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Woven Tapestry Practice During Hands-On and Experiential Learning Processes

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-based research investigation into collaborative tapestry-making as a pedagogical approach within fashion design education. The research is grounded in the project *Threads of Care*, a large-scale woven textile developed through the collective efforts of students, educators, and local artisans. This research draws from Kolb's experiential learning theory as the framework and explores in greater depth the effect of practical and hands-on learning methods on students' interest, skill development and knowledge acquisition of sustainable craft practices. Data were collected through observation, reflective documentation, participant interaction, and analysis of material outcomes. According to the results, collaborative textile-making brings about increased awareness of the material, involvement on a socio-emotional level, and establishes strong links between educational and community-based craft knowledge.

Keywords: Practice-based research, experiential learning, craft pedagogy, textile education, collaborative making.

Introduction

Tapestry, historically recognized as both a decorative and narrative textile form, has evolved into a medium that carries cultural, social, and political meaning. In contemporary practice, it operates not only as an artistic artifact but also as a process-oriented form of knowledge production.

Despite the design curriculum receiving the most attention in modern education systems, the question of incorporating the craft for sustainable and experiential models of learning is increasingly seen as a major concern. Here tapestry is seen as a medium that combines the technical knowledge, creative freedom, and the concept of living together through the community-oriented interaction.

The study argues that collaborative craft practices enable a shift from individual skill acquisition toward collective, situated, and experiential forms of learning, where knowledge is constructed through engagement with materials, processes, and social interaction.

Methodology

This research adopts a practice-based qualitative methodology, in which knowledge is generated through the act of making and reflecting on that process. The study aligns with frameworks of practice-as-research (PaR) and research through design (RtD), where creative practice functions as both method and outcome. Rather than isolating the project as a case study, the research treats the making of the tapestry as an epistemic process, through which insights into learning, collaboration, and material engagement are produced.

The participants consisted of 10 undergraduate students enrolled in the second year of a fashion design program during the 2025/2026 academic year. The group had varying levels of prior experience with textile techniques but limited exposure to large-scale collaborative weaving practices. Participation in the project was integrated into their studio-based coursework. In addition to the student group, the process was supported by academic staff and local artisans, who contributed to mentoring and knowledge exchange throughout the making process.

The preparation phase included the concept formation of the project, along with the choice of proper materials and weaving methods. At this time special efforts were made to start working with local artisans, so that the project would be a blend of both scholarly and craft knowledge.

The implementation phase was all about bringing the project to life primarily through a series of workshops and joint weaving sessions. The students were involved in the making process, at times individually but also collectively, under regular mentoring and guidance. This stage was very much about learning by doing and through experience, as the participants got to understand the features of the materials, vie with different techniques, and face the challenges that arose, all in the moment.

The last stage of the research was primarily about reflection and evaluation, both of which were very carefully and systematically done. Apart from gathering student feedback via informal interviews, analysis of the level of engagement, technical and creative skill development were also performed.

The study's data collection was quite diverse, including taking pictures of the process, observing the students' involvement first hand, and having informal discussions with the participants. Furthermore, the physical outputs were examined through the comparison of the small-scale tasks and the final large-scale collaborative tapestry, which offered insight into the growth of both technical skills and creative decision-making ability.

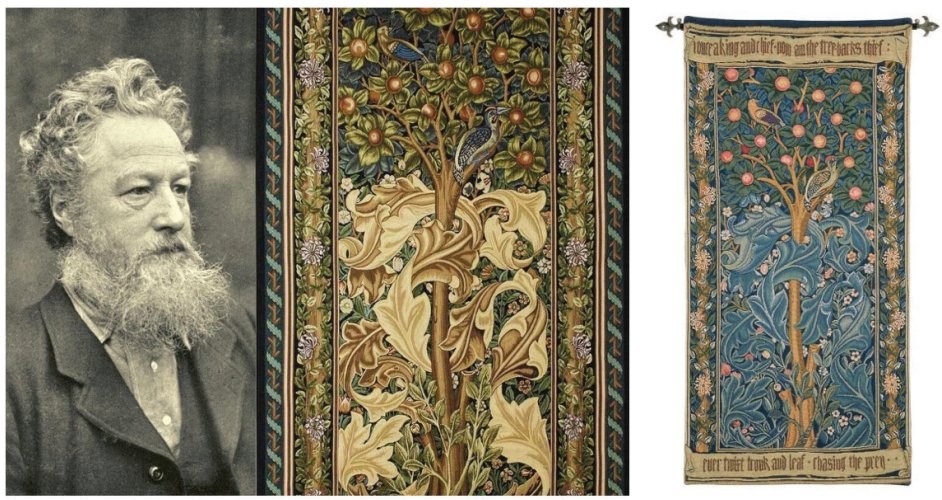
Literature Review

Tapestry as Cultural and Artistic Practice

Tapestry is typically linked with the highest levels of skill, labor and creativity. During the days of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris even considered the making of tapestries as one of the most sensitive forms of textile work (Huang, 2015). He made comparison between the creation of tapestries and that of mosaics, in which each tiny piece adds to the overall polished metro.

Figure 1.

William Morris and one of his tapestries, The Woodpecker.



Note. Portrait of William Morris reproduced from Art & Home; image of The Woodpecker tapestry reproduced from Hines of Oxford

Over a long period of time, especially throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, artistic representations based on the various stylistic elements of diverse ancient Egyptian and Peruvian civilizations have been deeply elaborated. At that time, the works of art commissioned by the nobility were fairly complicated through the beautifully knitted narrative.

Nowadays, a tapestry can be not just a wall decor item in a room. In fact, it can be a means to depict the history of a community, politically or culturally (Adamson, 2013).

In the modern world, tapestry is experienced and used differently than in the past. Modern artists' intent on tapestry is not merely to achieve beautification, but messages of far-reaching social purpose, political commentary, as well as identity, and sustainability are the vehicle of communication that artists choose. While referring to "Thinking Through Craft," Glenn Adamson brings up some instances of tapestries as a medium of a political message, feminist media, and criticism, or generally any medium of visual message communication. Take for instance, the tapestry made by the women of the Greenham Common protest camp with Janis Jefferies' facilitation, and whose main aim was to convey a feminist message.

Glenn Adamson refers to the fact that, apart from being a medium of communication, today's tapestry is also an issue worthy of lively debate among artists. This is clearly evident in the case he gives of Anne Newdigate, the Canadian artist who finds fault with the Lausanne Biennale for creating an elitist sanctuary for "high" tapestry that excludes "women's work" and the traditional textile culture.

Craft Knowledge and Mentorship

Craft-based learning heavily relies on the interaction between teacher and student, and the teacher imparting their knowledge through demonstration, observation, and practice. Holmberg (2022) suggests that craft knowledge should be regarded as a legitimate form of knowledge, equal to theoretical research, and its educational role should be recognized. Through mentorship, learners have the opportunity to access tacit knowledge, skills and understanding that cannot be effectively conveyed by words alone.

Hands-On vs Experiential Learning

Hands-on learning emphasizes physical interaction with materials and methods, which helps students develop their motor skills, focus their attention on details, and improve their problem-solving skills. Experiential learning, however, is not limited to this method alone. It also involves integrating reflection, conceptualization, and application into the learning process (Hoi et al., 2021). According to Kolb's learning cycle, learning takes place through ongoing cycles of experiencing, reflecting, and experimenting with new ideas. Such a difference is major in understanding how learning is altered when one moves from school activities to the actual in-person team work.

The Role of Effective Mentoring and the Difference Between Hands-On and Experiential Learning

During the academic year 2025/2026, students engaged in the project learned about several methods for producing and altering textiles in small quantities. Among them was a modern contemporary tapestry weaving technique, which employs enlarged yarn sizes and different core manipulations to create a three-dimensional and lively effect (loop weaving). In craft-based learning, the mentoring methods are very crucial as they help in skill development, creativity and understanding the craft at a deeper level. Such an approach is based on learning by doing, where learners work with the materials and techniques under the supervision

of knowledgeable artisans. The next parts discuss the role of mentoring and the method in craft-based learning.

Figure 2.

Detail of loop weaving technique demonstrating variations in yarn thickness and three-dimensional textile manipulation developed during the workshop process.



Note. Photograph by the authors (2025)

Mentoring in craft-based learning entails a personal connection between a mentor (a professor or a highly skilled craftsperson) and a mentee (student). This connection is fostered through demonstration, provision of guidance, and offering support during performance. Holmberg (2022) states that "craft knowledge should be equated with other bases of knowledge that a researcher has" (p. 208). This points to the significance of hands-on knowledge in the mentoring procedure because it enables students to acquire understanding that is not readily available through conventional teaching methods.

For craft-based and design education, "hands-on learning" implies getting one's "hands dirty" and directly interacting with materials and tools in order to acquire practical skills and knowledge of material properties (Joshi & Kaur, 2025). Consequently, students enhance their motor skills, deepen their sensory perception of materials, learn to pay close attention to details, and develop their problem-solving ability in the actual task performing. Nonetheless, such method usually doesn't involve a systematic reflection or linking to wider theoretical and societal contexts.

Experiential learning, alternatively, can be considered as a method starting by real experience (usually hands-on), and it is followed by analysis, reflection, and

abstraction. The process culminates with the application of what has been learned in new settings. For design studies, experiential learning involves tangible work that serves as a deliberate means to cognitive development, critical thinking, social-emotional competencies, and cultural and societal context awareness. Therefore, hands-on activity is central, whereas experiential learning converts that center into thorough learning, personal transformation, and professional proficiency. As shown in Figure 3, the mentoring process is realized through direct engagement, demonstration, and collaborative making.

Figure 3.

Collaborative weaving process and mentoring interaction.



Note. Photograph by the authors (2025)

Experiential learning is one of the main facets of craft-based education, as in these types of courses the students learn a craft by actually doing it. Teaching this way is very close to the idea behind Kolb's experiential learning theory which states that learning is a process starting from a concrete experience, then reflective observation, to abstract conceptualization, and finally to active experimentation. For instance, in tapestry weaving classes, the students are actually involved in weaving, and this helps them grasp the whole craft.

Holmberg (2022) notes that "learning is situated…not always progressive; basic understanding is gradually shaped and reshaped" (p. 217). Learning in this sense doesn't necessarily mean a linear progression "from point A to point B", nor does it happen in isolation; in fact, it is influenced by many external factors and personal experiences. This is in line with the spiral-shaped nature of learning in craft practices as well, where each experience is a part of the student's overall understanding and skill development. Knowledge doesn't flow at a steady rate; sometimes it is very rapid, and at certain times one gets a feeling of standing still and these are the moments when one re-examines and reflects on the ways to improve the techniques. Eventually, all these small actions together lead to the creation of mastery.

Figure 4.

Development of the woven tapestry: (a) intermediate stage of construction showing material density and structural exploration; (b) later stage illustrating refinement, openness, and compositional balance.



Note. Photograph by the authors (2025)

On Social-Emotional Learning

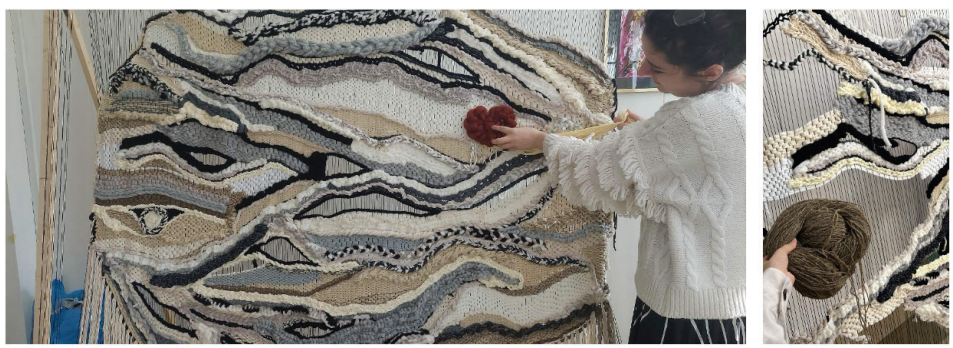
Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is a crucial component of craft and experiential education, particularly when working together in collaborative situations like textile-making. In the Threads of Care initiative, the very act of weaving together fostered an environment where students were able to acquire technical skills and at the same time responded to each other through shared decision-making, mutual support, and taking collective responsibility. These kinds of interactions are typical of social-emotional learning components like self-awareness, building relationships, and being a responsible member of the group (CASEL, 2020).

Here, learning is not something isolated from the surroundings. While students get engaged with the study material, as well as each other, knowledge becomes the product of a joint effort of communicating and interacting. This corresponds to the idea of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where the knowledge is something that flows from becoming a member of a community of practice rather than from the individual instructor. Besides, Holmberg (2022) has noted that learning is "not always progressive". Such changes in students' engagement levels can be attributed to this reason. To illustrate, they may be confused, must revisit the same things, or even put their progress on hold for a while. One should not think of these moments as failures, rather they're part of the normal learning process.

At certain points, students would pause, question their decisions, or adjust their techniques. These moments, although less visible than the act of making itself, were essential for reflection and understanding.

Figure 5.

Development stages of the collaborative woven tapestry: (a) intermediate phase showing density, layering, and ongoing structural experimentation; (b) near-final phase demonstrating refinement of form, openness of composition, and collective material decision-making throughout the experiential learning process.



Note. Photograph by the authors (2025)

From an experiential learning point of view, emotional engagement and cognitive development go hand in hand. Kolb (1984) points out that experience by itself is insufficient; it is only through reflection and re-experience that learning gets intensified. During the weaving activity, the gradual increase in students' confidence, their heightened perception of the nature of the material, and their increased willingness to work together were the main indicators of how engagement could lead to learning. Besides the physical act of handling textile materials, the social aspects of the group contributed to the creation of a learning environment whereby both personal development and the group consciousness could be nurtured.

The project clearly shows that collaborative craft practices can be a resource for social-emotional competencies, besides technical and creative development. The feeling of being part of a group, co-authorship, and shared engagement noticed in the project, all point to the fact that collaborative making can serve as a powerful framework for designing education that addresses the whole person.

Figure 6.

Final collaborative tapestry developed through loop weaving techniques, demonstrating collective authorship, material experimentation, and experiential learning processes.



Note. Photograph reproduced from Fashion Weekend Skopje Instagram account (2025). Fashion Weekend Skopje Instagram

Findings

Increased Interest by Means of Scale and Teamwork

The study shows that students' interest in the subject matter rose sharply when they were part of large group work as opposed to working individually. The concept of co-authoring in this case, a single piece of textile that would be gradually transformed allowed each student to feel a part of the group and, at the same time, sparked their enthusiasm for the activity.

Normally, when working on their own, students are mainly responsible for their own results; however, in this instance, the tapestry had so much on show that it kept asking for new contributions. People could easily see their personal effort as a piece in the grand design, this way of perceiving the whole having a very high impact on motivation and dedication. This is the reason why it may well be that the scale plus collaboration are two of the main stimuli at work here.

Development of Material Sensitivity

Spending more time with textile materials helped students to perceive texture, structure, and form more deeply. Initially, after a small contact with materials, students saw them only as fixed objects, but they now understand that they change and can be influenced while the work is in progress.

By frequent handling and trying out new ways, they felt the difference between compactness, tightness, and layering. Eventually, this resulted in making calls based on a gut feeling when material interaction overtook the idea generation. This transition probably indicates a profound performance of material recognition, which, in most cases, needs more time than a short task, or a teacher-led exercise.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship as a Channel for Knowledge Transfer

The master craftsman was the key instigator for issuing tacit knowledge transfer. Students got the chance to acquire skills and insights by seeing, being corrected and receiving informal guidance, which are things that cannot be easily transmitted through theoretical teaching only.

However, this method of knowledge sharing was not limited to skills only. It has had an impact on students' attitude towards problem-solving, meticulousness, and work tempo as well. Consequently, mentorship has not only been identified as a helping factor but as a main factor in the educational process which also supports the significance of craft-based education.

Shifting from Manual Work to Experiential Education

Previously, through several classroom activities, students learned some very basic technical skills, however, the nature of the project being collaborative and a shared endeavor made it even more learning that students got the chance to learn not only from their teachers but also from one another which is more effective than traditional teaching.

They had to make decisions at the moment, think of ways to overcome unforeseen difficulties, and change their plans as they progressed. This led to thinking and learning through the task, not just after its completion. Thus, the project did more than just provide hands-on learning as technical work; it became a learning through experience process whereby knowledge gets re-constructed step by step by doing, reflecting, and doing again.

Socio-Emotional Impact

This project, designed in such a way that it must be done collectively, brought about participants' significant socio-emotional changes. Students felt a stronger belonging and a deeper connection to both the activity and the members of the group.

Striving for a common goal eventually brought about a higher mutual understanding and a sense that everyone was dependent on each other so closely that even the smallest action of one affected the whole result. The outcome of this not only made the group being one unit in a very strong way but also gave the students a sense of being capable and motivated.

From these points, it can be concluded that collaborative craft practices can play a part in social-emotional learning by making interpersonal relationships, shared responsibility, and collective creativity the very core of the learning process.

Discussion

As concluded from this research, incorporating tapestry-making in a collaborative and experiential learning environment could be one of the most effective ways of teaching fashion design. Together making textiles is more than just a technical problem; it is also a way to engage on a profound level with both material and social sides of design practice. Going from working alone to working with others is just one example showing how drastic the overall shifts are happening in the field of design education today. Increasingly, educational institutions are turning their

focus towards community-based practices, sustainability, and other collaborative ways of thinking. So, a tapestry is not just a thing made from threads but also a means for conversation, dealing with differences, and commemorating the shared work. The team's joint efforts encourage students to step away from just showing their own selves through designs and to start looking at design as a community activity that is part of society.

Besides that, the addition of craft-related activities within a university environment puts the age-old divisions between the study of ideas and practical know-how into question. As was evident from allowing the participants to be their own instructors through the act of handling the material, knowledge comes through not only from grasping the ideas but more importantly through the senses and hidden knowledge. This argument relies on the point that making things can be a proper research approach wherein knowledge is being produced through engagement with materials, methods, and people.

On the other hand, this initiative draws to the fore that what matters more is the journey than the destination. The way the tapestry keeps on being modified and the group continually making decisions without a leader strongly advocates for the way that design learning should be capable of including aspects such as not knowing, trying again, and thinking that are to form the very elements of learning. Therefore, the project reflects through its very essence the experiential learning agenda that puts the spotlight on continuing involvement rather than a straight line progress.

The findings show that the fusion of working together, learning through making, and using the experiential ways can be seen as a step toward an education which covers all aspects of a person. Such an education style does not only give people skills both technical and creative, but it also arouses their critical thinking, makes them aware of society, and last but not least comes in with the idea of sustainability being more understood within the design procedures.

Reflection and Adaptation

The reflection phase of the project focused on observing and documenting the socio-emotional dynamics that emerged throughout the collaborative process. Particular attention was given to how students interacted with one another, how they responded to shared responsibilities, and how their engagement evolved over time. These observations provided insight into the less visible aspects of learning, including confidence development, communication, and group cohesion.

To gain a better understanding of how learning in different environments makes a difference, a few informal interviews were recorded with participants. During these conversations, the distinctions between "working in the classroom", which is mostly done through practice, and "doing a group project outside the classroom", which is more of a learning by doing, were discussed. Students also talked about the differences between work assigned to individuals and work that is made for public communication and final collective presentation. They said that the feeling of responsibility and awareness were much stronger when their work served a common product.

The results also demonstrate that changing from hands-on to experiential learning settings has an impact on students and educators. Students showed greater engagement and willingness to change; however, teachers had to redefine their roles, from being the ones who give instructions to the ones who guide and support students in a more open approach. Teachers needed to find new ways of being no longer simply delivering content, but acting as the ones who guide and help students.

This thinking over the paper demonstrates that learning in craft-based education is a kind of living thing, a product of human minds meeting, adjusting to each other, and the environment. Being able to switch back and perform in a conventional/directed and a free/open setting is a critical requirement if one is to facilitate development of skills as well as achievement of other educational purposes.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that collaborative tapestry-making can function not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a mode of knowledge production within practice-based research. By situating learning within the act of making, the study highlights how material engagement, social interaction, and reflective processes converge to generate meaningful educational outcomes.

The findings suggest that learning in design education extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills, encompassing embodied, tacit, and relational forms of knowledge. Through sustained interaction with materials, students developed material sensitivity and intuitive decision-making, while collaborative processes fostered shared responsibility, communication, and socio-emotional awareness. Mentorship played a crucial role in mediating these processes, enabling the transmission of knowledge that is difficult to articulate through conventional teaching methods.

Importantly, the study positions collaborative making as a legitimate research methodology, contributing to ongoing discussions in practice-as-research and design pedagogy. It challenges traditional distinctions between theory and practice, suggesting that knowledge can be produced through processes that are sensory, collaborative, and situated.

Despite these constraints, the study offers a compelling argument for the inclusion of craft-based, experiential, and collaborative approaches within contemporary design education. Such approaches support not only technical and creative development, but also broader competencies related to critical thinking, adaptability, and social engagement.

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