



Environmental responsibility

Conversation on creative climate with Joe Smith - part 2

Martin Reynolds

The idea of providing and nurturing an alternative form of space for conversation is clearly an important aspect of creative climate. In this second part of my conversation with Joe, we discuss more the role of stakeholders using the space and why such initiatives might be important for environmental responsibility.

Joe, you mentioned a number of different stakeholders involved with the creative climate initiative. This brings me on to the second domain of questions regarding the 'who'. Who do you see as being the primary actors in facilitating creative climate?

Joe Smith

The University is at the core of the project, and a team of academics that have a strong understanding of the issues from across the science, the politics, the philosophy are going to be, if you like, central to the editorial direction of the whole thing. We're also going to make use of The Open University's distinctive capacities to put together interactive spaces on the Web and interactive materials – supporting materials. But really all we're doing is behaving to type, in the sense of carving out public space for complex issues to be understood better and debated better. It's something we've done from birth, if you like, at The Open University. So our natural partners, our central partners in terms of media, are certainly the BBC and we're very confident that we'll be working with them. We don't know precisely how, but there's a lot of people interested at their end. We are also open to working with other partners, institutional partners, and I – just from the earliest conversations I've had with international bodies, research bodies and some other relevant players –

Martin Reynolds

And any government bodies?

Joe Smith

The government aren't just key stakeholders. They're central to anything that happens next on environmental change, so I'll certainly be knocking at their door and I'll want them to play. I think they're going to be very supportive of this project. One of the things that I think it helps to build is political space around the issue of climate change. It makes a bit more room for the idea that this is a problem that will take some time, some patience and a bit of, if you like, generosity of spirit towards our leaders, our political elected leaders. And for that reason, I think they will want to back us in different ways. Of course, one of the stories I'd like to follow is the stories of civil servants and ministers, you know. I'd like them to be posting on the site and make a bit of space for consideration of the challenges they're dealing with.

Martin Reynolds

And presumably broadening that out to an international scale – the kind of conferencing that's going on around climate change in particular, but also related issues to do with environment.

Joe Smith

Oh yes. And, I mean, realistically I recognise that you're not going to have huge numbers of civil servants and politicians taking time out to effectively blog for us across a decade. But what I think we can do is get, if you like, a representative sample of the story, so we'll seek to have a mix of developed world and Southern voices, a mix of different interests represented in our, if you like, diary exercise across the decade. Yeah – I'm going to be looking for that.

Martin Reynolds

OK, now moving on from the 'who', let's step back a bit and have a look at the wider rationale for the initiative. Could you say something more about why the creative climate initiative is important? What is it challenging and why?

Joe Smith

I think that the public conversation around climate change has become stalled. We've developed the idea, somehow, that this is an expert conversation that happens far, far away – that we'll get a report about the science and a report about the policy and we'll be more or less told how to respond. Actually, we know that we've run out of road with that kind of approach to the issue, and that this question of how we respond to climate change is going to have to seep into every corner of society. Everyone's going to have to, at one level or another, be either accepting of policies that come their way or be a part of building alternatives, whether in their working life or personally, or indeed just simply in the kinds of permission they give to politicians when they vote. So I wanted to develop a project that would help – that would help to build the political space around climate change and would allow us to see our response not as, you know, flicking a switch but rather engaging in a collective project over time that would require a whole range of voices, a whole range of talents, in response.

Martin Reynolds

Now that prompts me to think about the current discourse around climate change, which has been very much centred on mitigation – how to cut our carbon emissions – whereas, of course, there is increasing reference given to adaptation. But am I right in thinking that creative climate is actually more about adaptation but on a more conversational mode?

Joe Smith

Absolutely, and I think that we need to knit those two together. I mean, there's no doubt, of course we have to reduce our CO₂ emissions. Mitigation is essential. But it's, I think, interesting how little we've addressed adaptation. Adaptation is a much bigger issue for particularly the poorest parts of the world; places that are already very vulnerable to economic or social change now have another problem on the list. So you're right to sense that creative climate has behind it a desire to kind of even the scales in favour of considering adaptation. But also to set a tone around that that's a tone of opportunity – that we've got an opportunity in the next ten years to fix a whole lot of problems by addressing climate change. Those include the quality of our

cities, whether we're in Dakar or London. To address the perilous nature of our energy systems. To address the simple fact that massive increases in our material standard of living have not resulted in increases in our measurable quality of life, in our happiness, in our – a whole range of indices around how we feel. So I think addressing climate change in a creative way, in a creative frame, is a great way of approaching a whole set of other challenges we have at the moment. But not representing it as a sort of *fait accompli* – something we simply have to sign up to, as if then everything else will follow. It's a conversation. It's a whole set of practices we have to work through.

Addressing climate change is going to require a great deal of creativity; and actually reminding ourselves that it's creativity we need, more than giving things up, I think is really, really liberating.

Martin Reynolds

Yes, but adaptation normally implies a unilateral action. Creative climate appears to imply something different, more dynamic.

Joe Smith

Look, you're right – you know, one of the things that I think that you and I share, and a number of our other Open University colleagues share, is a sense of excitement at the fact that we're just entering a phase where we're beginning to think about ourselves differently. By that I mean we're in a phase where our whole intellectual frame of where humans sit in the world is shifting. And, you know, a phrase I've used before is, you know, in a sense climate change finishes Darwin's sentence. It means that we have to accept the fact that we're animal, that we're of the natural world and in the natural world. We can't pretend somehow that we live in a kind of discreet little machine-age bubble separate from natural forces.

Martin Reynolds

And it brings me back to the question about stakeholding and stakeholders, because there is an issue of how do we actually recognise non-human nature, the stuff that's out there that can't sit around a table like we are doing now and have a discussion about these things. What is it that has to change in order to provide that stakeholding for this incredibly important aspect of our natural world?

Joe Smith

Well, I think, I know you and your colleagues in Maths, Computing and Technology have been doing work recently that tries to reveal the reality, the presence of the non-human natural world in everyday practices and processes, and that's one creative way of doing it. It's an important way of doing it. But there are lots of other ways – you know, we have to work with proxies. We're pretty used to the idea that scientists generate proxies for the natural world in the generation of data and the reporting of results, and that's important too, but I'm really interested at the moment in how kind of other sorts of cultural work, particularly by artists, musicians, film makers, photographers, can help to just begin to melt that boundary between the sense of there being a cultural world and a natural world.

And certainly one of the places on the creative climate website that I personally anticipate visiting regularly is going to be tracking the new creative work that people are doing in the arts in response to environmental change. I think that's going to be really rich. It isn't, if you like, the natural world speaking with its own voice all the

time, although there are some interesting things happening in sound art that I think will give us some surprises.

Martin Reynolds

I appreciate very much the issue about you wanting the artists' input, but there is a kind of a danger, isn't there, of alienating the scientists. And it seems to me that if we're going to have conversational space provided here, somehow we have to try and get the scientists to think in more artistic terms as well as vice versa. So are there opportunities, do you think, of actually having the science and the arts engaging with each other? Is that something which you foresee?

Joe Smith

Someone said that you don't make interdisciplinary people. You find them. Some people are open to the idea of a conversation with people coming from different disciplines and backgrounds and with different kinds of creativity to hand, and some people aren't. And I think we're going to be looking for those people that are open to that. The Open University itself is full of people who are very open to interdisciplinary conversations, very open to breaking down the borders between arts and sciences. Only in the last week, I've got a great example – I won't start on it now, but a great example that I'd love to look at putting up very early on in the creation of the website – between an artist and a scientist about common threads in their work.

Martin Reynolds

OK, Joe, that sounds like a good point to stop and a good prompt for us to keep a check on the ongoing conversation. Joe Smith, many thanks for your time.

Joe Smith

Thanks very much. Cheers Martin.