

Attuning-with more-than-humans

Summary

In this teaching activity, students learn to attune with nature in their local area. They do this through different attunement and noticing activities that they design. Students document their attunement process through producing material for an exhibition where they share the outcome of their affective relations with more-than-humans in an environment (a natural environment or an urban environment) that they engaged with over a couple of weeks.

Learning outcomes

After the teaching activity students should be able to:

- Relate in embodied and affectionate ways with more-than-humans in a chosen environment.
- Design ways of attuning-with elements of the environment during a series of field studies.
- Describe and illustrate experiences of attuning-with through photos, drawings, collages, and creative writing.
- Discuss through informal dialogues about what 'attuning-with' means to designing-with / making-with more-than-humans.

Outline/Content

- Why is attunement useful for designers?
- Human more-than-human binary logics
- Earth Education model
- Attuning-with pedagogies
- Technician, mechanistic, instrumentalist approaches
- How can we see, feel, and explore otherwise?
- Field studies and exhibition

Key readings

Riley, Kathryn. and White, Peta. (2019) 'Attuning-with', affect, and assemblages of relations in transdisciplinary environmental education. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 35, 262–272. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2019.30>

Martin, Bella and Hanington, Bruce. (2019) Universal methods of design: 125 ways to research complex problems, develop innovative ideas, and design effective solutions. USA: Rockport Publishers.

- *You can look up the methods “collage” (p. 46-47) and “diary studies” (p. 88-89). However, any method you find relevant works.*

Attunement useful when working on local projects

Attuning-with methods are useful when we as designers work with more-than-human stakeholders in a local environment. We then have the opportunity as designers to gather our own embodied experiences with these environments and the more-than-human stakeholders living in them.

We do this by visiting the places often to establish contact and to be continuously in touch with the more-than humans living there. Attunement activities thus help to enhance designers' awareness of the more-than-human behaviors in the environments that they target with their designs.

With only expert knowledge, for example from biologists, designers might not gain embodied understandings of how a new more-than-human design can be integrated in natural environments. Therefore it is crucial that designers achieve a certain level of attunement, even though they may not know everything at the level of an expert such as a biologist.

Overcoming human-non-human binary logics

In this activity, you will explore what is socially accepted and socially meaningful in terms of how we interact and engage with more-than-humans in a chosen environment. We will do this through pedagogies of 'attuning-with'

- *how might we engage with more-than-humans in ways that foster a resonant relationship?*
- *What can we learn from these engagements?*

Rosa (2019) talks about embodied ways in which we establish relationships to the world. Concrete actions and experiences that come from these shape the ways in which we think about the world. Rosa argues that because humans living in urban environments have little contact with nature, they might have a broken relationship with the surrounding natural environment. A broken or problematic relation to the world might influence how we are (un)aware of and treat more-than-humans around us.

Earth Education model

Riley and White (2019) refer to the Earth Education model presented by Van Matre and Weiler in their book "the Earth speaks". It contains pedagogical strategies to disrupt dominant paradigms about 'nature'.

The aim of their exercises in this model is acclimatization to an environment. Some examples below:

Earth Walk: a participatory way of sharing nature where people together create sensory and visceral explorations of places. They forget about the Latin names labeling from botany or the 'sciency' ways of understanding and seeing things.

Magic Spots: solitude experiences of the natural world without words where participants develop non-verbal and embodied skills engaging with elements of nature.

Leaf Slides: everyone in a group picks up a leaf and look at it towards the light. It becomes a ticket to a theatre of leaves.

Wild pedagogies and slow pedagogies

Riley and White (2019) also refer to other related methods such as:

Slow pedagogies: pausing and dwelling in certain spaces to sense what kind of place it is. It is done silently where there is a poetic exchange of meaning. Meaning is attached to the landscape and nature and is also received from this environment. A person goes into a specific natural environment and may document their embodied phenomenological experience of this place and the nature there through creative writing and/or a diary. They may engage with the environment through embodied activities that emerge from the moment. The lived experiences thus unite the mind and the body with the environment.

Wild pedagogies: this involves listening to voices (for example bird song, the wind in the trees, sounds of water) of the more-than-human and discovering, creating, and re-examining your relationship with a place. During a visit in nature, a re-examination of this relationship with nature takes place. **Critique:** there might be an over-emphasis on the human experience of being separated from the environment, where the human is in opposition to, rather than being integrated with – especially if the integration is not practical and directly related to human needs that frame meaningful relations.

Attuning-with pedagogy

Riley and White 2019, page 264

Pedagogies 'attuning-with' depart from an inquiry into representations of/about the world by the phenomenological subject and subsequently dismantle the idea that the environment is a discrete and separate object to teach and learn about through discursively oriented and phenomenological positionings of bodies in 'nature'. This is because pedagogies 'attuning-with' are interested in the unfolding of contexts through the affective entering of bodies. In other words, as bodies are 'marked' through nonconscious experiences of pre-personal affective intensities, bodies are continually undergoing a dynamic and reiterative actualising of virtual possibilities within their assemblage of relations (Massumi, 2015).

This actualising of virtual possibilities is not derived from the feelings and emotions of a phenomenological subject and their object of perception, but from the grounded, lived, embodied and embedded account of individual subjectivities as relationally constituted with the composite of discursive materialities within the broader ecologies of the world (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010; Braidotti, 2013). That is, as we know 'Other(s)' through ourselves (Rautio, 2017), bodies are pulled to action through relationships with 'Other(s)'.

Technicist, mechanistic, instrumentalist approaches

Riley and White (2019) argue that some of the obstacles for engaging affectively with more-than-humans in natural or urban environments (or a mix thereof) are our learned technicist, mechanistic and instrumentalist approaches to our environments. Some unlearning is required.

We experience in gardens and city parks ourselves or someone else mows the lawn with a machine. When we go for a long hike, we might focus on our outdoor equipment and the sporty efficiency of walking with this equipment, step counter, calorie calculator etc.

Industrialized farming use big machines to control how we grow food, and we often see these machines interact with monoculture in what could otherwise have been natural environments.

Our visual culture: we are used to looking at things through our mobile phones, taking photos, filming ...

Hierarchy: it is very difficult to get a one-to-one affective relationship with more-than-humans if we think about them as an 'it' (Kimmerer, 2013) and something that should be controlled.

How can we see, feel, and explore otherwise?

Riley and White (2019, page 266)

One evening as we ventured to the shoreline hoping to catch a glimpse of the rising full moon on the eastern horizon, standing in a circle and clasping hands with the tide ebbing and flowing around our feet, my body stirred in/to action, reminding me of my life-affirming relationships with all ‘Other(s)’ around me. Becoming a human/water/sand/moon assemblage, we were emerging in a ‘togetherness relationship’, knowing our human selves through each other, the water, the sand, and the moon. In this moment, our human thoughts and feelings as socialised by discursive structures, had become entangled with the materiality of our own fleshy bodies; the coarse granules of sand under our feet, the dense swirling water around our ankles, and the iridescent yellow moon hanging in a pitch-black sky. I had always felt a romantic sense of affinity and intimacy with this coastal biome, extrinsically bound to environmental stewardship by stories of environmental crises that threaten the planet’s livelihood. Yet, through affective intensities ‘marking’ my body with liveliness and vibrancy, this bounding became an intrinsic knowing.

How can we see, feel, and explore otherwise?

Riley and White (2019, page 266)

Explore how we were becoming 'other' to ourselves in 'transforming-with' the world. In this way, the mindfulness practices challenged humancentric positions of teaching and learning about/of the world, to enact teaching and learning with the world.

Question: what does it take to becoming part of an assemblage in an eco-system? What kinds of activities might we engage in to really become part? (and not separated from)

How can we see, feel, and explore otherwise?

Another example can be found in Kimmerer 2013. Kimmerer argues that we might establish respectful relationships with more-than-humans – a feeling of kinship – through our physical, embodied and *practical* engagements with more-than-humans. Especially when these activities support our own survival and well-being. This is because we obtain an understanding of how our own well-being depends on the well-being of others (plants, animals who sustain us).

Read from one of the chapters in this book ... suggestion: page 235 from "I send the students off gathering, to read the land ..."

Field studies and exhibition

You will go on a fieldtrip to a place that is relevant to this course: the project and the case that you work on. You work in pairs. Pick a place of your choice that you find relevant and inspiring. Perhaps it takes a walk to different places to 'make the place find you'? (and not the other way around).

Make yourself available to this place. Try to explore it differently than the dominant scientific, mechanistic ... ways that you might be used to. Remember how you explored places as a child with an open mind.

When you get there, *relate in embodied and affectionate ways with more-than-humans in a chosen environment*. And after a while: *Design ways of attuning-with elements of the environment during a series of field studies to a chosen environment*.

You might want to stay in the places of your choice for a long time. You might also want to get back to it to experience it again on a different day, different time, different weather. Notice how it changes over time and depending on how you are that day. Your mood. The situation that you are in together.

Field studies and exhibition

When you developed ways of being and attuning-with more-than-humans in your chosen place, you can start to document a) how you attune-with, or document b) the results of attuning with.

Describe and illustrate experiences of attuning-with through photos, drawings, and creative writing.

You can use the methods in Martin and Hanington (2019): “collage” (p. 46-47) and “diary studies” (p. 88-89). However, any additional methods that you are inspired to develop there is relevant. Since you work in pairs, you can help each other out with the documentation.

Field studies and exhibition

We will have an exhibition in a later class moment where you will present your documentation. You might also bring some materials / more-than-humans from this place to the exhibition, if you think it is OK. Reflect on it. At the exhibition, each pair will split up so that one person mediates the attuning-with experiences while the other person walks around in the exhibition and explores what the others have experienced. Take turns. You can collect an A1 sheet of paper and gather your materials in an informal poster format. Under each poster, you are also welcome to show videos and play back sound files through headphones from a digital device.

In the exhibition you will *discuss through informal dialogues about what 'attuning-with' means to designing-with / making-with more-than-humans.*

References

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