Developing Local Studies Projects in Irish Primary Schools Using ICT - The Story of Three Projects

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From 1999 to 2004 three group projects, each based on a local studies theme, were organised jointly by Sligo Education Centre and the Heritage Office, Sligo County Council. The projects were: The Sligo Field Fences Project, The Sligo Seashore Project and Near the Shores of Sligo Bay. Information and Communications Technology was used as a learning tool in each project and the principal outcomes included books, posters, a range of artwork, websites, multimedia presentations and CD ROM's. The three projects followed similar methodologies, involved roughly the same number of students and there was continuity between them in that two of the schools were involved in all three projects with a further three involved in two. Classes in twenty-one schools were involved in total with over five hundred students taking part.

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1. Background to Sligo Field Fences Project

Information and communications technology (ICT) was first introduced into Irish schools in the 1980's when the Department of Education initiated a pilot project 'Computers in Education', in 34 schools representative of all types of primary schools over a two-year period. (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 1996). In 1997, the Minister for Education launched Schools IT 2000, a national initiative that was intended to establish a permanent infrastructure in schools for the development of ICT (Department of Education and Science, 1997). The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) was given the job of managing the IT 2000 project. In late 1998 the NCTE promoted the Schools Integration Project (SIP[1]), which became one of the key initiatives of IT 2000. It planned to ensure that all Irish students would "*have the opportunity to achieve compute literacy and to equip themselves for participation in the information society*" (Department of Education and Science, 1997). Approximately 90 pilot projects were eventually established in a number of 'lead' schools working in partnership with education centres, businesses, industry, third-level institutions and the community. At this time many local government authorities in Ireland were interested in promoting local heritage issues and this policy was also in step with Irish primary schools' curricular needs. Consequently the impetus for the Sligo Field Fences Project arose from the different but converging objectives of the Sligo Heritage Office, Sligo County Council and Sligo Education Centre. The Heritage Office sought mechanisms for raising awareness of the heritage of County Sligo through the existing education structure, while one of the objectives of Sligo Education Centre was to promote innovative uses of ICT to support learning in the classroom as outlined in the SIP initiative. The Field Fences project met both of these objectives and as a result more than two hundred students, from eight primary schools got the opportunity to participate in a SIP project.

1.1 Project partners

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[1] http://www.sip.ie/.

The main sponsor of all three projects was the NCTE and a number of local and national agencies including the Irish Heritage Council offered financial support or personnel to assist each project.

1.2 Project aims and objectives

The Field Fences project had the following aims and objectives:

- To stimulate an interest and awareness in students of their heritage and to make them aware of the elements that make up the heritage of a locality.
- To develop the skills of teachers and students in using multimedia tools.
- To disseminate the findings of the project to a broad audience

1.3 Project organisation

The project involved students, who were aged between nine and twelve years of age, in the senior classes in eight small schools (with four or less teachers). The class teachers agreed that each class would carry out a study of their area under four headings: Field Systems, Archaeology, Flora and Fauna and Folklore.

1.4 Methodologies

Investigation through field trips and research were the principal 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. A striking feature of the project and one that was replicated in the other projects that followed was the collaboration between the wider community, families, neighbours and landowners and the local school. Great emphasis was placed on learning through investigation and this focus shifted students and teachers from the traditional model of teaching to a model of learning. ICT skills were taught when appropriate and digital cameras, sound recorders and presentation software were used throughout the project. It was decided that ICT would be used not only to record and display project activities but also to enhance the project and ensure that a wider audience would view the outcomes.

1.5 Project supports

The Heritage Officer provided the teachers in the schools with resource materials, while the ICT Advisor organised hardware and software, sponsored by the NCTE which included digital cameras, scanners and sound recorders. A support programme was put in place which included a guest speaker for each school speaking on a sea related topic sponsored by 'The Heritage in Schools'[2] series and provided by local heritage experts. A ten-hour art support programme sponsored by County Sligo Vocational Education Committee provided an artist for each school.

1.6 Project launch

A feature of all the projects was the launch day. Each school had its own launch in June 2000, which involved not only the students but also members of the local community. All the work created was put on display and multimedia presentations were delivered. Parents, members of the management committee and others who had supported the project were invited and the launch day was a day of community celebration for each school. The entire project was launched in late June in Sligo Education Centre where samples of the work done in the eight schools were put on display. A similar format was followed when the Sligo Seashore Project and Near the Shores of Sligo Bay were launched.

[2] http://www.into.ie/downloads/pdf/professionaldevelopment/her_directory05.pdf

1.7 Website[3]

A website was developed to give details on the participating schools, the background to the project and an overview of the project activities.

1.8 Project evaluation

A questionnaire was sent to the class teachers at the conclusion of the project and these were analysed by Dr Jean McNiff who in October 2000 was invited by the NCTE, in her capacity as an independent researcher, to conduct an evaluation of SIP in order to investigate its potential impact in schools. Jean is an independent researcher and action research consultant who believes that evaluation[4] " *involves the presentation of evidence which enables the practise to be judged in terms of its educative influence in the lives of practitioners*". The returned questionnaires gave examples of teacher and student reactions. One teacher quoted a pupil's initial remark that probably reflected the attitude of most of the pupils at the start of the project "*Sure, there's nothing in the fields except grass and muck*". However, the teacher continued " *it became very obvious after our first field trip that there was a whole lot more in the fields and we all admit our eyes were opened*". Students' remarks included the following: "*I didn't know about the giant's grave or all the ring forts in our area until this project.*" "*I really enjoyed the field fences project. I especially liked learning all the stuff I didn't know, like "Gorse": I never knew what it was called, until the project* ". "*We interviewed people, looked through books and searched the Internet for information*". A teacher wrote " *In the Folklore module the children gathered the information from grandparents and elderly neighbours. I myself, armed with a tape recorder, spent about three hours with a renowned storyteller in the area. I had a most enjoyable session and returned to class where the children listened and then wrote the stories and illustrated them*". Another teacher declared "*They have also developed a confidence in their ability to research material and have a new sense of pride in their local area to the point where visitors are given tours by the children during holidays and they have been amazed at the wealth of information possessed by the children*". Having visited all the schools and spoken to the teachers, Jean described the work as "*of high quality, and you have good reason to feel proud of the way you (the co-ordinators) have enabled teachers to reach such high standards and influence the quality of education for the children in their care*"

2. The Sligo Seashore Project

The success of the Field Fences project inspired this project which was organised in twelve coastal primary schools from September 2001 to June 2003 and it involved four of the schools that participated in the Field Fences project along with eight new schools. The students studied the following themes related to the sea: animals, habitats and plants, man and the sea and history of our coast. The students recorded their findings through essays, stories, written articles, artwork, crafts, puppets, models, photographs, maps and multimedia presentations. One teacher said the project " placed greater emphasis on experiential learning, use of the environment and getting out to see and explore ". The principal outcomes from the first phase of the project were artwork, booklets and PowerPoint multimedia presentations. The second phase involved the collection and organisation of all the project material in preparation for the construction of www.sligoseashore.com, which as well as displaying students' work, also developed a range of resources for teachers and students.

2.1 The seashore website[5]

[3] www.sligofieldfences.com
[4] http://www.jeanmcniff.com/evaluationgrev.html

[5] www.sligoseashore.com

While it was not intended initially to develop a project website, the volume and quality of the work of the students demanded a permanent record. The Heritage Council funded the appointment of a project assistant who collected, sorted and digitally recorded the outcomes. In January 2003 a representative sample of work was selected for the website which was launched in June 2003. The site is primarily a vehicle to display the work done by the students in the twelve schools but it also presents an opportunity to provide further resources for schools. As a result three of the eight sections on the site, Discovery Zone, Teacher Resources and Links are specially developed to provide such support. The website was launched in June 2003 and in October 2003 the site won first prize in the eSchola Learning awards[6] in Geneva.

2.2 The role of ICT in the project

As was the case in the previous project,The ICT Advisor's objective was to promote innovative uses of ICT to support learning as outlined in the guidelines of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)[7]. The first and second specific aims for ICT according to these guidelines are that the child should be enabled to use a range of ICT tools in a relevant curriculum context and in the attainment of curriculum learning objectives. The teachers' learning objectives focussed on ensuring that their students' knowledge and understanding of aspects of seashore heritage was improved and by using ICT, it made the learning more interesting, more accessible and more easily achievable.

2.3 Seashore Project evaluation

Individual comments from teachers who replied to a questionnaire highlight successes as well as problems that arose. One teacher said *"things were not done in time due to bad organisation on my part"*. The multi class situation, which affected 75% of the teachers, was quoted by another *"usual problem of finding time especially in multiclass situation but handled it fine, (I think!)"*. The lack of robust equipment was also a problem as one teacher said *"the difficulty of coping with the volume of work involved caused it (the computer) to slow down considerably leading to some frustration"*. Another teacher mentioned overload *"trying to fit all we wanted to do into the allotted timeframe"* was a problem. How to use the mini disk recorder and the digital camera proved problematic for other teachers. In general teachers and students enjoyed the experience of working on the project and they were delighted with the comments of the chair of the eSchola judging panel who said the *websitewas "beautifully designed and perfectly integrated from a pedagogical point-of-view"*.

3. Near the Shores of Sligo Bay

Having created a website that contained many resources the project co-ordinators now wanted to see how those resources might be used by students and teachers in the classroom. This was the rationale for the project 'Near the Shores of Sligo Bay', a creative writing project where the participants in eight schools used the seashore website as an inspirational starting point. Again it combined aspects of Social, Environmental and Science Education, the Art and English Language curricula with the use of ICT. The project was organised on similar lines to the previous projects with two exceptions. First of all a writer in residence for Poetry Ireland conducted workshops with the classes and she encouraged and stimulated the students in their creative writing. An artist collaborated with the writer and the class teacher and a representative sample of the written and artistic work of the students was published in a book, '*Looking a Wild Salmon in the Eye'*. Five classes published class booklets and beautiful artwork was created. The project also differed from the previous one as an effort was made to create a virtual project location

[6] http://www.eun.org/eun.org2/eun/en/Celebrate_LearningObjects/content.cfm?lang=en&ov=30045
[7] http://www.ncca.ie/j/pdf/Publications/ICT%20English%20for%20web/ICT(English).pdf

where teachers and students could view each other's work. This involved the use of 'FirstClass'[8] software and while this aspect of the project was successful to some degree, slow bandwidth speeds prevented all classes in achieving full benefit.

3.1 Project evaluation

Tomás Ó Broin, an experienced teacher and ICT Advisor attached to Blackrock Education Centre in Dublin evaluated the project. His report stated, "*For the teachers involved there were many benefits and enriching outcomes to their class's work, some of which they wrote and spoke about. Some of these were in the words of the teachers: 'Involvement of the community' - 'participation by weaker pupils and these not afraid of failure'- 'lovely combination of creativity with computer' – 'ideas for future work' – ' extremely creative writing from the children'. All in all it was a very successful project which ought to be shared with others and, ideally, replicated both in the area and by other Education Centres"*. He reported that all the teachers and principals interviewed were very positive about their class's involvement in the project. "*The children in all of the classes, whether their own teacher was present in the discussion or not, were equally positive when speaking about all elements of the project. What came across to me in these discussions was how the children perceived that they had ownership over the product"*, he concluded.

4. Conclusions

While there were some problems the three projects were seen as successful by evaluators, NCTE, teachers and students. Whatever measure of success the three projects achieved was due to the collaborative partnership developed between the Education Centre and the Heritage Office. The experiences they learned on the previous project proved very useful. The support of the NCTE, the Heritage Council and the other organisations was vital as was the input of 'experts' that visited classrooms as speakers or artists. The enthusiasm of teachers was another important factor. The fact that work overload was avoided in the second and third project supported this. The delivery of ICT training at the appropriate time was very important while the imaginative use of ICT proved a motivating factor for students. Finally the project methodology seemed to appeal to teachers.

Teachers who work in similar group situations can easily adapt aspects of these projects as a project template or model. The following points are worth noting. The project will be more successful if grounded in the curriculum of the school. Learning objectives should be clearly defined at the outset of a project. Teachers must have an input into the pre-planning process and the project should have an agreed starting and finishing date. ICT can be used as a powerful tool to make students learning more meaningful and to provide them with a wider audience for their finished work. Possible partnerships should be explored as should the possibility that resources are available in the local community. Finally project leadership is vital and can come from within the project group or from outside it but is important in ensuring success.

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[8] www.firstclass.com

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