Visual Storytelling about Community Food Growing:

Participatory Action Research Methods, Processes, and Wider Implications

Authors

Les Levidow, Andrea Berardi, Julia Jung, Dave Richards, Fiona McAllister, Beth Scott, Kath Burton, Claudia Nuzzo, Victoria Emanuelle Forest-Briand.

Design

Viola Madau

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Summary

The Covid-19 crisis has revealed the stark inequalities in UK society. Many vulnerable people have had more difficulty accessing food. Simultaneously, people's social isolation prompted greater interest to continue, join or begin Community Food-Growing (CFG) initiatives. These efforts overlapped with mutual-aid networks; they initially supplied food to vulnerable people and soon expanded to wider cooperative activities.

The *'Grassroots Visual Storytelling about Community Food-Growing'* project investigated the expansion of community food growing initiatives during the Covid-19 crisis. The project built skills in digital visual storytelling which would explore and promote participants' experiences of CFG activities during the pandemic.

The project's approach developed Participatory Action Research with third-sector partners which were facilitating CFG initiatives. 'Community flourishing' and 'radical hopefulness' were the key concepts that stimulated participants to plan their video stories.

The resulting stories showcased a range of benefits of community food growing activities, namely, enhancing participants' well-being, strengthening social cohesion, localising food provision, addressing food insecurity, and building future resilience to social, environmental and economic crises. Those multiple benefits depend on staff skills, often called 'people skills'; these facilitate cooperative, creative relationships among volunteers.

The project impacts included building participants' skills and confidence in digital storytelling. The process of creating and disseminating the stories generated deeper engagement and reflection amongst participants, directly strengthening their community food-growing initiatives.

Keywords:
community food growing, visual storytelling, community flourishing, radical hopefulness, community gardens, Participatory Action Research

Introduction

Figure 1: *Allens Cross Community Garden, Northfield, Birmingham (photo credit: Anna O'Brien)*

Community food growing (CFG) encompasses the many community gardens that grow edible plants, and not just ornamentals and flowers. These initiatives have become important sites for group voluntary work, mental well-being, and wider societal benefits.

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted CFG initiatives, while also revealing and intensifying the stark 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).

The project was a collaboration between The Open University, the Cobra Collective CIC, and partners active in community cultivation, Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC) and Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming.

The project took place from January 2021 to June 2022 and worked with three distinct cohorts of participants in supporting them to create digital stories. Through their storytelling, the project explored participants' feelings, aspirations, social connections and multiple benefits from CFG activities. This exploration helped to identify the most effective strategies that have been deployed during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis.

Those best practices have now been shared in the form of digital stories.

A freely accessible OpenLearn Create course focusing on storytelling concepts and techniques has also been produced.

This report emerges from the 'Grassroots Visual Storytelling about Community Food-Growing' research project.

This project built participants' capacity in storytelling to produce and disseminate short video stories about their own experience in community food growing initiatives, during and just after the Covid-19 crisis.

Our project explored the benefits to the people involved in community food growing activities and to the wider community, along with the social barriers and means to overcome them, especially for more vulnerable marginalised social groups.

Community Food Growing

These videos were produced as part of the 'Grassroots Visual Storytelling about Group Food-Growing' Project. This project explores the multiple benefits and social connections from community food activities through participatory digital storytelling, and identifies and shares the most effective strategies that have been deployed during the Covid-19 crisis. The project is a collaboration between The Open University, the Cobra Collective, Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming and Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC). For additional information on the project, see https://cobracollective.org/portfolio/digital-storytelling-about-group-food-growing/

1 - 12 of 20   Share

ESCAPE TO THE GARDEN
a story by Safia Haque (Aisha Mosque gardens)

02:06

ONE OF READING'S BEST KEPT SECRETS
a story by Paula Kennedy (Whitley GrowAllot)
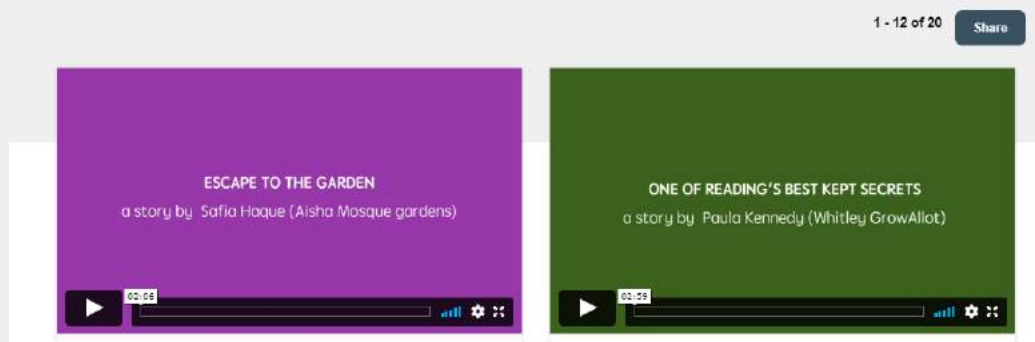
02:59

Figure 2: *The 'Community Food Growing' showcase of videos produced by participants is now permanently available on Vimeo.*
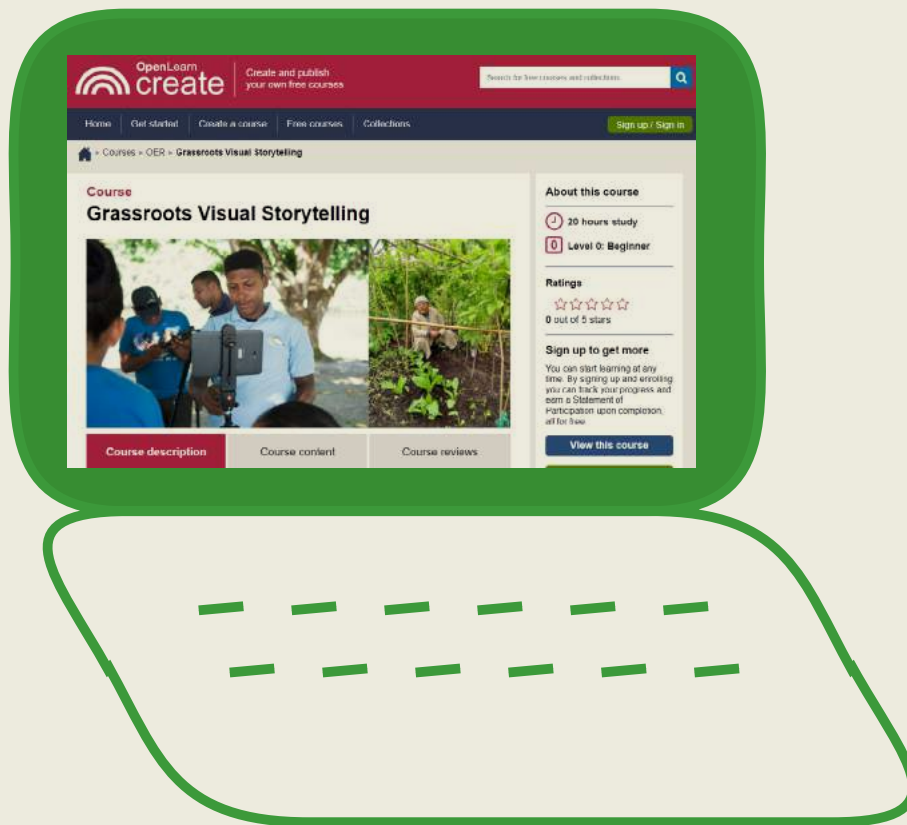
Figure 3:
The 'Grassroots Visual Storytelling' course is freely available on The Open University's OpenLearn Create platform.

This report complements the participants' stories and online course with a specific focus on the participatory action research approach used to support participants in creating their stories.

These outputs have been co-designed with participants and focus on highlighting lesser-heard voices to promote better mental health, well-being, better access to healthy food and enhance social resilience. Our aim with these outputs is to promote digital storytelling for community growing within the wider community food growing network and help to outscale community food growing benefits around the country.

You can contribute to those aims by:

- Drawing inspiration for your own initiative from the amazing videos produced by participants.
- Creating and sharing your own fantastic digital story of your own initiative through our freely accessible online course.
- Lobbying local authorities to create policies that will support community food growing initiatives.
- Joining or establishing such initiatives.

We therefore hope that this report can serve as an introduction to the concepts and processes for any organisation or group wishing to implement a similar participatory action research approach in digital storytelling for community food growing.

Community food growing during the Covid-19 pandemic

During and since the peak of the Covid-19 crisis, many vulnerable people experienced and continue to experience more difficulty accessing food, so third-sector organisations have mobilised emergency food provision. They have been plugging gaps left by the state's withdrawal from particular services and spaces. This palliative role elicited some disquiet from participants.

Emphasising the greater need for CFG, NGOs requested extra support from local authorities during the pandemic. 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). 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. Such tensions emerged more starkly during the Covid-19 pandemic as third-sector organisations expanded community food-growing initiatives.

Yet, some garden coordinators claimed 'to develop more meaningful spaces for themselves and local communities…'. 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: 2914-15).*

Many community food growing 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.

In participating in CFG activities, people reconnect with each other and with nature:

> *'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'* (cited in Cumbers et al., 2018: 140-141).

In the UK, community gardens interpreted and adapted the government's Covid-19 guidance through special measures that would protect participants from the virus and enable them to feel safe. Gardening tasks became a means to rediscover and remake interpersonal relationships.

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' (Schoen and Blythe, 2020).

Beyond simply creating or enjoying green spaces, community food growing constructs a sense of community by cooperatively organising tasks.

Storytelling as community-building potential

Figure 5: *A cartoon by Madeleine Jubilee Saito (2020) that captures the concept of 'community flourishing'.*

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 communities to form interdependent support networks where people can listen to, hold space for and support each other, thus creating or expanding community. In this project, we called this process 'community flourishing'. The sentiment of this concept is beautifully illustrated by Madeleine Jubilee Saito's comics (Figure 5).

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, 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 (Bruner, 1991; Baumeister and Wilson, 1996). Sharing personal stories can also be an empowering and enlightening process. Allowing participants to record their own story can allow them to reframe their own relationship to their experience and develop narratives that are convincing and capable of influencing others as well (Benmayor, 1998). These aspects motivated our project and were highlighted throughout the process.

Our storytelling process was about empowering people to create their own radically hopeful, uplifting stories of community food growing during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Giving primacy to the participants' voice in the research also gave a sense of agency and control to the participants in how they shared their experience. Like other participatory methods, they can also help generate insights from neglected perspectives and produce 'counter-narratives' that present alternative interpretations of the world to others and to the storytellers themselves (de Jager et al., 2017).

Our approach is 'accessible tech' i.e. the storytelling revolves around using everyday tools (smartphones and simple editing software). Simple accessible technologies gave participants the means to go beyond face-to-face storytelling, to put their stories online and so reach more people. We encouraged participants 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. The variable terminology here warrants a brief explanation: 'Visual' emphasises the images, while 'digital' emphasises the means for creating and circulating the videos.

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 independently creating their own digital stories.

Our participants' video stories explored 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 policy implications of such storytelling?

"Flourishing communities by promoting community food growing through storytelling"

Figure 6: *'Community flourishing' - a key concept underpinning the digital storytelling creations.*

Ethics: free, prior and informed consent process

Ethics refers to reasonable and well-founded standards of equity, positive attitude, and consent that provide guidelines for what we do in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society and fairness. Ethics is an integral part of proper research and community engagement.

These are the overarching ethical guidelines that should guide any community-based research which we also applied in our project:

✓ **Do not raise expectations** – Ensure that the objectives of the project are fully understood by the participants and that no false expectations are built.

✓ **Consent** – It is important that all participants are asked for their consent to participate in the project, and before any video or photographic material which they have produced and may feature them is shared and screened. An Informed Consent form should be used to gain this agreement (Appendix 1).

✓ **Ownership** – Prior to starting, ownership of the resulting audio-visual material and where it is accessible (storage location) should be made very clear. Be clear that all publicly available materials will be licensed under the Creative Commons "Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives" licence (CC BY-NC-ND). This implies that any distribution of original material will need to be attributed to the original authors, and that the material will not be allowed to be used for commercial purposes.

✓ **Participants younger than 18 years** – It should be acknowledged that children and youth may be present in the audio-visual material. Any material with children and youth should be taken with prior consent of parents.

Applying Participatory Action Research to the storytelling process

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 participated in the course, 20 completed a video story which they wanted to share publicly; some made more than one.

The project used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to support and learn from the three cohorts of participants. 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 its simplest form, action research is carried out in repeated cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting after the intervention purpose has been established (Figure 7).
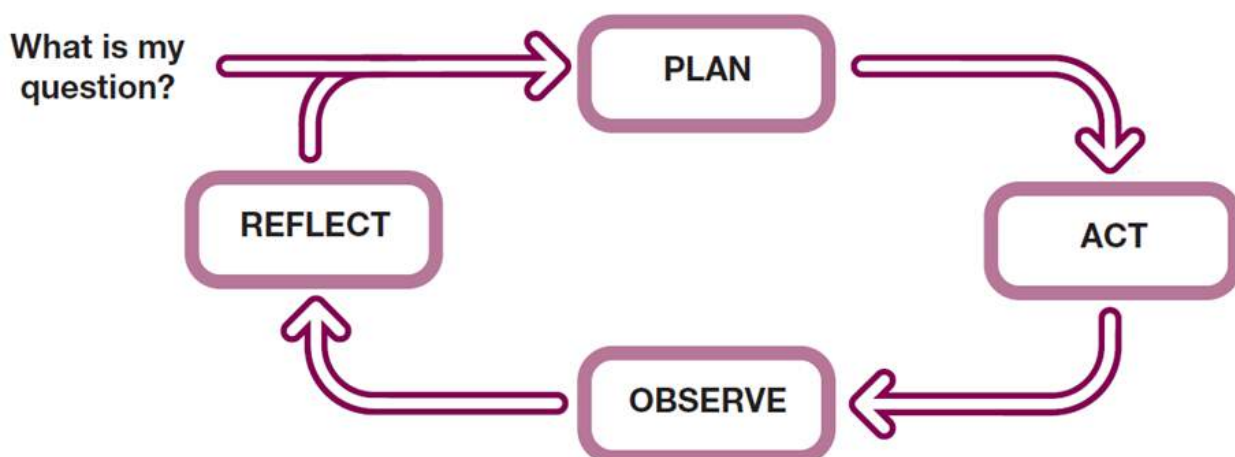
Figure 7: *A simplified action research cycle.*

Action research transforms relationships from a collection of separate individuals to a cohesive group that is mutually interdependent.

It creates spaces and platforms for interaction and learning in which individuals act, interpret results and outcomes, and share information, together.

And it generates the emergence of routines and procedures that can establish sustainable structural relationships for delivering agreed goals.

We can act without research or do research without acting, but combining the two is what differentiates action research from other forms of inquiry. The outcome of action research is therefore a new collective understanding of the situation, the change process, how we carry out action research and a positive change in the actual situation of intervention.

An emerging interpretation of action research is that it is not only a process of making change 'out there', but also creating new relationships and understandings within the individuals participating in the action research. In other words, action research is a process of 'social learning' - a collective endeavour that takes place through facilitated and structured interactions among inquiry participants.

The process of social learning within action research involves:

- ◼ *Generating the **convergence of goals and aspirations,** leading to more accurate mutual expectations, and the building of **relations of trust and respect.***

- ◼ ***Co-create the knowledge and co-learning** needed to understand issues and practices.*

- ◼ *Emergence of **agreement on concerted action** for initiating activities.*

- ◼ *Facilitating deliberate and **collective strategic interventions** which initiate a change in behaviours, norms and procedures.*

Thus, action research transforms relationships from a collection of separate individuals to a cohesive group that is mutually interdependent. It creates spaces and platforms for interaction and learning in which individuals act, interpret results and outcomes, and share information, together. And it generates the emergence of routines and procedures that can establish sustainable structural relationships for delivering agreed goals.

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 organizations, Sustain and RISC, promoting CFG initiatives and their local networks, namely: Capital Growth 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 our project, each iteration of the course represented one action research 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. Our project applied PAR, rather than impose a pre-set agenda and methods, for several reasons. The project's core was a course in visual storytelling, ambitiously

developing and linking participants' skills of several kinds. We didn't know what the response would be or what the best ways would be to capture/elicit it, driven by community food growers' interests and aspirations. Through PAR, the project team (along with RISC and Sustain networks) could learn with/from them and shape the project accordingly. The project was therefore designed as three PAR cycles, each cycle with its four standard stages. Specifically:

Plan action: design the sessions with participants with the key elements below

Act: hold the sessions, engage with storytellers

Observe results: monitor storytellers' responses (implicit and explicit) including the films

Reflect: discuss weaknesses, strengths and implications of the methods for the next cycle of the course

At each training session participants shared their plans for structuring a story, initially in a storyboard and then a draft video (Figure 5). These plans became clearer through discussion with their fellow gardeners, other course participants and the course team. In between the sessions, participants were able to deepen their understanding of concepts and techniques by engaging with an online module developed by the project team.

Figure 8: *A screenshot of a Zoom meeting during one of the online sessions of the first cohort where people were able to share their story plans and receive feedback.*
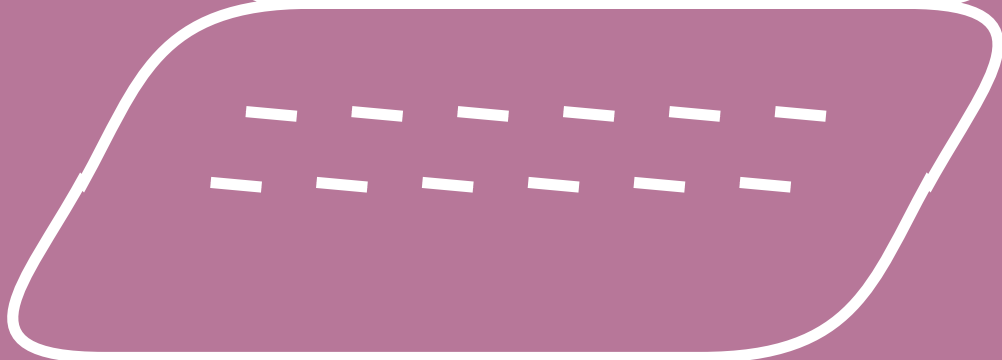
Held over approximately two months, each course had 4 sessions:

Session 1

Introduction to storytelling approach, key concepts, basic photographic techniques.

Homework: participants needed to produce a photostory to present at the next session.

Session 2

Reflections on photostory 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 below).

As in Session 1 above, each participant initially created a photostory of 8-12 images from photos or drawings (see Figure 6 for an example). This helped to plan the story and explain the plan at Session 2, as a means to obtain comments and refine the plan. For some storytellers, comments came from fellow gardeners as well as from other course participants. The storyboard provided a guide for what to film. The photostory technique was also an opportunity for participants to gain feedback on image composition, lighting and framing.
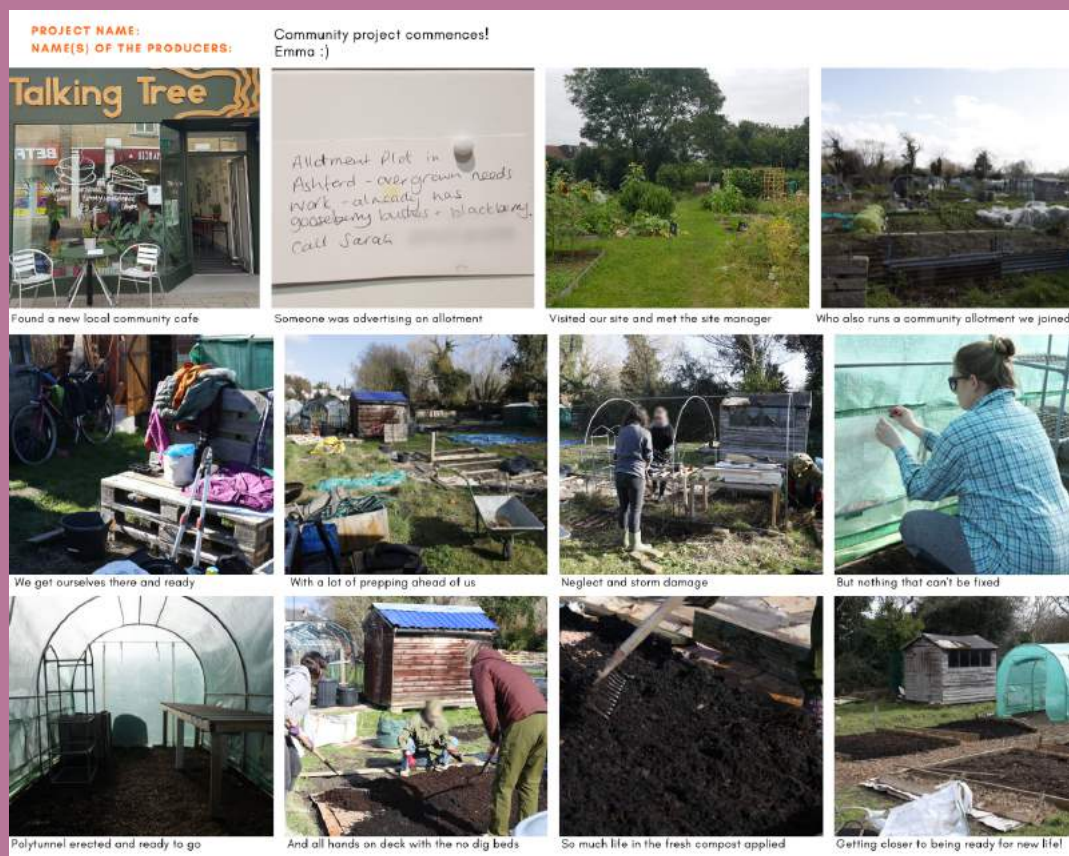

Figure 9: *Photostory produced by Emma Romer, participant in the third and final cohort. See the film here.*

At each session the storytellers had a slot to show the progress of their stories and receive suggestions from others. For each session, researchers devoted considerable attention to create group environments that were conducive to telling and sharing personal stories. This meant time-managing participants' interventions, encouraging equal participation from everyone, inviting certain quieter participants to comment, and encouraging and praising people's efforts. Researchers were also able to stimulate discussions through group and individual activities through the use of techniques such as rich picturing, and concepts such as the 'iceberg metaphor' and the 'whale' or 'wave' storyline. The storytellers sometimes adjusted their approach in response to comments in the session discussions and/or from fellow CFG participants. We also supported participants (and gained feedback) through a WhatsApp discussion group, email exchanges and one-to-one sessions. The research team also adjusted both the sessions and online module in response to the storytellers' comments and outputs.

For example, in the spring 2021 course, we often suggested how storytellers could include fellow gardeners in their stories and ideally depict them in their films, especially to describe community-building processes. As some replied, however, fellow gardeners were often reluctant to be filmed, especially with their faces visible (even wearing anti-virus masks). After this iteration we got the idea of suggesting that they try to interview fellow gardeners by discussing this beforehand with them. Such interviews also could be a way to include experiences of people who otherwise would not come forward – perhaps 'lesser heard voices'. We therefore made this suggestion in the second and third iterations, with some improvements in the participation of fellow gardeners in the stories.

Also in the first 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. Confirmation and agreement with the interpretations thus strengthened the rigour of the research team's interpretations.

It is also important to acknowledge the potential impact of the researchers and session facilitators on the produced stories. As Gubrium et al. state:

> *'the influential role of others (facilitators, funders, researchers) is often absent from reports, when in fact they may serve as more than just midwives to stories'*
> *(Gubrium et al. 2014: 1610).*

The 'community flourishing' and 'radical hopefulness' conceptual prompts were purposely introduced by the session facilitators to the second and third cohorts in order to direct the type of stories created by participants. But we also need to be aware of the relational dynamics between the researchers, session facilitators and participants, and between the participants themselves, as they exchanged experiences and feedback. The resulting stories thus emerged through a range of influences in addition to the experiences, interests and practical constraints of the individual storytellers.

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.

The following sections will outline some of the key adaptations that were made to the project as we worked through several PAR cycles.

'radical hopefulness'

Concepts to prompt stories about community food growing

This section explores how we used PAR to evolve the concepts for stimulating participants' storytelling.

To produce effective stories, it is necessary to go beyond merely exploring a personal angle, or produce a documentary-type film, as was the intuitive focus of some participants. The project team introduced various concepts to stimulate engaging and meaningful stories about group experiences.

These concepts were presented during the course sessions and circulated as text before or after these sessions.

The 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 participatory action research (PAR) cycle (spring 2021), and again after the second (autumn 2021), in preparation for the third and final one (spring 2022).

Here, we will briefly outline the prompt-concepts, their rationale, role and evolution during the project.

Visualising story dynamics

Across the project's three PAR 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 iteration of the PAR cycle and course introduced a 'whale' image, whose humpback and explosive spout symbolise the climax of a story, followed by a resolution.

Figure 10: *Whale image used in the second iteration of the course to represent story sequencing.*

Although the whale image did help some participants better structure their stories, the analogy did not quite work: the story is a dynamic trajectory changing over time, while a whale profile is a static representation. In the final course, the whale image was replaced by a wave, whose developing dynamics and breaking crest, representing the story climax, better stimulated story sequencing (Figure 11).

Figure 11: *Wave image used in the final iteration of the course to represent story sequencing.*

From 'resilience' to 'community flourishing' and 'radical hopefulness'

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. But this also provided a stimulus for cooperative activities to overcome the challenges. During the pandemic, community gardens were emphasising social or community 'resilience' as a means to deal with the pandemic and a benefit from CFG activities (e.g. Schoen and Blythe, 2020, Power et al., 2020). For example, our third-sector partner Sustain organized 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 participants' 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 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 agroecological 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 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, the story of Frederick the mouse 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.

Insights from the video stories

Analytical rigour in the PAR research process emerges from a process of triangulation between a wide range of independent data sources, and disseminating interim results for feedback from participants and stakeholders.

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.

Benefits of the process

The analysis showed the emergence of several themes, including community-building benefits, social processes underlying those benefits and the impact of the storytelling process itself on the community food growing initiatives. Initial stories that participants produced describe how the pandemic stimulated efforts to overcome social isolation by sustaining or even expanding food initiatives, thus maintaining individual benefits such as health and well-being. Despite Covid restrictions, participants' stories described how they (and often with their children) got to know each other better and extended friendship networks:

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

'My kids had been involved for quite a while in the community garden, but I hadn't been. So this story really started there. And now we're learning a lot and growing seeds at home with the kids.'

The stories also showcased how community food growing activities bridged social differences of ethnicity, national origin and age:

'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…'

'We got a much-needed ray of sunshine to our lives through classes on Gardening for Families'.

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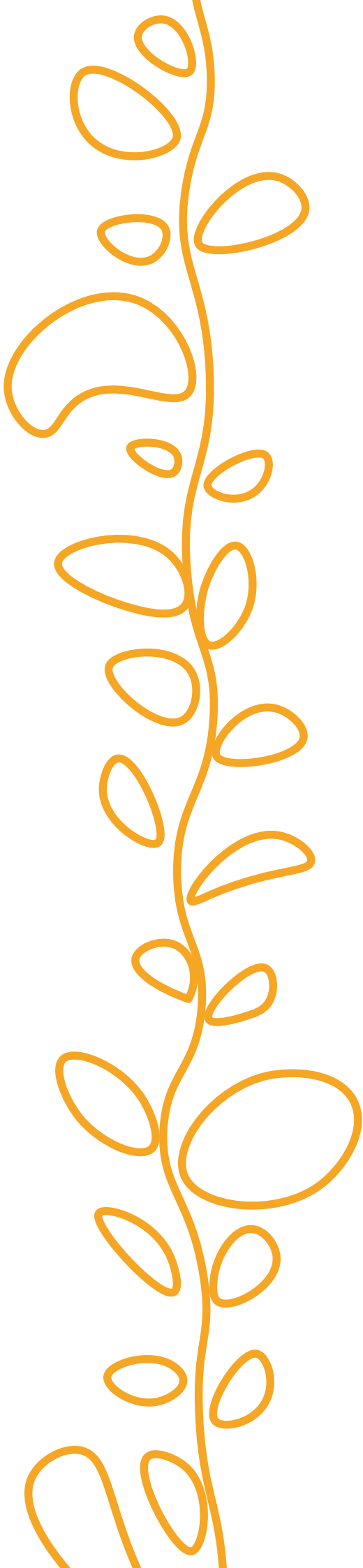
Cultivation activities bridged social differences of ethnicity and national origin:

'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 led to the idea for a Global Garden, growing food plants from other countries and cooking dishes with them.'

'Previously I didn't have many friends who are observant Muslims. I think that several of the people involved will become a more long-term, wider and different friendship circle.'

'It was extremely rewarding to be at the start of an exciting community project that potentially was a bridge between diverse communities.'

'At the heart of this garden is a community of volunteers and Gurkhas; we all share this important land. Gurkhas grow and harvest food to feed their families and communities.'

Cultivation skills were extended to homes, schools and other food growing spaces.

Participants gained a sense of collective agency serving the greater good and the opportunity to 'make a difference'

This is how participants described the impact they felt:

'The local mutual aid group started food growing in our raised beds.'

'Being part of a team with a shared purpose – producing food for people in real need and having the chance to meet new friends at the same time– has been a hugely satisfying experience.'

'Taking part in healthy outdoor work that benefits both the individual and the whole community helped to overcome the sense of powerlessness and to replace it with a sense of shared purpose.'

As food-growing became more popular in spring 2020, there was a shortage of vegetable seeds, so community gardens began to fill the gap and spread the skills.

A staff member told this story:

'I was worrying how we were going to survive. So I started sending packets of seeds to people's houses. And their reaction was unbelievable. Everybody has started to grow things at home, in the front garden, in the back garden, in the neighbour's garden, etc.'

Other participants said:

'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.'

'There's increasing recognition of the value of locally produced food and short supply chains. Therefore, the garden and everything associated with it will only continue to grow and become more important as we find our way.'

Those multiple benefits depend on staff skills, often called 'people skills'.

These facilitate cooperative, creative relationships among volunteers:

'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 previous expertise or 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, keeping us busy with new and exciting ideas..'

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

As one coordinator said:

'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.'

Story snapshots

These are some snapshots of stories that were told about particular community food growing initiatives.

Figure 13: *Aerial image of Lavender Place Community Gardens, Reading (photo credit: Claudia Nuzzo)*

1

In the <u>Whitstable Stream Walk community garden,</u> when the pandemic began, participants managed to keep in touch through Zoom meetings, WhatsApp and emails. Amid the pandemic gloom, they followed the Covid hygiene rules, dodging each other in the garden, each keeping their tools and gloves to themselves. Nevertheless, the initiative managed to flourish. It opened a National Garden scheme, an open garden weekend, and a parents and toddlers group. Despite erratic adverse weather in 2021, they grew fruit and vegetables and shared or sold them. Conversations shared doubts and difficulties of participants. Bringing together 'so many people with their own stories of family traumas, we are now a family of friends and colleagues, each with our foibles and quirky ways…' Participants express these commitments as follows: The garden protects us, while we protect the garden.

2

<u>Incredible Edible Barnet</u> was inspired by the original idea from Incredible Edible Todmorden and its wider network. When the Covid pandemic began in 2020, salad beds outside a church and a temporary allotment helped to supply local food banks. 'The garden brings joy to anyone who passes by, and even more to anyone who decides to get their hands dirty, and wants to learn more about growing their own food.' As one motive for the initiative, people have lost their relationship with food, where it comes from, and its impact on the planet. This initiative stimulates people to grow food at multiple sites and encourages passers-by to pick the crop. It encourages and helps people to start a community food growing space in their area, thus reconnecting with the source of food.

3

A campaign of Cambridge community groups generated the George Street Garden Share as an informal neighbourhood network. Each participant found or created 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 needed the food. Donations have given the donors much pleasure and a sense of social purpose. 'Many people felt they weren't really gardeners, but the results were fantastic', thanks to the mutual support and inspiration. The Garden Share film 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.

4

Hosted by Reading's Food4Families programme, the Lavender Place Community Gardens were created on a half-hectare site of the former Civic Centre offices. Numerous volunteers put raised beds of veg around the site, soon becoming abundant with fruit, animals, birds, their songs and of course people (both visitors and volunteers). It features a Global Garden with plants from places from where refugees have volunteered at the site. They have tried to do things in a sustainable, often quirky way, maximising benefits to its volunteer gardeners and the wider community around the space. The Garden has held many events promoting well-being and social inclusivity. Many participants experience the site as a paradise. Like many 'meanwhile' spaces, however, the Garden was potentially facing eviction for a long time. It finally got the bad news around the time when the autumn 2021 film was finished. The Garden team has been campaigning for an alternative site by various means, including new films using skills from this course.

5

The <u>Wolves Lane</u> site, once a plant nursery run by Haringey council in North London, has been turned into a web of interdependent activities. Before the pandemic, there were at least 20 volunteers per week helping maintain the palm house and the outdoor landscaping. Six other greenhouses produce food; two grow for charitable distribution and four are small business start-ups, one of which served an organic box scheme also located on the site. A flower-growing coop uses the eighth greenhouse. Several of these organisations have additional volunteers. Site overheads were covered about half each by grant funding and rents. Meanwhile donations came from visitors to the tropical greenhouse, Haringey's 'mini-Kew Gardens', an urban form of agri-eco-tourism. In early 2020 the pandemic hygiene restrictions ended the visits and so jeopardised that income stream. As another way forward, volunteers responded by selling seedlings and 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. Their interdependencies have analogies with alternative agri-food systems, whose economic viability depends on more than food sales, especially solidaristic commitments.

6

<u>Wash House Garden,</u> Glasgow, is both a market garden and community garden. It grows fruit and vegetables to sell in a veg box, sent to about 35 households a week, while sending any surplus to grocers and restaurants. Although it is 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.

Allens Cross Community Garden, Northfield, Birmingham, is a garden that emerged from the local community association. A parents' group sought to involve their children in gardening; then parents started to enjoy it and returned regularly. As one volunteer emphasises, a staff member generates enthusiasm: 'I like it because Jackie just gives you a job: just get on with it. And it's actually fun because it's relaxing.' Volunteers keep coming back and make new friends. An arts project has been installing items relevant to the garden; this encourages adults and children alike to engage with creativity and play.

7

8

Ashford Clumps Allotments, within Talking Tree's Community Allotment and Orchard scheme, is a site allocated by Spelthorne Council. The video tells how the storyteller saw an advert for an allotment at a Climate Emergency Centre café, which then resulted in volunteering in a community garden growing fruit and veg to supply the café and other users. In the film, the storyteller interviews fellow volunteers, who say this about the common garden there: 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', says the film.

The Growing Opportunities Project video, an initiative run by the charity Ideal For All near Oldbury, highlights the garden's benefits to participants' mental and physical well-being. These benefits come from a sense of camaraderie and selflessness in a space where people jointly work the soil. They feel inspired: 'Everyone has a story to tell. and everyone has something to teach you.' It's great that there are such spaces and opportunities within such close proximity to people, says the film.

9

10

The **'Grow Together'** initiative within High Wycombe tells the story of how, near the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, when this space was completely overgrown by weeds, it was taken over by a new management as a community garden. Through a big group effort, volunteers cleared the space and installed raised beds. Newcomers were helped to learn skills for composting, as well as for growing fruit and veg. Some of the harvest goes to a food bank as well as to volunteers. As one said, 'The joy is the companionship, sharing the learning, especially as we all were so isolated during the pandemic.'

11

The film 'To Grow an Apple', situated within the **G3 Growers Glasgow,** in the communal 'Back Garden' of Glasgow West Housing Association, Finnieston, tells the simple but powerful story of how an apple tree came to fruit on the site. This was the impressive result of a group effort combining many tasks and skills. It meant: saving seeds, putting them in the seed bank, creating compost, creating a rainfall collection system, building the polytunnel, watering seedlings there, pruning the trees, ensuring proximity for pollination, etc. The film describes this cooperative skill-sharing. 'How is this a radical act of hopefulness? You may think our apple grower is right in front of a Tesco shop', says the film, thus hinting at an alternative future.

Figure 14: *Still from 'To Grow An Apple' video by Viola Madau (image credit: Viola Madau)*

All these stories revealed some profound impacts. While fulfilling their own needs, the stories showed how participants felt they were doing socially useful activities, such as supplying food banks and learning skills for enhancing locally produced food. Cultivation skills have been extended to homes, schools and other food growing spaces. Earlier feelings of being powerless were overcome by a sense of shared purpose, serving a greater good, the opportunity to 'make a difference' and create a group agency. One particular story described how a local community garden became 'a place to be, escape and recover'. The stories showed how food activities have been growing community bonds; they have strengthened cooperative engagements, intergenerational learning, skills-sharing, inter-cultural exchanges and thus social cohesion.

Beyond the short-term benefits, the stories showed that such closer relationships strengthen the future basis for more cooperative, reciprocal, socially resilient practices. Participants described how their involvement in community food growing strengthened people's enthusiasm and

cultivation skills for localizing food production. In turn, local initiatives captured by the stories show how the multiple benefits emerged from coordinating staff capacities to facilitate cooperative, creative relationships among participants: "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".

Storytelling itself has played important roles. For example, 'During the pandemic, I told a story about a derelict former allotment and so attracted people to clear the space to create a new garden.' Another felt that standard horticultural training takes out the fun, 'so I want to tell a story that makes food-growing more accessible to people.'

As another participant said about cooperation:

'We are powerful, but only if we can tell the stories of our power.'

Mapping impact of the storytelling process

At the end of the project in June 2022, a two-hour online workshop applied the 'Ripple Effect Mapping' method (*Chazdon et al., 2017*) to gain deeper insights on how the course and spin-off activities affected participants, the CFG initiatives and the wider community.

Comments made by participants during the workshop revealed benefits at several levels.

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). Even when participants were able to only progress to the storyboarding and photostory techniques, they were still able to report beneficial impacts.

Regardless of whether the storyboarding and photostory steps result in a video story, a storyboard provides a fast, simple means to tell a group story in-person. This can help inspire a community-building process and generate group reflections towards future activities.

Here are three examples of personal impacts:

> *"I learnt about the importance of planning in the storytelling process"*

> *"I'm better at interviewing people. I am now using these skills professionally and within my family."*

> *"Storytelling was helpful to ask questions in a safe way [among fellow gardeners].*

Participation also changed personal value systems and perspectives.
Here are three examples:

> *"The course showed me the importance of shaping your own narrative."*

> *"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.

But the latter role left some unease for perpetuating a societal problem by filling gaps of an unjust agri-food system and/or declining social services: 'CFG addresses the symptoms while neglecting the causes', as one volunteer said.
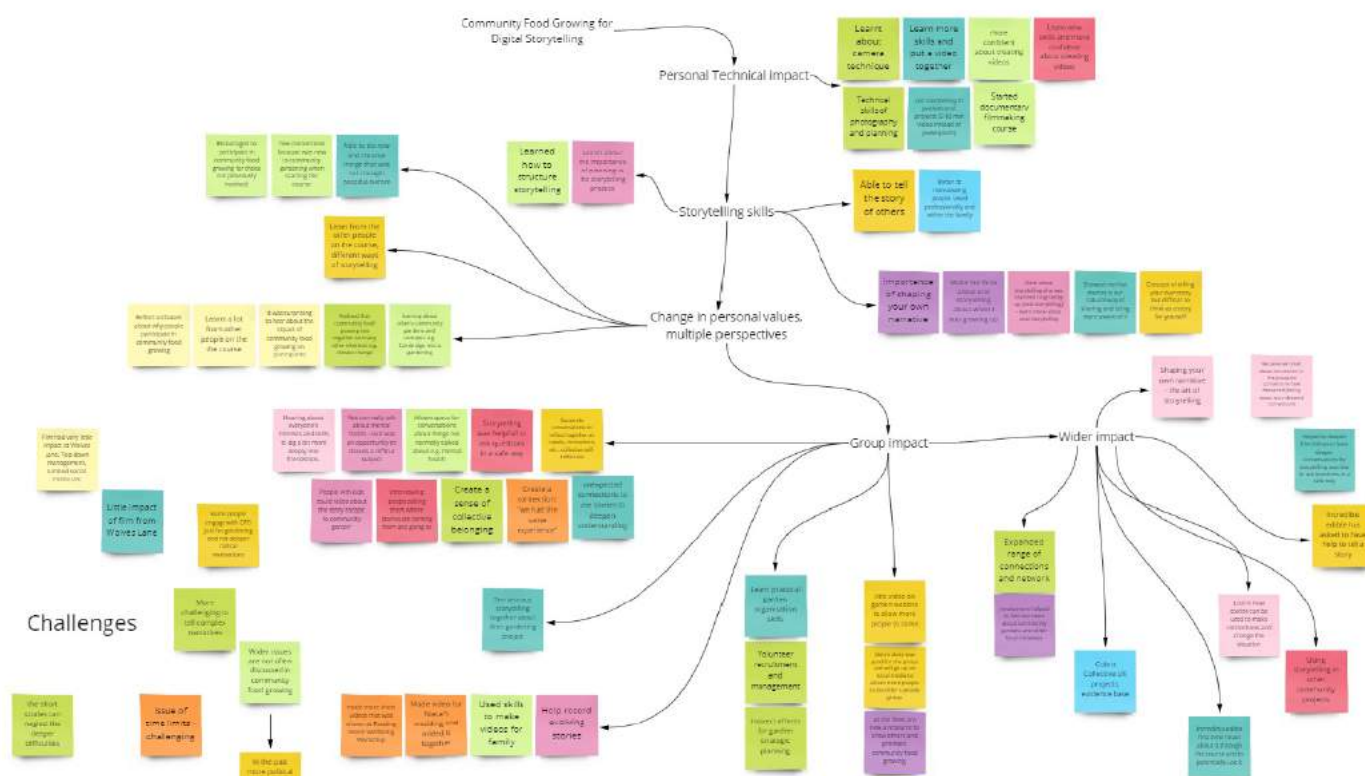

Figure 16: *Screenshot of impact mind map produced during the Ripple Effect Workshop.*

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). 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.

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 place-making within CFG.

Conclusion:
implications of PAR outcomes

Community food-growing can be seen in a wider context: For several decades, social cooperation has been channelled into narrowly instrumental or transactional forms, especially for coping with social inequalities, work stresses and competitive pressures of the job market. Social contact was being increasingly structured by social media. This marginalised traditional empathetic cooperation, whereby 'we send empathic signals to another person that we are attending and recognising what they are doing or thinking'. People have felt a social need to recover 'the value of face-to-face relations', said the sociologist Richard Sennett (2012).

The Covid-19 pandemic further constrained in-person contact, thereby shifting inter-personal contact to public parks and social media. As a significant exception, the government's Covid-19 rules permitted small groups to do gardening together. Its practical tasks became a rare opportunity for rediscovering and remaking inter-personal relationships.

Neither simply work nor leisure, community food-growing is a voluntary 'civil labour' which builds community (AHRC, 2015). This activity features playful relationships with fellow gardeners, the natural world and its domesticated garden-forms. Successful initiatives depend on participants' empathy with each other's feelings, inspirations, enthusiasms and hopes. These practices have been facilitated by staff and regular volunteers bringing relevant social skills, sometimes called 'people skills'.

Many CFG initiatives, especially during the pandemic, described themselves as building or demonstrating community resilience. Its meanings warrant some distinctions. As cited in the introduction, other studies have mentioned CFG initiatives plugging gaps left by the local state's withdrawal from particular services or left by the dominant agri-food system. This palliative role has elicited unease from participants in these studies (Milbourne, 2021). Similar comments arose from our project participants, e.g. as regards supplying food banks. Along those lines, prevalent narratives often interpret resilience as a system's capacity for bouncing back, i.e. returning to normal after a disruption. This role can entrench and normalise socio-economic inequalities.

Many participants in our project, however, reported that CFG initiatives build capacities for potentially bouncing forwards to different futures beyond the dominant agri-food system. As shown in the video stories, CFG spread self-confidence in learning and spreading agri-food skills such as cultivation, organic composting, cooking, etc. Informal teams build cooperative-organizational skills for extending the practices to other sites. Given the tensions between bouncing back versus forwards, those roles illustrate diverse meanings of resilience (Cretney, 2014). Grassroots storytelling can stimulate group reflection on those meanings and their practical implications for group priorities.

So, what lessons have we learnt from the stories produced by participants?

1 They show that community food growing initiatives have provided a crucial collective asset and a social basis for rebuilding the future differently.

2 They show that the way community food growing has adapted to the challenges of the pandemic can provide novel, creative ways to overcome current and future disruptions, towards a better, more resilient future.

3 The stories produced by participants have allowed us to better understand these processes of building community bonds, enabling food growing initiatives to build on their own strengths, attract greater commitments and extend the benefits.

4 Beyond such benefits to themselves, many participants see community food growing as promoting better ways for our society to organize and feed itself. This activity builds capacities for an environmentally sustainable, socially equitable agri-food system.

5 Community food growing strengthens the relevant capacities, skills, enthusiasms and pleasures. This offers a radically hopeful basis for building community, towards creating a better future, both through and beyond community food-growing.

Our PAR intervention showed that video stories provide means to highlight, share and spread such experiences. But also, the process of creating the video stories generates deeper engagement and reflection amongst participants, directly strengthening the community food-growing initiative.

One aim has been to promote and expand community food growing in the UK and beyond. Help us achieve this by:

- Drawing inspiration for your own initiative by engaging with the amazing videos produced by participants.

- Creating and sharing your own fantastic digital story of your own initiative by going through our freely accessible online course.

- Lobbying local authorities to create policies that will support (rather than undermine) community food growing initiatives (Sustain, 2021, 2022).

- Joining or establishing such initiatives through networks such as Capital Growth (London) and Food4Families (Reading).

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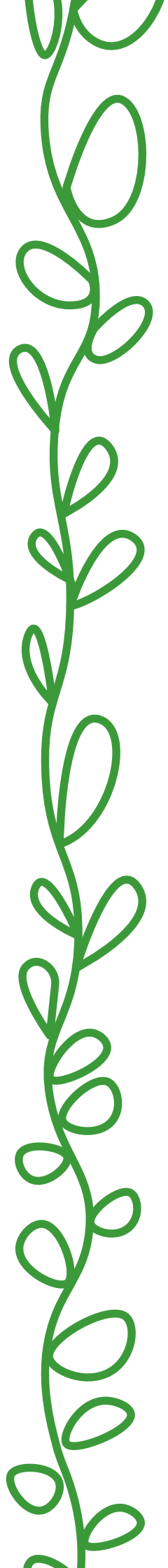
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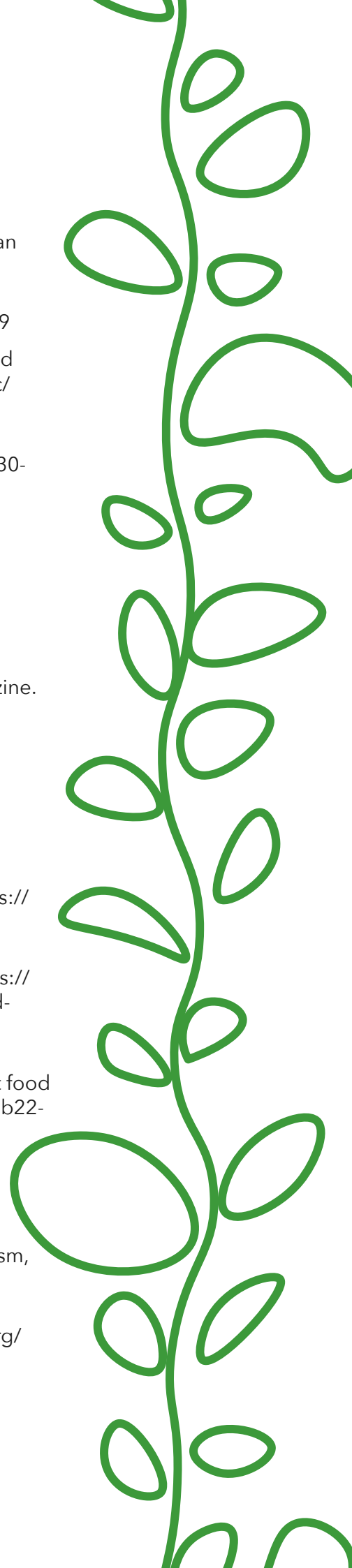
Appendix:
Consent Form

Human Research Ethics Committee
Consent Form

The Open University

Informed Consent for research project
'Digital Storytelling about Group Food-Growing'
https://cobracollective.org/news/digitalstories/

[Project leader and contact details inserted here]:

The Cobra Collective will run the online course in digital storytelling and initially receive the Consent forms from applicants. To return the Consent form, there are three options:
- Add an electronic signature and send by email to [contact email inserted here]
- Hand-write a signature, scan the form and send by email
- Hand-write a signature and send by post to:
  Cobra Collective, 21 Willson Road, Egham, Surrey TW20 0QB

==============

Ticking all the 'Yes' boxes, and thus agreeing to all the conditions, is necessary for participation in the course.
Please tick the appropriate boxes

1. Taking part in the study

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project's Information sheet (dated 08.03.2021) or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	☐	☐
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study. I understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason, except that withdrawal of my digital story has a deadline, as explained below.	☐	☐
I am at least 18 years old.	☐	☐
I will obtain verbal consent from anyone depicted in the audiovisual materials that I provide. I will explain to such persons that their images may be used in a film that will be publicly accessible.	☐	☐
I understand that taking part in the study involves two activities:	☐	☐

- Learning how to produce a digital story of your experiences in group food-growing activities.
- Completing a questionnaire about your experiences in group food-growing and in the online course.

2. Use of the information in the study

Information that you provide will be used for academic research and promoting the benefits of food-growing initiatives. In particular the results of the two activities above will be used as follows:

Digital story and its audio-visual components
Your digital story about community food growing will be produced from material that you collect on your own smartphone or tablet, as well as from your contributions during the Zoom training sessions. In producing your final story for public dissemination, you will decide which components to include. For example, you will decide whether to include your contributions to the training sessions, whether or how your face appears, and whether to use your real name or a pseudonym.
All the components will be stored and managed by the Cobra Collective. Shortly after recording your story with your chosen components, the Cobra Collective will do some editing and then send you a link to view the video. You may withdraw yourself and the video from the study up to two weeks after we send you the link. If you do so, then your audiovisual materials will be deleted.

Otherwise your digital story will become available for incorporation into a new online course on the OpenLearn Create platform, where enrolment is free of charge. The audio-visual material will be available for other uses through a Creative Commons licence. Under this licence, the materials can be freely reproduced by anyone for non-commercial

uses. The Cobra Collective needs to 'own' the outputs as a basis to pursue anyone who contravenes the licence or who uses the material without such a licence.

Beyond the digital stories, the Cobra Collective may want to use other contributions from the training sessions, especially for the new course on OpenLearnCreate. If so, then we will contact you to request specific permission.

Questionnaire: After recording your story, you will be invited to complete a questionnaire; doing so is optional. If you provide answers, then your questionnaire will be coded and anonymised. Any information identifying you will not be shared beyond the study team. Then your answers will be used for academic analysis. Citations will identify only your role in a food initiative, e.g., volunteer, tutor, leader, etc.
Answers will be cited in numerous places, e.g. the online course, Digital Stories Methods Guide, project reports, etc.

Your data will be stored as follows:
- Digital story (and their audio-visual components) will be stored by the Cobra Collective for at least 8 years after the project ends in 2022.
- Completed questionnaire will be anonymised with a code and stored in a secure OU sharepoint site for at least 5 years after the project ends.
- Signed consent form will be stored electronically in a similar way for 6 months after the project ends. This record will enable us to inform you about outputs and events. If it was originally a paper form, then it will be *electronically scanned and afterwards destroyed.

3. Future use and reuse of the information by others   Yes   No
    ☐ ☐

I understand that my digital story will be accessible for other uses under a Creative Commons licence, to be issued by the Cobra Collective.

I give permission for my completed questionnaire (after it has been anonymised) to be deposited in the OU   ☐ ☐
data centre so it can be used for future research and learning.

4. Signatures

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant   Signature   Date
[IN CAPITALS]

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of signing

If a witness is signing on behalf of a participant:
I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]   ] Signature   Date

This research project has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion, from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) reference number **HREC/3873.**
http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/