



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

"Aiming for Advancement" Ag Amas air Adhartas"

NORT
WEST


BUILDING BRIDGES
in Literacy P6 - S2

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Who are we?

The Western Isles Department of Education's vision statement, '**Ag amas air adhartas – Aiming for advancement**' permeates all levels of education provision in the Western Isles.

Over the past number of years, the Department has been actively encouraging the building of bridges between primary schools and secondary schools through clustering and networking arrangements. Sharing of best practice, engaging in professional dialogue, supporting networks, all contribute to ensuring continuous improvement in the quality of education available to our pupils.

One such cluster which has been co-operating successfully over a number of years is the North Uist schools' cluster, consequently selected for participation in this project.

Participating Schools:

Berneray School, a one teacher school which had a roll of 11 pupils at the start of the project, is the only school serving the island of Berneray. The school is situated on the north side of the island and has an excellent view of the sea. The school roll in session 2004/05 dropped to 5 pupils. The school is well served by Itinerant teachers of Art, PE and Support for Learning and instructors for Chanter and Gaelic Singing.

Carinish School is situated in the village of Carinish in the south of North Uist. The school serves the villages of Carinish, Clachan, Locheport, Claddach Baleshare and the islands of Baleshare and Grimsay. The school which had a roll of 33 pupils and 3 full time teachers in session 2003/04, offers a choice between English Medium and Gaelic Medium education. In common with other schools, Carinish is supported by Itinerant teaching staff and instructors.

Lochmaddy School, on the east side of the island of North Uist, had a roll of 31 pupils and 2 full time class teachers in 2003/04. The school is also supported by Itinerant teachers of Art, PE and Support for Learning and instructors for Chanter and Gaelic Singing.

Paible School is a 5-14 school which serves the community of North Uist, Berneray and Grimsay. The primary department serves the village of Paible and the surrounding rural area in North Uist. Its secondary department provides education from S1 to S2 for all pupils living on the island and for those living on the islands Berneray and Grimsay. In session 2003/04 the primary department had a roll of 58 pupils and the secondary department 39 pupils, with a teaching complement of 13 full-time equivalent, including those designated to support pupils with learning difficulties and special needs. Paible has four associated primary schools, including its own Primary. The others are Lochmaddy, Carinish and Berneray. Paible School is an integral part of the community both educationally and socially.

The following members of staff were involved in the project:

- Janet MacDonald, Head Teacher, Berneray School (Teaching P1-7 – 11 pupils)
- Catriona Black, Head Teacher, Carinish School (Teaching (P5- 7 – 11 pupils including 1 Gaelic Medium pupil)
- Annie MacDonald, Class Teacher, Lochmaddy School (P5-7 – 15 pupils)
- Thalia Matheson, Depute Head Teacher, Paible School Primary Department (Teaching P6-7 – 18 pupils including 3 Gaelic Medium pupils for half the week)
- Fiona Campbell, Teacher of English and Guidance, Paible School (Teaching S1/S2)
- Iain Bramwell, Teacher (Itinerant) of Social Subjects, Paible School (Teaching S1/S2)
- Felicity Bramwell, Community Librarian for the Uists
- Catherine MacLennan, Area Education Manager

Where did we start?

All the project schools were asked to carry out a Language audit using questionnaires provided by LT Scotland. As well as identifying issues which concerned teachers it was important to establish pupils' views and attitudes towards aspects of English language, both within English Language classes and across other curricular areas.

The results of the pupil questionnaires were collated and the project team met to analyse and discuss the responses and identify the focus for the project.

The Language audit confirmed teachers' own assessments, that pupils had less confidence in writing than in other areas of literacy. Issues pertaining to individual schools were also identified.

The team discovered that the primary staff's teaching had been focusing on the development of personal and imaginative writing and less so on functional writing, so this was an area which required further development. Many of the texts pupils encounter across subject areas in Secondary School are non-fiction texts and the writing tasks given are mainly functional. Therefore this was an area of common concern to both primary and secondary colleagues. It was clear that pupils' attitudes towards writing were less positive and particularly so the attitude of boys.

In the questionnaire, pupils were asked what things helped them with writing and the following comments were made:

- *"Good planning."*
- *"Having lots of ideas."*
- *"Having time to think in my head."*
- *"Thinking about what my work should be like at the end."*
- *"Having a clear idea of the purpose."*

They were also asked what helped them write in other subjects (eg. History, Science) and the following are a few examples given by the pupils:

- *“When you know what you’re writing about and can explain it.”*
- *“Being shown a report before you write one.”*
- *“In Science you write in steps, which is easier.”*

The Social Subjects teacher highlighted his concern regarding the poor note taking abilities of S1/S2 pupils and was searching for methods to improve this weakness.

He also felt that he lacked the knowledge and skills his Primary colleagues and English specialist colleague had in the teaching of literacy.

The start of the project also coincided with the roll out of the formative assessment programme in the authority. Staff had attended training led by teachers involved in the Assessment is for Learning pilot project where they shared their experiences in using formative assessment strategies.

Teachers in the Building Bridges project had also familiarised themselves with the “Black Box” publications (Dylan and Williams). Through the research carried out by Paul Black and Dylan Williams they found that formative assessment strategies do raise standards of attainment, particularly for pupils of low ability. A few teachers had also attended training led by Shirley Clark, author of Unlocking Formative Assessment. The teachers were keen to apply some of these strategies to the teaching of functional writing.

Issues to be addressed

The project team considered the best way forward to enable various issues to be addressed:

- What are the issues and impact in using formative assessment strategies?
- How can functional writing across P6-S2 be improved?
- How can boys’ achievement in writing be improved?
- How can teachers’ confidence and understanding in the teaching of functional writing be improved?
- How can pupils’ confidence in handling/understanding non-fiction texts be improved?

Drawing together the main issues arising from the responses made by pupils, the teachers’ own views in relation to the teaching of functional writing and the roll out of the formative assessment programme, it was decided the key focus of the project would be:

- To use evidence from research to identify the most successful approaches for raising attainment in functional writing.

Research activities

During staff development sessions the project team researched various documents, articles and papers which focused on the development of functional writing. The English language 5-14 guidelines and Taking a Close Look at Writing (SCRE) were revisited. Recommendations in Improving Writing (HMIE) and Improving Achievement in English Language in Primary and Secondary Schools (HMIE) were taken on board. The team also read and discussed recommendations from the Exeter Extended Literacy Project and the work of David Wray and Maureen Lewis. Individual school resources were also reviewed, identifying the most useful in developing functional writing. Teaching and learning strategies were shared and clips from the video, Literacy Across the Curriculum (Key Stage 3 National Literacy) were viewed and proved extremely useful in stimulating discussion on teaching and learning strategies.

Support from the Community Librarian was also sought in order to help improve pupils' functional writing through developing research skills and interacting with non-fiction texts.

From the research that the team carried out, it was concluded that schools had a good range of stimulating resources to support the teaching of functional writing. In order to raise attainment in functional writing a number of key characteristics emerged. These are highlighted in the document 'Improving Writing 5-14:

- Effective feedback through 'conferencing'.
- Purposeful tasks, clear to pupils, which ensure progression.
- Direct interactive teaching of qualities expected and strategies for achieving them.
- Well selected texts to work from.
- S1/S2 writing curriculum should be extended beyond English.
- Stimulating contexts across the curriculum.
- Understanding the qualities of writing through discussion of reading.
- Familiarising pupils with a good process for writing.
- Discussion and aspirations of models of good writing.

Teachers in the project schools were asked to take cognisance of the above factors when planning and delivering lessons.

Essential to raising attainment are effective teaching strategies, in particular familiarising the pupils with a good process for writing:

- ¹Preparing for writing (stimulating, discussing, planning)
- Drafting and redrafting (writing, consulting, reshaping)
- Preparing for publication (editing, considering layout)

¹ Take a close look at writing (1995 SCRE)

Armed with this information, the project teachers initially focused on improving pupils' skills in the following non-fiction writing genres:

- Report
- Explanation
- Procedural
- Persuasive

What did we do?

Keeping in mind the key focus of the project, the teachers set out to try a variety of strategies which had been identified in improving pupils' skills in functional writing.

➤ Contexts for developing functional writing

Teachers provided pupils with a wide range of stimulating contexts in order to develop skills in procedural, report, explanation and persuasive writing. Careful consideration was given to pupils' interests, in particular, contexts which would motivate boys.

The wide range of contexts used by one primary school had a very positive impact on pupils' motivation to engage in writing activities. In order to develop procedural writing the teacher used the theme of food as a starting point. Pupils' reviewed various recipe books, watched cookery programmes and then questioned parents, family and members of the community on the use of cook books.

"This activity developed a high interest level, pupils feeling they were very much part of the differentiated learning activities." (TM)

Using the food theme the pupils wrote letters to restaurants, both locally and on the mainland, requesting menus. They wrote to celebrities requesting their favourite recipes and subsequently wrote replies promptly.

This topic also involved collaboration at the primary, secondary interface as the English subject teacher incorporated agreed functional writing activities into a six week unit on food with two S1 classes.

Again the current popularity of culinary programmes both on TV and in magazines provided the context. The teacher also hoped that the predominance of male role models would go some way to motivating boys.

“Pupils again wrote letters to manufacturers requesting information on food products. This information, along with information from the internet was written up in report form for display at the end of the unit. Pupils recounted their favourite meal and we studied a selection of food reviews from newspapers to study persuasive writing. Pupils then used their recount as the basis for a review and compared two styles of writing. Material from the Vegetarian Society was studied and discussed and pupils wrote a discursive piece on the morality of eating meat.” (FC)

The primary pupil that received a reply from Prime Minister Tony Blair, with a copy of his favourite chocolate cake recipe resulted in another cross curricular link. The Home Economics teacher involved the S2 class in a ‘Bake a Cake Challenge’.

“How to chase deer”, “How to take in the peats”, “How to use hair straighteners” were also used in the primary class to stimulate writing. An activity which developed as a result of boys’ interest in cars and tractors, involved pupils in carrying out School Car Health Checks. They wrote check lists, letters to staff explaining what they proposed to do, replies with dates and times of checks and devised compliment slips from their committee.

“The element of highest interest was the actual carrying out of the task, in twos, with clipboards, boiler suits, under the supervision of the school janitor. It was very evident after the “car check” activities that I could see deeper learning from the majority of pupils who were able to relate knowledge and skills to previous activities and experiences.” (TM)

The range of contexts exploited by the teachers resulted in increased enthusiasm and motivation among pupils.

“Boy-type learners were catered for by emphasis on active organisation and choice of subject and material leading to an increased feeling of ownership in the finished product.” (FC)

- **Purposeful tasks, clear to pupils which ensure progression.**
- **Direct interactive teaching of qualities expected and strategies for achieving them.**

Sharing the learning intention (WALT – We are learning to) and sharing the success criteria (WILF – What I am looking for) were two of the formative assessment strategies which were used by the teachers.

One teacher used Scholastic Writing Workshop materials to develop procedural writing. One of the tasks, ‘Top Secret’, involved the pupils cutting out shapes to make a picture and writing instructions which another pupil had to follow. The teacher set pupils the task with little change to her teaching approaches. However, as the following quote makes clear,

“When we looked at the pictures the children quickly realised the need for clearer instructions.” (AMD)

The teacher then evaluated the work done and introduced the pupils to the idea of learning intentions and success criteria.

These two formative strategies were then used consistently as the pupils worked on other pieces of writing. Initially when the teacher asked the pupils what she would be looking for in their writing they all said, *“Good spelling and capital letters!”*

Pupils developed a clear understanding of WALT and WILF. After completing the procedural writing activities the teacher repeated the ‘Top Secret’ activity. This time the pupils produced clear, well written instructions.

The P6-7 teacher, who used the theme of food as a stimulus, also implemented WALT and WILF. She ensured pupils’ learning was within meaningful contexts. However, planning focused *“on the success criteria rather than the activity and the clarity of purpose had the following impact on pupils’ writing –*

- *More focused efforts*
- *Overall improvement in writing*
- *Raised and maintained interest levels*
- *Pupils able to transfer skills. (TM)*

Using these formative assessment strategies other teachers commented:

“It no longer became a piece of writing for the teacher.” (JMD)

“There is a buzz in the room during writing sessions with children supporting each other and a real sense of purpose evident. The children are better motivated because they know what the task is and what is expected of them and are better able to articulate this.” (CB)

The pupils were clear about why they were using a particular genre.

“Sharing the success criteria generated a lot of discussion on how to write and what we could do to improve the writing content. We looked at sentence structure – main clause, supporting clause, more than one clause, conjunctions, use of adjectives, synonyms, etc. Sharing the purpose and success criteria has resulted in pupils having a clear focus in their writing. Through improved discussion they have a better knowledge and understanding of how to manipulate words for effect. This has led to an overall improvement in functional writing.” (JMD)

- **Familiarising the pupils with a good process for writing.**
- **Discussion and aspirations of models of good writing.**

Through the various writing activities, whether procedural, report, explanation, teachers paid close attention to ensuring pupils were clear about the various aspects involved in producing a piece of writing. Pupils needed to know about the purpose, what form the writing would take and who the piece of writing was for.

Modelling the writing process was a technique used by some of the teachers. Using this strategy they showed the pupils the way in which writers tackle a piece of work, the decisions they might make and what the finished article would look like.

Using an example of a set of instructions to teach procedural writing, the teacher modelled the writing process:

"We discussed the reason for doing this type of writing, the need for precise instructions. We discussed what we'd be looking for when reading instructions, eg. the title, use of words such as firstly, after that, next, finally, etc. During modelling, the children suggested changes to the work in progress, eg. changing words, phrases. As the children became more confident with this I would hear 'would it not be better if...' 'yes maybe you could use...'. They now see that a piece of writing is not completed at the first attempt. A piece of writing, shared, enabled the children to 'think in their head', discuss, 'see what it should look like in the end', giving them confidence to become better writers". (JMD)

"It made me aware of the type of questions I was asking and how important modelling was for some children." (CB)

A comment from a pupil in another school where the teacher modelled the writing process:

"Seeing an example of what we have to do makes it easier."

Teachers also commented that boys responded particularly well to this strategy.

In order to provide pupils with additional support, and to enable them to become independent writers, **writing frames** were used by some teachers as a scaffolding activity. The writing frames provided a structure to help pupils to communicate what they wanted to share, while scaffolding them in the use of a particular form of genre within functional writing.

This was one of the strategies which was used by the Social Subjects specialist to improve the note taking skills of his pupils.

"Through meetings with and observation of my colleagues in the classroom, I decided as an initial step to introduce Writing Frames into my subjects. Previously I had used 'guided questions' or tasks to develop written information in the pupils' jotters and folios. I also had emphasised the use of headings in history notes to provide a basic structure to their historical notes.

I assessed the benefit of using writing frames to be that:

- *They provide a structure which allows for a greater use of detail in the note.*
- *They can be tailored to meet the needs of individual subjects.*
- *They promote the use of an efficient structure in the pupils' work.*

My first attempt at using a specific writing frame was a downloaded Stone Age frame from the Internet. This has the merit of offering two versions, a targeted frame giving relatively detailed guidance for the lower ability pupils and a more general open ended frame offering greater scope for the more able to express themselves. A survey of the pupils after using the writing frames found that the less able found it very useful and it improved their performance and confidence in writing, however the more able who had used the more open ended frame still generally found it too restrictive and disliked using it.

*As a result of this feedback I decided to produce my own frames mainly aimed at the lower ability pupils. To improve the pupils work further, I decided to introduce word lists or **word mats** to accompany each writing frame. These are also given to the more able pupils to reinforce their subject specific vocabulary.*

The result of this change in teaching strategy has been an improvement in performance in most pupils' work. Their notes are now more structured; the vocabulary used has become noticeably more extended and specific. They now appear to work with greater confidence on their notes and over the longer term I would hope to find evidence of an improvement in their knowledge and understanding thanks to their more detailed and structured note taking." (IB)

One of the primary teachers who used writing frames made the following comment:

"One of the boys who has learning needs and displays challenging behaviour has begun to write extended pieces of writing, recount and instruction following "hands on" activities, through the use of a writing frame. He has written an article on building corn stacks for a local environmental group's monthly newsletter." (CB)

➤ **Effective feedback**

Again, through the implementation of formative assessment strategies teachers have greater awareness of the need to provide constructive feedback to every child, focusing on success and next steps measured against learning intentions.

"As I progressed through the project (Building Bridges), it became evident that the quality of feedback I was offering to pupils required to be reviewed. To enable pupils to improve their work feedback had to be clearly linked to the learning intention. I started working on this and found several benefits:

- *Consideration was given to improving work rather than correction.*
- *Strengths were pinpointed early and advice given on how to develop them.*
- *Current work was compared to previous work to show improvements.*

An ethos of challenge was developed with increased confidence and a willingness to ask for help or to help others." (TM)

"I have made feedback more immediate and relevant and encouraged children to evaluate their own work and that of their peers." (AMD)

- **Well selected texts to work from.**
- **Understanding the qualities of writing through discussion of reading.**

Reading is naturally explicitly linked to writing. It was important therefore that pupils were familiar with “models” of functional writing genres to help them improve their writing. The aim of the Community Librarian’s involvement in the project was to support the work of the class teachers in addressing improvements in functional writing skills.

The Librarian visited each school and this was followed up by classes visiting the Community Library.

During school visits, the Librarian involved pupils in having a ‘hands on’ session with a range of non-fiction texts.

She also:

- Explained how the library is arranged.
- Illustrated research methods using the idea of an information web.
- Showed how information is located within non-fiction books.
- Read from fiction sources to show how information can be used within a text to enhance a story.
- Left information/worksheets for teachers to use in follow-up activities.
- Left a box of non-fiction books at the schools for pupils to use and enjoy.

Visits to the library enabled pupils to familiarise themselves with the layout. Pupils then carried out an internet search task and were introduced to issues such as possibility of inaccuracy and bias on the web.

Teachers and pupils were very positive about the impact of the work carried out by the Community Librarian.

“Visitors to the school have helped to interest the children in reading and writing.” (AMD)

“The Librarian visited the class with a selection of reference books and worked with the children on research skills. We visited the library the following week where they were able to use their skills to access information on the internet. She gave good advice on using quality texts in fiction which could be used as models for functional writing tasks. (CB)

“The Librarian visited the school with a selection of factual books about food and also recipe books. She delivered a lesson on how to access information from factual books and the internet and how to organise note-taking and research.” (FC)

“Evaluation sheets were circulated to teachers upon completion of the Information Skills sessions, and the results were encouraging. Generally, teachers found the sessions a valuable aid to their work on functional writing with pupils. There was a desire to continue this contact on a regular basis.” (FB)

What did we learn?

"I found the pupils to be more motivated, especially the boys, particularly because of the subject matter and the element of personal choice. This could have been a result of increased enthusiasm on my part however, as I genuinely felt more motivated and invigorated by involvement in the project.

Pupils wrote more, and boy-type learners responded to being given a target number of words in writing.

Sharing criteria meant less time was spent on repeating instructions and presentation of work improved when pupils were made aware of their audience.

The application of formative assessment strategies has improved pupils' writing skills.

Keen to include my S2 pupils, I used the scaffolding and modelling strategies in a poetry unit which resulted in pupils producing the best creative writing I have seen from S2 pupils. These pieces could then be used in either creative writing assessment or appreciation of the writers' craft.

Although cynical by nature and therefore sceptical about the plethora of new initiatives, I do feel that the inclusion on the Building Bridges project has improved my teaching in many ways. I have forged links with primary colleagues and increased communication has, I feel, led to greater understanding among colleagues."
(FC)

"I have become very aware over the year how much the pupils need to know the reason for writing. The pupils were very enthusiastic and produced their best writing when they had to write a letter to their parents and it was actually posted." (AMD)

"Membership of the Building Bridges group has benefited both my pupils and their teacher. A weakness in a specialist secondary course has been improved by using the expertise of primary and English specialist colleagues. My pupils now write better notes, their teacher is now more skilled and barriers between primary and secondary have been weakened." (IB)

"In terms of achieving the appropriate 5-14 levels, which many weren't achieving, I feel we have improved. Certainly for P7, they have achieved level D in writing. They have a clearer idea of what is involved in creating a piece of writing in a variety of genre. For the P6 pupils it is interesting to note that they are meeting success criteria effectively. One pupil who struggles with writing now asks what he needs to do to achieve level C. He is now setting his own targets and his raised self-esteem is wonderful to see. Pupils are now transferring their skills to writing activities in other curricular areas. While working on developing the genre 'Explanation' the pupils had to interview their parents to enable them to write a piece on "My Favourite Things". Judging by the completed work the pupils used good questioning techniques to get expanded answers." (JMD)

"The project has had a positive impact on the quality of writing in our class. I have changed my practice as a result of being involved in the Building Bridges project. I feel more confident using formative assessment strategies and now use them in other curricular areas." (CB)

"I realise that teaching and learning have improved within my composite class of very mixed ability. My own thoughts –

- *Pupils keep on task longer and are more focused.*
- *Less questions asked about task instructions.*
- *Discussion definitely aids understanding.*
- *Speed – most pupils work quicker." (TM)*

"Work on the project has led me to re-evaluate my own approach to teaching Library and Information Skills. I have found the use of star diagrams very useful in defining objectives and keyword searching. I have observed how responsive pupils are to a link between effective research and writing. I have found it very valuable to meet colleagues for an exchange of ideas." (FB)

"One pupil I feel has particularly benefited from the new strategies adopted is a P7 boy who seemed unable to complete any piece of writing or get any pleasure out of writing. He often has a negative attitude to schoolwork. I have noticed a significant improvement this year. When I asked him what had helped him with his writing this year he said,

"I liked working in a group as it's not just your own ideas. It's good having an example and knowing how many words you need to write. I have enjoyed writing this year and prefer it to other subjects. My writing has got much better this year."

Another boy remarked that he had enjoyed a piece of writing because there was so much discussion and he knew the subject and had been shown how to layout the work.

I feel more positive about teaching writing skills myself and have realised the value of:

- *Allowing children time to discuss their work*
- *Working in groups*
- *Giving the children a clear understanding of the purpose of their learning*
- *Giving a good model*
- *Giving positive, constructive feedback." (AMD)*

And the pupils:

"I now think before I start my work."

Referring to WALT and WILF:

"I like what you do now as it is on the board – incase I forget – I know where to look."

"I don't like English much but I have improved. I try my hardest in the subject and my teacher never gives up on me".

"I like knowing what my work should be like at the end and working towards that".

"WALT helped me find English easier because it told me what I was learning. WILF, I really liked because it told us what to do, it was like a guide".

I enjoy English this year because we have been taught more interesting things. We have discussed our work before we started planning or writing and that helps us to do better work".

Where do we go from here?

"The things I would like to improve in my classroom are:

- *The quality of the pupils' discussion in pairs and groups.*
- *My own questioning techniques.*
- *Peer and self-evaluation.*
- *The ability of the children to give extended answers.*

Improvements in these areas would lead to greater confidence and higher self-esteem and this, in turn, along with the formative assessment strategies introduced this year, would improve writing further.

A colleague and myself have already spent a day disseminating our findings to others teaching in our schools. We have also been leading networking meetings for other teachers who have shown an interest in the Building Bridges project. I feel that the work done so far is just the beginning.” (AMD)

“The Building Bridges project and within that, implementation of formative assessment strategies will roll out within the school - to all primary classes and to S1 and S2 through the School Development Plan for 2004/05.” (TM)

“We will continue to build on good practice and will concentrate on other non-fiction genres. The implementation of formative assessment strategies will continue focusing on written and oral feedback.” (JMD)

“Schools in North Uist have expressed a wish for more Information Skills sessions. I hope to ‘roll out’ the sessions to include primary schools on Benbecula and South Uist. I am in the process of revising my S1 and S3 Information Skills courses at Sgoil Lionacleit in the light of new insights gained in the course of the project.” (FB)

Conclusion

A start has been made to sharing good practice through network meetings and this will be continued.

The project team has produced a series of posters covering the various functional writing genres. These posters, designed for use in primary and secondary classes to support pupils in functional writing tasks, will be made available to all schools.

Pupils' writings, exemplifying the various non-fiction genres will be reproduced and used for teaching purposes.

The teachers and librarian have demonstrated commitment and enthusiasm to the project and colleagues within and outwith their schools have taken an interest in the work in which they have been involved. Pupils are clearly more motivated, enjoy writing activities and are producing much improved pieces of writing. They also have a clearer understanding of requirements within the various functional writing genres.

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