2014

300-BL Writing in Public - Theme: Ecology and Pragmatism

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WRITING IN PUBLIC

Theme: Ecology and Pragmatism: Is There a Place for the City in American Environmental Thought?

Course Description and Objectives:

Writing in Public is a writing-intensive course for sophomores in the Philosophy, Politics, and the Public honors program. It is taught in conjunction with Gene Beaupre’s experiential course in public policy (POLI 329 Public Policy Practice). Students in Writing in Public will produce a portfolio of writing on public issues for both professional and general audiences. The assignments are designed to encourage the development of two types of writing skills, those needed for a professional career in public affairs and those essential to shaping public opinion. Writing in Public thus seeks to produce public intellectuals, writers from a variety of occupations who love to learn about the world, use their learning to address public issues, and write in such a way to reach an audience broader than other specialists. Writing in public also means sharing your writing with one another and offering constructive criticism.

Writing in Public has a different theme every year. This year the course will explore the connections between the science of ecology and philosophical pragmatism with the ultimate aim of inserting the city into American environmental thought. Let me stress that what I am attempting here is highly speculative (although more and more scholars are treating pragmatism as an environmental philosophy). It is also, in the spirit of pragmatism, experimental. The pieces will not fit together seamlessly, as my struggle to outline the course below will no doubt suggest. But I do believe that the intersections of the various themes and topics, both anticipated and unexpected, will prove well worth our time and energy.

Briefly put, after an introductory session on the political importance of writing, the course begins by suggesting the pressing need for an ecological narrative for the city. That is, we need to understand cities as part of the natural world – as natural as a bee hive or an ant colony - and apply the same care and concern to city building and urban development that we do to preserving wilderness areas. There is no natural order we can appeal to for the design of our cities; our urban designs must come from our imagination, disciplined by our understanding of ecology (see March 26th readings below). In the second section of the course, we will examine the origins and early development of pragmatism, specifically its engagement with Puritan – and more broadly Christian – thought and, subsequently, its encounter with the industrial city. I’m posing the question here of whether pragmatism holds any clues to our proper response to creation (including the crucial response of wonder) and to the place of our cities and other settlements in
creation. The final section of the course delves deeper into the pragmatism of John Dewey. The focus here is on pragmatism’s approach to the search for the human good, including the tasks of city building and urban development.

I have tried to design the readings in such a way to intersect with your legislative projects in POLI 329 Public Policy Practice. That effort, as I’ve learned over the years, is at best a crap shoot, since we never really know what direction we may go. But there is certainly a good deal here that might inform an environmental issue (such as a regional water district) and also a fair amount that can speak to the issues of education. I’ve also tried to design the course to give you maximum time to write and reflect on issues that you care about. The reading load is limited if challenging, roughly 65-85 pages a week. Several class periods you have either no reading at all (to accommodate the Washington trip) or very little reading (for the writing in public exercises). There is also an open week at the end of the semester. I challenge you to propose something for that week but it will be ok if you just use the time for catching up and finishing your assignments. In any event, I hope you will dig into the texts, reflect on them, and put considerable time and energy into your writing this semester.

I recommend that you write a response to each of the reading assignments this term but I will not be policing that. If you do this, however, the final exam will be quite easy. I will, however, ask that one student write a short response, on a rotating basis, for each class period and post it for all to read the night before that day’s class. Depending on how things go, we may use those responses for in-class discussions of writing. As for your writing, I’m quite open to what you actually write about, so long as it is informed by scholarly inquiry, written for a general, educated audience, and touches in some way on public policy. I would think the reading cannot help but influence whatever you write – if only as an irritant. But you do not need to formally include these writings, themes, and topics into your papers, although you are welcome – and encouraged - to do so. Indeed, my hope is that you will in some way address the issue raised in student learning outcome #6 below.

**Student Learning Outcomes for HIST 300:** Students who read the texts, go on the field trips, participate in and contribute to the discussions, and complete the assignments in this course will be able to:

1. Explain the crucial role of writing in the political process.

2. Discuss the environmental significance of narratives, including the narratives associated with ecological science, commerce and advertising, and urban development.

3. Describe and evaluate the role of wonder in American environmental thought.

4. Identify, assess, and rethink the role of cities in American environmental thought.

5. Compare and contrast pragmatism with other philosophical systems and assess their relative value in addressing our environmental challenges.
6. Articulate a vision of an alternative environmental ethic that includes cities and other 
humanly-constructed environments (or, alternatively, make the case for the maintenance of the 
status quo in our environmental ethics).

7. Write effective prose in the context of public affairs.

8. Speak clearly and efficiently on complex issues.

**Student Learning Outcomes for the PPP Sophomore Block:** Writing in Public also 
contributes to the overall outcomes for the PPP Sophomore block. Students who embrace the 
opportunities in year-long block of four courses (HIST 408, POLI 246, HIST 300, POLI 329) 
will find that they have:

9. Developed a love of discussion, debate, and deliberation, a taste for wide and challenging 
reading in a variety of disciplines, and a desire to do careful scholarship and engaged social 
criticism

10. Acquired the habits of articulating and questioning their values, being open to new ideas, and 
connecting their values to their intellectual inquiries

11. Built confidence in their capacity to conduct research and organize a mass of chaotic 
evidence into an analytical narrative and improved their ability to find sources that can illuminate 
a contemporary issue

12. Gained an appreciation for past struggles to construct a better society, a humility about the 
difficulty of changing society, an understanding of the historical context of contemporary issues, 
and a recognition of their place in an historical continuum, connecting past, present and future.

13. Found ways of putting to constructive use their anger about injustice, their faith in the 
possibility of social change, their hope for social justice, and their passion for setting things right.


**Assessment:** These are the assignments for the course.

**A. Class attendance and participation.** This includes occasionally writing paragraphs on the 
reading and commenting on the paragraphs written by others. This assignment develops and 
provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-6, 8. (50 for attendance, 100 for in-class participation, total of 150)

**B. Portfolio of Writings.** I am going to remain somewhat flexible on this and invite you to make a formal proposal. But the default position is three short papers (1250-2000 words; roughly 5-8 pages) that are then combined at the end of the semester into a longer paper (5,000 words,
roughly 20 pages). Unless you make other arrangements, the due dates for these papers are: February 2, March 9, April 13, and May 2nd. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-6 and especially 7. (100, 150, 200, 250 points, respectively, total of 700)

**C. Final Examination:** A 750- to 1250-word (roughly 3-5 pages) essay on the theme of the course (i.e. “ecology and pragmatism: is there a place for the city in American environmental thought”). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-7. (150)

****Late assignments will be penalized at the discretion of the instructor, but generally 5% per day.


Please note the following policy from page 52 of the Xavier University Catalog (the History department and your instructors take this seriously.

“The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic and professional life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents, and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendation.”

“All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student’s own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another’s efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one’s own.”

“Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an “F” in the course, and expulsion from the University.”

**Texts:**

Lasch, *Plain Style* ***Other readings are on e-reserve. Please consider using double-sided printing and other measures to reduce waste (or, in some cases, not printing at all).

The web sites listed below may prove useful in developing your essays.

http://www.scientificamerican.com/cities/
Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments: All readings can be found in clearly marked folders on the e-reserves page for HIST 300 Writing in Public (Spring 1914). Look for the folder “2014 Materials” and the ten numbered folders inside that folder.


The password is public. You should take note where specific pages are listed (in some cases I’m not asking you to read the entire document). I recommend that you read each class period’s assignments in the order listed (I tried to make sure they are in the same order on the e-reserves page).

Ecology and Pragmatism: Is There a Place for the City in American Environmental Thought?

Jan. 13: Introduction: What’s the Difference Between a Book and An Election?

Lasch, Plain Style, 1-42 (presumably you’ve read this already but we haven’t discussed it); Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”: https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm (if the link doesn’t work, just do a web search; the essay is everywhere)

Part One: Ecological Knowledge and City Building

Jan. 15 (folder 1): What Do Narratives Do, Where Do Ours Come From, and What Might We Need a New Narrative About?


Jan. 20: no class


Jan. 27: (folder 3): Recovering Ecology’s Civic Aspirations

Fairfield, “Recovering Ecology’s Civic Aspirations: Can We Write an Ecological Narrative for the City?” (unpublished essay) (33): Lasch, Plain Style, 45-53 (9) (42)
Part Two: The World With Wonder: Puritans, Pragmatists, and American Environmental Thought

Jan. 29: (folder 4): *The Wilderness in Puritan and Modern American Thought*


Feb. 3: (folder 5): *Did the Puritans Have an Environmental Ethic?*

Lasch, “‘No Answer But an Echo’: The World Without Wonder,” in *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991), 226-261 (this is first of two parts, 35 pages)

Feb. 5: (folder 6): *The Machine in the Garden: The Trauma of Industrialization*


Feb. 10: (folder 6): *As the World Warms, A Word About Whaling*


Feb. 12: (folder 5): *Did the Pragmatists Have an Environmental Ethic?*

Lasch, “‘No Answer But an Echo,’” 261-295 (35)

Feb. 17: (folder 7) *Confronting the Human Landscape*


Feb. 19: (folder 8) *Chicago: Shock City of Big Shoulders and Bigger Minds*

Feb. 24: (folder 9) *The Pullman Strike and What the Social Organism Was Thinking*


Feb. 26: (folder 9) *Hegel Biologized: The Reflex Arc Experiments and a Special Sort of Earthly Clay*

Menand, “Chicago,” 316-333 (18); **please note: both halves of this chapter are in folder 9;** Browne, “John Dewey and Pragmatist Ecology” in *The World in Which We Occur* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 1-21: (21) http://site.ebrary.com.nocdbproxy.xavier.edu/lib/xavier/docDetail.action?docID=10309031 (if the link does not work, please just search using Xplore; we have electronic access to the book) (39)

March 3, 5: no class, spring break

March 10, 12: no class, DC trip

March 17, 19: no class, DC trip

**Part Three: Pragmatism, Ecology, and the City**

****The following reading assignments in Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* are rich, dense, complex, and invaluable. I hope you will start – if not complete – this reading during our three week hiatus. That will give you time, as we go through it, to reread and reflect.

March 24: (folder 10) *A (Pragmatic) Populism for the Cities?*


March 26: *Writing in Public* 1
Lasch, *Plain Style* 55-73 (19)

March 31: *Philosophy as “a powerful form of cultural criticism grounded in moral imagination and disciplined by the knowledge provided by the special sciences”*

Westbrook, “Reconstructing Philosophy,” 117-149 (33)

April 2: (folder 10) *Schools of Tomorrow*

Westbrook, “Democracy and Education,” 150-194 (45): ***The first 17 pages of this chapter are challenging. Reread the passage on “better institutions” on 149 for the conviction that informed Dewey’s theory of moral conduct and his social ideal. The historically-minded might want to jump immediately to the crucially-important sections called “learning to earn” and “the new republic” and then double-back to the philosophically more dense material at the start of the chapter – or perhaps just rely on the summary that I will post – though the intellectually more ambitious will not be content with that.***

April 7: (folder 10) *Can Humans Be Agents for Good?*


April 9: *Writing in Public 2*

Lasch, *Plain Style*, 75-92 (18)

April 14: (folder 10) *Practical Judgment vs. Theoretical Certitude*


April 16: (folder 10) *The Point of the Experiment is to Continue the Experiment*


April 21: no class, Easter break

April 23: *Writing in Public 3*

Lasch, *Plain Style*, 93-115 (23)
April 28, 30: open