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Creating Community for Those Who Work with Wool

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Creating Community for Those Who Work with Wool

by

Susannah L.K. White

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

December 2009

Buffalo State College
State University of New York
Department of Creative Studies

ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

Creating Community for Those Who Work with Wool

The purpose of this project was to create opportunities for reflection and to gather information from a diverse group of people (both geographical and occupational) who have an interest in working with wool. Using various thinking skills tools in small focus groups to identify needs, occupations, interests and themes of individuals, it attempts to create a common format suitable for connecting individual vocations to the wider community of woolworkers. The appropriateness of the use of a web site, and the form that it might take are examined. A great deal of useful information was acquired. Participants were impressed with the power of the group process, as the commonalities identified in their experiences formed a sense of community within the focus groups.

Date

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Introduction

I have acted in many capacities in my life. I am a parent, a craftsman, a teacher, a shepherd, a farmer, a community organizer, and a program coordinator. I have worked with all kinds and ages of children, mentally disabled adults, senior citizens, refugees, and migrant laborers. The work that has always been my foundation and that creates my center has been as a wool worker. To clarify, I am using the word “wool” to refer to any animal fiber.

Since I was 13 years old I have been working with wool; spinning, weaving and feltmaking. I received an undergraduate degree in Textile Design in 1983. As an adult I create my own work and teach handwork skills. I agree with Alex Osborn (1979) that, “There seems to be a reciprocal influence between brain activity and manual activity of the right kind” (p.77). By teaching students handwork skills, I help them to access that which makes them more creative and capable human beings.

Many years ago, I was very ill. Part of my healing was to recognize the role that a spiritual being plays in the establishment of courage and comfort. An image that is prevalent in religious literature and also most real to me is that of a shepherd. Since I had been working with wool since childhood, and my adult professional life revolved around the obtaining, interpreting and teaching of textile skills, I acquired a small flock of sheep and my life as a shepherd began.

To gain the necessary skills I worked with many people, read books, and learned by trial and error. I slowly became part of a community of people whose lives included working

with fiber animals and the predictable cycle of the year extended to the processing of fiber and the care and feeding of sheep. I have a great liking for these people. They are great problem solvers, taking what is universally recognized as being a marginal occupation and turning it into a good life. When I came to Buffalo State College to study human creativity, I wanted to hold on to the notion that all people are capable of living a creative life. Reading the work of Abraham Maslow (1999) and his thoughts on self-actualization and self-actualized people reinforced my implicit belief that creativity is an important part of human-ness. I was relieved to find support for taking into account creative expression as a necessary part of a full life. When I considered a topic for my project, I wanted to include those people who modeled self-actualization to me before I ever knew the word existed.

Most of what I have learned has come from watching other people, or by making mistakes and trying new ideas. In our industrial age, mentors for the care of land, animals, and craft are difficult to find and are often separated by great distances. The image of a shepherd out in the field is an apt analogy for any modern (urban or otherwise) woolworker. You are surrounded by beings, but none of them are sharing your thoughts. It is isolation in the midst of bustling productiveness. Shepherds, like most farmers, tend to be their own best friends.

Statement of the Problem

Agriculture is an isolating profession, and the life of a craftsman is also detached from the activity and rhythm of the twenty-first century. I found myself wondering if a web-based option could provide opportunities for education and community.

Searching for web information on working with wool has been very revealing. First, much of the “how to” information comes from geographic areas other than North America. The information is general and the presentation does not exhibit current computer technology. I experience my co-working woolworkers as being resourceful individuals who are constantly modifying their processes and materials to meet the situation. They are flexible. I do not see this reflected in the presentation of the craft. Additionally, there are many sites from the United States that provide information about a particular craftsperson or farm. These sites are largely economic in motivation, and are geared toward attracting potential customers. There appear to be few occasions for supportive sharing. Some have had educational components, but these are mostly European and specific to a particular aspect of wool work such as knitting, needlework or weaving. I could not locate an on-line location that addressed the entire cycle of sheep, shepherd, wool, craft and product.

Could I use the various thinking skills tools that I have been working on here in graduate school to identify needs, occupations, interests and themes of woolworkers, and connect their individual vocations to the wider community of woolworkers? Would this community accept and be served by the development of a web site designed from their

needs? I decided that collecting individual thoughts would help to identify points of similarity and aid in the creation of a recognizable community.

Background

The Thinking Skills Model of Creative Problem Solving (CPS) described by Puccio, Murdock, and Mance (2007) identifies the kind of cognitive skills that would be most effective given the stage and goal of the problem. Since each situation and challenge is unique, the recognition that working successfully with a problem might involve up to seven kinds of cognitive thinking options provides many entry or exit points for problem solving (p.50). It further recognizes that affective skills can also assist in the collection of information (p. 52).

For this project I identified visionary, strategic, and ideational as the cognitive thinking processes most useful to my goal. The affective skills that I wanted to encourage most were playfulness, dreaming, curiosity and openness to novelty. The techniques and exercises that I identified and developed were selected to use and encourage these skills. Specifically, I wanted to create opportunities for reflection and to gather information from a diverse (both geographical and occupational) group of people who have an interest in working with wool.

Before I could proceed, I needed to evaluate the appropriateness of an on-line forum for this use. Healthy debate questions whether the knowledge consumer can also effectively be the knowledge creator (Keen, 2007). It was also necessary to consider whether computer based technology is useful to those who most often are in real space,

not cyber space. Would this connect people, or further isolate them? Would this be a new sphere or familiar?

Developing a website would necessarily be a creative act. By engaging a multitude of opinions, it becomes a co-creative act, involving a variety of people with different skills, levels and content specific information. For the purpose of this project, I felt it necessary to recognize, as does Maslow (1999) the universality of the potential for creativeness, and to develop activities to nurture “that more widespread kind of creativeness which is the universal heritage of every human being that is born” (p. 151). It was important for me to admit that while certain professions involving the use of wool are conventionally assumed to indicate the need for creativity (fiber artist, weaver, designer), I could not exclude any of the professions as an area where a creative person is at work. Agriculture in New York State in the 21st Century is very challenging, as is craft. The kinds of problems that are encountered are very complex and require a different approach from conventional agriculture to be a part of a good and rewarding life. I felt that the people who have struggled with, and successfully and creatively solved those problems would be the best resource for information about needs, successes and concerns. Maslow referred to this kind of manifestation as “self-actualizing creativeness”. He felt that such people saw what was new and fresh in a situation and could recognize in the “raw”, potential. Because of this, he felt they were more likely to live “in the real world of nature” (p. 153). I attempted to locate and include this kind of participant.

About the Participants

The people who contributed by participating in this project were located in a number of ways. First, I would mention this Master's Project to a fellow wool worker. They in turn would mention it to others that they knew. When a group of four or more had evolved and asked to be included, a date, time and location was determined for a meeting.

These self-selecting individuals were from two geographic areas in New York State; the Western New York area and the Hudson River Valley area. In both instances, the communities contained at least one Waldorf School. The Waldorf pedagogy is committed to the educational philosophy of Austrian educator, scientist, and artist Dr. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and particularly appropriate for my use. An emphasis on handwork that begins in kindergarten and a process based approach to learning guarantees a population of people who have a firm grasp on fiber and its uses. All students learn to work with fiber from the sheep to the finished product.

In addition, I attended two fiber festivals; one in each area. There I had conversations with vendors. Those that expressed interest were then given a chance to answer questions. Lastly, I located college students who had an interest in textile design. They responded by answering a flyer posted in the textile lab area.

The ages of the participants ranged from 13 years old to 80 years old. Both men and women contributed. Included were shepherds, wool processors, students, craftsmen, teachers, and artists. Various levels of participation were offered to accommodate varying time and energy commitments.

About the Exercises

The exercises use a variety of techniques to encourage the participants to make connections between their life as a whole and their work with wool. Tasks, such as the *life/art gallery* and *treasure map visualization* were designed to help participants to look at things in a different way from their ordinary habit. I have used Synectics, the work of W.J.J. Gordon as my model (1961). Synectics uses analogies in a purposeful, teachable, explicit way, to reveal what is usually considered to be accidental or intuition. The analogy that the mind creates is personal and can “cover the scale with an endless variety of levels, ranging from that which is apparent to the popular mind to that which is known only to an expert” (p.54). The versatility and adaptability of the technique makes the use of analogies particularly useful given the diversity in ages, skill levels, and interests that contributed. For the purpose of this project I am using either direct analogy - meaning “the actual comparison of parallel facts, knowledge, or technology” (p.40) or symbolic analogy - meaning “objective and impersonal images to describe a problem” (p.44). The associations that are created between things not previously linked can lead to breakthroughs in image, thought and technology. “Making the familiar strange” (Gordon & Poze, 1976) or “making the strange familiar” encourages the making and breaking of connections (p.32) and allows new combinations to form. This can lead individuals to new insights into their life and work.

To help facilitate fluency, the focus groups had two brainstorming activities. *This is not a rolled up piece of paper* helped the group to develop comfort with one another, and

through the experience, “write” their own set of rules to encourage ideation. In all of the sessions, the guidelines that developed paralleled those of Alex Osborn (1979): criticism is ruled out, “free-wheeling” is welcomed, quantity is encouraged, and combination and improvement are sought (p.156). Excited by their tool and the energy it brings, they are ready for the second activity, and think about the questions they have about their work with wool.

As part of the *treasure map visualization*, participants are asked to listen to a spoken script, and then draw what they have visualized. In *Applied Imagination*, Osborn states, “Painting and drawing can’t fail to put imagination through its paces. Every stroke of brush, pen, or pencil tends to turn on that automatic power of ours called association of ideas” (p.77). Another perspective on presenting an image to stimulate creativity is presented by Ronald Finke in his book *Creative Imagery* (1990). His work with creative mental synthesis, creative inventions in imagery, and restricted imagery inventions has suggested that “creativity should not be thought of in terms of the specific products of the creative act, but rather, as the way one engages in exploration”. Presenting the participant with restricted imagery (in this case the notion of a treasure map), and allowing them to combine their own preinventive forms “often lead(s) to inventions and insights that seem so elegant and resourceful in retrospect” (p.168). The intent of the exercise was to create an opening for this kind of intuitive recognition.

Methods and Procedures

I focused on three areas of information:

1. Computer use patterns
2. How work with wool relates to and shapes a life view
3. Questions that frame the success and challenges of the individuals

I developed a series of activities and exercises to help people to focus on this project, and their work. A short written survey about computer use patterns (see Appendix A) was given to everyone who participated. This was to help in the evaluation of various computer based forums for suitability and accessibility. A short worksheet (see Appendix B) about the questions that shaped their work with wool was given to those who wished to participate, but because of distance or time constraints, could not attend a focus group. For those who wished more involvement, there were focus groups of 4-6 people that met for approximately two hours each. The focus groups worked collectively using tools that encouraged imagination and fluency to create a viable, living portrait of a life with wool.

With the help of my process buddy Dao-Wen Chang, I evaluated the data for common themes using affinity diagrams. Originated by Kawakita Jiro as a management and planning tool, the affinity diagram was developed to uncover meaningful relationships between different kinds of information. As an organizational tool, it is useful for refining

an overwhelming amount of data into something that makes sense.

(http://www.isixsigma.com/offsite.asp?A=Fr&Url=http://www.skymark.com/resources/tools/affinity_diagram.asp) The focus group sessions produced hundreds of ideas. Our first task was to divide them into two categories. The first, based on responses from the *Life/Art Gallery Exercise* and the *Treasure Map Visualization* had largely emotional content and related most to how people view their work and the affect on their lives. The second category contained the questions generated during the Idea Generating Exercise, as well as the categories that surfaced on the Treasure Maps and were more concrete and related to the tangible details of the work. Two affinity diagrams were created that consolidated and arranged the information into a useable form. The first will influence the form the homepage takes and the second will inform the navigation system of the site.

Focus Group Sessions - First Session

This is the agenda that I developed for the focus group sessions:

1. Participants introduce themselves. I introduce my project and thank them for participating.
2. A short survey relating to computer use is given.
3. The *life/art gallery* exercise:
 - a. Photographs are arranged around the circumference of a room. They are representative of either the natural world, the mechanical or constructed world, or contain people. There are at least 10 photos for every person.

- b. The group is directed to look at every picture. Each individual will decide which one they are most drawn to. They take it back to their seat where they have a blank piece of paper folded in half. Everyone writes on one half of the paper, everything they can think of about the picture that compelled them to choose it. They have about 4-5 minutes to do this.
 - c. The group is then divided into couples. They each take turns telling the other one about their picture, and why they chose it. This is done very quickly.
 - d. It is then suggested that each introduce the picture of the other person to the group. Each has about a minute and a half to talk. It is important to check in with the person who “owns” the picture to make sure that they feel that they have been adequately represented. They may add any other details that they wish.
 - e. After everyone has had an opportunity to speak, they are to write on the other side of the paper their thoughts on how the picture relates to their work with wool, or how wool working relates to the picture. They are encouraged to use their reflections on how the picture connects to their life, the observations of the person who presented the picture to the group, and the picture itself. This is also 4-5 minutes.
 - f. Each then takes a turn considering their connections and presenting them to the group.
4. We take a 10-15 minute break.

5. The next exercise is *this is not a rolled up piece of paper*. It is effective at creating a sense of fun, helps people to practice their ideation skills, and assists us in establishing our rules for the brainstorming *Questions about work with wool*.
 - a. Everyone stands in a circle around a piece of flip chart paper that has been rolled diagonally and taped into a long tube.
 - b. The rules are explained. They are:
 - i. Everyone must be silent.
 - ii. The roll is passed from person to person.
 - iii. When it is your turn, you demonstrate without sound, what the roll is. We know it is not a rolled up piece of paper. (Toothbrush? Flute? Broom? Scarf? Bridge?) Then you pass it to the next person.
 - iv. This happens as quickly as possible.

After about 5-8 minutes (it depends on how much fun everyone is having) we stop and talk about the exercise. I ask questions about what was noticed, felt, enjoyed, etc. Through this discussion we establish our ground rules for brainstorming. We will defer judgment, think of as many ideas as possible, be silly and playful, and allow our ideas to build on one another's.

6. The final activity is a brainstorming session. It begins with the Question, "What might be all of the questions you have had about your work with wool?" The next question is, "What might be all of the questions that you had when you first began your work with wool?" The last question is, "What might be all of the

questions you have had in the past year about your work with wool?" Each question is given 5 minutes.

7. I thank everyone for coming.

I presented this format to three different audiences. In addition, I prepared a shortened written version of the brainstorming questions, as well as the computer use survey to give to those who wish to participate, but could not be physically present.

Focus Group Sessions - Second Session

Individuals who had participated in the first session and wanted to continue investigating the subject came to one additional session. The web page visualization (see Appendix C) uses the analogy of a web page as a treasure map.

This is the agenda used for the session:

1. Participants greet each other and socialize for a few minutes.
2. To create an atmosphere of relaxation and fun, I teach the group a new song. It is sung in a round, and everyone is laughing by the time we are done.
3. We sit around a table with eyes closed. I read the visualization.
4. After a few moments of silence, everyone receives a large sheet of paper, is given a wide variety of materials to draw with, and is encouraged to put their images onto the paper.
5. When everyone has finished, we place the drawings around the room. Everyone interprets their "homepage" to the group.

6. After everyone has finished, each person is encouraged to write on the back of their drawing what they think is the most important element in the rendering.

Organizing the Data

Analysis of the Computer Use Survey Data

One of my initial questions for this project was, “Would this community accept and be served by the development of a web site designed from their needs?” In order to effectively evaluate the usefulness of a website for this particular group of people, all participants completed a computer use survey to assess their computer use patterns (Appendix A). The answers from the eleven questions were then entered into a table using the SPSS software. It was then analyzed for frequencies, and interpretive graphs were created (Appendix D). The data will be expanded on in the **Results** section (p.15).

Transforming the Information

The Affinity Diagram Tool was used to organize all of the information gathered from the focus groups. This included the questions from the *brainstorming sessions*, questions from the *questions about my work with wool worksheets*, the information on the *life/art worksheets*, and data from the *treasure map visualizations*. The initial organizing and diagramming session took about 3 hours. The process is similar to the convergence step of clustering and restating. I modified the procedures outlined by Miller, Vehar, and Firestien (2001) for screening options (p.44) and did not eliminate any of the options. Instead, I arranged the information into broad subject groups using

clustering, and then into successively more specific categories. This clustering activity stood alone as a step in my process and had its own significance. I agree with Tassoul and Buijs (2007) that:

It is really about expanding knowledge, about connecting ideas to problem statements (*how* does it solve our problem?), functionalities (*why* and *how* is it of interest?), and values and consequences. It is about making connections and building a shared understanding, in other words about 'making sense' of a seemingly random collection of independent ideas or suggestions. (p.17)

Within each reduced cluster was the essence of the idea, and I tried to use restating as a way to represent the idea in a meaningful and lively way.

Results

Computer Use

The creation of community in a geographically dispersed group of individuals creates a special challenge. One of the questions posed by this project is whether a web-based option, such as a web site, could provide opportunities for education and community. In order to have a better idea about how computers are being used by the group, everyone who participated in any of the focus groups completed a short computer use survey. Other individuals who wanted to contribute but were not available for a longer commitment also completed the survey. In all, there were 25 completed surveys. This small sample size allows only general thoughts but might indicate directions or areas of interest.

Demographics

The majority of respondents were female (80%). The ages ranged from those 10-15 years old, to those over 50 years old. The oldest participant was 80 years old. The greatest age representation was the over 50 year old group (40%), with the next most common in the 40-50 year old range (24%). Eight percent were younger than 15 years of age, 16% were between 20-30 years old, and 12% were 30-40 years old. When asked to self evaluate their skill level when working with wool, the greatest number saw themselves as moderately informed and capable when working with wool (36%).

Twenty-eight percent identified themselves as professionals, and 20% considered themselves informed and capable when working with wool.

Computer Use Patterns

My assumption about the participants was that as agrarians and craftsmen, they would be less likely (if at all) to be involved in cyberspace. This does not appear to be the case. Only one person surveyed did not use a computer at all. Ninety-two percent used computers in their own homes. Computers were used most often for email (88%), for research (88%), for on-line ordering (76%), and for word processing (68%). They were likely to use a computer at least a few times a week (28%), with the highest use frequency being multiple times a day (36%). Eighty-eight percent responded that they did use a computer to get information to learn and develop new skills. Almost 90% reported using a computer to research products, but just 68% responded that they felt information they retrieved from computer research was slightly reliable or reliable. Forty-eight percent report that they participate in social networking sites, with 40% participating in on-line communities where they chat. Perhaps the most supportive sign, in terms of considering the usefulness of a web site, was that 76% report that they have sites they regularly return to and depend on for information.

Overall, I was encouraged, and feel that this small sample might be receptive to, and have the skills and access to the technology for, using a site devoted to woolworking. More complete information about this survey is available in Appendix D.

Results of Focus Group Session One

Life/Art Gallery

There were ten participants in Focus Group Session One. The *Life/ Art Gallery* worksheets that they completed are available in Appendix E. The images that were presented as choices were in three subject categories- the natural world, the world of machines and industry, and pictures of people. All but one of the participants chose an image of the natural world. The tenth image was of people. Since the exercise asks for a relationship to be drawn between the image and the subject's life and then work (with wool) of the person, I divided the responses into four categories of relationship that seemed to be mentioned most in the responses. I chose these categories based on my understanding of the context that was presented at the session.

The four categories of relationship were:

1. Working with wool gives me.... - The relationship between the subject and the participants own feelings and sentiments was present. Many words were repeated on more than one worksheet.
2. Relationship to color and light.... - Almost every worksheet contained a reference to color.
3. Relationship to nature.... - This related to both how the participants placed themselves in the image, and how their work was a part of this.

4. Wool can be.... - This was the relationship between why they chose the image and its association to their work with wool.

Table 1 suggests one way of looking at the information. Each of the categories has its own column, and the information from the written worksheets was transposed onto the table. The answers were entered randomly within their columns. While many words were repeated more than once on the worksheets, I only used them once when creating Table 1. Reading down through each column gives a fuller sense of the relationship between the people responding, their lives, and their work with wool. It also provides indications of the qualities that drew the participants to the images they chose. This information could be useful as a design tool for developing a web site homepage or logo that would attract the woolworkers.

An interesting part of organizing their words was noticing how the same theme can repeat itself with subtle variations from one column to another, depending on context. An example of this is what I see as the concept of “oneness”, or “isolation”. I found four words across the columns (row 2) that expressed this feeling. In this case, it happened by accident that the words are right next to each other. Column 1 is *solitude*. Column 2 is *elusive*. Column 3 is *alone*, and Column 4 is *individual*. This is a good example of the degrees of meaning that can be expressed, but I resisted the urge to try to match up other sets across the columns. In this more random form, they can be more freely interpreted, and form more than one combination. Another interesting set that I would like to point out is *drama yet calm* (row 11), *contrasts* (row 9), *predictable yet has its*

own ideas (row 14), and *many things/opposites* (row 3). These are dispersed through the rows, yet seem to express a tension that might be significant for creating the look and feel of a web site. It is interesting to imagine how this could be expressed visually. Concepts that were expressed in different ways across the categories of relationship would appear to be important themes for the people who took part in the focus groups.

If a website and a homepage were actually being designed, the words that were used as descriptors would be useful for creating the emotional “home” that would draw the users to the site. Knowing that texture (contrasts, patterns revealed), a sense of warmth (inner warmth, warm like sunshine), and color (colors melting together, layers of color/light) will be recognized as appealing, is a useful result. This visual non-written information can inform the viewer that they have emotionally arrived at their destination.

Table 1

Descriptors for Relationships Extracted from the Life/Art Gallery Worksheets

Row number	Working with wool gives me....	Relationship to color and light	Relationship to nature	Wool can be....
1	Sense of peace	So important in my life	Gesture in nature	Special
2	Solitude	Elusive	Alone	Individual
3	Space	Light and shadow	Vibrant ever-changing light	Many things/ opposites (light or dark)
4	Rest	Warm like sunshine	Expression of the season- cycles	Ambiguous (living/non-living)
5	Homecoming	Patterns revealed	Varied textures	Transformative
6	Hope in community	Colors melting together	Contrast of life forms	Warm
7	Direction	Layers of color/light	Evokes scents	Part of a handmade life
8	Pleasure	Natural colors	Handmade	Simple
9	Beauty	Contrasts	Wool is a natural element	Relaxing
10	Relief	Not contrived	Physical nature of felting	Fun
11	Drama yet calm	Movement	Not plastic	Group work
12	Inner warmth	Bright	Look closely	Familiar
13	Inspiration	Pure	Purity	Mysterious
14	Healing	Light and Darkness	Predictable yet has its own ideas	Homelike
15	A congregation	Flow	Alive	Sweet and childlike
16	Protection	Transforms from one color to another	Earthy	Trustworthy
17		Different colors, different parts	Landscape	Forgiving
18		Flexible	Plentiful/ bountiful	Regenerative
19			Real	Delicate
20			Timeless	Time consuming
21				The path from farm to city
22				Uncomplicated

Questions You Have Had About Your Life with Wool

An important aspect of any web site is the information it contains and how it is arranged on the page. In order to be useful, the information must be pertinent and easy to find. Since in this case, the participants would also be the consumers, their opinions were very important. For this reason, I collected questions that the participants had about their work with wool.

The *brainstorming sessions* created a total of about 360 questions. These were presented in answer to the three questions about working with wool. Some of the responses were more esoteric in nature. An example would be, “Why do I do this?” Other questions reflected the practical nature of caring for living things. Information was also gathered from the *life/art worksheets*, the *questions about my work with wool worksheets*, and the *treasure map visualization*. Appendix F illustrates how the information was divided and arranged to reveal categories. The broad categories that surfaced were:

- Time (how to use time wisely, issues around time, how to find time, time constraints)
- Reflections around “why”
- Lifestyle choices
- Animal Husbandry
- Information (learning more, offering more, needing more)

- What are all the ways that we can work with wool (washing, carding, spinning, knitting etc.)
- Marketing
- Funding
- Rules and Regulations
- Wool Processing
- Products
- The Dye Process

Figure 1 illustrates one of the clusters that emerged in the affinity diagram and demonstrates the kinds of questions that might be asked around a particular topic. In this case it is animal husbandry. The categories can be further refined by separating areas of concern such as breeds; care and feeding; optimum flock size; maintaining and preserving wool quality; and fencing. This process was applied to all of the data, and the resulting clusters could be the basis of a navigation system for a woolworking web site. For more photographs of the affinity diagrams and the process, see Appendix F.

Figure 1

Cluster of questions related to the care of animals



Focus Group Session Two - Treasure Map Visualization

Focus Group Session Two had eight contributors. They were able to make the transition to metaphorical thinking with varying degrees of success. The image of a treasure map (see Appendix C) appeared to create vivid images in everyone's mind. Transforming those images to another use required conversation and encouragement. Eventually, everyone was absorbed in their own image, and worked quietly for about 20 minutes. While each drawing was very individual and none were superficially alike, there were points of similarity:

- Every drawing was either in color, or color was mentioned in the text.
- Every drawing used imagery. Some exclusively.
- Text was minimal. On the drawings themselves lots of text might appear, but mostly it referred to directions about what they wanted to see.
- In addition to written information, many of the sketches also mention music, video, and multi-lingual options.
- Traveling around the page or from one topic to another was very creatively accomplished. Options presented included traveling on the rays of the sun, following the sheep into the pasture, flying with a bird icon from topic to topic, and identifying a topic by its image.

My favorite metaphors that surfaced were of Rumpelstiltsken and turning Straw into Gold, and the image of Ariadne and her web of invisible strands creating a visible reality. To view the drawings that were created, see Appendix G.

Conclusions

When I began this project I had four questions in mind:

1. Could I use the various thinking skills tools that I have learned in my creative studies program to identify needs, occupations, interests and themes of woolworkers?
2. Is there a way to connect their individual vocations to the wider community of woolworkers?
3. Would this community accept and be served by the development of a web site designed from their needs?
4. What would this web site look like?

Designing a series of exercises that use a variety of techniques, I wanted to encourage the participants to make connections between their life as a whole and their work with wool. Tasks, such as the *life/ art gallery* and *treasure map visualization* were included to help participants to look at things in a different way from their ordinary habit. The contributors were a very diverse group- all ages, occupations (within the context of working with wool), and skill levels were involved. Yet they responded most enthusiastically to the sessions. We were successful in both identifying needs, occupations, interests and themes, and in connecting the various professions with one another. The process worked.

My sample was small and self-selected, but I believe from the responses that I received, that questions 1-3 can be answered “yes”. There is both a need and an interest in a

universal woolworking website - an "Everyone's Site", as one participant stated - that can address questions related to the care of animals, processing of fiber, sharing of information, development of a business, and the creation of products. I also believe that the data from the computer use survey supports the idea of a web site as being useful to woolworkers.

I enjoyed the time that I was able to spend with the focus groups. The people were very generous and open about their work. I believe that they enjoyed it as well. Every participant of a focus group said that they would like to continue working on the project. Creating a feeling of "safe space" was important to me. I wanted the participants to feel that they could try new ways of doing things and entertain new ideas and not be judged.

Initially, I feel that there was some unease around the exercises. More than one person expressed dismay that we would not be actually working with wool during our time together. In addition, early reactions questioned how the exercises related to wool. Luckily, I was working with patient people and at the completion of a session they appreciated the relationship between our sessions and their work. Many felt that they had benefited personally as well. This was not an anticipated outcome. Typical statements that I received at the end of a session were:

- "I don't see how this helped you, but I feel I've learned an enormous amount about my life."
- "I wish that I had done something like this before I got the sheep."

- “I feel that I have found a new direction for my work.”
- “Can we continue to meet as a group?”
- “I feel much clearer about (a particular difficulty) and now I think I know what I will do.”

Everyone was very supportive of one another. It would appear that creating a community was possible, if only for the duration of the session.

I was reminded of the power that an intentionally designed group process can have when contrasted with solitary work. Many people that I approached about this work wanted to participate, but were not in the vicinity of a focus group, or did not have the time for a focus group. In response to their interest I developed a simple worksheet about questions they might have about their work with wool. This would take the place of the brainstorming at the end of the first session. Twelve people requested and received the worksheet (Appendix B). Since I was receiving an average of 30 responses from each member of a focus group, I included room for 30 responses on each of the worksheets. When the sheets were returned I received only 52 questions total about working with wool. Comments that accompanied the responses were:

- “I know I have questions, I just couldn’t think what they were.”
- “I just dried up.”
- “Nothing seemed important enough to write down.”
- “I was embarrassed to admit I didn’t know.”

This was not a controlled experiment, so I cannot make assumptions about the differences in the fluency rates. However, I do wonder if the facilitated group process contributed to the comparative success of the brainstorming in the focus groups. I would expect that it did.

The fourth question, “What would this web site look like?” was only touched upon in this project. While there is an embarrassment of information that could be used to help create a visual representation, it is beyond the scope of this investigation to pursue it to any conclusion.

This was one of those projects that took on a life of its own. The imagery, language, emotion, motivation, and skill reflected in the data indicate to me that we are not yet finished. Moreover, it is no longer my project alone. Enthusiasm for creating a web site has been awakened, and a community of people now has an interest in seeing this appear live on-line. As a next step, we are problem solving around locating the funds that will allow us to focus on a common visual.

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Appendix A

Computer Use Survey

The creation of community in a geographically dispersed group of individuals creates a special challenge. One of the questions posed by this project is whether a web-based option, such as a web site, could provide opportunities for education and community. In order to have a better idea about how computers are being used by the group, everyone who participated in any of the focus groups completed a short computer use survey.

Computer Use Survey, Fall 2009
Creative Studies Project
Susannah White

Circle all that apply

I use a computer at...

- My home
- My work
- The library or community center
- My friend's house
- I don't use a computer
- Other _____

These are the ways in which I use a computer:

- For email
- Twitter
- To Blog
- For research
- To order something
- For on-line payments
- To stay up to date on news and the weather
- For music
- For word processing
- For videos (You Tube)
- Other _____

Circle the one that you feel is the most accurate response for you.

Usually, I am likely to use a computer....

- Multiple times a day
- Daily
- A few times a week
- Weekly
- A few times a month
- Monthly
- Every few months
- Seldom
- Never
- Other _____

I visit a website to get information or to research a product....

- Daily
- Weekly
- A few times a month
- Every few months
- Never
- Other _____

I use a computer to get information I need to learn and develop new skills.

- Yes
- No

I use the computer to research....

- Local products
- Regional products
- National products
- International products
- I do not use the computer to research products
- Other _____

In general, I feel that information I retrieve from computer research is....

- Not reliable
- Slightly reliable
- Reliable
- Very reliable
- It depends on the website
- I do not seek information from websites
- Other _____

Do you participate in any computer based social networking sites?

- Yes
- No

Do you participate in any on line communities where you chat, share information, blog, etc. with others?

- Yes
- No

Do you have sites that you regularly return to, and depend on for information?

- Yes
- No

Demographics

I am ___ male ___ female

I am....

- ___ between 10-15 years old
- ___ between 15-20 years old
- ___ between 20-30 years old
- ___ between 30-40 years old
- ___ 40-50 years old
- ___ over 50 years old

I consider myself to be....

- A student learning about working with wool
- Moderately informed and capable when working with wool
- Informed and capable when working with wool
- A professional when working with wool
- Interested, but with no experience in working with wool
- Uninterested in working with wool
- Other _____

Appendix B

Questions Worksheet

A short worksheet about the questions that shaped their work with wool was given to those who wished to participate, but because of distance or time constraints, could not attend a focus group.

Questions Worksheet, Fall 2009

Creative Studies Project

There are many ways to work with wool. (When I use the word wool I am referring to any animal fiber.) You may be a shepherd or stockman; a veterinarian; own a processing facility; work with the fiber as a dyer, spinner, feltmaker, weaver, knitter or designer; teach handwork skills and practice your craft.

Consider your work life when you work with wool. What 10 questions first come to mind?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Now reflect on when you first began this work. It might be last month or maybe 45 years ago. What were the 10 questions that were most important to you then?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Lastly, think about the last year. What 10 questions occupied you the most in the past year?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Appendix C

Treasure Map Visualization

This appendix contains the script that was read as part of the *treasure map visualization* exercise.

Treasure Map Visualization

Today we are going to use an analogy to help us envision a homepage for a website that would reflect the needs for the diverse community of wool workers.

Have you ever heard of a website described as a treasure map? Well, let's think about that for a moment...

What does a treasure map look like?

Lines

Arrows

Landmarks

Connect the dots

X marks the spot

A beautiful compass rose in the corner

A scale graph text

Pictures

The treasure or reward

Can you picture your treasure map?

How do you feel looking at your map?

Is something missing? Add it.

Is something jarring or out of place? Remove it.

You have control over your map and what it contains. You know what you are looking for and how to get there.

Hold on to your image.

Now I would like you to imagine you are searching for something.

You are sitting in front of a computer. Maybe you are at home, or at work, or at the library. Maybe you are with a friend. Settle yourself wherever you are...

You are searching for something. Information? Inspiration?
Communication? Imagine what it is. It is important to you. It will be
particular for you. Everyone's search will be different.
Good.

Search the web and find the WoolWorks website. The page you see will be
your treasure map. It is the ideal website and it contains your goal.

How does the page look?

What draws you to the page?

Does it have choices?

What are they

What do you like best about it?

Is there anything that needs to be tweaked a little? Make the adjustment.

Let's get very specific:

What are the colors?

How is the page divided?

Follow your eye as it travels across the page....where do you begin....where
does the road lead you?

Are there words?

Symbols?

How do you find what you are looking for?

Is it there?

Allow yourself to create the symbols and images necessary for your search.

Allow yourself to lead others toward your goal.

Do you have a picture in your mind?

Let us open our eyes, bringing our ideas with us.

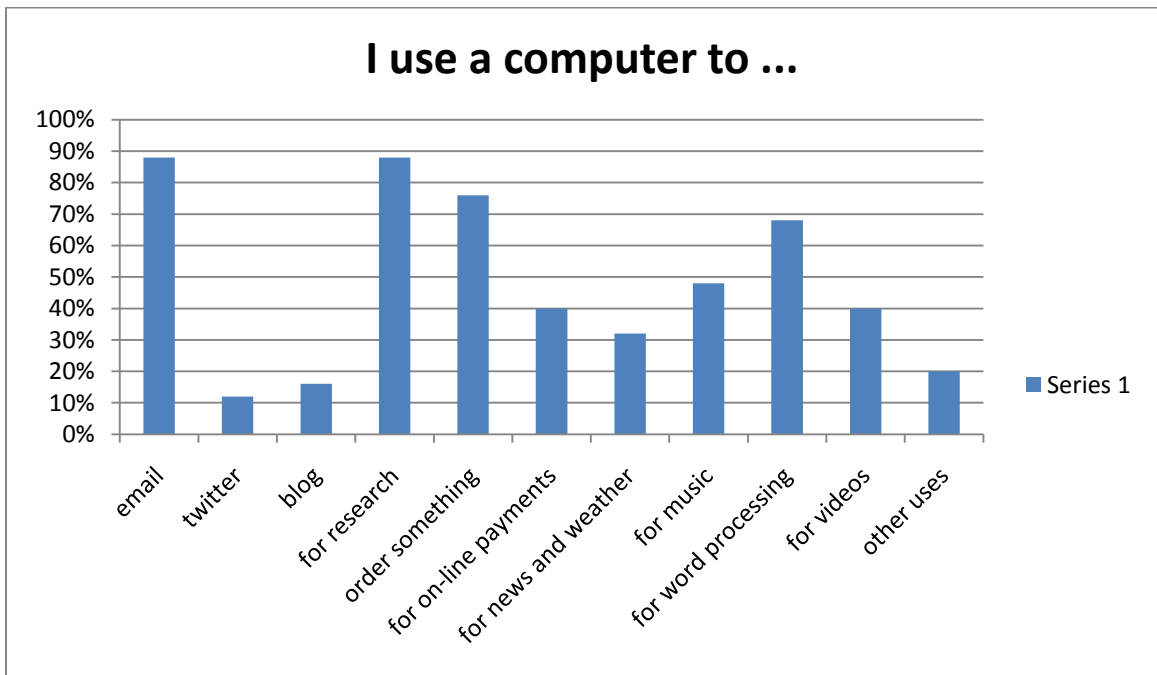
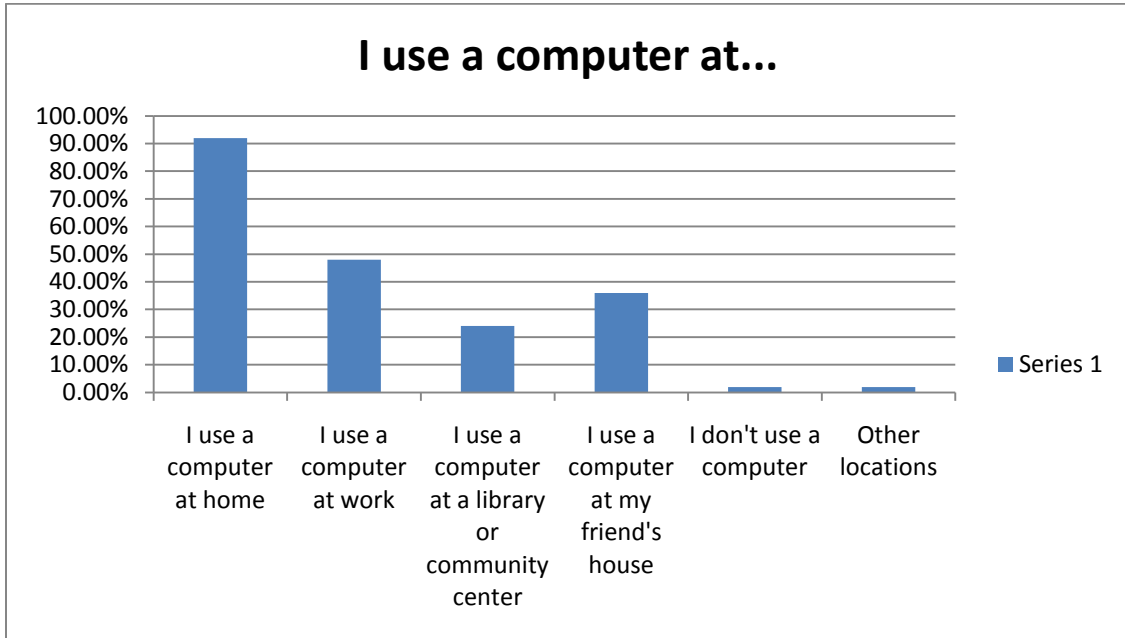
What I would like you to do now, is to draw your web treasure map on your
flip chart paper. Don't worry if you are not artistically accomplished.
Simple drawings are very effective. Just use your thoughts to create a
clear, sharp image that focuses your energy and ideas onto the
WoolWorks web page.

Appendix D

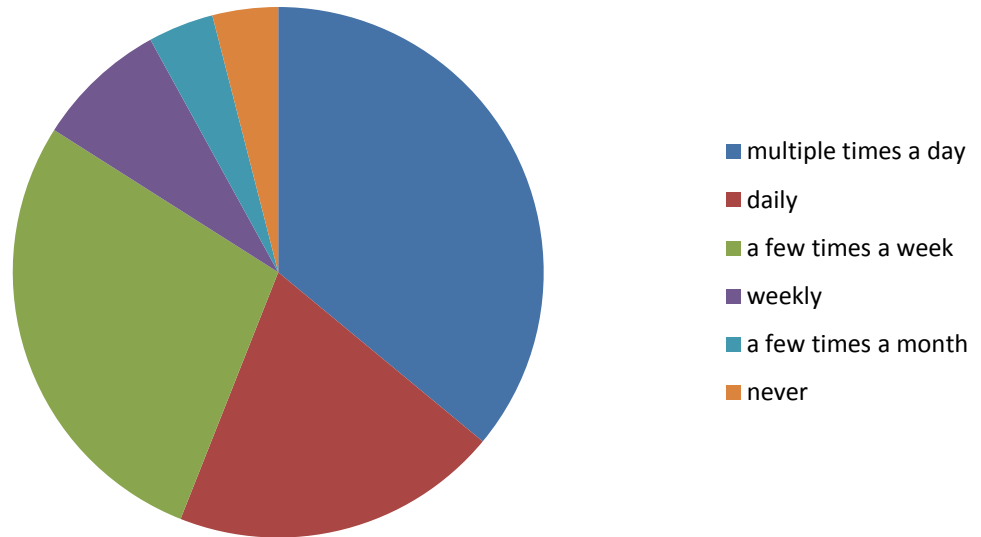
Computer Use Survey Graphs

A short written survey about computer use patterns (see Appendix A) was given to everyone who participated. This was to help in the evaluation of various computer based forums for suitability and accessibility. Graphs were created to help make the information obtained more accessible.

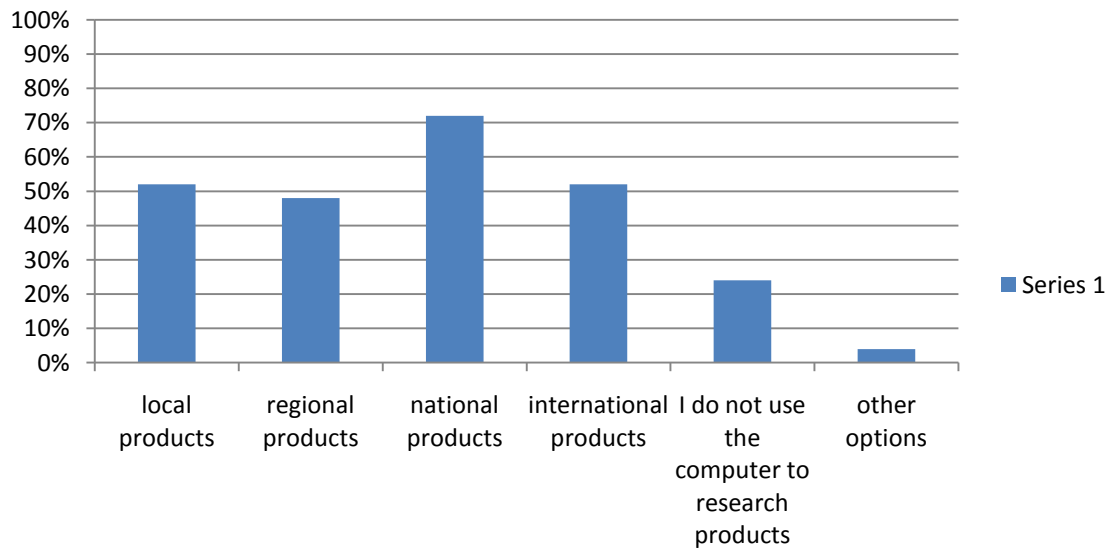
Computer Use Survey Graphs



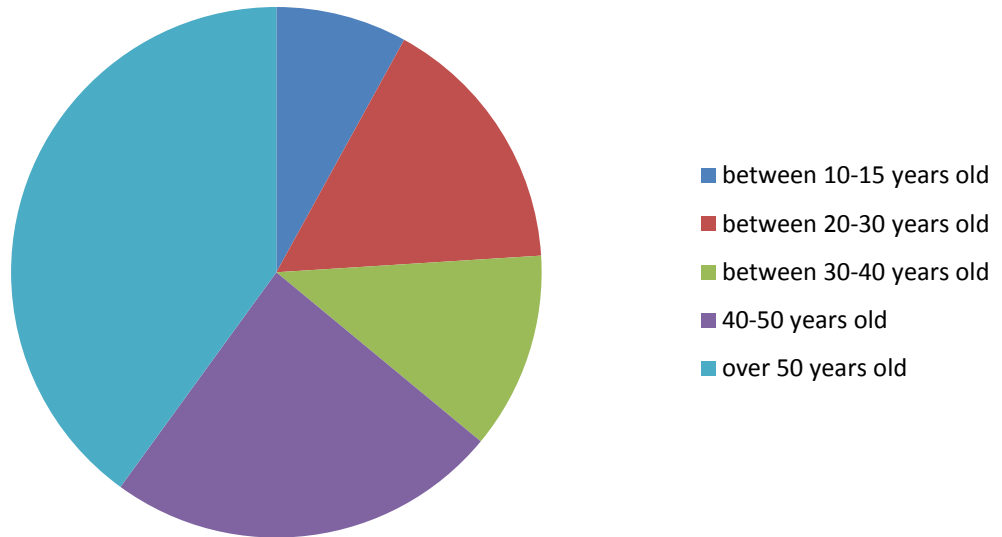
Usually I am likely to use a computer...



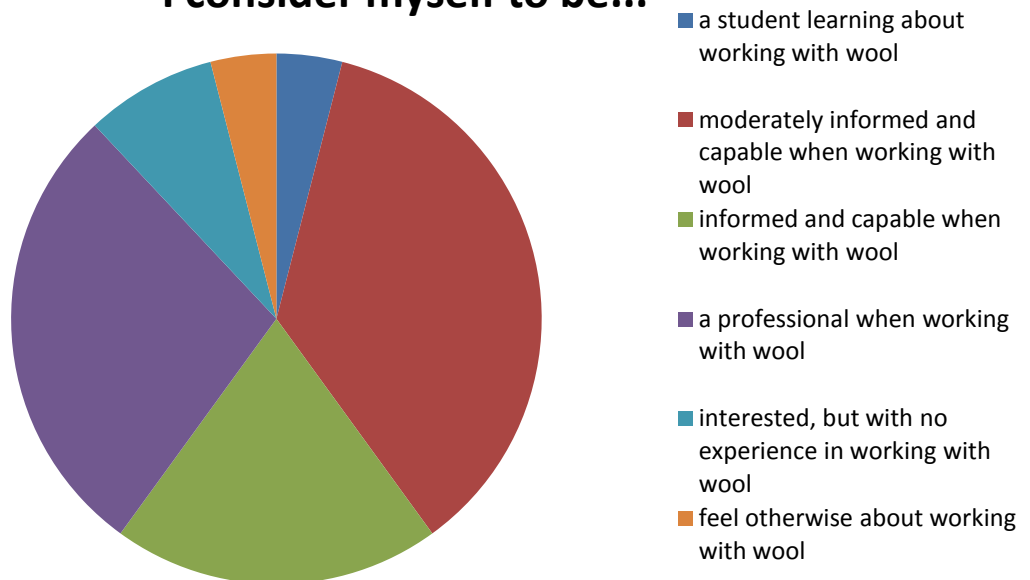
I use a computer to research...



My age is...



I consider myself to be...



Appendix E

Life/Art Gallery Sheets

Participants chose an image from a variety of photographs. A blank sheet of paper was folded in half. On the left hand side of the paper, participants wrote about what about the picture compelled them to choose it. On the right hand side they were asked to relate what they had written on the left side to their work with wool, or to woolworking in general.

Fox

reminding me of Finn playing a fox under the table

foxes as good omens in my life
orange

beauty

snaggle tooth

graceful even in a scratching

wave of texture in tree

space

solitude

Peace

fox has its own agenda

pointy ears

lush green

small + powerful

looks like its taking a rest before action

• playing with Finnoula → making toys, making open space to make a play space, allowing felt to take shape + gesture and character of different animals and moods in general

• color → so important in my life + art, plant dying trying to get the elusive oranges + reds always. orange color of power + passion. Use these special colors for just the right accent for perfect animal.

• Working with wool gives me a sense of peace, solitude, space, rest, home coming.

• lately I've been feeling at "rest" (holding still) in my work, ready to take off.

Example #1

the blues - the range of blues
light and shadow
the sea

design was what caught
me first

sense of desolation and
(place)

hope in community
(the congregation of penguins)

the varied textures -
ice, sea foam, ocean
currents, clouded sky
(dusk: dawn?)

Start contrast of life forms
black/white penguins on
pale blue icebergs

often - usually - alone in a
rural setting, I feel surround-
ed by family in my small
community of four fiber
animals who hang out in
the yard beyond my kitchen.
The inside of the house
has grown darker and more
shadowy compared to the
vibrant ever-changing light
that the sheep and alpaca
move through.

Where others might see just
"barnyard animals" I see
individuals, whose fibers when
sheared once a year moves
me deeply, as I feel I
can see the vivid waves
and changes of each season
as expressed through each
individual.

Example #2

- straight lines
- light + shadow
- multiple areas to focus attention
- very still + quiet
- consistency of shapes →
 - building lines,
 - trees
 - silos
 - barn even has 2 reflective arches

- wool can be many things,
 - bright or dark
 - straight, curved
- wool can replicate both living things - trees, animals and non-living things - house, silo, barn
- the picture may represent the path of wool from farm to city, from sheep to woolworker

Example #3

colors
freedom
Roaming
walking
lots of time
easy
Symmetry
relaxing
fun
laughing
piles of wool
golden light
pot of soap
change
turning in
warm sun crisp air
textures
patterns revealed
seeking colors
always looking - closely
examination
at peace

- dyeing colors
- colors melting together
- physical nature of felting
- time
- fun . relaxing . laughing
group work
- piles of fleece
- pot of dye
- changing from fluff to
dense material
- hot water, physical
- at peace

Example #4

a cozy place to live

Simple living

uncomplicated

living a life based on nature & cosmos

natural ingredients

warm sunshine

I think warm & loving & kind people
live in this house.

Clean air

simple clean place, easy to maintain

no clutter in space or life

isolated but still connected to a
larger farming community

working with wool creates warmth
wool is a natural element

the skill in working with wool
could be transformed into
roof thatching.

there are probably sheep in this
environment and the people would
use the wool for clothes, cloth
& bedding.

the smell of the hay reminds me
of sheep.

working with wool would bring
pleasure to these people.

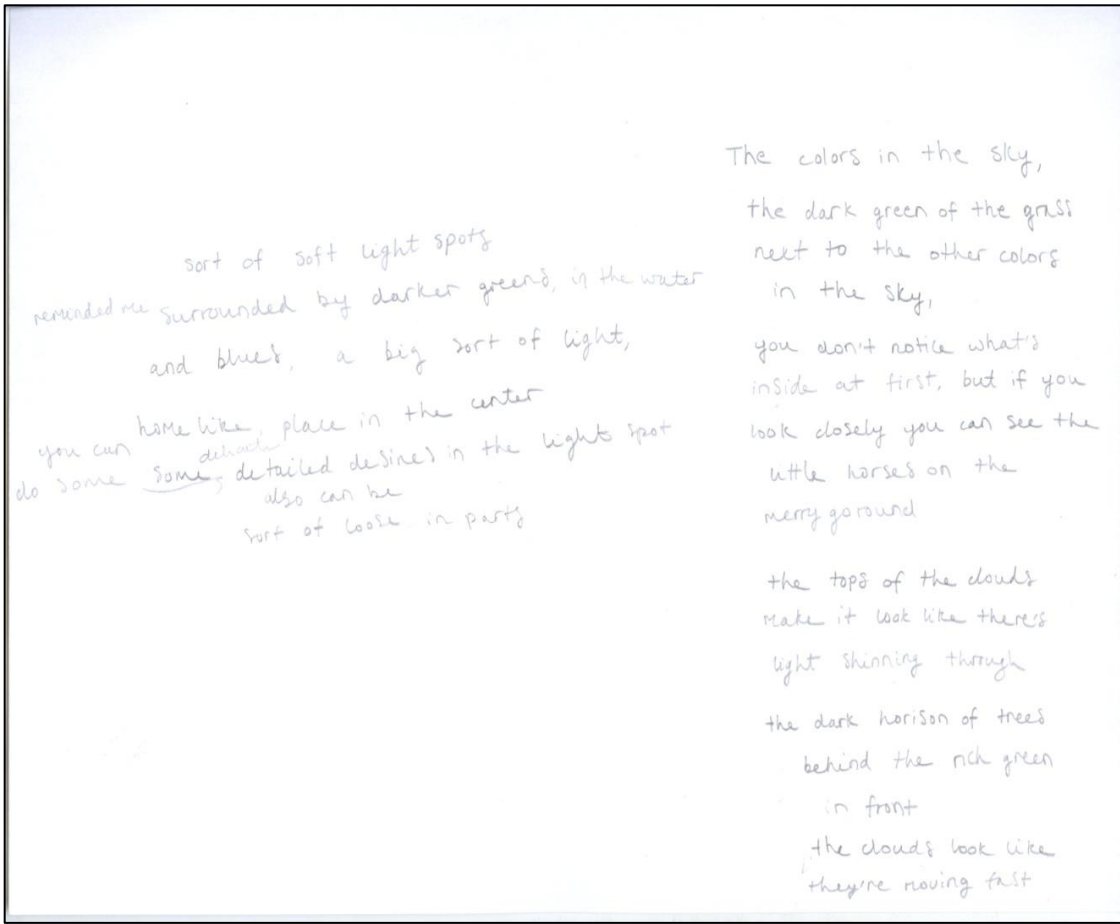
the round curves of house & roof
remind me of ~~wool~~ sheep
this is a handmade life & wool
would be a natural part of it.

Example #5

my work with wool is
extremely uneven, asymmetrical
and ~~preferably~~ undyed
natural greys, browns, etc.
very rough, but
intentionally so.

- colors - greys
- familiar - monoco
- contrast - real sizes
- not contrived
- real
- surreal
- mundane
- nothing gaudy
- rough
- not plastic
- mysterious
- formerly entirely unfamiliar,
recently familiar.

Example #6



sort of soft light spots
reminded me surrounded by darker greens, in the water
and blues, a big sort of light,

you can have like place in the center
do some ^{detached} ~~some~~ detailed details in the light spot
also can be
sort of look in parts

The colors in the sky,
the dark green of the grass
next to the other colors
in the sky,

you don't notice what's
inside at first, but if you
look closely you can see the
little horses on the
merry go round

the tops of the clouds
make it look like there's
light shining through

the dark horizon of trees
behind the rich green
in front

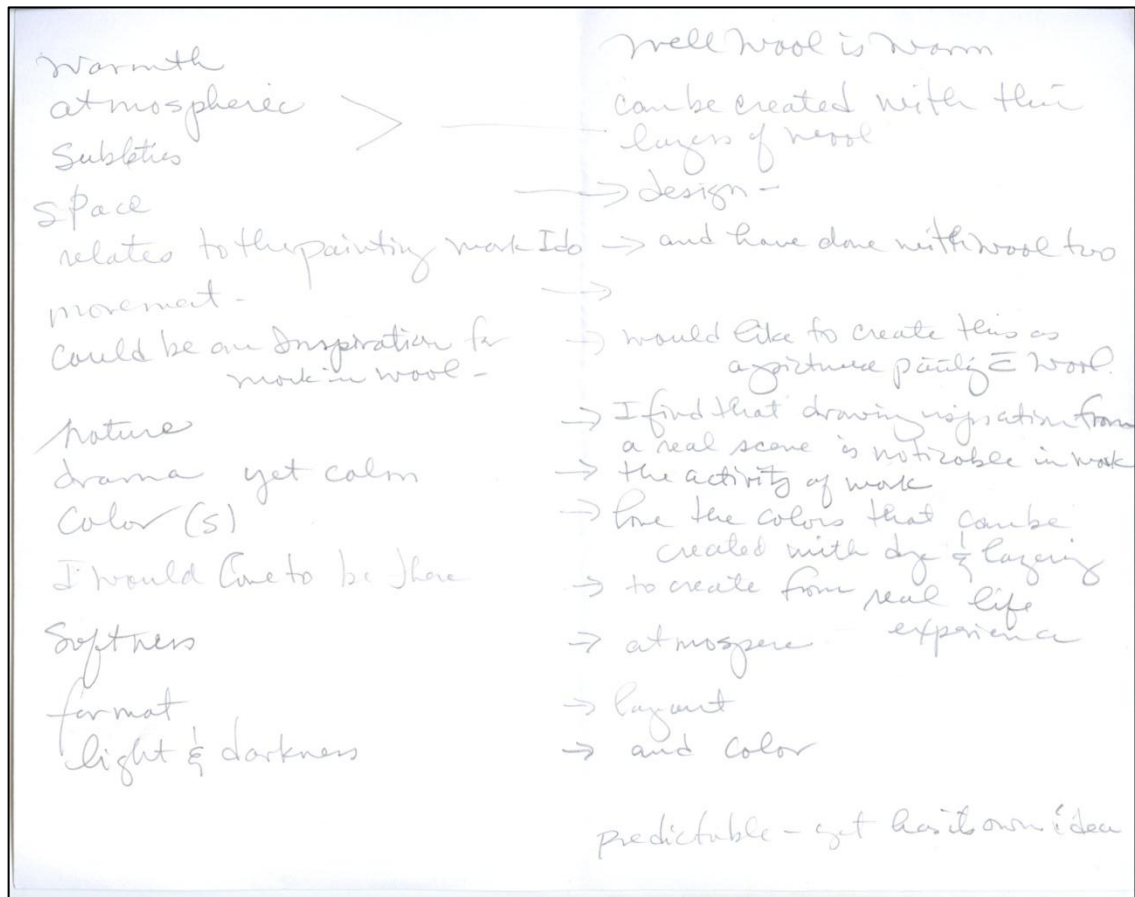
the clouds look like
they're moving fast

Example #7

birds
sweet childlike subject matter
soft, warm, good,
natural purity
trust worthy
forgiving sculpturally
bright pure color

open
breath
free
sweet
bright
safe
good
soft
colorado
home
fresh
pure
beauty
regenerative
forgiving
well
expansive
relief

Example #8



Example #9

How you can have contrast
in the colors that you use,
you can really make the
wool blend and almost flow
together.

All the colors.

you can be expressive like in
a picture with contrast.
the color of all the different
parts.

It looks delicate.

bright colors.

The darkness and lightness
together.

denseness and fluffy.

The contrast between the
red leaves and the water.

The water seems to float over
the black rock.

All the colors of the leaves,
how the water goes from
a greenish and then goes over
the waterfall and turns almost
white.

The color of the water.

It looks delicate on the waterfall
and almost stern with the
bright red leaves.

The darkness around the
water.

~~the darkness around the water.~~

Example #10

Appendix F

Affinity Diagram Session

The focus group sessions produced hundreds of ideas. To divide them into categories I used a tool called an affinity diagram. We loosely organized the post-its into two groups. The first, based on responses from the *Life/Art Gallery Exercise* and the *Treasure Map Visualization* had largely emotional content and related most to how people view their work and the affect on their lives. The second category contained the questions generated during the Idea Generating Exercise, as well as the categories that surfaced on the Treasure Maps and were more concrete and related to the tangible details of the work. Two affinity diagrams were created that consolidated and arranged the information into a useable form.

Affinity Diagram Session



Initial division of data



Identifying emotional responses

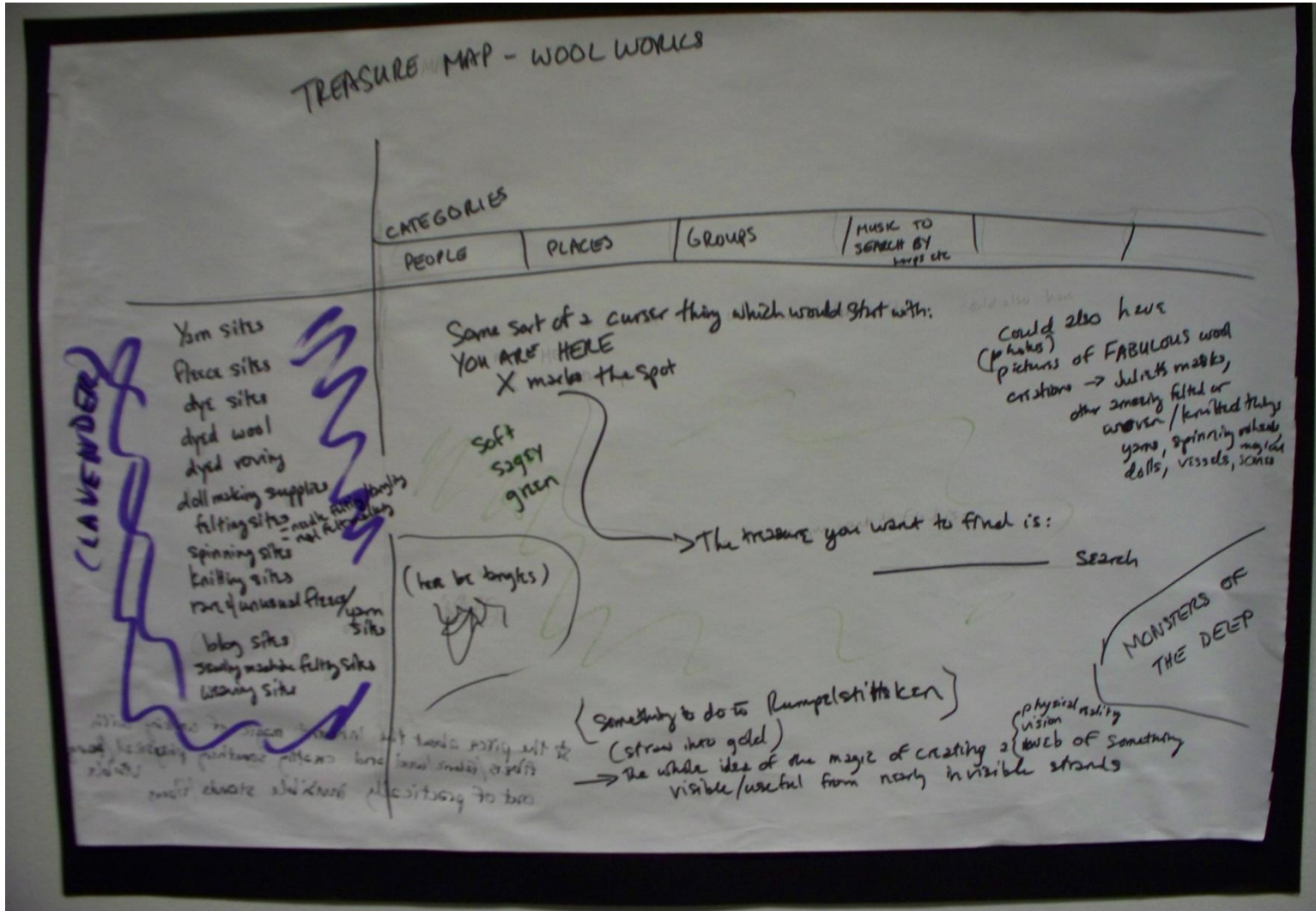


Organizing into clusters

Appendix G

Treasure Map Visualization

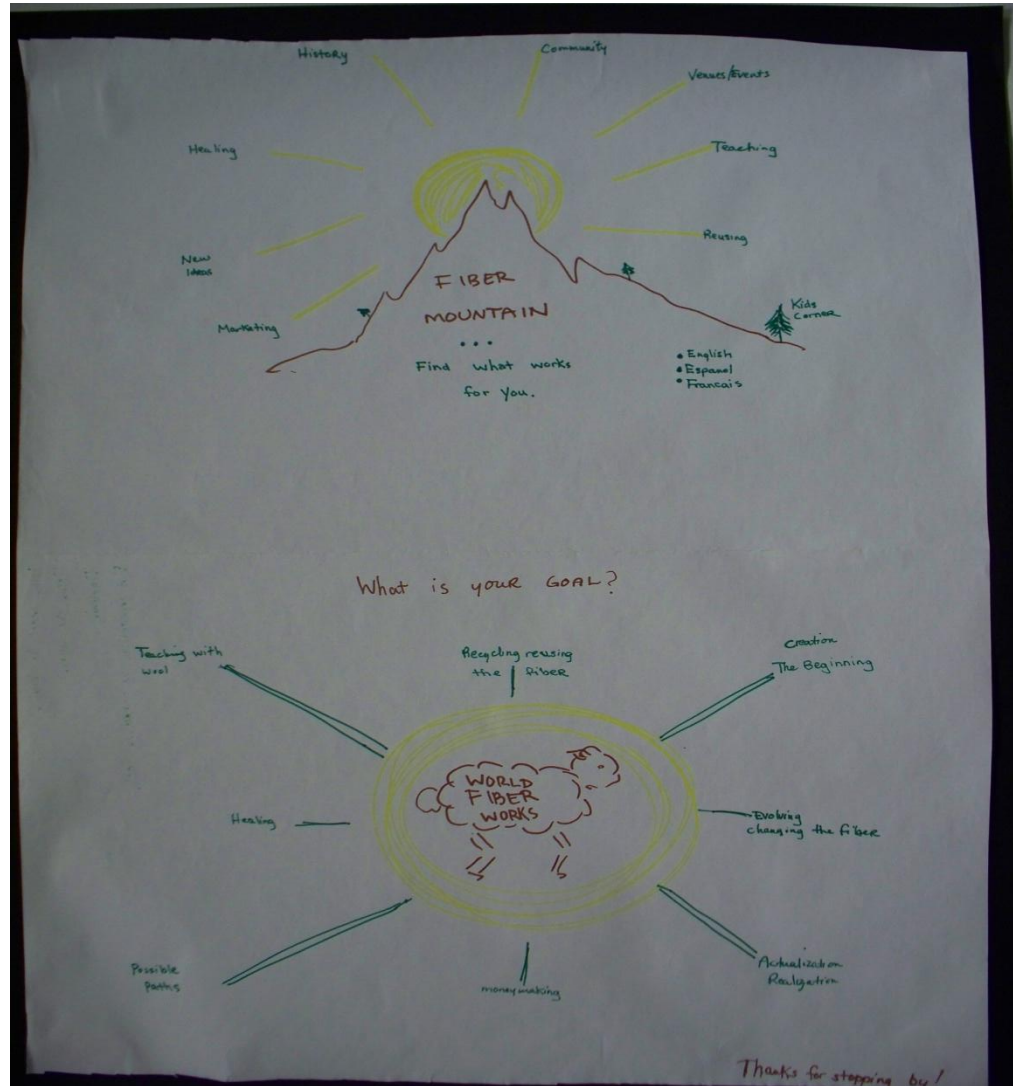
The web page visualization (see Appendix C) uses the analogy of a web page as a treasure map. Participants listened to the reading and then drew their ideas for a web site homepage. Each person wrote on the back of their drawings their opinions on what was most important in their image. I have included these comments below each example.



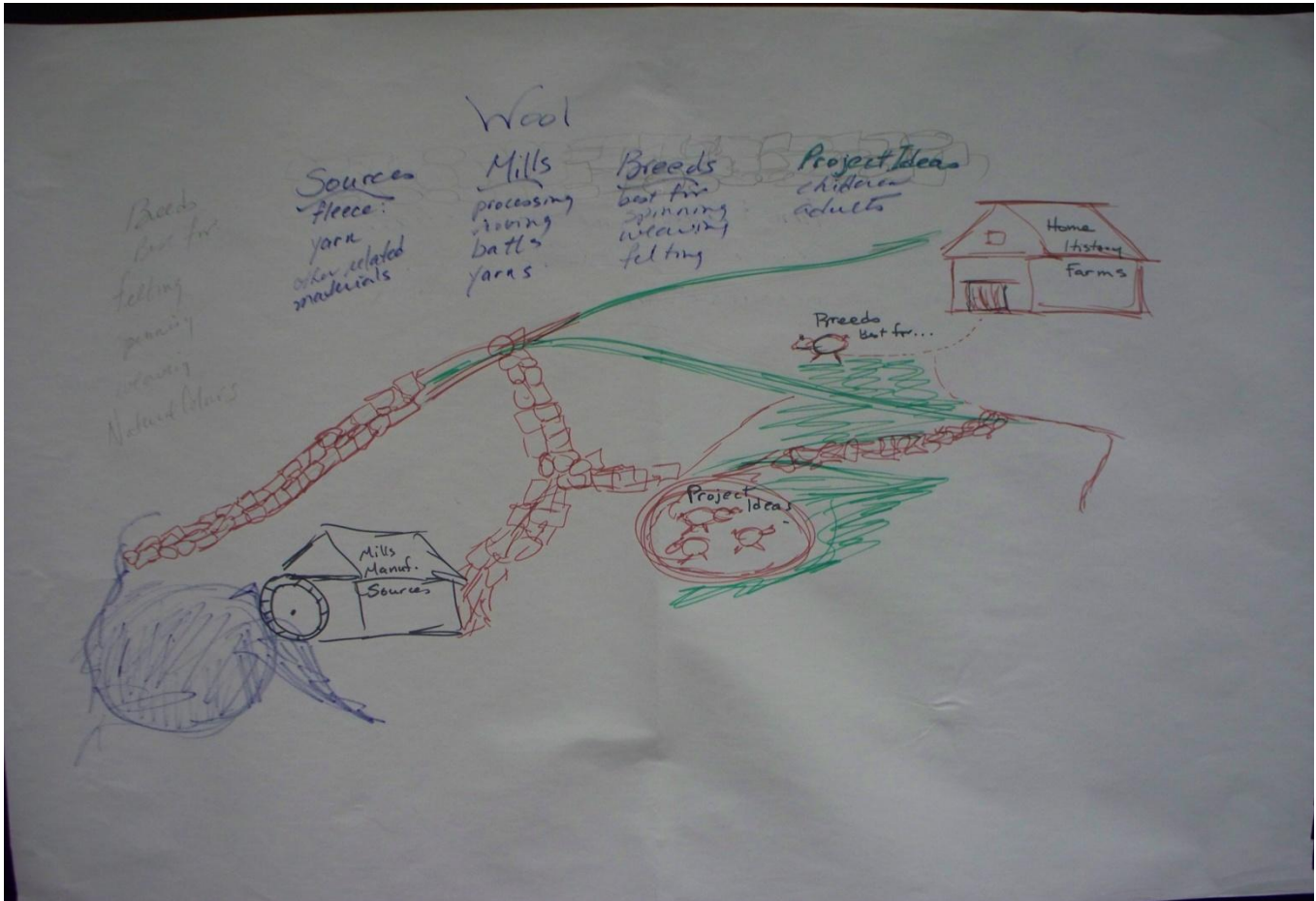
Example #1- “the inherent magic of working with wool and creating something tangible out of practically invisible strands”



Example #2-“easy to find/ lots of colors/ pictures of what you want to find”



Example #3- "using wool as a healing tool/ using the sun"



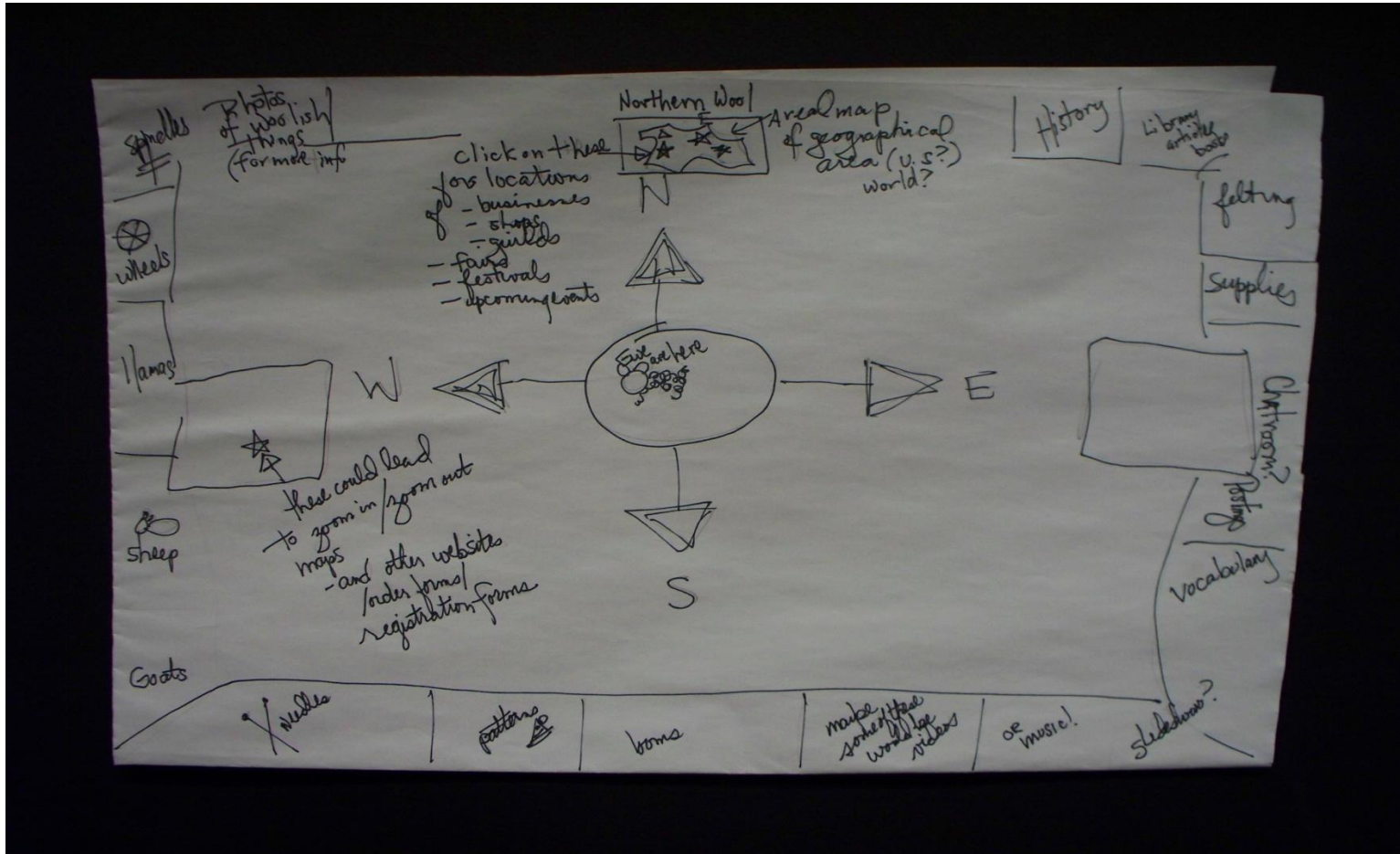
Example #4- "fun and beautiful to negotiate/ easy to see where to go/ resourceful"



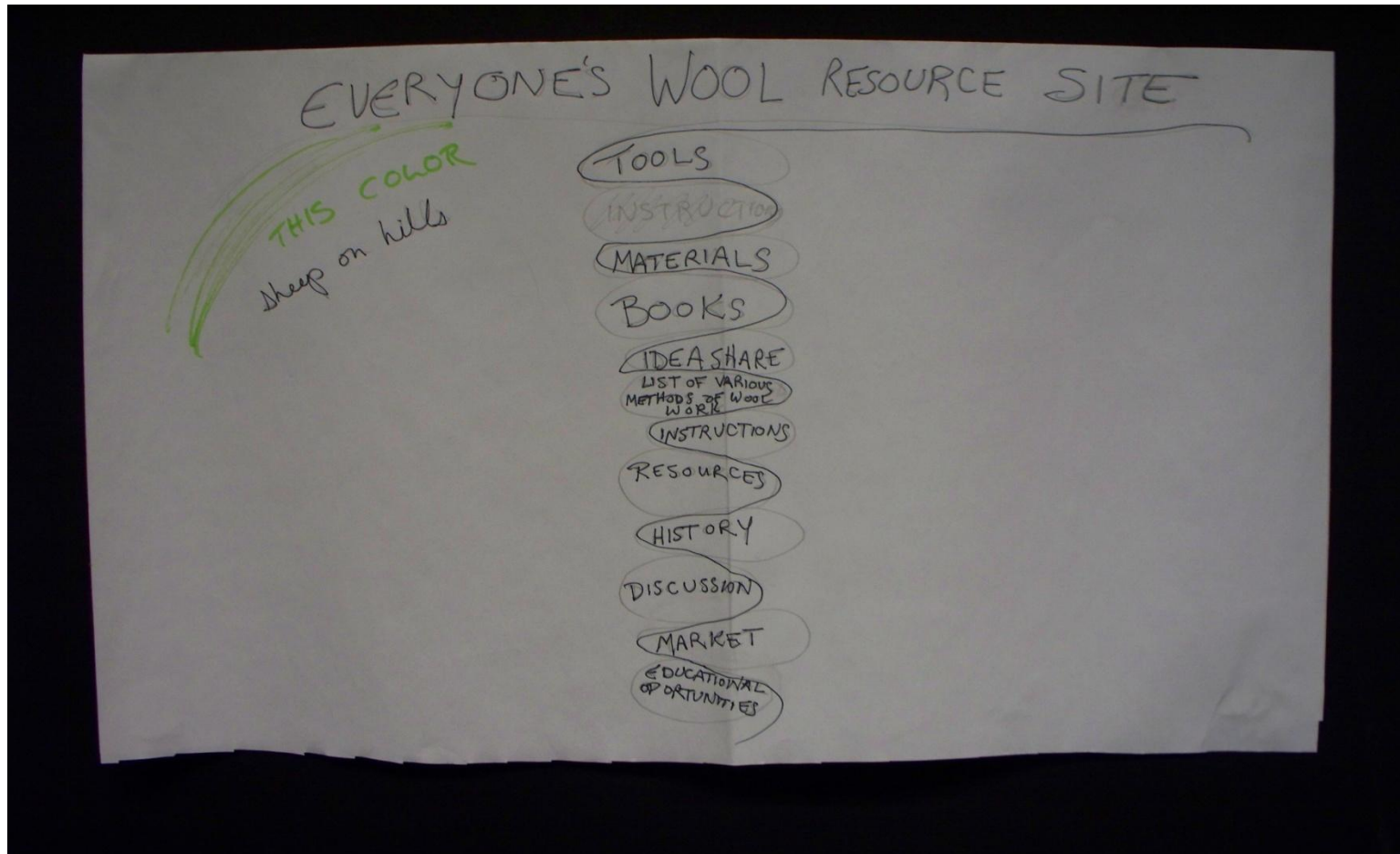
Example #5- "colors/ textures/ symbols"



Example #6- "make it clear/ make it fun"



Example #7- "visual with photos and examples of work/ accuracy with zoom in zoom out maps/ ease- more open but leading to more"



Example #8- "central easy to follow index/ gives one a welcome in a broad community of wool workers sense"

Appendix H

Suggested Reading

To prepare for this project I read a variety of authors. My own experience as a craftsman has resonated with the writings of both Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Abraham Maslow, and I suspected that others would also connect with this understanding of immersion and importance of the work. I wanted to reflect this somehow in the small focus group sessions. Since the population of people I was working with could not be assumed to be familiar with creative problem solving, or consciously aware of creative thinking skills, one area of focus was the creation of opportunities and activities that engage people in the process in a safe and comfortable way, while still providing space for growth and insight. I was particularly interested in analogies and imaginative imagery, and in the organizing of large amounts of data. Additionally, I had an interest in how computers can affect or be used to further the creative process.

Suggested Reading

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