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Andrew Oates

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Natural Resources: The Confluence of ESL/ELL and Outdoor Education

Andrew Oates

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in

TESOL degree at SIT Graduate Institute Brattleboro, Vermont

July 2020

IPP Advisor: Dr. Leslie Turpin

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores principles shared by outdoor education and language education that make for meaningful, engaged learning experiences, as well as what educators and learners are doing at the merger of these two fields. Its primary goal is to address how ESL/ELL teachers might draw on the values and practices illustrated in these examples to promote active, student-driven learning in their own contexts both indoors and outdoors. Through personal history, the author explains how he arrived at this inquiry and lays out the questions that guided this thesis. A two-part literature review examines examples of general outdoor education models and their overlap in values with language education, as well as how examples of ESL programs that incorporate outdoor learning into their classes benefit from the merger. The author then discusses ways ESL/ELL teachers can adapt ideas from these examples to fit their own contexts.

**Educational Resources Information Center Descriptors**

English (Second Language)

Experiential Learning

Multicultural Education

Outdoor Education

Play

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## **Introduction**

With this paper, I aim to identify the key values and qualities shared by language education and outdoor education, articulate why they are vital to learning in both arenas, as well as provide readers with ideas for how to incorporate them into their own classes, regardless of the context. I begin by explaining how and why I came to this particular topic through my personal and professional experience, followed by outlining the questions that informed my research and writing. In the first part of the literature review, I provide a glimpse into outdoor education's history and influences, examples of current outdoor education models, and a discussion about the commonality of values in outdoor education and language education. In the second part of the review, I examine different contexts merging ESL/ELL and outdoor/outside-the-classroom learning and discuss how their learners benefit from that merger. I devote lengthier descriptions and discussions to two contexts, an outdoor children's education program and an ESL gardening project in the first and second part of literature review, respectively, because I found them to be particularly illustrative of the values and qualities I discuss, as well as potentially instructive for interested readers. In the Applications section, I provide rationale for why we as ESL/ELL teachers should incorporate the strengths of the examples discussed into our everyday classes and describe potential activities in line with the spirit of outdoor education that are adaptable to our varied and unique contexts. Next, I present a framework in the form of a list of questions meant to help teachers interested in incorporating outdoor learning and/or its values into their own lessons. Finally, I close by reflecting on what the IPP process has meant for me.

### **Personal and Professional Interest / Guiding Questions**

In searching for an IPP topic, I knew I wanted to find something that would check three boxes: 1) an area of personal importance, both inside and outside of the realm of TESOL, 2) an inquiry that would prove to be professionally useful for myself, my peers, and all of our students, and 3) a project from which I could learn as I researched and wrote. The search was not long. In my lengthy and continuing experience as a learner and my more recent experience as a teacher, I have always been drawn to the learning that happens out of doors. As a kid, I was fascinated by the variety of life in our backyard. There, we had a brick patio and under seemingly every brick there was a new squiggling and squirming insect to discover. Neighborhood trees begged to be climbed, especially the skinny sweet gum directly in front of our house. During the school year, I enjoyed or tolerated (depending on the class) traditional classroom lessons well enough, but was without fail exhilarated to get on the bus for a field trip to a new, as yet unexplored location (students and teachers alike, who doesn't like a trip out of school?). Even if the field trip location did not sound particularly intriguing, it was still somewhere new and a chance to spend time with friends in a less rigidly structured way.

I was extremely fortunate to get to go to many different summer camps where hands-on, sensory-laden activities were the name of the game. My first summer at sleep away camp, I fell in love with what are still some of my most favorite activities: canoeing, spelunking, and long bike rides. Retrospectively, of course I was learning when getting the hang of these new skills, but it all just felt like fun at the time. Activities like the ropes course, putting up tents, and navigating rapids all required and built teamwork and communication skills between my cabinmates and I, but here again I basically just remember these moments as pure fun. Certainly, sneaking out of, and later back into, the cabin at night without waking the counselor required a

degree of group planning and collaborative effort, a decidedly out-of-doors activity. At the same summer sleep away camp, I had my first introduction to teaching as I became a counselor myself. Teaching campers how to steer a canoe, build different kinds of campfires, and shoot an arrow required some preparation and clarity, but was no less enjoyable than learning the skills had been. I also began to notice how the relaxed, no-pressure setting and atmosphere of such an environment came into play in how I instructed and how the campers learned. When campers would get the hang of, say, archery, it was a great opportunity to have them share tips and coach other campers having more trouble with it. I also noticed that bringing up and discussing any cabin problems or group dynamics issues during hands-on, engaging activities, whether in arts and crafts or on the ropes course, often yielded better results and facilitated more open conversation than sitting the kids down on the bunks to have a formal cabin meeting. Campers often also seemed more comfortable bringing up any personal issues or simply opening up a bit when in the midst of a hands-on activity. All this is to say I have long been enamored with the opportunities for joyful, engaged learning and growth that outdoor activities provide.

In recent English teaching contexts, I have been lucky to have had the chance to plan, try out, and sharpen various outdoor/outside-the-classroom activities and lessons. Similarly to my experience as a camp counselor, I have found that students more readily use their English with much less worry over whether or not it is correct during these activities. When engaged in a hands-on activity that does not require them to come up with the right answer and allows space for free form conversation, learners seem more willing to ask questions or bring up discussion topics in which they are genuinely interested. Most of my experience with these sort of lessons has so far been with kids, teens, and young adults, but I am confident older ESL/ELL learners

can benefit just as much from stimulating outdoor activities that provide opportunities for active, hands-on learning.

With these personal and professional experiences in mind, I wanted to dig further into the possibilities of learning through outside-the-classroom activities, lessons, and projects. The questions that have driven my inquiry into the juncture of ESL/ELL learning and outdoor education have been: 1) What are the commonalities between the two fields? 2) What is already being done at this juncture and how could these ideas be adapted to work in different contexts? 3) What can we as ESL teachers glean from outdoor education to strengthen our classes, whatever the context or location, and provide opportunities for fun, meaningful language learning through engaging, active projects?

### **Literature Review Part 1: Outdoor Education**

While ESL and outdoor education may not have a long formal relationship, outdoor education at large has a lengthy history that is mostly tied specifically to children's education and development. The term "outdoor education" itself did not enter into common parlance until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however Joyce (2012) credits early European educators and thinkers like John Amos Comenius, Robert Owen, Johaan Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Jean Jacques Rousseau with laying its foundations. They articulated the need for children to have space and time to play freely, interact with each other and nature, and, importantly, to allow space for and encourage children's curiosity about the natural world around them to develop. Their influences can be seen today in Europe's Forest Schools. It might not surprise one to learn that Friedrich Froebel, developer of the kindergarten and student of Pestalozzi, had his young pupils tend to their own small "gartens" and grow produce for the good of the community as a way to teach them about being good community members (Joyce, 2012). John Dewey, the philosopher and

educational reformer, observed that children's lives had altered dramatically with the Industrial Revolution, distancing children from learning hands-on skills that benefited families and communities, such as growing food and making clothes. In addition to his call for children to be able to learn through practical tasks outside school, Dewey envisioned schools as being much more porous, with children able to learn in the natural surroundings of their communities instead of solely in the classroom (Rivkin, 1998). Margaret McMillan was another great proponent of turn-of-the-century outdoor learning for children. She developed Camp Schools for young learners, where kids were free to play, learn in surrounding gardens, and even sleep outdoors, prior to World War One. (Joyce, 2012). It ought to be noted that this is simply a brief and, owing to readily available scholarship, Eurocentric sampling of figures involved in outdoor childhood education. While it is beyond the scope of this short literature review to investigate them, non-western and indigenous perspectives on how we can learn from and interact with the natural world absolutely bear further exploration. In looking into both the traditions and current models of outdoor learning across the world, we can gain a much richer understanding of the educational resources the natural world presents. Indeed, in a field as inherently multicultural as ESL/ELL, exploring and incorporating outdoor activities and outdoor learning practices representative of our students' cultures could be an excellent way to promote cross-cultural sharing and create a more inclusive learning environment.

Along with McMillan's Camp Schools, the 1900s saw the creation of outdoor education groups still active today. The Scouts movement, started by British soldier and artist Robert Baden-Powell in 1907, is still an active force in learning outdoors in the UK and US. Baden-Powell originally conceived the organization as a way to bring together boys from various backgrounds and strengthen communities (Scouts, 2020). Another current outdoor education

leader, Outward Bound, was also founded in the UK by Kurt Hahn in 1941 with a focus on fitness and survival skills (Purc-Stephenson et al., 2019). We also see a rich tradition of promoting learning through outdoor excursions in Scandinavia. Swedish ski instructor Gosta Frohm developed the *Skogsmulle* school, named for an imaginary forest creature, in the 1950s for young children to learn from hands-on, sensory experiences. A central tenet of the school was instilling a love of nature so that the children would grow to be good stewards of their environment (Joyce, 2012). On *Skogsmulle*'s heels came the *I Ur och Skur* school, meaning Rain or Shine, that Sew Linde developed in the 1990s. While preserving Frohm's idea of allowing children to explore and investigate the natural world, she moved to add more structure to these investigations, having children and adults explore an activity together, then reflect on what was learned. In this model, the teachers can provide scaffolding while still affording the children agency in their experiential learning (Joyce, 2012).

Similar to the Swedish models, the UK's Forest School model values outdoor play and learner autonomy while also presenting young learners with specific tasks to structure their experience, such as building fires and creating structures. In their 2019 study *Learning while playing: Children's Forest School experiences in the UK*, Coates and Pimlott-Wilson interviewed 33 Forest School participants about their experiences. The students, aged 4-5 and 8-9, took part in 6 once-a-week half day and full day forest outings, respectively. Looking to gain insight into what the learners saw as strengths of the program, the interviewers came away with three main recurring themes. They state, "These were: a break from routine; learning through play; collaboration and teamwork" (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019, p. 27). Several children interviewed described how being in an outdoor space outside of school eased feelings of pressure and stress they felt in the classroom. One student noted how she felt she could be herself in the

Forest School, in contrast to regular indoor lessons. Many students discussed the abundance of choices available to them in the Forest School, whereas in their regular school they would follow the lesson chosen for them (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). In terms of learning through play, the researchers found that when reflecting on their experiences, students did recognize that while they were having fun and playing, they were indeed learning and calling on prior knowledge. Many remarked on the opportunity for movement and physicality, which they said made the learning experience more fun. The role of the adult/teacher in the Forest School seems to be mainly to scaffold and observe. Therefore, children have the space to work out ideas and disagreements during activities amongst themselves. Interviewees noted the difference between this model and their regular school (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Some of the older set mentioned forming closer bonds with peers in the Forest School, while younger students touched on their social experience in the program, good or bad, and how they reacted to it in terms of completing the activity. In their discussion, the authors note that the Forest School's version of play-pedagogy allowed for both free play, in which students fully designed their own activity, as well as more structured activities led, or at least initiated, by teachers. Coates and Pimlott-Wilson put forth that this model affords learners a comfortable transition from traditional school that supports their learning in this new setting. The authors also note that the "study showed that the novelty of FS created feelings of excitement and change. Children tend to remember more about events which elicit strong emotional responses, like new or exciting experiences" (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019, p. 37). In light of the positive interview feedback and opportunities for enjoyable, learner-centered educational activities, the authors conclude by urging more primary schools to take advantage of such programs, asserting that the Forest School's program

complements the traditional curriculum by helping students develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019).

We can see strong similarities and threads of ideals between the Forest School's model and earlier educational thinkers who valued outdoor learning, perhaps most saliently the notion that children should have the opportunity to experience and play in the natural world on their own terms. This value on learner autonomy and agency in childhood education has been a constant theme in outdoor education, with some activities or lines of thought more scaffolded and goal-oriented, like Froebel's gardens or Scouts projects, and some more free-form and play-based, such as Comenius's call to allow children to organically develop their curiosity and appreciation for the natural world. This emphasis on self-directed learning and learner agency pairs quite well with language learning. Whereas young learners in the Forest School are allowed the space and given scaffolding to experiment with different approaches to projects, as well as to gravitate towards activities they are genuinely interested in, we as ESL/ELL teachers do well to encourage our students of all ages to direct their own English learning by providing them with opportunities to lead or suggest activities based on their interests, discuss topics that are meaningful and important to them, and create open channels of communication about individual learning styles. Encouraging students to read, write, and talk about their personal interests in English outside of the classroom is another important way we as teachers can help guide learners to direct and take ownership of their own language learning.

Another strength of the Forest School that is often applied in ESL/ELL, and one that is indeed present in many other outdoor education organizations with older participants like Scouts, Outward Bound, and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), is the focus on collaboration and teamwork. Collaborative work in language learning allows for students to in

turn teach and learn from each other, thereby filling in gaps in individual linguistic repertoires. Here again, we see a possibility for student-driven learning. Collaboration and group activities also provide the opportunity for cross-cultural sharing of knowledge in multicultural/multilingual contexts. By bringing their different perspectives and backgrounds to an activity, students enrich each other's learning experience and can enliven discussions about different strategies to accomplish a given task.

As Coates and Pilmott-Wilson point out in their study, the very setting of the Forest School provides a benefit in that it is a novel location, outside of the normal confines of regular school. The wall-less woods provide learners with an exciting new environment to explore and with which to interact. Along with being able to connect to the natural world in a fully sensory way, students' learning is also stimulated by the fact that they are simply in a new place. This idea of novelty as a method to stimulate learning and create memorable experiences can be applied, I believe, across all disciplines and ages. As quoted above, the authors mention that children are more likely to remember an experience if it is tied to a strong emotion, such as excitement (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). I would argue this is safe to say for kids, teens, and adults alike. We all are more likely to remember experiences, as well as what we learned during these experiences, that affect us on an emotional level. In the context of language learning, young and old learners alike can have a meaningful, exciting experience through an activity in a novel setting. As some of the Forest school participants mention, simply getting outside of the classroom can reduce feelings of anxiety or pressure. While low-stress environments should, of course, be the goal inside the language classroom too, it can be of great benefit to provide students with the chance to relax, depressurize, and learn in a new, and often thereby fun, setting by stepping outside. Moreover, because the shared experience of a class outing will, one hopes,

be stimulating and memorable, there is a great opportunity here to reflect on, discuss, and refer back to the event afterwards when back in the classroom or elsewhere. By sorting through what happened, what they did, and what they experienced during the outing, students can articulate and show what new vocabulary they learned through that outing. With these learnings associated with a memorable experience, students can recall and apply these learnings to future activities in and outside of the class context. While experiential learning can, of course, take place inside the regular classroom setting, I strongly agree with Coates and Pimlott-Wilson that the benefits of novelty of setting make outside-the-classroom learning experiences an excellent option and supplement to traditional classroom learning.

While the Forest School and the other examples of outdoor education discussed thus far are primarily focused on children's development, student-centered learning in language education should know no age limit, nor should outside-the-classroom learning. Indeed, a longitudinal study published in 2017 found that a group of disadvantaged teens in England, including three with English as a second language, who took part in a weekend outdoor experience program twice yearly over three years made great strides in improving their school test scores, among other gains (Fuller et al., 2017). Students took part in activities such as mountain biking, canoeing, and various team building challenges, often repeating activities over the three years to build up their skills in the different areas. The authors noted that, in interviews with the students, many expressed feeling greater self-confidence and attributed their growth to what they had learned and experienced in the program (Fuller et al., 2017). Here again, we see an example of outdoor education providing meaningful and memorable experiences that enabled personal insight and growth while simultaneously supplementing student performance in the traditional school context, this time with teen learners. In thinking about applying the

opportunities that outside-the-classroom learning can provide to adult learners, let us briefly consider team building workshops and corporate retreats. Companies regularly employ these as ways to boost performance and morale, using the same principles (play, hands-on activities, collaboration, novelty) at work in the Forest School. Clearly, adults just as well as children can benefit from playful learning experiences that take place outside the traditional venue, here perhaps the office, and create a novel, low-stress atmosphere in which to interact with peers. In the ESL/ELL context, it is a very small leap to see how adult students could similarly benefit from outside-the-classroom excursions.

### **Literature Review Part 2: ESL and Outdoor Education**

Thus far, in presenting a brief background and various examples of outdoor education, I hope to have illuminated some of its benefits, as well as the substantial overlap between its core values and principles and those of language education. Below, I present current examples of what is being done at the intersection of these two fields. I then discuss how they share and draw on key values of both ESL and outdoor education, as well as how the projects benefit from their merger.

Brown, O’Keeffe, and Paige provide an inspiring example of a longer-term gardening project that took place both in and outside the classroom setting in their 2017 case study, *The colour of velvet: A transdisciplinary approach to connecting students from a refugee background to the natural world*. The authors conducted an experimental project in an Australian school to look into how learners new to the country might be able to build ties and establish a sense of connection with their new environment. The students participating in the project, all refugees from various countries, were in the selected school’s New Arrival Program, designed to build up the students’ English abilities in order to enter into the main curriculum. The study’s garden

project interwove natural science, mathematics, and art with the overall focus on English, and content was closely aligned with the regular Australian curriculum (Brown et al., 2017).

Working with an ESL teacher, a school gardener, a local artist, as well as the researchers, these young learners delved into the life cycle of plants in an active, hands-on approach by planting their own garden at the school. The project began with a survey to elicit and assess the students' language around fruits and vegetables, as well to gather information about their previous life experiences, before and since coming to Australia, in relation to fruits and vegetables. Next, students completed a variety of activities all focused around real seeds from various plants, including sorting, discussions about the seeds in relation to the senses, and writing. The students then moved on to germinating the seeds and experimenting with different techniques while learning the scientific terminology (Brown et al., 2017). Finally, the project moved outside as the students planted their starters in the garden. The ongoing project continued as the budding naturalists maintained their new garden and discussed their observations of the changes occurring. The participants also completed a number of related art projects including sketches of different phases of their produce, large guide signs indicating what plants were where, and *rangolis*, a pattern/design of Indian origin, made from actual seeds on paper (Brown et al., 2017).

The researchers and school staff involved report several positive outcomes and take-aways from this project. In the beginning survey, the students were quick to draw or describe produce with which they had previous experience and from where (gardens, markets, grocery stores, etc) their families got it, thus creating a personal connection to the project moving forward, as well as drawing on student knowledge. By the end of the project, "the teacher and gardener were able to identify key science concepts that the students learnt: splitting seeds for roots and shoots to emerge, plants needing air, sun and water and using fertiliser such as

Season<sup>1</sup>™ to promote growth” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 28). It seems the students had measurable success in both learning the English required to discuss the life cycle of plants and growing strategies, as well as in understanding the scientific processes they had observed and managed. The gardener was struck by the students’ growth in problem solving and group cooperation, reporting that the learners quite actively discussed growing strategies and worked on how to navigate disagreements. The students themselves were able to articulate in English specific favorite moments of the project, such as eating seeds and observing various moments in the plant life cycle (Brown et al., 2017). In their conclusion, the researchers put forth that this project provides an example for how a natural setting can be used to build language by encouraging curiosity and pulling from different disciplines to create an engaging, hands-on experience. By planting and maintaining their own garden, students built a solid connection to place in their new country while also creating bonds through cooperative work. Furthermore, by bringing in community members from outside the school such as the local artist, the authors posit that the learners gained access to resources about which they and/or their parents might have not otherwise known (Brown et al., 2017).

As noted, Brown et al. state that a main purpose of the study and project was to get a sense of how refugee learners could build a connection to place in their new home. I think this project provides an excellent example for how to go about doing just that, as well as a way to build connections between students. A major strength here, I believe, is that the project kicked off by activating the students’ schemas regarding fruits, vegetables, where they come from in their experience, and perhaps any prior gardening knowledge. By allowing space for the students to share what they already know, they are immediately able to start learning from each other in terms of English and cultural knowledge. With a group of learners from diverse backgrounds,

this can be a great opportunity to open a channel for ongoing cultural exchange throughout the project. On a personal experience note, having worked with young refugees in a past context, I would be cautious about asking too much about students' lives prior to their arrival, as refugees are often, of course, coming from extremely traumatic experiences. Another example of sharing knowledge and multicultural learning can be seen in the *rangoli* art project, where Indian learners might have the opportunity here to share what they know about this art form. This could easily be adapted to a different art project depending on the students' home countries.

In terms of fostering a sense of connection to place, doing an activity with visible, tangible evidence of that connection makes it all the stronger. This is furthered, I believe, by actually interacting with the land of the place in question, which takes on a heightened significance for new arrivals to the country who may well feel a disconnect with their new surroundings. Planting and maintaining a garden in a new setting can help provide a sense of participation in and belonging to that new place and community. The garden project here provides a clear way in which new arrivals may both literally and figuratively put down roots in their new community by learning outside.

In Brown, O'Keeffe, and Paige's project, the learners participated in an experiential learning project in that they ultimately reflected on their experiences during the project and their own learnings that emerged from it. While such projects are certainly possible inside the classroom, as, indeed, this project moved back and forth in and out of doors, I believe there are several strong advantages to having an experience outside the classroom from which learners can return, discuss, and elaborate on inside the classroom. A change of scene has the simple and obvious benefit of providing new scenery and, with that, new opportunities for students to authentically interact with their surroundings as they learn how to discuss what they are seeing,

doing, smelling, and so on. As shown here, the act of getting outside and planting a garden provides a wealth of opportunities to explore different disciplines and gain new skills, all while building and using new language structured around the outside-the-classroom setting. In this example, when the garden project finished, students reflected back on their shared experience and learnings. In terms of English language learning, this reflection allows, at the very least, a great opportunity for using and exploring different tenses – What did you learn? What was your favorite part? What could we have done differently to grow a different or better garden? Will you plant a garden at home with your family? By sharing in an engaging, long term, hands-on experience that forges a connection to their new setting, students have a shared reference point from which to draw and continue to engage with their community.

The authors' garden project was developed for a specific context in a specific location. Clearly, the researchers and the school were able to provide the learners with key resources for such an endeavor, namely land to plant, seeds, tools, the gardener, and the local artist to guide the art projects. Many schools or organizations such as non-profits who work with refugee and/or immigrant populations may not have access to such resources. Later in the Applications section of this paper, I discuss some possible alternatives to this project that require fewer resources.

In another example of the potential for ESL learning outdoors, Barfod and Slattvik discuss the Danish *udeskole* approach to outdoor education and its applications for English lessons in their 2017 article *Teaching English outside the classroom*. The authors explain that the concept of *udeskole* involves getting learners out of the classroom on a regular basis as part of the standard curriculum. As such, students continue learning their core curriculum, simply in a different context and setting. In Denmark, English study is required and therefore often incorporated into the *udeskole* outings (Barfod & Slattvik, 2017). The authors describe a typical

but fictionalized version of an outdoor English class, demonstrating how the outdoor setting can provide various advantages to an ELL lesson. In this case, the students are learning about the general themes of Macbeth through various games and reflective exercises. After listening to an adapted version, the teacher and students briefly discuss themes such as loyalty, trust, and guilt. The students then play a game where one seeing student leads a blindfolded peer to a specific location using only English directions (Barfod & Slattvik, 2017). Afterwards, the students come together to discuss how they felt during this activity and how these feelings relate to the themes of the Scottish play. The lesson continues with various movement and communication-based activities all related to the central theme, such as a Macbeth-vocabulary version of Simon Says and a gossip game of Telephone. In closing, the teacher explains that in the next lesson, students will use their new language in an indoor writing project (Barfod & Slattvik, 2017). The authors then point out several benefits to having this lesson outdoors, firstly that the change of scenery provides stimulation for the students. This calls to mind the Forest School study. The outdoor venue also provides enough space to practice new language with a partner without fear of being overheard by others. This is an advantage particularly important to language lessons, as shy learners may often choose to remain silent in larger groups if unsure of their ability. The blindfold activity conforms to Krashen's language acquisition theory in that learners are practicing what they are learning with natural, genuine interactions (Barfod and Slattvik, 2017). Finally, the authors reflect, wisely in my opinion, that this kind of lesson can be a good way for the teacher to gain experience and comfort with taking the class outside of the classroom. In this example, the teacher needs only to lead the students out to a greenspace instead of a forest. With this sort of outing as a starting point, teachers may begin to gain an understanding of how

outdoor/outside-the-classroom lessons can benefit the learners and the overall goals of the language course (Barfod & Slattvik, 2017).

Kinard & Gainer discuss the intersection of science and ESL learning in a multilingual pre-K class in Texas in their 2015 article *Talking science in an ESL pre-K: Theory building with realia*. In the class the authors describe, young learners from different linguistic backgrounds, English, Spanish, and others, are all in the same class together. To ensure non-native English speakers are comprehending the lesson, the teacher uses various scaffolding techniques to help develop these students' English vocabulary. In a lesson focused on leaves, students learn and employ the language used to describe them as well as develop theories about their characteristics. The main scaffolding here is the use of realia in the form of, simply and elegantly, real leaves (Kinard & Gainer, 2015). After listening to a story titled "Leaves," students work in pairs to collect different specimens while the teacher roams and encourages students to use their language about the leaves. Afterwards, the class comes together to discuss their findings and talk about what a leaf can be, eliciting and learning adjectives. The authors point out that the greenspace used for this lesson is the only one available, a small strip of grass mainly taken up by air conditioning units. Many "non-mainstream" students, here meaning those for whom English is not their first language, often have limited access to greenspace and hands-on learning activities (Kinard & Gainer, 2015, p. 19). The authors conclude by praising the teacher for promoting a focus on lively discussion rather than steering the children towards only scientifically correct answers. Through encouraging genuine curiosity and interest, the teacher creates space for the students to experience a meaningful, inquiry-based exploration of language and science (Kinard & Gainer, 2015).

The marriage of science and language learning with the aim of having the two disciplines complement each other seems like a natural fit and a budding area of study. Garza et al. explored this merger in their 2014 study *ESL/ELL strategies that bridge content and language in science: Experiential learning in an environmental education workshop*. Using 66 pre-service teachers as participants, the aim of the study was to identify successful strategies to scaffold both science and English learning for dual-language (English and Spanish) classes in the context of an outdoor project, in this instance one called Project WILD. The workshop took place in a public park, aiming to instill key concepts about wildlife's role in the ecosystem and how humans can support local wildlife. Participants were purposely placed in small, dual-language learning groups, where some had native English and some native Spanish, and went through the different activities of the workshop. One major takeaway for participants was that their groupwork enabled negotiation of meaning, especially in translating some of the scientific content (Garza et al., 2014). They cited learning from one another as a strength of the group work, even though at times translations were not correct. Another takeaway was the benefits of the active, hands-on approach of the workshop. Participants reported feeling engaged and stimulated by the movement involved, as well as the different sensory incorporations such as music and plenty of visual aids, often in the form of realia. Yet another helpful strategy in navigating the content was identifying and using English/Spanish cognates, allowing the learners to quickly pick up on concepts in their non-native language (Garza et al., 2014). The authors conclude by noting that beyond language and science content learning, the workshop's multilingual groupings also "provided all group members an authentic learning opportunity to develop a cross-cultural sensitivity as learners of science" (Garza et al., 2014, p. 503).

In these glimpses into specific, ESL focused outside-the-classroom lessons, we see many of the same guiding principles and key ideas as in the multi-week garden project in Australia, as well as in the more generalized outdoor education endeavors discussed above. Throughout all of the cases, four key values are constant: student-centered learning through group or pair work, stimulation through novelty of setting, the importance of learning through varied sensory experiences, and creating the potential for the outdoor/outside-the-classroom experiences and learnings to be of further value in the regular classroom.

These outdoor excursions all provide space for learners to share and exchange their knowledge during group or pair work, effectively allowing the lessons or projects to be, in large part, student-directed while still scaffolded by the teacher. In all cases, learners have the opportunity to both teach and learn from each other, sharing what they already know in English, and in some cases Spanish, to help fill in gaps in the group's language repertoire. In the science-focused lessons, working in groups can allow students to navigate new concepts and language together, thereby co-constructing a fuller understanding of the content. In the Danish example, outdoor pair work affords students the space to comfortably experiment with their new language before using it in a larger group. In the UK's Forest School, group work seems to share much the same purpose in that it allows learners to construct strategies for the activities together, building off of one another's experiences and ideas. In many cases, we see group work as an opportunity for cross-cultural learning. Much like in the interviews and discussions featured in the New Arrivals gardening project, the leaf lesson and Project WILD presented the chance for learners young and old to pool their knowledge and perspectives from across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By making space for learners to bring in their own cultural and linguistic

experience to the lesson, it both enriches the experience for their peers and creates a meaningful connection to the content.

The idea of novelty of setting and its potential to stimulate learning is a constant across all of these outings, regardless of how far they are from the regular classroom. In the Project WILD study, the participants, pre-service teachers themselves, comment positively on how the park's open setting provided both room to move and plenty of sensory stimulation (Garza et al., 2014). Learning in a much different location, the young scientists in the pre-K leaf lesson are still able to find wonder and stimulation through their investigation of the natural world in a small strip of grass. It seems that regardless of the type of outdoor space available, a novel location can spark interest and create a sense of fun around the lesson. As some students allude to in the Forest School interviews, being outside and having freedom of movement can contribute to a low-stress environment (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) where, as Krashen (1981) would put it, the affective filter is lowered and learning can more easily take place. We see this focus on low-stress atmospheres across all the outdoor ESL lessons. Another boon of a novel setting, be it indoor or outdoor, is the wealth of realia, and therefore fodder for new vocabulary and discussions, it can provide. The science-focused lessons take great advantage of this, allowing students to physically interact with the content they are learning about. We see learners planting vegetables, collecting leaves, and spotting wildlife, as well as building fires and woodland structures in the Forest School and weekend outdoor residence program. This is yet another way learning is stimulated through genuine interaction with a new setting, as students can learn and use new language on the spot to discuss what they are experiencing. Tied to this is the idea of generating a genuine connection with and interest in both the setting and content. As Coates & Pimlott (2019) mention, a new, exciting location has the power to provoke an emotional response

in learners, potentially creating a deeper interest with what they learn there, as well as a memorable experience from which students and teachers can draw. Through their experiences guiding blindfolded partners in the greenspace, the Danish students in the Barfod and Slattvik (2017) example have a fun, memorable experience to which they can relate their discussion of Shakespearian themes, such as trust and loyalty, in the same outdoor setting or back in the classroom. With the longer term gardening project, the students' direct involvement with the setting and content created not only a genuine interest in the science which boosted their ability to discuss the topic in English, but also fostered a sense of ownership of the project and connection to the land.

Intertwined with the outdoor, realia-filled settings of these projects is the consistent value placed on learning through hands-on, movement-oriented, sensory experiences. Of course, one of the most obvious advantages of getting outside of the classroom is the space to freely move around. Again, in the Danish example we see how physical space can benefit learners who want to try out their new English with a partner before speaking with the group. They are able to practice this new language, both in pairs and later as a large group, while moving from game to game. The greenspace in this example provides the space for numerous movement-oriented activities that would feel restricted or impossible inside the classroom. In the Project WILD example, the participants found movement-oriented and hands-on activities, such as creating Venn diagrams with hula hoops and walking through the park to find wildlife examples, to be fun, effective strategies for understanding the environmental education content of the project (Garza et al., 2014). In the more traditional or generalized outdoor education examples discussed above, the hands-on learning done in the Forest School and weekend residence program is

acknowledged to be emotionally and socially supportive to the participants, as well as beneficial to their performance in the traditional school curriculum.

Just as separate outdoor education programs can supplement the regular school program, we can see in the examples discussed how, in the context of the same course, outdoor lessons and projects can supplement and create new possibilities for lessons/activities inside the classroom. In participating in engaging, hands-on activities outside the normal scope the classroom, learners, as mentioned, develop a memorable connection to both place and content. With this comes the opportunity to reflect and draw on this experience afterwards. By discussing what they experienced and learned during their outing, as well as how they can apply it moving forward, students and teachers alike can engage in experiential learning. This can be most plainly seen in the Project WILD example, where pre-service teachers develop and explore outdoor learning strategies in order to figure out how to best connect ESL/SLL and science content in their own future lessons (Garza et al., 2014). In the Barfod and Slattvik (2017) example, the class is constantly engaged in experiential learning even during the lesson: they listen and learn, they use the new language in play, and then they reflect on what they experienced and tie it back to the main topic, being the themes of Macbeth. At the lesson's close, the teacher says that they will be doing a writing project based on their experiences in the outdoor lesson. In this way of reflecting on and drawing from a memorable, hopefully enjoyable outdoor experience, the class can continue to learn and build on the lesson back in the regular classroom. In the Kinard and Gainer (2015) example, we see how the young naturalists' leaf collecting experience is reflected upon at the end of the lesson when they use adjectives to describe all of the different things leaves can be. While not explicitly mentioned in the article, it is easy to see how the realia

collected in this activity could be used indoors in a subsequent lesson in, for example, a hands-on art project or story writing project, furthering their new leafy vocabulary.

### **Applications**

In the cases discussed above, we see varied approaches to how and degrees to which ESL/ELL teachers, as well as educators at large, are working to incorporate meaningful outdoor experiences into their lessons. The ability to do so depends, of course, largely on the context of the school or educational organization. Not all schools have greenspaces, not to mention gardens, on their premises. Adult education centers may be located in dense urban areas with no nearby parks. An asphalt parking lot does not often inspire feelings of connection to place or stimulate the senses in the way that a swaying grove of trees can, at least not without the maximum optimism and creative thinking of all involved. Additionally, teachers all too often must deal with constraints from their administrations and expectations of measurable progress that do not, in practice, best serve the needs and growth of their students. A supervisor might not see the value of an ecology-focused picnic or a realia-gathering expedition in the local park. Even if the will is there, viable transportation and budgets for trips or supplies might not be. In short, there are myriad reasons why it may be difficult or unfeasible to provide quality outside-the-classroom experiences to our students.

So, what are fresh air craving teachers and learners to do in the face of all these obstacles? As at all times and in all contexts, I think we as teachers need to do our best to plan creatively and conscientiously to make the best of what resources are available to our students and ourselves. We can take inspiration from the teacher who led his pre-K students in a leaf-finding expedition in the only greenspace available, “the tiny green swath of grass and bushes that house the air-conditioning condenser units for this large public school” (Kinard & Gainer,

2015, p. 21). Not all of our students are young enough to appreciate and find sensory stimulation in such a place, but we can use this example of creative use of space and realia to (re)consider our surroundings in our own contexts. If there is no greenspace available, perhaps a class walk around the block can be used as an opportunity to gather natural realia, compare and contrast trees, or try to spot and discuss any urban animals that appear, just to name a few ideas. A class investigation into available greenspace could be an activity or project in itself, as well as a starting point for further outdoor learning. In groups or all together, students could search around the school property and/or neighborhood for greenspaces suitable for outdoor learning activities, perhaps even with an eye towards possible garden sites. Creating proposals about what could be done on their found greenspace sites could be a great opportunity for group collaboration, and having the students find the sites themselves would provide for student-driven learning.

Of course, getting out of the classroom does not necessarily mean focusing on the natural world. Putting aside flora and fauna for a moment, a novel setting and activity can be effective tools for engaged learning regardless of the subject. Does your classroom look out on a used car dealership instead of a verdant field? Teen and adult learners could benefit from and hopefully resonate with a project centered around the language of buying, selling, budgeting, personal needs, and preferences in the context of cars. Why not take an investigative stroll around the lot to discuss the different options and, if they are willing, engage with the salespeople to incorporate different examples of authentic speech into the experience? Students could work in pairs or groups with assigned imaginary budgets to decide which car would be the best option. This project could easily be taken back into the classroom in the form of further online research, a role play activity between buyer and salesperson, or a reflective discussion or writing project. If there is no such dealership nearby, this activity could easily be reconfigured to work with cars

in a parking lot or parked on the street with some imaginative pricing or quick smartphone research.

In a previous context, I worked with teenaged and young adult refugees in a youth center in Greece. During every 4-hour session, a handful of participants would be asked to volunteer to, along with one staff member, cook lunch or dinner for the entire group, usually around 20-30 people. While English was not necessarily the main focus of the cooking activity, it was the language we used in this multicultural, multilingual context. With the aid of recipe books, picture cut-outs of various foods, and a fixed budget in mind, the cooking team would decide on an ingredient list and walk to the nearby grocery store. Shopping for the ingredients was an opportunity to use the bountiful realia and setting of the grocery store to inspire conversation and questions. Besides strategizing on who would get what ingredient, together estimating how much of our budget remained, and what we could do without if we were over-budget, we had the chance for natural conversation stimulated by the setting and driven by genuine curiosity. Do you have this fruit in America? What is your favorite soda? Have you ever tried this? You do not eat meat?? Why not?? Once we got back to the youth center to cook, the kitchen was another abundant source of realia and authentic communication centered around a practical, hands-on activity. Though the regularity of the grocery store trips and cooking sessions certainly reduced the novelty of the settings and activities, the experience was always different. New participants would volunteer, we would search out new ingredients and therefore use new vocabulary, and success in the kitchen would vary greatly, often resulting in group problem solving and improvising, not to mention impromptu lessons in more colorful language in many different tongues. Moreover, the language learned and reinforced during these culinary endeavors was always immediately relevant, meaningful, and applicable in everyday situations. While none of

this constitutes outdoor learning in a natural setting, it is certainly an example of an outside-the-classroom experience that employs many of the principles and tools we have seen in the examples of ESL/ELL learning and outdoor education: learning through a hands-on, sensory experience, interaction with realia to stimulate relevant, meaningful language, group decision making and strategizing, the opportunity for student-driven activity and learner autonomy, as well as, to varying degrees, a novel experience/activity.

In this context, we were fortunate to have a large kitchen that could accommodate the bustle of a small group of people. This is hardly the case for many, if not most, contexts. If you do not have kitchen access, a field trip to a local grocery store or market can still yield a fun, valuable learning experience. With a small budget, students could discuss and decide on snacks and drinks that do not require much preparation. While eating back in the classroom or elsewhere, the class might review the foods they saw and, broaching the subject of recipes, take turns describing some of their favorites using those foods. If it is the case that your students, like the young learners in the garden project example that Brown et al. (2017) present, are new to the area, helping them get familiarized with the resources of the neighborhood/city could be an added benefit to the outing. If the situation is reversed and you are the newcomer, this could be a chance for the students to show you around and share their opinions on the best places to go grocery shopping. In any case, these types of outings and activities allow for personally relevant, practical language to come about naturally through interaction with our surroundings outside of the classroom.

However, sometimes leaving the classroom is simply not a possibility. Due to inclement weather, restrictive curricula, mobility issues, or any other number of reasons, the classroom may be the only option. In this case, I think it can still be hugely beneficial to take what lessons we

can from the merger of ESL/ELL and outdoor education, as well as from more generalized outdoor education. If thoughtfully planned, indoor lessons can possess many of the same qualities of well-designed outdoor learning. Let us first take novelty of setting. While we cannot physically transport the walls of our classrooms, we can aim to make our classrooms transportive. Decorating classrooms with a certain theme is certainly not a new idea. We can also, though, consider each topic or unit as a chance to redecorate, continually making the room a new space to fit the content. As we have seen through various examples, the real purposes behind and benefits to providing a novel space for our learners are to stimulate learning through genuine interest and curiosity, to create a low-stress atmosphere that encourages expression, and, with that, to allow space for fun in learning. As Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) discuss, one major aspect that contributes to the Forest School's success is the "break from routine" it provides for its learners (p. 28). Though this is, in large part, in reference to the outdoor setting, I believe we can still create such a break for our students indoors if we focus on the benefits and purposes just referenced. Bringing in new and varied realia to match the content and inspire discussion is one possibility. Having students bring in items and/or create artwork and decorations can change up the feel of a room as well as provide a sense of ownership and belonging associated with the space. Personal items can invite genuine curiosity and interested discussion. Desuggestopedia tells us that a cheerfully decorated classroom can help to relax students and enable learning, as well as that students learn peripherally from objects or posters in the room (Anderson & Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Even rearranging the seating for a specific lesson or activity can sometimes provide a sense of "new-ness" to the classroom.

Of course, novelty, fun, and curiosity are not solely reliant upon setting, indoors or out. In the outdoor ESL examples we have reviewed, we can see that the teachers carefully build these

qualities into their lessons and activities. By incorporating active, hands-on learning activities into our lessons indoors, we can also provide our students with the benefits found in outdoor learning. Returning once more to the New Arrivals Program gardening project, Brown et al. (2017) note how this project started indoors. If you have access to seeds, vegetable, herb, or any kind that will do, you could build a project around germinating them with damp paper towels right in the classroom. Further, if you have access to soil, students could plant the seeds using planters made from easily attainable plastic containers, such as yogurt tubs or cut water bottles, and put them on a windowsill if no space is available outside. Paired with other content such as art projects based on the plants and discussions on the scientific process, this project could provide, in essence, many of the same benefits as the Australian example. Students would still learn and develop language around a shared, interactive, sensory experience. For shorter bursts of novelty and fun in the classroom, games are, of course, a tried-and-true approach. While outdoor education focuses primarily on learning through movement-based play, a headier thought and discussion provoking game like Werewolf<sup>1</sup> can be a great change of pace for older or more advanced students that still provides a fun and low-pressure atmosphere for practicing English through a shared experience. Speaking of fun and low-stress situations, Anderson and Larsen-Freeman (2011) describe how teachers can use the Total Physical Response approach, developed by James Asher, to comfortably introduce new learners to commands in the target language through movement and repetition. As students gain familiarity with the language, the teacher can make sillier commands and eventually transfer the authority of commander over to the students. Central to this approach is the idea that learning should be enjoyable (Anderson &

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<sup>1</sup> A link to the game's rules can be found in the Additional Resources section

Larsen-Freeman, 2011). We can see here how a lesson perfectly suitable for an indoor classroom shares the sense of play and novelty present in successful outdoor lessons.

One other consistent quality we have seen across the examples of outdoor education is an emphasis on collaborative learning. This is plainly not a quality that need be restricted to the outdoors. Group and pair work are part and parcel of many of our standard classroom lessons. Let us consider some of the ways that outdoor ESL lessons benefit from group work and how that might be able to inform our collaborative efforts indoors. In the three examples where ESL meets science content, we see learners of all different ages in pairs or groups made up of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While helping each other to navigate through scientific concepts, recognize natural patterns, or experiment with different approaches to the given task, these learners are pooling both their scientific learning as well as their linguistic repertoires, old and new. In any group work or pair work, students can benefit from both learning from and teaching each other as they help one another fill in knowledge gaps. What stands out about these outdoor examples is the students' genuine interest and curiosity in the activities, and through that their personal investment. When a project can really capture students' interests, genuine and active collaboration can be a driving force of learning, rather than just a teacher's hope. In thinking about what will inspire collaborative learning indoors as well as out, I think it is important to consider what will inspire the learners themselves. Of course, this is different for every individual, so it is also important to encourage discussion about personal interests as well as to provide diverse learning materials. A further benefit of engaged collaboration is that the more invested the students are in the project, the more they themselves can steer it and direct their own learning. With students deciding on strategies and problem solving together, all the while using and reinforcing the new target language of the activity or project, they are taking

responsibility for their own learning and developing learner autonomy. While outdoor projects have the immediate strengths of sensory stimulation and novelty, we can co-create meaningful and engaging group projects indoors with the help of our learners if we pay attention to their interests and needs.

Back to our examples of multicultural learner groups, one other opportunity for indoor or outdoor groupwork we can pull from them is the chance for cross-cultural exchange. Obviously, this opportunity depends on the context and make up of the class, but even if you are teaching a group of students from the same place, we can remind ourselves that everyone has a different background and perspective to share. One (indoor or outdoor) activity, which can be easily expanded to a full lesson, that can either serve as a cultural smorgasbord or a glimpse into personal histories is to have everyone think of a simple game from their childhood. After working on clarifying the language of the rules and (ideally minimal) materials needed, students can, that same day or in a following class, take turns teaching the class their game and leading them through it. If the class is quite large, multiple students can set up different game “stations” for the other students to visit in arranged groups in a round robin fashion. Here, perhaps in the comfort of our own classroom, we have an activity that checks many boxes of what good outdoor education strives toward. Students are using language and learning through, literally, fun and games that create a movement-based, sensory experience. Students are engaging together in a shared, collaborative experience. Providing space for the students to teach and lead their games is an opportunity for student-directed learning and learner autonomy, as well as possibly for cross-cultural exchange. This also provides for, if not novelty of setting, novelty of activity. Finally, the language developed and knowledge displayed in this activity can be built on and unpacked in a subsequent lesson. Students might put together a book of game instructions or

further discuss where and how they originally learned these games. For an experiential learning wrap up, the class might reflect on their experiences as both learners and teachers and discuss what they are taking away from the activity.

### **Questions to Consider**

By exploring this topic, I have gained a great deal of insight into and inspiration for how I can incorporate outdoor learning, or at least its values and strengths, into my own English classes moving forward. With the questions below, I hope to provide a useful framework for teachers (myself included) to consider their resources and opportunities for creating engaging, novel learning experiences both outside and inside the classroom.

#### *Outside the Classroom*

- What spaces on the school grounds or in the neighborhood could be used as novel learning environments?
- What partnerships with community members or organizations might yield outdoor/outside-the-classroom projects, lessons, or activities? (For example, gardeners, artists, neighbors of the school, museums, local service project initiatives)
- What partnerships with other teachers in my context/community could be built to design multidisciplinary learning experiences outdoors?
- What are the obstacles to getting my students outside? What could such partnerships do to mitigate these obstacles?
- Where is the overlap between outside-the-classroom learning and my students' specific language needs and priorities? How can outdoor/outside-the-classroom learning experiences serve those needs and priorities?
- How can I use outdoor learning to build on and complement what we are doing inside the classroom?

#### *Inside the Classroom*

- How can the classroom space be transformed to create a novel learning space?
- How can the transformed space relate to and enhance what we are learning?
- What realia relevant to the subject can be brought in to provide a hands-on learning experience?
- What partnerships with community members might yield engaging in-class projects, lessons, or activities? Who might be able to visit the class and what learning aids could they bring?

- What partnerships with other teachers in my context/community could be built to design multidisciplinary learning experiences inside the classroom?

### *In All Settings*

- What novel learning experiences can engage my students and further their English?
- How can play and movement-oriented activities incorporate the target language and further the learning goals for a given lesson?
- How can I support collaborative learning amongst my students?
- How can I help foster a sense of connection to place for my students in my context?
- How can I build multidisciplinary learning into my lessons? What colleagues or community members might be good resources in this regard?
- What are the opportunities for student-direction in this project/lesson/activity? How can learner autonomy come into play here? What opportunities for cross-cultural sharing does student-directed learning provide here?
- What learning resources do the context's setting and surrounding community provide?

### **Reflections**

As I started out on this project, I was confident that further investigating two areas I care deeply about would be an edifying and rewarding experience. However, I really had little idea where that investigation would lead in terms of their juncture as written about in scholarship. I wondered if I would unearth a study outlining a potential dream job or context, such as an ESL-focused mountaineering camp or a riparian language school that regularly holds class in canoes. So far, I have not. The scholarship I have found on the merger of ESL and outdoor education, which is not particularly broad, outlines less adventurous pursuits. That is not at all to say I have been disappointed by my findings. The scholarship and resources I have come across in this project, both on the combination of the fields and outdoor education in general, have already altered my view on teaching and learning. After reading the accounts of how ESL, science, and other areas are being combined to create such richly educational sensory experiences for learners, my mind has been racing with possibilities for different projects. Through researching

and sorting out my thoughts through writing, I feel I have gained a refreshed and refreshing perspective on all the possibilities for meaningful, engaging classes, as well as on the vast wealth of resources available to us as language teachers both outside the classroom doors and within, including those inherent in our learners through their richly varied experiences and perspectives. Additionally, in sussing out the values and qualities present in both good outdoor education and good language education, I realize that I am making these observations through the prism of my own values and experience. These are the values and qualities most dear to me as both a teacher and learner, and therefore, I believe, have been most readily identifiable. In articulating why they demand our attention and how we can ensure they are present in our classes, whatever the context or location, I have reaffirmed and strengthened my core beliefs as a teacher. This reaffirmation, coupled with the exploration of what is being done at the crossroads of these disciplines and what has yet to be done (see: ESL hits the trails and waterways), has reinvigorated my zest for both fields and illuminated potential pathways for my future in teaching. I am excited for and hopeful about the possibilities to which further work in this direction will lead, especially in this age when we can all use a clearer sense of connection to the natural world and to each other.

### **Additional Resources**

Werewolf Game Rules link: <https://www.eblong.com/zarf/werewolf.html>

(UK) Council for Learning Outside the Classroom: <https://www.lotc.org.uk/about/manifesto/>

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