

Into the Woods: My Journey Away from Outdoor Classroom and Toward Learning with and from Outdoor Places

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My Journey Begins

This paper reflects my pedagogical shift from what I called an outdoor classroom to learning in the outdoors through an emergent co-constructivist theoretical framework, using a rights-based lens, rooted in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, that requires listening to young children and actively inviting their perspectives (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011). I will be addressing three key shifts in my practice: unlearning the label outdoor classroom (OC), valuing Wolastoqey knowledges, and co-constructing learning. These shifts have pushed me to acknowledge my continued colonized teaching and generalization of Indigenous knowledge, and how this contributes to the ongoing challenges and violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples.

I will connect with the research of Enid Elliott and Frances Krusekopf (2017, 2018) as they established their nature kindergarten program, Sooke Nature Kindergarten in the Sooke School District in British Columbia, part of the traditional territory of the Coast Salish First Nation's in southern Vancouver Island. While the scope of their work – establishing a nature kindergarten within the public school system – is much larger than my goal of embedding learning in the outdoors into my teaching practice, their research presented both similarities and challenges to my work, thinking, and practice, which I will examine throughout this paper.

Unlearning the Label OC

Before introducing this space to the children, I did an intentional walk through to identify the size, boundary markers and safety hazards. I created a plan for how I would use the space to extend the children's learning, how I would supervise the children while in the space, safety measures required such as a first aid kit and injury plan, and a means of contacting the school office should an emergency arise. The setting of these boundaries exposes my lack of curiosity about the **place**. In using the term 'space' I was ignoring the land's history, stories, and local narratives (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018). The safety hazards I sought to identify were visible and obvious, such as sharp branches at eye level. Within my definition of "safety" I was thinking only of myself and the children, and only in terms of physical harm, such as cuts, bumps, and scratches. I was not considering the safety of the more-than-humans that exist in the place we were entering; the harm our presence would inflict on them. In supervising the children, I was not honouring them as agents in the co-constructing of learning. I was maintaining my colonized role as knowledge holder rather than inviting the children to participate in learning alongside me and choosing whether they adopt or reject information. (Wark et al., 2017)

As I think with Blaise et al. (2021) I now understand I was more interested in what they call out as "destination- and education-focused events that are full of regulation and control" (p. 166), focusing on the human child body and what they would be learning from nature rather than the relational intermingling of humans with the place, plants, and animals. I now understand how I was seeing the place through a colonial lens of control and management, a lens that did not consider the more-than-humans who inhabited the place. I claimed ownership of this place as I

named it The Outdoor Classroom (which I abbreviated to the OC), the more-than-humans that exist here, and the children that learn and move in and through this place.

In their writing, Elliot and Krusekopf (2018) use the name Sooke Nature Kindergarten to identify and label the **program**, not the **place**. The place is forest, beach, ocean, creeks, forest, land, shorelines, bluffs, and hills (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017). My naming of the **place** as ‘the OC’ was an act of colonial violence: I was disregarding the more-than-humans, the natural materials, and the narratives of place – the land’s history and its stories. I saw nature as external and separate rather than entangled with and inseparable from. Through this lens, I was a destructive interloper planning to use the natural place as a tool to meet curricular outcomes. As my colonial mindset is disrupted, I have stopped using the name ‘the OC’ when referring to the outdoor place in which we regularly move and learn. I have found this challenging, and it takes concentrated effort as I re-shape the ideas that have shaped my thinking. When I do say ‘the OC’, I hear it; I stop and I correct myself, acknowledging my “move toward a pedagogical practice that activates attunements to the interconnections within the worlds we wander through” (Blaise et al., 2021, p. 167).

Valuing Wolastoqey Knowledges

Elliot and Krusekopf speak into one of their guiding principles, *Aboriginal Ways of Knowing*, and the feedback they received from the local Indigenous community suggesting the wording gave an impression of “assuming a universal Aboriginal understanding of nature” (2017, p. 384). This prompted them to re-consider and re-name the principle as *Local Traditional Knowledge*, recognizing “Canada has many different Indigenous groups each with their own language, narratives and knowledge unique to their particular place” (2018, p. 119). I pull from this re-cognition as I consider my now former use of the term *Indigenous Learning*. In using this terminology, I was not recognizing the multiple layers and narratives of place but continued to see and teach “through the history of colonisation and oppression that demeaned and disregarded both people and stories” (2017, p. 119) of the place in which we learn, live, and move: I was teaching, not learning. Elliot and Krusekopf’s re-consideration has disrupted my thinking, pushing me to acknowledge my continued colonized teaching and generalization of Indigenous knowledge, challenging me to stop teaching and to start learning with and from the Wolastoqey community, moving from *Indigenous Teaching* to *Valuing Wolastoqey Knowledges*.

Enacting my educational and treaty responsibilities to articles 62 to 65 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action², the children and I regularly read and discuss Indigenous authored and illustrated books such as *Sometimes I Feel Like a Fox* (Daniel, 2015) and *You Hold Me Up* (Smith & Daniel, 2021). We observe Orange Shirt Day (www.orangeshirtday.org) and have conversations about residential schools (<https://peopleforeducation.ca/calls-to-action-for-education>). Drawing on Elliot and Krusekopf, (2018) “through a growing sense of place, children should begin to appreciate their connections within their local community” (p. 118) and histories of place, I recognize that while we are Canadian in context, we live, learn, and move on the Wolastokuk homelands of Pilick, also called Kingsclear First Nation, a nearby Wolastoqey community. I recognize the need for

² [What Are the Truth & Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action & How Are We Working Toward Achieving Them Today? \(reconciliationeducation.ca\)](https://reconciliationeducation.ca)

learning with and from the Wolastoq community in building an understanding of the layers of complexity held by the land and the life beyond the classroom (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017).

I reached out to Anglophone School District West's First Nations Education Subject Area Coordinators, Molly Brown, Wolastoqiyik (people of the beautiful and bountiful river) from Neqotkuk, and Sarah Francis³, Wolastoqiyik (people of the beautiful and bountiful river) from Neqotkuk, to learn the narratives and knowledge that belongs to the place in which we were learning (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018). Sarah and Molly came to the classroom to lead us in a drumming and Wolastoqey language lesson. We sat in a circle and together we listened to the drum and took turns gently tapping out a few beats. We practiced the pronunciation of Wolastoq (beautiful and bountiful river), woliwon (thank you), kwe' or 'qey (hello), and apcec knemiyol (see you later), and we discussed the Wolastoq that flows through our city. After this session, the children and I included these four words in our conversations, and we carry them to outdoor places we enter. We greet the more-than-humans who inhabit these places as we enter by saying kwey. As we leave, we thank them for sharing their places with us by saying woliwon and we let them know we will be returning by saying apcec knemiyol.

Elliot and Krusekopf (2018) write "[c]hildren should understand that they are embedded in a circle of communities" (p. 118). Dolores Crofton Macdonald, a First Nations Wolastoqiyik Welamukotuk tribal member and a community member of The Houlton Band Maliseet Indians in Maine, USA, is a fourth-year pre-service educator in the UNB Wabanaki Bachelor of Education Degree program. Dolores joined the children and I this winter for her nine-week pre-service educator practicum. As we learned with and from Dolores, we expanded our language learning to include the phrase nil teliwis (my name is), 'koselomal (I love you), the numbers one through ten, and the Wolastoqey words of the Wolastoq Song (the honour song of the Wolastoqiyik, people of the beautiful and bountiful river). Dolores shared history of the Wabanaki First Nations, the original people of this territory who have taken care of Skitkomiq (Mother Earth) and lived here since time immemorial; those who have never given their land away but instead signed peace and friendship treaties long ago with the colonizers. I carry this learning with me into the outdoor place, re-considering my interactions with the more-than-humans who exist in the place. The depth of my curiosities, the disruptions of my colonial views as owner and user of the place, recognizing I am a guest of this land.

Morgan (last name withheld at her request), mother of a Cree child in our class, from the Moosimon Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, and I had met to discuss how we could learn with and from her. She explained how she had been smudging with her daughter at home, and asked if she could come to the classroom to share the smudging ceremony with us. She brought an abalone shell and wooden base for it to rest on, the four sacred medicines: sage (to cleanse away negativity), cedar (purifying, protection, healing), tobacco (for prayer), sweet grass (to bring in positive energy), and an eagle feather (a reminder of a person's connection to Creator). She taught:

We are going to light a smudge and honour our ancestors and Mother Earth. We will light the four sacred medicines: sage, cedar, tobacco, sweet grass. As we light them, we honour each medicine, saying their names out loud or in our minds. We smudge to start things in a good way and to clear our minds up of the negative we may be carrying and need to let go. We ask creator for help with that. We smudge each other's back to protect each other from the things we may not

³ Since the original writing of this paper, Sarah is now the Director of First Nations Education for Anglophone School District West.

see coming towards us. It's to connect to spirit and your inner self and how we treat each other including our standing ones (the trees), the winged ones (the birds), the finned ones (the fish), the little bugs and insects. We honour grandmother moon and father sky (the sun) and of course mother earth. It's a beautiful ceremony and sometimes we won't know why our spirit asks us to the smudge.

Morgan explained the steps and rationale of the cleansing process, how we can use our hands or an eagle feather to guide the smoke over us, and how, when the smudge is complete, we can place the remnants under a tree to signify that negative energy is placed outside our lives. She also taught us that smudging is voluntary; everyone is welcome to participate, but no one is ever forced to do so. She gave us time to see each medicine, to touch and smell, to ask questions. She patiently answered each question. When she had completed the teaching, Morgan passed the eagle feather to her daughter, asked if anyone would like to participate, and together, she and her daughter completed the ceremony with those who joined. Elliot and Krusekopf (2018) remind us “these teachings are rooted in the land” (p. 121) and the importance of beginning “the journey to understanding the layers of complexity held by the land and the life beyond the classroom” (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017, p. 387)

Co-Constructing Learning

In planning their Nature Kindergarten, Elliot and Krusekopf (2018) write of forming an advisory committee consisting of “early childhood educators (ECE), biologists, park naturalists, First Nations’ educators and environmentalists, as well as representatives from local post-secondary institutions” (p. 116) from their community to assist in establishing an educational vision and guiding principles for their program. The vision valued the entanglements of the children with the natural materials and the more-than-humans that make up our world and held hope for the rich opportunities for the children to build multiple identities as learners and community members (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018). Elliot and Krusekopf’s (2018) advisory committee, which “came from different segments of [their] community...from a broad range of backgrounds” (p. 116) prompted me to re-examine my practice and I realized I was still working with a colonial and patriarchal mindset, operating as the holder of the knowledge. I had ascertained administrative and parental support as an established educator in the school and community for over 15 years. However, this was not enough to move my learning beyond outdoor classroom and toward learning with and from these outdoor places. Molly Brown and Sarah Francis, ASD-West School District’s First Nations Education Subject Area Coordinators, Dolores Crofton Macdonald, pre-service educator, and Morgan, parent in the classroom, are now part of my learning committee, “providing children [and myself] with experiences that might broaden [our] understanding of and connection to our local landscape” (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017, p. 380). My experience with this learning committee is comparable to what was shared about the advisory committee across the research. In learning alongside these individuals, in the spirit of creating rich and meaningful educational experiences for the children and myself, I have been able to examine my pedagogy and guiding principles through multiple lenses. They provoke me to think deeply, encourage me to ask questions, and disrupt my colonial lens.

Children are agents in the co-constructing of learning. This was deeply apparent when they interrupted the boundaries of ‘the OC’ I had originally established during one of our visits to the outdoor place, they asked, “What is past that big log?” They wondered what might be beyond the log, but they would not go past as I had named it the ‘edge’ of the OC. When I told

them I didn't know, they asked if they could explore and find out. I paused, their eyes on me, waiting for my decision. Not only were they challenging the boundary I had implemented as the decision maker, but they were also exposing my lack of curiosity about the outdoor place. We were experiencing "tensions that [had] to be negotiated" (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017, p. 387), brought about by their eagerness to see and seize opportunities and my hesitancy. The outdoors has agency. It affected change on them as they actively engaged with it, building reciprocal relationships with the place and the more-than-humans that exist there. The outdoors called to the children and they, in turn, called to me. Through our numerous visits to the outdoor place, we had developed what Elliot and Krusekopf (2017) identify as "communities of safety where they trusted the teachers as well as their classmates to care for them, physically and emotionally" (p. 385). I leaned into this trust, shrugged my shoulders, said, "Why not?", and they were off. That response opened a whole new world for the children and adults as we explored and, together, determined new boundaries that offered more freedom yet still kept us close enough to maintain our community of safety.

My Journey Continues

As I continue to wander in and through this place, curious "worlds are opened and [I] come to know this place and others differently." (Blaise et al., 2021, p. 168) Through learning with and from place, valuing Wolastoqey knowledges, and co-constructing learning with and from children, place, Indigenous peoples, and community, I become more intent on interacting with the place and the more-than-human rather than the controlling colonial histories managing them. I am in a constant state of learning and becoming. While my colonial lens has been disrupted, I have found this challenging, and it takes concentrated effort as I re-shape the ideas that have shaped my thinking. I am learning to listen closely, to stop and correct myself, and to enact my responsibility in learning the true histories of the land on which I learn, live, and move.

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