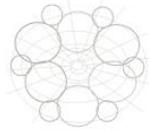


The survival of traditional crafts in a globalising world. A cultural ecological perspective

Patrick Dillon

This is an edited version of a paper presented at the conference 'Studying Traditional Crafts', Viljandi, Estonia, November 12–14, 2019. It contains PowerPoint frames that were designed to present the essential theoretical detail of cultural ecology by way of a diagrammatic animation. These have been consolidated and interleaved with short explanatory texts. Images of the illustrative examples are not included but some are mentioned in the text.

The survival of heritage crafts in a globalising world



Patrick Dillon

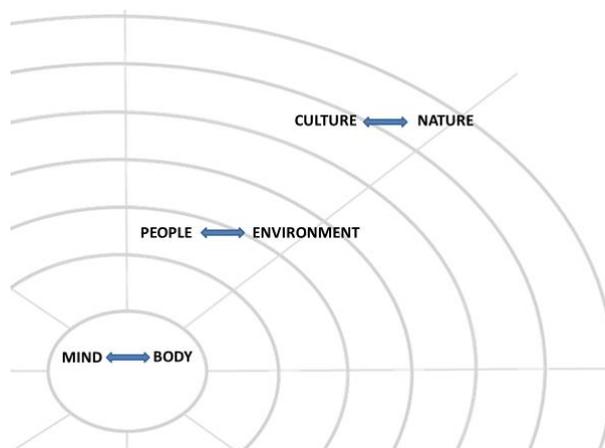
Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter

Adjunct Professor

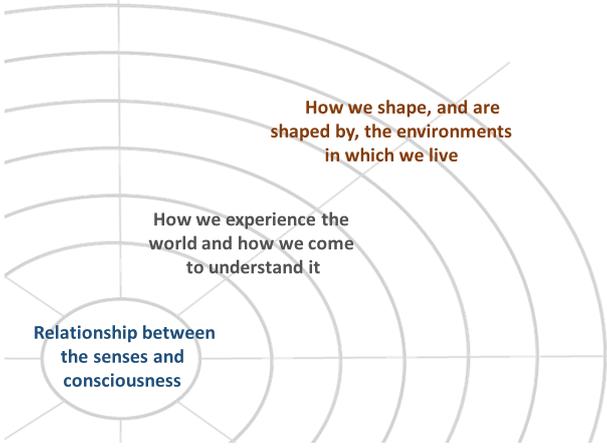
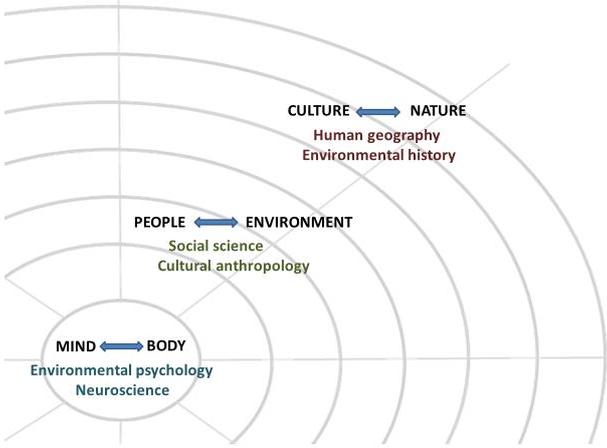
Universities of Eastern Finland and Helsinki

November 2019

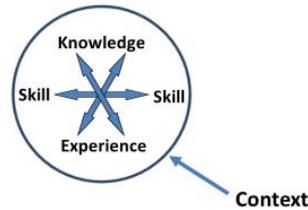
'Ecological niche' is the term used to describe how a plant or animal exists within its environment. The equivalent term for how humans interact and transact with their environment is 'cultural ecology'. Cultural ecology is concerned with relationships between people's experiences of the world and how they come to understand it, and how people shape and are shaped by the environments in which they live. Cultural ecologies operate at scales from the individual level to the global, and thus can be approached through a number of disciplines ranging from the natural sciences, through the humanities, to the social sciences. These relationships are represented in the next three frames.



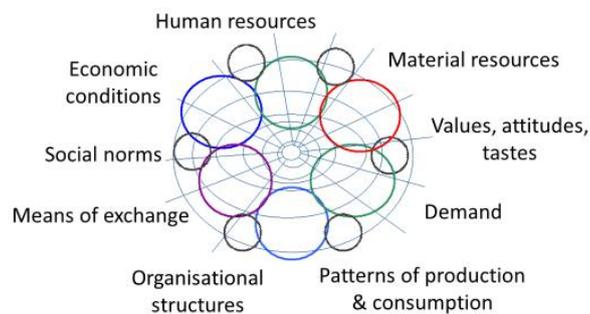
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The craftsperson is represented in the next diagram by three intersecting arrows signifying the unique combination of experience, knowledge and skill that he or she possesses. Although we are able to itemise these qualities theoretically, in practice, when the craftsperson is busy at his or her work, the qualities are inseparable; experience, knowledge and skill operate in unison, collectively they are the 'being in the world' or the 'presence' of the craftsperson. The 'context' in which a craftsperson works is represented by the surrounding circle.



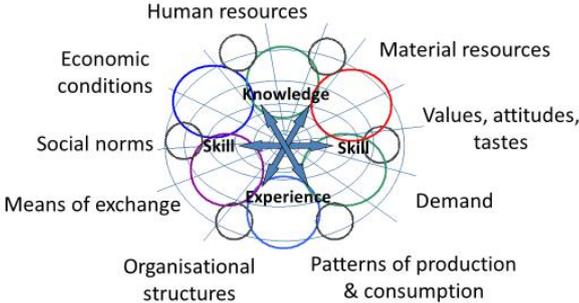
The next frame takes a closer look at 'context'. Context is a complex matter, so the simple circle surrounding the craftsperson in the previous frame is here replaced with a diagram of networks and connecting circles. In cultural ecological terms, context is the 'environment' in which the craftsperson works. 'Environment' in cultural ecology is an inclusive term: it is everything that surrounds the craftsperson, everything that in some way influences his or her 'being in the world'. Some categories (which in some literature are called 'influences' or 'factors') are labelled: material resources, social norms, etc. etc. The circle-network signifies that all of these factors or influences are interacting with each other, constantly re-shaping the context, most of the time subtly but sometimes drastically. The interacting factors may be thought of as a 'market' in the broadest sense of the word: not just places where goods and services are sold and exchanged, but any state of competition between beliefs and ideas and forms of behaviour.



Context = 'Market' complex

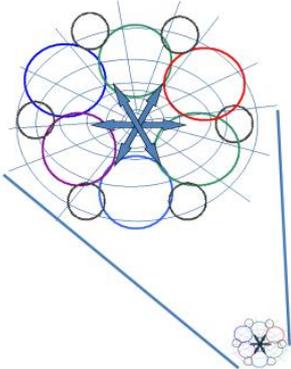
To complete the context diagram, the craftsperson can be restored to the centre of the action as in the next frame.

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Craftsperson working within a context

In moving on to the next part of the theoretical argument, it is necessary to 'shrink' the diagram of the craftsperson working in a context so that it can be inserted into a new diagram. To simplify things the texts have been removed.



The diagram of the craftsman working in his or her context can now be inserted into a timeline. Here it is in the next frame. The timeline represents continuity of craft practice in a particular place. This continuity of practice in turn represents the craft 'tradition' in that place.



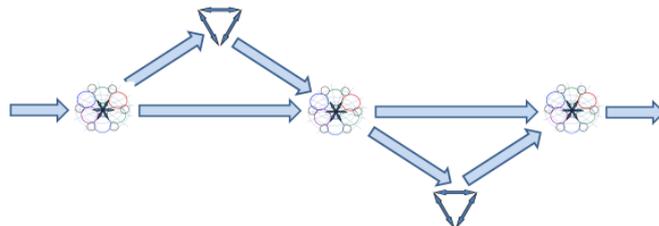
Craftsperson working within a 'tradition'
Localised continuity

But as noted earlier, the factors in which the craftsperson is working are constantly reshaping each other: perhaps a shortage of a particular resource, a change in the 'value' of the craft object, a change in the physical surroundings in which the craftsperson works, in fact any change in the environment of the craftsperson. Anything that changes may be labelled an 'agent of change', and it has the potential to alter the context and deflect the trajectory of the craft tradition.



Craftsperson working within a 'tradition'

Most changes can be accommodated within the local economy of the craftsperson and, over time, will lead to small incremental changes, but these changes may not be of a magnitude sufficient to deflect craft practice away from the tradition. Maintaining continuity through incremental change over time has been a characteristic of locally-based traditional craft communities across the world.



Craftsperson working within a 'tradition'
Incremental change accommodated – continuity maintained

But globalisation, which has become synonymous with the 'growth and development' economic model which dominates much of the world, is destabilising traditional continuity. The next frame itemises some of the many interacting factors associated with globalisation.

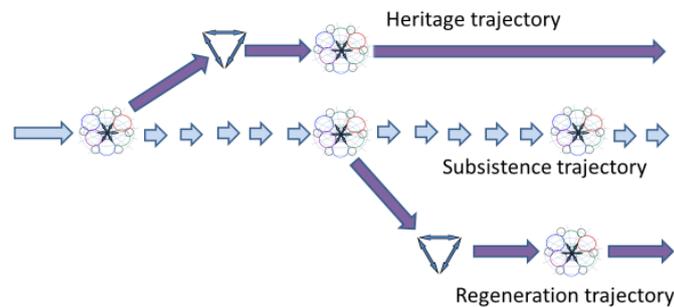


Globalising processes
[economic "growth & development"]

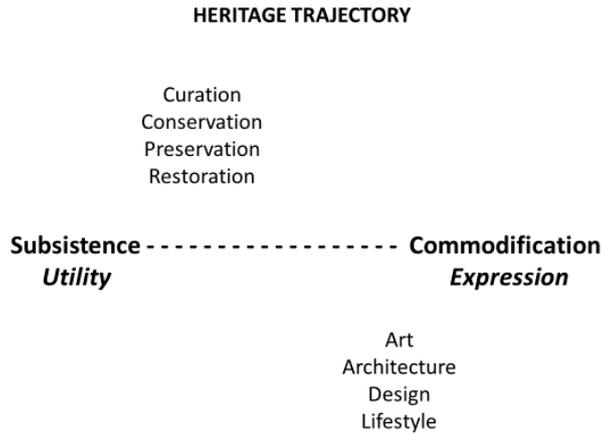
Accelerating rate of change
Geographical & quantitative expansion of 'market'
Increased migration

Cultural exchange & fusion
Commodification
Environmental degradation

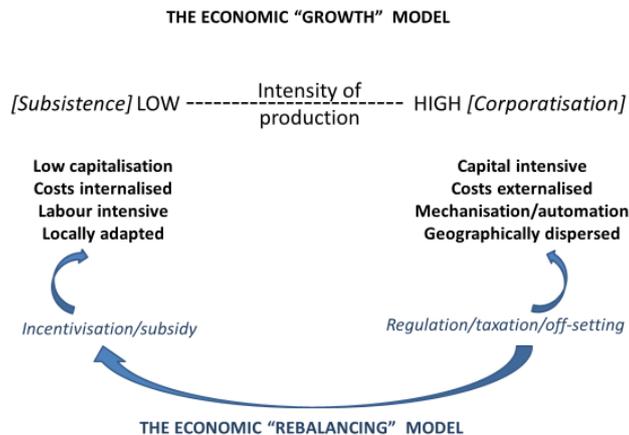
The impact of globalising factors on the craftsman working with a tradition is shown in the next frame. Maintaining continuity in locally-based traditional craft practice is compromised and is here shown as a 'subsistence' trajectory. But change provides other opportunities, here shown as alternative trajectories, one labelled 'heritage', the other 'regeneration'.



The heritage trajectory opens up possibilities for museums and private enterprises to offer services in curation, conservation, preservation and restoration. In these professions the integrity/utility of the craft (i.e. the craft within its historical and functional contexts, its 'tradition') is typically given priority. A different heritage trajectory opens up possibilities in art, architecture, design and lifestyle. Here the concern is less with utility and more with expression (i.e. a craft with historical and cultural associations but presented within a contemporary context).

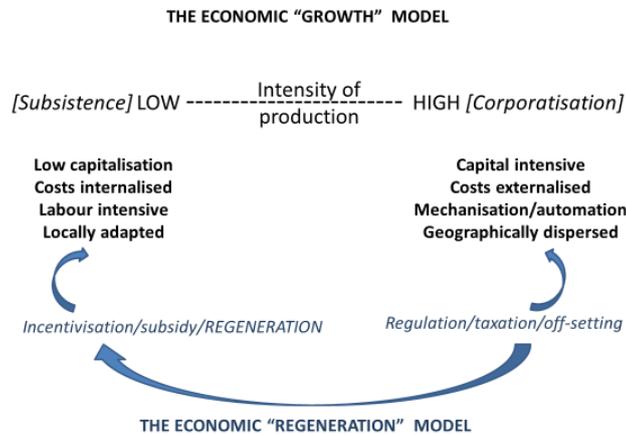


To understand the regeneration trajectory, it is necessary to look at the economic growth model that is driving globalisation. The next frame is a simplified, generalised representation of the model. Locally-based traditional craft practices typically have low capitalisation, they are labour intensive and their costs are internalised (which is why they are vulnerable to marginal fluctuations in the market). In recent decades many traditional crafts have declined or disappeared under these pressures. Others have metamorphosed into higher intensity, larger-scale enterprises that are capital intensive and rely on mechanisation to achieve economies of scale. But the more a practice moves towards 'corporatisation', the more some of its costs are externalised, e.g. elements of its carbon footprint. Within this model, there is some economic re-balancing as income, typical from taxation or levies from corporations generally (not just those concerned with crafts), is re-routed into public services, some of which may find its way back to traditional crafts through subsidies or direct support. This re-routing however, reflects political priorities and varies from country to country, region to region, and craft sector to craft sector: some traditional crafts benefit, others miss out completely.



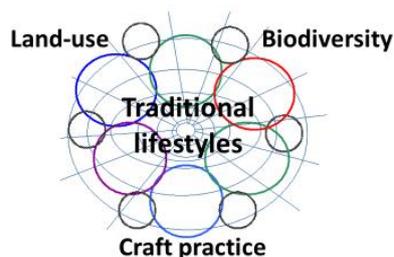
A variation of the economic growth model is what I have called 'regeneration' (see Dillon, P. 2018. Beyond Sustainability: Intergenerational change and regenerative development, available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329625982_Beyond_Sustainability_Intergenerational_change_and_regenerative_development My argument in this paper is made in the context of education, but the same principles apply to traditional crafts production.)



Regeneration also depends partly on re-routing public money (i.e. money from taxation), but this time into support for the benefit of traditional lifestyles, where craft practice is often inextricably linked with land-use and biodiversity. This integration, of land-use, craft practice and biodiversity, is at the heart of emerging approaches to sustainability.

Regeneration
 Another way of looking at ‘sustainability’



The example of regeneration I gave in my conference presentation came from the Somerset Levels in England. The Somerset Levels is a coastal plain of low-lying, flat landscape, about 70,000 hectares in extent. This landscape floods for short periods in the winter most years and over the centuries, settlement patterns, farming methods and craft practices developed that were adapted to the wetland environment. ‘Withy’ growing was part of this rural economy. Withies are the stems of willows (*Salix* species) which are grown as low bushes. The withies are harvested, treated and used for making baskets and other containers. In the twentieth century withy growing and the craft

industries associated with it declined as land was increasingly turned over to industrial agriculture. But a combination of intensive farming methods, changes in river management and climate change have rendered the Somerset Levels vulnerable to more severe flooding. There are more 'extreme events', when the floods are more extensive and last longer than in the past. Settlements that were once above the flood level are now at risk. One approach to dealing with this problem has been a return to more traditional forms of farming which are also compatible with maintaining habitat for the large populations of wetland birds which frequent this region. This in turn has stimulated a resurgence in withy growing, partly mechanised but still utilising many of the traditional skills associated with the main product of withies - basket making. There are now successful businesses which combine withy production, the manufacture of a large range of willow products, and education about biodiversity and traditional crafts, a coming together of heritage, conservation and engaging the public in leisure and educational activities.

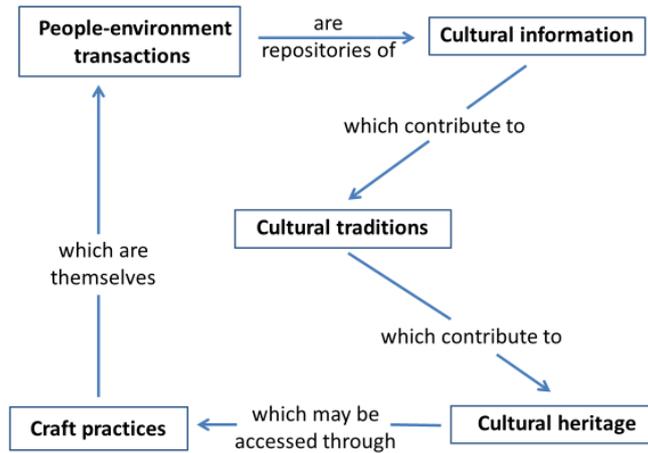
Initiatives like this, which offer new possibilities for the future of traditional crafts, raise questions about the content of educational systems. Research that I conducted with Sirpa Kokko from the University of Helsinki suggests that across Europe, most students reach the end of their formal schooling with only a superficial understanding of craft, tradition, heritage and culture, both generally and in connection with the region in which they grew up.



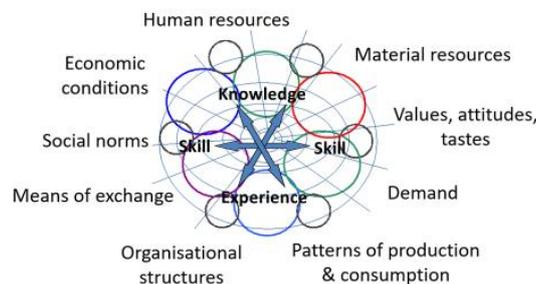
Formal education: generalist

Kokko & Dillon, 2016
Engaging trainee teachers with crafts and cultural heritage,
International Journal of Education through Art,
12 (1), 21–37

Sirpa Kokko and I have argued that general education should, at the very least, provide students with an understanding of the relationships shown in the following frame, both generally and in relation to where they live.



The education of the craft practitioner is a more complex matter. The frame below is a repeat of the craft practitioner working in the 'market' context shown earlier. The educational implication is that the craft practitioner must not only be proficient in his or her chosen craft, but he or she must also understand the ever-changing dynamics of the context in which they work. Specialist areas such as museum curation or artefact restoration, require additional expertise which, like craft practice, should be developed 'on the job', i.e. through first-hand experience. The Estonian Native Crafts Department of the Viljandi Culture Academy in the University of Tartu provide a good model of how this might be achieved. In addition to its undergraduate courses in native textiles, native construction and native metalwork, it runs a Master's programme with courses on native textiles, teacher of arts and technology, and folkloristics and applied heritage studies. Many of the students who study in the Master's programme are already highly skilled craft practitioners and enrich the learning environment by bringing with them practical expertise, skill and knowledge. This blend of academic and practical know-how is reflected in the Department's journal *Studia Vernacular*, which celebrates original craft work and research within the department with papers published alongside international contributions.



Formal education: specialist

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Finally

Diagrams and animations are useful for developing theoretical ideas but they have limitations: they reduce complex matters to much simpler representations and in doing so lose much of the context. I have added some of the detail in the text accompanying each of the frames above, but for an in-depth explanation of crafts conceptualised as cultural ecology see the following:

Dillon, P. 2018. Making and its cultural ecological foundations, pp. 51-61 in S. Walker, M. Evans, T. Cassidy, J. Jung & A. Twigger Holroyd (Eds) *Design Roots: Culturally Significant Designs, Products and Practices*, London, Bloomsbury Academic.

A copy of this paper can be downloaded through ResearchGate:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325119506_Making_and_its_Cultural_Ecological_Foundations

or email me directly and I will send a copy:

p.j.dillon@exeter.ac.uk

The following paper, also available through ResearchGate, provides further illustrative examples and case studies:

Dillon, P. & Kokko, S. 2017. Craft as cultural ecologically located practice. Comparative case studies of textile crafts in Cyprus, Estonia and Peru, *Craft Research*, 8 (2), 193-222.