

How to Run a Clothing Repair Café

A resource from
the Human Ecology Clothing Repair Café



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Introduction

So you're interested in setting up a clothing repair café in your community. Welcome to the club! It will be an incredibly rewarding adventure. But it can be hard to know how to get started. We have created this guide hoping that it will get you on your way.

First, a bit of background on where this information comes from: The Human Ecology Clothing Repair Café is a project started by Dr. Rachel McQueen and a group of dedicated students from the Human Ecology Department at the University of Alberta. Its first event took place on International Repair Day 2022. As of the time of writing, we have run 18 clothing repair events, during which an estimated 300+ textile items have been brought back into use. Our participants and volunteers include students and staff of the university, as well as community members from across the city.

Our context at a university may be different from your own context. For that reason, this guide includes questions to think about, notes about what we did, and alternative possibilities for other projects. This is a jumping-off point, but you will need to do what is best for your own community and context.

Getting Started

This section covers many aspects of running a clothing repair café that need to be in place before the first event ever happens.

Independent or Connected?

There are a few organizations, such as [Fixit Clinic](#) and [Repair Café International](#) that provide resources for those wanting to host their own repair events. However, the sharing of these resources sometimes come with conditions, such as paying a fee or exclusively using the organization's logos. You need to decide whether it's best for your repair events to be connected to a larger repair organization or independent.

Questions to consider

- Do you have the capacity to generate your own resources (including logos, registration sheets, etc), or would pre-existing templates be helpful?
- Do you already have a community of skilled repairers and event planners, or would access to an international community and help from other organizers be helpful?
- Do you have the means to generate publicity about our events or do you need exposure through inclusion in a larger organization's map of repair events?
- Are you open to running events that include repair for more than clothing and textiles?
- Are you able to or do you want to pay a fee to join a larger repair organization?
- Would you be able to comply with the terms of a larger organization (such as using their logos exclusively and hosting regular, ongoing events), or do you need more freedom and flexibility?
- Will your events be non-commercial or are you hoping to make some profit from them?

What we did

Before doing anything else, we looked into what other people were doing with repair cafés around the world. We did briefly consider aligning our clothing repair events with another organization. However, since our events would already be connected to the University of Alberta and we were concerned about conflicts of interest in terms of things like logos, we decided to strike out on our own.

Location

Questions to consider

- Do you want to use the same space for every event?
- How large of a space do you need for the number of people you want to accommodate?
- Consider the accessibility of the space. This is important both for being able to include participants and volunteers who may have mobility issues, as well as being able to easily transport your tools and supplies in and out of the space when needed.
- Can you store your tools and supplies in or near the space when events are not taking place? If not, how will you transport them at the beginning and end of each event?
- How many electrical outlets will you need in order to plug in your sewing machines, irons, coffee maker, kettle, speakers, projector, etc?
- Does the potential location provide tables and chairs?
- Are you planning on providing food and drinks in the space? And if so, would the potential space allow for this?
Side note: If you are not planning on providing food and drinks, consider the name of your event; perhaps a “clothing repair clinic” as opposed to a “clothing repair café.”
- What are parking and public transit like in the area you are considering?
- What will it cost to rent a space if needed? Are there free spaces where events could be held?
Will you need to purchase insurance in order to run events in a potential space?

What we did

We were able to book a third-floor classroom in the Human Ecology Department. While we run most of our events in that room, there are occasions when we run pop-up repair cafes at other community events in various locations. The classroom we use has a closet with a door that locks and enough space to store our supplies, so we only have to transport them for pop-up events. We have trolleys that we can load things onto and the building has an elevator that we can use to transport everything down to street level. Unfortunately, access to the elevator is tricky to find and it is not always reliable, which means that our location is less accessible than it should be.

With all of the tables and machines set up, the classroom accommodates 30 people fairly well; when needed, a few more can squeeze in. The room also has a sink and a bit of counter, which is convenient for the café area, and there is a larger lunch room down the hall if we need extra kitchen space. Sometimes we have to get creative with extension cords and power bars, but in general we are able to plug in about 6 sewing machines, 2 sergers, 2 irons, a set of speakers, a coffeemaker and a kettle without having to disturb the computers or projector that are already using some of the electrical outlets. The space comes with tables and chairs that we can use; we just put them back as we found them at the end of each event.

We are still learning and tweaking things as we go! As we have become more established and learned what has been missing at some of our pop-up events, we are planning on getting portable lights that can be charged by USB cables, some folding tables that can be stored and used when we need extra tables, a portable USB-charged speaker, and a collapsible cart that can help us move equipment to other locations, both on- and off-campus.

Being on-campus, our location is very close to several bus routes and an LRT (train) line. There is also a parkade directly next to the building where we hold our events, which has relatively inexpensive paid parking on weekends.

As a project connected to the Human Ecology Department, we have not had to pay rent for the space that we use. We recognize that this may be an exceptional case. In the next section, we will discuss funding.

Funding

Budgeting

It will be helpful to build a budget before getting too far into this project. Here are some things you may need to pay for:

- Rent for your event space and/or storage space
- Event insurance
- Some larger tools and supplies, such as sewing machines, sergers, irons and ironing boards, a coffeemaker and kettle
- Printing (for signs to be put up at the location or for flyers, etc.)
- Administrative costs, such as hiring a part-time employee to do the behind-the-scenes administrative tasks
- Honorariums for guest speakers
- Regular supplies for the café (e.g. coffee, tea, sugar, creamer, snacks)
- Regularly servicing your machines to keep them in good working order

Questions to Consider

- Based on projected costs, how much funding is needed to run repair events?
- What can you get for free or for a deal? Do you have access to a space that won't require you to pay rent? Can you request donations of second-hand supplies from your community? Is there a printing service or grocery store that might sponsor your events by providing printing or café supplies? Will a local sewing machine supplier give you a deal for purchasing multiple machines? Do you have a skilled volunteer who can service machines for you?
- What kind of funding opportunities (such as sustainability grants) are available in your company/community/city/province?

What we did

When the HECOL Clothing Repair Café got started, we were the recipients of a Campus Sustainability Grant, which funded the first two years of our work. This funding covered the purchase of several sewing machines and sergers, a few other tools, the cost of a part-time student to do the administrative work, and miscellaneous expenses, such as café supplies and printing. Since we purchased several sewing machines at once, a local sewing machine provider gave us a good deal on the initial cost and has provided excellent maintenance service.

Looking back at our experience so far with machines used by novice menders, here are some recommendations that we would make:

- 1) Get heavy-duty machines that are capable of sewing through tough fabrics or several layers of fabrics.

- 2) Aim to get multiples of the same kind of machines, or at least machines that use the same bobbins.
- 3) Learn how to care for your machines and aim to have expert volunteers on hand during events who can get machines back up and running when something goes wrong.

Not everything cost money! As already explained, we did not have to cover rent. We also sought out donations of supplies, such as fabric, thread, and basic sewing tools.

As our grant came to an end, we considered other forms of funding, including other grant opportunities and fundraising possibilities. We will be receiving another grant soon. Additionally, we are upcycling some old jeans from a previous research project into reusable bags that we can sell as a small fundraiser. Going forward, our costs will likely be lower than in our first couple of years, as we already have the machines and other tools that we need to run repair events.

Recruiting Volunteers

Most repair events are run mainly by expert volunteers. You cannot help all of your participants with their repairs yourself. You don't have the time and you may not have the expertise for every type of repair. Therefore, it's important to recruit people who are willing to spend a few hours helping others learn how to mend their clothes. You'll probably learn a lot from them, too!

Not all volunteers need to be experts in every type of repair. We have had a specialist in repairing knits, and others in darning. During an event we learn from each other, and when one of your experts in a certain area isn't available, it's amazing how you realize that another volunteer or regular participant has been able to guide someone through a repair. For example, in the cover photo of this document, we have Wing Sem teaching Rachel to mend a run in her cardigan. A couple of events later, Rachel was able to help a participant mend a large run in their sweater. We call our volunteers "experts", but many of our volunteers consider themselves just "competent".

Additionally, not all volunteers need to be repairers. You may have a few people who help to set-up and take down the event, check in participants as they arrive, refill the coffee maker, or take photos for social media or your website. Expert volunteers can do these things, but sometimes people want to volunteer even without being able to repair. There are tasks for them, too!

Questions to consider

- Besides the channels that you will use to advertise your events (see below), how will you recruit volunteers?
- Who do you already know who might become an expert volunteer?
- How many expert volunteers will you need for a successful event?

What we did

A few people volunteer have volunteered with us just because they saw a notice in a campus email or a social media post. However, most volunteers (especially those who have volunteered multiple times) were recruited directly from our existing contacts in the Human Ecology Department.

Right around the time that the Clothing Repair Cafe got up and running, Rachel talked about it in an [interview with the local CBC news station](#). Some of our volunteers from outside the University community connected with us because of that news article!

Spreading the Word about your Events

Once you have your space, supplies, and experts ready to go, it's time to set a date and spread the word! How will people find out about your event?

Questions to consider

- Social media is a great tool. Does your organization already have a social media account that you will use to advertise your repair events? Or do you need to set up a new one? Are you following other accounts that could share your posts? Have you set up links on your profile page so people can learn more about your events and register for them?
- Will you have a website or a page on your organization's website where people can learn more? What do you want to include on the website?
- Which local news channels might you contact to talk about your repair events? Consider everything from community newsletters to newspapers to radio and TV stations.
- Who are you trying to attract to your events? If you are focused on a certain group, such as students at a particular university, are there e-newsletters that could help your advertise?
- Do you want to set up your own email newsletter so that your subscribers can have the first opportunity to sign up for new events?

What we did

In terms of letting people know about our events, we did a lot! We set up a webpage about the Clothing Repair Café on a website that had several research projects connected to it. Later, we created a website specifically for the Clothing Repair Café. We also set up our own Instagram and Facebook accounts and started following other accounts connected to the University of Alberta and to sustainable fashion in Edmonton. Those accounts followed us back and often share our posts about upcoming events. In our profile, we linked to our webpage, to news reports about the project, and to registration forms for upcoming events.

Right around the time we got started, Dr. McQueen was interviewed for a couple of news articles related to prolonging the lifespan of clothing. She was able to mention the Clothing Repair Café in the interviews. These articles brought in a lot of participants from outside the university!

Initially, we thought that only people involved in the university community would come to our events (and that is where we find the majority of our participants). The University of Alberta sends out weekly emails informing people of upcoming events, so for the two weeks leading up to our events, we put a notice in these emails. We make sure to enter the notice in three emails: those for undergraduate students, those for graduate students, and those for faculty and staff. We also sometimes put a notice in the Human Ecology Students Association newsletter or newsletter for the faculty that the Human Ecology Department belongs to.

We also set up our own email list right away. People can sign up through our social media links or our website and they receive one email about an upcoming event a few days before we advertise it through other channels. This is great for people who don't use social media or who want to have a few extra days' notice.

Registration Forms

Although getting the word out is one of the first things you need to think about, there is something you actually need to do before you advertise. If you want to know how many people are coming ahead of time, you need to create registration forms. Having people know about the event is no good if they can't follow a link to a registration form while the information is immediately in front of them.

Questions to consider

- Do you want people to sign up for the event? Or should they just drop in?
- If they should sign up, how will they do that?
- How will you make your registration forms? What do you want to ask on your registration forms? Will you have separate forms for volunteers and participants?

What we did

We use Google forms. They are user-friendly, can easily be copied for each new event, and are free! We also use an add-on called formLimiter to automatically close registration once 40 people have registered. (This number is higher than the capacity of our space, but we have noticed that up to 50% of registrants may not attend on the actual day of the event.) We also allow walk-in registrations (due to having so many no-shows), so we have created a form that people can fill out when they arrive. The walk-in registration form asks many of the same questions and requires agreement for the disclaimer (see below).

Each registration form includes all relevant information about the event (date, time, location, etc.). We have separate forms for our participants and volunteers because we ask slightly different questions. Below are examples of the questions that we ask:

- First and Last Name
- Email address
- Please briefly describe the clothing item(s) you would like to bring in and what sort of repair or alteration it needs. ☐ Participants only
- Do you feel confident in completing the repairs yourself, or will you need assistance?
☐ Participants only
 - I feel confident in my ability to do it myself.
 - I might need a little help or advice.
 - I have no clothing repair skills and will need a lot of help.
- (If we are offering a special demonstration or presentation at the event, there will be a brief description of the event and what time it will take place, then we will ask:) Are you interested in attending this demonstration? ☐ Participants only
- Do you have any questions about what to expect? (If so, we will respond to you via the email address you have provided.) ☐ Participants only
- How did you hear about us? ☐ Participants only
- What will you be able to help with? ☐ Volunteers only
- What time will you be available (or how long will you be able to stay)? ☐ Volunteers only
- Photo waiver
 - The repair café has my permission to publicly use photographs taken of me or my property during the repair event to promote the repair café. I understand that the

images may be used in print publications, presentations, websites, and social media. I also understand that no royalty, fee, or other compensation shall become payable to me by reason of such use.

- I am not comfortable with having my photo taken or shared publicly.
- Disclaimer:

Participant disclaimer

Any repair attempt could result in further damage to your clothing items or personal injury, due to: the use of potentially dangerous tools, such as pins, needles, scissors, irons, etc.; the presence of food and beverage items that could stain clothing or burn skin; or hazards in the space, such as sewing machine cords that may run along the floor. By registering for the Clothing Repair Café, you agree that the Clothing Repair Café, Clothing Repair Café personnel (including repair volunteers), the Human Ecology Department, Faculty of ALES, and the University of Alberta will not be held liable for damaged items or personal injury.

You also acknowledge that not all items can be repaired and volunteer repairers may decline to attempt a repair on any item with which they do not feel comfortable. Other repairs may require more time than is available during the event. If a participant and a repairer agree to continue a repair outside of the Clothing Repair Café event, that becomes a personal agreement between those two parties and the Clothing Repair Café has nothing to do with it.

Volunteer Agreement and Disclaimer

I agree to treat all Clothing Repair Café participants, volunteers, staff, and property with respect. I will conduct myself in a safe and professional manner while I am at the Clothing Repair Café. If I am not comfortable helping with a repair, I will make this known and, if possible, direct the participant to another volunteer or staff.

Any repair attempt could result in further damage to your clothing items or personal injury, due to: the use of potentially dangerous tools, such as pins, needles, scissors, irons, etc.; the presence of food and beverage items that could stain clothing or burn skin; or hazards in the space, such as sewing machine cords that may run along the floor. By registering as volunteer for the Clothing Repair Café, you agree that the Clothing Repair Café, Clothing Repair Café personnel (including other volunteers), the Human Ecology Department, Faculty of ALES, and the University of Alberta will not be held liable for damaged items or personal injury.

Some repairs may require more time than is available during the event. If a participant and a volunteer repairer agree to continue a repair outside of the Clothing Repair Café event, that becomes a personal agreement between those two parties and the Clothing Repair Café has nothing to do with it.

- I agree ☐ Participants and volunteers must agree to their respective disclaimers in order to register.

Links to registration forms are added to our social media channels before posting about upcoming events. The links are also sent out in the email to our mailing list.

Preparing for an Event

Your event is coming up! This section explores how to be prepared by the time the first participants walk through the door.

Connecting with Participants and Volunteers

It's a good idea to connect with your registered participants and volunteers before the event takes place. This gives you an opportunity to remind them that they registered and to address any questions or concerns. If you collected email addresses in your registration forms, that is the best way to contact everyone.

Questions to consider

- How will you connect with your participants and volunteers?
- What do your participants and volunteers need to know before they arrive at the event?

What we did

In the week or two leading up to the event, we go through the responses from our participant registrations. If anyone has asked a question, we email them individually to respond to their question. In our email settings, we have created a template for responding to questions to make the process faster and more consistent, no matter who is writing the response.

Two days before the event, we send out one email to all of the participants. All participant email addresses are entered in the BCC section of the "Recipients" field for privacy. The body of the email contains a reminder about all relevant event information (date, time, location), as well as any relevant parking information and a brief description of what to expect. Participants are encouraged to reply to the email with any questions or concerns or to let us know if they can no longer make it. Sending out the email two days ahead of time has meant that more people are able to let us know if they can't make it. However, others may still be signing up during those two days, so we keep an eye on the registration form and forward the email to anyone else who signs up during that time so they have all the same information as everyone else.

Two days before the event, we also send out one email to all of the volunteers. This email includes the time that volunteers should arrive to help set up and the estimated end time after cleaning up. We also help volunteers know what to expect by sharing the number of participants and volunteers who have registered and by copying a list of the repairs that participants have said they want to bring in. Like the participants, volunteers are encouraged to reply to the email with questions, concerns, or a notification that they can no longer make it.

Getting Ready

This section considers everything else you might need to do before the event starts.

Questions to consider

- What do you need to pick up?
 - Groceries for the café
 - Tools or supplies
 - Printed signs to help people know where to go
- How should the room/space flow so that participants know where to go when they arrive?
- What needs to physically be set up?
 - Coffee, tea, snacks
 - Tables & chairs

- Machines, irons, supplies
- Directional signage
- What needs to be set up on the computer?
 - Registration lists
 - Walk-in registration form
 - Your email account, to keep an eye on any incoming, last-minute emails
- Will you play music? How?

What we did

Usually our administrator or Dr. McQueen will pick up groceries and any needed supplies the day before an event. We have a system for reimbursement through the university, but you will need to figure out how reimbursement will work for you.

About half an hour before the event, all staff and volunteers arrive and set everything up, from signs to coffee to sewing supplies and registration lists. At the beginning, we allowed more time for setting up, but as volunteers kept returning and we all got to know what needed to be done, we became quite efficient.

After running a few events, we noticed some inefficiencies in the way the room was set up, so we made some changes. Don't be afraid to try new things that could make your events better!

At an Event

Questions to consider

- Who will greet participants when they arrive?
- What do participants need to know about the event?
- How will participants be matched with expert volunteers? OR How will participants ask for and receive help?
 - Do you need to set up an "I Need Help" list?
 - Will participants be paired with expert volunteers, first-come-first-served-style? And if so, will that expert volunteer be paired with that participant from the start of their repair until it is finished?
 - How will participants differentiate between volunteers and other participants?
 - Will participants approach volunteers or vice versa?
- Who will be taking pictures of the event?

What we did

Since the beginning of the Clothing Repair Café, we have had one person stationed at a check-in desk at the entrance to the room. On arrival, participants are either checked-in (if they pre-registered) or are asked to fill out a walk-in registration form. Our check-in procedure is simply to find the participant's name on a list of people who registered and cross it off. If the participant has never been to a Clothing Repair Café event before, the check-in person will say something like this:

"Welcome! Feel free to find a spot to sit and make yourself at home. You are welcome to use any of our supplies, which you can find over here, or any of our machines, which are

along that wall. If you need help with anything, we have volunteers who can assist you. They are wearing volunteer pins like mine, so you can feel free to flag someone down or you can write your name on our “I Need Help” list, which is on that whiteboard, and someone will come find you. We also have some coffee, tea, and cookies over on the other side of the room; feel free to help yourself to those as well!”

Often, once the initial rush of incoming participants slows down, our check-in person (if they are also a sewist) will be pulled into the action and begin assisting participants with their repairs. It’s helpful then, for a few other people (often volunteers who have been to several events) to know the check-in procedure so they can greet participants who arrive later.

When we started, the person at the check-in desk would match arriving participants with available volunteers. However, we always had more participants than volunteers and things got confusing. We implemented two changes that worked for us: 1) We made “Volunteer” badges for our volunteers to wear so participants could easily see who to ask for help and 2) We created an “I Need Help” list on the classroom’s whiteboard. When a participant needs help, they write their name on the board. When a volunteer is available, they help the next person on the list. This is different from many repair cafes, who have a more structured way of matching participants and volunteers. However, since many of our participants have some sewing skills already, it can allow our volunteers to help more than one person at a time (i.e. while one participant implements the advice they were given, another participant can be helped). Our volunteers are the ones moving around the room, rather than participants having to find and/or approach volunteers. It works for us, but it may not work for you. This is an area where you might have to try a few things and once you land on something that works, you will know how to set up the room to facilitate it.

If you have volunteers who are not able to assist with repairs, you can give them the job of taking photographs of the event. In the excitement of an event, this is the thing that most often gets missed! Just make sure that the photographer is aware of anyone who has declined the photo waiver in the registration form.

After an Event

Following up after an event is completely optional. However, there are things you can do that will help future events.

Questions to consider

- How will you thank your volunteers?
- How will you get feedback on the success of the event?
- How will you record or report on the event?

What we did

The Clothing Repair Café would not be a success without our volunteers. They are amazing! So we wanted to give them something that would be a record of the time they have given us and that could be used in a CV or resumé. At the end of every semester, we go through the list of people who have volunteered at the Clothing Repair and send them a certificate of appreciation for their hard work.

Since our initial funding came through a Campus Sustainability Grant, we were aware that at the end of two years, we would need to report on the impact that our project made. This prompted us to do two things that ended up being incredibly helpful. First, we created a short survey to be sent out to all volunteers and participants at the end of each clothing repair event. Response rates were fairly low, but we received many ideas that, when implemented, improved subsequent events. These ideas included hosting demonstrations on specific types of repair (e.g. darning, sashiko mending, hemming) and creating a way to differentiate volunteers from participants. The surveys also allowed us to gather data on the types of repairs that were most often completed at our events and how many repairs participants were able to complete or start during the events. This data was collected into a table that made up one part of short summary that our project coordinator wrote about each event. The summaries also included the coordinator's thoughts on how the event went, a description of some comments from the surveys and ideas on whether/how they could be implemented, and a list of items to be acquired before the next repair event.

The surveys and event summaries helped us when writing the final report for the Campus Sustainability Grant, but they also became useful in other instances. For example, the Clothing Repair Café was invited to apply for an Alberta Emerald Award. The information we gathered and our reflections on events helped us to write an excellent application!

Obviously, recording or reporting on event outcomes can be helpful in terms of funding or award applications. However, it can also be helpful for continued advertisement and increasing your reputation as a place for skilled repair and community building! If we take photos during an event, we always post them on our social media platforms immediately after the event. We also add them to a photo gallery on our website. These photos can then be used later in posts announcing upcoming events.

Conclusion

Now you know everything we know about setting up and running a clothing repair café! We wish you well on your community repair journey.

Resources

Further resources related to repair cafés and textile repair can be found or by visiting our website at <https://sites.google.com/uAlberta.ca/hecolrepaircafe/home>. You can also follow us on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#).

[Fixit Clinic: Start a Clinic](#)

[Module: Host Fixit Clinics](#)

[Repair Cafe International](#)

[Repair Cafe Toronto](#)