6 Will the end of the world be on the final exam?

Emotions, climate change, and teaching an introductory environmental studies course

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For the past decade, I have annually taught GEO 103 Environment and Society, my university's introductory environmental studies course. It is a large class of 75 to 150 students with graduate teaching assistants leading weekly smaller discussion groups. The bulk of students in the course are not geography majors or even humanities or social science majors. Rather, they are visitors from other fields and far-flung parts of campus: engineering, computer science, elementary education, finance and entrepreneurship, broadcast journalism, sports management, and fashion design. In short, they are neither budding environmentalists nor would-be environmental studies majors—not by a long shot. This course is likely the first, and last, environmental studies class they will ever take. But since they are enrolled in this course to fulfill a liberal arts distribution requirement, they enter my class somewhat under duress, and most likely, the course is the lowest priority among the four to six classes they are taking that semester. Sparking interest in environmental policy and the Environmental Humanities in such an audience is challenging, both for myself and the teaching assistants who work with me.

By and large, many of the students approach this course, and perhaps their other classes, with a very instrumental outlook. Given this situation, it is not surprising that they lack enthusiasm taking courses outside their major. What many want from this course, is the highest possible grade with the minimum amount of effort. The instrumental outlook of contemporary college students is a familiar lament among academics (Nathan; Arum and Roksa), but it seems quite troubling in a course such as this given that it focuses so much on climate change—and climate change, to put it mildly, is something students will have to contend with for the rest of their lives, regardless of their major or chosen career. While the course focuses on the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of a number of environmental issues, climate change is a major topic in the class, and it has become even more so throughout the past ten years. While it is not a natural science course per se, I do devote a week to the science and consequences of climate change. Whether it is the rise of atmospheric temperature, the loss of sea ice in the Arctic, or the growth of wildfires in the western United States, the findings about climate

change published in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports or National Climate Assessment have grown more dire and worrisome with each passing year (Mann and Lee; U.S. Global Change Research Program). Despite my best efforts to contain this section of the course, my discussion of climate change now takes up more and more of the class.

Confronted with the dire predictions of climatologists, the students by and large have one reaction: indifference. The cavalier attitude of students toward their future and that of fellow people around the world was brought home to me a few years ago in an email by one of my teaching assistants leading a discussion section about climate change. "My soul is crushed," she began. "I thought we were going to have this fabulous conversation about framing arguments, the role of science, finding allies and figuring out how to effectively communicate [climate science to the public]. The class—and I don't just mean two or three vocal people—basically came up with this: all of Bangladesh could die, the temperature could increase six degrees, tons of species could die, and people in other places could suffer from drinking water and crop shortages, and we wouldn't care at all." She went on: "On one hand, it's sort of confusing—they're super cynical and at times seem morally bankrupt, but they also sort of want something to happen ... They won't care about species loss (even polar bears!) until they believe it will economically hurt them. They don't care about people in any other place. They will only care about drought when they don't have enough drinking water or when food is really expensive ... And if NYC becomes like Houston? Whatever. That's what air conditioning is for. And if poor people can't afford it? Go to the mall" (Green).

Dealing with such a reaction posed challenges for my teaching assistant and me, and I would argue, raises important questions for those of us in the environmental humanities. A generation of scholarship in the Environmental Humanities and allied fields such as political ecology, environmental history, and environmental sociology have urged scholars to highlight the injustice of climate change for poor and marginal communities, both within the United States and in the Global South, and how a warming world could deepen inequality (Nixon; Robbins; Perrualt, Bridge, and McCarthy). Imparting this knowledge about climate justice is a core intellectual, political, and ethical pillar of teaching climate change in the Environmental Humanities. Yet how should we react when students respond to the science and ethics of climate change with a shrug and a "meh"?

My initial response to my dispirited teaching assistant was to remind her that as much as we would like students to share our concern about climate change and the consequences for people around the world, we cannot make them care. Our role is to teach them the fundamentals of environment-society geography and pose the policy and ethical questions raised by climate change, but ultimately, what lessons they draw from that are their own. I also wanted to meet with the students in the discussion section, and fortunately, this is something they suggested themselves. We had a productive conversation about climate change—which, truth be told, some still doubted was even happening. Most seemed unconvinced it was much of a problem or that we owed much to those most affected by the rising seas, fiercer storms, and searing droughts that come with it.

A recent book by sociologist Kari Norgaard on emotions and climate change sheds light on their reactions. Drawing on ethnographic work in Norway and in-depth interviews with students in the United States, she sought to unravel the puzzle of nonparticipation in addressing climate change. Why do people fail to tackle climate change even when they know the science and the potential consequences of global warming? She argues that when faced with the reality of climate change, people in these countries have three dominant emotional reactions: guilt, fear, and helplessness (Norgaard 187–97). They feel guilt because as residents of industrialized countries, they realize they contribute to climate change through the energy they use and greenhouse gas emissions produced. Confronted by a warmer and stormier future, people are incapacitated by fear. Finally, climate change seems so immense and abstract they felt utterly helpless to do anything about the problem. The indifference and resignation many of my introductory environmental studies course students express may simply be how these feelings of guilt, fear, and helplessness manifest themselves. Yet if my environmental studies course fosters feelings of powerlessness and indifference among my students, what is the solution? And what different emotions would I want to elicit in my course? Instead of guilt, fear, and powerlessness I try to provoke feelings of *anger*, *entitlement*, and *empowerment*.

Anger

One of the more baffling aspects of teaching this environmental studies course is the students' lack of anger about climate change and the collective failure of governments to tackle the problem. While students might feel guilt about how their high-energy-use lifestyles contribute to climate change, they are not the ones who set energy policy; governments and the fossil-fuel companies that lobby them do. As scholars have amply shown, fossil-fuel companies have undertaken a decades-long campaign to foster doubt about climate change and how the burning of fossil fuel contributes to global warming (Oreskes and Conway). More recently, investigative journalists have shown how companies supporting climate-change skepticism, such as Exxon-Mobil, clearly understood the science of climate change and did peer-reviewed research on the topic decades ago, yet chose to fund climate-change skeptic groups instead of lowering emissions (Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer). Such scholarship and investigative reports assume a more prominent place in my lectures and the readings I assign in the course. They show, among other things, how powerful interests in our society have launched a sustained campaign to manufacture doubt about climate change and bully or harass climate scientists. This should foster feelings of anger, rather than guilt, among my students.

Entitlement

Of the three emotions I hope to elicit, this may appear the most unusual and controversial. Millennial college students are often depicted in the media (unfairly,

I would say) as pampered and privileged—in a word, entitled. Urging my students to feel more entitled might seem as only amplifying their supposedly worst tendencies. But if my students do feel entitled, they probably feel entitled about the wrong things. I want my students to feel entitled to the same sort of stable climate their ancestors enjoyed for much of the past 10,000 years. Scholarship from a number of disciplines argues that the rise of agricultural societies and modern civilizations was partly due to the relatively stable global climate that has endured since the end of the Pleistocene (Brooke). While historians and climate science have shown that the climate has changed, especially on the regional scale, over the Holocene, the magnitude of change is nothing compared to the degree of climate change anticipated over the next century, especially if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise in coming decades. Without people realizing it, a relatively stable climate, and the stable sea levels that came with it, were a fixture of human life for much of the past ten millennia. Now we are entering a period of profound climate instability. I encourage my students to consider the consequences of the loss of a stable climate for themselves and others of their generation and consider who had the right to take that sort of climate away from them.

Empowered

For most of the past decade, when I asked students if anything could be done to cope with climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they said "no." Since they feel guilt, fear, helplessness, and indifference about climate change, it comes as no surprise they doubt whether politicians or citizens can do much to address the problem. To counter this, I make a point to lecture and assign readings on the growth of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the many achievements of that era. As historian Adam Rome shows in the *The Genius of Earth Day*, the environmental movement was a disparate coalition comprised of liberals, middle-class women, counterculture youth, and others whose efforts led to many legislative achievements (the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Endangered Species Act) as well as a greening of higher education and journalism (Rome). Of course, there were many serious shortcomings to this movement, especially the fact that it was overwhelmingly white, suburban, and middle- to upper-middle class. But I also discuss the development of the environmental justice movement from the 1980s to the present and how people of color and less affluent supporters of this movement challenged corporate polluters, indifferent bureaucrats, and mainstream environmentalists to deal with the disproportionate siting of toxic waste dumps and facilities in poor and minority communities. As a scholar, it is imperative that I acknowledge the shortcomings of these movements, especially the mainstream environmental movement which has not done enough to diversify its membership or address environmental justice concerns. Yet since my students assume nothing can be done to cope with any environmental issue, least of all climate change, it is also essential to highlight the successes of these efforts toward environmental reform and social justice as well as their limitations.

In past years when I taught the course, most of the environmental achievements I cited came from events and movements in the past. More recently, I have been able to show the development of the climate justice movement in the United States and elsewhere (McKibben; Klein). As with the environmental movement over forty years ago, the climate justice movement is also a coalition that includes familiar supporters of environmental causes along with a much stronger voice for indigenous peoples, African Americans, and other groups not always identified as environmentalists (Wilson). Millenials have been among the most influential members of this vibrant movement, and they have demanded politicians and corporations make substantive commitments to lower greenhouse gas emissions. Perhaps the most prominent and innovative climate justice group in the United States is 350.org, which was founded by seven Middlebury College students and Bill McKibben in 2007. Employing their organizational skills, 350.org leaders have helped plan and lead demonstrations, civil disobedience actions, and countless protests. They represent a new generation of student leaders able to harness digital tools, especially social media, to build a movement.

Now I can also point to achievements on my own campus. As students have at many other colleges, some students at Syracuse University have embraced the fossil-fuel divestment movement. Beginning in 2012, a small group of students circulated petitions calling on the university to divest its endowment from fossil-fuel companies and they met with the administration to plead their case. Over the next three years, they held rallies and marches, organized teach-ins on climate change, lobbied the student government to pass a resolution favoring divestment, and along with faculty allies, pressured the University Senate vote in favor of divestment as well. They forged alliances with other groups on campus advocating greater support for campus sexual assault victims on campus, those seeking recognition for the needs of disabled students, and those standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Together, representatives of these various interests occupied the university administration building for two weeks and demanded action. Eventually, the university agreed to some of their concerns, most notably, divesting the endowment from fossil fuels. I hope students leave my class empowered by the history of environmental achievements and the efforts of climate activists on their campus and elsewhere. The point is not for students in the course to all become environmentalists or slavishly support the climate justice movement. Rather, it is to recognize that organized, committed citizens can effect change.

Should we structure courses in the Environmental Humanities to elicit emotions? Certainly, seeking to foster emotions is a more nebulous "learning outcome" than understanding key course-related terms and concepts. But as Environmental Humanities scholars have shown, the predominant ways we present climate change to our students commonly generate profoundly unempowering emotions among those in our classes. Instead of resigning ourselves to this fate, we should carefully consider what emotions we hope our courses will evoke and structure our lectures, readings, and discussions in the best way to induce them.

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