Thinking Through Writing in the Social Sciences: Environmental Justice

Instructor: Lisa Maya Knauer  email: lknauer@umassd.edu
Office: LARTS 392-G  Phone: 508-999-8405

OVERVIEW OF CLASS

As the semester begins, many of us have been glued to the news of the hurricanes that have been sweeping through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. But at the same time as Hurricane Harvey was wreaking havoc in Texas, the monsoon rains – which occur every year – flooded 1/3 of the country of Bangladesh, affecting over 41 million people, destroying or severely damaging nearly a million homes, and causing 1,200 deaths. There was severe flooding in Niger, a country in West Africa. Yet only one of these three occurrences was widely covered in the U.S. media, while the others remained largely invisible. When we look at who is most affected by these so-called natural disasters – or other technological disasters like the BP oil spill or the Fukushima nuclear meltdown – this raises important questions about the relationship between environmental issues and social inequalities.

This class will introduce students the theories of, and movements for environmental justice. At its heart, environmental justice is about understanding the root causes of environmental inequality – how existing forms of inequality, like race, class, gender and religion, affect the distribution of environmental burdens, like mining or toxic waste sites, and environmental benefits (like access to clean water), and how people have mobilized around these issues. We will take a historical and cross cultural perspective to examine how communities and peoples have been subjected to environmental inequalities, and how those communities have responded. Our approach is based in anthropology, so our readings will highlight the voices and experiences of the peoples affected by environmental injustices. But we will also draw upon other disciplines, such as history, law, policy studies and sustainability studies.

By taking this course you will develop a critical understanding of what constitutes environmental privilege and oppression by examining the historical roots of current, persistent, environmental inequalities across the globe. Through readings and discussions, we will address key questions such as: What are the historical roots of environmental inequality? Why do some communities and peoples have access to good food and clean water, while people in other places do not? How do other forms of privilege (class, race, nationality, gender) intersect with environmental and health concerns? Does inequality drive ecosystem degradation? Is social justice essential to, or at odds with, efforts to build a sustainable world? What is just and good, and if we can name that which is just and good, how can we build a just world?
This course will use the study of disasters as a point of departure into an exploration of critical reading and writing in the social sciences. As we explore how anthropology and other disciplines such as cultural geography, journalism, and ecology have analyzed and responded to disasters, we will also explore the ways that social scientists present research and critical analysis, and practice several different kinds of writing: from short critical summaries of published research, to a literature review, to a research paper.

We will do a lot of in-class writing as well, to explore the obstacles and blockages that prevent us from writing as freely and fluidly as we might like.

**Course-specific learning objectives:**
- Introduce students to different methodological frameworks and approaches in environmental justice studies;
- Promote critical thinking and your understanding of environmental, social and political history and contemporary conflict, and expand your view of race, gender, class by examining environmental topics.
- Develop writing and other important skills, such as discussion facilitation and public presentation.

**Learning outcomes:**
At the end of this course, you will be able to:
- explain major historical root causes of environmental inequality and strategies for promoting environmental justice and equity.
- articulate working definitions of key concepts in the field of environmental justice (e.g. race, gender, class, sustainability, social justice, environmental privilege, environmental burdens)
- demonstrate creative and critical thinking and communication skills, including the ability to interpret a variety of academic and popular literature pertaining to environmental justice.
- Articulate an understanding of your own position as a citizen, consumer, and student in relation to the study and struggles over environmental inequality

**Learning objectives for reading and writing:**
- Read with comprehension and critically interpret and evaluate written work in discipline-specific contexts
- Demonstrate rhetorically effective, discipline-specific writing for appropriate audiences
- Demonstrate, at an advanced level of competence, use of discipline-specific control of language, modes of development and formal conventions
- Demonstrate intermediate information literacy skills by selecting, evaluating, integrating and documenting information gathered from multiple sources into discipline-specific writing
This class is structured around principles of collaborative learning. In this online environment, we will accomplish this in a few ways. We will pair up for team work. Throughout the semester you will work with your learning community on specific skills, and also on assignments. We will "workshop" major assignments, along with writing proposals and drafts. Among the key skills we will practice are critical reading, and also how to give constructive feedback. At the same time, you will hone your own writing skills by reading and evaluating the work of other students.

Books and other reading materials

There will be two books that you will need to purchase.


Assignments and grades

This class will involve students in active learning, as well as reading, discussion and writing. This class is based upon the notion that learning is a collaborative endeavor and the role of the instructor is to facilitate, guide and serve as a resource for student learning.

Your grade will be based upon the following assignments:

- Introduction 5%
- 10 critical summaries of readings 25%
- Response to other students 10%
- Literature review essay 15%
- Audience-specific writing 10%
- Research paper 30%

TOTAL: 100%

**EXPLANATION OF ASSIGNMENTS**

**Weekly critical summaries/response essays**: You will practice writing clear summaries of the material. These will help refine your critical reading and writing skills and also provide the basis for class discussion. These will be critical summaries of the week’s readings, plus your comments and questions or issues for class discussion. These critical summaries should be 300 words long.

**Response to other students**: You will comment upon at least 2 other students’ critical summaries every week. This will be graded separately as your participation grade. Your comments must be substantive –that is, they need to go into some detail, and address the substance of what your classmate wrote. Just like you would in a face to face class, I expect you to engage in thoughtful discussion with each other’s ideas. Just saying “Hey I agree with what you wrote” is not a substantive comment.
**Literature review essay:** This three to four-page essay will be a critical review of several scholarly publications on a single subject. These can be sources you have located for your research project, but you will be writing about them in a different way. Writing a literature review essay is an important skill if you are planning to pursue graduate study.

**Research paper:** Each student will write a final 7-10-page paper based on original research on an environmental justice issue that has been approved by me. You will have the opportunity to go in-depth on a topic related to the class that interests you, and you will be guided through the stages of developing a research project, from coming up with an idea, developing a thesis or key research question to the finished paper, using books, scholarly articles, research reports and other reliable sources. The paper project will involve: draft proposal; revised proposal; draft paper; final paper; oral presentation.

**Audience-specific writing assignment:** Scholars often share their research in formats other than scholarly papers, articles and books. These include policy briefs, op-ed pieces and blogs. We will focus on op-ed pieces. This can be about the same topic you have explored for your research paper – you will just be writing about it in a different way.

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**CLASS POLICIES**

**Active learning:** This class is based upon participatory and inclusive pedagogy. I am not the repository of knowledge and you are not sponges, passively soaking up my pearls of wisdom. We start from the premise that knowledge is produced by all learners – that includes both you and me – working together. Therefore, each of you needs to take an active part in our collaborative endeavor. This is not only for your own learning, but it is part of your commitment to the other students in this class.

**Mutual respect:** We are in a community of learners, committed to intellectual curiosity and the free exchange of ideas. Some of the subjects we discuss address questions of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, and immigrant status – and some of these issues may provoke controversy. I expect everyone in this class to pay careful attention to everyone else’s ideas, and each of us must treat the ideas, views and opinions of others in the class with respect. If you ever feel that I as the instructor address your ideas or views in a way that is not fully respectful, please write to me so we can discuss this privately.

**MyCourses:** All of your written work will be handed in on MyCourses and many of the readings are electronic documents. Updates to the syllabus will be made on MyCourses. You should regularly check MyCourses for updates.

**Communicating with the professor:** If you have a question about something, or if you do not understand an assignment, the best way to address this is to email me and express your concerns. If you have something to communicate to the entire class, use the "discussion" or "mail" features of MyCourses. If you need to discuss something with me privately, send me an email message at: lknauer@umassd.edu
**Preparation:** Our exploration is a collaborative endeavor. You need to do the assigned reading every week so that you can both summarize it and also engage in thoughtful dialogue with me and other students.

**Due dates:** You are responsible for managing your time. No late assignments accepted unless you have received the professor's permission IN ADVANCE (which means that there is a clear and compelling reason, not just falling behind in your work). Do not expect to write to me the day an assignment is due and negotiate an extension. I reserve the right to not accept late papers or mark them down substantially. If you are having a problem with an assignment, please contact me right away.

**Academic Integrity (plagiarism)** The University does not tolerate academic dishonesty or plagiarism--the use of another person's ideas or words without crediting the original source. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, there are many resources available including the Academic Resource Center, the Writing and Reading Center, Reference Librarians, and me. Any work that includes plagiarism, whether deliberate or unintentional, will be penalized. The full policy is available at the following link: [http://www.umassd.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/academicregulationsandprocedures/](http://www.umassd.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/academicregulationsandprocedures/)

**Resources for students with disabilities:** In accordance with University policy, if you have a documented disability and require accommodations to obtain equal access in this course, please meet with the instructor at the beginning of the semester and provide the appropriate paperwork from the Center for Access and Success, located in Liberal Arts, Room 016; phone: 508.999.8711

**Incomplete:** An incomplete may be given only in exceptional circumstances at the instructor's discretion. The student must be passing at the time of the request or be sufficiently close to passing. If the work is not completed within one year of the recording of the incomplete grade, the grade will become an F(I). Students have to fill out paperwork, provide a reason and get the instructor's signature.

**Writing support:** Students of all levels of writing proficiency are encouraged to use the Writing and Reading Center, which offers both face-to-face and online tutoring services. Please refer to their website: [http://www.umassd.edu/wrc](http://www.umassd.edu/wrc). Students requesting online feedback on the structure or idea development of their working drafts can submit them, along with assignment specifications, to etutoring.org and receive a written response within 48 hours.