



The Envirolution Revolution: Raising Awareness of Climate Change Creatively Through Free and Accessible Community Engagement Festivals

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Highlights The use of Freirean praxis and pedagogy is a powerful lens to use in understanding, and advancing, impactful place-based climate action. Using non-judgemental and holistic approaches, free community festivals have the capacity to engage large sections of society and therefore have the potential to mobilise shifts towards societal change.

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Keywords Climate emergency · Community engagement · Environmental education · Festivals · Critical consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Envirolution is a Manchester-based volunteer-led cooperative which organises community engagement events concerning climate change. The group creates spaces where a praxis of learning and reflection can take place in a holistic, accessible and relevant way, aiming to engage those individuals who are not currently engaging with climate change as a subject. Using the teachings of Paulo Freire and the praxis model, Envirolution explores and develops creative ways to engage and empower people, utilising this reflexive process to inspire participants to take positive actions. At events Envirolution has organised or been involved with, the group has interacted with 189,400 attendees across the UK, involved 785 volunteers and provided a platform for 1142 educators, community organisations, performers and artists. At a local level, Envirolution aims to play a key role in helping Manchester City Council achieve goals set out in its Climate Change Action Plan 2020–2025, which includes supporting and influencing the city to reduce emissions by at least 50% by 2025. In a wider context, Envirolution aims to raise widespread awareness and engagement with the climate emergency and mobilise transitions towards a more sustainable future. Despite engaging significantly high numbers of participants since it began, the project's impact has only now been properly evaluated. Using data from a University of Manchester research

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team's project analysis, this chapter shows how effective this method of engagement can be and what can be learnt from the Envirolution project.

METHODOLOGY

To evaluate how effective Envirolution events have been over the past ten years, the project analysis took a multi-methods approach. This included a scoping literature review, analysis of quantitative data on attendance and participation from previous Envirolution events, and a targeted online questionnaire survey.

In the associated literature review, existing understandings of community engagement and climate change action related to the Envirolution model were consolidated to situate the research and provide context for the analysis. The quantitative data collected by Envirolution volunteers at previous events were analysed and trends were identified. A set of questionnaires were used to collect information on individuals' experiences of Envirolution events, and to understand and analyse the impact that engaging with Envirolution had on understanding of climate change and behavioural responses. A total of 40 questionnaires were obtained from: 15 general public attendees, 13 stallholders or workshop providers, 10 Envirolution volunteers and 2 workshop leaders or speakers. Responses were analysed thematically, drawing out key phrases and concepts.

THE ENVIROLUTION MODEL

Praxis is described by Paulo Freire as 'reflection and action upon the world to transform it' (Freire, 1996). Throughout his work as an educator, Freire stimulated praxis through informed action and critical pedagogy as a means to liberate powerless communities which he referred to broadly as the 'oppressed'. Reflective praxis motivates participants to become critical subjects, aware of their own contradictions (Freire, 1968). Freire suggests that the role of the educator is to help others in their own transformation, 'placing them in a consciously critical position before their problems' (Freire, 1968, p. 50). The aims of Envirolution are guided by Freire's work and events are created with the ethos and understanding that considered and careful reflection can lead to positive actions.

As Freire emphasised, 'the insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection – true reflection – leads to action' (Freire,

1996, p. 41). Praxis in this sense goes beyond activism in that it pursues actions that emerge from critical reflection. With this philosophy, Envirolution brings together individuals and organisations who ask themselves the same question: what can I possibly do about climate change? The events provide a platform to engage those who may have similar questions, or due to the incomprehensible scale of the problem, have not considered a response at all.

Envirolution primarily engages people from the local areas of Fallowfield, Rusholme, Longsight and Moss Side in Manchester, representing a multi-cultural demographic of various ages, backgrounds and circumstances. Well over half of the attendees are in the park on the day of the festival simply because it is their local green space, which then gives them the opportunity to access a free event. All attendees are introduced to facilitators who can provide opportunities for reflection on climate change, offering relevant and considered positive responses. This allows participants to choose and decide their actions through critical reflection, critical participation and collective action. Envirolution festivals aim to encourage this critical consciousness process in a free and non-judgemental environment, providing a space for praxis and exploration of possible ‘transformation of the world’ (Freire, 1996, p.106). Open free community spaces like these could prove crucial for exploration of the multi-level changes needed to avoid climate collapse, which depends on ‘the public’s willingness to accept, support, and actively engage’ with the required socio-economic, cultural, political and structural shifts (Geiger & Swim, 2016, p.79). The environmental festivals Envirolution volunteers organise work on the basis that ‘people’s individual issues lead to local projects; local projects link with others, elsewhere, to form networks and alliances; those alliances lead to movements that provide a real collective possibility for change’ (Ledwith, 2007, p. 609).

The Envirolution model also acknowledges how crucial emotional responses are to understanding people’s perceptions or levels of engagement with the climate emergency. Climate change educator and researcher Blanche Verlie identified ‘anxiety, frustration, feeling overwhelmed, guilt and grief’ as natural responses to such an unprecedented global phenomenon as climate change (Verlie, 2019, p. 751). Engaging people about impending global social and ecological destruction by highlighting the growing consensus that ‘climate change is the result of human lifestyle and behaviour’ (Roeser, 2012) can ignite many emotional

responses, not all of them productive. By concentrating on effective adaptation, ‘hope’ or ‘positive engagement’ can also be created through the forming of participatory groups (Verlie, 2019 p.751). Critical consciousness, in this sense, helps participants see the world and their place within it, acknowledging their emotional responses as a crucial element in the process of praxis and enabling progressive steps forward.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Engagement with Envirolution events has steadily increased over the past 10 years. At the inaugural Envirolution festival in 2010, there were 400 attendees, 52 activity providers and 22 volunteers. This increased to 5000 attendees, 89 activity providers and 52 volunteers in 2019. Those that engage with Envirolution events consider them to successfully create ‘a fun and friendly environment’ with educational and awareness activities that inspire them to ‘make positive changes for a sustainable future’ (Envirolution, 2021). When focusing on the impact that Envirolution has had on individuals that engage with the organisation, 4 key areas of impact were identified through analysis of the survey undertaken by the 40 participants.

LEARNING AND AWARENESS

Positive impacts only happen when people change their attitudes. (Volunteer 1)

Questionnaire responses found Envirolution to be ‘educational’, ‘informative’ and ‘inspiring’. Envirolution events aim to try to appeal to as many people as possible, so the solar-powered music stages play a range of world music and act as a hook to attract people from all cultures, ages and backgrounds. Once at the event, attendees can learn something new and see what they can get involved with locally. Attendees can listen to ‘inspirational speakers’ (Attendee 1) or ‘immerse themselves in environmental activities’ (Stallholder 7). The research also found that a considerable number of participants shared what they learnt with others (54% of attendees and 84% of volunteers).

If these kinds of events happened in parks around the country, I believe the population would be a lot more active in responding to the climate emergency. (Volunteer 4)

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Even small changes can have a significant impact. (Attendee 1)

83% of stallholders who participated in the research believe that their activities support positive changes in people's daily activities and behaviours. 90% of volunteers and 69% of visitors state that engaging with Envirolution made them more environmentally conscious, leading them to make changes to their daily activities. 5 of the 40 respondents confirmed that thanks to Envirolution, they have become climate change activists who actively campaign and engage with community groups, regularly sharing their knowledge with others.

The groundswell of support from the population, especially a younger generation fighting for their future, gives hope. (Stallholder 7)

COLLABORATION

Knowing I'm not the only one with this feeling. (Volunteer 1)

After Envirolution, many attendees have collaborated on environmental projects and learnt about other groups they can get involved with. Also, taking part in Envirolution events has boosted participants' confidence, enabling them 'to volunteer for environmental protection groups' (Volunteer 3). Inference from research responses demonstrates that Envirolution holds great potential for collaboration between multiple organisations and groups. This sharing of learning with others is inherent to the reflexivity and action with Freire's articulation of praxis. Effectively engaging large numbers of people in this manner can be of great value for local councils or national governments as part of action plans towards climate change mitigation and resilience strategies. So why are similar events not happening all over the UK? Or indeed the world? 'I don't know of another grassroots organisation like Envirolution. I would love to

see initiatives like this in other cities and towns across the UK' (Stallholder 1). As a volunteer-led organisation, Envirolution organisers only have so much capacity and putting on large engagement events provides the team with plenty to do already. But this raises interesting questions about how this method of engagement could be improved or expanded in collaboration with strategic stakeholders and policymakers.

We are no longer individual persons, each struggling alone to survive the whims of nature. Increasingly, we share the same fate. (Stallholder 12)

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

I fear it is too little too late for this world... I hope the majority realise we have to act fast and not leave the responsibility to a select few, it's everyone's problem! (Volunteer 9)

80% of attendees surveyed stated that Envirolution 'heightens awareness of environmental issues and promotes community spirit'. Of the stallholders surveyed, 75% said they were able to engage with a wider audience by participating in Envirolution. However, as stated the capacity of volunteer-led groups like Envirolution to be able to engage more people is limited. Project volunteers acknowledge the need to engage more participants from local religious centres, schools and other community groups in the lead up to events. With more support from local councils and other stakeholders increasing capacity, significantly greater levels of impact with a wider audience could be achieved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My fears are that we are too late to repair a lot of the damage our way of life has caused to our home world, and that history will not look kindly on this time. My hopes are that enough people respond to this emergency before much more damage can be done, and this results in us creating a more balanced and fairer society for all which values the natural world. (Volunteer 4)

The research of these methods of public engagement shows the abundant potential they hold in creating greater awareness of climate change and

a ‘growing understanding that social and environmental issues are interconnected and require a whole society approach’ (Head, 2005). Groups like Envirolution can undoubtedly help this transformational learning process. The effective evaluation of the project was both timely and crucial for better understanding of why people engage with Envirolution, and therefore climate change, identifying motives and perceptions that can inform other approaches to climate change education and engagement. This research certainly shows Envirolution and similar events can act as gateways for people to try and make sense of the climate emergency that is upon us and find a proactive way of responding. Project volunteers hope that by engaging individuals to become part of other groups and organisations, participants can begin to understand the necessity of collaborative responses and the valuable roles they can play as part of a global movement at a local level.

However, as can happen all too often in climate change education, collective action for change is not followed through to its greatest potential, and practice remains contextualised in the immediate, local and specific without making critical connections with the structural roots of what Freire would call the ‘oppression’, from which inequalities emanate. This can result in a fixation on symptoms, leaving the root causes free to perpetuate oppressions. ‘We debate responsibilities over rights, as the responsibility for an unjust system is turned upon the victims of that injustice and the radical discourse of social justice is subtly absorbed and distorted into a rhetoric of self-help’ (Ledwith, 2007). This can be seen in government carbon reduction campaigns across the world, focused on directing the population to reduce their personal carbon footprint whilst still buying into the global market and only being given mainstream retail, food and transport options that remain heavily carbon intensive.

We need to situate our local practices within the bigger political picture to identify the way that structural oppressions get acted out in local contexts. A participatory process, one based on true democracy, aims to give autonomy and power to the voices of subordinated groups, accepting that there are many truths, rather than one universal truth or answer. As poorer countries in the Global South hold the least responsibility for accelerating climate change but already experience the worst consequences, this aim is now more important than ever. Freirean praxis informed approaches can elevate the diversity of human experience over the imperative of economic ‘progress’, locating social and environmental justice at its heart, whilst mobilising collective action for social change

as its outcome. By combining praxis and critical consciousness focused social movements like Envirolution with wider political climate change mitigation and adaption targets, it becomes possible to create combined and informed responses to the climate emergency, which can be communicated and facilitated with large groups of the population. The urgency represented by possible socio-ecological collapse calls for more informed and combined responses between individuals and groups at all levels of society, promoting critical consciousness, and a culture of praxis and reflection towards positive action.

The evaluation report findings and more information about Envirolution can be found on the website at: www.envirolution.org.uk.

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