BIG Chair’s Report 2013

My final year as Chair of this fantastic network has, once again, seen a wide range of activity across the diverse fields represented in our membership. As we all headed home from last year’s BIG Event in York the world’s attention was moving to London for the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games. The Games were a mixed blessing for many of us – while it was pleasing to see science and technology so publicly positioned in the national culture, many of the institutions we work in experienced an unusually quiet summer with inevitable financial consequences.

A significant event for many members will have been the publication, in November, of the Wellcome Trust's Review of Informal Science Learning. Based on the findings of two separate research teams, the Review looked at the range of provision in the UK, attempting to understand it in terms of an “ecology”, and offered a commentary on its current strengths and weaknesses. Not all the findings were universally well received, but it will be a topic for discussion for many months and years to come.

I wrote a response to the Review having taken on board many of the opinions from members, particularly as expressed through BIG-chat. Key points I raised included:

• There are genuine, practical obstacles to practitioners making greater use of learning research (including time, particularly for small businesses, limited access to academic journals and the difficulty of monitoring such a potentially broad range of publications).
• The risk of the Review being interpreted as “researchers tell practitioners to be more like us” (which wasn’t the intention, but a genuine risk)
• Encouraging the use of networks such as BIG (both at events and through digital channels) to disseminate research findings.
• Requesting support for the ongoing drive to improve quality, including support for constructive criticism.
• Reminding the authors that the potential range of relevant research that can inform our field goes far beyond science learning.

I hope that BIG’s membership can continue to participate in the debate about where we want our field to go, while respecting the diversity that makes this community so strong. I know that the title has put off many people who feel the “informal learning” tag is too didactic and distant from the spirit of “public engagement” but I feel that overall the Review will have a positive influence on our work in the future.

As Chair I have been asked to contribute to a number of discussions when inviting the entire membership would be impractical. Of particular note this year were two events in close succession just before Christmas.

I received an invitation from the British Science Association to participate in a workshop to discuss the future of the Science Communication Conference. This was a stimulating day and made it clear that not only can the BIG Event and the
SciCommConf live happily in parallel but they can and should occupy distinct niches.

The Science and Society team at the Business, Innovation and Skills department (BIS) have been reviewing their programme over the last year and held a number of consultation workshops (including one on developing “new ways of understanding and influencing public perceptions of science” which I attended). I was slightly nonplussed to recognise relatively few people at the event that was dominated by science academics and industrial representatives. While we are seeing much more public engagement activity coming from the university sector, with much that is sophisticated and high quality, it is important that the broadest range of practitioners are promoted if future government policies are to be informed by successful theory and practice.

The committee has been hard at work again this year with a range of activities. We had a smaller programme of skills events this year but I would like to thank the volunteer organisers Toni Hamill and Katie Steckles, and all the participants for their contributions. Thanks also to Thinktank and to MadLab, Manchester for hosting events for us. Our Vice-Chair, Bridget Holligan, will bring a proposal to this year’s AGM for developing the skills events programme into a more substantial CPD programme.

We have been reviewing the governance of BIG over the last couple of years. Last year, at the Annual General Meeting, the membership ratified an update to the constitution and instructed the Executive to investigate the benefits and pitfalls of various different governance models, with a view to bringing a recommendation to the 2013 AGM. This question arose because BIG’s current status, as a membership society, potentially exposes the members to financial risk. Our Treasurer, Dave Porter, has led this investigation and has a separate report on the issue. However, the committee has taken some immediate steps to protect members by adjusting our insurance cover and will not be recommending any change in the organisation’s status in the immediate future. That being said, I believe that this is an issue that future committee’s should return to periodically as if BIG’s membership continues to grow as we hope it does, then there may be advantages to adopting a different shape.

So as I prepare to hand over to my successor I can look back with confidence that the network is working well and has delivered some good things. I’m disappointed that I will leave without having managed to establish a platform to support confidential constructive criticism of each other’s work, but I am pleased to see this beginning to happen openly on BIG-Chat. I know that there are people waiting in the wings who can take this on. I would like to thank this year’s Committee, Bridget, Dave, Ashley and Ben for their tireless work and support, and to the former committee members with whom I have served over the last 4 years. Most of all I would like to thank our two officers; Rachel, for looking after the BIG Event and more so effectively and Sarah for making BIG the smooth operation it is today.

I am really proud to have served as BIG’s Chair and to have represented such a fantastic network of highly skilled people. I hope you will welcome your next Chair as kindly as you have been to me.

Have a great conference and enjoy the summer.

Andy Lloyd
BIG Executive Committee Chair 2011-2013