

HOPEFUL GEOGRAPHY

SOLUTIONS-BASED TEACHING FOR HOPE IN GEOGRAPHY

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Studying geography myself at school 15 years ago (give or take) wasn't the same as it is today. Students in today's classrooms are faced with alarming, worrying and sensitive issues more often than I was. As teachers we have a responsibility to ensure these issues are taught in a way that isn't traumatising or anxiety-inducing for our students.

This responsibility first came to a front for me after returning to school in 2020 after the black summer bushfires. A large number of students at my school on the NSW South Coast had been severely impacted by the catastrophic fires and we were asked by our executive to avoid the topic of bushfires or catastrophic environmental events for a while. As a geography teacher, I thought "how can I possibly avoid talking about natural disasters?". Shortly after our return to school, the area was also hit by severe flooding that again impacted many students. This was also the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic, throwing even more challenges into the mix. Unfortunately it seemed this situation would only get worse, a deteriorating planet and compounding environmental issues coupled with deteriorating student mental health. I really wanted to find a way to teach with positivity and light to bring hope to my students for the future.

Another reason to make these changes became apparent to me when completing the Teaching Sustainability with Hope PD (Cool Australia) and hearing the psychologist Charles Snyder theory that increased levels of hope can lead to higher academic achievement and that productivity can be an implication of a certain level of stress. Snyder talks about

pathways being the envisioned paths to goals and I felt that connection as geography is all about envisioning pathways to the goal of a sustainable future.

At the GTA Conference in 2020, Damon Gameau was the keynote speaker. In question time at the end of his talk, I asked "if you had 45 minutes (the length of a school period) to teach a class about climate change, how would you do it?". He replied that he would teach it not by looking deeply at the issues but by looking at the solutions. This struck a chord with me, so I came back to school and as you do after professional development, pulled out all of our geography programs, and started to brainstorm how we could incorporate solutions based teaching.

We have all heard of providing a safe and supportive learning environment, but what does this explicitly mean in this kind of situation? What did we change at my school to facilitate more hope and hopeful conversations about these sometimes depressing global issues? As Natascha Klocker mentioned in her paper "Hope and grief in the geography classroom" and at her presentation at the recent GTA Stem Symposium PD, it's important to foreground student emotions to legitimise their feelings. In my classroom, I started to talk about and give space to the kinds of feelings and

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emotions that might arise when talking about issues such as climate change, refugees, human trafficking or natural disasters. We all know the importance of building rapport with our students, and this case is no different. As teachers we should aim to have a positive classroom environment and rapport with our students before attempting to teach distressing environmental issues. Teaching with hope also involved ensuring I gave strong content warnings before showing distressing content and foregrounded any distressing images or video with an option to leave the classroom if a student felt uneasy. Natascha also speaks about balancing distressing content with less stressful content and so I started showing something hopeful alongside anything confronting. Finally, it is important to allow time to debrief this type of content, so ensuring your lesson plan leaves a solid amount of time before the bell goes to debrief is imperative in making an effort to avoid students leaving the classroom feeling stressed or anxious.

How does all of this translate to the classroom? Here are some of the tasks we have formulated at our school in order to teach with more hope in the geography classroom. These range from classroom activities to assessment tasks.

1. Year 9– design a sustainable urban town (solutions to urbanisation rather than the problems associated) – this assessment task can be found in GTA Bulletin 3 2022.
2. Year 10 – students represent endangered species in a council of all beings meeting.
3. Year 10 – fieldwork task: propose management strategies/solutions for management of a local river system and coastal areas in the case of climate change impacts such as extreme weather events and sea level rise.
4. Year 10 – War on Plastics unit of work. Oceans of plastic documentary, students watch then do a think-pair-share. What are the emotions felt during screening? What do students 'hope' for? The 'I hope' Think-Pair-Share task can be done for any topic related to environmental issues.
5. Year 12 – pose as an academic studying the Great Southern Reef and evaluate the management practices of the reef and propose the best strategies for its management and sustainability.
6. Year 12 – completing practice extended response using solutions based questions such as 'Evaluate the solutions to the issues faced in megacities'.

Other general tips:

7. Link to your school environmental student committee and what they are doing – permaculture garden, waste management strategies, composting etc. This shows the solutions that are occurring at our own school (and hopefully gets more students involved at the same time).
8. Start any activity by sharing students feelings and thoughts on the topic or issue.
9. Showing students the careers and jobs that are linked to environmental sustainability and solutions such as environmental planner or engineer, a soil conservation technician, urban planner, water resource manager or ecologist.
10. Sharing of positive news articles. Whenever something positive pops up in the news, I make an effort to show my students eg: when single use plastics finally got banned in NSW, or when the Biloela family were granted permanent visas.

Managing student emotions when teaching topics that can incite negative feelings is a shared responsibility. Students are seeing, listening to and experiencing emotionally difficult subject matter at a time when the world is seeing more change and disruption than ever. The doom and gloom approach has desensitised students over time and as geography teachers it is our job to ensure that we are not only informing students of these major issues but also fostering hope, gratitude and a sense of responsibility and action. By thinking about the way we teach these topics and trying a more solutions-based approach, students can see light at the end of the tunnel and use these feelings to participate in actively working towards the common goal of a sustainable future.

References

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