

Developing Online Resources for Scottish Gaelic:

Turning compliance into opportunity

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Abstract

Gaelic is a Celtic language which has been spoken in Scotland since the 6th century. Today it is spoken by less than 58,000 people across Scotland and in communities around the world. In recognition of the value and importance of Gaelic to Scotland's culture, heritage and identity, the Scottish Parliament passed the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. The Act included the establishing of a public body, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, charged with the preservation and promotion of Gaelic and the preparation of the National Plan for Gaelic.

The Act also requires more than fifty Scottish public organisations to prepare and implement a language plan of their own, addressing the needs and opportunities for using Gaelic with their customers and the resulting development needs for their employees. These organisations are being invited, in tranches, to develop their plans, with priority given to those who will have the largest impact on the language and its speakers within Scotland.

Cànan (Scottish Gaelic for 'language'), the Company owned by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Scotland's Gaelic college, has researched, developed and delivered bespoke online resources and tools to support public organisations to meet the aims of their Gaelic Language Plan. These organisations range from the economic development organisation, Highlands and Islands Enterprise to the lifeline ferry company, Caledonian MacBrayne.

This paper explores the research, decisions made and development concepts and processes involved in creating Gaelic learner opportunities as online resources and ensuring they are effective and appropriate to the specific needs of each organisation. It also identifies some challenges faced and some successes enjoyed.

The paper addresses six key areas as follows:

- *Motivation: why is Cànan developing online language learning resources?*
- *Aspiration: what does Cànan hope to achieve?*
- *Learner personas: who are the learners and what are their needs?*
- *Case studies: what challenges are faced and what solutions provided?*
- *Evaluation: how is progress being measured?*
- *Transnational cooperation – are there opportunity for joint working?*

1. Introduction

The overall number of Scottish Gaelic speakers faces a continuing decline. In 1881, there were over a quarter of a million Gaelic speakers in Scotland, representing almost 7% of the population. According



to the 2001 Census there were 58,652 Gaelic speakers aged three or over in Scotland, representing 1.2% of the country's population and showing a decline of over 7,000 people in the 10 years since the previous Census.

With the Scottish Government focus on attempting to address this decline, including introducing legislation which requires public agencies to deliver their own language plans, there is good reason to review best practice in vocational language learning - particularly as it applies to a lesser-used language. Cànan, the creative media company owned by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye, believed that they were best suited to deliver this activity using ICT.

An initial appraisal recognised the very successful work being undertaken by Foras na Gaeilge and Udaras na Gaeltachta in Ireland and Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg in Wales. Although they provided excellent examples to draw on, caution had to be employed as the level of indigenous language use within the public sector is significantly higher within Ireland and Wales due to the status enjoyed by the languages there.

The focus on primary learning styles, cultures and methods towards successful learning environments, as highlighted by Annie Nielson, were also well explored, particularly in terms of the three elements for learning within the work place:

- Meta Linguistic Knowledge
- Analytical Competence
- Unanalysed Language Competence

The flexibility required to meet the needs of a very varied group of learners particularly demanded an approach which was adaptive and which offered options. Cànan considers Gardener's established multiple intelligences model whenever it delivers learning activity, particularly when catering for such a wide spectrum of people without individual support.

Cànan therefore made the decision to draw on the best of thinking from different sources when designing its own learning environment for the public sector in Scotland.

2. Scottish Gaelic: compliance and opportunity

Along with the other public agencies in Scotland, the ferry operator Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) is required to produce a Language Plan for review by Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The plan details an audit of their existing resource and how the organisation will incorporate Gaelic within their day-to-day working. CalMac had their plan approved earlier this year, but had made the decision a year before, that, although complying with the Act was important, they really wanted to ensure that time and effort was invested effectively for maximum impact within the organisation. CalMac received financial support from Bòrd na Gàidhlig and approached Cànan, to decide on how they should best provide for their staff. The resulting outcome is discussed in this paper. From this action, CalMac is now considering how to use Gaelic more in its own external marketing – good opportunity for CalMac and, as they have nearly 5 million passengers travelling with each year, good potential for the Gaelic language.

3. Motivation: why is Cànan developing online language learning resources?

Cànan Ltd, since it started in 1992, has supported the development of the Gaelic language by either gifting profits to support this action or by developing de-facto tools to support learning. The Company's success can be seen from its client list of national organisations; receiving a "Sector Leading Innovative Practice" award from His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education (HMI) 2009; and this month

when in the space of a week, the First Minister of Scotland made an announcement about funding for one of its projects, Film G www.filmg.co.uk and the Minister for Education launched the CalMac toolkit which is examined as a case study in this paper.

As a language classified as autochthonous under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, with a reducing number of speakers, a depleted infrastructure and with limited funding, the development of Gaelic has understandably focussed more on children's education. Although of great importance to any language, and despite some individual good examples, support for Gaelic from a vocational perspective has been sporadic.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and the resulting National Plan for Gaelic 2007-12 [1] has changed this emphasis and Bòrd na Gàidhlig is now engaging with employers who had not previously committed to Gaelic in any way. The challenge is how to motivate these organisations to think about what they're doing, assist them to make the right decisions and, particularly through a time of economic recession, to provide value-for-money.

In April 2010, Bòrd na Gàidhlig delivered its action plan to try and reverse the continuing decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, "Ginnealach Ùr na Gàidhlig" – a new Generation of Gaelic Speakers [2]. This action plan focuses on increasing the number of Gaelic speakers wherever they are, placing importance on the adult learner as well as school education.

Nationally, the motivation has to be increase the number of Gaelic speakers and for Cànan, the motivation is that it is best placed to deliver relevant ICT Gaelic language learning tools for the workplace.

4. Aspiration: what does Cànan hope to achieve?

To meet the Company's aspirations, Cànan must generate revenue while delivering quality resources. The most practical way to do this is to use ICT for language learning and for Cànan to reuse assets it has already generated through previous projects. Cànan wishes to provide the product of choice and ensure that aspects of the product are core and can be easily replicated.

Creating the best and most relevant learning resource is not enough. Cànan has sought to develop a strategic relationship with the agency representative, promoting the tools and ensuring that the development genuinely does meet their needs. By adding more clients, Cànan hopes to continually and organically improve its language learning toolkits, by reinvesting generated income and by increasing the size of the learner base.

5. Learner personas: who are the learners and what are their needs?

Critical to the development of the toolkit environment was Cànan's knowledge of the business environment, client community and the language learners themselves. The defining of the learner personas is challenging and general. The learners will be spread through over 50 public agencies across the country employing over 40,000 staff. The organisations include regional authorities to health boards to national parks and the police and so there is also a mix of virtually all job types including teachers, foresters, refuse collectors, cooks, nurses and ferry operators... The learners themselves will have different motivation levels, reasons for learning and background in the language. They will have different learning styles and will likely not know what these are. Prof Howard Gardner [3] highlights the need to develop learning portfolios and elements which cater for different learning styles.

There will also be different levels of computer literacy, access to computers and amount of time since someone has engaged in formal training. However, the computer is non-judgemental and, by



providing learning in an asynchronous fashion, the software caters well for those who feel more challenged by learning a language – the “patient enabler” as referred to by Professor Howard Gardener.

The only real factor uniting learners is the actual organisation they work for. It is therefore very important that the promotional message within the resource is compelling and relevant to individuals within that organisation and that company branding and photography is used strongly within the resources.

Rather than try and provide for different levels of learning, it was decided to instead focus on early learners and that the smaller number of more advanced learners would be best served elsewhere.

6. Case studies: challenges faced and solutions provided

Cànan has now provided three language toolkits to different organisations:

- Highlands and Islands Enterprise – economic development agency for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland www.hie.co.uk
- Highland Council – the regional government authority for the Highlands of Scotland www.highland.gov.uk
- Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) - the ferry operator which, with 29 ferries, services the island communities of the West Coast of Scotland and the Clyde Estuary www.calmac.co.uk

Highland Council and HIE received individual learning units over a two year period. CalMac, with assistance from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, purchased a full toolkit thereby providing the opportunity to address the Company’s Gaelic learning needs strategically.

For this reason, this paper will mainly use CalMac as a case study.

CalMac and its sister organisation, Northlink Ferries, employ 1,600 staff, mainly aboard ferries and at ports throughout the West and North of Scotland. Particular challenges and opportunities facing CalMac when deciding what type of learning provision to use are:

- Geographical distribution of staff – small remote groups over a large area
- Work patterns – staff work shifts to optimise the use of the ferries and provide best service to remote communities
- Broadband – the CalMac ferries have limited or no access to broadband during sailings
- Status – CalMac needs to maximise revenue from its operations and its staff are fully employed in making sure that this happens – and does so safely
- Market served – as CalMac serves the part of Scotland with the highest density of Gaelic speakers, it believes it should be addressing its Gaelic needs to provide good customer care
- Staff language profile – over 10% of CalMac staff already have some Gaelic
- CalMac’s existing Gaelic support – bilingual (Gaelic/English) signage is displayed on all its vessels and at all its ports; the Company is a key part of a major cultural tourism initiative; and is the main commercial sponsor of Scotland’s main Gaelic arts festival/competition, the Royal National Mod.

CalMac had a number of key criteria they required from the learning resource:

- The content had to be relevant to CalMac staff in their day to day work
- It had to explain why Gaelic should be important them and to CalMac

- There should be links to more advanced Gaelic learning
- It had to be fun and easy to use

It was therefore a joint exercise between Cànán and CalMac to identify and configure the optimum environment for their learners. There was a need for an asynchronous learning system where individuals could feel motivated and grow their knowledge and skills through a structured, flexible learning process. It was agreed that the skills of the Gaelic-speaking staff would be best-developed by asking them to support the learners participating in the toolkit activities.

The toolkit was launched on 1 September 2010 by the Scottish Minister for Education, Michael Russell MSP, who said "Increasing the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland is a core aim of the many Gaelic-related initiatives currently underway, so CalMac's initiative in finding a way to make language training accessible to as many staff as possible is to be commended."

6.1 The CalMac solution

The final product for CalMac is packaged with full CalMac branding using staff photos; over 1100 audio files to aid pronunciation; is attractive and intuitive; and is fun, engaging and focuses on culture and attitude as well as learning.

As shown in Figure 1, the resources developed are multimedia based with extensive use of interactives and audio files, arranged to address the needs of different learning styles and appear under three key strands: Why Gaelic, Talk Gaelic and Use Gaelic. Although the figure shows a linear approach to the toolkit, exploratory learners can use the resources in any order they choose, other than when working through the "Talk Gaelic" lessons.

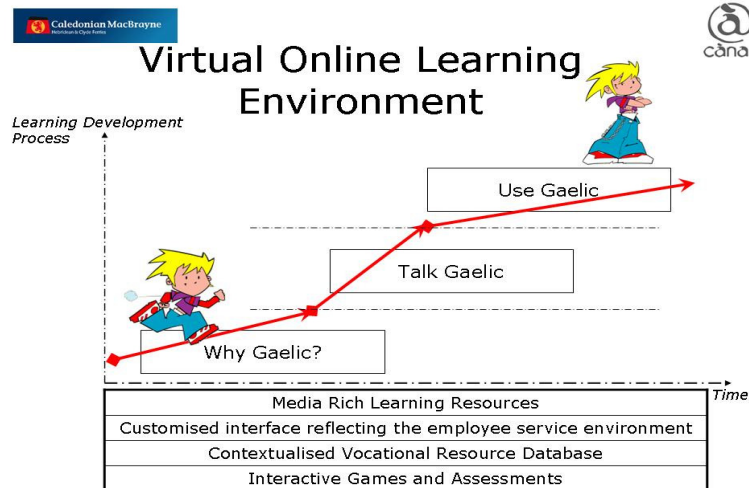


Figure 1: The online learning structure

The strands include:

- Why Gaelic?
 - a fun interactive quiz which challenges the learner's perception. Informed responses are also provided to wrong answers.
 - showing how Gaelic is evident in everyday "English" through loan words, place names, mountain names and personal names
- Talk Gaelic



- 10 introductory lessons broken down into bite-size learning and based on recognised language learning pedagogy and relevant topics
- Practice activities, learning games, an animated story and assessments
- Grammar and vocabulary support for those who want to learn more
- Use Gaelic
 - Glossaries of core phrases
 - Glossaries of terms related to shipping and being on the coast
 - Interactive ferry signs
 - Google map of all ferry routes, with audio files and the meaning of all port names

6.2 Future solutions

To ensure best value for money, the toolkits are now offered with core and customised elements. Agencies are being encouraged to work together in sectoral groupings where even some of the customised elements can be shared, for example: national parks, regional councils, arts based, health organisations. Since the launch of CalMac's toolkit three weeks ago, one land-based grouping – Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission and the Crofters Commission have commissioned a toolkit of which over 90% will be common for the three organisations.

Cànan is presently developing a supporting website for all public agencies, dealing with frequently asked questions (FAQs), encouraging best practice, sharing best practice and celebrating success.

We anticipate that by the time of the conference, another public agency will have committed to purchasing a toolkit. This would then be covering over 10,000 learners of Gaelic – a significant number given that there are less than 58,000 speakers of the language remaining.

7. Evaluation: how is progress being measured?

The toolkits aim to shift attitude, encourage participation and make people active in their learning. Evaluation will therefore be held to individual analytics of lesson completion, numbers of users and through staff audits relating to attitude to Gaelic, learning activity and aspirations for the organisations.

The overall success of the project will be measured by how many organisations have turned their need to comply into opportunity, through:

- sales
- active participants using the toolkits
- agencies returning for additional or enhanced resources
- endorsement or funding from government.

8. Transnational cooperation – any opportunities for joint working?

Cànan is presently working with colleagues in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to secure funding to develop a language bridge between Irish and Scottish Gaelic and to "use Gaelic as an enterprise driver" within communities and business. We would however like to identify other colleagues where we can turn compliance into opportunity or indeed start with the opportunity and build from there.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the case material and Cànan's analysis that development of this layered learning system allows both conscious and sub-conscious Gaelic learning and influence. In addition, the



resulting enthusiasm to grow the amount of Gaelic used within the organisation, as seen through CalMac's interest in using more Gaelic in its marketing - an area not required by the Act, results in a bigger opportunity for the organisation and for the future of the Gaelic language than compliance could ever deliver alone.

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