

Prifysgol y Cyfreddin Cymru/Communiversality of Wales – Toward developing a community of sustainability learning and practice in Wales

'Thinking, Acting and Sharing for Long-term Success'

1. Introduction

"...learning is like muck, the more you spread it around, the more human growth there is in spades...." – Martin Large, Chair of Stroud Commonwealth and co-founder of Stroud Communiversality

The journey toward a low-carbon, equitable and sustainable future is essentially a journey of learning and exploration; few have gone this way before, and never on the scale now required.

One purpose of the meeting today is for us to begin to explore together ways in which a network of shared experience, knowledge and learning might be helped to emerge from interactions between some of the leading sustainability and climate change projects in Wales. What all today's participants have in common is that their group or organisations has recently won major funding to carry out community-based climate change/sustainability activities in their localities. Although, as we shall hear later, individual projects and their settings vary widely, each of you is beginning a new phase in your activities. Although each of your organisations already has a fantastic track record in their respective areas of expertise – as recognised to some extent by the funding awards – a new phase of innovation and expansion always brings new challenges and the need for new knowledge and perspectives. Today's meeting hopes to identify some practical measures toward enabling a cooperative, dialogue-based approach to meeting those needs through the formation of a prototype 'community of sustainability learning and practice' dedicated to sharing and building the knowledge needed to respond to the impacts of climate change and take forward the transition to post-carbon living in Wales.

The idea is that participants in this learning community will take part in a series of workshops, seminars and site visits aimed at facilitating a deeper understanding of each others' projects and the specific social, cultural and economic contexts in which they are being carried out. Commonalities and differences will be revealed through dialogue, discussion and shared hands-on activity; participants will be encouraged to more clearly and consciously articulate their own knowledge and approaches while gaining a deeper understanding of others' outlooks and emphases, and the 'bigger picture' of which they are all a part. Where appropriate, aspects of these interactions will be captured by participants and observers/facilitators and made available online, alongside materials produced by the participants, providing the core of a body of current and Wales-specific 'open source' information and examples for wider use and discussion.

The perceived benefits of this proposed learning community are that it will help strengthen and improve individual organisations and their projects by:

- facilitating the sharing and exchange of technical, organisational and financial knowledge between the participating organisations
- identifying key knowledge and resource needs where research or other input from third parties (e.g. WAG, Universities, agencies) is required
- facilitating the sharing and exchange of key skills and competencies between organisations, both formally and informally

- identifying key skills and competencies gaps or needs where training or expertise from third parties is required
- providing a safe, mutually supportive community of peers within which a diversity of viewpoints – particularly on the 'bigger picture' – can be aired and discussed
- where appropriate and likely to be more effective (e.g. at Wales and UK national level), facilitating communication on behalf of the learning group as a whole rather than as individual projects – an exemplar being the Low-Impact Development Network.

2. The Communiversity Concept

One of the key ideas inspiring this initiative, and to which it might aspire, is that of the Communiversity. The Communiversity is a communal university, or, as our Welsh translation puts it, a university of the commons. It is organised along cooperative, mutualised, not-for-private-profit lines. A Communiversity is owned and operated by its faculty and students for their benefit rather than by state or business interests. It operates on a low- or no-cost basis to end-users. It is non-bureaucratic, non-hierarchical and offers equal access to all regardless of race, gender, religion or education. Its course materials, research outputs and the software it uses are all 'open source' – freely available as a shared commons for all. It neither requires nor bestows qualifications except when students, rather than funders, require them. It caters for every level of post-16 learner in integrated, multi-level groups. Its preferred method is action learning; it offers short courses designed around the needs of persons leading lives as activists and change agents in their communities. It integrates vocational and academic learning, physical and mental activity, skills-based, cognitive and emotional development, and takes place in classrooms, at sites of transition action, and in the great outdoors.

2.2 Example: Stroud Communiversity <http://www.stroudcommonwealth.org.uk>

Currently one of the most developed examples in the UK is the Stroud Communiversity in Gloucestershire, England, now in its third year of operation. A joint venture between Stroud Commonwealth and Transition Stroud, it was developed as a response to the growing stream of people visiting Stroud to learn from innovative economic, cultural and social projects such as Stroud Community Agriculture and Springhill Co-Housing. These visitors want to share what they are doing, their learning and their questions about how communities can make tangible differences in their affairs and take responsibility for their own present and future needs. Learning is through practical talks, discussions, workshops and visits to local projects, with the opportunity to develop personal projects and visions through action learning. The programme allows time for reflection on as well as Open Space for networking and exploring common questions. The aim is to build a community of practice for sustainable livelihoods and a local living economy. So far there have been two annual three day events, regular single day workshops and occasional evening seminars, and ongoing development of national and international partnerships.

2.3 Example: The School of Living <http://www.schoolofliving.org/default.htm>

Founded in 1934, the School of Living in Philadelphia, USA is a non-profit education network dedicated to learning and teaching the philosophy, practices and principles of living that are self-empowering for individuals within the general aim of establishing decentralized, ecologically-sound, self-governed and humane communities. Historically it has played a pivotal role in US movements

supporting: organic agriculture, consumer rights, cooperatives and worker owned businesses, tax abolition, geonomics, appropriate technology, neighbourhood and community rights and control. Today SoL is actively engaged in: community land trusts, intentional community support, permaculture, ecological use of resources, human scale and local self reliance, appropriate technology, alternative education, consensus decision making, non-exploitive banking, and alternative currencies.

2. Prifysgol y Cyfreddin Cymru - The Pilot

A 'Communiversality of Wales' modelled on the Stroud example could offer many benefits to all those in the Principality striving for the transition to 'one planet living'. Ultimately, almost every aspect of that transition involves an intense learning curve. Since the advent of the fossil-fuel age few, if any communities in Wales have ever been truly sustainable, self-reliant or resilient; almost every step along the path to a low-carbon future demands new knowledge and experience. It is urgent and imperative that, as new knowledge and experience is generated, it is shared as rapidly and widely as possible, and through multiple channels. While effective use of the electronic and print media is vital, there is no substitute for hands-on learning, dialogue, and mentoring. Action learning and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange is the particular strength of the Communiversality approach.

In today's meeting we are proposing a pilot programme to explore the idea of Prifysgol y Cyfreddin Cymru. We have begun by bringing together some of the most high-profile climate change/transition projects in Wales – the recent recipients of major NESTA and Low-Carbon Communities awards: Cymdeithas Cwm Arian, Lamma, Awel Aman Tawe, Cwm Clydach, Green Valleys and Light Foot Enterprises Household Energy Service. These six projects have each developed from different roots and serve different communities. Each has unique experience and a distinctive approach. They should have much to share with each other.

The proposed pilot programme could consist of this introductory one-day workshop followed up by a series of six, bimonthly site visits, one to be hosted by each of the participant organisations. Each session would ideally be attended by at least two representatives of each of the projects involved. In this first session introductions will be made, the basic Communiversality concept presented and discussed, the individual projects presented, learning topics identified and prioritised, and an initial action plan for the following six sessions developed. This and following sessions will be facilitated by academics trained and experienced in working with communities, following the well-established Science Shops approach. These 'external' facilitators will also take responsibility for ensuring records are made of the discussions, learning materials are generated and shared, and good communications maintained between all participants. Additional support will be provided by the WAG Climate Change and Water Division and the funding bodies concerned.

Subsequent workshops will take place on-site at each of the projects involved. The host organisation will work with the facilitators to set up a day of action-learning involving workshops, discussions, site visits and talks by key actors. Each host will be asked to identify strengths and needs, opportunities and barriers related to their project, and to give visitors a sense of the specific socioeconomic and cultural context within which their activities are taking place.