

# UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA), University of Glasgow

## The Arts of Integrating Culture Ceilidh

Keynote for the Spring School 9-11 May 2023

### Growing Together: Reclaiming our lost commons

Avril Bellinger (AB) and Deirdre Ford (DF)

**9.30 Introductions: DF:** Social Worker, trustee. **Fàilte**, welcome to the second day of RILA's Spring School

**AB:** Social Worker academic activist, founder & volunteer at START, Allotmenteer.

#### **DF Thanks; about START.**

Before we begin, we want to thank the RILA team and Bella Hoogeveen especially for her care in making arrangements and giving us the opportunity to deliver this keynote address here today - what a privilege.

This morning we want to talk about an extraordinary organisation which Avril founded in 2001. Briefly, Students and Refugees Together (known as START) is an NGO, a charity in the southwest of England. It has the dual purpose of supporting refugees (people granted leave to remain in the UK) to access their rights and realise their ambitions. It also supports the education of students on professional placements. In undertaking their practical placements at START, students are the main workforce, working with people who are refugees, and in transition like them.

As well as providing a casework service for people with leave to remain, START has developed a range of community activities that are core to its work. These include:

- a Cultural Kitchen serving hot food every fortnight
- a Women's Group offering a space for women and creative activities such as needlework
- two allotments or community gardens
- a Job Club to provide support and advice in looking for work
- a strong Service User Forum giving a voice to the people to whom the organisation belongs
- refugee awareness training courses run by workers and refugees for local agencies, schools, police and other groups in the city
- a walking project encouraging refugees to discover the countryside around the city, access cultural exchange and English language learning.

#### **AB why we are here**

We believe we were invited to this wonderful event because Bella noticed our contribution last summer to IFSW online summit – Co-designing a new eco-social world, leaving no-one behind. We gave START as an example of using our place in academia to make a practical difference in people's lives, instead of putting energy into maximising publications. It was

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called 'Doing what we can, where we are, with what we have' which really sums up our approach. The picture loop that will run throughout the session gives a flavour of START's community activities which as Deirdre has said, are a core part of START's work and are founded on the strengths approach. We have written in some detail about how the approach works in practice in our book and there are publisher flyers here if you are interested. All proceeds go to START. In chapter 8 we use the term 'Growing Community' because of its organic nature, especially with people in transition like refugees and students. From more than 20 years' experience we have identified some useful principles for growing community which we will be working to as you experience the difference between experiencing something and just hearing about it. We invite you to hold us to them throughout the session. Read Bellinger and Ford, 2022, Chapter 8 learning points (p.189)

**DF Outline of the session.** Broadly in 3 parts:

- Firstly, a brief activity with postcards to focus on the nature of '**the commons**'
- Secondly an activity with seeds to **grow community** here and now
- Third, examples from our own experience of the difference between **creating commons** as opposed to simply delivering services
- End with principles to encourage reconnection, reciprocity, and hope.

**AB** So let's start with thinking about commons which we define as ***an area or resource that is cared for by all those who benefit from it.*** Most often understood in relation to common land – available for grazing livestock, collecting fuel and food essential to life. Much has been written about the consequences of enclosure, exclusion and profiteering and we would direct you to Nick Hayes work 'The Book of Trespass'. The commons can also apply to water and its use for fishing, swimming, generating power and the devastating consequences of monetisation as Guy Standing's work shows. But commons do not have to be tangible. David Harvie writes about academic or intellectual commons and their enclosure – something we experienced in our careers. Maria Mies, in her paper 'No Commons Without Community' writes that enclosure of the commons is 'piracy, violence and theft, appropriation of what belongs to the people: land, forests, water, rivers, open spaces in cities and villages but also knowledge, culture and language'. A healthy, dynamic community is itself a resource that promotes inclusion, sharing, conservation and wellbeing when it is cared for by all who benefit from it. Our intention this morning is to grow just such a community and to encourage relationships that are future focused, reciprocal and that generate a culture of possibility and hope. So, without more ado, please move around and look at the postcards. As soon as you see one that represents something about commons to you – take it – it's yours! – sit down again - write your ideas on it if you like and talk to people about what you chose and why. At 9.45 we will ask some of you to share your thoughts.

#### **9.45 DF: Any comments about what 'commons' can include? Any thoughts about how we can create and preserve spaces for them?**

This Cultural Ceilidh event is an example of commons created by RILA, UNESCO and Glasgow University. It is protected from and subverts the consumerist, individualistic culture of the UK and offers us a chance to focus on our responsibility to the human and non-human world, taking literally the construct of culture and growth.

## 9.50 AB

Thank you for your enthusiasm! The next activity is designed to move us beyond critique and despair about the damage we humans have done because of our belief in our supremacy and our greed to positive action.

Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book 'Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teaching of plants' says '*It is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy.*' (327)

**These more than 200 pumpkin seeds** come from two pumpkins on my allotment. Each one is a metaphor for life – unique and full of potential and in the right conditions will produce food by September or October later this year (and many more seeds). For them to realise their gifts they will need soil, water, light and protection managed through a relationship with you. You might have noticed pictures of the 6 young plants I grew 3 weeks ago to check the seeds are viable, and the small grey pumpkins from last year. White seeds are orange and brown are Crown Prince (grey). Please take at least 2 seeds and write on the paper provided (*use back of booklist*) how you could plant and care for them over the next 6 months. Where could they be planted? What access do you have to soil and water? Who might be able to help? Make your own pot from the paper – look for molehills. Could you use public space (guerrilla gardening) or plant in a 'bag for life' to take with you if you move? If you need support to find somewhere to grow them then please talk to people or raise your hand. We are confident that you can help each other to grow enough pumpkins to feed the whole of Glasgow.

**[Watch, wait, talk to people, welcome and manage the unexpected]**

**10.05 DF Ask people to share** what they discovered and/or how they will plant and care for their squash. Robin Wall Kimmerer again '*The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others...In reciprocity we fill our spirits as well as our bellies.*' (134)

## 10.10 AB Thanks for such great engagement and participation. Growing Community

...is not about simply providing services. A service may have a clear distinction between providers and givers, helpers and recipients. In contrast, creating commons leaves space for everyone to participate. We hope the exercise we've just performed with the seeds illustrates how that can work.

In our organisation called START that we described earlier, all the different activities operate according to the same values of creating commons, values that are fundamental to the strengths approach (*gesture to book – The Strengths Approach: How it changes lives, Bellinger and Ford, 2022*).

So everyone's gifts are respected and welcomed. This will involve managing unexpected offerings and ideas and finding space for them - as we did in the exercise with seeds. We never know what might be possible; our work is to hold the space.

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***(AB and DF alternate in giving these examples)***

1. **DF** By way of a small example, we ordered a cake for a recent celebration at START from a refugee who has set up her own business locally. At the last minute, however, another former refugee, who had gone to a lot of trouble without us knowing, arrived with a large cake. The original cake was quickly hidden in the freezer as a treat for another time and for us to honour both contributions.
2. **AB** The celebration was hosted by START's Cultural Kitchen which, as we have already described, is run fortnightly to provide hot food for on average 60 - 80 people. Many people and groups in the city support START. On one occasion the local Women's Institute (WI) wanted to provide the food. What they brought were traditional English party snacks such as sandwiches and cheese and pineapple 'hedgehogs'. These were welcomed and served alongside the more substantial rice, meat and potato dishes that attendees were used to and the WI groups' contribution was appreciated as an interesting cultural supplement.
3. **DF** Another refugee used the Cultural Kitchen to set up an informal Conversation Club while the food was being prepared each time. This ran to help women learn colloquial, conversational English from British students and volunteers - to say 'hi' rather than the more formal 'good morning' they were learning from their classes, for example, at no cost and with much laughter.
4. **AB** A few years ago, START secured funding to organise walks with members of the refugee community. These walks aim to show people who have been dispersed to the city from London, well over 200 miles away, how to access the beautiful coastline or national parks nearby. (When people first arrive, often they don't realise they are living so close to the sea). START plans and checks the routes which are risk-assessed. One of these walks was the subject of an episode of 'Ramblings' with presenter Clare Balding on BBC Radio 4. A shorter version of a much-loved walk was carefully chosen to fit the BBC schedule but on the day people ignored this and ran laughing down the hillside in the sunshine to enjoy the whole route - it became a pleasure for everyone.
5. **DF** START rents 2 allotments from the city - plots of land on which individuals can grow vegetables, fruit and flowers both for their own and the community's use. The allotments are invaluable in giving people space and creating commons. They attracted the interest of a well-known organisation in the south west, notably the Eden Project. But Eden wanted to focus on growing different varieties and increasing productivity, so this partnership was not sustained beyond the gift of a polytunnel! As student research confirmed subsequently, the primary objective of the allotments is to grow community, but the polytunnel has proved to be a useful shelter in which to drink tea.
6. **AB** A local theatre group support START by offering 'playback' theatre sessions. As many of you will know, Playback Theatre is an established technique of inviting stories

from participants and using dramatic techniques to play them back, checking how accurate the representation is and correcting it where needed. Initially, with actors who lacked experience of working with refugees, we were worried that the sessions might be culturally ill-informed and might even revisit traumatic experiences unintentionally. From the beginning, however, these playback sessions have been enjoyed and welcomed by the women who have attended them over many years now. We encourage you to read Lucy Holmyard's paper of her clinical psychology research with the group which identifies the concept of 'reciprocal growth' – divisions of helper and helped being dissolved as everyone learns together.

In conclusion and to reiterate: the way things are done or process is the core and not the outcome or product. This is what differentiates START in creating commons – a process rather than providing a service or product.

To grow together the process:

- uses resources that are readily available
- **DF** everyone contributes – creating commons doesn't ignore anyone or anything
- **AB** it doesn't limit people's aspirations
- **DF** it is self-generating and accumulative, increasing capacity for the future
- **AB** it is founded on the need to trust the people who are worked with and to listen to them and be brave enough to pursue the things that they themselves want to do.
- **DF** Creating commons can be seen as a political act to promote social justice

10.30 Thank you! Come and talk to us anytime through the Spring School. Book flyers here – all proceeds to START.

## Reading List

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