



How to Teach Using Research on Climate Emotions and Youth Learning

Photo by [Oleg Moroz](#)

What Is The Issue?

Western approaches to education often undermine the role emotions play in learning and fail to respond to learner emotions in culturally responsive ways. This is despite [how strongly emotions signal sociocultural connections and deep care](#). This problem is exacerbated in [climate change and environmental education, where students often feel grief, anxiety, and overwhelm mixed with hope and joy](#). Fortunately, research on climate emotions has expanded greatly in the past decade. It offers vital insight into how to best support students as they experience, process, think, and feel in [more holistic ways \(Sentipensar\)](#)—and [cope with](#) and [navigate complex eco-emotions](#).

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

- **Educators** need to realize that the youth in their classrooms are experiencing an increased [allostatic load](#) as [climate emotions compound other challenges they face in their daily lives](#), impacting their learning capacities, engagement, and trajectories. Students need ways to navigate these challenges.
- **Administrators and Professional Learning Providers** should support educators in [building capacity to engage in care-centered pedagogical approaches](#), which has been shown to improve learning and wellness across learning contexts.

Things To Consider (review [this summary](#))

- The complexity of climate emotions of youth, coupled with the desire to mitigate harm for learners who are already overburdened, often [dissuades educators from teaching about challenging topics altogether](#). However, [not teaching about climate change magnifies youth anxiety, depression, anger, fear, and apathy](#) and [triggers feelings of betrayal and abandonment](#), and [even powerlessness](#).
- A majority of youth are concerned about climate change. By eight years old, [almost all children have voiced some climate change anxiety](#), and [older youth are making choices around higher education, careers, having a family, and maintaining long-term relationships based on their eco-emotions](#).
- [People experience multiple eco-emotions at once—and in no particular order](#). These emotional responses take many forms and are [influenced by a person’s own identity, community, cultural background, and experiences](#). Youth can sometimes toggle intentionally between very different, sometimes seemingly opposite, emotions to cope with challenging feelings, develop emotional self-regulation, and more clearly communicate their experiences and thinking.
- Social media, which often jump from one climate emergency to the next across a global scale and [use sensationalized imagery, can intensify challenging climate emotions](#). However, [some digital spaces can cultivate youths’ critical hope, solidarity, and awareness](#).
- Lasting anger and overwhelm can foster apathy, but it is vital to recognize that [anger can also mobilize action](#).

Recommended Actions You Can Take

- Become familiar with [climate emotion research and recommended actions](#). For example, developing coping and co-regulation skills early and often will help navigate climate amplified emotions—including talking about emotions, engaging in collective action, and [learning about varied worldviews](#).
- Explore pedagogical supports for teaching climate emotions, such as [Sentipensar](#). This will expand understandings of how feeling and thinking are interconnected and play an important role in climate sensemaking.
- Stop avoiding or dismissing youth’s demands to learn about socio-political and ecologically consequential topics; this can do significant emotional damage, including cultivating feelings of betrayal and dismissal. Instead, explore new ways to appropriately incorporate such learning into your curricular and local contexts.
- [Taking a collective and systemic focus to learning about climate change and working through climate emotions](#), instead of centering highly individualized approaches, will improve engagement and [foster climate empowerment](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How have you seen emotions impact climate learning?
- How can what we know about climate emotions and learning inform our teaching?
- What can we learn from other climate endeavors (e.g., [creating art](#), [collective action](#), [speculative dreaming](#)) about how to better support peers and youth?

Attending to Equity

Talking about climate emotions is an important coping and processing mechanism. Educator [silence about climate realities and emotions](#) fosters inequity by shielding a select few from the effects of the climate crisis through the erasure and denial of others’ unjust experiences.

[Language can unite or divide, either guiding us toward, or further away from, liberation](#), as such it is important to be knowledgeable and explicit about particular language to help ensure shared meaning and better care. For example:

- [“Climate-anxiety” is often related to neo-liberal narratives situated in predominantly white, middle-class realities](#) because some have been shielded from climate catastrophes and invisibilize experiences of people on the frontlines.
- [“Resilience”](#) is often seen as an individual trait, but should focus on current and historic drivers of collective resilience.
- [“Hope”](#) is a complex term with a [history of fragility, false optimism & fostering of unjust outcomes for those in frontline communities](#). Hope [can be “overrated.”](#)

ALSO SEE STEM TEACHING TOOLS:

- #107 [Sentipensar Pedagogy](#)
- #80 [Reframing Eco-Anxiety](#)
- #84 [Let’s Talk Climate!](#)

