

SIP Project 061

Exploring the Field Fences of County Sligo

Final Report

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Introduction

Exploring the Field Fences of County Sligo was a heritage project where students from eight primary schools whose ages ranged between 9 and 12 years were engaged in a study of their own locality. The students were asked to explore an area of one square kilometre near their school under four headings, Field Systems (Architecture), Archaeology, Flora and Fauna and Folklore. Thirty students from a post primary school were involved in adding value to the work of the primary schools, by selecting some of their work for inclusion in a booklet and poster. The students in all schools used Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools to enhance their work and ensure it reached the widest possible audience. The main aims of the project were to increase awareness in students and teachers of the rich heritage of their own local areas and to promote the use of ICT tools in schools to motivate students and teachers to improve teaching and learning. The project also aimed to involve the wider school community who would help and support the students in the schools. The project co-ordinators planned three major outcomes, a booklet giving a sample of the work done on the project, a poster and a website. It was also expected that the participating primary schools would produce either a written presentation in the form of a booklet, or a multimedia presentation of their findings. Initially the project was planned as a once off undertaking but we soon realised that the idea was one that could be replicated. The lessons we have learned from what has now become the first phase will help us to extend the project to a further twenty schools in County Sligo who will carry out a study of the seashore near their schools.

Background to the work

Since the early 1980's I have been interested in the use of the computer as a teaching and learning tool. In 1991 I completed a BSc in Information Technology and as part of a Master's qualification in Training, my thesis was "Information Technology in Irish Schools with Particular Relevance to Teacher Training". I have spent my entire teaching career as a school principal and in this role I introduced ICT tools to Cliffoney school in the mid 80's. I found that the introduction of these new technologies motivated teachers and students and the learning experience of both groups was enriched.

In September 1999 I was appointed ICT Advisor in Sligo Education Centre, to develop the Schools IT 2000 initiative in first and second level schools in County Sligo. I strongly believed that schools needed support in a practical way if the initiative was to succeed. From the outset I believed that a project-based approach was most likely to be successful in ensuring that ICT's would be used as a teaching and learning tool.

I am also a strong believer in the idea that we must give our students a love of their own place and an understanding of its importance in their lives. It is only when we know and understand our own roots that we can make sense of the wider world. In this respect I believe that we should give the students in our care a strong sense of local identity if we are to help them understand the complex world in which they will live their lives.

I was therefore very interested when I heard that, Siobhán Ryan, Heritage Officer with Sligo County Council planned to run a heritage project in selected primary and post primary schools in County Sligo. She approached me in late September seeking information on schools in the county. Having heard a description of the project, I felt that ICT tools

would greatly enhance it many ways and especially by ensuring that the end products would be seen by a much wider audience. I suggested that we might apply for inclusion in the Schools Integration Project (SIP), an initiative of Schools IT 2000 and following discussions with Seamus Knox, national co-ordinator SIP, the project was accepted in Autumn 1999.

Our aims were to

- To stimulate an interest and awareness in students of their heritage.
- To make students aware of the many elements that make up the heritage of a locality.
- To engage the pupils in cross-curricular initiatives that would develop an awareness of their own locality.
- To develop the skills of teachers in using multimedia tools.
- To provide students with access to ICT tools such as scanners, digital cameras and to use this tool as research and presentation resources.
- To provide students with the opportunities to explore new software packages to produce multimedia presentations.
- To disseminate the findings of the project to a broad audience through the publication of a poster.
- To provide each participating school with resource material for posting to their school Website.
- To use email as a communications tool.

Contexts

As ICT Advisor based in Sligo Education Centre my brief is to implement at local level the different initiatives of Schools IT 2000 in County Sligo. This initiative has been developed by the Department of Education and Science (DES) through the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) to ensure that ICT's will play an important role in the way the curriculum is delivered to students. The work of the ICT Advisor is crucial to the success of the Schools IT 2000 project as we have access to primary and post primary schools and can influence how ICT tools are used in these schools to enhance teaching and learning.

Projects such as SIP will guide future policy in the use of ICT's in Irish classrooms where new curricula and new approaches are being introduced. Since 1972 a flexible approach to delivery of the curricula in Irish primary schools has been supported. That philosophy is continued in the new Primary Curriculum, which is in the process of being introduced. It is therefore expected that schools implement new methodologies and experimentation with new approaches is encouraged. The use of ICT fits neatly into this approach.

Local studies and the study of local heritage are current issues in the Irish curriculum at first level. I believe that these areas of study should be seen as a living process where children and teachers have the opportunity to study life as they see it lived in their own environments. I look on this SIP as a pilot scheme for local studies. I would hope that DES would recommend it as a possible approach that other schools might implement. I also hope that the other issues that arise from this project will inform future policy as to how ICT's can support the implementation of the curriculum.

Methodology

Once the project was accepted as a SIP, Siobhán Ryan and I met on a number of occasions to discuss how we would manage the project. At the outset we agreed that we would act as project managers and co-ordinators. We planned for three major outcomes, a booklet, a poster and a website. As we had definite project outcomes in mind we decided that the project would be to a large degree prescriptive. We initially decided that the project would run from January 2000 to the end of that school year in June.

The selection of schools was the next issue to be decided. As the project was supported by Sligo County Council, it was agreed that the schools selected would be a representative sample, representing different landscapes in the county. A short list was drawn up and the schools were approached. One of the original schools selected was unable to take part and another school from the same area agreed to participate. The eight primary schools finally selected were: Banada N.S., Kilrusheighter N.S., Ballinlig N.S.; Ballintogher N.S.; Cliffoney N.S.; Ballweelin N.S.; Coolbock N.S. and Rockfield N.S. The primary schools were all small rural schools; five of the schools were two teacher schools, one was a three teacher and two were four teacher schools. A total of 174 students were involved with the great majority of in 5th and 6th classes and their ages ranged from 9 to 12 years.

The Ursuline College in Sligo town was selected as the Post Primary school and 30 students whose ages ranged from 14 to 15 years, from a transition year class, were involved.

Potential sponsors were approached and we were pleased that the following agreed to help us: Sligo County Council, Sligo Corporation, Sligo Leader Partnership Company, Sligo Education Centre, The Sligo Champion, The Heritage Council, NCTE, Sligo County Library, INTO

Heritage in schools, Sligo Leader Partnership Company and County Sligo V.E.C. A Heritage in Schools support programme and an Art support programme was organised by Siobhán Ryan and this proved very worthwhile and led to some unexpected outcomes.

Hardware and software were supplied to support the schools. Each primary school received a scanner; a digital camera and a zip drive as well as Hyperstudio and Paint Shop Pro. The post primary school was provided with an email server, extra RAM, and A3 printer.

Each primary school first of all selected a 1km Square, which would be the focus of the school's study. Ideally the square encompassed the school or was close to the school. The teachers in the participating schools attended a number of meetings where it was agreed that each school would cover the same topic over a set number of weeks. The selected square would then be studied under four headings Field systems (Architecture), Archaeology, Flora and Fauna, and Folklore. Schools were given a period of four weeks to complete each of the four modules. Originally it was agreed that the project would run from January until June but we soon realised that we would not meet the June deadline and so we set late October as the date for the project launch.

From the outset it was envisaged that the primary students would involve themselves in field work to familiarise themselves with the landscape of their own locality under the four headings and record their findings using written accounts, drawings and photographs which would be inserted into an A3 folder and sent to the Post Primary school. The Post Primary students would then select material from the Primary schools to produce a booklet on the project, a poster using text, pictures and artwork. We also intended that each school would produce either a booklet or a Hyperstudio presentation of their work and that a website would be developed to reflect all the work of the project.

The teachers understood from the start that that the main focus of the project was the investigation by the students of their own area. ICT's were there to be used as tools. Indeed the project could have been successfully organised without these tools, which were there to enhance the project. The importance of participation in the project by other children and teachers in the school was highlighted, as was the important contribution that the wider school community could make. Indeed one of the most heartening outcomes was the extensive and wide ranging support given by so many adults in the community to the project as was evident at the launch of each school's work.

The focus of the work from the start was on the students' learning by finding out and then recording using both pen and paper or digital media. The emphasis was very much on a model of learning rather than on a model of teaching. Investigation through field trips and research were the methods to be used by the students to discover what was relevant to the project in their own area. The aim was to involve not only students but also teachers, parents and the wider local community to collaborate and participate in this study. It proved as much a learning experience for many of the adults as it did for the students.

As many of the participants were beginners in using ICT, tutors in Sligo Education Centre provided training. As we intended to use Hyperstudio for the multimedia presentations training in this software was organised in early January 2000. This proved a mistake because schools were not ready to use the program until September and extra training in the software had to be organised at that stage. Much of the ICT training was done in the classrooms on my visits to schools. On those occasions I usually worked with two or three students who then trained other members of the class. I also provided MS Word templates for each school on a floppy disk so that they could produce their school booklet.

Because we were working with nine schools it was important to ensure that each module was completed at the same time. This did not always happen. This was the first time that the participating schools ever collaborated on a project and this aspect while eventually proving quite successful initially caused problems as meeting deadlines was a new experience for many of the teachers involved. Communication was also a problem. While all schools were connected to the Internet, modem failure in some of the schools meant that communication with the schools had to be done by letter or by phone as well as by email.

The project

After the teachers in the schools met with Siobhán the project was outlined to them. They were informed what resources would be given to the project in terms of hardware and software and what other supports would be available. Each teacher was given four A3 folders. These were used to hold all the material compiled as a result of field trips, from local research or gathered from interviewing people in the community. This material included hand written and printed accounts, drawings, photographs and scanned images. These folders, on completion of each module, were then sent to the Ursuline College where the Transition Year students for inclusion in the project booklet and the poster selected material from each school.

This involved a process of selecting the most suitable material and initially the Transition students used word processors to type up hand written material sent in by the primary school students while images were scanned. For the second and later modules the primary schools sent in their digital photographs, scanned images and text files on disks. This greatly reduced the workload for the Transition Year class.

Siobhan and myself agreed from the outset, that the published booklet would be quarto size. A template on disk in MS Word was given to the post primary students. Four pages were allocated to each of the four modules of Field Systems, Archaeology, Flora and Fauna and Folklore. The Transition Year students then compiled a booklet for each school under each module heading. The template given to the Transition Years was to a large degree prescriptive. For example, in the Field Systems or Architecture module, the students were asked to insert images of certain features such as a gate, a stone wall, different types of fences etc into text boxes with accompanying text into other frames. As some schools did not

send material under each of these headings the primary school booklets were very much incomplete but there was a wealth of information from which to select material for the printed booklet on the overall project.

In June an editorial team from the Transition year class in the Ursuline College came together in Sligo Education Centre to select the material for the final booklet. Four teams were selected under an adult leader for each module and final choices were made with material chosen from each of the eight school booklets.

The material from the primary schools included drawings, paintings and art panels or strips that were inserted on the bottom of each page. As part of the template schools were asked to design these decorative panels for the top and bottom of each page. These were designed to illustrate the particular module that was being described.

When the material for the project booklet was finally selected and sent to the printer we discovered that the images had been scanned in at a low resolution. That meant that the finished product would be of poor quality. As a result we now had to get one of the teachers, who was highly competent in the use of computers, to re-scan all the images and re-size the original digital photographs. They had initially been sent in jpeg format and now had to be sent in tif format. This meant a considerable amount of time had to be spent on this work and Micheál O Broin, a teacher who was involved in the project, was seconded from his primary school for a week to do this work with the project co-ordinators.

The introduction to the booklet was written by the co-ordinators and the Transition Year editorial team and sent to the printer. Finally five thousand copies arrived to the Sligo Education Centre on the 26th October 2000.

While integrating primary and post primary schools in the project was useful it did take up a lot of time and there were communications

problems. If a similar project was being organised in the future I would suggest that each school do its own booklet first and then an editorial group representative of the participating schools could select material from each of the booklets for the overall project booklet.

The second outcome of the project was a poster and again this was organised by Siobhán Ryan. Kidsown Publishing from Ballintogher was contracted to work with the Ursuline students and produce a poster using selected material from the eight primary schools. It was intended that the poster would be ready before the project launch date, which was set for late October 2000. However it was not ready until much later and this was a big disappointment.

The third outcome was the project website. It was expected that the post primary school students would do this work. However when nothing had been attempted by the class by February 2001, we asked Micheál O Broin to put all the material from the primary schools on to the project website, www.sligofieldfences.com. This work is ongoing.

Probably the most significant work of the project took place once the initial planned outcomes were organised. It was now September, the start of a new school year, which meant the at least half of the students involved in the project in year 1 had now left their schools to start their second level education at post primary school. However a new group of students were introduced by their teachers to work on the material already created. Each of the primary schools had collected a vast amount of written and other material on each of the four modules. As an artist had visited each school and given 20 hours support there was a great variety of different types of artwork. Also the Transition Year students in the Ursuline had already selected some of each school's material and put it into the template, which was provided. While this template was ideal in

selecting the material for the final booklet it proved to be restrictive in providing a basis for the schools own publications and was not used. At this stage as project co-ordinators, we were fortunate to have the services of Orla Kenny, an artist and art teacher. She visited each school, looked at their work and in consultation with teachers and students designed a new booklet template for each school. Seven of the eight schools produced their own booklet on the project. Ms Word was used by six of the schools for the booklet while one school did their booklet on Ms Publisher.

One of the original planned outcomes was the presentation of material using Hyperstudio. All primary schools did some work on Hyperstudio. Five schools completed a full presentation of their project using this software package while the other three completed work on three of the four modules. The material used was the same material already selected for the booklet but now sound files were added and new presentation skills were learned. Orla Kenny spent a further day working with each school on their Hyperstudio presentation.

There were a number of unexpected outcomes, which resulted mainly from the art support programme. Two schools did batik work and as a result ended up with beautiful framed batik panels. Another school did creative dance as part of their art programme and they performed an interpretative piece of how the ice age had formed the drumlin on which their school was built. Two schools designed tile panels for a wall in their school playgrounds. These panels are now in place and will be a reminder for future generations of this SIP project. Another school published a book of creative writing as a result of their artist's support programme and this school also typed up the result of the 1938 Folklore Commission for their area. Traditional straw crafts were highlighted also by this school and children were shown how rod baskets and creels were made. The art

of making straw masks as used by traditional wren boys was demonstrated for pupils in another school who now made their own set of masks. Another school went to witness an archaeological dig and had an opportunity to discuss with the archaeologists how a dig is organised. One school discovered three hitherto undetected ring forts after getting a copy of a satellite map of the area.

The school and county launches, were a very important aspect of the project as this gave the children and teachers an opportunity to develop a new range of presentation skills. It also gave each local community an opportunity to see the finished work of the students. Many of the adults were very interested in seeing the outcomes because they had a real involvement in the project.

These launches were set for the second last week of October 2000. While each launch was very different, reflecting as it did that all schools are different, there was a common approach to all the launches. An extensive display of all the materials researched, and all the artwork done during the project, was mounted around the walls of the classrooms, assembly halls and corridors of the schools. These presentations were generally done under the heading of each module studied i.e. Flora & Fauna, Folklore in our area etc. The Hyperstudio presentation was then shown to crowded halls /classrooms of parents students and members of the local communities. Copies of the school booklets were distributed and certificates, which I had prepared, were presented to all the participants. In many schools the children introduced the presentations and explained how they had completed the project. Refreshments were served and it was obvious that the project had involved members of the local community who now showed great pride in the work produced by the students in their local school.

Seamus Knox, National Co-ordinator of SIP from NCTE, and Hubert Kearns, Sligo County Manager, attended and spoke at the county launch of the project, which took place on Thursday 26th October in Sligo Education Centre. Each school was given a display stand to exhibit a selection of their photographs, drawings and artwork. These were displayed on cardboard mountings, which we supplied to each school. Students from each of the nine participating schools outlined how the project was organised and they introduced the work done in the nine schools to a large audience. A compilation Hyperstudio presentation, made up of selected materials from each for the eight schools, was shown and copies of the project booklet were distributed to all present. A copy of the booklet and the poster was then sent to each primary school in the country and they both have attracted favourable comment. Having visited the participating schools on many occasions I believe the teachers and children have gained much from their participation in the project apart from all new ICT skills they have acquired. I feel the children and teachers have gained a new insight into their learning. Learning has become more relevant for the students as it reflects the real world in which they live. Learning has also become more collaborative as information has been sought from teachers, parents, grandparents and the wider community.

Significance

It is difficult to evaluate the significance of a project when you are so closely linked with it over a long period and possibly an outside observer would be in a better position to measure the worth or otherwise of what was done in this SIP project.

From my own perspective I found the work on this project deeply satisfying. I also gained professionally from my involvement. As a school principal I was used to acting as a manager, organiser and supporter for a staff of four teachers within my own school. However in acting as one of this project's co-ordinators I was working on a much wider stage, dealing with teachers I did not know and whose skills and teaching approaches varied. In order to support them fully it was necessary first of all for me to get to know them and to see then where I could best help. I did this by observing and listening and taking on board their concerns. Generally these were ICT related, sometimes hardware problems and sometimes problems relating to software. I was also in a position to make suggestions as to where a school might develop a particular theme and I was in the fortunate position that I could get appropriate support people, such as Orla Kenny and Micheál Ó Broin, into the classrooms when they were needed.

While the project as originally outlined was mainly prescriptive, in that we wanted certain areas covered, we did give teachers freedom to explore the themes in the way that suited them best. We arranged monthly meetings with the teachers and these proved invaluable. We had the opportunity to hear their difficulties with regard to issues such as lack of time, curriculum overload, and skill shortage and hardware failure. They also had the opportunity to learn from each other. This was a new experience for teachers and an opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other. While everyone still approached the project in their own way

they learned from the experience of others whether it was in presentation techniques, in classroom organisation ideas or in time management. Without doubt the project had an impact on the schools in that it was a totally new approach to project work was developed. Some teachers had participated previously in projects but without the same level of support. The support on this SIP was multi-layered. Schools received heritage resources in the form of maps, booklets and reference material. An art support programme was put in place and ICT support was available on an ongoing basis. We were in a position to address most problems that arose in a school, which gave teachers a great sense of security, and as a result they had enthusiasm for the work they were doing. From the very start of the project everyone was focussed on the end products, the booklet and the poster and all were anxious to make a contribution to both of those outcomes. Collaboration was very important not alone between co-ordinators and teachers but also between teachers and students and between students and the local community. Children also had the opportunity to collaborate with each other when they worked as teams composing their multimedia presentations. They shared ideas and shared the work. This idea of social interaction is central to the ideas of the Russian thinker Lev Vygotsky, who worked in a number of areas including developmental psychology and education. In his book "Thought and Language" published in 1978, he declared that every function in the child's cultural development appears twice. First of all it appears on the social level, and later, on the individual level. According to Vygotsky all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. This project gave teachers the opportunity to put Vygotskian theory into practice and see if in fact children learn better with others than they do when they work on their own.

The computer in the classroom also supports another of Vygotsky's theory, the zone of proximal development which is the range of potential each person has for learning. This potential ability is greater than the actual ability of the individual when someone with greater expertise, such as a teacher, facilitates learning. Unfortunately our exam system ignores this developmental stage in students but in a project such as this the computer acts as a conduit between student and teacher allowing the latter the opportunity to support understanding and encourage learning.

This project was also important for the teachers in that it raised critical questions about their own involvement in curriculum design. Initially they talked about curriculum overload, and the difficulty they had in making time for the activities of the project but coming towards the end they realised that what they were doing was more creative and therefore more valuable and real than anything they might take from a textbook.

Hopefully the lessons learned from this and other SIP's will change the current outlook in some quarters as to what constitutes curriculum. This project has highlighted that an effective curriculum should be alive and real. Both teachers and children and other members of the educational community, such as ICT Advisors, working together can contribute to a curriculum that stimulates effective learning. The project also highlights the part that others outside the educational community can play in developing curriculum and enhancing its delivery. The results of the project also emphasise the fact that children too can also generate knowledge and have a role in the development of the curriculum.

In a sense even though we were not conscious of it at the time, we were encouraging teachers to look at the way they approach the delivery of the curriculum. For older teachers this was certainly new ground as they moved a way from the traditional model of the teacher who tried "to fill the jug" by "pouring in" information. Instead a constructivist environment

was developed in the classroom where a child learns best by finding out what they need to know. This new approach is in a way a model for teachers' educational development as it puts them in control of their own work. Whether teachers will continue with this model of teaching in the future will in the long term decide if this project will have lasting effects. Will they have the commitment however to continue to use these approach now that the project is over? I sincerely hope they will but to do so I feel schools and teachers will need similar outside supports that were available for the Field Fences Project, to be available on an ongoing basis.

John Joe Gallagher

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