

Reviewing for Wellbeing

by Roger Greenaway, Reviewing Skills Training

This article focuses on one of many ways in which being outdoors can support and enhance mental wellbeing. It shows how reviewing outdoor experiences can increase the chances that every participant in outdoor education will make significant gains in their mental wellbeing.

Reviewing is learning from experience. People who have trouble learning from experience are at risk of remaining stuck while their peers and the world move on. Not only do such people get left behind, they also find it increasingly difficult to cope with changes, problems and opportunities. A person's mental wellbeing is at risk if they find it difficult to learn their way out of trouble and through life.

You can find many clues about the kinds of reviewing that support wellbeing by taking a look at how wellbeing is defined. For example, here is a definition from Curriculum for Excellence, Scotland¹:

- *Mental wellbeing refers to the health of the mind, the way we think, perceive, reflect on and make sense of the world.*

In the accompanying guidance notes these four indicators of wellbeing appear most frequently:

- *receives regular praise and encouragement.*
- *has a well-developed sense of identity and belonging.*
- *has a well-developed sense of self esteem and self respect.*
- *is confident and competent when faced by problems and new challenges in everyday life.*

It is clear from other indicators that there is a strong social dimension:

- *feels accepted and valued by their peers.*
- *feels listened to and taken seriously ...*
- *talks to others about his or her feelings in age-appropriate ways.*
- *cares about and respects others.*

Several indicators emphasise the links between wellbeing and learning:

- *expresses a sense of achievement from their activities.*
- *expresses a sense of achievement from what they are learning.*
- *is learning new skills and applying them to meet new challenges.*
- *is given the opportunity to develop skills for learning, life and work*

A healthy orientation towards the future is also part of mental wellbeing:

- *is generally optimistic and realistic about what he or she can achieve.*
- *develops decision-making skills that will help them make good choices for the future.*

From theory to practice

Unless conditions are extremely unfavourable it is usually better to review outdoors, or at least start the reviewing process outdoors. Being outdoors signals a different approach to learning: learning from experience. Outdoors can provide inspirational places for reflection and an abundance of visual aids to assist communication. Outdoors there is usually plenty of space to switch between solo, paired, small group and large group learning processes.

Outdoors you can capture opportunities for learning as they happen and while the experience is fresh. And outdoor journeys can provide good opportunities for review and reflection while on the move. Of course, you can review for wellbeing indoors too, but you are off to a head start if the place you choose for reviewing has positive associations with wellbeing rather than neutral or negative associations.

An **Observation Walk** exploits many of these opportunities. It is a group journey of about 20 minutes that encourages noticing, sensing and sharing – in pairs and in the whole group. In this exercise you direct participants' attention towards self (sensing), others (noticing) and the environment (noticing or wondering). This is a simple tuning in process that creates *a sense of belonging* both to the group and to the place.

NB *Highlighted phrases in italics* refer back to the opening bullet points about wellbeing.

From noticing to appreciating

If what we pay attention to becomes our reality (a principle at the heart of Appreciative Inquiry) then we can enhance mental wellbeing by directing people's attention towards their *achievements*. In **Simultaneous Survey** you can ask each individual to collect positive feedback on behalf of one other person. The surveys can be carried out during a walk or in a large space. The question asked might be: "What is good about having this person in your team?" *Feeling accepted and valued by their peers* will almost certainly change *self-perception* for the better. Friendly feedback has most impact and value when it highlights what a person does or says to deserve that feedback. This form of Simultaneous Survey activates students' motivation *to care for each other*. Everyone receives *praise* and *recognition* from their peers. Many factors supporting mental wellbeing are at the heart of this short and intensive exercise. Notebooks are useful but they are not essential if you limit people to passing on no more than 5

positive comments.

Feedback using Simultaneous Survey is usually one-to-one, but with **Spokes** the feedback process happens in a facilitated group setting. You first ask everyone to show how they *rate their own performance* (by how much they move towards the centre of the group circle). If anyone seems overmodest, the group and the facilitator can bring that person's attention to things they deserve more credit for – by inviting them to move further in while providing evidence to support their invitation. The process tends to draw attention to those who are most in need of *positive feedback*. In most groups there is a strong urge to bring in those who remain on the outside – because *participants like helping those who appear to need most help*. Young people like *caring for others!*

The questions for **Spokes** should be about performance and behaviour (rather than internal feelings). This allows others to refer to real evidence on which to make their invitations. Examples of questions directly related to wellbeing are:

- *How much did you give praise or encouragement to others?*
- *How much did you do to help solve the problem?*
- *How much did you attempt to overcome the challenge?*
- *How much did you respond in a respectful way to other people's ideas?*
- *How much did you demonstrate a caring attitude towards others?*
- *How much did you develop or apply new skills during the activity?*
- *How much did you contribute to decision-making?*

The examples above are closely based on the

indicators of wellbeing listed at the start of this article. But the two-part Spokes process (self-assessment followed by invitations) will have a positive impact on wellbeing whatever desirable aspect of performance you ask about.

From snippets to stories

One feature of the methods described so far is that they produce brief snippets of information. Rather than giving sustained attention to any one person, these methods tend to briefly highlight one point and then move on – either to keep the process moving or to ensure that everyone gets a go. At some time it pays to slow down and use methods that give more sustained attention to the individual and their emerging story. Rather than seeking isolated snippets, the following methods give more sustained attention to the stories and the storytellers.

If you ask an open question such as "How was it?" people will often give an unbalanced response that either selects all the best bits or all the worst bits. **Storyline** brings out relative ups and downs in a story and helps to make the story a balanced one. The questions "What helped/enabled you to achieve this high point?" and "What helped/enabled you to recover from this low point?" are designed to *pay attention to the factors that worked well*, especially if they relate to *how the storyteller influenced what worked well*. Each story becomes a story of what worked well.

Storyline also helps to develop emotional wellbeing because it helps the storyteller *to recognise and express their feelings*, it helps listeners to appreciate that others may have different feelings in the same situation, and it helps everyone to *understand how feelings affect behaviour*. My favourite place for Storyline is on a grassy slope using a rope of about 5 metres. The storyteller arranges their rope graph and then walks along it as they tell their story. The slope helps to emphasise the ups and downs. You can ask the questions at the turning points while the rest of the group listen.

Storyline helps the storyteller *"talk to others about his or her feelings in age-appropriate ways"* and in doing so it is likely that many other aspects of mental wellbeing are enhanced.

From past to future

Part of mental wellbeing is having a healthy orientation towards the future, and story-based methods can help here too. One of my favourite methods involves the student constructing a story that takes a person closer to their goal. The story is based on real assets and achievements and builds up progressively – one step at a time. I have named this process **Back to the Future** because the person walks backwards towards their goal while talking about what they can see in their past and present. A sequence of questions guide the story-building process. Every question takes the form: "What [something] do you already have that will help you on this journey towards your goal?" The "something" can be things such as: knowledge, experience, strengths, skills, values, motivations, resources, support, relationships etc. The goal must matter to the individual. It can be about giving up a bad habit or staying out of trouble. Or it can be about learning something new, keeping to a healthy diet, or making a wish come true.

How does **Back to the Future** fit with outdoor education? Easy! "Much outdoor education brings out what people can do and opens their eyes to new worlds and possibilities. The combination of outdoor education and Back to the Future can readily help students to be *"optimistic and realistic about what he or she can achieve"*. The questions "What [something] do you already have ...?" can be directed towards recent learning in the outdoors such as problem-solving skills, insights, discoveries or achieving what seemed "impossible". Outdoor education enables the *learning of new skills* and Back to the Future helps students see how they can *apply their new skills to meet new challenges*.

From personal stories to shared stories

The opening list shows that mental wellbeing has a strong social dimension. Stories about self that are shared and developed in a supportive peer group, or with supportive family, carers or teachers are more credible and sustainable than stories about self that are developed in isolation. Stories and outdoor learning go hand in hand. Through smart and sensitive reviewing we can assist students' story-making processes in ways that deliberately support their mental wellbeing and personal growth. In "Everyone's an author"² I wrote:

"The making and telling of stories is often seen as something that other people do. In this way of thinking, stories might be for 'reading', 'hearing' or 'watching', but as for 'creating' or 'telling' stories, these are things that other 'more talented' people do. Such an attitude leads to people getting used to being bit players in other people's stories, and they become the victims of a reality that others impose. Personal growth remains at a low ebb until people are able to appreciate that alternative versions of reality are possible, and that they themselves can create credible stories and can be the co-authors of reality. This exchanging and adjusting of perspectives is central to a healthy and developmental reviewing process. Only through taking part in the authoring (or co-authoring) of stories about experience does learning become authentic."

And where better to develop and share such stories than in the authentic outdoors!

About the author

Roger Greenaway is the author of several articles [<http://reviewing.co.uk/articles>] and books including 'Reviewing Adventures'. He has been a school teacher, a tutor at Brathay, a training adviser with Save the Children and since 1991 he has been training people in reviewing skills and methods around the world. This article is based on Roger's workshop at the IOL national conference on "Health and Wellbeing in the Outdoors".

References

1. Curriculum for Excellence indicators:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/background/wellbeing>
2. Everyone's an author:
<http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/intro.htm>

For more detailed descriptions of methods described above, please write to roger@reviewing.co.uk

About this article

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