

OUTDOOR EDUCATION WITH A DESIGN

BY MARYANN CAVENDER HOOD

“Class, why do you skip essay questions and try only short-answer test parts?” I asked.

Andy* quipped, “It hurts to think!”

And so it does. Teachers search to find ways to make learning fun by providing such unforgettable experiences that their students feel compelled to think.

Educators have found that students participating in outdoor learning “have fewer behavior problems and can learn in a variety of ways. As a teacher participates with students in the out-of-doors, he or she creates opportunities for the Holy Spirit to inspire them and for them to catch a glimpse of their Creator. Students are thereby learning in the same setting in which Jesus was taught.”¹

Education outside the classroom may be brief—a class period to explore plants and shrubs growing on the playground or collect a variety of leaves for an art activity. Or students might search for examples of flowers and fungi as an extension of a science lesson. A longer activity could be a hike on a mountain trail or an excursion to a state or



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national park. Extended outdoor ventures (overnight or for a longer period) require cooperative planning by trained personnel, faculty, administrators, and parents.

Outdoor education has five major benefits:

1. Outdoor education brings reality to learning.

Students often complain, “Why do we have to learn that?” Teachers can help make learning relevant and history come alive by visiting “Living History” stations at a YMCA camp or special events at a historical site. There, they will have an opportunity to make candles, spin yarn and weave cloth, churn butter, construct corn-husk dolls, prepare apple fritters, thresh wheat, start fires with flint, and

use pioneer tools to help build a log cabin.

The first time my students and I participated in outdoor school, we spent the night in cabins, cooked a hearty breakfast over an open fire, and then returned to the cabins to prepare for the day. Stepping outside in the chilly November wind, I wound a scarf around my neck and clutched the woolen poncho tightly about my arms to ward off the cold, wondering if the trip would be worth enduring the frosty weather.

* Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy. The outdoor education story is a composite of several trips.

I called to my eight noisy 6th-graders to join me at the sign for the nature path. There, the outdoor school leader warned, “Stay on the trail, and don’t trample the tempting piles of leaves.” Looking down, we saw that the soil on the path had started to erode, so we tried to walk carefully.

“Wait for me!” shouted Robert.*

Breathless after a 15-minute hike up the steep trail, we reached the first station and rested on a fallen log. A mound of corn shucks and a tub of water stood nearby. We listened to the instructor, in a pioneer dress and white ruffled cap, tell about pioneer history while she showed us how to make corn husk dolls. “Now you try,” she said.

We scrambled for a handful of shucks, wet them in the water to make them more pliable as we had seen her do, and began to create our dolls. First, we shredded a shuck for “strings” to tie off parts of the body—the head, waist, and hands.

“I’m going to use the silks for hair,” said Julie,* brushing back a wisp of blond curls from her own forehead.

Robert, shy and unsure of himself, fumbled while trying to hold his doll between his knees to tie off the neck. Once he succeeded, he beamed with self-confidence and said, “I didn’t know I could make anything like this!” As we finished, we saw the next group approach for their turn.

We moved to station two. Here, we watched another instructor repeatedly dip a string into cans of hot paraffin and then into cold water to make a candle. Cans of melted wax sat on rocks over glowing coals. She passed out strings, and we dipped and cooled, dipped and cooled our candles to make them grow. The teacher explained how pioneers depended upon candles for light.

After making his candle, Jose* said, “I’m going to keep mine forever.” I understood because I was just as proud of my corn husk doll and candle as he was of his!

We moved on to the other stations. Soon it was lunch time, so we



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hiked back to camp, where we worked together to prepare food and clean up. In the afternoon, we studied leaves and stream flow. Twice a day, the students recorded informa-

tion from the weather station.

2. Outdoor education allows the teacher to accommodate varying interests while offering encouragement for students to accomplish specific goals.

The next day, the students tried the climbing wall. “Oooh, look at her. She’s doing great,” said Paul* as Mandi* moved up the wall.

“My thumb’s getting tired,” moaned Robert.

“Hang in there, Robert! You can make it,” encouraged Paul.

“Put all your weight on your left foot. Straighten out your leg. Step up, and put your right foot on number 42,” said Mark,* the adult leader.

“There you go. Go—go—go—yea!” the group shouted. “You’re over the top.”

“Now, step back over and slide down the rope,” coached Paul. “That’s it . . . way to go. You’re next, Julie.”



“Let’s get everybody over,” said Brent.*

“Bonding, an important social aspect of outdoor education, blossoms as students work together to accomplish goals. Leadership qualities often surface in pupils who do not display those characteristics in regular classrooms,” says special-education teacher Denise Bearden.

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3. Outdoor education enables students to bond as a team to find solutions and express support and joy when others succeed.

At our YMCA camp, the leaders prepared a series of hurdles to encourage groups of students to work in teams to overcome problems. For example: in order to cross a pretend canyon by way of a swinging log, groups of eight pupils had to cooperate to avoid falling into the “canyon.” The students who made it across helped the others.

The swinging log was chained between two trees on either side of a wide, shallow ditch. Since no one in

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my group was brave enough to go first, I inched backward on my stomach to the other side while holding on with my elbows and knees. After I made it across, I held onto the tree and extended my hand to Robert. He helped Julie, and she assisted the next person, until we formed a living chain to reach the other side. As one stepped on, another stepped off.

“Don’t let go until Mandi gets on. Now inch across. Fantastic! Oops—there you go into the canyon! Try again, Mandi. You can make it. Don’t lose your balance,” I said.

“I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can, Mandi. Look straight ahead. You’ll make it,” I urged. And she did!

“Yea, you did it!” everybody said.

We all clapped.

“Wait until it stops swinging, Jeremy.* Try to inch across on your stomach. That’s it. Hunch up. Lock your knees under the log. Now you’re halfway across,” said Paul encouragingly.

“Good! You can make it. . . . Now you’ve got it,” said Mandi, with newly acquired self-confidence.

Climbing walls, tackling hurdles, orienteering, rowing canoes, pitching balls, and preparing meals with students give teachers opportunities to send the message, “We’re on the same team.”

The class achieved a carryover of outdoor school activities into the classroom when Mandi later said, “If I could cross that swinging log, I know I’ll be able to do this project.” It reminded me to see my pupils, not as they appear, but as what they may become.

“Confidence-building activities produce feelings of achievement and acceptance,” states Miria King-Garner, a social studies teacher.

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other. Because each one achieves success, the whole group feels a sense of accomplishment and bonding. And their renewed interest in learning serves as an educational catalyst, not only in social studies, but also in Bible, math, English, science, and physical education.

According to Cindy Buff, a physical-education teacher, "My students seem to be more patient with each other, offering to help, whereas before they made wisecracks. Now they see each other in a new light."

4. Outdoor education nurtures creativity.

Environmental activities, with their broad expanse of earth and sky, spark interest in writing and stimulate curiosity. As students hike through pine-scented hills dotted with mountain pinks and bracken ferns, they stop and observe a garden spider swinging in its web or view clouds of purple asters, and turn over rotten logs filled with beetles. At night, they gaze in wonder at constellations and shooting stars, pointing the telescope at the Moon and Saturn's rings, and pause for a moment to stop and hold flashlights

against their foreheads to see tiny globes of fire-spider eyes staring out of the darkness. All this encourages thought and creativity. An example is the following haiku by Anna Nichols, age 8:

Spider
black creepy crawler
hiding near your crisscrossed web
you catch flies to eat

Sandra,* quiet and unobtrusive, was surprised to find a field of daisies growing in a mountaintop meadow under a canopy of blue sky, and wrote in her journal, "I didn't know anything could be that beautiful."

Recently, a local teacher, Denise Bearden, brought her special-education pupils to study wild flowers and herbs in my yard. We examined various specimens and sat around my dining room table talking and writing about what we saw. Latasha Tolbert's cinquain follows.

Violets
Different colors
Grow all around
Make the world prettier
Fragrant

5. Outdoor education helps students and teachers develop an awareness of beauty and relationships in God's world.

Ellen White writes: "So far as possible, children from their earliest years should be placed where this wonderful lesson book is open before them. Let them look at the glorious scenes painted by the great Master Artist on the shifting canvas of the heavens; let them become acquainted with the wonders of earth and sea; let them watch the unfolding mysteries of the changing seasons, and in all His works learn of the Creator."²

An education in the great outdoors enables boys and girls to enjoy and write about God's beautiful creation and to develop healthy attitudes toward ecology and human resources. They learn constructive ways to use their leisure time and benefit physically from the rigorous activity; spiritually, as they realize a design designates a designer; and emotionally as they learn to control

anger and improve their self-esteem. Pupils mature socially as they seek to squash individual desires, share, put themselves in the place of others, and make new friends.

Outdoor education also illustrates in concrete ways the Great Controversy that is raging in our world. Although nature still speaks to us of God's goodness, students will observe disease and death in plants and animals, and see how humans have despoiled the Earth. This opens the way for the teacher to point them to the Cross and to God's final triumph.

The bottom line in environmental education is not only to spark learning, but also to enable students to balance sensitivity to human need with respect for and preservation of the rest of creation. This helps them think about ordering their lives in keeping with the plan of the Great Designer. ✍



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For additional information on outdoor education and specific instructions for conducting an outdoor school, consult Greg N. Otto, "Outdoor Education," *Journal of Adventist Education* 46:1 (October/November 1983), pp. 5-7, 42-44; and the entire April/May 1999 issue (61:4) (see <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/resource.phtml?leaf/=3149>).

REFERENCES

1. Carleton L. Swofford, "Why Add Outdoor Education to a Full Agenda?" *Journal of Adventist Education* 61:4 (April/May 1999), p. 47.
2. Ellen G. White, *True Education* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2000), p. 60.

