



# Interdisciplinary Catalyst Activities

This collection of activities is intended for interdisciplinary research groups, organisations, and classrooms to spark discussion and critical thinking around how to actively 'practice interdisciplinarity' in environmental research. For further information, visit:

<https://www.naturerecovery.ox.ac.uk/projects/innovative-methods-to-connect-and-communicate-between-disciplines/>

## Activity 1: Field Work Tennis

In pairs, participants engage in back-and-forth conversations that are constructed to either accept or reject suggestions from the offering partner, with role-playing around an environmental research/restoration theme. This layered activity helps think through interdisciplinary critique as productive—rather than a hinderance—in research design and execution.

### Goals of the Activity:

The goals of this activity are to catalyse discussion on:

1. How agreement can be productive, for a time, but also limits openness to other possibilities and critical reflection;
2. How critique, or someone counteracting the initial offer, slows the speed of the conversation, but *may* lead to better reflection and creativity in idea generation;
3. How playing with different disciplinary roles opens people up to thinking across disciplines.

### Activity Directions:

*Layer 1: Yes/And (running time: 15 minutes):*

1. You (the moderator) introduce this activity as a warm-up, about opening up to suggestions, accepting offers, warming up the brain with a partner. Split the group into partners, with pairs including people in two different disciplines, where possible.
2. Explain to the group that the first person will start with an offer (e.g. 'let's go for a day out'). The second person must then accept the offer ('yes') and offer another suggestion ('and'). This continues for 1-2 minutes to get participants comfortable with the format.
3. You should demonstrate how this works to the group using an example:

#### Example of Yes/And:

Person A: 'let's go for a day out', Person B: 'Yes, *and* we can bring a picnic,' A: 'Yes, *and* I can make the special sandwiches to eat,' B: 'Yes, *and* we can bring juice to wash them down.'

4. Ask the pairs to give this activity a go for 3 minutes so that they can practice.
5. Next, in the same pairs, you will ask the participants to use the Yes/And format to 'build a field site.' Participant A begins with, 'let's go into the field,' and the pair subsequently use Yes/And to describe the features of their imagined field site. The pairs should enact a walk through the field site. Have them act out the different offers, acceptances, and other



suggestions through their bodies, pointing out and interacting with the features that they describe in the field, for example, as they continue their ‘yes, and’ conversations.

**Example of Yes/And ‘in the field:’**

A: ‘let’s go into the field’, B: ‘Yes, *and* we can take a survey of the beaver activity,’ A: ‘Yes, *and* I can see how much water their dams retained this time,’ B: ‘Yes, *and* we can count the new species we see, etc.

*Layer 2: Fortunately/Unfortunately (running time: 10 minutes):*

1. This activity starts off with the same premise as the last, with someone making an offer. But, it’s responded to with an obstacle (“unfortunately”) rather than acceptance, to which the offer-maker must respond with another offer (“fortunately...”). Staying in the same pairs, and maintaining the imagined field site as the place in which the conversation takes place, try this version of the activity for 3-5 minutes.

**Example of Fortunately/Unfortunately:**

A: ‘let’s go research in the beaver enclosure,’ B: ‘unfortunately, it’s raining, and we’ll get wet,’ A: ‘fortunately, I brought our rain boots,’ B: ‘unfortunately, we need waders to get to the new dam,’ etc.

2. Swap roles, so that each person gets a chance to be the Fortunately and Unfortunately person.
3. Moderate a quick discussion, asking, ‘How did you find being the fortunately person?’ and ‘How did you find being the unfortunately person?’

*Layer 3: Role Playing Fortunately/Unfortunately (running time: 15 minutes):*

1. Introduce researcher roles for the participants to integrate into their conversations ‘in the field.’ Designate the roles:
  - a. **Natural processes advocate:** who is most interested in gathering information about and paying attention to the ecological and biophysical aspects of the project, and
  - b. **Human dimensions advocate:** who is most interested in gathering information about and paying attention to community partner and other social concerns about the project.
2. With these designated roles and each pair’s created field site, run *Fortunately/Unfortunately* activity again in the pairs, with the natural processes role starting first with ‘fortunately’ and the human dimensions role with ‘unfortunately.’ Pairs have the option to ‘take it for a walk’ and introduce movement.
  - a. Next, keep the same roles, but switch which role is fortunately or unfortunately.
3. Finally, keeping the same roles, choose who is fortunately and unfortunately, but this time, the naysayer must follow their ‘unfortunately’ with a concession (“however...”), thus providing critique and offers from both roles. If there’s time, switch who is fortunately and unfortunately.



**Example of Role Playing Fortunately/Unfortunately, with concession:**

A (natural processes): 'I am going to start this project by mapping the nonhuman species present in the woodland,' B (human dimensions): 'Unfortunately, the local community uses this woodland to farm, and they are going to be working the farm on the days you are mapping. However, I have liaised with them and they will allow you onto the farm between 9 and 10am each day,' A: 'Fortunately, I will be able to measure the species in the soil on their farm,' etc.

**Discussion Questions:**

After these layered activities, the moderator should lead a discussion, asking the participants to step outside their roles and the activity. Suggested questions for discussion:

1. How did the scenario make you feel?
2. Do you think it was more or less productive to work with a yes/and, or a fortunately/unfortunately attitude?
3. How did it feel when the person stating 'unfortunately' also came up with a solution?
4. If you role-swapped (i.e. acted in the role of a natural processes advocate despite typically focusing on human dimensions in your everyday research, or vice versa) how did this feel?
5. Do you have experiences from your work that have similar dynamics to those in the activity? What happened?
6. If you were to apply the insights from the activity to your own work, what would you do differently as a result?

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