

# Are learners empowered to shape a sustainable future?



## Empowerment – Why and How?

What kind of future do you envision? What are the competences that a learner of the present should master in order to be able to shape a sustainable future? As an educator, how can you support your students in such a way that they will be able to find their own answers? Asking these questions is about empowerment. But why and how?

In our understanding, empowerment is the approach and practice of supporting learners to become able to shape a sustainable future.

Empowerment indicates a growth process, both for an individual or a group. This process is based on increasing self-esteem, of self-efficacy and self-determination: individuals can fully utilise and take ownership of their potential. This process leads to a reversal of their perception of their own limits in view of achieving results beyond their expectations.

In order to activate this process it is necessary to focus on desire for change and improvement rather than on shortcomings. In this way a growth process can be triggered for developing new competences for sustainability.

It is a question for debate how we choose the actor and the focus of empowerment. Do we set our eyes on the educator as the actor who empowers learners or should we rather choose the learner and the learning process to be the centre of our approach to empowerment - as a self-directed learner. Frymier et al (1996) say: *“The realisation that empowerment is a state leads us to distinction between “empowered” and “empowering”. Being empowered refers to an internal condition that an individual experiences, similar to experiencing state motivation or state anxiety. “Empowering” refers to the actions a person takes that can create an environment that helps others to feel empowered.”*

That means that the educator acts as a facilitator giving support to the learners - the learners having the real world experiences.

To become empowered to shape a sustainable future is a truly practical experience. Get your students to experience the 'real world' around them with the joy of learning in a self-directed way - strengthen their intrinsic motivation to care about the world they live in.

Behind these empowering experiences stands the term 'competences' – taken as being *“the skills, knowledge and understanding, qualities and attributes, sets of values beliefs and attitudes which lead to effective performance in a given context, situation or role”*(Woodall and Winstanley 1998).

In our model we choose to use the term empowerment instead of competences, because we wish to emphasise the importance of a holistic and practical approach that embraces the complexity of

learning for sustainability. It goes beyond acquiring competences when it gives the responsibility of the learning and evaluation to the learners, while keeping the responsibility of empowering with the facilitator. It encompasses all the competence items in a holistic approach, strongly connected to self-transcendence values.

Empowerment and the competences that are to be developed and strengthened are strongly connected to values - as the actions we take are guided and shaped by our values and vice versa. There are also connections to the other '*fingers*' of the model. For example, the competences are employed in all areas of life – therefore it is important (for a holistic approach) to encourage open-mindedness and diversity of views around the issues the learners deal with, to get empowered for sustainability (transferability-finger).

### **How can this be integrated in a learning environment, into teaching?**

Empowering learning experiences can occur in any number of ways. Here, we want to emphasise that it is important as an educator to have an open mind and to be conscious of using to their full potential those opportunities for empowerment which may arise through both planned and incidental learning experiences.

One very powerful learning method to empowerment which has already been mentioned is self-directed learning. We do not wish to overemphasise this particular path to empowerment above the many others, however, we would like to introduce and explore it a little further here.

Self-directed learning refers to learning where the responsibility for the initiative, process and outcomes of learning stays with the learner. However this doesn't mean that the learner is alone. It should be a carefully planned, well defined and structured way of learning with sufficient support from the facilitator, but only when it is needed and agreed upon by the actors of the learning. The scope of the self-directed learning may differ according to different age groups starting from small scale learning sessions to longer and eventually life-long learning.

The reason why we think that this learning method is a very powerful tool to empowerment is that this way of learning encompasses all of the Empowerment '*ripples*' i.e. responsibility, inner motivation, critical thinking, autonomous decision-making, managing feelings, flexibility, taking positive actions and being aware of interconnectedness. All these elements are necessary in self-directed learning with the additional benefit - and that's why it is an item itself among the others - of the act of reflection on and evaluation of one's own learning.

To help with the application of empowerment in practice, as a planning and reflective mechanism, we want to ask some questions that can help stimulate this process. They can be seen as triggers and definitely are not meant to be a finite check-list.

→ Does the learning experience allow for elements such as interaction / reflection / communication / exchange / recognition of emotions?

- Is self-directed learning possible / are learners self-directed?
- Which competences are promoted?

## Competences in learning: A practical example

Let us imagine an example of how some of the competences in our list are included in learning experiences that can be empowering to shape a sustainable future. For example we would like to refer to one of the case studies that can be found connected to the model which is a learning session that we believe is easy to understand, might be familiar to the reader and comprehensively represents the different aspects of the model.

### *Title: School farming<sup>1</sup>*



#### *Short description:*

The school farming programme is a week-long programme for school classes on an organic farm. The students become farmers themselves and are responsible for their peer group, and the animals and plants on the farm. They discover strong connections to their own life through the practical work.

The main aim is to develop competences and that the children feel themselves as capable to act and experience openness. The feeling “I can do that too! And it’s not so hard!” is very important for the children – as much as the emotion to be truly responsible for something or someone.

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<sup>1</sup> The following introduction is based on the text written by the German RWL team and can be found in the Case study section.

### *Which competences are developed that empower learners to shape a sustainable future?*

The competences listed below are taken from the Case Study text, outlining how the empowerment 'ripples' from the hand model are reflected in the learning outcomes of the School Farm programme.

*Critical thinking: enable learners to be reflective, critical thinkers - considering different perspectives to reach informed opinions and decisions.*

Students will be able to identify connections and relationships (they will determine and report links and relationships between phenomena, events and concepts of different disciplines. They will understand the systemic nature of farming, identifying similarities and differences, consistencies and inconsistencies, causes and effects).

*The future begins today: empower learners to be creative, flexible and able to take positive actions to deal with change.*

Students will be able to use their sustainability-linked skills and knowledge in everyday situations.

*You & Me & All the World around us: enable learners to become conscious of interconnectedness - you, me and the world around us.*

Students will be able to recognize their relationship to nature. Having nature experiences of different kinds will encourage them to reflect on their relationship to nature.

To read the entire case study, please, follow this link: [School farming](#)  
Other case studies relating to empowerment are available [here](#).

### **Competences in Real World Learning**

Under the 'ripples' you can find a list of competences that support the empowerment for shaping a sustainable future. Each ripple has a short explanation to help give it a context. During this project outdoor learning partners from six countries worked together to draft this list. They analysed existing lists of competences, interviewed experts and consulted outdoor learning professionals. We would like to emphasise that the resulting list of competences is only an offering, a starting point for discussion and thinking together. This arrangement of the competences forms a system of thinking and analysis, but should never be considered as written in stone. You may wish to be selective in your use of the list, to rearrange the items, or to edit the content; please do so; thus helping make the system of empowerment truly authentic.

### References - used in this text:

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