DIRTY TEACHING

A Beginner's Guide to Learning Outdoors

JULIET ROBERTSON



Independent Thinking Press

First published by

Independent Thinking Press Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK

www.independentthinkingpress.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

© Juliet Robertson, 2014

The right of Juliet Robertson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Photography © Jane Hewitt 2014, except pages 36, 37, 114–115, 118, 132, 140-141, 181, 182 © Juliet Robertson 2014.

Jane Hewitt has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as illustrator of this Work.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owners. Enquiries should be addressed to Independent Thinking Press.

Independent Thinking Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-1-78135-107-9 Mobi ISBN 978-1-78135-148-2 ePub ISBN 978-1-78135-149-9 ePDF ISBN 978-1-78135-150-5 Printed and bound in the UK by Stephens & George Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil.

Contents

Pref	face	iii
Acknowledgements		iv
Introduction		1
1	The Golden Principles of Teaching Outdoors	9
2	Before You Go Outside	19
3	The First Few Sessions	43
4	Thinking, Reflecting and Reviewing	61
5	Creating and Constructing	75
6	A Sense of Adventure	89
7	Exploring What's Out There	101
8	Caring for Nature	113
9	What to do in Concrete Jungles	131
10	Keeping the Momentum Going	153
11	Nagging Doubts, Fears and Worries	171
12	Embedding Outdoor Learning	
Cor	nclusion: Towards a Whole-School Approach	199
Cro	ss Reference of Ideas to Subject Areas	203
Bibl	Bibliography	
Index		209

Introduction

This book is for primary teachers and student teachers who want to teach outside. It is aimed at those working with six- to twelve-year-olds. The ideas are based upon my own experiences of working with classes where this is a new and different way of learning.

The majority of activities and suggestions are simple and involve minimal planning and resources. They are doable by a teacher with their class in the school grounds or local area.

Whilst training, courses and conversations with outdoor experts make a positive difference, there is no substitute for experience and knowing the children in your class. As a consequence, this book is written in the belief that teachers:

- Have the skills and competences to teach outside as well as inside. Any approach to learning and teaching usually works just as effectively outdoors as it does inside.
- Have an ability to take an idea and tweak it to make it suit the needs of the children in their class. All the ideas in this book can be refined and improved – it is a springboard for experimenting.
- Have to make an effort to learn how to teach outside on a frequent and regular basis. We have been conditioned to think 'indoors'. This is a habit that can be changed. The pay-off is very liberating and many teachers who make this change find their practice has a new lease of life.
- Have only just begun to truly appreciate the potential for learning outside and the benefits this brings in the short and long term to the well-being of children and our society, especially when the learning happens in nature.

This is not to ignore the contributions made by the vast array of professionals, organisations, volunteers, expedition organisers and residential centres to the learning which happens outside during a child's school life. However, I want to empower primary teachers to play an active part in this process too.

What is covered in this book?

There is a huge diversity of books about learning indoors. Likewise, it is impossible to do justice to the potential of learning outdoors in one book. So, this book mainly concentrates on:

Т

- Kick-starting the process of working outside with a class.
- Simple outdoor ideas that a primary teacher can lead with their class of thirty pupils in the school grounds or within walking distance off-site.
- Practical issues which arise when learning takes place outside.

The structure of the book is designed so that you can read it from cover to cover, or you can dip in and out of it as time and interest permits. I deliberately did not go down the route of detailed lessons or series of lessons. I would like the ideas and activities to be seeds of suggestion rather than directed activities.

What is outdoor learning?

Before stepping outside with a class, it can be useful to think about what outdoor learning is and why it matters. In a nutshell, outdoor learning is an umbrella term which covers every type of learning experience which happens outdoors. This could be adventurous activities, environmental education, team challenges, an international expedition or a playground game.

The beauty of this definition is that it covers little and large experiences of any sort that happen outside. What matters, however, is that – regardless of where the learning takes place – the quality of the experience is the best it can be and is authentic, meaningful and relevant for the children involved.

Ideally, we want to make the most of the unique and special nature of being outdoors. We need the variety provided by:

- The weather imagine a world without rainbows: the sunshine and the rain are key ingredients.
- The seasons these bring variety throughout the year, adding interest to our lives and festivals that celebrate the cyclical events.
- The space and freedom of the world beyond the classroom.
 - The landscape whether this is urban, wild or somewhere in-between.

Many teachers assume that outdoor learning is a subject, discipline or curriculum area. Some consider outdoor learning as an approach to learning, as just one of many tools in a teacher's toolbox. For me, it is about making the most of any place or space outside of the traditional school walls. Introduction

It's about relationships

It can be helpful to think of the learning that happens as a result of the relationships between people, the nature of the activity and the place and time where it takes place.

The idea of using *place* as a key part of the learning process comes from the work of Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), a Scottish town planner, biologist and educator, known for his progressive views, who developed the



concept of 'think global, act local'. He also advocated a 'hands, heart, head' approach to learning.¹

Most initiatives and ideas within education focus on activities and people. For example, reams of advice is available on improving literacy. Yet, this is largely focused upon motivating children and activities which encourage and support children to develop confidence in this area.

Where children read and how this impacts on the acquisition of literacy skills tends to be ignored. It also means that a huge range of possibilities is being missed when you think of the choice of locations in which we could learn. Think of all the places where people freely read, such as a novel on the beach or a newspaper on the bus. It rarely happens at a table with a group of people of a similar age taking turns to read a paragraph aloud, other than in a school.

Time matters too. During the course of a day, the weather and light changes, impacting upon any outdoor place. The seasons bring annual variety and so do the years. If you think about how a three-year-old child might walk down a street, their behaviour and perspective is very different to that of a teenager.

To forget about the impact of place is like removing one leg from a three-legged stool. The stool is permanently out of balance and much harder to sit on. Ignoring the influence of place when teaching makes your job a lot harder. Nature has inspired generations of artists, writers, inventors and scientists to create and innovate. Thus, as teachers, we can use different places and spaces innovatively to inspire our children.

Have a cuppa

Have a break. Make yourself a hot drink and take it outside. Drink it there instead of where you usually sit inside and compare the experience.

What are the similarities and what are the differences?

¹ P. Higgins and R. Nicol, Professor Sir Patrick Geddes: 'Vivendo Discimus' – By Living We Learn. In C. Knapp and T. Smith (eds), Sourcebook for Experiential Education: Key Thinkers and their Contributions (New York: Routledge, 2011) pp. 32–40.

The Golden Principles of Teaching Outdoors

As teachers, we have beliefs and values that determine how we teach. They shape what we say and do. When working outside over the past few years, I have found it helpful to:

- Take a sustainable and rights-based approach.
- Value free play and playful learning.
- Provide a nurturing, natural environment.

- the test of time and change in education I
- Develop children's creative capacities.

For me, these are golden principles because they stand the test of time and change in education. I use them to ensure that I think about the wider purpose of learning outdoors and its contribution to providing children with the best possible education. It is an essential part of making a difference to every child I teach.

Whilst the future may be uncertain, with uncertainty comes opportunity, especially in a rapidly changing society. Therefore, I believe it is our responsibility to help children develop a growth mindset and acquire the practical skills, compassion and empathy in order to live harmoniously and help one another.

A sustainable and rights-based approach

The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The next best time is now.

Chinese proverb

We need to consider the environmental impact of any outdoor lesson, as we do with any other aspect of our teaching. Over the years, we should be making our school grounds and local spaces into better places as a result of our stewardship. If we have a right to use a place, we have a responsibility to care for it.

My belief is that children need outdoor experiences to understand big issues such as climate change. This includes opportunities to experience wild or semi-wild spaces. As they get older, getting involved in collaborative, action-based projects in the local community may also be relevant. It demonstrates that we can all play our part in looking after ourselves, our communities and our local places and wildlife. Families should be included so that children see close agreement between school and home about the importance of sustainability, and participate in discussions and action in both places. Very often, children will initiate this if they are part of the ethos and approach at school.

We know children need the space and time to play freely outside in nature. Yet, it needs to go hand in hand with a developmentally appropriate progression of wider experiences that encourage children to care for nature and to have a basic understanding of natural processes. This was picked up by Nicol et al. when reviewing outdoor learning research:

Simply 'being outdoors' is not sufficient for young people to express an ethic of care for nature or develop an understanding of natural processes. These things seem to be learned when they are an explicit aim of experiential activities and when they are mediated in appropriate ways.¹

Adults need to model appropriate behaviour and attitudes too. Sustainable development education is a much deeper matter than remembering to pick up litter or save energy. Make sure you know what sustainability means and how you can incorporate your country's guidelines for sustainable development education into your class routines and practice.

The rights-based approach is two-fold. Firstly, it creates a more child-centred, reflective and positive framework for considering how to teach the big concepts and ideas behind sustainability. It dovetails neatly into the Rights Respecting Schools Award² and recognises that the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child³ needs to underpin educational practice.

Secondly, most countries have laws about what the public can or cannot do when out in the countryside. It is all too often forgotten that responsibilities go hand-in-hand with rights. For example, in Scotland there is a public right to beachcomb on the foreshore. This is the tidal section between the high-water mark at the top of the beach and the water line. However, with this right comes various responsibilities, such as:

- Being able to identify your finds so that you know what you are taking and can make a sensible decision as to whether it is okay to pick it up or not.
- Gathering finds sustainably and only removing a very small sample, or just taking photos.

¹ R., Nicol, P. Higgins, H. Ross and G. Mannion, Outdoor Education in Scotland: A Summary of Recent Research. (Perth and Glasgow: Scottish Natural Heritage, 2007). Available at: http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/publications/ search-the-catalogue/publication-detail/?id=852>, p. 5.

² See <http://www.unicef.org.uk/Get-Involved/Your-organisation/Schools/rights-respecting-school-award/>

³ Unicef, Fact Sheet: A Summary of the Rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf>

- Knowing and understanding the tidal system on a particular beach.
- Behaving in a manner that does not disturb other users or wildlife.

In this example, a sustainable and rights-based emphasis shifts the health and safety concerns about tides and good practice when working near water into a more positive context of knowing and respecting the environment.

[Idea **1.1**] Know your rights

Find out about the laws in your country relating to access rights. Have a think about how these can be used to develop children's understanding of how to care for the countryside and as a positive framework for outdoor activities. Think about:

- What behaviours will need to be modelled by adults?
- Are there any games, stories or activities that can be used to reinforce key points or issues? I find these approaches more effective than simply a discussion before going outside.
- What routines can be set up which would help to embed a sustainable and rights-based approach?

Value free play and take a playful approach to learning

If you want creative workers, give them enough time to play.

John Cleese

We have a paradox in schools. We accept the value of play, especially in the Early Years, but the idea of play in the primary sector and beyond often does not feel like a legitimate use of the precious time available.

For some children, school playtimes may be the only informal outdoor play opportunities available to them on a regular basis. It is a time for children to recharge their batteries between lessons. Some children find their lives are full of structured activities, such as music lessons and sports classes, or spend lots of time doing sedentary activities, such as playing computer games. Others may live in places where going out to play is not possible.

As part of developing learning outdoors, you can demonstrate that you value playtimes and facilitate daily outdoor free-play opportunities, regardless of the weather, season and the ability of a child to play with others or complete their work.

Dirty Teaching



There are many different types of play. However, it is 'free play' which we need to encourage during breaktimes. Play is often described by play experts as happening when children choose what they want to do and how they want to do it. It is child-initiated and child-led with no external goals or rewards.⁴ This is how children learn to socialise, develop independence, improve their physical coordination and enjoy themselves without adults directing proceedings. It is how they learn about grit and resilience, power and control, to apologise and make friends.

A lot happens at breaktimes. As educators, we can look for opportunities to capitalise upon this and to acknowledge the contribution of playtimes to the rest of children's time in school. Children appreciate creative, as well as physical, play opportunities – particularly in nature-rich outdoor spaces. I often hear teachers and children comment positively about such experiences and how it helps children to be more settled and better able to concentrate when back in class. The health benefits associated with free play are numerous and include increased physical activity, improved physical and mental health, well-being, and social and emotional development.⁵

⁴ This is an abbreviated version of the definition given in J. Santer and C. Griffiths, with D. Goodall, Free Play in Early Childhood: A Literature Review (London: Play England and the National Children's Bureau, 2007). Available at: http://www.playengland.org. uk/media/120426/free-play-in-early-childhood.pdf>, p. xi.

⁵ J. Gleave and I. Cole-Hamilton, A World without Play: A Literature Review (London: Play England, 2012). Available at: http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/371031/a-world-without-play-literature-review-2012.pdf>, p. 3.

If your school keeps children inside during inclement weather, you will know how this affects the class time afterwards – cabin fever! The primary schools who enable children to play outdoors all year round and in all weathers, find the benefits outweigh the hassles of managing wet clothes and mud.

As a teacher, you may feel you do not have much say in whole-school approaches to play. However, the children in your class will have plenty to say on the subject and may consider this a worthwhile matter to take forward to their pupil council or other child-led committees.

When it comes to thinking about play in the context of learning outdoors, we need to bear in mind the following factors:

- The informal learning that happens during breaks, lunchtimes and out of school think about how much of the curriculum may be being covered during this time.
- The need for children to have daily free play experiences and to simply be able to play for the sake of it.
- The inclusion of play as a valid part of formal learning which happens during class time this may be more directed than at playtimes so is not necessarily free play.
- The use of playtime activity as a stimulus to formal work during class times.



- Naturalising and making the school grounds play-friendly spaces (this is considered in Chapter 9).
- Different types of play can be facilitated by the right social and physical environments (e.g. social, role play, team games, journeying).

A playful approach to learning is very different to free play. A playful approach tends to be planned for by a teacher and is usually adult-initiated and adult-led. Generally there are specific learning outcomes in mind.

However there is a place for this during class time. A playful approach makes learning fun. Being asked to gather round and look at a wildflower and listen to the teacher talk about the functions of different parts of a plant is dull. Instead, it is better for children to make a personal connection to a plant in some way. For example, after undertaking a weeding activity, set aside time for children to play with the leaves, stems and roots they have removed. Ask them what they want to do next, in terms of finding out more about a plant's structure and its functions. You may be surprised how much they will strive to teach themselves when given an incentive, a supportive environment and not much structure.

A playful approach also brings variety. It is easy to develop confidence in one type of outdoor activity and stick to this. Yet, we all know variety is the spice of life, so planning and undertaking a range of playful outdoor activities helps.

Provide a nurturing, natural environment

I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.

Albert Einstein

A nurturing, natural environment is my description for an outdoor space which truly meets the needs of the children who play there. It is about providing a place that benefits their health and well-being. It sends a strong message that children are welcome and valued.

As a result of a two-year research project, *Special Places; Special People,* Wendy Titman demonstrated that school grounds, by design, influence the way children behave. She suggested that children seek a range of opportunities from an environment which is 'required to offer the potential for children to "do" and "think" and "feel" and "be" all at the same time'.⁶

Greenspaces, especially areas that feel wild, appear to have a particularly positive effect. They are calmer environments – places to think, be and experience time out from the stresses and strains of everyday life. The constant rhythms of the natural world, such as day and night, the seasons and

⁶ W. Titman, Special Places; Special People: The Hidden Curriculum of School Grounds (Winchester: World Wide Fund for Nature/ Learning through Landscapes, 1993), p. 58.



the weather, provide consistency for children, especially those who live chaotic lives.

Children will actively seek out different ways of interacting with features in the landscape. Woods, beaches and other natural spaces offer great potential in terms of how they can be utilised for play and learning. By contrast, asphalt playgrounds with fixed equipment rarely offer the range of play opportunities children need to explore and challenge themselves.

Finally, we need to consider the activities we offer children outside and how these contribute to developing resilience so they are able to look after themselves and others.

Developing children's creative capacities

By creating we think, by living we learn.

Sir Patrick Geddes

Creativity is a term that means different things to different people. It is often assumed to refer to subjects such as art, drama, dance or music, which can offer much scope to be creative. However, so do science, the social sciences, technology and many other facets of human activity.

It is the innovation, the motivation, the drive and the passion of any person, group or community wanting to change and improve circumstances that is the linchpin of creativity. If we have the capacity to imagine, innovate and ensure our efforts have value to humanity, then we have the potential to shape the future. This can give us a sense of control over our destiny and that of our pupils. We can see the impact of what we have set out to achieve and this further encourages us to be active and engaged. This is the gift of creativity.

As teachers, our job is to look at the outdoors in terms of its potential for developing creative capacities, such as:

- Positive risk-taking and management.
- Divergent as well as convergent thinking and ideas generation.
- Being able to transfer and apply skills and concepts in new and different ways.
- Finding practical solutions to everyday problems.

Juliet Robertson offers tips and tricks to help any primary school teacher to kickstart or further develop their outdoor practice.

One of the keys to a happy and creative classroom is getting out of it and this book will give you the confidence to do just that. It contains a wealth of ideas and activities which ensure you provide a broad range of engaging outdoor experiences for your students.

There is no need for expensive tools or complicated technologies: all you need is your coat and a passion for learning – oh, and you'd better bring the kids too!

The pages are packed with creative ideas for active and engaging outdoor lessons that will help teachers bring the curriculum alive for their pupils. Simon Beames, University of Edinburgh

This is certainly not just a book for the beginner, to whom it will be accessible, encouraging and informative, it will also be inspiring and stimulating to the experienced practitioner. Sue Falch-Lovesey, Norfolk County Council

A good practical common sense approach and a way of breaking down activities to encourage all teachers to get outside and teach. Alison Motion, Director, GfL Scotland

Part manifesto for outdoor learning and part manual, Dirty Teaching makes the case for outdoor learning and provides the advice, ideas and questions that allow teachers to deliver on it. **The Real David Cameron, Education Consultant**

The book reflects the current research which suggests that the real barriers to teaching outside are not weather, wind and wellies but confidence and competence. Easy to dip into for inspiration but also compelling to read as a narrative that engages and informs in equal measure. Juno Hollyhock, Executive Director, Learning through Landscapes



Juliet Robertson is an education consultant and former head teacher who specialises in outdoor learning. She combines her passion and considerable experience to create fantastic learning opportunities outside the classroom, and shows others how they can do the same in her popular education blog, 'I'm a teacher, get me OUTSIDE here!'



Independent Thinking Press Books that make you think for yourself