In this article Sharon and Helen consider ways pupils can be invited to pay attention to the more-than-human world.

In a relational approach, a teacher’s role is that of an ‘animateur’ – someone who models openness, curiosity, enthusiasm and attentiveness, valuing opportunities for learners to immerse themselves in natural environments through sensory exploration, thinking and creativity.

The liveliness of the more-than-human world

The term ‘more-than-human’ is inclusive of living organisms such as animals and plants and also, significantly, dimensions often considered inanimate including rocks, weather, imaginings, memories, dreams and associations. It may seem like a clumsy term, but more-than-human has been chosen carefully to honour diversity within the fieldwork space. Fieldwork spaces become places where the more-than-human/human interact. In these meeting places connections happen; knowledge, skills, values and emotions develop through stories, experiences, encounters and entanglements. More-than-human others, such as streams, fungi, trees and clouds have the capacity ‘to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 6) in relation with humans in fieldwork assemblages. Engaging with more-than-human dimensions encourages lively, spirited geographical explorations.

Invitations of place

Fieldwork is specific to the moment and requires both teachers and pupils to be open and attentive to notice what invitations are being offered within a place (Figure 1). Places invite us to engage in certain ways, encouraging geographers to be present in the physical world. Through being attentive to more-than-human invitations, it is hoped that pupils will ask questions, think differently, engage empathetically and attune to elements, building reciprocal relationships within fieldwork spaces.

Fieldwork spaces are full of wonder, potential and enchantment. They have much to teach us, if only we are willing to pay attention and engage with more-than-human invitations of place. In venturing on a relational fieldwork journey the teacher embraces serendipitous moments that emerge and provide opportunities for pupils to engage through their senses.

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A tree’s view

Activities that invite pupils to take a different view can help to provide new perspectives. In Figure 3, eyes have been drawn on to hands to help pupils to think about the questions:

- What might the tree see?
- What might this tree feel?
- What local knowledge does this tree possess?

Pupils also considered questions they would like to ask the tree (Figure 4). The pupils were fascinated by the age of their tree and wondered what sorts of events the tree might have witnessed given its proximity to a recently discovered Roman settlement. The tree-pupil encounters offered opportunities for the pupils to engage in sensory activities noticing the texture, colour and shape of their tree’s bark, leaves and branches. Figure 5 shares the pupils’ ideas about the perspective and responses a tree might make in response to their attention.

Figure 3: Drawn eyes help the pupils to make a real connection to their tree. Photo © Sharon Witt.

What would the tree like to communicate?

‘Please don’t pull off my leaves! I get really hurt when people bother me. Thank you for taking care of me’ (Anna, aged 11).

‘Why do you chop my precious wood down? It makes me feel lonely’ (Lucy, aged 10).

How did the tree feel after being hugged?

‘Touched, peaceful, loved, respected, cheerful, safe’ (Anna, aged 11).

‘It felt valued... it didn’t feel lonely’ (Lucy, aged 10).

Conclusion

In our experience, focusing attention on the material and more-than-human dimensions within a fieldwork space can enhance and deepen pupils’ relationships with local places. We recognise that relational encounters can be risky because you cannot be certain what thoughts, feelings, actions and possibilities may be present in the field. However, in a time of unprecedented global challenge it is time to make pupils’ worldly encounters richer as well as place relational thinking and understanding at the heart of geography fieldwork practice. Take a moment to look at places differently; we would love to hear about your relational engagement with geographical fieldwork (see web panel).

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Chiara Gattuso, a teacher at St Peters School, Bournemouth.

References


WEB RESOURCES

Download further relational activities: https://www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Primary-Geography
Post your stories: @attention2place

Sharon Witt and Helen Clarke are researchers in place attention and responsiveness, relational material encounters with landscapes seeking to connect pupils to environments.