



Welly Walks

Cultivating new narratives around the British weather

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Background

Welly Walks is a case study from Alice Stevens' practice-based PhD. This is an ongoing creative research project aimed at fostering engagement with alternative narratives about the British weather. This research addresses the challenge posed by dominant narratives surrounding the British weather, which often prevent individuals from forging deeper connections with the natural world. For instance, the consistent portrayal of rainfall in media as a negative occurrence fosters a disconnection from the vital role of water in sustaining all forms of life. Such disconnections may inadvertently promote behaviour that is detrimental to the environment. The main objective of this research is to develop a nuanced comprehension of weather as a conduit to nature and to explore how principles derived from ecolinguistics can be integrated into communication design practices to cultivate alternative narratives and conversations about British weather. This approach aims to foster reconciliation between the human and the natural world, thereby promoting environmental stewardship and enhancing overall wellbeing.

Welly Walks

Welly Walks offer participants the opportunity to wear a pair of wellies that play eco-poetry and music that relates to the prevailing weather condition. The project was showcased by Activate Performing Arts at the biennial outdoor arts festival, *Inside Out Dorset*, from 20-24 September 2023. The festival celebrates the beauty of Dorset's natural landscape whilst also enhancing its rich artistic scene. *Welly Walks* was presented at Wild Woodbury, a community rewilding site in Bere Regis, managed by Dorset Wildlife Trust.

Participants were invited to wear the wellies and immerse themselves in an experiential journey that aimed to provoke new thoughts about the British weather and foster a deeper connection with the natural world. By combining wearable technology and eco-poetry, *Welly Walks* invited participants to explore and re-think their relationship with the weather. The wellies are equipped with an environmental barometric pressure sensor that can detect changes in atmospheric pressure. Depending on the predicted weather, a pre-recorded track is triggered and plays a specific poem, music track or folk song that relates to the predicted weather category. The wellies also contain a Raspberry Pi Pico, which is a microcontroller board that can receive input from a range of electronic devices, along with a large LiPo battery, audio amplifier and a speaker. The intention of the project is to provoke conversations about the British weather and encourage people to go out and have positive experiences in all weather.



ADOPTION JOURNEY

Stakeholder engagement was crucial to *Welly Walks'* adoption journey and involved several organisations and individuals. Early in the project a collaboration with Mark Benson, Creative Technologist, was developed. Benson spearheaded the development of the technology embedded within the wellies and ensured alignment with project intentions. Continuous involvement enabled iterative refinement of the prototypes and for adjustments to be made to the final versions on site.

Another integral collaboration was with Kate Wood and Bill Gee, Co-Artistic Directors of *Inside Out Dorset*, and Dom Kippin, Outdoor Arts and Festival producer. These stakeholders enabled *Welly Walks* to be included in the *Inside Out Dorset* festival which was held at Dorset Wildlife Trust site, Wild Woodbury in 2023. Collaboration with the festival organisers provided valuable

insights to ensure alignment with the festival theme and audience, but also extended project engagement through marketing and advertising. In addition, through the provision of specific site amenities, the audience experience was enhanced, enabling successful capturing of qualitative research data in adverse weather conditions.

Conversations with Dorset Wildlife Trust staff, including Rob Farrington, Wilder Dorset Project Manager, and Seb Haggett, Wilder Dorset Community Ranger, were a catalyst in gaining a deeper appreciation of natural processes and the restoration project aims at Wild Woodbury. Insights from these conversations also inspired the eco-poetry themes for *Welly Walks*.

Additional collaboration and creative contributions came from storyteller and poet, Zakiya McKenzie, and Creative Writing graduate, Ben Whittall. Composer, Laura Reid, enriched the project through her musical contribution and the interweaving of the spoken word. Each strand of poetry ended with by a song by renowned folk singer, Kate Rusby. Their collective efforts helped deepen audience immersion and engagement.

Financial considerations played a core role in *Welly Walks'* adoption journey. Initial seed funding from Arts University Bournemouth (AUB) supported early prototype development, laying the foundation for project scope and viability. Further funding came through AUB's Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), which enabled the realisation of *Welly Walks* with participants in the festival context. In addition, Inside Out Dorset was funded and supported by Arts Council England, Dorset Council, Dorset AONB, Dorset Wildlife Trust, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Talbot Village Trust and specific funders for particular art works, such as AUB for the *Welly Walks* research project.

Clear communication ensured project execution and regular meetings with festival directors and collaborators facilitated decision-making, and addressed concerns regarding technical feasibility, health and safety, project language and the weather. Stakeholder discussions also addressed budget implications for technical development and participant engagement strategies. *Welly Walks'* adoption journey shows the importance of a collaborative approach, where stakeholder engagement and creative partnerships merge to maximise project engagement and impact.



How has it scaled and what were the enablers?

A culture of collaboration, shared values and purpose has enabled the scaling of the *Welly Walks* project.

Collaboration with stakeholders, Dorset Wildlife Trust and Activate Performing Arts, facilitated inclusion at *Inside Out Dorset* festival, and provided a platform for showcasing *Welly Walks* to a diverse audience. These partnerships also extended the project's reach and facilitated access to resources, expertise and promotional opportunities, enabling *Welly Walks* to engage with larger audiences and communities.

Aligning with national priorities related to the environment, wellbeing and creative technology, gave access to funding via Arts University Bournemouth grants. This funding supported the initial prototype but also enabled further technical development and for multiple units to be produced. This expansion facilitated participant engagement initiatives at the festival which otherwise would not have been possible.



What is the Innovation?

The innovation in the *Welly Walks* project lies in its integration of the principles of ecolinguistics, wearable technology, eco-poetry, and music to foster engagement with alternative narratives about British weather. Through utilising wellies equipped with sensors and audio capabilities, participants embark on an experiential journey that aims to challenge conventional perceptions of British weather and deepen connection with the natural world.

The innovation emerged through Alice Stevens' practice-based PhD research, which seeks to address the disconnection between individuals and the natural world perpetuated by dominant narratives surrounding the British weather. By drawing on principles derived from ecolinguistics and communication design practices, Stevens identifies the potential for cultivating alternative narratives about British weather.

Welly Walks aims to enhance environmental awareness and encourage participants to reconsider their relationship with British weather and the natural world. The integration of wearable tech and poetry offers a unique platform for community engagement and promotes

positive wellbeing by encouraging individuals to embrace all weather conditions and appreciate the natural world.

The effectiveness of *Welly Walks* as a conduit for new conversations about British weather, is supported by qualitative analysis obtained from participants feedback at the *Inside Out Dorset* festival in September 2023.

Quotes

- Kate Wood and Bill Gee

Co-artistic Directors of Inside Out Dorset

'The inclusion of Welly Walks in our festival, brings a richness and invaluable quality to the aim with our land steward partners to explore human's deep connection to landscape and nature. Embedding artistic practice into academic research enabled the audience experience to be really enjoyable and the deployment of new technology was also fascinating for both adults and children – rather magical.'

- Kate Wood

Co-Artistic Director of Inside Out Dorset

'The Welly Walks project proved a novel and interesting method of engaging new audiences to Wild Woodbury, and helped them to connect with the changing landscape at England's first community rewilding project. Poets and writers have long tapped into the wild and abundant source of inspiration that the natural world gives. Just like poetry, nature can provoke a sense of emotion for anyone immersed in it, a feeling that not only deepens our connection to the surrounding landscape but engages us with the world around us; the sound of birdsong, the colours of flowers, the movement of water. The transformative journey that rewilding provides to a landscape, coupled with the Welly Walks project, can encourage a shift in perspective and a new appreciation of the site. A combination that can widen access to, deepen knowledge of, and increase appreciation of the natural world that can be found on the doorstep of many people.'

- Seb Elwood (née Haggett)

Wilder Dorset Ranger, Dorset Wildlife Trust

'Inside Out Dorset 2023 welcomed 33,000 visitors across the five festival sites at Moors Valley Country Park and Forest, Poole, Wimborne, Bere Regis, and Weymouth. We are delighted with this year's festival. Despite some wet and windy weather, alongside some

mid-September sunshine, thousands of people visited our five remarkable festival locations and saw the Dorset landscape in a different light – brought to life by spectacular art. It was fantastic to see a range of people discovering something new about the place they live or as visitors to the area. Bringing a diverse mix of UK and international artists and their unique work to Dorset feels really special.'



Key Challenges and Learning

Throughout the project, key technological challenges and considerations emerged that shaped the development of the *Welly Walks* project:

- The decision to design the wellies without reliance on WiFi posed a significant challenge, particularly in a remote field context with very limited WiFi coverage. While WiFi could have provided accurate weather data for triggering specific poems, it risked compromising the “magical” experience of the wellies predicting weather and speaking eco-poetry to participants. Balancing technical functionality with the desired magical experience became a focal point of the early development phase, and highlighted the importance of maintaining the truth in the project and the physical experience.
- Another technical limitation arose from the wellies' inability to sense other pairs of wellies in close proximity. This would have resulted in audio tracks overlapping and creating a muddle of sound and poetry. Mitigating this challenge required re-thinking how to stage *Welly Walks*, and emphasized the importance of how to manage audience numbers and engagement strategies in a festival context.
- The reliance on a small environmental barometric pressure sensor in the wellies to predict the weather in triggering audio tracks introduced challenges related to the accuracy of the

Beyond the technological challenges, several other issues were encountered during the process and realisation of the project:

- Initially the *Welly Walks* concept was to celebrate joyful moments in the rain, and only trigger poems during times of rainfall. The unpredictability of British weather posed a potential barrier to engagement, particularly during an outdoor arts festival where rainfall is not guaranteed, or if there is rainfall, it might prevent people from attending. To address this, the project was adapted to accommodate any weather condition with the aim of engaging participants in weather conversations.
- Collaborating with diverse stakeholders, such as the festival organisers, presented challenges in aligning priorities and managing expectations. Balancing creative vision with technical constraints required clear and honest communication so that all stakeholders knew what to expect from the *Welly Walks* project.
- Whilst four key strands of eco-poetry were written to respond to different predicted weather categories, the poems were not tailored to specific users. This meant that among younger participants, the overall

prediction. Variations between the predicted and actual weather conditions weren't always accurate, and in future it will be important to explore other methods of weather prediction for greater accuracy.

- During the festival, issues relating to volume control emerged that limited some participants engagement in the experience. This highlighted the need for participants to be able to adjust the volume levels in the wellies based on their individual preference, hearing ability, and any environmental noise such as the wind. Although the volume had been tested in various outdoor contexts prior to the festival, it was evident that the tech needed to be more user-friendly and adaptable for outdoor use.

In navigating these technical challenges, valuable insights were gained into the intricacies of implementing wearable technology for outdoor weather experiences. Whilst some insights were integrated prior to the festival and provided opportunities for innovation and refinement, other insights will be used to inform any future iterations of the project. This would include further technical refinement and exploration of alternative methods for weather prediction, and appealing to diverse audiences.

meaningfulness of the experience was diminished. While some children appreciated and even memorised particular lines, some found the poems overly long. Gathering feedback identified areas for improvement, highlighting the need for tailored experiences catering to diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities in future iterations.

- Another challenge in the project emerged from a shift in research focus regarding what was being assessed. Initially the research aimed to prove behaviour change. However, given the festival context and temporary nature of the experience, it became more relevant to identify nuanced shifts in participant attitudes and perceptions. As such, the research pivoted towards qualitative data collection to gauge the effectiveness of *Welly Walks*.

By addressing some of these challenges, Welly Walks evolved into a multifaceted project that fostered meaningful engagement with the natural world. These insights can inform the development of future projects in response to environmental challenges.



What was the Impact?

Qualitative data collected from fifty-seven participants at the *Inside Out Dorset* festival provided valuable insights into the impact of the *Welly Walks* project. Analysis revealed several key themes including positive engagement with nature; nature as social connector; re-imagining the weather narrative; aesthetic appreciation and curiosity; language and communication; embodied engagement with nature; and positive emotions and relationships.

Participants expressed a positive re-imagining of narratives surrounding British weather through the *Welly Walks* experience, citing enjoyment, novelty, and social connection, and indicating increased environmental awareness, emotional connection, and social cohesion.

Participants' use of language revealed their embodied experiences with the British weather during the *Welly Walks* activity. Phrases like "feeling more in touch with what was going on outside" and "encouraged to go out and experience the weather" highlighted the role of interactive experiences in fostering positive embodied relationships with the environment.

These findings highlight the transformative potential of interactive experiences in reshaping environmental narratives, fostering positive relationships with nature, and promoting environmental awareness and stewardship. Incorporating the principles of ecolinguistics into communication design practice can enhance environmental engagement and emotional connection, ultimately inspiring individuals to connect with, and care for, the natural world.

The qualitative data suggests that *Welly Walks* positively impacted participants' wellbeing by encouraging them to slow down, notice their surroundings, and connect with nature. The project's ability to promote a connection to nature suggests long-term sustainability potential.



Next steps

Building on the insights gained from the Welly Walks project, the next step will focus on deepening our understanding of participant experiences through the lens of ecolinguistics and thematic analysis. In addition, we will be seeking additional funding to develop the user-friendliness of the technology to enable participants to operate the device independently and adjust the volume setting to suit their personal needs and preferences.

In addition, community engagement will be a key focus. We aim to collaborate closely with local health and wellness organisations to promote accessibility and inclusivity within the *Welly Walks* project. By working with these organisations, we will expand the range of eco-poems presented, ensuring they resonate with a diverse audience. This collaborative approach will enhance the *Welly Walks* experience and develop community connections.



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