

Resolutions that are too broad or aim too high can be intimidating. Instead of a sweeping generalisation to lose weight or do more, zooming in on one thing to do might be the easiest way to keep a promise to oneself. Two Sunday Times writers zeroed in on learning a new skill, courtesy of the range of short courses at LaSalle College of the Arts. Since the courses are eligible for the SkillsFuture

scheme, one can pick up a new skill at minimal cost, depending on what course one chooses and how much SkillsFuture dollars you want to use. Neither reporter is giving up her day job any time soon, as their encounters with new skills turned out to be more challenging than expected. But both have learnt something about themselves in the process.



Arts correspondent Olivia Ho taking a tailoring course at Lasalle College of the Arts, under the tutelage of master tailor Thomas Wong. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Life Experience

Getting the hang of tailoring

Olivia Ho
Arts Correspondent

One day I will be able to make my own clothes, but first, I have to get the hang of machine-stitching in a straight line without stabbing myself in the finger with the needle or screaming involuntarily.

"It's like driving a car," advised my instructor, master tailor Thomas Wong. "Control the pedal like you do the accelerator."

I have never been terribly good at driving and my prowess with sewing machines seemed likely to follow suit – especially since these were the industrial-level sewing machines in the basement of Lasalle College of the Arts.

In the interest of learning new skills, I had decided to attend a

tailoring course at Lasalle, during which I discovered that it is one thing to wear clothes – which I do a great deal, with pleasure – and quite another to make them.

The ever-impeccable Mr Wong, the founder of bespoke tailoring house The Prestigious, is 73 years old and became an apprentice tailor when he was 16.

The course I attempted, Design And Construction Of Men's Trousers, runs to 24 evening classes, each three hours long, and covers drafting and trouser-making techniques.

Before we picked up our scissors, Mr Wong gave us a brief rundown of tailoring history, which he described with the drama of a martial arts epic.

There was Western-style tailoring, which he referred to as "bai bang" (white sect),

and Chinese-style tailoring, or "hong bang" (red sect).

He also threw in more modern allusions to Kingsman: The Secret Service, the 2014 film about be-suited British spies who use a tailor shop as a front.

Trouser-making entails an enormous amount of drafting. We spent three hours learning how to draft basic trousers, then another three hours on trousers with pleats. In reality, of course, the draft changes with the wearer's measurements.

"You are the tailor," intoned Mr Wong as we pored over our butcher paper, armed with pencils and rulers. "It is your responsibility to dress the customer, whether or not they fit the standard."

He added later: "A good tailor is almost like a doctor. The customer

can only tell you how he feels. You, the tailor, must figure out what is wrong."

Tailoring is like a complex maths equation where each measurement is derived from a previous one. Mess up one step and the whole design collapses.

I have no hopes of being a professional tailor and had signed up for this course with the magnanimous thought that I might make trousers for the men in my life, but one class was enough to convince me that if somebody should benefit from such toil, it ought to be me.

"Can I use these techniques to make women's trousers?" I asked Mr Wong.

"No," he said. "The hip-to-waist ratio is different. The darts are deeper. I would need a whole other course to teach women's trousers."

Alas, I thought sadly, measuring out crotch room in my draft.

Mr Wong took pity on me and offered to teach me how to make a pocket. This was a surprisingly complicated process that involved overlocking – finishing off the seams of the pocket on a terrifyingly high-speed machine – and stitching in minuscule twin folds to hide where the pocket is sewn into the trousers.

I was delighted with the pocket. It was so neat and unassuming, yet capacious. Women go through life with such pocket envy. You look for them in every skirt or dress, often to no avail. The pocket is the Holy Grail of womenswear. I am still nowhere near being able to make trousers – but at least, with pockets, possibilities abound.

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A world of watercolour

Ong Sor Fern
Senior Culture Correspondent

I have the drawing ability of a potato. A travel sketching class seemed like a good way to sidle gently into learning a new skill.

Travel sketching is meant to be quick, portable and easy, I reasoned. It should be a better entry-level class than, say, the acrylic painting, botanical drawing and charcoal drawing classes listed on the Lasalle College of the Arts Short Courses page. Those options sounded too technical and advanced for my limited abilities.

Moreover, all the classes were eligible for SkillsFuture deductions, so the equation of pocket-friendly courses plus a new artistic pursuit added up to a no-brainer lure.

I showed up for my first weekday evening class armed with a sketchpad. My trepidation turned into horror when the instructor, Susan Olij, explained that her class would focus on watercolour sketches and sketching with pens.

Oh no, double jeopardy. I thought with a mental "facepalm". If there's anything I remember from primary school art classes, it is that



Senior culture correspondent Ong Sor Fern learning watercolour painting from Ms Susan Olij, a lecturer at Lasalle College of the Arts, as part of a SkillsFuture-subsidised course. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

watercolour is a challenging medium. Vague memories of untidy, multi-coloured splotches and runny colours in my failed homework resurfaced.

Sketching with pens sounded equally intimidating, since there is no chance to correct a mistake, unlike the more forgiving pencil.

On the bright side, Susan turned out to be a very reassuring teacher,

with her systematic lesson plans and practical tips.

She is also supremely qualified to teach the course, since she took 15 months off work to travel the world – 15 countries, to be exact – and filled five sketchbooks.

Her marvelous sketches became our class' inspiration. Four weeks went by in a blur. On Wednesday evenings, Susan

taught the class of seven adults some basics. We practised sketching and painting. Saturday mornings were spent on field trips where we put theory into practice, sketching and painting subjects in real environments.

My practical skills are still near zero, but the classes were invigorating, despite my typical Singaporean-student fear of

failure. One of the mantras Susan repeated throughout the course was that everyone makes mistakes.

While the course has ended, the class is still on a semi-active WhatsApp group chat. I haven't been able to join subsequent impromptu sketch outings, but I have kept up with occasional sketching and painting exercises.

The course challenged not just my skills as a newbie or "noob", but also my goal-oriented self. Like most pragmatic Singaporeans, I tend to balance investment with measurable output. If I put in this amount of effort, I should get these results.

The class taught me to slow down, look at the world around me, breathe and enjoy the process of learning a new skill.

While my technical skills will never impress anyone, there is pleasure to be had in reaching beyond my perceived limitations to try something new.

I am already planning to pack my sketchbook and colours for my next trip. The sketches might be wonky and the colours runny, but I'm learning to look at the world differently.

That was the best lesson from the class.

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