

Q&A: Experts discuss how best to educate people about climate change

January 23 2024, by Kevin Krajick



Community classroom, Bonsaaso, Ghana. Credit: Kevin Krajick/Earth Institute

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change

the world," said South African leader Nelson Mandela. That was in 1990, before climate change came onto most people's radar. Can we apply Mandela's prescription to climate, and if so, what are the best ways?

Education experts Radhika Iyengar and Cassie Xu have teamed up to write *Climate Change Education*, a book that explores how to engage the public, from schoolchildren to graduate students and beyond. It is the seventh in a series of primers from Columbia University's Earth Institute that focus on practical sustainability issues.

Iyengar and Xu were jointly interviewed by email about the challenges facing educators, and what they believe are the [best practices](#) for educating people of all ages about [climate](#) change.

Is teaching about climate change different from teaching other subjects?

Climate change is multidimensional and transdisciplinary, so a systems method is the best approach. This is not a totally new way of teaching or learning, but it does require us to think about how to connect subjects such as history, policy, biology, geochemistry and economics.

For example, we need to understand how cities are built in order to understand their level of resilience against climate disasters, how governing bodies at different levels can make effective policies, and how we can include the voices of all people to protect our environment.

Should education be confined to the classroom, or are there other routes?

We extend the meaning of [education](#) to include informal settings, and

communities. We include the work of nonprofits, some of which are exemplars globally. We believe that learning is the result of many different experiences that someone has. It does not just take place in the classroom, and does not end when we leave a schooling environment; it is lifelong.

Learning opportunities can be created regardless of the setting. Our hope is that through flexibility, creativity and strategy, educators can instill a sense of lifelong learning in learners anywhere and everywhere.

Are there limits to what education can do? For instance, how effectively can it compete with widespread mis- and disinformation about climate change, and seemingly immovable political attitudes?

Formal education is a very slow process. There are standards to abide by, curricular frameworks to honor, integrated lesson plans to be developed, textbooks to be written. Teachers need professional development time. There are challenges regarding equitable access to education.

All this requires new budget lines, dedicated professionals, and a will to create change. More complications arise when political parties begin to influence what learners might see. It can be highly frustrating to have loud opinions override [scientific knowledge](#) and fact.

However, we believe that there has been much progress in many countries, and many promising local initiatives here in the United States. Young voices out on the street understand the urgency of climate education more than the adults. They are asking questions, and those questions need to be addressed systematically across all subjects, both in and out of school.

Young learners have more information from various media than ever before. They are more aware and more critical of the answers they receive, and frankly, they are losing patience. The education community is on the hook, and is being made more accountable by students themselves.

Knowledge about climate change is continually evolving. Does this present a challenge?

While the speed of knowledge and research is fast, it is not necessarily a bad thing; we see it as an opportunity to have more meaningful conversations.

New knowledge allows us to stay updated with real-time information and integrate this into various learning environments. We hope our primer is a call to all educators to take the resources we have offered as a start to begin important discussions. As knowledge evolves, educators can use the book as a foundation that allows them to further their teaching and learning efforts.

Should climate education focus solely on science?

We provide a systems thinking view because we believe that climate education should not be limited to science. While fundamental scientific knowledge is important, [climate change](#) does not just impact our environment, but humanity.

We need to be discussing things like migration, displacement, and climatic and human-made disasters. It's a global challenge with local components, and therefore it must go beyond science classrooms.

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