



# Bringing nature into on-line learning

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## **A. Ideas for increasing engagement and bringing nature into on-line teaching**

The [Great Minds Think Outside](#) team includes outdoor/nature educators from a wide range of organisations and backgrounds. We deliver hands-on, outdoor, professional learning sessions for teachers on their own school grounds. To keep reaching teachers during the pandemic, we've adapted our sessions and created a virtual session. We have found these activities work well virtually, as well as in-person. Have fun!

- Encourage movement (“stand up, everybody ....”) - encourage students to go outside (for breaks or class-related activities – as long as all students are in situations where this can be done safely, with appropriate supervision); when going outside is not possible, encourage looking outside and engaging with nature through the window.
- Velcro elbows – just as when gathering a group outside, you can have your students stand up, raise their elbows, and align themselves so their elbows reach the edges of their screen squares. Everybody pretends that their elbows are attached to their neighbours' elbows (the people in adjacent squares on their screen). Then everyone detaches while making the sound Velcro makes when pulled apart.
- Use a magic orb – these orbs are invisible and repel all virus particles and negativity. Explain that you have an invisible orb and whoever has it, it's their turn to speak (to answer a question, share an observation, ask a question, etc.). Cup the orb in your hand and 'pass' it (act as if throwing a ball) to a student. They 'catch' the orb, make their contribution to the discussion, and then 'pass' the orb to someone else. These orbs have been passed back and forth across New Brunswick and across the whole country. They work really well – and get students participating as a group, as well as getting a bit of movement (or more, depending on how enthusiastic the passing and catching become).
- Assign outdoor activities - ask your students to go outside, do an activity, then report back to the class. This can be assigned as homework. Some activities that work well are described below.

## **B. Descriptions of activities that students can do outside, at home (or day care)**

One of the many benefits of learning outside is the ease at which the different senses can be incorporated into activities.

1. Fistful of Sounds – Stand quietly outside and listen for sounds. Try to focus on nature sounds. Hold one hand up and when you hear a sound fold in your thumb. For each distinct sound you hear, fold in another finger until you have a ‘fistful’ of five sounds. Share the sounds that you heard. This can also be done inside the house – it can be fun to see how many clicks, tick-tocks, and hums are in our indoor background soundscape. Are there any ‘nature’ sounds inside?

This activity is popular around the world (even during pandemic lockdowns):

<https://www.facebook.com/LeesonHouse/videos/a-fistful-of-sounds/928197757599989/>

2. Sit Spot – this is a fundamental activity for many outdoor education programs and forest schools. Students chose a spot that feels special to them and then visit it repeatedly throughout the school year or over years. This is a spot to sit quietly, to listen, to look closely, to think, and maybe to write in a journal or do a focussed activity (such as Fistful of Sounds or making a Sound Map, below). Repeated visits to the same spot create a sense of connection and can provide a place of refuge from the cares of one’s day. When learning from home, students can choose a spot in their yard or nearby – or even in the house, preferably by a window that looks out onto a natural setting (even a single tree). For younger children, start with just a few minutes at the sit spot. As children become accustomed to spending time at their spot, the length of time can be extended. This is a wonderful activity for elementary students, but it’s also very rewarding for middle and high school students, who benefit from time to de-stress outside and connect with nature. Getting to know your spot and experience it throughout the changing seasons develops a real sense of place and understanding of nature’s cycles.

3. Sound Map – All that’s needed is paper, a pencil and a clipboard – and maybe a mat to sit on. Find a place outside (if you have a Sit Spot, that’s an excellent place!). Draw a ‘x’ in the middle of the paper. Then listen to the sounds around you. Indicate those sounds on a map, either with simple drawings of the sound-maker (e.g. a bird or a car) or a symbol representing the sound (e.g. musical notes for a bird’s song) or by writing a descriptive word. Is the sound in front of you, behind you? Is it moving – if so, can you indicate the direction of movement on your map? Some sounds may be those of human activities. If there are lots of human activities sounds, mark those and keep on listening. Often nature’s sounds are quieter and you’ll hear them if you listen just a bit longer.

#### 4. Framing Nature (indoors or outdoors)



- Materials: one empty frame per student (can be a mat for a photo frame, or can be made from cardboard or even construction paper – but something sturdy is best).
  - Frame can be taken outside to ‘frame’ a nice view, a favourite tree, to illustrate a feeling.
  - Frame can also be taped to a window to capture a view; students can then draw or paint that view, or write about it.
  - The idea is to look through the frame from a variety of perspectives, to frame different views, before choosing one to focus on.
  - TEACHER PROMPTS (you can take this in many directions; some of these are from Back2Nature’s great ‘Into Nature’ guide (<https://www.back2nature.ca/resources-research/> )
    1. Frame a scene that reflects your mood.
    2. Frame a place/object that represents to you a character or setting in a short story read in class.
    3. Frame a view to show classmates what you like to see outside your window.
    4. Frame a scene that reminds you of an experience in your life.
    5. Draw a picture of what you see. Repeat this tomorrow – or next week – after a change in the weather, etc. Or think about how the view looks in different seasons – what would you see in summer? Spring? Fall?
    6. Write about your picture - descriptive writing, a poem, a story based on the picture.
    7. As a class, look for patterns or themes among the pictures students share.
    8. As a class, discuss what things are living, non-living in the views framed. Do you see any animals or birds? Do you think there are some there that you cannot see? What about plants? Do some of the plants look different now than in summer?
5. Nature Object - Students can be invited to find nature objects outside that can be brought in for show-and-tell or other activities, or they can be invited to look for nature objects inside their home (rocks, sticks, plants). Stories or poems can be created based on the object or the object can be drawn or incorporated into artwork.

*For more ideas and resources, check out our website: [www.learningoutside.ca](http://www.learningoutside.ca)*