

Uncovering Concerns, Taking Action: Studying Global Warming in ABE

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“It doesn’t matter,” says Ricardo Reyes. “Even if I pick up a bottle or a piece of trash, someone else is gonna litter...it doesn’t matter.”

Ricardo leans back in his chair, pulling his baseball cap over his forehead.

When my students dig in their heels, citing the futility of recycling in a city riddled with bullet holes and awash with drug dealers, I sense the futility too. Most of my students are struggling to survive.

“No one cares. There aren’t even trash barrels in this dump,” Ricardo reminds me. I picture Main St., Holyoke, and come to the same conclusion.

“Yeah,” Anushka sits up, echoing Ricardo’s assertions. “I can walk from Veteran’s Park to school and not pass one trash barrel. The city only cares about chasing drug dealers; no one cares about recycling!”

“They’d rather pay for video cameras to spy on crack dealers than pay for trash barrels,” Ricardo exclaims.

“So where does all that trash go?” I ask. “If there aren’t trash barrels, where does it go?”

“It clogs the drains,” Jose Garcia says. “It goes into the streets and then into the Holyoke River.”

“And what type of stuff gets into the rivers?” I ask. “What ends up there?”

“Bottles,” Anushka calls out.

“Plastic bags,” Jose yells.

“Used needles,” Ricardo adds.

“All the junk people throw on the streets,” Estefani Nunez, my quietest student says under her breath. “It’s bad,” she says. “If we had trash barrels, people could get rid of stuff in a better way.”

“Yeah,” says Jose. “If there were more trash barrels, I’d throw stuff in them.”

In our ABE class, we’ve debated the merits of recycling; we’ve argued and discussed what could

motivate people to get involved. We’ve talked about how the immediate problems of unemployment and homelessness make it hard to pay attention to longer term problems. We’ve struggled through challenging vocabulary: global warming, carbon footprint, emissions, and climate change.

We brainstormed ways that Holyoke residents can improve their city. My students have suggested having more trash barrels, planting trees, purchasing energy efficient heaters and office equipment, walking more, driving less, using more public transportation, and wasting less water.

Their lists of improvements have been transformed into formal letters addressed to the Mayor of Holyoke. As they struggle to articulate their suggestions and recommendations, I squeeze in lessons on capitalization and grammar.

But talk is cheap (and so are letters to public officials)! So this class brainstormed ways they would be willing to change their habits in order to reduce their impact on the globe. We wrote our “intentions” on Post-its and filled an entire sheet of flip-chart paper!

Dozens of “intentions” suddenly surfaced from students, who, just weeks ago, seemed unconvinced that they could make a difference.

The students pulled out bright colored paper, glue, markers, scissors, and tape to create ornaments inscribed with these intentions. Then they hung them on tree branches, signaling their personal commitment to reduce global warming.

We are only twelve: a small ABE class nested in a career center. How much of an effect can we have? But one thing is clear: our students do care about this planet, their one and only home.

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