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# The Curriculum as a Hope Process

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## Introduction

This paper considers rationales and approaches for developing the curriculum as a hope process. The paper starts by outlining three interrelated challenges on an undergraduate Sociology of Climate Change course. Namely, climate anxiety (which can be framed as an issue of well-being), limited horizons of possibility (which can be framed as an issue of anticipatory competence), and limited horizons of action (which might be framed as an issue of employability). Through engagement with writing on these topics, I identify that developing the curriculum *as a hope process* could enable these challenges to be addressed. To this end, I present a review of selected contributions that embed hope into classroom and assessment practices. I demonstrate how these practices might be combined and developed to align with central tenets of curriculum design, especially through a '4-column template' which I find useful in thinking through my modules. The paper concludes by signposting some implications for existing work on well-being and employability, and some reflections on the implications for the teaching of other courses within and beyond Sociology.

## Context

### The course and the cohort

'Climate Change and Society' is a 10 week Part 2 module, with 30 students, assessed with a reading diary (35%), a Wordle discussion of the reading diary in week 7 (0%), and a 3000 word essay (65%). There is 2 hours contact time each week. Lectures and workshops are interactive, with flipped format elements.

Climate anxiety, 'a chronic fear of environmental doom' (Whitmore-Williams et al., 2017) was noticeably experienced in the 2019-2020 cohort, in a way that I have not seen before. At its extreme, students were visibly tearful during sessions, with those already susceptible finding their anxiety exacerbated by the course. I explored a range of student feedback to help me unpick these reactions. I realised that the current cohort of students has a very different relationship to the topic of climate change than previous cohorts (see Figure 1 below).

In this essay I explore how climate anxiety might be addressed, with the aim of ensuring student well-being as they grapple with this complex global challenge. Before reviewing the literature, I include some reflections (from discussion with colleagues) on the nature of

sociological knowledge, which sets the scene for the threads of literature which I follow and weave together.

*Figure 1: the current cohort of students has come of age in a world in which the public debate on climate change is quite different to those of preceding cohorts.*



Greta Thunberg addresses UN Climate Summit 2019  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/09/why-greta-wins/598612/>



School strikes in Hong Kong 2019  
<https://images.app.goo.gl/5sJZNKAkW3aQsbAb6>



Extinction Rebellion protest  
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/extinction-rebellion/>

## The nature of sociological knowledge

I explored if there was something particular about 'sociological knowledge' that underpinned the issues above. Sociology is focussed on alternative (critical, evidence-based) understandings of society than those perpetuated in dominant ideology or 'common sense'. It is a discipline that is based on critique. In the case of my module, this is a critique of how capitalist societies organise in relation to nature, the environment and technology; and how structures of global inequity are amplified through climatic implications.

Irrespective of whether they are looking at climate change or some other subfield of Sociology (e.g. inequality), students are unsettled through their education. To do well, it is necessary to challenge existing understandings of the world and one's place within it. Such transformative learning can involve a broad range of emotions, some positive (empowerment, emancipation, courage, hope), but some less so (feelings of disempowerment, fear, anger, identity crisis, loss, grief, confusion).

Important for this essay, much sociological thought (though not all) stops with critique rather than addressing the question 'and so what?'. In this sense the students' more negative responses are easy to understand. However, colleagues find Sociology enlightening, empowering, hopeful and imaginative. Lecturers seem to undertake an extra stage of knowledge work that lifts up and out from the critique towards a better social future. In this instance, critique helps identify seeds of change and spaces of intervention, action and the creation of alternatives. Finding a way to conceptualise and translate this

‘added extra step’ into the curriculum could be a possible way forwards in addressing the challenges identified.

A second point of reflection in relation to the students’ challenges stems from my role as Part 2 convenor in which I am privy to the Sociology careers talks. Here I find no resonance with my own sociological career, as the framing is very conventional (e.g. public sector or charity workers, concerned with ‘social problems’). This misses out the vital contribution that Sociologists must make to the climate change challenge. Finding a way to open out this career space for students could provide a second possible way forwards.

## My values

My own values are apparent in these initial reflections. Put succinctly, the course starts from a presupposition that climate change is happening and it is induced by humans – by society. If a student is seeking to explore the validity of climate science itself, then this is not the right module for them. Secondly, I am committed to the position that *there is a way out*. I think our role as sociologists is to help find these ways out.

The idea that ‘there is a way out’ reverberates with hope; and it aligns with the suggestion above, that the extra knowledge work of finding hope must be part of the curriculum. It is relevant not only to my own module, but to modules across sociology (e.g. inequalities, colonial legacies, feminist thought, queer theory), and also in other disciplines (e.g. teaching time series data<sup>1</sup>) in which we can anticipate similar challenges at the intersection of well-being, anticipation and employability and it is to these intersecting themes that I now turn.

## Well-being, anticipatory competence and employability

### Well-being

Well-being has moved up the Higher Education agenda in recent years, due to an increased number of students disclosing mental health problems which meet the definition of a disability (therefore a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010). This is accompanied by findings that undergraduate students have a low sense of personal well-being when compared to the wider population of young people (Neves and Hillman, 2016). Well-being is a teaching and learning concern. Positive emotions, such as hope and pride are directly related to deep learning (Trigwell, 2011) and to more extensive thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005). Houghton and Anderson (2017) make a useful distinction between mental well-being (which everyone has) and ‘mental health problems’. It is the former which best relates to the climate anxiety under discussion.

The structure and forms of well-being service provision varies across institutions (HEFCE, 2015). The most relevant approach for this paper is to embed well-being in the curriculum,

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<sup>1</sup> SPACE discussion with a colleague in maths and stats.

as part of a whole institution approach (Houghton and Anderson, 2017). This is distinctive from other approaches, for example, making well-being the sole-jurisdiction of student services. It is also the most relevant to this paper, because the well-being issue I am concerned with (climate anxiety) is closely coupled with the curriculum content and process.

It is worth noting that the question of whether or not well-being should be embedded in the curriculum is a field of debate. Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) argue that it undermines academic scholarship. This is because they make an assumption that well-being is separate from the learning and teaching process, and should therefore be 'fixed' elsewhere. The example of climate anxiety on a 'Climate Change and Society' course reveals how limited this is, and supports Houghton and Anderson's argument.

The latter authors highlight several dimensions of well-being in the curriculum. Firstly, they distinguish between the formal and informal curriculum. In this essay I focus on the formal, in other words the learning which I plan and guide on the module. Secondly, they cite Barnett's (2009) definition of the curriculum as 'a particular **kind of encounter with knowledge**' (2009:249, my emphasis), this highlights that educators shape the way in which students encounter knowledge, with implications for well-being. Thirdly, they highlight that embedding of well-being in the curriculum can be thought about in relation to 'content' and 'process'.

Well-being as content is also referred to as 'curriculum infusion', for example introducing material on climate anxiety into the course. This would certainly be possible, and it could raise awareness of students. However, as a stand-alone session it would not achieve the move from critique to future possibility. On this aspect, the 'process' approach holds greater promise.

Aked et al. (2008) propose a 'Five Ways to Well Being' process comprised of: i) connect; ii) be active; iii) take notice; iv) keep learning; v) give. This process model is positive because it frames well-being as something that is shaped by the learning process (Houghton and Anderson, 2017). However, these 'ways to well-being' do not get to nub of climate anxiety, which derives from a lack of agency or future prospects when faced with the facts about the future conditions of human life.

As identified at the start, the way to well-being vis a vis climate anxiety seems related to an ability to step up and out of critique, to a better social future. In relation to this specific aspect of well-being, I have found the idea of 'anticipatory competence' to have much to offer, and I consider this next.

### Anticipatory competence and horizons of possibility

'Horizons of possibility', refers to the ability of a society to imagine a range of possibilities for its future, rather than assuming that the future will be a continuous present or repeat the past (Appadurai, 2013). Within 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) this

concept has been closely linked to ‘anticipatory competence’, a learning outcome in which students demonstrate an ability to deal with future dimensions. When learning about climate change, (young) people can be pessimistic and despondent concerning the global future, but this is not an inevitable reaction. Seeking to develop anticipatory competence provides a method of shaping students’ encounters with knowledge. Ojala (2017:77) usefully summarises a variety of definitions including:

- i) ‘the capability to think in a forward-looking way and to acknowledge and deal with uncertainty in a constructive way (Wals and Schwarzin, 2012 in Ojala 2017);
- ii) the ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty (Miller, 2015 in Ojala 2017);
- iii) “. . . the ability to collectively analyze, evaluate, and craft rich ‘pictures’ of the future related to sustainability issues.” (Wiek et al., 2011 in Ojala 2017).

These definitions reflect the kinds of competences that I am trying to convey when speaking of ‘stepping up and out of sociological critique’. Ojala (2017) argues that the most promising way to build anticipatory competence is to embed ‘pathways to hope’ in the curriculum. This is akin to ensuring a curriculum process to support well-being, but for the specific issue of climate anxiety. It is something of a sixth path to well-being, that could work alongside those proposed by Aked et al. (2008). Later in the essay, I explore some practical ways that such ‘pathways to hope’ might be actualised through classroom activities and assessments.

Before doing so, there is a further aspect that I wish to address. Although the idea of ‘anticipatory competence’ opens up horizons of possibility for future societies, it remains located at the societal scale. This does not address the limited ways in which students perceived themselves and their agency in relation to climate change.

## Employability

Ojala’s (2017) inspiring proposal of ‘pathways to hope’ is countered by her limited views of young people and the roles that they might have in bringing alternative futures into being. She casts young people as ‘laypeople’ that are reliant on experts, and locates agency in their roles as ‘conscious consumers’ and citizens (Ojala, 2017:80).

Gardiner and Rieckmann’s (2015) rationale for anticipatory competence is much more empowering in this respect. They say:

‘...our future decision makers need to be capable of interacting with the future, be able to create scenarios where humanity is tested in manifold ways, acknowledge and analyse where unsustainable trends will lead us and envision a future with hope and share this vision with others.’ (p.10555).

Gardiner and Rieckmann’s rationale, shifts the young people from simply being consumers and citizens dependent on experts, to being the ‘experts’ themselves. It lifts the level of thinking, and orients it towards future jobs and careers, and to what young people might become and do in the world, as experts and decision makers in their own right. This raises a

new set of questions: what are they experts in? what unique contributions can they offer? what influence do they hope to have? How will they have that influence?

In searching the employability literature from this point of view, Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) explication of a concept 'horizons of action' has some valuable synergies. Their paper is concerned with how socialisation throughout young peoples' lives shapes their ideas of their future careers. They refer to this canvas of ideas about the careers available vs their suitability for particular careers, as the 'horizon of action'. Grounded in a Bourdieusian tradition, their focus is on the career implications of class and gender, however there is potential to extend the idea to the current discussion.

In the context of the Climate Change and Society module, it seems that students enter the classroom already socialised through their high school, university and everyday encounters into a specific view of their relationship to climate change – mainly as consumers; and into a specific idea of what a sociologist can do (for a career). Given that well-being in relation to climate anxiety requires supporting students to find agency, developing horizons of action, alongside horizons of possibility, is a necessary goal. This aspect of employability is significant for the curriculum too.

Next, I engage with selected examples from the literature to explore how of anticipatory competence and horizons of action might be realised in practice to support students' emotional well-being.

## Embedding hope in the curriculum

In this section I have selected three practice-based papers that speak to the dimensions of climate anxiety, anticipatory competence and employability outlined above. These are namely Ojala (2013); Gardiner and Rieckmann (2015); and, Johnke (2020). In each case I provide an overview of the approach to teaching and/or assessment developed in the paper.

### Emotion in the classroom

Ojala (2013) focuses on emotional aspects of education for sustainable development. She demonstrates that harnessing emotion in the classroom can enhance deliberative, communicative models of education. Similar to the discussion of well-being earlier, Ojala notes that emotional aspects have potential to hinder learning if they are not engaged with and supported. She highlights that the 'emotional' should not always be conflated with the irrational. In fact, research shows that the opposite is the case, emotions actually underpin important aspects of the deliberative process such as critical thinking, reflection and discussion. Put a bit differently emotions are not just simple reflexive responses, but rather they are focused on the implications of a situation for a person in light of the person's needs, hopes, goals, values and abilities (Ojala, 2013:171). Therefore, rather than being

ignored, these emotions and the values they relate to should be acknowledged. She sets out two further ways in which emotions are important i) they are a key aspect of listening to other people's viewpoints; and ii) the way in which conflicting viewpoints are emotionally handled can have implications for learning goals.

In light of this she puts forward three ways that emotions can be brought into classroom practices to enhance learning. Firstly, she suggests that young people should be given the opportunity to talk about their emotional reactions to course material. Translating emotions into well-articulated arguments is an aspect of cultural capital. Not all students are equally capable of it, in this sense emotions are important messengers. Secondly, appraisals related to emotions should be discussed. In other words, the way in which an idea has been *interpreted* by a student should be investigated, to verify that emotions are grounded in correct interpretation. Thirdly, the exploration of altruistic emotions can encourage students to understand one another's viewpoints, and thus to engage in more reasoned discussions with one another, leading to enhanced learning (Ojala, 2013:177).

## Anticipatory competence

Gardiner and Rieckmann (2015) undertake an action research project to evaluate the acquisition of anticipatory competence on a course 'Sustainability and the Future' using reflective diaries, at the University of Vechta, Germany. In their course, the authors draw on a broad range of future studies methods to structure activities, alongside engaging with key reading and real world examples. Some of the methods used for classroom activities include trend analysis, backcasting, scenarios, letters to future self and making a newspaper from the future.

The authors use reflective journals as assessment that encourages the development of anticipatory competence on the course, and enables its evaluation. Journal-writing is supported by providing students with prompt questions to reflect on in class and then write about in their own words each week. To evaluate anticipatory competence, a framework from Schon's 'reflective practitioner' is used. This sets out four levels of reflection namely: i) descriptive writing, defined as writing which just describes the event or paraphrases a reading; ii) descriptive reflection: defined as description but with some justification and the consideration of possible alternative viewpoints; iii) dialogic reflection, defined as an ability to step back from events, analyse the process and integrate; and, iv) critical reflection, defined as a deeper awareness that actions and events are located in and influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts.

The analysis of the reflective journals combined with student focus groups revealed that anticipatory competence is about having a firm grasp of key issues *and* engaging in different methodologies to think about the future (Gardiner and Rieckmann, 2015:10565). The study

also shows that students were more often critically reflective in relation to thematic and sector-specific examples (e.g. transport), rather than trying to imagine futures in general.

Interestingly, the course also built in time for 'despair work', which has synergies with Ojala's (2013) proposals on emotion in the classroom discussed above. In particular, the action research identified the 'letter to the future self' as being a very successful way of accessing the hopes and fears about the future that students held.

## Employability and hope labour

Johinke (2020) explores how an assessment specifically designed for 'authenticness' on an English writing module, also served as a form of 'hope labour'. Authentic assessment focuses on learners using and applying knowledge and skills in real-life settings' (Sotiriadou et al., 2019 in Johinke 2020:3). It is a form of assessment that aligns with competences for employability. In the specific example, which involves students that might seek employment in the creative and cultural industries, a digital writing task - contributing to Wikipedia - is viewed as achieving this goal. In this case the 'authenticness' stems from the fact that potentially thousands of readers 'peer review' the material, rather than just the lecturer, meaning it is evaluated from a range of perspectives, and thus mirroring the reality of writing in these professions.

Johinke goes on to frame the authentic assessment as a form of 'hope labour' too. What she means is that by undertaking this 'free' labour, the students engage in a form of work that is done in the hope that it will eventually pay off. She highlights that such free labour is generally more available to privileged students. Building it into the course as a form of assessment democratises this opportunity. Such unpaid participation, especially in the cultural industries where it is commonplace - could contribute to future employment.

She positions this alongside the more collaborative and altruistic ethos underpinning initiatives such as Wikipedia and other social media platforms. In such communities the main motivation is to create and connect through voluntarily tweeting, posting photos, blogs, reviews, videos and memes (Johinke 2020:7).

A key point of interest in Johinke's analysis is that an assessment can have several outcomes at once. In this case, a form of authentic assessment enables students to achieve learning goals whilst making a valuable contribution to an online community, and the same task can show up on student CVs as a form of hope labour. Johinke highlights that in terms of employability it is useful for teachers to make explicit the aspects of cultural and social capital which an assessment facilitates, in addition to the grade that is often the students' focus.



# The curriculum as a hope process

These contributions were selected because of their potential to realise in practice the elements of the curriculum as hope process, which I set out in the first part of the essay. In the coming year, where teaching and learning will be delivered in blended format, that might shift quickly from face-to-face to purely digital means, this vision must also comply with these COVID-proof requirements.

Inspired by the practice-based papers above, my involvement in a discussion board at a recent event and the 4-column template from PGCAP1, I have sketched out one way in which all of these ambitions might be achieved (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: The curriculum as a hope process, seen through the 4 column template

Handwritten notes on the Padlet screenshot:

PADLET ~ it looks like the 4-column template of curriculum alignment from PGCAP1. Is that just an outcome of layout? Or are there some deeper synergies?  
 How could a discussion board like this underpin the Curriculum as a hope process?

4-column template of curriculum alignment from PGCAP1:

LEARNING OUTCOMES	IN-CLASS ACTIVITY INDEPENDENT LEARNING. (do these blend a bit in blended learning?)				ASSESSMENT	
1. 2. 3. 4.	Discussion Board					
	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON LECTURES + KEY READINGS	EXAMPLES, STORIES, LINKS ...that relate to the course ...encourage examples from different parts of the world.	VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE e.g. from IPCC, books, films, activist organisations, policy docs.	DO THE IDEAS HELP US ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE NOW? How not?	WHAT CAN A SOCIOLOGIST OF CLIMATE CHANGE OFFER? students try to explain this to e.g. urban design engineer, activist, transport planner, policy maker, material scientist.	1. (20%) Reading Diary WORDS + discussion. 2. (35%) Reading Diary 3. (65%) Essay.
	STUDENT ACTIVITY: Before, during or after lectures: • add a new comment, question or example • like or comment on someone else's post • posts can be anonymous. me: use student-generated material in lectures invite students to present examples, links etc.		This thread is populated through in-class activity each week.	This thread is created prior to and populated in the penultimate session.	MY CONTACTS IN OTHER SECTORS + DISCIPLINES ENGAGE WITH THE BOARD + POST REFLECTIONS. This is used as a basis for the final session.	

Padlet.com was the discussion board which inspired the model<sup>2</sup>.

The different columns (Figure 2, top left) enables students to contribute to the discussion board in a variety of ways, aligning with the ethos of community collaboration noted by Johnke. Through the course the discussion develops into a rich collaborative resource produced by the students. The Board is populated both asynchronously (before and after lectures) and synchronously (during in-class activities).

Each week students are required to make an asynchronous contribution. Expression of feelings and emotions is welcomed (Ojala, 2013). These contributions can be i) questions, emotional reactions and thoughts on the lectures and key readings; ii) examples, stories and links that relate the course; and iii) visions of the future that students find or write.

Each week, in-class discussion and activities are structured around key readings, combined with futures methods outlined in Gardiner and Rieckmann. In these sessions, students populate the boards (e.g. working in pairs or groups) with their thoughts on how the sociological ideas and insights can contribute to a better social future (or not). In the penultimate class, we focus on co-writing discussion board posts outlining what a sociologist of climate change can contribute to a range of professions and organisations (e.g. urban design, engineering, activist groups, transport planning, material science). A column of the discussion board is dedicated to this.

Prior to the final session, members of my cross-sector, interdisciplinary network engage with board and post their comments and reflections about these claims. In combination, through this work students extend their horizons of action and engage in an 'authentic' classroom activity that relates to future employability (Johnke).

The attraction of padlet.com is that each new discussion theme is added as a new column, so it is possible to see the knowledge build up and out, from sociological critique, to horizons of possibility, and horizons of action. (Though as noted above padlet.com has its downsides too).

The existing assessment can be adapted within the pre-validated format (with a view to revision of learning outcomes in future years). The reading diary will remain focussed on articulating sociological understandings of climate change, and reflecting on the specific contributions that this discipline can make (supported by the authentic activities in the final 2 weeks of the course). Essay questions, some of which already encourage thinking on future possibilities, can be tweaked, so that in this assignment, all students step up and out of critique into horizons of possibility. The classroom activities based on futures methods and subsequent discussion board posts, support this slight shift of emphasis in the essay. Further down the line, anticipatory competence, and the extension of horizons of action will be made explicit learning outcomes on the module in a CAIT revision.

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that Padlet.com is problematic due to accessibility concerns. However, the layout provided inspiration for the use of a synchronous/asynchronous discussion board that could underpin the curriculum as hope process, whilst achieving curriculum alignment. My next step will be to work through the potential of delivering this model in Moodle or MS Teams.

Through this revised curriculum, students' well-being vis-à-vis climate anxiety will be much better supported.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, climate anxiety can be viewed as an issue of well-being, that is best supported through curriculum process. However, the five pathways of well-being proposed by Aked et al. (2008) seem to miss the mark when it comes to this specific issue. Anticipatory competence as a learning outcome offers a promising way forward – a sixth pathway to well-being - that can be embedded in the curriculum by creating 'pathways to hope' (Ojala, 2017). In practice this can be developed through engaging with student emotions (Ojala, 2013) and using futures methodologies to design creative classroom activities that open up horizons of possibility (Gardiner and Rieckmann, 2015). Although this addresses anticipatory competence at the scale of society, it does not enable students to articulate their own agency, as Sociologists of climate change. Authentic classroom activities, in which students explain these contributions to a cross-sector audience, can extend students' horizons of action and provide a form of hope labour for their CVs and job applications.

The core ideas in this essay, the idea of curriculum as a hope process, engaging with student emotions in the classroom, using future methodologies to open up horizons of possibility, authentic activities to extend horizons of action, and embedding anticipatory competence as a learning outcome on courses, have relevance across the Sociology Programmes. As I note at the start, sociological knowledge, although often providing a lightbulb moment (in terms of seeing the way the world works) can also lead to much darker understandings of society than previously held. At the same time, Sociology often ends with critique instead of asking 'so what?'. In this context, curriculum processes that provide pathways to hope are necessary. This would be just as relevant when engaging with understandings of gender relations, colonial legacies or queer theory, as it is with the challenge of climate change. Opening up horizons of possibility not only supports well-being, it also points towards the unique contributions that Sociology can make to better social futures across a range of sectors and themes. This potentially enables students to articulate their qualities to employers, and helps to extend the horizons of action held by students.

Finally, these approaches might find some leverage in unexpected subject areas. For example, the teaching of time series data in Maths and Statistics tells particular narratives about past, present and future that might also benefit from a broader learning outcome of anticipatory competence. In particular, this could be about the ability to contextualise such (numeric) narratives in broader horizons of possibility, and to be able to communicate to others the limitations of the stories that time series analysis can tell.

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