



Exploring Place with Inquiry

ACTIVITY

GRADE LEVEL K-12

CATEGORY Outdoors, Projects, and Places

TOPICS Outdoor investigations in nature

TIME

Outside: 20+ minutes

Inside Review: 10+ minutes

MATERIALS

Simple tools for engagement: eg. trowels, eye loupes or magnifiers, soil probes, measuring tapes, metre sticks, thermometers, sieves, stethoscopes, white cloth or sheets, dip nets, etc

SETTING

Outdoors; choose your habitat

GROUP SIZE

Limited only by the number of various tools available

SUBJECTS

Can be applied to many, including science, socials, First Nations

KEYWORDS

Inquiry-based Learning; place-based learning; experiential learning; tools for outdoor nature-based inquiry

Goal

This activity lends itself to support inquiry in a specific habitat (forest, wetland, garden, etc), or generically in any convenient place outdoors, including the school yard or garden.

Overview

This activity can be used to ignite students in inquiry-based learning OUTSIDE. The activity seeks to engage students outdoors, in small groups, using a selection of different tools to enhance their exploration. The physical tools offer a means for interaction between student and nature, supporting student curiosity and playful exploration of the natural world around them. With few directions given, students explore, with their tool, the natural world. Students are tasked to come up with some questions from their explorations. The activity can stop there, or be extended to have these questions then become the basis for further inquiry-based learning, be it student-led or teacher guided.

Objectives

- To engage students in a self-directed exploration of the natural world, with the aid of a tool within a small group. (The tool allows for new ways of seeing).
- To allow student interests to naturally arise from the engagement which can become the basis for further investigations of inquiry.
- To engage in teamwork.
- To use the outdoors for whole person learning - mentally, socially, personally, and spiritually within the context of BC's most current curriculum.

Procedure

Preparation to Activity Outside

You will need to assess the readiness of your students for this particular activity, in terms of:

- using the tools;
- going outside.

- **Using the Tools:** Depending on the grade level, with younger learners it may be advantageous to have a lesson using the various tools, allowing students time to become familiar with them including care of and how to handle them. This could serve as a precursor for when they will use them outdoors in this activity and others. Sensitive or fragile tools may need guided instruction for their care while the intention is to otherwise keep instruction to a minimum encouraging engagement with the tool through open-minded, unburdened curiosity and playfulness.
- **Going outside:** you may find that your students first need to be acclimatized to going outdoors for formal learning. If this is the case, consider first taking them to a place to which they are familiar to reduce some of the potential chaos with being outside. Once outside, consider running some sensory activities to draw their focus and attention to be present to where they are, in nature.

Instructions are purposely written to convey the bare necessities students need to know in order to do the activity so that their experience is driven by the place and their interaction with it.

Resist the temptation to explain beyond stating that they will be exploring with tools and by forming questions so the process is not influenced by the outcomes.

The sequence of the instructions, plain language and brevity contribute to less confusion and more time exploring. There is a certain excitement that has the opportunity to emerge when students realize the instructions leave room for what inspires them and how the place affects them.

Some students may wonder if they can change tools or break some other “rule” they assume exists. Support their exploration by giving permission. The only “rules” are to explore and form questions. Using the tools is actually optional. The tools are simply “focusing” prompts.

During the outdoor activity the teacher plays a pivotal role observing the various groups’ activities, listening in to conversations, adding in comment where requested or needed (i.e. if inquiry is getting off-base), and answering questions relating to activity process/rules, often answering questions with a question. If discomfort is noted in a student or group due to the limited direction given or intimidation

from unfamiliarity with the tool or being outside for learning, the teacher can offer example inquiry questions to the individual to help with their ignition into wonder in their place. Encourage students who may be hindered by their assumptions about the instructions by suggesting they are okay to continue exploring without worrying about how they conduct that exploration.

One group may choose to join another group. Allow it and see what happens. A group member may become so focused in their own experience that they don’t notice what the rest of their group is doing. Allow this. Should it arise naturally among the students, allow students to swap tools or move to new spaces.

The Activity

1. Announce that there will be an outdoor exploration with tools. The intent is to find out what questions arise through the exploration outside.
2. Assemble in small groups (whether assigned or self-organized).
3. Each group chooses 1-2 tools (depends on student age, group size and number of tools available).
4. Head outdoors
5. Delineate the boundaries for exploration.
6. Announce requisite time for exploration, signal for time to gather, and reassemble place.
7. Remind students that their task is to notice questions that arise as they explore with their tool(s).
8. After specific time, sound signal to meet at Assembly place.
9. Prompt feedback from students. For example: What did you do? What was your tool? What did you explore? How did you find this experience? Was anyone anxious or frustrated?
10. Head back to class.
11. Remain in groups, write down questions within group.
12. As a class, compile questions from each group for all to see. Dialogue as a class on the questions listed.



Reflection

Reflect and dialogue on the questions. Consider the tools used which supported different topics of questioning, different wondering. Reflect on the individual and group experiences within the different groups.

Dialogue on where next to focus investigations, based on these questions.

Or the teacher, acknowledging the Big Ideas of the curriculum, with flexibility and adaptability, chooses from the questions for further class investigations or directs students into these areas.

Extensions

These questions can be used to support inquiry areas of further study. The inquiry can be confirmation, structured, guided, or open student-led, depending on student ability. Students, individually or in groups or as a class use these student-inspired questions of wonder to move deeper into investigations and learning about these topics. Students can create mind maps (online or on paper) of their understanding around their initial area of interest with accompanying questions for further wonder. At the level of open inquiry, students can choose one question to investigate, make a plan of investigation, design their study, explore their topic and create a product or project showing their new understandings, essentially modeling curricular competencies. If this level of inquiry is too advanced initially given the skill set of the students, then the teacher can move through the various levels of inquiry: confirmation, structured and guided, to ready the students for their own investigations. For example, if students do not yet have the abilities for forming good questions, the teacher can model and demonstrate good inquiry questions and the initial investigations can be done together as a class. Eventually, each student should be experiencing the unit in a different way, expressing their individuality and personalizing the content that makes it meaningful to them.

Further Resources

A Primer on Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL):
a WildBC circular - see website:
<http://hctfeducation.ca/resource-room/>

www.edutopia.org/practice/inquiry-based-learning-teacher-guided-student-driven

