



BOOK REVIEWS

# Learning to live with climate change: from anxiety to transformation

Book by: Blanche Verlie London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

Review by: Panu Pihkala (University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland)\*

We are “climate-changed” people, education scholar Blanche Verlie coins. The climate crisis and all the emotions it generates are here to stay. The task is to learn to live with them, not to try to leave them behind. Verlie sets out a three-fold task of learning practices: encountering climate emotions, witnessing multiple climate realities, and storying climate collectives. All these are intertwined and four key aspects run through them: the importance of relations, the need for embodied approaches, the significance of affective dimensions, and the need to emphasize the more-than-human world.

Verlie’s work provides a next step in integrating affect studies and environmental education. As an interdisciplinary eco-anxiety researcher, I also see this as one of the most significant recent books on climate anxiety. Verlie very skillfully integrates social, psychological, and ecological dimensions. She is aware of the impact of social contexts on people, and discusses her own privilege and position wisely. One can try to learn from Indigenous peoples and other oppressed persons, even while one wants to stay away from cultural appropriation.

A strong asset of the book is Verlie’s ability to bring crucial themes from affect studies to enlighten the complex emotional dynamics of living in the climate crisis. This work began during the last years in Verlie’s high-quality academic articles about environmental education. In this book, which builds on her dissertation work, the arguments are taken further and explained to a broad audience. Verlie skillfully navigates the fog of climate emotions: she understands the fact that there are numerous different feelings involved, and that they often form complicated combinations. These affective “entanglements” must be taken seriously in education and other spheres, she argues.

The work of Verlie and her colleagues has provided important names for eco-emotions. There is a rich array of such terms in this book, ranging from more universal emotions to less known ones. The chapters begin with vignettes, case examples of climate sentiment, and thoughts. This content helps readers to recognize what’s going on in people’s minds. The second chapter, *Feeling the Climate Crisis*, further provides empirical and empathy-provoking examples by drawing from people’s experiences during the wildfires in Australia in 2019–2020, Verlie’s country-of-residence. These parts of the text are bound to spark various affective reactions in the reader. As a result, sections of the book may be hard to read because of the emotional weight, as the author also notes. But this is how it should be, Verlie reminds us; the reality is disturbing, and we need to be disturbed by it.

This last point ties in with the way in which Verlie – and the writer of this review – uses the concept “climate anxiety.” While it can be profoundly unsettling, it is there for a purpose. In addition to lots of anguish and suffering, the climate crisis also offers potential for change. It seems, however, that Verlie’s use of concepts is evolving; some parts of the text (such as p. 2) still characterize climate anxiety more as a barrier, while most parts of the book build toward a more constructive interpretation. Conceptual evolution is also seen, for example, in Verlie’s decision to replace her earlier formulation of “affective adaptation” into “affective transformation.” The tasks provided by the climate crisis are so vast that they require transformation.

\*The online version of this article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has also been published

Verlie is able to integrate numerous justice issues into her work. Feminist, posthumanist, and postcolonialist perspectives are thoroughly present in the book. One of the main themes, witnessing different climate realities, brings this into fore. Verlie's approach includes also criticism of certain scientific viewpoints where the knowledge produced by local experiences is excluded. Witnessing means to step away from the position of a bystander – a concept that Verlie does not use here explicitly – into a participant.

Verlie raises up the importance of what kind of stories we tell about the climate crisis and humans.

She criticizes the “Anthropocenic” (see the debate about the term Anthropocene) and anthropocentric practice of claiming that all humans are greedy individuals. Instead, a focus on various collective stories further strengthens the task of witnessing multiple climate realities that can empower people. Thus, Verlie's book contributes directly also to the disciplines of environmental communication and ecocriticism.

The vivid language of the book deserves special mention. It is permeated by atmospheric knowledge. Many concepts and wordings are highly evocative. As often happens in writing about complex issues, some of the sentences are on the verge of trying to do too much (cf. p. 5, beginning with “It therefore”), but in general the language is marvelous. For example, the exploration of “cloudly collectives” is brilliant: both creative and precisely capturing some key aspects of many contemporary collectives.

The closing Chapter 6 brings together the key threads in this short but rich book. Here, Verlie discusses classroom dynamics more directly, even though examples from her educational work are present throughout the book. Verlie emphasizes that “bearing worlds” requires much emotional labor. Teaching in the era of climate crisis is profoundly challenging. However, having the courage to engage the affective dimensions can also help the educators themselves. Verlie provides a short and useful Appendix of reflection questions, but it should be mentioned that additional practices for this kind of work have more recently been published in a new website by an international network, *Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators*.

Verlie focuses heavily on the transformative, ethical dimension in the process of encountering climate anxiety, and other emotions. This is understandable and much needed. However, I do feel that a bit more could have been added about how to cope with the difficult emotions. For example, Verlie notes briefly the structural challenges that are related to ecological guilt in contemporary societies and economic mindsets. People tend to over-emphasize individual responsibility at the cost of downplaying the need for structural changes. Even complicit people are partly victims, in addition to being culpable. Literature on eco-guilt, such as Tim Jensen's *Ecologies of Guilt in Environmental Rhetorics* (2019), would have helped to develop the book further in this regard.

Verlie writes: “Regenerative atmospheres do not allow moral or existential comfort other than that dependent on radical cultural change” (p. 120). That kind of collective change must be pursued, that is clear, but other scholars and educators, such as Sarah Jaquette Ray (whose monograph *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*, 2020, is in Verlie's bibliography) also emphasize the need for “pleasure activism”: the need to find some comfort also in relation to guilt and grief. It is possible to enable people to find some relief even while the general ethos is to “stay with the trouble” (for Australian psychological reflections on related issues, see also Gillespie, 2020; for environmental education and eco-anxiety in general, see Pihkala, 2020). Related to this, the book could have included some more tips about “coping” literature. Verlie mentions a few good monographs, but there are also some excellent psychological guides available online, such as the ones produced by *Psychology for a Safe Climate* in Australia (see *Coping with Climate Change Distress*).

Overall, this is a very high-quality work. It is a book in education in the classical sense: it consists of wide-ranging philosophical and practical discussions, not only depictions of methods and activities. Empirical examples support the claims. The book contributes to numerous disciplines and the public discussion. For educators, it offers conceptual tools, crucial practices to learn, and emotional wisdom.

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**Dr. Panu Pihkala** (b. 1979, he/his) from the University of Helsinki is a leading expert in interdisciplinary eco-anxiety research. He has often written about education. Pihkala has published monographs in Finnish about eco-anxiety (2017) and ecological emotions (2019), and his articles in English are often cited by scholars from various disciplines. Among other positions of trust, Pihkala serves as a leading advisor for the Finnish national project on social and health sector responses to eco-anxiety ([www.ymparistoahdistus.fi](http://www.ymparistoahdistus.fi)). He has been awarded several prizes in Finland for his public work around eco-anxiety, including several education awards.

## When students protest: secondary and high schools

Edited by: Judith Bessant, Analicia Mejia Mesinas and Sarah Pickard; Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2021

Reviewer: Dr Monica Green (Federation University, Australia)

*When Students Protest: Secondary and High Schools* (Rowman & Littlefield publishers) is part of a trilogy that focuses on student political action via the act of protesting. As the editors — Judith Bessant, Analicia Mejia Mesinas and Sarah Pickard — note, the main aim of the three-volume set is to amplify the voice of young people and position them as key leaders of social and political action. A key intention of this book is to advance a new understanding of why students protest and how student action has been responded to by educational leaders, politicians, media and the general public more broadly. Despite the recent emergence of high school student protest action via the global climate action movement and in popular culture, this book is a cogent reminder of the extended history of student protests. Materializing more than a century ago when 3000 students from 13 Beijing colleges initiated a strike and subsequent reform movement throughout China in 1919, (see Chapter 1, p. 3), the reader is reminded about the long history of young people's protest actions. As this book argues however, such historical actions have been largely overlooked, both in popular imagination and by scholars. As the editors argue, the wider student protest movement has been substantially informed by a continuous wave of global political action by young people and students, most notably in the recent School Strikes for Climate, initiated and led by the Swedish student Greta Thunberg. Given young people's opinions and experiences have largely gone unnoticed, both editors and authors offer a critical reminder about (and immersion in) the impact of young people's active responses to social, political, economic and environmental issues on a global scale.

The book's explicit focus on young people and their capacity to insert themselves in diverse societal issues via the protest movement is both timely and insightful. Too young to vote and often frustrated by a sense of betrayal by their governmental leaders, student activism — as defined and