

## Under-valued?

**I**s outdoor learning under-valued in the UK in 2015? 'All too often' is my response. Why might that be? Are we as outdoor learning practitioners a least partially responsible for this?

The last decade has definitely seen an increase in interest in the outdoors as a place to learn and develop, as well as escape. In that same time there does not appear to have been a similar increase in the perceived value of outdoor learning. Why do I think that?

I've been party to some interesting conversations in the last few months. I've heard talented and enthusiastic practitioners early in their career express disappointment and frustration at the way the outdoor learning sector treats them. I've also heard potential commissioners of outdoor learning services fail to see what might be achieved by the service they are purchasing. Experienced educators expressing a desire for more innovative leadership whilst in the same breath describe the very limited way they engage with outdoor learning. Perhaps the most disturbing conversations for me relate to a resigned mindset that says 'if the client is happy with some basic activity provision why bother helping them consider what might be possible with a slightly different approach?'

I don't think it is over-stating the case to say that if the sector wants to be better valued by society, generate more income and opportunities and have more influence then we all have to step up. What does that step up look like? How clear are the targeted outcomes of the work you do? Do participants and funders know what to expect as a result of your efforts? Ensuring that all understand what your activities and facilitation are designed to achieve, not only increases appreciation of the impact you are having it also holds you accountable to delivering that impact!

Why are clients buying your services? Do they appreciate the range of potential outcomes you could help them achieve? I am clear that many users of outdoor learning are very happy with fairly low level amounts of learning and development. We all need to keep pushing on explaining the processes at play in outdoor learning, the potential learning achievable and how to identify if that learning is likely to be delivered. In short we need to raise the expectations of our clients and funders.

How do your clients know if they have received value for money? How do you and they tell if you have delivered something more than the provision of an agreed outdoor experience? Though it may involve some additional time and effort it is crucial that we ensure there are some forms of evaluation of outcome that are not just the 'good old happy sheets' at the end of your session or course.

Finally my little list would be incomplete without pointing to your wider professional development. In my experience this is best achieved through engaging with your community of professional practice. Stepping up your professional development in isolation is hard so I recommend working with others to challenge and support your thinking. That might be through regional IOL activity or by contributing to research or good practice development with a SIG or another professional body.

I'm passionate to drive up the value place on outdoor learning in the UK and hope you wish to do the same. My challenge to you is to ask which of the approaches to stepping up are you taking?... and how are your friends, colleagues and clients responding? Let us know at The Institute and we will share your story to encourage others and build the outdoor learning world's value proposition. ■

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO

Photograph by Gemma Stiles