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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Human-animal relationships in adult literacy education: Reading the Australian Magpie

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Abstract

This paper presents a case for the inclusion of human-animal relationships as a focus for adult literacy education. It outlines the ways in which language is implicated in human alienation from nature in a modern technology-focused life, and discusses the effects of nature-deficit disorder on human well-being. It calls for an 'entangled pedagogy' that attends to stories of local wildlife, and points to the importance of such a pedagogy for particular groups of adult literacy learners, including international students, new migrants and recent refugees, who may be unfamiliar with the flora and fauna of their new environment. As an example of entangled pedagogy the paper presents ideas for literacy lessons based on the iconic Australian Magpie whose relationship with humans is, at times, problematic.

Lost words

In early 2015 a group of prominent authors, amongst them novelist Margaret Atwood, led a protest against the removal of certain words in recent editions of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*. The items in question, including *almond, blackberry, budgerigar, magpie, fern, moss and willow*, were words associated with the natural world, and their removal made way for the inclusion of a new group of words, including *attachment, broadband, blog, database and voice-mail*, associated with the increasing use of technology in everyday life. In their protests, as reported in *The Guardian* (Flood 2015, para. 5), the authors highlighted the 'proven connection between the decline in natural play and the decline in children's wellbeing', and drew attention to the role of technology in 'the increasingly interior, solitary childhoods of today' (para. 1). They argued that the Dictionary should not simply mirror trends in language usage, but should seek to shape and extend children's knowledge and understanding of the wider natural world. As

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nature writer and landscape-language specialist Robert Macfarlane observed, 'We do not care for what we do not know, and on the whole we do not know what we cannot name' (para. 12). Language, he asserts, is in need of rewilding (Macfarlane 2015).

NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER

While it's true that the role of dictionaries is to document rather than dictate the use of certain words, the shift in language reflected in the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* points to an issue that has been discussed more broadly in society over recent decades and has implications not only for children but also for adults who create a world for children. Not long before these particular dictionary revisions, author Richard Louv coined the term 'nature-deficit disorder' to describe the negative effects on children's well-being when we are alienated from nature as a consequence of living in the wired world (Louv 2005). Although the term nature-deficit disorder has been criticised for its part in medicalising childhood, it has been recognised that the process of alienation from the natural world at the heart of NDD has occurred incrementally over many generations (Dickinson 2016) and recent studies have confirmed the negative effects of such alienation on human well-being (see, for example, Miller 2005; Soga & Gaston 2016). For Stephanie Schuttler et al (2019) the problem of alienation is specifically related to people's disconnection from *local* wildlife and *local* biodiversity.

A similar term to describe human alienation from the natural world is 'the extinction of experience', a phrase coined by Robert Pyle in 1975. Pyle's contribution was to recognise that alienation from nature not only diminishes human well-being but can also lead to a cycle of further apathy in regard to environmental conservation, and 'therefore to further extinctions: a cycle of disaffection and loss, sucking the life out of the land the passion out of the people' (Pyle 2005, p. 398). As a consequence of this negative feedback loop, alienation from nature is one of the biggest threats to conservation of the planet's biodiversity (Schuttler et al 2019). At the heart of this problem, as Pyle sees it, is 'the epic level of our nature illiteracy, amounting to almost utter ignorance of species other than our own' (2005, p. 400).

HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

Not surprisingly, the primary solution proposed for addressing the problem of human malaise in an age of technological distraction is to attend to, and reconnect with, the transformative power of nature (Louv 2011; Pyle 2005), a remedy supported by both anecdotal and empirical evidence that demonstrates the physiological and psychological benefits of human encounters with, and education about, animals, plants, landscapes or wilderness (Miller 2005; MacKerron & Mourato, 2013; Townsend and Weerasuriya 2010).

While MacKerron and Mourato's (2013) empirical study and Townsend and Weerasuriya's (2010) review of existing studies are primarily concerned with the benefits accruing to human mental health and well-being, a growing body of literature has focused more directly on the mutual benefits that accrue to both human and non-human animals. Thus, Louv's (2019) most recent book, *Our Wild Calling*: *How connecting with animals can transform our lives and save theirs*, makes a specific case for reconnecting with other animal species not only to overcome human alienation and loneliness but also in order to protect, promote, and create a sustainable habitat for all creatures on Earth. This argument shifts human attention outwards, enlarging the locus of concern to encompass a more empathetic approach to the well-being of the non-human animals with whom we share our planet. We have dual purposes, then, for engaging with experiences of nature: on the one hand, promoting species flourishing, while at the same time, promoting human well-being.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

An interest in human-animals relationships, and concern about the often deleterious effects of humans on other animals and our shared habitat, have been taken up in a range of popular and academic studies in language and literacy. In the media, George Monbiot (2017) argues that the language we use to describe – and therefore perceive – the natural world needs renovation, to more accurately reflect the wonder and beauty of nature, and urges the use of more precise language for 'climate change', for example, to recognise the current state of catastrophic 'climate breakdown'. In applied linguistics studies, Guy Cook and Alison Sealey (2017) argue that the anthropocentric language we use reflects significant changes in the relationships between humans and other animals that have, in turn, come about as a consequence of human population growth, increased consumption of natural resources, and environmental degradation. Also in applied linguistics, Arran Stibbe (2001, 2012, 2014) has written extensively about the ways in which English language obscures, distorts, and damages our relationship with other animals and the natural world. With the promotion of 'ecolinguitics', Stibbe (2014) argues for a discursive shift away from destructive discourses that erase the natural world and the adoption of discourses that 'begin vividly representing the natural world in ways which inspire people to take actions which protect and preserve it', because 'if the natural world is ignored, is erased from discourse, it will be physically erased, and so, ultimately, will we' (p. 599-600).

The role of language and its use in exploring the natural world has also been a focus for Dickinson (2013, 2016) in her field study of ecocultural conversations between adults and children. Dickinson argues that going *outside* into wild nature – as if nature were somehow already separated from humans – must always be complemented by an *inward* shift in the way we think about and perceive nature by exploring the cultural, economic, and political discourses of alienation. In this regard, Dickinson identifies poverty, racial segregation, and rampant overconsumption as contributing factors in the experience of alienation from nature. She recommends that conventional practices of engagement with nature through scientific framing, for example through taxonomic categorisation and naming, should be accompanied by non-traditional communication practices that value emotional, aesthetic, and sensory expression in order to reposition human-nature relations. In these new modes of communication, nature becomes an agentive 'partner in dialogue, not just a voiceless object' (Dickinson 2016, p. 41). The call to address the problem of alienation in this way, by incorporating an exploration of its cultural and symbolic dimensions, points to possibilities for a literacy education that engages with nature in multiple ways.

A small number of language and literacy educators have taken up this challenge in a variety of ways. Stibbe (2004, 2008), for example, has proposed a range of classroom activities based on an ecocritical discourse analysis of texts in advertising, complemented by other activities inspired by texts from Zen, Buddhist and Taoist traditions that present alternative ways of appreciating nature. Taking a different approach, Evans (2006) describes a content-based Animal Issues course for and English program in a Japanese university. This course aimed to improve students' English skills while, at the same time, deepening their knowledge on a variety of issues to do with 'endangered animals, wildlife trafficking, pets and society, zoos, whaling, and animal research' (Evans 2006, p. 171).

In a related body of work, research studies both internationally and in the Australian context have focused on children's environmental and place-based education. Somerville and Green (2015), for example, take up Indigenous knowledges and arts-based approaches in their exploration of young children's learning about language, literacy, and the natural world in Australia. Comber (2016) also focuses on Australian children's development of language and literacy through a critical engagement with place. My own interest is located at the intersection of adult second-language literacy education and critical animal studies, where there are fewer examples of pedagogically focused research to inspire classroom practice. It is to my own work in this adult context I now turn.

An entangled pedagogy for environmental literacy

As a teacher of adult language and literacy, and as a teacher educator in this field, I have been concerned to try and bring some of these ideas about the importance of the natural world into my own classroom practice in order to offer adult learners of English as an additional language a means of thinking about and engaging with their local environments.

I have argued elsewhere (Appleby 2017) for the importance of an environmental focus in language and literacy education with older international students in Australia and with refugee communities who may have been forced to flee their homelands as a consequence of environmental degradation and climate change. Moreover, an environmental focus for these groups of students is important in order to foster an understanding of natural ecologies in a new location and to encourage engagement with the transformative power of nature.

Of course, not everyone may be so keen on getting to know local wildlife. People's connections to nature and interest in the environment and wildlife will differ according to age and cultural history, and past experiences. In light of these considerations, Schuttler et al (2019, p. 13) recommend the need for 'culturally sensitive opportunities to engage diverse constituents with local wildlife'. In circumstances where direct contact with wildlife outside the classroom can be inappropriate or problematic, an environmental ethos can be engendered through educational experiences that engage learners with the cultural meanings attached to specific fauna and expressed, for example, in the arts and folklore (Hopper et al 2019). As previously discussed in relation to Dickinson's work, learners may also be engaged through 'ecocultural conversations' that bridge the human-nature divide by attending to emotional and cultural – rather than purely scientific – connections amongst species (Dickinson 2013, 2016). Both these avenues of engagement can highlight and harness the central role of language in reconnecting humans with their own natural environment.

As an illustrative example of my own literacy work with an environmental focus, I have described (Appleby 2017, 2019) how a particular incident of human-animal interaction appearing in the news media became the basis for English for Academic Purposes literacy teaching with a group of international students in Australia. The focal story in that case was an encounter, filmed during a World Surfing League event, between Australian champion surfer Mick Fanning and a great white shark in South Africa. I collected a variety of texts reporting on this incident in range of different media and together with my students explored the shifts in register as the texts moved across spoken and written modes (See Figure 1). While these texts became a language and literacy teaching resource they also served to open up classroom discussions about the importance of sharks in healthy oceans.

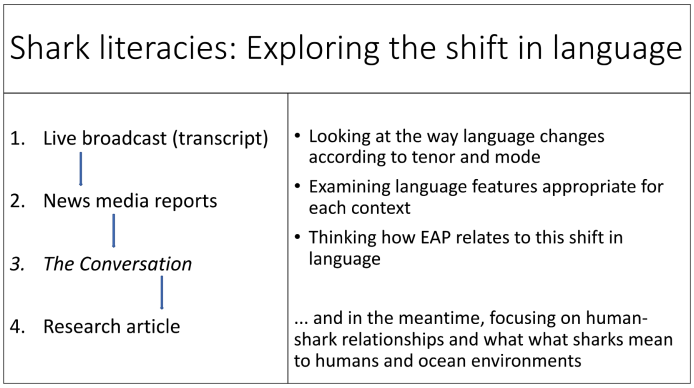

Figure 1. Register shift in texts about human-shark encounters

The series of lessons was also designed to model a process of inquiry activated by personal interest in my own local environment. As a keen ocean swimmer I had become familiar with various shark species, I was already curious about the alarm expressed in media reports of shark 'attacks' in Australian waters, and I was ambivalent about the efficacy of various shark control measures. My exploration of environmentally engaged texts was initially inspired by my own experience, curiosity, and inquiries; the collection of texts then gave rise to a form of teaching and learning that I have called 'entangled pedagogy' because it focuses on the transdisciplinary entanglement of humans in the natural world. An entangled pedagogy starts with small stories, with particular incidents, personal curiosities or puzzles, expands to explore how these stories are represented in discourse, and in turn considers the effects of those discourses on the ways in which we construct, understand, and respond to the world around us.

LOOKING AT BIRDS

My second example of entangled pedagogy is inspired by a more common experience of human-animal relationships. For many English language and literacy learners, particularly those in urban contexts where most humans live, the most likely opportunity for interaction with local wildlife will be through an encounter with birds. Birds offer us an opportunity to notice, attend to, and be curious and caring about other species with whom we share the planet. Birds have already been incorporated into the practice of English language and multimodal literacy education in a project reported by Cummins et al (2015) where primary school students linked their learning about migrating Canada geese to their own experiences of migration and belonging in two geographically distant homes. Before turning to other practical examples of birds' involvement in literacy education, however, I want to first comment on their significance in planetary well-being and their popularity as fellow species: both of these points are important considerations in selecting our focus for literacy teaching.

Beyond their value as literacy friends, each bird we encounter has intrinsic value as the individual subject of a life, a being in pursuit of its own desires, with feelings of pleasure and pain, and with emotional connections to kin and other species. Collectively, the wide distribution of birds across the continents is an expression of their ability to find a home, often alongside humans, in both rural and urban spaces. Moreover, birds increasingly draw attention as indicators of environmental crisis, and in recent decades scientists have recorded a staggering decline in bird populations as a result of human interference. Human use of pesticides, consequent insect population collapse, and the destruction of natural habitats across the world have led to a loss of bird abundance, with 'major implications for ecosystem integrity [and] the conservation of wildlife more broadly' (Rosenberg et al 2019). Scientists point out that the problem of bird population decline is not restricted to species that are nearing extinction and argue that the current loss of common and widespread species will disproportionately affect both ecosystem health and human well-being (Simmonds, Watson, Salazar and Maron 2019; see also Birdlife Australia 2015).

In recent years, one conspicuous measure of the importance of birds in the lives of humans – beyond the interests of conservation scientists, ornithologists and dedicated bird-watchers – can be seen in the popularity of the 'bird of the year' poll conducted by *The Guardian* in Australia. Reflecting the two poles of bird life discussed in conservation literature, both rare and common bird species are strongly represented in this Australian poll. In 2019 the highly-endangered Black-throated Finch, *Poephila cincta*, won the poll with over 11,000 votes, almost 8,000 votes more than the second-placed bird, the nocturnal Tawny Frogmouth, *Podargis strigoides* (Zhou 2019). It is reasonable to assume that most humans in Australia have never seen a Black-throated Finch in the wild because it has become extinct throughout most of Australia; indeed, most humans are unlikely to have even heard of this bird prior to hearing or reading reports of its endangerment by a proposed giant coal mine in the country's north. With one of its two small remaining colonies threatened by the coal mine, the Black-throated Finch had become an icon for the extinction crisis facing Australia's birds and a poignant symbol of the planet's environmental emergency. In this instance, it is the

cultural meanings attached to the tiny bird, rather than its familiarity as a common backyard species, that engendered human affection and awareness of its significance.

In contrast, the overall winner in the 2017 inaugural poll with close to 20,000 votes was the Australian Magpie, *Cracticus tibicen* a magnificent black and white native songbird that is widespread across the Australian continent and one of the most common species likely to be seen and recognised by the majority of Australian humans residing in rural and urban environments (Wahlquist 2017). The Australian Magpie is not related to the Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*, which is found throughout Europe and Asia; the Australian bird was mistakenly named 'magpie' by early Europeans because of superficial similarities in both species' black and white plumage. The Australian Magpies are loved for their rich songs, their intriguing behaviours, and their ability to form friendships with humans; they are highly intelligent and resourceful, having flourished alongside humans despite, or even because of, land clearing and the replacement of native vegetation with lawns. The Australian Magpie has been celebrated in a vast array of texts, from news media to poems and songs, from Indigenous creation stories to posts on dedicated social media sites. Given their widespread appearance and appeal, attending to the Australian Magpie offers many opportunities for an entangled engagement with literacy.

TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS WITH AUSTRALIAN MAGPIES

Just as media stories about sharks provide the textual backdrop to Australian summers, so too media stories about the Australian Magpie herald the arrival of spring. In this section, I discuss how such stories in a range of texts can play an important part in literacy and numeracy education, and can encourage ecocultural conversations about local wildlife.

For new residents in Australia, knowledge about the Australian Magpie is also crucial for another reason. Despite its popularity, the Australian Magpie attracts mostly negative media coverage during the spring nesting season when some ten percent of male Magpies choose to defend chicks in their nests by 'swooping' humans who encroach on their territory. Although swooping only occurs in early spring and is isolated to specific nesting sites, it can cause alarm and injuries, and therefore receives consistent media attention as spring approaches. In fact, Australian ecologist Darryl Jones (2013) has gone so far as to identify magpie swooping as 'the most significant human-wildlife conflict in the towns and cities of this country'. In this sense, Australian Magpies and sharks have something in common: they are both known to interact with humans in ways that put humans at a disadvantage. What better topic to include in local literacy education through a thorough and sensitive exploration of Australia's iconic songbird?

A preliminary collection of texts from news media published in early spring can be a useful resource for literacy learning in which students might focus on the ways in which Australian Magpies are represented, the typical narratives of human-magpie encounters, and the language of advice about how to avoid becoming a target of magpie swooping (see, for example, Thorne 2015; Dye 2016; Phelan 2018). Students of English for Academic Purposes can focus on shifts in register and the reliance on evidence to build an argument when they compare 'swooping stories' in daily news media and in the online academic news source, *The Conversation* (for example, Jones 2013; Bateman 2019). Students will find a further shift in register if they explore the way Australian Magpies are represented in traditional research articles published in academic journals. In this regard, a research report that discusses the way print media represents human-magpie conflict (van Vuuren, O'Keefe and Jones 2016) provides a useful means of exploring the formal language features and structure of a traditional report.

It can also be useful to narrow our focus from a broad study of texts about human-magpie interaction to a particular small story that raises a range of larger issues of potential significance for literacy learners and educators. One such small story appeared in local and international news media in 2019, with reports that an Australian Magpie had been shot by the Hills Shire Council in north-western Sydney (see, for example,

Taylor 2019; BBC News 2019). The reports stated that the Council had received 40 complaints over three years about the magpie which was infamous for its swooping attacks on humans, mostly cyclists, along a particular stretch of road. Because the Australian Magpie is a protected native species in Australia, the Council had to be granted a special permit from the National Parks and Wildlife Service in order to shoot and kill the bird. The texts describing this particular incident offer many avenues for literacy education in the mode of critical entangled pedagogy (see, for example, BBC News 2019; Cockburn 2019; Drury 2019; Heathcote 2019; Lagan 2019; Taylor 2019).

To begin with, each of the reports presents a number of participants, some with colourful descriptors, and each with a role to play in the unfolding drama. Classroom activities focusing on two of the reports (Cockburn 2019 and Taylor 2019), adapted as appropriate for the level of learners, could be designed to identify each of the participants and their part in the story: How is each human and non-human participant described (see the list below)? What did they do in this event? How would they communicate – orally and in writing – with each of the other participants? Whose perspective is the most important in this event, and why?

> **Participants in the magpie shooting story:**
> **The magpie, 'infamous for its attacks' and nicknamed 'the Windsor Road Monster' (Cockburn 2019)**
> **The Council, who tried various alternative methods to reduce the risks posed by the magpie, and whose final 'course of action was not taken lightly' (Taylor 2019)**
> **The NWPS, who described the bird as 'very aggressive and uncharacteristically territorial' and 'a significant risk to public safety' (Taylor 2019)**
> **Peter Danieluk, a resident who claims the bird's attacks 'were responsible for giving him a heart attack' (Cockburn 2019)**
> **The Animal Justice Party (AJP), 'disgusted an iconic Australian species had been targeted' (Cockburn 2019)**
> **Heidi Vasilevskis (AJP member), who is 'outraged and upset beyond words' and said the 'bird's death would put a whole family of magpies at risk', and (Cockburn 2019)**

These reports note that the magpie shooting prompted an outcry against the Council, thereby raising crucial questions for students to consider in regard to the morality of shooting, and opening a space for debate and response from the various perspectives represented in the texts. Moreover, the incident points to a wealth of broader cultural concerns for discussion and debate in the literacy classroom, particularly amongst adult learners who may have experienced disadvantage and discrimination: What does the story tell us about issues of belonging, territory, invasion, empathy, protection of home and family, and the coexistence of multiple species? Which participant/s have the most compelling rights? How could these rights be expressed and communicated?

Students could also examine the range of texts reporting the incident to identify the different ways in which the magnitude of the event is emphasised, and the ways in which an emotion of fear is evoked. For example, Lagan (2019) in *The Times,* signifies the magnitude of the 'attack' by noting that 'Adult magpies are large birds with a wingspan that can extend beyond 33 inches', and evokes an emotion of fear by claiming that such magpie attacks 'echo Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 *The Birds*' in which humans in one town 'are killed by thousands of birds'. Students looking across the range of texts might then discuss which of the reports is the most balanced, and how such balance is achieved.

ECOCULTURAL TEXTS

Beyond news media texts, literacy education can also find valuable inspiration and resources in social media sites and arts-based texts that embrace and celebrate the rich cultural heritage surrounding the Australian

Magpie. This cultural heritage could be explored through the *Swoopyboiz* Instagram site, which provides a comical celebration of human-magpie interactions, and through the Facebook page *The Magpie Whisperer* which documents and communicates 'feel-good experiences' with magpies for over 150,000 followers. Serving a different purpose with a range of different text types, the *MagpieAlert* website (https://www.magpiealert.com/) allows members of the public to record swooping incidents via an interactive map and a short narrative account. The site carries safety information and aggregates the incident data to produce a set of 'Magpie Attack Statistics' displayed in a range of colourful graphs suitable for educational activities in literacy and numeracy.

Social media sites such as *Swoopyboiz* and *MagpieAlert* need to be introduced cautiously, lest they risk engendering a needless fear of Australian Magpies amongst some literacy learners, particularly newly-arrived migrants and refugees. However, a range of complementary cultural texts can be introduced to encourage more positive sensory, aesthetic, and emotional associations with this popular bird. It is the sensory-aesthetic-emotional connection evoked by the sound of the Australian Magpie's song – a unique and distinctive warbling or carolling – that is most often referenced in poems and other narrative texts about the Australian Magpie.

Amongst these texts, one that I find particularly valuable for multimodal literacy education is Denis Glover's poem '*The Magpies*' (Glover 1964), recently translated into a song performed by well-known Australian singer-songwriter, Paul Kelly, on his album *'Thirteen Ways to Look at Birds'* (Kelly 2019). The poem/song is a narrative that tells of two young Australians who live and work on their wheat farm for many years but, as a consequence of drought and crop failure, eventually have to surrender their farm to the 'mortgage corporation'. Throughout the narrative we hear in a recurring refrain of the Australian Magpies' song, translated into English language by Glover: 'Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle'.

A literacy lesson based on the poem could begin with the sound of the Australian Magpie's own song, recordings of which are readily available on YouTube, followed by questions to elicit learners' knowledge and experiences of Australian Magpies, and to hear learners' stories about other birds that may be culturally significant. A series of activities can then be designed to scaffold learners' engagement with the narrative text of the song and poem. In preparation for exploring the text with a group of teacher education students, I developed one possible series of scaffolding activities, including a set of drawings to be matched with the relevant words from the text and sequenced as learners listened to the song; this activity was followed by a range of conventional tasks to focus on the narrative genre structure and specific lexical and grammatical features. The text also lends itself to a close reading to explore, for example, how the natural environment is rendered, and how the passing of time is symbolically represented.

The Magpies narrative is then open to critical inquiry, with questions about the experiences of the two main characters and their entanglement with, and eventual enforced separation from nature; the economics of housing and the power of mortgage corporations in Australia; practices of food production and sustainable farming in Australia and elsewhere; the causes and effects of drought and climate change; and the significance of the birds singing throughout the changes that occur for the people and institutions in the story. Both intellectual and emotional responses are called for here, with language used and extended to express the range of human thoughts and feelings. The poem/song also lends itself to collaborative writing extension activities that translate and rework the narrative into different genres for a range of different purposes and audiences, and collaborative research activities – in textual and experiential modes – designed to encourage students in exploring their local avifauna.

Concluding thoughts

In recent years, many words relating to natural phenomena, creatures and plants have been lost from English language dictionaries designed for children, reflecting a broader alienation from nature that afflicts both children and adults in the modern world. A sense of alienation from local environments may be particularly

acute for international students, newly arrived migrants, and recent refugees who find themselves in a new land with unfamiliar flora and fauna. Adult language and literacy educators can respond to the problems of alienation in their own practices by designing literacy programs that invite a re-engagement with nature at a local level. This article has outlined a series of lessons for adult learners that focus on textual encounters with Australian Magpies, iconic birds that are widespread and commonly seen across Australia and which have a complex and complicated relationship with humans. It is the deeply localised nature of these particular human-bird encounters that makes the Australian Magpie a welcome part of literacy education, and the lessons outlined here are designed in the hope that students will gain a greater understanding of local wildlife at the same time as they extend their literacy abilities. Wherever literacy education occurs, we need to look for ways that fellow species in our local environments can be invited into an entangled pedagogy in order to enlarge our engagement with, and appreciation of, the world around us.

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