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Learning Where the Weather Is Real

Why Teaching in Bad Weather Is Good

NELS ANCHOR CHRISTENSEN

Teach outdoors. Make your teaching outdoors make sense. And teach outdoors when the weather is bad.

For most educators, that first imperative—teach outdoors—probably isn't such a hard idea to swallow. After all, it's a rare teacher who hasn't at one point or another succumbed to the pull of sunny skies, warm weather, and a classroom full of students pleading to "go outside." Faced with this particular mixture of circumstances, it seems only right and natural to leave the indoor classroom behind, walk out to the quad, and circle up on a neatly trimmed lawn.

But there's something about that second imperative—make your teaching outdoors make sense—that asks us to move beyond the basic impulse to escape the stuffy indoors in favor of fresh air, something that encourages us to think critically about the shaping influence of place in education. In the past decade, this interest in the relationship among where, what, and how we teach has motivated important work from child advocates, such as Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2006) and Christopher Cook's *Where Do the Children Play?* (2007), a PBS documentary inspired by Elizabeth Goodenough's *Secret Spaces of Childhood* (2003). The connections between self and place also form the common bond among those of us engaged in what is variously called environmental, outdoor, experiential, or place-based education.

But as many of us know only too well, the simple act of taking a class

outside does not ensure the rewards of environmental education, particularly when we forget to engage critically with the physical environments of our teaching. Just think about how those excursions to the quad on sunny days seem so often to generate more student interest in the work of tans rather than the work of the mind. The dissolution of students' attention as they sit in grassy places in fine weather may have something to do with the way those places become a distracting backdrop rather than an essential part of learning. Teaching outdoors only makes sense when we stop trying simply to transfer indoor classes outside and instead ask ourselves, What's the right thing to do today for these students—here, now, in this particular place?

Thinking about the challenges and possibilities of making students aware of a particular place brings me to my third imperative: teach outdoors when the weather is bad. To be aware of a place is, among many other things, to experience the moods of its weather. Not surprisingly, the weather often plays a relatively minor role in traditional educational spaces, where students learn in classrooms designed to make weather something they need not think about at all. And when we do think to leave our classrooms to explore outdoor educational spaces, the thought typically strikes when the sun is up and the sky is clear—which is exactly when the weather demands little of our critical attention.

Teaching outside in the rain, snow, wind, or cold is a good thing to do precisely because it makes demands on us. It requires that students—and teachers—reckon with the weather and the physical facts of the world in an entirely different way than in a traditional classroom. For practitioners of environmental education, teaching in bad weather offers a powerful reminder that reality, to paraphrase James Galvin, is not essentially human (Henry Holt 1998). For all teachers, though, no matter the subject or pedagogical approach, reckoning with the weather is good because it forces us to acknowledge that all learning takes place in an environment—and those environments powerfully shape and influence the act of learning.

My own bad-weather teaching began at the New England Literature Program (NELP), a University of Michigan literature and writing program that runs for six weeks in the spring at a rustic and rugged camp in Alton Bay, New Hampshire. NELP is, among other things, a thirty-nine-year-long place-based educational experiment in which students and staff live communally without many of the amenities we tend to

take as givens—cell phones, computers, recorded music, drugs and alcohol, and, perhaps most important, temperature-controlled living spaces. By relinquishing these normal aspects of their lives, students free up intellectual and creative space in their minds that, in turn, they begin to fill with a new awareness of the physical realities of learning and why they matter.

Above all, NELP is a program that illustrates the power and possibility of the environmental humanities and its natural affinity for experiential and place-based models of education. In a world where educational institutions too often seem to pay lip service to the goals of the humanities and sustainability without actually dedicating the resources to make them work, NELP offers a dramatic model of what—and where—the environmental humanities can be. Through an act of geographical and communal immersion, NELP students study the literature and landscape of New England, all the while reflecting critically and creatively on their own place—physically, intellectually, emotionally—in New England and in the world.

This exemplification of environmental humanities at its best—of education as a daily act of living in a specific place—connects explicitly with my ideas about the pedagogical efficacy of teaching outdoors in bad weather. NELP begins on the first of May, when the warmth of spring feels more like a distant possibility than a present reality in New Hampshire. NELP’s “campus” consists of leaky wooden cabins, many of which lack lighting or heat of any kind. Given these living conditions, NELP students find themselves unable to avoid the weather, try though they might. For most of our students, coming to NELP is their first real experience living with the weather rather than, say, living by avoiding it. As one student memorably said to me, “NELP taught me that the weather is real.”

At NELP the weather often engenders a physical discomfort that powerfully influences the ways students live and learn, making them keenly aware of just how much where they are impacts how they learn—and even who they are. The weather resists the convenience and comfort of abstraction; it thrusts before us the rich and relentless concreteness of the natural world. This ineluctable presence of the weather is perhaps nowhere more dramatically experienced at NELP than when, at the end of the program, we climb Mt. Washington—which numerous signs on the mountainside declare to be an area known for “the worst weather in

America.” What makes Mt. Washington a perfect example of the kind of teaching I’m talking about here, though, is not the predictability of its bad weather. After all, I’ve known people who have summited Mt. Washington wearing nothing more than shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals and suffering nothing more than a sunburn. No, what makes Mt. Washington something much more than an extreme pedagogical sporting event is the simple fact that, given a strange combination of geological facts, Mt. Washington has the ability to create its own weather. What the weather looks like there on any given moment is anyone’s guess.

Like all trips at NELP, the three-day trek up and down Mt. Washington is really an extended outdoor class. Over the past years, as a kind of literary grounding for that trip-as-class, we have asked our students to memorize as they climb Wallace Stevens’s “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” which has proved remarkably effective in encouraging experiential learning.

As a so-called nature poet, Stevens might appear an unlikely candidate for a class on a mountain. After all, his poems are often just as interested in the idea of the natural world as in the messy particularity of the thing itself. But as Stevens himself suggests in a letter to Hi Simons in 1943, it is precisely his understanding of the relationship between the idea and the fact of nature that makes Stevens’s poems work so well on a mountain side. “The poem,” he writes, “is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. . . . There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro” (1966, 434).

What Stevens describes here perfectly mirrors students’ experience memorizing “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” on the rock face of Mt. Washington. The space inside a climber’s mind as she makes her way over rock and ledge is inhabited by a strange mixture of both aimless and highly intentional thoughts. One moment, the world seems replete with floating abstractions—cloud, rock, water, wind—and the next moment, the question of where exactly to place her next step snaps the world into a sharp and significant focus on the particular. For NELP students climbing Mt. Washington, Stevens’s words become part of this process of back and forth, “to and fro,” between the abstract idea of the mountain and its physical reality.

On the mountain, NELP students think about what it means for the poem’s speaker to remember picking his way among clouds while they



Fig. 1. Warning sign on the trail toward the summit of Mt. Washington.
Photo by Ryan Walsh.

bodily perform the physical reality of that very idea. And so the abstraction of climbing a mountain crashes up against the reality of climbing a mountain—a reality made visible at that moment, in large part, by the palpable presence of the weather.

NELP is, in so many ways, a remarkable place to teach. But it is also uncommon. Since so few programs such as NELP exist, not many of us have the chance to take advantage of this strange and wonderful kind of teaching. And even for those of us who do get to teach at NELP, it only lasts for two months of the year. For the rest of the time, it's back to traditional classroom spaces.

Still, the experience of teaching and learning at NELP, even on those rare clear and sunny days, has something very useful to tell us about teaching outdoors in bad weather wherever we are. That is, no matter if you are teaching on the shoulder of Mt. Washington in New Hampshire or in a small town in Michigan, bad weather forces us to reckon with the particulars of place and to confront how those particulars impact the way we move, read, write, speak, live, and learn.



Fig. 2. "Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds."
Photo by Ryan Walsh

In the ten months of the year when I'm not at NELP, I teach at Albion College, a small liberal arts college on the Kalamazoo River about forty-five minutes west of Ann Arbor. My position at Albion—a cross-disciplinary post in literature, composition, and environmental studies—has allowed me to experiment with outdoor classes in a traditional educational setting. With NELP clearly in mind, I have developed courses that spend half of their time in traditional classrooms and the other half outdoors in Albion's Whitehouse Nature Center. By institutionalizing a shifting movement between indoor and outdoor classes, I

have witnessed, intimately and over time, how the spirit and logic of the environmental humanities can revitalize conventional education. More than anything, I have learned that you don't need lofty mountain peaks or sublime vistas to teach literature and writing outdoors effectively. You just need bad weather.

I'm thinking, in closing, of a particular day with a class in the nature center. We were writing about Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1999), Gretel Ehrlich's *The Future of Ice* (2004), and the idea of climate change, on a bridge spanning the Kalamazoo, when we suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a flash snowstorm. We wrote on. We were wet and cold. Some of our pens actually froze midword. But when we returned later to the temperate zone of our classroom, those students had a new understanding of the relationship between what they were reading about and who and where they were. They understood better the unpredictable reality of a world facing global climate change. They understood better the reality of the weather.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nels Anchor Christensen lives in Albion, Michigan. He works at Albion College, teaching courses in environmental literature and writing, such as *Literature of the Great Lakes and Terrorists and Treehuggers*. You can find his most recent essay, "Leaving a Trace," in the online journal *Wake: Great Lakes Thought and Culture*.

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