



Finding a Way Through: Teaching with Naomi Klein's *How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other*

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Abstract

In this reflection I share insights from reading Naomi Klein's *How to Change Everything* with undergraduate elementary education majors. I discuss how Klein's book offered pre-service teachers clear pathways for alleviating their own eco-anxiety and how it equipped them to help their future students navigate climate emotions.

Keywords

[climate change](#), [eco-anxiety](#), [nonfiction](#), [hope](#), [youth activism](#), [Green New Deal](#), [system change](#), [How to Change Everything](#)

In fall 2022, I taught an undergraduate course on children's literature that included a unit on building climate change awareness and the pivotal role of literature as a resource for this purpose. The course primarily serves elementary education majors, therefore discussions centered around pedagogical and curricular considerations for the classroom. Despite the magnitude of information available about the [climate emergency](#), it soon became clear that many of my students had little content knowledge about its geophysical and sociocultural impacts. This lack of content knowledge was coupled with a palpable anxiety about the future of our planet, referred to, variously, as [solastalgia](#), [climate grief](#), [climate anxiety](#), or [eco-anxiety](#) (Clayton, 2020). Certainly, varying levels of anxiety emerge when one considers the link between geophysical climate change and mental health of students and educators. Situated in a uniquely tenuous position of assuming responsibility for teaching students about what climate change *is*—and, importantly, what they *can do about it*—educators carry a large burden. Many students of mine expressed this sentiment of simultaneously managing their own anxiety and also learning to hold the anxieties of their future students. "Climate anxiety is something that worries me as a future educator," one student wrote, "but it is not something to withhold from a young person, rather, it is something that should be done delicately" (undergraduate student, 2022).

In response to this and other [climate emotions](#), I chose to teach a nonfiction text that offers an in-road to building knowledge and initiating action. [How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other](#) (2021) by Naomi Klein exemplifies what I consider to be a key developmental process in understanding climate change and teaching climate literacy: knowledge, action, and hopeful futures. Klein advocates for [system change](#) and provides a clear pathway through an otherwise overcomplicated amount of information. The book is an invaluable resource and I found it empowers the young reader with content knowledge, actionable tools, and—importantly—a sense of hope for the future. The hopeful thread weaved throughout each chapter is not encased in naivete. Nor does Klein leave the reader with shopworn recommendations such as the classic R's of reduce, reuse, recycle. Instead, she focuses on examples of [activism](#) that have been successful to counter climate change inaction on a sociopolitical level, along with constructing a base of knowledge for the reader. Each chapter breaks down information into bite-sized chunks that provide space to open discussions. Each includes photographs and breakout boxes that showcase activist-inspired vignettes. This formula not only creates a more digestible read for young/all readers; it creates a balance between information and story. And it is the story that threads a line of hope throughout what might otherwise be another work of nonfiction to further incite anxiety about the fate of our planet.

Take Chapter 8, titled “The Green New Deal”. Klein starts by showing how the United States has dealt with crises in the past: the New Deal in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression and the Marshall Plan in 1948 to aid in post-war rebuilding of the world. This helps her lay the historical foundation for the ways that a Green New Deal is possible and achievable. Klein’s writing is persuasive, speaking directly to the adolescent reader. “Your generation is spreading the vision of a Green New Deal,” she says. “Young people are telling us that politicians can no longer avoid it, and they are right” (Klein, 2021, p. 251). My undergraduate students were equally inspired by Klein’s insistence on what is possible. As one commented: “teachers can support [student activism](#) and educate [students] make the changes they want to the world. [*How to Change Everything*] was a great example of how text can give knowledge and a call to action for students to fight what they believe in” (undergraduate student, 2022). What evolved from the text-centered discussions has curricular considerations for classroom practice. The voices in the room echoed Klein’s hopeful assertions that we can do better to support young people. And who better understands the radical nature of the youth than teachers?

One good example of how Klein’s book supports the bridging of information into pedagogical considerations for future classrooms came late in the unit. Nearing the end of the book, students had participated in many discussions and activities to build a robust conceptual framework for grasping the complexities of climate change and the power of children’s literature for climate literacy pedagogy. There was a noticeable shift during the last week of the unit when students started to think through curricular options for teaching climate literacy in their future classrooms. There was also a growing excitement about how to incorporate activities and community-based activism for their future students. As one teacher-candidate wrote: “I have always been interested in climate change and finding new ways that we as humans can preserve the planet. This book was

an amazing read for young adults and even younger ages that maybe do not understand climate change or ways that we can help” (undergraduate student, 2022).

Cognitive science supports my students’ experience about the power of stories: [Ojala](#) (2012) characterizes “meaning-focused coping” as a strategy for children to hopefully and actively engage with climate change. [Clayton](#) (2020) further supports meaning-focused coping as an adaptive response to the psychological impacts of eco-anxiety. She describes how the children in Ojala’s study were able to “gain perspective on environmental problems by putting the problems into historical perspective, and/or [attempting] to find hope by trusting societal actors such as scientists to find solutions” (Clayton, 2020, pp. 4-5). This, in turn, leads to high levels of engagement and efficacy, when students are able to draw upon their own beliefs and goals to mitigate the negative maladaptive response to climate change, namely anxiety (p. 5). Having watched students engage with Klein’s meaning-focused writing, I believe they experienced fewer moments of eco-anxiety and more moments of hope. In teaching [climate literacy](#), we should be aware of our students’ eco-anxiety. We must develop the skills to teach and motivate them to not only thoughtfully respond to our world, but to be active solution-seekers. *How to Change Everything* helped my students understand their role as Earthlings, humans, and future teachers who can inspire others to build a hopeful future.

References

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