Student Voices and Public Writing

Allen Webb

A former high school English teacher, I now teach in a university English department, working with future teachers and teaching literature classes. I am increasingly focusing my literature classes on the climate crisis, and those classes are the focus of this chapter. All the specific assignments described in this chapter and much of the student public writing I refer to are available at links from this chapter's page on the book's wiki page (https://tinyurl.com/y9ebyc5m).

Rather than writing papers only for my eyes, my students write to diverse audiences in everyday and activist contexts. Through their writing, students draw on what they are learning in the class, engage in additional research, and consider rhetorical strategies for communicating about climate change with specific audiences. As we know, publishing is an important stage of the writing process, and writing for audiences beyond the teacher makes writing more meaningful and can inspire students to do their best work (Share, 2024). As English teachers, it is part of our job to help young people find ways for their voices to be heard.

STATEMENTS OF CONCERN

As they begin learning about the climate emergency, I ask students to create a list of issues that concern them. We talk about how climate change already impacts places they know, from extra hot summers and warmer winters with less snow to wildfire smoke and excess moisture and drought. I ask students to select at least three points they want to share with others and write a paragraph on each addressed to people they know. I want them to find ways to open conversations about the climate crisis. Students commonly begin with statements such as "I have been learning about climate change, and I am concerned about. . . ." Or "I was troubled by the smoke from Canadian wildfires that made air conditions worse in our town than anywhere else on Earth." Research by the Yale Program on Climate Communication shows expressions of personal concern impact others, that "the more people felt worried and/or compassion in response to the story, the more they changed their climate change beliefs and risk perceptions" (Gustafson et al., 2020). Students have created statements of concern that became starting points for conversations as diverse as speaking to friends, employers, members of church groups, and climate-denying family members after a Thanksgiving dinner.

CREATIVE WRITING

Students in my classes write, share, and publish all kinds of creative writing addressing the climate crisis. In a recent class, I gave students the following public creative writing options:

- a collection of cli-fi poems
- a cli-fi short story
- a short play, perhaps about high school students who find a way to engage others/take action to address climate change
- the diary of a high school student living in a specific location in 2050 where climate change is a major factor
- a song or songs that could be used in the climate change movement
- a proposal to a video game company pitching a game with climate change themes
- a climate change cookbook with recipes and information about the relationship of food and agriculture to climate change (for the present or set in the future)
- a newspaper (or other news source) at a date in the future that reports on future climate change events (students could write different versions depending on what we do today)
- a description of a climate change clothing line—set in the present or in the future
- a proposal pitching a climate change phone app to a technology company

My students tried out many of these ideas; the most popular was writing short stories. Addie wrote a short story set in Seattle, years after the rise of the sea level had flooded the downtown area. In her story, a local girl makes friends with a climate refugee from Oregon as they watch Seattle locals diving into the acidic "chemical soup of an ocean" to find "materialistic shit" like silverware, earrings, and glass bottle collections. Jennifer also wrote a short story set in the near climate future where a teenager and her mother make an automobile journey across the country. They stay at different places, including an expensive environmental hotel with waterless toilets, timed showers, and a parking lot full of Teslas. In South Dakota, they cross the Missouri River, where "a thin ribbon of water inhabiting its wide riverbed creates a natural divide between the dust bowl and the active wildfire zone."

SHORT STORIES WITH AI

In the Spring, 2024 semester, my English class began by studying the environmental consequences of the Earth heating from 1 to 6 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial average, possibly even in their lifetimes according to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change if we stay on the business-as-usual pathway. In this class, students read a valuable book, Mark Lynas's *Our Final Warning: Six Degrees of Climate*

Emergency (2020). When I have less time, my students read the three-page review of that book by Bill McKibben in the *New York Review of Books* (August 20, 2020). While the scientific information about natural impacts is concerning and important, I wanted students to know the science and then draw on the imaginative power of creative writing to think about possible social, cultural, and political consequences of increasing temperatures.

So I had students experiment with the newly available generative AI program ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) to develop cli-fi short stories set at different levels of global warming. I asked students to use AI to create at least five short stories, take the story that most interested them, and work more intensely to develop it by further prompting ChatGPT or working on the story themselves. Only one student had ever used ChatGPT previously, and as they worked on their stories, they shared what they had learned about AI prompting. I encouraged experimenting with point of view, dialogue, extending stories, changing endings, and seeing how different environmental impacts they had learned about impacted the settings and characters.

I published the story they had chosen to develop further on a public website I created, AICliFi.com. I asked students to work with AI image programs (such as Craiyon or Dall-E) to create an image that would complement and accompany their short story. I also asked them to write (in their own words) an analysis of their stories, of AI writing, and of possible climate futures they were experimenting with. Donald explained:

> Using ChatGPT as a tool was quite amazing. I was very impressed how well a machine could pump out a story in a few seconds from a prompt as short as two sentences. With that being said, the initial stories needed to be worked on. However, you can tell it to add more detail and description, or to change words, or to change anything about the story you'd like to. On the other hand, you could just take that initial story [to your own word processor] and then change what you don't like about it yourself.

Olive described her experience:

> What I found the most interesting when writing Cli-Fi stories is the AI would default to a happy, positive ending unless prompted otherwise, not a negative thing of course! . . . The happy endings for climate scenarios made me feel more optimistic, though I made my story's ending very open-ended to reflect all choices and possibilities.

After her classmates had presented their short stories to the class, Kate commented, "Our stories contained a future president, scientists, mothers and their children, and billionaires. There are endless outcomes that the world could end up facing due to the climate crisis." Edna noted, "I learned that the future seems bleak. I'd like to believe humans will do the right thing and protect the Earth, but there are a lot of stories of people living in the aftermath of not caring for the planet. I find it hard to write positively about this subject." Jack claimed, "People need to know what a changing climate can do to our lives. These stories prepare us and organizations to advocate for policy changes, sustainable practices, and collective action. Writing is one of the most impactful things we can do."

SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURE JAMS

I have also had my students research and examine greenwashing propaganda and then develop one or more counter memes to "jam" the original by posting their memes on social media. Students studied the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement's rich website on culture jamming (https://tinyurl.com/yckf5tp8) and examples they found by searching on Google. I asked students to begin by describing and analyzing an existing greenwashing meme they found, where it was found, its intended audience, and how it "works." Next, students described their "jam," how it works, the alternative messages/information it presents, and how they can support their jam going viral (see Chapters 12 and 13 about students creating alternative media to challenge greenwashing and disinformation).

Kate had this to say about a Walmart meme she saw posted on multiple media platforms showing a green planet with leaves sprouting out of it next to the Walmart name and its slogan "Save money. Live better."

> This ad suggests that the path to Living a Better life and subsequently making more ethical buying choices is to buy the cheapest goods. In an attempt to cast a positive light on their environmental impact, an ad like this may work because people are often too busy and too preoccupied to do more research on the stakes of consumer choices.

Her culture jam took the same image, but flames came off the planet instead of leaves. The ad was tinged orange and brown instead of green, and the slogan was changed to: "Save corporations. Live conveniently." She explains:

> If we keep supporting the Walmarts of the world, we are going to be dealing with a hotter planet, not a greener one. I think this culture jam conveys to consumers that it's easy to be complacent in your choices when advertisement makes it so easy to think you're doing the normalized and best thing.

That semester on our campus, there was a controversy over cutting a grove of large trees where the university wanted to build a new dorm. The university recently changed its "tree policy," so my student Skylar created a public editing of the document she posted on social media. She crossed out "building on" before "our tree inventory" and replaced it with "destroying" our tree inventory. She changed the word "protecting" before "highly sensitive areas" to "eliminating" highly sensitive areas. She changed the word "activities" before the words "that may impact the trees" to "chainsaws" that may impact trees.

BLOGGING

Blogging is a form of public writing that allows my students to connect what we learn in class to current news and online resources. Written in a public voice, blogs are accessible to a worldwide audience. Students draw on topics we have read or talked about and then

engage in online research. They read and comment on classmates' posts, and we discuss the blog posts in class. As well as being a public document, their posts allow students to share their research with the rest of the class. For a unit on the impacts of climate change on the Global South, I created a blog, ClimateAfricaAsiaLatinAmerica.blogspot.com. After some common reading, students did their own research. They posted on my blog about various topics such as glacial runoff and water scarcity in Pakistan, climate migration in West and North Africa, and the climate impacts of farming in Brazil. Posts were 800–1,000 words and included images and links.

Climate justice is a rich, complicated, and multifaceted topic. To better understand it, I had students write posts on another blog I created, ClimateJusticeIssues.blogspot .com. I suggested 26 different aspects students could research, including intergenerational justice, global climate policy, environmental racism, renewable energy access, environmental and climate activists repression, failure to protect nature, climate migrants, and others. Their own research, reading and commenting on each other's posts, and our in-class discussions all enriched our understanding.

When I want students to blog multiple times, they create their own blogs, which I connect with using a "blogroll" on my blog. In an article in the *English Journal* (Webb, 2019), I describe a semester when students wrote a series of blog posts as we studied the literature of climate refugees, including John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

CLIMATE MANIFESTOS

As part of our study of the climate crisis, I have asked students to write a "climate manifesto." A clear and conspicuous public declaration on a matter of great public importance, the manifesto has a rich and diverse history, from the Declaration of Independence to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. An important climate manifesto is the People's Agreement of Cochabamba (https://tinyurl.com/mr2px8h3), defending the rights of nature and the people of the Global South (https://www.garn.org /rights-of-nature).

A genre we rarely ask students to write in, the manifesto calls for careful thinking and analysis. I tell students that their climate manifestos should be written in a "passionate, courageous, and visionary public voice" as they set forward the urgency of the crisis, analyze its justice dimensions, describe specific steps to be taken, and envision how a just and sustainable society should be organized. I encouraged students to direct their manifestos to audiences of their choice. Allison wrote her manifesto as a children's picture book. Jessa wrote her manifesto as a climate slam poem she sang to ukulele accompaniment (published on SoundCloud). Mariah worked at a chain movie theater and addressed her manifesto to the executives there, calling for a "Green Theater Initiative, eliminating waste, improving recycling, and showing more climate-themed films." All the manifestos were published online, and it turned out that they created opportunities for public sharing. Four students read from their manifestos at a public climate rally downtown held later in the semester. Several students shared copies at tables set up around campus.

ELEVATOR SPEECHES

There are many ways students can explore and research climate solutions. The website regeneration.org/nexus is a great starting point. My students learned about various climate solutions by reading the cli-fi novel *The Ministry for the Future* (Robinson, 2020). The novel describes the creation of extensive solar and wind farms, changing banking and economic systems, new laws, rewilding, airships and sails instead of traditional planes and boats, special passports for climate refugees, carbon-intensive farming, violent attacks on private jets, "carbon criminals," and more. Students chose one strategy, studied how the novel portrays it, and engaged in their research on the strategy. Next, they wrote an "elevator speech" for or against the strategy, gave their pitch a few times to different audiences, and wrote about what they learned.

Many students were surprised how little family, friends, and others knew about the crisis or possible solutions. Allison explained, "I learned that people who have not seriously studied climate change likely know very little about it." The people Jack spoke with

> seemed very surprised to find out that our sources of food were in danger [from climate change], let alone the concept of regenerative agriculture. . . . I couldn't help to be shocked at how little they knew about the food they eat every day.

Allie "thought it was interesting to tell friends who knew nothing about the climate crisis about these very real solutions."

IMAGINED "REAL-WORLD" DOCUMENTS

Climate change and its impacts are under-addressed by governments, international bodies, and nonprofit organizations. Teaching about climate refugees inspired me to experiment with students creating imagined public organizations or documents, such as a website for a governmental or nongovernmental institution, an international declaration of the United Nations, or a proposal for a set of national or international laws. Typically, these documents include some kind of preamble or introduction and explicit or implicit objectives and outcomes. I provided students with a list of real public documents (on other topics) that could be models for their imagined documents.

At first, students were dumbfounded. While they had done many different types of writing in school, they had never been asked to do anything quite like this. However, as some started to share ideas, the assignment became more interesting and achievable. By the end, I, and I think the students, too, were blown away by how they imagined organizations and documents that could actually exist and, indeed, change the world. Georgia created a nonprofit organization, Assisted Migration for Plants and Animals (AMFPA) to support moving farther north to avoid increasing heat. Johnny wrote a UN Declaration on [supporting] Climate Migrants. Carli created a U.S. Government agency focused on one of the most challenging problems immigrants face, learning a new language. Amy created a position statement for the ACLU on climate migration. Joe created

a foundation, A New Home for Climate Refugees (ANHCR), which focused on developing sustainable refugee housing. It is good that the students included text on their web pages indicating that they were part of a class assignment—many were so realistic they could be mistaken on the open web as the real thing. The second time I did this assignment, when I had previous student examples and my students had access to ChatGPT, the assignment was less intimidating and equally inspiring. Students found that when given specific instructions about the type of document and the kind of information it should contain, ChatGPT was quite good at creating public documents, perhaps better at documents than short stories. When my students published online documents they co-created with ChapGPT, they described how they used the AI program on their websites.

In addition to public writing, my students have done a lot of public speaking and organized events at our school and in the community. They have held a public tree planting, led a community reading discussion at the downtown library, and created a climate change "teach-in" where students, teachers, and community members spoke. This semester, my students created a series of Google Slide presentations about youth climate activist organizations (Fridays for Future, Sunrise, Earth Uprising, etc.) and about youth climate activists (Greta Thunberg, Vanessa Nakate, Varshini Prakash, etc.) that they gave to students from across campus.

Last summer, I drove five high school students, members of the Environmental Club at Kalamazoo Central High School, to Washington, D.C., to participate with Citizens Climate Lobby in trying to convince members of Congress to take climate action. The story of that trip could be a chapter by itself, and I witnessed face-to-face conversations far more meaningful than letter writing. I learned from my students and that trip about the power of young people speaking about the climate crisis to adults in positions of authority.

Young people—of all backgrounds, nations, and political persuasions—have a fundamental right to inherit a livable planet. Adults will often listen to what they have to say and sometimes act on it. There are so many local adult audiences students can impact: school boards about climate education or district greenhouse gas mitigation; township or local government boards about declaring the climate emergency, developing action plans, and taking steps to become more climate resilient; chambers of commerce to talk about how businesses need to make a climate difference; utility boards to speed transition to clean energy; and so on. That public talking is best prepared by student research, discussion, rehearsal, and writing.

Public writing not only helps students better understand, connect, and clarify the issues, but it also establishes their stance, empowers them to speak out, prepares them for activist leadership, and gives them hope for the future.

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