

“Numbers, Names and Narratives: Epistemology for Human Studies in Human Ecology”

Course Description – Winter 2011 -- Gray Cox

11:10-12:35 TF, Library Seminar Room

Office on second floor of Davis, hours 1-4 MTh and by appointment

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This is a course for students who want to use history, anthropology and social science research in their work on community organizing, social change efforts or public policy advocacy. Human ecological approaches to such problems and studies require using interdisciplinary methods to integrate different points of view and different theories in a more comprehensive understanding of a person, text, situation or problem. But how can we do that? What sorts of things are “methods”, “theories” and “disciplines” and how can they be integrated? How is theoretical research related to practical action? How should we deal with the ethical issues that come up in research? How do modern vs. post-modern or neo-liberal vs. neo-Marxist or hermeneutic vs. quantitative views of these things differ?

The aim of this course is to develop students’ abilities to articulate different ways of framing these questions and answering them and to develop their abilities to apply those questions and answers in projects in human ecology – including in internships, residencies and senior projects. It deals with challenges in choosing and using **methods** of research, the construction and application of **theories** in interdisciplinary contexts, and the negotiation of issues arising in **planning and pursuing a research process or action project** and dealing with **ethical issues** that arise in it. The class will examine a series of texts which provide case studies that address these problems at a practical as well as philosophical and methodological level. We will try these ideas out as a class by taking part in and critiquing a collaborative, community based research project in sustainable development issues concerned with the growth and use of wood as a fuel in Hancock County’s “woodshed”. Work for the class will also include a series of short papers and exercises that provide descriptions and critical analyses of texts read in class and provide applications of theories and methods to a project. A final paper will provide a systematic methodological review of that case study.

There will be several speakers included as part of the class. In most cases, their talks will be during the Human Ecology Forum on Tuesday afternoons. You will need to make arrangements to attend these or promptly view a film of them. There will also be a session on ethics and research that will probably be held as part of an ACM which will be a part of the class.

**READINGS:** The primary texts for the course will be **THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION** by Howard Richards; **INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH: PROCESS AND THEORY** by Allen F. Repko; and Donella Meadows **THINKING IN SYSTEMS**. Richard’s book is a very interesting example of an attempt to address the issues the class focuses on – combining both a very concrete case study with systematic philosophical reflections on key issues. It will provide a very useful case to begin with in order to raise basic issues and provide a common point of reference for discussions.

Repko's text synthesizes a broad range of recent research and thinking on the challenges of doing interdisciplinary work. It will provide a useful comprehensive text for reviewing a broad range of issues as students work on their own projects. Meadows book is a primer on systems thinking by one of the leading representatives of it. As such, it provides one example of an attempt to frame a systematic method for integrating theories in addressing problems in human ecology. Material from individual projects and the class project on the Hancock County Firewood Project will provide the other primary reading for the tutorial. Other short readings in epistemology will be used to supplement the primary texts and some other readings will also be assigned depending on student interests and concerns.

There will be regular homework assignments of a brief sort (e. g. framing questions or identifying a key passage to analyze) alternated with a series of short papers that provide an opportunity to apply ideas in the readings either to small research projects (e. g. ethnographic interviews) or to the critical analysis of a case study the student examines. These case studies will provide term long projects that will consist of reviewing an interesting major research project -- looking at its methods, theories, data, conclusions, critics, et cetera. Each student will do an in-class presentation on their case study as well as a final 12-15 page report on it. Collaborative projects are encouraged. Suggested case study texts could include topics related to the Woodshed project – e. g. studies of the forest industry in Maine, the history of Hancock County, the culture of current energy consumption patterns, etc. – or other cases of interest to the individual student including, for example: ALBION'S SEED by David Hackett Fischer, THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW by Wade Davis, THE TWO MILPAS OF CHAN KOM by Alicia Re Cruz, WOMEN'S WAYS OF KNOWING by Mary Belenky et. al., GUNS, GERMS AND STEEL by Jared Diamond, THE PENTAGON'S NEW MAP by Thomas P. M. Barnett, and THE MILLENIUM PROJECT. For students who are sufficiently advanced on an internship, residency, senior project or other significant research activity, it may be very appropriate to use this as the case study for the term project.

The Firewood Project will serve as a case study that allows every student to have a couple of field observation experiences and the opportunity to take part in a class effort at a critical review of its overall aims and methods. Beyond this relatively minimal participation, there will be quite ample opportunities for anyone who wants to participate more fully to do so. This may take the form of focusing your individual term project on it or volunteering to take part in various aspects of it, or attending weekly organizational meetings, or participating in field trips and speaker events for it or joining the project as a work-study research assistant. If you are interested in any of these possibilities, talk to me about them.

**Evaluation:** If you take this course for a letter grade, final evaluations will be based on class participation, field work on the firewood project and brief homework assignments (35%), short papers (25%), individual project in-class report (15%), and the final paper (25%).

HS, lab fee of \$25, intermediate, permission of the instructor required.

Schedule (subject to some review based on outside speakers, field trips, and student projects)

1/4 Introductions, Syllabus review, and a power point on what Human Ecology is  
1/7 THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION, Frame of book, Foreword and pp. 1-50

DUE student survey

Article on comparing costs of competing fuels with wood:

[http://woodheat.org/woodpile/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=62:can-firewood-be-compared-to-conventional-heating-fuels&catid=24:general-background&Itemid=10](http://woodheat.org/woodpile/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62:can-firewood-be-compared-to-conventional-heating-fuels&catid=24:general-background&Itemid=10)

1/11 THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION, pp. 51-90, ERRB website (mini-lecture on Heidegger, hermeneutics, Dasein and attitude change)

1/14 James Spradley, “The Ethnographic Interview” and Firewood readings

1/18 THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION, pp. 91-145

DUE: Initial proposal for final project

NOTE: Also on this Tuesday there will be a speaker at 4:10 in the Human Ecology Forum, Alec Givens, talking on the Maine Forests as part of the class.

1/21 THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION, pp. 146-201

Homework – Ethnographic Interview and/or surveys

1/25 THE EVALUATION OF CULTURAL ACTION, pp. 202-243

1/28 Firewood Project Proposal Critiques – paper due critiquing project using Richard’s concepts

2/1 THINKING IN SYSTEMS, frame of book and through p. 51

2/4 THINKING IN SYSTEMS, pp. 51-110

Homework – apply systems analysis to the Firewood project – schematic chart

2/8 THINKING IN SYSTEMS, pp. 111- 144

2/11 THINKING IN SYSTEMS, pp. 145-186

Homework – apply systems analysis to your term project – 2-3 pages

2/15 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, Frame of book and pp. 1-48

Sample report on text -- Gray

2/18 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, pp. 49-114

Class presentations on projects, with 20-30 pages of reading from text

2/22 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, pp. 115-159

Reading of Foucault on the history of disciplines? Or others to give variety

Mattt

2/25 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, pp. 160-216

- Alex  
Meg
- 3/1 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, pp. 217-270  
Brittany, Milena
- 3/4 INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH, pp. 271-326  
Megan Laflin
- 3/8 TBA
- 3/11 Final session, closing thoughts, course evaluation,  
NOTE: Final paper due