

Climate Change Despair and Empowerment (activity)

By **David Selby** and **Fumiyo Kagawa**

Purpose: Encouraging students to share their anxieties about climate change futures; helping them discover that others share their fears; fostering their disposition and readiness to take action.

Grade level: 9–12

Time: 60–90 minutes

Materials:

- circle of chairs, well spread out
- four or more blank cards per student, crayons, pencils and sheets of paper laid out within the circle
- a flip chart and marker

Procedure

When students have become familiar with climate change issues and debates, the teacher takes the students, sitting in a circle, through a series of stages each triggered by a question or instruction.

1. *Feeling Powerful.* Students are asked to think about times when they have had to do something very difficult or scary but they came out feeling very powerful. After a few minutes of reflection, they pick up a card and write down images that capture the experience and feelings of those times. Students share their images around the circle. They store their card for future reference.

2. *Thinking the Unthinkable.* The teacher asks students to each pick up a card and write three sentences beginning with:

- ‘The thing that worries me most about the heating of the climate is...’
- ‘The thing I prefer not to think about happening with climate change is...’
- ‘What scares me most about a hot planet is...’

Three to four minutes are given for writing (the teacher avoids giving examples and urges students to write what they wish). The cards are collected, shuffled and given out again. Each student reads out the card they have received. All sentences are accepted without comment.

3. *Climate Change Nightmares.* With eyes closed, students are asked to silently run a film in their heads about dangerous climate change inspired by their recall of a bad dream or of something they have read in a newspaper or book or seen on film. Without opening their eyes, they draw a picture on paper of their feelings, not to be shown to anyone.

4. *Something you love.* Again with eyes closed, students are asked to think deeply about something they most value about life or the world. Volunteers are asked to share

and describe things they thought of.

5. *A Hopeful Future*. On a new card, students write three sentences beginning:

- 'We really could face up to global warming by...'
- 'Life could be good, even better, if...'
- 'To transform things, a good way forward would be to...'

6. *Brainstorming*. Students are asked to brainstorm things that people and whole societies might do to stave off dangerous climate change. All ideas are accepted and written on the flip chart by the teacher.

7. *Revisiting Feeling Powerful*. Students are asked to go back to the images of themselves being powerful and look again at their cards (Step 1). They are asked to quietly reflect on how those feelings of power might be drawn upon to help reduce climate change and, in particular, be used in realizing any of the ideas brainstormed. Everyone in the circle is encouraged to share their reflections; those who wish to are encouraged to write 'commitment to action' cards to be shared or not shared with the class as the writer sees fit.

Potential

This activity sequence is designed to take students through a rollercoaster of powerful experiences and emotions before demonstrating their potential for social action ('blessed unrest'). First, they recall feelings and moments of power (Step 1) before encountering climate change dystopias in the face of which they may very well feel an acute sense of powerlessness (Steps 2,3). The orientation then swings (Steps 4,5) to focusing upon what they value most in life and to considering hopeful futures (something that is likely to be made more intense by just having considered what they love). The focus then turns (Steps 6,7) to action to preempt or reduce dangerous climate change. This segues into student consideration of personal change agency potential, by recalling the power students have been able to find in themselves in seemingly disempowering circumstances.

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*This activity was inspired by learning approaches described by Joanne Macy in *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, New Society, 1983.*

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