

SELECTING JOURNALING ACTIVITIES FROM OPENING THE WORLD THROUGH NATURE JOURNALING

Using journals with students

Scientists use journals or field notebooks at almost every step of their work. Journaling leads to deep observation, organized thoughts and ideas, and a written record of new ideas. Working on paper can also lead to massive leaps in conceptual understanding through an experience that is vitally different from discussion, lecture, or exploration. Scientists almost always have a purpose and focus to their journal entries; student journaling should be no different. If students are given pencil and paper and told to go journal, they might be overwhelmed and often won't know what to draw or how to organize information; they need structure and scaffolding, and it is the role of instructors to provide it. *Opening the World Through Nature Journaling* is a curriculum co-authored by John Muir Laws, Emilie Lygren, Emily Breunig, and Celeste Lopez. Its activities were designed to give students the focus and structure necessary to successfully use journals as tools for learning and are available at the johnmuirlaws.com website.

Using the curriculum

"Opening the World" has background on how to use journals with students, as well as tools to help students be successful journalers. It also contains many activities that stand alone in giving students experience observing and recording information. These activities provide instruction that asks students to record information in different ways and different places—but very few journaling activities refer to a specific type of organism, topic, or environment. These more general instructions can be used to support any lesson or trail experiences. While many BEETLES activities have specific steps in which students use journals, journal use shouldn't be restricted to the activities in which they already appear. Many of the instructions for activities in "Opening the World" could be introduced into the flow of a BEETLES lesson (or one of your own) at any stage by saying "...and we're going to use our journals as a tool," then inserting instructions from a nature journaling activity.

It is important to consider when to incorporate a journaling activity, which one to use, and how to frame it to students. The following set of questions can help instructors who are less familiar with journaling to begin to make these decisions.

- **Will students be ready to journal? (Or in the moment, are they ready to journal?)** Students won't be successful journalers unless their basic needs are met and their energy level is appropriate. Consider pacing of the day and student needs—both basic physical needs and the need to move around or be energetic—in thinking about when to use a journaling activity.
- **How will students feel as journalers?** If it is the first time students are using their journals, some might have resistance because of their experience with (and possible aversion to) writing or drawing in school. Many journaling activities in "Opening the World..." have a "hook" or game aspect to support initial engagement. After students have experience with one journaling activity they will be more likely to try others, so these more basic activities are often best to try first. Another successful approach is to make students feel that journaling is important and authentic—which it is. When students are told they will use their journals as a tool to record what they discover, journaling becomes a part of the exploration process and doesn't feel like "busy work." Students also feel trusted with information, feel that what they observe matters, and are invited into the lineage of naturalists and scientist who use journals in the same way. Showing students examples of naturalists' notebooks can help to illustrate this point.
- **What will students get out of the activity?** Deep, focused observation is the foundation of nature journaling. Journaling will help students to see and remember more of their surroundings. To use student journals well, though, use journaling activities to support a hike or lesson—not



just to get students to observe. Many of these activities could be used at any stage of the learning cycle depending on how they are framed and what they ask students to focus on. Some activities are more exploration-based while others require students to develop understanding of an idea or apply content they have learned. Some activities lend themselves particularly well to supporting certain parts of the learning cycle. This is indicated on the following chart with an “X” below a learning cycle stage, but it need not limit where these activities are used; many of these activities could be used at any stage in a lesson.

Here is an example of a thought process for deciding when and how to use journals. “OK, so I’m going to do the Spider Exploration after a couple active name games in the morning. We’ve done a couple journaling activities this week, so students are familiar with their journals. I want students to really go into depth when looking at the different kinds of spider webs. Since we are doing Spider Investigation later this week I’m hoping students will remember what they discovered while exploring. Journaling will help with that. I also want them to have a lot of ideas about how sheet webs and orb webs are different from one another. I want students to do the Comparisons activity (where students record every similarity or difference between two aspects of nature) while they are exploring different web types. But I think I’ll give them a few minutes to check out webs without their journals first so they’ll be ready to focus later.”

Using the Chart

The chart on the next page serves as an index of the activities in “Opening the World Through Nature Journaling.” It provides some additional information that can be useful in incorporating nature journaling into one’s teaching. Activities are rated “beginning” or “challenging.” Beginning activities are easy for students to understand and require only basic writing or drawing skills. Challenging activities have more complex instructions or might require more advanced drawing skills. Students at any level can succeed at any of these activities, but often it’s best to offer a beginning activity to students the first time they use their journals.

There are some journaling activities included in the curriculum that give students practice observing and recording what they notice, but do little to aid in students’ conceptual understanding. These activities are more stand-alone exercises that can be used to get students comfortable with journaling or to respond to a teachable moment. On the chart, these activities are denoted with an “X” in the column labeled “Observational” to indicate that they work best as observation practice for students. These activities are also listed as possible invitations because they can help students to become excited about exploring a topic or aspect of nature. The activities listed that do not have a marking in the Observation column will best support lessons or themes in a field experience.

Reflection activities

There are many language arts and poetry activities beginning on page 57 of “Opening the World Through Nature Journaling.” They are not included in this chart but they should not be overlooked! These writing activities are invitations that offer rich opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences and produce work that speaks to their personal connections with nature. Use them midway through or to close out a lesson, hike, or program to give students the space to process and make meaning of what they have experienced.

Guide to Selecting Activities from “Opening the World Through Nature Journaling”

Note- This activity list is from the 2nd edition of “Opening the World Through Nature Journaling published in 2012. The 3rd edition will include new activities and can be found at johnmuirlaws.com in 2016.

ACTIVITY	Difficulty Level <i>(for students)</i>	Time (mins)	Appropriate Phase in Learning Cycle					Observational	Possible BEETLES Activity Connections
			Invitation	Exploration	Concept Invention	Application	Reflection		
Secret Plant Scavenger Hunt	beginning	45	X					X	I Notice, I wonder, it reminds me of
Diagramming	beginning	20-45	X					X	Discovery swap, Related and Different
To Each it's Own	beginning	30-45	X					X	I notice, I wonder, it reminds me of
Zoom In Zoom Out	beginning	30-45	X	X		X			Discovery Swap
Diversity Inventory	beginning	30-45	X	X		X			Ecosystems, Exploration activities
Comparisons	beginning	30-45	X	X	X	X			Related and Different, any "exploration" type activity
Group Observations	beginning	15-45	X	X					Any activity, especially exploration activities
Make a field guide	beginning	30-45		X	X	X	X		Any activity, especially exploration activities
Wildlife Gesture Sketching	challenging	30-45	X					X	Adaptations activities, such as Adaptation Intro Live
Cross section	challenging	30-45		X	X	X			Exploration activities
Mapping	challenging	30-45		X	X	X			Exploration activities
Timed Behavioral Observations	challenging	15-30		X		X			Spider Exploration, Inquiry Fever
Plant Timeline	challenging	30-45		X	X	X			Adaptations activities, such as those that relate to Structure and Function

