12-1-1979

Ideas for Teaching Language Arts Outdoors

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An outdoor laboratory or school forest can be very valuable for language arts teachers and youth group leaders. Allowing young people to express themselves about natural subjects stimulates and enriches their imaginations. There are many communications and literary skills which can be developed more fully in a natural environment than in a confined learning area.

Some of America's greatest poets, novelists, and commentators have had strong outdoor interests. The natural world, which changes from season to season, provides an infinite variety of subject matter. The current interest in the environment makes it advantageous for youth to have an understanding of natural systems and their operations. The young person can develop an appreciation for words which describe the natural environment if given an opportunity to use those words in relation to something he can actually touch, feel, see, and comprehend. Vocabulary skills and spelling become much more meaningful and attractive when attached to things experienced.

The following ideas can be used in a variety of language arts programs. The young people may also have ideas for projects which can be related to your teaching objectives.

• Record and then report on "newsworthy" items seen in the woods. An alert group may want to prepare a newspaper containing nature news articles (beetles collide on walnut trunk, thousands of leaves fall before cold wind), features, editorials, comic strips, weather reports, advice to the woodlorn, recipes from nature, health tips from the forest (thin your blood with sassafras), birth reports, columns on forest politics, fanciful wood-land advertisements, classified ads, and humor columns. This exercise takes relatively little knowledge on the leader's part, requiring only assignments of duties. The local newspaper's outdoor editor or a local forester may be called in to help the reporters and columnists.

• Development of descriptive vocabulary can be exciting if the objects or sensations being described are actually seen or felt. Ask the group in the woods to name five objects (log, leaf, creek, rock, moss), one at a time, without using the actual name. Then have them write descriptive adjectives suitable to the object. Next, you might try nouns and verbs which are similes to the objects. Try this exercise outside of natural areas, without the direct contact, if you want to test the value of the trek to the woods.

• A journal can be kept by each youth on repeat visits to an assigned area. This area can be as small as one square meter. To start, he records everything that is in the square meter. Then, on successive visits, he records changes which have occurred in its condition and presence. What are the effects of the seasons? Of different times of the day? Later, the journal notes can be condensed into a report.

• Poetry is fun in the woods. Many instructors have used Haiku—poetry based on 5-7-5 syllables. A session of warm-day writing in the forest can start with Haiku and progress to more complex structures. The young people can be helped to concentrate on one topic amidst the flood of impressions available in the outdoor setting.
- Word games can be invented in or taken to the outdoor area. Try a synonym contest based on colors. What are the words to describe the color of the redbud bloom, the shape of a tree trunk, the sound of water on rocks, the feel of the wind? Many other observation word games can be adapted to the environment.

- Spelling bees can be held in the woods, with the visible objects as subjects, along with conditions surrounding them. Here are some words often misspelled: primitive, primeval, scenic, scenery, sassafras, persimmon, yew, raccoon, opossum, squirrel, pheasant, and coyote.

- Figures of speech often come from nature. Indians and early settlers spoke of men “sturdy as an oak,” “busy as a beaver,” “tough as hickory,” “wise as an owl.” (Look for owls in pine plantations—they often look right back if not startled). Find out what these sayings mean by trying to cut or carve hickory, watching an oak in a windstorm, studying a beaver. These observations can lead to written or verbal exercises.

- Write prose which is a) emotive, b) analytical, c) descriptive, d) interpretive, and e) dramatic about the same event observed in the woods. This exercise may be as simple as comparative paragraphs on the emergence of hickory buds, the return of birds, or the breaking-up of ice on the river.

- Use of the library can be more than just a requirement if the young person is looking for explanations of what is seen outdoors. By tying report preparation to outdoor observation and library research, the student finds that encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference books suddenly become the most useful volumes in the library.

- Scientific nomenclature of plants and animals provides a means of communication seldom taught. Yet, most dictionaries include these scientific names. They often (not always) help describe the plant or animal. Many of the Latin words relate to English words. Examples:

  * Populus grandidentata—big tooth aspen
  * Populus tremuloides—quaking aspen or popple
  * Populus deltoides—cottonwood (delta-shaped leaf)
  * Juglans nigra—black walnut (Juglans—Jovis+ glans; nut of Jupiter)
  * Viola tricolor—pansy (a three-colored violet)
  * Acer saccharum—sugar maple

- Speech in the forest can be excellent practice in projection, voice quality, and eloquence. Stage an old-time political rally (Rally for Old Tippecanoe, Lincoln-Douglas debates) on real stumps. Try an outdoor melodrama or a patent medicine show.