



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Making Best Practice Stick

Rural Youth Projects: Bridging the Border



An operating division of the Countryside Agency

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Introduction

The Bridging the Border project helps young people aged 11 to 25 in the Tweed catchment area to explore, appreciate and enjoy the wonderful cultural and natural heritage on their doorsteps. They are encouraged to become more aware and knowledgeable about where they live through fieldtrips, activities and events. The project officer works with school children, youth groups and community organisations and puts them in touch with experts in their fields such as artists, environmentalists and historians.

The project's uniqueness is its capacity to take the locality's outstanding cultural and environmental assets and use them to give young people pride in their origins and confidence in asserting their newly acquired knowledge. The project is situated in the isolated rural areas along the border between England and Scotland. The Tweed river system, which is one of the least polluted in the UK, supports a large variety of flora and fauna. The history of the area is also significant, with prehistoric settlements, hillforts, castles and battlefields from the Border Wars (an era of continuous warfare and rebellion in British history).

The work of the project

Bridging the Border started out as one of a number of heritage projects initiated by the Tweed Forum, a group of organisations with an interest in the future well-being of the Tweed.

Phase I of the project, which came to an end in 2003, concentrated on supplying teaching resources for Key Stages I and II (i.e. up to 10 years). Currently in Phase II, the project is about working with 11-25 year olds in a more informal way, not only through schools but also through youth groups and other community groups. Although this phase of the project comes to an end in August 2006, discussions are underway about how the project might continue, perhaps with greater emphasis on working with harder to reach young people.

Suzanne Wilson is the Bridging the Border project officer based in England. The project operates as one project but from two bases, one in England and one in Scotland. She is very aware that what she does with young people often has particular appeal for those who do not always engage with other, more formal, means of education.

The project has three main elements: Field trips, activities and events. In the past three years the project has taken young people into the outdoors for orienteering, shelter building, falconry, mountain biking and canoeing, and for other activities involving environmental art, history, archaeology and sculpture. To encourage an interest in local history, for example, the project officer might organise story telling activities or bring in archaeologists to talk about their work and how their finds relate to a particular locality. When two boys found a piece of old pottery the project officer called upon a whole range of experts to explore the historic and cultural significance of the piece. The boys were thrilled that their find led to such an interesting and valuable experience for the group.

The project officer makes sure that whatever the young people do is fun.

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“I liked speaking Latin when we learnt about the Romans. And the marching was good fun.” Kate and Jade

“We learned about trees, which trees you can use for shelters. And we played a game to learn about how animals camouflage themselves.” Liam and Tim

“You get fit going up the river. It’s good fun. I would do it again.” Joe and Colin

The project officer believes that rural children need guidance about their environments, just like urban children do. As she explains: *“Even though many of these young people live in the countryside, they do not necessarily connect with the land or with the wider environment.”*

She also believes that adventurous activities in the countryside offer real scope for personal development: *“Sometimes we take them out into the wilderness, set them a challenge and show them what they can achieve.”*

A group of Year 10 students from Berwick High School recently had a chance to shadow workers from Northumberland National Park to learn about environmental jobs and have a go for themselves. They went on a hill-fort walk with an archaeologist, built signposts, bird boxes and bridges with the Rangers, then carried out plant surveys with an ecologist and habitat studies with an education officer. The boys worked hard and gained enough knowledge to be able to lead their own guided walk for a group of Year 9s. At first many of them did not feel they would be able to do this, but they pulled it off. Suzanne adds: *“At first, many young people automatically say ‘I can’t’ when we tell them about what they will be asked to do. But invariably when shown what to do, and given encouragement, they do it and are really proud of what they have done.”*

The Land Lines project

A small valley just outside Wooler in Northumberland was the location for a community project led by a professional artist and young people. The valley is not named on any maps yet it contains many natural and cultural features, including an Iron Age hill fort over which passes part of St Cuthbert’s Way, and the Pinwell, a small wishing well filled by a spring. For generations, people have come to throw a bent pin into the well for luck, particularly young ladies who wished to be married.

Since a pipeline had been run through the valley in 2000, degradation of this previously wild site occurred. A local artist initiated the project to raise awareness of the valley’s assets. She worked with around 100 young people carrying out surveys of the site’s heritage and biodiversity, improving paths and habitats through practical conservation and through workshops produced many artistic interpretations of the place, including a stunning collage map, poems and a leaflet. The project brought together local people, landowners and other organisations to think about the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Pinwell area and how it might be maintained for future generations.

Resources for teachers and youth leaders

Bridging the Border also provides high-quality resources for others wishing to undertake similar work in their own localities. The resources include locally specific packs, with activities that young people can do in woodland, near rivers and on the coast. The project has also set up a maths trail with the Forest Education Initiative. The trail follows an established footpath through woods, with activities such as measuring the height of a tree or looking at its age along the way.

There is also training for teachers and youth leaders, to help them to offer environmental or cultural activities with young people. Training sessions have included woodland skills, first aid in the outdoors, and running orienteering sessions.

Creating sculptural benches and interpretation boards

When Sustrans opened a new cycle route as part of the Pennine Cycleway, it worked with the Bridging the Border project to give school children and youth groups the chance to design benches and interpretation panels for along the route. The young people went on field trips for inspiration, visited a sculptor in her studio, and made models with clay and wood. The result was two beautifully designed benches, one inspired by the area's natural environment and the other by its cultural heritage. The groups decided to launch the benches with a cycle ride, an art exhibition and a bar-b-q.

Suzanne Wilson explains: *"This project gave young people the chance to work with a professional artist. Those in rural areas do not always have the same kind of opportunities as those who live in cities to do interesting things like this."*

How this project works for young people

Bridging the Border also provides high-quality resources for others wishing to undertake similar work in their own localities.

The project has a very open brief, and is able to make the most of opportunities that draw on local attributes and expertise. It works in partnership with a wide range of individuals and organisations, many of them experts in their fields, to bring subjects such as history and the environment to life.

The project officer is very receptive to young people's ideas. Because they are involved in early decisions about what it is they want to do, having been told what is available, they tend to find the experience very fruitful and can see their own contributions to achievements.

Although the project does not target 'hard to reach' young people specifically, it does appear to have particular resonance with them, perhaps because it is practical, fun and they have a say. One original project objective was to work with "young people with accessibility difficulties", and this includes those who are rurally isolated. In some places this can be really difficult, especially where the population is sparse and there are no groups or organisations through which she can work. Although this is an attractive rural area, there are some pockets of

“I learned a lot about our past and the land. I respect the place more. At first I didn’t think it was that special but I know what it’s all about now.” William

extreme deprivation and in some communities there is literally nothing for young people to do. It is not surprising that they feel their environment has little to offer.

The project's transport budget has been highly beneficial in this sparsely populated area. Some groups are “over the moon” when they are told that the project will arrange transport to an activity or event. As Suzanne says: *“You can organise whatever you like, but if people can’t get there or you can’t get to them, then you are wasting your time.”*

As a cross-border initiative, much of the value of the project stems from the way it helps to overcome any prejudices or rivalry that young people might have. The project officer seeks out opportunities to invite youngsters from both sides of the border to her activities. On trips, she likes to point out, to the group’s astonishment, that they have been across the border a dozen times during the journey!

Partnerships and funding

The project works with the following partner organisations:

- Tweed Forum
- Northumberland National Park Authority
- Scottish Borders Council
- The Tweed Foundation
- Scottish Natural Heritage
- Scottish Borders Environment Partnership
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency
- Community Council of Northumberland

It is funded, on the English side, by the following organisations:

- Heritage Lottery Fund 40%
- Leader + 32%
- Northumberland National Park Authority 28%

Summary

Bridging the Border works in a very isolated part of the country to create interesting things for the young people who live here to do. Its informal approach to education has particular value for young people who although they may not be interested in more formal teaching, nevertheless feel the same need as everybody else to be doing something and doing it with other people who know a thing or two about it.

“The project is very different to learning in the classroom and I feel that I have grown more confident in my skills and as a person working as part of a team.” Melissa

The emphasis is on creativity, and the project's wide appeal stems from the fact that young people are given freedom to explore their own ideas.

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