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Climate Change, Education, and Social Justice: A Conversation with Bill Bigelow

Bill Bigelow

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Abstract

Bill Bigelow taught high school social studies in Portland, Oregon for almost 30 years. He is curriculum editor of Rethinking Schools magazine, co-directs the Zinn Education Project, and co-edited A People's Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis. He is author and co-editor of many books and contributes to Common Dreams. He was part of a collective that introduced a climate justice resolution to the Portland School Board. In this interview he discusses how and why we should include social justice in climate change conversations.

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An Interview with Bill Bigelow

Interview conducted by Hannah Dankbar

Bill Bigelow taught high school social studies in Portland, Oregon for almost 30 years. He is curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine, co-directs the Zinn Education Project, and co-edited *A People's Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*. He is author and co-editor of many books and contributes to Common Dreams. He was part of a collective that introduced a climate justice resolution to the Portland School Board.

Q. You have spent a lot of your career as a teacher, how did you get started in social justice work?

A. The Vietnam War. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. My senior year in high school was 1968-69. Having to register for the draft my first summer after high school, it was hard to avoid confronting the morality of the war. I went to my first demonstrations in San Francisco that year. The following spring, I was living in a collective household going to University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Nixon invaded Cambodia. The National Guard killed students at Kent State. In response, students at Pacific went on strike and shut down the school. The anti-war movement pulled me in. My first "teaching," if you want to call it that, was that spring, speaking to students at Manteca High School about the history of the war. There were twists and turns, but it was the anti-war movement that helped orient me toward a life of social justice activism.

Q. Will you describe how climate change and social justice are interconnected? What risks do we take if we do not address these two topics together?

That's an important question because so many people see climate change as solely a science issue. Looking at who is hurt the most by climate change turns it into a social justice issue, because the people most affected are, by and large, the people who have had the least to do with creating the carbon pollution that's causing this crisis. A justice approach to the climate crisis requires us to look at it from the standpoint of the most vulnerable. Science can help us describe the problem and predict some of the consequences. But we need a social justice lens to probe the causes of the climate crisis, to focus on the stories of those most affected, and to think about how we should respond. In *A People's Curriculum for the Earth*, for example, we include a role play activity that puts students in the positions of Indigenous peoples in a number

of communities around the world. They meet and learn from each other about the dire impact of climate change for Indigenous peoples and they discuss demands to make of the rest of the world. A social justice orientation to this issue means that we don't just turn people into victims. We need to highlight how people are organizing and fighting back.

You ask about the risks we take if we don't link climate and social justice. If we look only at the science of climate change, we run the risk of discouraging students. No doubt, science helps us see the enormity of the problem. But our classes need to take an activist stance, asking what we can do to address the roots of the crisis. That's where hope comes from: recognizing what can be done — and is being done — by ordinary people to respond to climate change.

Q. Will you describe the importance of climate justice education in schools and why the Portland School District's "climate justice" resolution is noteworthy?

A. Our resolution is the first of its kind in the country. It puts the school district on record as acknowledging that it did not have an educational strategy to address the climate crisis. It requires the school district to abandon the use of adopted text materials that deny the human role in causing the climate crisis or minimize its effects. And there are some terrible textbooks that do just that. The resolution also calls for professional development for teachers on teaching climate justice, and for the involvement of people from "frontline" communities—places in the world that are hardest hit by climate change. So it's a comprehensive climate justice resolution that we hope will inspire other people around the country to consider initiating similar measures.

Interestingly, the right wing and the climate denial folks, like the Heartland Institute, immediately saw the significance of the resolution, and expressed horror that the Portland resolution could inspire similar efforts around the country. They saw Portland as the threat of a good example.

Q. In what ways does climate justice education also educate students on other social justice issues such as race, class, gender and power?

A. Recently, I led two workshops for about 100 Portland-area high school students at an event sponsored by the World Affairs Council. I began by asking students what came to mind when they heard the terms climate change or global warming. They said melting glaciers, the Arctic melting, polar bears dying, 90 degree days in April (as we'd just had), sea levels rising, ocean

acidification, and on and on. But not one student mentioned anything about people. So the first thing that a climate justice education needs to foreground is the human dimension of this crisis—that there is not some barrier between nature and human beings. Yes, the climate crisis is about all the things that students listed, and lots more, but environmentalism has long been saddled with the tree-hugger label, and that’s a problem.

So when we acknowledge that this is a human crisis, we have to analyze it the way we analyze other social crises: who benefits, who suffers, what is at the root of the crisis? And how do people’s race, class, gender, or nationality help determine how they are affected? In *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*, we include a role play on La Vía Campesina, the global peasant movement, which brings all these into play. For example, students see that climate change is playing havoc with agriculture, and that globally, farming is overwhelmingly women’s work. In their roles as peasant organizers from around the world, students confront the G7’s neoliberal proposals for agriculture, which call for more use of fossil fuels, more free trade, more privatization of seeds, more seizing of peasants’ land for cash-crop agriculture. So climate change is embedded in larger systems of power and profit, and an honest curriculum needs to deal forthrightly with this reality.

Q. How can social justice academics and practitioners (including educators at all levels) bridge this false dichotomy between the environment and people?

A. I think the most powerful way to erase this dichotomy is through story. In *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth* we include lots of readings and activities that allow students to see that what affects the Earth affects people. For example, an activity included in the book, and one that I use frequently with high school students and in teacher workshops, is the Climate Mixer. Participants take on the personas of actual individuals throughout the world whose lives are touched by the climate crisis in different ways. In character, students surface how they are connected to the crisis and to each other through meeting and talking with each other in a “mixer” activity. The roles that students receive deal with nature—melting glaciers, declining caribou populations, the increase of terrible wildfires, and the like—but in the activity, I want to show how nature and humanity are connected.

Q. What do you see as key strategies to engage people in discussions about climate change and encourage people to take action?

A. The climate crisis can feel overwhelming. Because it *is* overwhelming. People need to feel that they can take an action that makes a difference—and they need to be inspired by others' stories of how groups of people are working together to contribute to a more democratic, more equal, fossil fuel-free world. We need to feel that our actions matter. Our climate justice resolution in Portland is a good example. It was very concrete: the official curriculum mis-teaches students about the climate crisis; teachers do not have adequate resources or a chance to share strategies with one another; the voices of people from frontline communities are not being heard; that needs to change. And Portland was vulnerable to activism around the biases and inadequacies in how schools deal with climate change. As are all school districts. School systems claim that they are equipping young people to thrive in and contribute to the future. They claim that they teach about things that matter. They claim that that they care about equity. And yet they are silent about what is arguably the most dire crisis facing humanity. So just like the divestment movement, I see the schools as an important arena for activism around climate justice.

Of course, the elephant in the room is fossil fuels, and the insatiable greed of the fossil fuel industry. Obviously, the extraction, transport, refining, and burning of fossil fuels is what is mainly responsible for the climate crisis. This industry is so ubiquitous—including all the university and endowments and public pension funds invested in fossil fuels—that we are presented with countless points of leverage. So all of these activist possibilities offer great opportunities for discussion and consciousness raising.

Q. A common approach to teaching environmental issues includes teaching students to reduce individual actions that are not considered to be environmentally friendly (examples: individuals should drive less, reduce food waste, etc.). You advocate that we should teach students that addressing environmental issues as individuals is inadequate. How do you engage students in this type of thinking when our capitalist society puts so much emphasis on individual actions and successes?

A. Well, first, I don't mean to suggest that individual actions are meaningless. I'm a grandfather, and I want my grandson to be aware that his individual choices mean something. In Oregon, much of our electricity still comes from burning coal. So when Xavier leaves the lights on, more coal is burned. We need to teach individual responsibility. But individual responses are not a strategy. We cannot buy—or not-buy—our way to a more just and environmentally responsible society. When we teach about the scope of the climate crisis, and its roots in a free market

economy, powered by the quest for private profit, we cannot then turn around and suggest that our salvation lies in individual actions of driving less or recycling more. We need a curriculum that encourages students to match what they are learning about the science—the speed of climate change, its dramatic effects, its potential to change life on earth—and the root causes of the crisis, with our actions to address it.

This is another dimension to the “storying” of the climate crisis we need to engage in: We need to story for students, and with students, the inspiring organizing around the world. What is daunting, but also incredibly hopeful, is that to truly deal with the climate crisis we need to imagine a new, democratic fossil-free world, where people don’t leave investment decisions in the hands of private corporations. These days, organizing for this new world is not just a matter of wanting something better, it’s a matter of survival.

Q. Do you have any other thoughts on climate justice that you would like to share with our readers?

A. As educators, we have to be louder and more audacious in demanding that our schools, our professional organizations, our teacher unions, our parent-teacher associations, our education publications, our school boards deal urgently and deeply with the climate crisis. In *Rethinking Schools*, we are making this work a priority. We are looking to inspire others by publishing stories of teachers at all grade levels and at all disciplines who are doing this work. Recently, we received a grant to promote Portland’s climate justice resolution and are distributing “seed packets” to encourage others to organize similar efforts around the country. We are leading workshops on *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth* and hoping to inspire more use of the book in climate justice teaching. We need to create lots and lots of opportunities for people to come to see themselves as activists for climate justice—activists for a new society.