

The Learning Community Annual Report - Academic year 2016-2017

This year TLC worked with 38 children and their families. We have continued to use Base Camp for many of our activities, with 2 main classroom buildings, an art center, and a separate space for individual and small group tutoring. This year we also added a kitchen to the campus, where children and adults are involved in snack and lunch preparation. In addition, we spend much time in other communities and outdoor spaces in and around the wider community. Our programme this year has deepened in the concept of independent learning, where older children were offered free choice in the content of their educational program, while with the younger children, the focus was on learning how to plan their days using a variety of learning materials that offer an exploration into different subjects. There has been focus on developing aspects like following through on commitments, planning ones work and time, reflection on process, input and outcome. The schedule has allowed each child to find and follow his/her own rhythm and work cycle.

Focus on social relations and respect for each other has been a main theme during the year. Much work has been done on how to share a space for learning, by not disturbing one another, and learning to move around the space and ask for help in a way that does not interrupt ones classmates. The space has materials and resources, internet connection for research and resourceful adults to guide children along their learning journey.

To build on the aspect of care and community, every morning has started with 30 minutes of service work, where the children and facilitators together have cleaned the classrooms, toilets and kitchen, prepared snack, done lice-check and worked in the garden. We have also had monthly workdays, where children and adults have been involved in bigger campus improvements, the making of a safer cycle path, and fixing broken things.

Following is an overview of some of the projects, classes and explorations that we have undertaken this year:

Weekly Community gathering

Direct aim : Including children in everyday life actions and decision-making.

Indirect aim : raising responsibility and action from the children

Impact : collective creativity in finding solutions together and taking collective decisions where children & adults have an equal voice.

History: Community gatherings began gradually in July 2016, facilitated by the adults. In October a group of children decided to take on the role of leading the weekly community gathering.

From that shift, the organizational team comprising 4 children gather the topics raised by the community during the week and lead the meeting.

There is a regular turnover of the children who lead the meeting and the children are in charge of its management.

There has been constant progress and adaptation of the way the children are conducting the meetings: according to the challenges they have faced and taking into account the inputs of the whole community.

Decisions pertaining to the collective are looked at together by children and adults. Voices are equal.

This is a learning process where the community is exploring a way for the adults to step back, allowing more space for children to make proposals, experiment, to grow into collaboration, to take more responsibility. It is an imperfect but rich process, full of insights, awareness and a dynamic learning experience for all.

The journey continues next year...



Field trips 2016-7

Field trips and wilderness experiences play an important part of TLC's educational framework. We believe that wilderness experiences embody the values of tenacity, responsibility, judgment, self-discipline, and compassion. The ability to work as part of a team, to take orders and respond accordingly and to eventually to lead others, requires among other attributes: good communication and listening skills, effective interpersonal skills, to overcome challenges, and to utilize initiative, drive and motivation not only in themselves but in others. Wilderness experiences can be an effective way of developing these qualities within individuals. Following is a report of two of the field trips that we undertook this year:

Building Bridges - Dharamsala

This school year a special field trip was organised in which 6 of the older children in TLC participated.

It was a combination of children from 3 Auroville Schools and one Outreach school, who spent 3 weeks in a Tibetan Orphanage school in Upper Dharamsala.

Organized by TLC (Matilde) and Pavilion of Tibetan culture (Kalsang) it was intended as a bridge between the 2 communities, Tibetan and Auroville, which began 7 years ago when the Tibetan kids come to spend 1 month in Av during their winter holiday.

It was a very gratifying and rich learning experience with the challenge of having a diverse and mixed group.

In Dharamsala, the Auroville representatives made a presentation on Auroville for the T.C.V students. The presentation shared information and experiences from TLC (The Learning Community), Transition School, Last School, Udavi School, Pavilion of Tibetan Culture and a brief History of Auroville. <http://www.tcv.org.in/content/tcv-upper-dharamsala>

The involvement in everyday life was rich and many kids volunteered to help to prepare meals, learning how to prepare local foods, such as momos (a few of them got very good at it!).

One of central parts of the trip was a 2-night sleepover in the TCV homes with the rest of the Tibetan children.

This was a very interesting experience because, for 2 days, the Av kids did what the other 1500 kids normally do: wake up at 5 am, chanting prayers, do the house hold chores all together including kitchen duties, cleaning, attending school and having all their meals at the respective homes. This was an eye-opening cross-cultural experience for all.

The group was invited by the staff of the private office of his Holiness Dalai Lama and taken directly to the door where His Holiness was coming out to meet the public.

He came out happily with a smile on his face, with the warm greeting "People from Auroville".

He looked each one in the eye, offering warm and powerful handshakes.

The journey back was very long and arduous. In Pathankot there was a delay of 10h, which resulted in the group leaving Peace house on Tuesday at 8pm and reaching Solar Kitchen on Friday evening at 7:30!



Kalrayan trip – September 12th – 20th 2016 – 12 children and 4 adults

Kalrayan is located in Tamil Nadu, many parts of the Kalrayan hills are untouched by tourism and urbanization. It is nearby and very accessible but largely unexplored and wild. Before leaving, team meetings were held with all the children and adults and all were engaged in the trip preparation, gathering food, tents, first aid, games, etc.

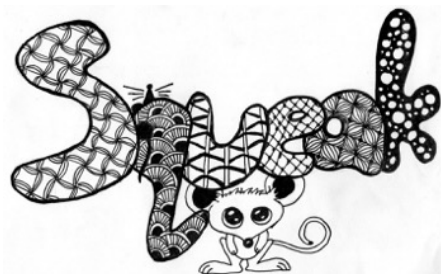
This camping trip required intensive collective effort (cooking, daily planning and managing the campsite). Morning/evening gatherings were called for planning and discussion. It was quite democratic and gave much sense of togetherness. Spending hours for basic needs (food/shelter and water) offered a great opportunity to understanding each other, feeling close to each other and having fun together. Collective work was not always easy, but offered an opportunity to learn how to work/communicate with respect within the limited time.

This trip was an eye opener for many in terms of understanding other realities. The water problem in Kalrayan was stressed; we practiced different ways to save water, learned that it is possible to live with little water.

The camp site which we used was not a public space, but rather it was a home for the family. To understand and adapt to the conditions was challenge for many of us but a great opportunity to learn how to respect the different realities.



Media and Communications



This was the second year of Media & Communications in TLC

It continues to be a project mainly aimed at encouraging the students to write and to lead them to develop their writing skills, including grammar, through editing of their texts as well as through some studying of guidance and hand-outs, such as on how to write articles.

Students continued to write on subjects that interest them, some undertaking interviews as part of the process. For the most part, this year, the class evolved into hands-on writing sessions as opposed to classroom teaching. At times it was a shame to interrupt after one hour, with the only reason being the class room was booked and in order to deepen the work, during the coming school year a full morning will be offered instead. That should also give enough space for some further instruction, as needed.

We did have a visit by Chris Sperry from the US. Well versed in media literacy, he gave a spell-binding session on what media really is (e.g. a wall can be considered media), and there will be continued openness to welcoming various experts. We also did some theoretical work, looking at the media timeline, dating back to papyrus scrolls.

Kids also illustrate and create for the fun pages of TLC's magazine "Squeak" and next year we hope to also develop graphics skills further. There is much encouragement for students to take on more of the editing themselves, as in learning how to shape the full magazine that continues to be an outcome of the work. Further issues of The Squeak were published and shared with the community this year, supported by the community, and it is felt that such a tangible outcome gives good impetus for meeting deadlines, and can act as portfolio material for further studies.

OWL – Our Whole Lives

Sexual education class with Paula and Damien.

Paula and Damien offered this course (8 sessions of 1 ½ hours) to TLC and we were very grateful to take them up on their offer for our oldest students (8 students age 13-15 years old).

The course on the one hand explained the more biological side of sexuality, introduced the correct terms for the reproductive body parts, but that was by far not all. The main aim of the course was to give students knowledge in order to make informed choices. An important aspect was to assert ones' own wishes in the face of peer pressure. Paula and Damien managed to gain the teenagers' trust on very sensitive topics by not shying away from addressing sexual matters. They engaged the teenagers by eliciting slang vocabulary that the students were familiar with, and explaining terms they didn't know. A very big part dealt with sexually transmitted diseases, and Paula's first-hand experience as a women's health practitioner made the class real for the students. For the students this frank approach to sexuality showed them that there are many sides to sex in the adult world and that it's ok to ask questions about what you don't know. The course also involved the parents, in a preliminary meeting, as well as in some of the homework, which aimed to open up the channels for discussions about sex between parents and children.

The students themselves found the course very useful and informative and feel that what they learned would be useful in their own lives. We were very grateful to Paula and Damien to offer their time and expertise, and hope they will repeat the class for the next group of students in the next school year.

Evolution project

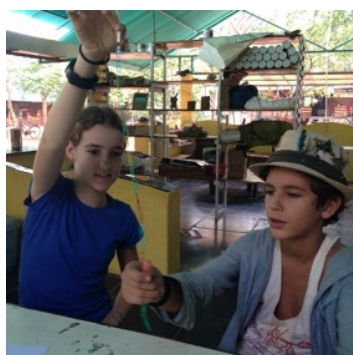


In this project a group of the older students studied evolution. Our starting point was defining how scientific methods are different from moral, religious or cultural beliefs. We explored how Darwin's theory of evolution came about, how his idea about life on earth clashed with that of his time, and that he formulated concepts of inheritance and adaptation without knowing the mechanics behind these processes. The students learnt how Darwin's ideas on natural selection and the formation of new species relies on a classification of species, and we briefly explored how Linnaeus developed his system of classification. We looked at the different ways in which the theory of evolution can be proven, through the fossil record, in spite of 'missing links', and in structural similarities between closely related organisms.

In the second term we saw that Mendel's experiments provided the missing understanding on inheritance, and the students followed Mendel's experiments with pea plants, created punnet squares and grasped the concepts of dominant and recessive genes. We spent some time understanding what DNA is and how it works, explored mutation, and investigated the similarities and differences between human, chimpanzee and gorilla genes, as well as those of our common ancestor. In the third term, we looked at the temporal context of evolution, the geographic timescale and when and how life changed throughout the last 4.6 Billion years. The students were amazed to see that for more than three quarters of the existence of the earth the only life forms were bacteria, but how then suddenly life exploded. It was important to understand that

evolution is a slow process (although it doesn't have to be, as the example of antibiotic resistant bacteria shows), and for most organisms to be what they are now, it took a long, long time to develop. Moving a step away from science, we briefly looked at how Darwin's ideas have been used in other areas: how Social Darwinism gave the justification for inequality, racism and Nazi ideology. We also saw that the term 'evolution' is used very differently in various spiritual contexts. Finally, the students composed their own graphic versions of the evolutionary progression leading to humans, and let their creativity take over in projecting the future of humans.

Throughout the class, I tried to use real original materials, often used in scientific contexts, because the emphasis was for me on understanding concepts rather than the details of say, the chemistry of genetic mutations. Although the students were still quite young (10-14 years old), they grasped the concepts of adaptation, natural selection; that mutations are random, the development of new traits are not planned but happen by chance; that those chance occurrences are responsible for the diversity of life; that all life is related; that a simple genetic mutation can change for example a blood clotting gene into a venom producing one. We studied as much as possible with hands-on activities, such as creating DNA for different species out of different coloured paperclips; simulating the survival rates of sickle cell anaemia patients through coin tossing. Using a 46 metre-long rope for the earth's timeline and clipping key events onto it helped understand the relationship between them. The class aimed to develop many different skills in the students, such as essay writing, team work, text comprehension, and presenting their own topics. All in all, although a large part of the class was based in science, I tried to bring out the historical context and social and moral implications, since for me learning happens most when we contextualise our understanding.



Independent Learning

Independent Learning (IL) is central to the educational program being developed in TLC. IL has this year allowed each child to follow their own individualized program in "academic" subjects.

Based on the three principles of education, "nothing can be taught", "the mind must be consulted in its own growth", and "from the near to the far", each child works at her/his own pace and has long uninterrupted time that allows for concentration to develop and for an individual work cycle to form.

Educational materials and assignments have been made to serve as guides in the children's more independent work. The facilitators have worked with preparing an environment and materials for self-directed learning to enable this. Experimentation with areas like time-management, goal-setting, planning, review have been key skills for the children to develop. This has given the children an opportunity to go deeper into a specific area of enquiry.

IL encourages individual expression, initiative, creativity, responsibility and 'ownership' of the work in a community setting. During the past years, the younger children ages (7-10) have been working in this way. New for this year was that also the older children (11-15) were offered this way of learning. Next year we plan to expand the IL to all areas of learning, not just the "academics" as it has been until now.



Nature & Spirit: Nature as the teacher of the multiplicity of expressions of spirit

The topic is Spirit in Nature; the way is being and becoming.

The idea is to slowly go deeper into the connection.

The attitude in which it happens is openness, spontaneity, receptivity, a capacity to be or to learn to be silent by moments. Different approaches can come along depending on our interest, the topics in the air or what happens in the moment. We have a toolbox at our disposal if need be: sense training – games- nature language- observing patterns There is a natural expression through drawing, writing, making mandalas, storytelling, flower arrangements, making video clips, world games, artwork with nature.

I believe connecting deeply with nature will foster respect and love for our planet and for each other and eventually help to save it....

These activities are part of the attempt to use the larger community of Auroville as our classroom, so here we meet at the Anususya forest house.

This year we had 2 groups, one was for a special project called 'One United Roar', a call to participate in a global talent challenge. Eleven children enrolled to make a movie clip roaring their heart out for Lions and for Nature. We spent time preparing the topic, watching relevant documentaries and exploring ways of expressing clearly and creatively. Everyone was a winner, while two of the children won the very special prize of a 1-week journey to the White Lion Protection Trust in South Africa, with one of their parents. A power point presentation was offered in Cinema Paradiso recounting their journey and experiences with the big animals and with a different culture.

The other group comprised of 6 kids (7y to 10y) and met weekly for an afternoon at the same location. The learning happens in a real-life situation where children could alternately explore freely what they wanted to do, and then do proposed activities related to nature, creativity, sense training games.

Beside this the World Game known as Sand-Box happened all the year around with some kids coming on a regular basis and making some project based work, to others coming once in a while. Here the joy of being the creator of one's own world is seen again and again.

You can watch a small slideshow here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdnAGkiAIVk>

And in the same channel, you can find many of the children's submissions to the One United Roar Talent challenge.



Survival! Sessions

Thirteen students aged 11-14 participated in the project Survival! Sessions in 2016-2017.

The project comprised 4 elements – survival stories; survival psychology; wild craft and first aid; survival trip, (the trip has been postponed until July / September 2017 due to the scarcity of water bodies after deficient rainfall). Sessions were every other week, giving time for guided assignments in the Independent Learning space. The idea for this course originated from discussions with students in the previous year.

In developing the course, I wanted it to be relevant, skills-based, experimental, encouraging authentic research, open to peer-learning. I was explicitly not a 'teacher', not an expert, but a participant and a guide.

We encouraged an attitude to be held in our sessions together, encapsulated in an oath which we took at the beginning of the course on the theme of cooperation and survival, and continued in games and activities with which we began each session in the first two terms. We also established a learning motto: "learn from others, learn by experience, learn together, keep on learning".

The course aimed to allow students to work with and develop a range of skills. These pertained to the act of surviving life-threatening situations, and to transferrable skills for effective learning (comprehension, organization and presentation of thought). It involved hands-on and theoretical dimensions.

For survival stories, the students selected stories about people who had managed to overcome extreme situations, and then presented these stories to each other, extracting the key learning points. They developed working knowledge of power-point. This strategy allowed the students to take ownership of their story, and represent it using visuals and graphics using their own initiative and creativity.

In survival psychology, we worked on a set of 11 skills, which included work on awareness, self-reflection on emotional triggers and impulses, resilience, knowledge of physiological reactions to threat, flexible thinking etc.). This component involved more conventional instructional elements and in-session activities.

The third component (wild craft) revolved around guided small group-work on wilderness survival themes: food, fire, water, shelter, trapping and fishing. The groups conducted research, which drew on survival manuals, the Internet and knowledgeable people; performed experiments on techniques discovered in the research; documented what worked and what failed; and presented to the others of their results.

The course will culminate in a survival field trip where the participants will test what they have learnt, in terms of skills and techniques as well as attitude and approach. They will also learn navigation skills on this trip.

Although many of the skills developed in this course came out of survival contexts, we made it clear through activities, discussion and assignments, that they are relevant to daily life – in the way we react to each other, how aware we are of ourselves, others and our surroundings, how a survival mentality is a humble one that is open to the new and unexpected, how real cooperation is a challenge.

Baking English and Children's tea shop

Baking English aims to provide the opportunity for an innovative approach to the study of the English language as well as other integral skills. We aim to provide children with an experience where learning is alive, spontaneous and relevant to what they are directly experiencing through practical, hands-on work; to take the study of English out of textbooks and worksheets and into a real-life situation, providing children with an opportunity to learn from context, with joy, and allowing for content to flow from spontaneous, real-life situations.

The Baking English project was initiated in The Learning Community five years ago where small groups of children (maximum 5 per group) have explored various aspects of the English language (including poetry, short story writing, parts of speech, punctuation, to name but a few) as well as research methodologies, mathematical concepts, computer graphic work, photography and team work skills, all through the medium of baking.

This year, the Baking English project began by building a wood-fired mud oven in TLC's Base Camp. The oven was built together with the children participating in the Baking English project, during the first 2 weeks of the first term. The classes have taken place in the newly created outdoor kitchen space. Three weekly classes have been offered, involving 14 children aged 9-13. The older children (those who have already participated in the project) have worked in a more independent format to previous years – they were required to bring their own recipes (rotating between each child in the class) and to work on a project derived from their recipe over the weeks that followed (until it was again their turn to bring a new recipe). The project incorporated 4 elements: creative writing (poetry/short stories inspired by the recipe/and or class), research inspired by the recipe (into nutrition, ingredients, historical context etc.), pricing of the recipe (incorporating relevant mathematic skills and calculations) and spelling. The younger group (participating in the project for the first time) were guided in an exploration of basic skills such as spelling, grammar and techniques of story writing/poetry. The whole baking process was photo-documented and towards the end of the academic year the children began to work on a recipe book, which will include the recipe texts, step-by-step photo illustrations, as well as the written work that they have completed throughout the year (poems, stories, research, recipe pricing etc.). Many other elements have naturally come into the classes such as co-operation and team-work, hygiene, time management, etc. The children have opted to continue working on their recipe books over the summer, and to complete them by the beginning of the coming academic year. This choice ties up with TLC's overriding approach of blurring boundaries between home and school, "school time" and "holidays" etc.... As an extension of the Baking English project, the children's tea shop ("The Dewdrop Inn") has been developed, where the produce of the Baking English project was offered to the wider community. The Tea Shop offers further opportunities to learn through doing, incorporating explorations into business models, cost-profit scenarios, alternative economies, promotional strategies, service skills, team work, to name but a few.



FFF – Fantasy, Food and Free-writing

This class combined several tools and approaches to encouraging creative writing in children, inspired by the manual "The Writer's Jungle" by Julie Bogart. Ms. Bogart's idea of "Friday Freewriting" evolved into the class Fantasy, Food and Free-writing where a group of five 9-10 year olds would meet once a week for a 2 hour "literary picnic" in the forest. Tea and cookies would be shared as together we read the book "The girl who could fly" by Victoria Forester (one chapter per class). Thereafter, the children would find a quiet space to write for the remainder of the class. The children were encouraged to focus on free expression, without over-focus on spelling, grammar, etc. The aim was to allow their creativity to flow unhindered by the formalities of the language. At the end of each class, children were given the choice whether to share their writing with the rest of the group or not. Each essay was collected in a personal folder. After five such "free writes" the children were asked to choose one essay. For the remainder of the classes, they worked on "perfecting" their writing. The focus of the work depended on the need of each child. Some spent much time correcting spelling errors (by looking up correct spellings in the dictionary), others worked on punctuation, while others focussed on story structure, creating rich introductions, setting the scene, character development, story endings etc. Finally the group worked on a cover and the chosen stories were compiled into a book. The class brought out the freedom and fun of creative writing for the children, while offering the opportunity to go deeper into different areas of the English language in general, and creative writing in particular. The faculties of creative freedom, persistence and patience were nurtured during this work.

