


Unlearning Cynicism: Rewriting Futures in Sustainability Education

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Abstract

Sustainability educators increasingly encounter student attitudes of resignation and pessimism toward societal challenges, often manifesting as cynicism. Cynicism undermines agency, engagement, and motivation, constraining futures orientation and limiting constructive responses to complex problems. Distinct from skepticism, which supports critical thinking, cynicism discredits information and fosters disengagement, spreads within groups, and can escalate to burnout. This article examines the cultural and psychological roots of student cynicism, including its links to grief, frustration, mental health consequences, and highlights its detrimental effects on learning and agency. Pedagogical approaches, such as reflexive journaling, explicitly considering dark sides, and positive examples, serve to identify and confront cynicism to foster constructive engagement. By embracing critical thinking and healthy skepticism, sustainability education can help students recognize multiple futures, strengthen agency, and reframe attitudes toward social and environmental challenges, thereby supporting more agentic and empowered orientations to future-making.

Keywords: cynicism, skepticism, futures literacy, agency, social innovation, entrepreneurship education, sustainability education

In our teaching practice with undergraduate and graduate students alike, we are increasingly encountering attitudes of resignation toward the societal challenges that our classes aim to empower learners to address. A common response we receive when prompting them to clarify consists of some variation of: “With the way things are going, what chance do we stand of solving this?” These expressions reach much further than dashed idealism or a more reactionary expression of worry after encountering news about pressing issues, such as the rapidly encroaching effects of climate change. In fact, regardless of specific sustainability problems we broach in our classes on sustainability, social innovation, entrepreneurship, or strategy, a resounding form of resignation is becoming too difficult to ignore. Rather than interrogating the intricacies of proposed solutions to challenges like deforestation or human rights in agricultural supply chains, these discussions are increasingly punctuated with these expressions, and only followed by silence: “Multinationals always greenwash”... “Governments let them do whatever they want”... “Nobody wants to fix this, so why should it be my responsibility?”

As their teachers, we acknowledge the validity of these sentiments toward sustainability challenges, though we are cautioned most by what belies them: a persistent form of student pessimism toward both the future and agency to shape it for the better. Even a casual glance into the media, social and traditional, reflects the social construction of these attitudes that reach our classrooms. The cartoon of a cute dog gingerly sipping coffee on the sinking remains of an iceberg while uttering “this is fine” aptly embodies our students’ sentiments. These consist of a blend of their sense of desperation and alarm in contrast to the mundane ambivalence they note in society. Researchers have studied these internet memes combining humor and biting irony that serve as a reflection of such attitudes of impotence in the face of gradually more inevitable catastrophe (Elgaaied-Gambier & Mandler, 2021). These cultural manifestations have also been studied as a form of grief, which engenders an active sense of loss and disempowerment as an increasingly common response to the mounting evidence surrounding climate degradation and its ill effects on our planet (Cunsolo & Ellos, 2018).

Such psychological responses underlying the attitudes we encounter are both well represented and perhaps warranted, as the largest survey of global attitudes toward climate change reports that large majorities are dissatisfied with and expect more action by governments and businesses alike (Flynn et al., 2024). In particular, young people, who comprise a significant proportion of learners in our courses, are affected by this sense of desperation and frustration. To this end, recent research suggests that majorities of young people actively worry about sustainability problems and suffer mental health consequences in the form of anger, sadness, guilt, and helplessness (Hickman et al., 2021; Lewandowski et al., 2024). One of the hallmark manifestations of this phenomenon among our students is heightened cynicism, which can result from such forms of distress (Spányik et al., 2025).

Understanding the Nature of Cynicism

In this context, we view cynicism as the principal characteristic of what we are seeing in students, as it refers to negative emotions fueled by an underlying attitude that all people are

decidedly self-interested (Neumann & Zaki, 2023). Given that an attitude can be understood as an “internal state that influences the choice of personal action” (Gagné, 1984, p.383), we regard cynicism’s potential effects upon students’ learning and agency as being particularly harmful. Cynicism manifests itself in two manners: an anticipation of self-interested behavior and a lack of confidence in formal and informal safeguards intended to restrain such behavior (Turkina & Thai, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that cynicism can negatively affect cognitive engagement (Söderholm et al., 2025), and thus, our students’ capacity for critically assessing the nuances of the sustainability challenges they care about.

According to the OECD (2025), a cynical questioning of motives is associated with distrust in government and public institutions rooted in the perception that one lacks a voice to compel them to act in the public’s interest. The perceptions of marginalization and powerlessness that fuel cynicism both include and extend beyond the individual, reflecting their embeddedness within a wider societal dynamic of socioeconomic strata, regional, and transnational conflicts. Specific evidence of this exists within our context of sustainability education, where research (Urberg, 2025) suggests that student resistance and questioning attitudes often stem from intertwined levels of conflict (e.g., rural vs. urban; conservative vs. liberal; individual vs. community priorities).

For students in courses that focus on sustainability and social innovation (Wittmayer et al., 2019), which serve as a training ground for proposing future solutions to complex social and environmental grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016), we strongly advocate for an approach that eschews cynicism in favor of conscientious forms of critical thinking. In this regard, we hold that the cynical attitudes that afflict many students, whether consciously or not, must be “named to be tamed,” as is often espoused in the field of clinical psychology (Siegel, 2010). The provenance of these attitudes, as reflected in the wider culture within the media are entirely understandable; however, they represent a pervasive impediment to the development of effective student mindsets toward future agency aimed at addressing large scale challenges. In this regard, we advocate for more engagement with futures as a critical component of sustainability education (Crandon et al., 2022). Teaching about the multitude of possible futures helps students problematize their assumptions, envision alternatives, and have an agentic approach towards building their future (UNESCO, 2025), which can help subdue the rising tide of cynicism we are encountering in the classroom.

The Case for Embracing “Dark” Orientations

The grand challenges and wicked problems that underpin sustainability education are inherently “dark,” referring to aspects that seem beyond “human control and comprehension” (Reffhaug & Lysgaard, 2024, p.1527). The essence of dark pedagogy centers on a spectrum of psychological responses to planetary crises that are encapsulated by these key aspects: denial, insanity, and death. Commonplace denial exists “both on structural and individual levels” (Lysgaard et al., 2019, p. 8) when “a person, often as part of a larger group, ignores a scientific or historical fact in order to protect a specific understanding of how life, society or power is structured” (p. 24). Insanity refers to the deviations from the prevalent norms and status quo, particularly in environments of “pathological norms” (p. 41). Death emerges as a rational subject that serves as “a metaphor for the possibility and limit of humanity” (p. 9).

Considering the sobering nature of the challenges we discuss in the classroom, it is not difficult to see how these elements could psychologically impede the development of a healthy future orientation if not addressed head-on. According to Lysgaard and colleagues (2019), the ability to engage in the darkness of wicked problems is best pedagogically situated between denial and insanity, bringing about change to the status quo through bringing more insight to inconvenient truths. Despite the argument that a negative emotional state may yield a better learning backdrop for understanding the complexity of polycrises, Lysgaard and colleagues (2019) specifically distinguish their call for a “non-cynical pedagogy that both accepts the fallibilities of human beings and the need to address what is not only human, and often way beyond our comfort zone” (p. 89). These considerations form the foundation of dark pedagogy, which is used somewhat commonly within sustainability education contexts.

To this point, it is not the “dark” underpinning of sustainability education, in itself, that is the challenge. Critically, dark pedagogy encourages simultaneously holding the complexity of global challenges and being open to viewing a multitude of possible futures (Reffhaug & Lysgaard, 2024). In contrast, it is when students succumb to cynicism that their engagement, participation, and openness to navigate complexity are hindered, presenting a significant barrier to learning (Söderholm et al., 2025). The result that can ensue imposes a fundamental mismatch between the nature of the challenges and the agentic mindset most conducive to addressing them.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Healthy Skepticism

In our view, sustainability educators should seize the opportunity to uncover the dark corners of student cynicism in order to foster critical thinking and foment healthy skepticism. To accomplish this, it is essential to distinguish between cynicism, which undermines engagement, and critical thinking or skepticism, which strengthen it by influencing how students form judgments. Skepticism furnishes students with a “method of academic reasoning: being scrupulous, doubtful, and critical” that also acknowledges both the strengths and the limitations of an argument (Quiring, 2021, p.3499). In contrast, individuals harboring cynical attitudes are prone to discredit data *a priori* instead of engaging with it through critical and reflective thinking (Yelbuz et al., 2022). As such, it is no surprise that individuals who approach information in this manner are more susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories (Bensley et al., 2022). On a deeper, psychological level, “skeptics doubt the substance of communications; cynics not only doubt what is said but the motives for saying it” (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989, p. 301). Accordingly, cynicism may limit futures orientation to viewing one inevitable outcome, whereas skepticism may recognize the potential of multiple futures, which allows for envisioning a breadth of possibilities (Mangnus et al., 2021). Thus, a skeptical orientation can complement educators’ efforts to cultivate futures literacy, serving as a means of preparing students for the complexities of the future (UNESCO, 2025).

Unlike the closed and limiting nature of cynicism, critical thinking supports awareness, openness, and fluidity in thought, serving as a key component in sustainability education (Reffhaug & Lysgaard, 2024). To this end, critical thinking in the classroom can help to accomplish four aims: (1) bring consciousness to able to evaluate and reason out ways of thinking and belief (logic-analytical); (2) craft a strong curiosity and understanding to

“question and disrupt the status quo” (criticality) (p. 1522); (3) foster the intersection between knowledge, self, and world (critical pedagogy); and (4) only consider alternatives (critical openness conceptualizations). When embraced together, skepticism and critical thinking equip students to navigate the field’s inherent complexity, whereas cynicism constrains their capacity to engage meaningfully with that complexity.

Confronting Cynicism in Practice

As educators, we recognize the necessity of explicitly addressing student cynicism. Education holds powerful potential to serve as “an antidote to the development of cynicism,” reducing individuals’ perceived constraints and increasing their sense of control (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2018, p.60). Because individuals position their understandings in relation to others (Cunliffe, 2016), detecting cynicism is critical, as it has the potential to spread amongst groups (Bakker et al., 2005; Petitta & Jiang, 2020). Accordingly, when cynicism is recognized, it should be confronted directly and with urgency (Wiens & Eckel, 2024), fostering students’ ongoing growth through reflexive and constructive engagement.

We have both found pathways to identify student cynicism through incorporating reflexive exercises. Reflexive exercises provide a valuable means of monitoring cynicism by fostering critical examination of students’ thought-processes, assumptions, behaviors, decisions, and the rationales that underpin them (Cunliffe, 2004; 2016). Reflexive exercises function as a dual mechanism: enabling educators to identify and monitor student cynicism, while simultaneously fostering their capacity to critically interrogate their orientations, actions, and interactions (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015).

Journaling is an excellent medium for reflexivity with limitless variations. Students can journal about their assumptions of a wicked problem, including how they assume it positions power structures and why they think the problem continues to persist, which allows them to think about how their assumptions may or may not reflect cynical sentiments (e.g., overgeneralized beliefs, narratives of helplessness, noting only extreme failures or extreme successes). Students can adopt a temporal or generational perspective to global challenges, and cynicism can be monitored through strong sentiments surrounding the unique challenges of a particular generation or an overgeneralization about nothing changing.

Having students journal their reactions to course content can be particularly interesting when capturing before-and-after reactions to a case. If students track their level of cynicism on a Likert scale or report their prevailing emotion from an emotion wheel, educators can capture a snapshot of individual before-and-after reactions to monitor whether the case example is having its intended effect. This can enable educators in adapting their content both during and after the running of a course, depending on students’ feedback. Positive case examples can also serve as a powerful pedagogical tool to counter and confront cynicism before it can take hold (Wiens & Eckel, 2024).

Reflexive journaling can even center directly on cynicism. For example, students can respond to which societal challenges might bring about cynical feelings, using the responses to think about where their beliefs came from, what aspects reinforce their beliefs, what barriers their beliefs might create for them, and what evidence exists to the contrary. Being encouraged

to think about cynicism overtly can help uncover assumptions and feelings of hopelessness to bring better awareness of what needs to be addressed at an individual and class level.

In our classrooms, students have seemed to appreciate the nature of reflexive journaling, as it encourages them to reflect deeply about both how they think and why they think in that way. Surfacing implicit beliefs and cynicism can allow both educators and students to be more intentional about managing the challenges that cynicism can add to the class dynamic and students' learning. Through fostering open dialogue and targeted remediation, educators can also help mitigate escalation to burnout, which prominently features cynical attitudes (Söderholm et al., 2025), and highly affects individuals working in sustainability and social innovation fields (Brieger et al., 2020). Building student consciousness of cynicism, therefore, helps to disrupt its limiting effects and provides a conducive framing for moving from cynical thoughts to critical thinking.

Conclusion

In returning to the initial question students so often pose regarding the sustainability challenges we face, educators may instinctively recur to all manner of external solutions. Nonetheless, as much as we view those as key, in this article, we advocate for creating a moment to pause and assess internal student assumptions. This consists of dedicating the time to reflect upon, question, and analyze deep-seated assumptions and understandings surrounding their sense of agency and future roles in addressing societal problems. In this sense, we hold that there is great value in carefully assessing the attitudes that may well antecede and influence, both positively or negatively, future agency orientations with which students approach applying diverse solutions to their chosen problems.

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