

# TRANSCA

## Environment

### Why read this text..

Climate crisis and general environmental degradation have put the Anthropocene – a proposed geological age – into contemporary focus. It seems these issues will define our lives and teachers have a need to engage the environment in ways that promote different kinds of accountability for future life on the planet. Teachers and educators are responsible for equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a changing world. There is no school subject where knowledge about different earth processes can't be meaningfully included and anthropology can help to learn how.

### Historical Context

In anthropology, the term environment refers in general to our physical and social surroundings, encompassing here what is often referred to as nature. It refers to our surroundings and encompasses what is often referred to as nature, material conditions that support life, as well as built environment, the one humans have created and socio-cultural environment, the relations we have with other beings and things, or ecology. This three part distinction is however crude as it depends on a conceptual dichotomy between nature and culture (or society), as two distinct, opposing phenomena, a conceptualization that tends to forget that humans are themselves part of nature, and that both of those distinctions are like other concepts – tools for thinking.

The concept of ecology refers to interaction between humans, other animals, plants and other organisms and a specific environment. Environment and ecology have recently become major global topics, not least because of the impact human activity, perhaps specifically industrial capitalism, has had on the Earth System, marking a new proposed geological age – the Anthropocene.

### a) Discussion

Anthropologists have always taken note of and studied interactions between humans and their environments, and they even formed specific branches of anthropology to explore those relations like environmental anthropology, ecological anthropology or etnoecology. It is after all the only way humans and other beings and things exist in the world, in environments that simultaneously shape and are shaped by human activity, through processes that have no beginning or end.



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While anthropologists studied humans, themselves immersed in different environments, they have, like other social scientists, created dichotomies privileging human action over the environment on one side, or on the other side, to a much less degree, privileging environment as the source of human action. But, some anthropologists have argued that it is precisely this dichotomous, dualist thinking that leads to the Anthropocene.

Anthropocene points to the breaking of earth systems- the entirety of interdependent physical, chemical, biological and human processes on which our existence depends. It points to human activity as the cause of this break. However, Anna Tsing (2015) and other anthropologists, critique the notion of the Anthropocene that puts focus on humans, as such, as powerful planetary forces. She guides us to see what is happening as the effect of modern capitalist ideologies and rationalities that turn all humans and other beings into resources. Whereas humans have inhabited the planet in various forms for tens of thousands of years, it is only recently that some humans and human organizations have managed to turn all organic life and nonorganic material into resource for exploitation and profit.

The burden of planetary breakdowns disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, the poor, the dispossessed, exploited, children, elderly and sick, such that those who have contributed the least to the effects of climate change but will carry the biggest burden. The wealthiest of states, EU included, contribute disproportionately to the emissions, pollution, consumerism and other drivers of climate change and will also be more protected from its effects.

In the summer of 2019, UN issued a report warning us yet one more time about the inevitable consequences of climate change and the ensuing “climate apartheid”, accelerating migration, death and rising inequality:

“Perversely, the richest, who have the greatest capacity to adapt and are responsible for and have benefitted from the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions, will be the best placed to cope with climate change, while the poorest, who have contributed the least to emissions and have the least capacity to react, will be the most harmed. The poorest half of the world’s population—3.5 billion people—is responsible for just 10 percent of carbon emissions, while the richest 10 percent are responsible for a full half. A person in the wealthiest 1 percent uses 175 times more carbon than one in the bottom 10 percent.”

The Anthropocene poses a great challenge for all of us. Teachers and educators find themselves in a position where they need to prepare their students for the realities of life they themselves are not yet prepared. Their classrooms become ever more diverse as the



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migration patterns accelerate globally and locally driven by climate change and as inequality between the rich and the poor rises.

In the special issue of teaching anthropology by the title „Teaching anthropology in uncertain times,“ authors invite us to see how ethnographically-informed pedagogy can help to frame teaching in a way that makes uncertainty a powerful analytic tool for learning and living in uncertain times. Kyle Harp-Rushing (2017) writes about the afterlife of teaching anthropology: that is, the resonance of anthropological ideas and ethnographic sensibilities that students take with them ‘out into the world’, whether or not they engage explicitly with anthropology later in life. Stefanelli (2017) suggests the profound value of teaching anthropology as a set of reflexive, critical practices that students can take with them wherever they may go, and whatever the circumstances of uncertainty that characterise the future. This can certainly be of great value to other educators.

But first, as Marie Brennan (2017) claims: „To do our job responsibly in education, we need to come to grips with a complex reading of the world, as global citizens and members of multiple communities, including those of world-wide education workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We cannot afford to be illiterate about the changing world and this means becoming much more familiar with a wider range of physical and social science findings and with local spaces/places.“

## **b) Practical Example**

Cara Payne (2015) offers us a project and an ethnographic study of Australian Curriculum that prioritizes sustainability. The study included the development and implementation of a sustainability focused science program embedded in children’s classes. The science program was based on a social constructivist learning theory and its pedagogy featured strategies that facilitated cooperative learning. The program was made to suit young children by providing age and culturally appropriate links and perspectives on education, using local environments for excursions, investigations and productive action, enhancing the grounded nature of the program. Based on cooperative learning strategies, stimulus images, engaging children in reflection through science journals, this child-centered approach supported different learning styles through excursions, problem-based instructions and providing a supportive environment in which their basic needs were met. Children’s participation in the program resulted in their empowerment, meaningful actions, more positive attitudes toward issues of environmental sustainability like mutual responsibility, biodiversity, habitat conservation, resource use, water pollution, litter and rubbish, air pollution and interconnections of things. The study not only produced and implemented a program but made a series of suggestions and recommendation for teachers, educators and schools, as to



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planning, implementation and engagement with environmental questions beyond a single discipline, program or class. The notion of the Anthropocene is deeply connected with other concepts covered on this site and we encourage you to explore: colonialism and imperialism, globalization, ethnocentrism, race, migration, representation.

## Thinking further:

1. In what ways has the question of climate change been addressed in your field of teaching? Do you find this adequate?
2. Can you try and think how do these issues affect your students individually and collectively? How do they affect your way of life and your everyday? How do they affect your city, town or country?
3. What are the most pressing environmental issues that affect the communities you teach? Do you cover any of them in your classes? How could you try to make those issue more accessible to your students?

## KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Anthropocene, Ecology, Climate crisis

## Sources

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American Anthropological Association statement on Humanity and Climate Change

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/pdfs/cmtes/commissions/CCTF/upload/AAA-Statement-on-Humanity-and-Climate-Change.pdf>

Human Rights Council Forty-first session 24 June–12 July 2019 Agenda item 3 Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development *Climate change and poverty Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*

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