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 2.3.2

Move and feel like an animal

Overview

Explore emotions and perspectives through moving like different animals. Humans have been imitating animals for thousands of years for many different reasons. This includes to understand the animal they are hunting and its behaviors, to honor another animal, to appease their gods and for entertainment. In this activity we will use imitation to spark empathy and curiosity regarding animals. How do animals move? How do they express their emotions through movement? More particularly, how do they express stress, fear, joy, contentment or affection? Movements will also help learners connect to themselves.

Curriculum linkage

Physical Education & Health and Civics & Social Studies.

Competences built

Emotional literacy and regulation, interconnectedness thinking, empathy, presence, compassion, nature connectedness.

Prep Work

Bring blankets, familiarize yourself with the steps listed below.

BASIC INFO

Age range:

6+

Duration:

45-90 minutes

Group size:

Up to ca 20

Level of difficulty:

Intermediate

Materials/space required:

A mat or a blanket for each person for sitting/laying on the ground. Notepad and a pen for the teacher.

Location:

Preferably outdoors in nature

Engagement of external stakeholders:

No

Steps in the activity

1. Musical chairs
2. Inventing nature movements
3. Telling a story together with the movements
4. Breathing like the more than human
5. Embodying an animal and an emotion

Tip: Feel free to choose the order of the steps of this activity based on the level of energy in your class. For instance, you can start with Step 1 (Musical chairs) to bring the level of energy up, or with Step 4 (Breathing like nature) to help learners relax.

Step 1: Musical chairs - with blankets/mats

This step is included in the activity to energize the group and get them excited about movement. You can use the learner's experiences to reflect on how climate change shrinks habitats for many different species.

1. Lay out blankets on the ground, around half as many blankets as there are learners.
2. Ask the learners to move around the blankets, they can choose big or almost invisible movements, fast runs or slow crawls, or anything in between. Tell them that as soon as you stop the music, the learners must find a blanket to stand on.
3. Stop the music, let everyone find a blanket to stand on. Multiple learners can stand on one blanket.
4. Now, to increase the difficulty, remove one or more blanket(s). Then start the music again and have the learners leave the blankets to move around them again. The difficulty will increase as the process is repeated, and more and more blankets are removed.
5. End the game when the learners can barely fit on the few blankets that are left. There are no individual "losers" in this game, and everyone experiences the shrinking availability of blanket space.
6. Optional, for older learners: Reflect on the game. Ask the learners if they can think of any animals who are losing habitat/cover because of climate change. See some examples below:
    a. The polar bear is struggling because of decreasing sea ice cover
    b. The hare is struggling due to decreasing snow cover (making it more visible in winter)
    c. Animals living in the mountains are struggling as they experience increased competition as other species move upwards with warming temperatures (ex. the arctic fox)

Step 2: Inventing nature movements

1. Give the learners (single or in groups of 2-3) 5 minutes to invent a short movement inspired by an animal. For example: flapping their arms like a butterfly or stomping the ground like an elephant. Tell the learners that the movement should be short (e.g. 3 moves), something they can remember and show to the whole class.
2. Invite each smaller group to show the whole class the movement they invented, followed by the whole class repeating that movement. This can be done with learners forming a large circle.

Step 3: Telling a story together with the movements

1. Introduce the next step of the activity, during which learners will use the movements inspired by animals to build a short story. Highlight that fun and movement exploration are more important for this story than the coherence of the story.
2. Start the story by saying “Once upon a time ….”
3. Going around the room, ask the learners to repeat their movements and add words to those movements. For example, a learner/group whose movement was waving their arms like a butterfly, might say “… there was a butterfly …”. The next group who was moving like an elephant may say“ … who met an angry elephant … “ etc.
4. Note down the story as it is told, and help learners craft the story with friendly follow-up questions if anyone is struggling.
5. When the story has been told and written, read the story out loud while each learner/group does the corresponding movements.

Step 4: Breathing like the more-than-human

1. Invite learners to sit in a circle, including on the floor if possible.
2. Take a few minutes to guide the learners in trying to breathe in the rhythm of various elements of nature, for example: waves, wind, hummingbird wings, blue whales.

3. Optional: Use the natural sounds in your surroundings as inspiration. Sitting near a lake or the ocean can for example inspire the learners to breathe like the waves. You can also use recordings of nature sounds (waves, wind etc) to support the learners.
4. Allow time for the exercise and welcome any reflections on the experience.

Step 5: Embodying an animal and an emotion

1. Ask learners to reflect upon and then tell which animal they each want to be.
2. Announce the animal you wish to be as well.
3. Ask everyone to strike a pose as that animal would. For example, a t-rex would be standing with its short front legs dangling, a squirrel would squat, or a crocodile would lie flat on the ground.
4. Ask the learners to name an emotion, and to move around as if their chosen animal was feeling that emotion.
5. Ask learners to now express a few different emotions.
6. End the activity by welcoming any reactions or reflections and sharing some of your own.

Dos and don'ts

Do:

Observe your learners closely during the exercises. If any learner suddenly seems uncomfortable with any of the steps, for example from having to stand too close to other learners as their "habitat" shrinks, you can choose that as a good time to end the exercise and go to the next step or a break or round of reflections.

Adaptations:

For learners who can't easily move around on blankets or grass: Skip blankets entirely, and instead draw circles on the ground/floor of your environment that the learners have to stand inside. When it's time to "reduce the habitat" for the learners, instead of removing blankets, you can cross out more and more circles.

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.

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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