

Finding Hope and Gratitude in the Climate Change Classroom

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Abstract: Through several original poems and contextual narrative reflection, “Finding Hope and Gratitude in the Climate Change Classroom” explores what it means to be a climate change educator and reflects on the author’s own experiences with cultivating agency and hope in the classroom.

Keywords: hope, cultural agency, imagination, gratitude, poetry, climate change

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Finding Hope and Gratitude in the Climate Change Classroom

Optimism says that everything will be fine no matter what, just as pessimism says that it will be dismal no matter what. Hope is a sense of the grand mystery of it all, the knowledge that we don't know how it will turn out, that anything is possible.
—Rebecca Solnit, “The Arc of Justice and the Long Run”

The classroom continues to be a place where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility, a place where spirit matters, where all that we learn and know leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life lived in community.
—bell hooks, *Teaching Community, A Pedagogy of Hope*

Before walking across campus to teach a class, I will often take a few minutes to read a poem quietly to myself. I have a folder on my office desk and a folder on my laptop, filled with Word files, magazine clippings, or faded photocopies of poems I have saved for just such occasions. I frequently reread to some of my favorite poems by Wendell Berry (e.g. “The Real Work”), Jane Hirshfield (“Against Certainty”), and Gary Snyder (“For the Children”), or turn to poems about the practice of listening, like Franz Kafka’s “Learn to Be Quiet” or John Fox’s “When Someone Deeply Listens to You.” Sometimes, I will read poems explicitly about teaching, such as Phillip Levine’s “Among Children” or William Stafford’s “A Course in Creative Writing.” All of these poems, regardless of their subject matter or their tone, from Levine’s melancholy to Hirschfield’s Zen-like playfulness, prepare me for entering the classroom. Reading poetry helps me enter a state of mindfulness and intentionality, which is so necessary for the exhausting yet thrilling work of teaching.

Writing a poem is a hopeful gesture, predicated on the belief that the creative act can bring more beauty, truth, or pleasure into the world than existed before. To a certain degree, every poem wants to be read, and thus when we read poems, we are tapping back into the original energy and hope of their composition. The practice of reading is like a car engine that recharges its battery each time it’s turned on or like the rain that brings out the dormant desert flower. When I think about poetry’s capacity for hope, I imagine Paul Celan’s famous description of a poem as a message in a bottle sent out with a “belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps” (396). Poetry, as Edward Hirsch explains, “sacramentalizes experience,” and for me, it makes sacred again the experience of teaching (xv). It helps me locate the “heartland” of teaching by reminding me of the hope that is latent in every classroom.

Hope

sounds like a bell struck
hard in cold, clear air

where the water ripples
and runs fast, equanimity—

a river stone resting
in my pocket

sometimes heavy and
sometimes catching

air between its folds,
buoyant—

This small, daily practice of reading poetry, and more recently, writing it as well, has even greater significance for me when I teach classes focused on climate change, a topic that presents a particular set of challenges to both teachers and students. Grappling with climate change can be both conceptually overwhelming and emotionally disheartening. Ocean acidification, bleaching coral reefs, melting permafrost, melting glaciers, the melting of the Greenland ice sheet, the sixth great mass extinction... the ecological impacts of climate change are everywhere proliferating and worsening. It is difficult to map the convoluted causal chains that link, for instance, the energy used by my laptop to the extraction of tar sands in Alberta, Canada to increases in atmospheric CO₂ levels to changes to warbler migration patterns in the Northeast. The social impacts of climate change are similarly far-reaching and complex, from migrants fleeing sinking Pacific island states to increases in respiratory health problems due to higher ground levels of ozone to accelerated childhood malnutrition in Arctic communities, where changes in seasonal migratory patterns radically affect local hunting economies.

Climate change is also affecting the places we are most familiar with, the landscapes we most love in ways both drastic and subtle. In my own state of Oregon, and in the Pacific Northwest region more broadly, the water levels in rivers are far below “normal” and salmon are fighting to migrate upstream in only a few inches of water. Wildfires are burning on the usually wet west side of the Cascades, blanketing cities a hundred miles away with smoke and degrading air quality. All along the Pacific Coast, starfish are wasting away in tide pools, a phenomenon likely correlated with rising ocean water temperatures.

Yet paradoxically, even though such impacts are more and more visible, both near and far, few people acknowledge the extent to which climate change is imbricated into every aspect of our lives, from our politics and economies to our cultures and local communities. As psychologist Rosemary Randall explains, “climate change is a disturbing subject that casts a shadow across ordinary life,” yet who would want to discuss, let alone acknowledge, such a shadow. Even with greater media attention and more instances of popular culture engaging with climate change (such as in blockbuster films, TV series, and novels), for most people, climate change is still an abstract, impersonal issue—and not a part of regular conversation. A 2015 study conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, reported that only four percent of Americans hear a friend or relative talk about climate change at least once a week

(Leiserowitz 10)¹. Just four percent. Environmental writer and activist George Marshall identifies the dearth of climate change conversations as part of a pervasive “meta-silence” about the issue (“meta” because it is so silent, people can’t even talk about not talking about it): “The most influential climate narrative of all may be the non-narrative of collective silence” (Marshall 82). Climate change is indeed the biggest thing nobody’s talking about. How can we maintain hope in a culture of silent denial, in this time of what Bruno Latour calls “climato-quietism” (54)?

So what do we do with the big things in this world

With ugly names?
Climate change
acid rain, nuclear waste
mostly human made
but beyond the familiar
time and space. Slow,
uneven.
Though we build bulwarks
to keep at bay
these things
enter anyway, make themselves
homes in our homes
living in our lives
they are everywhere.
The sea stars, plankton,
flagellated algae, lichen,
the Magnolia Stellata,
our neighbors in the soil
or down the street
how are we to be
good hosts?
Prepare a pot brimming over
for unexpected company?
Open the doors during storms?
Walk outside with arms wide,
welcoming.

Compounding this problem of our not talking about climate change is the fact that whether or not we talk about it, climate change is affecting our emotional landscapes. As Mike Hulme suggests, climate change is dramatically “shifting the ways we think, feel and act” and is completely altering every dimension of our emotionally social worlds (xxviii). The psychological impacts of climate change are, like the ecological and social impacts, distributed in ways that are uneven and unjust. That is, individuals and communities on the physical frontlines of climate change, who face the threats of rising

sea levels, drought, or extreme weather events, among others, are likewise in a position of greater psychological precarity (Bourque et al.). Yet there is also a certain sense in which, as Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has suggested, we are all on the “psychological frontlines” of climate change.² Living with an open mind and heart in the Anthropocene, a time of widespread social and ecological violence, means being psychologically vulnerable.

As environmental and sustainability educators, we would do well to recognize that our students are also on the psychological frontlines of climate change, perhaps even more so as young people are facing futures of greater risk and uncertainty. With such recognition comes an imperative to consider anew the purposes and practices of climate change education. For instance, what kinds of practices should environmental educators specifically use in their classrooms to teach climate change? How are we preparing our students for a future of increasing climate risks and vulnerability? What is the role of a teacher in this time of planetary turbulence? Is it part of our job to combat despair? To cultivate hope?

I do not have all the answers, or even many answers, to these questions, but through the practice of writing poetry, I have been able to keep these questions more clearly in the foreground of the work I do, both inside and outside the classroom. Writing poetry provides me not only with an outlet for working with my own emotional responses to climate change but also with a lens through which I can clarify my role as a climate change educator. Each poem I write shifts, albeit slightly, my approach to teaching climate change; pedagogical observations garnered from one poem refract off others. Kenneth Burke explained that literature could be “equipment for living”; I have similarly learned to make poetry part of my own equipment for teaching (Burke 61).

Teaching Climate Change

is a lot like searching
for lucky stones after storms
on the beaches of Lake Erie—

“Otoliths” my grandma called them—
tiny ear bones of long dead fish
looking like ivory scrabble tiles

grooved with the letters ‘g’ or ‘l’
and now, arranged on my desk,
conveying some ancient message—

*good luck, good luck, good
luck, you’re gonna need it.
You are like a small man gone
to find balance in miles*

*of sand and dark water,
then returned to a room, expecting
to feel bigger than before.*

(Excerpted from “Teaching Climate Change,” ISLE)

Climate change is a “wicked problem” in the sense of being difficult-to-define, messy, reactive, and thus resistant to any and all attempts at tidy, linear solutions. It is like a tangle of fishing line or yarn; whenever you tug on the thread, trying to untangle the problem, the knots become even more snarled. Climate change is also a wicked problem in the moral sense as simple daily actions like driving to work can raise fraught ethical dilemmas when considered within the vast web of the carbon economy. Climate change likewise demands new frameworks for conceptualizing intergenerational and international environmental and social justice. Being a wicked problem in these two senses, climate change necessitates not just quick fixes but wholesale changes to politics, economics, social organization, and culture—everything that makes up the fabric of human existence. Novelist Margaret Atwood prefers to refer to climate change as “the everything change” because the problem is really not just about the “climate,” and similarly, the title of Naomi Klein’s recent book and documentary film has become a rallying cry to a new generation of environmental activists: *This Changes Everything* (Atwood, Klein). We need a “great turning,” as David Korten calls it, a revolutionary shift from business as usual to “a world grounded in the values of justice, sustainability, and compassion” (209). Indian activist Vandana Shiva emphasizes that such a daunting revolutionary task will require “making the impossible possible, creating hope out of hopelessness, unleashing our creative energies in the midst of ecological and social ruin” (142).

If we take seriously the reality that climate change changes everything and that we thus need a Great Turning, then how to grow hope from hopelessness and how to cultivate the creative energies of our students must be two of the promises of sustainability education, forming the bedrock of how we imagine our jobs as climate change educators. Of course, such promises have always been important in our fields, and environmental studies programs and other sites of sustainability education have long been bastions of student-centered learning, transformative learning, problem-based learning, service learning, field-based learning, etc. In short, sustainability education has a robust history of tapping into students’ creative energy. Yet the urgency of developing hope-generating teaching practices is magnified in a time when the impacts of global climate change are worsening and the disparities of global social inequality are widening. Postcolonial and ecocritical scholar Rob Nixon calls these twin challenges “the great acceleration” and “the great divergence” (Nixon). In her recent essay on hope and the climate crisis, Rebecca Solnit has noted that while “we don’t have a map for any of this,” what we do have is “a capacity for effort” and “a compass called hope” (Solnit, *The Most Important Thing*). How do we prepare our students to face the unprecedented and interlocking challenges for which there may be no map?

Six years ago, when I began teaching climate change in my humanities courses (I am trained as a literary historian and ecocritic), I considered my primary role as teacher to be the expert, a sort of “climate change sage.” At the beginning of the term, I often administered beginning surveys to solicit information about students’ existing understanding of climate change. The results from these surveys were usually disappointing. These were not seasoned students long experienced in the nuances of climate science, climate policy, or climate justice. Rather, for most of these students, my courses represented their first experiences learning about the realities and impacts of climate change in a formal educational setting, and they were thus arriving with many misconceptions and gaps in their knowledge. In this context, it became easy to think my main task was to provide students with enough information (clearly and bluntly delivered) to increase their climate change literacy. Students had questions. I had the answers.

The “information deficit model” of climate change education rests on the assumptions that climate change is the domain of experts, and that agency is born from mastery (and a particular Western conception of mastery). It is an appealing model, one in which the public (and by proxy, the student population) is cast as uninformed and unknowledgeable, and educators and activists are tasked with filling in this information-knowledge gap. However, scholars such as Susanne Moser and Harriet Bulkeley have challenged the assumption that an apparent gap between caring and actions arises from a lack of knowledge or understanding of important environmental issues. As these and other researchers have demonstrated, knowing more doesn’t lead to caring more. Of course, understanding the material, and in this case, understanding the science of climate change, is important, particularly when students are growing up in a culture in which the agents of institutional climate denial actively spread climate misconceptions and misinformation. It is crucial to provide students with a basic grounding in climate science, and thus I still include a brief unit on it in all my climate change focused courses. However, I have learned to recognize that this approach to teaching climate change, and to conceptualizing “climate literacy,” is at best incomplete and at worst, ineffective.

Notes for a Lecture on Climate Change

Striding across campus
to an afternoon lecture, thinking
I can change the world—

no, not the world, but maybe
adjust the lens so students will see
a little more clearly

the inner workings
of capitalism, colonialism,
power and climate—

then pausing beneath cedars
hundreds of years old
I begin to worry:

If only I were more prepared, more
patient, more compassionate, more
like someone I once believed

I could grow into.
When I arrive at class
I am afraid—

being stranded with nothing
in front of students who expect
answers to a wicked problem.

“But it can’t be solved!”
I want to scream.
“Let me tell you how

we have already lost
so many days not seeing
the weather change.”

Yet their faces do not say
Give us answers, or
Tell us the way.

They say, *We are scared.*
We are sad. See us
for who we are, here,

here on this day, in this
room, in this place.
Listen to us—

We will wait.

I had chosen a content-centric approach to teaching over a student-centric approach. In part, I made this choice because of how I viewed the students, or rather, how I didn't view them. Sometimes, my own emotions about climate change, and specifically, my own despair, blinded me to my students. A study conducted by teaching and learning scholar Keith Trigwell found that when teachers experience worry or anxiety at high levels, those teachers are less likely to engage in student-centered teaching approaches and are more likely to approach teaching as a transmission of knowledge from expert to

novice. When I felt anxious or worried about climate change, it was easy to tell myself that transference of my own knowledge and expertise was how students were going to become climate literate.

At other times, I did “see” my students, but I viewed their lack of knowledge and interest as a symptom of the problem: a public that doesn’t know very much and doesn’t care very much about climate change. It is easy to see in students the rampant cynicism, political disengagement, and fetishizing of consumer culture that so seem to define younger generations. More difficult is to see students as the creative, witty, imaginative, and engaged young people they really are. As I have discovered over time—and continue to discover every time I walk into a classroom—the majority of students want to learn about climate change. Students elect to take these courses, and they choose to stick with them. They want to reweave from the fraying threads of social and environmental crises a better world for themselves, their peers, their elders, and their children. They are committed to righting social and environmental injustice. They are committed to building a more just and sustainable society.

In the context of a climate change education that emphasizes the transfer of content, teachers can have difficulty seeing the experiences that students bring with them to the learning encounter, and students are less likely to arrive at what Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone call “active hope.” According to these authors, active hope is a practice—that is, something we *do* rather than something we *have*—and as such involves three steps: “First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we’d like things to move in or the values we’d like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction” (3). From sight to imagination to movement: for students to transition through these steps, teachers need to focus on cultivating agency.

Joel Pfister argues that we need to incorporate more “agency studies” in the classroom, with teachers continually reminding students that they have agency and are not merely passive victims, or perhaps worse, passive colluders, to social and environmental problems. In this context then, what is generally thought of as “climate literacy” can involve more than acquiring a set of facts or frameworks.³ Rather, “climate literacy” can involve exploring the emotional and ethical ramifications of climate change. It can involve addressing questions such as what does it mean to be human and what does my life mean in a time of climate change? What does it mean to live well together? What does climate change *feel* like?

In fits and starts I have thus come to see my main role in the climate change classroom as being more of a guide, helping students traverse the difficult emotional and intellectual terrain of climate change, supporting them through the process of discovery. That is, I view myself as being a sort of “climate change mentor.” In his recent work on higher education in the United States, William Deresiewicz describes the tasks of the mentor as the following: “You do not talk to your students; you listen to them. You do not tell them what to do; you help them hear what they themselves are saying. You ask the kinds of questions... those ‘why’ questions that help people connect with what they care about”

(178). Being a climate change mentor isn't about answering questions, but rather about asking questions—particularly those questions that students seem on the cusp of asking themselves.

This approach to teaching and mentoring in the context of climate change might come across as overly idealistic, even naïve, especially when students are encountering this topic for the first time and have few existing critical frameworks with which to make sense of such difficult material. So, let me temper such idealism by suggesting that the kind of “climate mentorship” I have in mind is not optimistic in the sense that I *know* it will turn out well. The process is often painful, for both me and for the students, and I never know exactly where we will end up as a class. Climate change is huge, complex, uncertain, and fraught with ugly feelings. The kind of “great turning” suggested by Korten and others requires constant speculation, which itself can be uncomfortable for students. There are no easy answers. We can model and imagine futures but can’t predict them. Moreover, students often begin to see their communities, families, friends, and even themselves, in a new, more critical light. Learning about climate change can be a “disorienting dilemma,” as Jack Mezirow calls those educational experiences that challenge the usually invisible and unquestioned assumptions by which students know themselves and the world around them (21). Such disorientation can be painful as students recognize how imbricated they are in systems of social and environmental injustice and then often feel like their identities are being challenged. As bell hooks observes, there is always “some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches,” and she suggests that teachers must “talk about the discomfort it can cause” within the classroom and beyond it (43). Comfort in the classroom is overrated and often can get in the way of critical thinking, but disorienting dilemmas are potentially injurious when left unacknowledged by the teacher. In this context, mentorship becomes even more important, as teachers must be keenly attuned to their students.

Within the specific context of environmental education, Michael Maniates, in his 2013 article “Teaching for Turbulence,” similarly suggests that students need guidance in safely navigating the potentially turbulent personal and social landscape of climate change. For students to become the “thoughtful and anticipatory agents of change in the tumult to come” that we want them to become, emotions need to be front and center in the climate change classroom (268). That’s why in my climate change courses, I now offer students opportunities to talk about their emotions during class discussions (and I explicitly prompt these sorts of conversations). I also include multiple writing activities throughout the term—like asking students to keep traditional weekly journals or to use social media, like Instagram and Twitter, for similar reflective purposes—specifically geared to help students work with their feelings. This work becomes a sort of parallel track to the more overt course content. The despair and other ugly feelings that live in the climate change classroom can be good to think *with*. Thinking *with* is not the same as working *through*. That is, my goal is for this kind of learning to be critical and creative, not therapeutic or curative.

When will the posture of wisdom become wisdom?

We cannot predict what happens
next, the future a home we never
come home to, a classroom
with no desks, no chalkboards
no answers, no wisdom, only
this—the empty place
of imagination.
Each season, more species becoming
shapeless spaces in the landscape.
Yet our pose cannot be static
my students show me,
like the cloud whose shapes are not
its own but the wind's.
In every moment, the cloud listens
for the words we call it—
humpback whale, polar bear
monarch, tree frog, crested newt.
The cloud tries to oblige.
Does the cloud need practice?
Encouragement? Does the wind?

When I provide students with opportunities to think *with* their despair, students often begin finding footholds to climb out of it. Some of these footholds I provide—through assignments, activities, assessment, and feedback that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally supportive. Other footholds students seek out themselves. For example, in my winter 2015 climate change literature course at the University of Oregon, a group of students decided to volunteer at the 350.org sponsored Global Divestment Day Rally on our campus. This occasion turned into an opportunity for unplanned out of class learning as the students met with me as a group afterwards to discuss the issue of divestment, its potential to effect change, and the history of how the tactic influenced the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (a topic which I had not originally planned to include in the course but subsequently made room for the following week when the group of students presented on their experience to the class). This points to the other crucial element of Pfister's model of agency studies: providing students with opportunities to act and to reflect on the "real world" efficacy of their actions.

By the middle of the term, students were also taking initiative to complete self-directed research, discover solutions to climate change (the course itself was not heavily focused on "solutions" in the narrow sense of that word), and then post about them on our public course blog (see <http://blogs.uoregon.edu/eng104/>). Upon my suggestion (though it was not required), students then started having conversations about climate change with people not in the course and then writing on the blog about their experiences doing this. On many occasions, students were shocked and disheartened by how little people knew,

but these feelings became the impetus for them to teach their friends, roommates, siblings, or parents about what they were learning in class. The course's final project assignment asked students to work in groups to create their own works of climate change literature or culture. Humanities scholar Doris Sommer identifies imaginative or creative practice as central to developing in students what she calls "cultural agency": "Between frustrated fantasies and paralyzing despair, agency is a modest but relentless call to creative action, one small step at a time" (4). For me, the creative action that generates hope in the context of climate change is writing and sharing poetry. For my students, it became a multitude of practices, some which they were already expert in (such as the group of students majoring in journalism who produced a climate change themed radio drama) and some which they were trying for the first time (like the students with no experience in designing games who created a mock-up version of a new climate change-themed videogame).

At the end of the term, students excitedly shared with each other their final projects: short stories and poetry collections, public advertising campaigns and podcasts, board games and children's books. These creative works were students' attempts to imagine climate-changed futures. Some futures were more hopeful than others, some more far-fetched than others. Some were dystopian. Some were apocalyptic. Some were techno-optimistic utopias. But regardless the contours of the specific futures that students chose to imagine, it was the imaginative act itself, and then sharing with others, which helped students exercise their cultural agency. I reassured students that literary or artistic skill was not important. The underlying goal was to create and then share with others our imaginative visions, not to judge them. I did ask students to engage in critical reflection by writing "close readings" of their own cultural productions and considering the worldviews and assumptions implicit in how their work imagined the future. However, this was not critique for its own sake, but rather a practice that encouraged students to simultaneously identify the limitations of our present social and political structures and then offer maps pointing towards alternatives. Jonathan Lear defines the poet in a broad sense as one who is a "creative maker of meaningful space": "The possibility for such a poet is precisely the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities. No one is in a position to rule out that possibility" (52). In this sense, all my students were poets, whether or not they worked in the medium of poetry; by exercising their cultural agency in the context of climate change, the students were able to create new fields of possibilities, and likewise, new fields for hope.

The thing with feathers, Emily Dickinson called hope, suggesting its kinship with lightness, with uplift, with the human spirit's ability to transcend despair. I receive the honesty and warmth of a poem's hope as a form of grace, without the expectation or requirement of reciprocity. However, when I receive hope from my students, I am responsible to reciprocate, not simply with my own hope and my own imagination, but with gratitude as well. Imagination is, Paul Loeb notes, a form of generosity: "It creates an expansive vision of what's possible and helps us recognize the fundamental bonds that exist between us" (162). For those of us who choose to teach climate change, along with many other social and environmental problems that can draw down our emotional reservoirs, imagination is, ultimately, a form of hope that connects us to others. Shared

imagination, as Loeb explains, “leads outward, to other people and new possibilities” (164). This is what my students have taught me, and continue to teach me, and for their lessons, I am grateful.

On the Final Day

When the room emptied of your voices
I sat in the back row to read again
what you’d left behind—visions, futures
scrawled across the blackboard:

*Less consumption, less disease.
Trains of light connecting everywhere
to everywhere else. Justice and good food
for all creatures, a tiny house for each*

*to make its home. Lives of peace.
No war, no cages, no razor wire, no prisons
no corporate money, no student debt.
Instead, more forgiveness, more love*

*more conversation, more compassion
more things powered by the sun.
Better education and a planetary government
spaces for wildness, for wonderment.*

I wanted to leave your words
to instruct passerby that what they think
can’t be, you chose to see, and offered free
unknowing the value of your gift.

Yet for some easy routine,
and the thought that if not me
someone else surely would
I erased the board and walked out

into the long shadows of late afternoon.
But your words stayed with me
in the gathering darkness, stayed then
and still do, and all this is just to say

thank you.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to SueEllen Campbell, Professor of English at Colorado State University and founder of the “Changing Climates Project”

(www.changingclimates@colostate.edu), who pointed me to this upsetting, yet sadly unsurprising, statistic.

² In 2008, the American Psychological Association established a task force on the interface between psychology and global climate change and in 2010, released the report, “Psychology and Global Climate Change: Addressing a Multifaceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges.” The report offers recommendations for how practitioners can/should work with patients who are dealing with the psychosocial impacts of climate change. Similarly, a 2012 report released by the National Wildlife Federation’s Climate Education Program predicts a steep rise in social and mental disorders resulting from climate change-related events, estimating that “200 million Americans will be exposed to serious psychological distress from climate related events and incidents” and that the nation’s therapists, counselors, and trauma specialists currently are ill-equipped to respond to this social-psychological challenge (Coyle and Van Susteren v).

³ For example, the US Global Change Research Program defines the “climate-literate person” as someone who “understands the essential principles of Earth’s climate system; knows how to assess scientifically credible information about climate; communicates about climate and climate change in a meaningful way; and is able to make informed and responsible decisions with regard to actions that may affect climate” (US Global Change).

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