

## **REPORT ON the IOL Research Forum – Trinity College**

On 14 March 2007 the latest IOL Research Forum got underway at Trinity College, University of Wales, Carmarthen, with over 50 delegates and eight presenters in attendance. Our thanks go out to each of the presenters, many of whom travelled long distances, for making the event such a resounding success. In particular the delegates commented on the varied nature of research being undertaken and the encouragement they gained from listening to, and meeting, presenters who are at the start of their research careers and who had not previously presented their work/ideas publicly.

The Forum was started by Pete Allison and Ken McCullough from Edinburgh University sharing their insights into an international study of sail training. Their research raised some interesting methodological issues related to the gathering and analysis of data from different cultural settings and it clearly identified the truly international scope of outdoor learning.

Graham Moger (Plas Caerdon and Liverpool Hope University) followed with a concise insight into the value and impact of an outdoor residential experience upon student retention rates. Senior managers within the audience were particularly interested in the topic and it was good to see this type of research being explored within a UK, as opposed to a North American context.

The effectiveness of learning journals to promote reflective thinking was the focus of Stephen Hannon's research. Stephen works at the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology and it was particularly interesting to hear his thoughts on the process and assessment of reflective practice and in particular on the influence the assessing tutor can have on both the content and quality of the reflective narrative. Food for thought for many in the audience.

Starting the afternoon session was Peter Bunyan from University of Chichester who elaborated upon his current interest in developing context specific instrumentation in adventure education research. Peter's research was particularly thought provoking in respect of the drive by IOL to gain broader recognition for outdoor learning and teaching as a profession. Perhaps there is a need for the 'profession' to develop its own contextually grounded instrumentation to support its developing research profile?

Nick Ray of An-Turus was next talking about the need for outdoor development trainers to embrace the psychological process and work with psychological depth with their clients. Perhaps more than any other single presentation his provoked the most discussion and questions as he laid out his belief in why and how outdoor facilitators have a responsibility to embrace the psychological, as well as the physical safety and well being, of clients. In a society with an expanding awareness and broader understanding of mental health Nick's viewpoint and the role of outdoor learning to address issues of stress and disaffection is undoubtedly going to be given increased attention in the years to come.

Changing the focus completely Sue Waite from the University of Plymouth discussed her research into the provision and impact of outdoor learning for 2-11 year olds. Based on the work of local Forest Schools in Devon Sue highlighted a variety of opportunities and tensions around young children's outdoor learning including

whether it is learning or play, adult or child directed, free or structured, on or off site and in a natural or built environment. Many in attendance would recognise that these are not issues exclusive to young children but are relevant to many programme providers and client groups using the outdoors.

The penultimate presentation of the day was made by Ina Stan from BCUC. Grateful thanks are extended to Ina who was kind enough to be re-scheduled from a morning to a late afternoon slot thereby allowing the Forum to remain on schedule. Elaborating on her study into group interaction of primary school children taking part in an outdoor residential experience Ina, echoing Sue Waite, identified the need for teachers and facilitators to be more aware of the impact they have upon participant learning. In particular she identified issues of control and empowerment as particularly important concerns that can either benefit or detract from the participant's outdoor learning experience.

Finally, Kim Polistina from University of Glamorgan had the last presentation of the day. Congratulations are in order for the concise and interactive approach adopted in discussing her research into the nature of community based outdoor learning in South Wales. Her insight into the barriers to access and local inclusion strategies adopted emphasised both the potential that exists in and around every community and the need for the development of sustainable approaches that emphasise local ownership.

Concluding the Forum a Plenary session was chaired by Nichola Tucker-Welton that sought to draw together the day and flag-up future events. For myself, more than anything else, it was the immediacy of the research to the researchers/practitioners work that tied many of the presentations together. Irrespective of the broad differences in the research foci it was the startling to see how grounded and relevant the research was to the professional context and working life of the individual researchers. This suggests we do not need to look beyond our own daily activities as a rich research source in order to benefit both our collective and individual practice. If there is a better reason for practitioners becoming researchers I for one have not heard it.

Ian White of Routledge / Taylor & Francis was also in attendance to publicise the new arrangement that will see them take over the publishing of the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning. Many thanks go to Ian and more than a few new subscribers were signed up on the day. We may even see some of the research presented during the day in the journal in the near future.

Future dates and venues for the Forum have been agreed as follows:

2 November 2007 – University of Edinburgh – Pete Allison to coordinate.

Spring 2008 – University of Chichester – Pete Bunyan to coordinate.

Autumn 2008 – Lindley Educational Trust (Peak District – to be confirmed)

A final thanks to all who presented, attended and helped with the organisation for what was a very successful event.

Andy Williams  
Trinity College,  
University of Wales.

List of presenters:

Dr. Pete Allison & Ken McCulloch (University of Edinburgh)  
International study of sail training experiences.

Graham Moger (Liverpool Hope University & Plas Caerdeon OE Centre)  
Adventure-based residential fieldwork with first year undergraduates: implications for student retention.

Stephen Hannon (Galway Mayo Institute of Technology)  
The effectiveness of learning journals to promote reflective thinking.

Dr. Pete Bunyan (University of Chichester)  
The development of context specific instrumentation in adventure education research.

Nick Ray (An-Turus)  
Embracing the psychological process and working with psychological depth – opportunities for outdoor development trainers.

Sue Waite (University of Plymouth)  
Outdoor learning for 2-11 year olds.

Ina Stan (Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College)  
Doing an ethnographic study in outdoor education.

Kim Polistina (University of Glamorgan)  
The community in outdoor learning research in South Wales.