

The elephant in the classroom: Addressing climate anxiety in a climate change seminar for science students

JOSÉ MIGUEL LEÓN NININ

University of Bayreuth

Presenting Author: Jose.Leon-Ninin@uni-bayreuth.de

The public is constantly exposed to distressing news related to climate change and its effects on the environment and society. Previous studies have shown that such exposure might affect mental health resulting in what has been defined as “climate anxiety”, particularly among young people. (Under)graduate students of natural and environmental sciences are confronted daily with these facts in their academic activities beyond their personal life. Research has shown that feelings of despair related to climate anxiety can affect personal well-being and academic development, as well as generate apathy to take actions related to the climate crisis. During a seminar about the chemistry of climate change, we introduced the students to topics of climate anxiety, climate despair, and climate hope. During the semester, we reviewed news articles, podcasts, and documentaries related to these topics, together with the scientific discussion taking place as the central core of the course. A survey at the end of the course showed that although 71% of the students were already familiar with climate anxiety, they all expressed that discussing these topics in detail in an academic context is important for their academic development and well-being. Some learners stated they would like to hear more about these topics in their Bachelor’s and Master’s studies to develop tools to address such feelings. After discussing topics related to climate anxiety in the classroom for four sessions, the students expressed relief from being able to name the feelings they have experienced in the past, as well as a sense of connection to others by knowing that their peers have also experienced these feelings. As we prepare young students to take the lead in communicating with diverse communities and addressing issues concerning climate change and environmental justice, it becomes evident that they will also need tools to address climate anxiety beyond theoretical knowledge and practical training.