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Hope beyond Palliatives: Building Youths' Capacity for Climate Justice Action

A teacher educator shares approaches for engaging students in action for climate justice, including systems thinking to build students' knowledge base of the complexities of the climate crisis.

Every crisis is an opportunity.

—GRACE LEE BOGGS, QUOTED IN *EMERGENT STRATEGY: SHAPING CHANGE, CHANGING WORLDS* BY ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN

When students are asked to share what the phrase *global warming* means to them, what is their reaction? They may discuss their anger at those responsible, frustration or confusion about not knowing what they can do, despair about the future, guilt about their own inaction or seemingly limited choices, and fatigue in trying to make sense of what the United Nations calls "the defining issue of our time" (Diffey & Batey, 2022; Guterres, 2018). It is important to know the reality, but it can petrify our students when they only hear doom and gloom. There is a climate crisis, yet that should not deter educators from engaging students in finding positive ways to grapple with it to discover how they can be part of the solution.

Youth are ready and willing to find meaningful ways to be involved in climate action, as seen in their organization and participation in the first climate change protests, such as Fridays for Future, where students skipped school and marched to demand legislators create policy for climate action (Herrick et al., 2022). They realize they may need more viable and effective solutions as they contemplate their futures in a changing world. Solutions promoted by corporations that create and perpetuate ever-increasing global warming result in anger and aggravation due to their limited scope and ineffectiveness in realizing change.

For example, corporations have presented individual choices and lifestyle changes as the answer for sustainability over systemic change. This critique is not meant to diminish the importance of individual choices and lifestyle changes but to acknowledge that such measures alone will not solve this complex problem. By keeping the public's focus on consumer choices, corporations present palliatives to deflect attention from their ongoing efforts to block policies to control carbon emissions or promote greener choices (Elbein, 2023), ignoring issues of climate justice regarding how many green choices are unaffordable, are unavailable, or have negative impacts on individual lives. Corporate refusal to be accountable and manipulation of consumers to shift responsibility reveals the complexity of climate action.

The climate crisis raises questions such as: Why are corporations continuing to produce plastic for their products when more sustainable solutions are available? Does recycling make a difference? Can oil companies be "green" and "sustainable," as their ads claim? Why are factories, landfills, and extraction sites located where they are? Why are known solutions not implemented more quickly, effectively, and broadly? And what can we do that will make a

difference? These are difficult questions and require information, complex thinking, and critical analysis to begin to answer them. This article suggests a pathway to grapple with these questions, using sequential lessons that bring sustainability into the English classroom. The lessons are intended to develop students' capacities for positive engagement in climate action by helping them build a knowledge base of the complexity of the issues and then take action. The lessons foreground the literacies of critical thinking, discussion, collaboration, systems thinking, and research-informed argument writing. Primarily, this article aims to help teachers engage students in taking charge of their futures—using their informed voices and taking the first step to becoming climate activists.

When facilitating students' learning for climate action, foregrounding the concepts of hope and climate justice to use systems thinking prepares them to tackle a sustainability issue of their choice. Once students are prepared to self-select a problem framed by climate justice, they will research it and take action by writing an opinion piece for a periodical, group of stakeholders, or digital platform. Equipping students with the capacity to engage in climate action will provide solutions to alleviate their fears, anxiety, discouragement, and even despair through understanding the big picture and seeing what is possible, now and in the future (Stein, 2022).

FINDING A WAY FORWARD: HOPE FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

Often, hope is conceptualized as wishful thinking. Philosophers, leaders, and climate activists have framed it differently as providing opportunities for engagement to emerge from otherwise difficult or desperate situations. For many, hope forms a foundation for action that can disrupt the long con of corporations' pretense of concern about global warming, presented as palliatives with no immediate change in their business-as-usual modes of operation. It is challenging to hold hope amid this stalemate.

To cultivate students' ideas about hope, begin where students are. In a class discussion, first ask students about their hopes for climate change. It might be expected that many share a negative perspective. Use a follow-up question focusing on any positive responses from the class, asking what it would take to make that positive hope happen. This discussion begins to reframe the climate crisis from inevitable to potentially solvable.

Briefly discuss optimism as a passive assumption that things will be resolved positively without actually doing anything (Solnit, 2023). Explain that hope is different from optimism, and share these definitions of hope (or others with which you may be familiar):

1. Freire (1995) refers to "the radical nature of hope" and says, "Though I know that things can get worse, I also know that I am able to intervene to improve them" (p. 53).
2. Solnit (2023) shares that "to hope is to accept despair as an emotion but not as an analysis . . . to know the powerful have their weaknesses, and we who are supposed to be weak have great power together, power to change the world" (p. 6).
3. Václav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic, (as cited in Solnit, 2023) uses a definition that specifies, "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out" (p. 7).
4. Kendra Thomas (2024) writes, "What makes hope a virtue is not its ability to promote happiness and success, but its commitment to a greater good beyond the self" (para. 11).

Form four groups and have each group focus on one of the four definitions. Each definition is meant to act as a catalyst to frame hope associated with action. Provide students with guiding questions for group discussion, such as: "Can hope eradicate despair?" "Is hope passive or active?" "What examples can you use to support your conclusions?" Students share their views with the whole class, and the various conclusions presented by each group

can then be synthesized with the question "What did all the groups share that is similar?" in order to facilitate finding the connections and relationships across the groups. Conclude the discussion by asking, "What differences do you notice between hope and optimism?" and affirming that hope must have a component of action to help solve problems as daunting as the climate crisis. End the discussion by asking, "What do you align with—hope or optimism?"

Connecting to their lived experiences through discussion, collaboration in groups, and listening to others' hopes and experiences with hope engages students in critical thinking as they evaluate and analyze the definitions, create examples, synthesize the groups' judgments, and use their examples to compare hope and optimism. Knowing which construct students are more comfortable with, hope or optimism, validates their beliefs and provides formative information.

CLIMATE JUSTICE: CONNECTING THE ENVIRONMENT TO SOCIAL AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Global warming might often be considered an equalizer, affecting everyone similarly, but that is not the case (Grigoriadis, 2018). The impact of global warming is a human rights issue, and justice is needed for those who are suffering the most from global warming and who are likely to be the least responsible (Robinson, 2018). To help students understand the global impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations, begin with visual imagery that will create curiosity, leading students to adopt varied perspectives on climate justice.

1. Find images of recent extreme climate events close to home (see Images for Classroom Use sidebar)—hurricanes, fires, and drought, for example—along with the locations of factories and garbage dumps emitting carbon dioxide and methane, to show students. You might expand your presentation to include images of global climate justice issues, but starting locally and nationally is more personal.

IMAGES FOR CLASSROOM USE

This link (https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/people-in-extreme-weather) may help you select images of climate events to use in your classroom.

2. Ask for students' reactions, using questions like: "What do you observe in these pictures?" "What impact do the events in these pictures have on human populations?" "How does climate change play a role in the events shown in these images?" "What issues of justice can be inferred?"
3. Share the concept of climate justice and varied perspectives of it: as an issue of human rights in the definition above (Robinson, 2018); as an issue of economic justice in Macquarie's (2022) definition, noting how many of those "most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation are . . . largely excluded from the rewards of global economic activity" (para. 1); and as reframing our relationship with the environment and indigenous knowledge, as Jade Begay (2021) indicates in her comment "A colleague recently told me that climate justice is about building ties between people, their land, and their traditional, ancestral ways" (para. 1).

Ask students to consider these definitions and their varied perspectives on climate justice. Then have students share what climate justice means to them and the role of hope within that meaning. Through

the discussion, continue to probe students' thinking: Ask questions differentiating the perspectives, then find relationships among them. Examine which of the comments students share are assumptions, which are backed up by evidence or experience, and how hope fits in. Ending class with an exit ticket with students' definition of climate justice will make their thinking visible and give information on what misconceptions might need to be corrected. This lesson develops students' visual literacy and critical thinking as they compare definitions and create their own by synthesizing the definitions of climate justice shared.

Once students have a strong sense of the relationship between climate justice and hope, introducing systems thinking will help them to see the big picture of how corporations, sustainability, and climate justice are related and will position them for action-oriented solutions.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE: SYSTEMS THINKING FOR SOLUTIONS

Systems thinking can sound scary as a way to solve problems, but it doesn't have to be. The reason for developing this thinking skill is to see the big picture when solving a problem by examining a system's purpose and its varied components to provide the best solution. Analysis, a part of critical thinking that takes place in the English classroom regularly, breaks things and ideas down into pieces. Systems thinking is not the same as analysis, but it complements analysis. Systems thinking is a useful tool for meaning-making that suits sustainability work's complexities (Beach, 2023; Seibert, 2018).

Systems thinking looks at the whole, including all the parts of any given system and systems within the system, for a big-picture view of a problematic issue. This big-picture perspective creates "an *awareness* of how systems, structures, and ideologies reproduce hierarchies of power" (Share & Beach, 2022, para. 6). Systems can vary in size. Consider the system of plastic production, which comprises smaller systems like the production of toxic emissions or disposal practices that cause harm to ecosystems (such as sea life). The purpose of this system is complex, with unequal power differentials—some providing benefits (as in the medical profession) and some harm (such as toxic emissions affecting vulnerable communities). Systems are about relationships between the parts and their interconnectedness. While analysis yields a linear breakdown of parts, systems thinking reveals how the parts rely on each other to remain functional.

Synthesis is used in systems thinking to reveal *how* things are interconnected, finding the relationships between two or more things or concepts and creating new knowledge. Just as students might synthesize the various definitions of climate justice by looking at the relationships between the definitions and developing new knowledge from those relationships, systems thinking looks at relationships to seek knowledge about the complexity of the problem, examining the whole and the parts and how they interact. To construct a complex understanding, differing perspectives (such as those of the medical industry or people living next to a factory) are considered so that multiple possibilities of meaning within the relationships emerge.

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Consider the issue of sustainability within the fast fashion industry. Fast fashion fuels profits for industry, which is the purpose of the system. Within the industry are clothing companies, fashion houses and designers, manufacturers, marketers, celebrities and influencers, and retail outlets, highlighting the system's purpose of continued profits for all. Aspects of all these players interact within the system in ways that speak to sustainability and social justice.

The manufacturers ensure high production for higher sales and profit. High production, to remain profitable, relies on cheap production methods, including exploitation of workers who are underpaid and exposed to harmful chemicals from the synthetic, plastic fabrics and chemical dyes used. The cheaply made fabric wears out quickly, creating

waste. It is also synthetic, usually not biodegradable, creating a waste hazard in landfills or incinerators. High sales and profit also require high consumerism, interconnecting with the marketing and retail parts of the system.

Marketers, celebrities wearing certain brands, and influencers—who are, more often than not, paid to promote a brand (Jennings, 2023)—work to fuel high demand by consumers through manipulation, exploiting the fear of not having the latest style or the excitement of buying an item before it sells out. Low prices and the constant cycle of buying newer trends lead to disposability as consumers overbuy and wear things only a few times before discarding them. The cycles of overproduction, constant buying, and disposal are sustainability issues of climate justice. The consumer is insecure and dissatisfied, as the clothing cannot provide a true sense of belonging or self-worth (Shrum & Rustagi, 2019). The allure of wearing new styles conceals the exploitation of those working in the industry and living near emissions sites (Hayes, 2024).

Looking for solutions once the complexity is grasped helps students see that while an individual choice is important, it cannot solve the issue on its own.

The relationship of these parts to each other and to the whole industry of fast fashion reveals the complex web of actors and victims (Deshmukh, n.d.). Systems thinking also opens space for understanding that not *all* fashion is harmful. Still, *fast* fashion and its emphasis on quick cycles of trends and unsustainable production practices exponentially impact resource use, pollution, and waste. Looking for solutions once the complexity is grasped helps students see that while an individual choice of not buying clothes from unsustainable brands is important, it cannot solve the issue on its own, given the multiplicity of relationships involved. Collective approaches with local and global reach have more promise (Earthday.org, 2024). Seeing the big picture through systems thinking can lead to viable individual and collective choices that actively support climate justice action.

Introduce systems thinking to your classroom by modeling a concept map. The basic concept map in Figure 1 shows the interrelatedness of some of the various systems within fast fashion. This interrelationship between the main concepts as systems within systems, with hierarchies of concepts that frequently overlap, reveals the power and powerlessness within the system overall. When modeling, begin with a sustainability problem; the example in

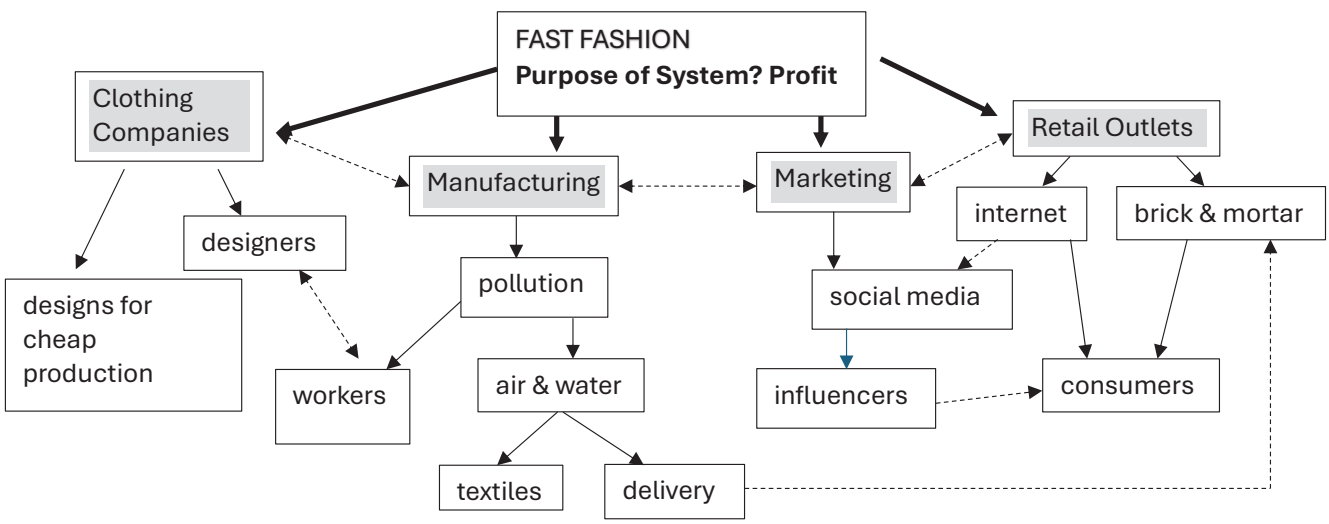

FIGURE 1
A systems thinking concept map. Overlapping parts of the systems-within-systems are noted with dotted lines, illustrating the complexity of the interrelationships.

Figure 1 shows the problem of fast fashion profits creating excessive harm to people and the planet.

If you use this example in your classroom, you may want to engage students in discussing what they already know about fast fashion or have them investigate the Level 2 concepts (shaded boxes) shown in Figure 1—companies, manufacturing, marketing, and retail outlets—to expand and explore concepts in Levels 3, 4, or 5.

Framing the various concepts through a climate justice lens illustrates how climate justice is related to sustainability. Ask students to apply the concepts of power, responsibility, and social well-being to the concept map. Solutions can then be purposefully developed to ensure they are not just targeting isolated issues, such as using electric delivery trucks to curtail pollution. Looking at the system as a whole shows that a more concerted effort is needed to solve the problem.

RESOURCES FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE RESEARCH

These sites focus on in-depth aspects of sustainability problems and solutions:

Project Drawdown (https://drawdown.org/news/project-drawdown-launches-the-global-solutions-diary)

Project Regeneration (https://regeneration.org/news)

Climate Education (https://oercommons.org/hubs/climate)

ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

Now that students have developed a knowledge base on the complexity of the climate crisis, they are ready to engage in an action project. Students will identify a problem of interest within the climate crisis individually or in pairs or groups; frame it through the lens of climate justice; write an opinion piece; and submit it to a periodical, stakeholder group, or digital platform. Once students identify their problem, they can draw on helpful resources like Project Drawdown and Project Regeneration (both require free logins to access), as well as Paul Hawken's related books *Drawdown* and *Regeneration*, and the database Climate Education (Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education, n.d.). See the Resources for Climate Justice Research sidebar for links to these sites.

The climate justice action project follows this outline:

1. Self-select a problem framed by climate justice.
2. Research the problem.
3. Create a systems-thinking concept map of the problem.
4. Research/develop a solution to the problem, narrowing the scope to one subsystem but keeping the larger system in mind.
5. Create a "one-pager" to share during a class presentation (Step 6) as prewriting to bridge the systems-thinking concept map and the opinion piece (this will help clarify areas of strength and areas for revision).

6. Present the problem, system, and relationships framed by climate justice to the class.
   a. Ask questions to help with any challenges encountered.
   b. Gather class feedback on relationships, hierarchies, and further concepts.
7. Outline the opinion piece using a list of criteria for effective arguments:
   - Get to the point quickly.
   - Add a personal connection to the problem (e.g., "I can't give up my plastic workout clothes").
   - Present controversial issues about the topic.
   - Offer clear solutions.
   - Include an explicit message for the reader (perhaps requesting a specific action, such as sharing the information).
8. Write the opinion piece and submit it to an appropriate periodical, group of stakeholders, or digital platform.

Some aspects of this phase may present challenges. Framing the problem with climate justice may be elusive, yet sustainable solutions can only be truly effective if they prioritize social and political vulnerability. Establishing students' authority to speak on the topic may be challenging. Connecting a student's personal stake in the topic to ethos is an effective approach—something like "Once I realized my clothes were plastic, I researched the issues around sustainability and clothing manufacturing." Using urgency, students must establish why the issue/problem is newsworthy (Corwin, 2024). Writing collaboratively may result in some students doing more than their peers; using a self-assessment detailing their contributions may help. Presenting their one-pager with their systems thinking map will allow students to receive suggestions on these issues from their classmates and teacher.

The actual writing of the opinion piece, although most closely aligned with the traditional skills of English as a discipline, is challenging. Identifying a periodical or group of stakeholders may be difficult for some students. To assist, note where the articles they identified during their research are published and what publications are listed in the references. Local publications, including the school newspaper (if there is one), are good options. Digital publications and blogs are possibilities, especially if students hope for a wide audience. It is also possible for students to create a video of themselves sharing their opinion essay verbally.

Communication techniques for effective, persuasive climate appeals have been researched, so examining these approaches is important. The United Nations advocates presenting the topic in a way that's relevant to the reader (for example, by emphasizing the need to protect their way of life), being clear on the urgency, and presenting opportunities for action (United Nations Department of Global Communications, n.d.). Harvard's Center for Health Communication provides 10 tips, including focusing on belonging and empowerment, using a "follow the crowd" mentality (because people do what others do), harnessing readers' emotions, telling a story and backing it up with statistics, and being specific about the action the reader should take (Peters & Salas, n.d.). The 2022 article "Identifying Climate Messages That Work" from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication is also helpful, sharing research showing that understanding the causes of climate change increases support for solutions. All of these resources are available online (see reference list for URLs). The project becomes more effective when students know they are crafting messages using research-based arguments.

CONCLUSION

This lesson sequence attempts to meet students where they are in the climate action movement and help them actively engage for climate justice. For Freire (1995), hope begins with actively engaging in our reality. When students examine hope and climate justice, they uncover the realities of global warming: namely, that action is necessary to create just, sustainable communities. Freire asks that we critically examine our reality, which students do through their research on a self-selected sustainability problem. Systems thinking enables them to

identify a viable solution. Students' vision of a better future due to their individual and collective critical analysis is embedded in their opinion pieces as they argue for solutions and share actions their readers can take. Finally, Freire believes that we can change our circumstances through collective action, which goes beyond the classroom. Students are propelled forward with hope for the future by tackling the complexities of global warming, exposing the false comfort offered by the palliatives of manipulative greenwashing, and taking climate action. EJ

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Fink, RWT

While sharing the provided definitions of hope or others that would resonate with your students, use the linked ReadWriteThink.org journal prompt with each of the four groups. Invite each group to focus on one of the four definitions on their journal page, using the guiding questions provided in the article to help inspire their work. https://bit.ly/2V0CtVR

An Existentialist Failing a Standardized Test

Why are we here?
In a windowless, concrete box:
walls painted institutional white;
lights humming, fluorescent, and sterile
while above us hovers mortuary stillness
and listless antiquated angels—
three of four ceiling fans working—
attempting but failing, and failing
should not be an option, yet it is.
Failing is an ogre, omnipresent and staring
up through the shallow depths
of computer screens, crouching
unseen behind multiple-choice answers,
waiting to be selected.
But which to choose?
Right: and you may continue
your educational adventure,
rewarded with more tests.
Wrong: and you will succeed
in failing at fulfilling all expectations,
punished with more tests.
And what is a test?
A state-legislated tape measure
unrolled in annual increments
designed to see how long you can sit
in an ill-lit, stagnant, cement box
in front of a computer, unblinking
and without thinking about the only question
you want to answer:
Why are we here?

—SIDNEY JONES JR.

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