

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Ruskin Mill coppice

The organisation: Ruskin Mill Trust

The project researcher: Richard Turley and Rachel Tomlinson

Participant group: Ruskin Mill College students (16-25 years)

Number taking part: 13 students

Activity: Coppicing an area of woodland in the college grounds. Coppicing is an important part of the yearly cycle of woodland management at the college as well as being valued for education and therapy.

Top 3 messages:

1. Students' feelings of competence and sense of purpose were identified as an important benefit of coppice work. For students, doing a 'proper job' with lasting effects appears key to their sense of achievement. The college is looking at ways to become more conscious of the significance of tool use for students and identify ways in which progression can be integrated into students' learning.
2. Coppice staff identified the importance of working with journey managers to identify students who could benefit from the coppice experience in terms of physical engagement, experiencing 'awe' and doing practical/purposeful work as identified in the research.
3. Ruskin Mill College has established a 'team work' B-Tech unit for students working in the coppice as the social importance of coppice work was also significant in the research.

• **Background**

Ruskin Mill Trust (RMT) is an organisation consisting of five colleges. Ruskin Mill College serves students with learning disadvantage, approximately 16-19 years old. The college offers a land based experiential education.

The purpose of RMT is to advance the education of young people with learning difficulties and/or behavioural problems through training in the areas of arts, crafts, agriculture and environmental sciences, with particular reference to the insights of Rudolph Steiner. The college is also influenced by the ideas of William Morris and John Ruskin. The organisation is committed to advancing educational and cultural opportunities to its staff and local community.

• **Research focus**

To find out why outdoor/practical/woodland work is important to students and how specifically it can promote student development. Examples from the research can be used as evidence to substantiate what college staff believe anecdotally about the benefits of coppice work. These staff expectations might also be challenged or confirmed by students' own experiences.

• **Context**

The research took place between January 2011 and April 2011 for approx. 10 weeks. Coppice work took place daily.

Ruskin Mill College Land Trust owns 22 acres of ancient beech woodland. Within this are 10 areas of coppice consisting mainly of hazel. The coppice is a clearly defined area within the woodland and had been previously coppiced in 2011. The space differs from other parts of the college in that it is made by students and is intimately known to only those who work there.

Woodland management by students and staff is fully integrated into the college curriculum. Coppicing provides firewood as well as wood for green woodwork and blacksmith workshops.

• **Expectations**

Stakeholders expectations were often connected to the benefits of feeling purposeful and developing oneself. This was backed up by evidence from students.

Stakeholders frequently cited 'being outside of yourself – having a sense of larger perspective', as important. However this was not significantly reflected in student experiences captured as part of this research. We may have been able to capture this with a longer time scale for the research or by using other methods.

Stakeholders focussed on 'where' students were, so the wood and trees were viewed as central. However 'what' students did dominated the evidence gathered about students' actual experiences.

It's worth noting that stakeholder expectations were often rooted in a theoretical understanding and their own beliefs. As the students all have learning difficulties they can sometimes struggle to express themselves verbally or articulate in detail how they're feeling. Stakeholders often talked in terms of their own, personal experience. Perhaps they don't feel that they can speak on behalf of students?

- **Methods used**

Students took an active part in the research by conducting video interviews of their peers and filming their favourite areas of the coppice, drawing pictures, taking part in group discussions and being interviewed by staff while working and spending time in the coppice.

It was challenging to achieve responses from students as the nature of their learning difficulties presented communication, relationship and cognitive processing difficulties. Whilst taking imaginative approaches assisted facilitating them to articulate their feelings and emotions these could be out of context. It was important that lessons didn't simply become filming or drawing sessions or distract too much from coppicing.

The practitioner-researcher wrote a diary based on his observations and personal reflections. He also interviewed other staff on a one-to-one basis and as a group during a 'goldfish bowl' group discussion.

A second researcher (external to the organisation) analysed the data and compiled the report, whilst liaising with the practitioner-researcher.

- **Results: 10 most significant findings**

Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

This was closely connected to tool use, practical/physical work, the fact that students saw coppicing as a 'proper job' and building the tea shelter. Students could see when these easily identified tasks have been completed or achieved in an appropriate way.

'I like to learn, learn new skills like chopping, lopping, splitting and I like being, I helped to put this teepee up [standing by tea shelter]...' RMP05

'I don't like when somebody uses the tools in an unsafe ways like when the axe, like swinging the axe too hard'. RMP11

'It's all right to go fast with the axe if you know what you are doing, and you got experience'. RMP10:

Being purposeful

Students seemed to feel a sense of purpose that was connected to the structured and productive nature of the work and associated with the recurring jobs that could be undertaken and the tools that could be used, within this context. It is the structure and productivity of the work that is associated with the feeling of being purposeful. This indicator of wellbeing seemed to be very closely tied to 'feelings of being competent'. Ensuring understanding of the purpose of the work seemed to be at the forefront of staff interaction with students in terms of questions they asked students.

e.g. 'This, this is RMS20 and RMP05 trying to cut a piece, a piece of wood, with an axe and a hammer'. RMP03 [student narrating and making video]

'When we fell the tree and cross cut the tree, we then split the logs into two halves and then we stacked the logs into a stack and then we have the white pickup which then comes over...' (RMAudio_RMS01_RMP10_RMP11_discussion)

'You get going jobs you wanted to do it, jobs cutting trees down'. (RMAudio_studentsgroupdiscussion_part02)

Experiencing positive emotions and moods

Aspects of the coppice's outdoor environment (being outside, fresh air, quiet) seemed to have most association with people experiencing positive emotions and moods. Much of the evidence for this expression of wellbeing was drawn from the researchers and other staff's observations of students, and was corroborated by some of the direct quotes from students or feedback from other tutors.

e.g.

RMP06: 'I like everything, it's really nice and peaceful, it's nice to be outside for a change'.

RMP01: 'I enjoy processing wood using the billhook. I didn't think I would like coppicing but I really enjoy it.'

Developing oneself

Most instances of students expressing a sense of developing themselves were connected to their learning new things. This is perhaps not surprising given the context of the learning environment of the college*. There was little evidence of people talking about how they had developed in other ways e.g. socially/emotionally, but this is perhaps more difficult to record and separate from other aspects of college life.

* The Practitioner-Researcher was also the lead coppice tutor, which perhaps increased the amount of research conversations focusing upon learning outcomes, both because this was a familiar route of inquiry and interpretation for the P-R and because students may have understood open questions within the context of the p-r's tutor role, increasing a tendency to give examples of knowledge gain. These factors perhaps make this indicator more prominent than it would have been otherwise.

e.g. Student: 'You learn about trees and stuff like that, all different type of trees, you learn how to use the safe tools and stuff, how to grow straight and all different kind of other growing - light - and knowing when they have like diseases, you learn about the well being of the woods themselves, what they do when they fall down and rot into the ground'

RMS01: 'OK, so you are learning about woodland ecology'

Student: 'Yeah and knowing how to collect the woodfuel safely'.

(Rmaudio_studentsgroupdiscussion_part01)

RMP11: 'Yep, I know much, like all the first years when they come, including me, and I just like I know what to do here and there and I didn't'.

RMS01: 'You didn't, but you discovered that?'

RMP11: 'Yep'.

(Rmaudio_RMS01_RMP10_RMP11_discussion)

Safe and supported within and through social relationships

Ruskin Mill College Tutors believed that the nature of the woodland space made it easier for students to function positively, socially, with its well-defined social areas such as the tea tent, and evidently less social spaces where students could work alone. The evidence associated with feeling safe and supported socially seemed to reflect the quality of students' relationships with staff and one another and the sense that, within the coppice environment, this social network constitutes a cohesive 'team'. There was strong evidence of friendships within peer-led videos. However, video makers were perhaps amongst the more socially confident students, increasing the likelihood of the capture of this sort of data.

e.g.

Student: 'We get on really well when we do team work like splitting the logs'.

RMS01: 'When you're splitting them especially with the splitting axe and the...'

Student: 'Sledgehammer'.

RMS01: 'Do you think about what - what do you think about particularly?'

Student: 'The, the, the like when we stack - when we like fell that ash this morning, that's a, that's a big team work effort'.

(Rmaudio_RMS01_RMP10_RMP11_discussion)

RMP03: 'Hello RMP05. We're coming to the end of the coppice season. What have you most enjoyed about the coppice season this year? [delivered in fast formal 'interviewer tone']'.

RMP05: 'Eh, um, splitting and working really hard. Enjoy the company really [moves arms in the air for emphasis and looks off camera, presumably at other coppice workers]. And [looks upward in thought], and being outside and things like that really. And, being with [names others, including tutor]. It's been quite good fun. It's good'.

(Rmvideo19_RM03_interviews_RMP05_whatdoyouenjoy)

Relaxed

There are a range of possible routes to students feeling relaxed, associated with work, familiar tasks or places and being outside. Feeling relaxed wasn't linked in the data with people, but rather with the impact of the environment and the activity.

e.g.

RMP06: 'I've forty winks sometimes'.

RMP03: '...you go to sleep?'

RMP06: 'Yes. And I don't know, it's like just peaceful'... [pause while thinking and looking around at coppice] And the... and the fire's nice and warm'.

(Rmvideo23_RMP03_interviews_RMP06_whatdoyouenjoy)

Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook

Many examples of respondents feeling connected to others, through a shared sense of values, were associated with their experiences of participating within a collective understanding of the significance of practical work or new knowledge: what could be described as the culture of the coppice. Some examples seem to be students repeating things that they've learned from tutors, about the work of coppicing. Students seemed keen to connect with other people in the coppice, through this knowledge. Tutors appear to help this to happen by imparting a very clear idea of what the coppice is for and how the job should be done, using consistent language to describe it. The students seem to gain wellbeing from reflecting this shared view back to tutors and to their peers.

e.g.

RMP03: 'Now it's the last week of the coppice and we're getting near to the end of the coppice season. The coppice season is from November to March... Winter Equinox to Spring Equinox '

'RMP05 picked up on this and imitated today. Talked about leaving stool in good condition so rot didn't get in i.e. clean cut. RMP05 may need this repeating'. (RM_reflectivediary_RMS01)

Awe

This new indicator was defined as: Experiences of awe bring people into the present moment, which underlies awe's capacity to adjust time perception, influence decisions and make life feel satisfying. Awe was often experienced when standards were felled in the coppice, because of the size of these trees. It could also be experienced on a small scale e.g. looking at the fire.

e.g.

RMP11: Timber, it'll go slowly, it doesn't want to go.

RMS01: It is...its opening. Look at that top. [Unclear]

RMP11: It's going.

Student: Fantastic [sound of tree cracking and falling].

Feelings of closeness to the natural world

The six examples of this indicator are closely associated with trees and being in the woods. There weren't any examples of this indicator being directly connected to the work of coppicing, except that they were necessarily in this environment to work.

e.g.

Student - no ID: Nice, it's nice and calm, touching the trees, getting into the trees, you feel like a tree. You know you feel like you're there...

Secure with personal limitations

The evidence for this was often from students experiencing things that don't go to plan and learning from their mistakes. There were no negative examples of this indicator. Is there something about the uncontrolled environment of the wood that makes it easier to accept things that are sometimes difficult?

e.g.

Student: Then I realised a cut in there it aiming at that larch. That will be much better, it's like that gap bit.

RMS01: Yeah. We got to be so accurate haven't we? So in retrospect would you have cut it a little bit more here? On this side?

Student: Yes.

• Reflections

The importance of doing practical, purposeful work seems to be the most significant outcome of students' experiences of the coppicing work. This was closely related to students' feelings of developing themselves through doing a 'real' and 'important' job. The activity was of primary importance in accessing this psychological wellbeing.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods was also very important and related primarily to where students were. The wood, and coppice space providing a flexible space in which to get closer to people but also where people could be alone.

Being safe and supported through social relationships was tied to working as and feeling part of a team as well as having a common/shared interest with other students but also staff.

Coppicing allows wellbeing to occur because it necessarily takes place in a woodland environment and involves people working together on specific and focused tasks which have real meaning for participants.

• Action points

- Interviews and discussion continue to be used and the practitioner-researcher benefited from techniques learnt whilst undergoing research. Coppice students are involved in producing an article for the college magazine and a cover article for the Royal Forestry Society.
- The research opened the researcher-practitioner's mind to the possible use of video as a tool for differentiating learning whilst coppicing. However video has not been used since, emphasis is on body coordination and use of tools and there is little context for video in terms of viewing or using.
- Students' feelings of competence and sense of purpose were identified as an important benefit of coppice work. For students, doing a 'proper job' with lasting effects appears key to their sense of achievement. The college is looking at ways to become more conscious of the significance of tool use for students and identify ways in which progression can be integrated into students' learning.
- Coppice staff identified the importance of working with journey managers to identify students who could benefit from the coppice experience in terms of physical engagement, experiencing 'awe' and doing practical/purposeful work as identified in the research.
- Ruskin Mill College has established a 'team work' B-Tech unit for students working in the coppice as the social importance of coppice work was also significant in the research.

Summary of findings

Rank (most reported)	Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors
1	Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)	What: tools, proper job, shelter building, practical/physical work, familiar job, producing things for other people to use, feeling part of something Who: staff, Ruskin Mill College community Where: tea tent
2	Being purposeful	What: proper job, tools, producing things for other people to use, practical/physical work, learning new things, being busy

		Where: the woods Who: coppice team
3	Experiencing positive emotions and moods	Where: being outside, tea tent, the coppice Who: coppice team What: being noticed, physical/practical work, practical/physical work, play, tools, being busy, coppicing
4	Developing oneself	What: learning new things, physical/practical work, tools, large scale nature, proper job
5	Safe and supported within and through social relationships	Who: coppice team, friendship grown from working together, other students, Ruskin Mill College community What: shelter building, physical/practical work



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