

## We were pupils again

The SpeyGrian group is a network of people interested in environmental learning that crosses traditional boundaries. The concept was devised by Scottish schoolteacher Dr Joyce Gilbert, and inspired by courses in the Canadian Yukon looking at the role of both science and the arts in shaping our attitudes and values.

SpeyGrian has run a range of courses and workshops, all of them with an emphasis on a reflective outdoor experience that will have very different outcomes for the different people taking part. Courses based on Leader, a converted Brixham trawler sailing off the west coast of Scotland, have been a particularly successful format. Here Alistair Thomson shares his experience of these physical and emotional journeys.

Teaching at one of the pilot Sustainable Secondary Schools alerted me to the opportunity to join the first SpeyGrian course on Leader in July 2002, sailing from Argyll around Mull to Rum and Eigg. From the start it was clear that we had to work together to make sail and keep the vessel in good shape. Before we knew each other's names we were pulling on lines, sweating to make them fast, and finding that there was much to learn. We were pupils again. My experience that first year convinced me of the merit of the underlying philosophy and encouraged me to volunteer as a facilitator for the following summer.

Sailing on Leader is spectacular. As we travel from port to anchorage and beyond, we meet storytellers, ecologists, musicians and others who share personal perspectives of their environment. A journal, sometimes a sketchbook, provides focus and helps to crystallise thoughts. We analyse articles collected from across the world that present new thinking in environmental learning. Together these elements provide a cohesive experience, facilitated by discussion or by simply being there.

The deck adapts itself as a meeting area. Even in less than kind weather we often gather there – somehow the seascape around us sets the perfect scene for enquiry and discussion. Formal themes are set, but issues raised by members often overtake them. It has become a philosophy of the group that participants influence the character of the experience, allowing this encounter with nature to be felt in very personal terms. Some folk see this learning as a model for work with pupils, others are focussed on the opportunity to see and do what are for them extraordinary things.

The social side of our meetings are a strong factor in building a sense of belonging. The journey can be punctuated by “wow moments”: often shared sightings of sea life revealed in the waves around us. Music and storytelling translate the experience as an equally valid expression of belonging.

After a week of discovery, participants reported feeling re-energised and better able to tackle whatever challenge awaited them back home. For some the experience was almost spiritual and afterwards they spoke of a catharsis of sorts. This direct

experience, exploring ideas and themes and the physical landscape by sea or by foot, has become a vehicle for contextual learning for SpeyGrian.

Now we aim to take these insights back to our daily lives. What can be done to deliver such experiences to others? How can we resist the constraints of fear and ignorance that will see our children confined in playgrounds, only to habituate them to contentment behind a fence?. Are we content to see the world as others might like us to?

Having taught Art and Design for over twenty years, I had found my love for my subject being challenged by the routine and confinement of examinations and classroom based pedagogy. My SpeyGrian experience has reminded me why my subject is important to me, but better still, it invites me to reconnect with the world in a way that adds meaning to my learning. I have taken my first step.

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SpeyGrian plan an event on Canna this year from 16 – 23 July, and hope to run further trips on Leader in 2006. More information, and a mailing list for news of the group's activities, is at [www.speygrian.org.uk](http://www.speygrian.org.uk)

True education flowers at the point when delight falls in love  
with responsibility  
*Philip Pullman*