In our roles as both lecturer (Janet) and student (Simon) in a first-year university course called “Foundations of Learning Outside the Classroom,” we developed a deep intimacy with Learning Outside the Classroom: Theory and Guidelines for Practice (2012). It is written by three highly qualified Scottish academics: Simon Beames, Peter Higgins, and Robbie Nicol and is published by Routledge Press. Although clearly grounded in Scottish heritage and the authors’ socio-cultural context, the text has theoretical and practical relevance for an international readership.

The book was a required text for the first-year unit we were both involved with, and we both found it highly suitable for offering pre-service teachers an introduction to the power and potential of teaching and learning happening beyond the four walls of the classroom. We also agree that the book would be highly suitable for in-service teachers across a range of learning areas. The book provides a theoretically robust set of principles and guidelines (rather than prescriptive, replicable activities) that enables educators to integrate outdoor learning across the daily timetable.

The chapters provide introductions to the topics that Beames, Higgins, and Nicol have identified as being foundational to outdoor learning, including place-responsive pedagogy, education for sustainable development, community engagement in outdoor learning, student curiosity and responsibility as well as the basics of supervision and the management of risk in outdoor settings. The chapters are thoughtfully and purposefully constructed. Each begins with clearly articulated aims and concludes with principles and guidelines for practice. Key theoretical and conceptual messages are reinforced with relevant case studies that serve to demonstrate the theory–practice nexus.

The book is theoretically robust, yet highly accessible, and effectively draws on educational theorists, such as Dewey, Vygotsky, and Piaget, whose theories relating to learning have been foundational to the field of outdoor learning. Throughout our course, we relied heavily on the “four zone model” (presented in Chapter 1) that illustrates the essence of what Beames, Higgins, and Nicol are arguing—namely, that outdoor learning can and should extend into the everyday curriculum, across learning areas, and
should be easily accessible through local landscapes. They make a strong and convincing case that schools and their surrounding environments are logical starting spaces where outdoor learning can happen (have a close look at the clever front cover).

We expect that it must have been challenging for the authors to decide the “chapter content” that would ultimately frame up this “nugget” of a book that is only 126 pages. We commend them on their decisions—as it achieves its intent of providing the basic building blocks to integrate outdoor learning across the curriculum. We did, however, find distinct differences among the chapters, and perhaps further editing would have helped align them more closely. We felt fully satisfied by the earlier chapters, such as “Learning Across the Curriculum” and “Education for Sustainable Development,” that had strong theoretical lenses. These chapters provided enough theory and evidence to engage in deep discussion as well as practical activities related to the topics. We were left wanting somewhat by later chapters, such as “Administration and Risk Management” and “Supervising People Outdoors,” that had a distinctly pragmatic flavor and that lacked the same theoretical richness. Addressing these topics in such short chapters seemed difficult. In our roles as lecturer and student, we both found ourselves seeking more information to flesh out our understandings.

We felt that the compact nature of this book was both a strength and weakness. On one hand, the succinct chapters made for accessible reading that usually left us satisfied, having been provided with a good overview of the key theoretical and conceptual foundations of the topic. On the other hand, we were left a bit unsatisfied at the end of some chapters—and felt that key ideas had been left out. This is probably an inevitability of any short book, and overall, we think the brevity and accessibility were overwhelming strengths. Perhaps each chapter could have ended with a “want to know more?” section, whereby readers whose interest in the topic had been piqued were offered suggestions of additional resources, journal articles, books, and websites.

This important text adds to a growing number of books seeking to re-vision outdoor education by proposing a more critical socio-ecological, sustainability and place-based vision of outdoor learning firmly positioned across the curriculum (e.g., Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Irwin, Straker, & Hill, 2012). Learning Outside the Classroom stands apart in its accessibility, theoretical/practical mix, and Scottish flavor. It is useful for pre-service teachers in training (who want a good foundational description of a new vision of outdoor and sustainability education) and for in-service teachers and administrators (who want to make a case regarding the power of learning outside the classroom). Beames, Higgins, and Nicol refer to a statement attributed to Confucius that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (p. 111), and this text should be viewed in the same way: as a foundation for what is to come.

References