DOES CLIMATE CHANGE HAVE A PLACE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM?

BY LORNA COLLIER
English teachers are experts at helping students examine relevant, complex, and connected stories and look for meaning and truths in and behind the words. This is the view of the authors of a new book from NCTE and Routledge, and is one of the reasons the authors believe the climate change story is one that deserves a place in the English classroom.

The book is *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents: Reading, Writing, and Making a Difference* (Routledge & NCTE, 2017), and the three authors are Richard Beach, professor emeritus of English education at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; Jeff Share, teacher education faculty advisor at the University of California in Los Angeles; and Allen Webb, professor of English education and postcolonial studies at Western Michigan University.

Teaching climate change in an English classroom is “a relatively new idea,” Webb says. But the significance of the topic is one reason it needs to be there.

“Once you start seeing climate change as the most important issue facing mankind or humankind, then you start seeing how important it is that we address this,” Webb says.

Another reason: English class can explore aspects of climate change that aren’t necessarily going to come up in science or other classes, the authors say, such as “social, historical, ethical, and human realities that are critical to the problem.”

As Beach says, moral values—“why characters behave in certain ways and do certain things”—are the domain of English teachers.

So is “story.” Climate change is a topic that can be studied in the context of story: Whose stories are being told? Which stories aren’t receiving mainstream attention, and whose voices are being excluded?

While stories of climate change may not have traditionally been explored in the English classroom, the authors argue that they will continue to dominate the news, as well as figure prominently in both literary works and nonfiction.

Climate change also is immensely engaging for young people because it carries real-world, immediate relevance for them.

“They’re concerned, and they should be,” says Webb, who has seen an eagerness to learn about climate issues from his college students. “This is the world they’re going to be living in. [Climate change] is happening now in a big way—but it’s going to be even more powerful in their time.”

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—Allen Webb
the Holocaust because some people deny that it ever happened?

“If what you do in schools is close to anything that is quote unquote controversial, then you’ve stopped people from becoming critically thinking citizens and you’ve eliminated their capacity to make a difference in the world about things that matter.”

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

First of all, don’t worry that you will need to find all new texts if you want to add climate change to your curriculum.

“Teachers may think, ‘I have this literature curriculum and it’s pretty well set,’” says Beach. But, he says, many traditional canonical literary texts can be used “to think about how nature is portrayed . . . and to frame those texts from an eco-perspective.”

For instance, if the work already has an environmental event or theme—such as The Grapes of Wrath’s Dust Bowl setting—this can become a springboard for climate change discussion.

Or, some works may not have climate change elements baked in, but can still be reimagined as if they did. Students can create “textual interventions”—fan fiction, if you will, in which they reimagine narratives in creative ways. For instance, students can write letters between characters, add scenes, change settings, introduce new conflicts and plot developments. Holden Caulfield from The Catcher in the Rye might react to global warming; Atticus Finch from To Kill a Mockingbird might take on an environmental law case; and so on.

Works ranging from The Hunger Games and Lord of the Flies to Frankenstein and even Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet can be used inventively and productively within a climate change unit of study, the authors say.

Or teachers can turn to newer “cli-fi” literature—that is, climate change–themed short stories, poems, plays, and novels as well as nonfiction texts, including articles, books, speeches, documentaries, films, and memoirs. Students can then create their own cli-fi or nonfiction works, perhaps imagining what the environment will be like in the future.

Short texts can be used as well as long; free resources can be found online, with an extensive list of suggestions included in the book.

Writing is a natural tool to use to help students understand climate change topics while also fostering literacy growth.

The authors suggest several types of writing assignments teachers might make, including:

- **Place-based writing**—Students can write about specific places they are familiar with. Webb, for example, has students do paired writings in which they first observe a place in the present day and then write about how the place may change over the next 50 years due to climate change. These assignments let students “take on critical perspectives and address social change and transition.”
• **Writing from the perspective of an animal or plant**—This calls on students to fire up their imaginations and “think more deeply about the impact of global warming on other species.”

• **Multimedia composing**—Tapping into visual literacies offers a wide range of possibilities for students to tell stories related to climate change. Multimedia work also allows teachers to highlight issues of critical media literacy, combining questions of composing and production with a look at inherent biases in visual images and media. Discussions on these issues can help “students [critically] question all media and the ideological messages they convey”—an important job for English teachers, say the authors.

• **Using drama and games**—Students might watch, act out, or write their own plays. Role-playing scenarios, board games, and computer games and simulations—such as *SimCity Edu*, *BBC Climate Challenge*, and others—can be used for creative lesson planning.

• **Involving students in civic projects**—Students can also engage in civic projects that tap real-world, authentic literacy skills, such as creating a climate change report card for local government entities, leading community groups, or presenting petitions to the school administration to ask for more climate change curricula.

Increasingly, says Webb, “Students are taking action to inform themselves and others in their communities.” He is enthused about student involvement and inspired by the engagement it represents.

“I think that’s one of the best things about this book—it creates a lot of hope.”

LORNA COLLIER’S ARTICLES ABOUT EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY HAVE APPEARED IN *US NEWS & WORLD REPORT*, THE *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*, AND *MSN.COM*. REACH HER AT LORNA@LORNACOLLIER.COM

*The authors are so passionate about the cause of reversing climate change that they are donating all proceeds of the book to the Alliance for Climate Education (https://acespace.org).*

For more information, visit:
Wiki for the book: climatechangeela.pbworks.com
Blog: English Teachers Concerned about Climate Change (etcccsite.com)