



Activity: Climate Change Denial

Purpose: Exploring the phenomenon of climate change denial, what lies behind it and the dangers it presents; also considering what might be done to confront denial.

Age level: 16-18

Time needed: 60 minutes for Stage 1; 60-75 minutes for each of Stages 2 and 3; ongoing short periods of time for Stage 3

Resources:

- ✓ A cut-up set of cards from the handout
- ✓ chart paper
- ✓ markers
- ✓ a glue stick and a pile of blank cards for each group of four students
- ✓ a Climate Change Denial pin-board

Procedure

Stage 1

Class members sitting in a circle are asked to think about times when they have worried about something but put it 'to the back of their minds' or otherwise tried to forget about it or reduce its significance; things like going out to play ball the evening before a big exam when as they play they feel uncomfortable not to be studying, or going through the motions with a boyfriend or girlfriend when they no longer feel good about the relationship but aren't prepared to face up to the fact by telling them, or behaving in one way when part of them is telling them they should be behaving in another but not confronting the problem. They recount examples they are prepared to share and the feelings they had. The teacher introduces the idea of denial; that in big things and small things people use mind games to evade reality and to protect themselves from facing up to things. The class is asked if they can identify in their examples different forms of denial and give each form a descriptor.

Stage 2

Students form groups of four. Each group receives a set of cards, chart paper, markers and a glue stick. They are asked to read and discuss the cards and determine the range



of denial-related issues raised by each card and by the set of cards taken as a whole. Their task is to arrange the cards on the chart paper, demonstrate connections and parallels between the cards by drawing one or two-way arrows, and write commentaries exploring issues raised and explaining the nature of their arrangement.

During the work group members take time out to write on blank cards their own personal examples relating to or mirroring the examples in the card set. They do not share these at this stage.

Each group presents, the teacher encouraging feedback and discussion of what is said. At an appropriate point towards the end of group-generated discussion, the teacher reveals the following explanations:

- ***Climate change denial*** is the term used to describe attempts to downplay the extent of global warming, its significance, or its connection to human behavior, especially for financial interests, but also to protect individuals from facing the future and facing up to changes they would need to make in their behaviors to slow or limit climate change.

- ***Cognitive dissonance***, a term used in social psychology, describes an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas or behaving in two contradictory ways simultaneously, or when we know - but won't acknowledge - that what we are saying or how we are behaving is contradicted by evidence and our own opinions yet still resist amending what we say or do.

Then the teacher asks questions. For instance:

- ❖ Do you see denial in the different cards and, if so, what forms does it take?
- ❖ Do you see examples of cognitive dissonance lurking behind or within what is written in the cards?
- ❖ Do you see any big ideas in any of the cards that would help explain denial and cognitive dissonance?
- ❖ Do you see any big ideas in any of the cards that would suggest how to deal with denial and cognitive dissonance?
- ❖ What examples of denial do you find most shocking?
- ❖ Should we distinguish climate change denial from climate change ignorance?
- ❖ Does denial of climate change add to the magnitude of the threat the planet faces?
- ❖ How should climate change denial best be faced up to?



Throughout the discussion following each question, students are encouraged to share examples of their personal climate change denial as they have written them up on the blank cards.

Stage 3

Students are asked, ahead of the next class, to each conduct a brief three-question interview with five adult members of their community:

- ❖ How serious do you think climate change is?
- ❖ What are you doing personally to stop climate change?
- ❖ Is there anything more you think you should be doing?

During the second activity session, groups re-form and students analyze their twenty interview responses using the concepts of denial and cognitive dissonance. They are specifically asked to identify different types of denial. Each group reports on its findings. Class discussion follows.

Stage 4

A Climate Change Denial pin board is made available in the classroom. Students are invited to bring examples of climate change denial they find in newspapers, magazines, and on the web, and pin them on the board with their own note of explanation. The class reviews the board occasionally.

Potential/Facilitation Guidance

This activity helps students develop denial-critical skills (i.e. the ability to detect, name, confront denial) as they examine climate change narratives and the debate that surrounds them. In the various stages of the activity, students should be encouraged to consider ways to address their own as well as others' climate change denial. How can they respond most effectively when confronted with climate change denial? Are different responses appropriate in the case of different forms of denial? What actions can they take to uncloak denial? How can they influence others?



Climate Change Denial Cardsⁱ

1. Asking wealthy people...

'Asking wealthy people in the rich nations to act to prevent climate change means asking them to give up many of the things they value – their high performance cars, their flights to Tuscany and Thailand and Florida – for the benefit of other people.' (George Monbiot)

2. We've managed before...

He watched the program on climate change. It really worried him. But then, he thought, 'we've solved these sorts of problems before, and somebody will come up with something'.

3. Wishful thinking...

'As a whole the American public is currently in a "wishful thinking" stage of opinion formation in which they hope the problem (of climate change) can be solved by someone else ...without changes in their own priorities, decision making or behavior.' (Anthony Leiserowitz)

4. We must act now...

His speech on the dangers of climate change was really well received. 'We must act ... and act now!' he had said. The audience of young people loved it and gave him a rousing ovation. Leaving late, he sped his big SUV down the highway to get home in time.

5. Urgent and vital...

'Addressing climate change is an urgent and vital part of our election program,' the politician said. 'This is why we have a definite target of cutting carbon emissions by 60% by 2050.'

6. Deeply concerned...

'I am deeply concerned, even horrified, about global heating,' the Norwegian woman said. 'But I live in a small country. The real blame lies with America and its gas-guzzling way of life and with China where they are building a new coal-fired power station every week.'

7. Optimism is misplaced...

'Unthinking optimism about the ability of humanity to avoid climate change is misplaced. But once we have faced up to the reality of a world under global warming, with all its horrors, we can perhaps begin to make plans and take actions built on the new reality. ...Maintaining optimism seems more and more like a disconnection from reality.' (Clive Hamilton)

8. Reward for green behavior...

Research in the UK from 2008 found that 'green idealists' or 'green activists' – those most aware of climate change and environmental issues - took the longest and most frequent flights, often seeing them as a 'reward' for otherwise green behavior.

9. Small window of opportunity...

The newspaper front page had a shocking piece about the melting of the Arctic ice. 'We have only a small window of opportunity to stop this,' the editorial said. On page 8 the newspaper was advertising its special world travel offers.

10. That is why...

'We have become the leading Canadian university for environmental protection and education,' the university press release announced. 'That is why forty of our academics representing several faculties are attending the world conference on climate change in Doha.'

11. Blue skies thinking...

'For society to function well, it's important to keep a climate of optimism that a better future lies ahead. It encourages the belief that we can be all successful and self-improve. We need blue skies thinking. The dark skies thinking of global warming doesn't fit with the way our society works.'

12. Above Niagara Falls...

'Our future is like that of passengers on a small pleasure boat above the Niagara Falls, not knowing that the engines are about to fail.'
(James Lovelock)

13. Big business...

Huge corporations are funding scientists to dispute what the vast majority of scientists are saying: that human-made climate change is happening and is dangerous. These scientists don't publish in the best journals where articles are carefully reviewed. They write in popular magazines and appear on television offering punchy sound bites. These are the 'climate change skeptics' paid by corporations scared that action on global warming will cut their profits

14. Nobody ever rioted...

'Political parties in most rich nations have recognized that we want tough targets, but that we also want the targets to be missed. They know we will grumble about their failure to curb climate change, but that we will not take to the streets. They know that nobody ever rioted for austerity'
(George Monbiot)

15. Failure to tell...

The biggest climate change denial is the failure of the wealthy nations to tell people that climate change is already having devastating effects for the people of the developing world with 300,000 dead each year and the lives of 325 million seriously affected.

16. The story people want to hear...

Commentators denying climate change is happening get more than their fair share of airtime because the story they tell is one that people want to hear.

17. Science will see us through...

'New scientific breakthroughs will see us through the climate crisis,' the teacher said. 'Solar, wind and wave power are just the start. There will be means to extract and bury carbon in the atmosphere. Sun shields in space that will protect us and cool the earth. There will be a brave new world allowing us to continue with business as usual.'

18. What a huge problem...

The teacher talked about what a huge problem global warming is. 'What shall we do?' the student asked. 'Recycle, wear things longer and have the family buy a smaller car,' he suggested.

ⁱ The following sources were used in devising some of the eighteen cards: Hamilton, C. (2010).

Requiem for a Species: How We Resist the Truth about Climate Change, London: Earthscan; Kagawa, F., & Selby, D. (2010). *Education and Climate Change: Living and Learning in Interesting Times*. New



York: Routledge; Leiserowitz, A. (2006). 'Climate Change Risk Perception and Policy Preferences: The Role of Affect, Imagery and Values', *Climate Change*, vol.77, 45-72. Lovelock, J. (2006). *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back – and How We Can Still Save Humanity*. London: Allen Lane; Monbiot, G. (2006). *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning*. Toronto: Doubleday; Global Humanitarian Forum. (2009). *The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*. Geneva: Global Humanitarian Forum Human Impact Report. Where an author is cited on a card, the quotation is verbatim.