

Participants' perspectives on the social bonding and wellbeing effects of creative arts adult education classes

Eiluned Pearce

Social & Evolutionary Neuroscience Research Group, Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, 9 South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3UD, UK, eiluned.pearce@psy.ox.ac.uk, 01865 271367

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Robin Dunbar for helping to plan the project, Jacques Launay, Rafael Wlodarski, Meg Hughes, Anna Machin and Bronwyn Tarr for assisting with data collection, and Anna Machin and Jacques Launay for providing feedback on this paper. The adult education classes were funded and organised by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), including through a grant awarded to them by the Rayne Foundation. I am grateful to the WEA staff involved, especially Howard Croft and Cathie Zara, and the learners and tutors who participated. The research was supported by an ERC Advanced Investigator grant (295663) awarded to Robin Dunbar. The author declares no competing interests. Ethics approval for this study was provided by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford (reference: MSD-IDREC-C1-2013-148).

Participants' perspectives on the social bonding and wellbeing effects of creative arts adult education classes

Abstract

Background: Evidence suggests that adult education classes have a positive impact on wellbeing, but whether this is true for all course activities is unknown.

Methods: A UK adult education charity ran four singing classes, two craft classes and a creative writing class for the purpose of this study. Written responses to open questions about health, wellbeing and social lives were collected from participants at the end of the 7-month courses.

Results: The classes enhanced wellbeing by improving mood and providing a sense of belonging. The classes helped participants develop self-confidence, create and strengthen relationships, and encouraged more active lives. Participants valued meeting people from their community and used these ties to access information about local opportunities. However, some participants reported negative experiences linked to unfavourable self-other comparison.

Conclusions: These results highlight how regular adult education classes involving creativity can enhance wellbeing and help community integration regardless of the subject studied.

Key words

self-efficacy, social capital, mental health

Background

Increasing public and governmental concern about the prevalence of mental and physical ill-health, and the associated personal, social and economic costs, has led to an emphasis on finding ways to improve individuals' wellbeing (e.g. De Feo, Barrett, Edwards, Hurst, & Green, 2014; Michaelson, Mahony, & Schifferes, 2012; Naylor et al., 2012; Windle, Francis, & Coomber, 2011). Consequently, much research is now focusing on assessing the outcomes of different activities in terms of how they make people feel, function, and evaluate their lives. One of the areas under study has been adult education, which encourages continued, 'lifelong', learning after compulsory schooling has been completed, either for pleasure (informal 'learning for fun' that does not involve accreditation but allows individuals to gain new skills) or to gain qualifications. For example, older adults who engage in informal education such as art or music groups and evening classes, or are members of sports clubs, have significantly higher levels of wellbeing than those who do not (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2014). Better health and wellbeing is associated both with having strong intimate connections with partners and close kin, and having a more extensive range of 'weak' social ties through membership of a broader group (e.g. Haslam, Cruwys, & Haslam, 2014; Koball, Moiduddin, Henderson, Goesling, & Besculides, 2010). Consequently, attendance of adult education classes and groups might particularly promote health and wellbeing through enlarging a participant's circle of acquaintances, with the potential for these to become closer friends over time.

Although Jenkins and Mostafa (2014) found that informal education is associated with greater wellbeing, these authors did not focus on distinguishing between the effects of different types of informal education activities. Consequently, so far it is

unknown whether some types of creative adult education activities promote wellbeing more effectively than others. For instance, if someone wishes to improve their wellbeing, broadly speaking would they be better off learning to sing or learning to make crafts? There is accumulating evidence that community singing leads to improved health and wellbeing (Clift, Nicol, Raisbeck, Whitmore, & Morrison, 2010; Coulton, Clift, Skingley, & Rodriguez, 2015; Judd & Pooley, 2014), but the same seems to be true of other creative activities (Eschleman, Madsen, Alarcon, & Barelka, 2014; Leckey, 2011; Perruzza & Kinsella, 2010; Pöllänen, 2015). This paper presents the qualitative results of a study that aimed to compare the effects of community-based ‘creative arts’ adult education classes in singing, creative writing and crafts over the course of 7 months, in order to explore whether musical and non-musical activities yield the same impact on learners’ social lives and wellbeing. These classes were ‘community-based’ in that they were not provided by an educational institution and took place in community venues, and involved the ‘creative arts’ in that they aimed to teach people to produce something new and valued (Mumford, 2003). The classes were also ‘informal’ in that they did not lead to accreditation or qualifications but were attended for pleasure. Correspondingly, it should be borne in mind that the classes examined here represent a subset of the wide spectrum of ‘adult education’ viewed as a whole.

Learners participating in the study completed questionnaires before and after their classes at three timepoints across their 7-month courses: month 1 (timepoint 1), month 3 (timepoint 2) and month 7 (timepoint 3). These questionnaires comprised quantitative scales assessing self-reported health, wellbeing and social bonding to their classmates, as well as their demographic profile. Although most questions were

answered once per timepoint (that is, either before or after class), scales measuring ‘mood’ and ‘closeness to the class group’ were completed both before and after the classes, allowing change across the class to be calculated (Author et al 2015). At timepoints 1 and 2, only quantitative data on health, wellbeing and social bonding were collected. At timepoint 3, in addition to the quantitative scales asked before and after the class, participants were also asked to provide written responses to open questions about their experiences across the 7-month courses in the questionnaire completed after their class. The additional open questions included at timepoint 3 were designed to provide ‘qualitative analogues’ of the quantitative scales used at all three timepoints (see Methods), in order to assess participants’ perceptions of any changes in their health, wellbeing and social lives.

The quantitative results of this study have been outlined elsewhere, and suggest that singing bonds the group more quickly than the other activities (Author et al 2015). However, by the end of the seven-month-long courses, participants in each of the classes felt similarly bonded to their group as a whole and did not differ statistically in their self-reported mental and physical health and wellbeing (Author et al 2015, Author et al, under review). Thus, although the quantitative measures uncovered different patterns of social bonding between the different types of activity, the levels of bonding and wellbeing achieved at the end of these interventions were similarly improved. These findings suggest that the opportunity to meet people regularly and frequently may be sufficient to create social cohesion and improved wellbeing for group members.

However, the quantitative data were limited to predefined measures and may have missed unexpected outcomes identified by the participants themselves. In the current paper, I concentrate on how the participant learners retrospectively expressed the impact of the classes on their self-perception, their social lives, and their wellbeing. To this end, I present thematic analysis of responses given to open questions at the end of the study (month 7), which provide a richer account of the perceived impact of the classes on the learners. I supplement these data with observations reported by the learners' tutors. Although I aimed to compare singers and non-singers in accordance with the associated quantitative analysis, participants of all three types of activity touched on the majority of the themes identified in the qualitative data. I therefore concentrate on elucidating these common themes, rather than on a comparison between the different types of class activities.

Method

Objective

The objective of this paper is to draw out common themes focusing on the perceived psychological and physical health, wellbeing and social outcomes of attending creative arts adult education classes.

Participants & setting

Participants (89 of the total 135 participants provided qualitative data, sub-sample Age: range = 33-83 years, $M = 58$, $SD = 12$; 79 female; 91% white ethnicity) chose to attend one of seven day-time courses set up for the purpose of the study by a UK-based adult education charity, provided free of charge and led by professional tutors. The four singing courses, two crafts courses and one creative writing course consisted

of weekly classes running over seven months, with a two-week break in the middle. Each 2-hour class incorporated a short tea break. The weekly classes took place in community settings such as a public library or community centre. Participants were recruited by the charity from the local population and a number of the courses ran in economically deprived areas. Previous research has suggested that it is fairly well educated individuals who are more likely to engage in adult learning opportunities (e.g. Duckworth & Cara, 2012), and this was also true for this sample, 92% of whom had gained qualifications at least to A-level standard or equivalent (Figure 1). Full written informed consent was given by both the learners and tutors at the start of the study, and they were debriefed at the end. Learners are referred to here as ‘participants’ because they were the focus of the study and the tutors were asked about their observations of their learners, rather than their own experiences of the classes.

[Figure 1 near here]

Procedures

Questionnaires were completed before and after the classes at three timepoints (timepoint 1: month 1, timepoint 2: month 3, and timepoint 3: month 7). At timepoint 1, participants were given written information sheets about the study as well as verbal instructions by the researcher, using a standard script. Participants were told that the research project aimed to look at whether attending adult education classes affected people’s health and wellbeing, but were not informed that the focus was on social engagement or about the hypotheses regarding differences between singers and non-singers. At each of the three timepoints, the researcher distributed the before- and

after-class questionnaires as a single pack before the start of the class. The participants were asked not to look at these until instructed to do so by the researcher, who was present while the participants individually filled in their questionnaires. Participants were asked not to talk and not to share their answers with each other while filling in their own questionnaires, which were completed on clipboards that could be angled to maximize privacy. Qualitative data in the form of written responses to open questions (Table 1) were collected as part of a questionnaire completed after the class at timepoint 3, at the end of the 7-month courses (questionnaires at timepoints 1 and 2 contained only quantitative scales). Participants were not reminded of the aim of the research at this third timepoint, when the qualitative data presented here were collected.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires at all three timepoints included quantitative questions that asked participants to rate scales measuring their mental and physical health, wellbeing, mood and feelings of closeness to their classmates. In addition, open questions were included in the after-class questionnaire at timepoint 3. These were designed to provide ‘qualitative analogues’ of the quantitative scales. For instance, items from the RAND 36-SF scale (McHorney, Ware Jr., & Raczek, 1993; Ware Jr. & Sherbourne, 1992) were used to quantitatively measure emotional/mental and physical health-related quality of life, so open questions asked whether participants thought that attending the classes had affected their quality of life and physical health (Table 1). Additional quantitative scales were used to assess psychological health (PHQ9 and GAD7: Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001; Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006) and wellbeing (Flourishing scale and SWLS: Diener et al., 2010; Diener,

Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and further open questions reflected this (Table 1). Similarly, the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale was used to quantify how close each participant felt towards their class as a whole before and after each class (based on Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), and the short-form Positive And Negative Affect Scale (Thompson, 2007) was used to assess mood before and after each class. Corresponding open questions asked participants, respectively, if they had noticed a change in the social engagement within their classes over the 7-month course and were asked whether they felt different after the class compared to beforehand (Table 1). To capture any effects not considered by the researcher, participants were asked whether anything about their involvement in the classes had surprised them. Another question aimed to elicit any perceptions of improved self-confidence as a result of the classes, something of particular interest to the collaborating charity.

[Table 1 near here]

Analysis

Thematic analysis initially consisted of familiarization with the material through repeated reading of all the responses to all the open questions, in order to identify commonly recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Machin, 2015). Particular attention was paid to social interaction within and beyond the classes and the confidence felt by participants in relation to socialising. A number of sub-themes were identified within these overarching themes (Table 2). The data were coded in relation to these sub-themes for each stimulus question separately. These themes and sub-themes were derived from the material under study, rather than from previous literature. Several iterations of examining the responses to each question and

adjusting the sub-themes accordingly were undertaken in order to code the responses, until all the responses to each question were covered by a sub-theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Machin, 2015). Since this research aimed to identify perceived changes associated with adult education classes, thematic coding was limited to responses where participants reported a change, ignoring comments such as ‘no effect’ or ‘no change’, which were generally linked to participants reporting that they already had a busy social life or schedule of activities and had a high level of health and well-being, and thus the classes had no additional effect: in other words, they felt that these areas of their lives could not improve. The responses linked to each sub-theme were then collated independently of the stimulus questions and were checked for internal consistency and for differentiation from the other sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Machin, 2015). The numbers of participants who gave responses represented by each sub-theme are given in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

Additional material from tutors

The seven tutors were also asked to provide written responses to open questions (Table 1). Where relevant, tutor comments are presented in the results section to support themes emerging from learners’ reports. However, the main focus of the study was how the participants’ felt the classes had affected them, if at all, so tutor responses regarding their observations of their learners were not systematically coded but were used to corroborate the themes identified from the participants’ responses.

Results

(Re)Connecting to the self

Participants related that the classes had helped them discover new, or rediscover forgotten, aspects of themselves.

[I feel] happier & much more confident - myself, at last! [Female, 61 years old, singer]

I want to do much more. I am quite an artistic person, despite also being an accountant. Writing the poem for the group has reminded me that I used to write quite a lot of poems and I think I would like to find time to do more.
[Female, 49 years old, singer]

In addition, several participants reported that they were coming to like themselves more. Generally, this was a product of the support and praise of others, the realisation that they had something of value to offer and that they were doing something ‘worthwhile’ that offered a ‘new direction’.

I have been pleased to find out that people see me as a nice person. I have been thanked for my sensitivity and empathy, told I would be missed if I couldn't attend...told I have a lovely voice...It has given me the belief that I am a good person who has something to positively contribute to others just by being myself. I have developed transferable skills, which make me feel that I am capable of increasing my intelligence! [Female, 65 years old, singer]

Participants enjoyed the ‘time out’ to be themselves, which helped them ‘tackle whatever came my way’ [Female, 35 years old, crafter] in re-entering their normal routines.

[I feel] more relaxed after a class, other things in life such as work related issues, children and family worries are forgotten for 3 hours! I get to be 'me' again. [Female, 33 years old, creative writer]

Having the opportunity to reassess their lives was particularly important for a few participants who were experiencing a transition, such as moving to a new area, overcoming health problems or retirement. For example, a 60-year-old creative writer explained that, for him,

These classes have come at a very important, watershed time in my life. They have increased my self-confidence and therefore made me feel better about myself and my prospects. Therefore they have improved my quality of life.

Developing confidence

Participants reported that they exceeded their expectations regarding their achievements and their ability to learn. Participants also discovered that they already possessed ‘innate’ capacities, such as having a ‘sense of rhythm’ [Female, 66 years old, singer], and found the confidence to explore on their own, for instance buying books on crafts to ‘develop my own creations’ [Female, 62 years old, crafter]. For example, one singer wrote:

I've sung on my own, and I've written a tune to go with the poem [a classmate] wrote about the group. I've let my voice be loud, and I've known I've been in tune. All these things have allowed me to feel good myself. I don't want to stop having music in my life, and will continue to attend at least [the tutor's] Saturday morning sessions. [Female, 66 years old]

Having the confidence to sing loudly is a sentiment echoed by several singers who stated that the class had given them 'a voice', suggesting that the classes developed their self-confidence and assertiveness, allowing them to express themselves:

I surprised myself today [when I improvised a solo] - I didn't realise there was a voice in there and it needed to come out. It's been so cramped for so long. To have people in tears! That only happens on Broadway. It was amazing. [Female, 48 years old, singer]

Along a similar vein, a creative writer talked about the benefit of being aided to 'speak one's truth'. As well as increased confidence in what they had already achieved, participants often stated that these classes had encouraged them to have more confidence to 'have a go' when approaching new challenges more generally.

I had always had an inkling that I could sing a little but had lacked the confidence in my own abilities or musicality and needed the affirmation from someone who "knew what they were talking about" to give myself the boost to try. I now know that if I was right about this then I may be right about other

things I might be able to do but doubt myself over. [Female, 41 years old, singer]

In some cases the new-found confidence extended to participants taking the initiative in pursuing further opportunities, such as volunteering and running their own classes. One of the learners set up a yoga class that was then attended by some of her singing classmates. Another participant set up her own craft session after facilitating the group during a period of tutor absence:

...After the 1st tutor left the course there was a gap between the 2nd tutor starting so I bought some craft activities for the group and helped them learn new crafts. This led me to becoming a volunteer at another class and also to setting up my own group for adults with learning difficulties. My volunteering has now led to a paid position as a learner support worker, I start in September. [Female, 39 years old, crafter]

In a third case, a participant started volunteering in her local school. As her tutor put it:

Another singer who had been very low and anxious not leaving the house now goes out again even volunteering in schools helping pupils with reading, she's become a centre point in the social group. [Singing tutor]

More generally, a number of participants described how they were initially hesitant about interacting with others, but that over the course of seven months they grew

more confident and lost their inhibitions, taking the initiative to engage with their classmates. For example,

[...]I am usually quite shy of speaking to new people but over the 28 weeks I have found new friendships & am much more confident in approaching others.

[unknown demographics, singer]

A small number of participants reported that they enjoyed playing a role in the class group: their presence mattered. Interestingly, only singers made these comments.

I see myself as able to be part of a group and also part of a choir. [Female, 48 years old, singer]

The latter comment suggests a shift in social identity from a ‘group that sings’ to ‘choir’, a term that culturally denotes some expertise in singing and implies confidence not only in herself, but also in her group.

(Re)Connecting to others in the group

Belonging, support & reinforcing existing relationships

Participants generally reported creating friendships, belonging to a group and a sense of support in their classes, both from their tutors and from the other participants. As one singing tutor reported:

I'm aware of a strong group energy that's developed during the course and from the music-related stories people have brought and the personal nature of

some of them that deep connections have been made that can only enhance people's sense of safety and belonging. People have taken risks in singing solo, bringing songs that have important significance for them and songs they've written themselves. This indicates a growing confidence in their innate musicality and the joy that brings in coming together in trust with others.

The fact that the classes were newly formed enabled the individuals who might otherwise have found social interaction difficult to feel included, meaning that they had a positive experience of the group and no longer 'feared rejection and isolation' [Female, 61 years old, singer].

I have understood that I can join in. The case of the group has been that we all started together, there was no already formed group. This made it much easier to join in. [unknown demographics, singer]

As well as meeting new people, three individuals who joined with others they already knew reported that attending the class together had strengthened existing ties, for example:

[The class] has enhanced the relationship I have with my mum as we originally joined together and I came to support her as I was already a member of another choir and it was just to help support and encourage her.

[Female, 43 years old, singer]

Expanding local networks & bringing together diversity

The classes also provided a means to create new connections and participants enjoyed recognizing people from their class in their local area:

[...]It's lovely to meet someone I know from the singing group when I'm in town - it brightens my day to see a friendly face, even if we are too busy to stop and chat. [Female, 66 years old, singer.]

A number of classmates were also communicating and meeting outside of the classes and several comments refer to taking part in local events or activities together, such as the local Art Week and classes in other subjects, as well as meeting for social meals and charity events.

The classes enabled interaction across a diverse section of the local population, who might not have engaged with each other socially otherwise. As one tutor said:

[...] several of the students were very reserved & self contained but have really come out of their shells. There is a mix of students of very different social backgrounds and a range of ages and it has worked really well. The more experienced crafters have been great at helping the less experienced/confident. [Craft tutor]

Participants enjoyed interacting with a range of people of different ages, genders and cultures, and were surprised at how well they got on:

People I thought I might not have anything in common with[, I] found out I have! [Female, 68 years old, singer.]

The word ‘interesting’ was used by several participants in relation to this sub-theme, suggesting that participants found learning about the lives of others and gaining novel perspectives stimulating and thought-provoking. The positive experience of meeting new people from a range of backgrounds seems to be linked to participants becoming ‘less insular or self absorbed’ [Female, 47 years old, singer], and developing attitudes of openness, understanding and tolerance:

[...]different perspectives on life don't jar with me as much as they may have done previously. [Female, 75 years old, singer]

Other participants reported being on the receiving end of this openness, in terms of feeling accepted ‘as I am’ [Female, 60 years old, creative writer.].

Sharing information & perspectives

The classes also provided a platform for classmates to share information about local events, and a pool of people with similar interests with whom to share these experiences.

Encouraged to try new activities both through the stimulus and also through knowing what activities others do. Also, met some people with whom I will go to other activities. [Female, 67 years old, singer.]

Participants found learning skills from their classmates valuable and enjoyable:

I had things to learn about writing as I developed a great respect for the way others performed. [Female, 81 years old, creative writer]

Sharing of ideas and advice did not necessarily relate to the subject being studied and through discussing life events, opinions and experiences with new people, participants gained fresh perspectives that helped them reassess themselves and their lives.

...I really look forward to [the day of the class] and feel a sense of belonging. I have met some very wise people who have made me look at things differently and feel happier. [Female, 60 years old, singer.]

Negative experiences and sub-structuring

Although the vast majority of comments were positive, three participants voiced a feeling of separation or viewed themselves negatively in comparison with their own expectations or with others. For instance, one female singer felt isolated as a result of her unusually low voice:

I still see myself as "class clown", but the fact is that my "low alto" voice makes me stand out from the girls - I would love to be soprano. [Female, 71 years old, singer]

Another participant reported negative reactions to the classes arising through comparison with her classmates, who to her seemed happier and to have more time to

do what they wanted. The same theme arose in a number of her responses to different questions. For example,

In some ways it has made me feel more excluded, as I have not been able to socialise with members of the class due to pressures of work etc. I find I am envious of people who seem to have time to do what I would like to be doing if my life was going better for me. [Female, 49 years old, singer]

The group context leaves open the possibility of negative self-other comparison, and the pressures one is feeling may become more salient by contrast with one's perceptions of others' lives, particularly if everyone else appears to be having a good time.

It is also worth noting that the nature of singing in 'parts' led to some sub-structuring within the singing classes, although this was not regarded as negative. For example:

...I am an alto and we club together. [Female, unknown age, singer]

Notice here that being a female with a lower voice is not considered a problem, but rather a badge of honour that marks out a group of similar women. The difference with the previous respondent is likely linked to the number of women expressing this trait and the resulting individual perceptions of inclusion or isolation.

A similar sense of getting to know only a few others in the class was associated with habitual seating patterns, which meant repeated interactions only with one's proximate neighbours:

Having found a position in the 'male section' [where a number of the men habitually seated themselves] of the class, (due to placing myself in a good hearing spot), I have got to know 3 blokes in the class a bit better. [Female, 62 years old, creative writer]

Additional sub-structuring within the groups occurred in terms of participants reporting liking 'some more than others' or disliking certain individuals.

Consequently, although most participants reported their class groups as a whole becoming 'closer' or 'friendlier' over time, individuals did not necessarily get to know every group member equally well or as positively.

Mood & physical effects

The classes generally had a positive effect on mood. Participants reported a mixture of increased energy (energized, uplifted, inspired, enthusiastic and confident) and fulfillment (contented, relaxed, and a sense of wellbeing). On the negative side, a few participants reported feeling exhausted or drained, though normally they had enjoyed the session despite this, suggesting that the tiredness resulted from the energy and concentration required.

My mood is generally improved. Sometimes I will attend feeling on an even keel, sometimes I will be suffering significant drop in mood, but without fail I

feel better leaving than when I walked in. It's hard to know whether that is due to the act of singing (required breathing, focus and concentration and therefore being a mindful distraction) or whether the active support of the group lifts me. I personally feel that the two act together with a synergy which is particularly effective. [Female, 41 years old, singer]

The warm-ups used in the singing classes were often reported to relax and loosen the body. One singer reported that she was sleeping better and another said that he could stand up for longer without back pain. Moreover, one singing tutor reported that

One student who has a physical degenerative condition is able to handwrite after the session.

Ripples beyond the class

Several participants reported that they had integrated what they were learning into their everyday lives, for example through making gifts, teaching their children to craft, singing to their grandchildren, or keeping themselves occupied whilst travelling.

The new skill I have learned I can show my children that are simple for them to learn, which they enjoyed doing. [Female, 44 years old, crafter]

Their new interests thus reinforced their social connections outside the classes, and some participants reported that they were encouraging others to take up the activity too, potentially spreading the effects of these classes through their community. As well as integrating new interests into their lives, the classes inadvertently encouraged

healthier routines. Those participants who thought that the classes impacted on their physical health generally reported an indirect influence through improved motivation and psychological health, or that it was a side-effect of being more active in terms of 'getting out of the house'. For instance, participants reported doing more walking, including to the class, or starting to attend a yoga course set up by one of their classmates.

By having this interest, it has prompted me to go out and buy things for my projects. Otherwise I would not have. I also show my Grandchildren things I have made and help them with it too. This gives me more exercise and energy as I feel good about doing it. [Female, 57 years old, crafter]

A few participants reported an increased use of local facilities and resources, and that having a positive experience in the venue encouraged them to go there again for other community events.

[The class] brought me into [the town where the class happened] more, especially the Library [the location of the class]. Started a routine - coffee shop/cake, shopping. Quite pleasant. Went on a knitting 1/2 day course[...] advertised in the Library. [Female, 62 years old, creative writer]

Discussion

Overall findings

These data corroborate past findings that lifelong learning enhances self-confidence and reported wellbeing (e.g. Duckworth & Cara, 2012; Field, 2011; Jenkins &

Mostafa, 2014), and further establish the claim that creative activities can benefit individuals through providing a sense of achievement and purpose, as well as a release from stress (Eschleman et al., 2014; Leckey, 2011; Perruzza & Kinsella, 2010). The classes generally enhanced positive mood, improving hedonic wellbeing, and generated a social identity and sense of purpose, thus improving eudemonic wellbeing (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). In addition, these classes were linked to increased self-efficacy (Hammond & Feinstein, 2005), health-promoting behaviours (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004), and improved social capital (e.g. Hyyppä, Mäki, Impivaara, & Aromaa, 2007; Nyqvist, Finnäs, Jakobsson, & Koskinen, 2008; Schuller & Field, 1998). These positive outcomes were identified in comments made by participants doing all three types of activity, suggesting that lifelong learning for fun can yield benefits regardless of what subject is chosen, at least if it involves the creative arts. However, this does not necessarily mean that adult education classes would improve wellbeing for everyone (Field, 2011). Indeed, some participants in this study reported negative experiences linked to self-other comparison. After outlining the major outcomes identified here (self-efficacy and health-promoting behaviours, social capital, and negative experiences), I outline the limitations and potential practical implications of the study, and suggest avenues for further research.

Self-efficacy and health-promoting behaviours

The classes helped participants develop self-confidence and gain a greater sense of control over, and satisfaction with, their lives (Hammond & Feinstein, 2005): improved confidence in their abilities and an associated willingness to attempt new challenges were outcomes that were frequently mentioned by participants (Table 2).

This is illustrated especially well by the learner who starting volunteering in her local school and the two participants who separately set up and led new classes, but is more widely demonstrated by participants taking time for themselves and deciding to pursue activities that supported their personal sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

A number of participants reported that the classes motivated them to be more active, and this may have contributed to their sense of self-mastery. The inadvertent transition to more active lifestyles ties with previous findings that adult learning is associated with improved health and greater uptake of health-promoting behaviours, such as quitting smoking and taking more exercise (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004). By giving individuals a reason to be active, adult education classes can have repercussions beyond the classroom that transform participants' lifestyles and support better mental and physical health outcomes.

Although crafters, writers and singers all reported improved self-confidence, only singers reported feeling that they played a useful role in the group. This feeling of making a distinctive contribution may have been linked to the shared goal of creating a piece of music and the associated coordination required (Koudenburg, Postmes, Gordijn, & van Mourik Broekman, 2015). In contrast, the crafters and writers worked towards individual projects. However, collaborative crafts or writing projects might have similar effects to singing in this regard and this is a productive avenue for future research (Author et al, 2015). In addition, the synchronization of sound production during singing may have created a sense of solidarity and bonding with the group through the release of neuropeptides such as β -endorphin (e.g. Koudenburg et al., 2015; Pearce, Launay, & Dunbar, 2015; Vickhoff et al., 2013). In the other classes, in

which there were more opportunities for chatting with classmates, bonding may have been linked to synchronous laughter instead (Dunbar et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2015).

Social capital

The comments collated here support previous findings that adult education tends to enhance social capital through facilitating a sense of belonging, promoting tolerance of others and providing participants with the opportunity and skills to extend their social networks (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004; Nyqvist et al., 2008; Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy, & Bynner, 2004). Indeed, along with improved mood, gaining a sense of belonging and support was the most frequently mentioned outcome reported by participants (Table 2). The classes provided a 'safe space' that supported positive social engagement, even between those who usually found social interaction difficult. It may have helped that classmates shared an interest in their respective activity, since such commonality is likely to have increased their liking of one another (Launay & Dunbar, 2015). Such classes provide a wider circle of acquaintances from diverse sub-sets of the local community who can share new information about local events and opportunities (Salo, 2009; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Moreover, if an individual does not already have a strong supportive network of close ties, for instance because they have recently moved to the area, then adult education classes provide a pool of potential friends.

The enhanced tolerance and openness to others found here and previously (Schuller et al., 2004) might arise through increased familiarity (Kaptein, Nass, Parvinen, & Markopoulos, 2013; Moreland & Beach, 1992; Moreland & Zajonc, 1982). In turn, liking of classmates from previously unfamiliar backgrounds might generalize to

others from that background (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Adult education classes, at least those in creative subjects, may thus act as a crucible of positive social mixing that spreads to the wider community, thus promoting greater community engagement, integration and cohesion. Although increased community engagement has been consistently associated with community choirs (Clift et al., 2010; Grindley, Astbury, Sharples, & Aguirre, 2011; Hillman, 2002), this relationship is likely to hold for other creative arts activities (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004).

The downside of adult education

Despite classmates becoming friendlier and closer over time, some comments indicated that habitual seating and task-groups (such as singing parts) can lead to sub-structuring within classes. However, this is not altogether unexpected given the typically hierarchical structure of human social organisation (Van Vugt & Schaller, 2008; Zhou, Sornette, Hill, & Dunbar, 2005). Nonetheless, it is worth bearing in mind that habitual seating patterns may prevent thorough social mixing within classes.

More worryingly, two participants reported negative experiences associated with self-other comparison. More work needs to be done in assessing the potential negative impact of attending adult education classes, which might include a new dissatisfaction with one's life that may not necessarily motivate positive change (see Field, 2011).

Tutors also need to be sensitive to such reactions and need support in order to manage the associated dynamics within the group.

Limitations, practical implications & future work

Participants were aware that the research aimed to explore wellbeing and health effects and one might thus expect demand characteristics in responses to open questions: learners reporting benefits to please the researcher, their tutor or the adult education provider. However, the author concentrated on identifying the specific ways in which any reported benefits were manifested. Although demand characteristics might lead participants to report that there were benefits, this would not necessarily account for the details of the effects reported. Moreover, some participants did voice negative experiences and a number reported a lack of effect in some areas, particularly in relation to physical health, suggesting that demand characteristics were not playing a role, at least for these individuals with respect to these questions. Even so, knowing that they were part of a research study may have meant that participants were more likely to be on the look out for changes than they would have been otherwise, and more likely to attribute them to the classes. Furthermore, being asked to recall and reflect on their experience retrospectively may have biased what they reported, for example due to inaccurate memories of how they felt at the start of the courses.

It is also worth noting that this analysis combined two different but linked datasets, which comprised (i) learners' perceptions of their own experiences and (ii) tutors' observations of their learners' experiences. These data were elicited using different stimulus questions (Table 1) from different samples, who would have had different motivations for, and perspectives on, their involvement in these classes. For instance, tutors may have felt more pressure than learners to emphasise benefits of the classes because their livelihood depends on advocating the activity they teach. However,

whereas individual learners might have been more concerned with their own experiences of the class, the tutors are likely to have had a wider perspective that would allow them to make observations on the overall level and quality of interaction between classmates, and the general effects of the classes. In addition, individuals often have inaccurate perceptions of themselves and the more objective perspective of the tutor could counter-balance this bias. Consequently, I argue that combining the responses of tutors and learners creates a fuller account of the effects of these classes: the tutors' observational accounts and their wider perspective complements their learners' accounts of their individual experiences. Nonetheless, future work could combine learner reports with an investigation of tutors' own experiences of facilitating classes, as well as exploring the relationship between the tutor and their learners and how this mediates their respective experiences. In addition, follow-up studies could use qualitative data to examine whether perceptions of the speed of social bonding reported by learners and tutors differs between creative activities, inline with previously reported quantitative trends (Author et al 2015).

Given these limitations, care should be taken in generalizing these results, particularly to men, who were underrepresented in this sample: 89% of the learners who responded to the open questions were female. Since other studies have uncovered differential gender effects with respect to the quality of life benefits of leisure activities, further work focusing particularly on men is required, especially to explore why fewer men tend to engage with adult education and choirs in the first place (e.g. Clift & Hancox, 2010; Hyypä et al., 2007; Salo, 2009). Another potential limitation to the generalizability of these results is that these classes were generally attended for pleasure, rather than for up-skilling or employment-related purposes (though some

individuals attending the creative writing class hoped to get published), so these findings may not relate to all categories of adult education. Moreover, the classes were all in 'creative arts' activities (in these sense of producing something new and valuable such as a painting or a piece of music), and the results may not generalise to other subjects such as computing or languages. However, despite these caveats, the findings presented here remain valid for several reasons. Firstly, the current work shows consistency both with previous work on other types of adult education and between the reported experiences of learners and the observations of their tutors. Secondly, any priming is unlikely to have dictated the exact details of the benefits reported. This being so, the similar comments from participants across the three activities suggest that many types of 'creative arts' classes for pleasure can yield marked benefits.

In many situations individuals taking up a new activity join an existing group, and this could be particularly challenging for those who lack self-confidence. In the case of these classes, the groups were newly formed, so individuals did not have to try to enter pre-existing cliques. As outlined above, at least one participant found that this aided social engagement. A possible implication arising from this is that adult education classes should not engage in rolling enrolment, but instead should use block booking for courses that run over multiple terms. Alternatively, on-going classes could adopt a buddying scheme to help ease a new individual's transition into the group. Another practical insight is that the warm-up exercises performed in the singing classes were reported to induce relaxation and consequently might be useful in other educational settings. Future studies could pilot test and evaluate such schemes.

The lack of course fees may have encouraged participation from a wider variety of individuals than would otherwise occur. It may be that in order to effectively engage the power of creative arts classes to integrate individuals from different backgrounds and translate this into enhanced involvement and engagement in the wider community (Schuller et al., 2004), funding needs to be available to subsidise all course places. This would ensure that income is not a barrier to attendance or group integration.

Conclusion

Overall, these creative arts adult education classes provided considerable benefits to participants that extended beyond the classroom. Participants felt more confident to take an assertive role in their futures, and more integrated into their local communities. Moreover, the classes allowed them to strengthen ties with close friends and family through sharing their new interests, and they enjoyed enhanced wellbeing linked both to more positive moods and a sense of belonging. Although group activities do leave open the possibility of negative self-other comparisons, in general the participants reported overwhelmingly positive outcomes of these creative arts adult education classes, irrespective of whether they were crafters, singers or writers. These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence demonstrating that participation in lifelong learning is an effective way of enhancing wellbeing.

References

- Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of other in the self scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *63*(4), 596–612. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.63.4.596>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(May 2015), 77–101. <http://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Clift, S., & Hancox, G. (2010). The significance of choral singing for sustaining psychological wellbeing: findings from a survey of choristers in England, Australia and Germany. *Music Performance Research*, *3*, 79.
- Clift, S., Nicol, J., Raisbeck, M., Whitmore, C., & Morrison, I. (2010). *Group singing, well-being and health: A systematic mapping of research evidence*. UNESCO Observatory *2*(1).
- Coulton, S., Clift, S., Skingley, a., & Rodriguez, J. (2015). Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of community singing on mental health-related quality of life of older people: randomised controlled trial. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *207*(3), 250–255. <http://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.129908>
- De Feo, D., Barrett, J., Edwards, J., Hurst, M., & Green, J. (2014). *Wellbeing & why it matters to health policy*. London, UK. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wellbeing-and-health-policy>
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *49*(1), 71–75. http://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13
- Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener,

- R. (2010). New Well-being Measures: Short Scales to Assess Flourishing and Positive and Negative Feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 97(2), 143–156.
<http://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9493-y>
- Duckworth, K., & Cara, O. (2012). The Relationship between Adult Learning and Wellbeing : Evidence from the 1958 National Child Development Study. *Department of Business Innovation & Skills Research Paper*, 94.
- Dunbar, R. I. M., Baron, R., Frangou, A., Pearce, E., van Leeuwin, E. J. C., Stow, J., ... van Vugt, M. (2012). Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 279(1731), 1161–1167.
- Eschleman, K. J., Madsen, J., Alarcon, G., & Barelka, A. (2014). Benefiting from creative activity: The positive relationships between creative activity, recovery experiences, and performance-related outcomes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 87(3), 579–598. <http://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12064>
- Feinstein, L., & Hammond, C. (2004). The contribution of adult learning to health and social capital. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(2), 199–221.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000215520>
- Field, J. (2011). Adult learning , health and well-being – changing lives. *Adult Learner*, 13–25.
- Grindley, H., Astbury, J., Sharples, J., & Aguirre, C. (2011). *Benefits of group singing for community mental health and wellbeing. Survey & literature review.* Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.
- Hammond, C., & Feinstein, L. (2005). The effects of adult learning on self-efficacy. *London Review of Education*, 3, 265 – 287.

- Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., & Haslam, S. A. (2014). “The we’s have it”: Evidence for the distinctive benefits of group engagement in enhancing cognitive health in aging. *Social Science & Medicine*, *120*, 57–66.
<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.08.037>
- Hillman, S. (2002). Participatory singing for older people: a perception of benefit. *Health Education*, *102*(4), 163–171. <http://doi.org/10.1108/09654280210434237>
- Hogg, M. A., & Williams, K. D. (2000). From I to we: Social identity and the collective self. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*. US: Educational Publishing Foundation. <http://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2699.4.1.81>
- Hyypä, M. T., Mäki, J., Impivaara, O., & Aromaa, A. (2007). Individual-level measures of social capital as predictors of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality: A population-based prospective study of men and women in Finland. *European Journal of Epidemiology*, *22*(9), 589–597. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10654-007-9153-y>
- Jenkins, A., & Mostafa, T. (2014). The effects of learning on wellbeing for older adults in England. *Ageing & Society, FirstView*, 1–18.
<http://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0144686X14000762>
- Judd, M., & Pooley, J. A. (2014). The psychological benefits of participating in group singing for members of the general public. *Psychology of Music*, *42*(2), 269–283.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0305735612471237>
- Kaptein, M., Nass, C., Parvinen, P., & Markopoulos, P. (2013). Nice to know you: Familiarity and influence in social networks. *Proceedings of the Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2745–2752.
<http://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2013.418>

- Koball, H. L., Moiduddin, E., Henderson, J., Goesling, B., & Besculides, M. (2010). What do we know about the link between marriage and health? *Journal of Family Issues*. Sage Publications. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10365834>
- Koudenburg, N., Postmes, T., Gordijn, E. H., & van Mourik Broekman, A. (2015). Uniform and Complementary Social Interaction: Distinct Pathways to Solidarity. *Plos One*, *10*(6), e0129061. <http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0129061>
- Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. (2001). The PHQ-9: validity of a brief depression severity measure. *J Gen Intern Med*, *16*(9), 606–613.
- Launay, J., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2015). Playing with strangers: Which shared traits attract us most to new people? *PLoS ONE*, *10*(6), e0129688. <http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0129688>
- Leckey, J. (2011). The therapeutic effectiveness of creative activities on mental well-being: a systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, *18*(6), 501–509. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2850.2011.01693.x>
- Machin, A. J. (2015). Mind the Gap : The Expectation and Reality of Involved Fatherhood. *Fathering*, *13*, 36–59. <http://doi.org/10.3149/fth.1301.36>
- McHorney, C. A., Ware Jr., J. E., & Raczek, A. E. (1993). The MOS 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36): II. Psychometric and Clinical Tests of Validity in Measuring Physical and Mental Health Constructs. *Medical Care*, *31*(3), 247–263. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3765819>
- Michaelson, J., Mahony, S., & Schifferes, J. (2012). Measuring Well-being: A guide for practitioners. *Report, New Economics Foundation*.

- Moreland, R. L., & Beach, S. R. (1992). Exposure effects in the classroom: The development of affinity among students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 28(3), 255–276. [http://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(92\)90055-O](http://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(92)90055-O)
- Moreland, R. L., & Zajonc, R. B. (1982). Exposure effects in person perception: Familiarity, similarity, and attraction. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 18(5), 395–415. [http://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(82\)90062-2](http://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(82)90062-2)
- Mumford, M. (2003). Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going? Taking Stock in Creativity Research. *Creativity Research Journal*, 15(2), 107–120. http://doi.org/10.1207/S15326934CRJ152&3_01
- Naylor, C., Parsonage, M., McDaid, D., Knapp, M., Fossey, M., & Galea, A. (2012). Long-term conditions and mental health: The cost of co-morbidities. *Report, The King's Fund & Centre for Mental Health*, 1–32.
- Nyqvist, F., Finnäs, F., Jakobsson, G., & Koskinen, S. (2008). The effect of social capital on health: the case of two language groups in Finland. *Health & Place*, 14(2), 347–60. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2007.09.001>
- Pearce, E., Launay, J., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2015). The ice-breaker effect: Singing mediates fast social bonding. *Royal Society Open Science*, 2, 150221. <http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150221>
- Perruzza, N., & Kinsella, E. A. (2010). Creative Arts Occupations in Therapeutic Practice: A Review of the Literature. *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 73(6), 261–268.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>

- Pöllänen, S. (2015). Elements of crafts that enhance well-being: Textile craft makers' descriptions of their leisure activity. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 47(1), 58–78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 141–166. <http://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>
- Salo, P. (2009). Adult education and social capital -the case of Swedish-speakers in Finland. In *Third Nordic Conference on Adult Learning 22 - 24 April 2009 in Denmark, University of Southern Denmark* (pp. 1–13).
- Schuller, T., & Field, J. (1998). Social capital, human capital and the learning society. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 17(February 2015), 226–235. <http://doi.org/10.1080/0260137980170402>
- Schuller, T., Preston, J., Hammond, C., Brassett-Grundy, A., & Bynner, J. (2004). *The Benefits of Learning: The Impact of Education on Health, Family Life and Social Capital*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B., & Lowe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: the GAD-7. *Arch Intern Med*, 166(10), 1092–1097. <http://doi.org/10.1001/archinte.166.10.1092>
- Tett, L., & Maclachlan, K. (2007). Adult literacy and numeracy, social capital, learner identities and self-confidence. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 150 – 167.
- Thompson, E. R. (2007). Development and validation of an internationally reliable short-form of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 38, 227–242.

- Van Vugt, M., & Schaller, M. (2008). Evolutionary approaches to group dynamics: An introduction. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Educational Publishing Foundation. <http://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2699.12.1.1>
- Vickhoff, B., Malmgren, H., Åström, R., Nyberg, G., Engvall, M., Snygg, J., ... Jörnsten, R. (2013). Music structure determines heart rate variability of singers. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00334>
- Ware Jr., J. E., & Sherbourne, C. D. (1992). The MOS 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36): I. Conceptual Framework and Item Selection. *Medical Care, 30*(6), 473–483. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3765916>
- Windle, K., Francis, J., & Coomber, C. (2011). Preventing loneliness and social isolation: interventions and outcomes. *Research Briefing, Social Care Institute for Excellence, London.*, 39, 1–16.
- Zhou, W. X., Sornette, D., Hill, R. A., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2005). Discrete hierarchical organization of social group sizes. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 272*(1561), 439–444.

Tables

Table 1: The questions included in questionnaires given to the participants (learners) and their tutors at the end of the seven-month courses.

Questions asked of participants	Questions asked of tutors
Since the start of the classes have your relationships with, or feelings towards, people in your class changed?	What effects, if any, do you think these classes have had on the physical health of your students?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on the way you see yourself?	What effects, if any, do you think these classes have had on the mental health of your students?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on your quality of life?	During the course have you noticed any change in how your learners interact with each other?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on your psychological health & wellbeing?	During the course have you noticed any friendships developing between people in your class?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on your social life?	Are you aware of any social activity between class members outside of the class itself?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on your physical health?	Is there anything else you would like to say about how the class has influenced the health and wellbeing of your learners?
What effects, if any, have these classes had on other aspects of your life?	
Did attending this course affect you in any ways that you did not expect?	
Do you tend to feel different after a class compared to before a class?	

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes identified in the participant responses and the number of participants whose comments were incorporated under each sub-theme.

Themes	Sub-themes	Number of participants
(Re) connection to the self	Self-identity/self-realisation	29
	Self-liking	14
	'Time out'	17
	Transitions	3
Developing self-confidence	Abilities and skills	38
	Gaining a voice	5
	Trying new things, rising to challenges	35
	Taking initiative	7
	Social confidence	21
	Playing a role [singers only]	6
(Re)connecting to others in the group	Belonging to a group, support & encouragement	49
	Reinforcing existing relationships within the group	3
	Expanding local networks	22
	Bringing together diversity, openness & acceptance	25
	Sharing information & perspectives	22
Negative experiences & sub-groups	Self-other comparison & failure to meet expectations of oneself	3
	Sub-structuring	12
Mood & physical effects	Improved mood	49
	Physical health	25
Ripples beyond the class	Integration of hobbies into daily lives, sharing with significant others outside the class	24
	Motivation to be more active, energised, providing a focus	23
	Using local resources	3

Figures

Figure 1: The distribution of the highest level of education achieved by participants.

