

# **When I stop and think about it ... Further research is NOT required**

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## **Introduction**

This presentation covers a very broad subject and one that can only be sketched over in the space available. The area of outdoor education is a complex phenomena as it involves working in a wide ranges of contexts and with various groups of people aiming towards lots of different ends. In the UK there is a saying that, 'Outdoor education is not rocket science – it is harder than that!'

The paper focuses on research methodology and epistemology which have a tendency to spark debates as they often involve discussion of deeply held beliefs.

I suspect that what I have to say and the lines of my arguments will not be popular with some people. I can anticipate this as it cuts against the grain of popular trends and patterns and many of my colleagues object to my views on much of the research that they undertake. In fact, some thinking I am barking mad.

The main thrust of what I want to say is concerned with the current trends in outdoor education research. These trends also prevail in educational research so what I want to say applies to both areas at some level. I am going to use the term outdoor education in a broad sense encompassing fields such as experiential education, adventure education and outdoor learning.

I want to suggest to you that much of the research in outdoor education is weak, easily criticised and of limited value to practitioners and academics. A great deal of the outdoor education literature is either very descriptive in nature or takes a critical position and does not offer suggestions regarding ways forward, developments and improvements. I see both of these patterns as problematic. So, following some discussion of current research I want to make some suggestions that are more positive and indicate how researchers might spend their time and the kinds of issues and approaches that could be helpful in furthering the practice of outdoor education. Before going any further I want to talk briefly about my own background and interests as I believe this will help to contextualise what I have to say.

Reference as:

1

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

My interest in education outdoors was triggered through my failures in the educational systems I experienced as a child and adolescent. My failures were quite spectacular and one consequence or reason for this was that my main interests were in the outdoors and in particular in natural history. My involvement in expeditions specifically and spending time in the outdoors generally was of great significance in my adolescent years and developed great fondness for remote mountain environments. I have a particular passion for the Arctic and the Himalaya and for journeys in wild and beautiful places. After developing these interests in a practical sense I became interested in academic endeavours, in education that would be meaningful and that would build on students' passions and interests. I became interested in using the outdoors for educational purposes for young people.

In many respects this explains why I am a supporter of the American philosopher and pragmatist, John Dewey(1938, 1958). He wrote extensively on the importance of education being meaningful for students and how the interaction of the student with the learning environment is of crucial importance.

When I first became interested in research and the emerging body of knowledge I was convinced that good quality research could make a major difference to theory, practice and political arguments. As I spend more time academia I find myself increasingly frustrated with research in the field of education generally and more specifically in outdoor education. In other words I came to research in outdoor education as a strong believer in the power of research and now I am increasingly disillusioned and ... often frustrated. The synonymous use of the term 'research' and 'empirical research' prevails. In my own work I have repeatedly had to question this assumption of both students and staff – because in other fields of study one would have to provide a strong rationale for the inclusion of empirical work in research. This narrowing of the term research to only include empirical work is unhelpful and not compulsory.

This frustration is concerned with a great volume of 'facts' ... people collecting endless empirical evidence but not examining what seems to me to be deeper issues and questions. It is my belief that collating reams of 'new knowledge' is not as important as gaining wisdom and good judgement. What I want to talk about today is not something I can amass facts about. I am concerned with the views taken on facts, the analysis – the way they are collected and 'seen'. In essence I am talking about the deep presuppositions upon which research in our field seems to be founded.

So there is some irony for me – having failed the formal compulsory education system I am now standing in front of you talking about educational research. Notwithstanding the ironies, in some ways I can summarise my interest in

Reference as:

2

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

educational research by my failings in school and whether I failed school or the school failed me? As a researcher it seems to me that this kind of issue is important but that any useful exploration of this issue will not be of an empirical nature.

A further irony here is that I am an academic – part of my work involves undertaking research – I get paid for doing research and most of the time the assumption is that the research should be empirical – partially because that is what is acceptable but also because it is what is apparently helpful to secure funds for educators. I will return to this issue later.

My interest in the use of research to inform practice and vice versa came about some time ago as I was working in the outdoors and reading different literature related to what I was doing. After trawling through endless books and journal articles I could not come to any useful conclusion about what I ought to do ... it did not help to improve my work or to explain my work to other people. Essentially, all I could conclude was that whatever I wanted to do, within reason, I could find some kind of justification for. Whether I wanted to take a militaristic approach or a more democratic approach – I could find literature to support whichever method to meet the ends I was striving for. This was the source of numerous attacks of deep scepticism.

### **So, what are the purposes of research in outdoor education?**

In very broad terms and for the purposes of what I want to talk about today we can think about internally and externally focussed research (Allison, 2000; Allison & Pomeroy, 2000).

Internally focused research is the kind of work that helps us to improve practice; it is aimed at developing our understanding of processes and outcomes in a range of contexts and using different approaches.

Externally focused research is work that is concerned with justification of what outdoor education involves and what it can 'produce' to funding bodies, decision makers and policy. Of course, research can have both internal and external aims so it is not a mutually exclusive proposition. Rather a way of thinking that I have found to be helpful.

There is little doubt that recent years have seen an increase in the number of researchers interested in outdoor education. One consequence of this is the proliferation of journals and books available which is only increased by the internet. As might be expected, the emerging research and the developing body of knowledge includes a range of quality and epistemological positions from a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, psychology and sociology.

Reference as:

3

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

The research has aimed at different targets ... some to secure funds (external), others to improve practice (internal) and some other work it is hard to tell. My cynical tendencies suggest that aims are about obtaining a qualification or securing promotion or tenure. Not surprisingly, many of my academic colleagues object to this last suggestion.

So, for the purposes of today I think it would be helpful to think about research as being internally and externally focussed.

### **The kinds of questions that are being asked**

Let me start by offering a few examples of research in the field that has been published in outdoor education journals. To those of you who might look at these and think I have selected them carefully to support my argument - these come from a long menu of options – they are illustrative of themes that are very easy to find in the literature.

The first is an American study by Ives and Obenchain (2006) who conducted a pre test – post test study to examine higher order thinking skills (HOTS) as compared to lower order thinking skills (LOTS). Following their study they concluded two main things,

1. "...we must recognize that HOTS is not a well defined term." (p.74)
2. "The difficulty of changing teacher practice surfaced frequently in our study." One of the teachers in the study commented... "it's been a lot of work so that I've many times said, if I just use my lesson plans from last year, my life would be so much easier." (p. 73)

The authors then go on to make the following observation, "Thus, teacher dispositions may be a significant hurdle to implementing more effective curricula." (p. 72). With this deep insight (??) they go on to note,

Practical considerations often pose a significant challenge to carrying out controlled studies in classrooms. Follow-up studies should address these challenges. (p. 74)

I wonder how they felt about drawing these conclusions? I wonder if they thought that it was worth all of their work to get to this point? I wonder if they realised that this was nothing particularly new ... that other people had come to these conclusions many centuries before without conducting any empirical work because it just takes some relatively low order thinking skills (LOTS) to get to this point.

The second is a conclusion from a paper which was published from a PhD in outdoor education – the equivalent of three years of study and this is one of the main 'findings',

Reference as:

4

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

This study shows the connections and disconnections for women outdoor educators in combining career and family relationships. ... the study highlights the ways in which women's ability to negotiate career and family relationships in outdoor education is made more difficult by the centrality of the body to outdoor education careers. (Allin, 2004, p. 69)

It seems to me that this is not a big surprise given that one of the often claimed benefits of outdoor education concerns the holistic nature of body and mind. So it seems to be fairly obvious that those working in this field would have to combine body and mind throughout their careers.

The third and final example I want to give concerns a study titled *Challenging Girls Constructions of Femininity in the Outdoors* (Whittington, 2006) which primarily involved primarily interviews 4 to 5 months and 15 to 18 months after a 23 day all female canoe expedition in Maine. Key findings from the study involved six themes,

1. perseverance, strength and determination
2. challenging assumptions of girls abilities
3. feelings of accomplishment and pride
4. questioning ideal images of beauty
5. increased ability to speak out and leadership skills
6. building significant relationships with other girls. (p. 211)

It seems to me that these are all things we could conclude by stopping and having a good think. It also seems to me that many of these themes are axiomatic and irrelevant to the gender of students: the first five could apply to any group and could be anticipated with some ease. The last one is no surprise – they could not build significant relationships with boys as there were none there. Put another way – there is a conceptual link between an all female group being out of doors and them building relationships with each other that allows us to anticipate the empirical 'finding'.

However, the real insight comes at the end when the author concludes ...

The girls have learned at a crucial stage in their development how to cultivate significant relationships with other girls and to build allies with other women. This connection can offer valuable skills for maintaining positive relationships with other women as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. ... The benefits of an all-girls program, particularly during adolescence, are that it allows girls to experience the outdoors and the wilderness with other females and to view the outdoors as a feminine sphere. (p. 217-8)

I want to be really clear here, there is nothing here that I disagree with ... in fact, I suspect there is nothing in these comments that most people here would disagree with. I could certainly not deny the importance of the ability of girls

Reference as:

5

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

to build positive relationships with other women. I will go further and say it is important for humans generally to build positive relationships with other humans. The point I am making is that these are not conclusions that require empirical work – if we just stop and think about these things we can come to these findings using logic. The questions that are being asked do not need empirical work to answer them. These are the kinds of findings that could be published in the fictitious '*Journal of the Blindingly Obvious*'.

So thinking about these three examples and other work that seems to be throughout the outdoor education literature I can not help but come to at least three reflections,

1. Much of the work is concerned with proving the value of a particular approach or of conducting research that confirms deeply held beliefs about how things ought to be. As researchers we all know that we can find whatever we are looking for if we try hard enough.
2. A lot of the literature reads like promotional material – in need of good analysis and weighing up of alternative views on data rather than the tempting analysis that is shallow and shows 'proof' – when often the issues explored are, as I have already suggested, conceptually linked.
3. Outdoor educators have a tendency to write for outdoor educators. We have a habit of preaching to the converted. This is common in most fields of study but the degree to which it happens in outdoor education is astounding. Writing and interacting with other fields would be one of the ways in which we might enrich our understanding, practice and wisdom. Let me offer a brief example – anecdotal evidence that one other field knows very little about outdoor education. Moral education is a claim repeatedly made in outdoor education literature and promotional materials and is often linked to, among others, Aristotle and Hahn (Wurdinger, 1997). In July 2006 I was at the conference of the Association for Moral Education in Switzerland. When I arrived I was surprised that there were no others there with even a connection to outdoor education and when I gave my presentations on moral issues associated with outdoor education, people had no idea what I was referring to.

Before moving on to make some suggestions and talk about some future research directions, let me 'come a little closer to home' and give you an example from my own research. Hopefully this will help me down from the soap box and convince you that I am not trying to take some kind of moral high ground.

About 10 years ago I conducted some research into expeditions in the arctic with young people. I collected endless reams of qualitative information regarding their experiences on their return home when they reported things like sleepless nights, missing fresh air, missing friends, missing the space in

Reference as:

6

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

the wilderness and the companionship. Some reported signs of depression and anxiety and had visited their doctors for assistance in coping. One of my findings was that people had a hard time adjusting when they returned. I wrote a lot about what people were saying and named the phenomenon 'post expedition adjustment'. Since then several other researchers have picked up this term and the topic has subsequently received some discussion and attention. When all this was happening I was aware that there was something that was bothering me and it took some time for me to figure it out.

The problem was that if I had just stopped and thought about this, read in some other areas and talked to a few other people I could have figured it out without collecting any 'data'. I had taken an extremely long route to find literature concerned with, among other things, transitions and grieving. Now I find myself shaking my head at the long and confused route I took to find something that I could have worked out if I had thought in a broader manner than conceptualising research and empiricism as one and the same thing.

### **The core of the problem**

Of course, what I am saying is not new – by any means. The most common statement on this issue is probably from Wittgenstein (1963, p. 232), "The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by."

Other people have subsequently written about these issues. For example Martens (1987) offered a critical perspective on research trends in sports science. More recently Egan (2002) has offered a similar commentary with regard to research in education. Wittgenstein hit the nail on the head and it is worth noting that he was a philosopher – he saw the problems of empiricism and the way in which the tools used were not appropriate for the questions being asked. Of course, this raises more questions regarding what the right tools would be to answer the questions asked – in other words, how do we get the right tools for the tasks we are undertaking.

One of the first answers to such a question that I find helpful involves Aristotle who advised in chapter 3 of Book I of *The Nichomachean Ethics*,

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts ... for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.

Reference as:

7

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

If we take this advice then we could do well to start by considering the degree of precision we can expect research in outdoor education to provide. My own view is that outdoor education is most definitely an art and not a science. The complexities involved in researching such an area mean that researchers can make insights but it is very unlikely that they will find rules or laws that are set in stone. One of the reasons for these problems is that research in education is generally more complex than many other areas. Education does not have one clear aim but rather has many aims which are deeply contested (Carr, 1999; Eraut, 1994). The work of Richard Rorty is helpful here

... we shall see all three attempts [moral philosophy, social sciences and literature] to find ways of describing our relationships to our fellows which help us to figure out what to do ... we shall think of universal truths as nice to have, if we can get them, but as something which we know how to get along without. ... we shall see this as having made us able to talk in less reductive and condescending terms about people very different from ourselves ... we shall see them as ... having made us morally better. (Rorty, 1983, p. 175).

In the range of things that Rorty says here a couple are particularly relevant to my argument,

- that we need to remember that research is a moral enterprise and;
- that looking for 'truths or reality' may not be a helpful 'holy grail' to search for.

Outdoor education is a complex phenomena, so looking for rules or laws to practice by is unlikely to meet with success. Midgley offers a useful metaphor when she likens research in social sciences to a large aquarium with lots of different windows – looking through only one of the windows results in a very limited picture where as moving around and looking through different windows allows us to build up a picture of the phenomena under study.

If we liken research in outdoor education to research in education more generally the essence of what we are doing might be epitomised in the following way. In schools we could develop a research proposal to study curriculum design with a view to establishing priorities of what ought to be taught. If we planned to do so by empirical work that involved asking students at the end of each class whether they enjoyed it and if they thought they learned something we would be rejected without any hesitation. One of the main reasons for such a rejection would be on the basis that such a proposal would actually be examining student experiences in classrooms which are effected by, among other things, the teacher – their style, approach, energy and such like. Furthermore, it would be laughable to make an argument that students should only study what they like. Put another way, we do not find researchers asking students at the end of, say, a mathematics lesson how

Reference as:

8

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

much they enjoyed themselves and then using the resultant statistics to make an argument for inclusion of maths in the curriculum. In curriculum theory and development, discussions tend to focus on the aims of education and what people *ought* to learn in formal education systems. As it happens I was not very strong in maths, but that is not the point here. We could choose any of the 'traditional' subjects that are taught in schools and the logic of this critique would apply.

There are, not surprisingly, many recourses to this argument such as many outdoor education providers are working on developing what we might refer to as personal and social development, communication, trust, teamwork, values, self-concept and such like. These are skills that transcend traditional subject boundaries. However, this response does not mean that we are exempt from conducting research and making arguments in the same way as other curriculum areas. Lots of other curriculum areas work in the affective domain and claim benefits such as personal development without getting caught up in 'proving themselves' in these same kinds of empirical ways.

The famous British philosopher of education, Alfred North Whitehead, criticised much of education for being 'inert'. In a similar way, we might argue that a great deal of research is inert. We can see this in at least two ways.

First, it might be concerned with proving connections between issues that are conceptually linked (see earlier examples) and second, it might be presented in such ways that make it difficult to see consequences and implications for practice.

While we are on the subject, this opportunity should not be passed by to point out that Whitehead did not conduct any empirical work to come to this theory. Likewise, neither did those people who are typically cited with being significant figures in the field of outdoor education such as Dewey (1938, 1958), Rousseau (1911/2000), Aristotle (1925), Hahn (n.d.) and Plato (1950). More recently I should perhaps draw attention to philosophers who are often overlooked within the field of outdoor education but who have things to say that are very relevant indeed to our work – people like David Carr (1991, 2003), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Alastair MacIntyre (1981, 1999), Mary Midgeley (1978/1996, 2001), Charles Taylor (1991, 1995), Mary Warnock () and Wittgenstein (1979) to name but a few. Closer to home, it seems to me to be no coincidence that some of the most heavily referenced and best selling authors in outdoor education are those engaging in philosophical lines of enquiry – people such as Jasper Hunt (1990), Robbie Nicol (2002a, 2002b, 2003) and Scott Wurdinger (1997).

I am not suggesting that all researchers should down their familiar tools and methods and re-train to be capable of philosophical inquiry. Rather, I am

Reference as:

9

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

suggesting that we should heed the advice of Wittgenstein and consider the alignment of problem and method. Different kinds of concepts need to be explained in different ways (Midgley, 2001, p. 178). Clearly, there is far more here to consider than time permits and I have already indicated that I can only offer a sketch today. Of course, there are good reasons for us finding ourselves in this situation, that is another discussion but for now it will have to be sufficient to say that undertaking empirical work is often seen as 'more scientific' and therefore more acceptable. There is often a call for 'facts' and so the response has been to gather them. In many respects this has become the currency of research in outdoor education – empirical 'facts'. I recently came across an illustration of this in promotional material for a positive psychology workshop,

Positive psychology has a strong intellectual base and intellectual credibility: not only are its leaders serious intellectuals and scholars but they are also empiricists. (Centre for Confidence and Well Being, n.d.)

I want to move on and talk about the kinds of questions that might be useful to ask and the lines of inquiry that may be fruitful.

### **The kinds of questions that might useful to ask**

I think I may have over emphasised the point here and my view that only in rare cases is further research required. Put more carefully, 'further empirical research is not typically required'. Of course, I am over stating my case, there are times when empirical work is most appropriate but I am suggesting that it is rarely the case and too often problem and method continue to pass each other by as we search for more precision than the subject matter permits.

A couple of years ago I undertook some work for a book and subsequently for a journal paper regarding risk in outdoor education. Certainly this area has received plenty of attention within the field but I wanted to take a different view on it, I wanted to suggest that trust was far more important in the learning process and that focussing on risk had become a bit of a 'red herring'. At the time I did contemplate doing some empirical work in this area but could not figure out anything meaningful to do. I did this work on trust and risk and related it to curriculum and the use of experiential approaches in formal education systems. It was a philosophical enquiry. I was pleased with the result and it was well received. Only last month I found that the university where I work did not 'count' this work when they were undertaking a review of research in the school of education. Why not? Because it was not considered to be 'real' research based on empirical facts. I was, shall we say, less than impressed by this.

Reference as:

10

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

It seems to me that we need to work to find ways for it to be more acceptable to use a range of tools for research – and I am here using tools in a broad sense to incorporate logic and philosophical inquiry as well as empirical approaches.

At this point it seems appropriate to note that one response to my suggestions is that evidence based research is what funders want ... and that graphs and tables are what people understand. I refer to this as an objection on political grounds. I am willing to concede some ground to this response but only so much. It seems to me that there is a place for empirical work but that there is also place for the use of logic. Further more, I want to suggest to you that it is OUR responsibility to explain and persuade those funders and people in positions of power that empirical work is often not the best answer. In short – problem and method pass each other by – we need to remedy this error that I believe is repeatedly made in our fields of practice and study.

### **So, what kinds of research might be useful to engage in?**

First and foremost, I want to reiterate that I think there is space for lots of different methods and philosophies to work alongside each other. I am not suggesting that this is an either or proposition. My concern is that research has become synonymous with empirical research and scientific thus leaving logic and theoretical inquiry homeless. Furthermore, that much of the research that I see emerging is for higher degrees and needs to be conceptualised in much clearer ways to be useful and to make *meaningful* contributions to the bodies of knowledge that make up outdoor and experiential education.

It seems to me that we might engage in logical debate and discussion about a whole range of issues in outdoor education that could develop the field in all kinds of ways. To return to the earlier example of research that I cited, if we want to know about the values and benefits of taking young people on expeditions overseas we might do well to stop, think about it long and hard, talk to other people – both in our field and outside the immediate field of outdoor education and, of course, read what others have said in neighbouring fields. Let me offer you three further brief examples,

1. I have a PhD student at the moment who is working philosophically on the nature of character and how character may be formed in outdoor education. Partially as a response to Andrew Brookes' (2003a&b) work suggesting that Neo-Hahnian outdoor education and character formation should not be connected. It will be no surprise to you that the arguments made by Brookes were based on social psychology empirical research that involved contrived experiments that have nothing to do with outdoor education. There are, of course, good

Reference as:

11

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

reasons to connect character formation and development together and Aristotle provides very helpful guidance on this. Again, this is not the time or place to go into specifics in more detail but the value of philosophical inquiry to this issue gets at some of the core assumptions of outdoor education and has potential to make a big difference to the way educators work.

2. Another PhD student is starting to examine spiritual aspects of outdoor education – he is concerned with the relationship that the wilderness has with human spirituality. This is not an easy subject by any means but, again, one of great importance. Because it is a difficult issue certainly does not mean it should be avoided ... it often means we **should** engage with the subject matter appropriately. However, as Aristotle noted we should only expect “...as much clearness as the subject matter admits of...”
3. The final example, in many current educational systems and specifically in Scotland, curriculum reviews are calling for a more coherent curriculum and for more project based learning and interdisciplinary study with a view to qualities such as integrity and citizenship. One response to these claims is that this is part of a trend of curriculum development that is not particularly helpful as it is almost impossible to argue against – who would object to developing citizenship or integrity as part of an educational process? However, it seems to me that outdoor education is very well placed to provide a cohering framework to address some of the issues which are receiving attention. We should bear in mind that it is very unlikely that empirical work alone will answer these questions, will make these arguments or will convince policy makers of the value of outdoor education in contributing to the process of reaching these lofty goals.

### **To sum up the overall thrust of what I am saying,**

Repeatedly we are told that ...Phenomena are subject to powerful tools ... these tools should include philosophical tools of the mind ... logical and intelligent analysis.

It might help us to understand experiential learning in a broader context, lure us to understand that there are other people doing this in lots of contexts and help us to see connections to other fields of practice, for example, adult learning. It might also challenge a range of our assumptions and help us to realise that experiential learning can and is used for all kinds of ends – it is in a strict sense a method and not a philosophy.

Reference as:

12

Allison, P. (2006). When I stop and think about it ...Further research is NOT required. Keynote presentation at *International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference*, Charles University, Prague.

While there are a plethora of future directions for research and evaluation some may be more fruitful than others. Careful consideration of focus and attention to philosophical inquiry can help to move the field forward – both in terms of practice and theoretical contributions. The crucial role of practitioners in actively directing research and being involved in the process is often ignored or blamed for the gap between research and practice.

Those embarking on research should take time to stop and think about it ... stop and think really hard about it to ensure that problem and method are aligned and to make sure that the degree of precision is in keeping with the subject matter.

While further research may NOT be required ... when further research IS required I hope that in the future it will involve a wide range of approaches that are appropriate and helpful in exploring the rich and exciting concept of outdoor education.

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13

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