

Perceiving the Place by the Senses

Abstract

Do you want to take up place-based learning while engaging all the senses? This minilesson will take the students from the classroom to the nature, where they will experience their surroundings unconventionally, using all their senses. The minilesson features small activities that prepare students to perceive their place through individual as well as collective experiences of detail. The activities provide students with novel perspectives on their environment and their position therein.

Unit type and duration

The activities can fit within a single morning. The time required is 90 minutes. An additional 30 minutes are needed for preparation.

Target group

The minilesson is designed for primary programmes. It can be adapted for lower secondary programmes at the cost of increased teaching demands.

Context and cross-curricular links

Reading, writing and literature; Civics education; Arts

Goals and outputs

Goal:

Students observe and notice different plants, animals, and phenomena directly outdoors, mindful of the feelings accompanying their perception, and use the information or experiences obtained to nurture their interest in nature in their immediate surroundings.

Outputs:

Students perceive a place through different senses and from different perspectives.

Students articulate what they have experienced in their contact with nature, including positive and negative feelings.

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Outline of the activities

Activity 1: Entering fantasy

Duration: 5 minutes

Location: in classroom or outdoors

Materials: none (elective tip: old type of phone with a handset)

Activity description:

Ask students to form a circle and start telling the story: *“I wonder if you know that some absolutely unbelievable things tend to happen at this place. You can see those things if you transfer yourselves to the reality of a slightly different world. I have a special device here on me...”* Produce the telephone, ideally some extremely outdated model, *“... which is going to help us transfer to that special world. Now please close your eyes, extend your arms, and when the signal sounds, we will be transferred to the world of unbelievable.”*

Now activate one of the phone’s ringtones or signals. And start with the first activity.

Activity 2: The tune of the place: perceiving the diversity of sounds

Duration: 25 minutes

Location: in classroom or outdoors

Materials: clipboard, pencil, sheet of paper, booster seat

Activity description:

Distribute clipboards, paper and pencils. Ask each student to find a nice place in the area where they won’t be disturbed by others, go to their place, and sit down on their booster seats. Their task is to close their eyes and listen to the sounds offered by the landscape around them. To enhance their perception, they can use paper to make a conic “receiver”. Ask the students to use their pencils and draw the sounds they hear on paper. The goal is not to depict the sounds visually but to record their amount and intensity.

In the following reflection session, exploit the students’ understanding of what is key for their perception during the next activities. Make sure to remind students of this during the minilesson:

- What was it like for you?
- How many sounds did you hear? Which ones did you find surprising? Which ones were the quietest? Which ones occurred the most often?
- Do you normally perceive that many sounds? How come you were able to hear that many sounds? What helped you perceive them?

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- Next time you want to perceive nature with your other senses, what is going to help you enrich your perception?

Activity 3: Connection with nature: touch perception

Duration: 25 minutes

Location: outdoors

Materials: one blindfold for each pair of students (not essential, only recommended)

Activity description:

Ask students to form pairs and put a blindfold on one person in each pair. Ask the sighted students to guide, in complete silence, the other person through the terrain. At a certain spot, they should knock on the other person's shoulder. The other person should keep the blindfold on and focus on their touch perception as instructed (bark of a tree, wall of a building, soil, grass...) Instruct the students to set out to discover the different surfaces and how they differ in shape, structure, roughness and wetness. Weather permitting, invite the students to take off their shoes and guide each other, with a blindfold on, through various terrains such as the forest, the meadow, or the path. Ask the paired students to switch after 10 minutes.

Now reflect the activity as described under Activity 1.

Activity 4: The path: visual perception of detail

Duration: 30 minutes

Location: outdoors

Materials: Monoculars made of toilet paper tubes or rolled paper sheets, wooden skewers with (or without) flags – 4 pieces per student

Activity description:

Pick a diverse plot of natural landscape about 4 metres long. Ask students to spend 15 minutes slowly crawling on all fours across the plot and examining it with their paper tubes, striving to discover objects of interest and unexpected little details or "treasures". Each discovery should be flagged. Subsequently, ask students to form pairs and guide each other as tourists on a tour of the beauties of their land, narrating and observing through their monoculars the different points of interest along their "educational path". In addition to the monoculars, mouth mirrors can be used to inspect details.

It is recommended to end the exercise with a sharing session: ask the students what they saw and what they found surprising.

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Activity 5: Aromatic cocktail: smell perception

Duration: 15 minutes

Location: outdoors

Materials: A cup or a glass

Activity description:

The activity is suitable for a slow walking transfer. Ask students to bring their own cups and venture outdoors to collect natural objects whose smell they find nice or intriguing. Before they set out, show them that some natural objects must be run through the fingers to smell more strongly. Then discuss with them the different places smells can be found and what can help them find smells. Ask students to mix their aromatic objects and come up with a name (e.g., the forest fragrance, the mushroom mix etc.) Finally, ask students to let their peers smell their “aromatic cocktails” and share: Which natural object surprised them with their smell? Which one did not smell the way they expected?

Activity 6: Poem about the place

Duration: 15 minutes

Location: outdoors

Materials: pencil, sheet of paper for the teacher, bell

Activity description:

Gather your students in a nice place and ask them to reflect on their impressions of this set of activities and experiences of the place.

Read out a Japanese nature haiku or a powerful poem about the nature, e.g. by Matsuo Bashō¹:

people in the world

*hardly notice these blossoms –
chestnuts by the eaves*

how many cloud peaks

*have come tumbling down upon
the moon's own mountain*

¹ Translated by Tim Chilcott, <https://www.tclt.org.uk>, 2004.

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*how many cloud peaks
have come tumbling down upon
the moon's own mountain*

Quietly and individually, students disperse throughout the area so that no one is disturbed. They sit down, make themselves comfortable, and recall what they have experienced during the previous activities. While engaging one sense at a time, they tune in to the place and then materialise their impressions by writing two words or an expression on a strip of paper. Provide 5–10 minutes, then ring the bell for students to return.

Collect the paper strips and divide them into stacks of 5–6. Students form small teams for each stack and use the words to create a poem (free verse is allowed). The form of Japanese haiku can be made obligatory. Then one person for each group recites the poem.

If running short on time, invite students to follow you quietly and whisper their words to you, and write them down. Finally recite them as a single common “poem”. Emphasise that the poem that has been created has the power to transport anyone reading it to this place.

Recommendations: When you do this in two or three local parks, ecosystems or shops, you will simultaneously obtain a comparative study and a place-based word bank.

Activity 7: Concluding the activities and reflecting the minilesson

Duration: 15 minutes

Location: in classroom or outdoors

Materials:

Activity description:

Ask students to close their eyes because we are about the play a sound that will transfer us back to the everyday reality. After some noisy rummaging about, say in a low and annoyed voice: *“Heck, it must be broken, it’s not working. But never mind, actually. As you have experienced by yourselves, this world is a magical and unbelievable one; and I’m sure you won’t mind if we stay in this world and take our perceptiveness home to our daily lives...”*

Now perform your concluding reflection. Arrange students in a circle and give each of them an opportunity to respond:

- How did I feel? What was it like for me to perceive nature?
- What are some of the things I found for myself in the process? What kind of interesting things did I see? What caught my attention the most? ? Did I notice anything new? Did I discover something I hadn’t noticed before?
- What helped me perceive nature during the different activities?

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- How would you use the lessons you learned in this programme during your next walk in the outdoors or through our town?

Below is a selection of alternative sensory learning programmes:

Mirrors

Get a mirror as big as possible. Walk with it through different environments – the meadow, the forest – while tilting it in various directions and examining the views and perspectives. Students can be asked to hold on to another person's arm. The other person will guide them while they can focus on observation.

Thousand Shades of Spruce Needles

Underneath spruce trees, pick a large amount of brown needles (alternatively, collect grass, purchase black sesame seeds etc.) Sit down, focus on their colours and sort them into at least five groups, from the brightest shade to the darkest one. Finally, use the sorted needles to create a mandala.

Painter's Palettes

Cut painter's palettes out of cardboard or thick paper and cover them with double-sided tape. Ask students to venture outdoors. They are now artists in the process of creating their painter's palettes. The goal is to create a palette as colourful as possible by attaching natural objects of different colours to one's cardboard palette.

My Tree

Go to a forest. Ask students to form pairs. One person in each pair should be blindfolded and the other person should guide them to a tree about 30 metres away. The blindfolded student has about 10 minutes to feel the tree. Take the student back to the starting point, remove their blindfold, and ask them to find their tree.

Photographer's Stories

Plan stations in a way to tell a story. One person in each pair is a photographer and the other one is a camera. The camera's eyes are closed. The photographer guides the blind camera with a view to capturing a story, noticing places they are passing. When there is an interesting shot, he/she points the camera (the head of the blinded person) and taps their shoulder twice. The camera opens their eyes and takes a few seconds to review the place to which the photographer has pointed them. In this way, the pair takes six snapshots (those can be details or panoramas). Then they switch. Each student finally writes down (in their diary) the story they have recorded as camera.

Finger Framing

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Ask students to move through the terrain in silence, observe various places and try to find a detail of interest. They should form a rectangle with the index fingers and thumbs of both their hands as a frame to assist their observation. Ask them to use their cameras, mobile phones or tablets to take a picture of their detail of interest.

Note: If some students do not have their own camera, camera-equipped mobile phone or tablet, use mirrors for the activity. Walk carefully through a delimited area while carrying the mirror horizontally and looking at the world from a different perspective.

Creating an Assemblage Together

Ask students to set out on a group tour or walk individually through an area. Without speaking at all, they should collect ten little things that catch their attention while walking. When their time is up or the teacher instructs them so, the students should form a circle. Distribute blank sheets of paper and ask students to place them in front of them inside the circle. Without speaking, each student should create an assemblage (picture) of the materials brought. Reserve enough time for the artistic process and subsequent viewing of all the assemblages. In the next stage, students recreate each other's assemblage. They ask one another questions: "*Do you mind if I take this flower?*" Answer: "*Sure; no, you can't; give me this in exchange,*" etc. This is followed by a reflection of the creative process. Students typically bring their materials home as souvenirs of this day.

Painting with Natural Materials

Give each student a sheet of paper and ask them to paint a picture using natural materials only. Then exhibit the artworks and reflect the activity together.

Guiding

Ask students to form pairs. One person in each pair should be blindfolded and the other person should be their guide. The guide should present the place in a different way, by letting the other student touch the different objects of interest, listen to them, smell them, put their arms around them, or inspect them with other senses. After ten minutes, ask the guide to bring their partner to the "starting line" and ask the students to switch.

Prerequisites and possible follow-up minilessons:

As this is a standalone minilesson, there are no prerequisites to it. The minilesson ranks 2 on the PBL Ladder (as described below) and its activities are suitable for classes that are being introduced to PBL. Those interested in gradually climbing up the PBL Ladder are invited to try other available minilessons, namely:

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Emotion Mapping of the Place: Emotion mapping offers a fun and useful way of tuning students to the place where they live. They start in the classroom by examining their and fellow students' feelings about the place or different local areas. Then the attention shifts outside, where students investigate the opinions and feelings of other community members. Students record their results in emotion maps that help us learn about different views of the place mapped. The output, one or more Emotion Maps, may become a useful information source for formulating a vision of the place.

Seeing My Town through Time-Travel Glasses: The easy minilesson inspires students to reflect on their town and how they would like it to be, what they find important for living in the town, or what they would rather change. Finally, students compare their visions with their real-life community.

Integrating the place and the community in the minilesson

The activity is designed as a possible introduction to PBL. Students are only learning to perceive the environment around them in different, unconventional ways. Students visit familiar local spots, whether they are in spots the school's immediate vicinity or other natural spots available locally. While the minilesson is not designed to engage the community, the available follow-up activities do integrate such engagement.

Application of PBL principles and the PBL Rung attained

Principles:

On-site learning – As learning steps outside the school, the community and its surroundings become the classroom.

Learning about the place – The minilesson informs students where the local forest is, which places are wet, where the road can be heard, etc.

Learning through the place – While this principle is not applied by the minilesson, follow-up minilessons applying the principle can be used.

Learning for the place – While this principle is not applied by the minilesson, follow-up minilessons applying the principle can be used.

Place attachment – Students form an attachment to the place by perceiving it and, above all, reflecting: what kind of interesting, novel things they discovered, which spot they liked, what they disliked, etc.

Adapting to local situation – The learning process is adapted to specific local conditions and needs. Each place is different and can also be perceived differently by each individual. This should be stated explicitly during the reflection.

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Personal relevance – Students find the learning process personally relevant, being able to see how it relates to their own lives. It is recommended to tell students that getting to know a place through one's senses may help us find out which places we feel good about, find interesting, and want to preserve, and which ones we will be inclined to change.

Active student involvement/participation – While this principle is not applied by the minilesson, follow-up minilessons applying the principle can be used.

Community partnership – While this principle is not applied by the minilesson, follow-up minilessons applying the principle can be used.

Interdisciplinarity – Reading, writing and literature; Arts; and Moral education are integrated in the cross-curricular learning process.

Full-fledged teaching tool – PBL is a full-fledged tool of school education, not a mere extra. The educator should have clear goals for what they want to teach students through PBL, how it all fits within the curriculum, and how it will be evaluated.

Cooperation – While this principle is not applied by the minilesson, follow-up minilessons applying the principle can be used.

Place-Based Learning Ladder (the rung attained by the minilesson is in bold):

Rung 1

Lessons are adapted by adding local examples to existing teaching units.

Rung 2

Lessons are designed to include direct experiences of the place (or direct experiences of the place are added to existing teaching units).

Rung 3

Teaching unit is designed to use the advantages of the place and form a community partnership.

Rung 4

Integrated teaching unit based on PBL that involves service learning and a strong community partnership.