



What Can Rewilding Teach Us About Learning?

Nicki Davey, February 2025

Here in our peaceful little corner of south-west Scotland, my partner Mark and I have been working to transform what was previously a heavily grazed 4-acre field into a biodiverse oasis for nature. Whilst ours is very small in comparison to many rewilding projects, we're striving to make a difference in this highly agricultural area - creating space for Nature (which includes space for people, since people are Nature), and inspiring others to see that we can all do something to restore Nature, no matter where we are.

The ongoing process of rewilding our land has given us joy and satisfaction, and taught us a lot of important lessons along the way. It has also highlighted the many parallels between the process of restoring nature and the process of helping people to learn and grow. Nature has an incredible ability to recover but it needs help to do so and whilst people also possess an incredible capacity to heal and grow, they too need help to do so. The principles of restoring nature so that it can thrive are also key principles for helping people to learn, grow and thrive.

We have to believe.

When we moved to this tree-deprived agricultural area and told our neighbouring farmers about our plans to plant trees they said it wasn't possible. They said it was too windy to grow trees (we're very near the coast) but this just isn't the case. The reason why trees don't grow here is because the land is heavily grazed by cattle, sheep, and a large deer population. By growing the right kind of trees for the conditions, planting enough of them so they create shelter for each other, and protecting them against grazing, they can grow and thrive.

We've planted 1500 trees (to create both hedgerow and woodland) and, by protecting them from grazing, growing the right kind of trees for the conditions, and planting them so that they create shelter for each other, they are all thriving.

Just like our trees, every person has the potential to learn, grow, and thrive, but we have to have belief in that potential, generate the right conditions, create a support network, and enable the type of growth that is right for each person.

We must create a safe environment.

We could plant as many trees as we wanted but if we don't protect and nurture them, very few will survive and even fewer will thrive. Providing stakes to keep the trees upright and protective tubes to stop the deer eating the tender new growth are essential for survival, and each year we also mulch them all to suppress weeds and reduce competition for nutrients which helps them to thrive.

In the same way, for people to learn and grow, we must create conditions where they feel safe and protected so that they can be vulnerable and authentic, open up, and explore challenging issues knowing that they are safe and unjudged. This psychological safety, along with additional support in the form of reassurance, information, insights, and shared experiences enables deep, meaningful personal growth to take place.

We need a plan.

Rewilding requires an understanding of the relationships between different aspects of nature so that we can create a plan and do things in a way that maximises success. For example, our tree-planting has several stages: Stage one was to plant hedgerow shrubs along the field boundary creating a shelter belt to protect the other trees and plants from the wind. Stage two was to plant hardy, smaller trees such as hawthorn, hazel, blackthorn, rowan and silver birch in the exposed high area of the field, and planting trees that love wet conditions (alder and willow) in the lower, marshy area of the field. Stage three will involve planting broadleaved trees that require more shelter and protection such as oak and beech when the other trees have grown enough to provide this shelter and protection.

When we facilitate people to learn and grow, we must also plan the process with care. If we are to open hearts and minds, generate shifts in consciousness, and change behaviour then we must plan carefully so that we lay the foundations at each stage for people to safely and confidently move to the next stage. We need to meet people where they are and help to create a pathway for them to move forward, step by step.

We must relinquish control.

Whilst having a plan is important, the ability to hold it lightly, to go with the flow and respond to whatever organically arises is equally important. Rewilding requires us to let go of the control that humans so often desire and to let nature take her own course. We inherited a muddy, boggy mess in part of our field where a lot of surface water runs off the hill and was trampled by cattle. Now the field has been fenced off and the cows no longer have access, this water has begun to form a small stream which flows through the field and supports a range of aquatic and marginal life. We didn't create this stream – it found the path of least resistance and carved its own way.

Likewise, when we support people to learn, we may have a plan for what they will learn and how this will happen, but ultimately our role is to create the appropriate conditions for learning and then accept that people will learn what is right for them to learn in a way that works for them. Facilitating learning is not about channelling everyone down a path that meets our own expectations of what we think should happen but about supporting and enabling them to go on their own learning journey.

We must continue to support.

We planted our woodland and hedgerow 2 years ago, but just putting trees in the ground and leaving them to grow is not always enough and we continue to nurture and support their growth by weeding and mulching them each year as well as replacing broken stakes and uprighting those that have blown over in the storms. This ongoing support makes a huge difference to their capacity to grow and thrive, and likewise, if we want to reinforce learning and sustain the behavioural change that occurs as a result of learning then we must continue to invest time and energy in people on an ongoing basis.

Learning is not a one-off event, and going on a course or completing an e-learning module is not enough to sustain long-term learning and growth. Whether it's through coaching, mentoring and other individual support, or group support such as action learning groups, it's essential that we create ongoing opportunities for people to embed, explore, test out, and build their confidence in their newly acquired mindset, knowledge or skills.

We need to create optimum conditions.

Last spring and early summer were particularly wet and so the trees that thrived and grew the most were the alder and willow, both of which love wet conditions, so I'm looking forward to seeing what the growing conditions will be like this year and which trees respond best.

This offers us an important lesson about how we need to pay attention to the conditions people need to learn, grow and thrive, recognising that these conditions will be different for different people. Recent work with people who are neurodiverse has shown me how traditional learning, education and training approaches don't necessarily work for them, whereas learning in, with and from Nature has been a really powerful, enjoyable, and effective way for them to learn.

We need to monitor and measure progress.

Our aim is to increase biodiversity in our field and, whilst we can see quite clearly that there is a far wider range of plant and animal life in the field already, we need to be able to measure it progress on an ongoing basis to be confident that what we are doing is working, and to identify any issues or problems that may arise so we can address them. With the help of volunteers from the South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre (SWSEIC) we're conducting an annual survey of species so that we can measure increases in both the density and diversity of species and take remedial action when things aren't working.

Similarly, if we want to be sure that training and other learning experiences are working, we need to be able to measure their effects. This involves finding creative ways to assess changes in mindset, skills, and behaviours on an ongoing basis, and ensuring that learners themselves are empowered to identify their own progress and celebrate their personal growth.