

Annie Warburton
Creative Director
Crafts Council

Can Do – Flourishing in the 21st Century

Summary

In this talk Annie Warburton, Creative Director at Crafts Council explores the relationship between craft and wellbeing. Annie outlines a number of areas where claims are being made about craft socially, politically, economically and personally. Drawing on recent research on 'learning through doing' and through projects that bridge the gap between craft and health, Annie explains how craft contributes to flourishing lives.

Can craft save the world?

The challenge to 'save the world' is somewhat surprisingly, increasingly being laid at the feet of craft and making - socially, politically, economically and personally.

Politically we are seeing a lot of what is called 'craftivism' (craft and activism). For example the popularity of the 'pussy hats' during the women's marches following Trump's assumption of the presidency of the USA. People who couldn't march were making hats for those that could. A very simple piece of craft activating in the political sphere.

Economically, craft has always had a contested relationship with luxury. Craft is seen as saving us from luxury but is also supportive of the luxury industry. London Craft Week as an entity focuses mainly on craft in relation to luxury. William Morris as we all know was a revolutionary, a socialist and a campaigner. He said "the greatest foe to art is luxury" and yet at the end of his life he bemoaned the fact that he had to serve "the swinish luxury of the rich". So there are these contradictions right at the heart of craft.

Then there is the digital. Can craft save us from the digital world? The arts and crafts movement was never against the machine, but wanted to see it mastered by humans. Now-a-days we see a lot of digital production combining with the hand made. For example a piece by Michael Eden named the 'Wedgewouldn't Terrine' that's made using additive manufacturing. Michael is based in Cumbria and has been a very traditional ceramicist for over 20 years. He says he can only use the new technology in this way because of the learned knowledge in his hand. He is just using another tool. So let's not get too romantic about craft being only about the hand and the past. It is as much about the future and certainly that cutting edge is where the Crafts Council positions itself, or hopes to be.

Then there are a number of writers such as Richard Senate and Matthew Crawford seizing on craft as the making of the person, of character, of autonomy, of agency, of being human. This has a political as well as a sociological aspect. It is being grasped by people across the political spectrum. Claims are being made for the mystical, soulful aspect of craft.

So can craft save the world? Can it save us politically or economically? Can it save us from the digital, bring us back to the physical? Or can it save our souls? That is all up for debate. But the focus for the rest of this talk is the relationship between craft and wellbeing.

So thinking about this conception of what a larger idea of wellbeing might be and then thinking back to arts and crafts, and people like Morris who talk about the importance of a dignified creative occupation and the need for connection with life through work, we can start to see a story. It is a story that many social enterprises are starting to tell.

For example an organisation in South Africa called Workspace has a programme called [TEN – The Employable Nation](#). This is a 25-day course designed to stimulate young people’s interest in making. They learn making skills and make ten products but they also learn ten qualities or characteristics: love; dedication; reliability; trust; teamwork; vision; respect; communication; understanding; and work ethic. What they are saying is that making is special, it matters in building these skills. At GalGael there is a very similar ethos about building skills for life as well as practical skills for employability. What we are seeing in these spaces is a much bigger story than just the instrumentalism of: ‘I am learning this skill in order to get that job’.

So what is the evidence for all these claims? Is there any? I was curious and carried out a large literature review and found very little. One thing that was remarkable was that in the studies there were, no one was speaking to the learners about their experiences. This led to the development of a project in two different settings: formal apprenticeships at the Goldsmiths Company and a much smaller scale social enterprise making furniture with young people referred through the police and social services. Trainees were interviewed in these two settings to find out their story and what they were getting out of it. The study proved to be very rewarding.

The interviews revealed a set of conditions of the context and the development of particular skills that led to flourishing right now and also opened up the potential for flourishing in the future. These findings are set out in the table below.

The right conditions <i>Features of training that foster capability development</i>	Capabilities developed <i>Skills and attributes that foster flourishing now and in the future</i>	Flourishing now <i>Experience of purpose, meaning and fulfilment, in process and outcome.</i>	Future flourishing <i>Factors that enhance potential for future experience of purpose and fulfilment.</i>
Community Close one-to-one relationships Balanced challenge, competition and support Pedagogy of trial and error Variety (skill, experience) Opportunity for autonomy and agency	Craft skills and life skills Discipline and work ethic Perseverance Patience Attention to detail Business skills Social and communication skills Time management Resilience Autonomy Agency	<i>Fulfilling processes</i> Flow Variety Personal progress Transformation of materials Agency Autonomy <i>Fulfilment of potential</i> Accomplishment in a skill Achievement: completing a challenging piece of work Tangible results Contributing to others	Aspiration Agency Autonomy Opportunity

Some examples from these interviews illustrate these findings. Such as apprentices describing the journey from what they are learning about making: “I’m always going to make it a bit better” and then translating that in to their lives: “I’m going to make myself a bit better”. Or the understanding of the workmanship of risk related to trial and error and the unpredictability of the particular material you are working with and the capacity of resilience

and flexibility that this engenders. Almost everyone interviewed said: “I learned it is OK to fail. My master still makes mistakes, he tells me he is still learning”.

Craft is fulfilling in the moment in process and in outcome; it develops capabilities and it facilitates future flourishing and develops aspiration. Grayson Perry said: “craft is the physical manifestation of ‘I can change the world’”. I make something and I can see that I’ve made a physical difference in the world. That is very simple and very profound. It gives a sense of agency and empowerment in life. For me this is all related to autonomy: if I know how to fix things or how to change things in life then I can be reliant on community but I am not dependent on community I can also have autonomy.

Innovation and research and development collaborations

A whole other aspect of craft and health and wellbeing, is around innovation and research and development collaborations between makers and medics. For example, new forms of making are transforming prosthetics; Mat Daron, a glassmaker, worked on the world’s first tissue engineered tracheotomy; soft roboticists are working with papermakers and embroiderers.

Similarly the ‘fix-pert project’ partners a designer and a ‘fix-pert’ (fixer and expert). It is a movement that is transforming how we think about addressing problems. It is bringing together people with different expertise in partnership to solve problems. A [series of films](#) provide a range of examples, such as co-designing cooking utensils so that Heidi, a young women with cerebral palsy, can cook. They tell a fantastic story about collaboration through making.

Conclusion

So ‘our future is in the making’ or rather, our current and future flourishing are in the making. In Scotland and England we are facing a craft education crisis. There is a flourishing of peer exchanged learning but in formal education craft courses in colleges are closing and the number of students taking GCSEs in craft-related subjects has declined by nearly 50%. On the one hand, we have the story on the value of making and on the other hand we have policy-makers who are not recognising that making is really core to being human. The Crafts Council have produced a [Manifesto for Craft Education](#) in partnership with people across the UK. It was launched in the House of Commons in Westminster and the opportunity was taken to get politicians to roll up their sleeves and take part in some screen-printing.



Returning to William Morris when he wrote ‘News for nowhere’ he said that he was concerned with the question of how we live and how we might live. What does it take to live a meaningful life? What is fulfilment? What is human flourishing? He talked about the book “being the embodiment of dreams *in one form or another*”. I think and I hope that this was a deliberate use of language. Taking something from the ether and bringing it in to form in the physical, material world. From the abstract to the concrete. The future is in the making, it is in our hands.