Rhetorical Histories of Scientific Communication: Theories of Sustainability and Ecology

Instructor:
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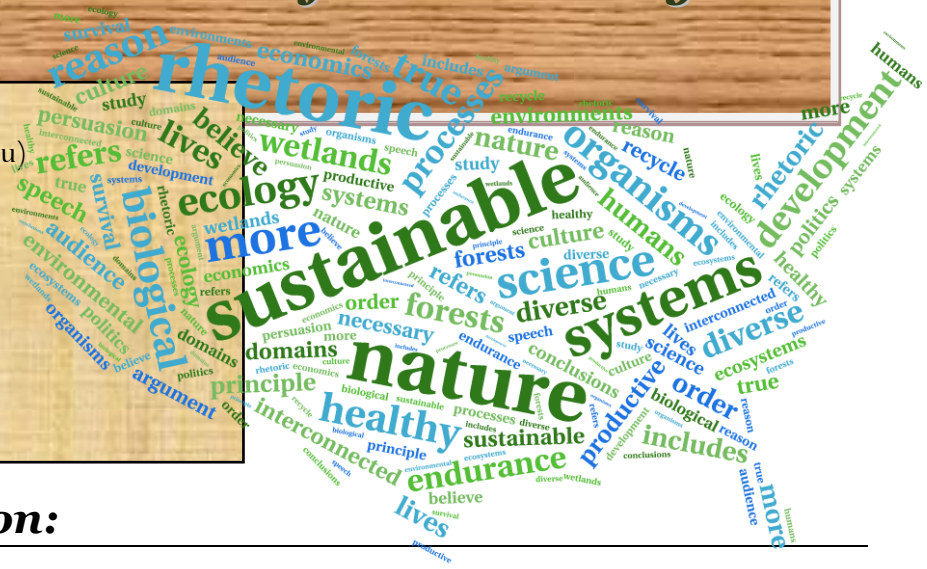
Office Hours:

Office Location:



Course Description:

From the time the term "politics" was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature.
-Bruno Latour

Power to define is power to influence behavior.
-Edward Schiappa

What do we mean when we use the word "sustainability"?

Sustainability is everywhere. It can be found in corporate mission statements, speeches, political messages, and everyday conversations. It is a stated goal of city governments and private companies alike; there is even an Illinois State University "Office of Sustainability," with a full staff, a clear mission, and significant (relatively) political and financial reach.

But what does it *mean*? On the one hand, the meaning of the word seems obvious—simple, even. Clearly, the term refers to practices that can continue without depleting the resources that keep them going. More specifically, it refers to the point that we should live in our world, in our culture, and in our environments without taking more than we give. Right?

As you may have guessed, it's not that simple. Sustainability is a term the definition of which is particularly valuable to many people and interest groups. In other words, what we mean when we say "sustainability" has a lot riding on it. Like all of language, though, the idea of sustainability is vulnerable to the influence of those who have a particular interest in shaping its meaning, and because of this, the meaning of sustainability is always contested, and is often shaped and molded to fit different purposes.

In this course, we will examine the history of the idea of sustainability along with the related term "ecology" (and more fundamentally, the history of the meaning of the terms "nature" and "natural"). In so doing, we will come to understand the forces that shape what these terms mean, as well as the history of what these terms *have* meant in both science and politics. As we will discover throughout the course, the supposed difference between a "scientific" and a "political" meaning is not so much of a difference after all.

Course Goals:

Over the following semester, we will study the history and diversity of the scientific and political meanings of contested terms—in particular, the meanings of the terms *sustainability* and *ecology*, and to some extent, the terms *nature* and *natural*. In so doing we will call into question traditional assumptions about language, agency, ethics, culture, and perception. By the end of the course, you should be able to articulate successfully the factors that shape our understanding of sustainability, and also be able to articulate other possibilities for what the term *can* mean. Among other things, at the end of the course you should know what we mean when we say that assumptions about our environments are never obvious, and never *simple*.

Course Schedule:

Texts you are required to buy are in **bold**

Weeks 1-5: Rhetorical Foundations of Scientific Communication, and an Introduction to "Sustainability," "Ecology," and "Nature"

Texts:

Aldo Leopold. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*

Edward Schiappa. "Constructing Reality through Definitions: The Politics of Meaning"

"A Sustainable Normal": Sustainability Plan for Bloomington-Normal, Illinois

Arjen E.J. Wals and Peter Blaze Corcoran: "Sustainability as Emergence: A Plea for Transformative Learning in Higher Education."

Peter Blaze Corcoran and Arjen E.J. Wals: "The Problematics of Sustainability in Higher Education: An Introduction."

Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature* (selections)

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Weeks 6-9: Rhetorical Histories of Scientific Communication about the Environment and the "Natural" World

Texts:

M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer. *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America.*

Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown, eds. *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America.* (selections)

Nancy W. Coppola and Bill Karis, eds. *Technical Communication, Deliberative Rhetoric, and Environmental Discourse: Connections and Directions* (selections)

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Weeks 10-12: Dualism, Holism, and the Terms of Scientific Discovery

Guest lectures to be given by Dr. J. Scott Jordan, professor and chair of the ISU Department of Psychology.

Texts:
J. Scott Jordan and David Vinson. "After Nature: On Bodies, Consciousness, and Causality." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 19.5–6 (2012): 229–50.
Other texts TBA

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Weeks 13-16: Mapping Our View of a "Sustainable" World: Complexity Theory and the Scientific Method

Ira Livingston. ***Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics***
Daniel Wildcat. *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (selections)
Karl Popper. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (selections)
Kees Van Kooten Niekerk and Hans Buhl, eds. *The Significance of Complexity: Approaching a Complex World Through Science, Theology and the Humanities* (selections)
Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (selections)