Becoming Fire Fighters Educational Disobedience in Times of Climate Crisis

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What you need for starters is a crappy teaching situation,
    e.g., a rather small group of half-motivated students
    and a teaching topic they are not really interested in.
The goal will be not only to get them interested in it,
    but also to have them understand that any topic has
    something to do with the climate and biodiversity crisis,
    and that they should be doing something about it.
Call it teaching situatedness if you want.

- Try classical methods first (informational slides on the
  climate and biodiversity crisis, discussions).

- Try the climate fresk ↗ https://climatefresk.org/ ↙
  (you can even hire a dedicated trainer for this).

- Then try other classical, albeit more recent methods:
  flipped classroom, project work.

- Within the general framework of the climate and
  biodiversity crisis, have the students collectively define
  relevant topics through mind maps and group work.

- Let the students manage social media accounts
  dealing with the aspect of the climate and biodiversity
  crisis of their choice.

- Have them give feedback on the social media
  experience.

- Wait for an awareness of the climate and biodiversity
  crisis to kick in.

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How I started to teach the climate crisis

What I am really writing about here is failing. Over the past years, I have been trying everything I could think of to root my teaching in the real world. So far, I have only been rather unsuccessful.

I think it was during the Covid pandemic that I fully realized my responsibility, as a university professor, to prepare the youths that I teach for what the world is becoming, and that this task was turning more challenging by the day. I have always been aware that teaching values, not simply content, was part of my job, but at some point it dawned on me that it was more than that, simply because we – me, my students – bathe in white, European, educated privilege (me certainly more than my students, but still).

This privilege is our debt. All that we can enjoy, our whole life, comes at a high price for people in less privileged countries. It actually comes at a high price for all living beings on earth, for earth itself. But we don't see it. The world in which we surround ourselves is based on our

39   participation in a fake reality, one in which sorting trash is enough to buy yourself a good conscience.

Beyond the bubble of this feel-good *Weltanschauung*, in which striving for status quo is as radical as you can get, the world is actually on fire. For 50 years now, research has shown how dramatic the destruction of the earth for the sake of some people's comfort (I count myself among these people) has become. ↗ See the reports regularly issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: https://www.ipcc.ch/ ↙ Knowing this as we do, and especially as we do in our function as educated researchers, there is no reason why we, and all people in privileged countries, should be doing anything other than trying to extinguish that fire right now. And there is no reason why the classroom itself shouldn't be part of the effort, because if we don't teach students how the world really is and their part in it, then what good is what we teach?

Implementation within the limits of Academic teaching

This was the rationale behind my sensibilization efforts with students regarding the climate and biodiversity crisis. Now I must say that I have been teaching rather unpopular topics at a small provincial university. Students come to this college to get an education and sometimes end up stuck with classes they have to pass whether they like it or not. Enthusiasm for the classes I give is often lacking.

The challenge was to teach them basics in digital literacy at large and/or German literature (the topics for which I was hired as a professor) and how to question them in the same teaching unit. In practice, it amounts to conveying, for the disciplines I teach, elements of digital literacy (how to properly use digital devices, manage data, archive information, grant online access or not) and at the same time explaining that the ICT sector emits as much CO_2 as civil aviation (European Union 2022). Or that German forests are wild and beautiful, and that literature tells stories of taming and civilizing them in a manner that is oftentimes rather violent, symbolically or even physically. Needless to say, this type of discourse

is rather unproductive in the classroom. When asking students at the end of the term what the take-home message of these classes was, the answers transported either one aspect (information) or the other (questioning structures of power, at an abstract level) but not both.

There is an immense difficulty in wanting to tell the truth to people who expect to learn something from you. My truth is not that of my students. Mine contains all the layers of the life I have lived. And my task is not to burden them with my truth, but to equip them to deal with theirs. I thought at first this meant giving them hard facts and showing them the contradictions they entail when it comes to our position in this world. Yet doing so is either too much or not enough.

But there is only so much you can do to compensate for the lack of time and space. The framework in which I have had to operate in has remained, from the students' point of view, that of an assignment to be realized according to a given calendar in order to pass a specific class. This, not the students' intellectual abilities or social backgrounds, was the actual limitation I encountered.

To this day, the closest I have come to actually doing my job the way I envision it was in a class in which I gave an assignment of a somewhat different kind. In the following, I present the concept of this class – not that it was perfect, but ultimately, it was my best take at overtrumping academic constraints and teaching how to act as a privileged person in a situation of climate emergency.

A new concept for the M.A. class: »Pedagogical and cultural usages of Information Technologies«

It is a 10-hour M.A. class for students in cultural studies entitled *Pedagogical and cultural usages of Information Technologies* (the class already existed when I arrived at the University and it was offered to me with its predefined title and number of teaching hours). I have been in charge of this class for 7 years and have had plenty of opportunities to improve it over time. The final setting I came up with is the fol-

41   lowing (French terms have 12 weeks, the seminar runs 5 times for 2 hours).

I hold this class in a classroom furnished with rolling tables, several whiteboards, and a cupboard full of laptops for students. Students can thus regroup on a table of the size they choose, sitting next to or opposite one another, as they prefer; they can turn the computers in the direction they want (as opposed to computer pools with fixed, aligned PCs); we can all walk around the room. Being able to both use digital tools and to move around establishes an important part of the class dynamics. It also makes it possible for the students to evolve parallelly in the virtual world (social media)—in which they think they are perfectly comfortable—and in the real world (the classroom)—which they consider restrictive and constrained—and for me to see how the classroom progressively becomes a comfort zone.

In **Session 1 (Week 1)**, I introduce the course with a general presentation on digital tools and their environmental impact and introduction to IT-based communication. Then we discuss the social media used by the students, and at that point I introduce the content of the four following sessions and what students have to achieve in order to pass the class: conduct a digital project and provide the corresponding documentation (group work) and write a small essay on the whole experience (individual work, to be handed in a few weeks later).

In the first years that I gave this class, I let the students decide on their own on the topic of their project, hoping that environmental issues would naturally arise. When I realized they wouldn't, I adapted my concept.

I then write »climate and biodiversity crisis« on the whiteboard. From there, I start drawing a mind map based on the students' input – anything they connect with the subject. The mind map extends in the directions they provide, which I try to organize while they drop keywords, ideas, or examples. At some point, the input usually starts to converge and I ask them to identify topics that regroup several keywords or can be considered as general issues. This is how ocean warming, nuclear

plants, or invasive species, to name only a few examples, come up. I then ask students to pick one of these topics and to build groups to work on them. The optimal group size is 3 students; each group settles on one topic and decides how to present it online. At the end of the first seminar session, they have to be organized in groups, to have decided on a topic, and to have settled on a communication platform for their project.

Now to the publication platforms. In the first years I taught this class, students considered writing or translating a Wikipedia article a compelling assignment. Not that it was that easy, as they quickly found out, but they were up to the challenge. In the last years, it appears that the encyclopedia has suffered from growing discredit. Students seem to have been taught, maybe more systematically than before, not to give it academic consideration (although working on Wikipedia article editing is probably one of the most efficient ways to learn about proper sourcing and how to construct a scholarly reliable discourse) (Wiki Riot Squad 2025). Anyway: Wikipedia is now mostly out of the scope, whereas it was an important outlet in the first editions of this class.

Attempts at creating a Youtube channel for video publications have proven to be so massively time-consuming that I now discourage students to engage in that kind of publication if they don't already maintain a YT channel (which they don't).

In the end, the platforms they select are Twitter, Instagram, and occasionally Facebook – the networks they feel confident they can master.

Figure 1: Screenshot Instagram Post from 4. December 2023.

At the beginning of **Session 2 (Week 3 or 4)**, each group has to present a comprehensive plan for the rest of the term: what they expect from the communication platform they have chosen, who their target audience is, how they intend to configure the account from which they will publish, which content (roughly) will be posted, and when. The *terminus ad quem* is the fifth session, in which they are expected to draw a balance on the project: by then, they have to be able to report on publications, interactions, on what worked well, what caused difficulties, what they could have done better, what they learned in the process.

Students who are regular Instagram publishers usually still think, at this point in the term, that the assignment is going to be a walk in the park and that they only need to come up with a nice color combination and graphic identity. At the end of this session, though, they are expected to have issued their first publication. Seldom do they manage to achieve it.

The 3rd and 4th sessions (usually around week 7 and week 9 of the term) begin with a short group report. Have they managed to stick to their schedule? Which

difficulties have arisen? I also comment on the students' latest publications (my own homework is to read the publications as they are published), but oftentimes the actual publication flow starts quite late in the term.

Managing Instagram accounts usually turns out to be trickier than the students thought at first. Some groups experience technical setbacks (having their account suspended or realizing too late that if they want to report on interactions, they need access to statistics). Some underestimate the role of hashtags and tagging in gaining traction and visibility. The learning process is a tedious one, but it is what the class is about. While I remain available for suggestions, ideas, improvements, at no point do I hand out a full plan on how to run an Instagram account efficiently in a short period of time. The learning process is an experiential one.

In parallel, the students also realize that in order to publish reliable posts, they need solid sources. One element of the documentation they need to submit at the end of the term is a bibliography (a general one including references on the publication platform they have chosen as well as an itemized list for each publication). An important part of the research process consists in learning to evaluate the sources, to consider whether they consist in facts or greenwashing, whether the position is scientific or political. One group working on environmental and social injustice turned out to be so torn about these questions that they barely managed to publish one or two posts over the course of the term. But they were able to describe the whole process, to analyze their difficulties, to grasp the problem. In terms of grading, they ended up doing quite well.

Research, phrasing, hashtagging: it is only by the third session, if not the fourth, that all students have finally registered that it takes at least 2 and up to 6 hours to write a good post. At that point, either their whole schedule is completely obsolete or they have found ways around it (splitting posts, reducing their ambitions, better distributing the workload among group members) – or the

45 groups have turned out to be unable to function in such a challenging situation. Some students decide not to show up at session 3 or 4, which they know will »only« be time to work on their projects (with my help if they ask for it). This also exacerbates differences in progress between groups.

Session 4 is the last opportunity to have me take a look at the documentation and say what needs to be improved. I also explain what I expect to find in their project presentation at the final session (a short, pointed version of the documentation), and what their individual essay should entail, and what not (especially, not a description of their project).
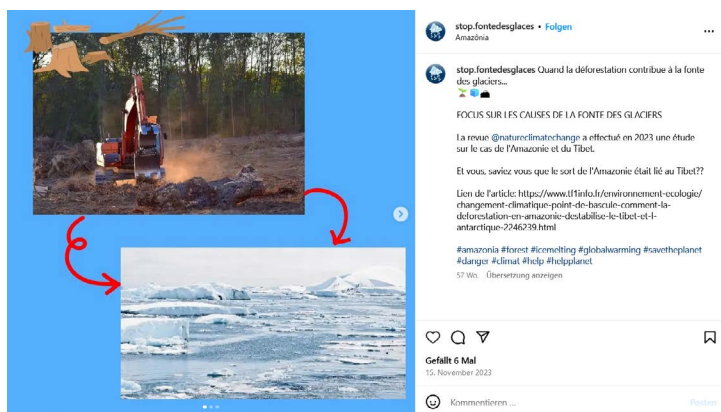
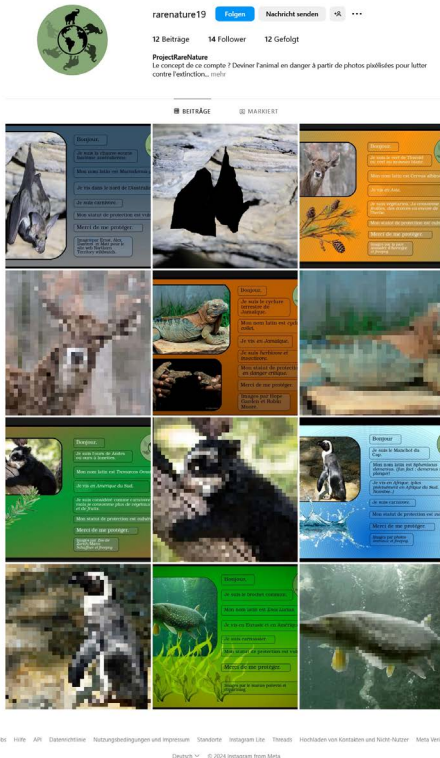Figure 2: Screenshot Instagram Post from 15. November 2023.

Figure 3: Screenshot Instagram Profile rarenature19.

Session 5 (Week 12) is dedicated to presentations of the projects. The concept of that session is not fully satisfactory. Students already know each other's work since they have been following each other's accounts throughout the term, and they end up presenting their projects in front of people who already know most of it. It feels like a rather artificial exercise.

Only a few groups engage in a discussion of the actual content of their work during this presentation time. One group that worked on nuclear plants had an exciting take on the dangers versus advantages of nuclear plants

47   layered with pros and cons of exposing oneself through writing about nuclear plants (this was a Twitter project). Based on this input, we had an interesting discussion about how far information can go, where it stops being information and starts being lobbying, how one can make sure that scientific evidence reaches the people one wants to reach by publishing it. This discussion was of particular interest because the students in charge of the project were able to grasp the specificities of French electricity production in the global context. But for people who are just starting to dive into topics such as biodiversity loss, the complexity of the debate is often as discouraging as the reality they describe is depressing, making it all the more difficult to gain perspective.

The last session is also an opportunity, on the one hand, to discuss the concept of the class, and, on the other, for me to make sure that my expectations regarding the individual essay are clear for all.

Year after year, the discussion on the concept of the class ends up being about how quality posting is time- and energy-consuming, how they learned much more and worked much more than they expected for this class – and how unrewarding online publications are. One major challenge is that what they post is not read solely by me, the teacher, but is presented to the whole world (under the account name of the project, but still: it is a way of putting oneself out there that is unusual for academic exercises). While it reinforces the idea that even academic work can be useful (most of the projects explicitly decide to target younger people), it also provides a bitter glimpse at how unrewarding it can be to want people to realize something and not be able to reach these people. In a way, this class is a flipped classroom in the sense that it puts the students in my frustrating teaching position. And my role is to help them deal with it better than I manage it myself.

In the final individual essay, the students are expected to discuss a point that relates to the general theme of the

class (»Pedagogical and cultural usages of Information Technologies«) and one that they

have identified during project time as particularly interesting. It can concern issues pertaining to digital identity, publication strategies, the targeting of specific audiences, using a private company tool to generate public knowledge, and many other topics. Still, for a good portion of the students, the abstraction effort required by this assignment on top of the project itself is too high and they end up summarizing the project.

In this essay, I expect students to not simply tell me how they have come to reflect on the question they have chosen, I also ask them to find and discuss research articles on it. It usually comes down to one or two references per essay, but that can suffice to support their argumentation.

Never have I seen any climate-related question put front and center in these essays, which is a bit sad. But this seminar is already blowing up the whole concept of a 10-hour class on pedagogical and cultural usages of IT. It is already taking the students much further than they expect in terms of knowledge gain, skill acquisition, and self-reflective effort. How could I possibly want more?
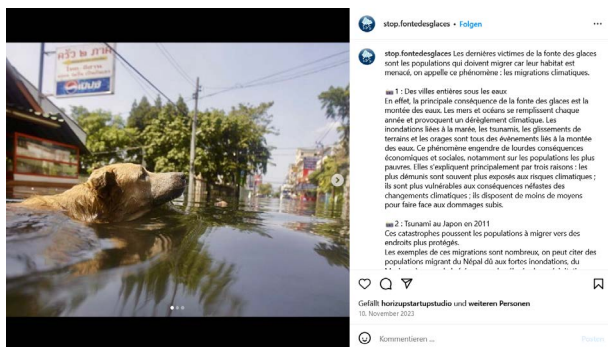

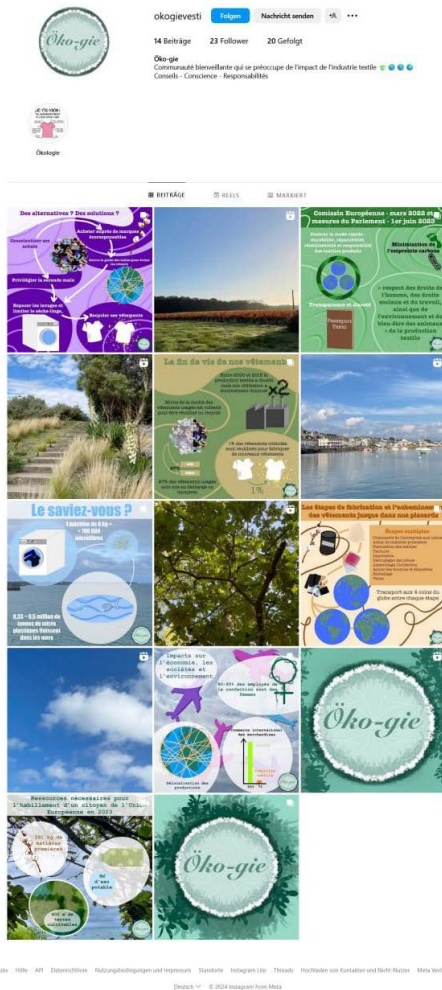Figure 4: Screenshot Instagram Post from 10. November 2023.

Figure 5: Screenshot Instagram Profile okogievesti.

What more could there be? And yet I do. I am convinced that we absolutely need to do more than that. Teaching should be about fostering self-criticism in an empowering manner – something I have never lived to see in my time as a university professor.

I have never come to love teaching. It has been one disappointment after the other – in me, mainly. How am I not able to convey all the passion I feel about being in this world, so privileged as to somehow be able to shape it? But I am disappointed also in a system where grades matter more than learning.

Over the past months, I have turned back to writing poetry and fiction after twenty years of writing solely scholarly articles and books. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to read out two chapters from a novel I am working on. I didn't know it when I enrolled for the open mic, but all the other performers were youths. And I had to go first because I was teaching half an hour later.

So there I was, standing up behind a microphone, in a luminous hall, in front of young dancers, singers, and acrobats, all waiting for their turn to perform.

As I started reading from the first chapter, the room was filled with an attention I had never experienced before. It was like I was talking to youths for the first time in my life. I let the words, my words, drop one by one into the microphone.

It was a story about protesting climate inaction.

From behind my microphone, I looked up. They were listening, and I was heard.

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