

Communicating Climate Change: Controversy, Conflict, and Confusion

FNR 59800 Section 1143

Spring 2014

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Course information

Meeting time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 10:30–11:45

Class Location: FORS 215

Credit Hours: 1

Office Hours: By appointment or just stop by. I have an open-door policy from 1–5, Monday–Thursday, though I’m more likely to be in if you email first.

Course description

Despite nearly 30 years of effort, climate change communication has failed to spur large-scale climate action. Indeed, around half of US citizens don’t believe in anthropogenic climate change despite a consensus among climate scientists. Why is this happening? Why don’t people believe in, or respond to, climate change? What can scientists do to better communicate the urgency of climate change? Can we blame the media? Please?

In this 5-week course, we will examine the question: **How can we successfully communicate with the public about climate change?**

What this course promises you

In this class, you will have the opportunity to explore the most important research on why people are or are not worried about climate change. You will develop an understanding of basic cognitive characteristics that promote inaction and confusion about climate change. You’ll gain insight into the role of mass media and journalistic norms in the public debate about climate change. You’ll be able to use this information to identify successful and unsuccessful aspects of past climate change outreach and understand how to improve climate change outreach in the future. **Even if you aren’t going to be a climate scientist or a communication professional, this course will help you to understand how people perceive risks and communicate about controversial environmental issues.**

Student responsibilities & course policies

To achieve these goals, it is imperative that you take responsibility for your own learning and participate as an active learner. I expect students to:

1. Read and reflect on the assigned readings
2. Come to class ready to actively discuss the readings
3. Draw on their individual knowledge, experience, and expertise to help the class as a whole come to a better understanding of the material

In other words, in this class, we will work together to understand these issues. If you're expecting me to act as an oracle and pontificate, regurgitate, and bloviate to you while your eyes glaze over and you wonder about the text message that just buzzed in your pocket, then you will probably be disappointed. Sorry.

Reading and writing in this course

This course consists of several readings from academic, professional, and popular literature each week in lieu of a textbook. Research shows that reading and then writing about what you read is one of the best ways to develop a deep, authentic understanding of the material. To that end, we will use regular *low stakes writing* in this course. Low stakes writing helps students involve themselves actively in the ideas of a course, helps students find their own language for the issues of the course, and improves the quality of students' other writing. I use it in my professional career all of the time.

Sometimes, the low stakes writing will entail freewriting in response to the readings. Other times, we will answer assigned questions as part of a reading guide. I will check this writing for completeness and offer occasional feedback, but it will only be graded as pass (you did it) or fail (you didn't). The point is to use writing or journaling to help yourself engage with and understand the material, not to give you an onerous weekly task.

Additionally, there will be occasional other written assignments in which you use what you've learned to assess pieces of climate outreach or communication or design your own communications. These projects will involve *high stakes writing*, that is, they'll be evaluated for a grade.

Evaluation

Your final course grade will be based on your class participation, whether or not you do the low stakes writing, and 2–3 additional assignments that will be handed out in class. The weights are as follows:

Participation: 40 points
Low Stakes Writing: 30 points
Assignments: 15 points
Final Project: 15 points

Final course grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

97–100, A+!
93–96.9, A
90–92.9, A-
87–89.9, B+
83–86.9, B
80–82.9, B-
77–79.9, C+
73–76.9, C
70–72.9, C-
67–69.9, D+
63–66.9, D
60–62.9 D-
<60, F

Here are some details about each of the components of your final grade:

Participation

It is essential that you attend each class session and actively participate in each class session. There are only 10 of them! Each day that you do not attend class without a good excuse you will lose 4 of your participation points. If you miss more than 3 classes, you will get 0 points for class participation. If you consistently attend class but do not actually participate, you will get up to 28 points. You will get up to 32 points for participating occasionally and/or only in easy ways such as offering basic information from the readings. You will get up to 40 points for frequently contributing to class discussions in ways that improve student learning, such as asking thoughtful questions or offering insightful examples from your own experience.

Low stakes writing

We will use low stakes writing in this course to help us engage with and understand the material. To do this, students (and I) will keep a reading journal throughout the course. The journal can be electronic or physical and should be brought to class. Most of the low stakes writing will involve journaling or freewriting as you read and as we analyze climate communication in class. Occasionally, I will offer "reading guides", which will have questions or prompts to consider as you read. This is intended to be a loose, informal exercise to help you engage with the material. Therefore, I'll usually just glance over your writing to make sure you've done it. At least once during the course I'll collect your low stakes writing and offer more detailed feedback to help your thought process along. The grading on this part is easy: you get full credit if you did the writing (that is, made an honest attempt, not just scrawled down a sentence right before class), no credit if you didn't.

Final project

For a final project, you will apply what we've learned in class to create some sort of climate change communication. This can be an audio or video Public Service Announcement, an editorial, a 5–10 minute presentation, or something else.

Assignments

There will be 2–3 additional assignments that will be handed out in class. More details to come.

Other course policies

Late Policy

Assignments received after the due date will be downgraded one full letter grade per day (24-hour period). If you can not attend class on a due date, it is your responsibility to turn in the assignment through a classmate or in advance. You must let me know if circumstances out of your control make it impossible to complete the assignment on time (e.g. a family emergency).

Academic Dishonesty

Dishonesty in connection with any class assignment will not be tolerated. The penalty for dishonesty will be a zero credit for the examination or assignment and the reporting of the dishonest activity to the Dean of Students for disciplinary action. Scholastic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, use of illegal crib notes, copying during examinations, copying of assignments, exercises, and computer programs, plagiarism, and knowingly furnishing false information. Moreover, knowingly aiding and abetting, directly or indirectly, other parties in committing dishonest acts is in itself dishonest. If you are unsure whether or not something is academically honest, it is your responsibility to clear it with me in advance.

Diversity Statement

Here is the Purdue Diversity Welcome Syllabus Statement:

"In this course, each voice in the classroom has something of value to contribute. Please take care to respect the different experiences, beliefs and values expressed by students and staff involved in this course. I support Purdue's commitment to diversity, and welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, citizenships, disability, sex, education, ethnicities, family statuses, genders, gender identities, geographical locations, languages, military experience, political views, races, religions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, and work experiences."

Beyond the boilerplate, I'd like to add that this is an important issue to me. Please respect others.

Campus Emergencies

In the event of a major campus emergency or any campus-wide circumstances that disrupt the normal course schedule, the course requirements, deadlines and grading percentages are subject to changes that may be necessitated by a revised semester calendar or other circumstances. Here are ways to get information about changes in this course: Blackboard web page, email (carltons@purdue.edu) and phone: (765) 494-1785.

Syllabus May Change!

I reserve the right to modify the syllabus as the semester progresses to ensure that students learn as much as possible.

Course schedule and readings

(NOTE: This is a draft that *will be modified after the first class* based on the needs and desires of the students. So it's already wrong! However, I wanted to give you an idea of what we're going to cover, so here goes.)

1/14 Course introduction

Topic 1: Why don't people do anything about climate change?

1/16 Psychological barriers to climate change action

1/21 Politics and climate change

1/23 The effects of personal experience on climate change belief

Topic 2: How does media coverage affect climate change beliefs?

1/28 Media effects: how does the media influence what we think?

1/30 Early media coverage of climate change

2/4 Recent media coverage of climate change

Topic 3: What makes for successful climate change outreach and communication?

2/6 The Six Americas of Climate Change and the role of knowing your audience

2/8 Making climate hot: tips for outreach & communication

2/11 In-class critique of existing climate communication

2/13 Final project presentation & course wrap-up