



## Using Nature to Help People Learn

Nature sharpens the senses, focuses the thinking, opens the heart and soothes the spirit. This has a powerful influence on our ability to learn and as trainers we should make the most of nature's effects to create more valuable learning experiences.

At Saltbox Training & Events we appreciate the power of nature and we believe that it makes us better trainers and makes our participants better learners. We strive to create opportunities for our learners to learn in, with, and from nature. Here are some suggestions for different ways to use nature that we hope you'll find useful.

### 1. Learning *in* Nature

**We are nature:** Humans have evolved alongside everything else on our planet, and as a result we have a deeply rooted evolutionary preference for connecting with other forms of life. This desire or connection with nature is known as *biophilia*. We have evolved to function best in nature-rich surroundings, and since being in or near nature is good for our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, it also makes us better at learning.

Time in nature improves the functioning of the brain and increases productivity. Research shows that being in nature improves our ability to focus and pay attention, increases our cognitive abilities and improves our memory – all of which are fundamental to good learning. Spending time in nature can improve creativity by up to 50%, and being more creative means that learners generate better ideas and more innovative solutions to problems. Stress and negative emotions are two of the biggest barriers to learning, but being in nature reduces stress and elevates people's mood, putting them in a healthier state for learning.

#### Ideas for learning *in* nature

- ☀ *Use venues with gardens or access to nature and outdoor space, or use the local park if necessary.*
- ☀ *Bring picnic blankets if no outdoor seating is available and work outside.*
- ☀ *Get people to take a walk whilst doing individual reflective activities or paired discussions.*
- ☀ *Help people to really connect with the nature around them and to become present using a short attuning activity. Ask them to breathe gently and slowly, and silently and individually to really pay attention to their surroundings – tuning in to the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, textures. After 5-10 minutes bring the group back together and reflect on the experience.*
- ☀ *If it's impossible to go outside, bring nature into the training room with flowers, plants, natural materials, essential oils.*
- ☀ *Open the windows so that people can hear the sounds of birdsong, the wind in the trees etc.*
- ☀ *Use recordings of bird song, rippling streams, or other nature sounds (available online).*
- ☀ *Use visualisations where people visualise themselves in nature.*

## 2. Learning with Nature

Nature is infinitely complex, diverse, subtle and inventive and therefore is an excellent mechanism to help the learning process. For example, we can use nature as a metaphor, as a tool, or as a mirror.

**Nature as metaphor:** We can use models, behaviours, structures or systems from nature to create a clear image or representation of the concepts that we are helping people to learn, or we can encourage learners to create their own metaphors to help them anchor their learning. Remember: “There is no such thing as a wrong metaphor” (Jon Brett, founder of TetraMap®)

**Nature as tool:** Nature provides us with free training materials. Whilst taking care not to cause damage to the natural world, we can use leaves, branches, flowers, stones, seeds, feathers and other natural items as materials, props and models for training activities.

**Nature as mirror:** Nature is a powerful force for promoting self-reflection and helping people to develop self-awareness. When people connect with nature they connect with themselves and this can lead to deep insight and personal growth.

### Ideas for learning with nature

- ☀ *Employ tools which use nature as a metaphor, for example the TetraMap® profiling tool uses the 4 elements of nature (Earth, Air, Water and Fire) as metaphors for different types of behaviour and communication styles and uses the diversity of nature to demonstrate the importance of diversity at work.*
- ☀ *Look for an example from nature to use as a metaphor for the specific model, tool or behaviour that you want people to learn, then create activities based around this (look to geology, geography, the animal and plant kingdoms, astronomy, ecological systems, meteorology etc).*
- ☀ *As an introductory icebreaker activity, set out a table full of natural materials items (flowers, seeds, twigs, crystals, plants, etc.) and ask learners to choose one that represents them (or that represents what they want to get from the course) then introduce themselves and share this with the rest of the group.*
- ☀ *As a closing/review activity, ask learners to go outside and find something in nature around them that is a metaphor for what they've learnt today, then either take it back to the training room or take a photo of it to share with the rest of the group.*
- ☀ *Task one group of learners with creating a new trail through a woodland or long grass and a second group to follow their trail. Use this as a lesson about learning, change, and doing things differently – it's much harder work to create a new path than to follow an existing one.*
- ☀ *Use a tree (or create an indoor tree with a branch held upright in a Christmas tree holder) and get people to hang leaves on it (real or paper cut-outs), on which they have written ideas/solutions in relation to the topic, or what they hope to learn, or what they've learnt etc.*
- ☀ *Instead of drawing with pens/paper, give people natural materials (sticks, twigs, leaves etc.) to create models or pictures which illustrate the learning topic.*
- ☀ *Instead of using 6 hats to look at a problem from different perspectives, use 6 different animals instead (eg how would a squirrel approach this, a moose, a shark etc.)*

- ☀ *Describe and discuss the multiple and complex roles and benefits of a tree. (eg protect, sustain and improve fresh water supplies, purify air, convert carbon dioxide, water, minerals and sunlight into nutrients and oxygen, provide a home for plants, insects, fungi, worms etc.) Ask the group to identify life lessons that we, as humans, can learn from trees.*
- ☀ *Show learners some examples of mandalas and/or natural sculptures, then take them outside into a wood/field/wild space. Ask them to create their own mandala or sculpture using the natural materials they find around them whilst contemplating a particular question or challenge, and to see what ideas and feelings arise.*
- ☀ *Share the Sundance Promise with learners: "If you will open yourself to the natural environment, the people around you, and timeless principles, you will find personal and specific answers to the leadership challenges and opportunities you face." (From The Nature of Leadership by Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill and Dewitt Jones). Discuss the meaning and use as a basis for leadership development.*
- ☀ *Put inspirational quotes about learning from nature on the walls. For example: "Look! Look! Look deep into nature and you will understand everything." Albert Einstein*

### 3. Learning from nature

We can learn from nature by looking directly to it for solutions. *Biomimicry* is the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems. There are many examples of products, services and solutions that developed as innovations inspired by nature. For example:

Velcro was invented by Swiss engineer George de Mestral in 1941 after he was inspired by the burrs he had to remove from his dog.

The lotus plant naturally repels dust and dirt due to tiny nail-like protuberances which cause water to collect any dust and debris as it rolls over the surface. German company Ispo developed paint with similar properties.

The temperature inside a termite den stays constant despite extreme variations in external temperature. Architect Mick Pearce studied the cooling chimneys and tunnels of termite dens and replicated these in the design of the Eastgate Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, which uses 90 percent less energy to heat and cool than traditional buildings.

As trainers we can help people learn by encouraging them to study nature's best ideas and then replicate these designs and processes to solve problems.

#### Ideas for learning from nature

- ☀ *When learning about specific behaviours, ask learners to look for examples of animals who do this successfully (eg resolving conflict), identify what they do and then draw out lessons from this for human behaviour.*
- ☀ *Create a quiz/competition in which learners are given a series of problems for which they must research examples from nature in order to find solutions.*

- ☀ Give people a series of photos of natural materials, or actual samples of natural materials and ask them to use these as a source of inspiration for creative problem solving.
- ☀ Give learners a selection of examples of biomimicry, ask them to discuss these, then task them with creating their own examples which are relevant to the topic being trained.
- ☀ Ask learners to suggest examples of systems, processes or behaviours which they think work well in nature and flipchart these. Then in groups ask them to discuss what their team/organisation might be like if these principles were consistently applied in the workplace.



We hope you've found this resource useful.

We'd love to hear your ideas and suggestions too so please get in touch and share your experiences with us.

*You can also:*

Find out more about Saltbox Training & Events at  
[www.salt-box.co.uk](http://www.salt-box.co.uk)

Contact us about using nature to enhance learning by  
emailing [info@salt-box.co.uk](mailto:info@salt-box.co.uk)

Talk to us about how Saltbox can help you address your  
individual or organisational learning needs by  
ringing Nicki on 01373 837333