

## **How can we incorporate nature connection into our work as learning developers?**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

This poster presents reflections on a year of facilitating regular outdoor 'walk and talk' activities embedded within a taught academic skills module. The aims were to foster connections between students, to deepen their sense of belonging, and to positively impact on their mental health by inviting them to spend time in local green spaces during timetabled class hours.

Recent studies have found an increase in university students reporting mental health conditions (Amirkham, Bowers and Logan, 2020). As a result, student mental health has become a subject of much focus, with suggestions that it is now at 'crisis' level (Thorley, 2017; Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, 2019; Lewis and Bolton, 2023). The University Mental Health Charter has highlighted that support should not only be based on reactive interventions when a student is in crisis, but also on the consistent promotion of good mental health across the university (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). The Charter recommends that universities take an active and holistic approach in the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing. One aspect of this has seen the encouragement to use local 'green spaces', as evidence supports being outdoors and being around nature as an antidote to stress (Holt et al., 2019).

Learning developers are in a unique position to have a positive impact on mental health amongst the students they reach, and I wish to open up a conversation with interested colleagues about how we might incorporate activities involving nature connection into our work.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; university; nature connection.



# How can we incorporate nature connection into our work as Learning Developers?

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## Context

- Universities are taking an active and holistic approach in the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing, following suggestions that it is at 'crisis' level (Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, 2019; Hubble and Bolton, 2020; Thorley, 2017).
- Encouragement to use local 'green spaces', as evidence supports being outdoors and being around nature is an antidote to stress (Holt, et al. 2019).
- Academic and support staff as 'agents of wellbeing' (Houghton and Anderson, 2017).
- The unique role of Learning Developers as 'third space' professionals (Whitchurch, 2013).

## Walk and Talk

- Campus is next to a large public park
- Students encouraged to use their break times to go for a 'walk and talk'
- Sometimes topics were given, but mostly it was an open invitation to walk
- Students re-named the walks 'wellbeing walks'
- Distinctly higher energy levels observed in those who had walked at lunch:
  - Reported they felt more engaged with discussion, uplifted
  - More focused, i.e. answering questions and taking notes
- Limited to sunny days; reluctance to walk in poor weather

## Discussion: How can we incorporate nature connection into our work?

- Encourage students to go for a walk and talk independently
- Offer walk and talk appointments with us (Psaros, 2022)
- Using nature imagery and metaphors with students grappling with abstract concepts
- Walking podcasts (Biber and Heidorn, 2021, adapted from the walking classroom)
- For our own professional development. Walk and plan sessions, walking meetings
- Brainstorming ideas outside using 'loose parts' as props
- Use outside spaces to reflect, have a mindful moment, get into the study mindset
- Embedding wellbeing practices across the curriculum (Houghton and Anderson, 2017)
- During induction and transition. Use the outside spaces to do activities.

## References

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Image 1. Poster presentation (Gregory, 2023).

## ***Community response***

The poster was presented at the online conference, and benefited from a lively discussion within the poster presentation session:

It was so nice to see your contribution on the use of outdoor spaces to support learning development (or other learning opportunities more generally).

I really enjoyed your poster and listening to the audio description - thank you for sharing.

The poster provided a great opportunity for the community to reflect on their campus and green spaces:

I currently work on a beautiful green site and am really intrigued to see how I can incorporate this into my work. I already use nature images very frequently during sessions as I find it calming for everyone

Connections were drawn to the conference at Northampton, and the great outdoor session run by Psaros (2022):

I was very inspired by Psaros' (2022) session at ALDCon last year, focused on the use of urban walks for dissertation support. Your poster expanded the potential of outdoor learning, and I particularly liked the element of encouraging students to do this independently.

Your poster reminded me of a presentation on walking consultations at a previous ALDCon, although I sadly can't remember which year it was. I'd love to try those out, but also love the idea of students going off to walk and talk with handouts on various topics.

The benefit for 'walk and talk' was well represented, and it was particularly beneficial to see the connection drawn to Learning Development:

Loved the overgrown metaphor for the curriculum and academic skills cutting a path through this and helping the students to find a way through! Something around how practising these things, such as active reading, is like making a well trodden path, the more you travel along it, the easier it becomes.

To add to the above, making a connection to how the brain learns and the forging of neural pathways.

More fundamentally, the session led to reflections of impact and future practice across the community:

Reflecting further, I wonder if AI could pose some solution to some of the disadvantages of outdoor learning. One challenge of a walking meeting is recording thoughts (very hard to write while walking). It now might be much more possible to record learning from such walks, and later transcribe with an AI.

We're considering writing bootcamp type sessions interspersed with 5-10 minute movement breaks every hour or so, as one of my colleagues studied contemporary dance. My dream is that one day, our learning spaces will be multi-sensory spaces that mimic the natural environment and encourage various degrees of natural, continual movement (or fidgeting) while working. Joan Vernikos has produced very inspiring work on the importance of this (Vernikos, 2016).

I like the idea of sending students off with a handout to walk and talk, before returning for discussion. I also wondered if this would be something that would also have an impact on belonging/cohesiveness if students had the opportunity to walk/talk with someone they don't usually speak to.

Could you use botany apps and/or print field guides to identify wild plant species in your parkland? And then create little art books base on these as outputs?

## ***Author's reflection***

It was really encouraging to hear the enthusiasm for incorporating nature connection into our practice. I certainly feel that walk and talk contributes to students' sense of belonging, especially those who have travelled far from home to start their course. Another way to encourage students to 'keep it up' would be to accompany them and offer walk and talk appointments, as it benefits us too! Using nature in metaphors to help students grapple with abstract concepts is something I think we all do. I like the idea of encouraging students to create their own metaphors to map out their experiences as a reflective practice.

On reflection, I see nature connection as just one way of extending our practice beyond the bounded notion of the classroom/library space and am interested in exploring other ways of doing this. Many colleagues were inspired by the workshop led by Chenée Psaros (2022) at a previous ALDCon. Chenée proposed that we 'consider a collaborative project across the UK with learning developers exploiting their very focused external spaces (one learning development team do woodland walks, another team do coastal walks, another uses museum space, another in cafes only etc.). From that, create a reflective comparison paper/blog/etc.' We have since met to discuss starting a community of practice focused on learning beyond the classroom, so please contact the author if you wish to join.

## ***Acknowledgements***

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Jodi Gregory has been a lecturer since 2005, starting out teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages in further education before moving into learning development in higher education. As a qualitative researcher, Jodi is interested in the situated, lived experiences of mature students. Based in Cumbria, she enthusiastically brings her love of the great outdoors into her work with students. She lives on a Herdwick sheep farm and hangs out with the trees in her free time.

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