Communicating Climate Change to Alberta’s Youth: Lessons Learned from the Alberta Narratives Project

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Abstract

Climate change and the future of energy has been a divisive, polarizing topic of conversation within Canada, but no more so than within Alberta. The Alberta Narratives Project (ANP) sought to address this challenge. Using intimate roundtable discussions, the ANP engaged with various Alberta stakeholder groups, including oil and gas workers, environmentalists, conservative voters, business leaders, and youth. The ANP undertook to understand and engage with participants’ values in order to facilitate open conversation among roundtable participants with the goal of finding effective narratives with which to discuss climate change within the various demographics as well as the broader community. At MacEwan University, researchers hosted a roundtable discussion for youth ages 18 to 28 to answer the question: how do youth in Alberta engage with the topic of climate change? Researchers found the youth group was receptive to government regulation, while being sceptical of absolutes and slogans. Youth valued government and corporate accountability along with the opinions of scientists on subjects like climate change. These findings are

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significant because they grant us insight into how we might approach climate change communication with this demographic in the future.

1 Introduction

Alberta is Canada’s divided province. While Alberta’s economy has long been tied to oil and gas, its politics have also been yoked to conservatism. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that the province’s 44-year-old conservative dynasty fell in lock step with global crude oil prices, culminating in Alberta electing the New Democrat Party on April 7, 2015, at a time when prices were low. A slow economic recovery followed, apparently too slow for many Albertans. The United Conservative Party took back the province four years later. Since then, Western Canada Select (WCS) prices have plummeted, but the province’s conservative premier has continued to invest heavily in the province’s bitumen reserves, most recently by announcing a $1.5 billion bailout (with another $7.5 billion pledge) of TransCanada Energy for the controversial Keystone XL pipeline (Leavitt and Boyd April 1, 2020). This announcement came just days after announcing the layoff of some 20,000 school support staff, a cost savings of $128 million in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bennett March 31, 2020). Both moves have been publicly criticized by some while praised by others. This split in politics and ideology is not new to the province. Simon Dyer of the Pembina Institute stated, “The vast majority active in this place don’t want to go back to a high conflict, polarizing environment. We’re not interested in polarizing this debate” (Weber May 21, 2019), yet in Alberta, the debate is just that: polarized.

If a correlation exists between Alberta’s oil and gas fortunes and its political leanings, perhaps one also exists between its reliance of oil and gas revenues and its views on climate change. Of all Canada’s provinces, Alberta is the one most suspicious of human-caused climate change. A 2018 poll conducted by Angus Reid showed Alberta was the only province where less than 50% of the respondents said they believed in anthropogenic climate change. In fact, more polled Albertans disagreed that global temperatures were rising than the respondents from any other region of the country. 49% of Albertans said that climate change exists and is caused primarily by vehicle and industrial emissions, and 46% of Albertans said they either don’t believe that climate change is human-caused, or
they don’t believe climate change exists at all. In this, Alberta is a provincial outlier, and in terms of belief in anthropogenic climate change, Alberta is, itself, a province divided (Angus-Reid Nov. 30, 2018).

The cultural relativity of risks can shed some insight onto Alberta’s divergence from the rest of the country, as “comparative risk research reveals large differences in the perception of risk between different societies,” or even within the milieus of a single society (Godemann and Michelsen, p. 8). Since Canada is a vast country, it’s likely that the dominant industry, economic reality, and political history of a region would play a role in the perceived risk of climate change or even belief in the phenomenon. In spite of this divide “involving citizens in the solution of their own problems opens up additional opportunities for influencing the future in a sustainable way” (Godemann and Michelsen, p. 11).

Climate change is not just a challenge of personal experience or peer support, geographic location or political affiliation. Climate change challenges imaginations. It challenges Albertans to put off short-term self-interest for long-term benefit. Even more to the point, it challenges Canada and other countries who currently benefit from the fossil fuel industry to prioritize communities vulnerable to the immediate impacts of climate change, the species most affected by changing habitats, and the earth’s unborn children over our own self-interest. Marshall (2014) sums up the crux of the climate change challenge: “Of all the possible combinations of loss and gain, climate change contains the most challenging: requiring certain short-term loss in order to mitigate against an uncertain longer-term loss” (p. 226).

Scholars, politicians, and activists have long struggled to find the best way to communicate climate change effectively. Climate Outreach was established as a charitable think tank with this in mind. With the “aims to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change” (Shaw and Corner 2017, p. 2) by looking for language that reduces polarization and promotes constructive discussion on the issue of climate change and energy, Climate Outreach developed the Alberta Narratives Project (ANP).

2 Methodology

2.1 Alberta Narratives Project

Climate Outreach, directed by George Marshall, developed the Alberta Narrative Workshop model to establish a means for rich data collection of diverging opinions about climate change and energy (Marshall et al. 2018). Understanding the
need for new outlooks for Albertans and others about energy and our climate future, Marshall et al. developed this model for researchers to collect rich data otherwise absent in climate change communication research.

The methodology for the Alberta Narratives Project (ANP) arose out of a desire to engage the public in meaningful conversations about climate change and energy (Shaw and Corner 2017). The intent was not to suggest policy or lifestyle. Rather, it was to produce a roadmap for constructive conversation that would reduce polarization and resonate with those Albertans who believe climate change is real but do not yet see it as a significant threat (Marshall et al. 2018).

Communication is a social process. As such, it begins with the intrapersonal: internal processes that affect human interactions—communication—within families, communities, and societies. Ziemann (as quoted by Godemann and Michelsen 2011) explains this relationship:

> The necessity of communication can be found in the (anthropologic) circumstance that each consciousness is isolated, our neuro-physiological, cognitive, emotional processes are mutually unobservable and there is not direct access to the thoughts, attitudes and intentions of the other. It is through communication that “the interior is exteriorized,” that we can inform each other. (p. 5)

The ANP methodology reflects the ways in which complex issues are communicated intrapersonally and how they are then externalized within and between social groupings.

A foundational principle of the ANP is that narrative is vital to the way that people comprehend the world (Shaw and Corner 2017). According to Böhm et al. (2019), narratives are more likely to “represent people’s understanding of climate change” than scientific facts (paragraph 8). Through narrative, people contextualize their understandings and beliefs, so narrative can act as a tool to understand how best to communicate about climate change. In fact, Fisher (1985) asserts that humans are inherent storytellers and that values, emotions, and aesthetic considerations ground our beliefs and behaviours. The ANP distinguishes itself from similar research projects by “grounding the dialogue in participants’ values and identity, which are the sources of their attitudes” (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 52).

Focus groups—referred to as Narrative Workshops for this study—were chosen as a format that would encourage “peer-to-peer dialogue” (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 52). Baker (2017/2018) explains that focus groups can be used to promote “democratic impulses” (para. 10) and can be used as a means to gather qualitative data, fueled by conversation, where the group dynamic can “dig deeper” (para. 1) into a complex topic than a one-on-one interview could alone. When participants
are privy to each other’s opinions on a topic, additional comments can be made between participants who can elaborate or even change their initial opinion on the research focus. Within a focus group setting, “it is not necessary for the group to reach any kind of consensus” (Robinson 1998, p. 906); rather, the discussion mimics the participants’ natural flow of opinion sharing, safely moderated by the facilitators. Additionally, focus group work helps facilitators use “various methods of communication employed by people in everyday interactions such as jokes, teasing and arguing,” producing rich data that reflects the complexity and nuanced understanding of human communication (p. 906).

The ANP hosted several training sessions during which 87 citizen scientists—or “communication researchers”—were trained to host the Narrative Workshops throughout the province. Training researcher to conduct robust qualitative research within their own networks and communities provided the opportunity for “access to a wide range of audiences (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 54). This resulted in 55 Narrative Workshops, each focusing on a unique demographic sampling, with 482 people participating in the study altogether (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 8). The audio of the conversations was recorded and the content later mined qualitatively for key conversational aspects. Additionally, the research surveyed the participants’ responses to five test narratives. (More on this in a later section.) The Narrative Workshops generated “robust research results…[and]…a large quantity of qualitative data which [was] used to generate ‘thick’ descriptions” (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 57) from which it produced generalized findings and recommendations.

### 2.2 Participant Recruitment

Narrative Workshops were categorized as either tier one or tier two. Tier one research, as defined by Marshall et al. (2018, p. 59), was composed of demographics most keenly sought after for conversational analysis. Criteria for inclusion in the tier one category was based on previous research which found that “age, ethnic identity and origin, politics, faith, degree of urbanization, and association with the oil industry” all played “a significant role in attitudes to climate change and energy” (p. 57). Tier one Narrative Workshops included the following demographics: new Canadians, rural Albertans, Christian faith adherents, oil sands workers, energy professionals, environmentalists, and others, as well as the focus of this chapter: Youth. Tier one Narrative Workshop results were therefore subject to more rigorous analysis than tier two results. In addition to the notetaking and reporting required from all groups, tier one workshop discussions were recorded
and transcribed. All written components of the tier one workshops—transcription discussions, narrative markups, and notes—were included in the analysis.

The focus of this chapter is the youth demographic as represented by the Youth Narrative Workshop. The workshop, which included participants ranging in age from 18–28, was considered a tier one demographic because it was identified as “an important audience of, and contributor to, Alberta’s Climate-energy conversations” (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 37). As stated by O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward (2018), the youth of today “have a large stake in the future” (paragraph 6).

The workshop was made possible through the facilitators’ close association with MacEwan University. Kerstyn Lane was Outreach and Engagement Advisor for the Office of Sustainability at the time of the study, and Roberta Laurie is an instructor in the Bachelor of Communication Studies Program. Age was the only requirement to volunteer for the discussion, but apart from the age requirement, participants were a diverse group: varying in socio-economic background, gender, career, and political affiliation.

To attract participants, the facilitators made a call-out to engage a participant pool, largely gathered through personal association. The facilitators made the call-to-participate through informal means, such as Facebook and emails.

### 2.3 Youth Narrative Workshop

The facilitators of the Youth Narrative Workshop hosted the two-and-a-half-hour session in a MacEwan University meeting room on May 18, 2018. Participants sat in a rough circle, which appeared to create an intimate atmosphere and promote relaxed conversation.

After the introductions, the facilitators asked participants open-ended questions and allowed the respondents to have a free discussion with minimal input from the facilitators. Approximately half of the workshop was spent in conversation about the participants’ values, attitudes, and views. The other half was spent responding to the text narratives and discussing the results.

The facilitators began by asking each participant to introduce themselves and tell the group why they had come to the workshop. The facilitators then lead them through “seven successive topics” laid out in the Narrative Workshop script: values, identity, changes, climate and climate change, energy and renewables (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 52). By asking open-ended questions, the facilitators were able to observe the discussion as it grew organically. Building from discussion about foundational values towards climate change allowed the participants
the opportunity to establish what was meaningful in their lives and what changes they had noticed in their environment.

After the completion of this portion of the workshop, the participants were instructed to respond to five test narratives. The narratives were prepared the ANP prior to the workshop and reflected common perceptions of Albertans’ attitudes toward climate change and energy. Participants were given printed copies of the narratives. Each narrative was read out loud by one of the facilitators. Individuals responded to the narratives by underlining the portions they agreed with in blue and the passages they disagreed with in red. They were also invited to write additional comments in the margins. One by one, each narrative was discussed by the entire group, allowing for peer debate.

The written narratives were developed from several sources: political speeches, journalistic articles, political campaign materials, and existing Climate Outreach research. Narrative 1 framed climate change as an ethical issue. It explored themes of compassion and unity. Narrative 2 expressed strong provincial pride and took a defensive position against energy industry critics. Narrative 3 was also rooted in Albertan pride but focused on the opportunities created by transitioning to renewable energy sources. Narrative 4 presented climate change and energy within the context of fairness and responsibility to future generations. Narrative 5 was critical of environmentalism and supported continued expansion of the oil and gas industry (Marshall et al. 2018). Having the participants respond to established narratives allowed the researchers the opportunity to see which narratives and frames might be polarizing audiences and which might encourage cooperative discussion.

2.4 Analysis

Transcribed audio recordings of the dialogue from the Youth Roundtable were analyzed for key messages that reflected the participants’ values and identity as well as their opinions regarding changes to their environment, climate change, and energy and renewables. Participants’ responses to the five test narratives were also examined for commonalities as well as differences. The results from the Youth Narrative Workshop were then compared and contrasted to those of the other Narrative Workshops so that both generalized findings and findings specific to the Youth Roundtable discussion could be reported upon.
3 Key Findings and Recommendations

Following introductions, the Narrative Workshop began in earnest with a discussion about participants’ values. Alberta Youth spoke about the importance of integrity, logic, compassion, and self-sufficiency, along with community, justice, and the environment. Robin (a student working part-time) said, “Being self-aware, so knowing what you don’t know and knowing what you know.” Jason (a paramedic) said, “Acceptance of other people’s views.” This was the beginning of a rich discussion.1

When asked what set Youth apart from other generations, Robin spoke up, “My parents were into oil, so I benefitted a lot from that, and now it’s over.” A number of participants voiced the opinion that the economy was different than it had been for their parents’ generation. Matt (a mechanical engineer) explained, “Even within the oil field industry…throwing money at the wall, it’s just not a factor that works anymore…A lot of companies do things entirely differently than they used to.” In fact, discussion about fluctuating “socio-economic factors” occurred at various times throughout the roundtable discussion. Kendell (an electrician working in oil and gas) described the times as “turbulent.”

Youth were quick to talk about their pride in Alberta’s natural spaces. Researchers observed that mountains, nature, and Edmonton’s river valley cropped up several times throughout the discussion, especially when participants spoke about the “best part” of Alberta. The participants said that Alberta’s environment was something they hoped would never change. However, like other demographics, Alberta Youth weren’t comfortable with grandstanding statements such as “Alberta is best” (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 23).

Alberta’s Youth view themselves as “agents of change,” particularly within industry, politics, and the economy. Kendell spoke about the previous election saying that the “younger people” were “sick of 44 years of PC [Progressive Conservative] rule in the province. Although participants did not support an NDP government unquestioningly, they expressed satisfaction that they were part of the transition away from a conservative government.

Within the Youth Narrative Workshop, some participants were skeptical of capitalism. “Big thing for me is that kind of capitalist thing that you guys were talking about and the wealth distribution. And honestly, I don’t know how that’s gonna change, but I feel like it has to,” said Jamie (a sexual health educator). Another difference between the youth demographic and many others came about

1Unless otherwise stated, all roundtable quotations come directly from the Youth Narrative Workshop transcript, May 18, 2018. All participants’ names are pseudonyms.
when discussing change. Youth recognized that individual action was an important component of change, but they were also supportive of government regulation and international cooperation. Avery (a student) said, “I think that on a personal level, if everyone did go vegan and stopped driving cars, we’d be a lot better off.” But they and others thought that ultimately government would need to take action. “It would be nice to see more government funding to scientific research projects so that they are less dependent on corporate funding,” said Kendell. Jason (a paramedic) added that there needed to be “de-privatization of essential services.”

Youth recognized that Alberta’s economy had benefited from the oil and gas industry in the past, but they displayed deep concern about the economy and industry today: “We definitely felt the recession hit,” stated Jason, and many of his peers agreed. Matt, who had recently been laid off from the oil and gas sector, said, “What used to be a consistent line of work… [no longer gives] stability to younger people.” Like most Albertans, Alberta Youth believe there needs to be less economic dependence on the oil and gas industry (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 44), and they seemed to have faith that Albertans were capable of making that change. “We’ll change what is mostly a resource-based province into something else,” explained Matt.

Like other Albertans, most youth felt connected to the oil and gas industry in some way (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 28), yet their attitudes about climate change did not appear as heavily influenced by this fact as other demographics. “I would say we’re kind of beyond the point of discussing whether or not climate change is real or not,” said Kendell. Within the group, there was unanimous belief in the science of climate change. “Climate change is real. It’s like back to basic science from the 1700s,” said Jason. At the same time there was a sense that climate change impacts would not be evenly distributed. “I’ll be seeing a lot more refugees from other places … coming to Alberta,” said one participant. While Landon (an international student studying at MacEwan) expressed skepticism that he personally would be “affected by climate change.”

Youth showed some similarities to the Environmental Group in that they expressed strong feelings of fear and “hopelessness” toward the climate change situation (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 23), which they found “overwhelming.” “My mental health is diminished by seeing the environment falling apart,” explained Mike, who also saw evidence of climate change around him. “Pine beetles just destroyed most of Jasper,” he said. More than most other Narrative Workshop groups, the Youth Narrative Workshop demonstrated a high level of awareness and concern about climate change.

Youth often expressed their perspectives on climate change and energy in ways that were personal to them. Jade (a nurse) spent some time explaining the use of
single-use plastics at the hospital where she works. She appeared torn between their importance for maintaining “sanitation” and their wastefulness. Kendell, who works in the oil and gas industry, stated that “the climate change movement” has had a positive effect on industry. He gave the example of the North West Redwater Sturgeon County Refinery, which he explained “is an emissions-free refinery.” Mason (a food service supervisor wishing to be addressed as “they”) expressed scepticism about being “better off.” They commute 100 km one way and explained, “Having all these things to save us time really hasn’t saved me a lot of time.” Landon expressed a similar sentiment: “Technology has surpassed our mental state.” He explained that society focuses too much on the development of “things.”

Youths’ concern about climate change was not always reflected in other demographics; for example, when climate change was brought up, “a group of oil workers in a work camp said they ‘didn’t buy it,’ and tried to close the conversation down” (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 9). Engineers and geologists from other Alberta Narrative Project workshop groups were also generally sceptical of anthropogenic climate change. “The climate is always changing, and it’s changing for a whole bunch of reasons,” explained one participant. Many people working in the oil and gas sector didn’t see climate change as a scientific issue but rather a political one. One participant quipped, “Sure, I’m concerned about climate change—my concern is the people that are using climate change to disrupt my livelihood” (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 10). Fear of job loss appears to be linked to some degrees of climate change denial.

### 3.1 Test Narratives

After the discussion portion, the workshop moved on to the test narratives. The first narrative framed climate change as an ethical issue. This produced a variety of responses. Mason said that it resonated with them: “The most vulnerable people will be the ones the most affected.” But Jason said that for his in-laws, “this would pretty much be a heretic discussion.” Although they believe in building a connected community, some Youth thought there were whiffs of hypocrisy in the way the narrative was framed. For example, in regard to the statement “our biggest opportunity may be to return to the custom of neighbours taking care of neighbours,” Jamie wondered who would “count as our neighbors.”

The second narrative focussed on provincial patriotism. Kendell expressed his belief that “there’s a lot of anti-oil propaganda and misinformation out there.” Based on his experience working for Syncrude, he explained that the company
was going to great lengths to “lessen the environmental impact that the oil sands
development had.” Avery didn’t think industry should be rewarded for doing
“something that [it] should do…I don’t want [a] participation trophy for trying.”

Narrative 3 took a more forward-looking approach by presenting the transition
to renewable energy as a continuation of Alberta’s legacy. There was strong
agreement that Albertans should recognize the hard work of people working in oil
and gas, but also that “we have become too dependent on one source of energy.”
Youth agreed that “we need to …spread our investment and create a balance in
our energy economy.” In fact, a number of participants underlined most of the
narrative in blue (showing agreement), but some challenged the narrative’s more
exaggerated claims: like assuming that renewable energy would provide “reliable
employment.” The phrase stating that transitioning to renewables “is not about
being “green’ or ‘eco’ or ‘politically correct’” was also highly contested.

The fourth narrative generated much more disagreement than the previous
three. It framed change as a matter of intergenerational fairness. The group was in
agreement that “Alberta is a great place to make a home and raise a family” and
that “we want to keep our clean air and water.” But many disagreed that “young
people are becoming much less willing to work in the oil and gas sector.” Jade,
who grew up in Fort Saskatchewan (a small feeder community north east of the
capital), said, “A large majority of the people I went to school with are in that
sector now because it’s good money,” and Matt agreed.

Disagreement arose over Narrative 5 too, the narrative critical of environmen-
talists. The statement “[environmental extremists] take a very narrow view that
is not grounded in reality” showed polarized viewpoints. Several underlined the
statement in red, several in blue (with a few abstaining). In spite of the cordial
discussion that took place throughout the roundtable, there appeared to be deep
division within the group over Albertans who openly oppose oil sands develop-
ment. During our discussion, Jason explained that in terms of shutting down the
oil sands, “it’s just not very realistic…I agree that it’s not grounded in reality.”
Macon responded, “I feel like we’re racing down this train and hopping off might
not be the best idea, but at least slam on the brakes and look at those alternative-
s…Both views, you could argue, aren’t necessarily grounded in reality.” To which,
Jason responded, “Yeah.” This interaction seems to demonstrate the weight of the
challenge that Albertans are facing.

Analysis of the narratives revealed a number of general findings too. It became
apparent that communicators should avoid imperatives such as “always,” “all,” and
“none.” Participants of the Youth Narrative Workshop were enthusiastic about
making change, so communicators should also avoid pessimistic language that
fuels hopelessness. At the same time, Youth is frustrated by language that sugar-
coats climate change and our response to it. Youth wants “authentic and real
language” (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 43). Additionally, Youth are tired of
language that sows “divisiveness and dehumanizes vulnerable groups” (ibid).
They want honest and informed discussion. Not surprisingly Narrative Workshop
participants responded positively to statements that used action words like “buil-
ding,” “connecting,” and “innovating,” and they often agreed with statements that
held people accountable at the individual or collective level. Jamie noted, “We
should always be questioning how we do things.”

Responses to the test narratives suggest we should create a positive vision
of the future to facilitate youth engagement. Youth want to “take control” of
their “future.” They believe they are “often underestimated,” but that “collectively
[they] can make a big difference.”

4 Limitations and Future Research

Of primary concern to the researchers was the quick turnaround necessary for
data collection. This made it challenging to find participants outside the sphere
of influence of the facilitators. Personal connections were called upon to populate
the roundtable discussion after initial attempts to find participants were met with a
limited response. Of the participants, five were previously known to one facilitator
and one to the other.

The ANP relied upon the personal and professional connections of the facilita-
tors as a mechanism to reach potential participants for the Narrative Workshops.
Nevertheless, it should be noted that the personal connections with the facilitators
may have reduced the candidness of the participants’ discussion. Additionally, a
power imbalance may have existed between the faculty facilitator and the student
participant. This could have affected the student’s responses during the discus-
sion. Lane indicated that some of the participants with whom she had personal
connections had yet to see her in a professional setting, creating an “interesting
shift in how [they saw] each other” (K. Lane, personal communication, Nov. 23,
2018).

As a roundtable discussion, the sample size was necessarily limited. The ANP
called for five to twelve participants per roundtable, so nine was well within
methodology limits. However, while rich discussion occurred as a result of the
limited number of participants, a study that included a larger number of young
Albertans might reveal more representative findings. If youth roundtable discussi-
ons were held in other parts of the province, there could be significantly different
results. Even hosting a youth discussion group at a technical college might illicit differing views. Future province-wide youth roundtables might supply researchers with valuable data.

Other limitations experienced by the roundtable discussion groups tended to centre around the time allotted for each roundtable session. Each discussion was limited to two and a half hours. The questions were paced accordingly as was the written narrative analysis; therefore, the focus group had, in total, an hour for discussion on the topic of climate change and energy amongst a group of nine participants.

Concern exists that conversation among some social groups might be problematic, particularly when individuals are called upon to share their values and opinions about perceived contentious issues. Intimacy and/or homogenetic out-group thinking (Simon 1992, p. 2) can prevent honesty within the discussion group setting. Conversely, groupthink can prevent honest opinions from being shared when a dominant voice within the group acts as representative of the group while more timid members may hold back opinions to bypass possible conflict that divergent opinions can create.

Recommendations for further study would include research methodologies that address some of this project’s limitations. A larger sample would help guarantee that a future study was representative of the population. To this goal, these researchers recommend more diversity in the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the participants as well as a broader range of worldviews and values sampled from a larger geographic portion of the province. Perhaps a series of focus groups could address these challenges.

5 Conclusions

It is undeniable that effective communication surrounding climate change has many challenges. There is a need to engage with a broad range of demographics. Past research has not focussed on the opinions, and values of youth in Alberta. The findings presented here attempt to fill these gaps.

It is important to recognize both individual and group values when attempting to communicate effectively about climate change. A unified feeling of pride for Alberta’s environment—specifically the mountains, national parks, wilderness, river valleys, and vast space—helped to create a connection among the participants of the Youth Narrative Workshop. This group was in agreement that human activity is a major contributor to climate change; however, there were divided opinions regarding whether collective change or change on an individual level was
required. The Narrative Workshop suggests that youth in Alberta are aware of the imminent threat climate change poses, such as food insecurity. This sample group recognized that Alberta is likely to suffer from desertification and permafrost melt in the foreseeable future.

These fears of the Youth Narrative Workshop Participants serve as a reminder of how important effective climate change communication really is. Recommendations from the Youth Narrative Workshop regarding language include the following:

1. Youth value communication that is honest and logical. Make connections by discussing your values and discovering those of your audience.
2. Youth values trustworthy sources, such as scientific or personal authority. They respond best to narratives that contain a consistent message.
3. When talking about solutions, youth want an achievable strategy rather than narratives promoting a quick transition. They respond best to statements with action words that hold people accountable at both the individual and collective level.
4. Youth dislike strong disagreement with language that casts blame on the oil and gas industry. Show appreciation for what Alberta is and has been.
5. Youth are generally not responsive to absolutes, qualifiers, or commonly used clichés or slogans. Avoid exceptionalism and language that exaggerates a claim or generalizes an experience. These alienate Youth.
6. The term climate change can be overwhelming for youth, resulting in a lack of engagement in conversations with friends and loved ones.

While these may serve as general guidelines for communicating about climate change and energy with Alberta Youth, as Climate Outreach makes clear in its second report, “it is essential to test communications” (Marshall and Bennett 2018, p. 57) in order to evaluate effectively the most appropriate approach for a given audience.

Climate change is a rapidly growing problem and one that requires us to reach out to our audience with a sense of good faith, empowerment, and community building. During his talk at the Climate for Change Conference in Edmonton, Marshall said the following:

One of the key problems with communications is that the narratives that people hear are telling them that there is something wrong with them and they need to be somebody else, rather than reinforcing or validating their sense of identity, it is undermining it (personal communication, 2018).
If we want to connect meaningfully with Albertans on issues of climate change and energy, we cannot berate them for their lifestyle or condemn them for their economy, we must start with who they are and what they value and move forward from there. Good communication must begin with recognition of and respect for an individual’s or a group’s values.

Effective communication always begins with common ground. When discussing a volatile subject like climate change, establishing common ground with an audience becomes more important still. During the Youth Narrative Workshop discussion, it was apparent that participants shared much in common. An appreciation of the mountains and nature was just the beginning.

Trust in the messenger is important as well. Early in the Youth Roundtable Discussion, “honesty” and “integrity” were discussed as key values. Many Albertans are distrustful of climate change information. “Identifying new messengers within communities should be a priority,” according to the ANP Narratives Report (Marshall et al. 2018, p. 14).

At its most fundamental level, “the key to climate communications is the language of togetherness” (Marshall, personal communication, 2018). Through cooperation and respect we can begin to understand the values of Alberta’s youth. Effective and impactful communication is the first step forward then in solving the pressing, global issue of climate change.

### 6 Reflective Questions

1. What are the barriers to effective climate change communication?
2. Which is more important for mitigating climate change, collective or individual action? Why?
3. How might one go about learning the values of one’s audience?
4. Alberta has a history of economic dependence on the oil and gas industry. How might the results of this study be applied to other regions with different economic histories?

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