Advancing Climate Education through Integrated Activities to Promote Inclusion, Creativity, and Mental Health

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Information Box:

Title: Inclusive and Creative Climate Education Workshop

What: Mid-Atlantic educators from universities, colleges, K-12, government, and community organizations prototyped activities to promote inclusion of diverse perspectives and value systems, to address climate anxiety and apathy in educators and learners, and to build creativity as a skill in climate change education.

When: 13-14 October 2023

Where: Wilmington, DE, USA
Meeting Summary:

Climate change researchers, practitioners, and educators recognize that the field needs to a) foster creativity to develop innovative solutions; b) include more diverse people, perspectives, and knowledge systems; and c) address climate grief, anxiety, and apathy. The Inclusive & Creative Climate Education Workshop (ICCE) was designed to support a Mid-Atlantic community of practice among formal and informal climate change educators, with the goal of improving educators’ ability to foster inclusive, creative, and emotionally supportive climate change education (Figure 1). In their feedback, participants valued the workshop’s creativity and positive energy and said the workshop changed the way they would engage in climate education – either by adopting a specific activity or by taking a more hopeful, inclusive approach.

The two-day meeting sought to: (a) build authentic relationships among participants, (b) leverage national keynote speakers to reframe and integrate the themes of creativity, inclusion, and mental health, and (c) actively prototype activities and exercises that could be applied in classrooms or outreach. We began with a Conocimiento activity where participants considered their identities, experiences, and motivations and how those shape their educational approaches. Conocimiento refers to a range of cultural activist practices inspired by Brazilian philosopher Paolo Friere, but it can also be used in pedagogy to build knowledge about oneself in relation to others and to systems of power (Sanchez et al., 2022). Participants “loved this activity because it allowed us to get at some of our group’s core values” and said they plan to use it in their programming.
Figure 1. A visual representation of the goals and activities of the Inclusive and Creative Climate Education Workshop. The workshop sought to connect creativity, inclusion and integration of diverse perspectives, and strategies to support the emotional and mental health of climate students and educators. Graphics by ImageThink.

Chief Dennis Coker, Dr. Julie Maldonado, and Dr. Nicola Ulibarri delivered keynote presentations about the importance of inclusion and alternative value systems, the work involved in not just acknowledging but integrating diverse knowledge systems, and the importance of building creativity as a skill. Participants were struck by Chief Coker’s comment that we have taken the environment out of environmental justice. Others reported that Dr. Maldonado’s talk changed the way they thought about climate change education not just as a set of scientific facts to be relayed but a conversation about values. Dr. Ulibarri’s talk on building creativity inspired many participants who intend to use rapid brainstorming activities (like the Crazy 8s activity we prototyped at the workshop) in their classrooms.
Rather than simply describe possible activities, we modeled those activities during the workshop and reflected on how they might be modified for various contexts. Participants made problem and solution trees to identify root causes and branching effects, engaged in rapid brainstorming, practiced gratitude, acceptance, and re-framing (e.g., speaking from the future or from a non-human perspective) using suggestions from The Work that Reconnects (Macy and Brown, 2014). Participants also made zines to process and integrate the insights from the workshop.

ICCE was hosted by the Gerard J. Mangone Climate Change Science and Policy Hub, the University of Delaware Associate in Arts Program, the Newark Charter High School, Delaware State University, and the American Meteorological Society (AMS) Committee on Spirituality, Multifaith Outreach, and Science (COSMOS). It was funded by the President’s Advisory Council on University Relations (PACUR) at the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR). The workshop and networking efforts stem from and build on earlier work by the MADE-CLEAR (Maryland-Delaware Climate Change Education, Assessment, and Research) Partnership funded by the National Science Foundation. A full workshop report, including details on the activities and speakers, is available at: https://sites.udel.edu/climatechangehub/icce-workshop.

References
