



Outside Together

Outdoor pedagogy gains ground at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles

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Who among you has ever dreamed of teaching with your hair blowing in the wind, lulled by the crisp air that sharpens your mind and that of your students? Despite the desire to reconnect with nature, there are a number of reasons why you may be reluctant to take the plunge; it is more reassuring to remain in the familiar environment of the classroom. However, there is a growing trend toward outdoor education, which has been gaining popularity in recent years at the elementary and high school levels and is increasingly being used in higher education. One might think that the pandemic has contributed to this craze, as outdoor spaces allow more distance between students than a traditional classroom, but this would be to ignore the benefits that this approach can bring to anyone who tries it, whatever the context. With its slogan "des études grandeur nature" ("life-size studies," Ed.), the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles had to be part of this trend. In the fall of 2020, a project was launched to offer teachers and the student community inviting outdoor classes, representing as many opportunities to experience outdoor pedagogy. In the spirit of cohesion, the four campuses of the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles—Carleton-sur-Mer, Îles-de-la-Madeleine [Magdalen Islands, Ed.], Gaspé and Grande-Rivière—have worked together to offer the best possible learning experiences.

Outdoor pedagogy, also known as outdoor education, is an educational trend that aims to use the outdoor environment as a learning tool. This approach can provide a more immersive and stimulating learning experience for students, while offering them the opportunity to connect with nature and learn practical skills. It is a teaching method that can be implemented in an outdoor classroom or in an unmodified natural environment. It is important to distinguish between outdoor pedagogy and the outdoor classroom, the latter being an infrastructure set up by an educational institution to facilitate the implementation of outdoor pedagogy. Outdoor pedagogy emphasizes hands-on experience, exploration of nature, and learning through action and discovery with the help of outdoor objects (Ayotte-Beaudet, 2020). In sum, outdoor classrooms are a tool used to carry out outdoor pedagogy, but

in no way are they essential to break down the boundaries of classroom teaching. The outdoor environment, without being arranged in any particular way, can be used in a variety of ways to promote learning in different disciplines by offering practical and concrete experiences that are linked to the subjects taught.

The benefits of outdoor pedagogy

In 2021, the Fédération des éducateurs et éducatrices physiques enseignants du Québec [Federation of physical education teachers in Quebec, Ed.] (FÉÉPEQ) organized the Plein Air - Apprendre à ciel ouvert [The Great Outdoors – Learning in the Open Air, Ed.] symposium, which was the impetus for the outdoor classroom project at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles. During this symposium, the

advantages of outdoor pedagogy were presented and aroused great interest among the participants of the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles. This pedagogical approach offers an alternative to the traditional classroom, providing an opportunity to immerse oneself in a different environment to foster new learning and discovery opportunities. It can also be particularly useful for learners who have difficulty concentrating in the classroom, allowing them to change their routine and focus on concrete and engaging activities. In addition to its benefits for learning, outdoor pedagogy can have a positive impact on well-being by providing a privileged relationship with the environment. This practice is consistent with the themes of our time, in that exposure to nature can reduce stress and anxiety, while improving the mental and physical health of members of both the student and teacher communities. Furthermore, by fostering the exploration and understanding of nature, outdoor pedagogy can help cultivate environmental awareness and eco-responsibility, thereby addressing the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities, 12. Sustainable Consumption and Production, and 13. Action on Climate Change (UN, 2015).



Steven Parent, an English teacher at the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, who teaches in our very first outdoor classroom.

Source: Sarah Lacroix

It is common to think that outdoor classrooms are best suited for elementary and high school students. However, outdoor pedagogy can also be beneficial for college students, who are often in the midst of transition and personal development. This approach to learning can provide new experiences and opportunities for them to learn, while building their independence and empowerment. For teachers, according to McIntyre (2019), outdoor teaching has several benefits, including reduced stress, more positive and harmonious relationships with learners, and better integration with colleagues. These benefits can have a tangible impact on teaching quality and teacher well-being.

Toward a pedagogical approach for the outdoors

Adapting a course to an outdoor setting, however, requires reflection on teaching and learning. Outdoor pedagogy requires careful planning, including consideration of student safety and health requirements, since the physical setting is no longer the familiar classroom. Teachers must be willing to make practical use of the outdoor environment as a pedagogical tool so that the choice to leave the traditional classroom truly enhances the learning experience. In this sense, when preparing an outdoor teaching sequence, it is important to question the pedagogical objective pursued and to design activities that are both effective and authentic for the learners. Certain criteria should be used to determine whether the transfer to outdoor education is efficient. These criteria include the specific pedagogical objectives, the subject matter and the characteristics of the learners.

Finally, teachers must be prepared for the challenges that may arise when teaching outdoors and to handle any situation that may arise (e.g., unanticipated rain, a noisy delivery truck, materials forgotten on campus). Nothing insurmountable, but innocuous situations that teachers must learn to deal with. The outdoor classroom offers a different environment than the indoor classroom, which will cause teachers to face different reflections and challenges than those encountered in the usual classroom setting. Anyone may feel the need to return to the competency of the course, to gain a deeper understanding of it, to identify the essentials in order to maintain pedagogical alignment with this new approach they wish to integrate into their teaching practice, always with the goal of ensuring that students get the most out of their learning experience.

According to Sauvé (1994), an environment can be used to advantage in three different ways in outdoor pedagogy: the outdoor environment can be an object of learning (education about the outdoors), a learning environment and a pedagogical resource (education through the outdoors) or a source of problems to be prevented and solved (education for the outdoors). To make good use of this environment, Ayotte-Beaudet (2020) proposes different pedagogical approaches:

- The problem-based approach, which presents a problem to the learners, whose involvement is essential to its resolution, and therefore to its understanding;
 - The project-based approach, which reflects authentic situational learning, where students pursue a common goal and work together by leveraging their respective strengths;
 - The community-based approach, which also involves working toward a common goal, but with a focus on improving the community by creating a sense of belonging.
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- The cooperative approach, which promotes interdependence in a small group of teammates to address a topic;
 - The experiential approach, which aims to explore a place to transform this exploration into knowledge and learning of a new concept, a new skill;

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Each of these approaches is linked to the others by a specific notion of student engagement in the task at hand. They are also all teaching strategies that can be described as active.

It is crucial to identify the learning objectives and the terminal objective of the course when planning an outdoor educational activity. The pedagogical approaches and activities used should be designed with these objectives in mind. On initial outdoor trips, it may be helpful to allow time for hands-on practice. As in a regular classroom, teachers need to think about ways to assess learner understanding, using formative, summative or review activities. Going back to basics and looking at the session as a whole is a valuable asset in an outdoor education setting. Using a lesson planner that includes both lesson objectives and learning and assessment activities ensures a coherent approach to the course and avoids losing sight of the pedagogical alignment for both the lesson and the entire session.

Growing outdoor classrooms

While outdoor classrooms are not a prerequisite for outdoor pedagogy, they can be practical and stimulating for teachers. The Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles undertook the outdoor classroom project for a variety of reasons, including fostering pedagogical innovation, responding to the need for post-pandemic change and promoting the SDGs. Moreover, the geographic context of each of the four campuses of the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles seemed naturally conducive to the creation of outdoor classrooms in order to allow students and teachers alike to take advantage of the richness

of the Gaspé and Magdalen Islands territory. The differences in landscape between the Carleton-sur-Mer, Gaspé, Grande-Rivière and Îles-de-la-Madeleine campuses offered a wide variety of possibilities for the creation of outdoor classrooms. Existing outdoor facilities on or near the campuses could also be integrated into the provision of spaces that could be adapted for pedagogical purposes: a community park for outdoor activities, a greenhouse for simulations or role-playing, and shaded areas for reading on hot days.

Obviously, not all educational institutions have the same possibilities as the Magdalen and Gaspé campuses in terms of outdoor spaces and proximity to nature. However, it is interesting to note that the variety of outdoor environments available for pedagogy is very vast; it is a most creative universe. An example of this variety is given by Ayotte-Beaudet (2020), who describes the different types of outdoor classrooms set up at the Université de Sherbrooke, including in the open air, in a covered courtyard or a marquee. It is therefore possible to use outdoor spaces that may or may not have been designed for pedagogy, depending on what is available.



Whiteboard in an outdoor classroom on the Carleton-sur-Mer campus.

Source: Sarah Lacroix

The implementation of outdoor classrooms requires certain steps to ensure the success of the project and the involvement of the entire campus; when the entire village pitches in, the energy channeled makes it possible to achieve great things. This inevitably strengthens the bonds between members of the community. Choosing a location for the outdoor classroom was the first critical step, given the scarcity of appropriate spaces. At the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, for example, the only potential space was between the college building and Highway 132; however, the proximity to the highway raised a noise concern. To overcome the challenges, a committee was formed to ensure the functionality and efficiency of the space. The material resources coordinator oversaw the construction of a foundation that would drain rainwater to prevent ponding. A local carpenter made adapted outdoor classroom furniture such as half picnic tables, high tables without seats and a large hexagonal

table. At the start of the outdoor season, our certified maintenance worker is also called upon to help set up the classroom with the support of his colleagues, repair the benches and move the whiteboard in case of wind, which is not uncommon in the Gaspé region. Members of the teaching staff also collaborated in the selection of plants that bloom late in the characteristic climate of eastern Quebec to embellish the outdoor classroom space. Finally, a teacher of the campus concerned was a great asset in promoting and enhancing the outdoor classrooms—a true ambassador for the project. Overall, the process followed a similar approach on the other three campuses, although there were specific challenges in each case.

At Carleton, the experience of the outdoor classroom was so positive that we quickly created a second gathering place for student groups. This second space was already present on campus and equipped with picnic tables,

but had not been considered in the first phase of the project. This discovery made the committee realize that the appropriate location for the outdoor classroom might already be available and just needed to be adapted. We added a whiteboard with the help of the maintenance workers and that was it. In sum, while creating an outdoor classroom from scratch can be an interesting process, this experience shows that sometimes it can be more effective to redesign an existing area to meet the needs of an outdoor classroom.

A third outdoor classroom will be inaugurated next spring at the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, thanks to a collaboration with a nearby elementary school. This school has access to a small woodlot through an agreement with the parish council. The campus manager worked to create a partnership that would allow us to use this space. After several discussions, an agreement to use the space was reached, with the condition that we install rustic wooden benches to accommodate the learners.

Three classrooms, three pedagogical universes

Each of the outdoor classrooms on the Carleton campus has its own unique characteristics:

1. With our first outdoor classroom, we wanted to provide faculty with a flexible space in which to incorporate pedagogical activities. There is a whiteboard and a few tables with seating as well as standing workstations. A bin was specifically designed to hold learning materials—such as small whiteboards for learners—and to allow teachers to adapt their lessons to the outdoor space by translating what they do in the traditional classroom to the outdoor classroom in a more fluid and integrated way.
2. The second outdoor classroom we built is equipped with picnic tables and a whiteboard. Unlike the first location developed, it does not have a materials bin, but provides the same opportunities for teachers to adapt their instruction to the outdoor classroom.

3. Finally, our rustic forest classroom offers a setting conducive to reflection, discussion and sharing. It is the ideal place to debate a text or to carry out simulations.

If the arrival of spring makes you want to grow outdoor classrooms in your college environment, there are a few things to consider.

- First, the formation of a committee is certainly a crucial phase in implementing successful outdoor classrooms. This step ensures constant progression and validation of the different stages of the project.
- The next step is to identify layout and equipment needs by examining the space and deciding on desired features of the classroom, such as the inclusion of a board, flexibility of layout, or the number of people it needs to accommodate. External factors such as wind, noise and weather conditions should also be considered.
- At the same time, it is important to recruit ambassadors—enthusiastic educators who will encourage students to use the outdoor classroom. Pedagogical counsellors can offer familiarization workshops on outdoor pedagogy to stimulate interest and spread the word.
- In the end, when you have reflected, analyzed, reconsidered your furniture choices, gone back and forth with the committee, reflected again, solicited bids, changed suppliers and installed your first planter, you can look forward to the inauguration of the new space. During the first few moments of use of the outdoor classrooms, feedback from users is invaluable: the need for

an umbrella, wipes to clean up the surprises left by the birds, or a circular arrangement of tables. These adjustments help make the outdoor classroom as enjoyable as possible for your community.

- Pedagogical counsellors (PCs) are available to assist teachers in adapting lessons and courses to outdoor pedagogy. Here are a few suggestions for adapting lessons and courses that a PC could give to a teacher who wants to venture into outdoor pedagogy:
 - Reduce lecture time;
 - Decrease the use of paper in teaching activities;
 - Incorporate teaching methods that encourage active student engagement, such as taking pictures or exploring;
 - Foster peer learning;
 - Encourage small group learning;
 - Reactivate and reuse knowledge previously acquired by learners in a more conventional learning environment.
- A reservation system for the outdoor classroom should also be put into place. In the early days of the Carleton-sur-Mer experiment, this was a challenge, especially when the campus had only one outdoor classroom. Although not all teachers used it, those who did wanted to use it as often as possible. As a result, the campus room reservation system was modified by adding a new room number to designate the first outside classroom, followed by the other two. This feature greatly simplified the reservation process and reduced the potential frustration if a teacher was planning to use an outdoor classroom, but a group was already there.



First outdoor classroom on the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, built from scratch, flexible furniture.

Source: Sarah Lacroix



Third outdoor classroom of the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, in the forest shared with the elementary school, very natural.

Source: Amanda Emilie Côte Boudreau



Second outdoor classroom on the Carleton-sur-Mer campus, existing location, addition of a whiteboard.

Source: Amanda Emilie Côte Boudreau

Conclusion

The shift to outdoor teaching does not mean that indoor classroom teaching is insufficient. Nor is it a dogma to be imposed on every learning situation: teaching grammar rules in an outdoor classroom in February in the middle of a snowstorm would be less than optimal for both the learner and the teacher. However, considering outdoor pedagogy inspires a rethinking of pedagogical methods to encourage learners to be more active, engaged, and involved in their learning so that it is more meaningful. Traditional approaches are appropriate for a classroom environment, but when teaching outdoors, strategies must be adapted to maximize the effectiveness of teaching in this different environment. When we go outside to teach a lesson, we are breaking down the walls of the classroom, and it is also a time to break down teaching methods.

The outdoor classrooms at Carleton-sur-Mer have proven to be a successful experiment and the idea of going back to how things were before is neither contemplated nor conceivable, given the enthusiasm it has created among the teaching staff and the student community. While the project has not been a smooth ride, the result has been the creation of three distinct, highly effective and engaging outdoor classrooms. The inauguration of our forest classroom represents the next step in the implementation of outdoor education on our campus. We are continuing to promote awareness of outdoor classrooms and the pedagogical approach to encourage teachers who have not yet tried out this approach to take the plunge and experience it first-hand. The committee has received a lot of positive

feedback from learners using the outdoor classrooms, which is a reward in itself. It is clear that the space is popular not only during classes, but also outside of class time for teamwork, gatherings and discussions, which is especially gratifying in this post-pandemic period. It was not intended that the creation of a pedagogical space would lead to gathering spaces that reinforce a sense of belonging to the institution, but it seems all the more reason to align the forces of your village to create an outdoor learning space to your image that rallies the community. —

For more information or to visit the outdoor classrooms of one of the four campuses of the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles, you can contact the pedagogical development team at this address: de@cegepgim.ca.

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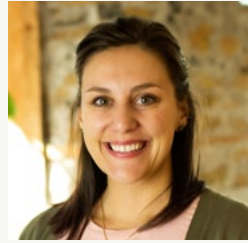
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Amanda Emilie Côte Boudreau, who has recently started working as a pedagogical counsellor at the Carleton-sur-Mer campus of the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles, has always had a passion for the mechanics of knowledge transmission. After teaching for five years in Nunavik, she returned to the Gaspé Peninsula, where she deployed her potential at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles by working on diverse pedagogical topics. Video games, virtual reality, the *Pédago grandeur nature* podcast, sustainable development and the outdoor classroom are some of her favourite topics.

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