

11-21-2019

Outdoor Activities to Improve Writing

Alyssa Kyllonen
Northern Michigan University, akyllone@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Outdoor Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kyllonen, Alyssa (2019) "Outdoor Activities to Improve Writing," *Conspectus Borealis*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol5/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Peer-Reviewed Series at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conspectus Borealis by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact [Kevin McDonough](#).

Outdoor Activities to Improve Writing

Northern Michigan University

Nature, the great outdoors, is home to an abundance of biologic and elemental diversity that is filled with processes, cycles, growth, and death. It reaches all five senses and is ever-changing— from the clouds in the sky to the dirt under foot, each element of nature has the power to captivate, intrigue, entertain, and cause the human brain to wonder and learn. Nature doesn't give us words to read: it paints us pictures, sings us songs, fills our noses with aroma, and enhances our touch with texture. Students spend around seven hours at school every day, but often only go outside for 30 minutes of recess. We have one of the greatest teachers right outside our school door, yet most classes aren't taking advantage of this free resource. I will explore the effects that outdoor activities can have on learning, and investigate whether nature can enhance and enrich the writing of students in elementary school and beyond.

Shawna Tartarchuk and Charles Eick wrote an article in 2011 titled, "Outdoor Integration." In this article, Tartarchuk and Eick (2011) explain how nature is a place of inquiry— immersed in nature students become curious, and have the opportunity to apply their conceptual knowledge. Outdoor experiences provide students with hands-on opportunities to make observations, respond to their surroundings, and be a source for reflection. Tartarchuk and Eick studied the results of tying nature into science, reading, and writing lessons. They found that the most effective method for incorporating an outdoor component in a science lesson was to start in the classroom with reading content knowledge, which preps the students' minds to observe from an inquiry driven perspective, and then have them write about their observations after the outdoor experience. According to Tartarchuk and Eick (2011), including the outdoors into lessons is a powerful tool that deepens student comprehension and motivates them to inquire, explore, and write in the subjects of language arts and science. Similarly, Mary Ellen Flannery, author of *Take Your Class Outside*, agrees going outside with a class can inspire

students' writing, as well as illustrate math concepts. Flannery (n.d.) highlights several broad principles to follow to ensure outdoor adventures equate to learning opportunities. These principles include being purposeful, setting ground rules, and seeking assistance from naturalists and others experts when available (Flannery, n.d).

The more we as teachers can appeal to the senses of our students, the more feelings they have to draw from to create and write. As noted by research, sensory-enriched environments restore and recover personal resources (Sona et al., 2019). These personal resources consist of mood, fatigue, and arousal, which can immensely influence productivity. Although our imaginations can take us anywhere, it can be hard at times to stretch our thinking purely in thought. Utilizing the outdoors is one productive avenue for stimulating students' senses and enriching learning experiences.

Sri Suharmi (2015) conducted classroom action research studying the effects of outdoor activity on descriptive writing skill and utilized a student improvement score to determine the results. Suharmi (2015) asserts the importance of writing skill by noting its vital purpose in academics and occupation; moreover, he expresses the difficulty in teaching writing due to its complexity. The researcher observed that often students have trouble getting started with writing: they lack inspiration, and struggle with paragraph development and style. Outdoor activity offers real experiences that add interest to students' thinking, influences their senses, and make students feel more relaxed (Suharmi, 2015).

Suharmi (2015) calculated a pre-test mean writing skills score of 57 prior to utilizing the outdoor activity strategy, and a post-test mean score of 70 (p.231). The results of the scores and feedback they received from participating students indicated outdoor activities increased student

motivation, creative and descriptive writing skills, attention span, and overall writing achievement (Suharmi, 2015).

A team of professionals from Brigham Young University observed over the span of two decades, students who have writing classes accompanied by an outdoor component appear to be more emotionally honest in their writing (Taniguchi et al., 2017). The team conducted research on two classes and applied Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Bandura's theory claims that having a perception of proficiency/mastery in one domain can lead to a generalized perception of proficiency/mastery in other domains (Taniguchi et al., 2017). One writing class contained an outdoor component whereas the other class did not. After the study, the Brigham Young University professionals learned the class that included the outdoor component had significantly more growth in self-efficacy scores- specifically pertaining to risk taking in writing (Taniguchi et al., 2017). The professional team described risk taking in writing as students who express their thoughts and feelings, and concluded taking risks in nature equates to taking risks in writing (Taniguchi et al., 2017). Taniguchi and colleagues noted teachers that utilize outdoor experiences often incorporate experimentation, reflection, and use writing components such as a journal or field notebook.

Research by Bandura found overcoming challenges in any aspect of life promotes an increase in self-efficacy in other areas: even areas that seem to be unrelated; therefore, having students take risks and face new experiences in the outdoors will boost their confidence across multiple areas of learning (Taniguchi et al., 2017). The Brigham Young University study illustrates how lessons don't need to be specifically around the act of writing. Simply exposing students to other kinds of risks such as snowshoeing or cross country skiing can build a sense of accomplishment and confidence which encourages experimentation in learning and writing.

In 2012, Isabel Hopwood-Stephens published *Learning on your Doorstep*, in which one chapter focuses on reasons to bring learning outside. Through her studies she has found that children's concentration and learning are stimulated through outdoor experiences (Hopwood-Stephens, 2012). When it comes specifically to writing, children can draw from their experiences and speak in their writing from a position of having actual hands-on learning. She highlights the effectiveness of the Forest School concept, which started in Sweden and has expanded into many other countries including: Russia, Finland, Latvia, Norway, and Denmark. It has been found to positively impact literacy, numeracy, logical thinking skills, as well as social, emotional, and personal development (Hopwood-Stephens, 2012). The activities in Forest School often incorporate fictional characters with hands-on problem solving activities; the research indicates that all students, regardless of reading level, performed better in their final writing samples after outdoor sessions were included in lesson plans (Hopwood-Stephens, 2012).

Seen by the spread and expansion of Forest School, the outdoor approach is effective; however, the cost and risk of running such a school is not a realistic option for most schools. Nevertheless, concepts and outdoor activities can be utilized, modified, and adapted to fit any given environment. Possibly, a school doesn't have access to a wooded area, but most schools have some sort of outdoor greenspace and still have grounds that lie outside of the building. Any sort of environment outside of the school doors has the potential to offer new perspectives, stimulate the senses of students, and inspire them to write. Furthermore, as noted by Mary Ehrenworth in her 2003 book, *Looking to Write*, natural landscapes can be brought into the classroom via artwork; therefore, even when access to natural outdoor space is restricted, outdoor experiences can still be simulated indoors.

Caroline Davey and Brian Moses published the 2004 book, *Location Writing: Taking Literacy into the Environment*, for the purpose of highlighting the imaginative and creative responses encouraged when students have the opportunity to feel and observe their surroundings. Davey and Moses (2004) found when students write about experiences out of the classroom and in a natural environment, their writing reflects personal feelings of realism and truth. One of the huge differences you experience in location writing versus classroom writing is perspective. Going to a new location, whether that is in the woods, on top of the playground slide, or lying in the grass, allows students to see things in a different and new way. Examples of how images can transform on location is exemplified by Davey and Moses (2004); a student observed a tree but saw “a tall finger pointing to heaven,” and another student sat on a hill and saw “cows holding a powwow” (p.vii).

Ted Hughes is quoted in *Location Writing* offering the following advice to young writers: “Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic” (Davey & Moses, 2004, p. vii). Many observations in nature can be a metaphor to the various facets of life, and when we are given time to observe and make these connections the words seem to simply deliver themselves. I see great value in exposing students to nature for the purpose of inspiration and reflection. I personally have experienced moments where a thought just pops into my head and I think, “I have to write this down!” I once sat next to a pond and watched the reflection of clouds move across the water. It inspired me to write: “An infinite beauty to life, lies in the ever changing reflections.” Davey and Moses (2004) look at writers as “idea detectives;” in order for students to see new perspectives they need to be given new environments to explore (p.viii).

Davey and Moses (2004) offer practical advice in planning location writing, and offer a range of ideas for ways students can write a response to their experiences. Leaving the school grounds is not always an option for classes and students, so I chose to focus on location writing that can be done at most schools. According to Davey and Moses (2004), preparing children for the experience prior to arriving is a crucial step in getting the most out of location writing. As noted earlier, Flannery (n.d.) makes the same point regarding the importance of preparing students for outdoor experiences.

One lesson plan provided in *Location writing* looks at using the school building itself for inspiration to write. Davey and Moses (2004) provide a sample lesson plan that consists of observing the school building and then creating a poem following a recipe type style. The students would use words such as stir, mix, measure, and beat to write a poem about the school (Davey & Moses, 2004, p. 2).

Another lesson plan provided in *Location Writing*, is creating and utilizing a writers' trail. This would consist of eight to ten stopping points along a trail where students can pause, observe, reflect, and write. In order to promote ideas for writing, Davey and Moses suggest giving names to the stops such as— "Tree Top Hill and Lily Pad Pond" (Davey & Moses, 2004, p. 1). The authors also suggest using "what if" questions to spark imagination: What if we were in a different time? What if those two trees or that goal post was a magical gateway? Where might it lead? How do you pass through? How does it make you feel? (Davey & Moses, 2004, p. 3-4).

Davey and Moses (2004) recommend using the playground or other points of interest such as walls and hedgerows for inspiration to write. If the playground had a voice, what would it say? What if the playground dinosaur stomped into the school? What critters might live in

there? What's their life look like? How can you personify items in nature such as trees? Could it be reaching out its long arms after a long nap? Davey and Moses (2004) state that if you offer students ideas and questions to get started, it is important to stress the importance of using the prompts as "launch pads" to stretch ideas into their own unique perspectives (p.viii).

Resources such as *Location Writing* exemplify how possibilities for outdoor writing activities are endless. As teachers, we have access to many teaching resources that share ideas and possibly spark us to come up with new ideas of our own; therefore, we are only limited by our willingness to try new things.

In conclusion, research indicates incorporating outdoor activities into learning activities, specifically writing, leads to positive effects in student performance. As a teacher it may not always be possible to leave the school; however, any outdoor space has potential to provoke the senses of our students, and motivate them to explore, discover, experience, and reflect. In addition, when outdoor experiences are simply not possible, nature can still be brought indoors through the arts. Nature is ever-changing; observations transform from day to day, and season to season. The beauty of nature is captured and held in the eyes of the beholder. What we see and how we experience nature is personal, which encourages a sense of autonomy. Students may observe the same setting, but see very different things. We may view nature from the same spot, but feel and sense dissimilar things. "Nature is nature of nature in nature." I wrote this phrase as a representation of the cyclical processes and connectedness of all things in nature.

Understanding and using nature as a point of reflection can lead to a deeper understanding of life. Exposing students to outdoor experiences will give them opportunities to enrich and enhance their writing with feelings and descriptions. Outdoor experiences will teach and strengthen students' reflection skills, and will expose them to new perspectives. Taking classes

outdoors will provide a reprieve from the many hours spent indoors daily, and will give students' bodies and minds a breath of fresh air; therefore, a teacher has nothing to lose and everything to gain in finding ways to incorporate the outdoors into their lessons.

References

- Davey, C., & Moses, B. (2003). *Location writing: Taking literacy into the environment*. David Fulton.
- Ehrenworth, M. (2003). *Looking to write: Students writing through the visual arts*. Heinemann.
- Flannery, M. E. (n.d.). Take Your Class Outside. National Education Association.
<http://www.nea.org/tools/take-your-class-outside.htm>.
- Hopwood-Stephens, I. (2013). *Learning on your doorstep: Stimulating writing through creative play outdoors for ages 5-9*. Routledge.
- Sona, B., Dietl, E., & Steidle, A. (2019). Recovery in sensory-enriched break environments: integrating vision, sound and scent into simulated indoor and outdoor environments, *Ergonomics*, 62:4, 521-536. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2018.1491643>
- Suharmi, S. (2015). Improving Students' Writing Skill in Descriptive Text by Using Outdoor Activity. *Register Journal*, 5(1), 210–255. <http://doi.org/10.18326/rgt.v8i2.383>
- Taniguchi, S. T., Bennion, J., Duerden, M. D., Widmer, M. A., & Ricks, M. (2017). Self-Efficacy of risk taking in outdoor recreation as a predictor of the self-efficacy of risk taking in essay writing. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 9(4).
- Tartarchuk, S., & Eick, C. (2011, February). Outdoor Integration. *Science and Children*, 48(6), 35–39.