

## A story of self-determined, self-directed & self-regulated learning

Naomi was a final year Biomedical Sciences undergraduate student when she wrote this story to explain how she challenged herself in her first and second year by organising and leading a small group of student volunteers to work in a village in Uganda.

### *Naomi's story*

The volunteer trip I organised was something I had thought about for years and finally had the means to do. I approached the Students' Union and asked whether there was a programme already set up. I was referred to a local non-government organisation called Experience Culture, which was set up by two ladies from Guildford. They informed me about the relationship the town had with its twin town in Uganda called Mukono. I had no idea of the extent of the connection until I attended a few council meetings and had conversations with the members. I was inspired by the idea of contributing to this ongoing project.

I emailed the entire university asking who wanted to come with me and soon realised just how much I had bitten off! The response was overwhelming and I tried to be as fair as possible while only being able to choose five other students. Once the group was assembled I started to organise the next steps and fundraising. I soon found that while students are generous to causes, it is difficult to stir up enthusiasm towards raising money without pitching the idea in an incendiary manner. It took a lot of planning and long hours, often through the night, to try and make our fundraisers enticing and fun, while maintaining the focus on the cause itself. We came up with ideas such as the sale of sweets at student events, a decorated bake sale, a pub quiz, a giant dodgeball tournament and a music concert at the university, all of which took place over six months. Any money raised was to be a donation towards the Mukono Children's Home and Medical Centre where we would be working.

This was all a huge challenge to me as I am not naturally outgoing, and I had to really pull myself out of my shell in order to achieve the results I needed. Being the organiser and leader of a group was new to me and extremely daunting; this proved to be one of the most marked times of my life, during which I grew immensely as a person, and developed my confidence through a comforting sense of achievement.

We started work immediately upon our arrival in Uganda, and soon became immersed in a life wholly separate and unique to our own back home. Working so closely with the students, teachers, hospital workers and volunteers was a wonderful experience, and we soon came to view the world through their eyes, with emotional and profound results. The humble and earnest attitude they brought to all aspects of their lives, and the courage they showed in the face of extreme hardships were true testaments to the strength of the human spirit. At the children's home we taught lessons in and out of the classroom, sports and games, and sex education. This was probably where I was most at peace while in Uganda, as the love and simple kindnesses the children bestowed upon us was almost magical. Their excitement towards learning was contagious and I looked forward to spending time with them every day. It was a sharp realisation to see the stark differences between the culture and attitudes in Uganda and those back home, where complacency and over-indulgence is rife.

At the Medical Centre we helped out at aids clinics, helped with filing, and went on 'field trips' out into rural communities to teach about HIV/Aids, sex education and health and nutrition. Our donations were spent on a library for the Children's Home, which we painted ourselves, shoes for the children, and mosquito nets for those in the communities. Seeing families

actually living in conditions of extreme poverty and illness exposes a helplessness in a form so raw it takes your strength and composure away more swiftly than you could ever expect or prepare for. To shake the hands of someone who has lost their family, their health, and their independence, while knowing there is only so much you can do to change this changes you irrevocably. And yet, their strength, and their composure remain not only intact but more strikingly dignified than anyone you would meet under better circumstances.

One particularly draining day of work involved us going out into a community far away to try to obtain support for Sarah, an 11 year old girl abandoned by her family who was HIV-positive [because she had been raped]. She had walked 41km barefoot to the medical centre to ask for help. We negotiated with her family for four hours to try to get them to provide shelter and food for her in order for her to receive drug treatment from the Medical Centre. It was entirely surreal to be sitting under a tree in the African sun, fighting for someone's chance of survival, with the desperation and urgency of the conversation all too apparent. This drawn out and highly strung affair was absolutely worth it when they finally agreed, ultimately saving her life. I have since been co-sponsoring her schooling fees and trying to ensure her welfare from a distance, which requires careful budgeting and communication with our contacts. The knowledge that we can help at least one person in this way is something I cling to when it feels that we are just one drop in an ever-present ocean of suffering that often threatens to overwhelm us.

The experiences we had in Uganda spurred me on to try and make a bigger difference, and to sustain what we had started. I began compiling an education pack which would include information on sex education, HIV/Aids, health and nutrition, and simple translations from English to Luganda as well as simple maths sums such as calculating monetary transactions. The idea was to make these packs durable and simple, so that one literate worker or volunteer from the Medical Centre could go out into the communities and teach it to large groups. I felt that one of the key targets to improving their quality of life was education. However, while this is often a daily component of life for most, it is painfully scarce in third world countries, where it is seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. The children in the communities we visited were unable to attend any schools as they could not afford it. Therefore, I hoped to bring a simple platform for education to them in the form of these packs.

Upon arriving back in England, we completed a video diary as a summary of our experiences. I also organised a book drive parallel to one being held by the Borough Council, to try and gather suitable children's books for the new library at the Children's Home. This required good advertising, such as printing and putting up posters around the campus, promoting it before lectures, arranging pick-ups and drop-offs and setting up boxes around the university. I plan to raise more money to send to trusted contacts at the school so that they will be able to buy local books for the children, but by sending books from England I hope to help introduce different perspectives and ideals to the children, and lend a new realm of imagination to their learning.

In my second year at university I set up a new volunteering society with my sister. Pioneering this society was daunting to say the least, with every step unpaved, and layers of bureaucracy to overcome. We held an AGM to elect a committee, and soon began planning events and ways to draw students in and promote volunteering. Our original goal was to keep raising money for different communities in and around Mukono, organise local volunteering opportunities for students, and send another group out to Uganda in addition to a volunteer trip to Thailand to work with children in slums and on an anti-trafficking project. This proved extremely trying, as university restrictions did not allow us to raise money for any charity or organisation ourselves, and also there were insurance restrictions on overseas university trips. As a result, we concentrated on local volunteering, and brought students together to

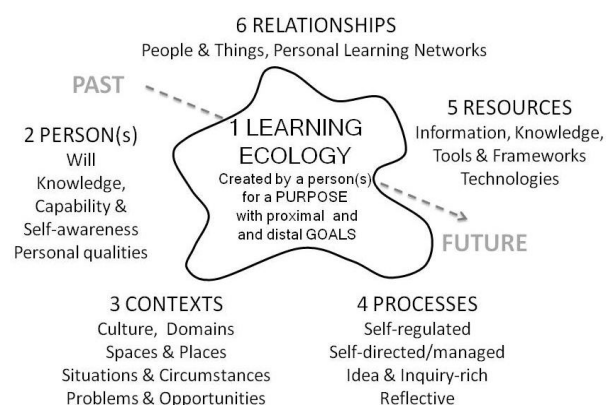
participate in events such as 'Swim for the children', 'Tree O'Clock', and various YMCA overnight events among others.

We planned the overseas trips on our own without the support other societies are able to lean on, and tried to prepare the students going on them as best we could by creating information booklets. These contained details on the respective languages and cultures of each destination, the projects they would be undertaking, helpful phrases and tips, and health and travel advice. I had not anticipated the immense amount of time required to run a society and plan events on this scale, and it is a credit to key members of the committee whose hard work and encouragement are really appreciated. Getting students involved in events that are purely voluntary is no easy task, and the skills I learnt through attempting this are truly invaluable. It took perseverance and optimism to make many of the events happen, and an incredible amount of committed time.

There were numerous moments when I felt disheartened or burnt-out, but the knowledge that we have started something to benefit others, which will carry on even after we leave university honestly makes it completely worth the effort. In my final year at university, I will be continuing the planning and support of the trip to Uganda and its communities with a new group of students, as well as an acting mentor of the volunteer society, which we have handed on to a new committee.

I cannot fully explain the feeling of wholeness that accompanies helping someone in a significant way. Every new experience adds to my person, and expands or alters my perspectives. I feel that it has helped me to grow in so many ways, especially in terms of confidence and my capabilities for dealing with unfamiliar situations and create new opportunities for myself and others. I feel spurred on to continue what we started and more, and truly believe that I am now much better equipped to achieve these goals. Through the various activities I have undertaken I have an improved understanding and insight into myself, and others. I have acquired skills such as time management, leadership and the ability to communicate ideas to other people, and very importantly, the outlook that while an idea may start as just an idea, or may seem like just a drop in a vast ocean, it can manifest itself as a wonderful accumulation of events; a tidal wave whose ripple effects extend continuously outwards.

Naomi's ultimate goal is to become a doctor and she was planning to apply to medical school after completing her biosciences degree. This was her ambition, her *distal goal* that shaped her everyday living in and experience of the world and drove her to create more immediate *proximal goals* towards achieving her ambition. In searching for something meaningful to do she discovered a new purpose - to help people in small town in Uganda. This became her *proximal goal* and she was willing to dedicate a significant part of her life to the project alongside her academic studies. In committing to this goal she had effectively created an *inflection point* in her life which had a significant impact on her development as a person, 'this proved to be one of the most marked times of my life, during which I grew immensely as a person'.



Naomi created a *process* to enable her to achieve her ambition. There was nothing in a book to tell her what to do, she had to invent and improvise this process for herself in the contexts in which she was living. She appreciated the enormity of what she was doing and realised that she needed the help and support of others so she developed a strategy to search for and find a group of like-minded and motivated people (*new relationships*). She then set about developing the *resources* they needed to make their contribution. Together with her co-volunteers they restructured the environment to support the development of resources by creating a strategy containing numerous fund raising activities.

The second part of her story relating to her experiences in Uganda, involves putting herself into an entirely *unfamiliar context with unfamiliar problems and challenges* through which she learnt and developed. Through her conversations and other interactions with village people and participating in activities with them, she and her team of volunteers began to develop knowledge that was situated in their socio-cultural setting. Together they encountered many challenges - culture, language, poverty, difficult social situations and disease: all contributed to the rich environment in which they had to learn to adapt and perform. Through their efforts and willingness to learn they managed to accomplish some useful short term goals in Uganda and feel that they had made a positive difference to the lives of people they had met.

'Working so closely with the students, teachers, hospital workers and volunteers was a wonderful experience, and we soon came to view the world through their eyes, with emotional

The third part of her story describes what happened on her return to university. It reveals the emotional impact the experience had on her. This new and different Naomi created new strategies for sustaining the work she had begun while in her second and third years at university. In this way the ecology she created for one set of situations developed into another ecology for another set of situations involving different people.

'I cannot fully explain the feeling of wholeness that accompanies helping someone in a significant way.

In my final year at university, I will be continuing the planning and support of the trip to Uganda and its communities with a new group of students, as well as an acting mentor of the volunteer society, which we have handed on to a

A learning ecology is a 'person-in-environment', 'person-in-activity' concept. By this I mean that the person - their beliefs, attitudes, values, knowledge and capabilities, behaviours, actions, learning, development and achievements is influenced and shaped by the circumstances, situations and physical, social-cultural environments they inhabit. Naomi's involvement in her self-directed project and the involvement of others she engaged and connected with in the different contexts she encountered, constituted her ecology for learning, development and achievement. This ecology included: her own self-determined process to enable her to achieve her goals, and complex set of relationships, novel contexts, situated social action, personal and collaborative learning, and the structuring of the environment to create usable resources. Her self-determined project was driven by a desire to make a positive difference and also the desire to be a certain sort of person, and through her efforts and experiences she became a different person. The next part of this chapter will examine the idea and role of self-regulation in

such self-determined processes before returning to Naomi's story to examine her experience through the lens of self-regulation.

We see evidence of self-regulation in the ecology she created to fulfill her ambition to make a difference to people living in a small town in Uganda? While her objective was not explicitly to learn and develop herself - significant learning and personal development were bi-products of the activities she determined and engaged in order to achieve her goal.

Her interest in volunteering in the sort of situation she described, had been in her mind for a long time (distal goal) but it was only when she became a university student that she realised she had the means to achieve her ambition and the confidence to begin the process of planning and organising herself.

I feel that it has helped me to grow in so many ways, especially in terms of confidence and my capabilities for dealing with unfamiliar situations and to create new opportunities for myself and others. I feel spurred on to continue what we started and more, and truly believe that I am now much better equipped to achieve these goals. Through the various activities I have undertaken I have an improved understanding and insight into myself, and others. I have shown that I have acquired skills such as time management, leadership, the ability to communicate ideas to other people, and very importantly, the outlook that while an idea may start as just an idea, or may seem like just a drop in a vast ocean, it can manifest itself as a wonderful accumulation of events; a tidal wave whose ripple effects extend continuously outwards. (Naomi's reflective account)

Her *forethought* involved her in thinking about how to explore possibilities until she discovered and was inspired by a concrete idea that she believed could form her personal project around. In this way she appropriated an existing project and made it her own. Her attention then turned to involving others and she created a strategy to find and build relationships with like minded people so that they became part of the process of co-creating the ways and means of raising money to fund the experience and make donations to the medical centre. This task involved many different activities. It seems that she was in no doubt that she, with the help of others, could achieve their goal and their significant commitment demonstrated that they believed what they were doing would make a difference and be worthwhile : a commitment that carried on after she had returned to the UK.

Her *performance* was demonstrated through the tasks she set herself in contexts that were both familiar and unfamiliar with problems, challenges and opportunities that she had not encountered before. She searched for and found like-minded people to help her accomplish the goal she had set herself and structured her environment to develop the resources she needed to accomplish her task. She invented, with the help of others, numerous activities aimed at improving the lives of the children and adults involved in her activities. On her return she planned, organised and participated in activities to continue her project and involve other students and developed new resources to support the educational programme she had begun.

I felt that one of the key targets to improving their quality of life was education.....The children in the communities we visited were unable to attend any schools as they could not afford it. Therefore, I hoped to bring a simple platform for education to them in the form of these packs.  
Naomi

Her commitment to *reflection* is evident in the time she committed to this activity during her experience through her hand written diary, the film clips that recorded some of the events, people and the social-cultural and physical setting she worked in, and the summary narrative. She evaluated her own performance by comparing who she used to be with who she was after being involved in these experiences. There is also a sense in her writing that when she looks back at what she did and accomplished she is satisfied with her performance. Here are some the ways in which she expresses judgements about herself and her performance and achievements.

'Though there were numerous moments when I felt disheartened or burnt-out, but the knowledge that we have started something to benefit others, which will carry on even after we leave university honestly makes it completely worth the effort.'

'I grew immensely as a person, and developed my confidence through a comforting sense of achievement.'

'I feel that it has helped me to grow in so many ways, especially in terms of confidence and my capabilities for dealing with unfamiliar situations and to create new opportunities for myself and others'.

Naomi's inspiring story illustrates well the self-motivated, self-determined and self-regulated nature of a complex learning ecology which evolved over a significant period of time because she continually revisited and revised her goals as her understanding of the 'problem' and 'situation' changed. This continual refinement of proximal goals, framed within the distal goals of 'making a positive difference to the people of Mukono' and 'becoming a doctor', continually energised her to do more and drove the continuous development of her ecology for learning, developing and achieving.