

Introductory Comment: Second Issue of Unsettling Environmental Studies

Running Grass

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Welcome to this issue of *Contingencies* on the theme of Unsettling Environmental Studies. Over the course of the two issues with this theme, we've heard from colleagues at universities, non-profits, research programs, and other organizational contexts on a wide variety of topics and from multiple perspectives. We've included articles on teacher preparation, environmental leadership development, environmental education, environmental justice, indigenous knowledge, Black feminist perspectives, course models and curriculum, novel pedagogical approaches, technology, and climate fiction.

Linking all the diverse topics addressed in the articles is the theme of and intention to unsettle, rethink, reconsider, and reenergize the broad field of environmental studies. Positive, constructive, innovative, and energetic thinking and practice often come from the margins with their power to unsettle.

The unsettling currents put forth in the articles are, in a way, attempts to comprehend, address, and adjust to the profound displacements, dislocations, and upheavals of the current era: the deepening global wealth disparities; the glaring racial and gender inequalities and injustices; the rising reactionary tide against democracy; the pace, impacts and uncertainties of technological

development; and the possibly irreparable disruption of the climate. Answers to the question of how environmental studies will respond to these challenges can be found in the articles comprising these two issues.

Seeded now with new ideas on the rich and unsettled ground of environmental studies, let's continue the exploration ahead with the question, "What refocused and inclusive vision of environmental studies emerges from the generative kaleidoscope of possibilities raised in the articles?"

This is a persistent question of our time and other colleagues, prior to our exploration here, have lent their thinking and voices to producing examples of broader conceptual thought that lights the way. One example that comes to mind is Mitchell Thomashow's both prescient and personal *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning* (MIT Press 2020). Thomashow asks an additional set of questions to consider: "What is the appropriate educational response to the perils of ignorance? How might the ecological knowledge gap be addressed? How do we revitalize environmental learning? How do we expand the possibilities for environmental awareness? How should the field of environmental studies respond? How can environmental citizenship be renewed and transformed?" (13) These questions are key in the pursuit of unsettling environmental studies and forging a new path forward.

A Book Note on Teaching Climate Change and Justice, and Addressing Climate Anxiety

A number of articles in the Unsettling series addressed teacher preparation and leadership development. Climate disruption is a transforming force in education with repercussions on preparing teachers to teach. The climate emergency has engendered many new books in the last decade to help teachers become more informed and effective instructors in K-12 classrooms. Teaching about climate is challenging science to unpack and convey accurately, and it has now

become a fraught endeavor, given the politicization and ensuing controversy that engulfs the climate change discourse. Add to this the currently orchestrated assault on science and fact that adds layers of difficulty to teaching the topic, especially given the partisan censoring and risk to teachers themselves.

Many of the books on teaching climate change have similar intentions to support teachers with the basic science of climate and the human impacts on it, aligning teaching with science standards, and providing abundant resources to support the teacher in providing instruction. A recent example is Mark Windschitl's *Teaching Climate Change: Fostering Understanding, Resilience, and a Commitment to Justice*. (Harvard Education Press 2024)

Climate change itself generates anxiety, and teaching about it risks exacerbating the condition. Teachers have had to address this emotional stress in their students. Complex and overwhelming information on a topic of this magnitude combined with fear in the current political climate can tend to block critical thinking, encourage hopelessness, and stall the ability to act during a time when informed and sustained action is clearly needed.

Recent books documenting and addressing the climate anxiety and eco-grief felt by students include *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet* by Sarah Jaquette (University of California Press, 2020) or *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis* by Britt Wray (Alfred A. Knopf, 2022). These two volumes extend the climate change conversation into the realms of emotional regulation, mental health, and mindfulness to regain balance, purpose, and effective and sustainable climate action over the long-haul.

A new and singular addition to the teaching climate change literature comes from award-winning author Robert Collin, educator, lawyer, and social worker—among the many titles of this truly

interdisciplinary scholar. His experiences in these fields can be clearly discerned in his *Climate Change in the Classroom: Celebrating Optimism for Students, Teachers and Parents with Multicultural and Interdisciplinary Activities*. (Robert W. Collin, 2025) Collin sees accurate climate information, skillfully delivered, as an antidote to the climate anxiety experienced by students, teachers, and the broader community as well. The use of case studies is an important part of his approach and one of his methods for creating the optimism he promises. Collin sees the teaching of climate change and generating of solutions as reaching beyond the teacher in the classroom to a partnership between students, teachers, principals, school districts, and the larger community. As such, his approach, while focused on the classroom, suggests elements of community education. His message is clear—climate action is urgent; climate education requires a whole community effort, which will generate the necessary optimism for sustained and successful action.

Collin has written an extensively researched compendium of best teaching practices and climate change resources. His book is a needed addition to the genre, informing and assisting teachers and community educators in the bewildering effort of teaching during this time of multiple threats to science, fact, and education itself, while climate disruption continues. These difficulties are compounded by governments backsliding on their climate commitments and doubling down on a fossil fuel economy. Teachers and the rest of us need and appreciate all the help we can get. Collin's book and the others referenced above are among the help we need.

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