



Teaching Outdoors

Tips and tools of the trade

Why teach outside?

It seems there are two reasons for teaching outdoors in this new Covid era. Either you are teaching outdoors because it makes sense for you to be there – i.e. there are specific opportunities there which you want to include in your teaching – or you are moving classes outdoors that would normally be held indoors for health and safety reasons.

If you fall into the second category, please take heart. As someone who has taught outdoor education for more than 25 years, I can honestly say that moving learning to the outdoors, in many cases, is best for learning and best for the social and emotional health of everyone.

Benefits of outdoor learning include:

- It is healthier for the students and for you (even before Covid, more so now)
- It teaches life skills that don't typically come up in the classroom
- It is an ideal setting for developing a wide range of social and emotional skills that are otherwise difficult to get at in a controlled environment such as a classroom
- It helps rekindle a love of learning for many students that they lose connection with in the more confined and less spontaneous environment of the classroom

What can be taught outside?

Taking advantage of the outdoor environment to teach natural sciences is somewhat of a no-brainer, at least here in rural Maine. But for those with an open mind, it's possible to integrate many other disciplines into outdoor education. Art and physical education, certainly, but also music, math, language arts and just about any other discipline can be moved outside with surprising success. Math, for example, is used to explain the natural world – so what better place to start than with nature?

The outdoors does present some novel situations and both teachers and students need to be generous with themselves as they learn to navigate this new learning arrangement. Teaching outdoors takes practice, commitment and a degree of flexibility on the part of teachers and students. The potential payoffs are big. In terms of boosting motivation, learning to face challenges, and offering authentic, hands-on opportunities, outdoor learning can re-ignite curiosity and spark wonder.

Tips for successful outdoor teaching

Regardless of why you are teaching outdoors, the following tips are intended to make this experience exciting and meaningful for both teachers and students, and ease the transition for everyone.

1. Comfort and safety first

- Come personally prepared, wearing the right clothing so you are comfortable and ready to teach. A backpack may be useful, and teaching tools such as a small dry erase board and pens.
- Bring a first-aid kit and radio to contact the front office.
- Help the students be prepared with appropriate outdoor clothing. This can be challenging, but it is critical. If you have specific needs let us know at Coastal Rivers and we will see what we can do to help find the gear that is needed.
- Give the students a gentle warning that outdoors there are insects, grass and leaves may touch you, you can trip and fall, sometimes the air is cold or wet. This is all part of nature and it is OK. It is also OK to be worried about some aspects of nature. Discuss and acknowledge concerns with students, but play up the highlights: “We might see bugs!” Or, “Getting wet can be fun!” Reassure anyone who’s feeling insecure that you are there to keep them safe.
- Make sure you know if any of your kids are allergic to bees, ants, or wasps and plan accordingly, perhaps with support from the school nurse.
- Bathroom needs will need to be met. Encourage students to use the bathroom before going outside, but also plan ahead for “nature hall passes,” support from other staff, or a buddy system that is consistent with school policies.
- You may wish to bring blankets, chairs or buckets (under pandemic circumstances these should be designated only for a single student). Students often need somewhere to sit while writing and making observations, and will be more comfortable if they are not in the grass or dirt.
- If necessary when talking with a group, align the students so the sun is in your eyes, not theirs.

2. Establish guidelines and boundaries

- **Enlist the students’ cooperation in creating a list of guidelines** that will help make outdoor learning more successful for everyone: “We are going to learn outside today, and hopefully many days, but I need you to agree to some rules or guidelines.” Call them “Rules of the Herd” (or School, Flock, Crash (a group of rhinos), Parliament (a group of owls), or whatever). It may help to write these

guidelines down and invoke them when students push the limits.

- Ideally these guidelines should come from the students, and be in their words, although you may also make suggestions:
 - We will focus our senses on learning.
 - We move our bodies safely.
 - Nature stays in nature (unless we borrow it for our science discovery center).
 - We take care of our tools.
 - We will be respectful of everyone.
 - We will obey the physical boundaries.
- **Review your guidelines** before going outside. Keep in mind, when kids are let outdoors it is usually for recess, and they may expect that kind of freedom every time. You will need to define the difference in purpose between class time outdoors and recess.
- **Give kids with special needs the support they need.** Connect with their therapists and determine ahead of time what these children will need outdoors to make the experience successful. There will likely be a period of trial-and-error until the kinks are worked out, but the investment of energy is worth it. Learning to be outdoors is a critical life skill for all students.
- **Develop a focus and recentering command** and practice using it with students. This could be a gentle bell that you ring, a countdown, a special sign like “quiet coyote,” or any other sign for the kids to return to learning mode.
- **Clarify the physical boundary for the activity** immediately and on an on-going basis as you move through an area. You can mark boundaries with small flags, cones, or other bright objects. If you are moving down the trail, provide expectations like, “Everyone will stay in line until I give instructions for the next part of our outdoor lesson.” Establishing boundaries is SUPER important and will help you relax and enjoy your time teaching outdoors.
- **Designate a base.** Tell students that by the time you count back from ten to zero, they should all be back on base ready to listen to the next set of instructions.
- **Provide tools.** Rulers, string for measuring, magnifying glasses, cups for collections, and bug catchers are great props for student to hold on to that can help them focus on the objective.
- **Recruit a volunteer.** It may not be possible during the pandemic, but if feasible, enlist someone (parent, school mentor, local university student, friend) to assist with outdoor lessons.

3. Structure and pacing is key

- **Start simple.** The first lesson of the year should be something simple like a scavenger hunt to get students familiar with their surrounds and help them learn the rules and boundaries. Build to longer and more complex experiences outdoors.
- **Let go of the schedule** if at all possible, or plan for a big chunk of time outdoors. This will allow everyone to relax and take their time. If you have extra time at the end of your lesson, play a game, do some stretching, or lie down and watch the clouds. The reality is that teaching outdoors often takes longer, especially at first. There are interruptions, and things like getting gear on, assembling teaching tools, and walking out of the building to a new learning location all take time, so it is important to plan with this in mind.
- **Have goals in mind for every lesson** and the various components and activities within the lesson – just as you would for indoor teaching.
- **Vary the pace and the type of activity.** If your goal is to have a relaxed sitting-down activity, start with a running-and-hiding game along the trail before you initiate the quiet part of class. If you have a quiet activity, balance it with an activity where kids can call out answers. If you have an activity that requires reading, follow it with an activity that integrates music or art. At some point, give a mini-break tell and your students “run to that rock and back to me!” The transitions will take time between the active and quieter activities, but you’ll reap big rewards in the students’ ability to focus.
- **Set up outdoor learning centers** for small groups of students to rotate through.
- **Build in a written or oral activity for most lessons.** Charts, lists, graphic organizers, illustrations, and round-robin reflections are a great way to assess whether students are making connections to the lesson outside. When it makes sense, use these for assessments. Clipboards can be really helpful here. In a pinch, you make them out of cardboard rectangles and rubber bands.
- **Anticipate distractions and plan accordingly.** Students may not be able to stay focused on the lesson when there are interruptions. Accept that there WILL be more distractions outside, and strive to be flexible enough to use these distractions as learning opportunities whenever possible.
- **Be ready to incorporate nature.** Learn some fun facts about trees, grass, clouds, rocks, worms, and common birds (the things you know you will encounter) and insert a little science mini-lesson into other lessons when the opportunity arises. See our “Schoolyard Nature Fun Facts” in the resource list.
- **Bring some extra educational tools** (or assemble them outside ahead of time)

to build on the primary lesson, such as a poem that fits into the science lesson, a math problem that follows the PE activities, or an art project that integrates found materials and connects to a language arts class. Alternatively, students could bring a book to read for a bit after the lesson and before returning to the classroom.

4. Some final thoughts

- **Check in with your students** as you move through activities. Questions like, “Did you enjoy that?” Or, “What was the best part of today’s outdoor learning?” will help you gauge how students feel about their time outside.
- **Do projects that matter.** Students know busy work when they see it. Whenever possible, integrate citizen science projects, hands-on opportunities like experiments, and projects that interest them and will enrich their lives in the future (who does not like shelter building or scouting for animal tracks?). Enhance the school grounds with a pollinator garden, grow some food or flowers, make slide shows of your class’ outdoor discoveries that can be shared, or develop forums for student-led teaching, with other students and families.
- **Inspire.** Take some photos of your group learning outside and hang them in the hallway. Share what you learn about teaching outdoors with other teachers.
- **Don’t forget to have fun!** Your own sense of wonder, enjoyment, and ease outdoors will be infectious.