STORYING CLIMATE CHANGE AT APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

By Laura England, Jennie Carlisle, Rebecca Witter, Derek Davidson, Lynette Holman, and Dana Powell

Abstract

A convergence of concern about climate change, the desire to engage students in more substantive critical discourse about climate (in)action, and the need for more generative responses kindled the creation of the transdisciplinary, university-wide Climate Stories Collaborative at Appalachian State University. We share the origin, rationale, and activities of the Collaborative, including the classroom experiences of several faculty participants. By storying climate through a variety of creative media, faculty and students develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complex, global-scale phenomenon of climate change and of how people perceive, experience, and respond to it. As people across campus participate in the Collaborative, they deepen their empathy and their sense of agency, becoming more engaged actors in this time of climate disruption.

Key words: climate change, creative practice, environmental communication

Introduction

The Climate Stories Collaborative at Appalachian State University began in 2017 as a faculty-led initiative. Our mission is to grow the capacity of faculty and students to be more creative and compelling climate storytellers, to provide opportunities for transdisciplinary connections, and to foster greater agency in facing the daunting problems of climate change. We center our approach on stories and creative practice.

The Collaborative uses a broad interpretation of the word "story," acknowledging that "a story can be many things, if not all things" (Maggio 2014:90) and focuses on three modes of storytelling: (1) representation, emphasizing our capacity to tell climate stories; (2) performance, emphasizing our capacity to embody climate stories; and (3) intervention, emphasizing our capacity to change climate stories (Giannachi 2012). Stories allow us to see and be with climate change. Stories connect people across difference and resonate through time. They call us to care for, respond to, and become responsible to one another. Storying climate change activates empathy, agency, and collective action—skills necessary for responding well to climate change.

Through a range of activities, the Collaborative brought storytelling first to faculty and then to students and endeavored to close the distance between those who are learning about climate change and those most impacted. The results, still emergent, have been tremendously rewarding and meaningful. The students, the stories, and the practice have their own agency, leading in directions we have yet to imagine and some that we can—more just and meaningful climate action. Thus, the Collaborative has become a shared space for imagining and for practicing the possibilities for addressing climate change.

In what follows, we further introduce the Collaborative and describe our activities centered around classroom vignettes from five faculty collaborators. We conclude by discussing the transdisciplinary scholarship that informs our approach as well as the implications of the Collaborative's work for our community and beyond.

Climate Stories Collaborative: Storying Climate Change across Campus

Inspired by a February 2017 visit to our campus by Jeff Biggers, celebrated author, historian, playwright, and leader of the Climate Narrative Project, a small group of faculty launched the Climate Stories Collaborative in May 2017. The initiative quickly grew to more than seventy faculty representing twenty-three departments. Thus far, activities have included faculty workshops to share pedagogical tools and climate change expertise, classroom visits, support for instructors wanting to incorporate climate themes into their courses through creative assignments, an annual showcase of student creative works, and a speaker series connecting our campus to climate-affected communities around the world.

Our faculty workshops embody the democratic nature of the Collaborative in that we invite collaborators from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to lead the sessions. We draw on diverse faculty expertise related to climate change as we build transdisciplinary connections that strengthen teaching and research. Beyond this, knowledge, experience, and skills-sharing strengthens faculty capacities to communicate stories in creative and compelling ways and to guide students to do the same.

Bringing these skills to students, fifteen faculty collaborators engaged their classes in our Fall 2017 Climate Stories Showcase. We set an open and flexible framework for faculty engagement, recognizing that instructors' approaches to climate curriculum and to creative projects reflect diverse disciplines and unique course objectives. Participating faculty created class-specific assignments that prompted students to use creative media to interpret, represent, and respond to the stories of individuals and

Photo by Sarah Jane Kennelly

Installation View of Appalachian State University's 2017 Climate Stories Showcase Exhibition

communities affected by and/or taking action to address climate change. Collaborative co-facilitators then made a series of class visits to introduce and to practice methods for storying climate. More than 110 students contributed their completed assignments to the first Showcase in December 2017. The exhibit featured paintings, drawings, graphic design, zines, comics, audio, and video; the performance component featured readings of poems and narratives and performances of original short plays. The concept of using creative expression to communicate about climate change clearly struck a chord, as the event drew an audience of more than 300 people from the university and community.

Our April 2018 Climate Justice Month event series drew more than 1,000 participants and deepened faculty and student connections to the lived experiences of climate change. Anthropologists Elizabeth Marino and Anthony Oliver-Smith and playwright Chantal Bilodeau shared climate stories from around the world in different narrative modes. The series also featured Chief Albert Naquin, leader of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw. The Band is currently relocating from their coastal Louisiana home due to sea level rise. Naquin's story in particular sparked empathy, which led to student action. Five student clubs partnered to host Chief Naquin with a potluck dinner, and others held a benefit concert to raise funds for the tribe's relocation project.

Classroom Vignettes

The following vignettes from faculty who engaged their classes in storying climate span five departments. The varied voices and approaches reflect the diversity of the broader Collaborative.

Dana Powell—ANT 3680 Environmental Anthropology

Retrospectively, I see the accidental design of having assigned my students their climate stories projects one week before Hurricane Florence devastated North Carolina. What might have otherwise been an academic exercise—tell the story of another community impacted by extreme weather events—became almost absurdly personal. One class member left Boone to assist her family in coastal Wilmington, and others witnessed the collapse of infrastructures and loss of life from a frighteningly close proximity.

When our own rivers receded and the University re-opened, we read Amitav Ghosh's (2016) call to write the epic stories that are, increasingly, our lived experiences alongside Bruno Latour's (2017:8) assertion that what we face is not a crisis (that might yet pass), but rather, a sustained "mutation in our relation to the world." These texts offered more than theoretical exercises; students felt this mutation as we tried to make sense of the violently transformed landscapes that once seemed so familiar and trustworthy: Wrightsville Beach, small hometowns in the eastern Piedmont, and even here, in the southern Appalachians where, within hours, abundant rivers became forces of possible death.

We were reflecting upon Florence when Michael made landfall, causing even more damage here. Like Ghosh who was nearly swept away by an unprecedented cyclone walking home from class, my students felt eerily close to an edge, poised to respond to forces far beyond their control. This sense of the epic was a perceptual shift I could not have planned in a set of "learning objectives."

The project guidelines were straightforward with ample room for play: craft narratives from lived experiences (their own, or others) and make a creative intervention that pushes disciplinarily boundaries. Their goal was to expand public understandings of climate change and encourage empathy. Students self-organized into groups of three with the intent to explore an event (e.g., a hurricane), a methodological inquiry (e.g., Ghosh's "unthinkability,") a certain species perspective, or a response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's call for urgent, local action. Students had the freedom to curate their story through any form or medium, collaboratively produced. I required independent research, an intensive group workshop, a project plan, and face-to-face consultation with me. At these

meetings, I learned what narratives were coalescing for each group: an illustrated children's book, a fine arts installation, a pantomime puppet show, a graphic novel, and a photo essay. Our shared experiences weighted these projects differently than I intended: the climate stories projects became the center of our course.

Jennie Carlisle—ART 3112 Art Exhibitions and Contemporary Culture

For my class's participation in storying climate, I situated a unit on climate arts within a larger discussion of curatorial activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. To understand some of the circumstances driving the contemporary art community's response to climate change, we discussed a variety of sources produced by public information campaigns. Students also shared research on the ways art institutions and curators internationally have told climate stories through exhibitions. We then decided to create our own exhibition projects in the form of zines, which we later featured at the Showcase and distributed to audience members.

These zines addressed themes ranging from the cultural impacts of fossil-fuel plastics, to sustainable food production systems, to artist-led environmental remediation efforts. Each zine gathered artist projects from around the world, produced at different moments over the past fifty years, and in response to unique social and environmental circumstances. By featuring works created by established international artists, our zines connected the stories told by their peers in the Showcase to the broader terrain of art responses globally.

Student approaches to this assignment spoke to the intricate web of stories and social interactions that make up the cultural discourse of climate change. Stories told through art and exhibitions are notoriously non-linear and complex, and our zines reflected this. Each gave voice to diverse perspectives on the problems of climate change and promoted a set of sometimes divergent solutions. The dynamism of the zines was mirrored in the larger Showcase exhibition, where stories of rising temperatures, extreme weather events, migrations, and shrinking habitats all shared wall space together.

What began as an academic exercise turned into something more urgently felt as students grappled with the potential of their project to effect social change. As students became part of the stories told, they also became more capable artists and citizens. As the semester progressed, students became ever more driven to produce their work as sustainably as possible. Meanwhile, discussions that emerged during zine-making often turned to the challenge of how to talk with family members about climate change. Following the Showcase, we made pacts to modify personal behaviors related to climate change and to check in with each other on those commitments over the next year. It was a powerful classroom experience—one that so thoroughly expressed how the telling of stories often most transforms the tellers.

Photo by Sarah Jane Kennelly

Visitors Engaging with the Exhibition, Including Video Produced by Students in Lynette Holman's Course, Multimedia Storytelling

Lynette Holman—COM 4420 Multimedia Storytelling

With this class, I show my students that multimedia-authoring tools provide communicators with a powerful and effective storytelling medium. Each semester, my students use video to tell the story of a local issue that lends itself to visual storytelling. They publish these stories with accompanying text on websites they create.

I teach students how to draw out stories in interviews and how their subjects serve as exemplars, or shortcut cues, to help audiences understand the complexities of issues like climate change. We then employ natural voices, strong visuals, ambient audio, and chronicles of people who exemplify these complexities. The editing process emphasizes subjects telling their stories in their own voices, without voice-over narration, all while applying solid, ethical journalistic decision making.

My Fall 2017 students interviewed local experts about how Fraser fir trees serve as a "canary in a coal mine"

Photo by Sarah Jane Kennelly

Kaitlyn Lyon and Joe Perdue Performing in the Short Play Wildfire*, Written by Lydia Brynn Congdon for Derek Davidson's Course, Playwriting*

for climate change and the impact its potential loss of viability could have on the local economy. Their final edits were featured in the Showcase. Students appreciated working on a timely, significant topic. The climate stories work inspired my students in a compelling way and helped them understand how effective narratives can promote empathy by connecting with an audience on an emotional level.

Derek Davidson—THR 3670 Playwriting

The idea subtending drama is an old and simple one, perhaps most succinctly articulated by Aristotle, who defined *drama* as "the imitation of an action." What Aristotle understood is that the imitative act can affect both imitator and witness. If watching a story can inspire empathy, enacting the story seeds compassion more deeply within the actors, often transforming them profoundly. I have discovered, as playwright and teacher of playwriting, that the act of writing a play can have the same, powerful effect—not surprising, since its craft demands the same process of performance (in the theatrical space of the playwright's mind) as the craft of acting.

In my Fall 2017 Playwriting class, I prompted students to create a short play addressing dimensions of climate change. Three or four students accepted the challenge and wrote ten-minute scripts with topics that ranged from increasing severe weather to corporate indifference and dynastic greed. Students performed one of the plays, *Wildfire*, by Lydia Brynn Congdon, at the end-of-semester Showcase. Some observations regarding the student work include:

First, many students chose to tell stories from animals' perspectives, refreshingly expanding compassion's reach. Congdon's play, for example, created a dialogue between two animals escaping a wildfire; the scene presented a way of regarding the loss of forest habitat from a new coign of vantage and encouraged an empathetic response toward other species besides our own.

Second, the tone of the plays was surprisingly optimistic. My students' unabashed hope in the future and generosity of spirit prove infectious: their sense of hope gives *me* hope. Finally, I return to the power of *imitating action*. The Showcase audience enjoyed the performances, but perhaps more meaningful is how the *actors* were affected. Many had little knowledge about climate change but immersed themselves in research and began to engage in more climate-conscious behavior. Their actions on the stage inspired action in their lives *off* the stage. For Congdon, in particular, the writing of *Wildfire* had a galvanizing effect: she is now working on a second, longer play, this time exploring the predicament of red wolves in the wild.

Rebecca Witter—SD 2400 Principles of Sustainable Development

Three-quarters of the way through the semester, we turn to climate change. We begin with the causes and effects of increased carbon emissions and why those who bear the consequences are not the same as those responsible for mass emissions. Students then compare institutional, market-based, and political economic forms of response. It's a solid start, but students ask for, and they need, more.

Enter Assignment 4: Identify a climate story—someone else's experience with and/or interpretation of climate change. Retell the story in the first person using a creative medium. *No conventional academic essays allowed*. Present your work in an in-class gallery.

Students express excitement, intrigue, confusion, trepidation….

Enter Laura England and Derek Davidson who lead an in-class Climate Stories Workshop. England shares images depicting recent climate-related events and their implications for the people living nearby. She then shares a series of opinion maps (Leiserowitz et al. 2018) that demonstrate: most Americans actually do "believe" in climate change. They think it will affect their loved ones. Yet, only a minority talk about climate change, especially *with* their loved ones.

These findings resonate with students. It's November 2017. Students' fear of fighting about (worse for some, *not* fighting about) climate change with their own loved ones over turkey and sweet potato pie looms even larger this year, near palpable.

Davidson, back in class, asks students for their stories. Something with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Something you experienced (climate-related or not). Everyone have one? Who is willing to share? A hesitant few accept.

The first volunteer recalls the recent flash flooding of Boone Creek. He pantomimes climbing through the sunroof of a car as waters rise around him. Next, the students divide into pairs and swap stories.

Davidson brings the class back together and asks, again, for volunteers but introduces a twist. Tell your partner's story, rather than your own, but

in first person. In nearly every telling, without direction or prompting, the tellers moved into present tense; they used gestures; and they captured vivid details. Tellers heard, connected with, even dwelled in—if temporarily—*another's* story.

Students populate the end-of-semester in-class "gallery" with memoir, spoken-word poetry, painting, photography, video, collage, knitting, even soup—each a medium for story. The stories relay displacement from natural disasters, mobilization against fracking, strategies of denial, fears of looming insecurity….

The work is vibrant, witty, fresh (with paint still drying), and compelling, but it's the practice of connecting and of responding that matters most.

Storying as Responding Well to Climate Change

Climate change is perhaps the ultimate wicked problem—built on shifting ground and socially complex, it defies straightforward solutions and communication. For much of the past twenty-five years, climate communication focused on science and made significant gains in terms of awareness (Moser 2016). While a growing majority of Americans (73%) acknowledge that global warming is happening and are concerned about associated harm to future generations, most Americans rarely or never discuss it (Leiserowitz et al. 2018). The challenge of transitioning citizens' awareness into engagement in meaningful climate conversation and action remains a profound, cultural problem (Latour 2017).

Recent advances in climate communication are in large part due to developments in the cultural sphere, particularly the rise of storytelling, a powerful mode for shifting the discourse towards motivating engagement (Moser 2016). The call in climate communication for narrative forms that allow people to see, feel, and be with climate change mirrors similar pleas in contemporary anthropology (Crate and Nutall 2009; Maggio 2014). Anthropologists have also observed that storytelling is a form of social action, a "vital strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is… to actively rework them, both in dialogue with each other and within one's own imagination" (Jackson 2002:15).

As with the narrative arts (e.g., fiction and playwriting), the visual arts address key challenges of climate communication. By making problems more immediate and concrete, artists can connect people's (in)actions to the places and communities where the effects of climate change are most intensely felt (Hawkins and Kanngieser 2017). Artful stories also transport us to another reality, indeed to another person's reality, in ways that rhetorical communication does not. Experiencing climate change through encounters with art opens minds, deepens understanding, and fosters empathy (Hawkins and Kanngieser 2017). A recent review of the growing networks of initiatives, artists and practitioners in the climate arts concludes that art contributes to cultural transformation via social learning and the emergence of "new ways of perceiving, understanding, and acting upon climate change" (Galafassi et al. 2018:77).

We are witnessing the transformative power of stories on our own campus. As this paper goes to press, we are hosting our second Climate Stories Showcase. The event series will feature the work of 35 classes and well over 200 students, more than doubling our reach. Student participants in the Climate Stories Collaborative confront the most challenging issue of our time with passion, creativity, wit, and commitment to meaningful change. As they bring stories into the classroom, students participate in "ongoing material world-forming processes" (McLean 2009:214). In other words, stories can resonate not only with how the world is but how we want it to be and to become. Student experiences make clear that the creative process of *imitating actions*—whether witnessed, performed, or documented—can lead to *real-world action.* Creative depictions of climate change can provoke a "repositioning of the viewer from spectator to participant…or activist" (Giannachi 2012:131).

Through such transformations, stories can author people (Maggio 2014). The stories that we foreground, both in telling and in listening, change us. Stories also "bind people together in terms of meanings that are collectively hammered out" (Jackson 2002:103). Thus, the collaborative (and contested) nature of story-forming is good practice for cultivating "response-ability" (Haraway 2016) and for generating the collective action necessary for addressing climate change justly. Indeed, the work of the Climate Stories Collaborative helped build a groundswell of climate concern that is now supporting a blossoming climate action movement (see https://climateactioncolla.wixsite.com/climate-action) on our campus, led by students and supported by faculty, staff, and community-based organizations.

Moreover, we have seen the power of story to generate a kind of entanglement, whereby experiences reverberate and transform people separated by thousands of miles. Chief Albert Naquin's visit, and his generosity in sharing the Biloxi-Chitamacha-Choctaw Tribe's story, made a profound impression on our community. Chief Naquin's mark endures; our students continue to invoke his story, and share their concern about the Tribe's future, on a regular basis. In September 2018, five months after visiting our campus and while in the midst of a long-term struggle for climate justice, he checked in with us as North Carolina anticipated the arrival of Hurricane Florence. Naquin wanted to see how our community, and our students, were faring. Chief Naquin's story interweaves with our own.

In these and other ways, the Climate Stories Collaborative continues to build momentum at an institution whose mission, to prepare "students to lead purposeful lives as engaged global citizens who understand their responsibilities in creating a sustainable future for all," encourages, even demands, that faculty and students work together to identify,

create, and develop the suite of skills necessary to respond meaningfully to climate change.

Acknowledgements

Inspiration for this work was ignited by Jeff Biggers, leader of the Climate Narrative Project. The Climate Stories Collaborative has received broad and generous university support, including sponsorship by multiple colleges, departments and offices on our campus. Among these, Phyllis Kloda, Dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts at Appalachian State University, has supported the Climate Stories Collaborative since its inception and the Office of the Quality Enhancement Program funded Climate Justice Month. We also thank collaborator Brian Burke for thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this manuscript. Finally, we are grateful to the ASU faculty who comprise the Climate Stories Collaborative and who made the ideas and experiences we shared here possible.

References Cited

Crate, Susan A., and Mark Nuttall, eds.
2009 Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Action. New York: Routledge.

Galafassi, Diego, Sacha Kagan, Manjana Milkoreit, Maria Heras, Chantal Bilodeau, Sadhbh Juarez Bourke, Andrew Merrie, Leonie Guerrero, Guorun Petursdottir, and Joan David Tabara
2018 Raising the Temperature: The Arts on a Warming Planet. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 31(2):71-79.

Ghosh, Amitav
2016 The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Giannachi, Gabriella
2012 Representing, Performing, and Mitigating Climate Change in Contemporary Art Practice. Leonardo 45(2):124-131.

Haraway, Donna
2016 Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hawkins, Harriet, and Anja Kanngieser
2017 Artful Climate Change Communication: Overcoming Abstractions, Insensibilities, and Distances. WIREs Climate Change 8(5):e472.

Jackson, Michael
2002 Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Latour, Bruno
2017 Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.

Leiserowitz, Anthony, Edward Maibach, Seth Rosenthal, John Kotcher, Matthew Ballew, Matthew Goldberg, and Abel Gustafson
2018 Climate Change in the American Mind: December 2018. New Haven, Conn: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Maggio, Rodolfo
2014 The Anthropology of Storytelling and the Storytelling of Anthropology. Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology 5(2):89-106.

McLean, Stuart
2009 Stories and Cosmogonies: Imagining Creativity Beyond "Nature" and "Culture." Cultural Anthropology 24(2):213-245.

Moser, Susanne C.
2016 Reflections on Climate Change Communication Research and Practice in the Second Decade of the 21st Century: What More is There to Say? WIREs Climate Change 7(3):345-369.

Laura England *(englandle@appstate.edu) is an ecologist, co-facilitator of the Climate Stories Collaborative, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sustainable Development at Appalachian State University.*

Jennie Carlisle *(carlislejk@appstate.edu) is the Director of Smith Gallery, co-facilitator of the Climate Stories Collaborative, and Lecturer in the Department of Art at Appalachian State University.*

Rebecca Witter *witterrc@appstate.edu) is an environmental anthropologist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Sustainable Development at Appalachian State University.*

Derek Davidson *(davidsonds@appstate.edu) is a co-facilitator of the Climate Stories Collaborative and Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Appalachian State University.*

Lynette Holman *(holmanlm1@appstate.edu) is an Associate Professor of journalism in the Department of Communication at Appalachian State University.*

Dana Powell *(powellde@appstate.edu) is a cultural anthropologist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University.* ■