

## Climate Change Catastrophe!

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### Keywords

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### Context

Climate Change Catastrophe! is a filmed performance piece devised through a knowledge exchange collaboration between young people from schools across the North East of England, researchers from Newcastle University and theatre company Cap-a-Pie. Based in Newcastle, Cap-a-Pie creates touring theatre, community and education projects. They have been working in partnership with Newcastle University on projects since 2012 across different departments. Drawing on this long-standing relationship, producer Katy Vanden from Cap-a-Pie reached out to their existing contacts at the University with the idea of collaborating on a theatre show about climate change involving young people and was introduced, via the former Institute for Sustainability at Newcastle University, to Dr Alistair Ford in the School of Engineering.

Alistair Ford's research specialism focuses on the direct and indirect impacts of climate events on city systems in the form of heatwaves or flood events, including the impact of extreme temperatures on railway networks. The theatre team were also introduced to researchers working on water treatment and waste water sustainability, carbon capturing and future weather predictions, with an emphasis on devising practical solutions to stop and mitigate against the ecological changes which are already in force. The decision to collaborate with engineers engaged in practical initiatives in the local area was one that came to have a profound impact on the young people involved in the project, as it exposed them to tangible solutions to a problem which can seem insurmountable and overwhelming.

Securing funding for the project involved a time-intensive jigsaw of applications and match-funding requests, often a huge drain on time and resources for cultural practitioners. The performance was supported by the Royal Academy of Engineering (which was only made possible through the partnership with the School of Engineering at Newcastle Uni), Arts Council

England. the Ray Wind Fund (from the Ray Wind Farm which sits on the Ray Estate in Northumberland), the Newcastle Culture Investment Fund from the local authority and Newcastle University.



*Filming*  
©2020 Katy Vanden

After an unsuccessful initial funding request to the Arts Council England, Cap-a-Pie were eventually successful in securing an investment to help transform the project into an online learning resource.

## Processes and Outputs

To make the show, Cap-a-Pie worked with Key Stage 2 young people from across the North of England, in collaboration with the theatre's professional cast and creative team, and scientists and engineers from Newcastle University. The project ran from January 2019 to November 2021, engaging 397 young people in creating the show, 2340 audience members, almost 400 students via digital activities and 150 students at in-person workshops.

A pilot project, funded by the Royal Academy of Engineering, was completed in early 2019 through an organic and interactive feedback loop

between the young people, researchers and performers which took place in classrooms and performance spaces.

For the main project, the interactive school workshops and lessons - which were scheduled for the early part of 2021 - were unable to take place due to the pandemic. The Cap-a-Pie team transformed the project into an interactive digital programme. Having worked with schools before, the theatre team understood many of the challenges faced by teachers, and knew that they would be under even more pressure due to the pandemic and teaching remotely. So the team focused on providing learning materials that were as user-friendly as possible for the teachers involved. Research-based creative activities were designed, and lesson plans and teaching formats were provided. The teachers provided feedback and ideas from the children, whilst the researchers provided recorded videos about their work and took part in live Q&As with the young people over Zoom. The performers and researchers were able to interact directly with the children and through the creative work they had completed in the classroom, to hear their concerns about climate change and speak to them about the research and work taking place to tackle the crisis. All of this information was adapted into the performance by the theatre company. A teacher commented, "I could see from ... the amount of work that the kids are doing ... you could tell that they were interested in it." And one young person commented: "It made me want to save the world."

The performance was recorded and adapted into a digital show. In May 2021 the performance was released as six short episodes on YouTube. The performance was then chosen to be shown at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) and won the UK Green Gown award for Benefitting Society.

Audiences involved the school children themselves, parents, teachers and members of the public. A student who took part in the project commented, "I think it's very good that 'Climate Change Catastrophe!' is being shown at COP26, it's a better chance of kids' ideas getting out into the world."



*Hannah Goudie-Hunter and  
Liam Scarth in CCC!  
© Lindsay Duncanson*

Later in 2021, Cap-a-Pie and their collaborators from Newcastle University were able to visit the schools and engage in workshops with the young people involved in creating the show, as well as other young people who were new to the project.

Reflecting on the process, producer Katy Vanden acknowledges that one of the biggest challenges was managing the logistics of working with a number of schools at the same time, in addition to six researchers from the University. There was a heavy admin workload for the theatre company. In addition, there needed to be a clear project focus from the start, as many school children would naturally conflate all environmental concerns into one overwhelming issue. As the project was designed to try and mitigate the climate anxiety prevalent amongst many young people, it was important for the researchers and performers to separate issues such as plastic pollution, rising carbon dioxide levels and extreme weather events, in order to address how they are being tackled.

“Climate change is a really serious issue which we didn’t want to minimise, but we felt it was important for the young people to feel energised and positive about what they could do to enact change after working with us, not anxious and afraid.” - Katy Vanden.



## Impact and Evaluation

Climate Change Catastrophe! was shown at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) and won the UK Green Gown award for Benefitting Society. It was also nominated for the International Green Gown award in the same category. Cap-a-Pie and Newcastle University are also shortlisted for a North East Culture Award for Best Arts & Education Partnership.

Feedback from students and teachers demonstrates the level of engagement from the young people involved in the project. “I think it’s good that the film is going to COP26 because it does show our ideas. And most of them won’t actually be able to happen, it just shows that something could happen.”

For teachers and students, it was important to be able to connect with experts in climate change. Before the project began, many of the young people were worried about the climate crisis. As one teacher said, “A big concern of mine was the number of children in my class that came with climate change anxiety.”

*Cap-a-Pie creative team  
Hotspur Primary School  
© Mark Savage*



Throughout the project there were lots of opportunities for the young people to meet climate change experts from Newcastle University who

were working on solutions to the crisis. A teacher explained how this helped the young people contextualise and understand the issue and how we can make changes, “The project was brilliant, especially when we talked to the engineer from the university... One of the children asked the question, ‘Is this it? Have we messed it up now? Is there no way back?’ and he [the engineer] said ‘No, if we change things now.’ You could see the children go okay, we can get on top of it.”

Working with the engineers from Newcastle University was absolutely invaluable to creating the show, and demonstrates the strength of collaborations between schools and research that are facilitated and animated by the arts. Dr Alistair Ford, Newcastle University, said “Cap-a-Pie has helped us to engage with local young people on a topic that really matters - climate change.”

During the project evaluation, teachers reported that they felt more confident delivering creative activities around climate change. One teacher commented, “They [Cap-a-Pie] really went above and beyond with the materials that they provided for the online learning.”

For Cap-a-Pie, the collaboration demonstrated the importance of partnerships working across academic, creative, and community sectors. The success of the project also reveals how creative arts organisations can perform a vital role in communicating complex engineering ideas to the general public. The University researchers and engineers also learnt that children have the freedom of imagination to think up climate solutions that have not yet been considered by adults working on the issue, and by forming a direct and creative link between these two groups the theatre team provided a positive lens to look towards the future with a constructive outlook.

## **Additional Information**

<https://www.cap-a-pie.co.uk/shows/climate-change-catastrophe>

[Cap-a-Pie and the 'Climate Change Catastrophe!' | Culture Bridge : https://culturebridgenortheast.org.uk/news/climate-change-catastrophe](https://culturebridgenortheast.org.uk/news/climate-change-catastrophe)

[Green Gown Awards 2021: Benefitting Society - Newcastle University - Winner | Sustainability Exchange : https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/green\\_gown\\_awards\\_2021\\_benefitting\\_society\\_newc](https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/green_gown_awards_2021_benefitting_society_newc)