Intentional Observation: Ecology and Art classes collaborate, compare research

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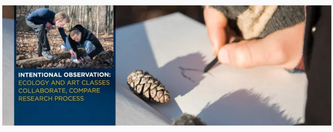
Sarah Joyner



How do artists and scientists see the world differently? What could they learn from each other?

On a crisp January morning, armed with coffee, coats and sketch pads, art students are dotted along the Guild Hardy Trail at the base of Lookout Mountain. Some sit on rocks or next to patches of moss and fallen trees. They dig through mounds of leaves, run their hands over tree trunks or look into cracks of boulders. They open up sketch pads and begin to draw, mimicking the veins in the leaves, the geography of the trees.

The following afternoon at the same location, groups of science students gather. They, too, cluster around trees and boulders, inspecting plants and insects. They pull out their notepads and snap photos, recording what they see.

This spring, Astri Snodgrass, painting and drawing lecturer, and Dr. DeAnna Beasley, assistant professor of biology, geology, and environmental science, are teaming up to teach their students about intentional observation—the practice of slowing down and taking the time to examine their environment.

If you go

What: Closer: Public Exhibition and Poster Presentation

Details: Joint exhibition featuring curated drawings from art students along with photos and research posters from biology students.

When: 5-7 p.m. Friday, April 20

Where: Apothecary, 744 McCallie Avenue

The approach might be different, but it's a process that both artists and scientists rely upon. The collaboration is giving students unique perspectives on how their different fields approach the process, but it's also creating a bridge and enlightening students on how their work is a lot more alike than they'd think.

"The first meeting between the artists and the ecologists felt similar to an alien encounter, but over time we've come to understand that both groups are made up of inherently curious and creative people."

The bridge

The process started with Snodgrass and Beasley taking each class to Guild Hardy Trail for the semester's first field experience. There, the ecology and art students practiced observation. As the semester progresses, their work from the trail is put to use as they assemble their own research projects, which require observational skills.

Throughout the semester, the two classes meet to discuss their research and the steps they take in each project, comparing methods. In late April, the two will feature their works in an exhibit at Apothecary, a contemporary arts project space supported by UTC's Department of Art.

Funding and materials for this collaboration are supported with a High-Impact Practices Development Grant from UTC's Walker Center for Teaching and Learning.

For his project, biology student Adam Lawrence is studying ants from two different locations—Signal Mountain's Walden Ridge and a spot near Collegedale's Southern Adventist University—to see if there's a difference in activity level based on the different temperatures at the two locations.

"It's been interesting to see their [art students] different perspectives on the environment and the scientific process," Lawrence says.

The art students seem to have the "flexibility to be abstract" when approaching their subjects, he says, while he and his fellow biology students are more rigid, taking a "somewhat more quantitative approach."

On the other side, art student Katlynn Campbell finds the collaboration refreshing and the scientific approach more flexible.

"As artists, sometimes we focus too much on trying to portray an object in an interesting way, not necessarily realistically, and do not really take the time to look at the object and appreciate it for what it is," Campbell explains.

Art and science students—Hilary McWilliams (grey shirt), Katylnn Campbell (teal shirt) and Adam Lawrence (blue shirt)—meet Friday, March, 23, 2018 to share their research progress to date in preparation for their joint presentation on April 20th at the Apothecary.

Since the collaborations started, she says she's begun to sit and soak in her subjects, instead of immediately searching for what makes them interesting.

Art student Hilary McWilliams has been pleasantly surprised by how similar the scientific and creative approaches to research have turned out to be.

"The first meeting between the artists and the ecologists felt similar to an alien encounter, but over time we've come to understand that both groups are made up of inherently curious and creative people," McWilliams says.

"I've learned that our practices are more similar than I expected in terms of motivation and process. Both artists and scientists go through similar processes of research, application and creation. I've become more comfortable with the use of the word 'research' in relation to artistic practice."

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