Seeing Sustainability

Context:

This reflective assignment is intended to encourage students to identify signs of sustainability and unsustainability in a particular place. It is part of a required interdisciplinary course on Sustainability for students at Antioch University Seattle’s Center for Creative Change enrolled in masters degree programs in:

* Communication
* Environment & Community
* Management & Leadership
* Organizational Development and
* Whole Systems Design.

For many students, this is their first and only university course on sustainability, so this assignment does not assume an in-depth understanding of the topic. The syllabus for this course can be found in the Sustainability Courses and Programs Faculty Learning Community.

This assignment is the first major written assignment in the course. Students complete this assignment on their own outside class time. They are given about three weeks during which they must conduct the observation exercise and write a paper about their experience. The short length of the paper (3-4 pages) is intended to encourage students to distill the essence of their experience.

Reflective Practice:

Although this assignment does not assume an in-depth understanding of sustainability, it does assume familiarity with methods for reflective practice. All of the Center for Creative Change’s programs are based on reflective practice, which is defined as “The social and individual recurrent connection of action, reflection, and creativity derived from the surprise and perplexity occurring when actions do not meet intentions, leading to repeated cycles of learning, renewal, and sustainable change.” The Center’s guidelines for reflective practice are shown in the appendix.

Assignment Instructions:

Briefly observe a place where people interact with each other and with the environment. It could be part of the built environment, such as an apartment building or your home, a public or private gathering place in your neighborhood, a community center, or a commercial space like a shopping mall, or it could be a natural place, such as a garden or a state park. Do not interact with anyone there. Take about an hour for your observation and take written notes on the following points:

* What are some of the features of this place? What is the weather here?
* If it is part of the built environment, what was here before? What resources were used to create and sustain this place?
* If it is part of the natural environment, how has human activity shaped or changed this place?
* How do people treat each other in this place? For instance, do they relate to each other or do they ignore each other? Do they know each other or not? Are they talking with each other or not? Do they show signs of friendship or affection or not?
* How do people act in this place? How do their actions affect this place? Are they rushing through it, or are they stopping to enjoy it?
* What is the importance of this place to people? How are people affected by this place? Are they glad to be here or do they want to leave?

Using your notes, write a 3-4 page double spaced paper that describes the social (i.e., the interactions among people) and ecological relationships you observe and your understanding of how these relationships contribute to, or impede sustainability. Also, identify any connections you see between the way people interact with each other and the way people interact with the place.

Student Writing:

This assignment has generated student writing on many different types of places including restaurants, coffee shops, parks, schools, museums, hospitals, big box stores, bodies of water, neighborhoods and private homes. Given this diversity, it’s not surprising that students have reflected on many different sustainability issues. These include the sustainability benefits of ethnic and cultural diversity, the privatization of space and the need for public community spaces, social justice, consumerism and its effects on the environment, corporate efforts to protect the environment, and a sense of awe and wonder at the natural world.

Perhaps most importantly, this assignment often results in students’ feeling a sense of affinity with the place they observed. A few years ago one student wrote, “Observing the farmers’ market, I fell in love with the people, the place and the produce. The sight of a child in a red dress holding onto her mother’s hand for dear life, the smell of the flowers and the incredible variety of fruits, veggies and other foods – I felt dizzy and almost drunk with the experience of life itself.”

Students also report surprise about their observations. When they observe a familiar place, they are sometimes astonished at how much more they saw during the exercise than they had ever seen before. And when they observe an unfamiliar place, they are sometimes amazed by how much they see. These reflections make students aware of how much they miss seeing during the normal lives.

Questions/Comments?

If you have any questions or comments about this assignment, please contact:

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Appendix:

Antioch University Seattle Center for Creative Change

Guidelines for Reflective Practice

To develop their reflective practice skills, students are asked to write a reflective essay every week that responds to the following questions about a specific event that took place in their lives that week, including:

* Where and when did the event happen? What did you do? What did others do?
* What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of this event?
* Why did you think and feel this way? What were your assumptions, beliefs and expectations during the event? What were your mental models?
* In your view, what were the assumptions, beliefs and expectations of others during the event? In your view, what were their mental models?
* Can you apply what you are learning in class to this event? What have you learned about yourself and others as a result of this event?
* In a similar situation, do you want to respond the same way or differently?

The main purpose of these reflective essays is to deepen students’ understanding of how their assumptions, expectations and beliefs influence what they feel, think and do, and especially how they interact with others.