



# Crafts Council

## Make:Shift:Do Case Study

### Slab Collective

Make:Shift:Do is a Crafts Council programme that works with makerspaces to co-create work with communities. In co-creation projects, people and partners work together to jointly develop and create, as opposed to conventional participation models which invite people to join in with the work of organisations or artists.<sup>1</sup> We recognise that true co-creation takes time to achieve; Make:Shift:Do projects are at different stages on this journey but aim to share their learning about the process.

Slab aimed to create a collaborative ceramics collective who would take ownership over the Warehouse ceramics space. The project model for Slab Collective involved a two-phase approach: the first phase aimed to create a horizontal learning structure in which members of the group would design, decide and make together; in the second phase, members of the group take more responsibility and ownership over the space and share their learning with new members.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has postponed the delivery of the project's second phase, but evaluation of the first phase shows successful steps towards creating an independent group of makers working in collaboration with each other, rather than relying on the leadership of a tutor or project leader. Here, Hayley Bruford (Participatory Makerspace and Collaborative Business Designer) explores some of the key learning from the project.

## INTRODUCTION

Slab was part of the Every One Every Day project, which has been running in Barking & Dagenham since September 2017 and aims to build the first large scale, fully inclusive, practical Participatory Ecosystem over a period of 5 years.

Barking and Dagenham is a borough of Greater London that faces a large number of socio- economic challenges including low incomes and levels of employment, poor education outcomes, high levels of homelessness, teenage pregnancy and domestic violence. In 2001 89% of the population were White British; by 2011 that percentage had more than halved and has continued to

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is borrowed from Battersea Arts Centre's Co-Creating Change programme



drop to the present day. These rapid changes make social cohesion a challenge.

The Slab programme was communicated as an opportunity to learn pottery basics and to co- design and co-produce a range of homewares in just 8 short weeks, culminating with a chance to sell the made items at a 3 week pop-up shop called Rock Paper Scissors. The programme was open to anyone over 16 years, no matter their prior experience or existing knowledge of pottery.

### **Project aims:**

Slab aimed to test ways that ceramics studios and makerspaces in general can organise in order to encourage co-creation. The project aimed to explore:

- How best to support the development of a collaborative collective who take ownership over the space, working together rather than relying on makerspace staff for support
- How to facilitate the collaborative design of a set of homewares that was co-produced by the participants of Slab

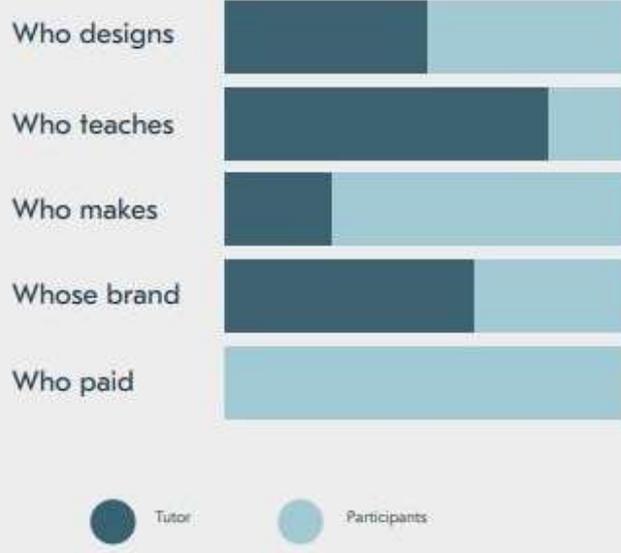
### **What was planned?**

The process to form the Slab Collective was designed to evolve over two stages. What was learned and created in the first stage would inform the direction of the second.

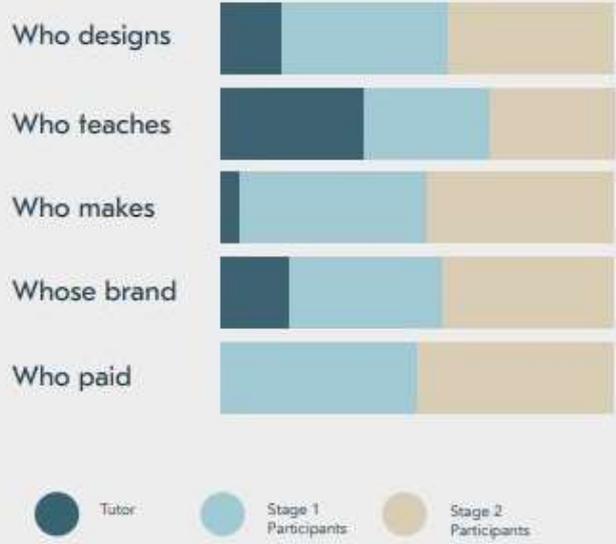
The two stage approach hoped that the participants from Stage 1 would continue on and take on more responsibilities in Stage 2. However, participants did not have to commit to both stages. Each stage was advertised identically in the Every One Every Day newspaper—as an opportunity to learn, create and earn. It was in the kick-off session that it was explained that the project hoped that the participants of Stage 1 would repeat the programme but take on more responsibilities in teaching, preparing and co-designing with new participants. Participants committing to both stages would be required to explain the space, design and decision processes to new participants creating a clear path to peer-to-peer learning. In theory, this would enable the tutor to relinquish some responsibilities, further fostering shared ownership within the collective and reducing the hierarchies typically found in educational spaces. The following diagrams illustrate this process.



### Model structure - Stage 1



### Model structure - Stage 2





With natural attrition expected, this model could be repeated endlessly, adapting to the needs and desires of the participants. Explaining the two stage model to participants quickly assisted in explaining the larger vision of the Every One Every Day project, and how this programme could be the continued beyond the finish date, 8 weeks away. The project was loosely planned out, with most focus on the first 3 sessions, designed to prepare participants with everything they needed to collaborate:

- Session 1: Inspiration and kick-off
- Session 2: Inspirational Trip
- Session 3: Communications and play
- Session 4: Communications and basics
- Session 5: Production, testing and packaging

The project began with just four predetermined decisions:

- The name
- The dates of the sessions
- The technique; slab building
- Starting templates of the ceramics

### **What were the outcomes?**

Overall, 8 participants committed to the Slab programme. Seven women and one man, who worked with one tutor to create a range of ceramic homewares. Four of those participants were also keen to continue into the second phase of the programme. For those that didn't continue, it due to change of job, family issues or needing to be at home to care for children.

The kick-off for the second stage of this programme went ahead at the beginning of March 2020 with 18 interested people attending and 8-9 new people considering committing to the project. Sadly, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, this phase was suspended until it is safe to resume.

Through the Every One Every Day project, participants were able to enjoy a ceramics course, learn the basics, teach others, design collaboratively, adapt iteratively, make tools, share ideas, produce products, sell together, evaluate and design the next phase.

It was observed that individually the participants didn't feel like ceramicists, but as Slab Collective they felt they were. The relationships between participants were also addressed in the evaluation.

The 'learn, share and earn' model adopted in this business programme, helped participants to shift from attending a course to passively consume information, into the mindset of a collaborative maker, without feeling like it is a big commitment or something difficult to achieve; it helped overcome a



sense of imposter syndrome within the collective. This was revealed in the evaluation as the group observed they were learning at different paces.

The role of the tutor was complex. It was to make sure all that individual learning was passed between participants whilst driving the overall aims of the project. Because participants played different roles in the space this encouraged them to explore the craft, while discovering what type of maker, teacher, helper they are too.

The Slab Collective made 30 bowls, along with some last minute additions of coasters and incense burners. In three weeks the collective made a profit of £135.00. Not enough to change any livelihood, but in 8 short weeks they had gone from ceramic novices to having customers eager to purchase their products.

Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic halted Stage 2 of this project, which was set to explore just how much participatory grounding had been laid to enable more autonomy, co-creation and peer-to-peer learning around a craft. Over lockdown, the group continued to communicate via WhatsApp, and one participant turned their kitchen into a mini-studio.

Over 8 weeks, the collective make a set of homewares, they created systems to make decisions, they came up with designs, they made plans, they made mistakes, they made iterations, they made money, they made preparations they made friends, they connected in breaks over a cuppa and began the story of the Slab Collective.

### **What was learned?**

Throughout the programme, insights have been synthesised through post-session reflections/diary completed by the tutor, anonymous survey feedback from the participants, and an evaluation session which asked participants to consider their personal experience, their collective experience and their experience as a new maker/designer, and what they would do next. These are summarised here.

- Create multiple opportunities, so people can play different roles

The Slab Programme ran alongside a beginners' clay project called Coiled, where anyone was able to come and make something with clay in the makerspace and ceramics studio. Coiled was a drop-in project promoted in the Every One Every Day newspaper. The Slab participants were encouraged to attend the Coiled project to practice their new skills and to experiment. As different people attended the Coiled sessions each time, this naturally invited Slab participants to take on different roles within the session.



The parallel sessions became a chance for the Slab participants to practice and explore what they'd learned by teaching others, helping prepare for the session and explaining the project to new participants which encouraged engagement and chatter within the session themselves. By practicing what they've learned, by helping others, and in turn being helped, Slab participants began to form a more sustainable type of learning environment.

- Foster relationships through what is known

The Every One Every Day project is set up to create community in Barking & Dagenham and to participate you must reside in the borough, so all participants have this in common.

A workshop was designed to encourage participants to share stories about their lives relating to the borough in which they all live. Using a large map of Barking & Dagenham and tracing paper, everyone identified and shared places in the borough that were important to them; one person talked about their early childhood memories of growing up on a specific road, another talked about where their son said his first word, another described a great spot to watch the sun set over the river Thames. All stories were completely personal and unique, and connected everyone to Barking & Dagenham.

This small and simple exercise created a common ground and contributed to participants getting to know each other, forming a culture of support and personal understanding of each other. The stories shared created an intimacy and trust within the group; vital ingredients to create a self-sustaining group of makers and collaborators.

Create a level playing field:

Play is not often reserved for adults. Nor is it often found within a traditional business programme. Yet in this programme, play has a vital role. For the very first workshop, participants were paired up. One of them was given a photo of a ceramic piece, and the other, a piece of clay. The person with the photo had to describe it to their partner without looking and together, they had to recreate the vessel as best they could. The workshop placed everyone on the same level and gave participants permissions to be playful, making it easier to be vulnerable in front of each other because the 'adult' pressure of being good at something immediately was removed.

- Create a shared mutual understanding and vision:

With many people, come many ideas. Being able to communicate them is easier when there is a shared visual language. The Warehouse ceramics area wasn't complete at the beginning of the programme, so by visiting a local pottery workshop, Turning Earth, participants were able to see and feel what a fully functioning and occupied ceramics space was like.



The trip to an external pottery became the first shared experience and thus an integral starting point for the participants to refer back to when designing their own range. This trip also helped to distinguish different preferences in the group; some wanted to design, some weren't sure and others became more interested in how the space at The Warehouse would function. Having the availability and options to make changes in the physical space fostered shared ownership and a mutual understanding and vision within the workshop.

- Create an environment that is horizontal:

Throughout the 8 weeks of the Slab programme, it emerged that people had preconceived ideas of what an educational and/or business programme should or shouldn't be like, primarily informed from cultural experiences such as school or work. Collaborative Business Programmes like Slab are designed to facilitate group learning and group reliability, which was regularly challenged throughout the programme.

To maintain this aim requires trust and clear communication about expectations of the tutor. The tutor is required to strike a balance between teaching and stepping back and letting mistakes occur. What this can look like to a participant, is that the tutor lacks knowledge or that they are not very good at teaching. However, not presenting as an expert created space for a 'maybe we could try this' attitude within the group of participant. The tutor would regularly remind participants to rely on each other, books and the internet to find the answers to their questions which was sometimes frustrating for participants, but essential for fostering a less paternal relationship.

This group-reliance encourages participants to take on different roles and begin to think of themselves as a maker, researcher, teacher, helper and so on, rather than someone simply taking part in a community project.

- Create processes for shared decision making:

Decisions are difficult. Early on, a 'contribute and vote' system for decision making was introduced. Participants were encouraged to research in their own time in preparation for the next session. Each person then had a few minutes to talk about what pottery they'd found and why they liked it, sharing with the group, being inspired by each other rather than being inspired by the tutor. The contributions created a pool from which everyone participating would vote on their most liked style, form, texture, and so on. As the group began to organise more and more sessions in their own time, they also decided that voting on design decisions should be reserved for the original fixed sessions. The participants used this system to decide what objects they were going to make, how many, what style they were hoping to achieve, colours of glazes and what they thought was achievable in 5 remaining weeks.



- Create time constraints together:

Occasionally time restraints meant that some decisions were based on logistics rather than desire. One such time restraint was the date when the pop-up shop would be opening in Barking Station. This was at the end of the programme and was when their items had to be ready for sale. Initially the group had voted to make a bowl, a plate, a mug and candle-holder. They began with the bowl, and soon realised just how long designing four separate items would take. This informed a collective decision to make the bowls but in 3 different sizes. They had recognised that the learning and designing process took longer than expected and adjusted their plan accordingly, taking responsibility for the deadlines they had agreed to.

Time constraints are an important lesson for any maker, they enforce a planning mentality and are something all craftspeople must adopt when working with clients. Asking participants to think about this helped them plan and take responsibility for the project.

- Document everything together:

One aim of the Warehouse is to create for Open Source and embodying this in the space is integral to communicating it, especially to residents unfamiliar with the term. Throughout the programme, all decisions were documented on a whiteboard in the space. This meant people could create test tiles and record the results somewhere open in the space for everyone to see. All of the templates were left out for anyone to use as were the clay colours and moulds that were made. This often prompted questions and conversations in the space. A Slab participant also began a 'glaze catalogue' to capture all the different effects and reactions that happen inside the kiln. Not only was this a great tool for the collective, but it could be contributed to and used by everyone who uses the ceramics area and is an object which reflects the open source values The Warehouse aspires to.

Creating clear opportunities for people to contribute to the space and document their learnings for the people who will use it in the future creates a legacy in the space, and is an open invitation for new people to contribute too. Introducing Open Source culture, and having conversations about intellectual property began to challenge people's assumptions about creating products and secrecy.

- Problem solve together

As the Slab participants continued to collaborate and reflect, they turned their attention to preparation and alterations to the project format in order to make it better, clearer and easier for future participants.



The participants were getting used to being autonomous with regards to their making and designing, but through their researching had come across slip-casting as a method to make.

Slip-casting is the process of pouring liquid clay into plaster moulds; as the water is soaked up, the clay clings to the walls of the mould to form the shape. The Slab Collective decided they wanted to learn this process to batch-make, as this would reduce issues around quality and consistency in the finish for all. This demonstrates that the participants were engaging in design thinking, reflecting on their own experiences to improve the experience for future participants, and logistically putting their analysis into action.

## Evaluation

As many projects are confined by a beginning and an end, this project aims to build a sustainable group that will exist beyond the timeframe of the programme itself—to exist within the participants rather than in the platform, or tutor.

Reflection and learning was constantly present throughout the programme, from the moments of realising what moisture level was best when building with clay, all the way through to altering prices in the shop based on what was selling well. This programme asks a group of otherwise strangers to work together under quite intense circumstances, so they also needed to reflect on how they'd worked with each other.

The group evaluation meeting was arranged after a 4 week break. In the session they were able to address and critique the way they had worked and the items they had made, and begin to devise a plan for improvements in the future. The break helps participants to problem solve and think critically and objectively. Additional feedback was collected via anonymous surveys.

Participants were asked about their experience in terms of:

- the collective
- products made
- their personal desires

Because the project is designed to be repeated, building up the core knowledge and autonomy of the group, it was difficult to measure the project's impact at this stage.

An indication of autonomy beginning to foster came through one of the questions, which asked the participants to thank someone for something during the last 8 weeks. Among the answers were thanks to people in the group for the times they'd been caught up, or for being patient, for helping them tidy up and so on. This indicates the group built a stronger sense of



reliance on one another rather than relying on the tutor, creating a more sustainable, and autonomous group of makers for the makerspace.

The evaluation was also a chance for participants to speak to one another candidly about how they had been working together. For one participant, who naturally felt like a leader, it was a moment where some of the group could approach them on ways to make space for others to take a lead. In the future stages of this collective, when Covid circumstances permit, the design of the programme should create a structure that avoids natural leaders creating a hierarchy which begins to undermine the process; leading is a practice not a status.

The group continued to share things related to ceramics, over the WhatsApp group, and hope that when Covid can be managed in the spaces they will continue to nurture the collective together.