

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

HU3825, Fall 2026
T/R 3:30-4:45pm, WA 143
Dr. Sue Collins
Office: Walker Arts 305
Office hours: By appt. in person or on Zoom
Office phone: x3260 (voicemail only)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.
Xun Kuang, 312-230 BCE

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.
Frederick Douglas, 1887

Where there is power, there is resistance to power.
Michel Foucault, 1976

This course introduces students to critical perspectives in ***environmental communication*** through service learning designed to develop communication competencies in ***social action***. Premised on the idea that communication powerfully impacts perceptions of the natural world, we begin with an understanding of how symbolic constructions of nature and technology shape the way people understand their relationships with the environment, society, and the world. We will examine key concepts and issues raised in environmental controversies, including the role of discourse, rhetoric, framing, and media in shaping public understandings of climate change. Students engage environmental controversies, then choose an issue/problem (informed by United Nations' 17 Goals of Sustainable Development) to develop an environmental social action campaign. Students will actively participate in a group over the course of the semester in implementing their campaign to change or instate a policy, regulation, or practice on campus or in the community.

Social action occurs when ordinary people in everyday life work together to develop their power in order to change something that matters to them. Accordingly, this course explores how power and democracy work in the context of our climate crisis. Students study environmental communication and theories on social change to apply to the real world through a direct experience of democratic participation and leadership. They learn to define social problems and develop concrete, quantifiable solutions (what we will call "demands") by participating in an environmental campaign they care about. More specifically, the course examines such topics as issue development, change theory, building power, group dynamics, strategy and tactics, and campaign planning and implementation.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course is an Experience course in SHAPE disciplines of the Essential Education program at Michigan Tech. The course content is designed to support the following Essential Abilities: *Thinking Critically* (analyze ethical implications); *Communicate* (communicate contextually, foster collaboration) *Adapt* (reflect on group dynamics and social action efficacy); *Contribute/ Transform* (engage in civic life). For more information, see Essential Education Abilities.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to…

- Identify dynamics of controversies in environmental discourses and the role civil society plays in environmental communication and advocacy (*analyze ethical implications*).
- Justify and develop an issue to frame an environmental campaign (*communicate contextually; foster collaboration*).
- Participate in a public social action campaign intended to change or propose a specific policy, regulation or practice (*communicate contextually; foster collaboration; engage in civic life*).
- Evaluate and reflect upon the efficacy and ethics of public communication in an advocacy campaign addressing environmental sustainability (*reflect on group dynamics and social action efficacy*).

REQUIRED READING (selections from)

Cox & Pezzullo, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (2026, 7th Ed.)
Myers-Lipton, *Change! A Student Guide to Social Action* (2023, 2nd Ed.)
Additional readings posted on Canvas under Course Reading Schedule

COURSE REQUIREMENTS/POLICIES

20% **Online Quizzes**: There will be periodic quizzes on the course reading materials. You will take a timed quiz on Canvas outside of class. Your lowest score will be dropped. Make-ups for missed quizzes will be granted given extenuating circumstances and ***only with an advance request***.

40% **Portfolio and Log**: In this class, portfolios take the place of exams and papers. Your portfolio is where you respond to assignment prompts that a) demonstrate your knowledge of the readings in light of your social action experiences, b) reflect on those experiences, c) log your out-of-class work on your campaign. Readings must be integrated with your project work and recorded in your portfolio. Students are required to engage in at least 25 hours of social action work (1.5 to 2 hours a week during the campaign phase of the course) to receive higher than a C on the overall portfolio grade. Students who fail to meet the required hours of social action work outside of class will likely not receive higher than a C on their overall portfolio grade. Your portfolio and log will be housed through Husky Folio (powered by PebblePad) and be due periodically over the semester. You may talk to your project colleagues, but the portfolio must be your own work. **Late portfolios with lose a letter grade unless you *request an extension in advance*.**

20% **Class Attendance/Participation**: Students are expected to arrive to class on time, having read the day's assigned reading, and to be prepared to participate in class discussion and/or campaign groupwork. If a student has **eight or more absences, they will not be able to get a passing grade** in this class. If you have a special circumstance with attendance, please bring it to my attention as soon as possible so that I may address your situation and consider make-up options. This grade will be evaluated on the extent and quality of your participation as follows:

Excellence (A): requires that you play a leadership role in class and group discussions, apply the course reading materials, discuss points articulately and respond intelligently to other's views; ask insightful questions, and take responsibility for the direction of the class discussion and your teamwork.

Above average (B): requires that you participate regularly in class and group discussions, demonstrate good knowledge of course materials, discuss points and respond intelligently to other's views; ask insightful questions, but you do not take a strong leadership role in the overall class discussion and the direction of your team.

Average (C): requires that you follow the discussions in class and your group, make occasional comments, have basic knowledge of course materials, and perhaps ask questions in class and your group.

Below average (D): requires that you occupy a seat and show occasional show signs of life.

Failure (F): not there, no signs of life!

At the end of the course, you will be asked to evaluate your level of participation as well as your teammates'. This evaluation will be taken seriously when participation grades are determined.

20% **Campaign Binder and Presentation**: At the end of the semester, your group will be required to 1) submit a campaign binder detailing your group's journey through your environmental campaign, and 2) give a group presentation on your campaign to the class. You will be evaluated on the completion and submission of materials related to social action on your campaign documented in your binder, NOT on whether or not your campaign achieves its demands. More details will follow.

In class protocols: Students are expected to actively participate in the tasks/activities for each class. Students who wish to multi-task on their laptops for other purposes will be invited to leave the classroom.

Group dynamics: Because this class involves intensive interaction with other students in a group project, it is expected that students will conduct themselves in with respectful language, tone, and decorum toward fellow classmates. If students wish to change their group for any reason, they should speak to me as soon as possible. I will discuss the possibilities of changing to another group with the student if the receiving group believes there will be little disruption to their group. (However, if the group feels that there would disruption to the group due to possible lack of trust and transparency issues, or negative behavior by the student, that group has the right to say no.) If the student has no group to join, then the student will be given an independent study with no negative repercussions to their grade.

EVALUATION STANDARDS

A: 93-100; AB: 88-92; B: 82-87; BC: 78-81; C: 70-77; CD: 68-69; D: 60-57; F: 59 and below

93-100 = Excellent. This work is outstanding in all respects. It demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of and engagement with the course's themes, theories, methods and reading materials through strong attendance/participation and the submission of all required work. For written assignments, it includes thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights, well-reasoned commentary, skillful use of source materials, illuminating examples and illustrations, fluent expression, and no or minimal grammatical/careless errors with written work.

88-92 = Very good. This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course materials, presents more than a reasonable degree of insight and broad levels of analysis through steady attendance/participation and submission of required work. Written assignments reflect fluency, grammatical competency, and skillful use of source materials.

82-87 = Good. Attendance/participation is steady and most required work submitted. Work reflects competence but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. For written assignments, source materials, examples, illustrations are used appropriately, articulation/writing is clear, and work has been adequately proofread.

78-81 = Fair. Attendance/participation is adequate. Some required work may be missing. Work demonstrates understanding that falls in the ballpark, but source materials, examples, illustrations are not well developed or indicate errors and omission.

70-77 = Adequate. Attendance/participation is adequate. Some required work is missing. Work reflects acceptable engagement with materials but remains superficial, incomplete, or expressing some errors or weaknesses.

68-69 = Passable. Attendance/participation is weak. Some required work is missing.
Work reflects minimal engagement with material. Source materials may be used inadequately or inappropriately, and written work lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations. Writing/articulation may appear vague, hard to follow, or loaded with typos and other technical errors.

60-67 = Unsatisfactory. Attendance/participation is weak. Much required work is missing. Work demonstrates a serious lack or error in understanding and fails to express the most rudimentary aspects of the course. Sources may be used entirely inappropriately or not at all, and writing/articulation appears deficient.

59 and below = Failed. Work not submitted, or attempted, or work that has been plagiarized, or absences total eight or more.

Academic dishonesty: Plagiarism is not tolerated and will result in failing the course. This includes the *adoption of AI writing programs, e.g., ChatGPT, and claiming it as your own* when/if they are prohibited in the assignment directions. (This does not include a writing assistant such as Grammarly, which is acceptable to use.) All written work submitted via Canvas will be subject to Turnitin. For more information on this serious breach of conduct, see:
http://www.studentaffairs.mtu.edu/dean/judicial/policies/academic_integrity.html

Students should keep all materials used in the construction of their written work (notes, outlines, rough drafts, etc.) until receiving a passing grade in the class.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Assessment: As part of the university's commitment to curricular quality, student work products (exams, essays, projects, etc.) may be used to evaluate how well Michigan Tech students are achieving programmatic learning outcomes. Findings are used to inform future course and curricular improvements to support student learning but are not used to evaluate specific students and individual instructors.

Academic regulations and procedures are governed by MTU University policy. The Institutional Equity Office asks that you be made aware of the following: Michigan Tech complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at Michigan Tech, please call the Dean of Students Office, at 487-2212. For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head or Institutional Equity, at 487-3310.

If you have a disability that could affect your performance in this class or that requires an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act, please consult with me as soon as possible so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

For more information on the following policies, see these weblinks:
Disability Services

[Equal Opportunity Compliance and Title IX]

Michigan Tech is committed to advancing the mental health and well-being of its students. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help or to find additional resources, contact Counseling Services at 906-487-2538 or visit the [Counseling Services website].

COURSE SCHEDULE (tentative; see Course Reading Schedule on Canvas)



Weeks 1 – 3

- Environmental Communication & Symbolic Action
- Environmental Discourses
- Issue Development
- Group Dynamics

Weeks 4 –5

- Change Theory
- Communicating/Framing Climate Change
- Building Power

Weeks 6 – 8

- Research
- Group Dynamics
- Strategies & Tactics

Weeks 9 – 10: campaign strategy development

- Campaign Kickoff
- Campaign Planning

Week 11-14

- Campaign Implementation
- Campaign Evaluations
- Campaign Class Presentations

Michigan Technological University is located within Ojibwa (Chippewa) homelands and ceded-territory established by the Treaty of 1842, the shared lands and waters of Native American nations in Gakiiwe'onaning (Keweenaw Bay), Gete-gitgaaning (Lac Vieux Desert), Mashkii-ziibing (Bad River), Odaawaa-zaaga'iganing (Lac Courte Oreilles), Waaswaaganing (Lac Du Flambeau), Miskwaabikong (Red Cliff), Wezaawaagami-ziibiing (St. Croix), Zaka'aaganing (Sokaogon Mole Lake), Nagaajiwanaag (Fond du Lac), Misi-zaaga'iganiing (Mille Lacs), and Gaa-mitaawangaagamaag-ininwag (Sandy Lake).