Collaborative interpretation as craft: Slow theory development in LIS

How does theorising happen? For some, it may be sudden, individual inspiration that comes to mind, Newton under the apple tree or Archimedes in his bath. But, for this international group of researchers, we stand with Werron and colleagues to position theorising as a craft; a slow and organic process of collaborative interpretation that involves assembling a team, thinking aloud, collecting, sharing and creating material, and writing together. Within Library and Information Science (LIS), theory development has typically prioritised the use of theory rather than its construction as well as the work of individual theorists instead of group perspectives. However, we argue that understanding collaborative theorising as a craft forms an opportunity to think creatively about how we "construct understanding from information and ideas," including the everyday tools and strategies that bring theoretical work into being. The communal shape of handwork, which centres on participation as well as dialogue and exchange, means that seeing collaborative theorising as a craft also allows us to think more carefully about how LIS could benefit from a consideration of shared practices of knowledge production.

Our own journey into the craft of collaborative theorising began with a failed grant application, a scenario that may be familiar to others. Free from the constraints of the bid, we decided to shelve our proposed formal examination of transition to engage in a more open exploration of the concept. Starting with a re-reading of 'old' LIS papers, we rapidly found ourselves, like Dalmer and Huvila, engrossed in "spirited conversations and debates" about the relevance that various information phenomena had to movement and change. There was no fixed plan of what to read next; it always depended on where the discussions left the group. As, though, we discussed the ways in which information was (and was not) entwined within literature, we noticed a marked disregard for the concept of information avoidance, with major models of transition rarely mentioning the term and the range of ideas that were referenced in LIS adding linguistic colour rather than conceptual precision. Gradually, our casual observations gave way to a playful mapping of connections and disparities between these ideas until, several months later, our initial information avoidance categorisations supported analytical depth.

The unorthodox yet creative shape of our experiences underscores our positioning of collaborative theorising as a craft. Starting without a fixed outcome in mind meant that our approach to theory development was necessarily resourceful; our original get-togethers were catalysed by the travel limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the ignominy of the failed grant application. The artisanal focus was further accentuated through the use of unexceptional everyday objects within our theorising processes, including meeting, mapping, writing and information management tools that afforded us the opportunity to think about our research while we were doing it. Beyond the use of material artefacts, the collective shape of craft understanding is referenced through our "synergistic" style of collaboration, in which dynamic small group pairings formed and reformed based on the task at hand. Facilitating a productive intersowing of ideas, the emphasis on shared and interwoven encounters rather than the portioning out of individual tasks also meant that our collaborations became centred on the creation of social space (and bonds) as we collectively refined our ideas.

The craft of theorising together, then, is facilitated through the fostering of dialogue and interaction across differences, all of which support the community formation and belonging that are necessary for practices of making to thrive. In our case, social fabric was woven through the

establishment of trust within the group, which both supported the freedom to 'think' and created a shared responsibility where all members, independent of professional seniority, felt able to contribute. Our cooperative methods of production were further supported through the cognitive proximity or distance between research group members; as [Hautala](#) points out, while different cultural or professional backgrounds might lead to innovation, collaborators need common understandings in knowledge bases to perform complex tasks. In our case, we found that our shared background in LIS provided a useful starting baseline but it was our individual interests that took us in directions we could not have anticipated. Understanding collaborative theorising as a craft therefore also required us to be open to ideas and research possibilities, something that [Degn and colleagues](#) note that may be at odds with goal-oriented approaches to knowledge creation.

We started this research partnership to connect with colleagues in a low-pressure learning experience. From this beginning, we have come to understand collaborative theorising as an everyday craft in which we mobilised digital spaces, cross-disciplinary interpretation and active community involvement to develop our thinking. Centred on the creation of a [rewarding, non-hierarchical and non-competitive](#) model of academic cooperation, these artisanal methods, which also reference slow ways of learning, have allowed us to collaborate with international colleagues in a way that would not have been possible within our initial grant plan, to encounter scholarship we would not otherwise have read and to make connections we would not necessarily have made on our own. Conceptualising information phenomena has a long history in LIS, with authors adopting a range of approaches to identify characteristics or show the potential utility of a concept. We argue that the craft of collaborative theorising stands alongside these methods to form an unconventional yet powerful approach for advancing the intellectual work of our field.