

A Forest Framework

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All photos provided by Ian Shanahan

by **Chloe Faught** and **Gillian Petrini**

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES you'll find five lesson outlines that you can use to help guide your students in their understanding of what it means to learn with and from forests. Part of this involves understanding our relationship to and with the Earth and, within these lessons, our specific connections to and with forests. Forests are critical to the health of our planet and the health of our species. Forests function as cohesive ecosystems, reliant on the various life forms within them to grow and thrive. This cohesion provides an interesting analogy for how we might look at education and learning with and from one another, inclusive of the natural world as a teacher. When we look at learning through and with a lens of the forest, it offers a unique framework for a pedagogical approach to learning. When learning through a forest lens, one recognizes and values interconnectedness to all things, the need for reciprocal relationships, the importance of nurturing conditions that invite opportunities for discovery and wonder, and the value of time to explore and allow for learning to emerge, naturally.



Learning through a forest lens is interconnected:

Interconnectedness

We frame our lessons using an Indigenous worldview of interconnectedness. In the local nations on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the concept is called Nuts'a'maat (Halqu'emeylem, Lekwungen) or Tsawalk (Nuuchanulth). As taught to us by our mentor John Harris, a member of the Snuneymuxw Nation, Nuts'a'maat means 'we are all one' or 'everything is connected.' Within this teaching is the importance of relationship, both to each other as human beings and to other beings. "If you view the trees in your yard, or the salmon in your river, or the whales swimming up the channel, or the eagles flying in the sky — if you view all things as your relatives, you are less likely to do things that will impact them adversely" ([John Harris, February 4, 2022](#)). You will likely find that there are similar teachings in the Indigenous communities in your region and we encourage you to find them out. It is beneficial to engage in all learning with a foundation of understanding of where one is, whose lands one is on, and with an understanding of our

interwoven connection with place. An integral practice used to help build a sense of interconnectedness is through circle practice, which encourages sharing, communication, and coming together.

Principles of circle practice

Circles have been a form of non-hierarchical gathering for decision-making, sharing stories, and celebrating since humans have been on this Earth. Circles are a powerful means of connecting with one another to build community. If key principles are practiced, the circle can become a contained place for students to be heard as they share a depth of thoughts and feelings. This practice can bring about a sense of solidarity and a sense of interconnectedness. If guidelines are in place and clear intentions are laid out for the circle, a respectful space and a culture of trust can be established within the class. Establishing expectations for respectful behavior ensures that everyone feels they can speak openly and be heard. There are many resources available on circle practice as referred to below. Here are four principles to highlight with students prior to engaging in circle:

- **Speak from the heart** (speak your truth; be genuine and authentic; your words are your own; use “I” statements)
- **Listen from the heart** (respectful listening means listening with your whole body, ears, and eyes — giving full attention to whomever is sharing)
- **Be open-hearted** (embrace the chance to connect; be accepting of varying thoughts and ideas; be non-judgmental)
- **Get to the heart of the matter** (be succinct enough so everyone has time to share)

In addition to the two principles above, here are two other important guidelines to frame your circle practice:

- **Silence is honored** (Anyone can pass; no one is ever forced to share)



Orange *Mycena* (*Mycena leaiana*)

- **Confidentiality** (no one shares what was shared by others outside of the circle)
Principles Adapted from Leighton. H. (2021). Principles for the Way of Council [Unpublished manuscript].

Learning through a forest lens is reciprocal:

Reciprocity involves the engagement in exchanges that are mutually beneficial. It includes a balanced back and forth of both action and responsibility. The act of reciprocity happens in the natural world all the time. The symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi through their mycorrhizae (see Lesson 1 to learn more) is one such example. Trees benefit from the nutrients the mycorrhizae gather from the soil and, in return, trees offer to fungi glucose (sugars) produced during photosynthesis. Mutual exchange, mutual responsibility. Such exchanges and responsibilities of reciprocity between humans and the natural world have been strained with an extractivist model plaguing our interactions for so long, leading us to a climate and ecological crisis. Engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the natural world involves understanding our responsibility within this relationship and committing to a two-way exchange, one that not solely benefits humans. Examples of actions of reciprocity with nature include preservation and protection, appreciation for what is consumed, gratitude, gift giving, and acts of service (for both human and non-human communities).

Gratitude

We believe that it is crucial to ground our learning in gratitude and respect. Lessons often start or end learning in this manner with a circle of gratitude or with a guided question for continuing to practice gratitude. Educators are encouraged to use the practices of gratitude detailed in these lessons at every opportunity.

Circle prompt examples for gratitude:

As an opening, here are two examples:

“Today at this moment, I am grateful for... because...”

“One thing I love about this place, this forest, is...”

As a closing, you can consider something as simple as

“One thing that I am grateful for in our day together/this class/this experience is...”

Learning through a forest lens is emergent:

Some of the most powerful learning comes not in the perfect lesson but rather through establishing rich conditions for curiosity and wonder. Like a fertile soil that is optimal for growth, a thoughtful learning environment that centers on curiosity and student interest is ripe with opportunity for meaningful, authentic discovery guided by student interest and enthusiasm. Emergent learning — learning guided by students’ evolving thinking and understanding of the world — requires an openness to students’ leading; it requires the valuing of time in a busy school schedule and the patience to set the groundwork for opportunities to spark curiosity about the world around us. Emergent learning is slow-paced. It is the antidote to the fast pace of life. It is a chance to slow down, to savor and be deeply immersed in the moment of learning together. Moving at a slower pace allows for expanse and depth. It allows for questions to arise



American Beech (*Fagus americana*) nuts

and answers to be revealed, often leading to further questions and wonderings. A slow pace and time allowance is truly a gift, empowering students as learners and deeply seeding the way they view themselves and their relationships with and responsibility to the world around them.

How to use the lesson outlines:

In the following lesson outlines, we have provided you with some background knowledge on forests as well as the tools for helping students observe nearby forest communities and engage in dialogue and critical thinking, using pedagogies to spark imagination. The five lessons can be used in isolation or as part of a forest framework. While each lesson has listed age groups and suggested subject areas, there are information and activities for younger learners that may be tweaked for older learners. We look forward to hearing about how you and your students have used our work.

Chloe Faught is a 5th-generation settler from the Lekwungen, **WSÁNEĆ**, and Halq'emeylem territories (known also as Greater Victoria, British Columbia, Canada), who has a deep love for her home and is grateful every day for being able to live on these lands and learn. She is a secondary science and social studies teacher with a passion for bringing people together and connecting them to the Earth. She strives through her lessons and through her work, both within and outside of her teaching practice, to move our

institutions and communities to alter our ways of living in a way that will enable us to continue to flourish on Earth.

Gillian Petrini is the Healthy Environments for Learning Day (HELD) Project Coordinator for the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE). Her background includes teaching for over 15 years with a passion for promoting healthy and sustainable environments, nurturing our relationship with the land, and connecting students to place. Gillian holds a BEd and MEd from the University of Victoria with a focus on environmental sciences. She also serves on the executive of the local chapter of EEPsA, the Environmental Educator Provincial Specialist Association (based in British Columbia, Canada).

Resources:

1. The article, *Pedagogical Talking Circles: Decolonizing Education through Relational Indigenous Frameworks*, focuses on talking circles as a pedagogical practice of decolonizing education. P. Barkaskas, D. Gladwin. (2021). *Pedagogical Talking Circles: Decolonizing Education through Relational Indigenous Frameworks*. *Journal of Teaching and Learning* Vol. 15, No. 1 pp. 20-38 Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1303475.pdf>.
2. This is the introductory portion of the document *BC First Nations Land, Title, and Governance Teacher Resource Guide*. Within this chapter there is an overview of talking and sharing circles. First Nations Education Steering Committee. (2019). *BC First Nations Land, Title and Governance. Planning for Instruction*. Retrieved from <http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/1.5-Planning-for-Instruction.pdf>

All extra materials needed for the following lessons are available online through this link:

<https://greenteacher.com/gt135-lesson-supplements/>