

Ecological Communication

COMM 4100, 3 credit hours, Thursdays from 5.00-7.50 p.m., ABAH 425

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Overview of the course

This course is an experiment in thinking ecologically about communication. Together, we will consider the impacts that (human) communication may have on ecological systems as well as the implications of ecological insights for the study of communication more generally. Moving across various intellectual terrains (nature writing, ecocriticism, rhetorical theory, and philosophy, to name a few), we will collectively explore human and other-than-human modes, styles, and media of communication. We will also place the commonsense concept of communication under critical pressure. Given our proximity to the North Shore, we will pursue opportunities to think with ecological communication practices in northeastern Minnesota as well.

Required books

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford: Oxford U Press.
Macdonald, Helen. 2014. *H is for Hawk*. New York: Grove Press.
Savoy, Lauret. 2015. *Trace*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press.
Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

General policies

Attend all class sessions. Make a good-faith effort to read, process, analyze, and assess all assigned readings prior to class. Turn off all electronic technologies before the start of class; you should have either the assigned book or a printed copy of the assigned texts in class. Be respectful of your peers and the professor both in and out of class. Produce original work that you are proud of and able to defend; do not plagiarize. Work that is plagiarized will receive a grade of zero and may result in an “F” in the class. Late work will be penalized one full letter grade *each day* after which it was due; after seven days, I will no longer accept late work. Consult with the professor early and often regarding any particular challenges you experience throughout the course. Make use of the professor’s office hours to clarify issues discussed in class, points made in the assigned readings, or other issues germane to your participation in the course. Both this syllabus and the schedule below are subject to change.

Obligations

- Attendance/Participation: You are expected to attend all class meetings. Since we meet just once a week, missing a single class is in fact the equivalent of missing an entire week of class. As such, attendance will be taken at the beginning of each meeting. Furthermore, you are expected to actively participate in the work of the seminar, which means that you must show up prepared to discuss the readings and engage in class activities. You will

receive a participation grade of up to one point for each scheduled session: 0 = absent; .5 = present but largely inactive; 1 = present and actively engaged. 12 points.

- Discussion Leaders: Groups of 2-3 students will serve as discussion leaders for one class session. The group is collectively responsible for: (a) reading the assigned text(s) closely and critically; (b) preparing and delivering a well-coordinated 20- to 25-minute group presentation about the author(s) and the main ideas or take-aways of their texts; (c) preparing a two-page handout that summarizes the text(s), includes at least five significant quotations with corresponding page numbers, and at least four thoughtful discussion questions that the group would like to pose to the class; and (d) initiate and help guide discussion of the text. I advise you to meet with me as a group to discuss your plans several days ahead of your scheduled class session. 18 points.
- Crisis Essay and Presentation: The English word “crisis” comes from the Greek word meaning “to decide.” We are living in times of profound ecological and earthly crises, each of which demands our collective consideration. You will select an ecological crisis (e.g., the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” environmental racism, nuclear waste, greenhouse gas emissions, industrial agriculture, copper mining, et cetera); research it using the university’s library resources; write a four-page essay explaining the crisis and why it requires your classmates’ attention; and present your essay to the class on February 13. The paper should adhere to the most recent MLA guidelines. 15 points.
- Etymologies of Place Essay and Presentation: Martin Heidegger teaches us that “words are wellsprings that are found and dug up in the telling, wellsprings that must be found and dug up again and again, that easily cave in, but that at times also well up when least expected. If we do not go to the spring again and again, the buckets and kegs stay empty, or their content stays stale” (1968, 131). For this assignment, you will draw on the various meanings of a particular word (see below for possible words) to help you reflect on a place. In other words, you will develop both an etymology of a word and tell a story about a place to which you’re connected. Potential words include, but are not limited to: ecology, earth, world, human, animal, nature, culture, wilderness, ground, technology, place, wild, science, awareness. Your paper should be five pages in length. Additionally, you will present your paper to the class on March 19. The paper should adhere to the most recent MLA guidelines. 20 points.
- Eulogy Essay and Presentation: The English word “eulogy” comes from the Greek word meaning “praise.” Eulogies are usually given in the wake of a loss; they typically serve to commend and memorialize the one lost. Eulogies also draw attention to the value of the one who has been lost. For this assignment, you will write a eulogy for a specific non-human being, species, place, or way of life that has either already been lost or is on the cusp of being lost. In addition to eulogizing this entity, you should also reflect more abstractly on the questions of death, extinction, loss, and transformation raised by the particular entity you have selected to eulogize. Your eulogy should be approximately six pages in length. You will read your eulogy to the class during the final exam period. The paper should adhere to the most recent MLA guidelines. This paper/presentation counts as your final exam for the course. 35 points.

Schedule of readings and presentations

January 16	Timothy Morton, “Thinking Big”
January 23	Roy Scranton, <i>Learning to Die in the Anthropocene</i>
January 30	Aldo Leopold, <i>A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There</i>
February 6	<i>No class: professor away at writing retreat</i>
February 13	“Crisis” essay presentations
February 20	<i>No class: professor away at conference</i>
February 27	Robert Macfarlane, “The Word-Hoard” Robert Macfarlane, “A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook” Atwood et al. letter to <i>Oxford University Press</i>
March 5	Lauret Savoy, <i>Trace</i>
March 12	<i>No class: spring break</i>
March 19	“Etymologies of place” essay presentations
March 26	<i>No class: professor away at meeting</i>
April 2	Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, “To Mourn Beyond the Human”
April 9	Helen Macdonald, <i>H is for Hawk</i>
April 16	<i>No class: professor lecturing at UMN-TC</i>
April 23	Edward Abbey, “Down the River” Edward Abbey, “The Damnation of a Canyon” Glenn Albrecht, “‘Solastalgia’: A New Concept in Health and Identity”
April 30	Thom van Dooren, “Mourning Crows” Terry Tempest Williams, <i>Erosion</i> (excerpts) Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life”
May [TBD]	“Eulogy” essay presentations and course wrap-up

Last Updated: January 15, 2020