



How can canal boats be used in community engagement and education?

Ailie Ross-Oliver

Edited by Linnea Wallen

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UNIVERSITY



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH



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Abstract

This research briefing examines how canal boats can be used as a tool for community engagement as well as in education; particularly outdoor learning. Through examining comparable projects as well as applicable research, the briefing highlights that in order to facilitate community engagement, ensuring inclusivity that can foster personal and community wellbeing is key. The importance of acknowledging and platforming discussions on local heritage is also crucial to community engagement, as well as heritage preservation. In terms of how canal boats can be used in education, this briefing sets out that adaptability of learning programmes and ensuring that programmes are cross-curricular means that learners find canal boat learning engaging and accessible. It is also noted that canal boats can provide unique opportunities for personal development for both learners and volunteers.

Keywords

Canal boats, community engagement, accessibility, wellbeing, heritage, outdoor learning, All Aboard

Key points

- Broadening participation and ensuring inclusivity creates cohesion and fosters personal and community wellbeing which, in turn, ensures community engagement.
- Facilitating learning and conversations about local heritage is crucial to community engagement, as well as preservation of the landscape.
- Ensuring that educational programmes are cross-curricular and adaptable, makes outdoor learning engaging and accessible for learners.
- There is a large scope for personal development opportunities for both learners and volunteers on board canal boats.

Introduction

Since the industrial revolution, canals and canal boats have become intrinsic features of our landscape. Initially designed to fuel economic growth; canals have now been recognised as a tool for broader social, environmental

and economic change (Canal and River Trust, 2017). 50% of UK residents are estimated to live within five miles of a waterway (Midgley, 2009). Therefore, maintaining the UK's canal system is argued to be a way in which we can

create more 'blue space' in communities, particularly in more deprived inner-city areas (White, et al., 2016). Canal boats can be used as 'floating classrooms' and community hub spaces and there are a wide variety of activities that can take place on board. Examples of such include curricular enrichment trips and excursions, local heritage maintenance programmes, open door sessions and community involvement projects. People Know How is currently preparing to purchase a canal boat, in partnership with Polwarth Parish Church, which will be used to enable their All Aboard project (People Know How, 2020). This project aims to use the canal to engage with learners through People Know How's Positive Transitions Service for young people in Edinburgh, engaging with the local community through facilitating community cohesion and enhancing People Know How's other projects (People Know How, 2020).

Six main themes relating to community engagement and education will be considered in this research briefing. When examining how canal boats can enable community engagement, it will consider how canal boats can facilitate: community cohesion, understanding of local heritage and personal and community wellbeing. In terms of education and outdoor learning, the briefing will give a brief overview of the benefits of outdoor learning and will consider how canal boats can be used to support learning and personal development. By examining these six main themes, this briefing will offer a comprehensive understanding of how People Know How and Polwarth Parish Church's All Aboard project can engage with the wider Edinburgh community as well as People Know How's service

users. By examining comparable projects as well as applicable research that has been carried out by relevant organisations, a broad understanding of the role that canal boats can play in community engagement and education will be gained. This will also contribute to wider discourses related to these topics.

Section 1: Community Engagement

How can canal boats create community cohesion?

The Canal and River Trust has highlighted that canals and canal boat projects can enhance the cohesiveness of communities, through community engagement (Canal and River Trust, 2017). They note that canal-based projects "provide an environment that contributes to the perceived safety and security of the locality" (Canal and River Trust, 2017, p.35). By fostering such a perception of safety, that can in turn make this an actuality, this can create a more cohesive community. Similarly, the Canal and River Trust notes that canal boat projects can create community cohesion through "broadening participation by people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, age groups and abilities" (Canal and River Trust, 2017, p.35). Through the often multifaceted and collaborative nature of canal boat projects, community involvement, inclusivity and broadened participation can foster community cohesion.

The coast-to-coast Desmond Family Canoe Trail (DFCT) is an example of a canal-based project that has highlighted the community cohesion that canals

can facilitate. This project was launched in 2015 and now has a 260-kilometre route from Liverpool to Goole on the Humber estuary (Canal and River Trust, 2020). This project has seen community cohesion on a community and regional level, as it links communities across the country. The project also has a Young Leaders programme which helps young people gain skills and experience on the waterways. 92% of young people on this programme said that they now feel more connected to their local community and local area (Canal and River Trust, 2017). The young leader programme and accessibility of the project's work means that this project has opened up the potential of the canals for communities along the route.

This highlights that canal boat projects can create community cohesion through broadening participation, widening access and creating opportunities for community involvement. Through linking this to the preservation of local heritage, community engagement and cohesion can be facilitated through canal-based projects.

How can canal boats support understandings of local heritage?

Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) highlights the importance of protecting local heritage. In many communities, local history is centred around the canal. KSB notes that many of the canals in Scotland are over 200 years old and must be conserved to preserve cultural heritage for future generations (Keep Scotland Beautiful, 2020). Through using the canal boat to hold open door sessions, the canal can become a space for gathering and learning for the community.

Similar projects include Re-Union canal boats, which is an Edinburgh and Falkirk based social enterprise that operates on the Union and Forth & Clyde canals, with which People Know How has worked closely with throughout their All Aboard pilot (Re-Union Canal Boats, 2020). Re-Union was founded at the beginning of the century when the founders saw a trend that seemed to be pushing canal boating towards becoming an exclusive pursuit. Through working with Scottish Canals and the Scottish Waterways Trust, Re-Union offers accessible community sessions about the "history, features and changes of the Union canal" on board their canal boats (Re-Union Canal Boats, 2020).

These projects highlight that canal boats can facilitate community engagement through facilitating a conversation about local heritage. In turn, as highlighted by KSB, this is a vital step towards the upkeep and future enjoyment of the canals. This suggests that through various means such as open-door sessions or accessible community trips, the canal boat can support community engagement through engaging with local community heritage.

How can canal boats support personal and community wellbeing?

Simetrica is a social impact consultancy group that the Canal and River Trust commissioned to assess the impact of waterways on wellbeing. Their research led to interviews with almost 15,000 people across England and Wales. Their research indicates that all levels of waterway usage – whether that is through water-based activities such

as boating, canoeing and kayaking, or land-based activities on towpaths such as walking, running or cycling – correlates to higher evaluative wellbeing (Simetrica, 2018). The research was based on four measures; life satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and meaningfulness of individuals' actions. The data was collected in terms of evaluative accounts (individual evaluation of life as a whole), hedonic accounts (based on experiences in the moment), and eudemonic accounts (meaningfulness of actions once completed) (Simetrica, 2018). Overall the Simetrica research highlighted a strong link between waterway usage, even if interviewees had only visited once, and high levels of evaluative wellbeing. From the data collected from hedonic accounts, it seems that the benefits of using the waterways increase with length of visit in terms of both happiness and lower anxiety (Simetrica, 2018).

In the example of the DFCT project, 92% of young people who have participated in their project stated that their wellbeing and happiness had improved over the course of their participation (Canal and River Trust, 2020). This links to the concept of The Blue Gym which is the idea that spending time by the waterside can improve health and wellbeing (White, et al., 2016). The research focus of Blue Gym has previously focused on marine and coastal watersides, but the findings are considered to be relevant in other aquatic environments such as canals; particularly in the context of the findings from the DFCT project and the Simetrica data.

White et al. (2016) use census data to measure distance from the sea, which was further considered against the backdrop of self-reported wellbeing data

from the same census. This research found “a steady coastal proximity gradient; the closer a neighbourhood was to the coast, the better, on average, residents' overall self-reported [wellbeing] data (White, et al., 2016, p.7). The researchers also note that the trend was strongest across poorer neighbourhoods, with poorer areas near the coast reporting much better health levels than poorer areas further from the coast. As noted above, whilst this data is based on coastal proximity, an assumption can be made that given the findings of the DFCT project and the Simetrica data, a similar trend to the 'Blue Gym' research could exist in terms of proximity to other waterways such as canals.

It is clear from the evaluative, hedonic and eudemonic accounts in the Simetrica data that using the waterways has a positive impact on personal wellbeing. The analysis of data from the DFCT indicates that direct involvement in canal-based projects has a positive impact on personal wellbeing. Furthermore, White et al.'s (2016) study indicates that this trend of improved wellbeing, spans different types of waterside systems but this topic needs further investigation.

As noted previously, inclusive canal-based community projects create community cohesion and, when this is combined with personal wellbeing benefits, this support community wellbeing. Altogether this demonstrates that canal boats can create community engagement through inclusive projects that support personal and community wellbeing and cohesion, whilst engaging with and protecting local heritage.

Section 2: Outdoor learning and education

How can outdoor learning support learners?

Research on forest schools, defined as “outdoor education using forests as a learning environment” (Wallace, et al., 2015), has shown that outdoor education is an effective learning environment and it is often more stimulating for both teachers and pupils than conventional classrooms (Harris, 2017).

The annual Learning Beyond the Classroom conference, is led by Surrey Outdoor Learning and Development (SOLD). SOLD runs canal trips for primary and secondary school groups, as well as for groups of young people that are not in education, employment or training. They also run trips that are accessible for those with special education needs and disabilities. The most recent Learning Beyond the Classroom conferences have focused on how children’s “behaviour, attainment, resilience, personal character development and positive mental attitude” can all improve in outdoor learning environments (SOLD, 2020a). Outdoor learning can also give learners a “renewed sense of engagement in the learning process”, particularly those who find classroom-based learning more challenging (SOLD, 2020b). Some studies have also highlighted that learners with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) particularly benefit from this style of learning (Taylor & Kuo, 2011., Wallace, et al., 2015). From this, it is clear that outdoor education can be hugely beneficial to learners, particularly those with ADHD.

How can canal boats support personal development?

SOLD has highlighted the five key groups of skills that can be developed through outdoor learning, including through canal boat projects. These personal development groups also link to personal wellbeing. The key skill groups, as adapted from the SOLD (2020c) learning outcomes model, are;

- Personal skills - including responsibility, commitment, motivation, initiative, involvement, focus.
- Social skills - including respect, communication, listening, cooperation, negotiation, leadership.
- Emotional skills - including resilience, managing feelings, confidence, self-awareness, positivity, pride.
- Physical skills - including performance, fitness, discipline, stamina, movement, balance, strength.
- Practical skills - including technical skills, broadening of horizons, cross-curricular understanding and accreditation through volunteering, mentoring and in-work training.

By specialising programmes to fit with the specific needs of different groups and individuals, outdoor learning on canal boats can be modelled to fulfil some of these learning outcomes that contribute to personal and academic development. Depending on the goals of participants, this can contribute to curriculum enrichment and positive school transitions for younger participants,

or skills development, employability and interview preparation for others. For People Know How and Polwarth Parish Church who aim to facilitate the positive transitions service through the All Aboard canal boat project, specialisation of programmes will be crucial to participants' learning and personal development.

Furthermore, KSB highlights how the canals can facilitate personal development of volunteers, as volunteers can play a significant role in the maintenance of canals and local heritage (Keep Scotland Beautiful, 2020). An illustrative example of this is the Sorted Project, that offers vocational opportunities, supporting people in recovery from substance dependency and mental health disorders (Sorted Project, 2020). Similarly, through SOLD's canal boat project, there are volunteering and training in employment roles that include roles in "outdoor education, catering, domestic work and maintenance". This indicates that personal development is not just limited to participants as it also extends to volunteers and employees. This provides a further link that shows how canal boat projects can facilitate community cohesion through supporting personal development.

How can canal boats support learning?

As with other forms of outdoor learning, canal boats can support learning in more conventional settings by creating cross curricular links for participants in trips and programmes. In examining the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes for different subjects (Education Scotland, 2020), it is clear

that a canal boat projects can uniquely support learning across multiple subject areas. These learning outcomes include, but are not limited to;

Social Studies

- "Develop[ing] my understanding of the history, heritage and culture of Scotland, and an appreciation of my local heritage within the world"
- "Learn[ing] how to locate, explore and link features and places locally and further afield"
- "Learning how to locate, explore and link periods, places and events in time and place"

Science

- "Develop[ing] curiosity and understanding of the environment and my place in the living, material and physical world"
- "Recognising the impact that the sciences make on my life, the lives of others, the environment and on society"

Learning on board can be easily linked to these Education Scotland (2020) outcomes and can be used to facilitate both learning and personal development. For example, learning about the history of local canals and local heritage could be linked to the current purposes and uses of canals, or a more scientific based excursion could focus on the science behind the canal systems of Scotland and the rest of the UK whilst considering how the canals can change and adapt with the natural environment. It is important to note that canal boat projects can support learning in most subject areas, as experiences on board will be cross curricular and adaptable

based on group learning outcomes. A key part of this is making trips and programmes specific to the needs and interests of individuals and groups.

Canal boats can also support learning by making this experience accessible to all. As previously noted, learners who have ADHD can find that outdoor learning is more accessible than traditional classroom-based education (Wallace, et al., 2015). Ensuring adaptability of learning programmes contributes to making canal boat learning accessible to all. The Seagull Trust is a Scottish organisation that provides trips and experiences via canal boat for people who have special needs (Seagull Trust, 2020). The trips they offer vary depending on the needs and interests of groups and the boat can be used as a “floating classroom”. The Seagull Trust’s work further clarifies the importance adaptability of trips offered, in order to make trips accessible and ensure that canal boats can support learning and personal development.

Conclusion

Overall, this briefing set out to determine how canal boats can be used in community engagement and education, in correlation with People Know How and Polwarth Parish Church’s All Aboard project. In terms of community engagement, canal boats can be used to facilitate discussions

about local heritage. Similar projects including KSB’s canal school and the Re-Union canal project, hold open door sessions and have accessible community trips in order to engage with the local community. Canal boats can also create community engagement by fostering community cohesion through broadening participation and creating opportunities for community involvement. The final key way in which canal boats can be used in community engagement, is through supporting and facilitating personal and community wellbeing that stems from participation in activities both on and off the water.

In terms of in education, the briefing first outlined the non-specific benefits of outdoor learning, introducing the idea that nonconventional learning is more suited to some learners. More specifically, canal boats can be used in education in terms of support to learning through ensuring programmes are cross-curricular and adaptable for learners needs and interests. Adaptability is also a key way in which canal boats can make education accessible. The final way in which canal boats can be used in education is through supporting of personal development through specialised programmes, volunteering and further training. Altogether, it is clear that by following these pointers, canal boats usage for community engagement and education purposes can be inclusive, adaptable engaging and effective for learners and volunteers.

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People Know How

525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

contactus@peopleknowhow.org

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