

Needs and Gaps Related to Traditional Knowledge Transfer in the Humber Valley, NL



Heritage NL

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Traditional crafts are the most tangible expression of intangible cultural heritage. The preservation of craft objects is very important, but there needs to be an emphasis on encouraging crafters and makers to continue their work and to pass their skills and knowledge onto others, specifically within their own communities. The skills, techniques, and methods needed to create craft objects are as diverse as the crafts themselves. (UNESCO, 2023)

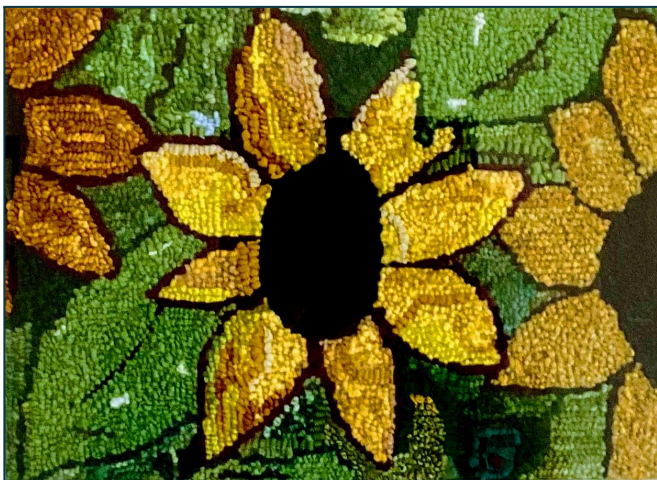


Image: Hooked Mat detail, courtesy Tim Spicer, Pasadena

For the purposes of this summary, we are using a definition developed by the UK-based Heritage Crafts Association, which defines a heritage craft as "a practice which employs manual dexterity

and skill and an understanding of traditional materials, design and techniques, and which has been practised for two or more successive generations."

The Humber Valley Traditional Skills Project aims to identify existing traditional knowledge holders in one specific area of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, and to identify needs and gaps related to traditional knowledge transfer.

The following communities are included in the study: Steady Brook, Little Rapids, Humber Village, Humber Valley Resort, Pasadena, Pynn's Brook, Little Harbour, St. Judes, Deer Lake, Reidville, Cormack, and Howley.

Common Issues Affecting Craft Viability

In 2008 and 2013, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Office of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador created two surveys to explore the needs of communities in preserving their ICH. These surveys identified a shared view among participants that certain forms of intangible cultural heritage were at risk of being lost. A list of traditions, knowledge, and skills participants thought were most likely to be lost was created. Five categories of ICH were included: oral traditions; knowledge of natural spaces; traditional crafts; customs, rituals and celebrations; and performing arts. Nearly 17% of respondents identified traditional crafts as being most at risk. (Mills, 2018)

In 2021 Heritage NL released its Craft at Risk List, a joint project of Heritage NL and the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The List was developed from responses to the Heritage Craft at Risk Survey in which practitioners, artisans, tradespeople, and craft producers were questioned about their traditional practices.

The Survey assessed the current viability of traditional heritage crafts in Newfoundland and Labrador while also aiming to identify crafts most at risk of disappearing.

While the responses provided useful information about specific skills at risk, it also highlighted other areas of concern. Craft producers and makers noted the lack of networks between craftspeople. They also stressed the importance of documenting crafts, craft skills, and traditions as a safeguarding measure and as a means of transmission.



Image: Leatherwork, courtesy Sabrina Gaulton, Deer Lake.

Responses to the Heritage Craft at Risk Survey identified six key threats to traditional crafts and skills in Newfoundland and Labrador.

1. Training for Practitioners

Issues concerning the lack of training opportunities for interested practitioners and the recruitment of skilled crafters and makers to teach the crafts was highlighted. Recruiting skilled craftspeople to teach courses, workshops, etc. would provide the best quality of learning.

2. Access to Materials

Materials needed to produce specialized crafts are becoming limited as they are too costly or too difficult to find - which can affect the future of certain crafts.

Particular issues include the rising cost of materials for smaller businesses, which can result in their inability to buy in bulk, a shortage of raw materials, and a shortage of tools and equipment.

3. Marketing

Poor marketing can result in a limited customer base. Training sessions focused on expanding market impact might help get information out to potential customers and create more opportunities.

4. Public Education

There is a lack of awareness of the differences between handmade and mass-manufactured objects, along with a lack of awareness by potential customers of the difference between high quality and poor quality craft products. Additionally, some craft trades are not being recognized and certain practices are not being considered fine arts.

5. Costs/Taxation

The rising cost of raw and allied materials has affected craft production. Practitioners are unable to make a livelihood from their craft due to high prices, less demand, and competition. Many craft businesses are closing. New municipal taxes charged to home-based businesses also impact expenses.

6. Globalization

Globalization and technology have limited the transmission of local craft knowledge from generation to generation. Practitioners are learning skills from around the world, but not traditional Newfoundland and Labrador skills. As a result, local nuances and specialities may be lost.

Specific issues raised by Humber Valley Traditional Skills Project participants

A Google survey sent out to Humber Valley practitioners resulted in responses from eighteen individuals, seventeen from the Humber Valley and one from outside the region. The survey answers provided insights of the experience of craftspeople in the Humber Valley region. The participants work in various crafts, from knitting to painting, quilting to rug hooking, and foraging to beekeeping. Many of the participants mentioned at least one of the six key threats listed above. The three main hindrances identified in the submissions were cost, access to materials, and promotion/exhibition of their work. Included below is a selection of responses to some of the questions posed.

What challenges do you face around materials or tools?

Cost and access to materials were significant issues in the participants' responses. More than a half (68%) of responses mentioned the cost of materials, and a quarter (25%) cited availability. Many parts of Newfoundland have limited access to supplies as compared to other parts of the province, let alone to Canada, so access to materials can be difficult, as one participant mentioned:

“Often I have to wait to get materials/tools until I travel to St. John’s because what I need isn’t accessible in the area (assuming I can even get it in St. John’s and don’t have to order it online and

pay shipping fees). Ex. Posca markers, many sizes of canvases, certain kinds of brushes, certain types of acrylic mediums.”

The increasing price of materials coupled with higher shipping costs is making it harder for some individuals to practise their craft.

What is the most challenging or difficult aspect of the tradition to learn?

Since the participants work in different mediums, many mentioned genre specific challenges, such as ‘casting off’ for knitting or ‘colour choices’ for quilting. Broader challenges were also noted. Almost a quarter (23%) noted the need for in-person instruction and workshops. One participant wrote, “trying to follow online videos; need more in-person instruction sessions,” and another wrote, “outreach, available classes, time to learn with qualified teachers.” Both comments speak to the need for instructional courses that help new learners and seasoned practitioners acquire and develop their skills.

What needs to be in place so that future generations can also learn this tradition?

The majority of participants (76%) mentioned the need for accessible workshops or workspaces for younger generations, where knowledge could be exchanged in person between mentors and mentees. Four of the Humber Valley participants mentioned the implementation of craftwork in schools as a way to reintroduce threatened crafts to younger generations. As one respondent noted, “We need a dedicated return to hands-on instruction in the skills from K to 12. We need a return of a significant budget for the visual arts in the school system.” Two respondents also mentioned gaining more understanding of the younger generation’s lifestyle and current trends. With proper introduction and explanation, and by understanding what younger generations enjoy or value, crafts could be revitalized in younger

generations. One participant said, “I believe we need to give them the knowledge and opportunity to learn a skill that they can make their own with practice.” By creating spaces where people can learn skills and then develop them into their own style, threatened crafts can find new life through varied forms of expression.

What are your suggestions for future craft skill training or learning?

Many different ideas were suggested but, as above, hands-on workshops were viewed as crucial. More than half of respondents (62%) mentioned workshops, a “centre for free access and learning,” and “events happening in an informal way” (so people can participate without it feeling like a huge commitment). One individual mentioned the need to practise “self sustainability” as the more we practise it, “the more future generations will have the same skills.” Another individual also wrote, “people have to see rug hooking, how it is done, what you can create and the work you can pass on.” A physical connection with crafts through workshops could significantly increase the number of people producing that craft. Another participant suggested the introduction of “more in-your-face advertising,” which could help with attracting people to workshops or learning about a particular craft.

One participant mentioned the need to support artists’ businesses and greater support in grant writing practices. Funding through grants is a way craftspeople can afford to continue their practice, but grant writing skills are an essential component of the process.

What areas of this craft or skill do you feel you need to learn more about?

Many answers to this question were very genre specific, for example, “detailing” for rug hooking and punch needlework and “advanced techniques in longarm machine” for quilting. More broadly,

there is an interest in social media literacy. Facebook, Instagram, and other digital platforms provide opportunities to promote and sell products. Although craftspeople are aware of the benefits of posting to social media, they may lack the time and/or technical knowledge to do so (Kholi, 2022: 10). Knowledge of current and emerging platforms would allow this source to be used to its full potential to market products and events. Greater social media literacy can also address the aim of connecting younger generations to traditional crafts.

Key Issues Identified

Participants noted several concerns, including those specific to their craft, but three key issues emerged from the consultation:

1. High cost of materials and a need to make them more accessible;
2. The need for in-person and accessible workshops, to both learn crafts and to transmit skills to a younger generation; and,
3. The need for entrepreneurial training and skills-building around marketing and exhibiting craft.

While there are clearly a number of skilled craft producers in the region, many are working at a hobbyist level. There are gaps in the professionalization of craft as an industry, and a disconnect between some of the surveyed crafters and potential markets.

This is not unusual amongst traditional craft practitioners. A 2011 study in Northern Thailand noted that artisans and crafters faced issues around market information, customer preferences, and product design, stating “Craft enterprises face a lack of knowledge and information about markets and buyers... Few companies know how to satisfy distributor or

buyer demands, particularly in the tourist and export markets” (Chudasri *et al* 10).

While maintenance and transmission of skills is one issue in that region, there exists a large knowledge gap of how to make existing skills more sustainable and marketable.

Research on quilting programs in Central Asia noted that efforts to establish training projects tend to end quickly when there is no effort placed on developing a long-term maintenance strategy. That researcher notes:

By creating a dependency on the outside agency instead of building a self-sustaining model based on the capacities within the community, these models are at risk when the supporting agency ends the program (Goodwin 39).

Recommendations

Based on identified key issues, Heritage NL makes the following recommendations:

1. Subsidy for mentor/apprentice training projects;
2. Support for documenting traditional craft techniques and the production of training films and documents;
3. Design assistance for developing new products using traditional techniques;
4. Introduction to the Standards of Quality Guidelines developed by the Craft Council of NL <https://www.craftcouncilnl.ca/archived-pages/membership>
5. Regional marketing/networking opportunities, entrepreneurship training, and development of social media skills.

Sources

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