



STITCHING SOLIDARITY

CONNECTING

THROUGH CRAFTING AND MAKING TOGETHER

Stitch Social
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Stitching Solidarity: Connecting Through Crafting and Making Together

There is growing interest in the potential of [making together](#) in groups for creating feelings of connection and solidarity. In this short piece, we reflect on the Stitch Social events and Zine Making Workshops between December 2023 and June 2024, which aimed to connect and support researchers in the School of Environment and development, University of Manchester.

Since December 2023, we have hosted several creative workshops and social events with the aim of connecting people across SEED ([School of Environment, Education, and Development](#)), through making, stitching, and being together. These events include a [zine-making](#) (a grassroots tool for sharing information within communities) workshop focused on tackling imposter syndrome, led by Inspire Women Oldham, and five 'Stitch Socials' - informal crafting get togethers inviting Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from the school and beyond. These and a celebration and sharing event in June 2024, were generously funded by the SEED Social Responsibility Catalyst Fund and the Humanities Social responsibility Wellbeing Fund.

The aim of these workshops was to create space for meaningful togetherness, and to offer opportunities to get to know one another in ways that go beyond extractive networking practices. As organisers of these sessions, we are interested in rethinking what 'productivity' means through an imaginative and inclusive lens (see Alison Kafer's, [Feminist, Queer, Crip](#)). The events were attended by a wide range of people, including Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) from in and beyond SEED, academics from other institutions such as Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Westminster, university staff from wellbeing and student services, as well as some more senior members of academic staff passionate about creating collective and feminist spaces.

STITCH SOCIALS





Starting in December 2023, we organised five monthly Stitch Socials across a variety of locations across the University of Manchester and the local area. The sessions invited SEED-based PGRs and ECRs to an informal and friendly meet-up where we learnt more about each other's research while working on a craft project. People brought existing projects (stitching, knitting, mending, or something completely different) or used the free sustainable stitching materials provided in the sessions. This gave us a rare opportunity to slow down and chat about things going on in our work and personal lives, as well as taking time to sit quietly, together. At one of the Stitch Socials, we also heard from two local artists, Nell Smith, who works with textiles and print, and photographer Simone Trumpet.



Across the workshops, people made a range of different creations using a variety of crafting techniques, including cross stitching, sewing, knitting, quilling, crocheting and colouring. People made t-shirts and necklaces, fixed socks and other clothes, and one participant even made a cape for their dog!



Image 1, 2 & 3:
Photos taken from Stitch Social events.



ZINE WORKSHOPS



Image 4:
An example of a zine made during the workshop
which is titled 'crip in the academy'.

Zines are an important grassroots tool, often used to share accessible information within and beyond communities creatively. Zines can be in physical form (i.e., made from paper or card) or can be digital (made and/or accessible on digital platforms).

During the zine-making workshop, in January 2024, we talked together about Imposter Syndrome. Led by Selina, Mary-Anne and Carrie-Ann at [Inspire Women Oldham](#), this interactive session aimed to empower and uplift participants. The workshop provided an opportunity to work with and learn from the brilliant Inspire Women, a partner on the Austerity and Altered Life-courses projece, and since this event our relationship has continued to flourish with us planning the next online zine making workshop in October. Through the practice of zine making, we explored different techniques to express our thoughts and experiences related to Imposter Syndrome. By sharing stories, strategies, and creative insights, we created a supportive and inclusive environment where attendees had opportunities to connect, learn, and grow together as a SEED community. You can [view and download](#) some of the zines created by participants during the workshop. We decided to digitalise the zines to encourage a continued conversation about Imposter Syndrome amongst researchers and to celebrate the creations we made during the workshop.

You can read more about zine-making as a creative method in the [‘how-to guide’](#) which was co-produced with [Inspire and the Austerity and Altered Life-Courses team](#), through the [Methods for Change project](#). [Catherine Wilkinson](#) has authored a thoughtful paper on imposter syndrome and the ‘accidental academic’, which is worth a read!

EXPLORING NEW SPACES





Image 5:

Photo taken by Laura at Hulme Community Garden Centre

As well as aiming to build solidarity and community within SEED we also wanted to explore and connect with interesting locations in and around the University. Taking on board suggestions from the growing Stitch Social group, we chose a range of spaces on campus and the local area, both indoors and outdoors. This included heading to [Christie's Bistro](#) at the University of Manchester in January, which is a great place to work and meet, and we were looked after very well by the staff at Christie's. In March, we were generously hosted by [Manchester Poetry Library](#), part of Manchester Metropolitan University. We enjoyed spending time here and learning about this creative and cultural venue, which is the North West's first public poetry

library and the only one in the UK to be supported by a university. Next, we visited the Polytunnel at [Hulme Community Garden Centre](#). Despite the on-and-off April showers and bursts of sunshine, the Garden Centre was a beautiful space to be and make together and many people reflected that they would return to this space to work and socialise in the future.

In May, we explored the [Firs Environmental Research Station](#) in Fallowfield. At over 100 years old, the Firs is the longest continuously running research facility at the University. It now aims to provide a green oasis in Manchester, researching, educating and engaging the community about biodiversity, food security and the environment. During our visit, we received a fascinating tour from Megan, where we learnt more about the history of the botanical grounds, glass houses, and the diverse collections of plants. We were particularly taken by the collection of mosses in the atmospheric Moss House, a longstanding feature of the gardens.



Image 6:

Photo taken by Simone at
Firs Environmental Research Station

During our visit to the Firs, we were joined by two local artists: [Simone Trumpet](#) and [Nell Smith](#), who shared their work. Simone is a photographer based in Manchester who specialises in portraits. We were able to see Simone's work in action and discuss some of her previous photography, including self-portraits featuring beautiful textiles and intricate images of plants and flowers. Simone describes herself as an evolving artist, who constantly refines her style and gravitates towards mediums that inspire her, from anime and music, as well as the shapes created in dancing and nature. Simone reflected that taking photos allows her to create a tangible memory of her feelings in that moment and gives her the freedom to express a variety of messages at once, such as, exploring identity, spirituality, and the fluidity of the human form. Simone snapped some amazing photographs at the Stitch Social, which we shared at our celebration event.



Image 7 & 8:
Sketchbook and textile pieces by Nell Smith.

We also had a chance to look at, handle, and talk about some of Nell's textile works during the Stitch Social at the Firs. Nell is a textile artist and printmaker working from a studio at Hot Bed Press in Salford. An interest in sustainability, the environment and nature has led her to carefully consider the materials she uses within her work. Her most recent collection, 'Chroma', is the culmination of an 8-month Arts Council funded DYCP research project into natural dyes and pigments for screen printing. Inspired by British folklore, she has made prints and textile pieces using natural dyes that she found, foraged, and extracted from plants.

It was an amazing opportunity to learn from both Simone and Nell and see and handle their work during the stitch socials.

REFLECTION ON THE WORKSHOPS AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE





Image 9: Handwritten feedback about the
 Stitch Socials

To celebrate these new creations and connections, we held a collective sharing event at the University of Manchester in June. This was an opportunity for friends of the Stitch Socials and Zine Making Workshops to share what we had made with colleagues from across the University, to reflect on what these spaces allowed for, and to think about how the connections we made could grow and flourish in the future. Everyone attending this event was invited to have a go at stitching and zine making to get a taste for the kind of activities which took place at our monthly meet ups.

Feedback from both the Zine Making Workshops and the Stitch Socials emphasised the benefits of creating these spaces in terms of building confidence, well-being, and community. For example, participants who made zines commented 'this workshop touched something deeply personal in me. [It] was healing to see that other people relate to my experiences', with more noting that the space felt 'cathartic', 'connective', and 'creative'.

Participants in the Stitch Socials said they enjoyed the 'gentle socialising' of the sessions, valuing opportunities to chat with colleagues but also to spend time together quietly, and sometimes even in silence. One noted that they found it 'rewarding to share craft hours together, bond with people, and calm down'. Having a reason to visit new places and lesser-known parts of the University was also something many saw as a benefit of taking part, with one person commenting 'I really love the idea of having a session and discovering different locations, especially as a newcomer to the city who hasn't had much.' We collated some of the stitch social feedback into a scrapbook, alongside some polaroids from the sharing event, the book also includes some of the brilliant (if slightly rainy!) photographs that Simone took during our trip to the Firs.

Interestingly, during our celebration event in June, many people reflected that making space each week or month to be with colleagues and friends, to make together, and to build community ties was something they valued in their work. But it can be difficult to carve out time due to busy schedules and the demands of neoliberal academia, where the spaces that support these kinds of interactions are often not prioritised. However, we would suggest that where possible, making time and space for informal, slowly paced and creative encounters holds potential to improve, or perhaps more importantly, [rethink productivity](#) by developing meaningful and generative connections among people who work together.



Image 10:
Photograph taken by Simone of our trip to
Firs Environmental Research Station

As researchers in SEED, we continue to experiment with creative methods in our own work. For example, Laura is developing slow and stitch-based methods for research settings in her current project [Making Slow Colour](#), including a [recent collaboration](#) with [Alison Jeffers](#) (Drama) for the [Performance Studies International conference, London](#).

In October 2024, Inspire Women Oldham are co-leading an online zine-making workshop as part of the Austerity and Altered Life-Courses symposium. This zine making session links to the symposium theme of 'Future Lives, and Austerity'. For more information about the symposium and the creative workshops which form part of this event, as well as how to get involved, keep an eye on the project's Twitter/X, @austerityalters or email Poppy (poppy.budworth@manchester.ac.uk).

As a PhD student in architecture, Xin is dedicated to the caring relations between bodily experience and urban infrastructure, particularly in developing care-oriented approaches in urban spaces through community and social engagements.

We are all keen to explore how creative methods and practices can be valuable both in developing sensitive research and in building solidarity. In 2024-25 we hope to nurture the communities we have begun to develop through the Stitch Socials and Zine Making Workshops. Building on feedback from group members, we aim to organise more informal creative get-togethers held both on campus and at nearby cultural and botanical venues in the city, learning new creative skills with a growing number of invited artists and practitioners.

If you would like to stay up to date with
Stitch Social related activities or if you
have any ideas for future events, please
get in touch:

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