

Catherine Bayly  
Fall 2014  
Honors English 101  
Description of Syllabus Changes

Discussions in my writing classroom have always danced around sustainability. While I never intentionally avoided sustainability as a discrete topic, it never felt central to *my* teaching of rhetorical writing. Of course I was open to student writing on environmental issues, as is the case with *most* issues—but the texts I've chosen to teach have always been more targeted toward humanitarian and social activism. However, while taking part in the Chesapeake Project, I realized that these strains of advocacy can be, or *are*, actually inextricably linked. Therefore, in the weeks following our meetings, I've thought of three ways my classroom will explicitly encourage students to think about sustainability on both theoretical and practical levels. First, we will specifically explore 1960s environmentalist texts as part of our study of rhetoric. Second, I will encourage students to write about some element of the sustainability triptych in their sequence of research papers. Third, I will attempt to implement increasingly environmentally friendly practices in my classroom.

As stated, my classroom discussions do engage sustainability to a limited extent already. Because my course focuses on the rhetoric of the American 1960s, we discuss the civil rights movements, feminist movements, environmental movements, etc. These 1960s humanitarian efforts towards social and global justice incite discussions (and student research) about the current state of our world. In past semesters, I've assigned students two source texts to summarize and contribute to discussions of our own topics for research. The students have always summarized a 1968 women's rights speech by Shirley Chisholm, as well as some lesser known contemporary articles. This semester, I plan to experiment with RFK's "Detroit Speech." I hope that, just as Chisholm forces students to confront gender biases in today's society, Kennedy's speech makes questions of sustainability present to students. They will, hopefully, be able to see what has and hasn't been done, how protest/advocacy/rhetorical language have changed, and how rhetoric is part of an ongoing process of evolution. In addition to the summary assignment, I will ask students to write a "rhetorical analysis." I do this each semester, but I plan to ask these students to specifically engage with some element of sustainability. They will analyze two pieces of sustainability rhetoric (one from the 1960s and one from now) to study how audiences and discourse have changed over time. I believe these assignments will give students a richer understanding of the history of advocacy and global movements. They will also force students to confront the major issues of the past century.

Moving forward from the assignments above, students will choose their research trajectories for the semester. Students' research interests vary broadly, as do their desires to research "serious" subject matter. By that, I don't mean to belittle any strand of research, but some students will simply research the easiest topic they can find. Or, more importantly, they are inclined to a surface reading of a very complicated issue. Although I am solely teaching honors this semester, I find this problem holds true across the board. So, rather than giving students (near-)absolute freedom with project topics, I will ask them to broadly interpret the sustainability triptych as a framework to guide their research. I think that focusing throughout the semester on something as tangible, complex, and multifaceted as sustainability rhetoric will help students approach the research project with a greater sense of exigence and gravitas.

Finally, I am screwing my brain over ways to make my classroom more sustainable in terms of day to day practice. I use technology often in my classroom and provide students with opportunities to work online vs on paper. However, I am very committed to hard copies, especially as part of the drafting and revision processes that are essential in my field. I have always been insistent on paper drafts, but I now plan to limit those drafts only to essential pieces of each assignment (and, in those cases, I will recommend students work with scrap paper). The rest of our drafting can be done on laptops, I believe. As for major assignments, I will continue to collect them on double sided paper. But, for lesser assignments, I will accept and provide feedback on electronic versions. I realize this is a small change, but in a field like writing cutting a single course paper draft can mean hundreds of pages saved.

I am so excited to see how these changes play out this semester. In the past, my honors students have been uniformly progressive and smart, as well as actively engaged with world issues. And while I'm an activist, vegetarian, gardener, etc., I think that my deepened knowledge and passion for sustainability will only help me model stronger thinking and better writing. I look forward to our meetings this semester and updates on our cohort's progress!