

Teaching in the New Anthropocene: Eco-Anxiety and Ethics in Higher Education

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Abstract

Current higher education students are located at the crossroads of two disturbing trends: growing anxiety, trauma and grief over climate change, alongside rising global mental ill health – with particularly high rates of mental health stress identified among university students. Speaking from an Australian perspective with reference to global trends, this paper explores the consequences of climate anxiety for tertiary students and the educators who work alongside them. It outlines key discourses in the climate change debate, from blatant denial to posthumanist reconfigurings of hope. In entering this territory the aim is not to resolve the debate but rather to plot a path through the competing discourses. Drawing on the idea of ethics as how to behave, it then invites educators to reflect on their own agency in responding to student concerns and supporting wellbeing and offers some starting points for doing so. While a range of strategies are discussed, key to all of these are embracing agency and the skills of collectivity.

Keywords: tertiary education, mental health, climate change, climate anxiety, Anthropocene, hope

The End of the World

If you think the end of the world is nigh, you are in good company. Whether by Black Plague, or Y2K, we have long been predicting our own death; and yet again there is an upsurge in both academic and populist writings about the end of the world. These debates span utopian to dystopian viewpoints, and invite a similar range of responses: from a valiant call to arms, to mournfully witnessing our inevitable extinction. My particular interest in entering this space is not to try to resolve the climate science debate, but to ask, for those involved in higher education, how might we engage? How, as teachers, do we respond to these various regimes of truth? And what is our ethical obligation to our students in this space?

This article was born of my own desperation and sense of futility. I began writing this as my country burned all around me – with unstoppable bushfires and soaring temperatures never before encountered. As a teacher engaged in social change work and community development, I am increasingly conscious of the growing feeling of despair among many of my students and colleagues. The vast majority of environmental and social discourses appear to be shouting that we are beyond a tipping point: we are unable to prevent catastrophic global heating, crises of biodiversity, over-fishing of oceans, storms, mass extinctions, water shortages, toxic pollution, soil erosion, and resulting famine, disease, conflict, war, state terror, and genocide. What can I, as a university educator, offer by way of theories, frameworks or models that could possibly be meaningful and would sound like anything other than platitudes?

To answer this, I firstly discuss the growing climate anxiety and its consequences from a mental health perspective and explain why this matter is worth considering for educators. I am speaking from an Australian viewpoint, but with reference to global trends. I then outline

the various positions in the literature, naming key discourses and their implications for action. In doing so, I explore the consequences for higher education teachers, and how we can make sense of this to respond thoughtfully, ethically and usefully.

Eco-anxiety

Climate anxiety has long been felt. Seventy years ago, American naturalist Aldo Leopold was among the first to describe the emotional toll of ecological loss, lamenting,

one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds . . .

An ecologist must either harden his shell, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise. (1947, cited in Leopold, 1987: 286)

From an archaeological point of view, the alteration of Earth's environment is not particularly novel either. "The human world has always been anthropogenic. Nearly every human society has lived in environments transformed by their ancestors" (Ellis, 2018: 102). The most recent research shows human-induced landcover change was globally extensive by 2000BC – some 4000 years earlier than previously thought (Stephens et al, 2019). Ellis argues that the role of human beings in the Anthropocene is always being defined and redefined; whether as "progeny, partner, steward, gardener, or destroyer" (2018: 1). However, never before has concern about our role been faced on a scale so large, or felt at a pace so urgent.

This particular type of existential distress has been named in turn, eco-anxiety, eco-grief, climate anxiety, climate grief, and climate depression (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Wallace-Wells, 2017). Increasingly, climate change is recognised as having an impact on mental health "through multiple pathways of risk", including intense feelings of grief as people

suffer climate-related losses to valued species, ecosystems and landscapes, as well as lost environmental knowledge (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018: 275). As people mourn the part of identity that is lost when the land upon which it is based changes or disappears, there is also loss of self. Ecological grief is a form of “disenfranchised grief”; a grief that isn’t publicly acknowledged,

While it may seem intuitive that those contemplating the end of the world find themselves despairing, especially when their calls of alarm have gone almost entirely unheeded, it is also a harrowing forecast of what is in store for the rest of the world, as the devastation of climate change slowly reveals itself. (Wallace-Wells, 2017: 136)

A recent US-based study, found that nearly 70 per cent of Americans are “worried” about climate change, 29 per cent are “very worried” — and 51 per cent said they felt “helpless” (Gustafson et al, 2019). The figures appear even more serious for younger people. Four in five Australian students report being somewhat or very anxious about climate change, with close to half of those experiencing these emotions on a weekly basis (ReachOut and Student Edge, 2019).

While there have been some arguments to counter the global mental health alarm (see for example, Richter et al., 2019; Horwitz & Wakefield, 2006), what IS uncontested is that young people have the highest prevalence of mental illness than any other age group (Stallman & Shochet, 2009). In the US, between 2008 and 2017, the number of adults experiencing serious psychological distress in the last month increased among most age groups, with the largest increases seen among younger adults aged 18-25 (71%) and adults aged 20-21 (78%) (Twenge et al., 2019).

Of particular interest to the present discussion are substantially higher rates of mental illness among university students than in the general population (Leahy et al., 2010; Stallman

2008, 2010; Stallman & Shochet, 2009). Not only is the onset of mental illness typically around 18-24 years old (Black Dog Institute, n.d), but university students are identified as being at greater risk of becoming emotionally distressed and/or experiencing mental illness as they pursue their degrees (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Auerbach et al., 2018; O’Keeffe, 2013; Santangelo, Provenzano, Piazza & Firenze, 2018; Viskovich & Pakenham, 2018). More problematically, more than 60 per cent per cent of university students experiencing high levels of psychological distress do not seek professional help (Orygen, 2017).

This article sits at the cross road of these trends: recognition of the growing anxiety over climate change; concern over rising global mental ill health; and particularly high mental health stresses among university students. In a recent editorial, Besley and Peters (2019) ask, “Do we have a moral, ethical, personal or professional obligation to now begin such conversations in educational and political arenas? Or should we not bother and just do nothing in light of life and death in the anthropocene?” It is to this question that the present article responds. As educators facing this population, what are our responsibilities to students and how might we respond? How, as Masri (2007) asks, do we teach amid despair?

From utopian rallying to dystopian resignation

A starting point for thinking about ways forward is to frame the various responses to the climate crisis as a range of circulating discourses. These discourses work as regimes of truth, determining what society accepts and makes function as true, and regulating individual’s thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours (Foucault, 1980: 131). Particular ideas are revisited upon individual consciousness until they are thought of as normal and are taken for granted. Once normalised, they exert a tremendous force upon consciousness, encouraging compliance and making resistance difficult. However, showing how such social mechanisms work to

maintain and reinforce regimes of truth, Foucault argues, re-engages possibilities for agency and self-determination. It is to this possibility that the present discussion turns.

“Needless anxiety”

“Don’t be afraid, don’t be scared, it won’t hurt you. It’s coal.” The extreme conservative end of the climate debate – the climate change sceptics and deniers – is vividly represented in Australia by the then Treasurer, now Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, holding aloft a piece of coal in parliament to taunt the Opposition. Observing Morrison’s antics, Hamilton (2017) remarks,

One cannot help noticing that this display of bravado by the nation’s leaders is especially vigorous from alpha males, men who act as if the future is a horror movie in which the anticipated terrors are to be relished but also withstood, except that they forget that this one has no end. We will all be trapped in the cinema as the never-ending movie becomes ever-more terrifying.

Morrison has responded to climate science debates by cautioning against causing children “needless anxiety” (Glenday, 2019).

The ethical implications of the climate sceptic position are challenging and go to the heart of what it means to be a teacher and indeed, a learner. Is it, for example, the role of educators to simply present various arguments so that students might weigh up competing evidence and arrive at their own conclusions? Do educators have a duty to be neutral (if indeed such a thing is even possible)? It could be argued that knowledge is only advanced by willingness to question and challenge dominant frames. As Callon et al., (2009, cited Kuntz, 2012, n.p.) assert, “not only must existing controversies be welcomed and recognized as participating in democratization of democracy, but in addition they should be encouraged, stimulated, and

organized”. Some argue that the left-leaning nature of academia – particularly in the social sciences, humanities and arts – make it all the more important for academics to be consciously raising awareness; being alert to double standards; encouraging adversarial collaborations; and emphasising the benefits of ideological heterogeneity within the academy (Carl, 2017).

On the other hand, it might be argued to be unethical to teach what is now widely regarded as misinformation (see Cook et al., 2016, Irwin, 2019) and that the left leaning nature of inquiry is necessitated by the extreme right persuasion of major societal institutions. Exploring this position, Kuntz (2012, n.p.) acknowledges that in the face of alleged uncertainties, many the idea of multiple truths and shifting paradigms may be reassuring. However, “no reference to indisputable scientific knowledge, renders risk assessment unscientific, increases uncertainty and paves the way for arbitrary decisions”. In other words, in a world where *all* facts are disputed, where meaning is referential and ultimately nihilistic (nothing has meaning) or sophilistic (there is only my meaning), there is nothing to guide decision-making, morality ceases to be relevant, as all options become valid.

“A better death”

At the other end of climate response are those who see devastation as inevitable. Seemingly composed in the face of disaster, writers like Bendall (2018), Ife (2019), Macy (2016), and Wheatley (2005, 2012), name an unavoidable near-term collapse in society. In what Bendall (2018: 12) terms the “deep adaptation agenda”, global annihilation is seen not as likely but as inescapable:

We might pray for time. But the evidence before us suggests that we are set for disruptive and uncontrollable levels of climate change, bringing starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war.

While human civilizations have collapsed before, what makes this different is that we now face global rather than localised civilization collapse. Alongside this, the level of destruction is far greater than ever previously experienced or imagined, and collapse of civilization is being accompanied by unprecedented global ecological change, which will result in the destruction of everything beyond anaerobic life forms (Ife, 2019; Macy, 2016)

The ethics of this discussion are thought provoking. Bendall's 2018 essay discussing the inevitability of collapse was rejected by an academic journal, with one reviewer questioning the emotional impact of such a bleak paper:

I was left wondering about the social implications of presenting a scenario for the future as inevitable reality, and about the responsibility of research in communicating climate change scenarios and strategies for adaptation...As the authors pointed out, denial is a common emotional response to situations that are perceived as threatening and inescapable, leading to a sense of helplessness, inadequacy, and hopelessness and ultimately disengagement from the issue. (Bendall, 2018: 35)

However within this discourse, there is no intention to contribute to scholarship on climate adaptation, as "we don't have a snowball's chance in hell" (Macy, 2016: 4). Writers located in the deep adaptation agenda argue that our role is as undertakers or handmaidens to an inevitable civilization and planetary death. There is no chance of rescue or reversal. Instead, the key task is to help people live the remainder of their existence as well as possible. We can still have better social services, better education. "Our civilization is dying; loving each other will not stop that, but it will make for a better death" (Ife, 2019: 65). Wheatley

(2005) suggests in a world without hope, joy is still available, not from the circumstances, but from our relationships. What is needed is therefore not false hope, but deep grief work, so that people might be strengthened and consoled by being hopeless together and “to transform grief, outrage, frustration and exhaustion into the skills of insight and compassion, to serve this dark time as warriors for the human spirit” (Wheatley, 2012: xi).

As educators our role is to assist with this deep grief work and help people embrace resilience, relinquishment and restoration (Bendall, 2018). Perhaps more importantly we need to ensure that the anxiety and fear of the current generations is acknowledged and treated with respect, regardless of our own personal viewpoints. In her work on trauma, Hunter (2018) argues that there is no arbitrary threshold by which trauma can be measured. Trauma is a subjective experience and in its simplest form, it is anything that overwhelms the body’s capacity to cope. Hunter raises the possibility that what is being named “mental illness” is actually “a unique constellation of understandable and adaptive reactions to overwhelming and unbearable circumstances” (Hunter, 2018: 121). Combatting the idea that acknowledging the inevitability of destruction will lead to deeper grief, Bendall (2018: 20) observes,

In my work with mature students, I have found that inviting them to consider collapse as inevitable, catastrophe as probable and extinction as possible, has not led to apathy or depression. Instead, in a supportive environment, where we have enjoyed community with each other, celebrating ancestors and enjoying nature before then looking at this information and possible framings for it, something positive happens.

The sense of agency here is created not by a rallying call to arms, but in the action of sharing grief about ecological loss and degradation. There is agency in sorrow, in that it enables people to choose what is valued through what is mourned. Butler (2003: 247) sees mourning as having “we-creating” capacities, building solidarity and connection. Ongoing

mourning for what has past and is “irrecoverable”, exists in a present that implicates the future. Somewhat paradoxically, Butler sees this as “the condition of a new political agency”.

“Hope on the side of life”

Between these extreme positions is a range of alternative framings. They do not deny climate change, but nor are they willing to concede that all is lost. Drawing on social movements in the Philippines, Wright notes the importance of generating hope, creating empowered subjects and generating alternative realities that make fear – if not redundant – then no longer central to the way people frame their lives (Wright, 2012: 223).

This kind of hope could be thought of as what Hage calls hope “on the side of life” (Zournazi & Hage, 2002: 150), which he conceives in opposition to capitalist and ideological aspirations of hope. Hage points to the empty hope of distant goals in this life (in terms of capitalist driven social mobility) or beyond (in the spiritual ideas of an afterlife), where hope is bound up in stasis, deferred joy and the status quo. By contrast, hope on the side of life is drawn from an appreciation of a capacity to act and to relate to others. Hage argues that hope drives us to continue to want to live. In what he calls “an ethics of joy” this hope emerges through being deeply present. Hage names this as a capacity to experience life as a transition and movement in one’s state of being, as something dynamic and embodied (Zournazi & Hage, 2002).

Similarly, Solnit (2016: xi) is clear that hope is not dead – but that it does need reworking:

It’s important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I’m interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite

or demand that we act. It's also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse narrative. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.

More simply, hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in that spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act (Solnit, 2016: xii). Where uncertainty is recognised so too is the opportunity to influence.

These influences however are envisaged as strategic. While applauding decisions to cycle instead of drive or to invest in solar panels for one's roof, or to take up a plant-based diet, Solnit makes the point that individual local actions are not enough and that "Nothing less than systemic change will save us" (2016: 136).

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light"

In his fierce poem "Do not go gentle into that good night", Dylan Thomas (1952) implores, "we should burn and rave at end of day" – that we should burn with life and never surrender easily to death. Similarly, Standing (2019) argues that the threat of extinction should be the tinder to alight outrage and action. This fourth position is a call to arms, and an urgent sense of a need to fight and to create changes – specifically at a systemic and global level.

The activist position is fuelled by the insight that not acting and losing hope is actually part of the neoliberal imperative. In one of his last interviews, Paulo Freire (cited in Denborough 2008: x), suggests that one of the most pressing global concerns is "neoliberal fatalism". He observes that,

the privileged in the world routinely look for solutions in the wrong places and then, when they cannot find the solutions there, they feel despair, and become convinced that broader change is not possible and therefore not worth aspiring to or acting towards.

Davies (2006) explains why this phenomenon is so compelling. By heightening individuality and competitiveness, neoliberalism works by convincing people that there is no choice at a systemic level. Instead they are encouraged to exercise power at an individual level by becoming appropriate and successful within that (inevitable) system. Consequently, “such a system is extraordinarily difficult to reflexively examine and may, through the discourse of inevitability, dismantle resistance to itself” (Davies, 2006 : 436).

However, examples of this kind of resistance abound, from documentaries like “2040” (Gameau et al., 2019), to the activism of the “extinction rebellion”, embodied by nonviolent civil disobedience to induce action by governments. The world is on the verge of collapse and more than ever, there is need to act: “Our struggle today does not mean that we will necessarily achieve change, but, without our struggle today, perhaps future generations would have to struggle much more. History does not finish with us, it goes beyond” (Freire, 1990, cited Denborough 2008: xi).

Alongside developing the skills of community organisation and social action, there are a myriad of options for resistance through curriculum. For example, influencing students to develop an ethic of place, custodianship and stewardship and extending rights approaches beyond human interests (Knauß, 2018), embedding a curriculum of responsibility and care (Tassone et al, 2018), reinvigorating the commons (Standing 2019), educating for survival (Besley & Peters, 2019), inviting an ecological humanities (Gibson, Bird Rose & Fincher, 2015), or embracing indigenous knowledges and decolonising the Anthropocene (Todd, 2015).

Both the challenge and the power of this particular position is that it constructs a binary; enabling the mobilisation of forces. Locating oneself in the margins can provide energy and urgency to imagine alternatives and create new worlds (hooks, 1990: 341). However, they

also tend to simplify arguments, and personify the enemy. As a wicked policy problem, climate change contains no agreed upon problem let alone solution, and attempts to create change in one area tend to result in additional problems in another (Ellis, 2018). Ellis points to the failure of numerous attempts at resolve global environmental problems at the level of international laws and agreements. He highlights the importance of other actors such as corporations, non-governmental organisations and city governments, and the need for radical rethinking of governance, the role of the citizen, how we make policies and laws and how we think about rights (2018: 138). We need not only activism, but a different way of thinking.

“We build our house on the crack”

The idea that what is most useful is a different consciousness enables the argument to turn to posthumanist thinking. Braidotti frames posthumanism as a “generative tool” to enable rethinking the basic unit of reference for the human in the Anthropocene. She argues that such new social ethical and discursive schemas of subjectivity are required to begin to match the profound change we are undergoing (2013: 12). Deliberately deconstructing the fundamental binary at the core of environmental thinking, she asks, “Does the choice between sustainability and extinction frame the horizon of our shared future, or are there other options?” (2013: 6). Braidotti argues that the posthumanism lens may also invite a positive view as we reconfigure our relationship with what has been called “nature”. By decentring the human, new possibilities are enabled. And instead of a nature-culture duality there instead exists a self-organising force of living matter.

The process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have humanity at the centre is sobering. Yet, the posthuman stance pronounces that we are already dead. The one certainty written upon our lives is our death; death is the precondition of our existence.

This means that what we fear most about our being dead, the source of anguish, terror and fear, does not lie ahead it is already behind us; it has been... We live to recover from the shocking awareness that this game is over before it started (Braidotti, 2013: 13).

Declaring “we build our house on the crack”, Braidotti (2013: 132), proposes that understanding we are over before we have begun means “making friends” with death. She observes that this is an ethical way of engaging in life albeit, as she says, “as a transient, slightly wounded visitor” (Braidotti, 2013: 132). However far from retreating into cynical and nihilistic misanthropy, this propels us to embrace life as radical immanence rather than aspirational transcendence.

From posthumanist thinking emerges an understanding of “co-presence” – the simultaneity of being in the world together, thus defining the ethics of interaction between the human and non-human others. In her pithy slogan “Make kin not babies”, Haraway (2015: 161) envisages that reinventing the human as entangled and embedded within a broader world of co-dependent multi-species assemblages, can reverse the destructive narratives that have justified and guided human transformation of Earth. This recalls Clark’s (1978) work, which speculates that the place of human beings on the planet could best be understood by recognising the interdependence of millions of species within a single living community. Key to claiming kin is appreciating that the secretion of thought is less important for the whole than the ability to fix nitrogen!

Ethical teaching

I began by admitting that this article was born of my own sense of hopelessness as a teacher witnessing the despair of her students. I have used writing as a means of exploring a problem

and trying to generate understanding for myself. However writing this article has proven to be key to my own hope and agency. It has assisted me to reimagine my own role in this vital discussion. I have identified six starting points, and I offer them here to my fellow educators wrestling with the challenge of teaching amid despair.

Firstly I contend that *this* is the conversation that needs to be had with students. As educators we need to elevate discussion beyond the rhetoric and ideology, to assist students to understand their subjectivity in discourse and the consequences for their framing of the world.

Secondly, there is a need for dialogue: not debate, not solutions, but acknowledgement of students' sense of anger and grief – wherever it may be located. Following Bendall's (2018) thinking that naming trauma and opening spaces for conversation is the beginning of the work, it requires us not to revert to problem solution, but to be present, to bear witness and to sit with distress.

Thirdly, it is the essential that we assist students to connect with their agency. All of the perspectives outlined in this discussion point to particular actions, but more importantly they celebrate a particular kind of agency, namely, collective agency. Regardless of whether one is takes an eco-nihilistic perspective, or sees local responses as being sites of possibility, or sees the need for grand systemic shifts, or embraces the post-human ideas of co-presence, there is a shared wisdom that connectivity is what will make a difference. This means, as teachers, more than ever we need to be sharing with our students the skills in being together and forging solidarity.

Fourthly, we need to move beyond skills discussions, and the inflation of universities as expensive apprenticeships for a life of work and material success. Standing (2019) argues that

we are constructing people with degrees but no education, which creates poor citizens and voters. In a world where we are already dead, employability matters less than how to think, how to be critical, how to be citizens, how to have a sense of art and philosophy, and how to be with each other.

Fifthly, as educators we need to think carefully about our own resistance. As Standing, Davies, and others have asserted, the university is a highly individualistic, competitive, market-driven space, which often works to commodify learning and create productive, docile subjects whose ideas of success are framed by the neoliberal institutions in which they compete. Its increasing commodification reduces education to a factory for human capital. I am not yet prepared to surrender the idea of the university as a “techno-bureaucratic ideal” (Reading, 1996: 14) or a “parasitical drain on resources” (Reading, 1996: 40). However, as educators we do need to be critically aware of our role in the reproduction of particular regimes of truth and constructions of subjectivities and imaginings. This accords with the thinking of Davies who suggests that as educational and social scientists, our responsibility, is to understand, to the extent that is possible, the complex conditions of our mutual formation.

We must understand our own contribution to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of particular lives. We must constantly ask what it is that makes for a viable life and how we are each implicated in constituting the viability or non-viability of the lives of others. (2006: 435)

Finally, following Zouranzi (2002), and respectfully pushing back against my colleagues who call for us to acknowledge that a sunset can be as beautiful as a sunrise (Macy, 2016), I suggest that as teachers we have a moral obligation to be hopeful, because hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair. Zouranzi says the true meaning of ethics is “how to

behave” (Zouranzi, 2002: 256). As argued above, to teach in the face of despair requires us not to radiate a naïve hopefulness; it is not simply the desire for things to come, or the betterment of life. Instead what Zournazi thinks of as *doing* hope, is a way of behaving that embeds us in the world (Zournazi, 2002: 14-15). However such a strategy requires us to move beyond our current understanding of education as consumption, and a path beyond the productive material life, and to seek to embed our students in the ecology of life, ethics and politics.

The regimes of truth we each have accepted may determine how we comprehend the current eco-socio climate and our place in it. However when we surrender to despair we are of little use to our students or ourselves. Embracing the ethics of teaching in the face of despair – how to behave as educators – means beginning with our own agency as educators, and reclaiming that.

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