

Chesapeake Project: Integrating Sustainability Across the Curriculum

AMST498B Special Topics in American Studies: Fashion and Consumer Culture in the U.S.

Fall 2011

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AMST498B is an upper-level course open to non-majors and American Studies majors; it is also cross-listed at the graduate level as AMST698A. This seminar is designed as an introduction to interdisciplinary research in consumer behavior and consumer culture. The syllabus is broken into four units:

1. theoretical concepts and approaches
2. American Studies approaches to the study of consumption
3. a consideration of current consumption trends using the critical tools we have acquired
4. presentation of student work

My Chesapeake Project experience has informed the third unit, which will focus on ethical issues in consumption, especially sustainability. The unit comprises three weeks, beginning with an overview of anti-consumption movements such as Voluntary Simplicity and the Great Turning. During the second week, we will examine the environmental, social and economic impact of clothing and apparel through the lens of cultural studies. I plan to use a product life cycle approach, incorporating not only studies of consumption, but also textile production and processing, laundering/dry cleaning, and the impact of "fast fashion" retailers such as H&M. During the third week, We will turn our attention to food, drawing on the ample literature on local eating, agribusiness and other related topics.

All students will complete a research project resulting in a final paper, presentation and annotated bibliography. They will begin by selecting a class of consumer goods to examine over the course of the semester, and in-class exercises and weekly blog posts will connect their chosen product to the week's theme. During the unit on ethical consumption, they will be asked to research the relevant aspects of their chosen item -- for example, if they are looking at the mobile phones, they will need to look at them from the angle of sustainability during that unit. Their final project is a prospectus outline the potential for research about the consumption of their chosen product. I will provide a list of possible angles for research, and sustainable/ethical consumption will be one of the angles to be explored.

Although I have had an interest in these topics for some time, have been blogging about them for several years, and have incorporated the material into three other courses over the last two years, the Chesapeake Project helped me connect my work with other UM scholars and to regional issues. The immediate result is a more robust unit on sustainable consumption for AMST498B. In the future, I hope to also incorporate similar material and assignments in other courses as well.