

Sustainability Education and Media Literacy

Climate change can often provoke deep emotions in students. Instead of shying away, use these media literacy activities to foster discussions of what the future holds



Photos: Tompkins County Youth Action Network

By **Sox Sperry**

“**H**OW MANY OF YOU know young people who feel fear about the future of the planet?”

All hands went up among those of us attending the “Beyond Green” symposium on education for sustainability. At a subsequent “Sustainability Salon” the majority of the large audience agreed that business as usual will likely lead to systemic collapse. One participant summarized, “Our house is on fire and we don’t know what will happen.” Many heads nodded in assent. Fear for the future. Systemic collapse. The uncontrollable fire. Where do these themes, located at the core of our common concerns, fit in the curriculum of our classrooms?

While some educators are of the mind; “Yes! We’ve got to push against the socially organized denial that’s keeping us from doing what we must in a time of grave global crisis.”¹ Others propose, “Such gloom and doom talk will only confuse the possibility of hope which is all we have to save us in a time of environmental despair.”²

Choosing critical conversations

As a curriculum writer specializing in materials related to sustainability I wonder:

How can I design materials that create a container that is large and safe enough for students to engage in collective reflection on the strong emotions – fear, anger, despair, loneliness – that often rise in response to work around sustainability? How can we help teachers prepare to deal with the emotional experiences of students and within themselves when raising these issues?

Caution often rules. In the teacher’s lounge I’m told, *Things may get out of hand if we allow students to articulate the depth of these problems.* Across the table, a parent says *I do my best to shield my child from the dark side of humanity.* At the community meeting an organizer proclaims, *Discussion of overpowering emotions just becomes a descending spiral, turning us away from the urgent action that is required.*

But caution will not save us from this conversation. Skipping over difficult and emotional material will not help our students develop the honesty, resiliency and courage that is

required to face our present moment. According to Lombardia and Sinatra, “Teachers who limit the amount of controversial content may actually allow students’ negative emotions about a topic to remain in place, and thereby limit their instructional engagement.”³

In my curriculum writing for Project Look Sharp’s media literacy lessons I urge teachers and students to question the biases in all media constructions including textbooks, lectures and even this article. Some of my own biases include the belief that systems thinking about sustainability must include consideration of the emotional lives of students and teachers, and collective reflection and critical thinking must ground our pedagogy.

Media analysis as one way in

I came by these biases, like most of us in the teaching professions, by way of the varied experience that make up my teaching career. But what has united each of my distinct experiences has been the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, particularly his understanding of generative themes or codes that help us learn to read the world as we simultaneously learn to read the word.⁴ My current work with Project Look Sharp, an initiative of Ithaca College, has led me to an exploration of the deep meanings, including emotional content, behind the media codes and themes that are ubiquitous in our world and in the lives of our children and students.

Project Look Sharp’s lessons are intended to help teachers integrate and sustain critical thinking about media messages into the teaching of key content in the K-12 classroom. Our goal is to help students develop habits of inquiry required to question the complex nature of media constructions while practicing reading, writing, speaking and listening skills that are essential to the practice of life-long democratic citizenship.

Over the past several years we’ve created and implemented media literacy approaches to teaching about sustainability in food, water and agriculture by considering how systems thinking about sustainability connects to social justice, climate change, energy, economics etc. Whenever I enter a classroom, lecture hall or community forum with an intention to engage in such complex reflection around these issues I am aware that deep feelings are never far beneath the surface. I know that a video clip, a phrase in a song, a blog post or a poster image can each provoke powerful emotions and provide a way to wade into profound conversations about these fraught topics.

Be willing to acknowledge deep emotion

As a beginning teacher I was hesitant to enter into content material that might bring up a strong emotional response from my students. The elementary school where I began my teaching career in 1974, however, was devoted to hands-on engagement in the world beyond our classroom walls. Our students did work-study at our local Friends of the Third World print shop and food co-op. We visited our local Vet Center while studying about the Vietnam War in its immediate aftermath. We attended rallies opposing the construction of new nuclear power plants on the shore of Lake Michigan. Reflection upon these experiences often brought emotions into the classroom. *Why do some children go to bed hungry while our food scrap box is filled with uneaten sandwiches?*

How did that veteran lose his leg? What if the new power plant melts down like Three Mile Island? These discussions required me to find ways to become honest and humble while opening the conversation to improvisation and risk.

We could close the conversation here, and many times we do, but this does not support the teacher who must engage with their students as they are and with the world as it is. I return to the words of the sustainability salon participant who said, “Our house is on fire and we don’t know what will happen.” This truth surely does not mean that we must be silent in the face of the flames.

Strategies to begin the dialogue

The use of images and a creative process are often a good place to start. Pick an example of media that can open the door for dialogue around earth changes. In various sessions with high school and college students, I have used: A clip from the *Twilight Zone* episode, “Midnight Sun” in which the Earth has begun moving away from its orbit and is gradually rotating towards the sun; an excerpt from the hip hop song, “Sky is Falling” by Blackalicious; Gary Snyder’s poem, “For the Children”; or a page from Octavia Butler’s dystopian science fiction novel, “Parable of the Sower.”⁵

Each of these examples can be used with key questions that help to move the discussion into the messages intended by the authors and their impact on the receiver.

- What are the messages about the future?
- What feelings does this bring up for you?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- What can you learn about yourself from your reaction or interpretation?

For upper elementary or middle school students visual imagery might be a better path. You might show several images related to profound earth changes and begin exploring the visual messages:

- Who made these images and why did they make them?
- Which are your favorite and least favorite images and why?
- What feelings do you have when you look at these images?
- What picture might you make that could fit with this set?

Ask students to simply sit in silence after viewing, listening or reading. This process of learning to be still and to breathe in and out in the face of whatever comes up can itself be a useful resiliency skill.⁶ Suggesting that students choose their own form of creative expression as a means to express emotional awareness can be helpful. Have writing paper, colored pencils or clay available for students to write, draw or shape whatever responses come up. Remind them that these expressions do not need to “mean anything” and can be kept private if they so choose.⁷

If you choose to have students share their responses be careful to create a setting in which personal sharing of feelings will not be obstructed by laughter or other distractions that could hurt individuals and make it harder to discuss the sensitive and important issues that have been raised.

Working collectively

There are a wide range of emotions that we might experience ourselves or witness in others as we look squarely at the



group they've studied while other debate teams having studied different voices and topics offer their own unique perspectives.⁸

Questions that follow these role-plays can help students to engage with one another around the emotional impact of the issues raised. Role-play, like media decoding, can provide an avenue to explore deep emotion ("The person I was representing in the role-play probably felt that...") and also "act out" their feelings. It's OK to be outraged, aghast, indignant, terrified or despairing since they are only imagining and expressing what another person may feel. The teamwork allows students to share feelings with one other student in a more private

conditions of the world today. Each emotion may be defined and measured on a continuum of intensity. We may feel anxiety, fear or terror. Frustration, anger or rage. Sadness, grief or despair. Contact with others who experience a similar sense of themselves alone in a world forever altered is an essential and shared journey.

One approach to working through loneliness in the classroom is to have students work in partners on projects that support honest engagement with issues and provide safe opportunities to share with others. A "Voices Role-play" pairs teammates who study the perspectives of an individual or group on a particular issue and then debate another pair who have studied a conflicting perspective on the same issue. For example one pair in a debate on water privatization might study the views of Vandana Shiva, the Indian philosopher and activist, while their debate opponents might study the perspectives of the private sector, United Water Company. Each debate team decodes two different media documents from the perspective or voice of the individual or

way as they prepare for the role-play debate.

Teachers can use the post role-play time for group reflection on common generative themes:

- Were there times in the debate when you had strong feelings? When and why?
- Which media documents brought up feelings for you?
- What makes it easier to talk about your feelings about earth changes?
- What makes it harder?

As before when we work with these questions in the classroom we must be aware to "do no harm" and make sure to create safe conditions to share. This may include providing the opportunity for students to opt out of certain discussions if they are unwilling or unable to sit with this level of personal sharing. It's helpful for teachers to anticipate this possible need in advance so that alternative activities and spaces can be made available with the least disruption and without shaming.

Project Look Sharp: "Climate Change, Agriculture and Sustainability"

In this complex lesson students review a written summary and a short video news clip of a New York State report on climate change adaptation and then compare brief perspectives on climate change and agriculture from Monsanto's *Improve Agriculture* blog and the Worldwatch Institute's *Mitigating Climate Change Through Food and Land Use Report*. Students then break into small groups to analyze video clips from diverse producers, each pertaining to potential strategies to adapt agricultural practices to meet the demands of climate change where they live. As you might guess the perspectives vary widely between an internet news clip on bioenergy production at a former army depot, a university webcast on first nations' science behind three sisters planting techniques and a community organization video on children working together to create a locally sustainable food system to ensure community food security.

This exercise opens the door to imagine how farming and eating in a time of global transformation is manifested in their community and region. Ask students to consider these questions as they transfer experience from classroom to community:

- How can we help one another prepare for the uncertainties that climate change brings to our farms, markets and dinner tables?
- How can we listen deeply and respond to those who remind us that not all people in our communities have access to enough healthy food?
- How can we find ways to invite these difficult questions, and others like them, to the settings where we plan for a future forever altered by choices that people made long before we were born?

Merging action with emotional honesty

How might students work with emotion while developing collective visions for community activism in times of transition? This level of work must be grounded in the acknowledgement that reckoning with deep emotions is not something that can be skipped or, once addressed, considered over and done with. We must understand the capacity to recognize, name and share feelings as an essential part of our ongoing reflection and action in order to transform ourselves and the world.

This kind of student exploration works best when it relates directly to the conditions where a student lives. A 2009 UK study on the role of visual, and iconic, representations of climate change for public engagement concluded that “on a standalone basis fear, shock, or sensationalism may promote general feelings of concern but have a negative impact on active engagement with climate change. That is, unless they are set in which individuals can relate. Otherwise, they tend to disempower and distance people from climate change.”⁹

Supporting youth-centered leadership

In my discussions with young friends about these topics I hear them ask for adult allies who can help them create space where they can get together with one another to listen to their own stories, feelings and ideas without adult direction. They need adult allies who will be able to help hold and witness the emotions that are a part of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in a time when the future looks very uncertain. They don’t need us to reassure them that it will be all right. They need us to be clear and truthful enough to say, “We don’t know what will happen.”

Recently I attended a panel members of the Tompkins County Youth Action Network. It was inspiring to attend an event in which high school and middle school students had the chance to speak to our community about their goals of youth engagement, connection and action towards true social change. Each panel member responded to the question, “How do you deal with the fear?” Here’s what they said:

- “I became a camp counselor and began to work with younger kids.”
- “I joined our community guidance board.”
- “I participate with my community farming project. I never knew anything about farming before and now I do.”
- “My middle school group was asked to carry the lead banner at the statewide anti-fracking demonstration in Albany. We felt proud and strong.”
- “My all-school meeting affirms that my voice is heard.”
- “I have a caring teacher who listens to me.”

I was glad that these kids had the courage to name their fear and to talk with one another about it, and grateful they had invited me into their space to listen and learn from them. I want the same for my classroom, for my dinner table, for my next community meeting. I want the same for each and every one of us.

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chemicals, resources and endangered species; social justice and peace movements and U.S. presidential campaigns.

Resources:

Project Look Sharp, *Media Constructions of Sustainability: Food, Water and Agriculture*; www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=sustainability

Media Constructions of Sustainability: Finger Lakes; www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=fingerlakes

Media Construction of Global Warming; www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=global_warming

Media Construction of Resource Depletion; www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=resource

Endnotes

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3. Lombardia, D. & Sinatra, G., “Emotions about Teaching about Human-Induced Climate Change,” *International Journal of Science Education*, 2012, pp. 1-25.
4. Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, 2000.
5. Project Look Sharp, *Media Constructions of Sustainability – Lesson 2*
6. Chodron, C., *When Things Fall Apart*, Shambhala Publications, 1997.
7. Sperry, S., “Moving and Seeing: Manhood Come Tumbling Down,” in Pallaro, P. ed, *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved: A Collection of Essays - Volume Two*, Jessica Kingsley, 2007, pp. 458-466.
8. Project Look Sharp, *Media Construction of Sustainability*, lesson 6
9. O’Neill, S. & Nicholson-Cole, S., “Fear Won’t Do It: Promoting Positive Engagement With Climate Change Through Visual and Iconic Representations,” *Science Communication*, Vol. 30 No. 3, March 2009, pp. 355-379.

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