

RMIT Fashion and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation)  
Project Launch MANU2506

**Exploring how participatory darning workshops can foster the development of empathy among participants through the lens of Joan Toronto's Ethics of Care.**

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## Abstract

This project explores how participatory darning workshops can foster the development of empathy between students from contrasting disciplines, guided by Joan Tronto's five-phase Ethics of Care framework. Through collaborative repair practices, participants from Fashion and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation) and STEM fields engaged in structured, hands-on workshops designed to reveal how relational care might cultivate interpersonal understanding. Empathy emerged not as a concept taught, but as a felt experience—evident in shared language, collaborative action, and emotional attentiveness. The workshops demonstrated how mending can become a vehicle for connection, revealing care as both a material and relational practice. The project culminated in the creation of a physical outcome, a handmade 'How to Care' guide, distilling collective insights into a personal provocation. Ultimately, this project argues that repair can do more than extend the life of garments—it can build bridges between people, challenge dominant paradigms of disposability, and make space for slower, more meaningful ways of being together.

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## Project Overview and Introduction

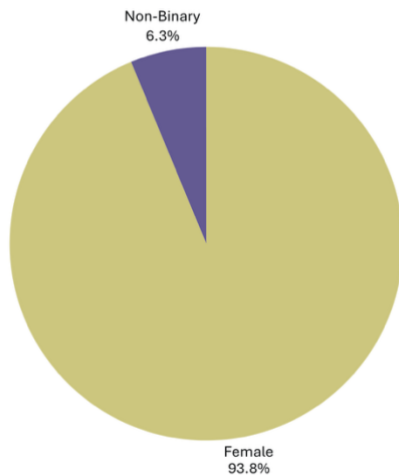
This RMIT Fashion and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation) capstone project explores how participatory darning workshops can foster empathy among participants through the lens of Joan Tronto's Ethics of Care. To do so, I engaged two contrasting demographics within RMIT University, male-identifying Science Technology Engineering and Maths (furthermore referred to as STEM) students and female-identifying Fashion and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation) (furthermore referred to as FTSI) students to take part in a short series of darning workshops. Joan Tronto's Ethics of Care, a five-phase framework, provided guidance for both the design of workshop activities and the way patterns were observed and responses analysed. Data was sourced from an initial survey, workshop observations, audio recordings (taken with consent), reflections shared during and after sessions, and a final post-workshop questionnaire.

This project responds to two interlinked challenges: the environmental urgency created by fast fashion's culture of disposability, and the growing social crisis of disconnection and loneliness. As consumption patterns rise alongside throwaway culture, the fashion industry continues to harm both people and planet (Potdar et al., 2022), leaving garments with short lifespans and making the act of repair almost obsolete (Fletcher and Tham, 2015). I aimed to explore how creative repair practices, like darning, are not only vital for extending garment longevity, but also offer deeper, less-examined 'social, cultural and personal benefits' (Gwilt, 2014).

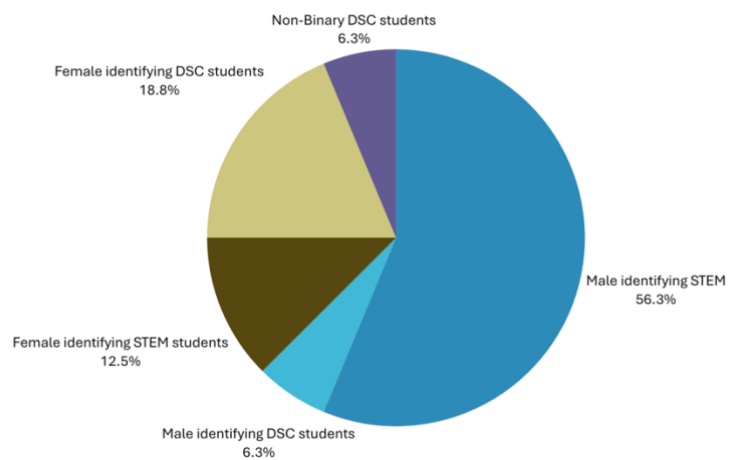
Society is experiencing rising levels of loneliness (Twenge et al., 2021). Slow, creative practices like textile repair offer moments of stillness and reflection — providing a creative outlet while extending the life of something pre-existing, rather than creating new. Recent research suggests they may also improve psychological wellbeing, foster belonging, and cultivate empathy (Pöllänen and Weissmann-Hanski, 2020). While mending has historically been gendered and undervalued (Jaakola, 2024), its resurgence — particularly among younger generations — presents an opportunity to reframe repair as both sustainable and socially transformative (Zhang and Hale, 2022).

This project initially aimed to explore how darning could act as a vessel for community-building between contrasting demographics, resulting in me reaching out to two opposing communities I am a part of; the RMIT Lacrosse club, and the Fashion and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation) Bachelor degree. See Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 for an overview of data collected that supports my assumptions of gender divide in both groups, and enrolment in STEM degrees in the Lacrosse club.

**Fashioning and Textiles (Sustainable Innovation) Gender Divide**



**RMIT Lacrosse Club Field of Study Gender Divide**



Left: Fig.1, Right: Fig.2, Data collected from an initial Expression of Interest survey sent out to both demographics. Based on authors own survey.

However, after selecting my participants, I realised that my deeper interest lay in the development and fostering of empathy, as a foundation of community. Having shifted focus, I initially questioned the necessity of contrasting demographics. But as the project progressed, this contrast proved crucial to some of the most significant findings.

Joan Tronto's Ethics of Care consists of five phases: *Caring About*, *Taking Care Of*, *Care Giving*, *Care Receiving*, and *Caring With*. While empathy is not explicitly named within the framework, active engagement with these phases offers a way to facilitate care, both interpersonally and towards garments, and, in turn, observe how empathy may emerge between people. By structuring the workshops around Tronto's five phases, I was able to explore how slow, collaborative acts of care, like darning, might foster shared relational empathy: a concept that emphasises empathy as something co-created between individuals through interaction (Fagiano, 2019).

While this project primarily focuses on empathy and care within a group setting, it also resulted in a physical outcome: a take-home Care Guide, rooted in Tronto's Ethics of Care, and exhibited at my graduation show. The Guide acts as a distillation of the project's collective experiences into a personal provocation, inviting viewers to become more intentional about care and empathy.

## Workshop Structure

This project consisted of four 1.5–2-hour workshops conducted over the span of a month. Four participants from each demographic were selected to take part, with selection primarily based on availability.

The first two workshops were dedicated to introducing participants to the practice of darning, one held separately for each demographic. It is important to note my role as a

facilitator rather than a teacher throughout this series. While I was able to support individuals at a beginner level, my knowledge would not have been appropriate for guiding more advanced or professional skill development.

This initial separation aimed to give participants space to learn the technique without additional social pressure. It also provided insight into their prior knowledge of repair and any pre-existing connections (or lack thereof) with the other group.

The following two workshops brought both groups together, using darning as a shared activity to facilitate connection. As previously mentioned, Tronto's Ethics of Care informed both the design of the group activities and the framework for analysis.

The same garments were used in both initial workshops, allowing participants to share an indirect connection before meeting. This also helped divide the larger group into smaller ones organically for collaborative tasks.

## *Tronto's Ethics of Care, Phase by Phase*

Here I will explore the different ways in which each phase of Tronto's Ethics of Care was embodied in each workshop activity and further observations I made as a facilitator.

### *Phase 1. Caring About*

*To truly care, one must first notice the need for care, to be aware enough to realise that there is something wrong.*

The two introductory activities in both group workshops were explicitly chosen to evoke Tronto's first phase within the context of darning: a group *Hole Hunt* and an individual *Show and Tell*.

In the *Hole Hunt*, participants were divided into small groups based on their engagement with the same garment during the initial teaching workshops. Each group was asked to discuss, document, and verbally share their responses to the following prompts:

Look at the holes on your garment (darned and still existing).

Think/talk about why that hole might have come about.

Talk about difficulties you faced when darning. What might you do differently next time?

Can you think of any other items of clothing that often require repair?



Fig. 3, Participants identifying areas of need on shared garments,

This activity required participants to actively notice and identify the need for care in the garments they worked on, clearly engaging with Tronto's first phase in a practical, embodied way. (This activity is also discussed in *Phase 2: Caring For*, where it relates to how participants acknowledged difficulties from the first learning-based workshop).

The introductory activity in the second group workshop, *Show and Tell*, invited participants to bring in garments from their own wardrobes that had holes or visible wear. This extended the act of "noticing need" from a shared group setting into a personal one. Notably, one STEM participant brought in a sock he had a sentimental attachment to. Although it did not yet have a hole, it was worn down, and he expressed a desire to pre-mend it, a powerful act of anticipatory care.

Importantly, both activities encouraged not only awareness of material need but also interpersonal attentiveness. By discussing familiar garments together, participants were prompted to see, acknowledge, and share one another's perspectives, core elements of Tronto's first phase. For example, during the *Hole Hunt*, FTSI students began to notice the STEM participants' lack of familiarity with textile language and skills. This realisation was deepened when, in a group exchange, one STEM student, previously struggling, experienced a breakthrough, finally grasping the wave-like motion of darning. The guiding FTSI student remarked,

'Under over totally means nothing if you've never done sewing before'.

This highlighted how different lived experiences shaped participants' ways of understanding and communicating.

This phase was also subtly embodied during introductions in the first group workshop, where participants responded to the question:

Why did you want to take part in this project?

FTSI students noted a desire to support me as a peer researcher, recognising my need for participation to bring the project to life, and additionally *expressing a disconnect between their values around sustainability and their lack of hands-on repair experience*. In contrast, STEM students voiced a desire for new kinds of social interaction, noting a lack of neutral, creative environments to connect with others. These early responses reflected a growing interpersonal awareness, noticing what might be missing, both in themselves and in one another.

By slowing down and paying attention to both clothing and each other, participants began the workshops by practicing the kind of attentiveness that forms the foundation for all subsequent care.

## *Phase 2. Caring For*

*To truly care, one must assume responsibility, ensuring they have the necessary skillset and understanding to care appropriately.*

Within this project, this phase was embodied by participants choosing to learn and engage with a new practice, not only as a personal skill but as a shared responsibility toward one another and the garments being repaired.

The initial learning-based workshops, held separately for each demographic, were designed to allow space for this phase to unfold. Participants were introduced to darning with time and guidance to practise the basic technique. Their decision to participate at all, made clear in survey responses and in-person introductions, reflected an initial willingness to take responsibility for learning something new. Notably, many STEM participants cited the opportunity to step away from screens and engage in hands-on learning, a reason that, at this stage, seemed to hold more personal value than the motivations voiced by FTSI participants, who largely expressed a desire to support me as a peer researcher. This distinction is revisited in *Key Patterns, Insights and Surprises*, as it points to one of the project's more unexpected contrasts. While this learning began as an individual exploration, it quickly shifted toward a more collective sense of care, as participants supported one another and made decisions that impacted the group.

What was especially significant in this phase was the vulnerability and eagerness expressed by those unfamiliar with textile practices. During the first STEM workshop, multiple participants mentioned they had little to no experience with sewing; one participant stated he didn't even know what darning was until searching it up the



morning of the session. Their attention to detail and concentration, particularly in this initial workshop, stood in contrast to the FTSI participants, who tended to rush ahead, relying on prior textile knowledge to support their learning of this new technique.

The shift from individual learning to shared responsibility became especially visible in the first group workshop through the *Teaching as Learning* activity. In small groups, participants rotated between darning and verbally guiding one another through the process. This reciprocal setup meant that, rather than STEM participants withdrawing and FTSI participants dominating, both experience and inexperience became valuable: FTSI students took on more confident yet supportive guiding roles, while STEM participants brought a sense of curiosity that encouraged others to slow down and explain things more clearly.

In one instance during the main *Darn and Rotate* activity of the final workshop, a STEM pair had chosen to darn a complex torn section. Upon having to swap with an FTSI pair, confusion arose, which the STEM participants were able to dispel by clearly explaining their approach in a digestible manner. This moment illustrated how ownership of knowledge shifted throughout the group, and how even newer learners could step into a guiding role when given time and confidence.

While this phase primarily relates to assuming responsibility, its strength came from its collective form, a group of strangers gradually becoming accountable to one another through the quiet act of mending. As discussed in *Phase 1: Caring About*, FTSI participants demonstrated an awareness of the need to adapt their teaching and communication styles depending on who they were working with. This was later reiterated in a *Final Reflection Questionnaire* response from an FTSI participant, who, when asked whether she considered others' perspectives, feelings, or needs during the workshop, said:

"We realised that not everybody understands [basic sewing terminology], so we had to try and come up with new ways to describe things so that everybody could understand."

These micro-adjustments, changing language, showing rather than telling, offering encouragement, revealed care in action.

In response to the *Show and Tell* activity, nearly all participants expressed an intent to use their new skill beyond the workshops, either on their own garments or those of others. This suggests that care was not understood as a one-off action, but something ongoing, to be sustained. In this way, the foundations laid through individual responsibility began to evolve into shared acts of giving through guiding, helping, and contributing. This natural transition introduces the third phase of Tronto's framework: *Care Giving*.

### *Phase 3. Care Giving*

*Conducting the act of care, now you know what is needed and how to give it, you can perform the act of caring.*

Having collectively displayed continued eagerness to learn and become competent at darning, in conjunction with actively responding to knowledge and skill gaps recognised within the group, active care giving became visible not only in the physical form of conducting repair, but also in the ongoing sharing of both knowledge and physical support. The conversational, communal aspect of these workshops meant that, within the context of interpersonal care for one another, through acts of anecdotal advice and hands-on guidance, a kind of cycle was created between this phase and the next, *Phase 4: Care Receiving*, something further explored in *Reflections on Tronto's Framework*. Regarding physical care within the context of darning, the main activities of both group workshops focused on this phase, requiring participants to actively darn holes they had found in each of the garments they had been working on.

Signs of care arose in the way participants worked together. As individuals gained experience during the group activities, they became more confident in their ability to engage with the technique. While FTSI participants, due to prior knowledge, often guided STEM participants early on, this guidance gradually led to an overall increase in group confidence. What became clear to me was that care was not dependent on skill, but on confidence. Even when individuals could not darn to a “perfect” standard, their willingness to support one another, especially when bonding over shared challenges or confusion, allowed care to emerge regardless of technical ability.

The lines between physical care for garments and interpersonal care between participants became increasingly blurred. In order to darn well, individuals had to rely on one another, not just for technique, but for encouragement, suggestions, and reassurance. While I made myself available, participants rarely turned to me for support. Instead, they increasingly looked to each other. This mutual reliance marked an important shift: when participants began confidently explaining the technique, they were not only contributing to garment care but also performing interpersonal acts of care through shared knowledge.

Care giving also became visible in less obvious moments, such as holding fabric in place or providing physical assistance when the tools or space were limited. These gestures allowed individuals to contribute to the process even when not actively darning. In the Final Reflection Questionnaire, a STEM participant shared a moment when he held a garment stretched out for someone else to work on because it couldn't be fixed to an object:

“This made me feel a lot more useful to the process even if I wasn’t actively darning.”

These kinds of physical contributions, though simple, helped participants feel needed and valued, expanding the definition of what it meant to “give care” in the workshop setting.

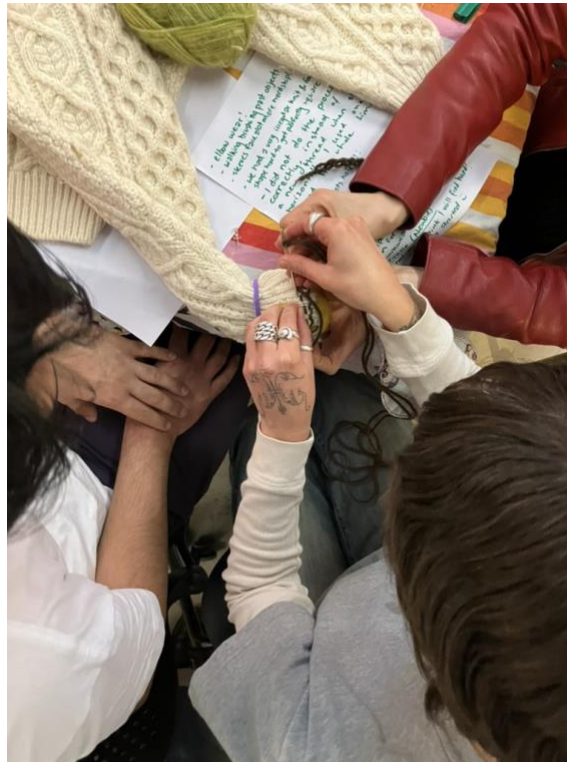


Fig. 4, A participant physically supporting another by holding a lemon in place.

Care giving was also evident in the way participants treated one another’s work, and, on occasion, mine. In response to the Final Reflection Questionnaire, several participants remarked that continuing someone else’s repair during the final Darn and Rotate activity made them more mindful and intentional. They didn’t want to diminish the labour of another, and instead felt motivated to match the level of care already embedded in the stitch work. One participant described how this sense of shared responsibility provided “a boost of confidence for those who were inheriting the new garment, so we would put in as much effort as we could,” revealing how relational care and craft-based attention became intertwined.

This dynamic became even more pronounced when one pair, a STEM and an FTSI participant, voluntarily chose to mend my own sentimental jumper after completing their assigned task. It is something I have been meaning to darn for years, but due to its colourful nature, I had consistently struggled to decide on a yarn colour. I decided to include it as an option to see how participants may respond differently when knowing the owner of the item they were working on. Despite expressing that my inclination towards a visible darn

and how this had impeded my ability to act upon this repair, they carefully selected two yarns that, when combined, blended seamlessly with the original knit. Even after all other participants had finished and the group had begun a final reflection, they continued quietly, finishing the piece to a standard they deemed appropriate. The colour match was so successful that the only reliable way to locate their repair is through touch. Their quiet commitment to completing the piece, even after the activity had technically ended, demonstrated how care giving can be both deeply personal and unspoken. Though I reflect further on this moment in Care Receiving, it is important to note here that the act of repair was not only received by me, but intentionally offered by them, an expression of care embedded in the process itself.

These moments, both practical and relational, highlight how giving care often involves more than just the action itself. It also invites a response. In the next phase, I explore how these gestures were received, felt, and reflected upon by participants, including myself.

## Phase 4. Care Receiving

*Witnessing the response of your care, when something receives care, it glows. Bask in this.*

While the previous phase focused on the act of giving care, this section explores how those gestures were recognised and internalised by participants. In this context, care was not always received through transformation of an item, but rather through the emotional, social, and relational dynamics between participants. As activities were not designed around personal belongings, receiving care often appeared in more interpersonal ways, through attentiveness and affirmation.

Moments of received care were most valuably noted in participant reflections, particularly among those who initially struggled with the technique. One STEM participant explained:

“Sometimes I do worry that I am making others frustrated with how long I take to learn things. I definitely started with the most struggles out of the group. It is always reassuring to see people be so supportive, instead of judging me for not starting at the same level as everyone else.”

Another shared:

“I definitely felt some anger towards some pieces at times as they were difficult to mend, but that was usually quickly subsided by someone I was working with, as they could calm me down by helping me.”

In these reflections, participants did not receive care through technical assistance alone, but patience and reassurance. These subtle, interpersonal dynamics made space for participants to feel safe and supported.

Care was also received through the act of continuing someone else's work. During the final *Darn and Rotate* activity, garments were passed between groups for completion. One participant remarked:

"It gave a boost of confidence for those who were inheriting the new garment, so we would put in as much effort as we could."

This intention to uphold the standard of a peer's stitch work became a quiet gesture of mutual respect, a way of receiving care by honouring what came before.

Similarly, small acts of help throughout the workshops also conveyed care. One FTSI participant reflected:

"I received empathy and care from others as they helped me thread the needles. I really struggle to do that. It was lovely to know that someone could do it for me or help me instead of being by myself and just struggling or giving up on that task."

Another described a moment from the final workshop:

"It felt like everybody was really committed to helping each other and ensuring everybody was on the same page."

Here, care was experienced as a collective commitment to shared understanding. The space created by the workshop structure allowed participants to slow down and notice the needs of others, a foundational element of this phase.

As previously explained in *Phase 3. Care Giving*, a STEM and FTSI pair worked on a jumper of my own that I had chosen to optionally include in the session. Recognising its sentimental value, they selected two yarns that, when combined, perfectly matched the garment's original colours. The care put into the entire darning process, evoked through an understanding of the sentiment attached to this garment was felt so strongly. The technique and colour match were so successful, the only reliable way to locate their repair is through touch. My engagement with Celia Pym's exhibition, '*Socks: The Art of Care and Repair*', heavily inspired this project. The 2024 quote from the artist, displayed in Fig. 5, acted as a manifesto throughout my research.

*'Mending is a constant action that changes the thing in front of you, it does not erase damage but makes the story more interesting. A spot of bright colour or scar-like line that indicates your small act of care.'*

Celia Pym

Fig. 5, Screenshot of Celia Pym quote from Celia Pym's Instagram story, 2024.

However, in contrast to this, the attention to detail in ensuring the invisibility of this mend by this STEM and FTSI pair only emphasised the care enacted. A secret display of care that is now experienced each time this jumper is worn.

Here we find that care was not only received through instruction or visible actions but also in more subtle yet collective acts of understanding, kindness and openness. In the next phase, these interpersonal acknowledgements begin to evolve into a form of mutual investment that bound participants together: *Caring With*.

### *Phase 5. Caring With*

*Reflecting on the care progress, recognising that this act of care is part of something bigger than just you.*

In Tronto's fifth phase, care became a collective ethic, shared through mutual commitment, reflection, and solidarity. This phase moves beyond isolated actions or exchanges and into a space where individuals understand care as a social practice, something co-created, and actively sustained.

Within this project, *Caring With* was embodied not through a single moment but across a series of interactions, decisions, and reflections. In the final workshop especially, participants expressed a noticeable shift from individual task orientation to a sense of group effort and shared responsibility. One participant remarked in their Final Reflection Questionnaire:

“It was really nice to spend time talking with people that I did not know, and all put effort and care into something collectively. I made new friends and gained insight into the lives of people who I would not usually get the chance to connect with in my day-to-day life. Also, the casual banter and playful rivalry by the third session was good proof of how comfortable we were all getting with each other.”

These comments suggest a deeper social investment, not just in the tasks at hand, but in one another. Across sessions, participants continually worked to support each other’s progress and participation. This was particularly evident in the final *Darn and Rotate* activity, where many expressed a desire to match the quality of previous stitch work. As one participant explained:

“It gave a boost of confidence for those who were inheriting the new garment, so we would put in as much effort as we could.”

This sense of collective ownership, that the outcome belonged to all, reflects the shift from “I” to “we” that defines Tronto’s fifth phase.

Further evidence of this shared investment came through both verbal and non-verbal group behaviours. By the final workshop, participants were laughing and joking across groups, passing tools without instruction, and engaging in decision-making as a unit. One participant described how, when initially placed into groups of four, they chose without prompting to work in pairs, allowing two people to darn different sections of the same garment at the same time. This quiet act of collaboration, done without my direction, reflected the trust and mutual awareness that had developed over the course of the workshops.

Humour, too, became an important tool for cohesion. As is further explored and acknowledged in *What Empathy Looked Like*, humour signalled ease and comfort, transforming the space into one that welcomed vulnerability and supported connection. As one participant noted:

“It’s a natural progression from the common niceties of meeting new people to developing genuine connections.”

Another wrote:

“I want to see the work that everyone has done at the grad show. I am invested in seeing them succeed, just as I felt they were invested in seeing my darning technique improve.”

This mutual encouragement, extending beyond the workshop itself, suggests that participants came to care not only about the activity, but about each other’s creative growth.

To care with is to recognise one’s part in a wider process, and to feel accountable to others through that recognition. These workshops provided a container for this

experience, and while short in duration, they revealed that even brief, intentional acts of collaborative making can give rise to lasting interpersonal connection.

This culmination of Tronto's phases naturally sets the stage for the following section, *What Empathy Looked Like*, where I explore how these collaborative acts of care translated into subtle but powerful moments of relational empathy.

## *What Empathy Looked Like*

This project set out to explore how participatory darning workshops could foster the development of empathy between participants from contrasting disciplines. While empathy was not explicitly discussed during the workshops, it revealed itself in a range of interpersonal moments, in the ways participants supported one another, shared tools, adapted their language, and celebrated each other's progress. Through the act of collaboratively caring for garments, empathy emerged not through grand gestures but through subtle, relational behaviours. These moments reflect what philosopher Fagiano (2019) calls relational empathy, a co-created, interactional process through which empathy arises between people as they engage meaningfully with one another over time.

The nature of the workshops, slow, hands-on, and deliberately social, enabled participants to engage more openly with one another. This setting fostered an environment in which individuals could learn by doing and, by doing so together, develop trust and consideration in both verbal and non-verbal ways.

## *Where Empathy Was Seen*

### *Pre-existing Displays*

Signs of empathy among FTSl students emerged as early as the first group workshop, during introductions. As explained previously, FTSl participants expressed a desire to support me in this project. As peers in the same degree, they were aware of the significance of this capstone and recognised the need for volunteers in order for it to succeed. By understanding my perspective and willingly giving up their own time, they demonstrated pre-existing, empathetically informed decision-making.

Furthermore, even before the group collectively recognised the disparity in textile knowledge and skill, FTsl students intuitively assumed the role of guides and educators. They responded to the hesitancy of their fellow participants with quiet support and care.

### *Encouragement and Guidance*

A consistent marker of empathetic behaviour was the willingness across both demographics to support and encourage one another, especially during moments of uncertainty. This support manifested in verbal encouragement, alternative



explanations, and even physical guidance throughout the darning process. One STEM participant acknowledged this at the end of the first workshop, stating:

“Sometimes when you’re trying to learn something new, the person instructing you tries to teach you their way or expects you to know more than you do, but that didn’t happen here. Everyone has been so understanding.”

This was further echoed by FTSI participants who had supported him, exclaiming:

“It’s like you’ve done five workshops between this week and last week!”

## Shared Success

By the end of each session, it became increasingly common for participants to express pride not only in their own improvement but also in that of their peers. Shared success became a key part of the collective experience, a participant’s breakthrough was felt and acknowledged by others, regardless of demographic background.

This extended beyond individual feedback. In the final reflection questionnaire, one FTSI participant noted that although she didn’t consciously consider others’ feelings on a personal level, she experienced a sense of group connection:

“As a little team, we shared a sense of pride when we would improve our stitching and results altogether.”

This subtle, embodied empathy, feeling *with*, rather than *for*, reflects Tronto’s later phase of *Caring With*, showing how care and connection can emerge through repeated, shared effort.

## Humour Resulting in Ease

As familiarity grew, so too did ease. By the final session, light teasing and casual banter were present throughout the space. Having built rapport with FTSI participants in his group, one STEM student shared a childhood story about his dislike of the colour green, a playful anecdote that sparked a satirical “creative difference” joke among the wider group.

In the final workshop, an FTSI participant reflected on how this type of joking had contributed to the group dynamic:

“It’s a natural progression from the common niceties of meeting new people to developing genuine connections.”

Rather than distracting from the task, these humorous exchanges added comfort and allowed participants to settle into the group space. They marked a shift from unfamiliarity to relational ease.

## Shared Responsibility and Focus

During the final workshop's main *Darn and Rotate* activity, participants worked on garments that others had already started. Several noted that this made them care more about the outcome, as they were contributing to someone else's labour. One participant said:

"When someone set a high standard, it encouraged me to continue to that standard and really put in as much effort as I can."

By working toward a shared outcome, empathy was embedded in the task itself. Rather than focusing on social performance, participants focused on showing up supportively. As one FTSl participant put it:

"Having something to do in front of you is a little less intimidating than facing someone and being really direct."

In this way, the physical act of darning became a social buffer, allowing empathy to emerge gently and organically across the group.

## Differences Between Demographics

Although both groups ultimately supported one another with kindness, their starting points and motivations differed, making the empathy-building process especially meaningful.

FTSl participants largely joined out of a desire to support the project and had some baseline interest in mending or sustainability. STEM participants, by contrast, were often motivated by a curiosity about hands-on skills or a desire to take a break from screen-based work. These contrasting entry points made their eventual collaboration all the more significant.

For two groups of strangers, with differing levels of textile knowledge, contrasting academic cultures, and varied social experiences, to develop mutual respect, patience, and camaraderie suggests that empathy was, indeed, cultivated.

Across each of these workshop moments, from shared pride and encouragement to humour, vulnerability, and gentle adaptation, empathy was not taught but in fact practiced. It surfaced organically through relational acts of care, shaped by attention, patience, and collective effort. These workshops became a space where contrasting backgrounds did not divide, but instead invited deeper understanding and trust, laying the foundation for more caring, connected ways of being with one another.

## Reflections On Tronto's Framework

Darning acted as an ideal, literal embodiment of each of Tronto's five phases. To accurately care for one's garment using darning, one must first be aware enough to notice a hole. Then, to care appropriately, they must learn how to darn with a level of competency. Upon reaching this point, they must actively repair the hole. In response, they can feel the full embrace of their newly mended garment. Having completed this process, the individual is then able to acknowledge their act of rebellion against an entire industry. To repair rather than replace is a powerful choice, particularly for young adults, who are constantly exposed to fast fashion and overconsumption through social media (Koning et al., 2024).

By collectively engaging in these embodied phases of care through shared experience, conversation, and collaboration on structured tasks, a myriad of opportunities for relational empathy to emerge were created between two contrasting groups who, as repeatedly acknowledged, would likely never have interacted otherwise. However, due to the multidimensionality of these engagements, the clarity and visibility of each phase varied during analysis.

*Phase 1. Caring About* and *Phase 3: Care Giving* translated most clearly into workshop activities, where literal examples of each phase were realised. *Phase 2: Caring For* flourished between these two anchors, providing a strong example of how engaging with darning can result in relational empathy, as explored in *What Empathy Looked Like*, particularly under *Encouragement and Guidance*.

*Phase 4. Care Receiving* proved more difficult to capture in a literal sense, as participants did not work on their own garments. However, it consistently revealed itself through the collaborative and supportive dynamics embedded in *Care Giving*.

Together, Phases 2–4 presented themselves in an almost cyclical manner: to develop one's skills, one must seek out knowledge; in response, knowledge must be shared, and therefore received. In these interactions, the nuances of care and empathy became visible. Tronto's framework offers an objective lens for interpreting an inherently subjective act. While empathy cannot be easily measured, the structure of the framework provided a necessary anchor for both the design and interpretation of this project.

Interestingly, despite initial doubts due to its more abstract definition, *Phase 5. Caring With* was clearly expressed through the reflective moments at the end of each workshop and in the final questionnaire, which invited participants to consider their experience alongside others involved.

These reflections highlight how Tronto's framework, though linear in theory, manifested as a flexible and overlapping system in practice. It helped surface and support the many subtle

ways care and empathy can emerge between individuals. The following section unpacks the patterns, surprises, and key insights that arose from these collective experiences.

## *Key Patterns, Insights and Surprises*

While Tronto's framework provided a valuable structure for both the design and analysis of the workshops, many of the project's most meaningful moments emerged beyond these defined phases. This section captures some of the unexpected reflections, behaviours, and relational dynamics that surfaced throughout the process, patterns that revealed deeper layers of care, connection, and surprise.

### *Attachments to Garments*

The garments used in these workshops were kindly donated by Textile Recyclers Australia, meaning they had no specific owner. As previously discussed in *Phase 4. Care Receiving*, this decision meant that the act of receiving care was less about one's relationship with their own belongings, and more about relational connection through shared acts of attention. However, despite their neutrality, these garments gradually accumulated meaning. Participants began to form emotional attachments through the time, focus, and labour they invested.

This was most poignantly expressed in the final workshop reflection, when an FTSl participant, having styled one of the mended garments, was asked how it felt to wear something that belonged to no one. Before she could answer, another participant interjected: "It's all of ours now." This moment crystallised a key transformation: care had conferred ownership. Through collective mending, the garments became sites of shared investment and belonging.

### *Pre-existing Connections Facilitating New Connections*

It is important to acknowledge the influence of pre-existing relationships within the workshop dynamic. FTSl participants, many of whom knew each other, and me, through a small cohort, entered the space with a degree of familiarity. Initially, I considered that this closeness might risk alienating the STEM participants. However, what unfolded was the opposite. These stronger social ties acted as a kind of social scaffolding, allowing the FTsl participants to speak and move freely within the group, modelling ease that gradually diffused across the room.

In both group workshops, FTsl participants would often engage in wide-reaching conversation, leaving STEM participants to listen and observe. But soon, these conversations rippled out, sparking dialogue in smaller breakout groups, which would later resurface as collective discussion. This organic pattern of engagement, from intimate to group-wide, gave STEM participants time to build comfort and eventually participate more actively. Rather than excluding others, these pre-existing relationships helped lay the groundwork for new ones to form.

## Darning as a Social Buffer

One of the most unexpected, and powerful, insights to emerge from this project was the way darning functioned as a social and emotional buffer. As a practice that demands patience, attention, and care, darning helped ease the pressure of direct eye contact, performative conversation, or high-energy group dynamics. It gave participants something to do with their hands, something slow, focused, and purposeful, that allowed connection to build gently.

As one STEM participant shared in the Final Reflection Questionnaire:

“I think it helps to think about questions a bit more and avoid awkward silence, which could be especially helpful for more introverted people.”

This idea of darning as a social facilitator was echoed by others:

“Yes, it helped me form new friendships, as through darning we had common ground to begin conversation and then potentially expand these talks further.”

“I feel like this made me more comfortable to approach them both with questions related to darning when needed, as I had built some sort of rapport with them.”

These reflections point to the calming, grounding effect that a slow craft like darning can have in contrast to traditional group settings, such as university classes or casual social events. In this way, the activity itself helped create the conditions for openness, trust, and relational ease.

## STEM Participants' Unexpected Engagement

One of the most striking surprises of this project was the level of introspection, openness, and emotional insight expressed by STEM participants. While the original assumption behind selecting these contrasting groups was to create a space of difference, with FTSI students assumed to be more naturally inclined toward darning and repair, what emerged challenged these expectations.

In initial expression of interest surveys, engagement levels were nearly identical across both groups. Only 16 students from the entire FTSI cohort responded, the same number as the RMIT Lacrosse Club, a much smaller group, revealing a surprising lack of interest from those with a presumed link to the topic. The STEM students, in contrast, responded with unexpected curiosity and reflection.

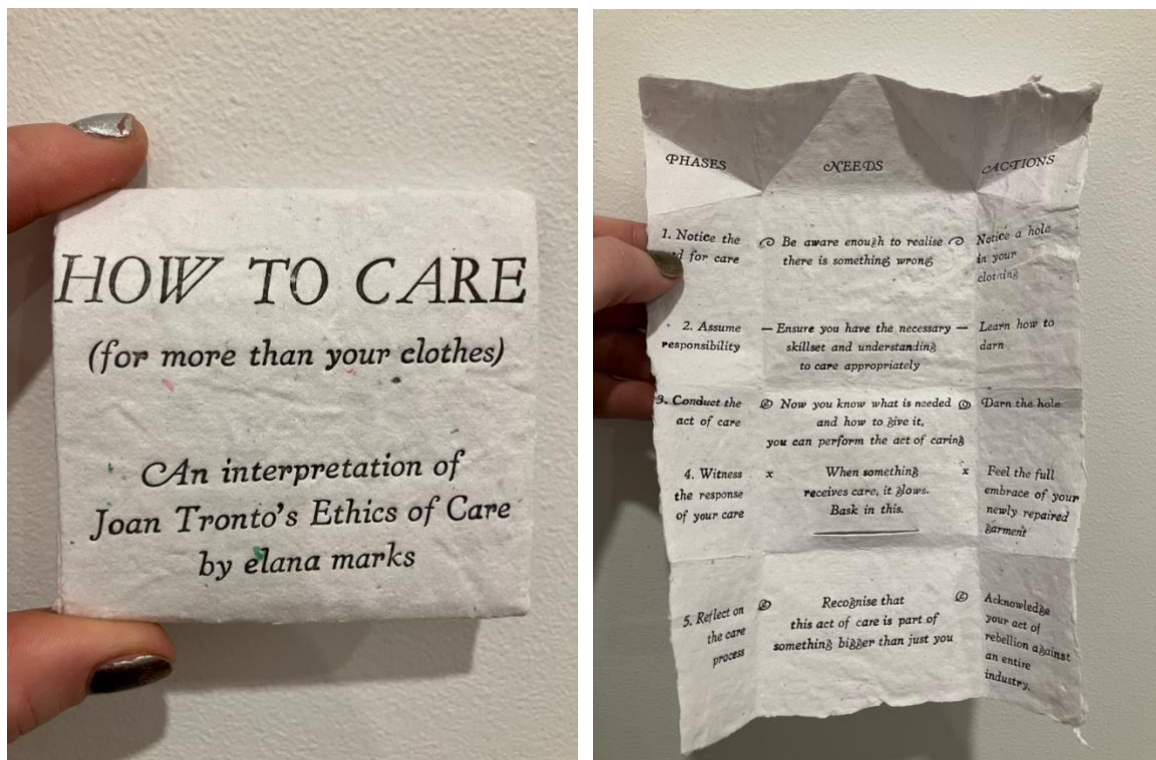
One STEM participant, reflecting on the first workshop, shared:

“It also got me thinking if maybe my ancestors had potentially done darning, as I know wool clothing was popular where they came from, which seems to get a plenty number of holes.”

This moment, brief, but deeply personal, revealed the expansive, connective potential of darning. It invited participants to look both outward and inward: toward those around them, and toward their own familial, cultural, and emotional histories.

## HOW TO CARE Guide, Explained

To support these findings, I created a physical outcome to be displayed and shared at my Graduation Showcase, inspired by traditional pocket-sized mending/sewing kits. As is displayed in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, this outcome incorporates both literal and metaphorical elements of this project, with the title '*How to Care (for more than your clothes)*' and subheading '*An interpretation of Joan Tronto's Ethics of Care*', enveloping yarn and a darning needle, becoming more of a care guide than a repair kit.



Left: Fig. 6, Right: Fig. 7, HOW TO CARE guide, printed on home-made paper.

To align with this project's subject matter, not only the contents but, more specifically, the materiality and the process of printing each guide had to be intentional. As Tronto's Ethics of Care relies on empathetic processes, it was important to directly reference all five phases, and to then provide each with both broad and contextualised guidance.

Regarding the construction and materiality of this project, I chose to print using letter press printing through a collaboration with Commoners Press, on predominantly paper I made myself from of my first year RMIT university notes, which was then folded into an envelope using a 16<sup>th</sup> Century letter fold style (Verse & Sip, 2025) carefully enveloping the contents including the yarn and a needle.



I became fascinated by the practice of hand paper making over the past 3 years, and first encountered Commoners Press when taking part in a letterpress printing zine workshop amid this project. This engagement is something I found relevant as I became aware of my role as a workshop participant in contrast to my recent experience as a workshop facilitator.

I had prior understanding of the practice of paper making and the ways in which is resonated with darning but quickly noticed how these similarities applied to letterpress printing in a similar way. All are time-intensive, manual, and meditative practices requiring deep attention and care, and all are endangered crafts, often overshadowed by fast digital alternatives, yet remain deeply meaningful.

The process of letter press printing these guides was gruelling and far more time intensive than I nor Rob Eales, the member of Commoners Press who supported the entire printing process, initially assumed. This printing process became a microcosm of what this project explored in its series of workshops. We were two contrasting, albeit both creative, individuals, who came together over four days to take part in a time intensive meditative traditional practice, teaching and learning from each other. By the end, we had developed a deep sense of care for the outcome we had created, having put such time and effort into the process, an interpersonal connection, a sense of care for one another.

At my Graduation Showcase, individuals were invited to build their own guides. Creative autonomy was encouraged when choosing their own yarn, and adding a needle size of their choice, as is displayed in Fig. 8, whilst patience and learning were required when taking the time to understand how to re-envelop the guide and its contents.

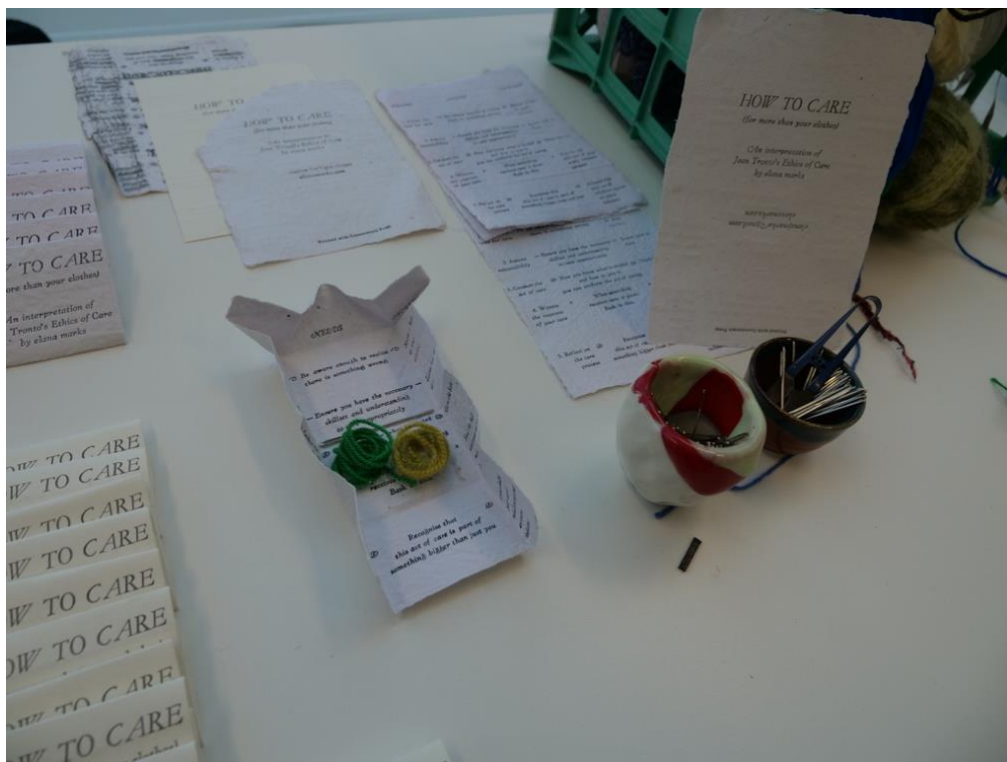


Fig. 8, The HOW TO CARE guide displayed at my grad show, with an example presented unfolded with yarn and a needle.

As this care guide would be for the individual rather than a group, something this project has focused on in response to its research question, it is important to note the way in which it is a distillation of the project's collective experience, into a personal provocation, specifically invoking Tronto's first phase, *Caring About*. For an individual to take one of these care guides, they were recognising a lack of care and accepting an invitation to learn how to appropriately respond to this, subtly forming a community of carers.

## Conclusion

This project explored the ways in which participatory darning workshops could foster the development of empathy amongst participants through the lens of Joan Tronto's *Ethics of Care*. The collective learning and engagement required by these workshops, supported by the initial contrast in textile knowledge, resulted in the emergence of rational empathy, knowledge exchange, and emotional connection. While the distinctiveness of Tronto's phases occasionally blurred, this only reflected the organic, subjective nature of care and empathy.

Future possibilities for this project point to its adaptation within workplaces or educational settings, where disconnection is often prevalent. There is also scope for further research that explores the subjectivity of care and empathy in broader and more diverse contexts.

Through the creation of my *HOW TO CARE* guide, this project reached a wider audience, inviting the idea that the act of caring is one to be practiced, and shared. Upon learning to care for our clothes, we can learn to care for one another.



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