

A Curriculum for the "Vasudha" Living Learning Community
H&SS First Year Studies Program
Fall 2008

IHSS-1970 Nature/Society

A Perspective on Energy, Natural Resources, Climate Change, and Biodiversity

Tue/Fri 2-4pm in Nason 130

(*Field trips & activities on selected dates may run until 5pm)

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Course Description

This course will focus on the social, biological and ecological aspects of humans in the natural world. We emphasize *critical thinking* about where we come from and where we are going. We will learn about how we have used the land in the past, what we do today, and what our prospects are as a species for the twenty-first century. Contemporary issues such as land use, energy use, climate change, and biodiversity loss will be explored through literature, films, and guest lectures. The course is also organized around a series of field trips to Lake George, the Erie Canal, the Rensselaer Plateau, and elsewhere (including "virtual" trips to South Asia and elsewhere) that will allow us to study human habitation in different ecological settings. Students are expected to participate actively in class through group projects, presentations, creative writing, and critical discussion of the readings.

In addition to being a core seminars for the new "Vasudha" living and learning community, this course is part of the "Integrative Studies" pilot program for integrating conversations about your transition from secondary to higher education into the class itself. Various academic transition topics and exercises have been integrated into the course design.

Course Objectives

In this class, your grades are closely tied to course objectives. Before listing the individual grade components, you may find it helpful to know the relative emphasis that we place on different learning components:

- *Research* (approximately 30%): Initial preparation for social and environmental research through critical engagement with texts (and other media including film), and through open, independent investigations into new areas of inquiry.

- *Understanding and reflections on content* (approximately 30%): The development of basic understanding and personal engagement with the environmental issues presented by the instructors as well as other students in this course, including but not limited to those of energy, ecology, evolution, biodiversity, land use, and the social, political, and historical dimensions of these issues.
- *Technical proficiency* (approximately 25%): Demonstrated progress in the basic technical proficiencies of higher education, including writing, oral and visual presentation, teamwork, and seminar-style conversation.
- *Academic transition* (approximately 15%): Thoughtful reflections about your own learning process, as facilitated through the various academic transition topics and exercises as integrated into the various assignments associated with this course. Also your contribution to building a productive learning community within the classroom and the Vasudha program at large.

Required Texts

The required texts for this course consist of:

- Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (Bantam 1995)
- Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (Harper Collins, 2007)
- Other texts announced and/or distributed in class

Books are or will be available at the Rensselaer Union Bookstore, or buy used through Amazon Marketplace and other online vendors.

Principal Assignments

The principal assignments for this course consist of the following. (Further details about each assignment will be distributed in class.)

Weekly, Reflective Thought Pieces

Beginning with the second week of class, you will be asked to submit a “thought piece” that reveals your thoughtful reflections about the assigned readings, class conversations, and any independent research that you did during the past week. Given the nature of this class, we rely primarily on an honor system as far as the required readings. However, you should use this weekly writing assignment to document the reading and independent investigations that you do for this course. Each weekly writing assignment should be at least 300 words (1 page, typed, double spaced) in length. We encourage students to think of these weekly writing assignments as an academic journal.

Team Project

As listed under “Objectives” above, this course aims to introduce you to the basic skills of social research, especially as related to environmental issues. During week 5, we will be creating several “research teams” (5-6 students per team) that will be responsible for investigating and presenting a “virtual tour” of a foreign ecosystem and its human/social dimensions in a South Asian nation, or other distant place unfamiliar to a majority of the students on your team. Formal requirements include a written report (min. 10 pages), and an oral presentation in class (including a PowerPoint presentation and/or other audio-visual presentation).

Final Project

The third major assignment for this course will be a final project, which may be pursued individually or in teams. Consistent with the principle that we want you, as the students, to contribute to the course's design, we will discuss and determine the final project during the latter part of the semester.

Ethnographic Study & Journal

Integrated into the course will be a small, ethnographic exercise where you will visit, observe, and write up your field notes on cities, land use, and consumer behavior. Purchase and keep a "field journal" (much like a diary) in which you will record all of your observations. Please write legibly so we can evaluate your work!

Academic Transition

This course is also part of a "Integrative Studies" pilot program that aims to integrate academic transition topics into the framework of the course. Each week, under the heading of 'academic transition,' there will be a specific aspect of your transition from high school to college level study that will be given specific attention. Further details will be provided in class.

Grading and Evaluation Criteria

The grading and evaluation criteria for this course are directly tied to the course objectives, and are weighted as follows (See also "fine print" for attendance policies and other grade modifiers):

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| • Weekly thought pieces | 25% |
| • Ethnographic field journal | 10% |
| • Your contribution to the team project | |
| ○ Report | 15% |
| ○ Presentation | 10% |
| • Your contribution to a final project | |
| ○ Report | 15% |
| ○ Presentation | 10% |
| • Academic transition assignments & discussion | 5% |
| • Other contributions to class and the Vasudha community | 10%* |

While we will assign a reference (average) grade to all team projects, you will be evaluated based on your contributions to the team project. (*Also, students who are not officially part of the Vasudha Living and Learning Community will be exempted from contributions outside of the classroom. Credit will be given to the extent that you do contribute.)

The Fine Print

Attendance: Given the nature of this course, being in class is an essential part of the experience. Although no specific “points” or penalties are associated with absences, you should consider two absences (**excused or unexcused**) as a limit. Beyond this, please speak with the instructor about suitable make-up assignments to compensate for what you missed in class.

Class Participation: Class participation is an integral part of this course and is reflected in the grading structure. However, students who have difficulty speaking up in class (for example, ESL students) may approach the instructors early in the semester to make special arrangements.

Late Submissions: No late papers or projects will be accepted except through specific arrangement with the instructors.

Gender Fair Language: Students in this course are expected to use gender fair language in their writing. Every time you use a masculine-oriented word to refer to people in general, the implicit effect, even if unintended, is to whisper: *women don't count*. Essays and other work that do not use gender fair language will not receive a passing grade. If you are unfamiliar with the practice of gender fair writing, you should read “Gender Fair Language,” written by Jenny Redfern of RPI’s Writing Center. See, <http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/genderfair.html>.

The Center for Communicative Practice: Writing is an important component of any professional career. Once you’re on the job, you will be writing upwards of 1-2 dozen memos and emails every day, in addition to any formal study or report that you produce. Your performance will always be evaluated based on how well you convey your ideas. Periodically, we may ask you to seek the services of the Center for Communicative Practice. It is located on the first floor of Folsom Library. You may obtain further information at 276-8983, or <http://www.ccp.rpi.edu/>. We may also require you to have someone in the Center go over your written assignment before you can resubmit it for consideration. If this is the case, you **must obtain a stamp from the Center**, and turn in all versions of your work in addition to the final revised version. Keep in mind that improving the mechanics of writing on any assignment will not be enough to receive a higher grade if the content remains inadequate.

ESL / LD Students: The requirements for this course will be adjusted to serve the needs and capabilities of ESL and LD students. Students who have difficulties reading or writing should feel free to notify the instructors about their particular situation. In general, the guideline we will use for making adjustments will still require students to spend from eight hours on out-of-class activities each week. All students should also expect to spend a minimum of two hours per week on written assignments.

Use of Student Generated Materials: All written materials submitted in this course will be considered to be contributing to the general educational mission of Rensselaer. It may be posted online or elsewhere as part of a student work archive, or used for purposes of educational research and assessment. However, we do respect student privacy and students rights to intellectual property. Students are therefore granted a right to exemption from the public disclosure of their work. Requests for exemption should be submitted in writing (either a general note or a note on specific assignments will suffice). Student generated material are not to be used for purposes beyond that specified herein without the express permission of the student(s) involved. Any scholarly work published from this material must do so without individual identifiers except when requested by the student herself or himself.

Academic Honesty: Student-teacher relationships are built on trust. Students must trust that teachers have made appropriate decisions about the structure and content of the course, and teachers must trust that the assignments students turn in are their own. Any and all acts that violate this trust undermine the educational enterprise. They contradict our very reason for being at Rensselaer. The *Rensselaer Handbook* defines various forms of academic dishonesty and the procedures for responding to them.

Students should note, in particular, that academic penalties for plagiarism are harsh. Any use of another person’s work, including the use of specific ideas and interpretations, must be acknowledged through proper attribution. All direct use of another person’s words must be placed in “quotations.” You must indicate when you paraphrase another person’s work. Though designed for a different course, you can find useful guidelines for academic citations at: <http://www.rpi.edu/~akeraa/pe-IT/citation.html>. In college, we do expect you to know what constitutes plagiarism. If you are at all uncertain about the academic norms regarding plagiarism, play it safe, or just ask the instructors.

For this course, penalties for academic dishonesty, especially cases involving plagiarism, can vary from failure of assignment to failure of the course plus a citation in the student’s academic record. The penalty will depend both on intent and the severity of the case. As noted in the handbook, any determination will be based on the instructors’ best judgment about what occurred.

Weekly Readings & Assignments

Week	TUESDAY	Readings	Academic Transition Topic	FRIDAY	Field Trip / Lecture / Other Assignments
1. Introduction	8/26	Begin reading Quinn, Ishmael	What are your interests?(Goal setting)	8/29	A Walking Tour of Troy “Treating the world as a text” (Independent Inqry.)
2. Hunter-gatherer societies	9/2	Quinn, Ishmael , ch.1-6 M. Sahlins, “ The original affluent society ”	What’s effective class discussion? (Critical dialogue)	9/5	Erie Canal
3. Agriculture, expansion, U.S. industrialization	9/9 QUIZ (diagnostic)	Quinn, ch. 7-9 P. T. Carroll, “ Designing Modern America ”	What are the different modes of reading? (College lvl reading)	9/12	TBA
4. On evolution	9/16	Quinn, (finish) Diamond, “ The worst mistake in... history ”	What’s expected in the weekly thought pieces? (Writing)	9/19	Film: Stephen J. Gould, “On Evolution”
5. Social Darwinism and representations of evolution	9/23	Sumner, “ The forgotten Man. ” Web: Eugenics Archive www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics	What contributes to effective group work? (Group work)	9/26	New York State Museum
6. The climate change debate	9/30	Films: <i>An Inconvenient Truth</i> // <i>Great Global Warming Swindle</i>	How do you do social / humanistic research? (Research methods)	10/3 DFWI*	Guest Lecture: Peter Murdoch (Water resources & climate change, USGS) (**=Probably on Friday)
7. Energy resources and peak oil	10/7	Simmons, <i>Twilight in the Desert</i> (selections) ASPO Website (www.peakoil.com)	How do you deal with mid-semester crunch? (Time management)**	10/10	(Check in on team projects / team project time)
8. peak oil (continued)	10/14	NO CLASS (Monday schedule)	(NONE)	10/17	Guest Lecture: Taury Smith (Geologist, NY State Mus)
9. Imperialism, resource use, and war	10/21	Adas, <i>Dominance by Design</i> (selection)	What makes for a good presentation? (Presentation skills)	10/24	Team Project & Presentations
10. The Human ecology of South Asia	10/28	(lecture by Dr. Gowdy)	What makes for a good presentation (revisited)?	10/31	George Roberts Dept Biol. Sciences SUNY Albany
11. The economics of biodiversity loss and preservation	11/4	Orr, “Saving future generations” Leopold, “Think like a mountain”	What have we covered? What’s missing? (Reflexive learning)	11/7	Ethnographic study of consumer behavior, assigned
12. Consumer culture & food consumption	11/11	Kingsolver, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle , ch. 1-4	(Distribute & discuss ethnography exercise)	11/14	Discuss final project assignment
13. Local food production & distribution	11/18	Kingsolver, ch. 5-9	(Vasudha in the Spring semester)	11/21	Ethnographic field notes (due)
14. Sustainability	11/25	Kingsolver, (finish)	(NONE)	11/28	THANKSGIVING (NO CLASS)
15. Conclusion	12/2	TBA	What were our goals? How did we do? (Goals & reflexivity)	12/5	Final Project & Presentations

* The optional field trip to the Darrin Fresh Water Institute will probably occur on this weekend (October 4-5). Participation is first-come, first-serve, with priority given to students enrolled in the Vasudha program. Registration limited to around 15 students.