

Get Them Up, Get Them Out!

Outdoor Learning and e-learning in best practice

A directive to explore the local environment pervades the Revised Curriculum in some shape or form and most of us are in agreement with it. It makes sense that children should be enabled to discover what's on their doorstep first before exploring the wide world beyond.

However, many teachers are understandably apprehensive about bringing their classes outdoors. Experience has taught many that the theory is fine but the practice is less than perfect!

Organisation is the key to success. 'Divida et Impera' (divide and conquer) is a good motto for exploration of the locality. It is both easy and fulfilling to teach children about the outdoors when they are divided into groups and focused on specific tasks.

What will they explore in these groups? Let's start with the environs of a school first. Most schools have a grassy patch, a wall, a couple of trees and a gate. These could constitute the five stops of an Exploration Trail.

Next comes the creative part. Get a colleague or two and

compile an activity based worksheet for each stop. A worksheet should ideally have:

- Title of stop; spaces for name of child, weather conditions, equipment needed for activities.
- A picture relevant to the stop.
- Points of information on the stop e.g. The oak is a native tree. It can live for 800 years. Its fruit is called an acorn. The Irish for oak is Dair.
- A variety of question types should be included. What colour is the bark? (low order). Is the bark smooth or rough? (middle order). Why do you think moss is only growing on one side of the tree? (high order).
- An activity e.g. Sketch a leaf.
- Words of praise.
- Clear instructions on how to get to the next stop.

When the five trail sheets are compiled a class could be divided into five groups:

1. The Wall.
2. The Grassy Patch.
3. The Oak.
4. The Ash.
5. The Gate.

A group leader or each child is given a trail sheet and clipboard.

Before going out emphasise safety and outline basic rules.

Allow the children sufficient time to complete a stop. When everyone seems to be finished signal to them to move on in rotation to the next stop. Station teaching in PE uses the same approach to active learning.

Back in the classroom, when the trail is completed, group leaders could outline what they experienced and learned and further research could be initiated. Then it's time to plan for the next trail! Before you do checkout the A-Z of compiling trails on www.trails.ie an introduction to exploration trails with Paddy Madden and Marian Rollins. This site contains all the information and tools necessary for estab-

lishing trails. Under the caption LESSONS you will find out about the aims and skills involved; how to establish a trail; the types of questions to ask; activities to include and how to compile all of this into a trail. Under TOOLS you will find a trail builder with templates; graphics and a sample trail.

This site is a collaborative initiative of Blackrock Education Centre, Airfield Trust and IADT, Dún Laoghaire. The site won a Digital Media Award for the best e-learning product in 2006. Tá leagan Gaeilge ar fáil chomh maith www.rianta.ie.

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Picture taken at Digital media Awards: l to r: Paddy Madden, Seamus O'Canainn, Marian Rollins and Ciaran McGuinness.

