Course Rationale

State of the Planet

Although Earth is 4.6 billion years old, human beings have been around for just a small fraction of that time—about 250,000 years. In that time, somewhere between 60 and 110 billion people have lived on this planet, civilizations have come and gone, and Earth has continued to nourish and sustain life. Until recently, we have not paid a great deal of attention to the impact of human activity on the state of the planet, nor have we paid adequate attention to the needs of our fellow humans.

In recent years, people have watched with increasing concern as significant environmental changes have become more apparent. We are beginning to realize that these changes may be the result of human activity—and, even worse, that our future on Earth is no longer certain.

The 20th century was the beginning of global efforts to improve human quality of life by working toward collective social goals. For example, in 1948 the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights marked a significant turning point in concern for the dignity of all human beings, and in the year 2000 the UN established the Millennium Development Goals to improve life for people across the globe.

Although some progress has been made, if we are to improve the human condition and sustain Earth for future generations, more work must be done. We cannot continue along the path we are on.

We need to change the way we live, reconnect to the natural world, develop an ethos based on ecological thinking and global concern, and teach our children to do the same.

Millennium Development Goals

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development (www.undp.org/mdg/)
**Why students should take this course**

Social studies examines human societies and the complex interactions among human beings living together in a shared world. This course provides a lens of ecological literacy through which students can study and understand the complex and often critical global issues that societies face today. Through this lens, students apply concepts related to sustainability, learn about the interdependence of environmental, social, political and economic systems, and develop competencies for thinking and acting as ecologically literate citizens committed to social justice.

The overall purpose of this study is not to instill fear in the next generation, nor to make students feel guilty for problems that are the cumulative legacy of many generations of mistakes, recklessness, and, in some cases, deliberate neglect or exploitation. Rather, the intent is to help students understand that human societies and institutions can and should be renewed, beginning with matters of personal lifestyle, and extending through to collective, large-scale social change. The role of education in this change is vital—hence the importance of this course both as an instrument of critical understanding (seeking the truth) and as an instrument of hope (seeking to create a better future).

**The role of education in social change**

Education plays a crucial role in motivating and informing both personal and social change. With this in mind, this course is designed to help students acquire a critical awareness about global issues, to alert them to the need to be vigilant about the consequences of their decisions and actions, and to provide them with opportunities to take action for positive change.

This course consolidates learning across the disciplines and helps students develop competencies as citizens who are mindful of their place in nature and in society and who are willing to work together toward a sustainable future. The pedagogical approach is based on the principles of active democratic citizenship, ecological literacy, critical media literacy, and ethical decision making. Throughout the course, students examine the social, political, environmental, and economic impact of emerging issues on quality of life—locally, nationally, and globally. They are provided with opportunities to engage in inquiry, active experiential learning, dialogue, collaboration, reflection, and decision making. With a view to transforming life practices, this course includes the planning and implementation of a school or community-based action-research project.

*Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.*

— Hannah Arendt