



Recording Island Voices – for ourselves and for others

JUST four years ago Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye took the outwardly adventurous step of contracting Benbecula-based Gordon Wells to co-ordinate a European project it had just embarked on.

The “POOLS” project had a worthy aim – to bring the benefits of modern technology to the attention of teachers of less widely used and taught languages. But a worthy aim doesn’t always translate into exciting, or even successful, results. It’s doubtful if anyone envisaged that, four years later, the college working together with Cothrom would have won two European awards for its work, that recorded samples of Uist life and work would be being viewed across the world in both Gaelic and English (including, memorably, in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington), or that visitors from away would be coming here to see Uist for themselves, enticed by initial online acquaintance through these video clips. And the work goes on...

The first series of Guthan nan Eilean (Island Voices) was completed in 2007 – a bilingual collection of 40 short films presented for learners of Gaelic and/or English. It featured brief documentary introductions to aspects of community and working life in Uist together with “talking head” interviews with real people. The recorded interviews were particularly useful for learners, as they gave them an opportunity to hear authentic speech as it occurs in the community, with all the stops, starts, and hesitations that natural speakers normally produce, rather than the necessarily simplified and ordered language that you get in a classroom or in a textbook. Initially available just online it

was a simple idea, but very effective, especially for remote learners working in isolation, and impressive enough for CILT, the National Centre for Languages in London to give it a European Award for Languages in 2007. In 2008, with help from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the college brought out a DVD/CD-Rom package (including transcripts and translations), which has been distributed to schools, and internationally via CLI, the learners’ association. It’s also available in local shops.

In the meantime work with learners of English also progressed. Working with Cothrom a group of Polish and Latvian workers at Kallin Shellfish produced their own 15-minute film of their life and work in Uist – a valuable record in itself, but also the result of a very productive learning process for the participants, helping them to develop their English language skills along the way. Cothrom have also used the videos as a basis for developing computer-based extension exercises online, which allows them to reach learners in their own homes. It’s a service designed for local learners, but again the online platform makes it available literally worldwide.

On the back of these successes, and with additional help from the Comhairle, the Island Voices project has moved into a new phase with significant support from the European Social Fund, which will see the video resource bank more than tripled in size by the end of 2010. Extending now beyond Uist, tutor training has already been offered in Skye and Harris as well, and a programme of classes for language learners will be launching soon which will offer them the opportunity of enhancing their learning through recording-based project work.



The project now has a wider Hebridean focus. Gordon is just back from filming on St Kilda.

Photos: Gordon Wells

Meanwhile, filming continues throughout the Outer Hebrides now (including St Kilda!), and also on Skye.

Under a broad environmental theme topics covered so far include traditional practices such as peat-cutting or lazy bed building, outdoor leisure activities (for example, surfing), intergenerational work such as the Children’s Parliament or vocational courses in Sgoil Lìonaclait, as well as local enterprises in, for example, environmental tourism, and even community journalism!

The important thing is that this list is not

complete. The project’s strength has always been its community base. It seeks to give a positive reflection of as broad a range of island life and activity as possible, and is always open to new suggestions.

If you have ideas please don’t hesitate to get in touch with Gordon by phone or e-mail. An awful lot of good things happen in these islands, which we ourselves don’t necessarily all know about. Here’s a chance to spread some interesting news not just to our neighbours, but to a wider world which can be surprisingly eager to learn more about us.

European Award for Innovation and Creativity in Lifelong Learning



Sabhal Mòr Ostaig earned the distinction of a Silver Award for the POOLS project (Producing Open On Line Learning Systems) at a recent pan-European Conference in Prague on Innovation and Creativity in the Lifelong Learning Programme.

Alison Dix (above), then the College’s Head of Lifelong Learning, was in attendance with Danish colleague Kent Andersen to collect the prize from Ján Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Training and Youth, and Ondřej Liška Minister of Education, Youth and Sports for the Czech Republic.

Alison has recently moved to Berneray and will continue her association with Island Voices from there.

Comments from around the world

“It was the first time that I had ever seen a native Gaelic speaker speaking Gaelic. If you aren’t in a Gaelic community it makes it difficult to learn. These videos bring you right there!” (Canada)

“The videos really are high quality, and the accompanying texts make them a very useful resource. The thing I like about video is that the learner has an immediate handle on the subject.” (Nottingham)

“Tha sin sgoinneil, mòran taing airson siud! Tha e caran doirbh Tbh Gàidhlig fhaighinn anns a’ Ghearmailt. (That’s great, many thanks for that! It’s quite hard to get Gaelic TV in Germany.)” (Germany)

Contact details

You can phone Gordon on 07879 644984, or e-mail info@gordonwells.co.uk
For up to date news on the project visit the project website at: <http://guthan.wordpress.com>.
Comments and suggestions welcome!



Free classes in English and Gaelic

Please see the Cothrom page in this month’s *Am Pàipear* for details of how to register your interest in taking classes in Gaelic or English, supported by the European Social Fund. While you’re learning the language you can pick up recording skills too!