

Promoting Peer-to-Peer Learning *for* Climate Adaptation



Peer-to-peer learning (“peer learning”) is defined as the “acquisition of knowledge and skill” by peers “helping each other to learn and learning themselves by doing so”¹.

Peer learning allows us to apply new knowledge from a similar context (perhaps at a different location or scale) and consider how it can be related to our own particular situation and in our own work. This can happen organically through existing networks and relationships or it can be fostered through facilitated opportunities, such as events or convenings of communities of practice. Peer learning is unique in that it is rooted in the belief that everyone has something to both teach and learn from their peers.

Peers can be anyone from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers—here we focus on climate adaptation practitioners.

Why is peer learning effective?

- We learn well from those we can relate to and we are responsive to those who are part of our own “in-groups.”
- We look to those who we know and work with to help us make sense of new and complex information.
- Peer learning allows for those more knowledgeable to meet peers where they are and bring them up to their level of understanding in a more low-stakes way.
- Peers are often trusted messengers who know which pieces of information are especially relevant because of shared common experiences and the nature of our work.
- Peer learning allows us to replicate and scale up what is working by sharing real world experiences and responses to challenges.
- Peer learning also provides a space for diverse voices to come together around a collective goal while also being able to share their unique experiences.

Why is peer learning important for climate adaptation work?

- Climate change is an urgent crisis and there is literally no time to reinvent the wheel with each initiative.
- We are often still figuring out the best adaptation actions to take and our work requires adaptive management and iterative thinking.
- As such, it is essential to come together as a community of practice to share lessons learned and build on each other’s work to have any hope of responding and transforming quickly enough.
- By sharing with one another, climate adaptation practitioners can be more nimble when advancing best practices and amplifying the most impactful work as we continue to establish our field.
- Climate change can feel like an overwhelming challenge, but having real peers sharing how they’ve taken action can be inspiring.
- Peer learning practices also emphasize building community and developing relationships as part of the learning process, which has many co-benefits for climate resilience.
- Happily, there are already many opportunities to engage with fellow practitioners through adaptation networks and collaboratives that offer a cross-sectoral community of peers. These networks bring together practitioners often working in a unified direction to hopefully achieve collective social impact.
- Many of these groups are interested in promoting peer knowledge exchange and leveraging peer learning strategies to advance their goals.



Patrick Smith shows fellow landowners and neighbors a wood duck nesting box that he designed. He and his wife Bet routinely host educational woods walks at their property to share about wildlife habitat and managing for resilience to climate change. The Fen, Woodstock, CT.

Photo: Lisa Hayden, New England Forestry Foundation

Facilitating peer learning among adaptation practitioners

As you bring peer learning into your practices, consider how to:

- Share information from trusted peer messengers
- Provide neutral convenings with a shared safe space to discuss ideas
- Emphasize building positive relationships and trust among peers
- Ensure participant-driven topics
- Make engaging in peer learning as easy as possible
- Be clear about your objectives for the peer knowledge exchange.

Women woodland owners help each other out in preparing their chainsaws for use at a women's workshop organized by the Forest Stewards Guild in southern Maine.

Photo: Amanda Mahaffey, Forest Stewards Guild



EXAMPLES OF PEER LEARNING IN ACTION

If you are hoping to incorporate more peer learning into your work, consider the many examples from groups across our region. Climate adaptation practitioners are facilitating peer knowledge exchange in a variety of ways from hands-on training to online sharing platforms to remote discussions.

There are also supporting practices and structures that can help set the stage for peer learning, such as the existence of already established networks. For example, the American Society of Adaptation Professionals' (ASAP) "Network of Networks" Group curates a Google Drive Resource Library where network coordinators can share examples of their outputs for others to build on or replicate in their work. The Mass ECAN-affiliated Forest Work Group compiled a list of ongoing projects with links and contact info as a complement to knowledge-sharing discussions.

KNOWLEDGE-SHARING CALL SERIES

Presidents' Climate Leadership Network

- The Presidents' Climate Leadership Network, run by Second Nature, facilitates peer knowledge exchange among colleges and universities through working groups on specific topics. For example, on calls of the resilience planning work group, colleges that have completed resilience assessments or climate action plans take turns sharing their plans, process, and lessons learned. Peers from other colleges can dive deep through questions and exchange sample plans and assessments through an easily accessible shared list.

NH Coastal Adaptation Workgroup

- The NH Coastal Adaptation Workgroup (CAW) is a collaboration of 24 organizations working to ensure ready and resilient coastal watershed communities. CAW facilitates peer-to-peer sharing in many ways. For example, CAW municipal staff/board members had suggested creating a space for them to get into the weeds about their work, such as how to incorporate climate into local ordinances. In response to these member needs, they started CAW Talks: bimonthly calls facilitated by the CAW co-chairs, with a speaker sharing about a particular topic/project followed by detailed discussion.

The Regional Collaboratives Forum (RCF)

- The RCF hosts bimonthly virtual convenings to support peer-learning among Regional Climate Collaboratives addressing climate impacts at the regional scale across the country. These facilitated discussions include questions such as "How have other collaboratives generated funding to initiate efforts and sustain their work long-term?" and "What communication or messaging strategies are effective to show the value added of having a collaborative to make the case for support?" The RCF is jointly facilitated by the Georgetown Climate Center, Institute for Sustainable Communities, and Local Government Commission.



NH Coastal Adaptation Workgroup members at a summit to exchange ideas and advance collaboration on coastal resilience.

Photo: Lisa Wise, NH CAW

CURRICULUM

Northeast Climate Adaptation Fellowship

- The Northeast Climate Adaptation Fellowship is a peer-to-peer curriculum for farmers, foresters, and advisors to empower their outreach about and adoption of adaptation practices. Fellows lead peer learning events to share the curriculum, which integrates climate science with land managers' knowledge and includes modules on vegetable/small fruit, dairy, tree fruit, and forestry.
- Diving deeper into one module, the vegetable/fruit growers program in 2021-2022 encourages peer knowledge exchange in three ways: 1) pairs of 1 farmer and 1 agricultural advisor learn from each other, 2) each pair conducts outreach to peers such as on-farm demos, and 3) the cohort of Fellows share their experiences. This Fellowship is a program of the USDA Northeast Climate Hub, Rutgers Climate Institute, and U. of Maine and was based on a robust curriculum review.²

Southern Vermont forester Alan Calfee hosts fellow natural resource professionals and foresters for a field exercise on how to manage Ash trees facing damage from the invasive Emerald Ash Borer insect.

Photo: Amanda Mahaffey, Forest Stewards Guild



EVENTS/WORKSHOPS

Forest Stewards Guild

- The Forest Stewards Guild facilitates peer-to-peer learning across a community of practice of forest stakeholders and managers interested in climate adaptation and carbon mitigation. For example, their Forums on the Emerald Ash Borer, an invasive insect, in Vermont brought together consulting foresters for field exercises to hear personal experiences and recommendations from fellow foresters who had already dealt with managing trees impacted by the pest.

Climate Community Leaders Program

- Climate Access and the City of Boston organized the Climate Community Leaders Program (now through Greenovate Boston) to shape local climate policy and community resilience. They facilitated events for peer-to-peer collaboration among community leaders and trained them as ambassadors in the Boston area to increase awareness of climate hazards, incorporate concerns into climate planning, and involve members in local projects. Community leaders within the same training cohort worked together to engage their shared networks on climate action and to combine knowledge and resources into their events. Leaders from previous cohorts served as mentors for new leaders, resulting in truly organic peer knowledge exchange.



East Boston community leaders share their knowledge and experiences as part of a Climate Community Leaders training by Climate Access and the City of Boston.

Photo: City of Boston



Left: Community members share their knowledge during Greenovate Boston workshops. Photo: Greenovate Boston

Right: Members of the Massachusetts Ecosystem Climate Adaptation Network’s Forest Work Group discuss management practices with co-benefits for carbon sequestration and adaptation of forest ecosystems at the Mass ECAN Annual Conference. Photo: UMass Amherst

Additional Resources and References

1. Topping, K. J. 2005. Trends in peer learning. *Educational psychology*, 25(6), 631-645.
 2. Schattmann, R. et al. 2019. Climate change curricula for adult audiences in agriculture and forestry: A review and Social Learning, Resilience & Land Management Transformations in the Northeast US: A Literature Review for the Climate Adaptation Fellowship
- Catanzaro, Paul F. 2013. Defining Peer-to-Peer Learning. University of Massachusetts, Cooperative Extension Outreach Pamphlet.
- White, Alissa et al. 2018. Social Learning & Peer-to-Peer Exchanges for Outreach and Extension Program Development. Climate Adaptation Fellowship, University of Vermont.

For even more examples of peer learning events, see the Institute of Sustainable Communities and Women Owning Woodlands.

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