OUT OF EDEN LEARN: AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR PROMOTING CROSS-CULTURAL INQUIRY AND EXCHANGE

An initiative of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Out of Eden Learn is an online learning community that connects school-age students from around the world to engage together in "learning journeys" of cross-cultural inquiry and exchange. These learning journeys invite young people to do several things: to slow down to observe the world carefully and to listen attentively to others; to exchange stories and perspectives related to people, place, and identity; and to reflect on how their individual lives connect to bigger human stories. Out of Eden Learn accompanies Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and National Geographic Fellow Paul Salopek's epic Out of Eden Walk: his multi-year journey on foot around the world along the migratory pathways of our ancient human ancestors and experiment in "slow journalism."

This white paper is intended to explain the underlying philosophy and model of Out of Eden Learn.

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Introduction: The need for cross-cultural inquiry and exchange

We live in information-rich and hyper-connected times—when, theoretically, those of us with the means and access could know more about the rest of the world and other people's lives than at any other point in human history. However, as Ethan Zuckerman and others have noted, on the Internet, homophily prevails: that is, people tend to connect with people who are very similar to themselves and who share similar perspectives and opinions (Hull, Stournioulou, & Sahni, 2010; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Zuckerman, 2013). Further—at least within the United States during a contentious election cycle—public exchange can be highly divisive and laden with stereotyping and mistrust (Healy & Haberman, 2015). Meanwhile, in Europe and elsewhere, the current sense of upheaval associated with migrants moving *en masse* is arguably exacerbating the potential for people to fear those who appear unfamiliar or different from themselves. Now more than ever, it feels imperative to offer young people opportunities to engage meaningfully with people who have different perspectives and life experiences to their own. Preparing our youth to engage in respectful, thoughtful, and insightful cross-cultural inquiry and exchange is not just the right thing to do—it is essential for preparing them for the complex globalized world in which they will live, and for working collaboratively to address the kinds of collective challenges (environmental degradation, public health crises, rising extremism and more) that increasingly defy national or cultural boundaries.

In what follows, we, the developers of Out of Eden Learn, explain the Out of Eden Learn approach toward promoting cross-cultural inquiry and exchange, and situate our work within a broader educational landscape. Our approach is shaped by three guiding principles: We believe that cross-cultural encounters should ideally be (1) **slow** rather than rushed, with an emphasis placed on careful listening, (2) **reciprocal** in the sense that young people should be exploring or re-examining their own cultural environment at the same time as they are exploring the cultures of other people; and (3) **authentic** such that the inquiry and exchange are driven by young people's natural interest and curiosity and are both rooted in and experienced as the "real world." As one Out of Eden Learn participant memorably commented: "You can't learn about the world from a textbook."

An exploratory approach toward cultural inquiry and exchange

Somewhat unusually for an educational research project, we did not set off with a fixed set of goals or a theory to test when developing Out of Eden Learn. Instead,

drawing on the wealth of resources and expertise that we and our colleagues at Project Zero have developed over many years, as well as Paul Salopek's remarkable unfolding journey, the project reflects an exploratory approach toward developing an online learning community. Nevertheless, as the project has evolved over time, it has become clear that one of its most significant contributions lies in the realm of facilitating meaningful cross-cultural encounters among diverse youth. This realization has come about in part because of the feedback we've received from our student participants and their educators about outcomes, such as stereotypes being dismantled or their curiosity about their own or other people's cultures being piqued. It has also come about because of an evolving geo-political context, which has imbued our work with a new sense of urgency. Moreover, the emergent, ground-up manner in which we have developed our platform and community— with an emphasis on learning with and from our participants rather than on testing the efficacy of an existing model or theory—reflects our approach to cross-cultural inquiry and exchange: one that is thoughtfully designed yet non-formulaic and driven by young people's natural curiosity (Dawes Duraisingh, 2014).

What do we mean by cross-cultural inquiry and exchange? As this project defines it, it involves learning about and from other people's stories and perspectives. Such stories and perspectives may come from people we mingle with everyday or from people we have never met and who may be geographically distant. In the Out of Eden Learn model, cultural exchange involves finding out about *our own* cultures— or what we take for granted in our everyday lives—as much as it is about exploring those of other people. While Out of Eden Learn avoids defining the slippery concept of culture per se, the project steers students away from thinking of culture as fixed or limited to "tip of the iceberg" phenomenon such as flags, national food dishes, or costumes (Deardorff, 2011). Indeed, taking a cue from Paul Salopek's "slow journalism," which involves walking through rather than jetting in and out of different cultures and communities (Blanding, 2015), Out of Eden Learn emphasizes the fluidity, hybridity, and complexity of human culture. Salopek's "The River of Culture"—a short text and audio that he wrote and recorded for our project—has provided a helpful metaphor in this regard. At the same time, the premise of Salopek's journey and storytelling is that there is enough commonality in human experience for us to recognize shared experiences and emotions, and that the meta-story of our species' evolution and collective dispersal around the world is one that can transcend specific cultural or national narratives.

Of course, inquiring and communicating across cultural boundaries is no easy task. As our colleague Veronica Boix Mansilla points out, seeking to understand

another's point of view risks surfacing our own ignorance or inadvertently offending others—or, conversely, of being offended ourselves (Boix Mansilla, 2015). Human brains are notoriously quick to latch on to simple narratives (Kahneman, 2011)—a phenomenon that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously terms "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009). Centuries, indeed millennia, of living in small, relatively homogeneous communities have left us predisposed to favor people who resemble ourselves, notwithstanding our seemingly unique human capacity to at least try to take on the perspectives of others and to learn both from and with strangers (Boix Mansilla, 2015). In other words, putting young people from different cultures in touch with one another has the potential to go awry, even in scenarios where they do not have entrenched negative perceptions or stereotypical imaginings of one another (Dawes Duraisingh, 2015).

Out of Eden Learn cannot claim to have resolved all the potential pitfalls of cross-cultural inquiry and exchange—a point to which this paper returns later. However, its aim is to support and nurture among young people the *beginnings* of an ongoing process of cultural exploration and exchange—or, in the words of one participating educator, to offer the "first stop in a lifelong journey" (Manso, 2016). We have been encouraged to hear that students value the opportunity to encounter different perspectives through our platform—and we certainly see many signs of their curiosity. Take, for instance, the following extract from an interview with a high school student in Crystal Lake, Illinois, United States.

> *Interviewer:* When you say it was an opportunity for you to grow, how did you see yourself growing?
>
> *King Charles X[1]:* I just think that being in the Eden walking thing has just given me more perspective on what's outside of my normal day-to-day reach in life. Usually, one would just go around and have a set life or just go around doing the same things over and over again. Sometimes, we allow for creativity or a break in the norm, but usually we don't. And now, I'm going around and doing that almost every day. I'm trying to reach out to people that I haven't reached out to before. I'm trying to learn about people and learn their stories and learn how they're different from me, and then I'm trying to relate to other people.

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[1] Participants in Out of Eden Learn create their own usernames. In accordance with Harvard research requirements to protect human subjects, use of real names is not permitted.

Note that King Charles X does not use the term "culture" explicitly; instead, he talks about a desire to connect with other people and to find out more about them and their perspectives, including "how they're different from me." Meanwhile, in a recent online survey (n=398, ages 9-17), we asked students who had just completed their first Out of Eden Learn learning journey: "By taking part in Out of Eden Learn did you become more interested in learning about people and places that are unfamiliar to you?" The vast majority of students responded positively: "a great deal" (41%), "quite a bit" (31%), "somewhat" (18%), "a little bit" (7%), and "not at all" (3%). Again, we did not use the word "culture" in this survey, preferring to try to gauge students' curiosity in finding out more about other people and places rather than, for example, how much knowledge about other cultures they thought they had learned.

Out of Eden Learn: Reflective of current trends in education, yet unique

Where does Out of Eden Learn sit within a broader educational landscape? At the broadest level, it is part of a growing interest in helping to prepare today's youth to become "global citizens" as well as savvy consumers and producers of digital media. A number of organizations and initiatives have used the affordances of the Internet to connect youth from around the world who would otherwise not meet (e.g., ePals, e-Twinning, Global Cities, Global Nomads, iEARN, PenPal Schools). Some of these initiatives involve students from disparate locations working collaboratively together on a project—which may or may not involve sharing information about their different cultural backgrounds (e.g., e-Twinning, iEARN, Quad Blog). Others are tilted more toward investigating and/or discussing an issue of shared interest and taking some kind of action in the world, be that separately or jointly (e.g., Global Cities, Global Nomads, IVECA's Virtual Classroom, TakingITGlobal, Verdentum). Such action-oriented projects are often framed as promoting global citizenship or global competence, with cross-cultural understanding or perspective-taking an explicit or implied part of that framing (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Other initiatives involve strategically bringing together groups of students who likely have negative impressions of one another's communities in the hopes of building bridges between those communities (e.g., Bridges of Understanding, Face to Faith, Global Nomads).

In a different vein, some organizations connect young people with solo travelers or adventurers as a means of exposing young people to a range of cultures and experiences. Reach the World, for example, has for many years matched US classrooms to US students studying abroad, as well as other independent travelers.

Adventure education initiatives, meanwhile, involve multiple classrooms following a single, often intrepid traveler and often focus on ecological or environmental sustainability (e.g., Doering, 2006; Earthducation, Ride to Learn). While Out of Eden Learn does involve young people following or engaging with Paul Salopek and his walk, the primary function of Out of Eden Learn is to put them in touch *with one another* via our online platform.

At the time of writing, over 1000 classrooms from 52 countries have enrolled in Out of Eden Learn since September 2013. Figure 1 shows the basic structure of Out of Eden Learn: it clusters diverse classes from around the world into private learning groups or "walking parties" to participate in a "learning journey" together. Each walking party consists of 6-8 classrooms, which can include home school classes and after school programs as well as school-based classes or clubs. At any one time, there are numerous walking parties engaged in learning journeys on the platform. By putting groups of classes together, students are exposed to a greater variety of perspectives or potential cultural encounters than if they were paired with just one other class or student.
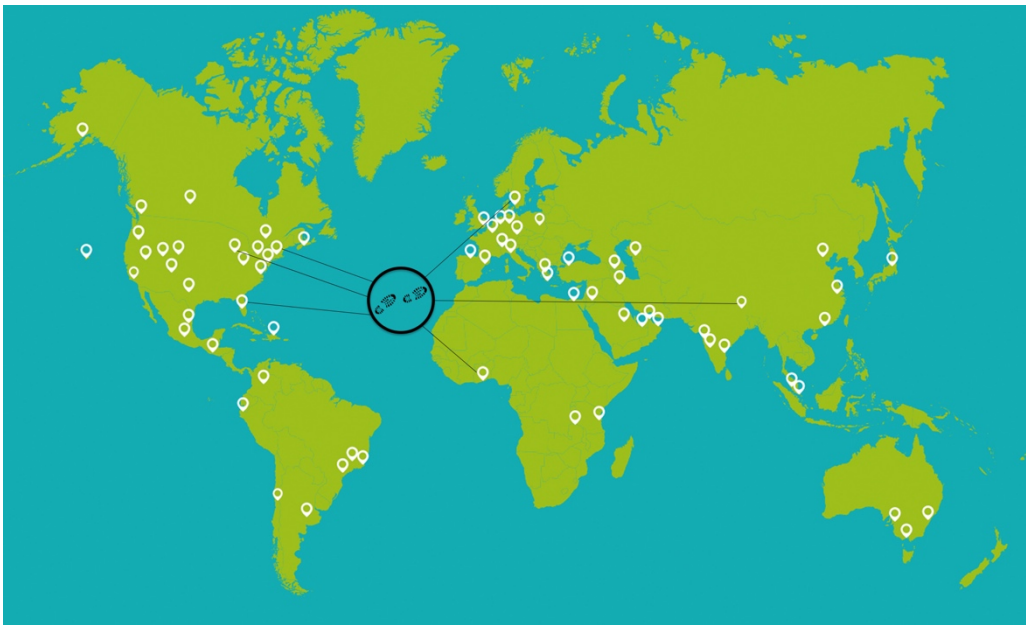
Figure 1: A sample walking party from Out of Eden featuring classes from Accra, Ghana; Gothenberg, Sweden; Kathmandu, Nepal; West Hartford, Connecticut, Chicago, Illinois, and Hobe Sound, Florida, USA.
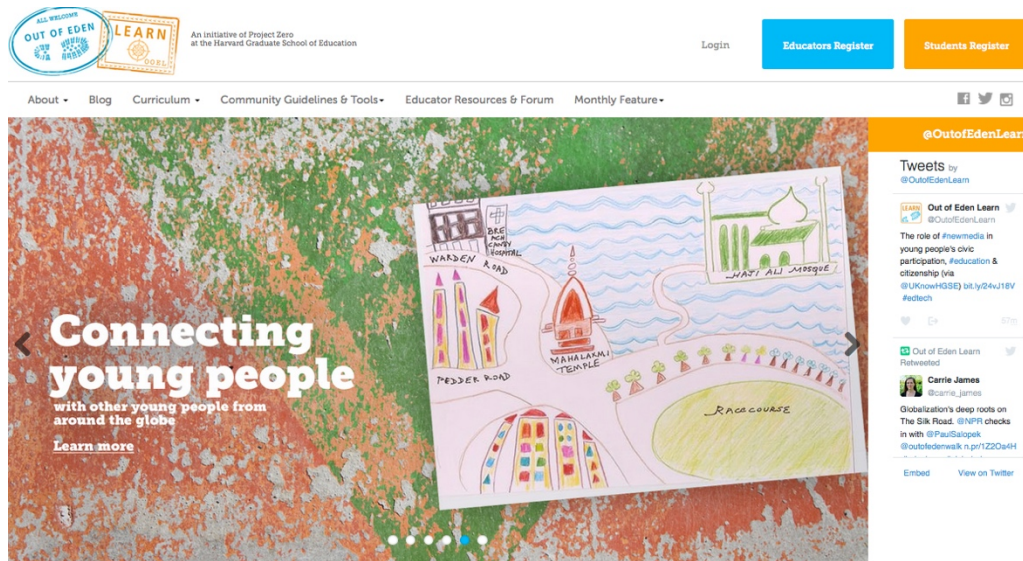
Figure 2: The front page of our custom-built website, *learn.outofedenwalk.com*

This model goes beyond "matchmaking" educators who would like to offer their students the experience of connecting with students from other cultural contexts (e.g., ePals, PenPal Schools, Quad Blogging, Reach the World); students engage in a structured curriculum and share their work with other students on the Out of Eden Learn platform. However, while the model is compatible with the concept of "global citizenship," to date the curriculum has not focused in a targeted way on issues that are playing out on a global scale such as climate change, poverty, or public health challenges (though we are currently piloting a curriculum on the topic of human migration). As explained above, Out of Eden Learn's approach to cultural inquiry and exchange is somewhat open-ended and exploratory rather than organized around a specific issue, mission, or pedagogical framework. Nonetheless, we believe that the model lays essential groundwork for civic and political participation—for example, by brokering fundamental understandings of people living across a range of cultures and circumstances, as well as providing tools for promoting thoughtful dialogue across contexts.

Other programs and organizations promote digital literacy or digital citizenship more broadly (Global Kids, Level Up Village, Voices of Youth etc.)—and Out of Eden Learn arguably reflects that trend, too. Certainly, many educators have incorporated Out of Eden Learn into their curricula as a way of fulfilling the kinds of digital (and non-digital) literacy skills they are often mandated to teach, including communicating effectively with different kinds of audiences. We have tried to develop an online learning community that supports best practices, with a dialogue toolkit and community guidelines that exemplify a commitment to

promoting respectful and thoughtful online exchange (James, 2014). Out of Eden Learn's curriculum activities invite students to create and share a range of media products and digital storytelling approaches on a social media-like platform while fostering engagement that goes beyond the simple "like" button of many other social media sites. At the same time, much of the curriculum involves *offline* learning—for example, inviting students to listen carefully to others talk about their lives, take walks in their communities, or look closely at everyday physical objects. Out of Eden Learn promotes storytelling and human-to-human exchange in ways that are not confined to the digital sphere: the kind of storytelling the project values implicates the very ways in which we experience and behave in the world, not just what we choose to share online.

Finally, and relatedly, Out of Eden Learn reflects a contemporary appetite for all things "slow" as a counterbalance to the frenetic world in which many of us live (Holt, 2002; Salopek, 2013; Tishman, 2013). Even from within the digital technology community there have been calls for "contemplative computing" (Pang, 2013), or a greater appreciation for the ways in which social media exchange is no replacement for slow-paced, face-to-face human conversation (Turkle, 2015). The currently popular concept of "mindfulness" promotes the idea of slowing down to focus our otherwise scattered attention and disrupt our tendency to fall into mindless routines (Brown, Creswell & Ryan, 2015; Langer, 2014; Sibinga et al., 2011). Our work is sympathetic to these trends, and participating students have expressed an appreciation, if not hunger, for opportunities to slow down to experience the world at a more measured pace. However, this strand of our work stems primarily from a Project Zero tradition of inviting learners to slow down to engage more deeply in learning activities to help them grasp the complexity of phenomena they are observing or exploring; it is less about extolling the virtues of slowing down or being mindful as a healthy or restorative practice for the individual (Tishman, 2014).

We believe the special contribution of Out of Eden Learn lies in the way in which it weaves together various contemporary strands in education—broadly speaking, global, digital, and slow—to build an innovative model for promoting cross-cultural inquiry and exchange. Further, the model has been designed for overall coherence, so that the Out of Eden Learn platform structure, curriculum materials, and learning community are aligned and mutually reinforcing. Figure 3, below, depicts the interconnectedness of the different parts of our model. The color-coding shows that the principles of promoting slow, reciprocal, and authentic cross-cultural encounters are reflected across the different parts of our design.
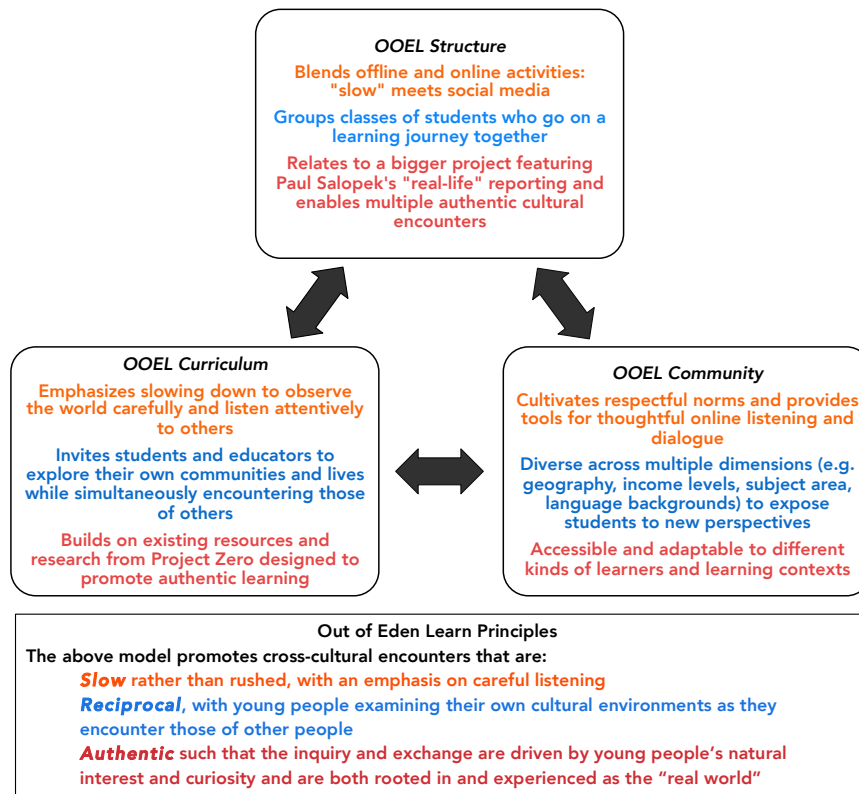
OOEL Structure

Blends offline and online activities: "slow" meets social media

Groups classes of students who go on a learning journey together

Relates to a bigger project featuring Paul Salopek's "real-life" reporting and enables multiple authentic cultural encounters

OOEL Curriculum

Emphasizes slowing down to observe the world carefully and listen attentively to others

Invites students and educators to explore their own communities and lives while simultaneously encountering those of others

Builds on existing resources and research from Project Zero designed to promote authentic learning

OOEL Community

Cultivates respectful norms and provides tools for thoughtful online listening and dialogue

Diverse across multiple dimensions (e.g. geography, income levels, subject area, language backgrounds) to expose students to new perspectives

Accessible and adaptable to different kinds of learners and learning contexts

Out of Eden Learn Principles

The above model promotes cross-cultural encounters that are:

Slow rather than rushed, with an emphasis on careful listening

Reciprocal, with young people examining their own cultural environments as they encounter those of other people

Authentic such that the inquiry and exchange are driven by young people's natural interest and curiosity and are both rooted in and experienced as the "real world"

Figure 3: The design features and principles of Out of Eden Learn (OOEL)

Below follow more detailed descriptions of each of the three principles.

Principle #1: Slow

As the above diagram of our model indicates, the concept of slowing down is a central theme of the Out of Eden Learn curriculum and platform—as befits a project that accompanies an experiment in "slow journalism." We believe that developing young people's capacity and inclination for respectful cross-cultural encounters begins at the local level. Accordingly, many of the Out of Eden Learn curriculum activities occur offline and invite students to slow down to observe the world around them carefully and listen attentively to others. For example, students take slow walks in their neighborhoods trying to look at a place that is familiar to them with fresh eyes. In doing so, they typically notice things that they would otherwise overlook.

For example, AlphaP from Mumbai, India posted a photograph of a man receiving a haircut, commenting "Hello, as I took a walk in my neighborhood today I saw things I don't ordinarily see. I was shocked because it seemed like everything about my neighbourhood was new to me." Such reactions are common. ZZ from Shanghai, China, for instance, noted in an interview: "Many times we are busy with life and don't have time to look at the environment around us. Seldom do we have time to make any plans. Out of Eden Learn lets me calm down, pay attention to my surroundings and make plans for places that I want to go."

Meanwhile, Ropinera from Barcelona, Spain writes about realizing as she was walking slowly "how much I loved being there and all the things that I didn't see before—I didn't notice that I had. And then I discovered new places too, and it was really incredible." Ropinera's description suggests the intertwined nature of slowing down, looking with fresh eyes at something, reflecting, and then opening oneself up to new possibilities or discoveries.
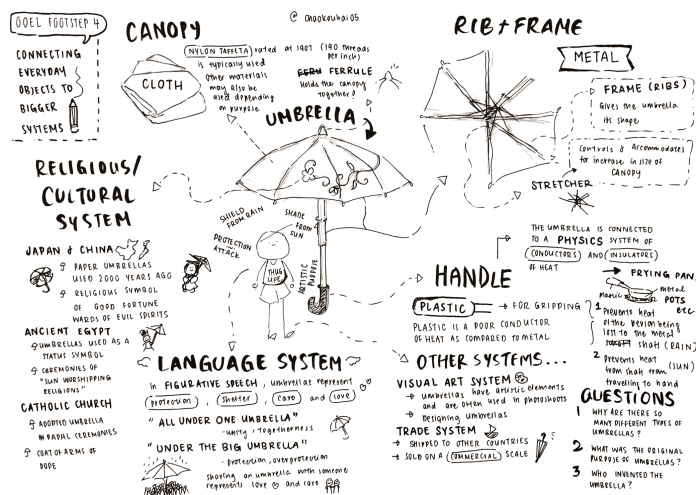
In a different kind of example, ChaoKouhai05 from Singapore chose to examine an umbrella in response to our Learning Journey 2 activity *Connecting everyday objects to bigger systems*. She noted the different components of the umbrella and how as an object it relates to cultural, manufacturing, trade, and linguistic systems.

ChaoKouhai05 was able to notice complexity by first slowing down to look at the umbrella very closely.

Out of Eden Learn doesn't just invite students to slow down to complete our curriculum activities: it also asks that they slow down to listen to one another and

engage in 'slow' dialogue. To this end, a dialogue toolkit was co-developed with Out of Eden Learn classroom educator, Chris Sloan. The toolkit is designed to support students to engage thoughtfully with one another and to encourage more substantial feedback than is typical of the 'like' buttons and off-the-cuff responses that pervade much of social media.

Figure 4 shows the toolbar that students see when they go to post a comment on another student's piece of work; as they mouse over each icon, specific instructions appear. For example, the toolbar prompts students to *notice* new or interesting things that other students are sharing in their posts. It also invites them to *probe* (ask meaningful questions); *connect* (make connections between their own experiences and those of other students); or *extend* (share how other young people's stories have given them a new perspective or pushed their thoughts in new directions). In emphasizing such dialogue moves, Out of Eden Learn seeks to support young people to listen thoughtfully to one another online and thereby experience deeper, more meaningful interactions.
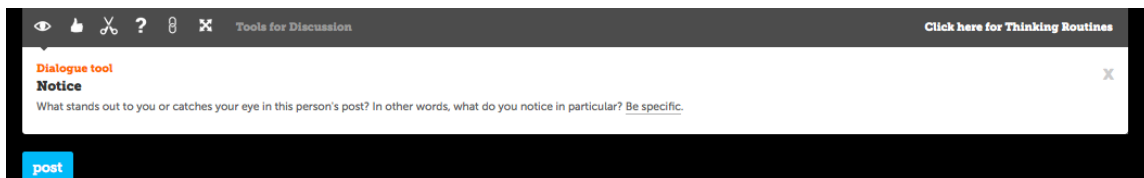

Figure 4: The dialogue toolbar that students see when they post comments on Out of Eden Learn

For instance, scarcemini, a middle school student from Chicago, Illinois, United States posted an image of a 32-year old Chinese-English dictionary that she talked about with her aunt for the Learning Journey 2 footstep *Learning from other generations.* Her aunt brought the dictionary with her to the United States when she migrated in 1986.

Cjtvillage of Marblehead, Massachusetts, USA responded to the post as follows:

Hello scarcemini! I really value how in your post you included exact dates and time periods! I value this because it gives you a feel for how long ago this was. I also have a few Questions. How did your aunt communicate with people in her neighborhood when she was still learning English? In order to communicate, did she carry the dictionary around with her everywhere she went? Lastly, did the dictionary cost 50 cents when she first got it or does it cost 50 cents now in present day? Thanks for posting!

Scarcemini responded in turn:

My Aunt didn't really talk to her neighbors, when she immigrated, she was a quiet person, until she felt like she can speak the language well. I'm not so sure if she carried the dictionary everywhere. Though, I am sure that the dictionary did change in cost as the years went by.

Here we can see that by following simple cues to notice specific things and probe for further information, Cjtvillage was able to generate a short but thoughtful exchange that built on the initial post and signaled that she had read Scarcemini's post carefully and with respect.

Principle #2: Reciprocal

Students in an Out of Eden Learn walking party engage in a journey of exploration together – both of their immediate lives and contexts as well as of the broader social contexts opened up to them through Out of Eden Learn (see Figure 5 below). Thus, while AlphaP, ZZ, Ropinera, and other students were discovering and expressing a new interest in their own environments (see above), other students were looking with great interest at their posts. For instance, JJG from Boston, Massachusetts, United States left the following comment for AlphaP: "Do people always get haircuts on the side of the street? I find that very interesting!!" To which AlphaP replied, "This happens quite frequently around my neighborhood, however the majority of people go to a salon or a barber shop," gently pushing JJG away from drawing too general a conclusion from one photograph. For JLV05, a student we interviewed from Beaverton, Oregon, United States the most compelling part of her Out of Eden Learn experience was "interacting with other students from other parts of the world. It was very interesting to see what their every day life was like … I actually got to [interact with] a student from Erbil, Iraq and I saw her pictures and she had a whole bunch of questions about what my life was like." Indeed, Out of Eden Learn positions young people as experts on their own lives and

perspectives—which can be a particularly powerful experience for students who do not necessarily feel validated or heard within their "ordinary" classroom contexts.

Our very model—alongside specifically designed activities—invites young people to reflect on who they are as individuals while making connections between their own lives and bigger human stories. We think that asking young people to reflect, for example, on the ways in which their own lives are connected to a bigger human past is a valuable activity in and of itself. However, when young people are doing so in the company of a diverse cohort of other students, the potential benefits are amplified as they compare and contrast their own responses to those of others posting on our site. Moreover, the sense that other young people share somewhat similar experiences and concerns can be an important realization for young people to make; at the same time, the fact that there might be real and/or perceived differences among them opens up new possibilities for thinking about the world and a broadening of perspectives.
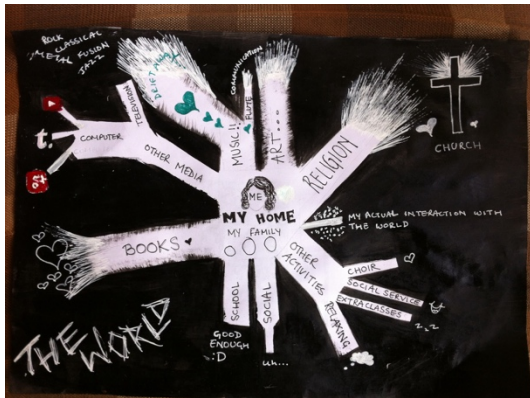
In this example, EugeneLasagneDSouza, a high school student from Mumbai, India shares a map of her neighborhood, explaining that she and her family have never stayed in one place for more than two years and "as a result, I find I've retreated into a shell and I see each city as the same."

She describes her life as shuttling between activities and not interacting with her neighborhood very much. "My life revolves around my home. To me, 'home' is wherever my nuclear family is. My Faith, Music, Books and Art are integral parts of my life. I don't know where I would be without them."

In response, chardog from Salt Lake City, Utah, United States, replies:

> Woah that is really cool. I like your map you have artistic ability. I feel the same, that home is where my family is. I think that all your interests sound very fun! I share some of the same, like books and art. Thank you for sharing about your life. For me, I have not moved that much, but I have changed

schools, and I feel like staying true to my values, interests, and staying close with my family keeps me who I am.

In this extract, chardog shows encouragement and appreciation for EugeneLasagneDSouza's work and picks up on connections she could make to her own interests and life experiences. EugeneLasangeDSouza writes back to say that she appreciates the feedback, commenting, "I wonder how people's 'values' differ."

Elsewhere on our platform, mabvillage, a middle school student from Marblehead, Massachusetts, United States shows a genuine interest in what it is like to live in a gated community in Hobe Sound, Florida, United States, as depicted in this map. "I have always wondered what it is like to live in a gated community, could you tell me some more about that?"

Julie1, who drew the map, replies:

> Hi mabvillage. In answer to your question about what it is like to live in a gated community I will tell you that it is okay. It is not that it is exciting or more fun than other communities, it just gives you a sense of protection when the guard at the entrance gate checks to make sure everybody who is entering should be. Sometimes, the guard will give us lolly pops or ice pops. I also like living in a gated community because you can basically ride your bike or walk everywhere without the worry of strangers or cars. In my eyes, it is pretty nice!

To which Mabvillage responds: "i would like it if every now and then when i went into my community i got a lolly pop" and that particular conversation comes to a close. This exchange involves one child offering an insider-perspective of her neighborhood to an interested peer who has no experience of that context. Students report feeling excited to receive comments from other students and to have this kind of interaction.

In another exchange that bridges a larger cultural gap, we see a high school student from a Catholic school in Erbil, Iraq offer supportive and appreciative comments to a student in Beaverton, Oregon, United States, who reveals in her post that features a photograph of a playground, that she has a young son.

> Hi, it's very nice to have a park at your neighborhood to have some fun, even if you were very young and now you grown up but you still have some memories even they were bad or good. And everyone wants to give the best for their children to make them happy and the best, and you are saying that you have a son is it a big responsibility for you and you are still a student? MAY GOD HELP YOU AND GIVE YOU THE BEST IN YOUR LIFE ....THANK YOU!!!....

Jlv05 responds positively to this comment and provides an explanation of how she is managing school and parenting.

> Yes it's very nice to have a park very close to where I live. I still go there with my son and play. Having a child is a HUGE responsibility, it's even harder when you are growing up yourself. I still am a student, but it's all thanks to the program I am in. It's a program where they provide us with daycare while we teen parents can still attend school and be a student. They also offer parenting classes to help us be better parents and manage our time. Thank you for your blessings, I greatly appreciate it! May God bless you as well!

Here, Jlv05 is taking on the role of explaining her life situation to someone living in a very different context. In fact, several of Jlv05's classmates, who are in an alternative high school setting, said in interviews that they viewed Out of Eden Learn as an opportunity to impart life lessons to other students about the value of working hard and overcoming adversity.

Principle #3: Authentic

Out of Eden Learn feels like "real world" learning in part because it is tied to the ongoing reporting and journey of Paul Salopek who is working in places that are

rarely covered by mainstream news media. In this sense, his audience members, including our students, feel like they are receiving glimpses into stories that are often inaccessible. Moreover, Salopek reports on the kinds of issues that have a contemporary urgency to them: he presents stories about the frontlines of the Syrian refugee crisis, the impact of climate change on local economies, and political tensions in the Gaza Strip, for instance, as being on the cutting edge of our collective, unfolding human story. He opens up new windows on to the world and other people's lives by practicing the kind of slow looking and attentive listening that is featured in our curriculum. The fact that students are invited to be part of his global project and to develop skills reflected in his work —as well as the work of other thoughtful writers, artists, and journalists—lends credibility and relevance to the Out of Eden Learn curriculum.

Even more importantly, the structure of the Out of Eden Learn platform is designed to enable young people to experience a diverse set of authentic cultural encounters when they engage in one of our learning journeys—all the while cocooned within a safe and contained environment. In Figure 5, the concentric circles around an individual student represent the following overlapping and interacting contexts: (1) the student's immediate class or learning group; (2) the student's (or school's) local community or neighborhood; (3) the other classes making up the walking party to which the student belongs; and (4) the wider world as glimpsed through Paul Salopek's Out of Eden Walk materials and other resources we have integrated into our curriculum. To those familiar with the work of the late developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, this diagram is reminiscent of his social ecological model diagram, which depicts how human development relates to the various social contexts in which an individual is situated (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Within Out of Eden Learn, an individual student may have the following varied cultural encounters:
- The student interacts with fellow classmates, often learning new things about their identities and lives. The student realizes that different people may have different perspectives on the same neighborhood.
- Through our curriculum, the student looks at —or encounters—her community or neighborhood in new ways —for example, through documenting the everyday or listening to neighbors' stories.
- The student interacts with students located in different geographic locations (who are simultaneously interacting with their own classmates and own neighborhoods), gaining insights into their cultures and lives.

- The student is exposed to other cultures through Paul Salopek's journalism and other resources.
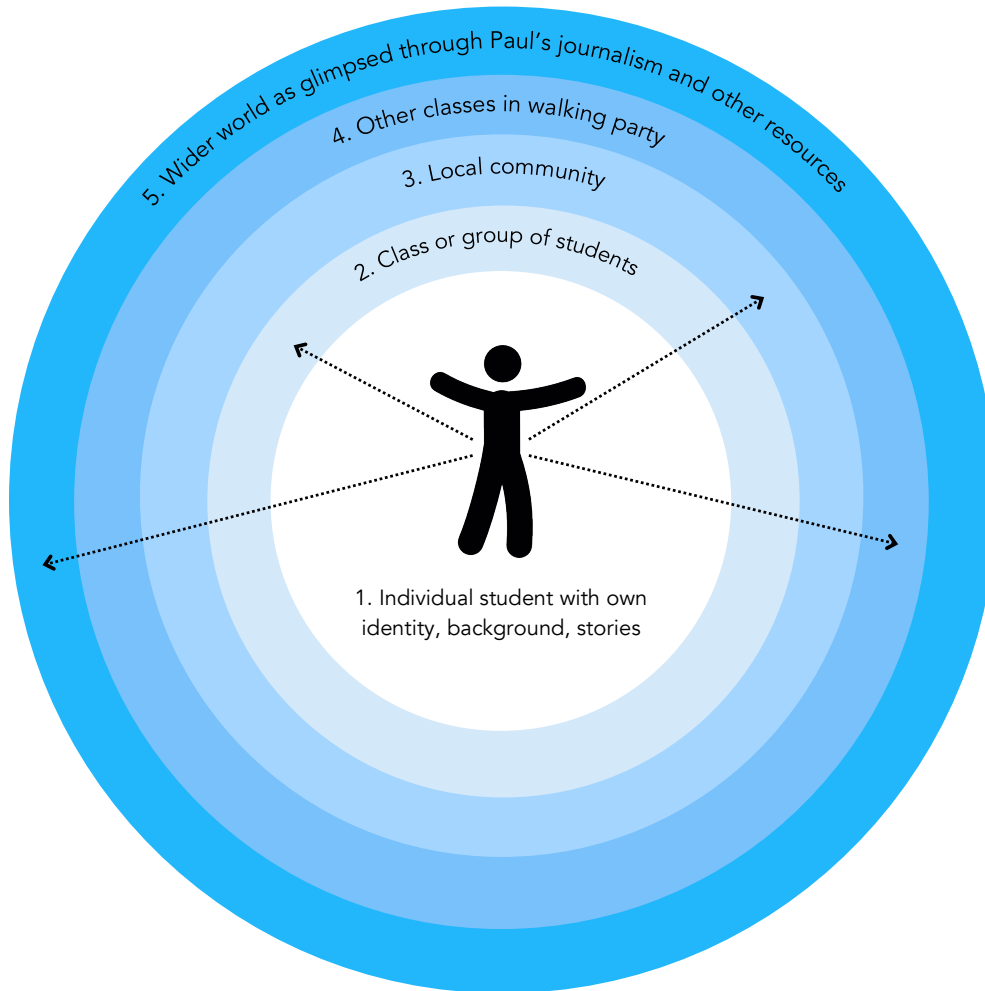
Figure 5: The social ecosystem of Out of Eden Learn

Individual students bring to the Out of Eden Learn community their unique stories, identities, background, tastes, and interests which will help to shape—but not determine—their personal learning journey experiences. In fact, one reason why students seem to be so receptive to Out of Eden Learn is that its activities invite them to actively explore and share their immediate and broader social worlds in ways that feel authentic to them and which move seamlessly back and forth across the concentric rings in the diagram. That is, the curriculum offers a learning experience that is both *about* "real life" and is *experienced as* real life.

For Ropinera from Barcelona, Spain, for instance, a key part of the appeal came from the opportunity to learn about places firsthand:

> [I liked] the part of interacting with some people because you could know more about your neighborhood and more about the neighborhood of other persons. For example, I remember that we were interacting with people of South California, I think. Maybe I can learn a lot about South California in reading in Wikipedia, but seeing the videos and the comments of the people of South California about their neighborhood, I think it's better to learn about their city … reading it from a person that really lives there, you see their real opinion and not just all the stuff that they always put in the webpages.

Ropinera's comment is interesting because it suggests a desire for more immediate, authentic knowledge about the world. While social media efforts such as Everyday Africa, Everyday USA, and Everyday Iran provide "on the ground" portraits of what life is actually like in particular places, youths' online connections may not typically bring them to these sites. Ropinera's use of the word "real" and "really" suggests that she also considers the student-generated content she reads in her walking party to be more reliable or trustworthy than reference websites. Further, the reciprocal nature of the learning experience can create a feeling of connectedness. TauSigma from Mumbai, India commented online:

> Most of all, Out of Eden brought about an immense sense of unity in all of us. The comments we received through our footsteps gave us more pride than likes on a social networking site ever could…In a world so often perceived as divided, we were able to see unity.

Ongoing challenges and questions

While the Out of Eden Learn model is promising on a number of fronts, it also poses some challenges and potential pitfalls. As acknowledged above, communicating across cultures can precipitate a variety of dangers and risks (Boix Mansilla, 2015; Adichie, 2009). For young people in particular, "a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing." That is, younger students can be rather quick to tell us that after a few weeks of engaging on our platform they are now "very open minded about the world" or that they understand everything about life in China, for instance, even while having been exposed to only one tiny and partial glimpse of life there. Over-generalizing can be a risk. Some of the Iraqi students who interacted with the

student-parents in Beaverton, Oregon, United States, for instance, went on to assume that most American high school students juggle parenthood and studying. Meanwhile, some American middle school students who read Paul's dispatch about a traditional fire healer in Saudi Arabia talked in somewhat pitying tones about the absence of modern hospitals in that country. We don't want to leave students in a space where they think they know everything they need to know about other people and places when, in reality, they have only just begun to scratch the surface. Furthermore, understanding others' perspectives is difficult, especially for middle school-age students who are likely still developing the cognitive capacity to take on other perspectives (Bengtsson, Söderström, & Terjestam, 2015).

Confronting these challenges is an important part of our enterprise. To date, our efforts have focused on the critical role of the teacher in supporting students as they make sense of their experiences on Out of Eden Learn. Our Community Guidelines, robust Educator Guide and strong lines of communication with participating teachers provide relevant supports. Ultimately, we acknowledge that the presence of a skilled educator is essential if youth are to develop the cultural sensitivity and humility to engage with and truly learn from their interactions in Out of Eden Learn and, ultimately, the wider world.

We still have many questions. For example, how can we most effectively promote the idea of complex and dynamic models of cultural belonging while recognizing that there *are* patterns and habits that persist through time? How might we support more critical conversations about contemporary global issues while continuing to encourage creative, open-ended exploration of immediate and more distant contexts? We are also pursuing lines of research that delve more deeply into (1) the cognitive affordances of inviting young people to engage in slow looking and listening; (2) ways in which young people think about and develop insights into their own and others' cultures; and (3) the quality of students' cross-cultural interactions on our platform, including the role of our dialogue toolkit in supporting those interactions.

To conclude

In sum, by experimentally yet synergistically developing Out of Eden Learn's structure, curriculum materials, and community of learners, we believe that we have developed a promising model for fostering meaningful cultural encounters among diverse groups of young people. The stakes have seemingly never been higher, yet the alternative of not even trying to understand other cultures or

perspectives for fear of causing offense poses a far greater danger than jumping into the tricky waters of cross-cultural inquiry and exchange. We conclude with some reflections by Out of Eden Learn participants. Hibyehey from Erbil, Iraq, commented in an interview:

> Before I thought it would be hard to talk to students from other countries because they have different culture; for example, they don't think the same things like we believe. After seeing their posts, I felt so relieved. I learned so much from other posts.

Nick from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States portrayed overcoming mistrust and cultural differences as a practical necessity in today's world: "I think it's really important to learn about all of those cultures and have a better understanding of different kinds of people just so you can really communicate with others better ... You won't be scared."

We believe that building opportunities for cross-cultural inquiry and exchange that feature the principles of **slowness, reciprocity and authenticity** in their design can help young people like Hibyehey and Nick prepare to engage meaningfully and respectfully in today's ever more complex, globalized world.

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Earthducation: lt.umn.edu/earthducation

ePals: epals.com

eTwinning: etwinning.net

Face to Faith: facetofaithonline.org

Global Cities: asiasociety.org/global-cities-education-network

Global Kids: globalkids.org

Global Nomads Group: gng.org

iEarn: iearn.org

Level Up Village: levelupvillage.com

Quadblogging: quadblogging.com

Ride to Learn: ridetolearn.org

Vertendum: verdentum.org

Voices of Youth: voicesofyouth.org