ENVR 203: Knowledge, Ethics, and Environment

Winter 2010

Schedule: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:35-12:55

Classroom: Leacock 219

DESCRIPTION
In seeking to understand human impacts on the environment, it is of course essential to understand cause-effect linkages from the point of view of science: run-off from farmland and algae blooms, emissions of greenhouse gases and climate change; bottom trawling or driftnet fishing and the degradation of marine ecosystems, and so on. Equally important, however, is to understand the linkages among knowledge, ethics and environment. How do we construct knowledge, or, in other words, how do we come to acquire knowledge, and how do we distinguish between knowledge, on the one hand, and opinion, belief, error or ignorance, on the other? Is there such a thing as objective knowledge? How, based on what we think we know, do we construct normative frameworks to identify good from bad, right from wrong? To what extent are our ways of knowing and our ethical frameworks implicated in environmental degradation? Can we change our impact on the environment by changing our way of thinking about the environment and of ourselves in relation to it?

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04 January 2010
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COURSE MATERIAL

Course Pack
Available at McGill Bookstore. Some supplementary materials posted on web site.
Except where indicated in this syllabus, required readings for the course are in the course pack.

Web Site
You are expected to refer on a regular basis to the course web site, administered through WebCT. There you will find information on the course such as the outline, schedule of classes and reading list; information on the conferences (see below) including lists of group members and meeting locations; and periodic announcements.

A discussion board is being made available for the class as a whole and for each conference. Do not expect that professors will read all submissions; if you want to contact any member of the teaching staff, please do so in person, by phone or by e-mail. Do expect, however, that the teaching staff will be monitoring the discussion board to ensure that it is being used appropriately.

Any inappropriate use, such as the posting of offensive messages, will result in the discussion board being closed.

EVALUATION

Overview
Midterm: 40%
In class 4 March. You are responsible for all material covered in the readings or class up to the day of the test.

Participation: 10%
The participation grade will be based on work done in the conferences (see below).
Final exam: 50%
The final exam will be scheduled to take place during the exam period.

CONFERENCES

Meetings of the conferences
Five conferences will be held over the course of the semester. As a rule, the conferences are held on alternate Thursdays beginning on 15 January but there are some adjustments to take into account reading week and the midterm; therefore, it is important that you consult the class schedule (see below) and enter the relevant dates in your calendar.

The purpose of the conferences is to permit in-depth discussion in smaller groups of the material covered in the preceding lectures.

For the conferences, the class will be divided on a random basis into six groups, each led by a member of the teaching staff. The composition of the groups, as well as locations for the conferences, will be posted on WebCT in the second week of class.

Students may not switch groups.

Conference assignments
Students will be asked to complete three short assignment (250 words, or about half a page). The questions will be posted on WebCT the day of the second, third and fourth conferences, and the assignments are due at 10 AM the following Thursday. The assignments are to be submitted on WebCT.

The assignments are marked on a high pass – pass – fail basis.

Attendance will be taken in the conferences. It is understood that students miss the occasional class for valid reasons; 100% attendance is not expected, but students are expected to make every effort to attend.

Missed evaluations
The only valid excuses for missed evaluations are illness, a serious family emergency, or an event of similar gravity. Appropriate documentation must be submitted to the course coordinator (Prof. Ellis).

Re-reads
If you wish to have your exams re-read, you may submit them to the course coordinator (Prof. Ellis), along with a document of no more than one page explaining why you think you should receive a higher grade.

Marks may be increased, decreased or remain unaltered as a result of a re-read.
**LANGUAGE**
In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT**
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

**PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS**
In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

5 Jan: *Introduction to the course*

**SECTION 1: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

7 Jan: *Environmental ethics 1: Introduction to ethics*
Why ethics? Different from law and politics? Three types of ethical theories.

**Readings:**

12 Jan: *Environmental ethics 2: Animal welfare*

**Readings:**

**Recommended, not required:**

14 Jan: *Environmental ethics 3 – Do trees have rights?*

**Readings:**

19 Jan: Environmental ethics 4 – Deep ecology

Readings:


21 Jan: Conference 1

26 Jan: Environmental ethics 5 – Ecofeminism

Readings:

Section 2: Social construction

29 Jan: Social construction I – Construction of social reality

Readings:

2 Feb: Social construction II – science
Is there such as thing as objectivity and neutrality? Can we separate facts from values?

Reading:

Recommended, not required:


4 Feb: Conference II
First conference assignment distributed; due 10 AM Thurs Feb 11.
9 Feb: Social construction III – nature
Nature is all in your mind.

Reading:

Recommended, not required:


11 Feb: Alternate epistemologies
Many people in the world conceive of nature, environment, and the wilderness quite differently from us. Are we agreed on what wilderness to protect? What happens if we don’t? Indeed, what does it even mean to “protect” that thing separate from us, the “wilderness”?

Reading:

Recommended, not required:


16 Feb: Environment: It’s all about capital and power

**Reading:**

**Recommended, not required:**


18 Feb: Conference III
Second conference assignment distributed; due 10 AM on Thurs 4 Mar.

Week of 22 Feb: Reading week

**SECTION 3: POLITICS**

2 March: Review session

4 March: Mid-term exam

9 March: Experts and public policy

**Readings:**

11 March: Technology and democracy

**Readings:**
16 March: Social systems I – Discourse ethics and democracy

Readings:

18 March: Conference IV
Third conference assignment distributed; due 10 AM on Thurs 25 Mar.

23 March: Social systems II – Systems theory

Readings:

25 March: Social systems III – Workshop on social systems

SECTION 4: CASE STUDIES ON COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

30 March: Cost-benefit case study I – Who pays the cost of climate change?

Readings:

1 Apr: Conference V

6 April: Cost-benefit II – What’s wrong (right?) with cost-benefit analysis?

Readings:

8 Apr: Environmentalists and cost-benefit analysis

Reading:

13 Apr: Conclusion