



Hands-on communities: Summary report

The community and wellbeing benefits of learning and sharing practical skills

Foreword from Dax Lovegrove

Director of Sustainability & Innovation, Kingfisher plc



Empowering people with hands-on DIY skills can help them improve their homes and neighbourhoods. This is something we have recognised at Kingfisher, which is why we provide online training and DIY classes in some of our stores and at various events.

At one event we hosted last year, one guest said: 'If you have pride in your street, you're more likely to do things to your home like paint your front gate.' It is this kind of appetite among people that inspires us to think how we can do more to support those who want to improve their surroundings.

“DIY skills can be a great enabler for people making their homes more energy efficient and this is a big part of ensuring carbon emissions from the built environment are reduced”

People's increasing interest in DIY and making things can also be seen within the 'maker movement'. This trend is strong in the US and is now creeping into the UK, where we now see maker spaces starting to take off in cities this side of the pond. The movement is attracting all kinds of creative

minds and people who want to skill up. They will bring new thinking around using materials more efficiently and re-using materials, which will in turn accelerate moves towards the circular economy.

The other opportunity to embrace is one of tackling the energy wasted in homes while also addressing people's concerns about rising energy bills. DIY skills can be a great enabler for people making their homes more energy efficient and this is a big part of ensuring carbon emissions from the built environment are reduced in line with the latest climate science.

“I’m excited that DIY can bring people together to build meaningful connections in the community.”

The sharing economy is another important area. This economy helps to move us away from a throw-away society to one where we unlock the use of idle assets and open up opportunities for collaborative access to goods and spaces that are often significantly under-used.

The Hands-on communities report from NEF and its great range of case studies helps us to increase our understanding for how learning and sharing practical skills matters to people. I’m excited that DIY can bring people together to build meaningful connections in the community and look forward to all kinds of organisations making the most of supporting better homes and better lives.



Dax Lovegrove

About this research

This report was written by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) with support from Kingfisher plc, Europe’s largest home improvement retail group. In 2012, Kingfisher launched Net Positive, which it sees as a commitment to work towards making a positive contribution to people and the planet, while growing a stronger and more successful business. As part of that approach, Kingfisher’s constituent companies will develop a range of community activities that are about sharing or learning practical skills. This report is therefore intended to be useful to Kingfisher plc itself, and the staff who design and work on these community activities.

However, we hope that the findings of the report will also be a broader contribution to the conversation about how learning or sharing practical skills, or indeed skills in general, can enhance communities and improve individual empowerment and wellbeing.

Introduction

How can learning and sharing practical skills help to empower people and communities? This briefing demonstrates how hands-on skills like DIY and gardening can improve wellbeing, strengthen communities, and combat throw-away consumerism.

This briefing explores the evidence and theory around how learning and sharing practical skills enhances communities and boosts wellbeing – and develops a model of the pathways involved. It is based on a literature review covering academic research from a range of fields, as well as reports written by think-tanks, NGOs, and government. Most of the literature found to be relevant came from the UK or the USA. We conducted primary analysis of the UK's 'Understanding Society Survey' and Big Lottery Fund Wellbeing Programme evaluations, interviewed two experts in the field of communities and wellbeing, and spoke to staff at Kingfisher who are working on some of their communities projects in the UK, France, and Poland. Given the nature of the subject matter and the research, we expect the lessons learnt to be relevant in all high-income countries.

This document is a short summary of the key findings and recommendations. A full report is available from the NEF website.

The triple challenge

At an individual, a community, and a wider environmental level, we face as a society an urgent triple challenge.

Table 1: The triple challenge, in numbers

Wellbeing and the risk to mental health	Weakening communities and social ties	Throw-away consumerism and environmental impact
Wellbeing has been in slight decline despite GDP tripling in the USA since 1960	The USA experienced a 43% drop in families having dinner together over 25 years	If, globally, lifestyles were similar to those in France or the UK, 2.5 planet Earths would be needed to sustain world's population
Cost of mental illness in developed countries estimated as 3–4% of GDP	In Poland, 35% say 'most people try to take advantage of me'; in France, 46% say most people can't be trusted	242 million new phones purchased in the USA in 2013 (total population was 314 million)
41% of days off work in the UK are due to mental health issues	In the UK, 27% don't feel close to people in their local area	398ppm atmospheric concentration of CO ₂ in February 2014. The IPCC has set a threshold at 400ppm to avoid the worst effects of climate change

We cannot pretend that a bit of DIY is going to deal with all these issues on its own, yet the research summarised here shows that people being able to do DIY in their homes and communities can lead to a cascade of positive outcomes including increased self-esteem, stronger communities, improved employability, and more altruistic behaviour (and some psychologists believe that the improved wellbeing associated with these outcomes might also reduce risk of mental illness). As Dharmendra Kanani, England Director for the Big Lottery Fund said in interview with us:

*'The potential is great for learning DIY to have an impact on people's ability to learn skills in general, on people's opportunity to engage with others, and to improve themselves and the local community.'*¹

Learning, sharing, and using practical skills provides an opportunity to confront each of the aspects of this challenge:

- **Wellbeing** is strengthened by being active, competent, and connected with other people.
- **Community empowerment** is reinforced by people sharing and being able to learn and to help each other.
- **A make-and-mend culture** can help us minimise our resource use in contrast to a 'throw-away' culture leading to over-consumption.

Learning and sharing of practical skills in context

Across the world, activities are happening that are designed to support learning and sharing practical skills.

The Big Lottery Fund, one of the UK's largest charitable funders, has funded a whole raft of such activities, as part of its Wellbeing Programme. Kingfisher's operating companies such as B&Q and Castorama are running many activities. And Timebanking, a concept developed in the USA, has swept across the world. These examples start to demonstrate how the ability to connect and contribute to a community, the tangible benefits of getting practical tasks done, and husbandry of resources go hand in hand.

Programmes to equip people with practical skills and to share the practical skills that exist within communities, are happening in the midst of some potentially formative trends. Commentators are observing an emerging spirit that is being called *prosumerism* or *new materialism*. It is a rejection of 'throw-away' consumerism – whereby people buy products which they discard and replace rapidly. Instead, advocates describe new materialism as a concept whereby through making, caring for, improving, and repairing objects 'we grow a more deeply pleasurable, and also respectful relationship, with the world of "things"'.² In an interview conducted for this report, French social entrepreneur Etienne Hayem describes how this trend relates to the kind of practical skills that we are focusing on:

'Doing DIY and gardening provides people with an awareness and understanding of how stuff is made and grown which creates a stronger link with the physical world.'

The new materialism movement can be seen entering the public consciousness with individuals selling their handmade items on websites such as Etsy, and TV programmes showcasing practical skills such as cookery, gardening, or home improvements.

Related to the emergence of new materialism has been the rise of the maker movement. This is an umbrella term for the growing ranks of people who are inventing, designing and building, often bringing together the newest technologies like 3D printing with traditional artisanal and DIY skills.

‘The maker movement encourages people to discover the maker in themselves, and to seek out other makers in their communities. Technology is making it easier for all makers to make things and share their projects with others. They are using this technology to create new kinds of products and drive innovation.’³

Dale Dougherty, CEO of Maker Media and founder of Make and Maker Faire

The movement includes hands-on Maker Faire events where enthusiasts can meet, make, and share. In 2014, there are 140 Faires scheduled all over the world from Shenzhen to the first White House Maker Faire in June.

The Economist has observed that the trend for making and repairing is a move towards the type of circular economy supported by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and away from the current economic system where we ‘take, make, and dispose’. It remains to be seen whether this new trend is a seasonal fashion, or whether it genuinely is the start of a new way of thinking about the things we own. For these movements to succeed, people need to have the skills to look after and repair the things they own, and the networks to promote these skills. Furthermore, cultural values need to set in such that this activity is perceived favourably. If this is successful, it could offer hope against the triple challenge identified in Table 1.

“For these movements to succeed, people need to have the skills to look after and repair the things they own, and the networks to promote these skills.”

The wellbeing impacts of using and learning practical skills

Our research has found that people who do practical activities feel higher wellbeing than those who don't, as the evidence summarised in this section shows.

Using practical skills

What is the evidence that people who do practical activities feel higher wellbeing than those who do not? Professor Toni Antonucci, who studies changes in lifestyles associated with ageing, has analysed data from the Americans' Changing Lives Survey in 1986, which had a representative sample of over 3500 respondents.⁴ Antonucci focused on respondents aged 65 and over, and found that those who spent more time doing DIY activities reported higher life satisfaction. The effect held, even when controlling for demographic variables such as age, income and education. What that means is that, if you were to find two people with the same age, income, and education level, the one that spent more time doing DIY would likely have higher life satisfaction.

Indeed, the positive effect of carrying out DIY was the strongest in their study, stronger than the effect of income, and stronger than the effects of

Definitions

Some of the terms used in this report require clarification and definition:

- **Practical skills** – The ability to carry out a range of activities with your hands, requiring dexterity and knowledge; for example, DIY, gardening, mechanical repairs and craftwork.
- **Empowerment** – Increasing the ability for either individuals or communities to achieve self-defined goals, through the enhancement of 'non-tangible' assets such as knowledge, psychological resources, and social relationships.
- **Wellbeing** – An individual's experience of their life overall.
- **Social capital** – The ties, habits, and trust that a community is built on. It is considered 'capital' because it takes time to develop, and because it can lead to on-going positive benefits for the community.

other activities such as volunteering and helping others. This pattern was true both for men and women. The authors conclude:

'The data indicate that for both men and women, engagement in do-it-yourself activities is significantly related to life satisfaction.'

Other researchers have looked at the relationship between gardening and life satisfaction, using the British Household Panel Survey. This is a large-scale and regular survey, which at that time reached a representative sample of 9000 adults throughout Great Britain. They found that the 48% of people who worked in their garden at least once per month had higher life satisfaction than those that did so less often or not at all. Like with the DIY study in the USA, this positive impact was significant even after controlling for a range of demographic factors, including employment status, income, working hours, age, and level of education.⁵ The effect was almost twice as big as the effect of income on life satisfaction.⁶

“Gardening is associated with a significant increase in overall life satisfaction, engagement, vitality, sense of competence, and many social measures.”

Learning practical skills

People who do practical things like gardening and DIY have higher wellbeing. We would therefore expect that learning practical skills and using them more would lead to people's wellbeing increasing. We analysed the data from a set of projects funded by the Big Lottery Fund Wellbeing Programme where beneficiaries learnt or practiced practical gardening or cookery skills, to assess the impacts of these projects in terms of overall wellbeing.

As can be seen for gardening in Figure 1, there were multiple significant impacts on wellbeing, including on overall life satisfaction as well as engagement (feeling immersed in whatever you are doing), sense of competence, and many social measures. Similar results were seen for cookery projects.

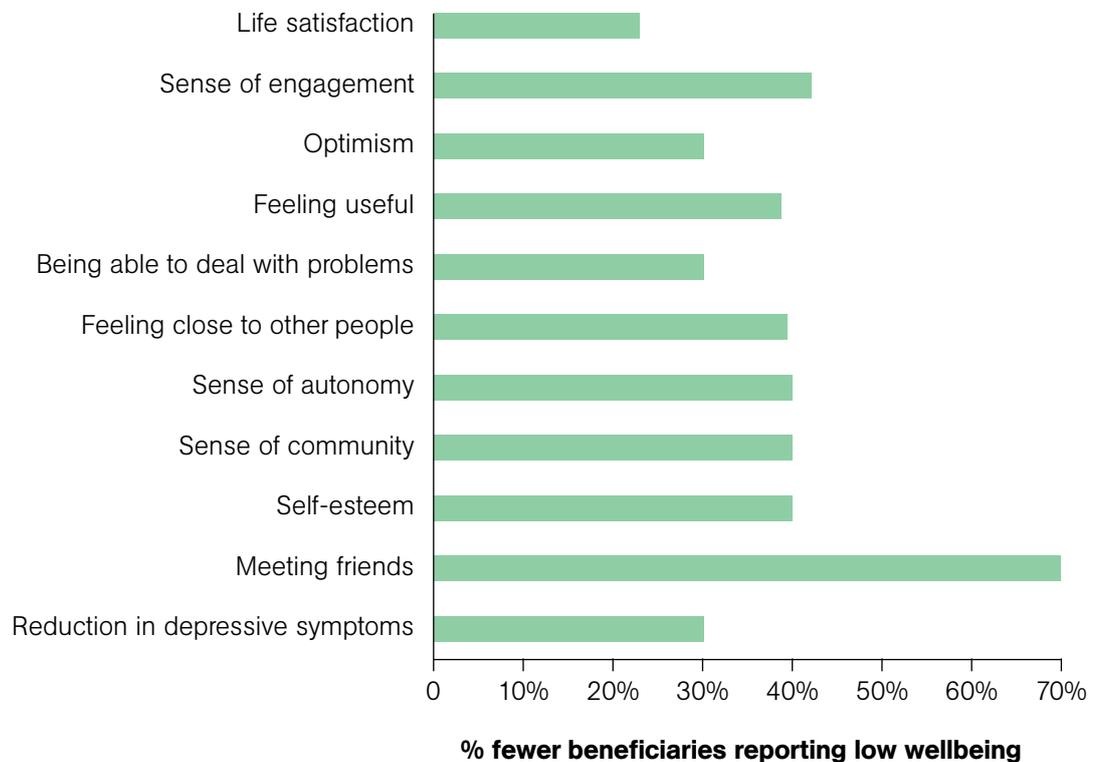
In most cases, impacts were sustained at least three to six months after a project had finished. For example, life satisfaction remained 0.7 points higher on a scale of 0 to 10 for both projects involving cookery and gardening.

These are very big impacts. Analysis of the British Household Panel Survey, which asked people about their wellbeing from year to year, shows that, for a person's life satisfaction to increase that much through increased income alone, their income would have to *triple*.

“If you were to find two people with the same age, income, and education level, the one that spent more time doing DIY would likely have higher life satisfaction.”

Figure 1: Wellbeing improvements associated with gardening projects in Big Lottery Fund Wellbeing Programme

Percentages represent the reduction in numbers of beneficiaries' experiencing low wellbeing for each aspect of wellbeing



And the impacts compared favourably with other projects within the Big Lottery Fund Wellbeing Programme. Out of 20 projects for which there were large enough samples, two of the top three projects in terms of increasing life satisfaction involved endowing participants with skills, specifically cookery and gardening. This suggests that learning skills is a particularly effective method of increasing life satisfaction.

This evidence shows that people who learn and/or have practical skills have higher wellbeing. Our work also explores the question of how that happens, and how these skills lead to community empowerment outcomes as well as individual benefits. In the following section we explore some of the evidence for the pathways from practical skill-learning and skill-sharing activities to these important impacts.

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How learning and sharing practical skills enhances community and individual wellbeing

Learning, using, and sharing practical skills...

1 ... builds self-esteem and a sense of competence

*'It looks great and I did it myself! It feels great!'*⁷

Learning practical skills has the immediate effect of increasing a sense of competence and self-esteem. Rosenberg's (2011) analysis of the personal narratives of members of an online home improvement hobby forum called Our House DIY-Club, from which the quote above comes, found that the acquisition of practical DIY skills creates a sense of accomplishment, as individuals can 'bask in the glory, pleasure and material manifestation of their efforts'.⁸

*'When I start something new, it is like climbing a hill. I want to do this. I want to say that I did it. I think it is more like I want to say with confidence that I did that, that I can do that... I like the idea of having the confidence and knowing that I can do it by myself.'*⁹

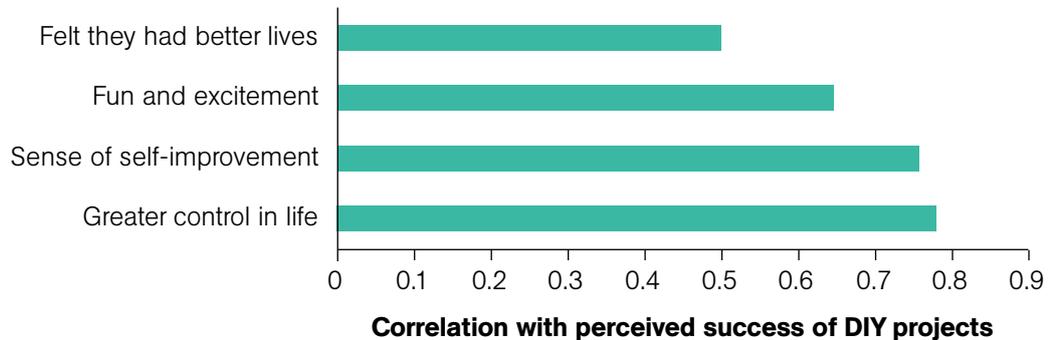
Research on the impact of skill-learning interventions carried out by the charity Crisis for homeless people found that 58% of interviewees reported that the scheme built their confidence and self-esteem, leading on to other improved outcomes, such as a reduction in substance misuse and improved mental health.¹⁰

Once people have learnt practical skills, the use of those skills continues to contribute to self-esteem and a sense of competence:

*'You feel a sense of achievement. Also, and this continues to this day, sometimes you go out and think – wow, I built this... Doing these kinds of things always make me realise the things one can do.'*¹¹

Sharing one's skills is also particularly valuable for self-esteem. The concept of timebanking emerged from a recognition that being volunteered 'at' can reduce self-esteem and lead people to see themselves simply as being a drain on others. Timebanking ensures reciprocity and provides opportunities for people to help others and feel valued. An evaluation of a timebank in Wales, where people shared their skills found that 66% of participants reported increased self-esteem as a result.¹²

Figure 2: Individuals who have perceived their DIY projects as being successful report a number of positive feelings



2... contributes to sense of control and identity

The study of a small but representative sample of 245 Americans who carry out some DIY found a strong correlation between completing DIY tasks and sense of control (Figure 2).¹³

When considered in a social context, this sense of control is also associated with a sense of pride and identity. Skills can make people 'who they are'.¹⁴ Marketing researchers Marco Wold and Shaun McQuitty identify four aspects of identity development associated with DIY:

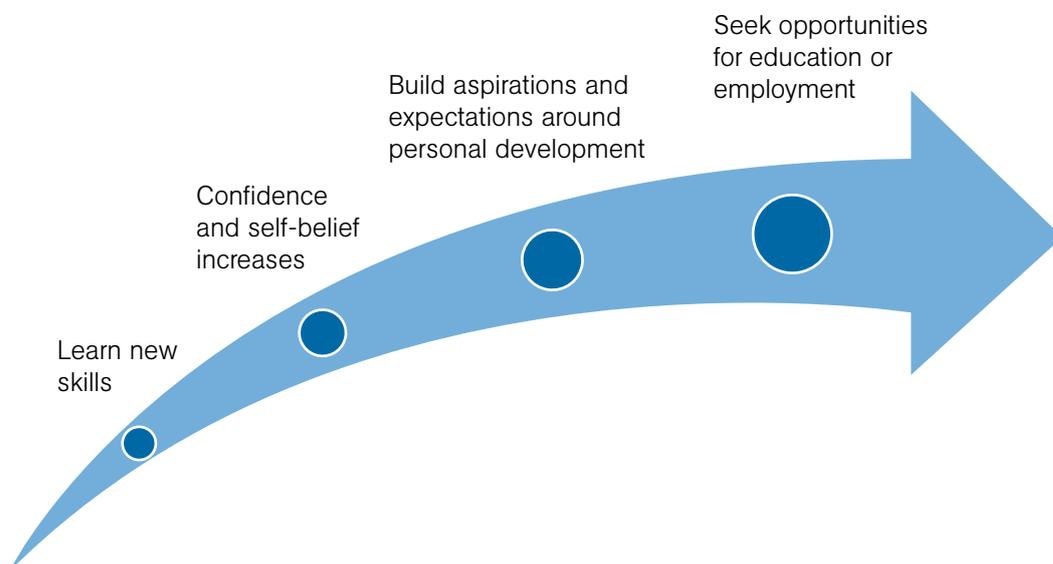
- **Feeling a sense of empowerment**
- **Building a sense of identity as a craftsmen**
- **Feeling like one is part of a community of DIY enthusiasts**
- **Satisfying the need to be unique from others.**¹⁵

3... can lead to employment

Unsurprisingly, many people have pointed to the benefits of having practical skills in terms of increasing employability.¹⁶ Research by the UK Government's Social Exclusion Unit has found that the increase in confidence associated with learning skills can also increase aspirations – which in turn encourages people to seek education or employment. This finding is supported by research into the potential benefits of learning and possessing skills for homeless people, the findings of which are summarised in the pathway in Figure 3.¹⁷

“The increase in confidence associated with learning skills can also increase aspirations – which in turn encourages people to seek education or employment.”

Figure 3: The pathway from learning skills to education or employment



4 ... saves money

The application of practical skills means that individuals are simply able to 'do more' and spend their money on other things.¹⁸ This has material impacts in terms of providing people with an opportunity to save money:

*'DIY activities can contribute to a higher standard of living by redistributing resources within the household, that is, income does not have to be spent on professional help and is available for other purchases.'*¹⁹

This is illustrated by a quote from a series of in-depth interviews with DIY enthusiasts in the USA, when one participant commented:

*'The estimate for the bathroom was between \$3000 and \$4000, but we did it for less than \$1000. The money we saved we can use for something else like upgraded appliances or fixtures we wouldn't have money for otherwise.'*²⁰

Several studies have found that saving money is one of the key motivating factors spurring individuals to undertake DIY activities.²¹

5 ... fosters relationships and builds social cohesion

We found much evidence of relationships being formed in contexts where people learnt new skills. For example, as a result of a project where participants learnt cooking and gardening skills:

*'The friendships formed within the group now extend beyond growing fresh food as group members organise group bike rides and trips and attended the Growing Food for Life celebratory event.'*²²

Skill-sharing networks provide an even stronger opportunity for such ties. The evidence from the Welsh timebank showed that 72% of participants noticed an improved sense of community.²³

The relationships built in these contexts can be an important form of bridging capital – linking people from different backgrounds – which can increase social cohesion. The evaluation of a timebank in South East London found evidence that it brought together members of the community, helping friendships and mutual respect to be forged where there was previously a prominent racial divide.²⁴

6... drives community empowerment

*'I'm also doing things in the neighbourhood like mowing lawns and keeping things nice... I'm retired and can be active and be outside.'*²⁵

Practical skills learnt by an individual can also benefit the community. A survey of 140 learners of practical skills carried out by the UK government's Learning and Skills Development Agency, found that one in four learners reported increased involvement in social, voluntary or community activities as a result of their learning experience.²⁶

A report by the Department for Education and Employment, the forerunner to the Department for Education and Skills, also found a community-level benefit of informal learning (that is, learning which takes place outside of the formal setting of a school or institution). For example, skills learned for house building were used to produce new or improved housing for the community.²⁷ In skill-sharing networks, participants begin to feel more like part of a group, rather than a collection of individuals, encouraging more community-directed activities.

Wellbeing benefits for staff

In the context of community activities being supported by private sector organisations, there is also the opportunity for benefits in terms of staff wellbeing. Research has developed a good understanding of the key factors that help create high wellbeing in the workplace. Community activities address many of these factors including:

- Perceptions that one's organisation and one's job creates social value.
- Sense of autonomy.
- Opportunities for positive social interaction.

In turn, there is also plenty of evidence that high staff wellbeing leads to benefits for businesses, including greater staff loyalty, higher customer satisfaction, and reduced absenteeism.²⁸⁻³⁰

Lessons for the future

The first lesson from our research is that projects where people have the opportunity to learn or share practical skills are valuable and worth doing.

There is evidence that learning and sharing practical skills can lead to the improvement of the personal wellbeing of all involved – the people learning skills, the people teaching skills, the people being helped out in their home, and the people doing the helping out.

There is also good evidence that these activities can lead to increases in social capital in the wider community, including greater trust and cohesion, opportunities for reciprocity and sharing, increased pro-social behaviour and civic engagement, and the formation of bridging capital – those social ties which create bridges *between* community members who might not otherwise interact.

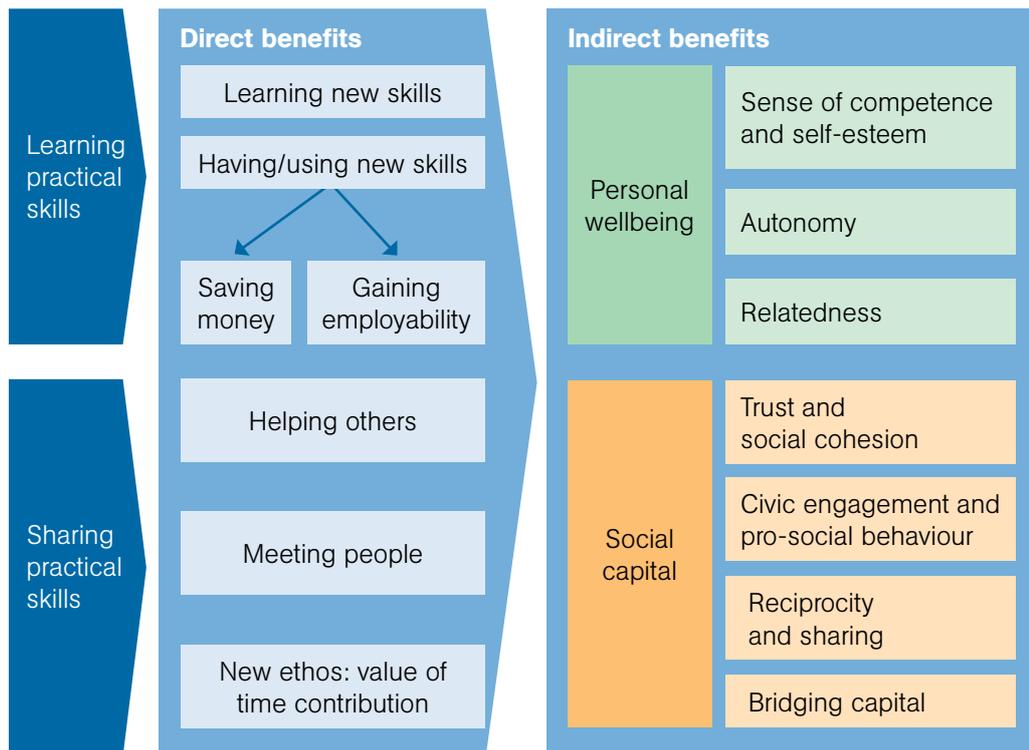
“Businesses connected to these activities have the potential to play an important stewardship role, in terms of preserving and spreading skills which can deliver multiple benefits to society.”

Based on the analysis of the Big Lottery Fund Wellbeing Programme, the wellbeing boost associated with participating in skill-learning activities was equivalent to the effect one would expect with a tripling of household income. The impacts of learning and sharing practical skills should be recognised, measured and nurtured by actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Perhaps, as French social entrepreneur Etienne Hayem suggests, businesses connected to these activities have the potential to play an important stewardship role, in terms of preserving and spreading skills which can deliver multiple benefits to society. That’s an important responsibility.

The Hands-on communities model

The Hands-on communities model (Figure 4) illustrates the pathways through which wellbeing and community impacts are achieved, and can serve as a tool for understanding these impacts.

Figure 4: How learning and sharing practical skills helps to empower people and communities



Principles for developing future practical skills activities

Achieving maximum individual and community benefit from learning and sharing practical skills cannot be taken as a given: activities need to be designed purposefully from the beginning. That's why we've developed five practical principles for how to maximise that benefit.

1. Mix it up

It's all too easy for people to spend all their time with people like themselves. Activities based on sharing and learning new skills offer some opportunity to mix things up and for people to meet those who they might not otherwise meet. This creates *bridging social capital* which creates long-term benefit for all involved, including building trust, reducing tensions, and helping people feel like part of a wider community.

2. Give and take

Community organisations and businesses striving to create a positive impact often assume that the best thing they can do is to 'give' something to people with needs. However, for people to flourish, they need to feel that they, too, can contribute positively to society, by giving and by sharing their own assets – this is the core of the idea of co-production which has been enjoying growing popularity.

3. Joy in learning

Learning can be fun. Both children and adults who have opportunities to learn, particularly outside of formal education, have higher wellbeing. Furthermore, the extent to which learning is enjoyable has an impact on how effective that learning is. Some would even go as far as to say that learning should be 'hidden' from those learning – so that learners feel that the activities they are involved in are about something other than learning.

4. Relish the challenge

Setting people up to fail, by giving them a task that is too hard, is demoralising and lowers self-esteem. But providing them with a challenge, and pushing them to test themselves, can be valuable for building self-esteem and confidence. For DIY, the feeling of success from completing a project that requires new skills and presents a challenge is one of the key pathways through which wellbeing is impacted positively.

5. From me to we

How can those organising skill-learning and skill-sharing activities ensure that the positive impact of the skills learnt and shared there can spread further into the community? The challenge is to move from 'me' to 'we', so that people participating in such programmes see the skills they learn as assets for the community as a whole, not just for themselves. Practical skills are ideal for this, because they can be used to provide positive impacts in communities, for example through the improvement and decoration of community spaces or supporting people unable to do their own DIY.

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