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Gabrielle Jean Laipenieks

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Climate Storytelling: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary Course Design

By Gabrielle Laipenieks

Western Washington University Honors College
Sustainability Engagement Institute, Climate Leadership Certificate Program

Professor Lindsey MacDonald, Advisor

June 14th, 2024
Abstract

It is becoming increasingly clear across many fields of research that to effectively address the climate crisis, new and innovative methods are needed that engage nontechnical dimensions of climate change, including the social and emotional effects of a rapidly changing world. A gap exists within environmental curricula at Western Washington University that does not accommodate these dimensions, nor the negative impacts of disastrous climate change narratives on students’ sense of professional efficacy. Storytelling has significant potential toward this end for community building, expression of climate emotions, and in political advocacy. I explored the uses of oral storytelling as an alternative means of climate change communication by designing and teaching an interdisciplinary class on climate storytelling for WWU students. The course concluded with a story showcase in which five students told stories for an audience of fifty students and community members. Future avenues for the course include institutionalization and departmental approval by the Environmental Studies department, course adoption by the Sustainability Engagement Institute, or a community course taught through the Office of Outreach and Continuing Education.

Background: Uses of Storytelling in Climate Change Communication

It is evident that the modern emphasis on technical and scientific understanding of climate change has not produced sufficient political and social action to reverse its effects (International Panel on Climate Change, 2023, p. 8). Other avenues that engage a multiplicity of values around climate change must be explored for further progress to be made (Hulme, 2015). I argue that storytelling as a means of controlled, vulnerable interpersonal communication has immense potential to bridge the gap between policy and values, specifically in community building, emotional processing, and political advocacy. Expanding upon the definition of storytelling could be a thesis in its own right; there is a rich and varied field of research on the topic. For the sake of brevity, in this context I will focus on the following narrowed working definition: storytelling as the usage of nonfiction narrative that humans create and share with ourselves and others to inform understandings of the world and our place within it, which can be communicated in a variety of oral, written, and visual media.

Storytelling as a means of controlled, vulnerable interpersonal communication has immense potential as a method to build empathy and a sense of community across groups with different cultural values on climate change, which will be essential for the societal shifts needed to address it. For example, in a case study analysis of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), environmental sociologist Justin Farrell argues that scientific and technical perspectives on environmental problems and solutions only capture one problem dimension, and that more attention should be paid to the moral and cultural values that provide a framework for humans to understand the world and our place in it. Farrell examines the values held by different stakeholder groups in the GYE, describing how environmentalists and Old-Westerners both have strong relationships to place but draw different meanings from them about the quality of the
connection between humans and the natural world (2015). Because storytelling inspires empathy, which enhances many forms of interpersonal cooperation (Rumble et al., 2009), it could be a useful tool to build common ground between stakeholders with different core values in situations like that of the GYE.

Storytelling is also widely recognized as an effective method for advocacy in traditional political arenas such as lobbying and legislative testimony because of its capacity to build empathy and community across varied life experiences in a way that facts and statistics cannot capture (Austin and Connell, 2019). Including human narratives in policy arguments adds an intangible element not captured by purely quantitative or economic rhetoric. Storytelling also has potential for political discourse outside of formal lobbying efforts. Critical anthropologist Michael Jackson writes that stories “bind people together in terms of meanings that are collectively hammered out” (Jackson, 2002, p. 103). Politics is, at its core, a process of societies making and remaking themselves according to battling narratives; it is the hammering out of meaning. Storytelling is a tool we use to do just that, but it could be harnessed in specific, regulated ways with an aim toward easing political polarization and rediscovering cultural common ground.

Finally, storytelling can function as a controlled way to communicate a range of emotions related to climate change. A new psychological term has emerged over the past decade to describe the negative mental health effects of climate change: climate anxiety. Climate anxiety can include grief over current and future ecological losses, as well as losses of ways of life that are no longer possible because of climate change (Clayton, 2020, p. 2). The epidemic of climate anxiety in the United States worsens as tangible climate change effects increase. According to the Climate Change in the American Mind Fall 2023 report, conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 65% of Americans say they are "somewhat worried" about climate change, and 29% are "very worried" (Leiserowitz et al., 2023, p. 3). 1 in 10 Americans exhibit anxiety/depression symptoms related to climate change. Stigma around climate anxiety is just as strong; most Americans rarely (65%) or never (33%) discuss climate change with family or friends (Leiserowitz et al., 2023, p. 3). The state of climate emotions among youth are even worse.

“In a global survey of 10,000 young people aged 16-25 across 10 countries, 59% were very or extremely worried and 84% were at least moderately worried. More than 50% reported each of the following emotions: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. More than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and many reported a high number of negative thoughts about climate change (e.g., 75% said that they think the future is frightening and 83% said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet)” (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e863).
Oral storytelling, in an intentionally created space where a chosen few are practicing vulnerability and bravery by telling personal stories, erodes stigma and fosters a sense of community and emotional connection. Storytelling as an emotional processing tool can reinforce both individual and community resilience (Mah et al., 2020, p. 5). It constitutes 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, p. 15).

It is essential to mention that oral storytelling in many forms has been practiced for all human history and that in the colonial and postcolonial eras, indigenous storytelling has not been seen as a legitimate mode of scientific inquiry for a long time. Storytelling has long been the vehicle to transmit traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which is defined as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (Berkes, 1993). This perspective on environmental issues sees land as inseparable from society and culture and could not be more different from the siloed Western perspective. Western science is only now reconciling TEK with its own mechanisms, historically seen as a lesser way of knowing (Vinyeta & Lynn, 2013, p. 13). This project would not exist without that long, proud history of storytelling that is intrinsic to humanity across many different places, times, and cultures.

**Statement of Need**

The need for this project comes from my own experience minoring in environmental studies and anecdotal experience from peers in the Climate Leadership Certificate Program and the College of the Environment. During my time here, I realized that core course curriculum around environmental issues at Western does not address the social and emotional weight of the climate crisis. The core content of this curriculum promotes an understanding of environmental problems that inspires overwhelm and despair and impairs one’s sense of efficacy.

Many students pursuing degrees within the College of the Environment are doing so not only out of a desire to better their future career prospects, but also out of a moral sense of duty to help the environment and make the world a healthier, more sustainable place. Thus, there are certain emotions invested in environmental education that may not be present in all other degree programs offered at Western. Yet there is almost no discussion about the element of personal wellbeing in the Environmental Studies curriculum. The concept of wicked problems is the foundational framework by which Environmental Studies students are taught to understand environmental issues, to which climate change is no exception. This concept, which is taught in the second core course ENVS 305, describes problems that are not solvable solely by technical means due to issues of moral and political subjectivity, unknown time parameters, unknown ‘solvability,’ no clear problem definition, and interconnectedness with many other problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). The emphasis placed on this framework, in conjunction with the rest
of the course curriculum, creates an understanding that environmental problems are impossible to solve and a decline in the belief that one’s own work matters. The looming threat of climate change and the hopelessness of solving environmental problems hangs over students like an unspoken raincloud during an already intense time of life that sometimes comes with increased personal and financial stress. Obviously, student mental health is a huge determining factor in academic success (and lack thereof)—for example, it plays a significant role in over 25% of non-returning students’ reasons for leaving Western in fall 2023 (WWU Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2023, p. 11). It is also well-known that young people aged 16-25 are some of the most vulnerable to climate-related mental health struggles.

This struggle is one that all sustainability and climate professionals deal with to some extent (Kelsey, 2016, pp. 24-25). These students, once they graduate from Western and enter the workforce, will engage in climate and sustainability work long into the future. It is imperative that they learn strategies for coping with the mental load of their careers, and that they cultivate a sense of personal efficacy, so that they may continue doing their best work for as long as they can. The third goal of the strategic plan of Western Washington University is to “foster a caring and supportive environment” in which faculty, staff, and students can learn, work, and thrive (WWU Office of the Provost, 2018, p. 1). Careful consideration of student mental health in engagement with particularly grave curricula ought to be part of the creation of such a learning environment. The strategic plan also emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary and innovative approaches to dealing with complex issues such as climate change (WWU Office of the Provost, 2018, p. 3). The course I designed falls neatly within the scope of that goal.

The long-term sustainability goal to which my project contributes is the Curriculum and Research section of Academics within WWU’s 2017 Sustainability Action Plan (WWU Office of Sustainability, 2017). While not directly addressing a stated objective within the plan, the creation of this course continues the work of creating innovative curricula and fills a niche not previously filled by any current course offerings (for more on potential future homes for the course, see the recommendation section). Its interdisciplinary nature and open availability to any interested student increases accessibility to environmental curricula to students outside the College of the Environment and promotes alternative ways of knowing, understanding, and narrating climate change, which are essential for our rapidly changing world. Much more broadly, my project also connects to several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, a set of priorities and metrics that guide climate action on a global scale, which were adopted by all United Nations member countries in 2015. The first is goal 3, Good Health and Well-Being, more specifically target 3.4: “By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being” (UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). A sense of connection to one’s community and a lack of individual and societal stigma around climate anxiety are essential to mental health and well-being. The other goals to which my project contributes are goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and goal 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.
Practicing alternative climate change communication tools will positively contribute to the health of our social communities and trust in government accountability and transparency; this course allows students to practice those methods and build localized community in real time. Furthermore, storytelling has the capacity to build emotional intelligence in both storytellers and listeners, which is increasingly recognized as a key competency for transformational sustainability work (Wamsler and Restoy, 2020, p. 3).

The goal of this project is to begin a conversation around the social and emotional dimensions of the climate crisis with environmentally engaged students and faculty at WWU, both inside and outside of the College of the Environment. It is also to offer interested students the opportunity to develop storytelling and advocacy skills in preparation for a rapidly changing world, especially in conversations on climate with people from different backgrounds, life experiences, and opinions.

Methodology

I designed the Climate Storytelling course with significant inspiration from the program structure of Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS). MHATS is a student-run program which addresses mental health stigma among Alaskan high school-age youth. Alaskan youth are some of the most vulnerable to mental hardship in the country, experiencing higher-than-average rates of suicide and suicidal ideation and woefully inadequate mental health services to address need (Mason, 2023). Through the program, which is sponsored by the Anchorage branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, participants learn the basics of oral storytelling, best practices for discussing sensitive mental health topics, and how to advocate for policy change in a legislative setting. The program runs quarterly storytelling showcase events open to the Anchorage community while also engaging in a long-term lobbying effort to pass legislation that would mandate the inclusion of mental health curriculum in all Alaska K-12 public schools. The impact of MHATS is reflected in its endurance; the program has run two sessions a year for the past five years, producing dozens of storytellers and becoming a beloved fixture in the Anchorage community. I participated in MHATS for several years, first as a storyteller myself, and then as a story coach and alumni board member for two years. It was through my time in the program that I first interacted with oral storytelling as an art form and witnessed its transformational power, an experience that has remained memorable for me in the years since. I drew heavily from the MHATS program structure and storytelling resources from Alaskan organizations in creating the syllabus and lesson plans for the course; without it, this project would not have been possible.
Throughout winter quarter of 2024, I created the syllabus and lesson plans by adapting the MHATS session guide to Western’s twelve-week quarter schedule. I also created a Canvas course with corresponding readings and assignments. I consulted a wide range of syllabi from previous classes I have taken, including upper-division political science courses, Honors seminars, and choir classes, to inform the design of an interdisciplinary class structure with elements of both traditional scholarship and participation-based performance. I met with several different faculty members to get pedagogical advice, including Dr. Kamarie Chapman of the WWU Theatre Department; Dr. Kate Darby, who teaches Hope and Agency for a Changing Climate (an Environmental Studies GUR course, one of the few ENVS courses that is accessible to all students); and Brandon McWilliams, a graduate student whose research focuses on hopeful climate fiction. I received regular advising from both Zander Albertson and Dr. Grace Wang during winter quarter. I also explored many other climate storytelling projects and climate education tools to inform the course content. The most impactful of these were the Climate Stories Project, the Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators, and the Appalachian State University Climate Stories Collaborative.

During the latter half of winter quarter, I focused on advertising the class and helping students to register. I created a poster and informational blurb promoting the class and sent it to several different professors within the College of the Environment, the two active Climate Leadership Program cohorts, the Honors College, the Students for Climate Action, and the Environmental Studies Department administrative office for communication to students. I posted several physical flyers in twenty glass cases around campus and within the Arntzen and Environmental Studies buildings. I also spread the word to student attendees of the Washington-Oregon Higher Education Sustainability Conference, which WWU hosted on March 4-6, 2024. I remained in regular contact with undergraduate advisor Kathryn Patrick during the last two weeks of the quarter, getting overrides for interested students. I chose to leave an override requirement on the class listing, which acted as an informal screen of enthusiasm—students who
took the time to email me introducing themselves and explaining their interest in the course were my target audience. I also began preliminary event planning, as was necessary to create the course schedule, and booked the Underground Coffeehouse for the evening of May 31st for the final storytelling event through the Viking Union Reservations Office. To effectively balance all these different elements of the project, I created a Gantt chart to use as a timeline management tool.

During spring quarter, I taught the course using the plans I created in the winter for ten weeks of instruction. The class met once a week for two hours a week. During these meetings, I presented lectures, facilitated discussions, and led story workshops and rehearsal activities. I developed my own climate story and encouraged the story development process of my students. I also completed more logistics and publicity work for the Climate Stories Showcase, including food purchasing, social media advertising, designing and hanging posters around campus, sending the event information to several departments, and even visiting Environmental Studies classes to publicize the event.

Results

Course Materials

The first half of the course is focused on collective grounding in the basics of climate science, introducing climate hope as a concept, and learning the basic structures and applications of oral storytelling as an art form. The second half is focused on workshopping individual stories in a highly collaborative, intimate class setting, with increasing focus on public speaking skills week by week. The course ends with a final storytelling showcase (on which students’ grades depend) and a short debriefing class meeting during the penultimate week of spring quarter to reflect on the course and students’ goals set at the start of the quarter. Deliverables for this project include a course syllabus designed for eleven weeks of instruction with meetings once a week, an associated set of lesson plans for each week, and a Canvas course including weekly modules, readings, and assignments. Each of these items are included in the appendix.

The Climate Stories Showcase

The Climate Stories Showcase offered an opportunity for students to share their stories with the Western community at large and functioned as the major project of the course. It was held on the evening of Friday, May 31st, in the Viking Union Underground Coffeehouse. 50 people attended; the audience was comprised of almost all students, many of which were College of the Environment majors but included students from many other colleges as well. Light snacks were served, and attendees had the option of using climate emotion-oriented conversation prompts and participating in engagement activities on tables before stories were told. Five spoken word stories, each ranging between six and ten minutes, were told to excellent reception from the crowd. Stories focused on a
range of topics, from individuals’ experiences with climate effects in places they love, to what drives them to study the environment, to musings on the future; there were elements of humor, fear, uncertainty, grief, deep love of place, and hope. After the event concluded, many audience members described feeling impressed, inspired, and hopeful after hearing all five stories. The stories were compelling and thought-provoking; I also heard many great conversations in the event space after the stories were told.

Figure 2: Sophomore Anna Gilboard performs her climate story.

Figure 3: Attendees write on collaborative art prompts.

**Student Feedback**

I collected student feedback on both the showcase and the course as a whole through two main methods: I created a final written reflection assignment for students to complete at the end of the quarter, and I also led a verbal discussion during our final class meeting. Both of these methods allowed students to reflect on highlights from the course, areas for improvement of the content, and ideas for the course’s future iterations. Overall, students described feeling very satisfied with both the showcase and the entire course. Every student was proud of their performance at the showcase. Highlights of the course for students included the balance between lecture, discussion, and story practice, the
friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere, and the opportunity to practice public speaking skills. Some said that they were able to gain a new understanding of the climate crisis and new tools with which to articulate their passions. Most importantly, all the students accomplished the goals that they set for themselves at the beginning of the quarter. Based on this excellent feedback, I feel confident that I achieved the goals I set for this project.

**Leadership Reflection**

Throughout the course of this project, I was able to practice leadership principles in a variety of different ways, notably including project management, facilitation, systems thinking, and leadership for equity. This project had many elements with differing timelines, including background research, stakeholder engagement, syllabus creation and lesson planning, student recruitment, event planning and publicity, teaching the course itself, and reflection on the entire process. It tested my ability to juggle many responsibilities and forced me to rely on a variety of project management tools to hold myself accountable. I was able to meet almost all the deadlines I set in the Gantt chart that I used to plan the entire project timeline, which I consider highly successful. The few that I did not meet did not result in any of my objectives going unmet, and some were simply unrealistic given the reality of teaching during spring quarter, which I couldn’t have known in advance.

I utilized an equity lens throughout the entire process of structuring the course and planning lessons. A focus on equity is deeply relevant for pursuing justice-oriented climate work because it allows for more people of diverse backgrounds and situations to participate. Most notably, equity informed my fundamental decision to pursue teaching the course as a for-credit class. As an undergraduate student, I understand the variety of pressures on students during their studies, specifically finances and time. Personally, because of my relative lack of time and finances, it can be difficult for me to justify doing work if it’s not being rewarded with academic credit or wages. I know that this is a problem that many students face. I wanted the course to not weigh heavily on any student’s mind, but rather for it to be a fulfilling and non-stressful part of academic life. The course also requires consistent, accountable, fully engaged participation of the kind that is much harder to enforce in an extracurricular context. In consideration of these factors, I decided to teach the course for credit through the Urban and Environmental Planning and Policy department. I also put significant thought into the course attendance policy and grading system with these factors in mind. I approached the question of course accessibility using an equity lens. The course itself is highly interdisciplinary, and many students at WWU are environmentally engaged but not necessarily majoring in an environmental course of study, so I kept the course open to students of all years and majors. I publicized the course using a wide variety of channels—through College of the Environment communications, Honors communications, environmental clubs, attendees of the Washington Oregon Higher Education Sustainability Conference (WOHESC) held on WWU’s campus in March of 2024, and posters.
hung around campus—to cast the widest net possible within my working capacity. I made the course override-only and directed interest emails to myself to act as an informal screening of enthusiasm in consideration of the unconventional demands of the course.

Facilitating the course during spring quarter was perhaps the most impactful way I practiced leadership during this project. I taught the course for eleven weeks of instruction, meeting once a week for two hours. I presented lectures, led discussions, taught students effective storytelling skills, and workshopped students’ stories. I approached this task with a specific focus on cultivating a safe and supportive classroom environment. Because the course places unusual demands on students not found in a typical college course, requiring significant emotional awareness, vulnerability, and bravery, I knew it was essential for the students to bond with one another socially in order for us to share difficult climate emotions and personal experiences. I encouraged this through the creation of group norms during the first class meeting, and the incorporation of group check-ins to start every class. Collectively creating group norms allowed us to set expectations for how to treat one another and primed students for what we were going to dive into during the quarter. Group check-ins, where each student had a minute to share how they were doing and anything notable going on in their life, jumpstarted the bonding process and gave us a sense of each other's emotional states coming into class, which gave us the tools to tread lightly when necessary. Finally, I engaged in continual self-reflection and awareness of my own affect in the classroom space, navigating the fine balance between peer-to-peer learning and classroom authority.

Through facilitating the course, I learned anew the power of collaboration and emergence. The success of this project, and of the Climate Stories Showcase in particular, was in large part due to the effort and engagement of my students, who were willing to jump into something new and interdisciplinary and did so with incredible composure and courage. This was simultaneously the most exciting and the most terrifying aspect of the project—I had to acknowledge my lack of control over student engagement and story content, and luckily, they vastly exceeded my expectations on both counts. They also provided me with detailed feedback on their experiences with the course and offered ideas for improvement of specific lessons and activities, which will prove valuable for future development of the material. This lesson of unexpected outcomes ties into aspects of social learning and systems thinking that we engaged with routinely at different points throughout the Climate Leadership Certificate program.

Another notable way I practiced leadership through this project was through the art of effective pitching. I faced challenges with both legitimacy and legibility in my efforts to teach the course. First, an undergraduate student leading their peers in such a way, with department backing, is not something that happens often at Western Washington University or at many other higher education institutions to my knowledge (with the notable exception of the now-defunct Chiron Studies program at Portland State University) (PSU Chiron Studies, 2018). I faced pushback from the Environmental Studies department chair when I pitched the idea of this course to her because of department policies governing the approval of curricula offerings, but
also specifically because of my status as an undergraduate. I felt that my legitimacy as a facilitator was at best met with significant shock from peers and professors, and at worst, called into question. I had to battle my own internal doubts throughout the entire process, especially during the beginning of spring quarter as I was just beginning to teach. However, after the showcase and the course’s end, I feel a renewed sense of confidence in my own leadership skills.

As an MHATS alum and Anchorage local, I bring a unique perspective to this project that I had to learn to explain many times to others. Anchorage has a culture of storytelling that is well-established in the community. For example, the popular storytelling series Arctic Entries, which puts on monthly storytelling shows in Anchorage’s biggest performance hall, sells out almost every show. Storytelling is also integrated into Anchorage high school English curriculum; the program Story Works Alaska visits high school classrooms across the city to teach storytelling to students. This cultural knowledge, along with my participation in MHATS, has informed nearly every aspect of my project. To my knowledge, a widespread culture of storytelling does not exist to such a degree in Bellingham. This forced me to find creative ways of communicating my project’s value to many people who did not share my experience and frame of reference, both in conversations and through student recruitment and advertising for the showcase event. Only after the Climate Stories Showcase did many of my peers fully understand what I was going for all along. This ability applies to sustainability work broadly because sustainable projects are often written off as being economically unsound or simply not as important as more pressing issues. Pushing these projects forward often requires arguments that demonstrate non-financial value or show financial value from an unconventional angle, because they must appeal to individuals or institutions that work from a different set of values and might not be primed to support sustainability work for its own sake. Because I had to repeatedly persuade others of the connections between storytelling and climate, and its intangible changemaking value, I feel more prepared to apply that skill to future sustainability work.

**Recommendations**

I hope to see this project continued in some way after I leave Western Washington University; there are several potential futures that may allow it to live on. Because I will be working for the Sustainability Engagement Institute during the summer of 2024 as a mentor to the next cohort of Climate Leadership Certificate Program students, I am fortunately and uniquely positioned to guide its next iteration.

In the short term, there are more options for continued student facilitation and trial runs, as well as potential avenues for increased community involvement. The course could have an initial home through the Sustainability Studies Minor, which is an interdisciplinary course of study organized by the Sustainability Engagement Institute, of which my advisor is a part and thus has some influence over course offerings. The course could either function as a core requirement for the minor or be included as an option to fill the Society and Social Justice competency (WWU Office of the Registrar, 2024). Along with the course deliverables, I plan on
creating a crash course in storytelling facilitation and teaching it to both Lindsey MacDonald and Kate Beck (members of the SEI staff) so that they can safeguard knowledge of the course into the future, long after I may leave the Sustainability Engagement Institute. However, a significant strength of the course is its peer-to-peer element that may not exist if taught by a faculty or staff member. I have been in conversations with at least one student that is interested in learning to facilitate this course for a future Honors capstone project; it was an initial goal of mine to generate interest in storytelling on campus and potentially pass this project on to another student, so I am very pleased with this outcome. However, the challenge with teaching facilitation to both students and faculty is that none of these individuals have participated in a storytelling program of this kind, climate-related or otherwise. The ideal scenario would have been to pass this on to one of my students from this spring, but none have indicated interest in taking it on (which is perfectly understandable, as it was no small feat). To accommodate for this lack of experience, I would recommend that any individuals interested in learning storytelling facilitation should participate in a workshop series put on by Bellingham Story Hour. Bellingham Story Hour is one of the only storytelling groups doing similarly structured work in our local community, running monthly storytelling workshops and live events that would allow potential facilitators to gain experience at a low barrier of entry (Bellingham Story Hour, 2024).

In the long term, I believe this course could fit well into the Environmental Studies department’s existing curriculum as an elective or possibly a major requirement; I originally noticed a need through reflection on my experience in the core courses of the Environmental Studies minor, so it would be appropriate to apply it to that department. The course aligns with several of the Environmental Studies student learning goals and objectives, especially Learning Objective #1, which integrates concepts of well-being, and Learning Objective #4, which emphasizes communicating ideas effectively in oral and visual forms (WWU College of the Environment, 2024). The course could also fit well as a program requirement of the B.A. in Environmental Studies emphases in Education and Eco-Social Justice, as well as the B.A. with emphasis in Justice and Community Resilience. Realistically, institutionalizing this course within the Environmental Studies department will require much more detailed curriculum development with faculty assistance and more trial runs of the course. The content will have to go through a detailed review and approval process that is beyond my expertise.

Another potential avenue to increase this project's longevity is to connect with the Bellingham community via a course taught through the Outreach and Continuing Education program. The course could be offered in the Academy for Lifelong Learning, which has significant reach to community members, especially retirees (WWU Outreach and Continuing Education, 2024). Offering the course to this demographic could provide opportunities for intergenerational and community connections between traditional and nontraditional students. Notably, pursuing institutionalization through either the Sustainability Studies program or Outreach and Continuing Education would require approval by the Council on University Programs, a committee of the Academic Coordinating Commission (WWU Faculty Senate,
I think that the council’s focus on interdisciplinary studies and academic innovation would lead it to view the course more favorably than the Environmental Studies department would. If approved under the SUST label, it could potentially be cross listed with ENVS or UEPP, which would provide both departments with the benefits of more elective offerings without the added costs of instruction, which would fall on the Sustainability Engagement Institute (which is deeply unfortunate considering the budget landscape of the entire university at this moment). This is another reason to continue the practice of student facilitation—it would take up less faculty and staff time if they only had to oversee a student facilitator.

The Appalachian State University Climate Stories Collaborative also offers inspiration for the course’s long-term future. The Collaborative was founded in 2017 by faculty from across Appalachian State, and now includes over 80 faculty members from 25 different departments (England et al., 2019, p. 21). The Collaborative holds a workshop series, provides teaching resources, and holds an annual showcase in which student work from many different classes is highlighted. While my course focused on one specific style of true, personal, spoken-word stories, the Collaborative includes both fiction and nonfiction narratives through all types of art styles. Its showcases have engaged thousands of students and community members and have made a huge impact on campus at Appalachian State. Such a project would be incredible to see at Western and would fit with many of our institutional values, but it would require faculty and staff time and financial resources that currently do not exist within the budget. More research should be conducted on this project and the institutional factors that made it possible at Appalachian State, specifically an in-depth interview with its founder and co-facilitator, Laura England.

Regardless of its future home, the course needs more development, and more trial runs to continue to evolve in an intelligent way that fits into the landscape of climate-related curriculum at Western. I can only hope that as it develops, more and more students and community members are introduced to the power of storytelling to make our world a more connected, humane, sustainable place.
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Appendix A: Climate Storytelling Course Syllabus

Climate Storytelling (UEPP 495, Spring 2024)

Wednesdays 2-3:50, AW 408

Office hours by appointment

Primary instructor: Gabby Laipenieks (laipeng@wwu.edu)

Advisor: Lindsey MacDonald (macdonl6@wwu.edu)

Course description: The climate crisis has presented unprecedented challenges for our society, including cultural and social upheaval. Through this course, we will grapple with these changes through non-traditional forms of climate change communication, primarily oral storytelling. We will share and tell stories related to climate change with a guiding ethos of climate hope and will explore the various uses of storytelling through lenses of advocacy and community building. Students will learn the basic structure and practice of storytelling and spend much of the latter half of the quarter developing and workshopping their individual climate stories. The course will conclude with a final performance for the WWU community.

An important note: This course will require extensive collaboration, emotional vulnerability, and bravery for full participation, which in my own experience is very different from a typical college classroom setting. We will take steps to get to know each other and to make everyone feel comfortable in the classroom space.

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Actively and critically reflect on climate emotions and personal relationships to climate.
- Build an advocacy-oriented community within the environmentally engaged student body at Western.
- Develop effective oral and written communication skills.
- Collaborate with other classmates on story development.
- Develop, practice, and perform stories relating to climate change.

UEPP Department Learning Goals/Outcomes:

- Develop effective oral, written, and visual communication skills.
- Integrate concepts of equity, justice, and well-being to advance socio-environmental solutions.
- Work collaboratively to identify environmental problems, engage diverse stakeholders, and generate solutions for just and sustainable futures.

Potential changes: While I have tried my best to plan the course out in advance as much as possible, this syllabus is a living document and is subject to change. I’m also very open to feedback on assignment structures, given that we are a small group and I want everyone to learn in the best style for them.

Assignments:

- Weekly assignments: You will have one assignment a week, which will consist of engaging with short readings and story examples in the first half of the quarter, and story preparation and workshopping in the second half. The weekly assignments will become more and more important to your success in the course as it progresses.
  - Note on readings: All your readings will be free and provided by me!
- **Final**: Your final in this class will consist of the showcase performance and a short reflection due during dead week. There will be no class held during finals week.

**Attendance:**

This class relies heavily on active participation, so it is essential that you ideally attend all class periods. I’m keeping outside assignments light because most of the work will be in class. If you know you will be missing a class period, please do your best to let me know in advance so we can schedule a makeup meeting.

Attendance is mandatory for the dress rehearsal and final performance. The only exception to this policy is serious illness or family emergency.

You are responsible for staying on track with class materials and assignments even if you miss class.

**Grading Scale:**

- Total points possible: 100
- S: 81 points or higher, U: 80 points or less (S/U grading)
- Attendance and engagement: 60 points (6 pts per class meeting)
  - Engagement constitutes the following: coming to class prepared, attentive
- Weekly assignments: 20 points total
  - Weekly assignments will be accepted late for ½ credit. Assignments are open until the Friday after the class period for which they are due and will not be accepted after.
- Dress rehearsal and final performance: 20 points

**Class Schedule:**

- Assigned readings must be completed **before** the class period for which they are assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week #</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class Content</th>
<th>Assignments (due on the date listed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>4/3</td>
<td>Intros, course overview, group agreements</td>
<td>None!</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Week 2 | 4/10 | Intro to storytelling | • Goal setting (in Canvas)  
• Climate story example response (in Canvas) |
• Read the Climate Science 101 article by Katharine Hayhoe (linked in Canvas). |
<p>| Week 4 | 4/24 | Storytelling workshop | None! |
| Week 5 | 5/1  | Unconventional approaches to climate change communication | • Read (Still) disagreeing about climate change: Which way |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>Plot details / make it pop</td>
<td>• Pick one or two ideas from Week 4’s workshop to develop; begin a</td>
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<td>bullet-point version of your story for workshopping (due 5/15).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Submit check-in 1 on Canvas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>5/15</td>
<td>Storytelling/planning flex</td>
<td>• Create a bullet-point version of your story, bring it to class for</td>
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<td>workshopping.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Work on memorizing your story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>5/22</td>
<td>Final storytelling workshop</td>
<td>• Please have a final, memorized or mostly memorized version of your</td>
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<td>story ready to share with the group for credit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>5/29</td>
<td>Week of Show! Show order, polishing, final run-through in UGCH</td>
<td>• Practice, practice, practice!</td>
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<td>• Show introductions form (Canvas).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>6/5</td>
<td>Meet to debrief/celebrate!</td>
<td>We did it! We will celebrate our accomplishment and reflect on the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>experience.</td>
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<td>• Please submit your final reflection by Friday, June 7th at midnight.</td>
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<td>(Assignment will expire on Sunday, June 10th, at midnight.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>6/12</td>
<td>No class</td>
<td>‘Thank you for your hard work!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic Honesty**

Western Washington University’s official policy concerning academic dishonesty is published in the General Catalog: [http://www.wwu.edu/depts/registrar/acad_dishonesty.shtml](http://www.wwu.edu/depts/registrar/acad_dishonesty.shtml). All students are expected to abide by this and other policies listed in the official catalog.

**Other Policies for Students (Disability and Religious Accommodations, Title IX Office information, etc.)**

Visit [https://syllabi.wwu.edu](https://syllabi.wwu.edu) for a compilation of other policies relevant to your student experience.
Appendix B: Course Lesson Plans

Climate Storytelling Course Week-by-Week Lesson Planning*

*Time estimates are subject to change based on group size. Each lesson plan is designed for an hour and fifty-minute class period with a 5-minute brain break in the middle.

Week 1: Intros, course overview, group agreements, icebreakers story practice

Pre-class homework: read the syllabus

- Introductions (5 minutes): name, major pronouns, why you took this class/what you hope to get out of it, a fun fact!
- Go over syllabus (20-30 minutes)
  o Explain project (CLC, I am an undergrad, note Lindsey as the instructor of record)
    ▪ Schedule, purpose, goal
  o Emphasize attendance
  o Be up front about the unconventional social/emotional demands of this course!
- Group agreements (15 minutes): setting expectations for the environment we will create together.
  o Write on whiteboard in classroom, take picture and post to Canvas after class
  o Ideas if folks are shy:
    ▪ Take space, make space
    ▪ One person, one mic
    ▪ All members treated with respect and equality
    ▪ A word to refocus the group if off-task (ours was egg: enough, get going)
    ▪ Culture of consent
- Closing business items / prep for next week

Week 2: Intro to storytelling

Pre-class homework: Climate story example activity (in Canvas)

Listen to Grey Areas, Mary Blair (The Moth): https://themoth.org/stories/grey-areas and respond to the prompts (see Canvas course for full assignment)

- Check-ins 10 min
- Example stories 20-30 minutes
  o Discuss Grey Areas (5-10 min)
  o Counting Down the Tides, Hannah Morris (The Moth) (10 min)
    ▪ https://themoth.org/stories/counting-down-the-tides-1
    ▪ Discussion (5ish min): Similarities/differences to Grey Areas? Details that stick out to you?
  o Lighthouse, Omiah Mitchell (Appalachian State University Climate Stories Collaborative) (5 min)
    ▪ https://elevatingclimate.wixsite.com/stories?pgid=kn29xyo-ecd8c895-f81b-4060-9c31-40a3c1f822ee
    ▪ Discussion (5 min): Similarities/differences to the first two? Details that stick out to you?
Discuss storytelling principles with group (10 min): What makes these stories different from other forms of stories you’ve seen? What do they do well?

- Story is told, not read
- Clear change from beginning to end
- Concise and intentional
- Sensory, specific details
- Structure and Transitions
- Storytelling performance skills:
  - Eye contact
  - Intonation
  - Dynamics (volume of sound)
  - Movement
  - Body language
  - Dramatic pauses

- Storyworks principles (5 min)
  - Be true: factual and emotional honesty. Self-reflection is part of the process!
  - Be brave: willingness to share. It takes courage!
  - Be kind: be kind to yourself and others.
    - Culture of consent
    - Position of positive strength

- How do I start? (5 min)
  - Climate stories can look like so many things!
  - A particular place that is important to you or that has informed your perspective on climate in some way
  - The story of how you became interested in climate work
  - Experiences that inspire you/motivate you to continue your climate work
  - Personal experiences with climate change effects
  - A vision of hope / what an ideal climate-changed world looks like to you
  - How climate change makes you feel

- Break 5 min

- Storytelling practice with low-stakes prompts 40-50 min (not climate related, see story prompt masterlist in Canvas course)
  - Pairs, switching partners every 3 prompts
  - One minute each to share out on the prompt

- Closing business items / prep for next week

**Week 3: Climate Science 101 / Climate hope**

Pre-class homework: Kelsey reading and reflection (see Canvas)

- Check-ins 10 min
- Lecture on climate science and climate hope (20 minutes, see PowerPoint slides in Week 3 Canvas module)
- Short group reflection on reading (5-10 minutes)
- Kelsey discussion questions (10-15 minutes):
  - What are the effects of focusing on disaster narratives?
  - What definition of hope resonates most with you and why?
- Project Drawdown activity (15 minutes)
Each person navigates to the Project Drawdown website and selects a solution they are interested in or passionate about, takes notes and shares out with the class
  - What is the solution you chose? Why did you choose it?
  - Potentially replace this activity with Lindsey/Existential Toolkit climate emotions spectrum activity
    - Series of free writes, 2-3 minutes per prompt, each person shares out after writing time (25 minutes)
      - What stories do I believe about climate change? / When I think about climate change, what initially comes to mind?
      - What does an ideal climate-changed world look like to me?
      - What kinds of self-care practices can I use to combat climate anxiety?
    - Closing business items / prep for next week

Week 4: Storytelling workshop

- Check ins 5-10 min
- 20-25 minutes brainstorming / writing responses to prompts (remind of the storytelling principles from Week 2, as well as climate hope perspective from Week 3)
  - A particular place that is important to you or that has informed your perspective on climate in some way
  - The story of how you became interested in climate work
  - Experiences that inspire you/motivate you to continue your climate work
  - Personal experiences with climate change effects
  - A vision of hope / what an ideal climate-changed world looks like to you
  - How climate change makes you feel
- Share prompt responses in groups of 3, 2-3 minutes each per person, switching partners after everyone shares (30 minutes)
- 5-10 minutes of work time, incorporating feedback via notes
- Mix up groups, share out process round 2 (30 minutes)
- Business items/prep for next week

Week 5: Unconventional approaches to climate change communication

Pre-class homework: read (Still) disagreeing about climate change: Which way forward? https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/zygo.12212 and respond to the prompts (see Canvas course for full assignment)

- Check-ins 5-10 min
- Go over reading: what stood out? (10-15 minutes)
  - Specifically, what about the role of science in CC debates?
  - Hulme’s 4 meanings of climate change
- Advocacy basics lecture (15 minutes, see PowerPoint in week 5 module in Canvas course)
  - What does advocacy mean to you? / What are ways you can create meaningful change?
    - Open to the floor
      - Conversations with family and friends
      - Social media
      - Community organizing
      - Policy change
- Testifying to a legislative body (next activity)
  - Advocacy for climate change isn’t just important in the policy arena—it also matters in building community (use example of climate denying family members, etc)
  - Talking about climate change doesn’t have to use the words “climate change”
  - Relationships to place are a unifying thread to pull on when discussing climate change

- Advocacy activity (30-35 minutes for group to research their issue, fill out sheet, and share)
- Closing business items, remind about future assignments
- Extra time: use for storytelling workshop (ask class for needs at this point—writing individually vs pair and share, etc), or release early

**Week 6: Plot details / make it pop**

- Check ins 10 min
- Individual story check in 10-15 min
  - Students will respond to the following prompts in notebooks
    - What are the stakes within my story?
    - How do I change from the beginning to the end?
    - What is the climax of my story?
    - What do I want people to take away after listening?
  - Each shares out their answers to questions
- Storytelling roundtable (60-70 min, time dependent on group size)
  - Each person shares (using their notes, conversational tone), each person provides feedback relating to the above questions (glows and grows)
- Business items, remind about future assignments

**Week 7: Storytelling flex**

- Check ins 5-10 min
- Go over show plan, discuss (10 minutes)
  - Facilitator should have reserved a space 6-8 weeks in advance, created publicity materials 4-5 weeks in advance
  - Itinerary, food, brainstorm ideas for audience interactive portions (conversation prompts, collaborative art, etc.), have students help with publicity
- Practice stories (50-60 minutes)
  - Roundtable, each person has a notecard with key cues for their story
  - Glows and grows after each
- Business items: share event poster with class, tell them to publicize it

**Week 8: Final storytelling workshop**

- Check ins 5-10 min
- Run stories with very minimal notes, standing at front of room, feedback should be focused on speaking skills as well as story content, time each storyteller
  - Stories should be between 6 and 10 minutes long
- Business items: publicity, introductions for show (see Canvas for full assignment)
Week 9: Week of Show!

- Check ins 5-10 minutes
- Full show run through
  o Opening remarks
  o Run all stories with intros and transitions, storytellers rising from seats and standing at the front of the room as they would in the venue

Week 10: Meet to debrief / celebrate

- Check ins 5-10 min
- Debrief discussion: however long is needed
  o What went well?
  o What didn’t go so well?
  o What was your favorite aspect of the show?
  o What was your favorite aspect of the course?
  o What would you change about the show?
  o What would you change about the course?
- Business items:
  o Please submit your reflection in Canvas by Friday, June 7th, at midnight.
  o Invite everyone to Honors/CLC presentations!

Week 11: No class!