



Craft and Wellbeing

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Happiness remains high on the political agenda, as the UK government sets out to determine and measure the nation's wellbeing, as a basis for future policy making. Both ethical and practical considerations around this politicization of happiness continue to be debated, but in the meantime new ways of thinking about and measuring wellbeing have been in development by academics and independent foundations and think tanks, as well as through the [Office of National Statistics](#) itself.

So what does craft contribute to individual wellbeing? The answers may seem obvious to those who make, yet can be surprisingly difficult for others to pin down. In this briefing note we show how craft can enhance quality of life for people from all backgrounds. Drawing on [recent research from the Crafts Council](#), we investigate how and why a career in craft can provide job satisfaction, how participating in craft as a leisure activity can improve physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, and what is distinctive about craft as a source of wellbeing both in leisure and in our working lives.

Satisfying Work

[Jo Davis](#) never stops making: her day job teaching young people with learning difficulties is just one part of a vibrant craft career. At weekends Jo runs ceramic button making [workshops](#) at Birmingham's Custard Factory, and in her spare time she makes porcelain vessels for exhibition from her home studio in Wolverhampton. She enjoys this quiet time making, but her curiosity about materials and craft processes constantly pushes her towards new creative collaborations and teaching experiences. As Jo says,

I love feeling the joy of having an idea and realizing it and then holding it in your hands.... And when I'm teaching, I'm excited and enthused and the students are too – they all think I'm obsessive, a mad scientist type! I just can't stop – I want to know how to make everything!

[Research from the Crafts Council](#) shows that many makers share Jo's enthusiasm for an independent, self-directed career, making their own decisions and creating their own opportunities in pursuit of personal goals. Makers seem to find ways of working that suit them, whether teaming up with others or working alone, and whether constantly seeking new challenges or working to perfect a signature range over many years.

Research also shows us that makers' careers are often fluid, shifting in creative direction over the years and changing in scope to allow for volunteering or learning experiences, and for time spent with family and friends. Whilst they may not typically produce high revenues from their work, makers can – and do – create very viable businesses that also promote the opportunities for personal satisfaction and work-life balance, which are known to enhance wellbeing.

These features of self-employment may not be unique, but there are other benefits to a craft career that are uncommon elsewhere. These include the pleasure makers describe when describing their immersion in making – the



feeling of being lost in the 'flow' of things, as the mind and the body work in repetitive co-ordination. People who make also delight in transforming an idea into something 'real,' enduring and precious, whether for themselves or for a client. One jeweller explains,

I think success is when I'm working with a client, and they ask you to design something very particular for them... and then it comes out exactly as you'd imagined it. They love it, they're thrilled with it, and you know that piece is going to be a family heirloom almost. You're making something that's going to be permanent, and will stay on this planet for the next thousand, two thousand years.

[Research](#) shows that three out of four craft graduates are satisfied with their overall work situation (up to six years after graduation), and that this holds true for those from less affluent and educated families, as well as for those with dyslexia (which is twice as common amongst craft graduates than in the UK population as a whole).

Looking beyond the graduate population, craft can create new routes to employment for people from more severely disadvantaged backgrounds, too. The [Graffiti*d](#) project, profiled in recent [Crafts Council research](#), shows how. In this British Ceramics Biennial project, a group of 13-16 year old boys worked with ceramicist [Cj O'Neill](#) to develop public graffiti pieces. The boys, who were excluded from school, used the graffiti to transform ceramic plates into installations which commented on the closure of the Ainsley Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent. In the process, they gained a voice on local issues within their community through media coverage, whilst developing pride in their work and enthusiasm for work opportunities in the creative industries.

Other community based craft programmes routinely encourage first steps towards work for people with special educational needs or disability, and who suffer from other forms of disadvantage in the workplace. Our research shows what a real difference these first steps can make to quality of life – building the personal and social confidence that leads to Further Education and work.

The withdrawal of funding for community based craft programmes – combined with limited formal training opportunities in craft – is a major cause for concern, given this clear potential for craft to create social mobility in the workplace.

Health

Can knitting really be addictive? [Research](#) by physiotherapist Betsan Corkhill suggests that it can – in a good way. Knitting, according to Betsan, can replace other addictions to weight loss and binge eating, smoking and alcohol, and the constant checking and rechecking symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

At the root of this 'constructive addictiveness' are the rhythmic, repetitive movements characteristic of knitting and many other craft activities. Absorption in this type of activity not only occupies and distracts the brain, but has also been clinically proven to raise levels of the mood-enhancing chemical serotonin, whilst inducing the relaxation and 'mindfulness' more often associated with meditation.



This triple-whammy of distraction, mood-enhancement and relaxation has other benefits for wellbeing, quietening chronic stress and anxiety, improving dexterity for those suffering from arthritis and muscular disorders, and measurably reducing chronic pain. At the same time, both the sense of achievement gained from craft and the social interaction it encourages can help to combat the isolation of depression: as Betsan explains,

Knitting can change negative thoughts and attitudes into positive ones. It encourages people to move forwards. Confidence, self esteem, motivation and mood improves. It gives people a vehicle by which to make social contact and, in so doing, keeps their world open.

Absorption in making can be particularly beneficial for young people with severe learning difficulties, who often lack opportunities to focus, to achieve and to control their immediate environment. Ceramicist [Jon Williams](#), working at Beaufort School, says that a severely autistic child he has worked with is 'given a little bit of peace' by working in clay: 'He can just be there with the material and not think about anything', Jon says, as he explores and transforms the material with his hands.

In a very different way, craft has a specific role to play in improving wellbeing for dementia patients by using materials and making to trigger and connect memories of forgotten times, people and events. Recent [Crafts Council research](#) profiles [Dr Jayne Wallace's](#) pioneering work with dementia patients and their families, which combines fabric from old clothing with digital audio clips (triggered by sensors) to evoke a specific time from the past and spark conversations around it.

In this instance, it is the power of materials and objects to hold stories and intimate associations, that enables craft to enhance wellbeing. Jayne's work shows how dementia patients can be supported, through craft, to improve the quality of their lives through enhanced interactions with partners, friends and family.

Relationships

Craft's contribution to wellbeing is not limited to clinical and therapeutic settings. In the wider community, there are very specific ways in which craft can bring us together and strengthen our sense of connectedness.

The popularity of craft courses, DIY networks and knitting clubs shows that people enjoy gathering together to make things: [Crafts Council research](#) shows that many makers today provide craft leisure workshops, courses, holidays and corporate away-days, servicing a market keen to experience making with their families, friends and colleagues.

Craft also has a special and distinctive role to play in promoting wellbeing through social interaction amongst people otherwise excluded from social and community networks. Working with community organizations, local authorities and community centres, many makers offer participatory workshops for specialist groups, including disadvantaged children, older people or people with a disability and young people at risk of offending.



[Melanie Tomlinson](#), a metalworker and illustrator, runs workshops with women newly arrived in Birmingham from conflict zones around the world. Melanie describes how the experience of a group metalworking workshop promote social interaction and helps participants to feel at home in their communities:

Exploring the material brings people together because it's really challenging: there's no time to think about prejudices because they're engaging with mess! They talk about what they're doing and share materials and learn from each other... they can talk even though they speak different languages. Over time, they open up – it doesn't happen straight away but it just comes through in the work. Putting something out there and sharing it – making it real and permanent – has an almost spiritual element... It's about saying that you don't leave your culture behind, but you can make it current in your new culture.

In recent [research from the Crafts Council](#), 13 makers working in community settings – ranging from Sure Start Children's Centres to care homes – were interviewed about the contribution their work makes to the lives of workshop and course participants. The research indicates very specific benefits for the individuals involved, in terms of their confidence and ability to interact with others.

First, it's clear that craft workshop participants enjoy the immediacy and concreteness of working with materials such as metal, textiles and clay. Perhaps for the first time, they are able to produce something they are proud of, which belongs to them, and which can be kept for themselves or given to a friend or family member.

Second, participants gain confidence from developing skills in handling materials and tools, both from transforming raw materials into objects and from making their creative vision real. For some, this translates into a rare and valuable feeling of being in control of their immediate environment.

Third, participants who are generally given little freedom in life (young people with learning difficulties, for example) experience a new autonomy from being encouraged to experiment within boundaries, and especially from being given responsibility for sharp, hot or otherwise dangerous materials.

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Collectively, it seems that these distinctively craft-based experiences encourage a sense of achievement and ownership. This, in turn, builds the confidence that strengthens social interaction and ultimately wellbeing: research suggests that social connectedness is perhaps the single most important factor in distinguishing happy people from those who are merely 'getting by.'

Conclusions

The current Government / Office for National Statistics consultation presented a good opportunity to state the case for craft and its distinctive contribution to



individual wellbeing. Craft, as we've seen, can provide opportunities for satisfying work and a balanced approach to life and work which promotes all-round wellbeing. It can create routes into employment for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, alleviate the symptoms of physical and mental disorders and stress, and help people to build strong relationships with the people around them.

The current debate around the politicization of 'happiness' is not a new one: both the ethics and the practicalities of advocating wellbeing as a policy goal have been the subject of controversy since their original introduction to New Labour policy by LSE economist [Richard Layard](#).

This debate will no doubt continue, as new ways of thinking about and measuring wellbeing are developed by [academics](#) and independent [foundations](#) and think tanks, as well as by the [Office of National Statistics](#) itself.

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