

## IMBYs and the Future of Outdoor Experiential Education: Redefining the Meaning of "Up Close and Personal"

By Grant Linney

If you ask outdoor educators what a group of learners looks like when they're "up close and personal," the following quickly surfaces:

*You see it in the eyes, the look. It's one of total focus, of fascination and connection.*

*Yeah, and it's in their bodies too. They're leaning forward. They're physically close together, bonded by something that's immediate and real and totally engaging. They're directly participating in something as one, as a community of hands-on explorers who are not sure where they're going. They're part of an adventure, a narrative whose middle and ending are not yet known.*

*And, if you could read their minds, the last thing you would find is any association with formal classroom learning. They're thinking that they are out of school, not anywhere near it.*

If you ask these same outdoor educators what "up close and personal" looks like in terms of activities, you get an impressive and inclusive array of responses:

*They're sharing hot chocolate about halfway along a 20-kilometre cross-country ski loop. They're in the middle of a hardwood forest that is blanketed with the silent beauty of fresh powder snow.*

*They've found this female crayfish in a pond or stream, and she's laden with eggs under her tail. There's this instinctive fascination with the crusty skin, the clump of dark reddish-brown eggs and the searching chelipeds (claws). The desire to reach out and touch is tempered with the fear of a pinch as well as a dash of the unknown.*

*The class is in two lines, facing each other and with overlapping open palms. All eyes are on one brave soul above them and at one*



*end of the line. After a series of back-and-forth communications, this person falls backwards, tin-soldier style, into their waiting arms.*

*It's early spring, and they're drilling holes into grand sugar maples with brace and bit, then attaching spiles, buckets and lids for collection of the sap. They're hauling the sap to fire-stoked evaporators where clouds of steam billow into the air and an increasingly sweet smell permeates the air. Then, they are eagerly awaiting a delectable taste of the finished product.*

Outdoor experiential education (OEE) is about hands-on, direct experience; it's about a community of learners; it's about rapt attention and total engagement; it's about

discovering oneself, one's peers and one's surroundings (frequently, but not necessarily, natural surroundings). Unfortunately, it has also all too often been about the following largely unquestioned and widely practiced tenets:

- To experience the outdoors, one must travel *away* from one's home community and into more natural settings.
- To safely and effectively experience the outdoors, one must have the security of designated outdoor education properties.

Let's now look at these assumptions more closely.

Don't get me wrong. There is considerable merit to travelling away for OEE, to attempting our modest version of the mythical hero's journey of adventure, challenge and growth before returning home. I have experienced many extended and remote wilderness trips. I have spent most of my teaching career at a dozen day and residential outdoor education centres and I appreciate that their settings offer a range of geographies and habitats that can be effectively used for a wide variety of programs at different times of year. With the continuous use of these settings under the direction of trained outdoor educators, issues of safety, program development and resources become much easier to handle. And, for students at a residential centre, "away" acquires a whole new dimension: it can become a powerful retreat, an opportunity to get away from the multiple and often disconnected fragments of their days at home and to instead experience sustained focus within the same community of learners . . . powerful stuff indeed.

However, the time is past due for us to consider the downside of travelling away for OEE and I see at least four factors to consider here:

- **The financial cost of transportation:** Bussing is a significant expense for OEE, so much so that it limits who can come and how often.
- **The environmental cost of transportation:** The single most important value of OEE in these times is surely *education for environment*. We need to show that OEE can walk its talk.

- **The grade levels covered and the frequency of OEE experiences:** The few school boards with significant OEE programs strive for universality by mandating that all classes at one or perhaps two grade levels have these experiences. The Toronto District School Board, with one of the largest board budgets in the country, provides 4.5 days worth of OEE between Grades 1 and 12, including 2.5 days of residential programming at the Grade 6 or 7 level. This, to the best of my knowledge, is the largest amount of OEE for any public board in the country. But we must realize that even this allocation is not nearly enough to realize the kind of multiple and lasting benefits of OEE that are outlined in COEO's 2007 summary of research into the values of OEE (Foster & Linney, 2007).
- **The potential for a limited transfer of learning:** There is considerable evidence in brain-based research that making connections to "home" is more difficult when learning happens "away," and my own experiences over some four decades provide a personal conviction about this potential weak link. However, this does not need to be the case. A good outdoor educator will always strive to complete the experiential learning cycle, to process, reflect upon and debrief an experience so that its learnings can be brought home.

When these four factors are taken into account, one can be left with the strong impression that the potential widespread and lasting impacts of OEE too frequently remain just that: unrealized potential.

### An Alternative Approach

Many years ago, I read an article with a title something like "In Praise of NIMBYs." Remember them? The "Not in My Back Yard" types we frequently dismiss because we presume that they oppose anything that could impact their immediate neighbourhood in an adverse fashion? Well, the article's author praised NIMBYs for their passion and for lines of argument that were frequently very well thought out.

With reference to OEE, my proposal is that we move from NIMBY to "IMBY." We need OEE "In My Back Yard," i.e., in our home communities, within walking (or perhaps public transit) distance of our schools. I am not saying that we should close existing outdoor education centres, but let's face it: we're not about to get many more of these relatively expensive facilities. So, let's get our outdoor educators to assume more of a resource role for classroom teachers. Let's support our elementary teachers through a gradual progression of outdoor experiences and the supervisory assistance of well-prepped parents to take their students outdoors at least six times a year. Let's get our students to realize that the life support systems of this planet are all around them and that *up close and personal* can occur locally, repeatedly, relatively inexpensively, and in powerful ways that really bring home connections with themselves, their classmates, and their natural surroundings.

As for secondary teachers, one need only look at Michael Elrick in Guelph and the extraordinary things he and his colleagues accomplished with two four-credit integrated course packages, one in Grade 10 (Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP)), and the other at the Grade 12 level (Headwaters). Yes, he took his students away on remote trips, but he also based the bulk of programming within his local community. There will be much more said about this outstanding educator in our forthcoming Spring issue of *Pathways*.

For the pedagogically inclined, IMBY education is more commonly referred to as *place-based education*. American educator David Sobel (2008) is an articulate proponent of this approach:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students'

appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. (p. 131)

In *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow*, the Ontario government makes a few scattered references to the value of local outdoor experiences for purpose of environmental education but it inexplicably limits these experiences to the confines of the schoolyard. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). We can do so much better than this! With proper scouting and supervision, one can usually find and make repeated use of a piece of "untended" land nearby . . . an uncut strip along the edge of a playing field, a "vacant" piece of land that teems with life. And, such local forays can even contain the element of adventure.

Whatever we call it – "IMBY Education," "Place-based Education," or perhaps "One Kilometre Education" (i.e., OEE within one km of the school), one thing is very clear to me: if we really want OEE to have the widespread, varied and lasting impacts research shows it can have, we need to bring it "home" so that students are repeatedly exposed to its magic.

## References

- Foster, A. & Linney, G. (2007). *Reconnecting children through outdoor education: A research summary*. Toronto, ON: Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario.
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*Grant Linney is currently contracted with Lakehead University to write a course outline for the new Teachers' Additional Qualification Course in Outdoor Experiential Education.*