

2010

Bun is Bàrr Project Closure Report



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9/15/2010



BACKGROUND

In 2008 the Office of Gaelic Affairs piloted the Bun is Bàrr Gaelic language and cultural mentorship program involving four people: Jim Watson mentor, Shay MacMullin and Carmen MacArthur, apprentices, and Mary Jane Lamond Gaelic singer who also participated as a host and apprentice.

The **goals** of the *pilot program* were:

To test the draft curriculum developed by Jim Watson for Bun is Bàrr and make revisions and improvements as required. The end result should be curriculum that could be used by other mentors in Nova Scotia.

- To test the viability of doing a mentorship program with students who live a distance from the mentor.
- To evaluate ways to include elderly native speakers in the program.
- To explore the use of digital resources such as *Sruth nan Gaidheal* and *Cainnt mo Mhàthar* as a tool for learners.
- To give apprentices experience in creating social spaces in which they can mentor other Gaelic learners.
- To explore ways to include other Gaelic specialists in the program: such as Gaelic researchers and singers.

Project components include:

1. Conversational opportunity with fluent and native speakers;
2. Engagement of Nova Scotia's Gaelic cultural expressions;
3. Grounding in the historical and modern makeup of Gaelic Nova Scotia;

4. Training in accessing and developing technical resources for building Gaelic skills focusing on *Sruth nan Gaidheal*;
5. Experience in organizing Gaelic social spaces;
6. Prescriptive routines for improving language ability in the areas of writing, reading, and idiomatic expression.

The Pilot Program was to run from February 9 until May 8, 2009. It continued until a final evaluation meeting on June 7. It was extended as the pilot team did not feel they completed all the hours required. A final report on the program was issued in August 2009.

A meeting was held with the participants on October 5, 2009 to discuss the outcome of the pilot evaluation and recommendations from that report. To meet one of the goals, to prepare apprentices to mentor other apprentices, the apprentices felt they needed more time to work with their mentor on their language, cultural and mentoring skills. A pre-mentoring program schedule was developed, bringing the participants together for four, two to four-day sessions in the fall. This was a residential program, and participants felt this extended time was very valuable. Shay MacMullin noticed that in the evening, after working on structured learning through the day, she was able to relax and let what she learned surface in natural conversation. She writes in Gaelic (email sent in August 2010) on what she gained from Bun is Bàrr and the three most important things to focus on in future programs: *An càirdeas a rinn sinn còmhladh. Ghabh mi suim mhór as na h-òrain nach robh agam roimh' ach gu ìre beag. Tha mi fada na `s fheàrr gus Gàidhlig a sgrìobhadh na bha mi. Tha am misneachd agam air fàs. Chòrdadh teagasg rium na bu mhoth' na bha e. Tha mo chuid Gàidhlig fada, fada na `s fheàrr na bha e. Dhèanainn-sa céilidh air duine sam bith aig a bheil Gàidhlig anis. Cumaidh mi Gàidhlig ris an fheadhainn òga agam.*

Na trì rudan a `s cudthromaiche

1. *Feumaidh cothrom bogaidh a bhith ann na `s fhaide na beagan uairean a thìde.*
2. *Feumaidh na tàilleabhaich cumail conaltradh ri chéile.*
3. *Feumaidh iad obair a dheanadh air na h-òrain, na naidheachdan agus tar-sgrìobhaidhean, agus feumaidh e bhith `na spòrs!*

(The friendships we made. I became very interested in songs. I am much better to write in Gaelic. My confidence increased. I enjoy teaching more. My Gaelic is much, much better than it was. I can visit anyone with Gaelic now. I speak Gaelic with my children now.

The three most important points:

1. There has to be immersion opportunities much longer than a few hours in length.
2. The apprentices need to keep in touch with each other

3. They have to work on songs, stories, transcriptions and the program should be fun.)

Communication and file management for the fall program was facilitated by Basecamp project management software and the participants also tested a blog which included photos and information on the program (www.bunisbarr.blogspot.com)

In January 2010, the Mentor's Guide for Bun is Bàrr was revised with input from the pilot team. A new logo was developed in February 2010 and a Call for Expressions of Interest was distributed on February 23, seeking two mentors and four apprentices. Deadline for letters of interest was March 8, 2010. The Office of Gaelic Affairs received 17 letters of interest to be an apprentice and six letters of interest to be a mentor. From March 10-19 Frances MacEachen, Jim Watson and Carmen MacArthur spoke to the apprentice applicants to determine their level of Gaelic. Two people withdrew their applicant letters. Six were determined to have a level of Gaelic appropriate for participation in the Bun is Bàrr program and nine were determined to be at a beginner or intermediate level, not yet ready for the program. At this time the Office of Gaelic Affairs received support from the Department of Seniors (\$8,000) which allowed us to add another mentoring team. The Office of Gaelic Affairs decided to establish three teams to accommodate the six apprentices ready for the program and three mentors who had excellent language and cultural skills. Jim Watson was offered a position as mentor again, and Hector MacNeil and Effie Rankin were chosen as the other two mentors. Apprentices were assigned to mentors based on their geographic location, their family or dialectal preference (if known) and efforts were made to ensure that apprentices did not work with someone who they had as a teacher before. This was to ensure new friendships and experiences for both the apprentice and mentor. The teams were: Effie Rankin, Laura Stirling and Kenneth Morrison; Jim Watson, Emily MacKinnon and Pàdraig Bennet; Hector MacNeil, Meaghan O' Handley and Norman MacIntyre.

The teams met with the OGA on April 9 at Nova Scotia Highland Village. The OGA intended to have the teams come together for a residential orientation at the Gaelic College at the same time as one of their immersion weekends; however the immersion weekend was cancelled so a shorter evening meeting was held. Members of the pilot team were on hand to answer questions and to help with planning. Apprentices were given reading binders, a copy of *Highland Settler* and *Na Beanntaichean Gorma*. They formed into their teams and scheduled meetings for the upcoming three months that they would work together.

The mentors were expected to spend five hours one-on-one with each apprentice, or 10 hours as team, per week, with their mentor, either in person or on the phone. Apprentices were also expected to do any assigned homework or readings. They were also expected to visit native Gaelic speakers.

The three mentors provided the Office of Gaelic Affairs with a report on their activity. Effie Rankin and Hector MacNeil chose to work with their apprentices for several hours over one day a week. Effie also worked on Skype with Laura and Kenneth every Thursday from 8:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. Patrick and Emily had regular phone conversations with Jim. When Patrick drove to Cape Breton he spent weekends at Jim, allowing for a residential and extended Gaelic experience. The mentors provided a list of the materials they worked on, the native speakers they visited and observations they had regarding the program and the progress of the apprentices.

At the end of the program the Office of Gaelic Affairs hosted *Caidreamh Bun is Bàrr*, a Gaelic social which brought together not only the Bun is Bàrr participants but other Gaelic speakers. Held at the Grand Narrows Hotel on July 4 and attended by 35-40 people, the afternoon featured Gaelic stories, conversation, songs, fiddling and dancing.

Before Caidreamh, Bun is Bàrr participants gathered to talk about the program, what they liked and what could be improved. Telephone conversations were also held with the apprentices after the program.



PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES:

- **Focus on Nova Scotia Gaelic language and culture** – Apprentices liked the focus on local dialects, for two reasons: One, to learn more about a particular dialect that the apprentice wanted to learn (i.e. the South Uist or Barra dialect spoken around Boisdale and Christmas Island where Meaghan, Norman and Hector lived); and, two, to learn about the variety of dialects in Nova Scotia. Patrick said he benefited from Jim’s knowledge of dialects and from the recorded oral tradition he was assigned to listen to and transcribe. Audio files were useful in helping to obtain dialectal/idiomatic expressions. Reading transcriptions for the mentor and/or “parroting back” what the mentor said or read was helpful for rhythm and *blas*. Transcriptions were also helpful, although time-consuming. The degree to which transcribing recorded speech is helpful depends upon the reading, writing and comprehension skills of the apprentice. This work may be too advanced for some and mentors may simply choose to have the apprentice read material already transcribed. Just learning about the stories was exciting for Emily MacKinnon, who recalls working on *Sgeulachd nan Gillean Glasa*, a story told by the late Neil John Gillis, Jamesville: “I found it so entertaining. It was like a mini-series. I thought *sgeulachdan* might be too difficult, but it wasn’t. It’s just amazing to me that people in our own community had stories like this.”
- **Home-based** – Meeting in a home environment allows for a more natural and relaxed experience. It was noted, however, that it takes time for folks to get to know each other and meeting in a public place or less personal place first may work for some. Hector MacNeil met with Meaghan and Norman in his office at Cape Breton University for a month before they began meeting at his home in Castlebay. Effie Rankin’s team visited the Highland Village and noted that this was an ideal learning environment. Effie Rankin wrote: *Se fìor àite math ionnsachaidh a th’ anns a’ Clachan na mo bheachd-sa – a faicinn is a’ laimhseachadh saoghal nan Gàidheal. Bu chòir dhuinn barrachd feum a thoirt as an àite seo.*” (Highland Village is a very good learning environment, in my opinion – you can see and touch the world of the Gael. We ought to make more use of this place.”)

- **Visits with native speakers** – The chance to visit with native Gaelic speakers is a rare occurrence for some Gaelic learners in Nova Scotia and Bun is Bàrr mentors act as an intermediary, both in terms of keeping conversation going in Gaelic and modeling Gaelic social skills. Laura Stirling remarked: “Just watching Effie start and keep a conversation going in Gaelic taught me a lot about the way to ask questions and the kind of questions to ask.” The visits are also positive for the native speakers. Meaghan O’ Handley brought her fiddle and played some tunes during the visit. Hector MacNeil noted in the wrap up session that there are so many elderly living alone that a visit is valuable in keeping them connected in the community and engaged with their own language and culture. The extent to which native speakers can be involved will be limited in the future, as they are aging quickly.
- **Activities which allow for conversation:** -- Driving in the car, fishing, walking in the woods. Meaghan mentioned how much she enjoyed going to Governors Pub in Sydney with Hector, where they listened to live music. Using Gaelic in public places is important to raise the status and awareness of the language in Nova Scotia.
- **Bringing others into the program** -- Every team at one time connected with people who were not part of the Bun is Bàrr 2010 program. Shay, Carmen and Mary Jane interacted with Effie’s and Jim’s teams and Hector’s team participated once in a weekly conversation group in Boisdale and had a visit with Flora MacIsaac, Boisdale who invited neighbors and cousins. “It was a great session,” said Norman. “There was music and dancing.” Meaghan noted that although she sees many of those who came to Flora’s at church each Sunday, she didn’t know they spoke Gaelic. Jim Watson made his program very social, with every face-to-face meeting with the apprentices involving learners other than his apprentices. His son, Colin, became good friends with Patrick, who is the same age. They visited the MacKenzie home in Mabou Mines, and went to a dance with Kenneth MacKenzie, also the same age. “I remember dropping Kenneth off (after the dance)” said Patrick, “and we were saying how great this was. Kenneth mentioned how much Ronald (his father) enjoyed having us there.” Emily MacKinnon said she particularly liked having other learners around: “If we are creating community, it felt more natural than if it were just me and Jim.”
- **Teach about elision.** Emily mentioned that having Jim explain how letters and sometimes words are dropped in speech helped her tremendously in understanding recorded speech. In his book *Cothrom Ionnsachaidh*, Ronald Black writes that “words blend together so smoothly in Gaelic that linguists have remarked that in Gaelic the concept of a “word” does not exist.” Knowledge of elision is particularly important if

the learner transcribes reported speech and wants to carry on natural conversation with native speakers. “Very often what you think is one word is actually three words,” said Norman. The concept of elision would be most helpful to literate learners; those who learned by ear may not be aware of it.

- **Gaelic-only** – A foundational aspect of Bun is Bàrr, the Gaelic-only rule nonetheless is worth stressing again since so few opportunities exist for apprentices to use Gaelic socially and pick up the culture through the language. Apprentices all commented on how they felt their Gaelic advanced, particularly their comprehension and their confidence. Forming bonds with others through the medium of Gaelic is important as it will be their natural form of communication in the future. Creating a relaxed immersion environment is a special skill, at which the apprentices noted their mentors were particularly adept. Meaghan O’ Handley said that this was the first time she did not feel nervous learning Gaelic and credits her mentor and the learning environment for this.
- **Emailing in Gaelic** – Apprentices appreciated the opportunity to be able to email questions or communicate with their mentors in Gaelic. Emily mentioned that she saved all of Jim’s emails to re-read.



CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- **Program duration**– The main complaint of apprentices was that the program was not long enough. “I felt I was just getting into it and we had to end it.” Said Meaghan O’ Handley. “Bun is Bàrr has been very effective, if too short,” wrote Laura Stirling
- **Travel** – Gaelic speakers are spread out across the province, so matching apprentices with mentors who live close by remains a challenge.
- **Balance between an unstructured and structured program** -- While some apprentices said they liked “the freedom from rigid structure,” they also commented that they felt the program could be more structured and that meeting once a week left a lot of time “unfocused.” Meaghan mentioned that she did the work assigned, but would have done more. Other areas to balance or in need of further exploration include: How to bring in aspects of grammar without turning their time together into a grammar lesson, and identifying ways to measure progress without formal tests. Meaghan suggested that apprentices do Personal Growth Targets (PGT) which they use in the school system.
- **Communication and time together among apprentices** -- Although OGA sent out contact information for apprentices and mentors and pilot participants mid-way through the program, participants did not contact each other. Opportunities to get together seem to need facilitation. Kenneth Morrison suggested selecting apprentices from the same community so that if they had to travel to work with the mentor they could car-pool, speak Gaelic in the car and work together in between visits. He also suggests group outings would be great. Most of the apprentices said they would like to have spent time with the other teams. This is easier said than done. Three months is a short time to bring everyone, or even most of the people in the program, together more than two times (At the orientation and Caidreabh Bun is Bàrr only eight of the nine participants attended each session). There are also cost considerations. Norman MacIntyre: “I would have liked to see more conversation with other apprentices... It needs to be mandated that apprentices get together.”

- **Funding and time commitment** – Some Bun is Bàrr participants worked full-time while trying to do the Bun is Bàrr program. Gaelic language learning in Nova Scotia is mainly done part-time or piecemeal due to the need for adults to make a living, which seems to make the learning process more challenging. It is also difficult to identify the optimum length of time needed to really boost an apprentice's language skills – most of the apprentices said the time they had in this program was not long enough. Extending the hours will take more financial resources, but perhaps be more cost effective. Is compounding the hours or giving the apprentices more time to build on their skills a better investment than bringing more people into a three-month program? Shay MacMullin notes the extra time they had in the fall, after their spring Bun is Bàrr program made all the difference in her language and cultural skills, particularly Gaelic song. What is the optimal program duration and duration of learning sessions? How is this determined?
- **Language and cultural acquisition is a slow process** -- Language and cultural learning is a slow, long-term process, with many plateaus and progressions that may feel insignificant to the learner. “I was expecting something magical to happen where you progress by leaps and bounds,” said Patrick. “You’re always hoping for more, but I was happy with my progress.” Meaghan O’ Handley would agree: “I was expecting more of a difference in my speaking ability. I feel my understanding has gone through the roof.” There is also the reality, as noted by Norman that “the more you learn the more you realize there is to learn.” The apprentice's awareness is developing and with it their standards for language and cultural use. Their learning is deepening, as they begin to understand the depth of the pool. Providing information about and support to Gaelic learners during the language learning process is important.
- **Mentors’ Training and Support** -- Mentors and apprentices noted that more direction and support needs to be given to mentors on this teaching approach. Training would need to be developed for this program.



BUDGET

Expenses	Projected	Actual
Apprentices	\$6,000	\$9,000
Eolaiche	\$12,000	\$18,000
Ard Eolaiche	2400	\$200
Eolaiche Travel	600	330
Apprentices Travel	3,000	3834
Meetings	3600	562
Other Gaelic specialists	\$1,000	890
Other	\$1,000	50
TOTAL Expenses	\$29,600	32,866
Revenue		
Office of Gaelic Affairs	29,600	24,866
Department of Seniors		\$8,000

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

- Payment for Ard-Eolaiche was reduced from \$200 per visit to \$50 per visit for the Bun is Bàrr 2010 program. Of the seven Ard-Eolaiche eligible to receive a stipend, only four submitted their forms for payment.
- The Residential orientation weekend was cancelled and an evening meeting was held, which cost only \$62 for tea. Caidreamh Bun is Bàrr cost \$500.
- Other Gaelic specialists included support from Shay MacMullin and Carmen MacArthur who were present for the orientation and Shay for Bun is Bàrr debrief. Carmen was paid a stipend to interview apprentice candidates. Jim Watson also interviewed candidates but did this at no cost to OGA.
- Other included food costs incurred by Jim Watson.
- A decision to include another apprentice team on the project was made after funding from the Department of Seniors was confirmed.



REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- A three-month program does not allow enough time for mentoring teams to get to know each other and establish a working relationship. It also does not allow for apprentices to get to know each other, which is something every apprentice noted as important
- While the Gaelic-only rule is important, logistically matters and even points of clarification may be best done in English. Organizing your time so that there is a definite Gaelic-only period but also opportunities for English clarifications may make sense in some instances. This is not the same as translation from Gaelic to English, which research shows is a hindrance to the language learning process. Mentors should always avoid translating for clarification but rather use actions, props or simple conversation to get their meaning across.

- While it is good for mentors and apprentices to form new friendships, a program such as this may work well if the mentors and apprentices know each other beforehand and have a familiarity that allows them to jump into the learning process. If they don't know each other an orientation needs to be held in advance for at least a weekend.
- The selection process for Bun is Bàrr needs to be reviewed. The California Master-Apprentice program model, where teams apply, rather than individuals, should be considered. We should also explore setting up a selection panel.
- There needs to be more documentation of what is done during the program. Apprentices should be required to keep a journal and hours together recorded.
- OGA should facilitate ways for the apprentices to communicate more regularly with each other.
- Bun is Bàrr needs an organized feeder language learning program that gives the apprentice better grounding in self-directed learning and stronger language skills. It may be that Bun is Bàrr is not held every year, but alternates with one or two years of an introductory language program. This could be modeled on the California Master-Apprentice program which is well established.

Next Steps:

1. Bun is Bàrr project manager to send out report to Bun is Bàrr participants for their feedback and corrections.
2. Bun is Bàrr project manager to with CEO to discuss the report and next steps.
3. Bun is Bàrr manager to review the California Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program as a model for a feeder Bun is Bàrr program.
4. Bun is Bàrr project manager to explore ways to work with NSCC or other formal educational networks in delivery a program like Bun is Bàrr, which could also be used in other language communities in Nova Scotia.