Creative Corner

A cold, wet wood in winter is the last place you would think of taking a school group on a photography workshop. But on a recent trip with Dalwhinnie Primary School, a tree covered in tiny mosses and fungi yielded so many colourful images that the kids quickly forgot the miserable conditions. Armed with magnifying glasses, they investigated an alder wood, then, using digital cameras capable of focussing on objects close to the lens, they took stunning close-ups of a normally unseen world.

I design new media workshops that engage young people with the environment. Some of the techniques I have developed, such as rocket-borne video cameras, are technically quite advanced. However, there are some processes, such as utilising the macro function on digital cameras, which allow novices to achieve amazing results.

Using a desktop scanner as a camera is another simple technique that produces exciting images of tiny worlds. Material collected from a field trip can be placed on the scanner, scanned at a high resolution, then scaled up and printed out. This works well with small items, particularly plant material. Objects such as cones and fruit can be cut in half and faced down on the glass to create beautiful cross-sections.

Some of my more advanced workshops use tiny security cameras. Combined with a portable video monitor, they are ideal for investigating inaccessible places such as burrows and nests. I've also attached these small cameras to helium balloons, kites and even model rockets. The resulting aerial views provide a great way for kids to relate to and chart a particular site. This approach worked well for SNH's Freeflow project when we sent a rocket high above Loch Lomond. Suddenly the shape of the landscape that we had studied on our maps was revealed.

Using new technologies to investigate the environment works by literally providing a new perspective on the familiar, encouraging children to look again. The trick is to ensure the media isn't so complex or novel that it becomes a distraction.

Fortunately, computers, scanners and digital cameras have become increasingly available in schools and youth groups, and many children and young people are familiar with them. Lack of technical support, however, is an issue that needs to be addressed if the children are to exploit the full potential of this exciting new approach. And get the most out of those wet winter workshops!

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"If computers get too powerful, we can organise them into a committee – that will do them in"
Anon.