

Nature's Classroom: How to weave group management, team building, and nature-based activities

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Abstract

As interpreters it's important to understand how to manage school groups and facilitate team building. Interpretation is organized, and by implementing a seamless program your group will be inspired and open to new ideas. It is possible to juggle group management and program flow while also encouraging teamwork and nature-based learning for outdoor programs with kindergarteners to high schoolers.

Keywords

Group management, classroom management, team building, natural cycles, program organization

Introduction

As interpretive naturalists many times the majority of our programs are school field trips and other organized groups of kids of all ages. We must wear many hats when giving programs, one of which is the teacher hat. By being teachers we not only impart knowledge but we also use classroom management during these programs. In addition to being a teacher we must also be a coach, being sure to emphasize team building and team work. Lastly, as interpreters of the environment, it's important to use nature-based activities as much as possible. When we are able to weave all of these into one program we allow our students to feel excited and open to new ideas. As instructors, we are able to leave the program feeling inspired, energized, and successful. Drawing from my experience and two important resources, Joseph Cornell's *Sharing Nature with Children* and Young's *Coyote's Guide to Connecting Children with Nature*, I have learned to do this in my programs.

Body

The following steps are drawn from the inspiration of these two books as well as my specific experience teaching outdoor school, teen service learning projects, and 2nd grade class field trips.

- **Ice Breakers:** Depending on how long the program that you are leading is, you want to get to know your students especially their names. Using a kid's name makes them feel accepted and they will be more inclined to participate in the program.
- **Nature names:** Write down the names of some local species on small pieces of paper. Put the papers into a hat and have the students choose one by one. This way, the nature name has chosen the student rather than the other way around.
- **Line/circle up:** With younger students, it helps to line them up while walking along a trail or in a circle while staying in one place. Most teachers already have a line order but you can line them up in any order you want. For a geology class I have them line up in order of birthday from oldest to youngest, just like layers of rocks.
- **Hidden talent introduction:** For teens you can boost their confidence, get to know them, and build a team or community by having everyone share a hidden talent. Or if you'd like to stick to the nature-based theme you could have them share their favorite outdoor adventure.

- **Setting Expectations:** It is important to set expectations for all groups, even groups that you will only have for half an hour.
 - **Classroom rules:** A good habit to get into with school groups is to ask them what their normal rules are while in class. You can remind them that they are still in school and that those rules still apply. Ask for their quiet sign or use your own like the “quiet coyote” symbol.
 - **Community agreement:** For older students you can have them each come up with a code of conduct to follow during your time together. As they say each rule or guideline, write them down on a large piece of paper (positive “do” actions rather than negative “don’t” actions work best). Then have them trace their hand and sign their name inside their hand. Whenever you have issues during your time together, refer to the community agreement, this is what *they* agreed to do after all.
 - **Organization-wide rules:** If you are able, create your own organization-wide rules that each group follows during their trip to your site. You can keep it simple: be respectful, be safe, and have fun.
- **Be Intentional:** You can only “wing-it” every once in a while, by being intentional you’ll find that you’re more prepared and provide a more meaningful program.
 - **Plan more:** It’s always good to plan more activities than you could reasonably get to during one program. This way you’ll always have something to engage your group and you’ll be prepared with meaningful activities to use. Some go-to materials you could carry for nature exploration are binoculars, compasses, bandanas, whiteboard and markers, field guides, and a collecting box/nets (remember to have the students help you carry everything).
 - **Purpose:** Each activity should have purpose and relate to what subject you are addressing. For example, I have 2nd graders play rock, paper, scissors when there is down time during a geology and mining history program. While playing, they think about whether or not rocks, paper, or scissors come from a mine.
- **Natural Cycles:** Meet each group where they’re at, don’t force any activities.
 - **Cornell’s cycles:** Awaken enthusiasm (energetic/playful), focus attention (attentive/observational), direct experience (calm/experiential), share inspiration (reflective/sharing)
 - **Coyote’s cycles:** East (excitement/inspiration), Southeast (orientation/motivation), South (focus/perspiration), Southwest (relaxation/internalization), West (harvest/celebration), Northwest (reflection/release), North (distillation/integration), and Northeast (end/beginning)
- **Debrief:** You always want to wrap-up, and recap your day to celebrate what was learned and what was enjoyable. It’s also a great way to re-visit activities that happened toward the beginning of the program.
 - **Yes! Circle:** While standing in a circle have each student think of a word (it can be any form of word) that best encompasses their day. After each individual shares, everyone shouts “Yes!” to affirm their response.
 - **1 thing you learned, 1 thing you enjoyed:** Have students tell a partner 1 thing they learned, and 1 thing they enjoyed. The distinction between enjoying and learning is key. Then have some of the students share with the whole group.

Conclusion

Using the ideas listed above can help get you started in the right direction towards creating manageable and enjoyable programs. With experience and trial and error you’ll find that you can be an even more effective interpreter by also being a teacher and a coach. Remember to discuss and bounce ideas off of your fellow colleagues to learn more tricks and tips.

References

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