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To cite this article: Les Levidow, Andrea Berardi & Julia Jung (2023): How does community food growing build community bonds? Insights from grassroots visual storytelling, Local Environment, DOI: 10.1080/13549839.2023.2248612

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2023.2248612

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Published online: 07 Sep 2023.

Article views: 111

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How does community food growing build community bonds? Insights from grassroots visual storytelling

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ABSTRACT
Community food growing (CFG) builds community bonds and placemaking through emotional attachments. This process has been illuminated by grassroots visual storytelling, whereby CFG participants made short video stories about their experiences. The stories inspired community-building for better futures so as to encourage greater support for and participation in CFG. These stories were analysed to illuminate the social basis and roles of CFG. Participants’ stories highlight some key aspects, namely: solidaristic mutual-aid relationships around food-growing, cooking, eating and distribution; cooperative, creative, adaptive capacities for collectively responding to common difficulties; empathetic bonds among participants across various differences (such as ethnicity, age and prior skills); a food culture strengthening participants’ knowledge and supply of healthy food; and the social-organisational skills for facilitating and inspiring those group practices. As these video stories show, community-building processes are radically hopeful: they acknowledge difficult issues and emotions, alongside aspirations for a different future. Together those roles helped to strengthen place-attachments for more participants. By screening the video stories, moreover, participants have made the process more visible and attractive. This provides a stronger basis to identify exemplary practices, extend their strengths, spread the societal benefits and attract greater commitments. Although many urban and peri-urban spaces are potentially available for expanding CFG, successful initiatives depend on social-organisational skills to facilitate self-confidence, empathetic cooperation and place attachments among volunteers. Support measures from Local Authorities are generally fragmented across several policy areas and so warrant integration. Community-building skills can provide a focus for such policy integration around the multiple roles and benefits of CFG initiatives.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 18 August 2022
Accepted 10 August 2023

KEYWORDS
Community food growing; grassroots visual storytelling; COVID-19 pandemic; community bonds; placemaking; radical hopefulness

Key policy highlights
Community food growing (CFG) brings many societal benefits, which depend on social-organisational skills for community-building and placemaking with emotional attachments, as highlighted by participants’ video-stories about their experiences.

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Although many urban and peri-urban spaces are potentially available for expanding CFG initiatives, long-term policy support is necessary for community-building and placemaking, i.e. for transforming spaces into meaningful shared places.

Many Local Authorities provide some support measures, but these are generally fragmented across disparate policy areas, which should be integrated in order to enhance the benefits of CFG.

Collective capacities for community-building and placemaking can provide a focus for such integration.

1. Introduction: how does community food growing (CFG)-make places and build community?

Over the past decade or more, community food growing (henceforth CFG) has become more popular and widely known for many societal benefits. CFG encompasses the many community gardens that grow food, beyond simply flowers. These initiatives have become important sites for group voluntary work, mental well-being and wider societal benefits. Many CFG participants see themselves as doing social action, e.g. by sharing skills, building community, overcoming social isolation and developing alternatives to the dominant food regime (Kirwan et al. 2013; 2014). The pervasive term “community” plays a performative role in creating social bonds, building enthusiasms through congenial activities and expand the societal benefits (Levidow 2018).

As many studies have shown, CFG brings benefits for people’s health and mental well-being, especially elderly people and refugees (SF&G 2016). Even in places which have little formal engagement with the arts, such as housing estates, many people contribute to “creative practice in popular activities such as gardening and cooking”, which remains crucial for their well-being (ACE 2012, 98). The most successful place-based community gardens “are internally driven, as they are initiated and managed by participants from within the neighbourhood community” (Firth, Maye, and Pearson 2011, 565).

This process was illuminated by the Connecting Communities Through Food report (AHRC 2015). From a wider interest in food quality,

this cultural turn from consumption to production is driven by changes in the ways in which people practice development of the self in the context of community … Many have been expressing commitment to sustainable everyday life practices, informed by a range of aspirations …

As the report emphasises, however, “community may be absent, even when people are together” (AHRC 2015, 3–4).

So it is crucial to understand the conditions and processes that build community, including informal social bonds (AHRC 2015: citing Sennett 2012). He has conceptualised these bonds as empathetic cooperation, dependent on a tacit skill or craft which can build social bonds: “The dialogic conversation … prospers through empathy, the sentiment of curiosity about who other people are in themselves. Empathy occurs when we send empathic signals to another person that we are attending and recognising what they are doing or thinking” (Sennett 2012).

Beyond simply creating or enjoying green spaces, CFG builds community bonds by cooperatively organising tasks. This can be understood as “civil labour” or more specifically as “civil agriculture” (Delind 2002 cited in AHRC 2015, 5; Rojek 2001). The term “community” denotes such activities whereby people reconnect with each other and with nature in its cultivated forms. Here are some examples.

Across several community gardens, a Glasgow study identified “new forms of place-based identity and community”; these emerged from encounters among diverse social groups who might otherwise have little substantive contact with each other. Participants came together to “exchange ideas, stories and knowledge as they collectively produce new urban spaces through the practice of community gardening” (Cumbers et al. 2018, 134). That study quotes a volunteer:

The garden is much more than just food growing. It is a space people can come and use for storytelling and crafts and music performances and things like that. It just means more people and we get people contacting us to use it. (Cumbers et al. 2018, 140–141)
In their Glasgow cases, community gardens “foster new collective and egalitarian ways of working with food that also enhance people’s knowledge and everyday food skills” (Cumbers et al. 2018, 146).

When successful, CFG activities strengthen group place-attachments. Gardening communities “form through making place, sharing experiences through which gardeners feel at home together”. They are guided by skills, feelings and affinity. They find comfort in “a dynamic sense of belonging as moving with others”, e.g. by sharing experiences and future plans (Pitt 2013, 2).

Moving together through what process? According to a schema of four parameters, placemaking constructs meanings, social exchange, collective action and civic empowerment. “Community gardeners reclaim and transform open space into meaningful social places” (Wesener 2020, 23). A different schema highlights another four parameters: joint knowledge-production among diverse stakeholders to develop the place; functionality for participants cooperation; a step-by-step iterative development; and dealing with obstacles (Karge 2018). Rather than focus on obstacles, gardeners may proactively emphasise new opportunities for collaborative placemaking (Wesener 2020, 22).

An international survey found some tensions around the roles of community gardens. They have been plugging gaps left by the local state’s withdrawal from particular services and spaces. Nevertheless, through its participants’ interactions, “community gardening has been creating spaces that are arguably more meaningful in terms of the quality of social interaction, social responsibility and political activism than in the more obvious public spaces of the city” (Milbourne 2021: 2914–2915). Such tensions emerged more strongly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as we shall see.

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted CFG initiatives, while also revealing and intensifying the social inequalities in our society (Power et al. 2020). Simultaneously, people’s social isolation prompted greater interest to continue, join or begin CFG initiatives. These efforts overlapped with mutual-aid networks; they initially supplied food to vulnerable people and soon expanded to wider cooperative activities (Sanderson Bellamy et al. 2021).

In the UK community gardens interpreted and adapted the government’s Covid-19 guidance through special precautions that would protect participants from the virus and enable them to feel safe. Gardening tasks became a means to rediscover and remake inter-personal relationships. A community garden

creates the increasingly rare opportunity in cities for encounters across generations. Volunteers and visitors talk about accidentally bumping into others that they did not yet know, and children play freely in this bounded green space, developing a sense of belonging to the garden . . . . (Van Duppen 2020)

Relative to social isolation during the pandemic, many people experienced improvements in their emotional well-being through the social interactions and social relevance of CFG, as well as from connecting to nature in a green space. They were “using garden produce to do good for the local communities in which they are situated”, e.g. by providing products for food banks. London’s community gardens have demonstrated their niche role through food provision to those in need locally and in a safe outdoor space for those with mental health problems. CFG initiatives receiving grants could continue more easily than those dependent on income from their activities, which unavoidably declined in the pandemic (Schoen and Blythe 2020).

Emphasising the greater need for CFG, NGOs requested extra support from local authorities during the pandemic. Beforehand, 18 London-area Councils already provided resources including small grants for community food-growing projects. At least 15 actively supported community gardens in their borough to stay open during the pandemic. Some initiated or expanded allotment schemes (Sustain 2020). Support measures from local authorities and charities were crucial for helping community gardens to continue and to engage volunteers. Some obtained income from local authorities or charities on the basis of supplying food to food banks or directly to recipients.

For the community-building process, special insights have come from our research project, “Grassroots Visual Storytelling about Community Food-Growing”. This project used a grassroots DIY approach to build participants’ capacity in storytelling to produce and disseminate short
video stories about their own experience in CFG initiatives, during and just after the Covid-19 crisis. The variable terminology here warrants a brief explanation: “Visual” emphasises the images, while “digital” emphasises the means for creating and circulating the videos.

This article draws on the participants’ video stories and comments in order to discuss the following questions: What practices have helped CFG initiatives to extend community bonds and strengthen group place-attachment for more participants? What insights come from engaging some participants in an accessible process of visual storytelling? How did the storytelling process involve and affect participants including CFG initiatives? What are wider implications of such storytelling for good practice and supportive policies?

The article has the following structure: (2) the methods of our storytelling project; (3) insights from the participants’ video stories and surrounding discussions; (4) visual storytelling as a placemaking process, and then (5) policy support and its limitations, and (6) Conclusion on wider implications for CFG and policy support measures. The text provides hyperlinks to some documents, CFG webpages and video stories about them.

2. Participatory methods for video stories

Food and storytelling have always been connected. Through the foods we consume and the foods we make, “we stake claims in our identities and stories” (Williams 2017). The food we grow and eat not only generates stories about its origin, but also creates a space for people to share their stories and to create a feeling of community (von der Haide et al. 2021). Visual culture has an important role in mediating and highlighting “the spaces of food communities” (AHRC 2015, 5).

The stories we tell each other can help build community. Hopeful, uplifting stories can bring people together and galvanise action to overcome personal, community and global challenges. Good stories push or entice the listener to encounter another person’s experience and perspective, which may be previously unfamiliar. This narrative experience can challenge the listener’s assumptions and overcome emotional barriers, thus eliciting empathy and understanding. Storytelling also helps the tellers to reflect on their own experience and learn from it (Baumeister and Wilson 1996; Bruner 1991).

As a research method, participants’ storytelling democratises research practice by enabling storytellers to control what information is combined in a familiar visual and oral format. The method flattens hierarchies between researchers and participants by prioritising their lived experience and expertise; they gain an opportunity to direct, document, and reflect on their own narratives (Flicker and MacEntee 2020). Participants work through a series of techniques, e.g. storyboarding, photo-stories, narrated slideshows and the final video. Meanwhile, they receive regular comments from their own CFG group, from fellow course participants and from course facilitators (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007).

Along those lines, our storytelling process elicited participants’ desire to convey how their own CFG initiative built novel community bonds, especially while overcoming difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their story ideas stimulated the films, generating closer engagement with fellow participants in their CFG initiative and thus strengthening its internal bonds. This unusual opportunity, free of charge, filled a significant gap in the training available anywhere. Moreover, film screenings helped to stimulate and extend such bonds among CFG participants (see Section 4.1).

2.1. Story development as participatory action research (PAR)

In our project’s DIY storytelling method, the process aimed to empower participants to create their own hopeful video stories of community food growing during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. We encouraged them to use accessible digital tools such as smartphone video, photo and audio recording apps and simple online editing software. These gave CFG participants the means to go beyond face-to-face storytelling, to put their stories online and so reach more people. This grassroots
basis contrasts with the many professionally made food growing films available on social media platforms such as YouTube (Figure 1).

The project was structured as a storytelling course, where participants from community gardens aimed to produce a short video story by the end. Cobra Collective members trained participants to use accessible tools to devise their own visual stories describing group experiences, exploring their feelings and sharing beneficial practices. Most participants had no prior experience in film-making. Many initially felt anxious but also excited by the prospects of creating their own digital stories.

The project used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. In the general sense of PAR, all participants should be empowered to play the role of “change agents” (Bradbury 2010). This need not mean a parity of influence within an inquiry process. More modestly and feasibly, the PAR process needs “a sufficient degree of inter-dependent collaborative reflection and management, for the research to be genuinely with people, and not about them or on them” (Heron and Reason 2006, 151).

In a PAR process, researchers generally work with a collective subject, e.g. a specific group which plans and implements practical interventions. In this case, the collective subject was mainly the project team, which included two voluntary organisations promoting CFG initiatives and their local networks, namely: Sustain in London, and Food4Families in Reading. Their roles in the project team helped the aims in many ways: they co-designed the project aims and processes; they circulated the call for participants among their support networks; they strengthened the course methods by sharing their own knowledge, insights and reflections; and they promoted the resulting films, especially through workshops, training events and screenings.

In one model of PAR, a collaboration is planned through repeated cycles of 4 stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, as a basis for the subsequent cycle (e.g. Heron and Reason 2006; 2008). In our project, each iteration of the course represented one action cycle: a two-month course with a new cohort. This had a PAR process in a more subtle sense: responses from storyteller-participants informed subsequent iterations of the course, as explained next.

At each training session participants shared their plans for structuring a story, initially in a storyboard and then a draft video. These plans became clearer through discussion with their fellow gardeners, other course participants and the course team. In between the sessions, some participants deepened their understanding of concepts and techniques by engaging with an online module developed by the project team.

Held over approximately two months, each course had 4 sessions.

Figure 1. Zoom training session of the storytelling course. Credit: Cobra Collective. https://cobracollective.org/news/first-insights-community-food-growing/
Session 1 – Introduction to storytelling approach, key concepts, basic photographic techniques. Homework: participants needed to produce a photo-story to present at the next session.

Session 2 – Reflections on photo-story and engagement with key concepts; progress with techniques onto narrated slideshow. Homework: participants produce a basic video (later it was a narrated slideshow) to present at the next session.

Session 3 – Reflections on video/narrated slideshow and engagement with key concepts; introduction to more sophisticated video techniques. Homework: participants produce a more advanced video to present at the next session.

Session 4: – Screening and celebration of the videos. Reflection on advanced video and engagement with key concepts. Next steps for disseminating the videos (e.g. community screenings, as in section 4).

The storytellers sometimes adjusted their approach in response to comments in the session discussions and/or from fellow gardeners. And the research team adjusted both the sessions and online module in response to the storytellers’ comments and outputs. For example, in the spring 2021 course, some storytellers expressed frustration that they were dependent on a facilitator-tutor to assemble their audio-visual elements into a video film. They preferred to do the assembly themselves and then perhaps adjust the elements to improve the film, without waiting for the tutor. So the autumn course encouraged participants to use the WeVideo platform (available through the Cobra Collective’s subscription). An introduction to WeVideo required a little more of the session time, but storytellers mainly used the in-built tutorials. Everyone expressed satisfaction at learning this online video editing skill.

Although one researcher led the process of writing up preliminary insights from each PAR cycle, participants and wider stakeholders confirmed or added their interpretation to the research insights, so that these were faithful representations of the stories and the participants’ reflections. Insights from each PAR cycle were publicly disseminated on the Cobra Collective’s website and widely circulated to participants. Their responses strengthened the rigour of the research team’s interpretations.

In summary, the PAR process was structured around live synchronous sessions, complemented by an asynchronous online course that went into more detail, so that participants could follow up the sessions with further support in their own time. We also supported participants (and gained feedback) through WhatsApp discussion groups, email exchanges and one-to-one sessions. At the end of the project in June 2022, a two-hour online workshop applied the “Ripple Effect Mapping” method (Chazdon 2017) to gain insights on wider effects; see section 4.2 below.

### 2.2. Concepts to prompt storytelling

In the course, the prompt material (verbal and written) aimed to stimulate stories about group experiences, as entry points to a wider community-building process. Likewise our comments on participants’ storyboards in the training sessions. Otherwise, their films might have emphasised individual experiences, or environmental aspects, or a documentary format – all valid, but not our project’s focus.

So the course team introduced various concepts at the sessions and circulated them as text before or afterwards. The course team observed whether or how participants responded positively to the concepts through their story plans. These responses became a basis for team judgements about whether to emphasise a concept or try others. Some changes were made in the course after its first cycle (spring 2021), and again after the second (autumn 2021), in preparation for the third and final one (spring 2022).

Let us briefly survey the prompt-concepts, their rationale, role and changes. Across the project’s three course cycles, the concepts emphasised that storytelling can play crucial roles in either undermining or building community bonds. But some participants intuitively planned a documentary-type film, without a clear and engaging storyline. So the second cycle introduced a “whale” image, whose
humpback and explosive spout symbolise the climax of a story, followed by a resolution. In the final course, the whale image was replaced by a wave, whose breaking crest represents the story climax (Figure 2).

As the core of many stories, within and beyond the course, the Covid-19 pandemic posed difficulties for participants or for an entire CFG initiative, as a stimulus for cooperative activities to overcome them. During the pandemic, community gardens were emphasising social or community “resilience” as a means to deal with the pandemic and as a wider benefit from CFG activities (e.g. Power et al. 2020 Schoen and Blythe 2020). For example, our third-sector partner Sustain organised a webinar on Growing Resilience through Food. In parallel the project team was discussing the concept of social-ecological resilience, an original focus for the project.

In the first cycle the course team introduced “resilience”, yet the concept elicited little resonance or response in the stories; many participants saw difficulties in using the concept to describe practical CFG activities. So the team discussed more accessible concepts that could gain greater engagement from participants. The second cycle (autumn 2021) introduced two extra concepts: “community flourishing” and “radical hopefulness”, as explained next.

Stories can help us to understand how group experiences encounter difficulties and cope with them, thus inspiring others to develop similar practices. Otherwise stressful experiences can become bearable and be turned into social connections that evoke positive emotions. Sharing such personal stories helps participants to form interdependent support networks where people can listen to, hold space for and support each other, thus creating or expanding community bonds. This process was expressed in the concept of “community flourishing”, as in images by Madeleine Jubilee Saito (2020; Figure 3), which we incorporated into our autumn course.

The autumn course also introduced the concept of “radical hopefulness”. This means practices which acknowledge difficult issues and emotions, as a basis of responding with care and putting this care into practice. By such means, collective practices can not only envision a better future, but also enact or prefigure this future in the present. For the food-growing theme of the course, radical hopefulness can inspire practical steps towards an alternative agri-food system. This concept is related to the notion of “radical hope” about how to face mounting challenges that seem impossible to overcome (Lear 2006). It also relates to an aphorism by Raymond Williams: “To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing” (Williams 1976).

In the second autumn iteration, the course materials also included the famous children’s story about a mouse, Frederick (Lionni 1967). It begins during the summer: the other mice busily gather nuts, wheat, and straw for the winter, while Frederick instead gathers in his mind the imagery of sun rays, colours and the words expressed. In the winter, when all the food supplies have been exhausted, his fellow mice ask Frederick for his contribution. His lush words bring the

Figure 2. Breaking crest denotes a story-climax.
warmth of the sun’s golden glow, that paint within their previously depressed mindsets the bright colours of blue periwinkles, golden wheat, and berry bushes.

During the pandemic, this classic story attracted greater interest from adults as well as children. A commentary posed these questions: How does a community work together to prepare for challenging times ahead? What stories must we stockpile? How can these be shared? And what is the role of the storyteller? (Hall 2020). By including this material, our course suggested analogies with the Covid-19 pandemic, when storytelling played diverse roles – e.g. in creating community division or cohesion, in urging a “return to normal” or else opening up different futures.

3. Storytelling results: community-building through CFG initiatives

In this project, storytellers were self-selected for wanting to convey their positive experiences to fellow gardeners and wider publics, as a means to promote and strengthen CFG initiatives. Of the approximately 30 individuals who expressed interest in the course, 20 completed a video story which they wanted to share publicly; some made more than one.

The results here come from several sources, including the video stories and session discussions, which were transcribed and thematically coded. CFG volunteers and a few staff members made the films. A subset wrote blogs. Some also completed the questionnaire which, had two parts: firstly, questions about benefits of their CFG experience and how these arose from good practices; and secondly, questions about benefits of the storytelling course, and how these arose from its process or structure. The course leaders did minimal investigation of the CFG initiatives from which the storytellers came. So the analysis depends mainly on insights from the digital storytelling process, participants’ comments and video outcomes. This priority expresses our research commitment to elicit the lived experience and expertise of participants.

Key themes emerged from our analysis through similarities across different CFG initiatives, while some detailed data sources provided depth and nuanced insights to validate and strengthen the emerging themes. Participants’ responses to our preliminary findings also added rigour to our analysis. Results are grouped together below around two themes: community-building benefits, and social processes underlying those benefits, as complementary aspects of placemaking. The details below include hyperlinks to specific initiatives and films.
3.1. Community-building benefits

The video stories generally highlighted a community-building process around CFG activities. As many storytellers intended, the film provided a resource for attracting volunteers to remain or join. All this encouraged more gardeners to learn skills to make their own films.

In the training sessions, participants spoke about previous roles of stories. They had already been inspiring people to participate in CFG, affirming their societal benefits, getting to know diverse participants, highlighting their cooperative relationships and so building community bonds. For example: “I told a story about a derelict former allotment, which attracted help to clear the space to create a new garden. My story attracted more people to work together during the pandemic”. In the new course, participants expressed similar aims, for example: “I wanted to tell a positive story to promote the garden and involve more people”.

Their video stories depict participants’ efforts to overcome social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic by joining, sustaining or expanding food initiatives. In each one, a group agency emerged from previous and new volunteers. As key insights, CFG initiatives overcame difficult challenges, found ways to comply with hygiene restrictions, reached many more people and so extended the earlier societal benefits. They were fulfilling their own needs for social contact, joint activities and emotional well-being. The gardens’ activities spanned divides between generations, ethnic backgrounds, genders and prior skills. Gardeners got to know and trust diverse people whom they would not otherwise meet.

Special cooperative efforts became necessary for dealing with difficult conditions. Volunteers were taking turns using the same tools, a potential medium for spreading the virus. So they discussed and agreed on a hygiene protocol for the tools, as a basis for mutual trust. At Lambda Community Garden:

In wet weather the raised beds flooded. So we tackled the problem by digging a canal system around them. And then we made a bog garden so that the water gets taken away from the beds when it’s flooding … We’re all happy, we’ve achieved something together.

Early on in the pandemic, Reading’s Aisha Mosque set up a community garden with many societal and ecological aims. As in its plan, “Creating beautiful community gardens is a process … involving all stakeholders across as many communities as possible is critical in ensuring the long term sustainability of the project” (Aisha Masjid 2020, 2). The construction had help from the Food4Families programme, whose coordinator wrote:

It has been an amazing reminder of the power of positive green thinking. The worst of circumstances – the mosque community was mourning many deaths – provided the motivation for people to take back some control, to help create a greener future for the wider community. Among the volunteers were many homeschoolers, mostly non-gardeners, who discovered how food growing is the perfect resource for enriching the learning experience (Richards 2021).

At the mosque garden, a volunteer made a video about her children gardening there [film by Safia Haque, “Escape to the Garden”], highlighting the importance of community gardens as a family activity. Indeed, children had a central role in many gardens. Parents sought to involve their children in gardening activities; then the parents started to enjoy them and returned regularly. This pattern arose in several initiatives (for example, Allens Cross Community Garden, Northfield, Birmingham, film by Anna O’Brien; likewise the film by Nieves Gomez, “Gardening During Coronavirus Pandemic”). At different gardens, parents made these comments:

My passion was taking children outside for learning because they learn better outside.

I’m interested in what brings people together and what makes people want to do things for each other. And how children learn to be kind …

Children’s involvement was extended through nearby schools: “We now have a raised bed for community food growing. And then a nearby school began growing food as well. It’s all linked up with mutual aid. So it became really huge …”
Many video stories highlight the garden’s benefits to participants’ mental and physical well-being. These benefits came from “a sense of camaraderie and selflessness in a space where people jointly work the soil … Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone has something to teach you”. They felt inspired that “there are such spaces and opportunities within such close proximity to people” (Growing Opportunities Project, run by the charity Ideal For All, near Oldbury; film by Alastair Russell, “Stepping In”).

Even in an urban setting, “You can really be in a magical place with nature. But I really like being with people. I think there’s something really meaningful about doing it as a group of volunteers and staff”, says a volunteer (Wash House Garden, Glasgow, film by Jac Reichel).

As shown in another video-story, gardening is a way to share skills, to work with generous like-minded people, to improve our mental health, to appreciate nature and to rebuild self-confidence after the Covid-19 lockdown: “We need to knock down those walls that we’ve built that keep us separate from everyone else”. By socialising with these communities, it has provided “a sense of radical hopefulness” (Ashford Clumps Allotments, within Talking Tree’s Community Allotment and Orchard scheme; film by Emma Rommer).

Inter-cultural exchange is exemplified by the Lavender Place Community Garden. “In summer 2020, a group of asylum-seekers helped out in the gardens for a few months. We had the opportunity to hear their stories, welcome them and support them”. This stimulated the idea for a Global Garden, growing plants from countries where refugee-volunteers came from, as well as cooking dishes from the harvest (film by Emily Aldridge, “The Garden”).

Alongside fulfilling their own needs for social engagement, participants also felt they were doing socially useful activities. These included: learning skills for locally produced food, supplying fresh produce for socially beneficial uses by fellow volunteers, neighbours, community cafes or food banks. Participants have valued the contribution to environmentally sustainable food production, as a response to the climate crisis and as a model for wider replication.

Some gardens were also providing seeds or seedlings for wider food-growing. This gained extra significance as so many people wanted to grow their own food, amidst a national shortage of seeds. Seeds and seedlings became an important means of community outreach and wider cultivation. At the Calthorpe Community Garden in central London, a staff member sent seeds packets to volunteers, who then began their own small plots in various available spaces; some encouraged neighbours to do likewise. “Everybody has started to grow things at home, on the front garden on the back garden, on the neighbour’s garden, etc.”

At the Wolves Lane Centre in Tottenham (London), in early 2020 the pandemic hygiene restrictions ended visitors’ site visits and so jeopardised that crucial income stream. As a way forward, amidst a national shortage of seeds, volunteers began selling food plant seedlings and ornamental plants grown from cuttings from the palm house stock. Thus the pandemic occasioned an important new source of income generation, crucial for all the site’s activities (see film by Anne Gray, Wolves Lane Story). Their interdependencies have analogies with alternative agri-food systems, whose economic viability depends on more than food sales, alongside solidaristic commitments.

A campaign of Cambridge community groups generated the George Street Garden Share as an informal neighbourhood network. Each participant finds or creates their own growing space, which could be a back garden or simply a windowsill. They share all other elements of food growing, e.g. seeds, tools, compost, cultivation knowledge and the harvest. This has been shared and allocated in a food hub, especially for neighbours who most need the food. Through donations, donors have gained pleasure and a sense of social purpose.

The Garden Share provides an innovative, alternative imagination for the concept of a gardening community. “Many people felt they weren’t really gardeners, but the results were fantastic”, thanks to the mutual support and inspiration. The film by Suzanne Geoff, “George Street: Grow a Row”, offers advice and encouragement for people starting similar initiatives elsewhere. This proliferation helps participants to create community bonds from otherwise isolated individuals, to build capacities for independence from the dominant agri-food system and to generate support for alternatives.
3.2. Social processes underlying the benefits

Course participants described a mixture of anxious and hopeful feelings about their community gardens, especially in the early-stage 2020 pandemic. They had felt anxieties about whether their joint efforts would save the garden from many difficulties, as well as individual anxieties about overcoming diffidence or avoiding the virus despite precautions. CFG participants had shared those experiences, thoughts and feelings by various means, e.g. via in-person conversations or WhatsApp groups of volunteers. Through their purposeful practical activity, people got to know each other’s motivations, fears and hopes.

For a long time, CFG has been known for such a sharing process – variously called empathy, social bonding, soft skills or social capital (Connor 2020; Firth, Maye, and Pearson 2011). Through the visual storytelling course, storytellers shared such experiences by various means, especially in the training sessions and through the course WhatsApp group. Some reflected further on the process when completing the post-course questionnaire.

In CFG initiatives, staff (and some regular volunteers) have brought social skills facilitating self-confidence, conversations and practical cooperation among volunteers; those are sometimes called “people skills”. Work teams often arose from training sessions, especially before the pandemic. After it began, some initiatives put training sessions online. These often attracted more participants than the pre-pandemic in-person ones and generated more cultivation activities. Most attractive were relatively simple tasks such as sowing seeds and watering plants. Training sessions were necessary for more complex, perhaps less attractive ones such as weeding crops, debugging them and turning compost piles. Through such teams, participants did a task together in small groups or took turns at different times.

Participants in CFG overcame social isolation and emotional unease through regular congenial participation, getting to know and trust fellow gardeners. They became able to feel welcome, safe, useful and enthusiastic there. This process describes many of the video stories from the course.

The Coordinator’s role was emphasised in the film by Nieves Gomez, “Gardening During Coronavirus Pandemic”, about Josiah Braithwaite Community Garden: “I always love how she has different ideas, not the regular normal thing that everyone does. She always told me something that I never knew about. She was a really amazing person for us during this time”.

Some course participants likewise attributed the congenial process to facilitation or inspiration by staff. For example:

The organisers and tutor growers are very welcoming and encourage the belief that all the volunteers can make a worthwhile and valued contribution, regardless of degree of expertise and extent of relevant experience. For me, the most important benefit was the chance provided to interact with other people socially while being involved in a worthwhile activity, followed by the chance to learn new practical skills.

I think the tutor did a great job, kept us busy with new and exciting ideas. We really looked forward these regular meetings.

[The Coordinator] has been a great motivator and teacher. You’re learning so much.

One storyteller elaborated that role in the project questionnaire:

The garden facilitators always make sure to create a very safe and warm and welcoming space for anyone who comes to the garden which has helped with the sense of building a community. For example, making sure there is always a break for a shared lunch together, making sure that everyone is happy doing the tasks they are doing in the garden and that people are supervised properly and given tasks according to their abilities.

I think the benefits depend hugely on the social skills of staff and other volunteers. I have had volunteering experiences in other places where I felt less welcome and part of the group and I think this has to do with things like not being clearly told what needs to be done, being treated not as an individual but just as another hand in an operation, not feeling really included in the wider aims of the organisation, not feeling
respected in my identity as an LGBTQ person. At the garden I currently volunteer regularly, these things are all taken into consideration and the staff members put a lot of effort into making it a safe and inclusive space for everyone.

Conversely, garden coordinators seek to strengthen and spread volunteers’ capacities. According to one, “My aim is to develop group capacity so that they acquire the skills to teach gardening skills and embed the values amongst the wider community”, said the coordinator of Reading’s Food4Families programme. His personal respite from social isolation helped to catalyse community-building:

Having a leadership role within the process has been tremendously rewarding for me personally, especially at time of crisis. It provides more proof of the value of community gardening and a blueprint for extending our reach … (film by Dave Richards, “Growing Respite”).

Beyond the participants’ films, the project team interviewed key individuals in three initiatives. These were initially online audio recordings, as a basis to clarify the focus for on-site interview questions. These probed the community-building and placemaking process, especially the underlying social skills of staff and volunteers; these are highlighted in two films (CC&OU 2022a; 2022b). Those processes were extended through the visual storytelling and film screenings, as explained next.

4. Storytelling as placemaking

The visual storytelling process generated a collective self-reflection on the aims, means and benefits of CFG. This contributed to placemaking within specific initiatives and as a general understanding among the storytellers. This section looks firstly at CFG participants and then the storyteller-video makers.

4.1. Video stories evoke placemaking

Further to Reading’s Lavender Place (see above), volunteers had transformed a derelict space into a beautiful, flourishing oasis which attracted numerous activities beyond vegetable growing, e.g. yoga, stone sculpture and art (film by Kath Burton, What’s That Down There?; also photo gallery). The story conveyed a sense of belonging to a place that they had created with their bare hands. Its emotional attachments and meanings were highlighted by volunteers’ distress in 2021, when the garden was evicted for the site’s redevelopment. Thus the video story became a social memory of their group identity and placemaking role as they were moved on to a new site. The physical garden was gone, but the story endures.

Video screenings have stimulated discussion about participants’ group identities. Here are two examples.

During the Urban Harvest Festival in September 2021, the Calthorpe Community Garden screened several of the course’ films about other community gardens. In the discussion, Calthorpe volunteers highlighted how diverse people come together there to create a sense of group belonging: “We feel at home here”. In the discussion, participants praised the experience and the films:

It is nice to have people from different backgrounds and ages. And that’s another thing that is really beautiful to see. And people stay very engaged for years. So I feel that you belong here.

I thought they [the films] were really inspiring. I love the idea of the space that was just a piece of empty ground that people just walked past – and now it’s a community garden (both quotes from Levidow 2021).

As mentioned earlier, Reading’s Aisha mosque set up a community garden to provide many benefits. A course participant made several short videos about the activities, including Rauf’s Story, about a retired man who volunteers in the garden. As he comments there, gardening “is essential for mind, body and spirit” (Kennedy 2022, Figures 4,5).
In April 2022 the Reading Green Wellbeing Network (RGWN) organised a workshop on “green social prescribing” and screened the film. The discussion elicited comments such as: “Your film kept the focus on why we were all there … the video captured the impact of the network’s message about finding mental wellbeing by connecting to outdoor spaces”. Partly thanks to Food4-Families, moreover, the garden facilitated social engagement between mosque participants and other social groups, thus making a multi-cultural place.

In the storytelling course, a volunteer at Josiah Braithwaite Community Garden made a short film, “Gardening During Coronavirus Pandemic”. Her film highlighted the Coordinator’s role in enthusing everyone to learn gardening skills by sharing knowledge. This focus gave the project team the idea to make its own film about inter-generational learning there (CC&OU 2022b).

When both films were screened at the garden premises in November 2022, the discussion generated comments such as these:

Every day you learn something from the garden and the other people there. Everyone in the family gets involved. The whole family appreciates what they can learn and contribute there.

Kids are learning from people they don’t normally meet. They come out of their shell and look after each other. This makes it a safe place to visit.

Traditional knowledge is passed on to the younger generation. It could be simple things such as how your grandmother used to plant seeds, bake biscuits or spin cotton.

In the garden, adults remember things that they used to do or know when they were children.

In all those ways, inter-generational learning has been central to placemaking with emotional attachments (Figure 6).

4.2. Storytellers’ reflections

Course participants came to understand effective storytelling as a learned skill through interaction with others in the course and beyond. As our participants were planning their stories, they engaged fellow gardeners or friends in conversations about all the above processes. Some conversations arose from requests to film their activities or to interview them.

Figure 4. Staff and volunteers at Calthorpe Community Garden. Credit: Les Levidow.
The course leaders suggested questions that could be asked around the garden. As some storytellers reported, they got to know fellow gardeners better from these interchanges. In this way, the film-story development created extra opportunities for conversations and insights: “I benefitted in meeting other people doing similar projects to me, building confidence in telling stories and by being able to visit other garden projects and learning from them for my film”.

Afterwards course participants emphasised their positive experiences of learning and sharing the skills. As one said, “This course gave me a superpower” referring to their newly developed skills in film-making. Another said, “I learned from other people’s ways of telling and structuring stories”. Moreover, this participant anticipated opportunities for future films from ongoing activities of CFG. “Now I can plan better to capture audio-visual material in the process to tell whatever stories will emerge”.

Figure 5. Discussion being recorded after video screening at Calthorpe Community Garden, September 2021. Credit: Patrick Campbell.

Figure 6. Storytelling project logo. Credit: Cobra Collective.
Some explored earlier legacies. As one said, “I looked up old films of storytellers from when I was a child. I understood better how they developed their craft. Now people can use smartphones and video”.

In mid-2022 several participants attended our “Ripple Effect Mapping” workshop (based on Chazdon 2017). Their comments revealed benefits at several levels. The video-making process helped strengthen social bonds within CFG initiatives: “Because we talked about connections in the group, the connections have deepened”. Sharing the video stories among participants also created a sense of collective belonging to a similar process: “We had the same experience!” In those ways, storytelling extended the efforts at community-building and placemaking within CFG.

At a personal level, participants reported a significant improvement in their digital, technical and narrative skills (e.g. story creation, camera techniques, video editing, etc). Here are three examples:

“I learnt about the importance of planning in the storytelling process”

“The course showed me the importance of shaping your own narrative.”

“I’m better at interviewing people. I am now using the skills professionally and within my family.”

“Storytelling was helpful for asking questions in a safe way [among fellow gardeners].”

Course participation opened up personal value systems or perhaps evoked ones that were already latent. The process broadened perspectives on shaping futures and linking issues. From comments at the workshop, here are two examples:

“I realised that community food growing ties together so many other interests e.g. climate change.”

“I don’t normally talk about mental health, so it was an opportunity to discuss a difficult subject.”

The break-out groups provided opportunities for storytellers to reflect on ambivalences. They shared a satisfaction that they were doing socially useful activities, such as extending skills, supplying seeds, or providing food for food banks or for direct distribution to vulnerable people. But the latter roles left some unease about filling gaps of an unjust agri-food system and deficient social services, thus concealing and perpetuating a societal problem: “CFG addresses the symptoms while neglecting the causes”, as one volunteer said.

Moreover, their initiatives were affected by wider societal problems, e.g. mental health problems and food poverty. Civil society groups have stimulated public debate on how to address the root causes of those problems (Sustain 2019/2015). But these awkward issues were rarely discussed within community gardens, according to some volunteers.

Those doubts and difficulties were likewise absent from the video stories, for understandable reasons. The short films generally focused on positive stories in order to attract more volunteers, build wider support and showcase exemplary practices. Problems and difficulties would warrant a longer, different kind of film.

5. Policy support and limits

What are the potentials and preconditions for expanding community food growing (CFG)? What policy measures facilitate or limit such expansion?

In Britain more studies have documented the many social, psychological and environmental benefits of CFG (e.g. Gayle 2022; Rurban Revolution 2021; see also our Introduction). According to a national survey of Britain’s urban spaces, they have the capacity to support production that is 8 times greater than current domestic production of fruit and vegetables (Walsh et al. 2021). This potential further justifies long-standing proposals for stronger policy support.

To realise the greater potential, underused land should be seen as public assets which have not been properly maintained, argues the Incredible Edible network (Warhurst 2021). “There is an
appetite for finding unloved bits of public land, rolling up our sleeves and growing food on it, but we've found an uneven playing field for people getting access to land in their community”, especially as regards the necessary support from Local Authorities (Barkham 2022).

Long-term group commitments to CFG depend on policy support for more secure land access and site maintenance as public assets, contrary to land use as financial assets. According to the campaign and support group Sustain, Local Authorities should provide greater “access to land and land use including supportive local planning policies” (Sustain 2020, 24). These measures are necessary for expanding urban and peri-urban agriculture (Sustain 2022).

In Local Authorities, however, a prevalent mindset fragments people’s needs and activities according to administrative categories. This mindset assumes, for example, that people grow food mainly on allotments, they socialise at potluck meals, they learn cookery in evening classes, they do leisure activities (such as sports) in parks, they do arts in community centres, and they get nutritional advice from health centres. In practice, such diverse activities already happen together in some community gardens as a multipurpose space, even an urban oasis (e.g. CC&OU 2022a).

In attempting to create such a space, however, one CFG initiative ran up against narrow assumptions of its Local Authority:

It’s a partnership: the Councils and developers need our energy, our passion and our creativity to create towns that are worth living in. Also to meet all the challenges of climate change, health, well being, obesity and global food security. All these things come together in a project like ours. But unfortunately people in power simply lack the imagination to support these endeavours (CFG coordinator, interview, June 2022).

The necessary multi-issue partnership remained elusive. Local Authorities generally have provided some support measures, but these remain sporadic, unstable and fragmented across policy areas. Towards a coherent way forward through community partnerships, Local Authorities should:

Take a cross cutting approach: Include food growing in public health strategies, food strategies, local plans, and climate and nature strategies. This is especially important for councils as community food growing meets many Council objectives and crosses the work of many departments.

Build capacity: Appoint a designated officer to champion food growing and create clearer pathways for accessing land, as well as links with local networks or key VCS organisations (Sustain 2021: 2, referring to the Voluntary and Community Sector).

Along those lines, a few Councils include CFG in policies on food-growing, cookery, diet, mental health and interaction with nature (Sustain 2021). Alongside such inclusion, support measures would ideally integrate all such policies and support measures within each Council; this would connect the diverse roles of CFG initiatives and thus enhance their societal benefits. All this can help to strengthen collective capacities for placemaking and community-building.

6. Conclusion

The Introduction began with questions such as: What practices have helped community food growing (CFG) to build community bonds and turn spaces into place-attachments for more participants? What insights have come from engaging participants in an accessible process of visual storytelling?

For a long time, the academic and civil society literatures have documented the many socio-environmental benefits of CFG initiatives. More recently, they have emphasised a social or community “resilience”, as an immediate means to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and as a wider societal benefit. Probing more deeply, our research highlights the underlying social processes and skills which generate those benefits. As key insights from the video stories, successful initiatives depend on social-organisational skills to facilitate self-confidence, congenial conversations, empathetic cooperation and placemaking through emotional attachments.

Participants’ video stories have made more visible some key aspects, namely:
solidaristic mutual-aid relationships around food-growing, cooking, eating and distribution;
cooperative, creative, adaptive capacities for collectively responding to common difficulties;
empathetic bonds among participants who did not previously know each other (across various
differences such as ethnicity, age and prior skills);
a food culture strengthening participants’ knowledge and supply of healthy food, through their
dual roles as both producers and consumers; and
the social-organisational skills for facilitating and inspiring those group practices.

Brought by staff and regular volunteers, those skills have enabled participants to feel welcome,
useful, enthusiastic and “at home”. The processes facilitate belonging as “moving with other” by
sharing experiences (cf. Pitt 2013, 2). This encompasses efforts to plan future activities, as well as
to overcome the pandemic’s difficulties (cf. Wesener 2020).

Some storytellers saw the activities as spreading better ways for our society to organise and feed
itself. This activity builds capacities for an environmentally sustainable, socially equitable food
system. Together those roles and societal visions helped to turn spaces into place-attachments for
more participants. Moreover, the video-making and screening activities further stimulated those pro-
cesses through various ripple-effects. As a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the video
process helped storytellers to act as change agents (cf. Bradbury 2010).

Whenever successful, community-building processes are radically hopeful. They acknowledge
difficult issues and emotions, alongside aspirations for a different future, responding with care
and prefiguring such a future in the present. This project’s video-stories highlighted the everyday
solidaristic basis. All this provides stronger grounds to include digital storytelling within CFG initiat-
ives in order to identify exemplary practices, extend their strengths, spread the societal benefits and
attract greater commitments.

However, as revealed in our course discussions, participants felt unease about some roles of their
CFG initiative. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many community gardens thankfully provided fresh
food to rising numbers of vulnerable people; these donations often supplemented surplus from
supermarket chains, distributed through the FareShare network. As an emergency response, this
arrangement had multiple benefits but was filling gaps within the dominant agri-food system and
deficient social services. By concealing a societal problem, this role serves a neoliberal agenda
whereby voluntary efforts bear the burdens of systemic failures.

Hence CFG initiatives have subtle tensions between a merely compensatory versus a transforma-
tive resilience. The latter creates more meaningful spaces for social responsibility and political acti-
ivism (cf. Milbourne 2021). This relates to the distinction between “bouncing back” to the status quo
ante versus “bouncing forward” to agri-food alternatives (Jones, Krzywoszynska, and Maye 2022). As
a key contribution, CFG initiatives develop solidaristic bonds and promote agri-food methods
improving people’s everyday lives, while also building capacities for futures beyond the dominant
agri-food system.

Stable long-term policy support from local authorities could help CFG initiatives to strengthen
their collective capacities for a placemaking process, which helps to transform spaces into meaning-
ful shared places. Many Local Authorities provide support measures, but these are generally frag-
mented across several policy areas. These warrant integration, recognising the diverse roles of
CFG initiatives as multipurpose spaces.

Community-building skills can provide a focus for such policy integration. In those ways, relevant
institutional support “is placemaking in action” (Wesener 2020). As in our project, digital visual stories
have highlighted and extended placemaking processes, as a basis to inform policy integration as well
as to enhance the benefits of CFG.

Acknowledgements

Video stories from the course: https://vimeo.com/showcase/6851866.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The storytelling course was part of a research project, “Local food-growing initiatives respond to the Covid-19 crisis: enhancing well-being, building community for better futures funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), by Arts and Humanities Research Council [Grant Number AH/V015109/1] during 2021–22, https://cobracollective.org/news/radically_hopeful_cooperation/.

Ethics approval

The project was approved in February 2021 by the Open University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), number HREC/3873. All course participants signed a prior consent form outlining that their final videos would be made publicly available (unless they objected within 3 weeks) and that other comments (especially their questionnaire responses) could be used anonymously in project publications.

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