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Volume 62, Number 3, November 2022

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Adult learning education on climate justice

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Welcome to this Special Issue of the Australian Journal of Adult Education on Climate Justice Education. This issue was an initiative of AJAL editor, Dr Trace Ollis and we sincerely thank her for her timely invitation. We are most grateful to the AJAL team of Henrik Steenberg and Jenny Macaffer whose magnificent support proved invaluable. We thank the contributing Australian and international scholars for creating an issue brimming with ideas and seasoned analysis revealing the real complexities of adult climate justice education. And we thank the external reviewers who considered both the research articles and stories from practice and who provided generous insights and advice.

The importance of a direct focus on adult education for the climate crisis cannot be overestimated. In her recent book, *Humanity's Moment; A climate scientist's case for hope*, Australian Joelle Gergis

(2022), a lead author of the 2022 Sixth IPCC report, documents the overwhelming scientific evidence of a rapidly worsening ecological crisis. What is demanded is urgent global climate action to reduce carbon emissions and keep temperatures rises to no more than 2C degrees (and preferably, 1.5) and prevent further biodiversity losses.

Gergis recounts her battles with constant depression at recognising the increasing planetary tipping points being crossed in analysing the latest scientific data and writing and editing the IPCC report. Then she poignantly reveals a transformation in her emotional state to one of hope in narrating her understanding of an improving political situation resulting from the power and influence of the global climate movement in general and in Australia more recently, as manifested in the May 2022 federal election results.

She then argues for a key role for the arts and storytelling as they enable us “to have an emotional connection with other humans and the rest of the natural world. Art provides:

a way of creating empathy, emotional engagement and the cultural understanding that is needed to bring about effective political change (p. 224) Although we need science to underpin our political response, we also need to unlock the potential of the creative industries to inspire people to bring about the societal changes that will fuel political change (p. 225).

What are the implications for adult education? International and Australian sustainability education policies focus on schools, curriculum development and higher education in terms of developing teacher capacity to teach about and (in enlightened cases) for climate action. In the absence of structural educational facilities, adult educators are self-organising and acting on their own initiatives to educate themselves, create collaborative groups and engage in work within their communities.

Acting within formal institutions and through informal and formalising networks, education is a significant contributor to climate movements, where adults have acted collectively with commitment and confidence as their understandings and values evolved. The research papers and case stories in this special issue build on Gergis' sense of hope in pointing a way forward by illuminating diverse approaches that adult educators

are adopting to contribute to addressing the climate crisis. The works in this Special Issue explore diverse approaches that adult educators are adopting to contribute to addressing the climate crisis.

We begin with collaborative research from lead author Shirley Walters and her international collaborators, Astrid von Kotze, Joy K.P. O’Neil, Jane Burt, and Darlene Clover. They conduct an invigorating, scholarly case study of their climate justice curriculum initiated through PIMA utilising the technology of online webinars and made available to participants around the globe. PIMA was formed and registered in Melbourne as Friends of Pascal International Association and is an international network of individual adult learning and education (ALE) practitioners and scholar/ activists. PIMA’s mission is to promote, interrogate, and mobilise ALE in the interests of greater socio-economic and ecological justice. Walters et al. examine their practice and argue when people engage in real-life struggles they more fully learn what climate justice means within the entanglement of co-constitutive local and global lives. They conclude that climate justice learning has to work within the radical traditions of adult education and lifelong learning in order to fully address the multiple injustices which drive contemporary ecological breakdown. Climate justice education must address the systemic reasons for the emergencies that are unfolding.

Similar complexities are explored by Australian scholars Tania Leimbach, Jennifer Kent and Jeremy Walker who analyse the affective dimensions of teaching climate justice education in a university setting. Their research draws on the concept of ‘difficult knowledge’, a term used to signify representations of social, historical and contemporary traumas in curriculum and the learner’s affective encounters with trauma in pedagogy. Their paper presents many wise and detailed insights arising out of this case study research. They investigate the experiences of teachers and students in an undergraduate subject titled Environmental Communication, delivered during a period of intersecting crises in Australia. The authors make links to work in environmental communication (EC) and climate communication and education (CCE), which readers will find useful. The existential, emotional and intellectual challenges of what the authors call “crisis pedagogy”, require that students and educators need new knowledge, capacities and resources to address the affective dimension of grappling with the social trauma of the climate crisis.

Lorraine Larri's research illuminates an original facet of adult social movement learning in the face of our material and existential crisis. She explores climate justice education in action by describing and analysing the peer learning pedagogy and networked, informal education strategies used by the Australian Knitting Nannas against Gas and Greed (KNAGs). The 'Nannas' are motivated, older women who shun the sedimented norms of adult education to craft a radical collaboration that builds their ecological and environmental literacy and their non-violent direct-action skills. Their purpose is activism, cleverly deploying the traditions of the domestic arts to give their movement visibility and political traction. They call themselves a "disorganisation", and their brilliant wit, and continued resolve in the face of numerous obstacles, has led them to cooperatively create a transformative pedagogy of practice that Larri terms "Nannagogy". We are truly delighted that the Nannas appear in this Special Issue. The author herself is an honorary KNAG, and her research reveals the importance of older women's learning in addressing the extractive, economic arrangements causing the climate crisis.

Nannas, teachers and scholars alike have innovated their own ways of doing climate justice education. This is because there are few, enabling national settings, such as policies, frameworks and plans, to directly support climate justice education. While Australia has settings to support education for sustainability, particularly in the school sector, the nation has not yet developed a specific approach to climate change education that supports the school sector, tertiary and vocational education and the informal and community adult education sectors. Such inaction has its roots in national politics that has been reluctant to engage meaningfully with scientific evidence or, until most recently, with community experiences of extreme weather events. The politics of our nation has been hamstrung by the political interference of carbon dealing mega-corporations cashing in on a profit-making bonanza, and this has caused great frustration for many educators and their students.

In searching for guidance in the international sphere, Hilary Whitehouse and Annette Gough turn to the frameworks and policies developed under the auspices of the United Nations. They conduct a content analysis of a selection of published documents from 2010 to 2022. Their search revealed an emergence of increasing levels of detail in new and existing frameworks to support climate justice education.

In the absence of national policy, educators can usefully draw on United Nations documentation and resources. The current tendency is to focus on youth education and teacher education, though there are indications adult learning and life-long learning are gaining increasing attention - the climate crisis is not a mess for the young to clean up. This paper contributes to the argument that it is high time for Australia, as a United Nations signatory, to cease gesturing and start acting to develop coherent national and state policy for climate justice education for citizens of all ages in line with climate education responsive United Nations settings.

Our three stories from practice come from China, Poland and Australia. English is a compulsory course in China from primary education to postgraduate education, and Chinese linguist scholar Chunlin Yeo is an experienced university teacher of English at Tianjin Chengjian University. In his story from practice, he describes his teaching philosophy as helping both students to improve their foreign language knowledge and skills and develop their thinking around contemporary social and cultural issues. In the face of a systematic reduction of optional university offerings, such as dedicated climate education courses, educators innovate alternative curriculums as means for expressing their values. In 2022, Yeo introduced climate change education into an English class using a problem-based learning pedagogy delivered through blended learning. He presents the results of his language analysis of online forum responses and student interviews. In modelling how to successfully embed action enhancing climate education into compulsory courses, Yeo concludes that cultivating adult learners' knowledge of combating climate change is an urgent task for Chinese university educators.

Piotr Kowzan is a scholar from the University of Gdansk and a flood victim. In this beautiful story of practice, he writes a reflection he calls an autophenomenography of water. As a pedagogist charged with annually teaching a course called Global education: Educators confronting multiple global crises, he found that concentrating on water infrastructure was a beneficial topic for making desired connections. He also found the mental costs of teaching and learning in this course becoming deeply challenging. The need for psychological adaptation to deteriorating living conditions related to climate change could not be solved through his teaching work. In experiencing a bad case

of climate anxiety (we all have known this), Kowzan reflects that an “almost spiritual adaptation to the climate catastrophe” was triggered by taking a year’s break from teaching and paying close personal and family attention to water. In this piece, Kowzan demonstrates how in observing, writing and reflecting – specifically on the various meanings of water - he found a psychological process for re-calibrating his teacher’s tools for working again and again with difficult knowledge.

For our third story, Sydney-based scholars Tania Leimbach and Tema Milstein reflect on their action-oriented, inside-out pedagogy. Their template is a ten-week postgraduate course, titled Climate Crisis and Action, delivered as part of the Master of Environmental Management at the University of New South Wales. The authors explain four key elements of this course design as: repositioning the course convenor as academic-facilitator to empower students to understand the climate crisis as a shared challenge; establishing an atmosphere of collective intelligence, shared accountability, and affect-based learning; designing assessments that embed solutions and pedagogy to position students as climate innovators *and* educators; and providing leadership opportunities in real-time to support students to grow their expertise and professional agency. Their approach is underpinned by two professional motivations: to engage students with the immediacy and urgency of climate crisis, and to extend the core function of teaching academics to support real-world problem solving, innovation and transformation. Their insights provide a useful model for curriculum in practice.

Our final paper is a commentary prepared by Robert B. Stevenson. He writes that the significance of the May 2022 federal election results made clear the public’s increased concern about Australia’s laggard response to climate change. In revisiting the long history of the political failings on climate action, youth, women and the environmental climate movement were the major contributors to the influx into parliament of record Green Party and ‘teal’ independents who campaigned on climate action and brought hope finally for the enactment of significant climate policies. Despite these gains, Stevenson argues, much more remains to be accomplished. Urgently needed are specific plans to rapidly phase out and replace the use of fossil fuels, curb methane emissions and forest clearing, and increase climate mitigation and adaptation. These tasks demand political will to resist powerful vested interests and

invest in new industries and transition arrangements, especially in the communities most affected by the turbulence of economic transition. Political history indicates how hard it is to broker agreements for ambitious and effective climate policy, but tensions over strategy in and beyond parliament are a normal part of the policy process, as well as negotiating actions within social movements.

Adult learning and education are a critical part educating for the present/future and for citizen actions and climate movements. In engaging and preparing people for responding to the many disruptions of the climate crisis, adult education collaboratively builds knowledge, investigates and determines the appropriate policies and actions needed to bring about the necessary political, economic, cultural and technological changes. The complexity of transforming community values and priorities, political positions and policies, demands collective insights, imagination, and action. We are pleased to present you with this series of informative and thought-provoking works further contributing to our understandings of adult climate justice education.