

The Dynamic Between *Humans and Goats*

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This article arises from my research project undertaken as part of the *Growing Land, Growing People* course. The research explored the implications of cultivating the land biodynamically and nourishing it as a living organism, in relation to human wellbeing and conscious self-development.



My specific focus was to examine the dynamic relationship between humans and goats, and to consider how this relationship may influence communication, self-understanding and personal development in the young people we work with. While there is well-established evidence demonstrating how biodynamic methods benefit the Earth, my role as an educator has led me to explore more deeply how the relationship between people and land – and between people and animals – can support individual growth.

In narrowing my focus to goats, I was guided by an observation developed over time: that this particular animal-human relationship holds a unique potential to support communication and connection, especially for students who experience significant challenges in this area.

My research drew upon interviews, ongoing conversations, and my own sustained daily observations, focusing particularly on students for whom communication is experienced as difficult or overwhelming. The project explored whether regular, meaningful work with goats could positively influence communication, learning and broader personal development. These observations were gathered over nearly three years, allowing for a deepened and evolving understanding within the unique context of the biodynamic farm environment at Coleg Plas Dwbl.

Learning through relationship on the biodynamic farm

As an educator immersed in the biodynamic farm setting, I have been in the privileged position of giving time and close attention to the relationships that unfold between humans and animals. Through daily engagement with the animals – learning their behaviour, rhythms and individual characteristics – I have been able to observe how these relationships influence the students working alongside and with them.

Developing a conscious relationship with the animals myself is essential. It forms the foundation for providing appropriate care and for creating an environment that can support learning and transformation. The quality of relationship held by the educator shapes the space in which others can learn.

To deepen my understanding of the students, I also drew upon secondary sources such as individual histories and documentation. This background knowledge informed and supported thoughtful preparation for each student's work on the farm. However, the heart of the research remained rooted in direct, lived experience: observing the students in

front of me, responding to their needs, and guiding them into relationship with the land and animals through biodynamic practice. Life will always be the primary teacher.

My teaching experience consistently affirms the value of experiential learning. Active, physical learning allows knowledge to be integrated through doing, feeling and reflection, rather than remaining abstract or external. In contrast, passive learning environments appear to limit a learner's capacity to engage in their own processes of self-creation.

The biodynamic farm offers a uniquely supportive environment for immersive learning. It is a living system shaped by the interaction of spirit at rest in mineral, digestive system as soil, life forces in plants, centered, integrated animals, intentional humans and cosmic forces. To work within such an environment – where learning is held within relationship – is a privilege.

ASD, communication and animals

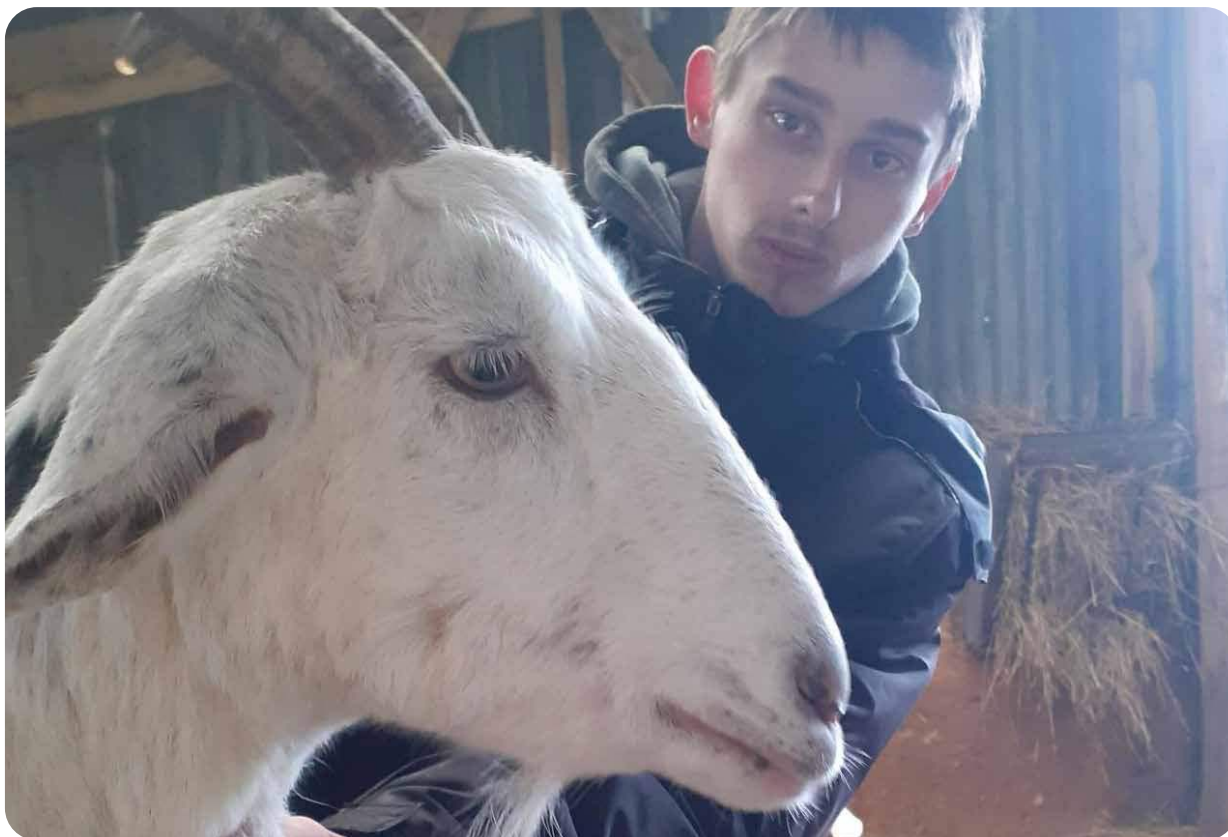
Many of the young people we work with have received a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD can affect communication in a wide range of ways, including differences in speech and language development, reliance on physical or non-verbal cues, and challenges in interpreting social signals.

Difficulties with social communication are common, including reading body language, eye connection challenges, interpreting facial expressions and navigating conversational exchange. Some individuals experience echolalia, repeating words or phrases without fully grasping their contextual meaning. Others may understand language very literally, finding idioms, humour or sarcasm confusing. These differences can make social interaction exhausting or alienating, even where there is a strong desire to connect.

Understanding and honouring this diversity is essential when supporting students. Each learner requires an approach shaped around their individual strengths, sensitivities and ways of perceiving the world.

In a similar way, each animal on the farm brings its own character and energy, calling forth different skills from those working with them. As educators and farmers, it is our task to create the right conditions and introduce the right opportunities so that meaningful learning can take place.

When a student is introduced to an animal, another level of communication enters the space. The student is already in dialogue with the environment; the presence of the animal adds a responsive partner to that exchange. While cattle, sheep and hens each support distinct forms of learning, this



Constantin encountering a goat

research focuses on goats, whose relational qualities consistently evoke something particular in the students. Through my work with other animals, I have also witnessed powerful transformations, which I have explored but focusing here on goats.

Constantin's journey with the goats

With his permission, I would like to share the experience of one student, Constantin, and his journey on the farm at Coleg Plas Dwbl. Constantin was with us for two years, and during that time his presence had a profound impact on the farm – and the farm upon him.

When I first met Constantin, he had been sitting alone on a bench in the college grounds for several days. Anyone who approached him was met with hostility. He came from a turbulent background, marked by early trauma and experiences of abandonment, followed by an adoption far from his place of birth. Understandably, these experiences had deeply affected his ability to trust the world around him, other people and as a result himself. His communication was often aggressive, and he expressed a strong desire to be left alone.

During our early meetings, I invited Constantin to accompany me to meet the goats. He came reluctantly, with little expectation that the college

– or the farm – held anything of interest for him. Initially, he observed the goats warily, staying physically close to me and lacking confidence to stand independently in this unfamiliar environment.

Over time, his curiosity grew. He continued to keep some distance, but his attention was more focused and sustained. During this period, he took a photograph of himself with one of the goats, Dot, and wrote in his journal:

“goats sit there
on the table
everyday! Why
does she do this?
I don't know why.”

Here, Constantin demonstrates the beginnings of relationship. He is not dismissing the animal, but questioning her behaviour, seeking understanding. Communication is already taking place through attention and curiosity.

Gradually, Constantin began choosing to spend more time with the goats during his farm sessions. This interest soon developed into a daily rhythm. He visited them on arrival at college, during breaks, at lunchtime and again before leaving at the end of the day. Through these repeated encounters, his development became closely entwined with his relationship to the goats.



Constantin in dialogue with Dot



Dot, by Constantin

The consistency and rhythm of this relationship provided Constantin with a sense of safety and recognition. He took responsibility for the goats' wellbeing and began speaking to them, asking how they were, and – most significantly – listening. I observed this pattern repeatedly, not only with Constantin but with many students: the goats invite a form of dialogue that is both verbal and non-verbal, mutual and non-judgmental.

Unlike relationships with other livestock, which often maintain a clearer separation between human and animal, the relationship with goats frequently carries a sense of equality and shared presence. Students experience them not merely as animals to be managed, but as companions within a living relationship.

Goats as mirrors for what is needed

In much the same way that natural materials used in craft act as mirrors – revealing inner states and needs – animals can reflect what is required

within a student. Goats, in particular, offer warmth, affection and responsiveness. For some students, this meets a deep but often unarticulated need for connection that may feel too confronting or complex within human relationships.

Within the supportive presence of the goat, an atmosphere of warmth and safety can arise. It is within this space that learning and transformation become possible.

My role as educator is primarily to hold the environment and gently support the relationship as it unfolds. The form this guidance takes differs for each student and each animal. Once safety is established, the animal and student often find their own way of working together.

During his time at Coleg Plas Dwbl, Constantin's language softened. The trust he developed with the goats began to extend into relationships with people. As trust grew externally, so too did his trust in himself. He began to recognise his own agency, power and place in the world, contributing positively to the college community.

Constantin's reflections

In interview and conversation, Constantin shared the following reflections:

"It's strange but sometimes I think that they think I am a goat. They really like me because I understand them... We are connected by trust."

"They can tell what I'm feeling... When I put my hand on them I can feel how they are inside... They never judge you like many people do."

Later, while working on a living skills pamphlet, he wrote:

"One of the best things about Coleg Plas Dwbl is the animals... If you can make friends with the animals, they can help you to feel more confident in yourself. This also helps when talking to people too."

These reflections reveal a deepening sense of connection, self-awareness and confidence – qualities that were not accessible to Constantin at the beginning of his journey.

Communication, expression and transformation

Over the course of two years, Constantin's ability to express himself – verbally, visually and emotionally – changed significantly. His farm journals show a progression from minimal expression, through images of conflict and fragmentation, towards greater integration, colour and coherence.

Through trusting himself, Constantin began to trust his environment. Through caring for the farm, he learned to care for himself. He shared his learning with the goats, spoke to them about his developing friendships, and eventually introduced human friends to his trusted companions.

On his graduation day, Constantin came to say goodbye to the goats, thanking them for their companionship and wishing them well. This moment reflected the depth of relationship that had supported his transformation.

Biodynamic farming as a life-generating environment

The biodynamic farm generates life through relationship. The health and connectedness of the human contribute directly to the health and communication of the farm as a whole. As a living organism, the farm thrives through the interconnected care of minerals, plants, animals and humans.

This single example offers a glimpse into the transformative potential held within such an environment. The warmth of the farm creates opportunities for connection, generating life and learning, supporting therapeutic education in its fullest sense. The health of the animals within the farm organism is an integral aspect, enabling the contribution to the education, wellbeing and consciousness of the human within it.

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