

Teaching Sustainability in the Humanities classroom

As the daughter of a French government official specializing in environmental issues, I grew up repeatedly hearing about “le développement durable” (French for sustainability) and our individual responsibility as stewards of this world. This childhood influence followed me to this day and I still recycle, use a reusable mug for my tea and spend far too much time and money finding the ultimate shower head that doesn’t drain our water supplies while still providing a “spa-like experience”. In a word, I really believe in sustainability. That is, at least in my personal life.

When the concept of sustainability became mainstream in Luther’s discourse, I embraced what I saw as the organizational version of our individual responsibility. I was quite excited about promoting local foods and hearing about worm composting in the dorms. Then we started talking about including sustainability into the curriculum. And that’s where I started getting a little bit confused. For, after all, I teach mainly 18th and 19th c. French literatures, and as much as I want to see sustainability as an “interdisciplinary method of inquiry”, I am quite at loss when it comes to explaining a “sustainable Chateaubriand” to my students.

It is admittedly much easier to include sustainability in my lesson plans when I teach Business French, for instance, and have students do poster presentations on nuclear energy in France or on the economical impact of water protection in Brittany. It is basically easier when I teach language and culture classes that are closer to the social sciences. My dilemma thus is: Is it possible to transform a set of environmental practices into an academic avenue of inquiry in the humanities?

Of course, one can teach about the natural world in Rousseau’s *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* and see it as a starting point for a critical analysis of the need for sustainability. However, not all novels I teach have a natural world component nor is it always their main “point”. I am thus weary that adopting the concept of academic sustainability at the forefront of the curriculum would just be another way of instrumentalizing the humanities in a context where we seemingly have lost confidence in our ability to contribute directly to general education programs. Of course, talking about concepts such as sustainability is not a bad thing but if it is my main “angle”, am I not

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losing sight of what teaching literature should really be about and just embracing a
“mercenary redemption” of my discipline?

With this workshop, I am hoping to be able to understand how sustainability could be a
viable avenue of inquiry in the humanities classroom: if we see sustainability as “the
relationship between environmental limits and the human values, decisions, and actions
that shape the future” (Sherman) and the teaching of the humanities as a way to reveal
our agency in the world, perhaps we can unveil ways in which we can live and create as
responsible independent human beings.