**The Sea As A Time Machine: A creative workshop method for exploring thoughts and feelings about climate change**

*Background:*

This method has been devised as part of an AHRC research project, ‘Peat, Diesel and Seaweed: A Poetic Inquiry into the Green Transition in Northwest Highland Coastal Communities’. It was originally a fun process sharing an idea that I had had while sailing, which I thought would be a nice game to play at the seaside during a creative writing retreat with some of my students. I write fiction, both historical and speculative, and I find being at sea on my boat to be a very conducive atmosphere for writing, not least because it’s easy to imagine I am in another time: the wind, sea state, tides and even much of the wildlife are much as they were back in the iron age or will be in the future; and out at sea, most human impacts on the landscape are no longer visible. I have jokingly described the sea as a time machine many times and then more seriously wrote an essay on the topic, published in *Northwords Now,* after my historical trilogy, *The Stone Stories,* was published in 2017. During my work on ‘Gorm’, a research project using poetic inquiry, which I did for the Northwest Highlands Geopark in 2022, I wrote a poem called ‘Time Machine’ consisting of statements and words used by two research participants, both sailors. That project was exploring how local people feel about climate change and the sea, and as both of these participants had positive attitudes about climate action, I decided to explore whether the imaginative work of considering the sea as a time machine could have a positive effect on thoughts and feelings about climate change. My students at the retreat seemed to enjoy the ‘game’ and were markedly more cheerful afterwards. So I combined all this experience and devised the following workshop process, which I ran at the International Creative Research Methods Conference in Manchester, September 2023, and have subsequently used with two groups of young people, once in Cromarty, once in Ullapool. I am fascinated by tides and very influenced by the Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite, who is credited with starting the movement known as ‘tidalectics’, which treats knowledge as tidal, coming and going, washing in and washing away and out, but the workshop doesn’t require any particular philosophical position.

*Materials needed*

* pens and pencils for all participants,
* paper waves in at least two colours (I use pale blue and dark blue)
* paper strips in at least two other colours (I have used white and yellow, or sometimes, pieces of paper with two different shells drawn on them, a periwinkle and a whelk, for example, or paper in the shape of seaweed fronds, in green and brown)

*Workshop Method (total time 45 minutes)*

1. Explain that this workshop will explore how we can use the sea imaginatively as a time machine to learn from the past and look bravely into the future. Get any necessary permissions to gather words from participants.
2. Hand out a white strip of paper (or a periwinkle or whatever you choose as your ‘before’ paper) and get them to write a word or phrase on it. Ask participants ‘How do you feel about climate change?’
3. Gather in the ‘before’ phrases, and hand out the pale blue and dark blue waves, one of each to each participant.
4. Introduce the workshop process and read a poem (I read ‘Time Machine’, see below, and explain the process that generated it, see above). Talk about tides – this exercise uses the tide as a metaphor for time more generally, with the present moment as mid-tide, the past as low tide and the future as high tide. Ask the participants to imagine themselves (if they aren’t really there) on the sea shore at the mid-tide mark. Ask them to surrender themselves to the ocean and allow the tide to go out. ‘As the water level falls, imagine yourself going back in time to some earlier year either when you were happy yourself and have fond memories, or a time before your birth when you would like to have lived or when you think the world was better in some way than now. Imagine that time, immerse in the past.’
5. Ask participants to use all five senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch), and to defy rationality, to really be in that time. Then write a word, some words or a phrase about that time on a pale blue paper wave.
6. Get everyone to tell the group the time they went back to. ‘Tell us *when* you were.’ Don’t let anyone bluster or be vague, you need them to specify a year, or number of years (or days, weeks, etc) ago. Don’t ask people to elaborate or explain what it was like or share what they have written and stop them if they start reading or sharing. You don’t want to break the spell, but this task makes it feel like a shared group activity and gives you a sense of the range of times and in particular, who went furthest into the past and who is closest to the present. Usually, I find this ranges from someone in deep time, millions or at least tens of thousands of years ago, to yesterday or this morning.
7. Now the tide will rise again and participants should take themselves imaginatively out into the future exactly the same time period as they went back. ‘You must go as far into the future as you were in the past, taking some good thing from the past with you.’ Ask them to imagine the future again, use all five senses again, use the good thing from the past in some way and write something down from the future, this time on their dark blue wave.
8. Move everyone into their temporal order. This can be chaotic and fun and the best way I find to do it is to get the earliest and latest people to stand on either side of the room, and then ask the group to self-organise in temporal order. It’s hilarious and that’s part of the point. You can just stand back and laugh (or join in, if you did the exercise yourself).
9. Start from the person who was furthest in the past and is now furthest in the future and work back to now, hearing what everyone has written. Encourage people to read what they have actually written on their waves. If people do not want to share, that is fine, but if so, they may be willing perhaps at least to say what the good thing was that they took with them from the past. Gather in the waves, if people are willing to give them to you.
10. Hand out a yellow strip of paper (or a whelk or whatever you choose as your ‘after’ paper) and get them to write a word or phrase on it. Ask participants ‘How do you feel about climate change?’ Gather these papers in.
11. Discuss anything that participants want to raise.

*Variation if working in an online environment*

Steps 2, 9 and 10: Participants can use the chat to share their phrases and writings.

Steps 6 can be spoken or use the chat.

For step 8 to work, you will need to keep a careful note at step 6, and while step 7 is happening, create a running order to call people to share that follows the temporal sequence.

**Time Machine**

*(with thanks to Alan Rankin and Murdo McPherson)*

It’s a time machine, the sea.

From out in the Minch, you’re seeing the land

as the Lord of the Isles would have seen it.

You sail along, part the water,

it folds in behind.

You’ve made no trace.

You’re moving silently,

self-reliant in an environment

that has hardly changed for eons.

If you can read the geology

it tells the full deep time story.

It’s all just there for your imagination to see

with a real sense of discovery,

of days gone by on the sea highways –

Viking boatmen who named these landmarks,

Spanish sailors who came to grief in the Armada time,

the puffer trade, like clockwork,

on the old sea roads.

Here’s the past. It’s not long ago

boats were vital

to the very existence of these communities.

In so many anchorages you can see

where stones have been cleared

to make a little slip

for a small boat

to go fishing from the bottom of the croft.

These people lived their lives

close to the sea, dependent on it.

Our economies have revolved

around the shoreline:

close in you see a salmon bothy, lazy beds,

derelict homes, ruins,

old shielings going back to earth.

Someone lived there,

did a lot of work there,

took their livestock out to graze

in that now uninhabited spot.

Things are fragile.

The kelp industry has been and gone.

Yet the tide keeps coming in and out

and on the sea you can see

straight back into times past

and out into the future too

maybe.

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