

Getting out and about

The new 'Learning Outside the Classroom' agenda

Wide-eyed wonder

Many of us have positive memories of educational school visits – both the ones we went on in our childhood and, perhaps more recently, the ones we planned and led as educators taking our students outside the classroom. I, for one, can still visualise the time when, as a nine-year-old studying Tudor history, I was taken on a class visit to the Geffrye Museum in London. There we sketched genuine Tudor furniture and dressed up in Tudor costumes.

As a teacher, I have equally happy memories of taking primary school classes on a multitude of visits to a huge variety of museums, galleries, parks and places of worship. It was fantastic to see children from the East End of London in hushed awe and wide-eyed wonder as they visited Saint Paul's Cathedral, the National Gallery and Kew Gardens for the first time.

A rising tide of fear

As a newly qualified teacher, starting work in the early 1980s, 'school trips' were very much the order of the day, with everything from impromptu nature walks to look at autumn leaves and spiders' webs, to camping trips which included cooking everything we ate on open fires and going for midnight walks in Epping Forest. Many of the things now being vigorously promoted (eg physical exercise to combat youth obesity, and the awe and wonder element of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) were part of everyday



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teaching a few decades ago. But that more carefree approach to educating children slowly disintegrated with the advent of the National Curriculum and the emphasis on preparing children for their end of Key Stage tests.

The final nail in the coffin has been hammered in by the rise in anxiety over health and safety, should things go wrong, produced by our increasingly litigious society. My father-in-law, a youth worker for the Boys' Brigade and the Methodist Church for many years, and an outward bound instructor running a centre in the Yorkshire Dales, has noticed a rising tide of fear which led to a serious drop in bookings for both residential visits, and for adventurous activities with children and young people of all ages.

Excellence and enjoyment

Concerns around the concentration on the Core Curriculum to the exclusion of other subjects, and the emphasis on a solid diet of SATs revision in some schools, were some of the issues which led to the publication of the Excellence and Enjoyment strategy in 2004 by the (then) Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

The E&E document recommends that 'Primary education ... should also be a hugely positive, rich experience for all children in itself' with children 'not just learning different things, but learning in many different ways'. It goes on to urge schools to 'take a fresh look at their curriculum, their timetable and the organisation of the school day and week, and think actively about how they would like to develop and enrich the experience they offer their children', raising partnership beyond the classroom, including investment in partnership with museums and galleries.

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God's world

The new Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) agenda aims to make sure that everyone recognises the value of learning that takes place outside classrooms. As Christians, the idea that learning is not confined to lessons in classrooms and lecture theatres should not come as a surprise. The Bible is full of reminders that the wider world is filled with things that help humans to grow and learn in body, mind and spirit. The world in which we live bears the signature of its Maker. It may be fallen and tainted by sin, but it is still God's world. Everything in it belongs to Him. And, because of this, spending more time in that world can help promote wisdom, knowledge, understanding, compassion, concern and care for other people and the natural environment. Although the LOtC initiative may not be Christian, it is something all Christians should support.

Alfresco manifesto

The LOtC manifesto, recommended in 2005 by the Education and Skills Select Committee, launched in November 2006 and published in 2008, invites individuals and organisations to sign up and pledge their support to take action in order to 'make a difference' (see the www.teachernet.gov.uk website for details).

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Back in 2006 the DfES – along with Farming and Countryside Education (FACE) and Natural England – commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to assess the extent and nature of LOtC activity and practice in schools and local authorities in England. The resulting manifesto's underlying aim is to promote the belief that 'every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances'. It outlines the educational benefits and the purpose of LOtC, suggesting ways that it can be supported. Clear links are made to 'Every Child Matters', 'Youth Matters' and 'Sustainable Schools'; the agenda is no longer merely 'about what we learn but importantly how and where we learn'.

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Great! Outdoors!

The Department for children, schools and families (DCSF) has produced a comprehensive package of guidance to help school staff identify appropriate settings for LOtC, and plan and prepare for activities in order to get the best out of them. This is being called the 'Out and About Package'. For those of us who have been effectively and successfully organising educational school visits for years, this guidance does come across, somewhat, as 'teaching granny to suck eggs'. However, if it motivates schools and teachers that have shied away from school trips and learning outside their school setting because of fear of lower SATs scores or of litigation due to accidents or incidents, to launch out and broaden the horizons of the children in their care, it will have achieved its aim and done our children a great service.





There is also support for providers of LOtC. The DCSF, in conjunction with Pricewaterhouse-Coopers (PwC), is currently developing a LOtC Quality Badge to be launched in September 2008. The hope is that it will be taken up by the full range of LOtC organisations and settings, and would be an instantly recognisable quality assurance indicator, trusted by schools and colleges, of high quality teaching and learning experiences, and of effective health and safety management.

Two routes

There will be two routes for this award, determined by the degree of risk management needed by the setting concerned and the activities offered. Route One will be for those providers deemed as needing a lower level of risk management. For those providers that have signed up to this, random spot checks will take place in order to determine compliance. Route Two providers, involving a higher level of risk management, will have an external assessment before the quality badge is awarded.

The full details surrounding this quality badge have not yet been unveiled. Concern is currently being expressed around possible costs involved in signing up for the award, especially for venues which do not charge for entry or services offered, and that may have charitable status. This would include the many places of worship and sacred spaces that host school visits to support and enhance RE. It is not yet known whether this would eventually lead to schools, in the main, limiting themselves to visiting venues with the Quality Badge, something that many places of

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it PSALM 24:1

worship might find that they do not have the resources or personnel to apply for.

LOtC

I would encourage *ACT Now* readers to raise the agenda of LOtC and the Quality Badge with their local churches and SACREs as well as their own school or college.

'If we listen to what children and young people say inspire them most, we can be left in little doubt that good quality learning outside the classroom should be part of our educational mainstream.' So said Sir Al Aynsley-Green, Children's Commissioner for England in March 2008. I am sure that both our own personal experiences and our experiences working with children and young people would lead us to agree with this. The Learning Outside the Classroom agenda can, therefore, only be a good thing which will be of benefit to everyone.

■ Barbara Todd

Useful websites

www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningoutsidetheclassroom

www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/resourcemat/outsidetheclassroom/newsletters

www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools

www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/healthandsafety/visits

www.teachingoutsidetheclassroom.com

www.teachout.co.uk

www.gem.org.uk/home.html

