

THE ALLOTMENT PROJECT



Photos © Matt Willer

Grow Your Own Help

Matt Willer explains how to grow a group of volunteers for a school allotment and create a community that forges a shared responsibility

In my previous article in *PM89*, 'The Edible Outdoor Classroom', I wrote how back in February 2015, two Sixth Form students and I built a school allotment site, virtually from scratch, using almost all recycled materials. Now, three years on, there are over 50 volunteers of all ages and abilities, coming to help work on the 'Allotment Project'. We also have a group of parent and staff volunteers, including members of the local community, who help as part of a shared responsibility to make Reepham High School and College's Allotment Project what it is today. As a primary aim, all of our produce is sold to our privately run school canteen team who use it in their daily cooking or, on some occasions, at our local market in the town of Reepham. We annually produce a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, salads and freshly laid eggs. We also harvest our own rainwater as we have limited access to mains water. However, absolutely none of this would be possible without the syngeneic hard work of all our volunteers, be they parent, staff, member of the local community and the children themselves. The latter of which are, without question, the most important of all. I would like to share, especially to those who are fellow teachers, how it is indeed possible to bring together all these people to do something incredibly important for our young people.

Our Student Volunteers

I started out with just two and now have well over 50 student volunteers, helping out at lunchtimes and weekends. What made these young volunteers want to get involved and, more crucially, made them want to stay involved?

The first bold move was partnering up with the Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) Award. A few months after we started building the allotment in February 2015, I turned up to an after school meeting with Year 10 DofE bronze participants (aged 14-15), and advertised to them the up and coming Allotment Project as a good opportunity to complete the DofE skill or volunteer section. To my surprise, it was a real hit, and before I knew it, I had 10 volunteers who would pop down to the allotment one lunchtime a week and one full day in the summer. The following academic year, 2016-17, I attempted

again to sow the seeds of volunteering at the Allotment Project. This second time I ended up with 22 bronze and 15 silver (ages 16-17) DofE Award participants. Success!

Using the DofE Award scheme to muster volunteers has proven such a success that the DofE Operations Officer for Norfolk and Suffolk has been using our project as an example to other schools and colleges on how to turn wasteland into an 'outdoor classroom'. This would be a good point to share Josh's view (a Silver DofE volunteer) on why he signed up: "I initially got involved with the Allotment Project when I was volunteering for my Duke of Edinburgh Award, but then I quickly got more involved spending some Saturdays down there. The aspect of the allotment I like so much is that it offers an escape from the normal routine of school. You can just be outside and enjoy the independence the allotment offers you." Joshua's use of the word 'escape' recently helped me understand why these young people want to stay and help.

Deeper and unbeknown reasons include escapism, purpose and ownership.

On the one hand, the DofE volunteers had to stay on to get their skill or volunteer section signed off, however, on reflection, I think there had to be more to it, especially with regard to the younger children who continue to come and help out during the lunch hour on a daily basis.

As I wrote in *PM89*, the Allotment Project is, and firmly remains, a place for young people. It is absolutely designed to inspire them, the children, so they can inspire each other to think about growing their own food in the future. This has to be the future for humanity, but as Jane Goodall once stated: "I am not alone in saying that we have a window of time, a window to start changing the direction, but it depends on changing attitudes ... [but] if our young people lose hope, then we may as well give up."

Reasons for Volunteering

It is my opinion, in our current world, that if 'changing attitudes' were an animal, it would be one on the verge of extinction. This is because of the disconnection and apathy



Reepham allotment project

caused by the entwinement of materialism and an exam factory education. Is it any wonder there are 'seas of spaced-out, stressed-out, depressed kids'? The whole idea of the Allotment Project, I guess deep down, is to counter all of the above and to strive to change attitudes and give young people hope. I discovered that the young people who signed up to volunteer felt the same. This became even more apparent to me when I asked some of our volunteers in a survey: What do you like about the school allotment? And: Why do you keep coming to help out? Some of their responses are shown in the panel.

Without knowing it at the time, these young people enjoy being involved not only because it gives them something to do at lunchtime, but because it gives them an opportunity to have a decent break and to remove themselves from the fast pace of the school day.

I am convinced, the geographical location, by coincidence, really helps young people feel that they can, for a short time at least, escape the hustle and bustle of the school day. The Allotment Project is tucked away and is totally hidden from view of the main school at the very edge of the school playing field which borders a woodland. The allotment is about 400 metres from the school itself and it takes about five minutes to walk there. I am convinced that had the allotment been built next to the school playground, then children wouldn't come. In hindsight, it was good, but accidental permaculture, to build the allotment site where we did. Good people care.

Good Rapport

On my own reflections as a teacher, I feel that I am able to get young people to stay involved because I hold a good relationship with them. I think it is absolutely paramount to have a strong and positive rapport with young people; if they like you then they trust you. As a classroom teacher I always seek to find the very best in young people and do my utmost to make them feel good about themselves. This works when using diplomacy and delegation. Giving a young child a specific job to do (e.g. cleaning chickens and collecting eggs)

"I became involved because I found that academic study alone was neither wholly conducive nor rewarding to my personal development, and hence, the project provided me with another sense of purpose – one which aided not only my own well-being, but the long-term prosperity of the Allotment Project, school and community at large, and most importantly, for the students."

Robert, Sixth Form Volunteer

"I started to get involved because I had nothing else to do in a lunchtime and wanted to get away from work, work, work for a while. Also, it sounded really fun and is such a great thing to be involved with. I keep coming because once you get started you really enjoy it and can't leave work unfinished and seeds unplanted!"

**Holly, now in Year 10,
a volunteer since Year 8**

"... because I have nothing else to do at lunch and the allotment is just the place for me to get involved with a big part of the school, contributing to the school. We have quite a few very hard working people at the allotment and I am pleased to say that we have got a nice and peaceful area down there now."

Tyler, a Year 10 student, recently joined

"I love going down to the allotment to get away from all the shouting and squeaking, to come to a relaxing peaceful place. It's the place I come to think and relax before more lessons."

**Joshua, now in Year 9,
a volunteer since Year 7**

"I like being away from the classroom. I also enjoy having some responsibility."

Robert, Year 9



The stall at the local market, which is manned by students



Some of the kids enjoying their time at the allotment

and putting them in charge of other students whilst doing this job gives them a sense of purpose and belonging to the Allotment Project. Always giving praise and thanking them for their enthusiasm, hard work and ideas, even asking their advice on something (e.g. 'what should we grow here, or do you think we need more manure in this bed?'), are all important in showing that you value them and it also helps them to have a sense of ownership. Every year since the project started I hand out 'sustainability awards' to all volunteers during end of year award assemblies to publicly recognise their hard work.

Our Parent Volunteers

Getting parents to help build the allotment, and to sell produce, has been an enormous help and the allotment, as it is today, would simply not be possible without them. I am a young teacher and it is extremely useful when parents, who are interested in gardening, offer wiser suggestions on how to do things. Some of our parent volunteers are skilled carpenters, builders, farmers, and landscape gardeners, with some even being knowledgeable about food preservation. This year, for example, we have sold our own chutneys and relishes to raise funds. This could not have been possible without parental help.

Having recently completed a Permaculture Design Course, I now know the importance of discovering what human resources you have before you start a new project. Who can you approach within your community to help? In hindsight, I should have asked this question and approached our parent community as this could have saved time and prevented the inevitable mistakes/problems from occurring. For two out of the three years of running the project, I was on my own as the only adult, making some very big decisions. Nonetheless, once word got out, the parents kindly started to offer their time. I asked two of our parent volunteers for their thoughts on why they wanted to get involved with the Allotment Project: "I initially wanted to be involved to offer support so that you [Mr Willer] could maintain your energy to inspire. The profession needs passionate teachers and they usually burn out quickly." Another parent reflected that: "I help when I can at

the allotment because, as a family, we encourage a love of and curiosity in the environment and to have this wonderfully practical resource at our school is so important. I have been so impressed with the welcome of the students and staff that it has been a highlight of my year."

Clearly, without these parents, I could not keep going. They inspire me to continue helping with the Allotment Project and are proof that a school allotment has to be about a community of people that create shared responsibility.

Our Staff Volunteers

At the beginning, it was very difficult to get other members of staff involved. I am always transparent with what I am doing at the allotment, but it is only recently that more staff have become involved. I don't blame them for not coming to help, not at all, as I fear that it is the unsustainably busy teaching culture that kept them away, sadly. I was only able to get things started at the allotment by giving up most Saturdays as I was prepared to work very hard to get things going, especially when students are keen to help out too!

Our Community Volunteers/Support

This is a group of volunteers that are up and coming. This has only really happened since the Allotment Project's appearance at the local market in Reepham and our recent participation in the Reepham Food Festival. We now have a local member of the community, Judith, who very kindly gives up her time to keep an eye on the allotment and the chickens over the weekend when we are not there. In her own words why she volunteers to help: "I'm so lucky to have the allotment on my doorstep. Being able to watch, and in a very small way contribute to, such an inspirational and constantly evolving project is great. I love walking over every day to feed the chooks, especially early in the morning when I often see a barn owl and a hare. The skills the students are learning are so important, will never be forgotten, and in my opinion are life enhancing." Judith has been able to watch our project grow since February



Volunteers preparing the raised beds

2015. Without her, I would conscientiously feel that I had to be there every weekend as I did when we started the project. Judith is therefore a crucial part of our shared responsibility.

Positive Feedback

The mental and emotional support is important too, and it adds to the joy of what we're doing when we get messages like the following, from Alison O'Malley, a mother of two pupils at the school: "I cannot express to you how impressed I am with your project at the allotment. I follow you on Twitter and am amazed by the amount of work being done and the progress you make with extending and improving the allotment and with the success of the produce you have. I absolutely love the fact that the school canteen uses much of what you produce and that we can also buy it at the Reepham market. Not living in Reepham, I have not managed to profit from your stall yet but keep meaning to come over on market day to buy some. I think it is fantastic just how many students you get involved and how the allotment can be a safe sanctuary for those who find the playground overwhelming. The whole project is providing the school with so many benefits, I wouldn't know where to start listing them! It is one of those things that has no downside to it either. You are doing a fantastic job and should be recognised by other schools as a wonderful example to follow!"

I've also found when it comes to the internet, having a basic website from the beginning really helped us reach the wider community. Although I'm not a fan of social media, having a Twitter account continues to prove extremely useful at spreading the news about the project. Giving regular updates helps keep everyone informed on what is going on. It is how local people find out about us and offer their help and support.

Leaving the student volunteers aside, this collection of parent, staff and community volunteers has been fundamental to why the Allotment Project continues to develop and has achieved what it set out to do: to inspire young people to understand the importance of growing their own food locally. This is because of the shared responsibility which is starting to

emerge from our pool of volunteers. This is absolutely crucial as a principle, one person running the show is totally unsustainable, and is not good permaculture at all.

As a final point, RHSC's Allotment Project is about people, young and old, from various walks of life, working together for the common good and to set an example that there is a sound ethical alternative to producing our food. Should the Department of Education and Ofsted make it compulsory for all schools to provide an 'edible outdoor classroom' for their students? Of course they should, but they frequently view the world of education through a short-term lens. The former of which, only too often, make decisions based on their next political campaign. As teachers and parents, why should we wait for them to find the wisdom of planning for generations ahead? Start now! Learn too from my shared experience and build an allotment for your own school. Do it for your young people as they are the future. As I wrote in *PM89* "... it is in young people that all attention must be directed; we must show an incentive and set a sound example that our current methods of producing food and behaviour towards eating it (and certainly wasting it) simply has to change." I feel Mr Whiteman, a parent volunteer poetically sums up what our school community has achieved for our young people: "I feel now that the volunteers [the children] will have a real sense of pride in their collective achievement that means it [the school allotment] now has many beating hearts as opposed to just one."

Matt Willer is a Humanities teacher at Reepham High School and College in rural Norfolk. RHSC's Allotment Project was awarded 'highly commended' at the Norwich and Norfolk Eco Awards 2016-17 and has recently been awarded 'highly commended' in the Broadland District Council's Heart Awards.

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