

**Open Meeting of the Comhairle na Gàidhlig
Language Development and Education Committee, Dec 6, 2009**

Present: Susan Cameron, Michael Linkletter, Ken Nilsen, Tim Aggett, Ashley MacKay, Mairi Sine Parr, Rosemary Poirier, Dwayne MacEachern, Michael Newton, Caroline Cameron

Regrets: Several people sent regrets that they were unable to attend due to schedule and poor weather.

The meeting was opened with an explanation by Comhairle na Gàidhlig staff, Caroline Cameron of its purpose. In her role, she is responsible for developing the Comhairle as an effective supporter of Gaelic development, which requires buy-in from individuals, groups and government. It is necessary to bring CnG work into a wider forum of interested people in order to strengthen both effectiveness and credibility.

Secondly, if the CnG is to get resources to act on behalf of the community, it should use them well, otherwise the resources can be moved elsewhere. If we focus only on getting work done, without collaborating with the community, the Comhairle may execute successful projects independently, but this work would not be effective in building a strong organization and community, and the work may not be in line with community needs. It must be done in concert with the community, which requires strong committees that are hard-wired to the community.

Thirdly, there is an excellent Education Committee in place, but supporting the range of community, school and university offerings requires a broad range of experience and expertise. We need to be well informed and directed. With a good structure and breadth of input, we will increase the effectiveness of our work.

This meeting was called to bring out people who want to contribute in some way to moving things forward. It was noted that the discussion here was just one conversation to be built upon over time. A larger group can follow the discussions through Email. People were asked to resist dominating the floor, and to make room for others' points of view. The discussion would include all education sectors together to discuss general concerns, and then if desired, the sectors could break off to discuss specific strategies.

The members of the Education Committee who were present were introduced: Tim Aggett, Susan Cameron, and Ashley MacKay. Those not able to attend were Debbi MacDonald Sobey, Beth Anne MacEachern and Chair Emily MacKinnon.

Current projects of the Language Development and Education Committee:

- To increase the Gaelic language teaching capacity in Nova Scotia – we hosted a tutor-training workshop in November in Ainslie Glen
- To inventory Gaelic language educational resources – this was stalled by the possibility that the OGA would hire a researcher, but some work has been started with a Wiki site set up by Susan
- To promote the creation of social spaces for speaking Gaelic – one student took on this question over the summer and discussed it with many communities. We learned a lot, which we plan to roll into future work.
- To investigate ways to make Gaelic language education more affordable and accessible – TIP is generally not inaccessibly expensive, but it is difficult for serious learners to take off the necessary time from work to engage in training, so compensation would be helpful.
- To promote Gaelic language education in all our communications – providing portals for interested people to get involved.
- To host a school competition in Gaelic Awareness Month – we must work on this to bring it about for 2010/11 school year

The discussion was then opened to the floor and the following comments were presented:

- Advanced learners need offerings – something in between lecture series / workshop days bringing 3 or 4 people in to make presentations, as well as story telling sessions.
- Universities may not be in communication amongst themselves, plus we all know little about school curriculum. These sectors' work is independent of community work, which has no curriculum or strategies for sharing techniques with each other. There is a need for interaction between sectors so that each can build on each other's contribution.
We should formulate a path for life-long Gaelic learning – Gaelic can go beyond a learning experience to a living experience.
- There are parallel parent organizations such as Canadian Parents for French Language Education – we need this.
- Perceptions of community and formal education have contributed to the view that these fields are exclusive of each other and are in competition, rather than these each having particular strengths and contributing different values. (For example, the strength of community level instruction is in fluency and community building, while school offerings provide literacy, prestige to the language and contact with parents through students). People's opinions are based on their own experience. School offerings are often judged on French programming which they received in schools 30 years ago, but may not incorporate how current Gaelic teachers are contributing. TIP can complement school offerings, which are limited to a short time. Students should not be exposed to the view that these approaches are in conflict.
- Focussing exclusively on certain aspects of Gaelic may be self-defeating.

- The ‘bigger picture’ of how Gaelic is perceived and our overall goals is not articulated, and this may be one contribution of higher education. There is a basis for this work in community consultation data.
- We need the ‘30 second blurb’ that articulates our vision. The Comhairle’s Communications and Promotions meeting is working on this issue, and will be hosting a meeting in the new year.
- We need to build links with the community. People and decision-makers need to be convinced of the importance of representing the contribution of Gaelic to our lives and institutions. People are partly handicapped by past attitudes about Gaelic, but a portion of the younger generation is free of negative attitudes. This is the kind of advocacy work that the Gaelic Council can undertake. Generally the Council board feels that it is most important that such work gets done, rather than being concerned about who does it, but we will support whatever work falls in line with our objectives.
- The issues which are important to Gaelic development are shared with other cultural groups which DO get media attention, so we must work on drawing attention to our concerns.
 - We need media events which allow an opportunity for comment – for example, the tutor workshop was a success and it was reported by the Inverness Oran – but that is just a small step.
 - The Council also needs a clear PR protocol
 - We need the public to write letters in support of our advocacy positions
 - And we need to get the info out there in order to support greater awareness and well informed, strong arguments

Comments from a number of individuals who submitted Emails in advance of this meeting were presented:

Community level learning:

- We need more Gaelic immersion opportunities for the more serious Gaelic learners.
- Priority must be given to tutors, teachers and parents who have children at home and will use the Gaelic language in the home setting.
- How do we get more of the "not already convinced" into the task at hand. Action must be determined always by the Gaelic community. If not, efforts will be unsuccessful.
- We need a policy with regards to tutors:
 - We must not only train tutors but
 - Have a doable strategy to retain tutors.
 - Which tutors will be the priority for our efforts?
- We need to develop an association of instructors which
 - establishes regular contact with the Department of Education and
 - has a representative from the Council's Education Committee,

Areas of concern regarding school level teaching:

- More communication with schools boards and school board administration regarding Gaelic programs for students and professional in-servicing for Gaelic teachers.
- There is no provincial position to monitor the promotion and overall supervision of Gaelic programs. This expertise exists for all other cultures/languages in our area.
- There is no body in place at the school board level to make sure that Gaelic programs are adequately advertised in schools to students and parents and sustained and managed properly,
- We have no proper Gaelic representation at the school level
- An expert could come over from Scotland to communicate with our schools regarding Gaelic as we don't have this expertise yet.
- To engage school board members would result in great benefits for the Gaelic.
- We should have a strategy to approach all school boards across Nova Scotia with regards to more Gaelic in the schools
- Identify challenges and appropriate resources for student learners in the public school system and communicating this to the Department of Education,
- Understand how further training for Gaelic instructors in the public school system can be realized.

Because it important not to drain ourselves by focussing too much on our needs and deficiencies, it was suggested by a meeting participant that we switch the focus of the discussion to an inventory of assets to provide a platform for finding strength to build upon. A wide range of resources were listed, which I have organized into categories.

Internet resources:

- Gaelicstream and Cainnt mo Mhàthar are geared towards advanced learners
- Beaton Institute
- Work through Time – four cultures represented
- BBC programs for early learners – as well as videos - their access for Nova Scotians needs to be addressed – perhaps follow-up with Allan MacMaster, can it be a part of MOU with Scottish Highlands?
- The need to understand what the public school offering consists of, and who to contact with comments. This was addressed a few times. The “Celebrating our Celtic Heritage” curriculum was an example of a program that people want to know the content of because of its popularity. Discussion addressed how much Gaelic might be presented in the course. It was suggested that the Gaelic curriculum which is offered at various schools should be posted on the internet for people to review.
- Ceumanan – Scottish material
- Wiki Resource listing is set up and open for contributions. Susan Cameron agreed to send invitations to everyone present to participate.
- ‘Google groups’
- Social networking – facebook, MyGaelic.com
- Skype – we can consider resources that aren't ‘Gaelic resources’
- NSCC infrastructure / communications
- MacEdward Leach Collections
- Tobar an Dualchas

Radio:

- CJKM Cheticamp has weekly show
- Judique – current project in the works
- Island Echoes – early shows had high Gaelic content - can we access these?

Institutional:

- Libraries
- CnG
- OGA – this is a big achievement
- St Ann’s Gaelic College
- Highland Village
- Siol Enterprises
- Libraries
- Collections
- AGA
- Celtic Studies program

Events:

- March Break workshops for youth
- Film Festivals
- Children’s presentations – school plays, film showings
- Gaelic Day at StFX
- Gaelic singing groups
- Lunch & Learn
- Events which do not require funding are important to long-term development

Print:

Columns, magazines, OGA MMR

Organizations:

Heritage Groups
Community Language Groups
Museums

Other

Roads signs
Technology, infrastructure
Leadership provided by other cultural groups

Venues

An t-Àite
St Ann’s Gaelic College property
Highland Village

Employment

CnG Hiring students

This list of topics can in no way be considered exhaustive, and was not intended to be so, but it helps set the course of the discussion, and will serve as good base to move forward. From the perspective of the Education Committee, it is useful to consider the overall benefit of these assets in terms of how many educational sectors each supports.

A thread of the discussion addressed unrealized or partially realized opportunities in various fields that serve as needs or potential objectives in support of Gaelic development.

Event opportunities

- Sponsoring films at larger film festivals – CnG can advocate to include Gaelic films
- Children’s presentations – school plays, film showings provides more exposure in communities
- Opportunities for a Gaelic play festival
- Exchanges
- Need more Youtube postings – milling frolics, recreation of making bonnach, maragan making (produced on North Shore) – these are good learning resources but also promote the organizations that create them.

Educational opportunities

- Increase programming at St Ann’s Gaelic College
- Promote Celtic Studies Program to schools
- Wiki resource list
- Consider the benefits of different types of public school curriculum offerings
- Service learning opportunities can provide Gaelic daycare – can we establish a croileachan (sp?)?
- Seniors’ homes present a great opportunity for Gaelic programming.

Networking opportunities

- Radio programmes
- Social networking
- Discussion group on education
- Using radio and print for events
- Service learning – students working with preschoolers, nurseries, community opportunities, linking school children with university such as Spórs program.
- We have the Acadian Community to look to for examples. Learning from other cultures’ development work
- PEI connections

Advocacy opportunities

- Need various discussion groups/ message boards for advocacy, events and education
- Need to bring the discussion into the community
- Example of development in the success of Gaelic music
- Could use a brainstorming session around Gaelic entrepreneurialism. Caroline described CnG proposal for an annual forum over five years which could assist in this.

Following this discussion, the group was asked if there were immediate issues to be worked upon.

- Generally there is more need to talk and collaborate. Forthright discussion of concerns seems to be counter-culture to contemporary Gaelic culture, we therefore don't have the fullest opportunity for understanding the elements at play in our work. The group was pleased with the frank discussion at this meeting.
- Need to understand why more youth/high school students don't get out to university events – how can these be promoted as attractive to them? Truro students do attend – Create a dialogue around 'cool' and the opportunities which come with Gaelic Education, beyond teaching.
- Further discussion of knowing about school offerings, the effect of offering it opposite French – perhaps creates an issue between cultural groups, ensure that this is not divisive, want to encourage the blend of cultural skills - post where Gaelic is being offered.

We agreed that a follow-up meeting be scheduled for February, and that notes of this meeting will be circulated. The objective of the meeting will be to continue to discuss some of the needs and opportunities across the sectors of Gaelic education and in the medium term identify priorities and strategies that the community as a whole can work to address through its collective resources.

**Special thanks to Rosemary Poirier
for agreeing to host this meeting at her home in Antigonish.**