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Beyond Man Vs. Nature: Utilizing Books Clubs on Nature and Climate Change to Create Engaged Citizens of the Anthropocene

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“It’s sometimes annoying when people say, ‘Oh you children, you young people are the hope. You will save the world.’ I think it would be helpful if you [grown ups] could help us just a little bit.” –Greta Thunberg

In the next decade, climate change, which is already wreaking havoc across the globe, will become an ever more daunting social, political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. And, as this crisis grows, meaningful action becomes more costly and less effective. Without a “climate literate” populace, there is little hope for productive civic debate about policy solutions to mitigate damage and protect people and the environment. And that’s why ELA teachers must develop and integrate lessons that help students to become “climate literate.”

English Language Arts students have long explored “man vs. nature” conflicts. In texts like Gary Paulson’s *Hatchet* or Jack London’s “To Build a Fire,” a plucky hero fights off starvation, the cold, and perhaps also dangerous predators. It is easy to overlook, however, that the “hatchets” of nearly 8 billion people cut down forests rather than trees and that the “fires” of nearly 8 billion people produce anthropogenic climate change rather than just a bit of smoke. As student climate activists take to the streets or boycott school to protest government inaction, the traditional “man vs. nature” presentation of the earth as something that threatens human survival—but which is unaffected by human

activity—needs to change to an inquiry into the reciprocal relationship between people and the planet.

Wait, you may be thinking, who are English teachers to guide student inquiry into a topic that may include climate change, ocean acidification, and the sixth extinction? It’s not hard to imagine the logic here: “because I’m not a climate scientist, I am therefore not qualified to guide students as they explore their relationship with the environment.” This fear paralyzes a group that should be invigorated because “a purely science-oriented approach to climate change can miss the social, historical, ethical, and human realities that are critical to the problem” (Beach et al. 7). Decisions about what we should do as individuals and as societies *are* the domain of the Humanities. NCTE agrees, stating in its Resolution on Literacy Teaching on Climate Change:

“Climate change is not simply a scientific or technological issue, but one with enormous ethical, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Understanding climate change challenges the imagination; addressing climate change demands all the tools of language and communication, including the ability to tell compelling stories about the people

and conflicts at the heart of this global discussion.”

In other words, ELA teachers can and should employ their unique skill sets to learning about—and helping students learn about—this issue: parsing sources for reliability, researching, reading nonfiction and narrative, synthesizing complex arguments, and analyzing rhetoric.

“Climate literacy” may seem new to some teachers, but it is an essential competency in our time. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) suggests that “[p]eople who are climate science literate know that climate science can inform our decisions that improve quality of life. They have a basic understanding of the climate system...They have the ability to assess the validity of scientific arguments about climate and to use that information to support their decisions.” Seeking guidance from administrators and science teachers is a beneficial practice, but it is also worth noting that climate literacy can be described as “being able to critically question and understand the stories of our time” (Beach et al. 5). We read to make sense of our world, and whether discussing scientific findings, the emotional impact of living in what some term the “Anthropocene” epoch (Crutzen), or the best policy portfolios (Harvey), we are ultimately interrogating our relationship with the environment. Thankfully, interrogating relationships is something English teachers do well.

We have developed two units within a book club model that pairs meaningful long and short text selections studied in small groups. One unit grounds the study of the environment in memoir while the other inquiry is grounded in argumentative texts.

In these units, the teacher provides essential questions but also seeks student input on the questions students want to explore. Students select a book club text, but the whole class examines a series of shorter texts (articles, videos, memes, infographics, websites, simulators) together. Because the teacher selects these shorter texts, they are certain to be relevant and reliable sources, and they can work to provide a common baseline of understanding around issues related to the politics, economics, policies, or impacts of climate change. Thus, students build their literacy and competency as they tackle their longer book club texts.

Memoir Book Clubs

Personal memoir is one of America’s proudest literary traditions. Many teachers already make time for Thoreau’s *Walden*, but people continue to find something wondrous and fulfilling in the wilderness today. In *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed realizes her life is in ruins and seeks herself again on the Pacific Crest Trail. In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson hopes to reconnect with his nation by hiking the Appalachian Trail. These memoirs are engaging and inspiring, but they also invite readers to consider what they might consciously seek from the planet. Whether it be escape, redemption, or adventure, the wild offers something of value—if we choose to value it. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv documents how past conservationists discovered a connection with the world through a wide variety of childhood experiences. These texts can invite students to wonder what we seek and what we find in the wilderness while also exploring humanity’s impact on the planet (see table 1).

Table 1

Memoir Book Club Unit

Guiding Questions	Long Texts	Shorter Texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do people want from the planet? • What impact do people have on the environment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Walk in the Woods</i> by Bill Bryson • <i>Into Thin Air</i> by Jon Krakauer • <i>Wild</i> by Cheryl Strayed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ezra Klein Show climate series (podcast) • Harvey's <i>Energy Policy Simulator</i>. • Hawken's <i>Drawdown</i>. • Thunberg's TED talk. • Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi." • Friedrich's <i>Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog</i>. • Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us." • Tan's <i>The Rabbits</i>.

Argumentative Texts Book Clubs

Activism and public debate also have a proud history in American letters. Students can engage with this content directly by studying the rhetorical strategies employed in climate writing. In *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, for example, Bill McKibben calls on readers to reassess their relationship with a planet dominated by human actions. In *This Changes Everything*:

Capitalism vs. Climate, Naomi Klein calls on her readers to reevaluate their choices within the context of a planet that is nearly one degree (Celsius) warmer than it was before the Industrial Revolution. We don't have to rely on social studies teachers to invite students to critically assess and respond to these messages about our relationship with the environment (see table 2).

Table 2

Argumentative Book Club Unit

Guiding Questions	Long Texts	Shorter Texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the environmental, economic, technological, and humanitarian facets of the climate crisis, and how do writers address these facets in rhetorically compelling ways? • How do writers craft rhetorically effective messages on climate change that resonate? • How do writers use narrative, graphics, or charts to convey the dangerous impacts of climate change in rhetorically effective ways? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Eaarth</i> by Bill McKibben • <i>Climate of Hope</i> by Michael Bloomberg and Carl Pope • <i>Unstoppable</i> by Bill Nye • <i>This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate</i> by Naomi Klein 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Katharine Hayhoe's TED Talk, "The Most Important Thing You Can Do to Fight Climate Change." • Fourth National Climate Assessment. • Richard Louv excerpt from <i>The Last Child in the Woods</i>. • Interactive infographic from <i>NYT</i> "Can You Stay Within the World's Carbon Budget?" • David Roberts' article "A Beginner's Guide to the Debate over Nuclear Power and Climate Change" • Robert Macfarlane article "Generation Anthropocene" • Bill McKibben's "We Need to Declare War on Climate Change"

ELA in the Anthropocene

Rather than giving up “man vs. nature” units, we need to reestablish and reinvigorate this conflict for today’s climate reality. To approach this content in an “Anthropocene aware” way, we offer several guidelines.

First, these units must foreground our relationship with the environment. We need to not only consider how the planet affects human life but must also take into account how human activity is affecting the planet.

Second, we need to foster student inquiry into this relationship. Students need help asking questions that are more accessible and specific than “what should we do about climate change?” They need models of student inquiry to serve as guides into their own journey.

Third, students need resources to carry out their inquiry, including time, structure, and guidance. Students need permission and guidance to access philosophical and ethical texts, scientific texts, and policy and human interest texts as they carry out their inquiry and reach conclusions. Given how easily online search results can include misinformation, students need help finding relevant sources written responsibly and in good faith.

It is often said that climate change is a “wicked problem” because it cannot be solved simply, and this can make any attempt to become climate literate daunting. Nevertheless, the study of climate change must not be divorced from the political, economic, social, and sometimes even humanitarian facets of the issue. The Humanities more broadly, but English Language Arts in particular, are well-situated to facilitate inquiry, research, discussion, and writing on climate change that draws these facets of the issue into conversation and enables students to become informed and active citizens. We owe students the chance to engage with this

content, consider their own relationship to the environment, and develop informed opinions on action.

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