Tool 2.3

Connecting with the animal

CLARITY Competence Area:

Nurturing connection to oneself, others and nature

GreenComp Competence Area:

Embracing Complexity in Sustainability

Why use this tool?

This tool can help explore animal behaviors, needs and habitats, while reflecting on coexistence. By connecting with the animal, we can better observe, reflect upon and empathize with other species, as well as reconnect with our own nature as animals. Friendly laughter, harmless exploration and fun is encouraged, as we learn and retain knowledge more effectively when we are enjoying ourselves.

Activity 2.3.1

Observe and research animals

Overview

How do animals relate to one another and to their environment? What do we have in common with other animals, and how are we different? What examples can we find of our common ancestry with animals, and of our different adaptations? Explore these questions through observation, reflections and movement exercises. Suggested 'Questions for reflection' and various examples are included to encourage learners to consider ways of living that sustains all forms of life. Friendly laughter, harmless exploration and fun is encouraged! We learn and remember more easily when we are having fun. Access to animals for this tool can be as simple as visiting a town square to observe pigeons. The exercises provided do not require the observer to be close to any animal.

Curriculum linkage

Natural Science, Civics & Social Studies and Cross-Curricular & Global Competencies.

Competences built

Critical thinking, systems thinking, interconnectedness thinking, empathy, presence and nature connectedness.

BASIC INFO

Age range:

6+ (adapt reflection questions to group level)

Duration:

45 minutes + 45 minutes, or more for the optional activity

Group size:

Flexible

Level of difficulty:

Intermediate

Materials required:

Animals to observe, for example birds, sheep, beetles or lizards

Space required:

Quiet enough for conversations, large enough for movement exercises

Location:

Wherever you find animals, for example near a lake, park, town square, farm or zoo. Some of the activity also takes place indoors

Engagement of external stakeholders:

Optional for step 4

Prep Work

Familiarize yourself with suggested questions for reflections.

Steps in the activity

1. Find, choose and observe
2. Describe and try out movements
3. Questions and reflections

Step 1: Find, choose and observe a species/ group of animals

1. Take your learners to an area where you know animals can be found.
2. Choose a species together with your learners. Based on what you think is best for your class, you can either have the whole group choose a species, or divide them into smaller groups, with each group selecting a species to observe.
3. Allow everyone to observe the chosen animals for a few minutes.

Step 2: Describing the animals' movements and trying them out

1. Ask the learners to describe the movements of the chosen animals.
2. Then, learners mimic these movements with their own bodies.
3. Optional: Reflect together on the experience, either during or after the activity. You can ask the following questions: What movements feel easy for you? Which ones feel difficult or even impossible?
4. Invite learners to consider which aspects of the animal's environment may have influenced the evolution of their movements? (For example, running quickly to escape predators, or reaching high into trees for food.)

Step 3: Questions and reflections based on the observations

1. Encourage learners to discuss and reflect on the **similarities** and **differences** between humans and the chosen animal. Use the questions below as inspiration, or use your own and your learners'. Feel free to divide the class into smaller groups to facilitate more meaningful conversations. In order to reflect on similarities and differences between humans and the chosen animal, you can ask learners to reflect on the following questions:
    a. How many legs does the animal have?

   b. Where are their eyes?
   c. Can they live or go underwater?
   d. Do they have bones? What does their skeleton look like?
   e. Do they live in groups or on their own? Do they have friends?
   f. Do they slow down when the weather is cold?
   g. What does their shelter look like?
   h. What are they scared of?
   i. Do they experience or think about climate change?
2. Invite learners to imagine how animals see the world and/or communicate with each other?

Step 4: Connecting reflections and imagination with research and facts

1. Invite learners to research their chosen animal, looking into the assumptions and imaginings expressed during Step 2. Research can be done online or in books, and can be complemented by a short lecture or a conversation with an expert.
2. Invite learners to compare findings from their research with the assumptions and imaginings expressed during Step 2. Encourage learners to share what they learnt and what surprised them.
3. Invite learners to represent with a drawing or a collage how their chosen animal communicates and/or sees the world. Some inspiration can be drawn from the work of Marshmallow Laser Feast, and their immersive experience titled "In the eyes of the animal".

(Optional) Step 5: Expand this research to other animals

1. Invite learners to gather information about the species they chose, focusing on:
   a. How does this species experience the world through their senses?
   b. How does this species communicate, and maybe even collaborate?
2. Encourage learners to carry out research through direct observation (where applicable), watching videos, researching online or in books, or asking an expert.
3. Invite learners to present their research in any creative way they want, acknowledging practical limitations. Ideas for such creative presentations include:
   a. A short play or improv theatre to be presented in class
   b. Photographs, paintings, drawings, comics or multi-media artwork

   c. Texts, for example poems, short stories or essays
   d. A short presentation with a slideshow
   e. Physical models
   f. A collection of descriptive AI-generated images, based on text prompts the learners provided, provided that all are aware of the ethical implications of this practice.
4. Invite learners to reflect on each other's presentation.

Dos and don'ts

Don't:
Don't force any learner to do movements they don't want to do, or to speak out loud to the whole group. Focus instead on making the setting and space feel as safe, encouraging and interesting as possible for the learners.

Adaptations:
You can combine the activity with a visit to for example a zoo, and coordinate your choice of species with the zookeepers. You can then do steps 1-3, and for step 4 you can ask the zookeeper to give the group a short presentation about the species you chose.

We invite you to adapt this activity to the specific needs of your learners, including by taking into account their neurodiversity. When adapting tools and activities for neurodivergent learners, please note it is not about treating others how you want to be treated, but how they want to be treated. Ask, listen, and stay open to different ways of learning and engaging.

References

This activity was designed by Climate Creativity.

- Schönfelder, M. L., & Bogner, F. X. (2017). Two ways of acquiring environmental knowledge: by encountering living animals at a beehive and by observing bees via digital tools. International Journal of Science Education, 39(6), 723–741. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09500693.2017.1304670
- Marshmallow Laser Feast. (2024, August 1). In the Eyes of the Animal — Marshmallow Laser Feast. https://marshmallowlaserfeast.com/project/in-the-eyes-of-the-animal/

Numerous meta-analytic reviews show that mind–body practices are effective in promoting motor, cognitive and affective functioning of both healthy and clinical populations. See for example:

- Han, Y. M. Y., Chan, M. M. Y., Choi, C. X. T., Law, M. C. H., Ahorsu, D. K., & Tsang, H. W. H. (2023). The neurobiological effects of mind–body exercise: a systematic review and meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies. *Scientific Reports*, 13(1). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-37309-4
- Mualem, R., Leisman, G., Zbedat, Y., Ganem, S., Mualem, O., Amaria, M., Kozle, A., Khayat-Moughrabi, S., & Ornai, A. (2018). The effect of movement on cognitive performance. Frontiers in Public Health, 6. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2018.00100

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