HAVE YOU BEEN OUTSIDE TODAY

Have you been out-of-doors today— with your students? Perhaps you should. Your students will enjoy it. They'll probably even talk about it at the dinner table tonight. What's more, educational research supports using out-of-doors activities (field trips) as some of the most effective teaching modes. If you're still inside, let me give you a gentle shove towards the door.

It's boring! I don't know about you, but I've heard too many secondary students mutter those words. On the other end of the spectrum, more than a few elementary students have told me how much they like school, especially recess. There is a message here. According to Arthur Powell (1986), "Kids and teachers spend far too much time in classes." What he meant was that we need to promote more engagement with learning. A bored student is usually a student without the proper incentives to learn. The prospect of walking out of the classroom into the brisk air, the fresh odors, and the real sounds of nature and human activities is enough to perk up any student at any age. With the proper direction from you an hour of fun in the sun can become a deliberate learning experience.

Research supports the contention that out-of-doors education is effective in 1) stimulating critical thinking, 2) increasing problem solving skills, and 3) developing concepts and understanding. (Backman and Crompton 1985) Comparisons with indoors and outdoors teaching strategies and learning behaviors confirm this. Not only can immediate impressions be exciting for your students, such as touching, smelling, and listening to the real objects of your lesson, but long term memory is enhanced. The processing of experiences in the memory structure is an important and effective learning technique. Retention of subject matter and performance on achievement tests has been shown to be significantly improved with structured field experiences. (Mackenzie and White 1982)

The success of an out-of-doors excursion is not a secret. Like any good lesson the prime requisite is good planning. After all, a field trip is not a recess. Who you take where and what you do when is very important. Younger students learn more in familiar surroundings (which is why every school should have an outdoor learning laboratory) while older students find novelty more conducive to learning. (Berliner 1985)

Organizing a short lesson on a piece of paper may be adequate, while the longer trip will require a detailed outline. Regardless, the out-of-doors lesson should be well thought out and have a definite pedagogical purpose. Identify exactly which lesson you want to address. Remember L. B. Sharp's famous statement, "That which can best be learned in the out-of-doors should be taught there."
Your objectives should be clear to you and to the students. Tell them what they are expected to learn, without overemphasizing the concepts to the point of spoiling the fun. Focus their attention and use the setting to peak their curiosity. Build up to the lesson using pictures, stories, and appropriate vocabulary terms.

Teaching out-of-doors is essentially reinforcing learning with playing, whether the activity is exploratory or discovery oriented. Every game has its rules and so should every field trip. Have a plan that will keep your students busy all of the time. With younger students, simulation games and games with environmental themes can be your best approach. In his book, Sharing Nature With Children, Joseph Cornell describes his very effective "flow hike." His technique of leading younger students on excursions incorporates three levels of games that range from the exuberant and playful to those that demand sharp attention, and on to those that require stillness and concentration.

For older students a worksheet or set of data collection devices will keep them busy. Be careful not to make the activity too rigid. The best out-of-doors activities are more often teacher guided rather than teacher directed. Providing the students with the lesson to be learned and the environment to carry it out is much better than giving them the answers. Use the outdoors activity to its fullest and allow them to discover science, not just confirm what you already know.

The out-of-doors experience isn't over when you walk back into the classroom. A follow up is often the most productive part of the lesson, even when it may not seem like the most fun to the students. With younger students review the experience in discussions or with artwork. Have older students call on their higher order thinking skills by challenging them to analyze their experiences, research unanswered questions, and project how they can use their new found information in the future. If you don't review the field trip in relation to the objectives being taught your students will lose an important lesson. Remind them that the experience had an instructional purpose. It wasn't a recess. It just felt like one.

If you didn't make it out-of-doors with your students today, plan on it tomorrow. You may improve your students' performance and you'll have fun while they do it.

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RESOURCES


(For more information on planning and implementing effective field trips contact the Science Education Center, ESU, Emporia, KS 66801.)