

## STS300, “The environmental context,” 2004 Recommendations for future classes

This is a summary of the feedback about STS300 in 2004. Out of 62 students in the subject, I received 44 individual forms. I didn't receive forms from Shoalhaven, Moss Vale or from students who were absent in week 13.

I've tabulated numbers of responses and added a few comments of my own. In addition to suggestions for change, there were also quite a number of write-in comments in support of the ways things were done this year, which I haven't tabulated. As well, there were a number of specific comments and suggestions that didn't fit easily within my categories; only some are indicated here. I've noted all comments with interest. Brian Martin

### Environmental topics

Which topics would you recommend most highly for future classes?

- The Limits to Growth, 28
- Sustainable Development, 27
- Valuing the Environment, 33
- Market Instruments, 17
- Equity, 22
- Environmental Standards, 23
- Technological Choice, 16
- Participatory Democracy, 19
- The Environment Movement, 20
- Controversies/Politics, 13
- \* Opposed to all the topics, 2

2. What new topics would you recommend?

- \* animal rights, 2
- \* appreciating nature, 1
- \* Australian environmental policies, 1
- \* current sensitive issues, 1
- \* disasters, 1
- \* environmental regulation, 1
- \* Gaia/deep ecology, 1
- \* global topic, 1
- \* green movement, 1
- \* introduction to theory, 1
- \* new technology/policy change affecting the environment, 1
- \* population growth, 1
- \* processes of change, 1
- \* sustainable development in other countries, 1
- \* worker groups promoting environmental change in organisations, 1

## Theories

1. Which theories would you recommend most highly for future classes?

- political theories:

liberalism, 13  
representative government, 16  
fascism, 6  
socialism, 15  
anarchism, 23  
totalitarianism, 5

- economic theories:

neoclassical economics, 10  
Marxism, 20  
political economy, 6  
Gandhian economics, 18  
humanistic economics, 9

- religious “theories”:

Buddhism, 24  
Christianity, 23  
Islam, 13  
atheism, 12  
Scientology, 8  
Rastafarianism, 5  
Jediism, 5

- other theories:

feminism, 18  
racism, 14  
altruism, 4  
pacifism, 7  
militarism, 12  
consumerism, 25

2. What other theories would you recommend be added to the list?

- \* agnosticism, 1
- \* Amish, 1
- \* capitalism, 2
- \* classism, 1
- \* constructivism, 1
- \* deep ecology, 1
- \* ecofeminism, 2
- \* egalitarianism, 2
- \* environmental racism, 2
- \* existentialism, 1
- \* Fordism, 3
- \* Gaia, 1
- \* human rights, 1
- \* natural capitalism, 1
- \* neoliberalism, 1
- \* paganism, 1
- \* poststructuralism, 1
- \* psychoanalysis, 1

- \* psychological theories, 1
- \* realism, 1
- \* scepticism, 2
- \* scientific theories, 1
- \* semiotics, 1
- \* sociology, 1
- \* utilitarianism, 3

### **Class activities**

Is there any aspect of the class activities that you would suggest changing?

(Use of de Bono techniques; time allocations; assessment criteria; working in groups; choosing weeks to present; etc.)

- \* Have less de Bono, 9
- \* Have no de Bono, 2
- \* Explain de Bono, 1
- \* Put time limits on class activities, 3
- \* Do the activity before the posting on that topic, 1

[Brian's comment: Most students were happy with the class activities. The most common recommendation for change, by a quarter of respondents, was to have less de Bono. This feeling was strongest on the South Coast, perhaps because limited print resources meant fewer de Bono techniques were used. In the Wollongong tutorials, most groups used different de Bono techniques. Some students expressed appreciation for using de Bono techniques.]

### **Bulletin board contributions**

Is there any aspect of the bulletin board process that you would suggest changing?

(Word lengths; linking of theory and environmental topic; assessment criteria; due dates; link to a previous posting; number of postings; etc.)

- \* Have more postings marked, 14
- \* Have postings on fewer weeks, 8
- \* Promote more interaction between posters, 5
- \* Give more feedback on postings, 2
- \* Have a lower word limit, 2
- \* Have a higher word limit, 2
- \* Have the postings due any time up until the beginning of the tute, 2
- \* Don't have any postings, 2
- \* Have the same due date for all tutes, 1
- \* Have a single marker for postings in different weeks, 1
- \* Allow students to choose which weeks will be marked, 1
- \* Have less strict assessment criteria, 1

[Brian's comment: In my view, having the postings due each week before the tutorial was a tremendous improvement over the previous system of having them due afterwards. The tute discussions were among the best I have experienced in many years of teaching. I was greatly impressed by what students had learned before the tutes and by the great insights shared during tute discussions, as well as in class activities.

The main source of discontent is from students who do not want to do work unless it is assessed. This is a dilemma for me as a teacher because, like many of my colleagues, my aim is to encourage a love of learning. For students who do not develop a desire to learn outside of class requirements, university education is largely a waste of time, because most of the specific things learned in classes are never used later in life. What is most important later is the capacity for further learning.

Unfortunately, we live in a "credential society" (for an insightful analysis, see the book by Randall Collins with this title ). In this context, I agree that it would be nice to provide feedback on and assessment of more work. But this is where resource constraints cut in. In Australian higher education, we have many more students per staff member than in years past. So there have to be some compromises.

In my view, marking a random selection of bulletin board postings is similar to setting questions on an exam. In preparing for an exam, students often study topics that are not covered. In essence, from the study point of view there is a certain randomness to what is covered in the exam.

I'm a great believer in fairness. Each bulletin board was marked by the same marker across all campuses and tutorials, and likewise for the essay. No one knew in advance which bulletin board weeks would be chosen, so everyone was in the same boat.

I will ponder ways to get feedback on postings back to students early in the session and to foster more free-flowing interaction.]

## **Essay**

Is there any aspect of the essay that you would suggest changing? (Dialogue format; word length; assessment criteria; due date; use of theories; preparation in class; etc.)

- \* Dialogue format shouldn't be used, 4
- \* There should be a choice of format, 2
- \* There should be more preparation in class, 3
- \* Word length should be greater, 2
- \* There should be less theory, 2
- \* The essay should be due earlier, 1

[Brian's comment: Quite a few students commented that the essay was challenging but worthwhile. Only a fairly small minority didn't like the format.]

## **Activities in tutorials**

Which activities do you recommend for future years?

- Class discussions of topics/theories, 32
- Exercises to learn other students' names, 15
- Introductions, 21
- Exercises working in small groups, 26
- Class activities (run by student groups), 32
- Study of previous bulletin board postings, 14
- Others —
  - \* consensus decision-making, 1
  - \* guest lecturers, 1
  - \* hypotheticals, 1
  - \* local issue, 1
  - \* reflection on learning, 1
  - \* website contributions, 1

[Brian's comment: Exercises to learn other students' names were mainly relevant on the Wollongong campus, because at the other campuses most students know each other. In the Wollongong tutes, "introductions" were linked to learning names, but went beyond this.]

## **Assessment**

What is your recommended mix of assessment methods for future years?

- essay, 27
- bulletin board postings, 18
- oral short reports, 5
- class activities (run by student groups), 23
- exam, 8 (with 8 others expressing opposition)
- other —
  - \* class participation, 1
  - \* website contributions, 1

## **Miscellaneous**

Would you recommend any of the following?

- Small oral assignments each week, such as 1-minute comments on a media item, 15
- Requirement for a summary of the essay due several weeks before the final submission, 21
- Peer assessment (assessment by other students), 12 (with 5 expressing opposition)
- An excursion, 19 (with 1 expressing opposition)
- An in-class simulation (for example of a press conference), 19
- Other — green magazine subscription, 1

[Brian's comment: Based on responses, I will certainly consider introducing one or more of small oral assignments, a summary of the essay, an excursion and an in-class simulation. Although I am sympathetic towards peer assessment, I am reluctant to introduce it given the dislike expressed by some students.]