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CHAPTER 8

Playing with posthumanism with/in/as/for communities

Generative, messy, uncomfortable thought experiments

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Abstract

Theorising to disrupt humancentric ways of knowing, doing and being is increasingly pursued in these eco-catastrophic times. Building on previous conceptualisations of human-non-human community learning, this chapter experiments with the practicalities of thinking and being with an entangled, beyond-human sense of community. The intention being to re-frame learning and being with/in/as/for all community. Posthumanism concepts and perspectives are engaged with through multimodal, embodied, abstracted and layered thought experiments. By bringing ourselves into purposeful, sensory, artful 'conversation' with the living and material co-dependents of our ecology, we experiment with ways of thinking and being in a world not centred on the human. Beyond-human physical and metaphorical experiences are entangled with body, self, other (human and non-human), concepts, place, space and time. These practices extend thinking, knowing, doing and being with/in/as/for community. Notably, these efforts unsettle our deeply held prejudices of being human that are difficult to detach from. These generative thought experiments reveal rich, embodied and creative ways of knowing and being, as well as provocations and tensions shared with the aim to spark beyond-human conversations with/in/as/for human-non-human learning communities.

Keywords

Posthumanism, non-human, community, learning, Anthropocene, creative, thought experiments

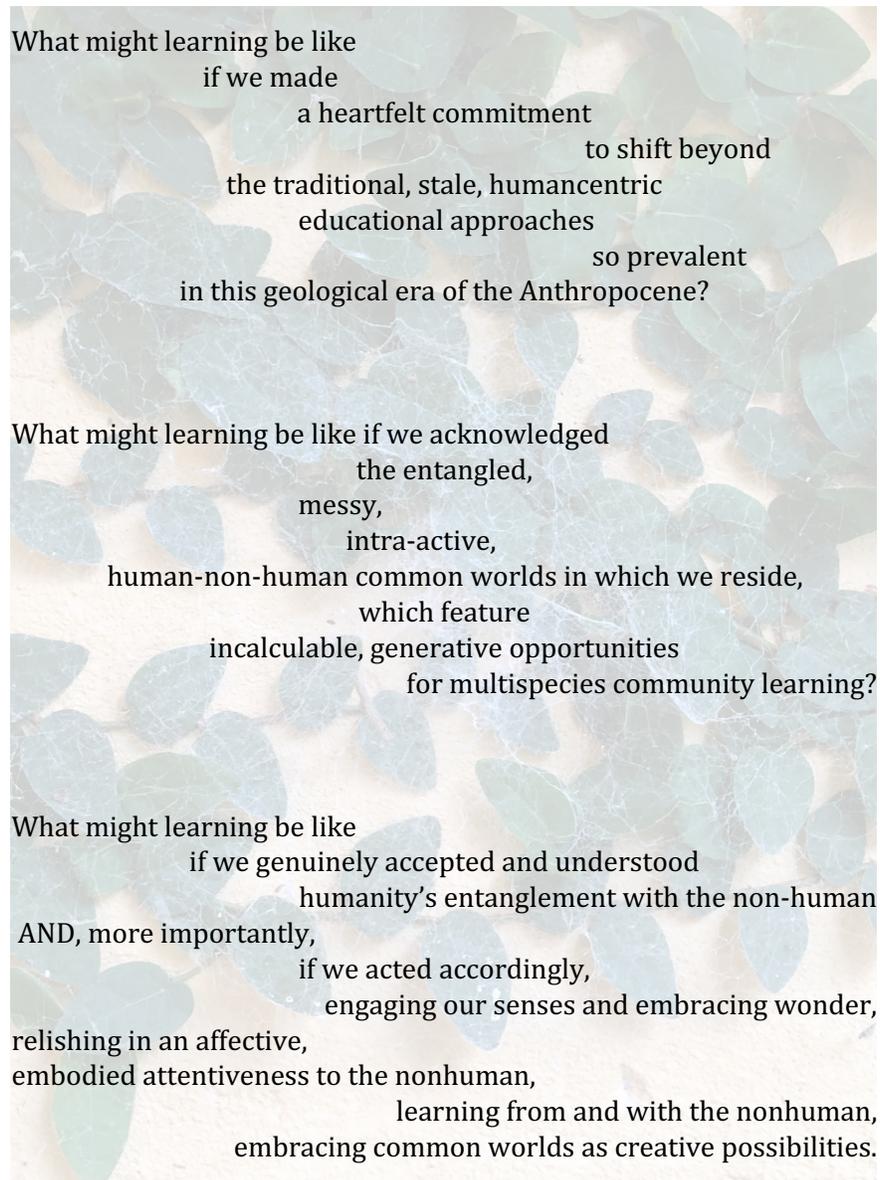


Figure 1: Prologue poetry/image montage

Leveraging the Touchstones¹

Pivoting from our interest in ‘de-imagining² and re-invigorating learning with/in/as/for community, through self, other and place’ that we have written about previously (Osborn, Blom, Widdop Quinton & Aguayo, 2020), here we, the two authors of this chapter, experiment with arts-based approaches to imaginatively interpret what it means to learn and be with a beyond-human sense of community. Our intent is to encounter possibilities and complexities of common worlds community intra-actions in an exploratory and creative way. We pursue these aims via thought experiments, investigating “the nature of things” (Brown & Fehige, 2014, p. 1) through engaging our imaginations, senses and affect. In essence, these artful experimentations tease out human-non-human entangled experiences, beyond traditional academic or intellectual boundaries.

Launching from the ‘touchstone’ concepts of the Anthropocene, posthumanism and common worlds as creative milieux (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al., 2020) to de-imagine learning with/in/as/for community, we focus our orientation to engagement with the non-human essence and heart of community. In this era of human impacts on the Earth (the Anthropocene), our focus touchstones for reimagining generative intra-actions with common worlds of all beings and materials are posthumanism – regarding humans as just one of the many elements of the meshwork of life and matter – and creative meaning-making. Our immersion in the blurred, messy boundaries *between* human-nature, lively-inanimate and nature-culture focuses our attention upon possibilities of “fluid assemblages of human-non-human-place community encounters” (Osborn et. al, 2020, p. 216).

In our efforts to de-imagine and reinvigorate learning with/in/as/for community, arts-based methods are placed into conversation with posthuman common worlding (Taylor, 2013), to practice being one among the many intra-acting (Barad, 2007) elements of community. We launch off our original chapter to engage in more “collaborative and relational research” that affords opportunities for human-non-human intra-action (Burke et al., 2017, p. 120). Taking a creative turn stretched our boundaries of comfort and experience, but allowed us to involve the sensuous and embodied, as well as the cognitive and affective – to engage with self-other-place in new ways. Our artful

thought experiments are not aimed at creating art as a product (both of us are novices in arts-based inquiry), but as representations of making visible different ways of thinking and being. To engage differently through “unfamiliar experiences” that inspire “new conceptual and embodied frameworks” (Sayal-Bennett, 2018, para 32).

These efforts constitute slow scholarship; commencing with an embodied immersion together in place, then independently and collaboratively re-engaging with place, artefacts, memories, reflections and imaginings, stretching over days and months for almost two years. Embracing slow scholarship and diverse experiences together and apart allowed us to move beyond linear conceptions of time and engage more fully with the “aesthetics of place, of experience, and of movement” (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017, p. 117). Although we may have been ‘apart’ for some of this work in the traditional sense, our thinking, musing, pondering, learning, sharing and engagement with the non-human were always entangled and “entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

Origins and methods of our thought experiments

Under the winding, whorling tendrils of a flourishing grapevine at a Sustainability, Environment and the Arts in Education [SEAE] Research Cluster writing retreat in 2019, we discussed the need to listen attentively to the non-human to inform and expand our understandings of community. Through thought experiments and embodied encounters, we sought to listen to and learn from the non-human – and ourselves – to distil what learning with/in/as/for community may look like, sound like, feel like, and what it has the potential to be/become within and beyond humancentric structures and contexts. We intended our thought experiments to constitute a liminal space between what is and what comes next – to inform the realisation of genuine human-non-human community learning. We hope our meanderings in this liminal space stimulate conversations, insights and ultimately action. These efforts are motivated by a desire for greater, deeper and more widespread generative engagement with human-non-human communities to enrich learning, thinking,

knowing, being and becoming in all facets of life – personal, community, society and beyond.

At the SEAE bushland retreat in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, Australia, we commenced our first thought experiment by ‘taking posthumanism for a walk’. We sought to purposefully decentre the human however we could, and therefore dwell differently in place. The non-human was honoured and valued through our committed attentiveness and sensorial attunement. Throughout this and the later thought experiments, we embraced “a radical openness to collaboration and encounter” with ourselves, each other, and the non-human, including place (Cutcher, Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2015, p. 450).

We pursued a sensing, thinking, feeling awareness to the non-human as active agents in our encountering, learning, pondering, seeing anew. We walked slowly through the yard, gardens, buildings and bush; attentive to the position and movement of our bodies, other bodies and matter; listening, looking, feeling, smelling, touching. We strove to embody an awareness of our transcorporeality – deeply attuning to the intermeshing inseparability of human, place, other, and matter (Alaimo, 2010). We took considered photographs in the hope of eliciting insights into what non-human nature might be willing to share with us around learning with/in/as/for community. We were cognisant of the importance of “noticing, lingering, reflecting and trusting ourselves” to understand insights afforded by these creative, experimental acts (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017, p. 118).

During this and later thought experiments, we documented our individual and shared experiences through a “performative process of walking and mapping,” (Cutcher, Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2015, p. 450). Specifically, we mapped these thought experiments and the liminal spaces between them through poetry, photography, mixed media collage, and slow conversation. Walking and mapping afford generative, creative opportunities for learning, research (Burke, Lasczik Cutcher, Peterken, Potts, 2017) and wayfinding (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017). The entanglement of doing (walking) and recording (mapping) helped us to think deeply through, and simultaneously capture, these experiments. This enabled us to share the experiments with readers, to inspire continuing discussions around opportunities for posthuman community learning through

deep and attentive sensorial engagement with the non-human. We see these efforts as both creative and theoretical work (Burke et. al, 2017).

Being common with/in/as/for community: Thought experiment 1



Figure 2: Thought Experiment 1 - Common worlding photo montage with images from the retreat on Bundjalung Country

gentle breeze, clean and green, warm embracing
shimmering
feeling, seeing, sensing
going deeper
invasion
resilience
clinging to the edge
micro mini - change direction
shift perspective
learning, growing
me, human

leaf, animal
 rocks
 heat
 rain
 renewing

hum/anim/all

Our efforts at common worlding through an immersive walk in the natural and built elements of community feel

clumsy
 uncertain
 uncomfortable
 anthropocentric
 not authentic.

Such challenges associated with thinking beyond humancentric boundaries are expected - because we are human! Our experiences mirror Prendergast's frustration - "I want to decentre myself, but I don't know how" (2020, p. 19). Like her, we acknowledge the limitations of language, and agree attempts to imagine ourselves as (or attempt to speak for) non-human beings "feels injurious/unjust" (p. 19).

Persisting, we explore further, dwelling and lingering with/in/as/for community.

**Found poetry from the complexities of our research stories³:
 Thought experiment 2**

Community partners facilitating learning
 wandering
 wondering and intra-acting with,
 seeing
 touching
 sensing
 feeling
 appreciating the non-human
 as "active communicating agents"⁴
 ever entangled.

Embracing non-human nature as teacher who can
nurture
support
and share rich insights
with us.

Challenging the enduring silencing of the non-human
in education during the Anthropocene⁵.

beyond Pushing the
boundaries of pedagogy
the human.

Exploring the possibilities and potential of
what living *as* nature
truly means in *practice*.

Awareness of the sensitivities of the human body-as-nature,
porous and intermingling with other nature bodies⁶.

De-imagining community for parent and child,
where the human body-as-nature emerges
from a place of embodiment, a feeling,
rather than an intellectualising.

Engaging with/in/as the online space for
collective co-creation
social distribution of intelligence
knowledge production and meaning making.

Embracing collective socio-techno learning,
a complex intertwining biological and artificial
distributed intelligence
human and non-human.

Emplaced meaning-making, where
places *make* us⁷.

Intra-acting with the non-human,
we as mere parts of common world experiences
that influence and strengthen being and becoming in the world.

Unsettling traditional
rigid
human-centric classifications.

Opening up possibilities for
fluid assemblages of
human-non-human-place
community encounters.

“Seeking possibilities for
learning how to unsettle,
rather than sustain
what is inherited⁸” of the Anthropocene.

In this second thought experiment, Maia felt called to dwell with, reflect upon and see anew the four research stories from our original chapter (see Osborn et al., 2020). Inspired by Prendergast’s (2020) evocative poetic conversation crafted from the work of Carl Leggo⁹, Maia revisited and ‘mapped differently’ our diverse ways of learning with/in/as/for community, by slowly and repeatedly being-with the research stories; reading, re-reading, mapping key concepts and ideas, before crafting a found poem¹⁰.

This process of experimentation – mapping through poetry – sought to play with the original chapter, re-interpreting the complexities and seeing anew the various possibilities for learning with/in/as/for community. The found poem illuminates the precious gems in the original work, sharpening attention on key possibilities for human-non-human community learning with people, animals, farms, school grounds, gardens, community groups, businesses, online communities, human body-as-nature, and mountains. The poem is offered as a reminder of the diverse opportunities for human-non-human community learning that require urgent prioritisation in education and society more broadly, to respond to the challenges of this unsettling era – the Anthropocene.

Dwelling with water bodies: Thought experiment 3

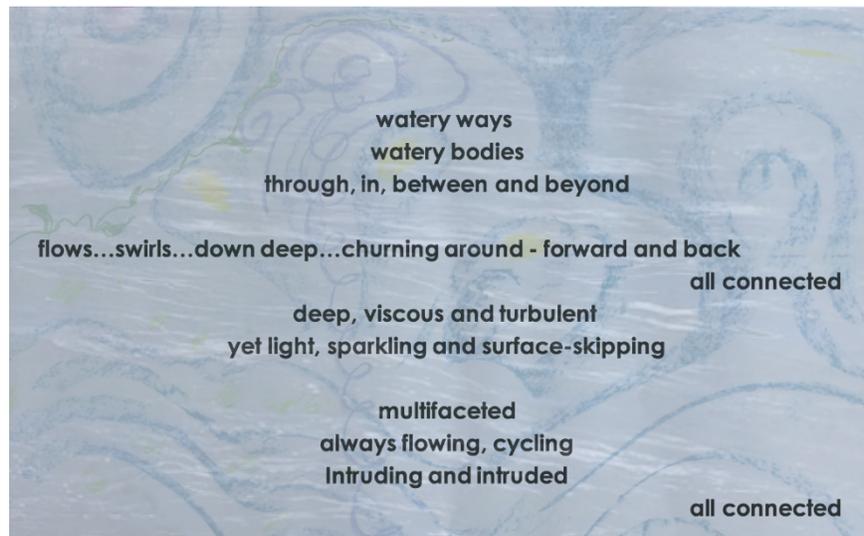


Figure 3: Thought Experiment 3 – Encounter with watery bodies

In this third thought experiment, Helen sought new territory by dwelling with watery places through the lens of Neimanis' notion of porous bodies of water (2016), to think through intra-acting with the non-human community. By attuning to water flows in, around and through bodies, with sweeping, swirling marks on paper, a different level of entanglement with the meshwork of life and materials of our common world was felt, through embodied arts practices (Sayal-Bennett, 2018). Zooming into the microscopic movement of water molecules through clouds and leaf pores; the life-giving water flows of birth and living processes. And with simultaneous sensing of being enmeshed in the macro scale movement of water that shapes the planet. All sensed through drawing movements and prose. In feeling and sensing the story of watery bodies, the logics of enmeshed bodies, places and matter emerged. With watery bodies concepts and arts-based deep thinking, common worlds connections through watery flows makes sense.

Slow conversation reflections on human-non-human community encounters: Thought experiment 4

Voice 1 (human element): *Experimenting with 'walking the talk' requires dwelling in the weave of the world without foregrounding human privilege. Purposefully disassociating from self as a bounded individual human was a struggle. But with stillness, attention shifts from the big human narratives of buildings and cut-down trees, to the quieter stories of water, birdsong, wind, warming sunshine, persistent plant growth and the industriousness of life all around. The listening with all of myself was an important learning – the embodied listening of the sensuous experiences, along with the deep listening to narratives that travel through and connect body-place-time into the different elements of local and planetary communities.*

Voice 2 (non-human community):



Figure 4: Thought experiment 4 – Slow conversation contribution 1 from non-human community at the retreat on Bundjalung Country

Voice 3 (human element): *Immersion with/in/as/for community through the camera lens in thought experiment 1 was initially a similarly-felt struggle, dominated by feelings of pressure – pressure to notice, photograph and learn from the non-human in a short space of time, within this constructed experience. The encounters with non-human nature felt somewhat artificial, ironically unnatural. But slowly, the agency of non-human matter – lively and inanimate – began to make itself known. The porosity and messiness of human-non-human boundaries emerged, as did a deeper awareness of my place within/as nature – just one part of a multiplicity of relational assemblages. As the pressure and concern to ‘get it right’ subsided, evidence of entanglement and non-human agency all around settled me into a slower, calmer state.*

Deeper understandings of time – specifically the entanglement of past-now-future – afforded insights and opportunities. Revisiting our encounters through artefacts and narratives, tangled with technology corruptions and the limitations of language to portray embodied experiences enhanced appreciation of the agency of time. By slowing down, sensory attention became attuned to non-human agency to challenge binaries, blur boundaries, and experience a myriad of generative intra-actions with/in/as/for community. The importance of attuning to these intra-actions is the lesson that emerged most strongly through thought experiment 1.

Voice 1 (human element): *Taking time to be, know and act differently reveals the mismatch between human time scale and attention span with place and planetary time. First Nations peoples have long recognised the temporal weavings, foldings and unfoldings for being with/in/as/for community now often opaque to urban humans. Time dwelling with the non-human community through arts-based practices stimulated surprisingly deep engagement with the non-human community. Through these subtle, affective, sensory experiences, a glimmer of understanding emerged about the enduring entwining of life and matter of community. Taking time and venturing into uncomfortable and uncertain territory of arts-based practices enabled entry into that liminal space between a humancentric perception of community and experiencing being with/in/as/for human-non-human community.*

Voice 2 (non-human community):



Figure 5: Thought experiment 4 – Slow conversation contribution 2 from non-human community at the retreat on Bundjalung Country

Voice 3 (human element): *These thought experiments strengthened intellectual and embodied understandings around the possibilities of slow, affective, thoughtful creative practices and pedagogies to inform and inspire both subtle and more radical conceptual, personal, environmental and social change. Creative pedagogies inspire a real depth of thinking, feeling, seeing, doing, knowing and being differently, by affording opportunities for wondering, listening, storying, imagining, embodying, enacting, experimenting, creating, negotiating, problem-solving, nurturing relationships, playing, singing, sharing, dancing, crafting (Ewing, 2020), learning, pondering, questioning, exploring, as well as expanding consciousness, understandings and sense of purpose. The process of engaging sensorially with non-human community brought surprises, particularly around the potential of arts-based experiments to generate deep insights.*

For example, the process of crafting the found poem served as a powerful lesson around the value of poetry as a genuine and generative research method. Through engaging slowly and thoughtfully with our previous research stories, attempting to distil the essence of the stories and share these insights creatively, understandings of the possibilities poetry presents in research were enriched. Poetry affords opportunities to get to the core of lessons learned through research and share these with a wider audience.

Furthermore, this slow conversation thought experiment inspired a deeper remembering of the retreat. Engaging more deeply with the experience, and then intra-acting with paper, scissors, glue and watercolours, artefacts, technology, place and non-human others to play again with efforts to attune to and sense entanglement with the non-human. Again, a sense of past-now-future as one emerged. This awareness prompted wondering differently, seeing differently, feeling differently, engaging differently (through memory) with the plants, animals, sky, soil, breeze, warmth of the sun, the agency of rocks, place, weather and an infinity of other non-human elements.

Memories surfaced of attunement to/with/as/for the non-human at the retreat, particularly the moment of experiencing a sense of breathing in and becoming-with the cosmos, while marvelling at the magnificent night sky. Through this opportunity to slow down with the cosmos, and engage with felt experiences, an even deeper awareness struck, viscerally. It was a powerful, embodied knowing of the environment not as a place, but as multiplicity of relational assemblages within which humanity is inextricably entangled, intermeshed and wholly dependent upon.

Voice 4 (materials and memories assemblage):

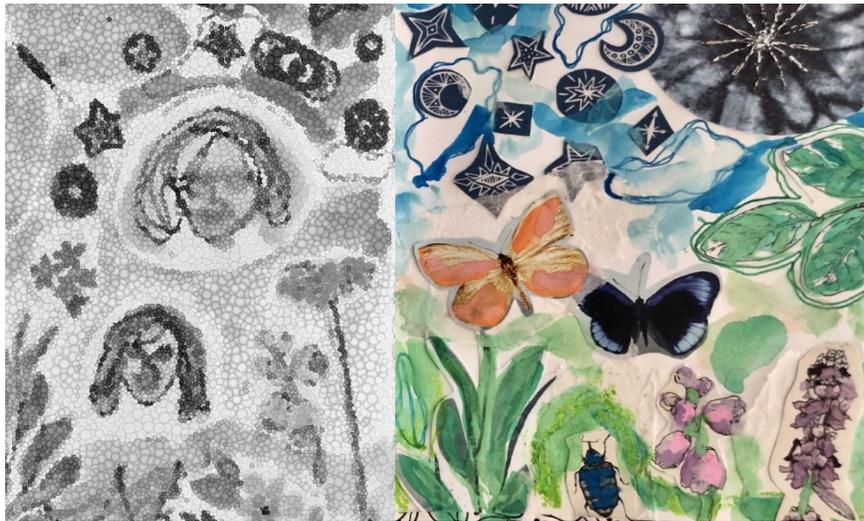


Figure 6: Thought experiment 4 – Slow encounter with non-human community: a materials and memories assemblage

Voice 1 (human element): *This slow encounter with materials and memories is such a vibrant recreation of the intra-acting community elements encountered in thought experiment 1! Our representations are, however, subjective human narratives. The images of non-human community as agential cuts into this slow conversation can only be anthropomorphising and interpreting non-human and material intersections with/in community. Nevertheless, these representations attend to and honour non-human voices, and model some strategies for meaning making about learning and being with/in/as/for community.*

Some concluding thoughts

Playing with posthumanism with/in/as/for community was a purposeful, artful venturing into new, and sometimes uncomfortable spaces. These experiments enabled dwelling in the messiness beyond humancentric community learning, involving encounters that were sometimes frustrating and unnerving, yet other times evoking a sense of ease, peace and togetherness. So, although fraught with tensions, taking posthumanism for a walk was nonetheless generative, and stimulated new possibilities for co-becoming with/in the common worlds, particularly through sensorial and creative efforts.

We therefore offer these thought experiments to stimulate and enrich awareness of humanity's entanglement with the non-human, and to inspire others to engage in posthuman ways of being, knowing and enacting learning with/in/as/for community. In essence, we sought to "somatically and relationally experience vibrations, perceptions and energies that flow, drift and emerge in, through, and with" creative, experimental acts such as photography, poetry and collage (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017, p. 117).

So, echoing Prendergast's query "What have I found in crafting this work, these poetic missives?" (2020, p. 31), we ask ourselves: What have we learned through engaging with these diverse thought experiments, dwelling with posthumanism literature, with the non-human in place, with entangled thoughts and ideas in multispecies common worlds? We have hinted at our learnings within the performance of our thought experiments, however, in the spirit of self-discovery and critical thinking, we wish to avoid stifling your own

realisations with our potentially limiting reflections. It was not our intention to interpret or explicitly describe what the non-human was sharing with us, because everyone will engage with and learn from posthuman communities in different ways. Factors influencing our intra-actions with the non-human may include personal experiences; the local First Nations cultures and histories; our sense of place, and much more.

Instead, we encourage you to now ponder what you have learned/ discovered/ realised/ found through engaging with this chapter. We invite you to pay particular attention to the insights you glean from the figures included in this chapter – our efforts to engage with the non-human creatively. We invite you to walk-with, think-with, know-with, be-with and become-with self-human-non-human-place communities moving forward. To discover and bring to life to creative common worlding in this time of the Anthropocene. Finally, we offer some closing thoughts for you to linger with, to inspire reflection upon the possibilities of human-non-human community learning.

Seeking out powerful multispecies intra-actions

to generate
inspire
grow consciousness.

Pushing boundaries and unlearning limiting beliefs.

Ponder reflect
 experiment play
learn discover
 understand and see anew.

Embracing and illuminating the potential of

embodied
affective
sensory
human-non-human
community learning.

Situating/ positioning/ disrupting learning:
beyond the classroom, beyond the school,
beyond the human,
beyond the limitations of linear time.

Pursuing entangled human-non-human learning
to inspire engagement, understanding and meaning.

E x p a n d i n g perceptions of community learning,
heroing diverse, untraditional ways of learning in place,
embracing playfulness.

Reality, learning, education, absorbing, knowing, seeking is MESSY.

Dwell in and surrender to
the discomfort, the messiness, the tension, the struggle.

Learning is
inextricably grounded
with/in/as/for human-non-human communities.



Figure 7: Human-non-human community musings grounded in nature

Notes

- ¹ The Touchstones are the four conceptual instruments from the companion book to the compendium this chapter is part of: Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A., Lasczik, A., Wilks, J., Logan, M., Turner, A., & Boyd, W. (Eds.). (2019). *Touchstones for Deterritorializing Socioecological Learning: The Anthropocene, Posthumanism and Commonworlds as Creative Milieux*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- ² As used in the companion book to this compendium of thought experiments, “‘de’ meaning ‘from’ in Spanish” (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, Lasczik, Logan, Wilks & Turner, 2020, p. 2).
- ³ (Osborn et al., 2020, pp. 200-205).
- ⁴ (Barrett et al., 2017, p. 132).
- ⁵ (Barrett et al., 2017).
- ⁶ (Malone, 2018; Neimanis, 2017).
- ⁷ (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621 with authors’ emphasis).
- ⁸ (Nxumalo, 2017, p. 8).
- ⁹ See *Dwelling in the Human/Posthuman Entanglement of Poetic Inquiry: Poetic Missives to and from Carl Leggo* (Prendergast, 2020).
- ¹⁰ In crafting the found poems at times Maia changed tense, added or removed words to improve flow, however the majority of words were found in, and borrowed directly from the original research stories, with permission from the authors (see Osborn et al., 2020, pp. 199-216).

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