Practical Application: Curriculum Plan for Outdoor Activities

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EDOE 543: Environmental Ministries

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Introduction

The following lessons were developed for implementation at Inez Wrenn Seventh-day Adventist School in Crossville, Tennessee. The students were from the upper grades classroom that includes grades five to eight. Nature awareness was the main goal of each of these activities and they were taught during the regular science class time period. Some activities were specifically developed to include a spiritual focus/lesson while others were more generally to help students learn to appreciate Creation and the Creator who made it. At the end of this paper, I will provide a short reflection on teaching these lessons.

Antlers (1-1.5 hours)

This lesson is designed to be a follow up activity for the “Antlers” nature nugget. The nature nugget is intended to take 10-15 minutes to share and discuss (and possibly up to 20). After sharing “Antlers,” progress into a discussion on things in nature that are reborn each year or otherwise are shed to allow for something new to be created. Ask students to come up with at least three things in nature that fit this description and bring them back to share with the rest of the class. If it is cold outside, sharing may take place indoors. Give students 10 minutes to find their three items. This part may be done in groups if desired. I specifically asked them to do this on an individual level.

Allow another 10-15 minutes for students to journal about their finds. Describe each item. Choose one item and draw it carefully. Why is this item something that is shed or otherwise discarded? What benefits does this process give? How can you compare the item to your spiritual life?

Finally, give each student time to share with the group to wrap up the lesson (10-15 minutes). Lesson total should be about an hour.

One Living Thing (30-45 minutes)

Find one living thing in nature to study today. Draw that thing. Describe it thoroughly in words. If you were describing that thing to someone who was blind, how would you describe it? Here are some other questions to answer and/or think about. What is it good for? Is it edible? How does it smell? How does it feel when you touch it? Do you even want to touch it? What do you suppose God was thinking when He made this thing? How does this thing fit in to the environment around it? Do other animals eat it? Does it benefit humans? What spiritual lessons can this thing teach us?

Tracking (1 hour)

Do tracking lesson that was shared with our group on the intensive by the park ranger. What is tracking? What things are we looking for when we go tracking? Another name for tracking is reading sign. What signs do the animals leave behind?

Each student needs to find a partner. With your partner, find an area that is approximately one square yard/meter (use outstretched arms to give dimensions instead of telling them specifics). Study that area for 15 minutes. Find as many signs of animals in that area as you can. You are going to be the expert trackers and will share with the rest of the class about all of the animal signs you found there.

Finish with a tracking walk and ask students to watch for all signs of animals as we walk. At the end of the tracking walk, ask students to write reflectively for 5-10 minutes. What did they learn? What did they enjoy or were there any parts they did not like? What animal signs did they see?

Sit Spot (1.5-2 Hours)

This lesson will begin with the “Friends” nature nugget, followed by sharing 2-3 of my favorite sit spot experiences (SAU Biology Trail scaring a person, robins giving the hawk alarm, otter scaring big brown trout in Smokies, robins attacking a holly bush while and taking turns while others were sentinels). Once this part is completed, I introduce the basic concepts from *What the Robin Knows* and ask the students just what DO the birds know out there in the woods? For older students this could include actually introducing the book itself. This will transition us to a discussion on how the birds are the sentinels of the woods. Ask them if they can move through the woods without making the birds upset.

What is baseline? This topic is essential to the idea of a sit spot. Ask the students how long they think it will take for birds to calm down once they have been upset. If we go and sit quietly in the woods, the birds should return to their normal activities. We are going to try a sit spot. How long does this need to be for the birds to return to baseline? Let’s find out.

Feed birds at the feeders before this activity. Spend a little time at the window discussing/observing their behavior. Discuss some of the types of alarms that birds give through the use of questioning (i.e., what would happen if a cat shows up? What would happen if a hawk that eats birds shows up? What would happen if I walked out there?).

Do a group “sit spot” for fifteen to twenty minutes to model how to approach observations and what types of things to notice. At the end, ask students if they think birds and animals will feel comfortable around a large group. Probably not! What do we need to do to have effective sit spots?

Allow students to do a sit spot, with or without a journal or paper for notes. At the end, I want a detailed explanation on what ONE bird did during their time sitting. Any other interesting observations that they noticed would be great as well.

Once everyone is together again, then we will do a group debrief on this activity. Ask them how long it would take them practicing before they become expert at doing a sit spot. Encourage them to try this activity at home.

Nature Design (45-60 minutes)

This class begins asking the following question. What was God thinking when He made the birds? Let students answer. Here are some ideas of mine. I think He wanted to bring joy, beauty, color, and sound to the world. Tell the students that they are going to have an opportunity to create the perfect bird. The trick is that they can only use nature materials found outside to make a picture of this bird. When we finish, the picture will be left on the ground for others to find and enjoy. While I do not intend to do so during this class, this could launch a discussion on Leave No Trace and discuss whether it is appropriate to leave our creations or not.

Once finished, I will ask each student to share with the rest of the group some details about their bird. What kind of voice does it have? Where does it live? What does it eat? Does it migrate? If so, where does it migrate between? At this point, I will allow students 15-60 minutes depending on age to work on the project, more for older students and less for younger. Once they finish, I will bring everyone back together and tour the art gallery of birds. Allow each student time to present about their particular bird.

At the end, debrief what everyone learned. What did it feel like to be creating something? What were you thinking as you created your bird?

Reflection

Over the course of three separate days, I spent about five hours facilitating these learning activities. One of the most important things I learned is that flexibility is important. While I had some great lessons prepared, some of the activities took on a life of their own as students spent much more time than I anticipated on some activities and not as much time on others.

The first activity was great. The part that surprised me here was how much time the students spent on drawing and journaling about their nature item. That was a consistent theme. Whenever they were given time to be creative, the students spent more time than I anticipated. The other time this was really proved was when I had the students make birds from natural objects/materials. Only one or two students did what I expected and threw something together hurriedly. All of the rest went to great lengths to make a beautiful project, and I was impressed with the results.

Due to using more time than I anticipated on other activities, the one activity I did not do was “One Living Thing.” I also adjusted the “Sit Spot” activity on the fly and shortened it because I wanted the students to have time to do the “Nature Design” activity. The “Sit Spot” activity was actually awesome. We never broke up to do individual sit spots (that was the part I cut out) so they never got the full experience. However, the group sit spot went far better than I could have imagined. The students were quiet and focused. A large group of yellow-rumped warblers were feeding nearby and jumped up high in the trees when we arrived on the scene. As we sat calmly, they went quickly back to feeding down along the stream near the ground. A large pileated woodpecker flew by and got the students really excited. Each student took some time with my binoculars to look around and enjoy the birds for themselves. This turned out to not be a true sit spot activity as it is normally defined, but the students still gained a LOT from doing it this way.

The main reason I made the adjustment to cut down on the sit spot time was because the day I had scheduled to do my nature activities turned out much colder than anticipated. I wanted to do something where the students could keep moving around. So, I quickly decided to do the “Nature Design” activity. The students did very well on this activity and were much more focused and had a lot more fun than I anticipated. This is something that I will definitely be doing with young people again in some form. The great thing about this activity is that there are so many possibilities. You can have students create anything or give them specifics.

Conclusion

Overall, I enjoyed this part of Environmental Ministries immensely. I think the students appreciated the break from their normal routine as well. Every class, I was amazed at their creativity and eagerness to spend time in nature. This just reinforces the idea in my mind that we need to spend more time outdoors with kids, not less. Hopefully I will be able to teach some more soon!