

Beyond AALA in Outdoor Learning

In my dealings with the experienced professionals at the Health & Safety Executive the message about how safe the adventurous activity industry is comes across loud and clear. In times of restricted budgets and philosophies of minimal government intervention it should be no surprise then that the HSE is looking very seriously at alternatives to funding an inspection regime for providers of adventurous activity to under 18's.

Adventurous activity provision (and the wider outdoor learning sector) has come a long way since the tragedy in Lyme Bay in 1993. The resultant introduction of specific legislation for the sector with mandatory inspection and licensing for providers was not wholly welcomed at the time. In the years since it has had a very largely positive impact on outdoor learning but the regime we have come to value may be in its twilight years. As the sector enters talks with the HSE about the potential for a sector led and HSE endorsed alternative to Adventurous Activity Licensing, is it the health and safety dimensions of provision we should be focusing on?

Despite significant pressures on education, youth work and personal domestic budgets the provision and take-up of adventurous activity and other forms of outdoor learning has fared relatively well. The experience may be too often limited to primary school students. Despite a growth in teacher or teaching assistant led local activity there is also limited evidence of progression through a range of outdoor learning in schools. Beyond schools the voluntary organisations that draw on outdoor learning, such as Scouts and the government funded NCS programme, have prospered. So 'it's a mixed picture' you might say! Not if you consider the need to tackle mental and physical health issues, environmental sustainability and young people's employability... to mention just a few things that outdoor learning as reasonable track record in delivering on. As I suggested in these pages in 2015, outdoor learning is still undervalued by UK society.

My point here is that redefining adventure activity licensing does not drive up the value placed on outdoor learning; it simply maintains the status quo. We need to continue the appropriate management of health and safety but more importantly we need to think about how we ensure higher value is placed on what we do by managing quality.

Managing quality? What does that mean in the context of outdoor learning? There is space for real differentiation between providers of similar activities in the quality of their customer service. There are also some important variables we might consider managing in the quality of our outdoor learning practices. It's worth reflecting on some work funded by the Sutton Trust in the last 2 years that points to what teachers might consider in assessing their teaching quality. These are listed in order of evidence of impact on student outcomes :

1. (Pedagogical) content knowledge (Strong evidence of impact)

As well as a strong understanding of the material being taught, teachers must also understand the ways students think about the content, be able to evaluate the thinking behind students' own methods, and identify students' common misconceptions.

2. Quality of instruction (Strong evidence of impact)

Includes elements such as effective questioning and use of assessment. Specific practices, like reviewing previous learning, providing model responses for students, giving adequate time for practice to embed skills securely and progressively introducing new learning (scaffolding) are also elements of high quality instruction.

3. Classroom climate (Moderate evidence of impact)

The quality of interactions between teachers and students, and teacher expectations: the need to create a classroom that is constantly demanding more, but still recognising students' self-worth. It also involves attributing student success to effort rather than ability and valuing resilience to failure (grit).

4. Classroom management (Moderate evidence of impact)

A teacher's abilities to make efficient use of lesson time, to coordinate classroom resources and space, and to manage students' behaviour with clear rules that are consistently enforced, are all relevant to maximising the learning that can take place. These environmental factors are necessary for good learning rather than its direct components.

5. Teacher beliefs (Some evidence of impact)

Why teachers adopt particular practices, the purposes they aim to achieve, their theories about what learning is and how it happens and their conceptual models of the nature and role of teaching in the learning process all seem to be important.

6. Professional behaviours (Some evidence of impact)

Behaviours exhibited by teachers such as reflecting on and developing professional practice, participation in professional development, supporting colleagues, and liaising and communicating with parents.

What Makes Great Teaching:
Review of the underpinning research October 2014
Centre for Evaluation & Monitoring (Durham University)

It's not hard to translate these research findings into an outdoor learning specific focus, even if your practice is not school related. The developing work by the outdoor learning research hubs will add to this (see IOL web pages). So as the sector gets into a debate about what a sector led health & safety inspection regime might look like let's have a bigger debate about how we develop the quality of outdoor learning practice and as result the value placed on it. ■