

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Or understanding the wonderful world of stuff and the associated words.

**Pick up something in front of you.** Have a close look at it. Do you know it's naming word, noun?

Describe it in terms of shape, colour, size and texture, adjectives.

What does it look like, smell like, feel like, taste like, sound like?

Welcome to the world of seeing things for the first time, just like early learners do. How much do we, as adults, take for granted about the world around us and how we got to know things for ourselves?

When children are young they ask, continually, "What is it?" and a bemused parent repeats the name of the object, which then gets extended through colour, shape etc, in an effort to broaden the vocabulary, sometimes just to make the "conversation" a little more interesting.

If you have two objects, then you can compare them in a variety of ways, starting with the sensory experiences above, introducing the language of comparison, rougher, smoother, heavier, lighter...

You can explore similarities and differences, for example, a handful of different leaves allows sorting and the beginnings of classification. It can also embed the idea of simile.

Things that move can be exciting, as then you can seek words that try to describe the movement, beginning to incorporate a range of verbs and adverbs.

What is it made from? This could be the beginning of some kind of materials science explorations, or perhaps also incorporating geography, as the materials may have been imported.



**Feel it, talk it, think it, explore it and then think again. Why should there be talk in class?**

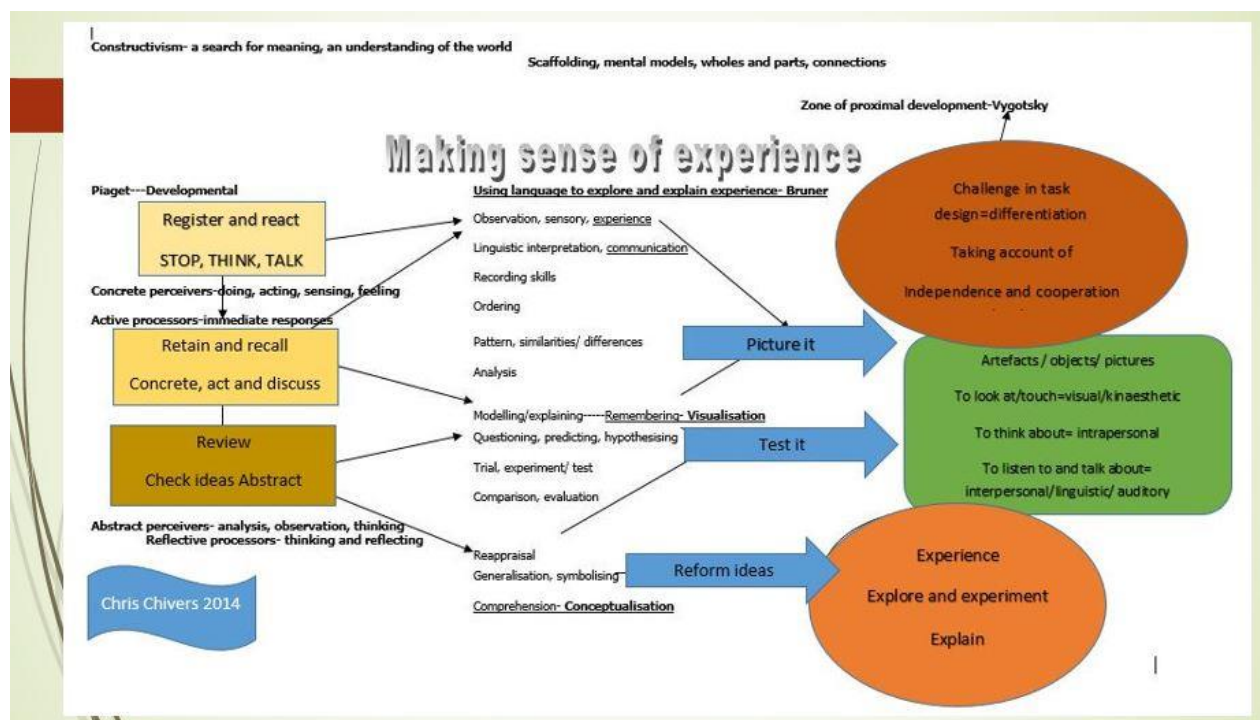
Life is lived for everyone as a sequence of experiences, time-bounded, and often constrained by geography. Each experience is absorbed in different ways by different people, depending on an individual's sensory acuity, and possibly by the preferred means of accommodation of incoming information. Sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell all play a significant part in absorption of each

experience. How can we know the impact of the experience on the receiver, without them having a well-developed articulacy and the active participation of the listener?



Over time, experiences will build together, with each relating to earlier ones, comparison being a key skill in processing information. To start with the premise that something similar has been seen before leads to early classification which has, at its base, the notion of similarity and difference. How do we learn that dogs are similar and yet different, but that collectively they are still all dogs? Simply by attributing the key elements of similarity of the species, four legs, furry coat, a head at one end, a tail at the other, and a barking sound. The differences of size and fur colour come with expanded experience, often accompanied by new names for each new breed.

Gradually internalised pictures begin to develop which can be drawn to mind when the naming word is given, so to talk of a dog will create an image of such a creature. However, will it cause the same image to be called to mind in everyone, or will some think of a terrier while others recall a Great Dane?




Children, as engaged learners, can develop an articulacy that enables them access to a wide range of experiences, whatever form the experience takes. Articulacy and the ability to think for oneself are the forerunners of success at school and beyond. The current challenge is to engage children in their learning, to show them how they learn and to allow them the time, space and resources to develop into the best learners that they can become, within and without the formalised settings of classrooms. We currently have a range of structures within which we have to work, but each of these stands or falls with our ability to ensure that the children are active participants in the process.

The simplest response to a stimulus is to describe what has been experienced. Articulacy and names of objects are vital first steps in seeking to understand anything new, especially if the thoughts are shared with others who are able to respond appropriately and to share their own insights, so we have the beginnings of discussion and collaboration in learning. Therefore the key to this approach is communication of reactions to experience, employing any appropriate form of language and a variety of associated skills.

Experience provides the context for thinking, talking, reading, writing.


Learners develop ideas and schema, encapsulated in a broadening vocabulary.

It's all talk, really.

A cartoon illustration of a character with a large head, wearing a blue cap with a yellow lightbulb on top. The character has a small yellow speech bubble next to it. The background is white.

### Really VAKuous?

- Why do you provide learners with
- Images?
- Artefacts?
- Musical backgrounds?
- Visits to places of interest?
- Interesting ideas by discussion?
- Opportunities to explore for themselves?

A photograph of a large, ornate castle or fortress situated on a steep, snow-covered mountain. The surrounding landscape is also covered in snow, with some evergreen trees visible in the foreground.

We tend to make huge assumptions about ourselves and others, often indulge in communication limited to the superficial for fear of causing any offence by having seen things differently. Communication, discussion and reflection, often thinking aloud, are the bedrock of understanding. Are these skills valued by society as a whole? What proportion of the population falls at the first hurdle, by not engaging with the world of experiences around them?

The issue of how we learn has taxed many generations of educationalists. Over a hundred years ago, Dewey coined the idea of visualisation as a key to learning. If one considers this idea, at its core is the idea that we need mental images that can then be manipulated to develop deeper thinking, more abstract thoughts. The ideas of Piaget were often simplified to the notion of concrete and abstract thinkers. This idea does fit with Dewey's, in that the concrete stage is concerned with experiencing for oneself, at any age, playing with materials, artefacts, tools and seeking to understand some attributes, so that, by the time maturity appears, there is an ability to draw from memory images that can then be manipulated mentally.

A reflective approach to experience can be developed with questions arising that are worthy of further consideration. Exploration, experimentation including measurement, and evaluation further enrich the memory bank. The learner can begin to test hypotheses, checking things for themselves. By sharing thoughts within as wide an audience as possible, these can be further refined through feedback, clarification and reorganisation to a point where the learner can be more secure in their beliefs. This accords with both Vygotsky's and Bruner's thinking, on language and the impact of informed outsiders reflecting back within discussion.



So what is the effect on school learning? **How many children come to school lacking in experiences which were once taken for granted, such as visiting the beach or lake, a wood or just knowing**

**what is happening in the garden?** How many of them play with toys that demand a high level of engagement, alone and with others, not just through a screen? Do they come to school with a set of visual images which are available to help them in their learning? Without these picture clues, if abstraction and imagination derives from the base of experience, how can children understand a story set in a specific setting, or think of a variety of characters if they have nothing on which to base their imaginings?



The best teachers are good storytellers, engaging with their audience, knowing their script so well that it can be adjusted to the needs of the participants. Engagement means a common understanding, shared experiences and the knowledge that each values the other. High levels of articulacy will be evident, suited to the children's needs. The listeners will have the skills of attending and thinking alongside the teacher, sharing the common idea and might from time to time interrupt to clarify points or to embellish the telling with their own experience. In a climate where all experiences are valued, there is a collective growing with everyone benefitting from each other's lives.



**It is down to teachers to lead from experience.**




Experience =

- Conceptualisation and Articulation

In other words;

- Something to think about, talk about and record, including writing, aka to learn.



### Let me learn?

Put learning in my way then walk beside me.  
Talk to me.  
Point out things that I may not yet see.  
Answer my questions, and ask me some.  
Ask me to explain what I think.  
Add new words and ideas as you see that I understand.  
That way, I'll grow a little and you'll know how much.  
Then you can put new learning in my way.  
Talk to me about learning, share thoughts and words.

Excite me to join in the world of stories and of discovery,  
To fit with what I already think.  
The world's a very big place and I am very small.  
The stories are sometimes enormous, too big for me to understand,  
Perhaps for you too.

Share with me the secrets of discovering things for myself,  
To experience, to experiment and explore,  
To explain with my words what I have seen, read or heard.  
Help me to learn to think for myself.  
That way I will become a learner.  
Give me a voice. Give me the words to join in.

## A Sense of place



Recently, we went for a walk in Winchester, parked by the water meadows, then walked the footpaths, passing opposite Winchester College, into the Cathedral Yard, then onto some of the smaller streets where we find our favourite coffee house. During that mile of walking, we passed over nine hundred years of history.

It made me think that just going for a walk around your neighbourhood tells many stories, if you know how to read them.

### **Orientation**

In the first place, there is the organisation of the area itself, a series of interlocking paths that offer alternative routes and different scenery; we took a completely different route back to the car, to avoid the mud of the water meadows.

Knowing your way around is a fundamental organisational skill, which can apply to navigating your house (try moving around your house in the dark during a blackout, a different place) through to the journey to school or other important place. Within the school, orientation is an important aspect of being in the right place at the right time. So having mental maps is an important aspect of living in the world, in order to function independently.

My childhood, in Exeter, Torbay, Brisbane, Adelaide, and other cities en route to and from Australia and, living in a time where parents were less concerned about stranger-danger, the act of exploring

Last term, I watched a PGCE student on final practice take a class of year four students through an exemplary English lesson, with a major focus on grammar. The learning objective was on creating a setting.



The children demonstrated very good understanding of a range of grammatical elements, significantly more than I knew at their age. The lesson had several parts with imagery and excellent opportunities to talk and capture ideas. The writing and the supporting images were focused on the class book, so there were textual links as well as imported images and a short DVD.

The focus of The Railway Children was interesting and the children came up with similes and metaphors, adjectives and adverbial starters, strong choice of verbs and embedded noun clauses.

At the end of the lesson, the children had produced and shared a wide range of examples of sentences and constituent parts that showed that they could write appropriately.

But, throughout I had a nagging feeling. Did the children really have a good understanding of the setting about which they were writing? Despite the local station being a five or ten minute walk from the school, there was no guarantee that any of them had ever taken the train, or stood on a platform and watched trains arriving or departing. In addition, the setting was the early part of the 20th century, with steam trains, so several removes from their experiences. None wrote about the real sensory experiences, such as the noises, the feelings and the smells. They had the visual, so they wrote what they saw on the video.

In the summary session, the children were asked to share, on a post-it, what they knew about writing settings. Without exception, they wrote down the grammatical constructs. While they are essentials, the sensory aspects need to be available to provide the depth, to create writing that fully brings the reader into the narrative.

Children today, more and more are living vicariously, through television and computer imagery. While they give a flavour, as David Attenborough did, for me, as a young child, it was the fact that my best friend's dad was the zoo superintendent at Paignton Zoo, so was able to get close to the animals, that they really became real.

Don't assume that children have experiences from which to draw mental images. That may be a significant limiting factor in a child's education.

Ps. The conversation after the observation was very positive and reflective; the student is an excellent prospect.

### **Buildings**

People need somewhere to live. Some live in houses, terraced, semi-detached or detached, while others might live in a flat, or possibly an apartment. On two occasions in my life, I lived with my family in a caravan.

Working on locality based topics allowed for an orientation project, using the landscape and features to orientate the children.

Another topic, based around settlements explored the need for temporary shelter, finding ways to cover and protect someone from the weather, then using the available materials to build slightly more permanent dwellings, within which families might be able to live all year round, which enabled them to develop small farmsteads. Within 20 miles of all the schools where I worked, were two

excellent “living” museums, Butser Ancient Farm and the Weald and Downland Open air Museum, as well as Portsmouth Museum rooms from history, or the Gosport Search Museum 1930s experience. These provided excellent stimuli for exploration.

The basis of the topic was discussion of life essentials, food, water, shelter and the better places to build a house and to find out where the first settlement might have been. Exploring maps over an extended time frame gave the impression of the area growth.

Once this was established, consideration of the available materials for building gave rise to speculations, which could be checked through our local museums; for example, where locally there was evidence of Neolithic habitation, if they used trees to build, how did they cut and shape the trees with axes? Equally, with the museum showing deer antlers used for “digging” preparing for planting, finding a similar shaped piece of wood offered an opportunity to try in the school grounds.

Creating a building museum in the classroom and asking children to bring in labelled offerings, we received a wide variety of building materials that were surplus to projects, as well as a significant range of tools. Every item gave food for research and reflection.

Bricks, made from local clay, enabled the challenge to dig some from various gardens, then to make small dwellings from mini-bricks. Other (purchased) clay was also used. Various waterproof materials were explored to find the best for a damp-proof course, while sand, gravel and cement were mixed with water to make various concretes, which were then tested for strength.

Vocabulary was probably the most significant winner, providing the language through which the topic could be discussed, researched, explored and expressed.

All of the above was with Infant and lower junior classes, while an extension would be provided by exploring building details, windows, doors, brick sizes, all giving clues to the ages of houses, with local census materials giving the evidence of habitation over time.

The essence of good topic activity is opening children’s eyes to what is around them, but also giving them the knowledge language with which to interrogate what they are seeing. The alternative is to leave them “blind” to their surroundings.



## **People**

As a species, we tend to live in communities, starting with families, extended or otherwise, living in our street, among others with similarities and differences, within villages or towns which have different forms of collective structures.

Each of us experiences our personal narrative as a result of birth, most of us, fortunately, being brought up and kept safe by our parents, grandparents, wider family and friends. We are born in our particular time, which has implications for the articles that surround us and possibly the finances available to parents to support our upbringing.

### **Our story, my story, her story, his story = first steps in history.**

I used to use the idea that each of us has a story when I worked with Infants and Lower Juniors, to make a link between different ages of "lived lives". Working with their own memories, supported by photographs, we were able to consider time before they were born, with exploration of parent and grandparent narratives, again with photographic storyboards. In this way, children could develop the idea of time having passed. The oral tradition of sharing stories was kept alive and the shared experience was often quoted as bringing children closer to older family members, as links were established.

Stories of playing, or eating and how they dressed were shared. The highlights and difficulties of significant events. Each could be recorded, physically on tape, but also as transcripts.

### **People around us**

The local police officer was a regular visitor to schools, especially when there was dedicated school link officer, to talk with the children about growing up issues and responsibilities. Other regular visitors would include the fire-service, ambulance, school nurse, area librarians, local sports coaches and local representatives of several different churches. In so doing, this extended the school community, by invitation.

Local organisations often asked for children to participate in local events, sometimes singing, carols or summer fair fun songs, sometimes country dance, including maypole dancing on 1st May on the village green.

Taking advantage of local expertise supported some aspects of the wider curriculum, as they became known to the school.

All of these events served to show the breadth of people locally and the specific skills that each had to offer to the community.

Life is largely lived in some form of group, home, school and work. Each of us has to find our place within this matrix. Some find it easier than others. An aware group will keep an eye on each member, to ensure that each has a place and is valued for themselves.

Children need to learn to live within and value the group for all that it offers them and others.



### **Things.**

The first twenty years of my life were somewhat nomadic. By that point, I had been around the world twice, both times as emigrants to Australia, first as £10 Poms, then at 17 with residual family after parent's messy divorce. It was seen as the land of milk and honey by my dad. We came back reasonably quickly, as 1) he discovered that bringing up teenagers alone was not going to be easy and 2) he was worried that I'd be called up for the Vietnam war.

As a result, I got into the habit of travelling relatively light. The things of childhood were spirited away, but not into someone's loft to be rediscovered in a sense of lost joy. A few special pieces remain from that period; my County cricket cap, having been awarded that the year before the second Oz trip and a small wooden model of a man that "lived" in my grandmother's display cabinet and came out when I visited. The legs moved and that was magical to a three year old, "walking" the man down the arm of the chairs or across the table. That this belonged to my grandmother means that it is now over 120 years old.

That I lived a somewhat itinerant lifestyle and had little when I got married meant that this period was the most settled period in my life to that date. Seeking out and renovating furniture became a hobby. To be able to look at a finished piece and feel that it was pleasing to look at and the product of personal effort imbued the object with special meaning. It was something of mine. It belonged to me, and, in a sense, created a sense of belonging.

A few pieces remain from that period. After my first wife died, it was a period of sorting and readjustment, with special emphasis a couple of years later, as I remarried and moved house. Some special bits remain, this time some in the loft, but, in order to rebuild a life, it required an adjustment and a selection of specific special things. You cannot live in the past, only the present and with plans for the future.

A new "nest" had to be created.

The "things" that remain, when all is said and done, are the memories that go with and surround any physical pieces. You may pick up something and remember. I remember holidays in South Wales

when I smell coal dust; the smell of the slag heaps. Meeting people jogs memories of shared experience.

The things matter, but so do the ephemeral aspects of life, the stuff of memories. The pictures and the words often outlast the physical closeness of “things”.

I just need to know that I belong, which is also what I wanted for any child in my classes.

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### **People, Places and Things**

There's always a time when whatever activity you have devised for a class comes to a close before the time you had planned. There's a need for some kind of "filler" activity.

Early in my career, a colleague suggested that I should make three sets of cards, based on a set of people, places and things or objects. The idea was very simple. a child would select a card from each group, then link the elements together in a short spoken story. This became a very popular filler, but had the potential to be developed further, into extended pieces of imaginary writing.

Where experiences might be limited, and based on the teacher's good knowledge of their class, each of the groups can be tailored to their locality. Of course, this also relies on the teacher having a good understanding of the area where their class lives!

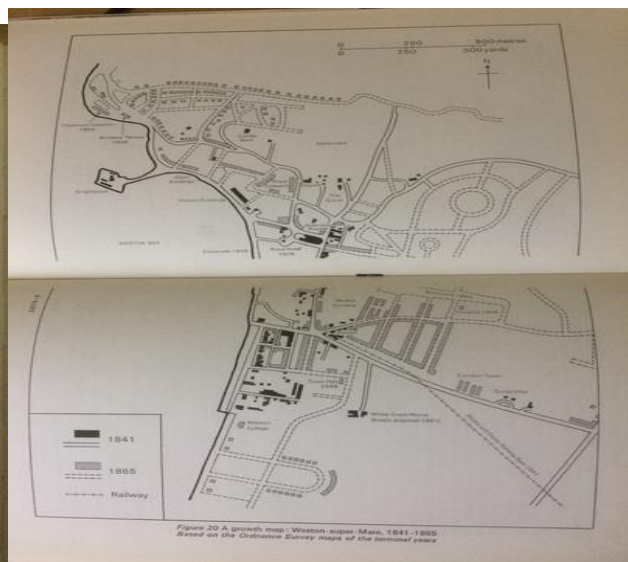
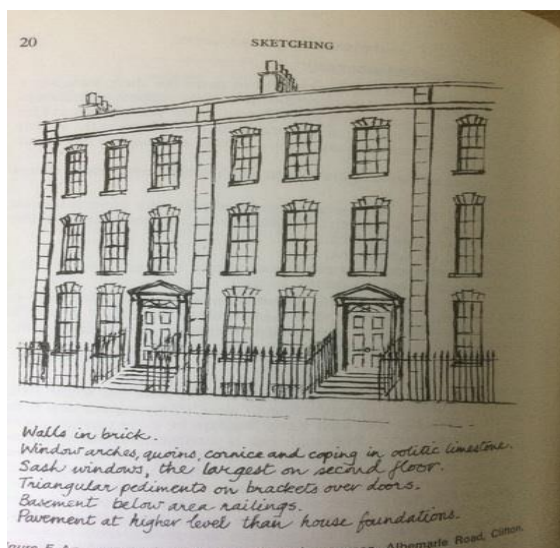
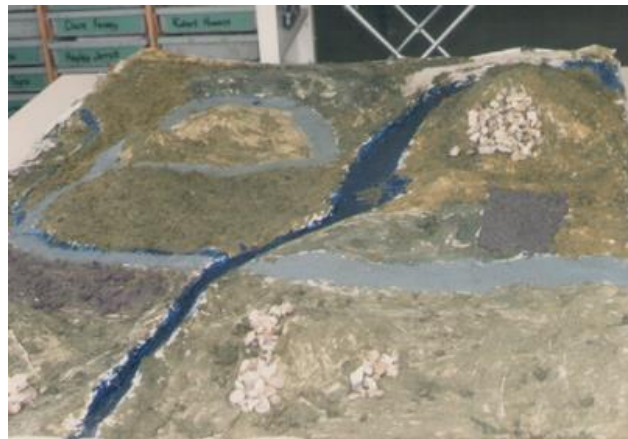
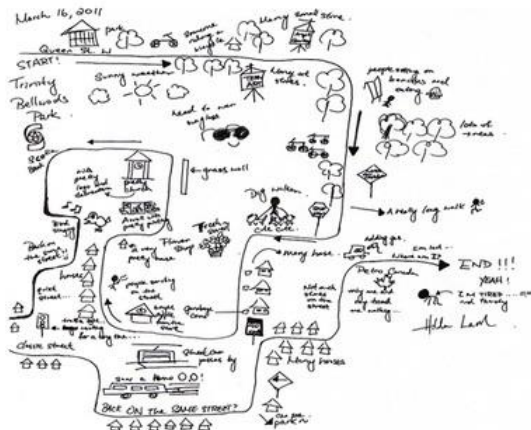


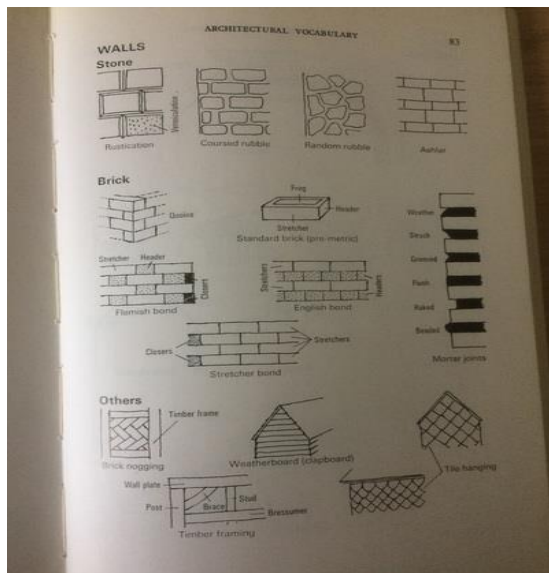


## A Sense of Place; Locality

We take what's outside for granted!

Going outside provides the easiest set of free resources that any teacher could want, the buildings that make up the locality. Of course, if your school is set in 50 acres of rolling fields and woodlands, you might beg to differ, but they can offer an alternative environment for study.





Some of the best topics, projects, thematic approaches that I've undertaken, have had housing or settlement at their heart. The central idea of people needing a place to live is quite a central one to human existence and in many ways provides a hook for young children to hold onto. They understand the need for shelter, warmth and keeping dry.

Having a local woodland available allowed me to take an infant class to make shelters, from scratch. At the same time, we had access to a Romany heritage museum, being run by a traditional van maker, who had a bender tent in the grounds. It gave the children insights into simple structures. This was extended with a second trip, to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, at Singleton, with a collection of houses from Saxon times, some moved and rebuilt, a few built from records as examples.



In another school, I started the topic with an "I spy trail" creation project with the local Secondary art (photography) department support. Children, working in small groups, started at the "village" centre and went in one of six directions. They had to decide on and record (Juniors drew, Secondary photographed) twenty different features along the route. On return, they swapped drawings and had to follow the trail. On the return to school, the trails were interpreted as sketch maps, with

written instructions.

Within our locality, we also have the Iron-age Farm, which started on the top of Butser Hill, as an experimental archaeological site, developed by the late Peter Reynolds. This has been redeveloped in Chalton, south of Petersfield, still with an experimental brief, but more of a visitor experience. These early buildings were a source of great interest, with exploration of the basic materials, where they might have been sourced, reflections on how they were cut and prepared with very basic tools, moved from distance to where they were needed. Working at heights without scaffolding etc. Challenging their preconceived ideas. The experimental site introduced early textiles, food storage and other basic needs.

A mapping project in another setting, looking at the village development over a few hundred years of maps, sourced from the County archive, led to a drawing and investigation walk to the village centre. The Georgian fronts of the village centre, had been established as false "fashion" fronts to earlier tenements, where inhabitants were explored through earlier histories and census returns, which showed several families in each building. Some obliging local families opened their houses to show the features of the earlier houses that still existed. Finding Roman tiles used as a part of the local church was linked to one child digging up a tile in his garden; verified by the County museum service.

**Sketching** was a key element of each topic, used as a means to encourage the children to look closely.

Where possible, these were **supplemented with photographs**; much easier now with digital. Photographs were the basis for recall and retelling, which supported poorer writers to retain some order and organisation.

Basic pictures were given to **support dialogue** with each other and with the accompanying adult(s), who also had some additional information sheets to share.

**Drawing sketch maps** secured some feeling of spatial awareness, extended with giving instructions to get from one place to another, inside school or within the locality, but also extensive use of local maps to aid orientation.

**Written reports and instructions** were developed, as were **histories** of some of the individuals who had made up part of the developing narrative; the local Lord of the Manor and his wife were buried in the church, while some of the local people's headstones were in the churchyard.

**Clay modelling** allowed making bricks and creating "dwellings", which in turn became the centre for story making.

**A museum of tools and building materials** allowed exploration of modern approaches. Local builder dad talked about some of the issues in building a house.

**Making concrete** of different consistencies in margarine tubs allowed some stress testing of materials.

**Creating a 3d model** of the "Village with three corners", derived from a reading scheme, allowed

children to picture and develop storylines more clearly, using little model people.

Just opening children's eyes to what is around them can give them **something to talk about** with their parents, particularly if they walk the same areas together. This can lead to further personal exploration, which adds to the general stock of knowledge and shows that the child's education extends beyond the classroom.

## On observation



We are all observers of the world, of a specific time and place. Our ability to interact with the world will be determined by our depth of knowledge of that which we observe. This is ultimately an extended form of classificatory language, as well as specific learned knowledge. Deeper knowledge of attributes enable broader and deeper insights and questioning. "I've never noticed that before" can become the catalyst for thought or research.

I have been a keen wildlife enthusiast since childhood, had the great fortune to have a best friend whose dad was the zoo superintendent at Paignton Zoo, so we had access after-hours and also knew many of the keepers, so got up close and personal with many more animals. I also kept my live insect collection beside the bed. With Gerald Durrell as my hero, my original career choice was to be a zoologist or an entomologist.

In my 20's, I ran a Watch group for the Hampshire Wildlife Trust, meeting regularly once a month to introduce children to a love of the outdoors and nature. I took over the County volunteer role for several years until school management duties precluded that.

When out on a walk, knowing the names of things can mean that you look a little closer, so a green sward could be the opportunity to explore a wide range of plants or insects. My garden in France allows further opportunities; last week for example, I was able to see migrating storks flying south-south west and also a black woodpecker, initially identified only by its sound. I've red squirrels, a range of fritillary and swallowtail butterflies, hummingbird hawk moths and mole crickets.

There's a great deal of talk about ["Austin's Butterfly"](#) in terms of drafting, evaluating and redrafting. There's not much point, unless we also encourage the Austin's of this world to go out and look for



themselves. Equally, there is talk of deeper vocabulary. This needs linkages as in classification, so that the knowledge can be apportioned appropriately.

Exploring an example.

A child views an object in the air. It can be seen to be moving in a definite but slightly strange way, haphazard, due to what appear to be slightly floppy moving appendages. In reply to the regular question “What’s that?”, or simply the pointed finger, the word “butterfly” is brought into the shared vocabulary, although family alternative words can also appear, eg “flutterby”.

Further exposure to such experiences can begin to extend the thinking. Colours, sizes, shapes, food plants can eventually be considered. Differentiating an orange-tip from a cabbage white might involve some level of relatively easy comparison, but compare green veined white and cabbage white, or different fritillaries gets a lot harder.

Interest can be further developed through research. My early “library” was based around the “Observer” series of books, easily available at the local second hand shop. Learning about life cycles, egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, adult as well as alternative associated words, larva, pupa, imago, creates further broadening and deepening.

How would you know if (certain) butterflies were endangered if you didn’t know these things? Food and habitat scarcity and poor weather conditions can impact, with devastating consequences.

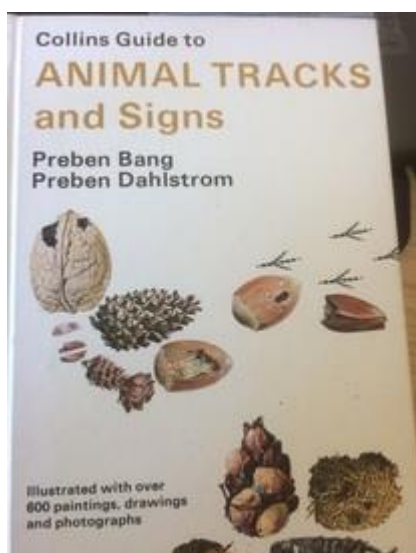
Observation is a basic skill. Learning to look closely needs encouragement, an interested other and perhaps, a magnifying glass, through which to look ever closer, enhanced looking.

Re “Austin’s Butterfly”. Look before you draw...





## Create Nature Detectives



Go outside; there's such potential out there.

With the arrival of autumn, you can't help but notice the changes of the colours of the leaves, and that they are beginning to fall in profusion, together with their fruits, conkers, acorns and various nuts, providing food for a variety of animals.

Knowing something of what you are looking for is really important, if children's attention is to be drawn to specifics that might lead to an interest that lasts a lifetime. I was lucky as a child, that an uncle in Wales took us for walks over the mountains, sometimes after a nightshift in the mines, to clear his head, but also to introduce us to the world around us.

Uncle Don won't ever have known that he instilled a love of nature in me, as a messy parental divorce led to estrangement from Wales that existed until one of my own children was eight. Deciding to make contact with my mother, I arrived on the doorstep on the morning that Uncle Don had died in his chair. Life can have a strange symmetry.

However, in my turn, as a teacher who loved the outdoors, from the early 70s and well before the "Forest Schools" theme came into existence, I was developing conservation areas, to enable outdoor study and making links with the local wildlife trust, eventually becoming a Watch (junior naturalists) leader, and voluntarily taking on the role of County Organiser for Hampshire. It was a measure of the success of this that, when I stepped down, it was advertised as a paid post!

You may wonder what there is to look for when outside. It's worth having some sort of guide if you are unsure. One constant since it was published in 1972 has been the Collins Guide to Animal Tracks and Signs, by Preben Bang and Preben Dahlstrom. This series was very useful as an introduction to many areas. Other guides are published by the Field Studies Council and one still exists from my Watch days.

**Conservation starts with observation and asking questions, then following up with some research, which might include asking an "expert". It involves learning the names of animals and plants and identifying them easily.**

**It is about attention and awareness, without which it's easy to miss that there have been fewer**

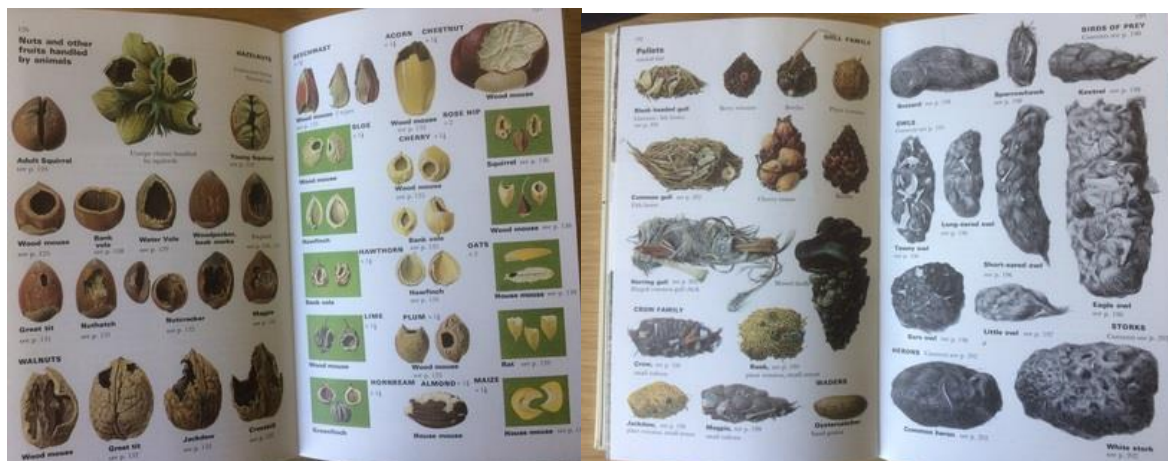
butterflies this year, or that ash trees are suffering and may well die out in large numbers in the next few years. When creatures die out, as a result of our apparent disinterest, we are partly to blame.

Go out and look; be an active discoverer of the world and, do you know the best bit? It's good for your well-being! Go outside, breathe fresh air and look...

And maybe you have the next David Attenborough in your class.

So, what to do?

- 1) Visit a DIY store and find colour charts with autumn colours. Get children to bring in egg boxes. Put one autumn colour in each egg space and go out to find something that matches the colours in the box. This can be a home activity.
- 2) Go out and look for the signs that mammals have been eating nearby, especially where nuts or pine cones have fallen. Unpick a pine cone to find the pine nuts that are being sought. Show children something that is not obvious. Look at the nuts, especially hazelnuts, to find holes, or if they have been split in half.
- 3) Look for droppings, of different sorts, even in towns, where rabbits and foxes may be most obvious.
- 4) Make a sand area or find a mud area where animal tracks may be more visible. Make plaster casts; a circle of cardboard to secure the plaster, add the plaster to an appropriate amount of water (a small mound should appear above the water to make it the right consistency), pour into the mould and wait. Clean off when dry. Nb you can practice making plaster casts in the classroom, with handprints in plasticine.
- 5) Look for bark scratched or gnawed off trees.
- 6) Look, listen, film, photograph. Make an Attenborough style documentary.
- 7) Speculate; where do the animals live? Make a map of the area, record where the evidence has been found and then look for any holes, or other signs, that might show where the animals are.





## In search of the Triantiwontigongolope

During the spring and summer terms, in classrooms across the country, mini-beasts will be a subject of learning. That was no different when I was an active classroom teacher, but my classes went in search of the Triantiwontigongolope. This came about after I discovered a poem, written by C.J. Dennis (1876 - 1938). With the help of a very talented musical colleague, we turned this into a song based on an Irish Jig, so it was at once catchy and engaging. It was able to serve a multitude of needs.

**We did a range of searches around the grounds.**

- Using upturned light coloured umbrellas underneath low bushes to shake and catch the falling insects.
- Putting sheets under bigger trees and shaking branches.
- We put out jam jars and tins from the kitchens as traps.

- We dug through the composting heap of leaves and grass clippings.
- We looked and looked regularly and just spotted things, in flight, as well as static.
- We got out pooters and magnifiers and classification guides.
- We drew and labelled and classified and described in detail.
- We drew and painted.
- We measured and created fair tests; eg how fast does a snail/mealworm move over different surfaces?
- We imagineered the Triantiwontigongolope, as pictures and personal writings and poetry, as well as making 3D models. One poem became the start point for a great deal of complementary learning.

In the end, we never found the Triantiwontigongolope, but the children learned a lot.

### **Triantiwontigongolope.**

There's a very funny insect that you do not often spy,

And it isn't quite a spider, and it isn't quite a fly;

It is something like a beetle, and a little like a bee,

But nothing like a woolly grub that climbs upon a tree.

Its name is quite a hard one, but you'll learn it soon, I hope.

So try:

Tri-anti-wonti-

Triantiwontigongolope.

It lives on weeds and wattle-gum, and has a funny face;

Its appetite is hearty, and its manners a disgrace.

When first you come upon it, it will give you quite a scare,

But when you look for it again, you find it isn't there.

And unless you call it softly it will stay away and mope.

So try:

Tri-anti-wonti-

Triantiwontigongolope.

It trembles if you tickle it or tread upon its toes;

It is not an early riser, but it has a snubbish nose.

If you sneer at it, or scold it, it will scuttle off in shame,

But it purrs and purrs quite proudly if you call it by its name,

And offer it some sandwiches of sealing-wax and soap.

So try:

Tri-anti-wonti-

Triantiwontigongolope .

But of course you haven't seen it; and I truthfully confess

That I haven't seen it either, and I don't know its address.

For there isn't such an insect, though there really might have been

If the trees and grass were purple, and the sky was bottle green.

It's just a little joke of mine, which you'll forgive, I hope.

Oh, try!

Tri-anti-wonti-

Triantiwontigongolope.



**triantiwontigongolope.m4a**

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## The world is not wallpaper



Forgive me for being distracted this morning when I am supposed to be reviewing scripts before a moderation meeting this afternoon, but I have just raised my eyes from the screen and spent several minutes looking out of the window. Admittedly, the first thing I looked at was the new raised bed edging and the upgraded small terrace which is ready to catch the spring morning sunshine around coffee time, which I completed yesterday. It is still a bit too early for the sunshine, but there is some about.

A couple of blue tits alighted on the fat ball feeders, to be chased away by a great tit, only to move to the seed feeder, where they proceeded to sort the seeds, throwing some to one side as rejects, much to the delight of the dunnock and the robin, squabbling over the bits on the ground. The names come easily, as they are embedded knowledge, but the behaviours always intrigue. I need to look in order to see. **The world is a visual place.**

To hear the spring calls of birds and to be able to identify some adds to this pleasure. Night sounds, of the three owl species that are found locally, or the call of the fox, while annoying in the early hours, creates a contact between the inside and outside world. **The world is full of sounds.**

Being outside is one of my delights. I like the feeling of the wind on my face. Growing up in the South West, by the sea, I'd often walk the promenade during strong winds, just to blow away the teenage angst. It was cathartic and restorative. I enjoy the sounds and feelings of the environment and always have had an interest in the natural world. This interest led to reading and finding out from a range of other sources. I like museums and galleries as a result and it is no surprise that I became an active conservationist and a leader of a local wildlife group for children.

Sometimes, we just need a way in, to find a foothold into an experience that enables us to prolong our interest sufficiently long, so that the whole begins to make sense, to us. It is, after all, our way of being. I don't know if anyone else sees the world as I do; I can only see it through my eyes and seek to explain what I see to you. I am intrigued by the Nordic noir series "The Bridge" at the moment, with a unique heroine, Saga, who, as a person with autism, has her own way of looking at the world.

I love to work with wood; part of me has always wished that, instead of being academic as a child, I had continued my interest and a developing teenage talent for woodworking and cabinet making. Triple science and two languages took away the practical subjects. Nowadays, I have to restrict myself to such things as garden edging, carpentry which has to be done, but to encounter a piece of well finished wooden furniture is a delight. **The world is a tactile place.**

Some buildings, landscapes and experiences just make one go “wow”, just by their majesty and splendour. There are hills in Dorset where driving to see family in Devon, to reach the brow of the hill opens up a vista that covers many miles.

My one sadness over the more recent past has been the loss of a sense of smell. As a gardener and lover of the outdoors, to lose an important sense must diminish the whole experience in ways that I cannot now tell. It may well impact on my sense of taste also, in some ways. Wearing glasses, I am aware that my sight is slightly less secure without them. So I am aware that I could be encountering some elements of sensory deprivation.

If a child does not learn to look, to listen, to feel they may well live in the world with a form of sensory deprivation, but of an unlearned kind. Their awareness of the world will be incomplete. They may be able to “experience” the world through their tablets or laptops, but only as voyeurs.

Sometimes, there is no substitute for real experience. Put on a coat and go and find out.

