

Doing it outdoors - Why would you want to take your class outside?

Duncan MacLean, Senior Tutor at the Field Studies Council centre at Kindrogan, offers us his insight into why outdoor learning should be encouraged.

The real world is all around us. Look out of the window and check it out. Seriously; count how many scientific processes you can immediately jot off in your head. Nearly everything that is being taught inside of the classroom is going about its day-to-day business on the other side of that glass pane.

There's biology, physics, chemistry and a bundle load of additional holistic outcomes to be achieved by having a good gander outside.

Outdoor learning is not complicated. You and your class can enjoy the glory of the winter sun or the summer rain and go about the teaching and learning process outdoors. Not exclusively, unless perhaps a science experiment has gone seriously wrong and it's only you and the last oak tree left in the school grounds, but regularly and meaningfully.

In this article I hope to express at least a little bit of my personal joy for taking kids into the outdoor classroom. We can discuss the objectives, learning domains and practical effectiveness then, having justified our curriculum links, have a look at the further learning outcomes that are met. Essentially, my stance is that the laboratory is only a reflection of the dynamics of the real planet. It is a controlled means to explain the world-motions to your students. The classroom is, of course, the ideal place to conduct this lesson in. But the outdoor world is the rich, diverse and inter-disciplinary end-game of everything that you are teaching. Once in a while it will pay dividends to get your young learners interacting with it.



Outdoor learning is good pedagogy. It is certainly not the be-all and end-all but it does have an important role in any teacher's ammunition belt of teaching strategies. Before cracking on with the justifications though, there are a few conceptions of outdoor learning that should be challenged. The first is that it involves a residential trip, is costly and needs a coach to be organised. While this may be true and is one end of the spectrum for field work - only to be trumped by the overseas trip - there is another end of the scope. Learning outdoors begins with an activity that has been planned for the school grounds. True, this probably isn't as grand as the Cairngorm plateau or the Falkirk Wheel, but it can be done

in a jiffy. The second misconception concerns risk assessments. The risk assessment needed for a practical activity in the school grounds need not be more complicated than for an activity in the classroom. Again, these are certainly required for the moment that you leave the school gates with a duty of care for students, but there is plenty to be done within the playground. Unless you're climbing trees to 'do a Galileo' then you should not need one. Third is that an outdoor learning lesson is time consuming and can only just be squeezed into a double period. This depends on what your intentions are. Learning outdoors can be an introduction, a consolidation or a full activity. ▶



Yes, there is the faff of taking jackets on and off and trooping down the corridor but the more regularly you do it the speedier the students will become.

The flip side is the justifications for leading a lesson outdoors. Curriculum for Excellence promotes it to the hilt. Right through from primary levels and on into the outcomes of National 4 and 5 and the in-coming Higher and Advanced Higher, opportunities for outdoor education are endorsed. Primary practitioners and leaders are already taking it to heart and incorporating the woodlands and local streams into their timetables. They are already setting the attitude for learning experiences outside of the classroom. The need at secondary level in Biology for assignments, sampling experience and ecological procedures are mandatory aims of the 'Life on Earth' course while ecosystems and biodiversity in the higher 'Sustainability and Interdependence' unit lend themselves to a fieldwork investigation. All of these are outside techniques.

It isn't just Biology! Teachers of Chemistry and Physics can also take a class outdoors. The learning objectives are not as neat, but the

changes of pace for a lesson are the same. Chemical changes (SCN 4-18a), Forces (SCN 4-07a & b) and Processes of the Planet (SCN 4-05b) can be demonstrated outside. Sustainable learning is a goal that is reflected throughout the science curriculum. Taking this theme outdoors requires a bit of effort to plan for meaningful outcomes, but the reward of transforming the lesson into a tangible interpretation of natural events is massive.

An example is to measure a student's carbon footprint, itself an ephemeral quantity of carbon dioxide creation. To help make sense of this number, take the students outdoors to measure trees using trigonometry. Convert this to the biomass and then to the carbon consumption and then the students can count how many trees are needed to sustain their lifestyle (it's usually about 20 mature oaks with a combined age of around 2,000 years). Alongside the scientific outcomes that are met wider links such as of numeracy, team-work,

health and well-being, positive behaviours towards the natural world and independent project work.

Even in the school yard that has been crossed a million times, there is plenty to investigate. With the fresh eyes of a learning objective, you can ask your students to interrogate their surroundings with a new keenness. The true beauty of the outdoor facility as an educational arena is that, in a young learner's eyes, this is the domain of play and of recreation. With the exception of rainy days, outdoors is fun and indoors is controlled. So take your lessons outdoors once in a while; capitalise upon the feel-good element, appropriate the generic playground for education, make indoor learning meaningful in a real-world context. And, if you're wondering what to begin with, take any one of the scientific processes you can see out of the window and take the class out to see what they make of it. It might just be a breath of fresh air. ◀

Signposting Outdoor Resources

In the next Bulletin we will include details of resources that have been developed to link the great outdoors with specific learning aims in the national 4 and 5 curriculum.

In the meantime, however, here are some addresses that might get you started:

- www.opalexplornature.org
 - Resources to give young learners techniques, recording sheets, ID cards and activities to sample for flora and fauna in their neighbourhood.
- www.field-studies-council.org
 - Residential field work trips (FSC Kindrogan at Pitlochry is your closest) and an excellent range of hard-wearing ID charts.
- www.jmt.org
 - The John Muir Award provides a framework and award system for young learners and teachers to discover the outdoors with.
- www.educationscotland.gov.uk/outdoorlearning
 - An umbrella of information to get you started. The interactive map helps to show you where to go and who can help.