

Transformative food education in Wales

Jane Powell, Organic Centre Wales, IBERS, Aberystwyth University

The Food Group of RCE Wales brings together higher education researchers, community groups and educators to develop good practice in Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship, with an emphasis on food. This paper describes our progress to date and is our invitation to others to join in the work.

Formation of RCE Wales and its Food Group

RCE Wales¹ grew from an initiative led by the Centre for Alternative Technology and UNESCO-Cymru, which was promoted by the Welsh Government in 2008 who, with HEFCW, and ESDGC projects across Wales, provided input to enable the formal application process to be undertaken by the ESDGC team at Swansea University, assisted by the University of Wales, Newport. 'RCE Wales' was accredited by the UN University in 2010 and its secretariat is at Swansea University where the chair is Dr Jane Claricoates. The Food Group was set up soon afterwards and is chaired by Jane Powell of Organic Centre Wales at IBERS, Aberystwyth University.

Linking practice, reflection and knowledge

The starting point for the Food Group was to critique existing provision for food education in the context of sustainable development. An early impression was that there were two distinct approaches, one based on content (carbon footprint, climate change, food systems, economics and so on) and the other rooted in process (for instance, empowering school councils to make decisions on school food, or teaching empathy and respect in classroom discussions). These two approaches both seemed valid but tended to compete for attention rather than complementing each other. In addition, there seemed to be a question about the purpose of food education: was it intended to change behaviour along predetermined lines, or was it education for its own sake?

We used the AQAL approach of Ken Wilber to map the relationship between these different aspects of food education, as follows.

<i>Subjective, individual</i> How individuals experience the world and what it means to them; motivation and intention, e.g. "I like to buy local food because it feels more sociable"	<i>Objective, individual</i> How individuals appear and behave e.g. my carbon footprint, how often I drive a car, how healthy my diet is
<i>Intersubjective, collective</i> Shared cultural interpretations of the world, values and ethics, e.g. "In Wales we think sustainable development is important"	<i>Objective, collective</i> Food systems, economic systems, the biosphere, facts and figures, e.g. school meals uptake, the amount of food imported by Wales

We started on the premise that the best education would integrate the strengths of all these aspects, and linked this principle to Kolb's action learning cycle. This has four phases: active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, each

¹ RCE = Regional Centre of Expertise for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). At the time of writing, there are 116 accredited RCEs across the world.

of which draws on one or more of the quadrants in Wilber's model. For more details see our 2011 position paper, cited below.

Putting it into practice

The RCE applies the action learning cycle to itself, so this episode of abstract conceptualization was followed by some active experimentation, in the form of an event. We decided to assemble a group of people with an interest in food, and get them to reflect on their reasons for choosing a career in food and their visions for the future.

With support from Coleg Powys in Newtown, we brought together farmers, growers, cooks, hoteliers, retailers and others for a morning of investigations in October 2011. We used a combination of silent thinking, listening and group discussion to probe the motivations and values of this group of people whose day jobs are strongly oriented to the practical work of feeding their local community. This revealed a strong commitment to values of community, health, family and connection with the land, which could be traced back in many cases to early childhood influences. For them, personal habits of cooking and eating were linked to a vision of a future in which more people would enjoy the social connection that food brings, and more value would be placed on food quality.

The Food Group hopes to organize more of these events, and welcomes involvement from any researchers and community groups who can put time into developing its work. Our remit covers formal, informal and non-formal education, and we are interested in any approaches which will allow a deep questioning of the world. This often comes from working across different sectors, such as health and agriculture. Another interest is the collection of traditional food and farming knowledge that could support sustainable development.

Recommendations for Welsh policy

The Newtown group's vision of a future food system that is more localized and seasonal and that includes a strong element of education resonates strongly with some Welsh Government policies, such as *Food from Wales*, *Food for Wales*, the *Local Sourcing Action Plan* and *Appetite for Life*. Wales is however experiencing considerable challenges in putting some of these policies in place – public procurement of local and sustainably produced food is notoriously difficult – and events such as these provide an opportunity to probe and find out what the barriers are. This microcosm of the food chain identified many, from the soil and climate of Wales to perceived government over-regulation and the public demand for cheap food.

Food touches all areas of life, and is of central concern to health, agriculture, education, social cohesion, energy policy and much else. By the same token, there are many competing interests at work and contradictions are rife, such as leisure centres that promote exercise but sell junk food. Leadership is needed to convince the various stakeholders to set aside their individual concerns for the sake of a greater good, and if government is to take on that role, it too must make it a priority to work across its own divisions, for instance bridging departments of farming, food marketing, environment, health and economic development. The international RCE network then provides a means for Wales to share its experience with the rest of the world.

Further information

Please see <http://foodesdgcwales.wordpress.com/> for our position paper and a report of the Newtown event, or contact Jane Powell at jnp@aber.ac.uk. We are always pleased to hear from others who would like to get involved in the work of the RCE.