



## PERSPECTIVE:

### It's not all about evidence....

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO

**T**hanks to the Guardian I had the privilege of sitting round a table recently with a

group of people with an interest in outdoor learning. The debate was healthy and wide ranging but what became clear as the meeting went on was that we were all advocates; in fact some of the most passionate advocates were those people for whom outdoor learning was only a part of a large portfolio e.g. Head Teachers. The debate will give rise to what should be a useful article that I will not pre-empt, though I will reflect on one particular point of discussion here, an issue that should concern us regardless of the kind of learners we tend to work with.

During the meeting I was reminded of the almost unavoidable rule of working behaviour 'what gets measured gets done', together with its sibling expressed in my own words 'money follows measurement'. As our society strives for improvement in education, business and a range of societal standards such as 'wellbeing' the need to evidence progress, to ensure focus on more 'activity' that delivers progress, means we are in danger of falling victim to short term or overly narrow measures. This phenomenon is not restricted to the world of outdoor learning but does impact on our drive to ensure the benefits of outdoor learning are available to as many 'learners' as possible. As managers, trainers, teachers and others seek to find ways to enhance the impact of their actions, outdoor learning is unlikely to come very high on their list of options without measurement. The recent IOL national conference saw some very healthy debate around creative evaluation methods, and good case studies of the impact of outdoor learning in schools, communities and business are available.

Though we should continue to develop a robust evidence base for the impact of our work, it is clear from the experience of other sectors that offer substantial learning opportunities, such as the Arts, that evidence alone is insufficient. Even with a wealth of formal and anecdotal evidence, engaging those who aren't already adopters or advocates of outdoor



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learning remains a challenge. I am convinced that many potential adopters of outdoor learning do not engage because they perceive it as the domain of the specialist or as being a practice that requires taking time out of other mainstream

learning activity. We have work to do to overcome these perceptions. We need to introduce decision makers and potential practitioners to non-specialist forms of outdoor learning and creative ways of integrating outdoor learning into their plans for achieving learning outcomes. Experience tells me that those decision makers who are introduced to the transformative power of the outdoors (or better still participate in well designed outdoor learning) are more likely to utilise that power to achieve the change they are looking for. The good news is that I am also convinced that there is an appetite for such introductory activity.

Despite the challenging economic times the outdoor learning world continues to grow. We need to ensure we do not 'short change' those who consider its benefits worthwhile by failing to show them appropriate evidence through models of integration and measurement. ■

*Photograph by Fiona Exon*