

## Aberystwyth University

### *Educating with enthusiasm*

Griffiths, Chloe Ena; Wilberforce, Lizzie

*Published in:*

Natur Cymru - Nature of Wales

*Publication date:*

2021

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Griffiths, C. E., & Wilberforce, L. (2021). Educating with enthusiasm: and how not to crush the spirit of new learners. *Natur Cymru - Nature of Wales*, 56-59.

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400  
email: [is@aber.ac.uk](mailto:is@aber.ac.uk)

# EDUCATING WITH ENTHUSIASM...

## ...and how not to crush the spirit of new learners

*The process of re-launching Natur Cymru has prompted some interesting discussions about representative diversity amongst our contributors. Not all parts of the natural history community are equally willing to volunteer themselves as experts, so what are the differences in people's paths to knowledge and confidence? CHLOE GRIFFITHS and LIZZIE WILBERFORCE spoke to a range of wildlife enthusiasts to investigate their collective experiences of learning natural history, and discuss how we can apply this to supporting others.*

It all started as a conversation about social imbalances in the community of people volunteering to write and lead in natural history. Why is it that some groups of people are less willing than others

to offer themselves as experts, we wondered, and can that be overcome? Diversity (and the lack of it) in our natural history movement is rightly rising up the agenda, and we all have a part to play in encouraging those who are under-represented. We chatted about our own experiences of acquiring knowledge, and what empowered us to go on to feel we had knowledge worth sharing. How did our experiences of learning compare to others, for better or for worse? Listening to people's stories was a revelation.

Good field skills in natural history take passion and commitment, often for a lifetime. You can be expert in one branch of natural history and a novice in another; many of us are simultaneously mentors and mentees. This should make us all sympathetic to the needs of other learners, but what do we get right, and what do we get wrong? Do we recognise how each other's needs may vary?



Field skills are often improved by time spent with enthusiastic and encouraging peers.



People often cited the opportunity to take part in an activity that opened their eyes to a new perspective on a familiar place as a life-changing event. Examples included storm petrel ringing (pictured), moth trapping and dolphin surveys.

© Sam Hobson

## Getting it right

We found that early inspiration often came from witnessing someone else's enthusiasm and delight in the natural world. Experiencing genuine passion for a subject in someone close to you, and their sincere enthusiasm to share that joy of knowledge, is important – it's something more than teaching for its own sake. Most people pointed to individuals- often friends or family, but occasionally teachers – whose delight in the wild was an early inspiration. Often, the first glimmers of interest came from being introduced to the extraordinary in the everyday, an encouragement to inquisitiveness, or a fascinating fact. Not just what, but why, when, how?

Many of us gain our field skills from other people as much as from books. Consequently, encouragement to nurture knowledge becomes a lot about feeling welcomed by others. People's most inspiring mentors were those who took pleasure in sharing what they themselves had learned and for whom there were no 'stupid questions'. "I have come to relax socially and gain confidence, because I

don't feel I'm being judged by my knowledge" said one. "I'm not being tested, I'm simply joining in a celebration of what's around us, and there's so much to see, hear, feel, learn and celebrate!"

The most enthusiastic reports of spending time with experts explain how they made their expertise seem accessible. Much of that is about encouraging those tentative first records. "Well done!", one encouraging recorder said to a beginner. "So-and-so is quite common, but it is always valuable to have records. So-and-so is on most such-and-such, but it is one of my favourites. Keep it up, I look forward to your next batch!". The same kind of positivity can also be found in supportive online recording communities- helping people learn, one record at a time, with verification and encouragement.

That personal encouragement makes the greatest difference- supporting people to learn through mistakes, showing them new things and new places. Discussion fosters understanding; why do you know it's species X and not Y? How can I remember that more easily? I'm not sure about this, do I feel I can ask for help?





Equipping yourself as a field ecologist can be expensive, and the cost of kit is often a barrier to new starters. Many people felt judged by the equipment they carried.

## Getting it wrong

Perhaps unsurprisingly, plenty of tales of woe were also shared. We can learn a lot from listening to what people found challenging, and discovering what it's like to be in someone else's shoes.

### *Attitude problem?*

The best mentors make you feel "like they are sharing their knowledge with you, not too serious, not lecturing to you" whereas some people felt looked down on for their inexperience in what was often a new field of knowledge. Stakes were highest in a group situation; everybody wants to feel part of the gang rather than an outsider. People noted that attitudes which led to them "feeling outcast as a beginner" or "being made to feel stupid" were particularly unwelcome. Age was also an issue- for young people 'breaking in' to groups dominated by older people can feel tricky. "I didn't feel welcome till someone went out of their way proactively to talk to me and make me feel included." Other advice we heard was "be open to everyone, not cliquy or condescending" and "don't make your educating have a 'professionals only' vibe about it."

### *Don't assume prior knowledge*

People feel embarrassed to admit ignorance, so find a way to ensure that everyone is with you at each step in the learning. People are often with your group or on your walk in order to learn, but don't want to have to reveal what they don't know. We've heard that being asked about your level of experience can be awkward and even shaming.

If asking a question can make people feel

vulnerable, that they might be mocked or looked down on, being encouraging is key. One respondent wrote "I felt welcome, even though I knew very little and was the one asking 'what's this/that?' all the time! The fact that I even spoke out and asked these questions shows how comfortable I felt within the group and amongst the experts. I think this is very unique - to be in a setting of extremely mixed ability and to feel accepted."

### *Be respectful with beginners' mistakes*

It is the nature of learning to make mistakes, however, how this is handled can make a huge difference to whether it consolidates someone's learning, or humiliates and puts them off a subject for life. Diplomacy and tact are called for! We have been told of "intentional or indifferent" skills-shaming. "I, like many others I am sure, am very nervous of speaking up if I'm not sure I'm right, so attending a bird log where you are bluntly and publicly told your report is clearly wrong can be surprisingly damaging". This learner acknowledged that mistakes do need to be addressed but commented "it's all about the way it's done- correcting patiently and well is a very important skill".

### *Don't disdain a common sighting!*

Learners will be coming across species new to them, and hopefully finding this exciting and worth sharing. Even if a toad is old hat to you, it's going to be thrilling for many, so "crushing someone's enthusiasm for reporting something just because it's common or their count isn't the highest is awful and discouraging." This respondent explained that this might simply be down to indifference or lack of energy to make the effort with beginners, but it can "create an atmosphere that's very intimidating to beginners."

### *Don't assume people know how to dress or what to bring for a session.*

For beginners, what to wear on different wild terrains may be something they've never thought of. If they are not warned, they can turn up ill-equipped, and it can be not only embarrassing and uncomfortable but actually painful! One person told us, "as a novice I was ill-equipped in my clothing, footwear and waterproofs, and knowledge of the treacherous trenches of *Molinia*! Sadly, I wasn't briefed on any of these matters beforehand and the leader continued onwards regardless. I survived (!), but arrived back at the base frozen, wet and a complete nervous wreck after trying to avoid falling down deep holes every other step for a several hours."





**Being proactive in involving people is important in a group context; we all have our own anxieties and barriers. We all learn more when we feel welcome, whatever our skill level.**

#### **Banter...**

...or mockery, can be seriously mis-interpreted and cause great offence. It can be taken as genuine sarcasm or even abuse. One story we were told illustrates this well:

"Once when hoping to get interested in hoverflies I went out with a small group of expert entomologists. I found a very striking-looking one and took it to the leader who held up the tube with it in and said in a sarcastic voice: 'Oh look, Alastair thinks he has found a rare hoverfly!' Being a sensitive soul, I felt completely humiliated and have hated hoverflies ever since." Someone else reported being mocked for where they came from, and what they were wearing, "There was a moment where I thought 'oh maybe I shouldn't go anymore because people might judge me'." The knowledge and cost of looking the part can be an insurmountable barrier and we should be careful not to judge other people's choices.

#### **Use of terms not appropriate to the audience**

We could have called this section "To Latin, or not to Latin" as this really divided our respondents. It does seem to be the case that, when we are beginners, scientific names, as well as the jargon of body parts and plant anatomy, can really put people off. One person told us that "use of common names makes getting started easier, Latin is accurate but hard to remember for novices!" Another wrote, "unfortunately it doesn't really impress a beginner if a

specialist uses lots of Latin names - we have no idea what you're talking about, and it just makes us feel excluded from your world." Just like the respondent with the humiliating hoverfly experience, this person was put off completely from the subject, they have "no further desire to learn more".

#### **Becoming better educators**

There's good news. The one key take-away for us is that, before anything else, be open about how fascinating you find your subject. If you love newts, you should say so, and let other people know why they are so enthralling. It's reassuring that we don't have to keep up a stern scientific front of neutrality to educate, it is actually far more effective to let your enthusiasm show; it will bring many more people with you.

An equal welcome for everyone means not just people who are your age/gender/social group. We can't know what makes someone feel anxious, different or 'other' – so actively welcoming each person and asking for their contribution is key. We all have our own insecurities about our knowledge – even mentors. Treat others as you want to be treated, don't be tempted to prove your own knowledge at someone else's expense. Watch out in group situations for any unkindness or tendency to clump up in familiar groups of friends. Can you ask a particularly approachable member to buddy a new person until they are integrated?

Do offer your skills. No matter where you are in your own learning, you will know more than someone does about something. Share it, offer to help someone identify a caterpillar, take them bird ringing for the first time, show them how to run a moth trap, or share a special habitat with them. Your input could be the moment that someone decides "this is for me", and you could create a future expert! You don't have to be an expert yourself to inspire others: let them see your enthusiasm, that will do the job.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

The authors would like to thank the many people who went to the trouble of sharing their personal experiences with us during the development of this article.

*Chloe Griffiths is a biological recorder running a wildlife recording project in her village, Penparcau near Aberystwyth. Lizzie Wilberforce is the editor of Natur Cymru and enthusiastic natural history generalist.*