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## Q&A: Educator Pedagogical Approach

### *Curricular Guide for Environmental Justice*

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***Rachel Forbes: How do you help students feel empowered to create change given the enormity of the climate crisis?***

It's easy to feel powerless and hopeless in the face of climate change and the ecological destruction that comes as a result. As the world becomes hotter, natural disasters are more destructive and more frequent, and the health impacts of environmental injustices destroy vulnerable communities worldwide. It is normal to feel paralyzed by the enormity of the climate crisis and feel unable to affect positive change. One way that I support students to feel hopeful and motivated while learning about the climate crisis is by helping them foster a sense of agency by focusing on what they can change.

We need to acknowledge that the systems and structures that uphold the climate crisis—colonization, capitalism, extractive industry—are the primary actors in the devastation we are witnessing. It is important, however, to also focus on the individual and what small actions the individual can take to make the world a more sustainable, habitable, and ecologically engaging place for current and future generations. This can mean reducing our carbon footprint, changing small behaviors in our daily routine to be more carbon neutral, and learning about local advocacy efforts to support a just transition. When students feel like their seemingly small actions are making a difference, it supports a sense of agency and thus a sense of hopefulness for the future. Yes, learning about the climate crisis can seem overwhelming and “doom and gloom” can engulf our outlook. But feeling like their voices and their actions matter can go a long way in helping students maintain a positive outlook to enact future change.

***Cathryne L. Schmitz: Would you offer an example of a pedagogical approach that educators can use to teach environmental justice?***

One example is to have students conduct a team project on environmental justice, community, and sustainability to identify an environmental issue for exploration. The focus of the team project can be local

or global, but both contexts must be analyzed. Using interdisciplinary teams adds depth to the analysis. Factors to be engaged include social, economic, and environmental justice; community engagement; and sustainable economic models. Current and historical issues must be explored. Specifically, students examine the interrelated economic, social, and political systems and power dynamics; evaluate social relationships and resource needs; and synthesize the interdisciplinary implications. The team then prepares a final report to be shared with the class.

Each team prepares a 30-minute presentation based on the team exploration and leads a class discussion. The goal is to educate the class on the issues and facilitate a dialogue on the role of social work across the personal, interpersonal, community, and policy/advocacy levels.

A useful resource for this project is *Seeing Systems: Peace, Justice, & Sustainability*, produced by [ecochallenge dot org](https://ecochallenge.org). *Seeing Systems* is a hands-on toolkit that facilitates an interdisciplinary multicultural and global examination of the complex dimensions of sustainability. Through the exploration of knowledge from multiple disciplines, issues of justice, transformative peacebuilding, and healing guide sustainable development. The toolkit is designed to be a guide for community building, transformative learning, and life-changing action. Through their [Ecochallenge Platform](https://ecochallenge.org) and discussion courses, the organization connects people with research-backed actions and with others who want to take these actions.



**Rachel Forbes, MSW**, is an associate professor of the practice of social work and the Western Colorado MSW program director at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work. Rachel's research interests include health equity and climate change, environmental justice, and rural social work practice. She co-chairs the CSWE Committee for Environmental Justice and serves on several local and regional boards in Western Colorado.



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