

Environmental Communication Theory: In Principle and Practice



UO LA Student Course Testimonials:

“This DBB environmental communication class was not a lecture – but an open dialogue that will keep you on your toes and engaged. The content of the class gave me the vocabulary to break down and analyze what is really going on when someone creates a drawing, gives a presentation, or simply expresses a thought. DBB’s class also pushed me to find my professional identity in the landscape architecture world. This type of engagement and critical thinking may be uncomfortable to some people, but if it is, then this course is probably exactly what you need.”

- *Will Bonner, MLA 2022*

“Communication is the basis for our environmental reality.’ This course statement by DBB cements how I now approach design-thinking and design representation. Design becomes a sort of storytelling and we intentionally create how the story plays out through visual culture and presentation. David’s class has given me the ability to understand the “why” behind much of conventional design representation”

- *Evan Kwiecien, BLA 2024*

Spring 2024 - LA 472/572

Environmental Communication Theory

Seminar Format (16 students)

Credits: 4

Time: Tuesday + Thursday, 8:30AM to 9:50AM

Location: LA 231

Instructor: David Buckley Borden (he/him/his)
Lawrence Hall, Room 381
dborden4@uoregon.edu

Curricular Context: Fulfills theory course requirement in BLA and MLA degree programs.

Prerequisites: None. All are welcome. This course is open to all majors.

Online Office Hours. Immediately after class, or by appointment via Canvas.

Our greatest environmental problems are not rooted in ecology, but rather culture. And, all effective cultural solutions grow from our collective communication.



Course Description

This course will explore a range of environmental communication theories across disciplines and practices in and outside of contemporary landscape architecture. Content will draw from a variety of allied fields, with shared environmental interests and ethos, including design, art, education, science, policy, and conservation. A range of disciplines, principals, and theoretical ideas relative to the environment will be interrogated through a diversity of cultural lenses.

Assignments along with in-class discussion and exercises will frame principles and ideas as they relate to landscape architecture and environmental design, both in theory and practice. Readings, writing exercises, in-class discussions, and term projects will revolve around major communication themes and modes of practice.

A series of guest lecturers will ground the theoretical coursework in the context of contemporary practice. As such the class will host a range of practitioners with shared interests in ecology, science-communication, visual art, activism, graphic design, futures, and landscape architecture. Speakers will include specialists ranging from thought-leaders at the MIT Media Lab to landscape architects in practice and academia.

Tentative Speakers Include:

- Matthew Battles, Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, Food Futures through community event program
- Sands Fish, designer/technologist, MIT Media Lab's Civic Leader Group. Police futures as speculative design
- Robyn Reed, landscape architect, Los Angeles within design process
- Meg Studer, designer/illustrator, Situations Zoning manuals, picture-books as landscape storytelling.
- Erin Kelly, landscape architect, 2022 LAF Research Fellow, community communication through collective design and maintenance



Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to demonstrate the following:

- An appreciation of landscape architecture as an environmental communication medium;
- An understanding and working knowledge of environmental communication theories, methods, and practices relative to landscape architecture;
- The ability to situate landscape architecture projects relative to communication principles within the greater cultural discourse;
- The ability to creatively synthesize layered environmental information into design projects;
- The ability to clearly articulate environmental communication theory through effective graphic and written narrative;
- A proficiency in communicating in a professional setting, including project organization, file preparation, and final submission of a quality intellectually rigorous paper;
- An ability to balance the demands of a rigorous course while simultaneously enjoying the learning process; specifically, have fun.

Course Content Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1: Intro to the course; communication theory 101 vocabulary, personal narratives
Guest: NA

Week 2: Semiotic Communication Tradition (Signs and Symbols)
Guest: NA

Week 3: Spatial Narratives
Guest: TBD

Week 4: Landscape Futures
Guests: Mathew Battles and Sands Fish, Harvard Meta Lab/MIT

Week 5: Humor and Art in Design
Guest: Claude Cormier via YouTube

Week 6: Publications for Public Design
Guest: Meg Studer, Siteations, Chicago, IL

Week 7: Design Communication for Community Engagement
Guest: Erin Kelly, PLA, University of Detroit, Mercy

Week 8: TBD: Students Choice

Week 9: TBD: Students Choice

Week 10: Breakfast of Communication Champions





Class Format

This class can be characterized as a seminar and is organized around weekly readings, workshops, class discussions, presentations, and guest lectures.

Class meets twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30am to 9:50am. Classes will typically be structured around three modules:

Reading discussion: drawing out principles, themes, and questions from the readings

Workshop: in-class work to further students' critical and analytical skills, including verbal and graphic analysis of environmental communication projects.

Lecture and case study: clarifying and synthesizing principles and ideas as they related to landscape architecture practice.

Students are required to read selected readings and prepare questions before class to ensure productive discussion. Optional readings are highly encouraged.

The class will generally follow a regular schedule as follows:

- **Tuesdays:** Lecture and/or workshop
- **Thursdays:** Discussion

Weekly assignments to be uploaded by start of class **on Thursdays.**

Course work will be posted before the start of class on the Thursday before the week it is due.

Please refer to Canvas for weekly agenda, readings, and assignments.

Guest lecturers will be scheduled as their professional calendars permit. That said, the class content schedule will surely change.



Requirements

1. Attendance to all lectures and discussion sessions.
2. Evidence of reading preparation through written response assignments, prepared discussion questions, and conversation and debate during class, or by specific reference in the student's individual projects throughout the term.
3. Projects analyzing communication design through different practice modes and communication tools

This class is graded with formative and cumulative feedback. Exceptional effort, intellectual growth, and creative risk-taking will be rewarded in final grade. Minimal effort, not so much.

Grading Breakdown

- 10% Personal practice statement
- 25% 50 Applied Enviro-Comm Concepts
- 20% Class participation in discussions
- 35% Critical response assignments
- 10% Final course response

Attendance, preparation, participation, and all assignments are mandatory. Unexcused absences or failure to submit assignments on time will lower your overall course grade. Students are permitted one grace absence.

Unexcused absences beyond that will result in a grade reduction of a grade per two absences (An A to and A-, e.g.).

Assignments

Assignments are due digitally (PDF), at the beginning of the class session on the due date. Include last name and date in file name, for example *Smith_04292024.pdf*. Late work will be penalized a grade step per day (Marginal Pass to No Pass, e.g.). Digital work must be submitted on the Canvas course website; emailed work will not be accepted.

Reading and discussion

Class includes discussion of the readings for that session. Discussions are an integral part of the course. They are forums for sharing your critical insights regarding the readings; and they are where questions can be aired and discussed with your peers.

Expectations

I expect the highest professional standards to be maintained throughout the term. Active in-class participation, open communication, and consistent progress is very important. In addition, class participation also includes respecting the rights and property of others, working cooperatively, and completing assignments satisfactorily and on time.