

Cultivating Empathy Through Phenology



A PreK-12 Activity to Practice Empathy for the Earth

Created by Skylar Primm, Educator

"The circle of ecological compassion we feel is enlarged by direct experience of the living world, and shrunken by its lack." – Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

Introduction

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote about how my students and I [found comfort in the rhythms of nature](#). Phenology, the study of seasonal changes, helped us stay connected in those difficult days of video calls and extreme social distancing. Since that time, I've also become increasingly convinced that these types of close observations of nature can help students develop empathy for the natural world. This cultivation of empathy in one realm is sure to pay dividends in other areas of their lives, as well. The best part is that no one needs any special supplies or pristine natural spaces to make these observations.

Just follow the four steps I've outlined below – make adjustments as needed for younger learners, or pass along the directions as written for older learners.

Phenology in Practice

1. Pick a spot to observe

Your observation spot (sometimes called a "sit spot") doesn't have to be some sort of mythical space untouched by human hands. Even those of us who live in urban areas are surrounded by nature. Maybe it's a tree outside the window, or some grass and wildflowers along the median. Your school also may have a courtyard or grounds space where you can safely sit

Cultivating Empathy



outside. Your spot just needs to (a) have something natural to observe and (b) be accessible year-round.

I've been spending time recently on a convenient bench, observing trees along the lakeshore in a neighborhood park in Madison, Wisconsin. This spot has the benefit of being within walking distance of my home, and even in quieter times of the year, the lake offers signs of motion and change to observe. It's also along a walking path, so usually people and their dogs are passing by while I sit.

2. Engage your senses

Once you've found your spot, settle in for a few minutes. Maybe take some deep breaths to transition yourself from whatever else you were doing before this moment. Then use all of your senses to fully observe the space. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? (You should probably skip over the tasting, unless you know for sure that your subject is an edible plant.) You could also take a few photos, if that's your jam.

In the last few months, I've seen leaves turn color, heard geese overhead preparing to migrate south, felt strong winds at my back, and smelled soil disturbance after a light rain. I've seen runners, walkers, babies in strollers, and dogs of all sizes. I've heard snippets of conversations between people and pups alike. Paying attention to these aspects of my spot has helped me feel a stronger connection to it, and more of an appreciation for the ways that folks in my community choose to use it.

3. Notice any changes

Make a habit of visiting your spot regularly, whether that be monthly, weekly, or even daily. Each time you visit, pay attention to the changes that have occurred since the last time you were there. Have the leaves grown a bit? Has the soil been disturbed? Are there different bird sounds this time? All of these observations help you to understand how the seasons affect nature, and will leave you with a stronger connection to your spot and the myriad living creatures within it.

The people coming through my spot have begun to wear more layers and move a little more briskly from place to place, and there are far fewer folks out on the water. Observing the slow changes in the colors of the leaves and groups of migrating waterfowl gathering on the lake has helped me feel more of Kimmerer's "ecological compassion" for a spot that's been pretty thoroughly integrated into an urban landscape. It's also helped me to think about all the life underground that facilitates the life above. How many fungi, invertebrates, and microbes might be moving, unseen, beneath our feet? What responsibility do we have to these other living organisms that share our space?

4. Make some predictions

Cultivating Empathy



Finally, once you've got a few visits under your belt, try making predictions about what will happen next. Will that branch keep growing? Will the flowers bloom? What might happen to that moss? Half the fun is in seeing the unpredictable changes that will happen at your spot throughout the year, but you'll probably get better at predicting changes as you go.

During the winter, I'm expecting the rate of change at my park spot to slow down considerably. The lake may take months to freeze over, but eventually it will get some use for ice fishing and pick-up hockey games. As spring approaches, I'll be paying extra attention to the buds on the trees and the tiny shoots of green poking through the soil. These signs of rebirth fill my cup and help me remember that brighter days lie ahead.

Conclusion

Phenology observations really are that straightforward. By slowing down and paying attention, you and your students will begin to feel more connected to the spaces in which you live. The nonprofit organization [Radical Joy for Hard Times](#), which advocates for recognizing the value of damaged spaces, notes that: "Love of place unites us and goes deeper than our differences." By learning to respect and love our own spaces, may we all discover that sense of unity for ourselves.

Biography

Skylar L. Primm teaches at [High Marq Environmental Charter School](#), a project-based learning school in Montello, Wisconsin. In 2017, he was the recipient of a Herb Kohl Educational Foundation Fellowship in recognition of his teaching, leadership, and service. He currently serves on the boards of directors for the [Human Restoration Project](#) and the [Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education](#). He blogs at [skylarp.medium.com](#). You may contact Skylar at skylarp@mac.com.