

I have found in teaching this course (an advanced introductory course open to majors and the non-majors alike), in addition to other classes at VU and other schools, that students feel disconnected from academic information. The doom and gloom regarding the condition of the Earth and its resources are some abstraction of the evening news or Hollywood films. Classes are just a means to an end, that being the “wallpaper” that proves in their minds that they have an education. Since the environment is literally the world around them, this course is designed to serve as a connection between their existence and the environmental realities we are all painfully aware of. With an interdisciplinary background I strive to approach this from several pedagogical directions that they can absorb, accept, and relate to.

Sustainability is stressed in a number of modalities; via metaphorical measures that can be concretely conceptualized (like cubic football fields) and using quick extrapolations of observable trends (the latter being very useful for resource depletion of all sorts.) For instance we may use a car, and break down its components roughly, and then extrapolate the amount of ores and petroleum required to make it, and then multiply by the millions of cars produced/year. In addition, regional examples are used, such as coal-mine run-off, and particulate and nutrient pollutants from agriculture (we are in a coal-mining, agricultural area.) These themes and others are encompassed in the overarching theme of humanity’s temporal disconnection from Earth and its resources. That is to say, humans exist in a time span of generations which are at present around 75-80 years per. We think a generation ahead and behind our own existence with relative ease, but beyond that it starts to get increasingly abstract. We discuss this in terms of knowledge of their own families, and thoughts given to the future. Our perceptual window turns out to be astonishingly short. It is little wonder then that our treatment of resources that exist in millennial time scales is stilted when the “real” world around us is time-wise (in our minds) so temporally small.

The issue of acceptance, and hence acknowledging some measure of responsibility, is one of the most desired outcomes of the course. I bring this notion forth repeatedly throughout, the 4<sup>th</sup> “R” (responsibility), by having them calculate their own environmental footprints, comparing trash output, discussing “stuff” and its place in their lives, and by gauging their moral interface. This last is a simple test. On a card or paper you have two questions (with instructions clearly to NOT turn it over until instructed); 1) I can tell right from wrong. YES or NO, 2) Littering is wrong YES or NO. On the obverse a single question, 3) I have littered YES or NO. Using this we start what is often a profound discussion of people’s morality versus environmental responsibility.