Field notes 25th April 2023

Artist

North West school

Tree twinning. (note: This was originally to be called ‘tree twinning’ but it ended up being tree measuring).

I set off at 8.00 very busy traffic – 2 hours 40 minutes of listening to radio four. Depressing news about the coming war in Sudan reminded me of an oral history project where I edited audio recordings of people describing fleeing the war in Somalia – one woman had lost her family walking through the desert and hadn’t seen them again for a year. The car felt like a Faraday cage the lighting of the storm of the world finding its way to Earth without burning me.

I deliberately decided to arrive late so I could join the activity rather than take a more active role. I think the main reason for me to be there was to get some nice, good quality video footage of young people working with the technology – I have a feeling I am going to be asked to make a film that captures aspects of the project at some point so in the back of my mind is the idea to capture some key moments as we go along. Experience has taught me that this is important – no point in regretting not doing it later.

As I sat in traffic on the M62 though I decided that perhaps this was a little too much effort and I could make do with what I already had. Ethnographer wanted to show the film to the class we worked with – I thought it was important for me to be there for this bit but again wondered if I was making too much effort.

I didn’t feel like an ethnographer and although I knew Ethnographer would ask us to do field notes I didn’t really make head notes or enter an ethnographic space. I also didn’t really focus on capturing what was happening on video as much as I had done previously – I was more interested in getting some nice clean footage which told a story visually – probably to use as a 12-second cut away in a 4-minute PR-type film.

I got to school just in time for the second session – I put my camera together and the kids liked my fluffy windcheater (sound receiver) – I explained what it was for and let a few of the children listen to the sound on the mike. I told them it was called a shotgun mike and one of the kids asked what would happen if he pointed it at a pigeon – I said we would hear it cluck and we all laughed. For a few moments I felt more like a kid than an adult – I felt complicit with the students and a bit like I was at school again.

We went outside – the session was interesting, and Environmental Geographer was great with the students – I think the fact we were working on a real science project with a geographer was important. I worry about the idea of carbon and scale and trying to put a figure next to an individual or a thing. I wonder what pedagogies might work better. Environmental scientist said something about how negative the students were at(City Secondary) about the future, I wondered if we were teaching this negativity. If it takes 10 Kg of carbon to make a teabag then really what hope is there?

I want to say something about this but then remember I don’t know enough about it to hold an informed position- I also want to say something about this. I ask Children’s Geographer if the bubbles in Champagne are Carbon dioxide are – we are not sure. I wonder if it is methane but realise it can’t be or champagne would smell like trumps.

We ask Environmental Geographer at lunch and the bubbles are CO 2 but its natural produced by the yeast. I should not say natural here as it's part of the problem – The idea of the natural can become a tyranny.

The kids attention span is about 8 minutes then a few of them start doing handstands and rolly polies – I like this bit on the edge of chaos – I think we all do. It is a good way to recognise how good class teachers actually are and how the structure of the school is all on the surface.

I’m a bit frustrated in trying to film – the light is difficult as people are silhouettes \_ I think this may be good if we want to show something where people cannot be recognised. Stuff is moving too quickly – I don’t want filming to get in the way but to get anything of any real film quality, especially close-ups I would have to step in and stage something. Its much easy to be a listening lens when you take stills – photography is a different art – the results remain more fluid and ambiguous you catch fragments you don’t try and build a whole.

The film shows went well – I had not made the film for the students I had made it for the school and the project and to advocate for forest schools and demonstrate how they enabled and afforded a different space in the school day. I think it did this and the kids liked it – it was a bit talky for them though and I thought I should have done a different version for the class which was more of them and fewer adults – the power relation was wrong.

There was a strange bit where one of the students got upset that she wasn’t in the film – she had run past me and shouted in the mike and pretended to be a cat. It had blown the levels and hurt my ears – I had got rid of the footage in the first edit. Ethnographer said I would put it back in and as I didn’t have it anymore combined with the fact that I didn’t think it was a good thing to allow her to demand to be in the film by making an enormous fuss I tried to navigate her genuine upset without promising to put the footage into the final film. I fudged this by saying I would put some outtakes at the end. I did think we should have had a quick chat with the teacher about how best to manage a situation like this as it’s something specific that must come up quite a lot in this class.

I then had a 2-and-a-half-hour drive home – I’m not sure I needed to be there for the day and it did make me think about being more careful with my time. I still don’t really know what tree twinning is. I think we have the potential to work with some interesting ideas about scale and measurement. I was left with a slight worry about what the pedagogies of carbon are engendering in young people – Its part of making a film and keeping an overview but the rational felt weak today – perhaps it will grow into something – that is the hope.