



## **Environmental responsibility**

*Conversation on creative climate with Joe Smith - part 1*

### **Martin Reynolds**

Hi, I'm Martin Reynolds from TD866. In 2008 I talked to Joe Smith from The Open University about the 'creative climate' initiative. This has implications for enhancing environmental responsibility.

My conversation with Joe is divided into two podcasts. In the first we focus on the main features of the initiative, what it is and how it might look. In the second we talk about who does what and also about why the initiative is important in the wider scheme of things.

Hello, Joe, thanks for joining me. The creative partnership is a partnership between the BBC and the OU. Could we begin by you giving us a brief explanation of what creative climate is?

### **Joe Smith**

Creative climate is an attempt to tell the story of the decade from 2010 to 2020 and to give an account of how human ingenuity responds to the challenge of understanding and acting on climate change. I heard chief scientists, presidents, prime ministers saying that the next decade is a key decade in human history in terms of responding to climate change. And two things occurred to me. First that, well, if it's a key decade in human history someone ought to capture it; and secondly, that actually the business of saying we're going to create an archive was a hopeful act that would help people feel that actually this is a problem that we can probably fix. And that in trying to capture a whole range of stories about human ingenuity, creativity, imagination in response to environmental change, that actually we would reinforce society's capacity to cope.

In my dreams it involves edited broadcast stories that the BBC will produce; that might be television and radio, it might just be radio, but we'd certainly be using video on the Web – although, of course, over the decade of the project I think what TV means will have changed. We're going to work with the BBC to tell stories of charismatic people and institutions that are, in one way or another, important to how we respond to climate change. They're going to be following them. They're going to be going back to them, year in year out, to see how their stories are unfolding.

And those stories will follow everyone, from polar scientists through to architects, engineers, designers, right through to, you know, people like me at the weekend down on the allotments. People who are growing their own food, people that are coming up with their own solutions to how you might live a low- or zero-carbon lifestyle.

That's where I think there's lots of interesting material going on for Open University students. We're going to be inviting what the web-wise call 'communities of interest' to cluster on the creative climate site. So you might have architects or artists clustering together to, a couple of times a year, benchmark each other; swap notes, see what they're doing, share their experiences, maybe post recent projects. And then another aspect of the web offer is for open public posting, where you or me, my

grandmother, anyone in a bus queue could go and post their own experiences, experiments, ideas about understanding or responding to environmental change. Note that I've said environmental change, not just climate change, because we'd like biodiversity loss to be part of this conversation.

### **Martin Reynolds**

You mentioned benchmarking in relation to retrieving stories from the past. Could you just say something a bit more, Joe, about the value of that process – of keeping that kind of repository?

### **Joe Smith**

You know, I love history – in a parallel life I would be a historian – and I think that the period we're going through is of historical significance. I mean, every period is, but you know we really are at a hinge point. Humanity has to get wise, and do it quickly, around how we think about resources, how we think about pollution, how we think about the character of our development. And for that reason, I think that we ought to do a good job of capturing this period so that in the future people will be able to make sense of it in a rich way.

### **Martin Reynolds**

And, very clearly, the technologies that are available to us now facilitate that kind of process very well.

### **Joe Smith**

Yeah – really rich textual histories, really rich oral histories. But perhaps the much more important thing – I mean, really that's an indulgence at some level – the more important and urgent thing is that I think benchmarking could have a really significant role in allowing, as I say, the general public and specific communities of interest in accelerating progress, sharing learning.

### **Martin Reynolds**

And that notion of sharing invites this idea of providing a space, and there seems something about the creative climate which is offering an alternative type of space for these types of conversations. Is that roughly about it?

### **Joe Smith**

Bang on! No, thanks – thanks for raising that Martin. The Web obviously offers all sorts of new spaces for dialogue and exchange, and they're being used, you know, whether people want them to or not. People are invading that space and doing fantastically interesting things with it.

I'm really interested in the way the Web can generate new public spaces. At one level – you might think it trivial – I think the photo-sharing site Flickr has given people a whole new way of showing themselves to the world, sharing themselves, you know, family snaps among a family or, you know, keeping in touch with people they've met at a festival. So ... just if you take some of the technologies inside that site, just a simple one – tagging – allows a whole body of the population to visit a site like Creative Climate and pursue their own interests. So I mentioned allotment holders to you earlier – well, I'm an allotment holder; one of the tags I would pursue is gardening, self-provisioning. You know, we're going to see new ideas developing about how you can provide for yourself cheaply and healthily on your own garden.

**Martin Reynolds**

And when you talk about tagging, this is something which is a way of locating different types of conversations that are going on, on the web space –

**Joe Smith**

Yes, simply, it's just one of a number of ways in which people can identify other people with common interests –

**Martin Reynolds**

And engage with them.

**Joe Smith**

Engage with them, post their own thoughts – it's how we can find each other, in short, and have the conversation we want to have.

**Martin Reynolds**

This use of web space seems to bridge two purposes – a broadcasting model of disseminating lots of information, and an exchange model providing a medium for conversation. Focusing on the broadcasting model, is there a danger of the public, or even interest groups, being overwhelmed with the amount of information?

**Joe Smith**

Overwhelming, but also there is the dangers of how you, kind of, measure the authority of statements on the Web. So people who are sceptical of climate change, but without an adequate scientific basis to their claims, have caused all sorts of havoc around public understanding of this critical issue, simply because the Web gives them a space to muck around, misbehave really.

**Martin Reynolds**

So what help might be given here?

**Joe Smith**

I think what we'd like to do is to make a space where the joins between expert opinion and public debate are both a bit more explicit, but also we make a space where that can happen with a bit more confidence and a bit more authority. So people can have more confidence that their own judgements have been well considered, so people have, you know, a right and an opportunity to have their opinion and their voice heard. But they've also got access to the kinds of materials they need to equip themselves to take part in the debate. So, I mean, it's a classic Open University thing to do, to act in a way as a bridge between expertise and wider public debate.