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Want to Lean a New Hobby?

Digital tools, apps and communities make learning to do something new faster—and cheaper

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I was 13 when I first learned to knit...a little. I tried again at 18, and then in my late 20s, and then again as a new mom in my 30s. With each attempt I'd shell out for needles and some nice yarn. But I never made it further than a few sad rows of misshapen loops before I gave up, daunted by my own poor eye-hand coordination and the expense of taking up a new hobby that required not only raw ingredients, but expert guidance.

About a year ago, I decided it was time for my once-a-decade knitting experiment. I stopped in at my local yarn store to pick up some yarn and a pair of knitting needles. The friendly clerk who helped me select beginner-friendly options took a moment to jot down a quick note that would help me get started: an index card with the URL of her favorite YouTube knitting videos.

It took all of one hour for me to realize that YouTube was a game-changer that would make this knitting effort different from all of my previous attempts. That wasn't all: A whole range of online communities and digital tools were now available to help me realize my long-held aspiration of becoming a knitter. Within a few weeks, I'd mastered the basics. And nine months in, I'm proud to say that I've completed three cowls, a cotton beret, a tie, a giant shawl, three scarfs, one sleeveless jacket and a misshapen stuffed hedgehog.

The broader lesson here, of course, isn't about knitting, as proud as I am of my newfound talent. Rather, it's that I've discovered a new use for technology. By providing ready access to expertise, tools and community, social and digital media make it both cheaper and easier to take up a new hobby.

Here are some of the things I've learned in my quest to overcome decades of knitting false starts.

When you want to get started...find online how-tos.

Expertise is the most essential part of taking up a new hobby—and getting it can be expensive. While there are certain kinds of hobbies that require in-person instruction and/or expensive equipment (scuba diving and falconry spring to mind), there are many more hobbies that you can teach yourself, thanks to online guides. Start with YouTube, where you'll find all the how-tos you need for such hobbies as knitting, cooking or crafting. If you prefer to get your guidance in the form of diagrams, look on Pinterest or simply Google the words “beginner,” “how to” and “[insert your hobby here].” Different experts may have different presentation styles and techniques, so take note of the YouTube channels or websites that feature guides you like. Make those your first stop when you need to problem solve or learn a new technique.

When you're ready for your first (or next) challenge...find an online community.

There is an online community for every hobby: Visual artists have DeviantArt, golfers have GolfWRX, and genealogists have Geni.com. Where new hobbyists once had to pay for classes, teachers or coaches—or to get to the nearest gathering or teach-in—we can now access help from one another, anywhere and anytime.

For me, that free help comes through Ravelry, an online community where knitters and crocheters share patterns, yarn options, project photos and preferred techniques. My own knitting took a leap forward once I realized that Ravelry not only let me find knitting patterns, but gave me access to feedback and discussions about the various patterns I was interested in trying. Reading the discussions of specific patterns has helped me steer away from projects that are beyond my current skill level, identify adaptations that will make a pattern easier to execute, and solve problems I encounter while working on a specific project.

When you hit a roadblock...turn to online friends or discussion boards.

Six months into my new hobby, I decided I was ready to tackle a bigger challenge—which is another way of saying I invested in some really expensive yarn without actually knowing how to complete the pattern I'd picked out. In the pre-Internet world there was only one easy way to make good on a premature investment in a fancy camera, a snowboard or a backyard meat smoker: hire someone to teach you. These days, social media can help you avoid that expense. In my case, a [Facebook](#) friend offered to do a video call and show me the stitch herself. Half an hour later I was back on track—plus my Facebook friend had just turned into a real friend! If you've picked up a hobby that's relatively common, your existing Facebook, Instagram or [Twitter](#) circle may well include people who are happy to answer any questions; if you're engaging in something more esoteric, a Facebook group or online community dedicated to that hobby will likely include some generous souls who can help you out if you run into trouble.

When you need specialty tools...look for a mobile app.

In the olden days, woodworkers needed a range of measuring tools, plumbs and levels. Today, rather than buying and storing expensive tools, hobbyists often can use apps to accomplish tasks inexpensively or free. Whatever your hobby, there's almost certainly a mobile tool kit to help you out. Whenever I discover a new enthusiasm, I create a new app folder on my phone, and fill it with all of the free or cheap apps that look useful. I also compare apps with other knitters whenever I get into conversation at a knitting store or knitting circle. Indeed, that is how I discovered Knit Companion, which is the app I now use for viewing and annotating my knitting patterns.

When you need in-depth reference materials...download digital guidebooks.

Book buying is another way a new hobby can overtake both your budget and your home. I have bookcases that reflect hundreds (or thousands!) of dollars spent during my musical theater, cooking and web-design phases. This time around, I committed to an all-digital knitting collection. I use the Overdrive app to access my local library's collection of knitting books, which includes a range of how-to and

pattern books. I have even more free options through my subscription to Amazon's Kindle Unlimited (though an awful lot of the free downloads seem to be patterns for knitting your own Kindle cover). So before you build your own personal hobby library, check out what you can get free—or cheap—in your favorite e-reader.

When your hobby takes over the house...get an inventory app.

If you're anything like me, half the fun of a new hobby is that it opens a whole new category for shopping excursions—and for overspending. Every time I place an Amazon order I find myself throwing in some stitch markers or a new kind of knitting bag, and whenever I'm on the road, I now use Yelp to find that city's best knitting store. To get the physical and financial mess under control, I used Ravelry to set up an inventory of all my yarn purchases and needle sizes, so that I can keep all my knitting gear tucked away without losing sight of what I own, and avoid making duplicate purchases. Similar tools for other hobbies include Model Train App (for model-train enthusiasts), Aquarimate (for tracking the fish and gear for your personal aquarium) and CLZ Comics (for comic-book collectors).

Together, these digital solutions not only will make it easier and cheaper to pick up a new hobby, they'll also make it more likely that you'll stick with your new avocation and steadily improve. Far from distracting us from hands-on creativity, technology can be the gateway to rediscovering the joys of making, crafting and collecting.