Outdoor Classroom Management

Managing an outdoor classroom to promote authentic and successful student learning.

Key Method

Preparing and managing a safe and effective outdoor classroom activity through each of the key management stages.

Method Components

The teacher designs and manages a safe and effective outdoor classroom activity through each of the key management stages. During the outdoor activity, the teacher collects video, photographic, or other forms of evidence showing how their outdoor session contributed to overall learning gains.

Key outdoor classroom management stages

1. Choosing the activity
2. Student preparation (before going outside)
3. Teacher preparation
4. Outside (during the activity)
5. Inside (after the activity)

Suggestions for choosing an activity

- Choose an appropriate outdoor activity for your learners. One resource is the North American Association of Environmental Educators guide "Excellence in Environmental Education: Guidelines for Learning K-12" (http://eelinked.naaee.net/n/guidelines/posts/Excellence-in-Environmental-Education-Guidelines-for-Learning-K-12).
- Choose an appropriate outdoor space to support the lesson. This could be a neighborhood park, a school garden, or another environment.
    - School gardens are excellent outdoor teaching spaces. For ideas and tips on how to start a school garden and incorporate it into your classroom, visit the Nature Conservance website Nature Works Everywhere (https://www.natureworkseverywhere.org/#home).
- Select an activity that requires a high level of student engagement, collaboration, and a very specific focus.
    - Activities that engage a wide variety of roles and group work might be helpful to engage a range of student preferences and experience levels. Giving your students a choice of roles or tasks might make them more comfortable with outdoor learning.
    - It is best if the activity uses strategies and structures with which the students are already familiar (i.e., data collection, using equipment they know).
- Incorporate opportunities for the learners to authentically experience and become more aware of the natural and human systems outdoors.
    - The activity should give the students an opportunity to ask open-ended questions and to explore a variety of answers.

Suggestions for student preparation

- Use language that helps students understand that the outdoor space is a classroom environment. You might call it a "living laboratory," "outdoor classroom," or "garden lab."
- Prepare students days ahead of time for the conditions outside.
- Have students help create a list of outside norms and acceptable behaviors. Make sure they understand your expectations for their behavior when outside.
    - Discuss the importance of respecting the outdoor space and being careful to not disturb organisms in their natural environment. Sometimes data collection outdoors involves moving leaves or lifting rocks, but emphasize that students should leave no trace and refrain from tearing leaves off trees or throwing rocks, for instance.
- Be sure that students understand their roles before they go outside. Are they observers? Data collectors?
- If you are going to use tools or instruments outside, be sure to model their proper use while you're still inside.
- Establish a signal with the students that will alert them when it's time to regroup and head indoors.

Suggested teacher preparation

- Have a worst-case scenario back-up plan for students who refuse to "get a little dirty."
- Consider asking parents or other volunteers to help manage your large group.
- If students will use any equipment, consider providing an equipment list so they can be sure to bring everything back inside when they are finished.

Suggested strategies for management while outside (during the activity)

- Build in time for students to explore the outdoor learning environment and become comfortable with it before they begin required tasks.
- Remind students of their roles while they are outside. Walk around during the activity to monitor students and make sure they are performing their roles and using equipment safely.
- If you need to address students while they are outside, use your established signal to call them together and seat them in an area where they will be comfortable. Make sure it's dry, they aren't looking into the sun, and the temperature is suitable.
- While you are outside, be sure to model how to observe organisms WITHOUT interfering with them.

Suggested strategies for management while inside (after the activity)

- Check in with your students and have them evaluate their experiences in the outdoor classroom. Ask what worked and what didn't work and have students explain why.
- If they conducted an investigation, have students brainstorm next steps or future investigations.
- Check in the equipment (if applicable).

Supporting Research

Teaching students while outdoors is not as easy as it seems. The teacher must ensure that the necessary structure is in place before ever leaving the classroom to ensure students feel safe and prepared to learn outdoors. A well-crafted plan that includes strong objectives, elements of differentiation, modeling, generation of class norms, and clear consequences will help instructors achieve a higher degree of success outdoors. With guidelines are in place, a successful outdoor experience can increase students' achievement level in science. One study showed that fifth-grade students who participated in school gardening activities scored significantly higher on science achievement tests than students who did not participate in such activities (Klemmer, Waliczek, & Zajicek, 2005). Researchers in another study found similar results in Indiana and Louisiana schools that participated in the Junior Master Gardener Program (Dirks & Orvis, 2005; Smith & Motsenbocker, 2005). Other research supports the idea that garden programs in general can promote effective experiential learning in several subjects areas (Blair, 2009).

- *Guidelines for Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Education,* North American Association of Environmental Educators, **http://eelinked.naaee.net/n/guidelines/posts/Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-amp-Professional-Development-of-Environmental-Educators**
- *Excellence in Environmental Education: Guidelines for Learning K-12,* North American Association of Environmental Educators, **http://eelinked.naaee.net/n/guidelines/posts/Excellence-in-Environmental-Education-Guidelines-for-Learning-K-12**
- Blair, D. (2009), "The Child in the Garden: An Evaluation Review of the Benefits of School Gardening," *The Journal of Environmental Education, 40*(2), 15–38, **http://www.csupomona.edu/~smemerson/business318/articles101/childrens gardens.pdf**
- Dirks, A.E., & K. Orvis (2005), "An Evaluation of the Junior Master Gardener Program in Third Grade Classrooms," *HortTechnology 15*(3), 443–447, **http://67.59.137.247/media/KO_Research.pdf**
- Klemmer, C. D., T. M. Waliczek, & J. M. Zajicek (2005), "Growing Minds: The Effect of a School Gardening Program on the Science Achievement of Elementary Students," *HortTechnology, 15*(3), 448–452, **http://horttech.ashspublications.org/content/15/3/448.short**
- Smith, L. L., & C.E. Motsenbocker (2005), "Impact of Hands-on Science through School Gardening in Louisiana Public Elementary Schools," *HortTechnology, 15*(3), 439–443, **http://horttech.ashspublications.org/content/15/3/439.short**

Resources

- *Lesson Plans and Garden Guides*, Nature Works Everywhere (The Nature Conservancy), **https://natureworkseverywhere.org/ - _resources**
- *Best Practices for Environmental Educators,* **https://eeco.wildapricot.org/Resources/Documents/bestpractices.pdf**
- *How Can I Possibly Manage 30 Kids Outdoors in a Garden?*, Life Lab, **http://www.lifelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/04/OutdoorClassroomManagement2.pdf**

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

Following are the items you must submit to earn this micro-credential and the criteria by which they will be evaluated. To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing evaluation for Parts 1, 3, and 4 and a "Yes" for Part 2.

Part 1. Overview questions

- Activity Description:
  (200-word limit for each response)
  - What project or lesson did you conduct for the outdoor learning experience?
    - **Passing:** The activity description is clear and indicates the content of the lesson, the time frame, the location, and student responsibilities.
  - Describe the teacher preparation you did before the outdoor learning experience.
    - **Passing:** The response clearly describes the teacher preparation completed BEFORE the activity.
  - Explain how you prepared the students for this activity.
    - **Passing:** The response clearly indicates the methods used to prepare the students for their outdoor experience.

- Activity Evaluation: Evaluate the activity. Be sure to address the following questions in your evaluation (500-word limit):
  - Did you make any modifications to make the activity more appropriate for your students? If so, describe them
  - How did you select the outdoor environment for your activity?
  - How did you keep your students engaged while conducting the activity?

- How did the activity help students achieve their learning objectives?
- How did you measure the success of the activity?
- **Passing:** All of the questions have been answered completely. The activity evaluation process is clear and detailed, and the evidence used to demonstrate learning gains is detailed and appropriate.

Part 2. Evidence/artifacts

Please submit documentation (video or photo) that demonstrates your competence in conducting an outdoor classroom activity and provide evidence that the outdoor activity contributed to improved learning gains. If you use a video, make sure to narrate or have the students explain what they are doing so the method component for which you are providing evidence is clear. If you use photos, please provide a caption for each photo.

"Yes"	"Almost"	"Not Yet"
Documentation includes a 2–5 min video or 5–10 photos that depict the highlights of the lesson and demonstrate how the instructor planned and implemented each of the outdoor classroom management stages. Artifacts make clear how management techniques contributed to a safe and successful outdoor learning experience.	The video/photos somewhat demonstrate how the instructor planned and implemented each of the outdoor classroom management stages. Artifacts do not clearly show how management techniques contributed to a safe and successful outdoor learning experience.	The video/photos do not demonstrate how the instructor planned and implemented outdoor classroom management stages. It is unclear what activities students are doing in the video/photos. It is not clear how outdoor classroom management techniques contributed a to safe and successful outdoor learning experience.

Part 3. Student reflection

Submit **three** (100-word maximum) student reflections, with students' names omitted for privacy, demonstrating each of the following outcomes:

- **Evidence of learning, questioning, and future plans**
  - Students should reflect on what they learned during their outdoor classroom experience, using the following questions as guidance:
    - **What did they enjoy, and what did they learn?**
    - **What didn't they enjoy, and what are some of their lingering questions?**
    - **What do they hope to do during their next outdoor learning experience?**
  - **Passing**: All three reflections clearly indicate what the students learned during the activity, what they enjoyed and didn't enjoy, and what they hope to do for future outdoor activities.

- **Feelings about natural environments**
  - Students should also reflect on their impression of the outdoors before the experience and how that impression may or may not have changed after the outdoor classroom activity.
  - **Passing**: All three reflections clearly demonstrate how students' impressions of the natural environment changed or didn't change as a result of the activity.

Part 4. Teacher reflection

Please provide a personal reflection, using the following questions as guidance (500-word maximum):

- What were the challenges you experienced in implementing your outdoor lesson? Were there

management challenges that you didn't anticipate? How will you prepare differently for future outdoor lessons?

- Why did you choose the specific images or video footage you submitted to document your activity? What about these images do you feel best exemplifies the management techniques you used during your outdoor lesson?
- What outdoor activities do you anticipate using in the future?
- What were the criteria you used to choose the three student reflections to submit? How will these student reflections inform your practice for the next outdoor learning experience?
    - **Passing**: Reflection indicates implementation challenges and ideas for addressing these challenges in the future, addresses how the chosen video footage or photos demonstrate management techniques used during the lesson, gives examples of future outdoor activities that might be conducted in the future, and addresses why the particular student reflections were selected for submission and what the takeaway was from the student reflections in general.