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ARTICLE

Moving from Reading to Dialogue to Action: Teaching Degrowth in Anthropology Courses

Susan Andreatta

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
s_andrea@uncg.edu

Abstract

Collectively, how can we work towards reducing human impacts on the environment to lessen the process of climate change and develop plans for climate change mitigation and adaptation? Current trends such as extreme climatic events and climate stress, food insecurity, declining natural resources, and inequitable access to food, health care, and education make it clear this is a time to act. After teaching at a university for a few decades, I find students are overwhelmed with the increasing amount of negativity in their local and global worlds. By introducing the concept of degrowth into several classes, I found ways to empower students to use their own data collection to inform themselves of what they could do differently to lessen their impact on the environment. Degrowth is defined as a philosophy of life or a lifestyle that calls for a conscious effort to reduce, reuse, recycle, and repurpose. Degrowth is also a political and social movement based on ecological economics designed to lessen consumerism and production; in a word, it is anti-capitalism. Degrowth is a re-envisioned way of living that emphasizes quality of life and conviviality that serves as an economic strategy to respond to the limits-to-growth dilemma. This paper *discusses an approach used to engage students in degrowth and create an opportunity to help them move from passive reading of assigned articles to taking action to globally heal Earth.*

Keywords: *degrowth; climate change; sustainability; autoethnography; teaching environmental anthropology*

Today, an increasing number of students feel overwhelmed and helpless with the amount of negativity in their local and global worlds. As instructors know, students have uncertain employment prospects. Environments are changing with diminishing natural resources such as potable water, healthy soils, biodiversity, forested lands, and nonrenewable energy in the form of oil, coal, or natural gas. As populations continue to rise, there is further need for affordable housing, education, and healthcare. Greenhouse gas emissions as well as other forms of pollution will continue to increase with current behavioral patterns locally, nationally, and globally unless profound changes are made.

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Alarming questions arise as to how we will feed, water, and shelter a global population approaching more than 9 billion people by 2050 if we do not curtail rising global temperatures, climate stress, and their negative impacts. How can we collectively work towards reducing human impacts on the environment no matter who we are, where we reside, or what we do? Current trends such as climate stress and extreme climatic events, food insecurity, poverty, declining natural resources, and inequitable access to health, healthcare, and education clearly indicate this is a time to act. It is becoming increasingly clear that future generations will not have a planet comparable to the one we currently reside on if something is not done to deter this negative trajectory. However, what actions can be taken to make a significant difference?

In this paper, I reflect on teaching undergraduate anthropology classes designed to move students from reading articles to having a dialogue that leads to action. Bringing activism into classes and encouraging students to make a difference for themselves, and others who they may not know, is critical to an applied anthropological perspective. To elaborate, in this article I describe how I introduced degrowth into a small, upper-level undergraduate course at an urban university with an ethnically and economically diverse student population. This course was conducted as a seminar with fewer than 20 students. I introduced degrowth into the syllabus to help students go beyond just thinking about the human and cultural interface with the environment and instead consider strategies for improving human interactions with the environment. Student-directed action in anthropology courses can empower students. We have an opportunity in and outside of our classrooms to provide attention to practicing anthropology and applying anthropological concepts and methods to real-world activities. There are three goals for this paper: 1) to introduce a degrowth perspective to teaching about climate change – a perspective that is usually unfamiliar to students and particularly productive in classrooms because it challenges ordinary notions of wealth, development, and globalization; 2) to explain how ethnographic methods can be used to encourage student-directed action that empowers students; and 3) to demonstrate that this approach can help students move from passive activities like reading to concrete actions. These goals empower the reader to think and act mindfully as they incorporate new material and experiences in their anthropology courses.

How to Face Climate Change

Scientific data inform us that the rate of climate change is a problem for the planet, and climate mitigation action is needed to reduce the average rate of global temperature increase (NOAA 2020 and 2022). Many climate researchers claim that there needs to be more effort put towards renewable green energy sources that lessen emissions (Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment 2019). Others contend that green energy and green growth are insufficient to slow the rate at which humans are elevating the earth's temperature (Hickel 2020; Mills 2019; Trembath and Hausfather 2020; Woolard 2019). Scientists point to increased greenhouse gases that contribute to climate variability and

extreme variation in climate. While reading about climate change, I too became frustrated. I questioned: What are we really doing locally and globally to make a difference in greenhouse gas emissions, waste build-up, depletion of natural resources, and loss of biodiversity? How do we get beyond talk, spreadsheets, and charts and put this information into action? Increasingly, I believe introducing degrowth through an applied anthropological lens enables students to engage in action to make a difference in their communities and families.

In the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, 197 countries signed a treaty to limit global warming to below 2.0 degrees Celsius, where it needs to be to reduce rising temperatures (UNFCCC 2020). The Agreement asks each country – rich, poor, developed, and developing – to do their part to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. To achieve these goals by 2050 requires political, economic, and social transformations at all levels and in all sectors (Robinson 2018). Although there are no penalties for failing to meet a nation's goals, the Paris Agreement requires monitoring and transparency with scientific data submitted to the "global stocktake" (NOAA 2020 and 2022, Robinson 2018). What is recognized is that multiple pathways are needed. While developing countries and small island nations would engage in climate change mitigation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and identify zero-carbon solutions, such pathways would not mirror those of wealthier countries, especially when considering energy and transportation sectors. Changes made in the US, Sweden, or Denmark, would be different from those made in Haiti, India, China, or Zimbabwe. For example, modifications that would need to occur in communities and countries more dependent on coal or woodfires for heating and cooking differ from those needed in communities relying on natural gas or nuclear energy. Communities that have access to more sun and wind might be able to increase their use of solar panels and wind power to supplement energy needs. Improving access to affordable and reliable public transportation could lessen the dependency on single occupancy vehicles. As global temperatures continue to rise and pollution in many forms (air, water, soil, etc.) abounds, actions need to be taken to achieve marked improvements in the health of the environment and a myriad of ecosystems.

Learning about Degrowth – A New Syllabus Topic

I was inspired to read about degrowth after attending past sessions at the American Anthropological Association conference (Paulson and Gezon 2015). To increase my awareness on the topic, I attended a degrowth conference in Malmö, Sweden, in 2018 to learn from those who have been working in this movement for the past couple of decades. Degrowth is defined from several perspectives. For some, degrowth is a philosophy of life or lifestyle that calls for a conscious effort to reduce, reuse, recycle, and repurpose (Latouche 2009 and Muraca 2013, for example). For others, degrowth is a political and social movement based on ecological economics designed to lessen consumerism, production, and colonial resource extraction; it encourages a shift away from capitalism-driven economic systems measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (D'Alisa et al. 2015).

Degrowth is a re-envisioned way of living that emphasizes quality of life, well-being, and conviviality while serving as an economic strategy to respond to the limits-to-growth dilemma.

Since the 1970s, concerns about the cost of "growth" and its impact on the environment and humanity have been raised (see Gorz 1977 and Georgescu-Roegen 1971 in Latouche 2009). The term "degrowth" was coined by French philosopher André Gorz, who wrote, "even at zero growth, the continued consumption of scarce resources will inevitably result in exhausting them completely. The point is not to refrain from consuming more and more, but to consume less and less – there is no other way of conserving the available reserves for future generations" (1980, 13). Another way to state this is that the degrowth movement needs people to shift their behavior to rely on less and reduce waste; both practices are central to the degrowth mission to move away from being a consuming society. Economic ecologist Giorgos Kallis furthers these thoughts and states, "in economic terms degrowth refers to a trajectory where the throughput, meaning energy, materials and waste flows of an economy decreases while welfare, or well-being improves. This hypothesis suggests that degrowing throughput will in all likelihood come with degrowing output, and that these can only be outcomes of a social transformation in an egalitarian direction" (2018, 9).

The degrowth movement has many goals for the health of the planet and its global citizenry, while recognizing countries of the North and those of the South will have different pathways to achieve their part.[1] Degrowth, in part, is aimed towards running a smaller economy with less impact on the environment, and it is dependent on less production and overall consumption. The intent of degrowth is to consume fewer natural resources in the short and long term, thereby extending what exists for future generations. Yet, what are the safety nets that get more vulnerable members of societies through the transition period from current approaches to alternative ones? In addition, sustainable development and green growth are at odds with the principles of degrowth. Scholars contend that increasing green items eventually get mainstreamed for mass production and consumption, defeating the purpose (Kallis 2018). Degrowthers also contend that continued consumption of non-renewable resources over time is unsustainable, although they recognize this consumption is a start by removing dependency on non-renewable energy sources (Hickel 2020).

In the end, degrowth challenges the concept of accumulation (wealth); it questions the foundations of capitalism, development, and globalization and sees them as destructive to the environment because of their extractive and colonializing nature. Kallis writes, "ecologizing society, degrowthers argue, is not about implementing an alternative, better or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern growth-based development" (2015, 1). Degrowthers call for a time of change, a new imaginary, an alternative way of coexisting on the Earth that values global citizenry.

[1] In non-English literature degrowth is written as "*décroissance"* among French scholars and "*decrecimiento"* among Spanish scholars.

Leading a Degrowth Way of Life

Scholars writing on degrowth vary in how they employ the term as a theoretical concept, a philosophy, or a political-economic movement (see Demaria, Schneider, and Martinez-Alier 2013; Dittmer 2013; Escobar 2015; Kallis 2015; Latouche 2009; Liegey 2013; Liegey, Madelaine, Ondet, and Veillot 2013; Martinez-Alier 2012; Paulson 2017; Sekulova et al. 2013; and many others detailing varying approaches to degrowth). Barbara Muraca (2013) lays out a clear historical development of degrowth in "Décroissance: A Project for Radical Transformation of Society." The authors of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Er*a suggest it is a political, economic, and social movement based on ecological economics, anti-consumerist, and anti-capitalist ideas (D'Alisa et al. 2015). Proponents of degrowth remind us that the term degrowth does not refer to negative growth or a negative GDP, for that is what we would call a recession or depression (Kallis 2015). It is a way to recognize the negative extractive impacts colonialism has had on oppressing the Global South and to call for social, economic, and political transformation towards equity (Latour 2018). Some degrowth scholars suggest that there should be a basic unit of income or minimum standard of living to provide quality living for everyone (D'Alisa et al. 2015; Hickel 2020; Kallis 2015; Latouche 2009). In addition, degrowthers advocate shorter workdays and workweeks, which in some cases could be accomplished through workshare programs. More specifically, degrowthers recommend a 37-hour, 4-day work week that provides a basic minimum standard of living for everyone (Latouche 2009).

Over the years, degrowth workshops, conferences, and summits have been held in Austria, Spain, Germany, Denmark, France, England, and Mexico. Degrowth involves local and community approaches as well as national and international ones. Depending on where one starts, the strategies for influencing change will be different. For example, strategies for living in an ecovillage or intentional-sustainable community will be different than strategies for a nation trying to meet zero carbon emissions. Degrowth has slowly gathered momentum, with proponents interested in how to live more simply, with fewer material objects (de-consumerism) and a smaller carbon footprint (Hickel 2020; Robinson 2018). This may involve doing for one-self (gardening, cooking, sewing, and repairing), volunteering one's services (helping with bike repairs or childcare), or participating in a workshare as well as sharing cars, lawn mowers, and the like (Fosket and Mamo 2009; Litfin 2014). Simple living, filled with self-care and healthy relations with others, and devoid of greed and competition, seems too good to be true. However, given the need to reduce the global temperature by 2.0 degrees Celsius, I contend many more people around the world need to join the movement to make the difference the environment and ecosystems require.

What is missing from the intellectual debate among the noted scholars listed above is how to implement degrowth, especially on a macroscale. Questions abound about whether degrowth could be used by individuals, communities, and nations to heal the environment. For example, what would a new political and economic system be like that

did not measure success in terms of economic growth or consumerism? What policies would be needed to provide a transition from a growth model that has been part of the capitalistic system to one that would enable and provide for social, economic, and environmental justice in both the Global North and South, and offer everyone the means to live comfortably? How could quality living be built into systems in a way that values leisure time and conviviality over ingrained in Western norms of working hard to earn a paycheck to pay for essentials (food, shelter, medicine, transportation, clothing, etc.) and non-essential items or experiences? Could a basic existence ensuring a minimum way of life be established? How does transitioning take place when creating a different system that is not about accumulating material items, but that values equity for others, meets basic human needs, and incorporates affordable housing, food, warmth, education, and health care throughout the life cycle so that the young, aging, and aged are not left out, denied, or forgotten? How does this message get embraced at national and global levels? How are behaviors modified and consumption patterns altered such that overall production levels decline substantially to reduce energy use and reliance on petroleum and plastics, and to decrease overall waste and landfill contributions or any form of pollution (air, water, soil, etc.)? For degrowth to become mainstream locally, nationally, and globally, how do we collectively work towards making major systemic changes? Can degrowth be a bottom-up approach with individuals living a reduced waste or zero-waste lifestyle? Or will it become a top-down approach governed by national policy? Many of these questions, which are critical to degrowth, informed the re-design of my anthropology courses and were included in the readings and our class discussions.

Incorporating Degrowth into an Environmental Anthropology Course

After teaching for a few decades, I find students are overwhelmed with negativity and sad news. I felt a new tactic was needed in and outside the classroom. I introduced degrowth into two upper-level specialized courses: an environmental anthropology class and an applied anthropology class, ranging from 10 -15 students.[2] In these upper-level classes, most students were either anthropology or environmental studies majors, and none of the students had ever heard of degrowth. Below I detail the approach taken in environmental anthropology classes where I had graded assignments with regular attention put towards the degrowth topic over a semester. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and students consented to the use of class materials for future publications.

As a bit of background, in my *Methods in Data Collection for Cultural Anthropology* course, I have developed a variety of exercises over the years that get students walking on our campus, testing their memory recall, engaging in participant observation, creating

[2] I draw on several different course experiences for this article: an upper-level *Environmental Anthropology* course taught in the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 semesters and an upper-level course in *Applied Anthropology* taught in Spring 2019, Spring 2020, and Spring 2021.

surveys, interviewing, and collecting quantitative data on their own dietary intake to perform statistical analyses. These exercises are based on basic ethnographic methods that are important whether one is a descriptive field anthropologist or an applied or practicing anthropologist (Angrosino 2002, 2008; Bernard 2011; Crane and Angrosino 1992; Emerson et al. 1995a & b). Building on this experience, I used similar ethnographic methods exercises in my environmental anthropology course to empower students to modify their own behaviors and discuss the process with others based on their own data collection. However, students were directed to focus their quantitative and qualitative data collection specifically on environmental and degrowth matters. Students used participant observations, autoethnographic reflections, qualitative and quantitative data to inform themselves about what they could do to lessen their carbon footprints and to document how they were impacted by actions related to degrowth. As emergent social scientists, learning to collect and analyze ethnographic data are critical skillsets for the discipline. Therefore, asking students to apply these skills to their degrowth experience in an autoethnography was a way to document change and employ anthropological methods they could later adapt to a larger sample size (Bernard 2011).

As I re-designed my *Environmental Anthropology* course, I incorporated readings on degrowth (see references for a sample list) along with a variety of graded and ungraded assignments. As they engaged in their autoethnographic degrowth experience, students generated weekly fieldnotes and reflections. There were no prompts for the weekly fieldnote entries, which were turned in at the end of the semester and were not graded. During the semester, students were also asked to give oral updates on their degrowth experiences, and they concluded the semester with a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation highlighting what they learned from their degrowth experience and supported with their own data. The final oral presentation was graded by me and their peers according to criteria such as treatment of theory, presentation of quantitative and qualitative data, use of visuals, use of time, etc. In addition to the autoethnographic activities, students presented a Hot Topic on environmental issues that they selected from everyday life, which was different from reporting on their own degrowth experiences. Students provided a visual image for their hot topic, some elected to use PowerPoint, and each student stood before the class to present their topic for 3-4 minutes. These classes were very exciting for students brought the class's attention to a range of environmental issues. At the end of the semester there was an essay final exam that covered different theoretical orientations and applications used in environmental anthropology along with a degrowth question. Students also wrote a 2,500-3,000-word research paper that had something to do with the human-environment interface but did not have to relate to degrowth.

How Ethnographic Methods Can Interface with Teaching Degrowth

On the first day of a 15-week *Environmental Anthropology* class that met twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes, students were introduced to degrowth through a review of the syllabus. Students are bombarded with information about what is wrong with the

environment and the negative impact humans have had on the environment since the days of the earliest hunters and gathers, and especially since the Anthropocene[3]. Students come to the class familiar with pollution, climate change, urban expansion, deforestation, desertification and many facets of the human-environmental interface that lead to social inequality, poverty, food insecurity, and environmental injustice. Introducing students to degrowth on the first day of class is pedagogically strategic and designed to encourage them to participate and explore the topic throughout the semester.

The first two class meetings are busy ones. On day one I review the syllabus in detail and show the first part of a documentary (*Bag It*); we finish the documentary in the second class and conclude with a discussion to set the expectations for the semester. In a direct way, I want to illustrate how humans affect each other and a wide range of environments through the use of single-use plastic bags and plastics in general. *Bag It* (Beraza 2010) is a perfect visual to address this learning objective. After viewing the documentary, students shared their own practices with respect to the use of plastics: experiences with single-use plastic bags, plastics used in packaging of edibles and non-consumables, and their concerns about the effects plastics have on human health and that of the environment.

During the initial class sessions, students were asked to examine their own behaviors and identify ones that they could modify with a new set of cultural values that aligned with a reduced environmental impact. Specifically, students were asked to change a behavior (or more than one if time permitted) they know has an impact on the environment, to keep track of the change(s) qualitatively and quantitatively, and to share the data with the class throughout the semester. I offered suggestions to not overwhelm the students and to create a positive sense of contributing to change for the environment, society, and future generations. For example, students were offered ideas for creating less waste by packing their lunch in reusable containers, cooking with raw ingredients, sharing meals with others, walking more and driving less, making their own coffee and drinking it from a reusable container, creating time for mindfulness, and connecting with nature. Over the course of the semester, during our class discussions, students shared what they were changing and the impact they observed from their lived experience. We learned what degrowth meant for each of us and to extrapolate to our communities and different parts of the world, understanding there would be different ways in which everyone could contribute.

There are several misconceptions among those new to the degrowth concept, including the students in these classes. I started out by explaining degrowth is not just about the new fad of "tiny home" living. It is not just about the "virtuous circle" of Rs (reducing, reusing, repurposing, recycling, reconceptualizing, re-evaluating, restructuring, redistributing, and many other Rs) that we learned from reading Latouche (2009), and the

[3] The Anthropocene is a geological epoch dating from the time humans had significant impact on the Earth's ecosystem and climate change. The date for when the Anthropocene period begins is debated, with some scientists point to the Neolithic Revolution (14,000-15,000 BP), to the rise of the Industrial Revolution (1800s), or to fall out from the detonation of the first atomic bomb in the 1940s (National Geographic Society 2019).

long-term impact humans have had on the environment. It is not just about the four-legged sustainability stool (at my university we define sustainability as what is economically viable, socially just, environmentally friendly, and aesthetically pleasing). From the course readings selected for discussion (see references), we learned degrowth is bigger than "smalling up" or reducing one's carbon footprint; that it includes decolonizing the colonizers and reducing resource extraction obtained from the Global South. As we deepened our discussions on degrowth, we questioned what degrowth means to all classes of people and what the implications would be for peoples in different parts of the world. Again, going back to my point made earlier questioning how degrowth works, we used the class and students' autoethnographic activities to figure out how to operationalize elements of degrowth in everyday life and to document what kind of difference was made. Having students look at their culture, one that emphasizes working numerous hours and intensive material consumption, and to consider their own impact on the environment vis-à-vis their own patterns of consumption, waste generation, and energy usage became an objective for the course and provided interesting openings for informal in-class conversations and formal class presentations. Students recorded their weekly experiences of how they went about engaging in degrowth systematically in their fieldnotes, which was part of the structure for the autoethnographic exercise. They needed to be able to follow these changes quantitatively and qualitatively in their journals; these fieldnotes also helped students prepare for impromptu in-class contributions.

Throughout the 15-week semester, I posed questions to get students thinking about their culture and its values and to explore different ways they could co-exist. These questions were important because even though we were learning about other aspects of environmental anthropology, I wanted to keep degrowth part of their weekly experiences and conversations. By regularly probing these questions, students did not put degrowth on the backburner. To illustrate, here are a few discussion prompts I used in classes. I asked students to consider: if they self-selected ways in which they used less energy, consumed less, and were freer from an emphasis of what material culture and accumulation imposes, what would be an important outcome for them? What would they need to do differently to walk or cycle more or rely on public transportation? Had they tried sharing home cooked meals rather than going out for a fast-food takeout or pre-packaged meal? What ways have they identified where they could economize, work less, and be less in debt? Have there been times when they resisted temptation and did not purchase new technology or went back to doing things themselves without being aided by a mechanical gadget? Knowing how complicated their lives are at present with school and work, I asked them to think in the abstract and consider, post-graduation, what life might be like if they were able to engage in a simpler life, one where they valued spending time with others or in nature or read more for pleasure and gazed at the stars? Would any of these behaviors become routine for them to carry on with their degrowth experiences?[4]

[4] Curiously, during our various COVID-19 locked-down experiences (March 2020-December 2020), non-essential workers stayed home, traveled less by car or plane, cooked and baked at home, gardened, canned,

How Students Embraced Degrowth

My intent in this course was to begin a dialog about possibilities and provide hope and action for the students' future. Our class conversations stimulated the beginning of students' degrowth journeys, highlighting what one could do in a day, a week, and over time. We brainstormed opportunities and, in the end, their journal entries over a 15-week semester are very telling. Students mentioned walking more, buying less, packing their own lunches, even bringing their own reusable containers to take home leftovers when eating out. Many were already carrying water bottles and recycling, yet they questioned what more they could do to really change things for themselves in ways that would make a difference. What students realized was their behavior and that of others needed to have a much bigger impact than a simple one-off act such as refilling a water bottle or printing on both sides of a sheet of paper. Students related to degrowth when they started with the individual, themselves; this made degrowth personal, and they linked it to their behavioral change affecting the environment, their economic situation, or their quality of life. This aspect of the autoethnography served to help students understand the larger issues related to wealth and globalization.

Out-of-classroom discussions also took place, which was encouraging and inspiring.[5] Students regularly brought the class's attention to information they were finding. For example, a student shared a documentary that we watched entitled *50 Minutes to Save the World* (Zakeri and Burbage 2019) that examines pollution impacting coral reefs around the world. As the narrator purports, one couldn't "find Nemo" living anywhere these scuba divers went. Connecting with these documentaries enabled students to see they could live differently with modified cultural values and demonstrated why everyone needed to participate in a more reduced-waste lifestyle. Discussions led to what they could do themselves, such as carrying their own bags into all kinds of stores, reusing other kinds of bags when food shopping, and making choices to purchase items that had minimal packaging over something that might cost less. One student spoke about what was in her very large purse, where she totes her stainless lunch box, bamboo utensils, metal straw, reusable cloth bags, and a mason jar for hot and cold beverages that she decorated with yarn to be able to pick it up when there are hot beverages. She says she wants to live a zero-waste lifestyle. She is part of the new generation setting an example for others to follow.

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and engaged in much of what we had discussed as part of the degrowth process the previous class year (Daley 2021; Dali 2020; Keshner 2020; Overland 2020). Although 2020 data suggest there was a 12% reduction in US carbon dioxide emissions, scientists recognize this is not a way to deal with climate change in the long term (Le Quéré et al. 2020). Regrettably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of families suffered from hunger, eviction, and unemployment (CRS 2021; Sraders 2020), for unlike degrowth, which suggests there be a basic unit income for people, no transition was in place for when the pandemic was thrust upon the world.

[5] Students created a group chat for the entire class. I was excited that they were taking our discussions outside the classroom and staying connected with one another. This was their space, for I was not part of the chat, although I would hear about some of the exchanges in class.

Many environmental topics were raised over the course of the semester. For instance, we discussed overflowing garbage dumps and their locations, recycled plastics and glass going nowhere, pollution, and increasing global temperatures. Students noted that current efforts locally and globally have remained insufficient to retard the process of climate change and related poverty and social and environmental injustice. Students recognized that much more is needed than merely turning lights out, taking shorter showers, or using reusable metal straws. They recognized doing all these things together, along with many others, mattered and could make a difference, yet more people needed to be involved for collective action to truly make a difference in an ecosystem, the environment, and for one another.

Midway through the semester, we discussed the Gross Domestic Product. The GDP is an indicator used to keep track of the monetary value of goods and services produced to measure the success of a national economy, but it is not necessarily a good indicator of how well households are doing. For example, keeping track of what is bought and sold does not give a clear picture of equitable access or how consumption relates to the environment or the quality of life of a nation's people. Students made connections between the market economy and the food they ate, questioning whether food was local, from where it was imported, and who grew and harvested it. Chocolate and coffee were two commodities they understood were impacted by environmental and work conditions. One day, one of the students brought in samples of ethical chocolate for each of us to taste, which stimulated a lot of discussion, including about whether there is such a thing as "good capitalism." Students recognized the importance of degrowth economically, environmentally, and socially, but they questioned the limits of capitalism. Students responded to the critical qualities of the degrowth perspective by considering impacts on their own lives rather than the macroeconomic impacts. Fair wages, fair work conditions, and access to healthcare were topics of concern for them. They concluded that, at present, there are no blueprints for alternative market models or ways to degrow significantly and on a macro-scale peacefully.

De-consumerism is a big part of the degrowth concept, for it ties into reuse, repurposing, and the many Rs Latouch (2009) and others write about when discussing ways to lessen one's impact on the environment. More than halfway through the semester, several students were talking before class about how their buying habits had changed since they began this class. Students raised questions that tied back to the *Bag In* video they watched and framed them as hypotheticals they used when they shopped. They asked: "to purchase or not to purchase?," "how is it packaged?," and "do I really need it?" One student wrote in her journal, "I made the switch to a safety razor, a single blade razor; it was around $17.00 dollars, and the refill blades (pack of 100) were about $8.00. The razors I've always used in the past have been the hydro disposable ($10.00/pack of 3), which aren't very expensive, but they don't last long and are made of plastic, I usually go through about 1 a week." She figured she saved about $25 over the fifteen weeks of the course and that over a year she would save $148; however, she was more pleased that 52 plastic

razors would not end up in the landfill. Other students reflected in their journals on making coffee at home and taking a thermos of coffee with them, enabling them to save money and not use a disposable cup. Others used things up before buying something new, while others made what they saw as more dramatic choices where they used less, bought less, and did for themselves (i.e., cooked, mended, and walked).

As students shared their experiences and it was clear they were becoming more mindful of their own behaviors, they had thought about how they wanted to change their behaviors until they became more routine. For example, in the beginning, they questioned whether they should purchase new, used, or repurposed items. One student, regularly sporting his mom's 40-year-old denim jacket that appeared well loved, well worn, and filled with elbow holes and other signs of long-term use, said he prefers getting most of his clothes from used clothing stores. He commented that even before this class he shopped at thrift stores and the like not only to save money, but to keep items from going to the landfill. Once he shared his favorite locations to find his treasures, other students commented where they, too, obtained previously used items, including shops that sold pre-owned, vintage, and used clothing. As a result, another door was opened, and classmates felt they could share where they chose to purchase pre-owned items and why they purposely did not follow fast fashion.

Using less energy was another degrowth-aligned topic raised in class and in students' autoethnographies. Students reported experimenting with taking the bus, which is not common for our area. Although buses are available, the routes and times are not frequent enough for students' class and work schedules. Students experimented with riding bikes and scooters, including using a new rent-a-bike and rent-a-scooter program to get across campus and the community. Walking, carpooling, and consolidating errands were other ways students reduced their energy consumption. They commented that doing all their errands on one day was more efficient than the multiple trips they generally made. Students found they saved time and gas. Other students talked and wrote about taking quicker showers, turning off lights in rooms no one was using, and lowering the heat temperature during cooler times or raising the temperature needed for the air conditioner during warmer times. In the end, students commented on how they were saving natural resources (water and gas, natural gas, or other resources used to generate electricity) and purchasing fewer items, which they concluded lessened their impact on the environment. Saving money in one area did not mean one went out and bought something new with that savings.

The openness in the classroom also provided opportunities for students to share about being food insecure and how they had to cut corners to eat or visited food pantries. These conversations on degrowth and behavior changes included cooking more of their meals to save money. Over the course of the semester, most of the students could not believe how much money they saved by eating in and cooking, which also meant not having disposable containers to throw away. The classroom became a comfortable place to speak during this

pre-COVID-19 time, and those who discussed their on-line purchasing were now questioning how much they would use it in the future given what they were learning.[6]

To be sure, students faced challenges when embarking on degrowth experiences. Students commented that they went to class, studied, and worked part-time jobs to support themselves; learning time management was key to engaging in degrowth. For example, sleeping until right before class meant rushing out the door with no time to make coffee or get food. On occasion, some students said they would forget their water bottle and chose to purchase bottled water rather than use a water fountain or wait. To not put anyone in a bad light, we discussed balance and how sometimes the opportunity to do something right for the environment needed thought and planning for when it could become more regularized. Small steps, but regular ones, are needed, and as more and more people take them, then collectively they become a bigger shared step. What students recognized was that doing nothing was not an option for the future.

Sometimes students reported resistance from family or friends who they tried to enlighten about the degrowth concept. In some instances, students reported coming from families with climate change deniers and where discussions about caring for the environment went against their elders' views. Several students remarked both in class and in their journals that if a degrowth or de-consumerist approach was considered too negative or too radical by those with whom they interacted, then people closed up early on in discussions, and students feared the profound changes needed to heal Earth's ecosystems would be delayed further. If their family and friends struggled, their bigger worry was the rest of the world. Some students were coming from families where their parents worked multiple jobs and they knew there were many families like theirs making difficult choices based on how far their limited incomes would stretch. For some families, eating cheaply is what they must do, not what they want to do. For families with limited incomes, paying more for less is not always an option. The students questioned how degrowth does or would impact the lives of families with more limited incomes. Questions related to social class, the Global North and South, decolonization, privilege, and non-privilege came up frequently in class discussions. Students recognized that there needed to be buy-in from all social positions to have a collective impact on the environment, Earth, and humanity, and for the big changes needed to reduce waste, energy usage, greenhouse gas emissions, and to lower land and ocean temperatures. As a class, we also questioned whether, if significant macro-outcomes were not achieved from continued individual- and household-level "bottom-up" efforts, would a "top-down" approach be imposed by local and national governments? What policies would need to be in place and what would they look like? We did not come up with answers for the top-down policies, mostly out of

[6] COVID-19 did force an increase in on-line purchasing, though some found ways to maintain their degrowth lifestyles by limiting purchases and supporting local businesses and farmers. Many people developed a new interest in the local, shortening the distance from which services and products were sourced, and conserving energy and fuel. It became clear that "local" is at the heart of communities.

concern with avoiding a heavy hand. We did, however, draw on Latouche (2009) and others who believe bottom-up approaches in local and micro-community settings are best for producing the needed material and behavioral shifts, thereby eliminating social hierarchies, economic classes, and power grabs.

Moving From Talk to Action

To recap, in the beginning of the course, discussions revolved around what students could do to contribute to the degrowth movement. Beginning with a focus on the individual was an encouraging first step. As students moved forward in the course, they adopted a behavior change, and some regularized this change for the rest of the semester. As students obtained data from their own experiences, they became more informed, and they took the plunge to discuss degrowth with roommates, friends, and family. Our classroom became a place for reflections and sharing ideas for action. We were moving from talk to action. Students were looking for meaningful measures for themselves and for others they brought into their degrowth conversations. Some students reported in their journals that their families were making changes along with them. One student who went food shopping with their grandmother was able to get her to carry reusable shopping bags rather than single-use ones. Another student made homemade hummus, so they did not have to purchase it in plastic containers. Students also shared how their roommates changed behaviors such as monitoring energy use and cooking meals together. One student commented that he got his roommates to turn off lights and monitor their apartment thermostat more closely, and to their amazement their utility bills were lower.

Towards the end of the fifteen-week semester, students prepared PowerPoint presentations illustrating the impacts of their behavior change quantitatively and qualitatively. We realized as a class that creating a classroom environment where small and large contributions mattered made a difference to our discussions, to the attempted changes students were making in their own lives, and to how they communicated their changes with others. Over the course of the semester, degrowth became easier to discuss as students were experiencing and living it. For students who were making major behavior changes, time management was the key to staying with the change(s). Students said they had to plan ahead to cook, take public transportation, or ride a bike. Moving away from fast-food and prepared packaged meals meant making time to food shop, plan the meals, and plan when to cook them. They became more mindful of their actions, and making a difference made it a conversation starter with friends and roommates. Overall, students were changing their behaviors to positively impact the environment and talking about their experiences with others.

Lastly, I put an essay question on degrowth on the final exam. The question asked: "We have seen in the videos that there are creative people thinking outside of the box with respect to developing ways in which we can reduce emissions and capture energy efficiently without generating new waste. They call our attention to hope and inspiration in

living in a world with increasingly changing environmental conditions. How can civic environmentalism and degrowth be used to change factors locally for a global impact? What are some positive and purposeful ways we can get more people on board with living a life more sustainably?" Below are several excerpts from three students' exam responses; they are shared with the students' permission to illustrate what they gleaned from the class and from their personal experiences outside of class. Their comments illustrate a movement from talk to action and address a range of issues, from contributing less waste to landfills, and sharing these actions with others, to consuming less and conserving more, engaging in civic environmentalism, and getting more people to care for the Earth.

> Innovation is one of the key essentials to why we have advanced so far in the field of environmental and sustainability studies. Everyone in our class has taken something away, whether it was a theoretical framework like ecofeminism or degrowth. Similar to the movement in Kenya (Wangari Maathai) if we have enough contributions, like the hummingbird it can lead to making change locally up to globally (the million-tree movement). There are plenty of ways to get people to live more sustainably. For instance, you could show off the ways you are sustainable in your everyday life to your friends, how well off you are and it could spark them to be competitive and then they lead possibly more sustainable lives than you. Introducing them to knowledge on sustainability can have them question life choices that lead into degrowth. Suggest to them they rent a movie on plastics [*Bag It*], then they could jump on board with you. All of these are positive ways to get people to people to live life more sustainably and contribute to degrowth. (Chris)

> Degrowth is simply about living differently with less. It is about identifying what is necessary for livelihood, and slowly cutting out the rest. Degrowth and civic environmentalism go hand-in-hand because both can begin with the community level. Encouraging your community to decrease the use of plastic bags could lead to a ban on plastic bags! Or using community consumer power to purchase ethically sourced items can cause other companies to adopt more ethical practices. Starting at [a] local level can generate paradigm shifts that could change the way companies produce on a global scale. Take Europe for example. Some parts of Europe have placed a lot of value in sustainable energy and have increased their reliance on wind and solar energy. The companies have still been able to produce their product without relying on non-renewable resources. This makes consumers happy too! By proving that people will still live a rich, quality life, people can be encouraged to make more ethical decisions that will improve their community. Sometimes our reliance on plastic can make us feel like we can't live without it, but by cutting back on plastic consumption in a slow, manageable way, people may begin to realize that living sustainably is attainable. Here's just a few things that can be done, avoid plastic bags (go bagless), buy reusable water bottles and coffee cups; walk more, bike more, or try to use public transportation to cut back on one's carbon footprint; research local farmers you can support; participate in community outreach to keep

> people informed and educated; start a community garden. . . . This list goes on and on! Small changes over time are the most sustainable. Consumers have deciding power, so if you start avoiding unsustainable businesses, eventually a global impact will be them adopting more sustainable business practices. (Haley)
>
> If we shift the value from production and consumption to maintaining, conserving, and improving we can not only get more people on board and involved but also save our environments. All it takes is you to get the ball rolling, from reducing your carbon footprint to picking up trash. We can all try to make a difference in reducing our impact on our world. Using civic environmentalism and creating grassroots movements or getting involved in existing ones can help turn it all around. (Cydney)

In an ideal setting, I would love to be able to find these students again five years from now to see how they are living their lives. It is one thing to talk and share ideas in a classroom, but I wonder if there is a difference between what students say they are doing and what they are actually doing, and does it last?

Conclusion

In summary, degrowth is complicated. Degrowth embraces social and environmental justice and human rights for all global citizens. Teaching about degrowth to modify cultural norms to minimize consumption, reduce waste that is created in any form, reduce overall energy use, reduce financial debt everywhere, reduce weekly working hours, reduce unemployment, and minimize colonial resource extraction, while increasing benefits to all, be it locally or globally, is an enormous challenge. Looming over everyone are the climate stressors triggered by excessive greenhouse gas emissions and the warming of the Earth's temperature. Yet we are not hearing many strategies to reduce rates of temperature rise on land or seas. Degrowth is one approach, but is this the kind of approach needed to get people, communities, and nations involved in tackling these challenges? For some degrowthers, ensuring people have a universal basic income and reside in ecovillages or sustainable communities are strategies for co-existing and making changes to combat climate change, reduce carbon footprints, and reduce poverty. Are there opportunities for college campuses to be involved similarly, especially where there is communal residential housing? Are there ways to further reduce waste and energy consumption and reward such efforts? More and more campuses and communities are adding edible gardens as a form of community engagement to teach life skills such as growing fresh produce, cooking, time management, and fiscal restraint along with mindfulness. What other opportunities are there and how can we work together to share more success stories? From my perspective, anthropology has an opportunity to contribute to these endeavors. To do so, we need to continue to move from the literature to dialog and action to globally heal the Earth, and we can begin by working in our own communities and classrooms.

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