



**Future
Skills
Centre**

Centre des
**Compétences
futures**

Project Insights Report

CRAFT



PARTNERS

OCAD University



LOCATIONS

Ontario



INVESTMENT

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☰ Executive Summary

The Craft project at Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) University in Canada was initiated in response to the significant challenges faced by the creative sector during COVID-19. This project aimed to foster resilience among creatives through the development and testing of an online marketplace based on a platform cooperative model—an equitable and democratic business structure designed to empower rather than exploit creatives. The model was intended to empower artists and designers by integrating learning and upskill training into income generation.

The project started with research to refine the target user groups and value proposition of the platform. This research included stakeholder interviews, a survey of OCAD University-affiliated creatives, and in-depth interviews with creative entrepreneurs. Overall, the project engaged over 600 artist-entrepreneurs through various initiatives, including workshops and business accelerators. This comprehensive approach helped identify the profiles of artists and designers who would benefit most from the initiative and understand the competitive landscape of platforms available to creatives.

The result was the launch of Fineline, an art marketplace and a cooperative platform that helps artists and designers grow their businesses online while developing cultural entrepreneurship skills. The project was shaped by artists and designers throughout the project's life cycle. Participating creatives are now forming a cooperative to enable co-ownership, co-governance and peer-to-peer support for members.

The success of the Craft project provides a blueprint for systemic change based on user-led solutions and cooperative models to support sustainable artistic entrepreneurship through community and peer learning.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Finline has scaling potential. Finline's model has attracted interest for regional expansion, with organizations in the Vancouver area expressing interest in incorporating elements of Finline's approach. This suggests strong prospects for broader adoption and adaptation across various regions and communities.
- 2 Participatory and artist-led approaches are needed to ensure that the cooperative business model is relevant, meaningful and supportive to artists' needs.
- 3 Co-ownership and co-governance foster equity and are central to the sustainability of a collaborative, community-driven creative marketplace.

The Issue

The creative sector in Canada was significantly impacted by COVID-19. The sector faced substantial job losses and financial instability. A wide range of professionals within the arts and design fields were affected, including artists, designers and other creatives who often rely on multiple income streams and freelance work to sustain their livelihoods.

The independent nature of work in the creative sector, while offering flexibility and autonomy, often leaves artists and designers exposed to exploitation and financial instability. Freelancers in these fields frequently face challenges such as late payments or being paid less than owed, issues exacerbated by the lack of financial and legal resources that larger organizations possess to enforce payment terms and manage contracts. The precarious nature of this self-directed work became even more pronounced during the pandemic. This highlighted the need for new models of collective resourcing that provide creatives with the tools necessary to navigate and thrive in an increasingly uncertain economic landscape.



What We Investigated

In response to these challenges, OCAD University, Canada's largest and oldest institution for art and design education, initiated the Craft project. This project aimed to establish an online marketplace operating on a platform cooperative model. The initiative sought to build both individual and collective resilience among creatives, enabling them to better withstand economic and social disruptions.

The project explored several research questions aimed at understanding and addressing the needs of creative entrepreneurs. In particular, the project sought to learn how creatives who typically pursue multiple income streams and non-traditional career paths can build economic and career resilience with access to a community-based market platform. This involved defining the potential target users and understanding the types of creatives (artists or designers, product-makers or service providers) that would benefit most from such a platform. The project also aimed to better understand the role of platform co-op models in training and empowering members as digital citizens and how such an approach could be replicated across other Canadian communities, providing a platform for supporting and connecting the creative sector.

A number of key stakeholders were engaged throughout the project via surveys, interviews, workshops and business accelerators. In particular, the research methodology involved stakeholder interviews to gather diverse perspectives within the OCAD University ecosystem, a survey to capture the experiences of affiliated students and alumni, and in-depth interviews with creatives to dive deep into individual experiences and needs. Project coordinators collected a total of 24 survey responses and conducted nine interviews with creatives. The project engaged representatives from various offices and departments at OCAD University, as well as over 600 artist-entrepreneurs. All of the stakeholders provided valuable insights into the experiences of creative entrepreneurs within and outside their work, which helped to shape the project's direction.

This comprehensive approach allowed for a robust analysis of the creative entrepreneurship journey and the development of targeted interventions to support these entrepreneurs through Craft.

What We're Learning

Participatory and artist-led approaches are crucial for a cooperative business model to flourish

This means that artists actively participate in the decision-making processes of the cooperative and its governance, helping to shape its direction and policies. Artists understand their own needs and challenges, and by involving them in decision-making, the cooperative can ensure that its services, programs and initiatives are relevant to the artistic community it serves. And when artists have a say in how the cooperative operates, they feel a deeper sense of ownership and connection to the organization. This enhances the overall meaningfulness of their involvement and fosters a sense of belonging within the cooperative community. A participatory and artist-led approach enables the cooperative to tailor its support services and programs to address these specific needs effectively. Engaging artists in decision-making also empowers them to take control of their own destinies. By having a voice in how the cooperative is run, artists can collectively advocate for policies and practices that advance their interests and values.

Co-ownership fosters equity

The project also found that co-ownership and co-governance are fundamental principles for the sustainability of a collaborative, community-driven creative marketplace. Co-ownership ensures that everyone benefits from the marketplace's growth and prosperity. It also fosters a sense of collective responsibility for its well-being and ensures that the benefits generated by the marketplace are shared equitably among its members.

Fineline has scaling potential

In terms of wider impact, Fineline's model has attracted interest for regional and national expansion, with entities like Vancouver-based company the Jibe and the ArtsAlly marketplace expressing interest in adopting elements of the model. This indicates potential for broader adoption and adaptation of the Fineline approach across different regions and communities.

Why It Matters

The insights gained from this initiative underscore the critical need for tailored support structures that cater specifically to the unique challenges faced by creative entrepreneurs. These findings are pivotal for informing policy and practice, emphasizing the importance of integrating community-driven, cooperative models in the creative sector. Such models not only enhance economic resilience but also foster a supportive ecosystem that is crucial for sustainable artistic entrepreneurship.

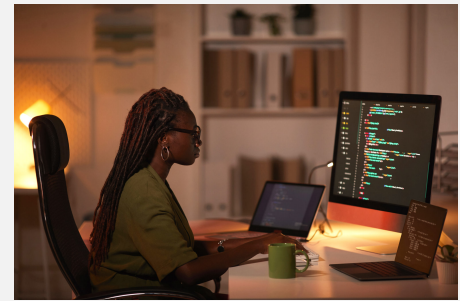
The project's approach to co-design and co-governance with creatives is a good model of inclusive and participatory economic and community development. This is particularly relevant for policy-makers and funders looking to promote equity and inclusivity in entrepreneurial ecosystems or in the creative sector. By adopting similar frameworks, other sectors could benefit from increased stakeholder engagement, leading to more resilient and adaptive business practices better aligned with diverse communities' needs.

The project's emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and mentorship presents a compelling case for adopting these strategies beyond the creative industries. This approach not only supports individual growth but also strengthens professional networks, enhancing overall competitiveness and innovation within industries. The project also highlights the potential for digital platforms to serve as economic engines and learning hubs.

Finally, the success of the cooperative model in providing a non-extractive, equitable platform for creatives suggests that similar funding and support structures could be beneficial in other sectors characterized by freelance and gig work.

► What's Next

Since the conclusion of the project in December 2023, the cooperative has incorporated and developed a monthly learning program for 2024. This represents a significant milestone and showcases the viability of the cooperative model for independent creatives. There are also efforts to explore opportunities to replicate this model in other regions and institutions across Canada.



State of Skills: Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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