

BY LORNA COLLIER

A photograph showing a globe being held up by several hands from different people. In the foreground, two young people, a Black woman and a white man, are laughing joyfully, looking up at the globe. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting with green foliage. A red horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the main title in white text.

# DOES CLIMATE CHANGE HAVE A PLACE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM?

**E**nglish teachers are experts at helping students examine relevant, complex, and connected stories and look for meaning and truths in and behind the words. This is the view of the authors of a new book from NCTE and Routledge, and is one of the reasons the authors believe the climate change story is one that deserves a place in the English classroom.

The book is *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents: Reading, Writing, and Making a Difference* (Routledge & NCTE, 2017), and the three authors are **Richard Beach**, professor emeritus of English education at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; **Jeff Share**, teacher education faculty advisor at the University of California in Los Angeles; and **Allen Webb**, professor of English education and postcolonial studies at Western Michigan University.

Teaching climate change in an English classroom is “a relatively new idea,” Webb says. But the significance of the topic is one reason it needs to be there.

“Once you start seeing climate change as the most important issue facing mankind or humankind, then you start seeing how important it is that we address this,” Webb says.

Another reason: English class can explore aspects of climate change that aren’t necessarily going to come up in science or other classes, the authors say, such as “social, historical, ethical, and human realities that are critical to the problem.”

As Beach says, moral values—“why characters behave in certain ways and do certain things”—are the domain of English teachers.

So is “story.” Climate change is a topic that can be studied in the context of story: Whose stories are being told? Which stories aren’t receiving mainstream attention, and whose voices are being excluded?

While stories of climate change may not have traditionally been explored in the English classroom, the authors argue that they will continue to dominate the news, as well as figure prominently in both literary works and nonfiction.

Climate change also is immensely engaging for young people because it carries real-world, immediate relevance for them.

“They’re concerned, and they should be,” says Webb, who has seen an eagerness to learn about climate issues from his college students. “This is the world they’re going to be living in. [Climate change] is happening now in a big way—but it’s going to be even more powerful in their time.”

Share too has observed high interest in climate change from students. He’s worked with an elementary and a middle school teacher who brought climate change into their classrooms. “It was really amazing to see how much the students connected with it,” Share says.

By contrast, today’s English language arts curriculum often “is disconnected and, frankly, irrelevant to the issues in students’ lives and the world today,” the authors argue.

Share points out that, besides being relevant and exciting to students, the topic is also an opportunity to foster critical thinking and media literacy skills, in part because “climate change is one of the big places where there’s so much manipulation happening in the media in terms of miscommunication and false news.”

### **WILL I GET HASSLED IF I TRY TO TEACH IT?**

Should teachers expect pushback when teaching a topic so politically controversial? After all, some federal and state government officials have censored use of the term *climate change*, and a significant percentage of

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Americans continue to doubt its existence or at least human culpability.

The authors say they realize some teachers may find it challenging to implement new ideas their curriculum, much less those involving a potentially controversial topic like climate change. Yet some English teachers already are addressing climate change in the classroom, the authors say. They describe many of the practices teachers are using to successfully teach the topic, including as part of interdisciplinary units.

Share urges teachers not to be afraid of taking on controversial topics for fear of offending people—especially, he says, when it comes to addressing “the single most important problem facing the planet Earth that may lead to the extinction of life on Earth, including all human beings.”

“Teachers have been willing to take on deniers of various kinds,” Webb says. “Should you not teach about

CONTINUED ON P. 32

## STARTING POINTS FOR TEACHING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

These recommendations are excerpted from *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents: Reading, Writing, and Making a Difference* (Routledge & NCTE, 2017), by Richard Beach, Jeff Share, and Allen Webb. Visit [bit.ly/2h9UEFh](http://bit.ly/2h9UEFh).

### 1 TEACH A SHORT STORY ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Two excellent collections are *I'm with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet* (Martin, 2011) and *Winds of Change: Short Stories about Our Climate* (Woodbury, 2015).

### 2 ASSIGN WRITING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Short stories can be a springboard for persuasive and narrative writing. As we know, students are most likely to learn writing or media skills when they are engaged with meaningful content and composing for real audiences.

### 3 ADD INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Nonfiction about climate change can be studied as a topic/genre on its own, or it can be paired with literary works. If you're looking for something quick and easy for your students, you won't do better than the four-page "Four Degrees," the final chapter of *Don't Even Think about It* by George Marshall (Bloomsbury, 2014.)

### 4 INCORPORATE DOCUMENTARIES AND IMAGES

Documentaries can be combined with literature, writing, and essays to develop units, or they can serve as the focus for literature circles or individual research. Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* is one of several documentaries recommended for this purpose in *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents*.

the Holocaust because some people deny that it ever happened?

"If what you do in schools is close to anything that is quote unquote controversial, then you've stopped people from becoming critically thinking citizens and you've eliminated their capacity to make a difference in the world about things that matter."

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

First of all, don't worry that you will need to find all new texts if you want to add climate change to your curriculum.

"Teachers may think, 'I have this literature curriculum and it's pretty well set,'" says Beach. But, he says, many traditional canonical literary texts can be used "to think about how nature is portrayed . . . and to frame those texts from an eco-perspective."

For instance, if the work already has an environmental event or theme—such as *The Grapes of Wrath's* Dust Bowl setting—this can become a springboard for climate change discussion.

Or, some works may not have climate change elements baked in, but can still be reimagined as if they did. Students can create "textual interventions"—fan fiction, if you will, in which they reimagine narratives in creative ways. For instance, students can write letters between characters, add scenes, change settings, introduce new conflicts and plot developments. Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* might react to global warming;

Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* might take on an environmental law case; and so on.

Works ranging from *The Hunger Games* and *Lord of the Flies* to *Frankenstein* and even *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* can be used inventively and productively within a climate change unit of study, the authors say.

Or teachers can turn to newer "cli-fi" literature—that is, climate change-themed short stories, poems, plays, and novels as well as nonfiction texts, including articles, books, speeches, documentaries, films, and memoirs. Students can then create their own cli-fi or nonfiction works, perhaps imagining what the environment will be like in the future.

Short texts can be used as well as long; free resources can be found online, with an extensive list of suggestions included in the book.

Writing is a natural tool to use to help students understand climate change topics while also fostering literacy growth.

The authors suggest several types of writing assignments teachers might make, including:

- **Place-based writing**—Students can write about specific places they are familiar with. Webb, for example, has students do paired writings in which they first observe a place in the present day and then write about how the place may change over the next 50 years due to climate change. These assignments let students "take on critical perspectives and address social change and transition."

- **Writing from the perspective of an animal or plant**—This calls on students to fire up their imaginations and “think more deeply about the impact of global warming on other species.”
- **Multimedia composing**—Tapping into visual literacies offers a wide range of possibilities for students to tell stories related to climate change. Multimedia work also allows teachers to highlight issues of critical media literacy, combining questions of composing and production with a look at inherent biases in visual images and media. Discussions on these issues can help “students [critically] question all media and the ideological messages they convey”—an important job for English teachers, say the authors.
- **Using drama and games**—Students might watch, act out, or write their own plays. Role-playing scenarios, board games, and computer games and simulations—such as *SimCity Edu*, *BBC Climate Challenge*, and others—can be used for creative lesson planning.
- **Involving students in civic projects**—Students can also engage in civic projects that tap real-world, authentic literacy skills, such as creating a climate change report card for local government entities,

leading community groups, or presenting petitions to the school administration to ask for more climate change curricula.

Increasingly, says Webb, “Students are taking action to inform themselves and others in their communities.” He is enthused about student involvement and inspired by the engagement it represents.

“I think that’s one of the best things about this book—it creates a lot of hope.”

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**LORNA COLLIER’S ARTICLES ABOUT EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY HAVE APPEARED IN US NEWS & WORLD REPORT, THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE, AND MSN.COM. REACH HER AT LORNA@LORNACOLLIER.COM**

*The authors are so passionate about the cause of reversing climate change that they are donating all proceeds of the book to the Alliance for Climate Education (<https://acespace.org>).*



**For more information, visit:**

Wiki for the book: [climatechangeela.pbworks.com](http://climatechangeela.pbworks.com)

Blog: English Teachers Concerned about Climate Change ([etccsite.com](http://etccsite.com))



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