



Developing Climate Literacy through Artistic Practice

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Abstract

This article describes a 120-minute professional development workshop on climate literacy for a cohort of urban arts school teachers. Our goal included engaging teachers in reflective conversation and providing language to describe climate emotions—particularly those affecting today’s adolescents, such as climate grief and eco-optimism. We identified tangible ways to make climate literacy part of their classrooms, including connecting climate conversations to existing course content as well as framing learning experiences within climate discourses.

Keywords

Arts education, ecojustice, climate emotions, professional development, climate literacy, hope

Overview

Heeding the call to respond to “visible results of ecological crises all over the world” (Foster & Turkki, 2023, p 91), we developed and implemented a 120-minute professional development workshop for 25 high school educators working at an urban arts school in Minnesota. Our goal included engaging teachers in reflective conversation (and ultimately curriculum development) about climate-specific narratives that center hope and cultivate optimism through artistic expression. Knowing that youth hold deep feelings about the climate crisis, even if they don’t openly express them in school, we also encouraged participants to develop climate literacy curricula that allow students to explore a spectrum of feelings often associated with the crisis (Kelsey, 2020).

Narrative Framing

Foster & Nella (2023) write: “The human-caused climate change, mass extinction of species, and broadly polluted areas have slowly started to convince a growing number of scholars from diverse fields and the general public that a collective ecological transformation is needed” (p. 91). In our experience as arts teacher trainers, conversation about the climate crisis often connotes doom and gloom; thus, thinking about the climate crisis from a place of hope while acknowledging that climate conversations draw upon deep feelings seemed an innovative approach in our field of arts education. We set about creating a professional development experience addressing key aspects of an ecological future with the goal of exploring what educators should know in order to support their students to develop climate literacy through artistic practice. Providing language to describe climate emotions—particularly those affecting today’s adolescents, such as climate grief and eco-optimism—felt essential. Equally important was creating learning opportunities for youth to explore these feelings in school. Key aspects of this process can be found in the table below.

Professional Development at a Glance

Title	Exploring Ecojustice through Arts Education
Unit Time	120 minutes
Grade Level(s)	Secondary K-12 Teachers
Core Text	"Climate Justice Literacy: Stories-We-Live-By, Ecolinguistics, and Classroom Practices"
Supporting Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Climate Change Promise by Apple • Dead Reckoning
Climate Literacy Terms	Eco-optimism, climate grief, "stories-we-live-by"
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how the climate crisis elicits feelings that impact adolescent youth (and all of us!) • Recognize the need to shift conversation on climate crisis from only doom and gloom to stories of hope and possibility • Identify and evaluate multimodal "stories-we-live-by" that focus on the environment to use in classrooms • Support youth to create new "stories-to-live-by" through artistic practice to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings about the future of the planet—to "re-story" the future as possible and hopeful

Knowing that our meeting time would be brief, we sketched a plan for the workshop to introduce climate literacy and guide teachers to reflect on the possibilities that could occur in their own classrooms in the subsequent academic year. We asked teacher participants to:

1. Consider their own thoughts and feelings about a climate future, including finding language to describe how they experience the climate crisis
2. Explore the intersection between climate “doom and gloom” stories and students’ mental health
3. Reflect on the importance of storytelling and artistic practice to effect change around social justice topics, including eco-justice (Foster & Turkki, 2023)
4. Brainstorm ways to integrate “stories we live by” (Damico, Baildon, and Panos, 2020) and artistic practice into curriculum so students could consider the impact of discipline-specific practices on a climate future
5. Commit to developing climate literacy in the classrooms at least once during AY 2024-2025

To accomplish these objectives, we asked teacher participants to talk with a person near them using the following questions as prompts to guide conversation: how do you feel about the climate crisis—do you trend more pessimistic or more optimistic when you consider the future of our planet? How might your views be different from your students’ perspectives? How might generational differences explain this, if at all? Using their discussion response as a basis for large group conversation, we introduced concepts related to ecological grief (Comtesse, Ertl, Hengst, Rosner, Smid, 2021), eco-optimism (Oziewicz, 2022), and eco-justice, or work that addresses environmental issues to understand how “social and ecological issues have the same root in modernity” (Foster & Turkki, 2023 p. 91).

To underscore this information, we shared two resources with attending teachers from contemporary media illustrating the connection between feelings and the climate crisis with the aim of considering how narratives shape public discourse about our climate future. First, we highlighted an article from the *New York Times* (Soloski, 2024), that describes how a “doom and gloom” approach to the climate crisis has not worked

effectively to engage global citizens in climate crisis conversations. This is significant because most adults have grown accustomed to hearing alarm bells ring—a fatalistic or dystopian attitude applied writ large to climate conversation—in a questionable attempt to build motivation and momentum around our planet’s future. When seen through an ecological lens, these stories frame the climate crisis as destructive. Why does this matter? It reinforces climate despair, which research shows does not mobilize action toward a solution for our future and may be contributing to unease among adolescent youth (Comtesse et al. 2021).

We shared Apple’s climate change commitment as the second exemplar, which is a short [video](#) outlining the company’s pledge to address the climate crisis. By the end of this video, some teacher participants were visibly moved by the film’s message (including a handful who were in tears) over Apple’s message: our climate future is high stakes. Using a large group discussion format, we then deconstructed the explicit and implicit messages woven into Apple’s climate commitment and connected these factors to notions of both “doom and gloom” as well as “hope” for a climate future.

As workshop participants reflected on ways to incorporate climate conversations into their classrooms, we offered “stories to live by” (Damico, Baildon, & Panos, 2020) as a possible avenue to explore with students. Sometimes described as “mental models” (p. 684), stories we live by are large structures holding social, cultural and other norms shared across communities. We shared examples of contemporary artists whose work addresses the daily impact of environmental issues, such as “[Dead Reckoning](#)”, a dance work created by KT Nelson and performed by San Francisco-based dance company, ODC (2014). Using these examples as a starting point, participants worked in small cross-disciplinary groups to brainstorm ideas for bringing this work into their own classrooms.

By the end of the workshop, teachers identified tangible ways to make climate literacy part of their classrooms. These included the following approaches to fostering critical thinking about the climate crisis:

1. Connect to existing course content (e.g., expanding a class focusing on social justice art to include climate justice as a subject of inquiry),

2. Frame course content within climate discourses (e.g. exploring climate justice, policy, and its impact on language in a world language classroom), and
3. Design an inquiry-based learning experience to examine course materials (e.g. investigating the climate-impact of printmaking materials while proposing alternate, more climate friendly resources)

Going Forward

Our professional development workshop began by acknowledging that for most educators, supporting climate conversations in the classroom may not have felt like a pressing need. While some had considered the personal impacts of the climate crisis—perhaps even experiencing feelings of panic or anxiety—few had incorporated climate-related topics into their teaching. Moreover, none had approached these topics in a way that fostered a sense of hope or optimism about the future. Generating workshop experiences to enhance how teachers amplify students' climate literacy—especially connecting students' feelings with visions for the future through artistic practice—underscores the need to consider the place of hope in climate conversations. Engaging youth to “re/creat[e] multimodal texts in the pursuit of social justice in their local and global communities (Janks 2010, as cited in Mayes & Center, 2023 p. 525) means shepherding youth through possible solutions for a climate future that hinges upon optimism, possibility, and delight.

In the future, we will continue to develop and deliver this professional development content to area schools, perhaps even as part of an extended summer workshop. Participating teachers could gather for multiple days to not only learn more about developing students' climate literacy but work in community with other K-12 teachers to develop tangible curricular materials as part of a community of practice. Importantly, our approach avoids “the types of scare tactics sometimes used in climate outreach” because “teaching young people about climate change can empower them and help alleviate concerns about climate change” (Baker, Loxton, and Sherren, 2013, p. 136). Amplifying a sense of climate hope and its connection to adolescent mental health through artistic expression can positively prepare our students for the future.

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