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Paper by John O'Connor Senior Lecturer in Design at Dublin Institute of Technology.

Sherkin Island Art Degree Project

Organised by the Higher Education Equality Unit, the conference *Rural Issues in Higher Education* took place in Tipperary Institute on 22nd and 23rd November 2001. The conference proceedings were published in August 2002 ISBN 0-9543323-0-x.

I would like to tell you a story this afternoon. I want to describe a journey. It begins on the most westerly point of Europe . . . moves about as far from there as you could imagine . . . and then continues on the Atlantic coastline. It is the story of my part in a project that we – in the School of Art, Design & Printing – have embarked on in partnership with the Sherkin Island Development Society (SIDS).

It begins in An Blascaod Mór – the Great Blasket Island – in 1953. Following years of emigration and the difficulty of eking a living from the poor land and pitiless sea: it was, finally, the inability (due to inclement weather) of a doctor to cross from the mainland to attend a young man who had fallen ill and died, that resulted in the decision to evacuate the remaining residents to the mainland¹. On that day a unique island community ceased to exist. An extinction, every bit as tragic as that of the great auk, or the impending extinction of the giant panda and the mountain gorilla, was witnessed in this country. The Blasket Island community began the journey into mythology.

This tiny island community was a remnant of a previous era: the oral tradition still held sway, Irish was not only the first language² but, for many, the only language. And yet, a

unique and distinctive literary heritage emerged from this community. Scholars from across Europe came to study their language and culture and, also translated the books bringing them to an international readership.

I see this as an economic, political, social, and cultural failure on the part of the country. Perhaps a harsh judgement on such a relatively young state – and all too easy to make with the benefit of hindsight. At the time priorities were different. This was after all, the period in which the railways were dug up to make way for the motor car. The government was driving forward with a programme of modernisation and economic development. The response to isolated communities was to bring them into the mainstream.

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I began visiting the Blasket Island regularly about fourteen years ago. I have often wondered about the fate of the island community. Could it have survived into the twenty-first century? The conventional wisdom seems to be that it couldn't; the harsh existence and the isolation from the supposed civilisation of the mainland was deemed intolerable. Yet, this community survived – and even flowered

– for hundreds of years. Ironically, it was only with the arrival of the technological revolution in this country that the island existence seemed to become unbearable.

In 1998 I spent a few days camping on this rock which basks like a whale in the Atlantic – the most westerly point in Europe, less than a thousand feet above sea level at its highest. Some weeks later I was at the centre of the greatest land mass on the planet, on the roof of the world. At around twelve thousand feet above sea level I had come to Ladakh – in the Northern Indian Himalayas.

I was part of a small group trekking through the mountains to visit the remote villages of the region. These villages were essentially isolated islands in a bone dry desert. Our guide, a local youngster, skipped up and down the hills and through the passes along ancient trading paths, dressed simply in a pair of old runners, jeans, a sweatshirt and baseball cap. We, in contrast, were togged out in expensive hiking boots and all the essential accoutrements of experienced hill-walkers, but lagging behind; attempting to extract what little oxygen we could from the thin, dry air to feed our starved muscles. I could feel the desert sucking the precious moisture from my lungs at every breath.

During one of my conversations with Sonam, the guide, he told me he was studying at a university town some way down the mountains. I asked what he intended to do when he was finished, anticipating a desire to get away, see the world and maybe settle down in a city. But in fact, his intention was to return to live in his home village. This village, of some few hundred inhabitants, had only recently acquired electricity.

* * * * *

Some months later I had taken up my position as Head of School and a conversation with Bernadette Burns, a lecturer in painting, turned to islands. She has strong links with Sherkin Island, off the West Cork coast and spends much of the year living there. The island, and the entire West Cork area, hosts a vibrant artistic community. Bernadette had taught art classes in the island Community Hall over the years but, had always wanted to develop something more permanent. She knew there was a demand for a more formalised approach to art education.

As she continued I remembered the lost community of the Blasket and the desert islands of Ladakh. These stories had convinced me that education is the key to survival. It is axiomatic in rural and island communities that once the primary school cannot be sustained the community is all but lost. If the youngest, brightest and most energetic members are plucked from the community its heart and soul begins to wither.

Education results in empowerment. A White Paper³ on European Social Policy issued by the Commission in 1994 emphasised the vital need for a society in which all are active, all can contribute. In order to bridge the 'quality of life' gap for members of isolated communities access to education must be addressed. However, the traditional forms of third level education centralised in large urban areas exacerbates the problem by taking the youngest and most able contributors out of their communities. Traditional forms of distance education have not provided the solution because the programmes on offer have not always been appropriate to these communities. People need to have an input into developing programmes that are truly relevant.

So, Bernadette introduced me to Liam Chambers, the Islands' Development Officer. We quickly decided to arrange a meeting between staff of the School and members of SIDS to explore the possibility of cooperating to develop a viable programme.

The three pillars of our discussions were:

- partnership
- relevance; and
- sustainability.

The initial meeting was a success – both professionally and socially. We agreed to form a partnership between the SIDS and the School of Art, Design & Printing.

In a true partnership there must be a return for both sides. That is the only way to sustain it.

Our interest, as educators, is in developing a model for linking isolated communities with third level educational institutions where a true sharing of knowledge can arise. In this way educational programmes that are truly useful to these communities may be devised, validated and delivered. In the process we have the opportunity to test the efficacies of new digital technologies and pedagogical approaches. The project also forces us to develop new ways of assessing learning – in a manner that is inclusive and empowering rather than judgmental.

Sherkin's interest is in having a course specifically designed for the local community, that will stimulate development and impact on the economy.

However, learning is a two way street, as they say. What of the local culture and indigenous knowledge base? For example, island communities tend to have an innate understanding of the need for flexibility and adaptability at a fundamental level: this ability is

essential for survival in the frequently adverse conditions they face. This is valuable knowledge in today's changing world. We need to recognise such forms of knowledge and begin to find ways of disseminating it. It may seem absurd to suggest that the 'keepers of knowledge' have anything to learn from isolated communities but, Helena Norberg-Hodge⁴ proposes that cultures like that of Ladakh can point the way towards a 'sustainable balance – a balance between urban and rural, male and female, culture and nature.'

This process of exchanging knowledge and learning in an equal partnership is essential to preserve the structural integrity of the community and ensure sustainable development which will broaden the economic base of the community.

Over the course of the following year a series of meetings were held in Cork, Dublin and Sherkin. We began to tease out the issues. Apart from our goal to develop some kind of accredited course we had no real idea how to proceed so we simply continued to talk, discuss, argue, read and write until a picture began to emerge. Eventually, we decided that a pilot programme in Art & Culture would be a good place to start. It would be open to participants from the South Western islands – Cape Clear, Sherkin, Heir, Rathlin, Long Island, Whiddy, and the mainland West Cork region. The pilot would be recorded, monitored and evaluated with a view to assessing the feasibility of producing a full Degree Programme.

The pilot was designed for delivery using a combination of live and remote methods. It was built around a series of four day intensive workshops which involved a member of our staff travelling to Sherkin to deliver. A fully qualified lecturer from the local community

facilitated one and two day workshops in the intervening periods. Lectures were delivered via video conferencing and email links were established. The pilot was accredited under the Dublin Institute of Technology's Short Course Programme. This enabled the awarding of credits under the European Credit Transfer System with the intention that they can be combined with credits available on any future degree programme to be developed.

Following interviews in the island fourteen places were offered on the pilot which ran from October 2000 to May 2001. It was an unqualified success. The feedback from the participants was positive. Both the SIDS and ourselves were satisfied with the results and so decided to extend the pilot to include another intake for this academic year while continuing with a second stage for the existing participants. With such a positive result we also decided to begin the process of seeking validation from the Institute for a full degree programme.

That brings you pretty much up to date on the story. So, what have we learned from the project so far? What nuggets of information can we pass on to help others developing community programmes?

A good place to start is to review the questions I had when the notion was first proposed. They can be grouped under three headings:

- what will it cost?
- what resources are required?
- how can the project be sustained?

You will not be surprised to hear that there are no definitive answers to these questions. However, I can begin to sketch out some of the issues that we tackled.

Firstly, the cost factor. This question really

revolves around decision making responsibility. For my part, as a Head of School I had access to a budget and reasonable discretion. In addition, I had the authority to allow staff become involved in something that could be seen as somewhat outside our remit. We were also fortunate that DIT is very supportive of research, access and community development, and we successfully applied for a series of grants within the Institute.

SIDS is also a body with the authority to make decisions and fund projects. It had the responsibility for providing accommodation for the course and pay for two local lecturers. This required a serious financial commitment and, clearly, would need specific funding. This came from the Department of Education & Science under the Education Equality Initiative. This scheme is funding the project over three years.

Naturally, there are a range of other costs, such as transport, subsistence, course materials and so on. We also have to consider the impact on participants who may be on benefit of one sort or another, and issues such as childcare.

In addition, we have been clear, from the beginning, that the project will need ongoing funding support to be sustainable. So, our approach has been to build a solid foundation for the project – to allow it develop slowly and have it well rooted in the community.

Secondly, the need for a basic level of resources. Surprisingly, this turned out to be even more important than the funding issue. There are two kinds of resources to be considered. Obviously, the physical resources: a suitable building, equipment etc. But, perhaps, less obviously and yet more importantly, the human resources.

The single most important factor leading to the success of this project is: trust. A project like this will try every ounce of your patience; everything that can go wrong will go wrong at some stage or another; because building anything new requires imagination and risk-taking the project will face opposition at times. The only way to survive these pressures is to have genuine trust between the partners. In our case this was facilitated by Bernadette Burns who had a foot in both camps. As a member of staff at the School she understood the demands that would be made on us by the Institute and, as a long-time resident in Sherkin, she knew the community. This allowed the development of the team that has guided the project.

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of nurturing the development of the team. We met as regularly as possible; we ensured that as well as conducting business we had time to socialise and get to know each other more fully. As a result we were always able to speak frankly, address problems that arose and ensure no misunderstanding developed.

The physical resources already in place that made consideration of the project a possibility in the first place included the Community Hall in Sherkin, video conferencing facilities both in Sherkin and Dublin, access to basic computer terminals and internet access.

Finally, the question of sustainability. From the beginning, it was our objective to keep sustainability at the heart of our considerations. To raise expectations just to have them dashed at a later stage would have done more harm to the community than good.

Sustainability is more a state of mind than anything else. If people really believe something is valuable they will do all they can to ensure its continued existence. So the project

had to be embedded in the community. This could be achieved only by complete participation in the development of a learning environment and empowering the community to effect change. This is why the development of trust between the partners is so important.

Of course, the other requirement for sustainability is funding. We took the decision at the very beginning to get the project up and running on the resources we had available. The reasoning was that it would be easier to get funding for an existing successful project than for a potentially good idea that had yet to be tried. It was agreed that once we could prove viability we would begin to develop strategies for ongoing funding. We are now at the point of considering that step.

So, watch this space. I am confident you will be hearing more of this project.

Notes

1. The 'evacuation of the remaining islanders was urged upon the local TD after the death in mid-winter of a young man of the Kearney family, who had fallen ill over Christmas. Because of bad weather it had been impossible to bring a doctor or priest to him from the mainland, and his funeral was delayed for some days.'

Stagles, Joan & Ray, *The Blasket Islands*, Next Parish America. Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1984, pp 131–5

2. 'Only Irish is spoken and little English is known. Reading is a habit only recently acquired and seldom practised.'

Llewelyn Davies, Moya & Thomson, George, *Translators' preface to Twenty Years a-Growing* by Muiris Ó Súilleabháin. London: Oxford University Press, 1933, p viii.

3. *White Paper on European Social Policy*, European Commission, 1994.

4. Norberg-Hodge, Helena, *Ancient Futures – Learning from Ladakh*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992, p 5.