

Chapter 14

Herbarium with Poetry: How to Connect People and Plants



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14.1 Introduction

Humanity might be in the midst of an epidemic of plant blindness (Parsley 2020; Jose et al. 2019; Krosnick et al. 2018). Plant blindness refers to the tendency of humans to perceive plants as one indistinguishable green background without differentiating any species or attributing any importance to plants. Yet, our food security depends on plants (Sōukand et al. 2021) and, even more, on our knowledge of how to use plants. To retain the knowledge accumulated through the generations, an urgent increase in interest in plants is needed. The method proposed here is based on our “Herbarium and Poetry workshop,” which took place in Venice (Italy) during the ONA Short Film Festival (2021). This method merges biodiversity learning and creative writing: in the first stage, participants take part in collecting and displaying dried herbarium specimens; second, they custom their sample by writing a “Little Elfje,” a short poem of 11 words that aims to describe their feeling for the natural

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elements. This practice was applied during an outdoor nature and adventure film festival, but it can be easily adapted to diverse purposes, including research, awareness raising, and connection to the local environment.

A herbarium, as a collection of preserved plant specimens, holds a long history and has played a crucial role in transmitting knowledge in plant research and beyond. Poetry is one of the most ancient means of human artistic expression, and it can help us to bring plant stories into our lives. It can provide us with a new language that conveys the confluence of intellectual and emotional strands, creating a visceral connection to the environment. Throughout history, there have been several instances where the art of crafting poetry and the scientific practice of creating herbaria have been intertwined. One prominent example is Emily Dickinson, an American poet of the nineteenth century, who was known to have a deep interest in botany and created a herbarium with her own poems (Marshall 2015). Also, Charlotte Smith, an English novelist and poet, crafted a literary herbarium, intertwining the distinct characteristics of the plants depicted in her poetry. This collection highlights the ever-evolving material environments and connections between the nonhuman and human realms (Boettcher 2023). Particularly the Little Elfje (Elfchens in German, Little Elevens in English) provides the opportunity for anyone to express their story, which was for this particular exercise, about a plant. By combining both elements (the dried plant specimen and the poem), participants create a personal sharing and attachment to the chosen plant. This approach ensured that the workshop was not just an academic exercise but a holistic educational experience connecting the dots between botany, culture, and artistic expression.

14.2 Transformative Potential

Many things can happen when a person decides to embark on an internal journey that will lead them to a poem-writing experience in connection with a plant. We recommend that the participants pause, closely observe, and give themselves permission to express their creative self, in a language that might be dormant in them most of the time. We consider this act tremendously regenerative since it awakens a power that we often forget to have: to translate feelings, thoughts, and emotions into words, inspired by the connection with a plant. The plant works as a prompt for poetry, and the practice of sewing the dried specimen on paper creates the space for emotions to settle down and take the form of the Little Elfie. The local flora used in the exercise connects participants with the reality they likely experience on an everyday basis or gives them a hint for what to search for on later walks. As in ethnobotany, herbarium specimens serve as a link between emic and etic, between people's knowledge and scientific knowledge. The resulting artwork keeps the memories and the link vivid and may prompt them to explore more.

14.3 Application

The activity can be carried out both individually and in small or large groups (e.g., as an icebreaker for an event). This practice takes around 30 minutes, but it requires preparatory work, which adds an additional time requirement. Therefore, the authors have divided the application into two sections: the workshop session and the preparatory phase.

14.3.1 *Workshop Session*

The workshop was built upon a strong foundation of ethnobotanical fieldwork, meticulously prepared by the workshop facilitators, who collected plant specimens and dried them on newspaper sheets. For the workshop, the following tools were used: white cardstock paper, needles (for sewing the dried specimen on cardstock paper), white sewing thread, post-its, table/chairs, instructions for the poem, and pens or pencils to write the poem. Before the beginning of the workshop, the facilitators arranged the materials making them ready for participants to use.

Once the location is set up, participants are welcomed and briefed about the dynamic of the workshop. For the herbarium making, the dried specimens and required tools were handed to each participant. Afterward, a short briefing is provided on the Little Elfje poem, which involves five lines (or verses) and holds a distinct pattern (ECSA 2021):

A first line is made of 1 word (an adjective).

A second line is made of 2 words (a noun with an article).

A third line is made of 3 words (an action of the noun).

A fourth line is made of 4 words (a complement of the action).

A fifth line is made of 1 word (a noun that closes the story).

For the Festival workshop, we emphasized the attention to the plant as one of the elements for making the poem. After the poem-writing session, the participants were invited to use a post-it to note down the local name of the plant and the location where it was collected (provided by the facilitators), which created the “plant ID” for each specimen.

14.3.2 *Preparatory Phase*

In order for the dried specimens to be ready for the workshop, the facilitators collected the plants 2 weeks before the session. Smaller common plant specimens were also dug out with roots to create the matching element of the authentic herbarium collections. After the collection, the plants were dried following three steps. First,

the specimens were cleaned from the soil; second, each plant specimen was placed between newspaper pages adding a post-it with the basic information (“plant ID”), including time and day of collection, place, and short location description, and Latin name of the plant when available (e.g., using available community-based platforms, e.g., the NatureSpots app running on SPOTTERON Citizen Science App platform, and for proper identification inviting a botanist is essential). Last, each newspaper with the specimen inside was covered with an empty newspaper page and placed under a heavy, flat object (e.g., a book). For the research process, the botanical press is used. The press usually consists of layers of cardboard, blotting paper, and newspaper to absorb moisture from the plant, with straps or other mechanisms to apply pressure and ensure the plant dries flat. Then, the plants undergo daily inspections throughout the drying process. It is crucial to store the collected plants in a dry environment.

14.3.3 Future Recommendations

When used together, herbariums and poetry can provide a well-rounded educational experience, combining scientific knowledge with emotional engagement and artistic expression. Ideally, involving the participants in the preparatory work, including the process of choosing, collecting, and drying the plant(s), would provide a more meaningful experience and connection with plants. The instructors of such activities can channel the choice of plants based on either their usability (wild food plants, medicinal plants, personal preferences of the students, etc.), their prevalence in the area (most widespread local species, all flora that grows around the school, etc.), or in a long-term perspective, to document the changes in the environment and relations between plants and people (Table 14.1).

Table 14.1 Method overview

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| Main purpose |
| Creative community engagement. |
| Gained competences |
| Creativity. |
| Educational setting |
| Workshop. |
| Space requirements/restrictions |
| Outside and indoor activity. |
| Resources and necessary materials |
| White cartoon paper, needles (for sewing the dried specimen on white cartoon paper), white sewing thread, post-its, table and chairs, instructions for the poem, and pen/pencil for writing the poem, dried plant specimens. |

(continued)

Table 14.1 (continued)

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| Number of participants |
| Group or individual. |
| Facilitator competences and skills |
| Experience with making herbarium and facilitating creative storytelling workshop. |
| Participants' skills/Age/Competences |
| Students, community, practitioners. |
| Duration |
| 30 minutes to 1 hour (workshop). |
| Up to 2 weeks (preparatory work for dried plant specimens). |

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