SENV 3420: Understanding Place

What is a “place”? How do we come to know our places? What impact does knowledge of place have on our efforts to craft sustainable futures for ourselves and our communities? We all dwell in places, but in our increasingly mobile and globalized lives, the importance of appreciating one’s “emplacedness” sometimes seems to fall by the wayside. Seeking to rectify that problem, this course will use a place-based approach to examine pressing socio-environmental issues across multiple spatial and temporal scales (specifically centered on the issue of agriculture) developing a capacity to understand and appreciate place that is essential for environmental studies and leadership.

Places are partially defined by their unique historical, ecological, cultural, political and geographical features, but also inevitably interpreted and encountered through individual experiences. Individuals have unique perceptions of the places they hold dear, the places they have visited, and the places about which they have only heard or read. The goals of this course are to examine those features and perceptions and gain tools to better understand and solve environmental issues in any place. Specifically, in this course we will:

- Develop multiple interdisciplinary and intercultural lenses that contribute to understanding “place” in its many details and permutations.
- Deepen our understandings of relationships between ourselves, food, farming, community, and place.
- Understand how local places sit within broader global networks.
- Describe how coming to know a place can also inspire people to care for that place (e.g., how is place tied to activism? or how does place work for change?).
- Communicate how our perceptions of place have evolved during the course, including tools we have gained that can be shared with others and applied to better understand any place.

Students will use specific places – including our shared community place at the School of the Environment (SoE) and places of students’ choosing – to develop and articulate their understandings of place. We will examine these places through several lenses, attending to ethics, geography, time, and multi-scale systems, and focusing specifically on the issue of agriculture. Eventually, students will share the toolkits they develop for understanding place with the entire SoE community, providing others with a framework for understanding place.
Instructors

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Geology and Environmental Studies    Philosophy and Religion

Course structure

We will examine place by exploring agriculture through interwoven scientific and cultural narratives, building a class community while learning about our shared place – the SoE – and about our individual places as well. The narratives will include multi-cultural perspectives on environmental and social ethics, geographical and temporal time scales, and multi-scale systems, as well as students’ own embodied experiences in place. We will explore these narratives through readings, discussion, field trips, guest speakers, and physical activity.

As a class community we will weave the narratives together to tell a story of agriculture – land, ecosystems, culture, and history – in Vermont and in places students hold dear. There are many ways of telling a story, and we will decide as a class on our storytelling approaches to effectively combine disciplinary expertise, for example through writing, art, theater, and spoken word. Our class community will tell the story and share our findings to the entire SoE during the final week of the program.

Readings

There is no required text, and all readings will be provided on the course Moodle. Students should plan to read at least one significant text (e.g., a book chapter or journal article) in preparation for every class, and several smaller texts to be read inside and outside of class each week.

Assessment

Short reading assignments (25%): It is critical that you complete all assigned readings before class on their assigned day. You will have short writing assignments associated with each of the major readings that will be due at the beginning of the class period. These will be submitted as typed hard copies.

Weekly reflections (25%): We expect you to reflect on the themes of each week by applying readings, discussions, and experiences to build an interdisciplinary narrative of place. These reflections will then be integrated into our group “Understanding Place” toolkit project. The reflections will often be written reflections in journal format, but will also include alternative forms of expression. Students should expect to submit these reflections through the SoE blog before the start of each Monday’s class.

Understanding Place toolkit project (25%): Throughout the course we will be creating an interdisciplinary group project to be worked on both inside and outside of class. Based on our growing understanding of place, we will develop a set of tools and perspectives that can be
shared to the entire SoE community and others to help others find creative and effective ways for coming to know their places. This is a cumulative project and part of your grade will include weekly checkpoints on your progress (measured by the weekly reflections and in-class discussion). This is also a group project that requires you to work independently and with the group to cohesively intertwine narratives and disciplines, and your grade will include both group and individual components. This is NOT a term project that you will be able to complete with a frenzy of activity during the final week, so it is important that students stay engaged and cooperative throughout the course. We will describe this project in greater detail in the class sessions.

Engagement (25%): Participation in class discussions, activities, and trips is critical if we hope to develop a strong sense of community and achieve a truly interdisciplinary understanding of place. We expect you to be present and engaged in every class, contributing your disciplinary, cultural, and place-based knowledge and experiences, while listening respectfully to your peers about their knowledge and experience.

Grading

Grades will be assigned on a straight percentage basis: 90-100% is an A, 80-89% is a B, 70-79% is a C, 60-69% is a D, and <60% is an F, with + and - grades assigned to high and low scores within those ranges.

Course Calendar

**Week 1: Defining Place – Perceptions and Perspectives**

- Monday, June 22: Encountering place; Addison County field trip

- Wednesday, June 24: Shadow Places
  - Reading 1: Val Plumwood, “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling”

**Week 2: Human Scales: Social and Environmental Justice**

- Monday, June 29: Place, Race, and Social Justice
  - Reading: Excerpts from Bell Hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

- Wednesday, July 1: Meet with Migrant Justice activist group
  - Reading: Brown and Getz, “Farmworker Food Insecurity and the Production of Hunger in California”

**Week 3: Geographic Scales**

- Monday, July 6: GIS activity and Addison County field trip
  - Reading: Foley et al., "Global Consequences of Land Use"

- Wednesday, July 8: Bioregionalism/polyamory of place
  - Reading: Bauman, “Developing a Planetary Environmental Ethics”
Week 4: Temporal Scales

- Monday, July 13: Getting our hands dirty at the Middlebury Organic Garden
  - Matson et al., “Agricultural Intensification and Ecosystem Properties”
  - Berry, “Let the Farm Judge”

- Wednesday, July 15: Time and Place, visit the Sheldon Museum
  - Reading: Leopold, “Good Oak”

Week 5: Multi-Scale Systems and Flows

- Monday, July 20: Industrial, urban, and small-scale agriculture
  - Reading: Anguelovski, “Place Remaking through Environmental Recovery and Revitalization”

- Wednesday, July 22: Boat trip on Lake Champlain
  - Reading: Charles, "Fertilized World."

Week 6: There and Back Again; or, Returning to Place and Sharing our Stories

- Monday, July 27: Wrapping up the Understanding Place toolkit project

- Tuesday, July 28 (afternoon session): Final presentation

- Wednesday, July 29: Personal and course reflections.