BASKETRY

Then and Now

WOVEN COMMUNITIES

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Woven Communities **is an interdisciplinary project which uses basketry as a way of inspiring people to communicate their memories and historical knowledge about Scottish social history. It uses basketry as a lens through which to examine the past. This summary introduces the work of *Woven Communities* and its relation to the *Basketry Then and Now* project.**

Above image: Members of the Scottish Basketmakers' Circle wearing traditional creels. © Stephanie Bunn.

The *Woven Communities* project in Scotland began in 2010, with Stephanie Bunn from the University of St Andrews working with the Scottish Basketmakers' Circle to explore basketry as a way of inspiring people to communicate their memories and historical knowledge about Scottish social history by using the basket as a lens, a fabric of society through which to examine the past. *Woven Communities* began by working in archives and museums with basketry practitioners, bringing basketmakers' knowledge to museum curators, and working with makers and the public in knowledge-exchange events to encourage people to share their memories about artefacts in museum collections. The aim was to work with the power of making, how it touches people to engage.

We soon came to realise that basketwork, perhaps like crafts such as knitting or crochet, encourages a particular focus, or state of mind, which seems to encourage people to recall the past, but also enhances thinking and communication in a particularly constructive, creative kind of way. Our definition of basketry is quite broad. It includes cordage, weaving, netting and knotting – and we find these techniques all overlap each other. The result has been our more recent interdisciplinary focus on mathematics, memory and rehabilitation – areas we do not think are mutually exclusive.

Image: Julie Gurr and Liz Balfour in the organics store at The Scottish Museum of Rural Life. © Stephanie Bunn.

We see some of the connections between these themes as follows:

- Our interest in maths focusses on its expression through bodily movements such as gesture and the 3D spatial understandings employed in basketwork.

Image: Conversations at the Woven Communities Symposium in St Andrews, 2012. © Stephanie Bunn.

Image: The 'Tinkering with Curves' maths event run by Woven Communities. © Stephanie Bunn.

- We have been exploring the role of hand memories with people with dementia through working with Lewis-based organisation An Lanntair. Giving people the chance to practice skills such as basketry or net-mending, which they had learned as children, shows how many people with memory loss can both rediscover and recover that skill and the associated memories, and also improve communication.
- We have also been working with the Stroke Recovery unit at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness, where we plan to explore how doing basketry with people with brain injuries can enable them to build up new connections and reskill through developing kinds of neuroplasticity.

In *Woven Communities*, we first developed our understanding of what basketry could do – beyond evoking memories – in our first symposium in St Andrews in 2012, where the audience were invited to make baskets at the same time as listening to lectures and papers. We found this produced a particularly constructive way of thinking and discussion, a concern with how things were intuitively related, rather than how they were categorically different, leading to discussions which developed new ideas in terms of synthesis, really new combinations, rather than analysis, breaking down into preformed parts.

We developed this into exploring applications of basketry for mathematical understanding. Here we were interested in how mathematical understanding is not simply something mental or just of the mind – it has a physicality, a practicality. Baskets cannot be made by machine, they form their own frame as they grow or are woven. This gives an integrated action which links both form and process, parts with whole, and we think this integrated approach is key to forms of mathematical understanding and engineering thinking which are not possible to achieve without practice. We've been very fortunate to benefit from the insights of Professor R. Nemirovsky, a mathematical educationalist. We see basketry's patterning, its structure and its rhythmicity as integrally linked to its use in learning and in healing.

In regard to memory, which is where our project began, while basketry may be associated with a kind of nostalgia for the craft, we would argue that there is much more to the relationship between basketry and memory than this. This is evidenced from the love that makers have of the skill in their craft and the way they want to ensure this skill is not forgotten, to the way watching basketmaking inspires feelings of interest and past memories in others, to the ways that memories of doing such work in one's youth become embedded and can be recovered through the doing years later.

This is particularly relevant for people living with dementia who, being given tasks such as net-mending or twining marram grass, which they may have learned as young people, find that they can still do them despite the passage of many years, and that in the doing they will also recall memories of those times. This process is one that our collaborators from the An Lanntair project in Lewis call 'hand memories'. For example, when we gave one participant some straw to twine, she was reminded of a time when she and her siblings made marram grass horse collars many years before. Our colleagues from Arora at An Lanntair will tell of a man who, when presented with a

Image: Hand-memory work with An Lanntair. © Stephanie Bunn.

torn fishing net, immediately knew how to mend it. A woman who, when given a sharp knife and a herring, could safely gut it. At Sacred Heart in South Uist, we met a woman who knitted quite complex patterns, remembering her place as she worked. People living with dementia, who we have met during our collaboration, have also proposed that handwork such as basketry can enable a kind of neuroplasticity or establishment of new pathways where old ones have gone.

This relationship between handwork and neuroplasticity links with both the role of basketmaking in war rehabilitation and with the work on stroke recovery which we are just beginning with Drs Palmer and Macaden at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. At Raigmore, our aim is to work in situations where recovery is possible. The ward's work is usually to pay attention to the side of the body affected by the stroke. By mobilising one side of the body through activities such as basketwork and physiotherapy, there will often be a knock-on effect on the other which can help patients regain use of their limbs. Often working with one hand, the other hand joins in even if not with much control. (Children with cerebral palsy actually do this for themselves.) This movement facilitates pathways in the spinal cord. Again, a kind of neuroplasticity, creating new pathways. And if this does not work, then patients can still use their hand, for example, as an anchor. So the 3D work and manipulation in space required in basketwork is incredibly important across multiple spheres for recovery and cognition, and this work can also spill over into the actualities of daily living.

Linking *Woven Communities* with *Basketry Then and Now* has inspired us to think about how all our work links to occupational therapy, and also to the role of basketmaking and other handcrafts in rehabilitating soldiers after the First World War.

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