RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Course Instructor: Elonda Clay
2016

DESCRIPTION
From “cognitive surplus” to Twitter and Facebook “revolutions,” digital and social media have led some to say that we are entering into a new era of activism that enables people from diverse locations and backgrounds to develop extended networks of collaboration and collective action. Recent years have seen an explosion of digital strategies that are designed to educate and change public consumption and to transform corporate and government policy on environmental issues.

The primary goals of the course are to guide participants in exploring the diversity of traditions and forms of religious and spiritual environmental activism and to educate participants on how to produce digital media strategies that will have significant impact on environmental issues. Online web sites and social media campaigns are used by national and local environmental organizations to mobilize and encourage people to take action either online or offline. Participants will examine what "works" and what does not "work" in terms of digital media strategies that aim to advocate and to influence environmental issues. Throughout the course we will discuss a range of new media technologies employed by organizers. Examples of “tools” include Facebook groups, Twitter, Tumblr, SnapChat, wikis, or hashtags. We will also discuss a range of e-tactics deployed by activists, such as email newsletters, social media campaigns, blogs, crowdfunding, selfie protests, viral videos, digital storytelling, and e-petitions.

A key premise underpinning the design of this course is that the environmental issues we face are intimately intertwined with social, ethical, cultural, and political issues. Many of the activists we will cover in class view the environmental crisis as a reflection of a global religious and spiritual imbalance. The course will examine four “big questions” with respect to religious environmental activism and digital activism: 1) Does religion and culture make a difference in environmental activism? 2) When, where, and how do religious environmental activists mobilize? 3) What tactics do they use? 4) What explains success and failure in advocacy or participation?

REQUIRED TEXTS:


OBJECTIVES
Your work in this course will help you:

1) Enrich your understanding of diverse forms of religious environmental activism that exist in the United States and globally.
2) Develop your own digital strategy for religious and/or spiritual environmental activism.
3) Become familiar with multi-faith online networks of religious environmental activism.
4) Gain insight into the goals and motivations of religious environmental activists and into how all forms of religious environmental activism are influenced by their social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.

5) Reflect on your own religious and/or spiritual beliefs and environmental values and access your positions on contemporary environmental and digital activism debates.

6) Engage in a critical discussion on how digital activism can mobilize religious and spiritual environmental activism offline.

**Course Expectations:** Classroom learning is a fundamental component of your professional education. Students are therefore expected to attend each class, arrive on time, and be in attendance for the full class. In the event that you are unable to attend class for any reason, you must notify the instructor in advance and learn how you are to make up the content you missed. Excessive absenteeism (e.g., missing more than two classes) is considered a serious problem the instructor will handle by meeting with the student and determining whether the student's educational adviser should be notified. **Excessive absenteeism could result in course failure.** Students are expected to: (A) participate substantively in class discussions; (B) read on a weekly basis and come to class prepared to critically engage the reading assignments; (C) submit assignments by the due date and in accordance with the specified format.

Most importantly, students are expected to **HAVE FUN, BE CREATIVE, AND ENGAGE THE READINGS AND VIDEOS!**

**Assignments and Grading**

- Midterm Exam (25% of final grade)
- Final Paper (25% of final grade)
- Informed Class Participation and Attendance (20% of final grade)
- Digital Strategy Assignments (30% of final grade)

**Note:** Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with physical, sensory, cognitive, learning and psychological differences. You may request accommodations by submitting documentation to the Student Services.

**Midterm Examination:** The midterm exam will consist of essay questions that will be selected from a list handed out one week prior to the exam.

**Digital Strategy Assignments — 30%**

At the start of the semester, students will be asked to choose an ecological, climate change, environmental justice and/or social issue, organization or topic they will follow throughout the semester. Students will be assigned digital strategy based assignments that relate the coursework to their chosen research focus. Students are required to complete all digital strategy assignments, but only three of the digital strategy assignments will be submitted and graded. One or more of the assignments can involve public engagement with an offline local organization that does advocacy or activist work for an environmental-related cause.

**Final Paper:** The final paper should consist of a 7 -10 page related to religious and spiritual environmental activism. The topic must be cleared with and approved by the professor in
advance (please make an appointment for office hours.) The purpose of this exercise is NOT mere description; rather, an analytical essay is expected in which the theme appropriately relates to and makes use of the class readings and discussions. The paper must be typed, double spaced and properly cited/referenced.

**Format**

All papers must be typewritten, in 12-point font, double-spaced, page-numbered, with 1" margins at the left, right, top and bottom. Papers should be stapled, not paper-clipped. Papers must be proofread carefully for clarity, organization, spelling, punctuation, and other potential errors before submission—please use inclusive language. Students should use Turabian format for citation. Accuracy and consistency are essential. All papers that do not largely follow a consistent format or properly document source materials will receive a reduction in grade. Printing front and back to use both sides of the page is highly recommended.

You should keep a copy of all assignments submitted. I will gladly answer any questions regarding format, citing or organization.

**Plagiarism**

Students are expected to conduct themselves consistent with Pacific Lutheran University’s Code of Academic Honesty, which presents standards regarding plagiarism and academic integrity. Students are expected to be familiar with the Code as outlined in the Student Handbook.

**Grades:** Grades will be determined according to the following scale with (+)’s and (-)’s designated when deemed appropriate:

- 90-100: A
- 80-89: B
- 70-79: C
- 60-69: D
- 0-59: F

**Grading Policies**

The final course grade is based on the student's participation and performance on all assignments and activities. Students whose performance is minimal or failing at midterm will be notified in writing. Generally, late assignments will have a penalty of one full letter grade for each day late. In the case of extenuating circumstances, a conversation must take place with the instructor in which documentation of such circumstance will be requested. A failing grade will be applied to any and all assignments not handed in.

**Week 1: Introduction and Syllabus Overview**

**Required Viewing:**

Week 2: What is Religious and Spiritual Environmental Activism?

**Required Reading/Viewing:**


**Further Reading/Viewing**


Week 3: What is Digital Activism?

**Required Reading/Viewing**
"Introduction" and Chapter 1, "Where We Have Been and Where We Are Headed" in Earl and Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*.


**Further Reading/Viewing**


**Week 4: Debates on Digital Activism.**
Does online activism = slacktivism? Is digital activism reducing activism to marketing, likes, and clicks, making it a commodity? Or is digital activism much more complicated?

**Required Reading:**

**Week 5: Environmental Activism as a Spiritual Practice – What is the role of spirituality in environmental activism?**

**Required Readings:**
Chapter 4, “Environmentalism as Spirituality” in Gottlieb, A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future.

*(choose 1 from this list of 4 readings):*

“Special Issue on Religion, Disability, and the Environment.” Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology, 19, 1-7 (2015). [choose one article from this special issue]


**Further Reading/Viewing**

**Week 6: Religious Environmental Movement Organizations (Remos) Online - Multi-Faith Digital Networks of Religious Environmental Activism**

Go to each of these websites and read their “About” and “Mission” page sections.

- Interfaith Power & Light: http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/
- GreenFaith: http://www.greenfaith.org/
- Evangelical Environmental Network: https://creationcare.org/
- Operation Noah: http://operationnoah.org/


**Further Viewing:**
Lutherans Restoring Creation [ELCA]: http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org/

**Week 7: Connections and Differences: Comparing Online and Offline Activism**

**Required Reading/Viewing:**


- Visit and give feedback on the e-tactics of the AddUp website, sponsored by the Sierra Club. https://www.addup.org/

**Further Reading**
Week 8: Innovation in Activist’s Tactics for Environmental Activism: Digital Storytelling

**Required Reading/Viewing:**


**Further Reading/Viewing**


StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling). http://www.storycenter.org/stories/ (watch any of the short videos under the theme, “Environment”)

Climate Stories Project. “Climate Stories” http://www.climatestoriesproject.org/

Free Range Studios, “Winning the Story Wars - The Hero's Journey.”
https://vimeo.com/50791810

Week 9: Mobilizations and Online Methods of Organizing Protests

**Required Reading:**


**Further Reading**

Poell, Thomas. "Social media and the transformation of activist communication: exploring the
social media ecology of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests." Information, Communication & Society 17, no. 6 (2014): 716-731.


**Week 10: Religious Environmental Activism and Environmental Justice in Urban Environments**

We will watch and discuss during class scenes from the documentary, *Renewal: Stories from America’s Religious-Environmental Movement.* (2008); the first feature-length documentary film to capture the vitality and diversity of today’s religious-environmental activists. http://www.renewalproject.net/film

**Required Reading/Viewing:**


**Further Reading**


**Week 11: Crowdfunding Environmental and Social Change Online? The Promise and Problems of Crowdfunding Environmental Projects**

**Required Reading:**


**Examples of Environmental Crowdfunding**

- We The Trees website. http://www.wethetrees.com/
• Start Some Good website. https://startsomegood.com/projects [Click the “Environment” button]

**Week 12 #WeWhoLoveTheEarth: Telling Your Own Digital Story of Religious and Spiritual Environmental Activism**

This week the assignment is for class participants to take a selfie of themselves either actively engaged in an offline environmental activity or a “selfie” of an environmental cause that they have been following through their digital strategy assignments. Students are encouraged to share the stories behind their selfies and their participation in environmental action with the class. This activity is more of a storytelling style of sharing than presentation oriented.

**Required Reading:**


**Week 13 Religious Environmentalism in a Digital Age – Strategies Going Forward**

We will spend this week of class synthesizing our previous readings and multimedia resources and raising critical questions about how our environmental commitments connect religious environmental activism and digital activism.

**Required Readings:**
Chapter 8 “Obstacles, Prospects, Hope” in Gottlieb, A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future.


**Week 14 Thanksgiving Break – No Classes**

**Week 15 Final Class. Final Papers are due.**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


---. “If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part Two): Sticky and Spreadable—Two Paradigms.” http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_1.html


Poell, Thomas. ”Social media and the transformation of activist communication: exploring the social media ecology of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests.” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 6 (2014): 716-731.

Poell, Thomas, and Erik Borra. ”Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as platforms of alternative journalism: The social media account of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests.” *Journalism* 13, no. 6 (2012): 695-713.


