Thinking Like a Climate

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FOOTPRINTS AND TRACES, OR LEARNING TO THINK LIKE A CLIMATE

Once climate change comes to take on a body — a figurative form that has the potential to impinge on social relations, one question that arises is how to turn this figure into something that can be communicated or taught. As a new being, what are the processes by which this body is socialized and brought more squarely into thinking and into practice? There were several programs of training in climate thinking underway during my research that were working to socialize climate change. I attended a number of training sessions and interacted with various online resources run by different organizations. These included an organization set up by broadcaster and community activist Phil Korbel and former information technology (IT) consultant and Manchester: A Certain Future steering group member Dave Coleman called the Manchester Carbon Literacy Project, a workshop run by environmentalist George Marshall and his organization Climate Outreach, and a number of workshops linked to accreditation schemes that aimed to help businesses understand their impact on the environment. To give you a flavor of how these workshops and resources invited people to learn to think like a climate, let me describe for you my experience of a couple of these events.

At the entrance desk to the offices of the recently defunct North West Development Agency, I am met by a friendly, portly man who works for the
new Low Carbon Hub. He strikes a lonely figure as he leads me through the eerily empty office clad with bare bookshelves and scattered with stacked chairs, empty desks, and sheets of discarded paper to the room where the meeting will take place. I am here for an eco-accreditation workshop being run by a carbon accountancy company, which is teaching small businesses about how to reduce their carbon footprint. The workshop is funded by the EU, so Katie, a young blond-haired woman in her twenties who welcomes everyone into the room, is getting everyone to fill in attendance sheets and paperwork that proves their eligibility for inclusion in the program.

Soon everyone has arrived, and as people sit around the table filling out their forms, they start to make small talk finding out who the others are. There is a woman who runs a hotel in Altrincham, a man who is a tree surgeon, a builder, someone who runs a beauty salon, someone from a secondhand car dealership, and a woman who works for a roofing company. One man stands out from the others. Dressed in a tailored suit and exuding an air of confidence, he is, it turns out, an ecoconsultant who, having eco-retrofitted his and his boyfriend’s home, has turned his expertise into a business and now advises others on how to do the same.

This workshop was one of a number of events and meetings I attended that focused on how to get people who lived and worked in Manchester to learn how to think about their lives in climatological terms through footprinting techniques. In addition to this particular EU accreditation project, the council also ran their own “environmental business pledge” scheme; there was an organization called Enworks run from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce that had been set up to help small and medium-sized businesses be more energy efficient; and there was also a flagship project called the Manchester Carbon Literacy Project, which was established to fulfill the audacious ambition, written into the 2009 Manchester: A Certain Future plan, that all citizens and workers in Manchester would be offered half a day of carbon-literacy training by 2020.

So what happened in these workshops?

In the eco-accreditation workshop we start with a PowerPoint presentation about the accreditation scheme, and then we begin to talk. Katie’s boss, Susan, who is leading the workshop, gets everyone to play the elevator game. Everyone has to imagine they are in an elevator, and they have three minutes to tell how environmentally friendly their business is. The woman who works in a car showroom and the man who runs the beauty salon pair up next to me, and after some raised eyebrows and nervous
laughter, they begin, the man from the beauty salon going first. “So, we are constantly trying to get our staff to turn lights off. We have tried to get energy-efficient equipment where we can, like ecofridges. Um, we have changed our light bulbs into energy-saving light bulbs.” Later in the break I talk to him again, and he tells me his wife is very worried about him participating in this program as she doesn’t want people interfering in how she runs the salon. She expects that they are going to tell her that she has to use an industrial waste disposal company to take the industrial-grade waste away, but she prefers to just burn it. He doesn’t think this is illegal, but he expects it’s going to be a point of contention in the workshop, for burning must be an environmental hazard.

The woman from the car showroom goes next. She explains that they have recently changed location and that this was a big learning curve for her. They switch lights off where they can, but it is an open-plan car showroom, so they cannot close any doors to keep heat in. They need to maintain airflow around the space, and so she can’t really see how they could reduce their heating bills. They also give fuel-reduction advice to their customers about how to drive more efficiently and make sure they don’t fill the cars with more gasoline than they need.

With these descriptions and others hanging in people’s minds, Susan then shifts the meeting into a direct confrontation with what she calls “climate change quandaries” and “myth busting.” Here the organizers of the workshop try different ways to bring climate change into the room. First, people are shown a photoshopped image of the center of Liverpool after a projected sea-level rise so as to imagine how climate change might manifest in material form. Then they are asked to imagine a tonne of carbon dioxide as a way of understanding what it means to have carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. Susan asks the room how many double-decker buses do they think are equivalent in volume to 245 tonnes of carbon dioxide. One person says a million. Another says 300,000. The ecoconsultant estimates 1,300, and Katie then reveals that he is nearly right—it is 1,200. Everyone seems very impressed that he was so close about what was for others such an unfathomable thing.

Katie then asks everyone to do a short exercise where they are given two Post-it notes and have to guess what aspects of their organization’s activities contribute the greatest amount of carbon dioxide to their footprint. The two categories that people write down most frequently are “travel” and “electricity,” and so these become the focus of the conversation about what people could do to reduce their carbon emissions.
The discussion about electricity starts off with some advice that re-iterates what people are already doing—using energy-saving light bulbs, improving control over lighting, not lighting empty rooms, and “delamping” (taking out extra bulbs where not needed). But then some of the quandaries begin to appear. Someone asks whether it is true that turning a light on and off uses more electricity than leaving it on. The ecoconsultant, whom everyone is now deferring to after his intervention about the double-decker buses, says that the problem is not use of electricity but the fact that turning the light on and off wears the bulb out more quickly. He tells the room, with some authority, that “it has been calculated that the threshold for the energy efficiency of turning the light off rather than leaving it on is about three minutes.” Prompted by this claim, one of the women at the table then asks, “What about getting rid of CRT [cathode ray tube] computer monitors? Is the environmental cost of manufacturing a new screen plus the cost of recycling or dumping the old one more or less than the extra energy used by continuing to use the CRT screen?” Everyone nods as they look around at one another and then to Katie and Susan for an answer. The woman from the hotel interjects, saying that they keep their computer on all night because they were once told they should, but now she can’t remember what the reason was. Susan is back on firmer ground here and tells the hotel manager that this was because updates used to happen at night, but it’s no longer necessary to do this, and you can now save £35 a year by turning your computer off at night!

Learning about climate change can be confusing and disorienting, reflected with moral implications, and seemingly critical of people’s lives. The people who run footprinting workshops deal with this complexity through a deferral to the numbers of science and accounting, to the facticity of climate, and to a busting of the myths that swirl around climate thinking.

In a second workshop I attended, which was run as part of the Manchester Carbon Literacy Project—a project to educate every adult and child in Manchester into the science of climate change—the capacity of climate change to speak for itself was also emphasized. Here it was achieved through the creation of a form of learning that disassociated climate facts from the person speaking for the facts, through a method called “train the trainer.” Not having an expert at the front of the room but instead a peer teaching the sessions was seen as key to enabling facts about climate to “stand for themselves” (Wagner 1986). Rather than inviting scientists or expert trainers to come and speak about climate change to employ-
ees and citizens, the Manchester Carbon Literacy Project worked with the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, as well as with other publicly available and sanctioned evidence on climate change, to create a training pack that nonexperts could use to train their peers to learn about climate change and its implications. I attended one of the sessions that was put on to train employees at the council who were going to provide the sessions to their peers.

The session started with an icebreaker exercise of “green bingo.” Everyone was given a bingo card with a grid of boxes inside of which were listed a range of green behaviors—“cycles to work,” “recycles,” “always turns off computer screen,” “is vegetarian.” People then had to go around the room asking others if they did one of the behaviors until all the boxes were ticked off. The idea was to “get people thinking that way for the rest of the day.” Participants were then introduced to two kinds of carbon footprinting. The first calculated an individual person’s carbon footprint in terms of tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted in their everyday activities. The project used an online tool that asked people a series of questions about travel, food eaten, and the type of houses that people lived in. The output was a figure in tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (TCO₂e). This number was, however, seen as relatively hard to engage people with, as the objectlike quality of carbon dioxide itself was slippery and difficult for people to evaluate—how much is a lot or a little carbon dioxide? What does five tonnes of carbon dioxide look like? In part because of the difficulty of imagining a tonne of carbon dioxide and, moreover, then understanding its relationship to the concentrations of that gas in the atmosphere, another kind of carbon footprint was introduced that compared each individual’s use of resources with the planet’s capacity to replace those resources. Here the activities of the individual were both set alongside planetary processes, so as to demonstrate a lack of equilibrium between planetary accounting and carbon accounting, and scaled up, so as to show how many “planets” would be needed if everyone in the world had a similar carbon footprint, thus putting individuals and nations on a sliding scale of differential carbon responsibility.

After responsibility was apportioned in this way, everyone was then asked to choose an action they would do to reduce their carbon footprint. These ranged from shaking a kettle to see if it had too much water in it before boiling, to recycling more, to exploring the possibility of putting solar panels on their roofs. One of the explicit aims of the carbon-literacy training was to scale a global problem of carbon dioxide emissions down.
to the level of simple everyday behaviors to help people be able to relate in new ways to material artifacts as objects of climatological significance. In an online training module that accompanied the face-to-face training session, this same form of engagement that enabled a significant relationship to be established between the whole world and turning on or off a kettle was enacted once again, with learners first of all given an introduction to the science of climate change and then provided with testimonials from individuals living in Manchester—scientists, residents, and policy makers—about what they had done to reduce their carbon footprint. According to the welcome page of the training website, the aim of the online training was to give people “the knowledge to make low carbon choices and to think about what you are going to do to make them happen.”

Carbon footprinting was a way, then, of encouraging people to reduce their individual environmental impact, but, more important, it was seen as the means of bringing about a cultural change, whereby people would learn to think like a climate. Carbon footprinting worked in and out, aggregating and disaggregating, with numbers and stories, so as to create a sense that individual actions might be able to add up to global environmental change. Through pledges people were being asked to rethink themselves and their actions as part of a global environmental ecumene. Carbon footprinting was thus not just an accounting tool but a tool that aimed to change the world by reassembling people’s entanglement in it.