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# Best practices for outdoor teaching excellence

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When we consider the word excellence, how would each of us describe it? Do we have a standard definition? A starting point might be some description of elements that can narrow the expected thought. One could say the quality of being must be outstanding. So how can we apply that exact definitive description to teaching in, for, and about the outdoors (Asfeldt et al., 2021)?

While a nuts and bolts science approach to teaching is common and even though teaching definitely has an art to it, this chapter is about the craft of teaching. It examines seven principles that go beyond the art and science of teaching outdoors and presents several Canadian examples.

## Introduction

Take some time to think about your key ideas for what makes a great outdoor teacher. As you think, questions might arise, like “are my talents

and passions aligned with reality and a good fit for teaching outdoors?” We might agree that being efficient, practical, organized, creative, and intentional within a well-thought-out plan to create desired learning outcomes would be significant contributors to teaching excellence. However, the journey of developing one’s craft also comes from a deep desire to pursue such excellence and each outdoor teacher naturally wants to perform well. As an introduction, if we examine people deemed to be a master at something, they appear to perform effortlessly.

Let’s start by looking at the centre of our practice: our values as practitioners. Readers are encouraged to examine and list their personal values. These values come from the heart that desires to make a difference and seeks to empower learners as outdoor leaders should. If leadership comes into play, we aim to guide, license, and develop people to become better and

more skillful. So how does all of this strategy happen? Modeling and research can help guide the development of such a strategy. Being strategic in the learning environment is a crucial trait every outdoor leader should possess: intentionally seeking to plan, prepare, deliver, and reflect on practices they would apply in an outdoor setting.

Next, let's consider quality in teaching and learning. Quality assurance focuses on a continuous improvement model of planning, delivery, assessment, and improvement cycle that applies to teaching. Planning any teaching moment or lesson is a critical starting point. Indeed, curriculum design has a significant guide to the organization and elements vital to ensuring that all factors are considered and arranged systematically to fit learners' needs. Using quality assurance principles, especially for curriculum design and delivery, develops the highest standards of quality and becomes a benchmark for outdoor practitioners and their programs.

To achieve high teaching and learning quality, readers may want to investigate the values of Quality Matters (2023) in supporting curricula design and delivery. Quality Matters (QM) is a design standard that guides practitioners in organizing key components critical to building and assuring well-organized and effective inventories for inclusion in any curriculum plan (Cochran-Smith, 2003). While originally intended for online teaching and e-learning, the QM framework has gained application, from hybrid or blended learning, through face-to-face or classroom teaching (Quality Matters, 2023). This author suggests that outdoor teachers may also find this useful, although the framework has yet to be tested in natural or field settings.

Teaching with a well-executed plan is like a symphony of sorts. The conductor has a composed curriculum and works with various groups and individuals to: bring the best out of each, build strength from each instrument, and encourage an amazing collaborative work as one effort. This effort and its desired goal ask a provocative question: how are all these elements brought together in harmony to create the special environ-

ment needed to make such wonderful music and a place to grow and learn?

In the opinion of this author, the answer can be found in combining seven principles for learning and teaching excellence (Griffith University, 2009). This chapter will examine these in greater detail and explore their potential for supporting dynamic and engaging environments in the classroom and outdoors.

### Seven principles for teaching excellence

The keys to the best teaching practices are engagement, creating interest, and drawing students' focus onto what you're communicating. Telling stories is an excellent segue into making such a mutual connection. Learners have come outdoors for something they seek to discover and transform. It's an adventurous story with mystery and discovery about the world and themselves. How can we enrich their lives and enable the experience to become a change in their personal thoughts, feelings or behaviours?

#### 1. Create a dynamic learning environment that is engaging, motivating, and intellectually stimulating.

- Model and demonstrate to students the excitement of discovery and creativity in exploring ideas and solving significant and actual problems.
- Find ways to present appropriately challenging learning activities in an enthusiastic, interesting, enjoyable, and dynamic way.
- Foster active participation and passionate engagement in learning activities.
- Encourage mutual recognition of the talents, aspirations, and background knowledge that learners and teachers bring to the learning environment.

During the recent pandemic, faculty and students at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec, published a guide to education outdoors as an alternative to classroom-based instruction in higher education as a means to reduce viral transmission (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2020). They recommended a combination of experiential,

problem-based, and project-based pedagogies that took “place in real-life situations” with problems that were “meaningful, motivating and as close as possible to a real-life situation” and where learners “engage in...learning that is anchored in real life” (p. 8). Of course, outdoor education is applicable and practiced at all levels of formal and informal instruction.

Another best practice is applying and creating a dynamic situation where ideas and theories are applied. This validates the scientific views and allows learners to discover the truth from fiction, but also tests the boundaries of learned concepts in the real world. Consider teaching mathematical trigonometry concepts, where triangle side lengths and angles (sine, cosine or tangent) are calculated in relation to one another. One could teach this in the classroom, or go outside to measure the heights of trees, lengths of mountains, and widths of rivers using the same techniques (Yamamura et al., 2003). Seeing the concepts in action establishes a level of comprehension that complements the developed knowledge. The key idea is connecting to real-world situations that engage learners in every process.

## **2. Emphasize the importance of theory and knowledge, relevance, and integration with professional practice to develop solutions to real-world challenges.**

- Provide examples from one’s own professional or discipline-based practice to illustrate concepts, skills, and knowledge relating to the discipline.
- Showcase the relevance and significance of curriculum content and learning activities to professional, disciplined, real-world, and personal experiences.
- Provide opportunities for students to understand their learning by providing links between individual content, the broader program of study, and the relevance and application of their education to the future.
- Provide learning experiences that simulate professional and disciplinary practice or address professional and disciplinary practice problems.
- Design curricula, learning tasks, and assess-

ments that allow students to apply their disciplinary knowledge in real-world and practice settings.

- Invite the community, professional, and industry experts to present guest lectures, seminars, or other activities.

More than 50 years ago, as outdoor education was just emerging in Canada, the Executive Secretary of the Canadian Education Association noted that “more and more Canadian teachers are discovering the value of outdoor education as a method of learning through first-hand experience and discovery, and as a method of teaching which uses the real world as a resource” (Passmore, 1972, p.5). Today, many outdoor programs are echoing the real world teaching philosophy espoused by the Blue Mountain WILD School (2020, no page) in Ontario.

*Our classroom is life, our campus is the natural world. We foster curiosity in learning through hands on experiences. We peel back knowledge like an onion, exploring the many layers that go beyond initial perceptions and investigate how they integrate and relate. Our thinking is critical, our lessons are rooted in real world problem solving using relevant examples. This stimulates interest and motivation to discover more. We take the classroom outside and into the community - integrating real world projects and opportunities.*

An additional piece to this collection of ideas is creating a learning space where one can express cultural backgrounds and beliefs, be encouraged to participate equally and be free to participate and feel respected. There’s much we can learn about learners’ history that shapes how they process information and may identify limitations by such beliefs that form the values utilized by each person. We were raised differently and in varying environments; we were inspired by some and discouraged by others. This process of each person’s history will create a way of processing situations differently and can challenge the environment and be one of the personalizing perspectives.

**3. Offer learning experiences that develop internationally aware and culturally sensitive graduates who make a difference as socially and ethically responsible citizens.**

- Model respectful and culturally competent interactions with students.
- Make use of case studies and depictions of ethical and professional dilemmas.
- Integrate ethical issues and approaches into students' inquiry-based learning and assessment activities.
- Use cooperative and team tasks to increase opportunities for interaction among students in cross-cultural groups.

In the outdoors, the emphasis for making a difference often refers to developing the individual participant in relationship to oneself, others, and/or the environment. In Canada, cultural sensitivity may refer to our pluralistic society and/or Indigenous reconciliation efforts. Teaching in the outdoors demands all of this be addressed in integrated combination, because everything in the world is connected. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education has published an interdisciplinary guide to teaching in natural environments. Its suggestions for practice include many references to a wide variety of cultural perspectives about learning on and from the land. Most notably "it is important that other diverse cultural and religious perspectives are acknowledged, respected and analyzed in terms of their implications for [environmental] issues" and "First Peoples Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of specific landscapes, regions or ecologies can be an important component of culturally appropriate and responsive, environmental education" (BC Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10). Learners cannot make a difference, if they ignore significant alternative contributions to solving environmental problems.

The chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlighted education holds the key to future reconciliation, because miseducation was a past tool of oppression. Many programs across the nation teach land-based education from this perspective. Learning the Land, an excellent example evolving nation-wide from Sas-

katchewan, links treaty rights with inherent Indigenous rights, to state:

*Learning the land is more than an outdoor education program. It is about learning from the land and understanding our connection to it. Understanding our connection will give life to what the land can teach us, how it communicates with us and how it looks after all life upon it. The land has a way to strengthen all things....Every culture, no matter their location, is connected to the environment. It is that connection where cultures teach their people how their traditional ways connect and respect all things in their environment. Indigenous cultures have lived off the land for centuries so traditional knowledge and connection is deeply rooted in the original relationships (Learning the Land, 2020, no page).*

The next component addresses the support and maintenance of the learning environment. Without establishing mechanisms of support and group management, learning behaviours may become unreasonable. As mentioned, learners have some limitations and perceptions that can influence behaviours that disrupt a smooth learning process. It tests patience, perseverance, compassion, and fortitude to limit the emotional discourse inside each of us. A learning environment should be a sacred space, where learners feel safe to step out of their comfort zones. Teaching is primarily about developing people intellectually, mentally, and physically. It stretches and challenges them to invest in themselves, while being sensitive to others. It encourages a respectful discord with collaborative spaces and relaxing activities sensitive to cultural and social norms.

The most critical piece is introducing policies or practices that address the discord to a more meaningful outcome with provisions for mediating behaviors that circumvent these policies. Setting an example early typically displays follow-through and brings credibility to the guidelines, which will be a cornerstone of classroom management. This is one of the most critical

factors in a healthy learning environment where learners are supported and encouraged to be respectful. The teacher needs a rapport with students to build trust. Without this trust, the learning connection will be diminished.

**4. Provide an inclusive environment of support and respect for all students by embracing diversity and indigeneity, remaining empathetic to students' needs, listening to the collective student voice, and involving students as teachers and leaders.**

- Be a role model for respectful behavior.
- Acknowledge the value of student input.
- Demonstrate and foster the class's respect for student diversity.
- Establish ground rules for group discussions and apply quick action in the case of discriminatory student comments or behaviors.
- Provide support to students with learning and physical disabilities.
- Learn students' names and find out about their interests.
- Create a safe, non-threatening learning environment in which students are encouraged to express their views and opinions while respecting those of peers and staff in a respectful intellectual context.
- Emphasize the value of student diversity in the learning context and the benefits of learning from different individual and cultural viewpoints and perspectives.
- Design early formative assessment tasks to gauge students' background knowledge to determine gaps in requisite knowledge or skills and the support required by students at risk of failure.
- Adapt the pace of teaching to accommodate different learning styles while maintaining rigor and standards.
- Provide students with the necessary information about available support to assist them in managing learning and personal issues, especially during times of stress, to reduce the risk of attrition or failure.
- Provide opportunities for students to develop oral presentation skills and use multimedia technologies in a supportive context.

- Design assessment activities that encourage students to use outdoor spaces – whether real or virtual, particularly in group settings that encourage students to meet and socialize outside of formal classes.

A Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence recipient encapsulated the importance of engaging students as teachers. Her grade six classes with Inuit children in Nunavut have provided

*...a chance to learn from elders, enjoy the land, connect as a class, and allow the students to show leadership, and become the teacher. The experiences are used as teachable moments, and references when using a cross-curricular approach. Project-based learning has revolutionized my differentiated instruction in the classroom; students who were not engaged have now become the leaders in the classroom and the school (Sawyers, 2013, p.16).*

Another outdoor teacher, researching schools on Vancouver Island and realizing a revelation, stated that her new

*"...teaching practice involves keeping in mind my students' voices and their needs. In order to make significant changes I need to change my lessons to be more student-led and less teacher directed....Allowing my students to communicate how, where and what they would like to learn within the confines of the curriculum can be the impetus of my new outlook on teaching" (Gleeson, 2013, p. 37).*

A crucial component is enhancing curiosity and encouraging creative thoughts as the learner's mind seeks to explore. This supports the expansion of the student's imagination. An appreciation for self-discoveries is empowering. There's a different kind of risk-taking in the outdoors, where we teach the learners to learn independently, a critical step for future self-development. Guiding learners constructively to explore while keeping the scope of the assignment focused on the topics is essential.

**5. Encourage the spirit of inquiry, compassion, curiosity, and critical and creative thinking informed by current research, standards, and conditions.**

- Design activities and assessments where students pose research questions and investigate the answers.
- Use problem-based learning, problem-solving approaches, and other strategies to build analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills.
- Involve students in research team assignments.

In Alberta, a private school teaches outdoor education to achieve its mission of “engaging, dynamic, student-centered experiences that nurture a caring, inclusive culture and instill a love of learning” (Calgary Academy, 2021, no page). One teacher shared the importance of serendipity in developing curiosity, creativity, and thinking skills.

*My favourite part about teaching OE is the ‘aha moments’ where the kids are experiencing something outdoors for the first time and realizing their love for it. I also love the connectedness that students begin to develop within themselves when they take on challenges and learn what matters to them. Finally, I love the relationships that are built here within our classes that transcend time – Jason Lindsey (Calgary Academy, 2021, no page).*

At the University of Saskatchewan, Ecology Camps for Kids, is outdoor education taught through the senses. The children “lie down in the grass and ‘bond to the prairies.’ Using all five senses, they...see the wind pulling the grass, listen for birds and insects, feel the sun and know when a cloud passed over it.... They visit a different wetland every day, walking barefoot and feeling the mud squish between their toes” (EcoFriendly Sask, 2018, no page). Engagement is achieved through multi-sensory awareness.

Engagement is an essential item on the list; without participation and interest, there’s a limit to

the transfer of knowledge and skill development. Communication is vital, both verbal and non-verbal. Clear expectations guide learners, which is so essential to avoid frustrations. Setting goals and objectives creates a path of progress for each learner to reflect on and they can ask themselves, “Am I getting there?” Measurements need to be fair and reasonable. This is about the learners’ experiences; when this is encouraged, engagement improves. When it’s ambiguous, learners see it as unfair and check out. Creating dynamic learning environments with interactive self-paced activities supported by gamification helps by keeping students engaged.

**6. Enhance student engagement and learning by designing an effective curriculum, matching technology with teaching, and using appropriate assessment methods.**

- Communicate the goals and objectives of courses and programs.
- Explicitly link teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks to learning purposes, ensuring that learning objectives are aligned.
- Design a valid and reliable assessment that ensures the highest educational standards will be maintained at the highest level of appropriateness.
- Create fair reviews and have measures appropriate for the discipline.
- Apply reliable processes for marking and assigning grades, with consistent and systematic moderation processes used within and across courses.
- Provide transparent information about course and assessment requirements, the criteria by which work is created and measured, and the standards expected for high performance.
- Provide timely and targeted feedback on the assessment to enhance student learning and consider individual learning needs.
- Apply a combination of formative and summative evaluations, with the opportunity for students to benefit from early feedback.
- Create good spread and timing of assessment tasks, considering student workloads

within and across subjects in the timing of assessments.

- Use a range of teaching and assessment strategies to consider different learning styles.
- Ensure students are aware of issues and policies relating to academic integrity and penalties associated with breaches.
- Where possible, provide flexibility in terms of delivery of course content and type/timing of assessment.

Yukon Experiential Learning (YEL) is an initiative of the provincial Department of Education that supports outdoor learning by providing consulting advice, risk management guidance, equipment and other resources to any school that wants to offer these programs. Their website defines experiential learning as “teaching and learning that incorporates the direct experience, critical reflection and negotiation as a foundation for the learning process” and explains that, in outdoor experiential learning, the teacher’s or

*“educator’s primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process. The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning. Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner. The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes” (YEL, n.d., no page).*

As mentioned earlier, this practice must complete the initial plan and the teaching cycle of delivery, assessment, and improvement. During instruction, mini check-ins can help the teacher to stay in touch with the learners as delivery progresses. Student performance assessments can signal some quick clues on how they are processing knowledge and its application.

After delivery, materials may be redeveloped or newly developed, teaching approaches or in-

structional strategies can be further refined, and lesson plans can be adjusted for the future and in keeping with the continuous improvement model. This is also an excellent time to gather feedback on the achievement of learner’s initial expectations as were communicated at the beginning. How the learners felt and were self-directed within the outdoor setting can also be reflected upon. Gain assistance through collegial relationships with other teachers. Last, but by no means least, is the crucial importance of ongoing development and continual improvement for outdoor teachers themselves.

**7. Improve teaching practice through continuous self-awareness, ongoing professional development, and critical reflection as informed by various evaluation approaches. Pursue opportunities to experiment with innovative teaching techniques while staying current, committed, and passionate about the subject matter.**

- Regularly monitor how effectively students engage with learning in their courses and programs.
- Seek feedback from students and peers and continuously improve by identifying strengths and weaknesses and responding accordingly.
- Use student feedback about teaching, courses, and programs to examine and justify possible curricula and teaching practice changes.
- Deliver feedback to students regarding how programs have improved in response to their feedback.
- Draw on evidence about learning and teaching scholarship from journal publications, conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.
- Develop scholarly practice through professional development activities.

The Western Region of the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District’s Residential Outdoor Education program is a partnership with Killdevil Camp and Conference Centre, Gros Morne National Park of Parks Canada, and the Qalipu First Nations. This experience is linked to the

curriculum, allows the opportunity for every student in the district to attend once during grades 4, 5 or 6, and has administrative staff conducting logistics, scheduling, and transportation, thus allowing teachers to concentrate on teaching.

*This program is also unique in that, visiting teachers do much of the teaching during their class visits. To prepare for this program, every new teacher to the program will participate in a two-day professional learning session whereby they learn to teach students outdoors and deliver specific learning sessions pertaining to the specific curriculum outcomes.... By teaching within the program, teachers are able to observe their students in contexts far different from the regular classroom and are able to follow-up on what is taught here once they get back in the classroom. As well, teachers who are comfortable teaching their students in an outdoor environment, have tools which can be used to teach their students in outdoor environments closer to their schools (NL English School District, n.d., no page).*

### Conclusion

In conclusion, isolated pockets across the country appear to be including some of these seven principles in their outdoor education programs. Evergreen, based in Toronto, but operating nationally, is a movement to change Canadian communities toward being greener, more livable, and prosperous. They summarize some of this teaching chapter in a great starting place for developing outdoor teachers. Their 4-page document, *Classroom Management: Outdoor Teaching Strategies* (Evergreen, n.d.), gives teacher suggestions, lesson planning advice, activity introductions, and guidelines for being outside. Most provinces have similar documents through their education ministries. For example, *Get Outdoors!* from WildBC (n.d.), contains a number of start-up tips and tricks for budding outdoor educators.

These defined practices, in these isolated Canadian pockets, develop best teaching by setting

benchmarks of excellence one can strive towards. Over the years, this has proven to be a model of personal growth for a variety of outdoor practitioners and highly rewarding for their personal development. The model's foci remain: improving practice, being culturally sensitive, supporting the learning environment, staying connected to the instructional task, relating to learners, and expressing the teaching media and methods that reach them most effectively. Hopefully, this information will be valuable and meaningful, as we all continue developing our art, our science, and especially our craft to best meet students' challenges and needs.

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## Resources

The introductory chapters of these two Canadian books address outdoor teaching techniques.

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