A Climate Consortium for High School Students

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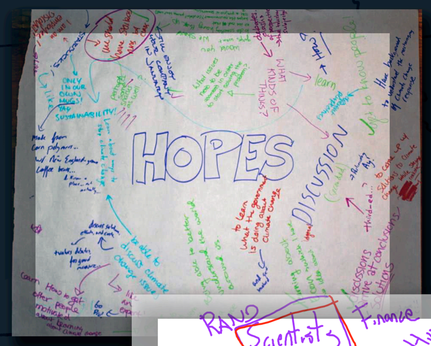
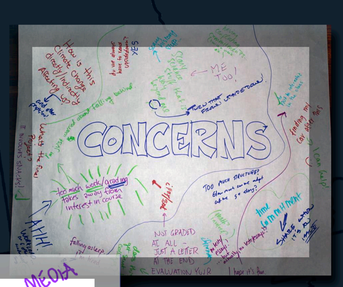
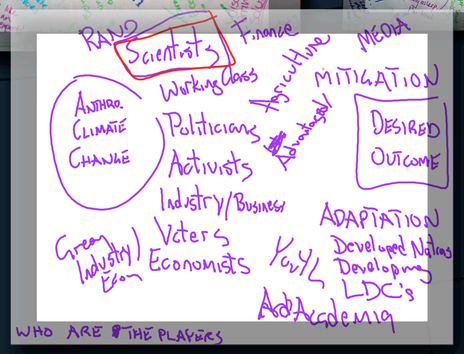
The Course

The Four-School Consortium is an agreement between four high schools – two public (Concord-Carlisle High School and Wayland High School) and two private (Concord Academy and Middlesex School) – to rotate hosting a high-level, one semester seminar on a topic not offered in the regular curriculum of any of the schools. The course had traditionally been a history offering, but was broadened to allow other social science topics – in our case, Climate Change: Policy, Politics, and Action Behind the Science.

During the fall of 2011, Steve Lane and Jeff Yuhas taught the Climate Consortium. This represented a unique collaboration between a social studies teacher and a science teacher. The dynamic allowed for a greater emphasis on policy and messaging than found in most climate change courses, which typically focus on just the science of climate change. The goal of teaching the course this way was to have a class of aspiring voters leave with the tools necessary to critically assess how science is portrayed by the media and is understood by the electorate and see how this dynamic shapes public policy.







Rather than focusing on the science, the course shifted to discuss how scientific research is filtered and repackaged for consumption by the general public. In short, we focused on the impact of the message – as delivered by media, politicians, policy makers, and corporate and environmental advocates – instead of the science itself.

The course slowly evolved into three predominant topics:

1. Science and Public Trust
2. Politics and Policy
3. Approaches to the Problem

Uses of Social Media

The primary challenges in offering a course to students from four different schools is communication among the 12 students, and between the students and teachers.

Using Facebook was integral to our course, and we will certainly make greater use of it if we teach the course again.

A private Facebook group was set up, with the instructors as the only administrators. (It should be noted that the students were able to join the Group without being Facebook "friends" of the instructors.)

From a teaching standpoint, Facebook provided a common, free, on-line environment for posting assignments, making class announcements, and initiating discussions.

Students would post draft copies of their presentations allowing for both teacher and peer comments.

The students formed an online support group where they would help each other out if they did not fully understand assignments.

Urgency and Hope

Problems to be addressed in the course:

Policy: can a democratic government create effective climate change policy that addresses the needs of all stakeholders involved?

- Understanding historical and economic issues behind perspectives on climate change
- Who are all the stakeholders? What are the connections between them all?
- Are all stakeholders' "needs" equally valid? Whose needs get priority, and why?
- What does the public care about? What should politicians care about?
- Mitigation vs. adaptation?

Messaging: Is science loosing the messaging battle?

- What is the distance between sound scientific conclusions and public opinion? Who / what shapes public opinion?
- Should scientists also be political advocates? Have scientists lost the trust of the general public?
- Complexity: Is it possible to craft an understandable public message that conveys complex scientific information?

Maintaining Hope:

- Keeping focus on how to affect change
- Not getting lost in the science
- Allowing for difference of opinion while still trying to move toward some kind of action
- Dealing with complexity without letting it wear folks down