

Dealing with environmental loss: teaching about grief and hope

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In the midst of an environmental crisis, young people are increasingly dealing with climate anxiety, ecogrief and other emotions around environmental loss and climate change (Hickman, 2020). University courses teach this new generation about the state of the world and the causes of this destruction. Yet, there is little room in the classroom for the emotions that this knowledge brings about (Ojala, 2007; 2017; Klocker et al. 2021). In 2023 we organized the course “Grief and hope in time of environmental loss” motivated to provide room for these emotions on both a theoretical and experiential level. In this presentation we share our experiences with teaching this course and reflect on the insights we gained on environmental emotions.

The six-week course was open to BA and MA students of all faculties of our university. Students formed a highly interdisciplinary group, including students from ecology, psychology, anthropology and political science in different study phases and with different nationalities. Through lectures, discussion groups, assignments and excursions we aimed for students to learn about the complexities of environmental loss, analyze how emotions regarding this loss have been theorized, and to translate their own experiences with these emotions into an expressive form. This resulted in a final presentation of creative works produced by these students, that captured their own feelings about environmental loss in poems, short stories, photography or a game.

In this presentation we zoom in on four aspects of the course that were particularly insightful to us. Firstly, we reflect on our attempt to make a course about environmental grief ‘hopeful’ and how to maneuver and challenge the often-perceived opposition between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ emotions. Secondly, we share our experience with finding a balance in sharing theoretical knowledge on environmental loss, whilst providing space to share personal experiences. Thirdly, we emphasize the benefit of integrating more experiential learning methods such as excursions and creative assignments that are better attuned to the topic than in-class lectures. Finally, we highlight how students felt supported by each other and benefitted from a space where they could share their experiences with diverse yet like-minded peers.

References

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