ENVS 4/555 Sustainability - Fall 2012

MW 10:00-11:50pm 142 Columbia Hall; Credits: 4
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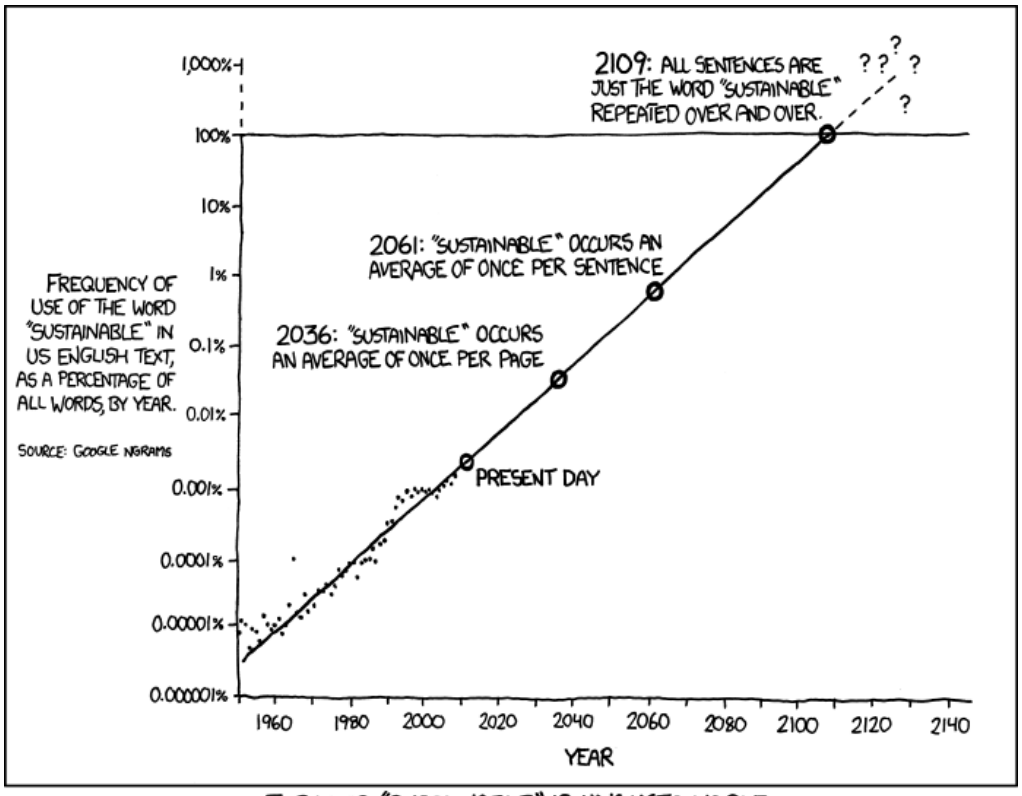

THE WORD "SUSTAINABLE" IS UNSUSTAINABLE.

After 25 years of public discourse, the concept of "sustainability" has arguably become the dominant framework for addressing environmental challenges today. Yet, the concept of sustainability is widely used to describe greatly differing ideas and practices with only loose (or even contradictory) definitions. Some have questioned whether this idea means anything at all. Is sustainability just a fuzzy (if appealing) buzzword meaning, roughly, "stuff that somebody claims is good for the environment"? As the dominant concept shaping our environmental goals today, it is essential that sustainability mean something more, since, by *any* reasonable definition, the world is today becoming less sustainable. Yet, those who have tried to define sustainability have in some cases come to wholly incompatible conclusions about its meaning (for example, ongoing debates between certain economists and ecologists over whether economic growth is compatible with sustaining ecological systems).

A careful examination of the competing conceptions of sustainability reveals disagreements about core social, cultural, and ecological assumptions, such as: *What* is to be sustained (economic growth? ecosystems services? ecosystems and species independent of their economic value?); *Who* is to benefit (humans alive today? *which* humans? where? future generations? what about other species?); Whose

values (or "needs") are to be sustained? (is American consumer culture a "need"? can materially wealthy societies deny similar aspirations to others in a rapidly globalizing culture and economy?); and, *What time frame* is appropriate? (a short time frame may make sustainability too easy, whereas in the face of today's rapid ecological and technological changes a long time frame may make sustaining current conditions impossible, or even undesirable). In short, an examination of sustainability is nothing less than of an examination of what we desire to be as a society, what values and cultures we prioritize, how we understand our biophysical interactions with the planet, and what ethical obligations we have.

This course is about the evolution of the *concept* of sustainability and its complex and sometimes problematic uses among scholars, policy makers, environmentalists and businesses. The course examines the competing social, cultural, economic, and ecological assumptions and priorities that are often quietly but powerfully promoted in the push for sustainability. A concept that means all things to all people can too easily come to mean little or nothing. The purpose of this course is to help students to go beyond fuzzy buzzwords by critically examining these multiple meanings and encouraging more explicit and rigorous thinking about sustainability that is supported by sound theory and evidence, as well as efforts to understand and reconcile the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions in the concept. This is a "tough love" course for sustainability: by examining sustainability with a critical eye, students will be better positioned help make sustainability "real" through rigorous thinking about how to make it ecologically sound, socially effective, ethically and culturally defensible, and technologically achievable. This course is intended to help us find a path to a more meaningful, just, and practical sustainability.

course requirements

Preparation: This is a 4-credit class that meets two times a week, and ***this is a reading-intensive course***. That means, students enrolled in this course must be prepared to devote four hours to reading and preparation for *each* class session (see UO Student Handbook, 2012-13, p. 56) in order to get a good grade. Additional time will be required to prepare sustainability reports. ***Students who are not able to devote at least this much time to preparing for each class session SHOULD NOT ENROLL***. ***No kidding***.

In-class discussions: Full preparation for classes is essential in order to get a good grade in this class because 20% of your grade will depend on your participation and contributions to in-class discussions. The classroom will primarily be a forum for discussion rather than lectures. Fifty percent of your participation grade (10% of the overall grade) will be based on attendance and punctual arrival in class. Attendance will be taken during each class. The other half of your participation grade will be assigned on the basis of the consistency and quality of your contributions to discussions in class, including clear demonstration that you have read and understood the readings, as well as demonstrated improvement in quality of contributions to classroom discussions over the term.

Daily reading responses: To aid reading comprehension and reinforce the policy that students must come to class having read the assigned readings and be prepared to contribute to in-class discussions, students will bring to class a 1-page written response. These are NOT just summaries of the readings; rather, these should describe your ideas in response to the readings, and what you see as their strengths, weaknesses, or omissions. These are the "so what" questions: what difference did these readings make in your understanding of the question of sustainability? Responses must be posted on the Blackboard journals page before each day's class, and in total count for 40% of your grade.

Sustainability reports: In addition to your contributions to classroom discussions and your daily reading responses, another 40% of your grade will be based on your contributions to a group "sustainability report". Groups of students will select specific, real-life places, projects, or programs that invoke the concept of sustainability as an explicit objective. For example, businesses, governments, and non-governmental organizations often promote the idea of sustainability. A community may promote sustainable energy, transportation, or agriculture. Such projects exist at many scales, from global projects by international non-governmental organizations (such as the United Nations, or various environmental groups) or multinational firms (such as petrochemical firms who have recently promoted "sustainable energy"), to local communities or neighborhoods (for example, organic foods projects or local government activities such as the city of Eugene's "Sustainable Eugene" program). Your group will select a sustainability place and topic, and then critically evaluate the principles and goals that underpin these programs by *specifically applying the concepts and readings we have covered in this course as tools for assessment. In short, in what meaningful sense, if any, do these efforts achieve sustainability?* Groups will be required to post a 1-page summary of their topic by 5:00pm on Monday, October 22. At the end of the course each group will present to the entire class on whether and how these efforts uphold and achieve the principles of sustainability.

Graduate requirements: Each graduate student must meet individually with the professor by the end of Week 2 to draw up a "Graduate responsibilities contract". Each contract will be drafted on the basis of the level of advancement and particular areas of need and interest for the graduate, but typically additional graduate responsibilities include at least four additional articles per week, or four books over the term. Articles must be from peer reviewed academic journals and must be at least 25 pages in length; books must be published by high quality academic publishers and must be at least 200 pages in length. The total number of additional graduate readings will be calculated to reach a total of 160 hours of engagement in the course. At least once during the term each graduate will be required to make a formal 20-minute presentation and discussion of their additional readings to the class as a whole, including a brief overview of the authors' arguments, a critical assessment, and synthesis of ideas from the additional readings with the "base" readings and concepts readings from the class. Graduates must be prepared to take questions on the additional readings from other students and the professor.

Classroom attendance and etiquette: Absences will be excused only in circumstances of serious and *documented* health or family emergency. If you are sick, go to a doctor or health center and get a note. Late reading responses will be accepted *only* in such circumstances. *Do not ask for exceptions*. To receive full credit for attendance and participation, students must display respectful and mature conduct, including: 1) TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONE; 2) Do NOT TURN ON LAPTOPS except when requested to do so; 3) show respect for all persons in the class, even if you do not agree. Failure to abide by these terms will result in a single warning, and then dismissal.

schedule & readings

There are no required textbooks for this course. All required readings are posted on Blackboard in PDF format. See Blackboad for detailed listing of readings. Note that readings may change during the term. You will be notified in the event of any reading changes.