Psychology for Sustainable Behavior

Course Overview

Your Professor

Prof. Christie Manning
Contact: cmanning@macalester.edu
Office hours: Monday, 2:00-3:30 in OLRI 158A, or Sign up on my appointment calendar.

Course Materials
Book: Scott, B.A., Amel, E.L., Koger, S.M. and Manning, C.M. (2021). Psychology for Sustainability. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Writing Preceptor
Sydney Jones
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Office Hours: Sundays 7:00pm-9:00pm, library first floor reading room

Course Description

Psychology of Sustainable Behavior is built around the argument that so-called "environmental problems" are actually *human behavior* problems. Global crises such as climate change, ocean acidification, plastic pollution, and deforestation ultimately stem from individual and collective human actions. Understanding the foundations of behavior is thus critical in addressing these issues. In addition, the deterioration of ecological systems has significant social justice implications; the world's poor and those already targeted for marginalization and economic disadvantage are disproportionately impacted.

This course approaches environmental degradation and environmental justice through a psychological lens. We will use psychological principles, theories, and methods to explore the complex web of factors underlying how people satisfy their needs, express their identities, participate in their communities, and experience nature. We will also apply psychological knowledge to real-world sustainability case studies at the individual level, on our campus, and in our larger community. Throughout the course we will emphasize the central importance of justice, equity and anti-racism, often overlooked in environmental initiatives.

Psychology of Sustainable Behavior is a project-based class. Students will participate in an individual self-change project (2-3 weeks), a campus- and community-based collaborative project (5-6 weeks), and a collaborative education/communication project (3 weeks).

Course Goals

- Introduce students to psychological perspectives on global environmental crises, particularly climate change and climate justice

- Examine human thinking and behavior at multiple levels: individual, social-network, organizational, community, governmental

- Explore the varying experiences with and perspectives on sustainability held by different US social groups and identities

- Develop and enhance student analytical skills through critical reading and discussion

- Demonstrate the practical implications and limitations of psychological theory with real-world testing and application of course material

- Encourage students to reflect upon their personal values and lifestyle choices

Course Details

My hopes and expectations of You

- Be present and engaged. Listen. Ask questions. Offer your perspective.

- Communicate with me. Early. Often. Especially if you are struggling with any aspect of the course, or if you are having difficulty being present in the course due to other life concerns.

- Take responsibility for your own learning and growth.

- Be open to the diversity of perspectives that are available from your peers in this class.

- Visit my office hours to chat – in person or on zoom - not just about class, but about your life and ambitions, who you are and what you want to do to help fix what's broken in our world.

- Talk with Sydney, our writing preceptor. She is wonderful and always willing to offer her perspective and help.

Course Assignments and (Un)grading

<u>What</u> <u>is ungrading?!?</u>
In most learning situations in life outside of school, you are not assigned a grade. In academic settings, they are the norm. Yet conventional grading structures are often counterproductive. They may lead students to think more about their grades than about their writing or learning, or to focus on impressing (or fooling) a teacher rather than engaging wholeheartedly with the material, or to fear failure and thus be reluctant to take risks with writing or ideas. Many decades of psychological research in education suggests that grades can actually harm learning.

One of the possible (small?) silver linings of the COVID-19 global pandemic is that it has disrupted some of the conventions in education, and many of us are rethinking grading. Thus, I would like to work with you all this semester to try UNgrading.

It turns out that a culture of support in the classroom - learning with a group of people who care about the wellbeing of each other – helps you learn. One of the best ways to learn is to teach others. I hope that through ungrading, we all can become members and collaborators of a learning community, kindly sharing our skills, abilities, experiences, perspectives (etc.) with each other.

<u>How it works:</u>

Throughout the semester, I will stay mindful of your (physical and digital) engagement and participation in class, will respond to several of your reading responses (and will note whether or not they are completed on time), and will offer you feedback on your written work (reading responses, blog posts, group project report, individual reflection) and your other assignments (group presentation, comm/ed project). We will talk together about what you all – and I – think it might mean to "do well" in this class. Around the middle of the semester and at the end of the semester, I'll ask you to engage in a brief self-reflection that will include a question about what letter grade you would give yourself for the course - in essence, you will assign your own grade, based on the reasoning you present in your reflection. Although I would ideally like to give everyone the grade they give themselves, I reserve the right to raise (or lower) grades as I see fit.

Some of the conditions that I think are important for wholehearted learning:

- Be present for most class meetings and participate in in-person activities

- Turn in assignments by their deadlines. (Note: I am relatively flexible with deadlines, but I strongly believe in the need for them.)

- Demonstrate obvious care and effort on each formal assignment (e.g., practice your group presentation, proofread/spellcheck your formal written work (eg., blog posts, project report))

- Respond thoughtfully to instructor and preceptor feedback on your writing and other work

- Attend your feedback meetings (mid-semester, end of semester) ready to talk about what you've learned, what you're proud of, and where you'd like to invest more effort. At these meetings we will look over your work together, and discuss its strengths and areas for growth.

Assignments

Full assignment descriptions will be posted on Moodle. (Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of total assignment effort I *think* is appropriate for each element.)

- Engagement in class discussions and activities (20%)
- Writing portfolio, containing:
    - 14 (out of 17) reading responses (around 500 words each) (20%)
    - Three blog posts for your self-change project, with revisions (15%)
    - Community project report (written as a group), with revisions (15%)
    - Community project individual reflection (10%)
- In-class group presentation (5%)
- Communication/Education project (15%)

Participation and Engagement (20%)

We continue to be in pandemic times, so attendance may be complicated this semester. That said, attendance – that is, being present and engaged in class – plays an essential role in learning, especially in a discussion-based and active learning class such as this one. During many classes, we will spend time applying the material through small group activities. Thus, attendance is important not only for your learning, but also for our collective ability to learn from each other and maintain a sense of connection and commitment to one another. Your presence in class matters.

The foundations of strong participation and engagement include:

- Preparation for discussion by carefully and critically reading the class readings, making notes, thinking about the ideas ahead of time.

- Willingness to offer your thoughts. Well-considered comments are best, but it's also OK to share ideas that are not yet fully-formed, and to call upon your peers to help you think them through.

- Support of others' contributions through attentive and respectful listening, offering responses that refer to others' contributions, not dominating the discussion, and allowing others to have a turn to speak.

- Willingness to (respectfully, civilly) disagree with your peers, and for your peers to disagree with you.

- Enthusiasm and openness to the various active learning and applied activities we will try in class.

 For those who are less comfortable speaking in class, remember that asking a good question is also a valuable way to contribute to the discussion. However, if you are having serious difficulties with participation, please talk to me outside of class so that we can develop a strategy for improvement.

I also recognize that there are unavoidable circumstances that may sometimes make it impossible for you to attend class. Although I hope it isn't the case, please stay in touch with me and we will navigate the ups and downs of the semester together.

Reading Preparation (20%)

Before each class, you will post a short but substantive written response to the reading assignment. This required response is the major writing assignment for the course, and is structured to help you synthesize the readings and to begin to articulate your own position with respect to the issues presented. Check Moodle for each class's response format before composing your post. (I strongly recommend that you compose your response in a separate, saved document and then paste it into Moodle when you are finished.) It may also be helpful to look at the questions on Moodle before doing the reading. **Please post your reading response to Moodle no later than midnight the day before class.**

These 300-500 (or so) word responses are your opportunity to demonstrate an ability to explore the ideas from the week's readings with a critical eye. Your response should display your own genuine reflection upon the material of the week. The best reading responses are both substantive and focused; it is better to choose a few key points and develop them well, rather than describe a set of disconnected and underdeveloped ideas. Strong reading responses call upon the week's readings and refer to specific points or paragraphs as evidence or to illustrate a point. Where relevant, reading responses should explicitly connect to ideas and readings from previous readings and discussions.

These reading responses are an example of "writing to learn" writing rather than formal academic argument. Consequently what is important is the thoughtfulness of the ideas and questions you raise rather than on writing style or polish.

There are total of 17 reading responses throughout the semester. You are welcome to skip three of them if you need to!

Self-Change Project Blog Posts (15%)

It is easy to underestimate how difficult behavior change can be when thinking about it in the abstract or when focusing on other peoples' behavior. To help you understand some of the challenges that arise when attempting to change a behavior, the thought patterns that accompany these challenges, you will undertake a quest to produce no garbage for ten days. During and after the project, you will compose three blog posts describing your experience and connecting it clearly to concepts from class material. A detailed description of the assignment will be available on Moodle.

Community Project (30%)

Does this psychology stuff really work? For this project you will work with a small group of your peers in class to help the Sustainability Office on campus create the conditions for a desired "sustainable" behavior. Your group will make observations, interview community members to understand their vision and understanding of sustainability, and develop a strategy to foster change (based on course materials). Ideally, you will also pilot test your strategy and evaluate the results.

You will work with your group to write a report of your project and outcomes, and your group will also present your findings to the class and the Sustainability Office.

After the project report and presentation are complete, you will submit a brief individual reflection on your project experience and learning.

Communication/Education Project (15%)

An important step in any social change is raising awareness of an issue. This assignment is meant to be low-work-intensity, fun, expressive, and creative. You will have two options: 1. You can develop a psychologically-informed communication/message about an issue you care about, or, 2. You can critique an organization's communication or approach (e.g., Extinction Rebellion, Climate Reality, The Sunrise Movement) and offer them a set of bullet-point recommendations based on the psychology you've learned in class. Further details will be available after fall break.