



Facts, Fictions, Doom, and Gloom

Three Principles of Climate Literacy Communication and Pedagogies

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Abstract

This article confronts the notion that engaging with climate crisis facts fosters doom and gloom. It outlines three principles of climate literacy pedagogies, suggesting that facts are especially useful when contextualized and appropriately balanced with inspiration, curiosity, or anger that motivates action.

Keywords

climate literacy pedagogy, Six Americas, climate facts, climate politics, doom & gloom, climate emotions, climate literacy

In April 2024, I presented at a colleague's undergraduate class at the University of Minnesota, introducing students to climate literacy. I shared a few sobering facts about the climate emergency, and then we read *The Fate of Fausto*. I thought I was making a call to action, but one of the students raised objections. This is all doom and gloom, she said, you're not telling us what to do. Although I cast [The Fate of Fausto](#) as a parable and warning about the consequences of human expansionism, the student interpreted the story to mean that humanity is doomed.

While other students spoke up in support or against the objection, we did not have enough time for discussion. I left the class disconcerted about my response. Is bringing up facts automatically doom and gloom? How else do we talk about the emergency as an emergency? A year later, I believe that educators need to be more intentional about framing our message and more strategic about preparing to engage with audiences that may not see things the way we do. This article outlines three principles related to practical applications of this notion.

Principle One

The goal of climate literacy pedagogy is to help move audiences toward the “Alarmed” position on the [Six Americas scale](#) proposed by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (2024). The six positions refer to sets of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that make a person less vs. more likely to support climate policies, demand change, and take action. The positions include the following:

- The Alarmed (28% of Americans): people convinced that global heating is happening, that it is caused by human activities, especially the emission of greenhouse gasses, and that it poses an existential threat to humanity. The Alarmed strongly support climate policies even if most “do not know what they or others can do to solve the problem” (Yale, 2024, n.p.).
- The Concerned (29% of Americans): people who share deep concerns of the Alarmed yet who also believe that “climate impacts are still distant in time and space” (Yale, 2024, n.p.) or that global heating can be contained even while the world continues to use fossil fuels. This speciously “common-sense position” (Guenther, 2024, p. 3)—created by decades of fossil fuel propaganda—is extremely dangerous as it is shared by many of the Alarmed, the Concerned, and people representing other positions except the Dismissive.
- The Cautious (15% of Americans): people who are unsure and haven’t made up their minds yet: “Is global warming happening? Is it human-caused? Is it serious?” (Yale, 2024, n.p.).
- The Disengaged (6% of Americans): people who are not interested in the topic at all.

- The Doubtful (11% of Americans): people who either dismiss the climate emergency completely or “they believe it is just a natural cycle. They do not think much about the issue or consider it a serious risk” (Yale, 2024, n.p.).
- The Dismissive (11% Americans): people who deny the reality of the climate crisis, seeing it as a hoax or ideological manipulation. The Dismissive is a polite term for climate deniers.

Even though teachers don’t know where students stand on this scale—or may not be able to ask ([Six Americas quiz](#))—this framework is helpful to bear in mind as most classrooms will likely include students representing a range of positions.

Principle Two

Once teachers learn to pay attention to feelings and beliefs expressed in students’ questions, they are better positioned to right-dial messaging based on where the student may be in the Six Americas scale. In my experience, three tips are especially important here:

Tip One

When faced with the Dismissive, do not engage. One exception is when you believe that other students would benefit from hearing the conversation.

In confronting denial, one good strategy for a teacher is to ask what professional organization or (inter)governmental bodies students or parents trust. This may mean inviting them to check the websites of leading organizations across domains: for economy, this could be [World Economic Forum](#) or [World Bank](#); for space exploration, it could be [NASA](#) or [ESA](#); for the military, it could be [the Pentagon](#), [NATO](#), [U.S. Army](#), [Navy](#) or [Air Force](#); for international bodies, it could be [United Nations](#), [UNESCO](#), or [World Health Organization](#); for science, it could be [EPA](#), [NOAA](#), or [IPCC](#). One of the best sources for specific tips to confront climate misinformation is [the Skeptical Science website](#). In general, however, trying to convince the Dismissive is a waste of time.

Tip Two

When addressing questions from the Alarmed or the Cautious, the double goal is to boost their engagement and sense of agency and to help them better cope with negative climate emotions: especially fatalism, despondency, and other varieties of anti-democratic doomerism that are widely prevalent today.

Both the Alarmed and the Cautious already know about the climate emergency. They know that defeating the fossil-fuel interests will require a systems change approach in which the governments' regulatory power and international cooperation are the main forces to catalyze transformation toward an ecological civilization. What they likely struggle with is helplessness (what can we do in the face of such massive forces?) and fear (what if it's too late?). The best response to helplessness and fear is collective empowerment: building a broad civil society movement of people who stand up for the planet. Such a movement is the only power to force states, nations, and elected officials to break from ecocidal bondage of fossil fuels. In these conversations, mobilization can be achieved through sharing specific examples of how students can fight for what they love (school projects, volunteering, civic engagement, community-oriented research projects, etc.) and through funneling outrage at the [destruction of the planet by the few at the cost of the many](#). Countering despondency with visions of action is crucial because anti-democratic doomerism plays into the manipulative narrative of the fossil fuel lobby.

Tip Three

When engaging with concerns raised by the Disengaged or the Doubtful, the goal is to plant a seed or spark interest.

This can be done by rising a question about [recent weather events that threatened people and property](#) or about [cheaper, healthier or more efficient solutions](#) that are becoming widely available. The point is to keep it light: making someone feel like they lost an argument will only disengage them even more. The goal with these audiences is to leave them intrigued rather than convince them. Specific facts from our own experience are especially helpful. For example, I now drive a hybrid, and I appreciate

the difference between its 37-mpg fuel efficiency versus the 14-mpg which was the case for my last vehicle.

Principle Three

Facts are essential except when they're not. While teachers need to know facts about the climate emergency, the challenge is to calibrate using these facts based on the audience, circumstances, and other contexts. Operationalizing this principle is hard. It requires teachers to stay with two seemingly contradictory truths at the same time.

On the one hand, facts are important. All climate misinformation is based on distorting or denying facts in order to replace them with doubt or convenient fictions. Likewise, all calls to urgent climate action are based on the geophysical, scientific facts of [rising emissions](#), [rising median temperatures of the planet](#), [collapsing biodiversity and ecosystems health](#), more frequent and intense [extreme weather events](#), and other intra-systemic impacts of the climate emergency—impacts that have been measured and tracked for several decades by numerous organizations and with a variety of tools, including [the planetary boundaries framework](#). Most of these facts are scary and demonstrate an unmistakable trend.

The other truth is that facts don't speak for themselves. Facts are not enough to mobilize action. Action arises from inspiration and commitment, from personal engagement, from beliefs and dreams we have for ourselves and our loved ones. Facts are helpful to envision solutions, but if they make one give up, they are not helpful at all. Like powerful spices, facts should be part of the conversation only in the right proportion to other ingredients, especially the belief that change is possible.

In the current stage of the fight for the planet's future, this belief is a far more important goal than communicating the facts. Facts are there for anyone who cares to look them up. But the belief that change is possible, a precondition for change, is where we have so far failed. More precisely, this is where the decades of fossil fuel misinformation have created a false "common-sense" narrative embraced by many people across the Six Americas spectrum. This false narrative—the subject of Genevieve Guenther's 2024 book [The Language of Climate Politics: Fossil Fuel Propaganda and How to Fight It](#)—is built around "six key terms that dominate the language of climate politics" (p. 2) and goes as follows:

Yes, climate change is real but calling it an existential threat is just *alarmist*—and anyway phasing out coal, oil, and gas would *cost* us too much. Human flourishing relies on the economic *growth* enabled by fossil fuels, so we need to keep using them and deal with climate change by fostering technological *innovation* and increasing our *resilience*. Besides, America should not act unilaterally on the climate crisis while emissions are rising in *India and China* (Guenther, 2024, pp. 2-3, italics for key terms in the original).

As Guenther sums it, this narrative fosters a scientifically incorrect belief that there are no alternatives to fossil fuels or that the climate crisis is will not be too bad. Our job as climate literacy educators is to counter this falsehood with a narrative that envisions real solutions and a transition to an ecological civilization—a narrative that is unambiguous about the urgency to phaseout fossil fuels and unambiguous about the role everyone has to play in accelerating the transition.

Going Forward

We are all a bit afraid, but that's fine. Fear is a natural reaction to unnatural circumstances—to what the world is becoming with each year of the unaddressed climate emergency. The student who raised objections was probably the Alarmed, overwhelmed by fear and urgently needing positive messaging. What I should have shared was an empowering message that we are in the middle of an epochal transition to an ecological civilization: a transition in which we are reimagining our energy, technology, financial, educational, and other systems and in which we each have a role to play.

This is exciting yet scary too. The fear we feel thinking about what may happen if we fail to act is not alarmism: "It's a sign that you're willing to look at the danger head-on and not look away. It's a sign of *courage*" (Guenther, 2024, p. 44). In this framing, facts, in and of themselves, are not "doom and gloom." The "doom and gloom" is an attitude. As teachers, when we feel tempted to let it take over us, let's ask ourselves whom it benefits. If *The Fate of Fausto* is read through a fear lens, it may be interpreted as predicting humanity's end. But if it is read through an action lens, it

communicates that humanity can change its course if we choose to fight for what we love.

This is a time to fight, not a time to give up. As Guenther puts it, “talking about the dangers of global heating and the people who are still committed to promoting fossil fuels is a very effective way to disrupt systems of denial and complacency, which depend on codes of silence to seem normal” (2024, p. 187). These conversations—in every classroom, family and community—are urgently needed. They build our [climate literacy capabilities](#): “practical ways of being and doing we can achieve as climate literate Earthlings” (Oziewicz 2023, p. 45). This is how education will make a difference for the Earth’s future.

References

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