

# SUITCASE STORIES IN YOUR HANDS

Exploring climate adaptation through  
participatory storytelling with young people

Please let us know how you get on at:

 [@YSJSocial](https://twitter.com/YSJSocial)

 [c.heinemeyer@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:c.heinemeyer@yorks.ac.uk)



For young  
people  
aged 11+

Suitcase Stories is a drama-led approach to climate education that uses storytelling to explore climate adaptation. Climate change can be an emotionally overwhelming topic; the Suitcase Stories approach brings to it a spirit of curiosity and open-ended questioning, and allows young people to steer the process.

This short guide will support you to lead a Suitcase Stories project with your own class or youth group. It provides suggested activities for five phases of the project, although they might intertwine as you follow your students' interests. It will enrich the process if you or your students can connect online with a group of young people living on the 'climate frontlines' (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, Australia) for story sharing – however we have provided a range of freely available online true stories covering a wide range of experiences.

If time permits, you may be able to spend one or two sessions on each phase, or condense them into a shorter period by simply engaging with one stimulus story, and using the activities below selectively. Ensure you leave enough time for young people to rehearse their stories and share them with the school or wider community.

## Why climate adaptation?

Learning from the stories of how those on the climate frontlines are adapting focuses young people's attention on climate justice, and practical solutions to build community resilience.

## Why suitcase stories?

The activity involves researching true stories, but also working imaginatively to create performances that pack into suitcases, so that students become empowered storytellers of the climate crisis.

You can read more about Suitcase Stories and watch the project films at:

[www.yorks.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice/research-themes/ecological-justice/suitcase-stories](http://www.yorks.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice/research-themes/ecological-justice/suitcase-stories)

## PHASE 1: Exploring storytelling and climate adaptation

### Exploring the idea of 'adaptation':

#### Freeze – Hold – Change

Stand in a circle. One student adopts a freeze in the centre of the circle (e.g. kneeling down with hands cupped). Their neighbour joins them, adopting a position which interacts with the first student's pose (e.g. Student 2 pretends to pour water into Student 1's hands). Student 1 then returns to stand in the circle, leaving Student 2 frozen in position. Student 3 then enters the freeze, taking a different pose that changes the story (e.g. planting a tree which Student 2 now appears to be watering). Continue around the circle, each student adapting to others' ideas. Discuss with the group the different scenarios that emerge.

### Exploring students' personal relationships to different places, and existing knowledge of local and global issues: *The Map Game*

**LOCAL:** Create as large as possible an empty space in the room. First it will represent the local area (town/village) – decide together the location of certain key landmarks (school, town hall, parks, shopping centres, hills, etc). Ask students to go and stand in a place:

- Which has important childhood memories for you?
- Where you feel really confident or independent?
- Where people can go if they need support?
- Which needs more care, or transformation?

In each case, ask individual students to tell the group why they've chosen that place. This will draw out stories of memories, identities, local institutions and networks, problems and issues – suggesting ways in which the local environment and economy relate to wellbeing.

**GLOBAL:** Now the space represents a map of the world. Again, agree which continents are in which area of the room. Ask students to stand in a place:

- Which is important to their family
- Where they would love to go
- Where people are experiencing the impacts of climate change

Discussion and storytelling will draw out students' global connections (e.g. family in different countries), appreciation of diverse habitats and cultures, and existing knowledge of environmental issues, which can act as starting points for your Suitcase Stories process.

*"...ask students to give you feedback on your storytelling style and how you could have made it more vivid or compelling."*

## PHASE 2: Listening and telling as research

### Modelling storytelling: *Facilitators' stories*

Model the power of storytelling by telling students a Suitcase Story of your own. Research a story of climate adaptation using the example stories at the end of this document, your own experience, observations, or wider reading. Prepare by filling a small suitcase with some props that help you tell your story. Tell it informally, without a script, lifting out each prop in turn to help students visualise what happened. Afterwards, ask students to give you feedback on your

storytelling style and how you could have made it more vivid or compelling.

If you have little time for student-led independent research in your Suitcase Stories project, the story you bring can be the stimulus for everything that follows.

### Exploring local climate resilience: *Pooling local knowledge*

Divide students into groups, each with a large sheet of paper. Ask each group to nominate a facilitator and a scribe. Brainstorm lists of local organisations which contribute to community resilience and mutual aid, and any knowledge students have of how they operate. Discussion afterwards can draw out how groups which appear to be unconnected to climate (e.g. sports teams, faith groups, 'Friends Of' groups,

cultural organisations, youth groups, mental health support) all create networks which help in times of crisis (e.g. flooding), or can be part of climate solutions (e.g. resource sharing, educating people, looking after green spaces, strengthening youth voice).

### Skills for unscripted storytelling: *Beginnings, middles and endings*

Discuss with students: what makes a good story? Using one of their own stories (perhaps from *The Map Game*), or your own Suitcase Story, ask them in groups to either draw a storyboard of the four or six really key moments in the story, or make physical images of these moments using their bodies. They should present these to the whole class as a flowing sequence of images that tells the story in miniature. Alternatively, ask groups to choose a single moment that is the pivot or 'turning point' of the whole story and share this with the whole class, explaining why it's so pivotal.

Discuss why beginnings and endings can be the most challenging, and important, parts of a story to get right. These are the moments when storytellers need to establish their authority and relationship with the story and the audience. Ask small groups to practise the opening, and the final sentences, of their stories. Now set up a storytelling performance space, with the class sitting as audience. Ask each group to enter the performance space confidently, tell the beginning of their story, leave a 5-second pause, then tell its ending. The rest of the class' role is to applaud them wildly when they are finished!



## PHASE 3: Choosing your destination and forming storytelling groups

### Choosing your journey: *Suitcase Game*

Stand in a circle and place a selection of suitcases and bags in the middle. Invite individual students to step forward, pick up a bag, and walk out of the circle with it as if heading on a journey. By the way they walk and move they should wordlessly show what sort of journey they are going on and how they feel about it: are they excited? Hesitant? Fearful? Is it an adventure or are they fleeing from something, moving house or simply going to work? (You might want to take the first journey yourself, to model this for students.)

Now ask students to call to mind all the stories and issues they have considered so far in the process. What country or issue do they want to explore, what story of climate adaptation do they want to tell, what journey do they want to take audiences on? Any student may now enter the circle, inform everyone, "I'm going on a journey to (insert destination)", and pick up the best luggage item for that journey. The destination could be far away or very local. Once several students have named their story destination, others may choose which groups to join, according to which story interests them the most. These groups will work together for the rest of the project, using their chosen suitcases, developing their stories through devising.

In a condensed version of the process, where the teacher has already chosen the story for the whole class, this activity might still be useful to explore how students feel about it.

## PHASE 4: Devising as research

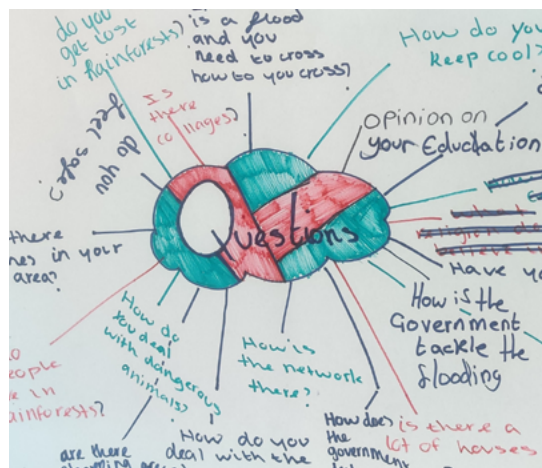
### Learning from experts by experience: *Dream Interview*

In their groups, students imagine a group of young people their age who live in the place where their story is to be set. They brainstorm all the questions they'd like to ask them about their lives, how climate change affects them and how they are adapting to it.

They then spend some time researching around these questions, before taking turns to be in role as these other students and be interviewed by the rest of the group, answering the questions as best they can. (Of course, if you can make contact with a real group of young people to interview, so much the better!)

### Developing a central character: *Role On The Wall*

On a large sheet of paper, each group draws a stick figure. This will be their central character, around whom they will craft their story. Through discussion they agree the character's name, age, gender, family, friends, favourite childhood memory, talents, employment/education, interests, dreams, fears, difficulties. They draw or write representations of these things on appropriate locations on the stick figure (e.g. friends near the heart, debt in the pocket!). Each group tells their character's life story to the class.



### Generating the storyworld: *Blind Guiding*

Students work in pairs (within their groups). One student in each pair is blindfolded and takes the elbow of the other, their guide. The room becomes the area where the group's character lives. Guides take their partners around the space, drawing their attention to landmarks, obstacles, sounds, smells, habitats, dangers (e.g. "Duck, we're passing underneath the village laundry lines. ...now taste this water from the well, it's a bit muddy but not bad...It's getting noisier as we approach the market.")

### Using objects to thicken the story: *This Is Not A Shawl*

Place a simple object like a shawl in the centre of the circle. Any young person can come forward and explain how it fits into their story (this will involve developing details of the story), saying for example "This is not a shawl, it's the cloth Tamara's granny gave her to filter water from the well". Now place numerous objects in the centre (you might ask each student to bring a selection of objects from home to contribute to the process). Young people can come forward and 'claim' them for their own stories and their own suitcases, by explaining their link to the story.

## PHASE 5: Telling your story

### Polishing your Suitcase Story

Once students have their character, storyworld, and props they can use strategies from the previous phases to develop, refine and rehearse their suitcase story. Storyboarding, 'Dream Interview', and 'Beginnings, Middles and Endings' will be particularly useful. Students may find they need to do additional research, and source additional props. Discourage scripting unless absolutely necessary as this will hinder young people's eye contact and engagement with their audience; repeat performance is much more useful. It is valuable to pair groups together to give each other feedback.

### Performing your Suitcase Story

Talk to the group about what audiences they want to reach with their stories. Stories could be performed in school assemblies, community festivals or events, or filmed for students to share with online audiences. Ensure there is time for audience Q&A and feedback following the stories, so students can reflect out loud on their process and intentions. You might want to follow up by talking about the work of local or international organisations which support climate adaptation or community resilience, to encourage the audience to contribute or get involved with them.

### Reflecting on learning

First ask each student to write on a scrap of paper their most memorable moment from the Suitcase Stories process. Pass around an empty suitcase and as each student puts their memory in it, they tell the group what it is and why it was important to them.

Invite each suitcase group in turn to sit at the front of the class and be interviewed by the rest of the group. You could follow up with individual written reflections using prompts.



Photographs of Suitcase Stories project carried out at Batley Girls High School, 2022

Real-life stories of climate adaptation with simple videos/audios – UK EXAMPLES:

- 1 *Surplus To Purpose* intercept food that is going to landfill and redistribute it: [www.surplus2purpose.com](http://www.surplus2purpose.com)
- 2 *Season Well* teach people to forage and cook seasonal food that is often growing in our towns, cities and parks: [www.seasonwell.co.uk](http://www.seasonwell.co.uk)
- 3 *Cornwall Beaver Project* – rewilding landscapes to boost biodiversity and protect towns from flooding: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=evEgbnouPd8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evEgbnouPd8)
- 4 *We Are Seacroft* are creating a community response to the energy crisis. For example, they have funded 1000 slow cookers to be distributed across the community, as a slow cooker uses less energy than oven or gas. They have engaged [www.groundwork.org.uk/projects/green-doctor](http://www.groundwork.org.uk/projects/green-doctor) to visit hundreds of houses and give advice to people about how they can save energy.

Real-life stories of climate adaptation with simple videos/audios – GLOBAL EXAMPLES:

- 1 The *Floating School* in Makoko, Nigeria, designed so that children can have a year-round education: [www.theguardian.com/cities/video/2016/feb/23/water-world-makoko-floating-school-lagos-kunle-adeyemi](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/video/2016/feb/23/water-world-makoko-floating-school-lagos-kunle-adeyemi)
- 2 The *Palestine Heirloom Seed Library*, sharing cultural knowledge and seed varieties suited to the climate and soil: [www.mothersofinvention.online/s3-ep-4](http://www.mothersofinvention.online/s3-ep-4)
- 3 The solar-powered ironing cart invented by 14-year-old *Vinisha Umashankar* to improve health, air quality and incomes: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfEmRCnPiJo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfEmRCnPiJo)
- 4 *William Kamkwamba*, Malawian teenager who designed windmills to bring electricity and irrigation to his village: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=arD374MFk4w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arD374MFk4w)
- 5 Indigenous knowledge of ancient potato varieties being used to build farmers' resilience to climate change in the Andes and Himalayas: '*Guardians of Diversity*' film: [www.iied.org/film-documents-visit-guardians-diversity-potato-park](http://www.iied.org/film-documents-visit-guardians-diversity-potato-park) (could be paired with the UK example *Season Well*).
- 6 The charity *Practical Action* shares numerous innovative approaches to climate adaptation, [www.practicalaction.org/news-media/2022/01/13/reusing-waste-to-adapt-to-climate-change](http://www.practicalaction.org/news-media/2022/01/13/reusing-waste-to-adapt-to-climate-change)

Est.  
1841

YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY



Natural  
Environment  
Research Council

