

Health benefits of evening classes revealed

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Credit: University of Oxford

Those with a taste for adult education classes have long known it, but now Oxford University scientists have confirmed that taking part in the weekly sessions can boost wellbeing – regardless of the subject studied.

In partnership with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in England and Scotland, a team from Oxford's department of experimental psychology studied attendees at seven separate day-time adult education classes. Their findings are published in a series of papers.

Each class took place over seven months and included a break in the middle. Attendees completed questionnaires before and after their class three times over the seven months: at the beginning of their courses, after 3 months, and at the end of the seven months. Participants were involved in one of three activities: singing, crafts or [creative writing](#).

Overall, attendees at all seven classes had improved mental and physical health and reported more satisfaction with their lives at the end of their courses.

Dr Eiluned Pearce led the research. She said: 'The students reported benefits including increased self-confidence, a greater feeling of control over their lives and more willingness to take on new challenges. Some said the classes made them more motivated to be more active, despite the classes not specifically involving physical activity.'

'Participants also said that the classes broadened their networks of friends and gave them an increased sense of belonging. We also found that the more someone felt part of their group, the more their health and wellbeing improved.'

An intriguing finding was in the singing and creative writing classes. Building on the results of an earlier paper from the same study, which found that people in singing classes felt closer to their group more quickly than those in the other classes, the team looked at how relationships formed between individuals in the classes.

Each person was asked to name those other people in the class whose name they could remember, whether or not they felt connected to each person they named, and whether they had talked to that person during class.

Dr Pearce said: 'The results showed that those in the singing and creative

writing groups built up relationships with other individuals more quickly than the crafters, and singers felt more connected to the class as a whole more quickly than both the other groups.

'While this confirms our earlier finding that singing has an 'ice-breaker effect' compared to other activities, it shows that other activities may enable people to increase their social networks just as much, even if it takes them longer to feel connected to their group as a whole.'

Co-author Dr Jacques Launay adds: 'While much of our previous work has demonstrated the importance of music, it is likely that the most socially bonding activities are always those that are personally chosen and enjoyed. This research adds to growing support for the relevance of creative activities in creating happy communities and improving health and well-being, with consequent benefits for public services and society.'

Dr Pádraig Mac Carron, Dr Anna Machin and Professor Robin Dunbar were also involved in the research.

Howard Croft, WEA Regional Education Manager, said: 'The findings reiterate the feedback that we have had from our students over the years: learning is a fantastic way to boost your self-esteem and confidence. Also of note, is its therapeutic effect. For many students, creative courses are a means of finding a new outlet for expressing their feelings. This can be of immense help during times of personal difficulty or emotional upheaval, such as divorce or bereavement. Simply going to a course can offer much-needed respite.

'For others, learning can be an opportunity to reignite a former passion. This could be anything from a subject which you enjoyed at school to an area which you are interested in. Whatever your reason, there are so many benefits to be gained by signing up to a course.'

More information: Eiluned Pearce et al. Is Group Singing Special? Health, Well-Being and Social Bonds in Community-Based Adult Education Classes, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/casp.2278](https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2278)

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E. Pearce et al. Tuning in to others: Exploring relational and collective bonding in singing and non-singing groups over time, *Psychology of Music* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0305735616667543](https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735616667543)

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