Connecting Students Across Ages and Schools for Environmental Justice

By Mandie Torres and Alejandro Ojeda | December 16, 2020

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres recently gave a speech on the current state of the planet. He began, “Dear friends, Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal.” Guterres went on to describe the catastrophic predictions recently provided by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme, if we continue with our current output of CO2 gas emissions. Education can play an integral role in shifting humanity’s consciousness towards sustainability and a sense of community with people around the world. In this spirit, students from a middle school, high school, and UCLA have come together to learn and raise awareness about environmental issues.

As university students in the Educ187 Environmental Justice class, we had a unique opportunity to work with younger students through a series of online collaborations. UCLA graduate student Emiliano Amaro is a full-time teacher at Camino Nuevo Middle School (CNMS) and was one of the teachers who organized our collaborations. He states, “In order to address the climate crisis, humanity will need to create new systems of collaborative education that revolve around environmental stewardship and community empowerment. A glimpse of this possibility was on display through our inter-generational and inter-academic convening for the environment.”

Multi-Age PSA Poster Collaborations

The series began with a mini-conference organized by School of Education and Information Studies Lecturer Jeff Share, Environmental Science High School (ESHS) teacher and 2016 UCLA Teacher Education Program graduate Tyler Kenney, and Amaro. The event kicked-off with our first keynote speaker Karen Rodriguez from Kiss
Rodriguez gave an overview of the organization’s work and focus, explaining their mission to regenerate and restore the health of soils to achieve a balance between humans and the Earth. She went on to describe the different methods they use to achieve their vision such as media programs to create awareness, a farmland program which guides farmers into a regenerative agriculture transition, and their stewardship program to promote education and provide resources for the regeneration movement. She finished off by letting us know about volunteer farming opportunities we can be a part of in Fillmore, CA.

After hearing from Rodriguez, we also had the pleasure of welcoming Gia Chinchilla into our space. Chinchilla is the founder of Climate Action Lab, an organization that provides information and resources to youth interested in tackling climate-related issues in their communities. Having her present to us was fitting for our conference, as she has been doing for years what we were accomplishing that day: collaborating with other youth to empower our message and bring attention closer to the climate justice movement. Her organization has a growing presence on social media, particularly Instagram, where she continues to advocate for climate justice and shine a spotlight on efforts being made by youth in the Los Angeles area. She gave students tips for creating media of advocacy. It was enlightening to say the least, as we were learning more about the efficacy of visual calls to action in supporting environmental issues.
Next, we went into breakout rooms where we collaboratively created public service announcement (PSA) posters that brought an environmental issue to light. Prior to class, groups were pre-assigned into breakout rooms based on the topics that most interested us ranging from climate denial, to alternative energy, to air quality, and much more. There were a total of 16 groups with an average of two UCLA students with one ESHS student and one CNMS student per group. Once in the breakout room, students introduced themselves and chose roles to create the poster (designer, image finder, researcher, or writer). Together they discussed the topic, identified the problem, and brainstormed possible solutions. Designers were in charge of creating the poster by choosing the border, fonts, colors, etc. The image finder searched for images that reflected our environmental issue, the researcher looked up the topic's issue and solution, and the writer typed out short descriptions of the problem and solutions. If the students had time after creating their posters, they looked for a supporting organization and a song that was relevant to the issue. We then uploaded our posters to a shared Google Slides presentation in which every group’s poster was available to be seen (see examples of some of the collaborative posters created by students).

When we had all exited our respective groups, we closed with a survey. Although each group’s performance was telling through their production of a PSA poster, we were able to gain insight into the ways students from each school felt about the activity they had just completed. Based on students’ responses, the collaboration was appreciated by all parties, especially by the university students who enjoyed working with a younger audience. Since a majority of students wanted more time with their peers, many expressed a desire to continue with the activity at a different time, asserting more time would have proven to be beneficial in discussing matters dealing with the climate crisis. This feedback suggests many of the students felt it was time well spent. The posters produced in collaboration demonstrate the passion that students put into their work, ensuring information was provided that would help a reader learn more on the topic. As the conference came to a close, the UCLA students reflected on their experiences, and hoped to meet with their peers again. Due to the strong interest for a follow-up from all students involved, we decided to continue collaborations through alternative platforms and hold another conference.

**FlipGrid Conversations on Indigenous Worldviews**

The first follow-up session to the mini-conference was in the form of student interviews so that the students involved could reconnect and continue the conversations that were started during our first conference. This time, there was a stronger focus on Indigenous worldviews and perspectives. Kenney discusses his excitement about the continued collaboration: “This is an exciting project! The students feel energized at the potential of meeting UCLA students and collaborating with their middle school pen pals. Anything
that provides traditional education students with unique learning opportunities has awesome results with engagement. In the days of virtual learning this has posed a challenge to me as a teacher. However, thanks to the tireless commitment of Share and Amaro, we have used our passion for environmental justice to connect these students and provide them with a rare opportunity to connect over their shared interests. The agency that they had in choosing topic groups, the preparation work they completed in designing individual posters and gaining confidence with broadcasting environmental justice messages and the pride they took in having something to contribute made them special. While I wish that this was possible for all my cohorts, our shared work gave me the creative freedom and experimentation space to build out these same projects within my other classes. I am excited to continue to let our students do the talking!”

All of the students watched Robin Wall Kimmerer’s short video “The Honorable Harvest,” and created responses through the online platform FlipGrid. The middle and high schoolers video recorded themselves asking questions about the video to the UCLA students and then they responded with a video recording as well. They also posed questions to the younger students in return so that the process was reciprocal. Several UCLA students commented that having this sort of interaction with the middle and high school students was a great alternative since we didn’t have enough time during our first session with them. Many of the middle and high schoolers said that hearing UCLA’s students responses to their questions was helpful and enlightening. However, some did express feeling shy having to record themselves. While the online ability to video record ourselves enabled us to continue our conversations and deepen our relationships, it was not the same as actually being together physically and talking. Not all students recorded videos and few questions were asked and answered. Yet, this asynchronous online space did create an opportunity for those interested to continue collaborating. This activity also helped students prepare for our final event by providing background knowledge and conversations about Indigenous worldviews and perspectives.
Another advantage to having our classes online was that we were able to reach out to guest speakers from anywhere in the world. We were very fortunate to connect with the poet and activist Lyla June who agreed to not only talk with us but also assemble a group of Indigenous women working on environmental justice as well. To wrap up the collaboration, the final event was our “Indigenous Perspectives on Environmental Justice Conference.” Given that the main focus of this course is the environment and climate justice, we feel that it is important to center Indigenous perspectives and worldviews. So, we had the honor to hear from Indigenous artists/activists Lyla June (Diné - Navajo / Tsétsêhestâhese - Cheyenne), Leona Morgan (Diné - Navajo), Janene Yazzie (Diné - Navajo), and Sarawi Andrango (Kayamby) as they shared their poetry and spoke with us about their experiences and ideas.

We opened up the event by giving a land acknowledgement to the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples, and thanking our guests for coming to the space to share knowledge with us.

Following the land acknowledgement, the first of the four women to present their ideas was June, who set the stage for what was to come. She places a large emphasis on the collaboration and sharing of ideas in environmental justice, focusing on the impact of personal stories from those like her sisters. June’s work deals with that of paleoecology, specifically looking at the food sources that flourished before Columbus’s arrival. She covered a lot of issues found within environmental justice, especially racism and the foundations of white supremacy in our nation. June stressed that education has been, and continues to be, one of the most important aspects of fighting for what is right, asserting the idea that learning from each other is a large part of the process as well.

June then passed it over to Andrango, who Zoomed in from Ecuador to speak on issues relating to inequality and the realities of the climate crisis in the Andes. She spoke in Spanish and with Zoom’s interpreter function, and our volunteer interpreter, the people who used this feature were able to hear her words translated into English and she was able to hear the English translated into Spanish. Andrango spoke about her experiences and of those around her who are also fighting for environmental justice in South
America, giving us all deeper insight into the obstacles faced by people across the globe. More specifically, she gave some information on the wrongdoings in Ecuador by companies contaminating water sources, as well as the government who is not allowing these companies to be held accountable for their damaging effects on Ecuador’s environment. These water sources are largely used by Indigenous folk, so they are the ones suffering from the lack of availability of clean water. She also provided details on the economic and social failures of our societies in dealing with climate-related issues, like the ideals that capitalism has instilled in our governments. One of the topics she discussed was the use of plastic bottles, especially since these bottles are harmful to the environment. Most importantly, she made sure we were aware of the disconnect between those fighting for justice and those ignoring the issue, and the effects this could have on progress. Andrango shared a piece of her own work, a poem titled “No Mas Humanos” (“No More Humans”). Her verses spoke of the truth behind the crisis we are facing, placing emphasis on the effects humans have caused. She ended the poem with a passionate plea: “¡Depieta! Si el humano no escucha, no ve, no siente, no trasciende ¿para que existe?” (“Wake up! If humans don’t listen, don’t see, don’t feel, don’t transcend, why exist?”) It was empowering to hear her speak on her work in environmental justice, especially as it relates to the current injustices we see occurring around the world.

A question and answer session followed June and Andrango’s presentations in which we had the privilege of hearing from Margarita Maldonado, an Indigenous elder living in the southernmost tip of South America in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. Hearing from these women and getting to interact with them was a powerful moment itself, as we had the opportunity to gain stronger insight into their ideas related to environmental justice.

After our first discussion, Morgan shared her work surrounding nuclear colonialism and uranium mining (both historic and current) as a form of colonization in the Navajo Nation and all over the world. She defines nuclear colonialism as the “systematic taking of [Indigenous] lands and [their] resources for the production of nuclear weapons first and then later nuclear energy.” She spoke about how the U.S. has used uranium mining as a way to remain a dominant, imperialist power and how that has directly impacted Indigenous, Black, and communities of color across the globe by invading Indigenous lands and creating toxic nuclear waste in these communities. This carries an impact on the communities’ health through exposure to radiation, contamination of water and sacred lands, and much more.

Our final speaker of the day was Yazzie, who enlightened all with her words on environmental justice and its relation to Indigenous worldviews. To start off, she discussed the idea of analyzing each aspect of the climate crisis, asserting the fact that it is not at all “human-centric” in the ways it is affecting our world. She referred to our
impact on the environment as the “colonization of sacred life,” in which we continue to harm our surroundings unaware of the damages that will last. The last theme of her presentation brought light to the idea that we can still shift our focus from the capitalist mindset to one that builds on healthy relationships between cultures and people, as this is something that will aid in our progression toward fighting the climate crisis. Especially in times like these when COVID-19 is becoming rampant, Yazzie spoke about the lessons we may learn from this experience, as well as the pathways this has introduced to our ways of learning. She asserted that if we can learn from one another, instead of competing against each other, we may be able to restore the harmony of nature.

To close out the conference our guest speakers spoke about the connections between gender/patriarchy and violence to the Earth. June began by explaining that some of the most powerful, life-giving forces are women and water. Since capitalism aims to destroy life, women and water are the most targeted. Furthermore, when we think of the ways many Indigenous societies have been organized throughout the centuries, it’s been matrilineal. June explained matriarchy as the antidote to patriarchy, so matrilineal societies are targeted as well. Yazzie added on by drawing attention to the role of the church, currency, and colonization in European countries first, as the foundation to the problem. She explained how the church convinced people to believe in the coin as a replacement to sustenance, which shifted people’s views on what is deemed valuable and worthy, with value being put on money versus the natural world and women. Because this shift began first in Europe, she asserted that white women were “the first colonized race.” Therefore, roots in “destroying the feminine [and] the connection to nature,” was then spread throughout the world with European colonization. When we think about brainstorming alternative economies we have to look at the role of patriarchy, religion, and capitalism and how they work together to enforce the destruction of life. Morgan closed out the discussion by bringing light to the impact of nuclear mining specifically on Indigenous women and children. The Federal guidelines on exposure to nuclear radiation are based on white middle-aged male bodies and completely ignore the effects on Indigenous women’s bodies and their children (whether born or not).

June reflected on this experience and explained, “I decided to speak to Dr. Share’s class because we need to continue to build and form alliances among those who see a future where people are equal. We are up against a stubborn and entrenched paradigm that
serves no one, not even those at the ‘top.’ We will need all of us, working together in unison, to slowly bring healing and richness to this system. I decided to bring my Indigenous sisters with me because they have the answers I do not have. It is through a diversity of experiences and opinions that we gain the whole picture. We are stronger together.” She concluded, “The conference hosting female Indigenous leaders from all parts of the world helped to further erode the wall of miscommunication between Indigenous peoples and the Eurocentric world. We not only live in a culture that values the monoculture of plants and animals, but a monoculture of the human mind. Prior to European contact there were 80 languages spoken in California alone... that we know of. This is the opposite of monoculture. This was cultural pluralism at its finest, and had corresponding biodiversity to match. We must all work to erupt the paradigm of ‘English-only’ and ‘Eurocentric only’ and bring in the world views of many peoples who have a proven track record of sustainability on this land. This conference helped to do so.”

Students from ECMS, ESHS, and our UCLA class expressed feelings of gratitude towards the women who shared space with us. There were several comments surrounding different important topics they learned about that they weren’t aware of such as nuclear mining and its effects on Indigenous populations, the plastic water bottle industry, Indigenous worldviews in general, and much more. Many UCLA students also pointed to the fact that Indigenous women’s voices are often erased, so having the opportunity to hear directly from them was inspiring and an honor. ESHS students expressed enjoying listening to guest speakers outside of their usual classroom as well. An area for improvement would be to have more time for discussion since it was extremely limited and there were four women to hear from. But overall, from the poems, to hearing about the grassroots work that they were doing, our class left the conference feeling inspired and wanting to learn more. It was a beautiful success. A link to a list of some of the resources shared during the conference, along with a link to the conference video, can be found here.

Although there are many limitations to remote environments that can include unequal access, technical difficulties, lack of in-person interaction, and Zoom fatigue, this course has shown us the positive potential as well. The online environment encouraged us to be creative with our interactions and in a sense was fundamental to the creation of our multi-age collaborations and conferences. Being online created accessibility for people from different classes to interact and get to know each other, as well as bring guest speakers from around the world. We have been grateful for having this opportunity to work with youth and Indigenous women especially on a topic that we are passionate about. As aspiring teachers, we want to implement an environmental justice curriculum wherever we go, so this course has given us a transformational experience, practical tools, and a wide-range of resources to apply toward our future goals.
Links

List of resources to the conference and video of the talks:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Io856oiP61gt1G3deiB2_gVgf15-Duy-Q9NiodF8okY/edit

Video of the Honorable Harvest by Robin Wall Kimmerer:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEm7gbIax00

Kiss the Ground: https://kisstheground.com/

Climate Action Lab: https://www.instagram.com/climateactionlab/?hl=en

Land Acknowledgment:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/19oybu2j8CDufWNKf3P25SsixmCLGX23kGWN0tHHPVlg/edit