

Slow colour, community and well-being

Claire Wellesley-Smith, Online Guild



Left: Springtime at the allotment (woad in full flower in the foreground)

Above: Madder seedlings growing in the allotment greenhouse

Below: Dressed tree at the allotment
Photos: Claire Wellesley-Smith

Research has shown that contact with green spaces can improve psychological health and mental well-being. For the past three years I have been co-ordinating a project called *Out There*, based in and around Bradford in West Yorkshire. Working with community mental health organisations and the NHS, the project *Out There* has engaged adults who have had experience of mental health distress. The project aims, through creative activity and connections with the local environment, to enhance the well-being of participants and to reduce the stigma associated with mental health distress.

Out There has focused on the growing of plants for natural dye and a highlight of the project to date has been activity connected to a community allotment space. This is shared with HALE, a local health engagement charity, and is used by a number of groups of all ages. I devised a programme of activities around the creation of a dye-plant bed at the allotment, with the idea of growing traditional dye plants from seed, processing them and then using the dyed fibres produced in collaborative group textile projects. Although my own textile work had been rooted in sustainable practices, specifically in projects involving creative reuse of materials, my experience of natural dyeing had been mainly that of using pre-reduced indigo, dyeing with rust, and a very inspiring workshop

I attended given by *The Mulberry Dyer*. I needed to begin a sharp learning curve, mostly accomplished through reading, trial and error, and also through the blogging community where I found much support and advice.

We have grown Japanese indigo, madder, woad, weld, sweet woodruff, onions, bronze fennel and french marigolds. The latter three choices were made as I liked the links that could be made between common domestic garden or culinary plants and natural colour – they gave participants the idea that plants do not need to be ‘special’ to make beautiful colours. A weekly walk up to the plot, some gentle horticultural activity, and a chat in the open air, has proved to be a simple but very effective format through all but the worst winter weather. A comfortable shed (sofa included) and a camping stove for cups of tea has often been a good incentive on dreary days. The project has quickly developed as a firmly seasonal activity, something that in an urban environment can be difficult to achieve. Open air workshops were run in better weather using the plants on site. A gentle reminder of the seasons and natural processes can really enhance well-being. Abigail Doan, a US-based environmental artist, writes, ‘I believe that people are currently drawn to [craft activities] as they allow one to feel environmentally grounded and connected



to a place, despite all of the uncertainty that presently surrounds us. Understanding the start-to-finish process of any craft-based activity mirrors life cycles and the rhythms of nature.¹ Feedback from participants echoes this view, ‘It was great to find local walks I didn’t know about and a chance to work on an allotment seeing changes through the seasons. This project gave me the chance to experiment and play with



Washing line outside the studios

Below: Colour wall of fibres dyed in Hive workshops exhibited at Saltaire Arts Trail in 2011

materials, colours and techniques while working in a helpful and easy atmosphere.'

Using locally produced colour, being involved in the cultivation of the plants, and seeing the whole process from the ground up has made some very positive connections for everyone involved. The harmonious colours produced in the dye baths were commented on again and again. There is real alchemy involved when a scrap of silk dipped in a red onion skin dye bath, saddened with a little iron, becomes a beautiful olive green. A day spent processing our Japanese indigo is looked back on with great affection by a group who ran with the freshly harvested leaves (which lose their potency quickly after picking) back to the studio to create the glorious turquoise shades on wool and silk that come with this particular processing technique. Using locally produced plants in the dye baths has given participants a greater connection to the materials used and a greater appreciation of their local environment.

Working with materials and fibres dyed in these sessions has had its own benefits. In her book, Beverley Gordon comments on the universality of textiles: 'To be human is to be involved in cloth.'² Using slow, hand-built processes, such as stitching, piecing, knitting, weaving can strengthen links within groups using those techniques. Some participants were familiar with using mindfulness training as part of their therapeutic routine, and made some interesting connections between this and slow stitch-based activity. The repetitive nature of handwork, the pleasure found in handling



and choosing natural coloured fibres and fabrics, and the concentration required for this hands-on, slow process, have also proved to be a good distraction technique. Discussions were had about the difficulties we sometimes face in adjusting to a slower pace of working, but how rewarding it often is for our mental health when we do.

A new project is to begin shortly, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This will use process-driven activities to explore the rich textile heritage of Bradford, with a specific interest in pre-industrial activity and how this can inform contemporary concerns around sustainability and textiles. It will work with a wide variety of groups and organisations within the Bradford community, including the Society of Dyers and Colourists, Bradford Museums and Galleries and local environmental projects. Young and older people, families, and adults with experience of mental health distress will be engaged in projects over the next two years. Work on a new community dye garden, a patch of council



Above: Participants labelled samples

owned waste ground, has already begun. This will hopefully offer new opportunities to use local colour and traditional techniques to improve community connections, beginning new relationships for participants with a slow, sustainable, creative process.

¹ DuFault, Amy (2011) Using Your Hands to Soothe the Brain: Part 1

<http://tinyurl.com/AD-hands-brain>

² Gordon, Beverly (2011) Textiles: The Whole Story – Uses. Meanings. Significance, London: Thames & Hudson

Out There is delivered by Hive, a community arts organisation and charity that has worked

for 30 years supporting marginalised communities, It uses creativity and the arts to engage and develop individual potential. Out There has been funded by an Ecominds grant, through the charity Mind as a partner of BIG Lottery Fund. The project works in local green spaces using creative activity to enhance the well-being of participants, making connections with the local environment, and aims to reduce the stigma of mental health distress

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See also <http://www.hivebradford.org.uk> and <http://www.haleproject.org.uk>