UC CLIMATE STEWARDS

Learning Involves the Whole Person: Building Social-Emotional Resilience for Climate Communication

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"Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. In contrast to optimism or despair, hope requires that one actually do something to improve the world. Authentic hope comes with an imperative to act." [1]

Much stewardship work is grounded in the relationships we foster with other community members and the trust we build through honoring those relationships. It also requires us to acknowledge our own and others' personal experiences with climate change; it requires that we understand that people perceive and understand the world differently; and it requires that we fully realize just how profound the work ahead of us is to protect the community of life, our life support systems, and ourselves. Climate stewardship thus involves significant social and emotional effort on our part, and finesse in how we approach others about this emotionally challenging topic—especially if they or we have already been traumatized by climate disruption. One of the central goals of UC Climate Stewards is to bring climate change topics to our communities through trauma-aware education and communication so they can once again experience nature as healing and nourishing.

Learning, Doing, and Being Involves the Whole Person

When we enter into the spaces where we work and learn, we don't magically detach from aspects of our self. Each person exists in every moment as a combination of mind, body, spirit, and emotions; this is the *whole person*. Whether we are gaining knowledge or making choices, all of these aspects of ourselves are present. When our mind learns that climate disruption threatens the people and places we care about, we respond emotionally, too. When our body feels the soaring temperatures of an extreme heat event, our spirit reacts as well. Since all parts of our physical and psychological selves are engaged as we learn and make choices to act, the UC Climate Stewards course is specifically designed to address the needs of the whole person. With an eye to *holistic* learning, we emphasize and incorporate self-reflection, social and emotional resilience, trauma-aware practices, interdisciplinary science, and communication science throughout the UC Climate Stewards curriculum.

"When communicators and educators come with the heavy news of climate change, it helps to think of ourselves as "friendly communicators" (the "communicator as friend"). As a friend, we would first show up not as a scientist or teacher or an advocate, but as a human being." [2]

Experiences with Change Shape Us

We are living in the midst of tumultuous times. Nearly every day we hear new stories of happenings in the world that challenge how we see each other, what we think of society, and how we feel about life in general. Each of us holds a lifetime of experience that shapes how these events affect us. Many of us respond in similar ways, yet we may respond in ways that others cannot fathom.

Responses to climate change range across the spectrum of emotions. Some people experience emotions like sadness, anger, disgust, helplessness, despair, fear, and anxiety. Others experience the changes around us with emotions such as hope, curiosity, inspiration, compassion, empathy, empowerment, and passion. Many people experience a mix of all of these emotions, in part because of the uncertainty associated with change.

Living with uncertainty can be uncomfortable, but uncertainty can also be one of the greatest motivators. The opportunity to channel pain into possibility opens up a world of choice and action that can help us through tough times. As changes occur around us, it is important to remember that we are all doing our best.

By now, most people have had an experience with or perception of climate disruption. These experiences and perceptions can come directly through a personal encounter with a climate impact (e.g., flooding event, wildfire, disease); indirectly through our relationships with friends, family, communities, places that matter to us; or via the news, social, and other media. Our experiences and perceptions can deeply affect how we think of, feel about, and interact with the world around us. Sharing our experiences and perceptions can be a valuable way to process our feelings, connect with others, and lay the foundation for strong relationships and flourishing communities.

The Nature of the Work

"Research has shown that many environmental educators, [climate communicators, and scientists working in related fields] may live with a high degree of stress as a result of speaking, observing, and thinking about human-caused environmental degradation on a regular basis (Albrecht, 2007; Fraser & Brandt, 2013; Fraser et al., 2013). The nature of environmental educators' high-contact work with the public requires them to mask or suppress the feelings of distress in order to productively engage with their audiences [i.e., social-emotional labor]. When working directly with audiences, or observing public dialogue about environmental issues, educators often perceive that others do not share their commitment to pro-environmental values and actions. This repeated perception can be upsetting. If educators feel they are in the minority opinion on environmental issues, they can also experience feelings of

isolation owing to this sense of distance from others' priorities. In addition, many have anxiety about confrontations with audiences who disagree with an environmental message." [3]

Social-Emotional Work and Resilience in Conservation, Environmental, and Climate Education

Professions related to environmental, conservation, and climate education, interpretation, and communication usually draw passionate people. Most people who come to work in these fields feel strongly invested in the current well-being and future flourishing of the people, organisms, ecosystems, and/or outcomes that they are working to promote and protect. This deep personal investment often means that when people in these professions run up against barriers that diminish or destroy what they're working toward, they may feel the same frustration and pain as if they themselves were being harmed. Working with and through these feelings and continuing to be in the spaces that induce such emotions is referred to as social-emotional work. It is *work* because it takes effort to manage the emotions you are feeling, maintain your relationships, and sustain social expectations.

It can be overwhelming to continue working while feeling ignored, alone, depressed, and angry. It becomes easier to continue moving forward when you know other people are experiencing the same things as you are; having someone to talk to about your frustration can restore your hope. Fellowship with, and mutual support from, others working toward the same or similar goals allows the work to continue in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Social-emotional work can be exhausting, but finding a community that can bolster us with social-emotional support can be incredibly empowering. Emotions have power. They can stop us in our tracks or spur us on to our greatest achievements.

Ultimately, we want to harness the power of our commitment to the work and the emotions our passion produces by endeavoring to reach a place of social-emotional resilience. *Resilience* is the ability of a system or community to survive disruption and to anticipate, adapt, and flourish in the face of change. As conservation professionals and environmental educators, we know all too well the historical patterns of human-caused degradation and disruption of the wider community of life. To move through this difficult moment in time to a "better normal", we need to speak the struggles we face aloud. UC Climate Stewards supports the social-emotional resilience of its community members by fostering social-emotional support through a *Community of Practice*. In spaces like these, "opportunities for educators to address their emotions can reduce the intensity of these feelings and prevent a cyclical and damaging emotional grind." [3]

Other Factors Affecting Social-Emotional Resilience

- **Anxiety about Deniers & Confrontation**

  Many climate communicators have a fear of facing someone who is aggressive in their climate skepticism or science denial. As such, individuals who are skeptical about climate change or deny the science represent the fear, anxiety, and emotional weight that many people feel concerning communicating about climate change. Over the years, the media portrayal of individuals vocal in their climate skepticism or science denial has created the false narrative that aggressive "deniers" lurk around every corner lying in wait to attack the unwary climate communicator. While individuals entrenched in their climate skepticism or science denial do exist, they make up less than 10% of the U.S. population.[4] Sometimes, while someone may speak from what may sound like a "denialist" stance, they may be trying to ask a question about something they have heard but don't fully understand. For some individuals, skeptical audiences may be family members and friends who repeatedly deny climate change. "As a result, [climate change communicators] may anticipate opposition, anger, dismissal and people trying to undermine their credibility during conversations about climate change. For some, anxiety about confronting a denier creates a larger-than-life monster particularly in a public setting." [3]

- **Climate Science Knowledge**

  Many educators and communicators feel the strong desire to equip themselves with as much climate science knowledge as possible to gird themselves for anticipated confrontation with climate skeptics or science deniers. However, "hearing about the severity of climate problems may be overwhelming or depressing; scientists may go into a level of detail that individuals may not be ready for or a level of crisis [messaging] that is hard to manage emotionally." [3] In many, if not most cases, the weight of this new climate science knowledge can be paralyzing, with individuals sometimes reflecting that they wish they could unlearn what they have just heard.

- **Health Benefits of Connecting with the Natural World**

  In June 2019, researchers published a study demonstrating that being in, seeing images of, reading about, and even talking about the natural world can bring relief to the sometimes-overwhelming feelings associated with the impacts of climate change.[5] As part of the UC California Naturalist Program, UC Climate Stewards recognizes that connecting with the natural world is vital to the community and ecosystem resilience we are striving toward.

Involving the Whole Person in Learning is Key

Learning is not just an intellectual exercise. Taking in new information, developing new skills, and thinking outside our established patterns can be emotionally draining. When preparing "to break the social norm of silence around climate change and to feel comfortable approaching strangers with unfamiliar ways of communicating, it is imperative to address all aspects of learning - supporting not only intellectual development, but also social and emotional needs." [3] Making space for social-emotional support in our learning and training environments gives our cohorts (and our audiences) permission to be their authentic selves; they don't need to feel as if they must suppress or hide their distress. Addressing these feelings can reduce their intensity and prevent a damaging emotional cycle.

Trauma-aware Education and Communication Practices

With the expanding impacts of climate disruption, how we approach education and communication becomes ever more important. Growing numbers of people have lived through an extreme event that may have left deep wounds in their psyche. The traumas that can result from these experiences are unique to every individual; no two people experience trauma or react to trauma in the same way. By approaching education and communication with a *trauma-aware lens*, it is more likely that we will connect with our audiences rather than trigger a memory that may cause them 1) unnecessary pain, 2) to deny the state of affairs, and/or 3) isolate themselves from all thoughts of climate disruption, its impacts, and most significantly its solutions.

The traumas that can result from experiencing the impacts of climate disruption are unique. Not everyone experiences trauma or reacts to it in the same way. Some people experience trauma firsthand by living through an extreme event. Some people experience trauma as first responders to a crisis (e.g., firefighters, healthcare workers). Some people experience trauma while supporting others after the initial phases of disruption (e.g., teachers, therapists, volunteers, community planners, adaptation professionals). These lived experiences and psychological after-effects of trauma are most commonly referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In a similar vein, "researchers have found that environmental educators' continual experience of stress, distress, worry, and isolation [related to their social-emotional work] can begin to look like symptoms of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fraser et al., 2013)." [3] Other recent studies also show that deep concern over climate disruption and its impacts can cause Pre-Traumatic Stress Syndrome—a condition with similar psychological, physical, and cognitive responses.

"This is a dark time, filled with suffering and uncertainty. Like living cells in a larger body, it is natural that we feel the trauma of our world. So don't be afraid of the anguish you feel, or the anger or fear, because these responses arise from the depth of your caring and the truth of your interconnectedness with all beings." [6]

Community of Practice

One of the best places to find and grow a social-emotional support network is within and across a Community of Practice—a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, learn how to do it better as they interact regularly, and have a shared concern, community, and practice. UC Climate Stewards foster a Community of Practice that shares concern for community and ecosystem climate resilience; a community consisting of all those associated with UC Climate Stewards, and practice centered on an inclusive approach to climate literacy, climate communications and interpretation, and building community resilience.

The UC Climate Stewards community of practice supports each other socially and emotionally as well as in their collective work, sharing best practices, discussing ideas for projects, seeking support in difficult times, and engaging in "boots on the ground" work. "Research shows that when environmental educators feel like people in their social networks share their pro-environmental values, they feel less fear or panic about the environment, and being part of the group increases educators' hope (Swim & Fraser, 2013)." [3] Turning to existing relationships and building new ones is critical to connecting with your community of practice. This remains true regardless of the issue and is especially important when it comes to building trust for long-term resilience.

This document is inspired by, builds from the ideas presented in, and shares some excerpts from the white paper, *How Attending to Social, Emotional, & Cognitive Dimensions of Learning Builds a Network of Change Agents*.[3]

Endnotes:

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