

CREATING A SENSE OF WONDER: A SENSORY APPROACH

From Nature's Classroom Environmental Education Program

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WHY USE A SENSORY APPROACH?

Have you ever taken a walk through the woods and, all of a sudden, become aware of the songs of birds and other sounds of the forest? Similarly, have you ever focused in on a deer in a field when just moments earlier your thoughts were “a million miles away?”... once seen, the deer seems to stand apart from the background. Upon hearing the bird songs mingled with various other sounds of seeing that deer, you are often surprised by an overwhelming feeling for the present... this is what is happening right here, right now. You may even ask yourself, “Why wasn’t I aware of those sounds before... They have been here all along, but somehow I’ve blocked them out?”

If anyone has ever had that type of experience, they appreciate the need for focusing their attention on the information pouring in through their senses. Especially in natural settings, why, then, do some environmental educators persist in basic lecture techniques and ignore the rich sensory possibilities surrounding them? Knowledge fluctuates with age, personality, health and many other influences. Our senses, on the other hand, are always right here, experiencing the present. Unless we have a physical handicap, everyone has the five different senses, each one revealing a unique way of experiencing the world.

WHAT IS THE SENSORY APPROACH?

The words “sensory approach” means different things to different people. Speaking with respect to Environmental Education it is a term referring to when we purposefully manipulate sensory exercises to reinforce a concept (s) we are trying to teach. Put simply, participants are asked to use their senses as part of a learning experience.

The techniques for a sensory approach are as varied as the people using them. The thing they have in common is that the participants’ attention is shifted from verbal communication to individual sensory experiences. After a sensory exercise, however, that is no reason why they should refrain from verbalizing how they felt, what they thought, and so forth. In fact, this interaction between experiencing and verbalizing often makes for an enjoyable and interesting learning session.

WHO CAN USE A SENSORY APPROACH?

Spotting an animal in the wild or inhaling the perfume of a honeysuckle bush can be exciting for anyone, regardless of whether they are in pre-school or a senior citizen. We all have senses. Granted, the outdoor educator is not always going to have something as dramatic as a gracefully leaping deer to point out to his/her pupils. Nevertheless, the sensory approach is limitless as to where or when it can be used. The clever educator will exploit it to enhance the subjects he/she is teaching. It has been noted that humans are primarily “sight-oriented” creatures. Therefore, when touching, smelling, tasting and hearing become central to a hike or class, there is a good chance that students will experience the subjects they are studying in new, fresh, and vivid ways. Anyone can use a sensory approach, provided they learn a few basic techniques. After that, it is simply a matter of sensitizing oneself to what does and does not work, and elaborating on your own personal style.

HOW, WHEN AND WHERE DO YOU USE THE SENSORY APPROACH?

Try to use a sensory approach to compliment and enrich whatever you are attempting to convey. Actually feeling the warmth of the sun on your face is more likely to convince you of the value and possibilities of solar energy than an entire lecture on the subject. The applications for sensory exercises are endless. How, when and where depends a lot on what you are trying to accomplish.

We have come up with three basic categories for classifying them. These categories are descriptive rather than definitive:

1. **Blocking a sense:** This often accentuates the others. A few examples of a blocking technique are as follows:

- a. Blindfold students before having them go through an exercise
- b. Have students wear earmuffs
- c. Put gloves on their hands
- d. Taste something with the nose pinched closed; re-taste with the nose open.

2. Framing a sense: This “forces” a student to focus in on a subject. For example:

- a. Use an actual picture frame to frame a small area of field or forest and students examine this area in great detail
- b. Lay a transect: Using a length of rope or string, lay it through a field or forest and students record what it touches or passes over
- c. Use an empty paper towel roll for a ‘telescopic scanner’.

3. Extending a sense: This will accentuate the sense... For example:

- a. Use magnifying glasses, telescopes, and binoculars
- b. Cup hands behind your ears and pull them slightly forward to enhance your hearing. Try this with one hand at a time.
- c. Moisten the bottom part of your nose to intensify your sense of smell.

SO WHAT? ... DOES THE SENSORY APPROACH WORK?

Unlike a standard test, where students have to recall facts or assemble facts into a coherent statement, the sensory approach is more subjective. Sensory experiences are highly individual, but that does not preclude talking about them. Perhaps the best way to evaluate a sensory session is to take the time at the end of an activity and have students talk about their experiences. Did they enjoy it? Was there anything particularly striking about what they just went through? What was their favorite sensation? Why? What didn’t they like?

These are some of the questions that could be asked. As stated earlier, a sensory approach is meant to enhance a subject, giving it more holistic interpretation. If students come away from the experience excited and stimulated, then chances are that your techniques are working.

ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE THE SENSORY APPROACH

1. Blocking a sense to accentuate the others:

- a. Blindfolds:
 - 1. Students are blindfolded and asked to line themselves up according to height, age, birth date, etc. without talking
 - 2. Direct a group blindfolded along a trail, each holding on to one part of a rope, stopping to notice sounds, temperature changes, to touch or smell, or taste objects
 - 3. Direct students to crawl on their hands and knees, blindfolded, feeling their way along the path.
 - 4. “String Hike”: Connect twine to trees with few lower branches at waist height. Blindfold students and direct them to follow silently along the twine as a solo experience.
 - 5. Blindfold students and direct them to form a sharing circle, passing around objects to notice textures, tastes, smells, etc.
- b. Gloves and/or blindfolds: Participants are asked to guess the identity of an object based on its odor or smell
- c. Taped thumbs: Try various uses of the hand with the thumbs taped. This is a good activity to follow with

animal adaptations.

d. Matching bark: Place various types of barks in a box and ask participants to feel these samples. Based upon what they feel, direct them to match the bark in the box with an outstanding tree.

e. Taste objects with the nose pinched closed.

f. Block hearing by wearing ear muffs or a hat.

g. Try lip reading.

2. Framing a sense to focus in on a subject.

a. Use a picture to outline a micro-community.

b. Terrariums or aquariums, insect zoo, visit a local aquarium

c. Transect: A string stretched straight along a certain distance, students examine objects along its length.

d. Recipe for a forest: Examine a cubic foot of soil for animal and plant life, soil textures

e. Pond probe: Place plastic on bottom of cans or use a clear plastic container to look into the pond and watch the activity.

f. Use a flashlight beam and examine what it lights up

3. Extending a sense to accentuate that sense

a. The use of magnifying glasses, binoculars, or telescopes to examine objects

b. Owl ears to listen: cup hands behind ears... discuss adaptations

c. Resting palms on the surface of water

d. A sensory feast of wild, edible foods

e. Clapping hands before touching something

SENSITIZING EXERCISES

Choose one object to explore using the senses independently.

Sight

- o Magnifying glasses: examine bark and leaves
- o Negative spaces: look at spaces between leaves and branches
- o Make friends with a leaf, an ant,

Hearing

- o Stethoscope: tap the tree with a stick
- o Listen to wind through the branches
- o Draw abstract versions of sounds

Touch

- o Try feeling things with the back of the hand, the elbow, toes, etc.
- o Touch different nature objects without seeing them first
- o Explore a part of nature without your sight, such as a tree

Taste

- o Taste various plants: Lower part of a cattail (white stem portion), violet leaves, sassafras, etc.

Smell

- o Smell different plant parts: crush some leaves, smell bark of some trees, smell the soil, etc. and compare to familiar smells