

How the Lifewide Education inquiry into helping nature, the environment and sustainability has affected me and my learning & development

Our health, sense of wellbeing and sense of who we are (identity) and who we are becoming (learning and development) are influenced by the way we live – our habits, our relationships, circumstances, problems, illnesses, achievements and how we deal with setbacks, and day to day experiences. These feelings emerge through our everyday living but they develop over the accumulation of lots of days of living. There are therefore two scales of involvement – the lifewide and lifelong.

In our inquiry we focused on the question of what motivates us and how commitment to a belief or cause develops. We explored the diverse range of needs that compel us to do what we do. Being able to satisfy these needs, at least in part, helps us achieve a sense of wellbeing - feeling comfortable, healthy, satisfied, happy and or fulfilled that we are living a life with purpose and meaning. While tackling and making progress with challenges, or seeing and acting on new opportunities satisfies our need to learn and develop.

Our inquiry is underlain by the proposition that by helping nature, the environment and sustainability we are helping ourselves and our stories of participation reflect the choices we are making to help ourselves in our own circumstances. As we move into the final stage of our inquiry it is important to reflect on whether or how this proposition was realised and manifested in our own projects.

Q1 In what ways has your experience of trying to help nature, the environment and/or some aspect of sustainability contributed to your health, your sense of wellbeing or any aspect of your development as a human being?

Being amongst people who share my attitudes, values and beliefs about learning and education, and who want to develop their own understandings through actions that are directed to living for a more sustainable future, is the fundamental reason why I participate in these inquiries. Its a journey with interesting and good people and the way I feel about the overall experience depends on my sense of whether my companions are gaining fulfilment from their experiences. Our monthly zoom meetings provides me with an opportunity to judge this and my general sense is that those who have shared their stories are benefiting from the experience.

Participating in an active learning process with others encourages me to reflect on my own situation and to be exposed to the perspectives of others, both of which help me learn and understand myself better. Quite honestly being part of a community of learners is so much more enjoyable than doing something by myself and that in itself contributes to a personal sense of wellbeing.

There is a second social dimension to my project. I am working with a small group of people in my village to encourage our neighbours to appreciate nature more than we do and to undertake specific acts to improve biodiversity in the area where we live. My sense of wellbeing is to some extent tied up with the extent to which we are able to make progress with

our community project. Over the last 6 months there have clearly been *ups* (40 people agreeing to sow wildflower seeds) and *downs* (few people attending our zoom meetings or responding to my invitation to give me feedback on whether their seeds have germinated or flowered). But overall my small team believes that we are doing something positive for nature and our environment and that makes us feel useful.

We have also received some recognition for our efforts from Surrey WildlifeTrust. Our community project has been captured in a video made by the Trust and we have just won a Community Champions Award -one of three awarded to the 30 community groups working for nature in Surrey. This external recognition makes us feel that we are doing something that this nature based organisation believes is significant and that makes us feel good about what we are doing. It might also enable us to attract more funding for our work.

My specific project, to cultivate wildflowers in my garden and an adjacent field, has required significant physical effort and financial cost and there have been many times when the words 'no gain without pain' have come to mind. The poor spring weather dented my enthusiasm and I had to adjust my expectations believing that the wildflowers would not flower this year. But slowly but surely they eventually blossomed in mid to late summer and seeing them, and the enormous number of foraging insects they supported has been a joy and the only feedback I needed to judge that my efforts have been successful.

The inquiry is founded on the belief that we have to act in order to have experiences through which we learn and develop – the more we act and the range of ways in which act creates the experiences and opportunities that enable us to learn.

Through my project I have learnt a lot about cultivating wild flowers for example, seed mixes for different sorts of soils, how to prepare the ground and how and when to sow seed, how to identify wildflowers, how to collect and look after seed, how to manage grasses that overwhelm the wildflowers, and the costs involved in creating wildflower meadows. I have also learnt a about the distribution of wildflowers in the countryside around my home as I spent time walking, observing, recording and making maps.

Through my project I have also paid a lot more attention to the invertebrates that use the wildflowers to forage. By photographing them and using simple charts I have been able to identify 16 species of butterfly and 10 species of bee.

I involved myself in an introductory gardening for wildlife course and next week I will participate in a scything workshop. This knowledge was acquired through direct experience of trying to grow wildflowers, watching YouTube videos and conversations with people more knowledgeable than me. I have met several people who have helped me and who I have formed good working relationships with and these will continue into the future. And I have shared my wildflower meadow with members of my community who have visited my garden on a wildflower wander and received appreciative feedback. I have benefited from all these interactions and I am now more confident in helping others to grow their own wildflowers.

My wildflower project has encouraged me to spend time observing and photographing the plants and insects as an aid to their identification. I have a long standing interest (hobby) in

making short nature movies and during the course of my project I made 6 short movies (4 about wildflowers and 2 about insect pollinators). Making movies and setting them to music is an expression my love for nature and an expression of my own creativity. The process of making is always uplifting and it undoubtedly contributes to the way I feel about myself, my environment and my relationship with and connection to my environment.

Finally, I have tried to keep a record of my own process and learning through my Garden Notes Blog (16 posts to date) <http://www.norman.jackson.co.uk/garden-notes> It is sometimes a chore to make myself write something but having written it – like this reflective essay, it makes me feel better. There is both a discipline and a therapeutic value in recording and writing.

Q2 In what ways has your experience affirmed or conflicted with the beliefs and values you held prior to the inquiry?

I believed that we all have capacity to help nature and our environment but it requires effort and the use of our resources to do so. This belief has been reaffirmed and deepened through my experiment. Another belief I have, that we can do more by working together, has also been reaffirmed and this motivates me to extend my efforts to engage my village community in nature-based projects.

Q3 Are there specific things you would like or plan to do in the future that have grown out of this inquiry?

Yes, with my small village team we have recently met to plan the next stage of our B-Line project. In the next few weeks we plan to re-engage our community with the aim of extending our B-Line south through the village. Thanks to our experience we have the confidence to expand our vision for a biodiversity corridor from 3km x1km to 5km by 1km.

We are now able to demonstrate results from our initial sowing and we are all happy to commit more time and energy into engaging more people in our community. There is also the prospect of growing our enterprise through our neighbouring parish and I am trying to facilitate this process through encouragement, practical help and finding donations of wildflower seed.

Knowing that I can cultivate wildflowers and seeing that these attract many more insects than the adjacent field makes me more committed to expanding my wildflower meadow. Over the next 6 to 8 weeks I am planning to 1) collect seed from my own wild flowers and 2) extend my 300 sq m plot further into the field 3) sow the seed I have collected on prepared ground and 4) buy and sow more wildflower seed to extend my meadow. My target is to double the area of wildflower meadow over the next 10 months.

Q4 As a result of your experiences has your understanding or attitude to the SDGs changed? Are you more or less committed to the idea of living your life in ways that are consistent with the principles of the SDGs?

My interest in sustainability and living for a sustainable future has grown out of my interest in the ecological nature of all life, and our living and learning. I believe it is important to

try and live for a more sustainable future and this hasn't changed. I also believe in helping nature and my experiment has shown me that what I am doing is a simple but effective way of helping nature in my own environment and in this respect my commitment has been reinforced. At the community level I remain committed to the work of our RE-Betchworth charity to help nature the environment and sustainability and I intend to support our Wildlife Trust and other wildlife conservation groups like Buglife and Butterfly Conservation Society, and offer help and advice to other communities that would like to do something similar.

The bottom line is that I know my wildflower project nested within my community engagement project has benefited me greatly.

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