

The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change

Volume 1 *The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change: Conference Proceedings*

Article 6

2021

The Emotional Curriculum of Climate Justice Education: An Existential Toolkit

Jennifer Atkinson

University of Washington - Bothell Campus, jenwren@uw.edu

Sarah J. Ray

Humboldt State University, sarah.ray@humboldt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/sustainability>



Part of the [Environmental Studies Commons](#)

APA Citation

Atkinson, J., & Ray, S. J. (2022). The Emotional Curriculum of Climate Justice Education: An Existential Toolkit. *The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change*, 1(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55671/2771-5574.1003>

This Executive Summary is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. It has been accepted for inclusion in The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

The Emotional Curriculum of Climate Justice Education: An Existential Toolkit

Jennifer Atkinson (University of Washington - Bothell Campus), Sarah J. Ray (Humboldt State University)

Abstract

While we tend to focus on the physical impacts of climate change, our ecological crisis is also taking a significant emotional toll. This executive summary outlines ways that anxiety, fear, hopelessness, and guilt impact student learning in Environmental Systems and Societies (ESS) Programs and immobilizes young people from getting engaged in climate solutions. We also suggest that ESS curriculum is itself partly responsible for these spiraling emotions among students. In response to the need to better understand this emotional register of teaching and learning about our climate crisis, we outline a set of college-level teaching strategies – titled an “Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice” —whose purpose is to help students and educators develop the resilience to cope with our climate emergency.

Overview

As the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice are felt by more people around the world (IPCC, 2021), despair about our future is on the rise. A raft of new studies identifies climate disruption as a mental health crisis (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Leiserowitz et al., 2018; Clayton et al., 2017). Within higher education, these emotional impacts are most pronounced in the field of ESS, where teachers and students are confronted with heartbreaking material at every turn (Pihkala, 2020; Wu et al., 2020). Processing and applying this difficult material across learning contexts can give rise to existential, emotional, and intellectual challenges that are too seldom made explicit in our teaching.

Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and nihilism not only compromise creative thinking and learning; they can also immobilize people from taking the kind of collective action needed to promote climate justice (Wallace, 2020; Davenport, 2017). Yet, educators across disciplines typically lack the knowledge and resources to help students deal with these difficult emotions. Indeed, many persist in communicating the scale and urgency of environmental problems without addressing their impact on students’ ability to learn or respond in meaningful ways (Eaton et al., 2016; Hickman, 2020). As exemplified by the COVID pandemic and recent movements for racial justice, our challenge today is to ensure that students don’t just have the analyses and content they need to address the climate crisis, but that they also have the existen-

tial tenacity to stay engaged in climate work and navigate the long emergency ahead.

Toward a pedagogy of emotional and collective resilience

We recognize that it is unconventional for Environmental Systems and Societies (ESS) curriculum to focus on affective, psychological, and existential skills. However, many educators are themselves partly responsible for their students' spiraling emotions. For example, by narrating climate change as the fault of a generic "humanity" rather than extractive structures that exacerbate human inequality too (Higgins, 2020; Harris, 2019), or by teaching students to eliminate their individual impacts on the planet through ecological footprint exercises, or by relentlessly pressing the urgency of these problems, ESS instructors fuel students' guilt, fear, and misanthropy (Ray, 2020; Kelsey, 2020; Kretz, 2017). These same instructors then wonder why their students find their courses disempowering, depressing, and anxiety-producing (Ray, 2018).

Proposed Resources for Climate Educators

To better understand and address this emotional register of teaching and learning about our climate crisis, we are curating a toolkit of college-level teaching strategies that help students across disciplines build resilience for a climate-changed future. Contributions have been submitted by educators from across disciplines, as well as activists, artists, psychologists, game designers, writers, and others actively integrating emotion into climate justice programming and teaching. These resources, which collectively aim to support students and educators confronting the existential fallout of climate injustice and disruption, will be published in 2022 as an edited collection titled *An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators*. Tools range from poetry- and arts-based activities to mindfulness practices, templates for workshops and discussion groups, creative writing assignments, service learning through community-based partnerships, and more.

What distinguishes our collection from existing resources on climate anxiety and grief is that the *Existential Toolkit* will offer teaching strategies and resources tailored specifically for college-level educators, rather than general/personal strategies for coping with climate despair. These are meant to be broadly accessible resources for all disciplines (as well as for those in non-academic or co-curricular settings), and for instructors/facilitators without prior experience addressing mental health dimensions of climate change.

In curating these resources, our team has selected assign-

ments and strategies that students themselves identified as effective through written feedback and testimonials. In particular, we prioritized tools that students said helped them develop a sense of agency and hope, enabled them to generate visions of a just and livable future, or helped them channel distress into collective action. While the considerable diversity of these interdisciplinary contributions makes it difficult to summarize a specific "solution" for producing those student outcomes, there are two prominent trends shared across resources featured in the collection.

First, these interventions acknowledge and make visible the often invisible and unacknowledged emotional dimensions of learning about climate breakdown and injustice. Too often, we do not voice difficult eco-emotions, which creates a sense of loneliness and powerlessness (Harvey et al., 2020; Hickman, 2020). Moreover, as psychologists like Davenport (2017), Lertzman (2015) and Randall (2009) argue, ecological losses that are not fully confronted and processed can lead to numbness, repression, cynicism, and apathy. Put another way, failing to acknowledge our pain in response to this crisis is yet another form of climate "denial." Opportunities for authentic conversation and deep listening, where students are welcomed to share those feelings, not only helps them overcome this denial, but student testimonies also identify such exchanges as comforting, empowering, and as sources of creative inspiration. Moreover, by explicitly acknowledging learners' emotional responses to course material, resources featured in our *Existential Toolkit* establish such emotional content as a legitimate subject of classroom discussion. This counteracts the tendency to pathologize climate anxiety and empowers students by reframing their distress as a "moral emotion" – a healthy and indeed compassionate response to the existential threats we face (Atkinson, 2021). Finally, centering emotion in the classroom allows students to connect with course materials in personal, idiosyncratic ways, thereby enriching and deepening their engagement with it (Cavanagh, 2016).

The second trend we have identified across contributions to this toolkit is an emphasis on building community. Indeed, student testimonies identify this aspect as the most empowering outcome across a range of classroom interventions. In the process of sharing difficult emotions or engaging in other activities that build trust and community with their peers, students say they feel less isolated and therefore more empowered to take action. They recognize that they don't have to shoulder the burden of climate action alone and can be part of a greater community working toward solutions in solidarity with each other (Ray, 2020; Brown, 2017).

Project Impact

In developing the *Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators*, we aim to provide resources for navigating the affective terrain of teaching and learning about power, privilege, identity, epistemological diversity, climate injustice, and ecological grief. This project will also enhance student learning and feelings of agency in seeking climate solutions and empower the Climate Generation to avoid despair and burnout as they take up the difficult work ahead.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J. (2021, Spring). Mourning climate loss: Ritual and collective grief in the age of crisis. *CSPA Quarterly* 32 (8-19).
- Brown, A. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.
- Cavanagh, S. (2016). *The spark of learning: Energizing the college classroom with the science of emotion*. West Virginia University Press.
- Clayton, S., & Karazsia, B. T. (2020). Development and validation of a measure of climate change anxiety. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 69: 101434.
- Clayton, S., Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). Mental health and our changing climate: Impacts, implications, and guidance. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica.
- Cunsolo, A. & Landman, K. (2017). *Mourning nature: Hope at the heart of ecological loss and grief*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Davenport, L. (2017). *Emotional resiliency in the era of climate change*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Eaton, M., Hughes, H., & MacGregor, J. (2016). *Contemplative approaches to sustainability*. Routledge.
- Harris, M. (2019, March 4). Indigenous knowledge has been warning us about climate change for centuries. *Pacific Standard*. <https://psmag.com/ideas/indigenous-knowledge-has-been-warning-us-about-climate-change-for-centuries>
- Harvey, A., Manley, J., & Hickman, C. (2020). Ecology, psychoanalysis and global warming: Present and future traumas. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34(4), 337-348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1843418>
- Hickman, C. (2020). We need to (find a way to) talk about ... eco-anxiety. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34(4): 411-424. DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166
- Higgins, A. (2020, May 11). Your climate anxiety is another person's existential crisis. *The New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/157660/climate-anxiety-another-persons-existential-crisis>
- IPCC (2021). *Climate Change 2021: The physical science basis. Contribution of working group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press. www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/
- Kelsey, E. (2020). *Hope matters: Why changing the way we think is critical to solving the environmental crisis*. Grey-stone Books.
- Kretz, L. (2017). Emotional solidarity: Ecological emotional outlaws mourning environmental loss and empowering positive change. In Cunsolo, A. & Landman, K. (Eds.), *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* (pp. 258-291). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Leiserowitz, A., et al. (2020, May 19). Climate change in the American mind: April 2020. *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*. Yale University and George Mason University. www.climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-in-the-american-mind-april-2020/2/
- Lertzman, R. (2015). *Environmental melancholia: Psychoanalytic dimensions of engagement*. Routledge.
- Pihkala, P. (2020). Anxiety and the ecological crisis: An analysis of eco-anxiety and climate anxiety. *Sustainability*, 12(19), 7836. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12197836>
- Randall, R. (2009). Loss and climate change: The cost of parallel narratives. *Ecopsychology* 1 (118-129).
- Ray, S. J. (2018). The Affective Arc of Undergraduate Environmental Studies Curricula. In Ladino, J., & Bladow, K. (Eds.), *Affective Ecocriticism* (pp. 299 – 319). University of Nebraska.
- Ray, S. J. (2020). *A field guide to climate anxiety*. University of California Press.
- Wallace, R. L., Greenburg, J. & Clark, S.G. (2020). Confronting anxiety and despair in environmental studies and sciences: An analysis and guide for students and faculty. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 10, 148-155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-020-00609-6>
- Wu, J., Snell, G., & Samji, H. (2020, September 9). Climate anxiety in young people: A call to action. *The Lancet*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(20\)30223-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30223-0)