorts, as well as creating social spaces for learners to connect over shared interests and needs that go beyond course objectives. Additionally, it was found that the development of bidirectional mentorship opportunities between all members plays an important role in building self-esteem and learning motivation. Also, in the fast pace of change faced by most people, it is important that learning can look to the future with a sense of the past, as adult learners are less inclined to engage in things that feel temporary or fixed-term. Finally, informal learning has much to contribute to the debate on building communities with high social capital that place value on civic engagement, volunteering, and participation. It is also important to note that participating in the research itself became for the researchers and the other participants



an aspect of the engagement of the group, as members were eager to share and eagerly anticipated the results of our study; the ethnography became an additional shared learning activity of the group.

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