



## Maximizing Teaching Time for the Outdoor Classroom

### The Rationale

We all care about the success of our students and strive to provide a positive environment in which students are healthy, motivated, and learning content in innovative ways. Every educational setting has such a place ... outside. The outdoor classroom ties in to curriculum, supports state academic standards, and provides real-world application for standardized tests and textbooks. Engaging with other professionals, teachers can plan to teach outdoors, smoothly integrating the outdoor classroom into each day, week, month, or season. (For more information, see <http://childrenandnature.ning.com/group/naturalteachers/forum/topics/10-reasons-to-take-your-students-outside>.)

### Different Strategies

PWLC staff and Prairie Science Class teachers invite teachers new to teaching in the outdoor classroom to consider using any or all of the following recommendations in order to make this proven-effective practice a practical and regular reality.

1. Remind yourself that you don't have to teach to curriculum, the textbook, or to the test for *everything, all of the time*. Standards and textbooks guide you in *what* to teach, but now *how* to teach. How you teach is your discretion as a professional educator and can include the use of the outdoor classroom.
2. Include field time on your day's agenda written on the board. Your students will look at it when they enter.
3. Tell your students first thing in the day what they'll be doing in the field and how it applies to the indoor classroom. Use outdoor classroom time first thing in the day as a springboard for the indoor time that follows.
4. Schedule your class to go outside for at least the first 30 minutes of the school day. Then it's impossible to run out of time for it at the end of the day.
5. If going outside later rather than first thing, schedule a drop-dead time to go outside no matter where you are at in your day's schedule. At that point, stop, drop everything, and get ready to go outside. It's okay to not get everything done every day.
6. Teach mini-lessons appropriate to the attention span of your grade level, freeing up time to teach outside in fresh air, different scenery, and using movement (simply walking).
7. Incorporate your class' outdoor experiences into indoor teaching, as well. For example, DOL (Daily Oral Language) content can be about recent outdoor happenings.

8. Become a student of your place and all it can teach you. Make the outdoor classroom the centerpiece, the main stage, the hub of your teaching wheel. Let what is happening in the outdoor classroom (phenology) drive your teaching – reverse the flow.
  - a. Use your textbook to support what is happening outside. Give yourself permission to use chapters out of sequence or to skip sections completely.
  - b. Examine your state academic standards to determine which ones can be best addressed outside
    - i. Usually life and earth science work best (such as ecosystems, life cycles, plant and animal adaptations, rocks, water cycle, weather, the scientific method, scientists/naturalists, change over time)
    - ii. Also non-science subjects (such as writing, punctuation, spelling, research, reports, art, history of the land, measuring, benchmarking, map-making, etc.).
    - iii. Schedule dates on your calendar to use those topics outside.
9. Be willing to loosen your ownership grip and team-teach or coordinate with other teacher(s) in your building or district who are also striving to use the outdoor classroom. You will each gain peer support and collaboration to strengthen your teaching practice.
10. Seek out a mentor who is experienced at teaching in the outdoor classroom to advise, coach, and encourage you regularly.
11. Seek the administrative support and approval you need to devote time to teaching in the outdoor classroom.
12. Find a local conservation partner and commit to collaborating together on mutually relevant projects that educate and make a difference.
13. Pursue professional development opportunities which enhance your skills in using the outdoor classroom and increase your familiarity with your local ecosystem.
14. Even if you are an experienced classroom teacher and outdoors person, gradually let go, open and humble your mind and heart to learn and try a different way of teaching. Give yourself permission to do this.

