

Outdoor education at universities can be a positive legacy of Covid-19

By [Jean-Philippe Ayotte-Beaudet](#)

4 Jan 2021

Universities have faced major [planning challenges](#) due to Covid-19. While there has been significant media coverage about [universities offering students online learning](#), what has been less discussed is how some activities have continued in face-to-face settings.



Université de Sherbrooke students participate in a course about elementary school science education. (Jean-Philippe Ayotte-Beaudet)

My research is [concerned with outdoor science education](#) so I have long been engaged in studying outdoor learning. At the Université de Sherbrooke, among our measures to promote student and staff safety during the pandemic was [setting up outdoor sheltered and amphitheatre-style learning environments](#). Since the university was already planning to develop outdoor spaces that could be used for teaching, the pandemic provided an opportunity for pilot testing.

To develop our outdoor learning environments, we appointed a committee with diverse expertise in learning and teaching, health and safety and a variety of logistical and technical considerations such as managing audiovisual resources. Together, we created a [guide to support outdoor education in higher education in Canada during the context of Covid-19](#).

Teaching and learning considerations

In times of pandemic, outdoor classes allow students to meet their professor or classmates in person, when they would not otherwise have had the chance to do so. However, even during regular non-pandemic times, outdoor classes may also allow professors to incorporate outdoor education into their lessons directly on campus.

Outdoor learning environments should be used only when activities have an added value. In other words, not all courses have to be held there. They can be used in a complementary manner with indoor or online learning when they support the learning objectives.

In a university context, outdoor education can have several benefits. It provides the opportunity to draw on the environment to explore different disciplinary knowledge. For example, students might engage with the outdoor environment to learn more about social behaviours on campus; they might explore natural phenomena or examine technical phenomena such as building construction.

Open spaces can also encourage teachers to combine physical activity with educational content. Activities that put students physically in action [are associated with the potential to increase academic achievement](#).

In the university context, where appropriate student accommodations can be made when necessary, this could include field activities with classmates or a guided walk with the teacher to explore the surrounding area.

Some research suggests that for people without attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) [“inattention and impulsivity are reduced after exposure to natural views and settings,”](#) but it is unclear what these findings could mean for students with ADHD. It is important to consider accessibility when planning to create an inclusive gathering space for all students.

Student and faculty experiences

This fall, a total of 57 teachers made 137 reservations in the 10 outdoor classrooms. Of the 1,275 students who had at least one outdoor activity, 94% were at the undergraduate level. 57% of them were entering their first year at the university. These outdoor activities allowed them to experience the campus during this time of physical distancing.

The faculty of education and the faculty of arts and humanities were the most represented. Instructors led courses in a wide variety of fields, such as primary science education, drama and film writing, physical activity anatomy, psychology and research methodology.

We conducted a survey to better understand the students' experience. Most striking was the potentially positive and negative effects of outdoor learning environments on concentration.

While some students mentioned that the outdoors allowed them to be more focused, others mentioned the opposite. These insights highlight the importance of selecting locations that enhance positive stimuli (for example, feeling the warmth of the sun or being surrounded by nature) while reducing nuisance stimuli such as passers-by and ambient noise.

These preliminary observations will lead to first adjustments when our outdoor learning environments reopen in May 2021.

Looking forward

While education at all levels has been shaken over the past months, the pandemic is an opportunity to think about new learning environments. Outdoor settings were an opportunity for students to discover the campus, meet their teacher and develop relationships with new fellow students. Paradoxically, the current context does not allow teachers to fully benefit from one of the important principles of outdoor education: active teaching methods.

Since teachers in higher education institutions are generally not familiar with teaching outdoors, it is essential to develop training or offer a community of practice within the institution to support them. This process must be embedded in a broader change from a paradigm centred on teaching to one centred on student learning.

Much research is being conducted to better understand the [effects of experiences with nature on cognitive, physical, mental and educational components](#) for students between kindergarten to Grade 12. In higher education, we still need to develop a co-ordinated research agenda to answer important questions. How can outdoor learning promote inclusiveness in higher education? What teaching methods are most conducive to outdoor learning in higher education?

At Université de Sherbrooke, outdoor learning environments will be a legacy of the pandemic, in terms of both infrastructure and pedagogical practices. I invite all those interested to join us in these new avenues of research.

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