

Proposal to the University Curriculum Committee re Freshman Inquiry Course

II. Course Narrative

A. Statement of theme/topical area.

The human animal is considered to be both a part of and yet distinct from nature. This relationship between our human selves and the natural world we inhabit is complicated and perplexing. This theme explores the complex connections between humans and nature. In what ways are we humans “natural”? Is there such a thing as human nature and, if so, what is it? How are we related to nature and our larger natural surrounds? How have we described and represented nature to ourselves? How have humans over the course of time understood and interacted with the natural world? How have our understandings of nature changed? Do humans have unique responsibilities toward the natural world and, if so, what are they? Over the course of the year we will attempt to answer these questions, drawing on the resources of the social and biological sciences, history, literature, and the arts.

B. Learning objectives specific to this theme.

By the end of this course students should be able to understand and articulate:

1. the principal issues of the “nature vs. nurture” debate in regard to humans.
2. the ways in which human capacities result from the complex interaction of biological and socio-cultural factors.
3. the various ways in which human societies different in time and place have portrayed the both the natural world and the relationship of humans to that world through myth, art, music, literature, and knowledge.
4. the implications for human action and responsibility that accompany different cosmologies, epistemologies, and *Weltbilder*.
their own personal appreciation for and capacity to move responsibly within the dilemmas that technologically-advanced societies present.

C. Assessment of student learning.

Assessment of both theme-specific and University Studies goals-based learning will be accomplished through graded written work, oral presentations, web products, attendance, and contributory participation; ungraded but carefully reviewed work such as drafts and personal journals; content-specific measures of knowledge which may include but are not limited to exams; and specific measures of University Studies goals.

D. Description of methods to ensure coherence of theme across participating faculty.

The “Human/Nature” team will meet for a concentrated period during the summer and weekly throughout the academic year to discuss course implementation, including adjustments and redesign as necessary. Faculty will visit and present in each other’s classes on a regular basis throughout the year. The syllabus will be collaboratively constructed and major assignments and readings will be shared over the entire three terms.

E. Interdisciplinarity of the theme.

Our faculty team currently includes an applied linguist (Becky Boesch), an historian (Richard Beyler), and a sociologist (Michael Toth). Together they represent over 25 years of interdisciplinary teaching. We anticipate one additional faculty member from either the arts or biological sciences.

F. Relation of this course to other University Studies offerings.

This theme is not formally tied to any Sophomore/Junior cluster. However, students interested in continuing to pursue the issues raised in this course would be well served in several clusters, including “Environmental Sustainability,” “Knowledge, Rationality, and Understanding,” “Framing the Two Cultures,” and “Natural Science Inquiry.”

G. How this theme will address the University Studies Goals:

Embodiment of general education goals as defined for Freshman Inquiry

One of the guiding principles of the course is to design in-class content and assignments which integrate several educational goals simultaneously. Note also that the items in the right-hand column are meant as examples, not an exhaustive list.

FRINQ goals	Examples of how these goals are addressed in the course
Communication • Writing • Graphics and visual communication • Numeracy (quantitative communication) • Oral communication • Group process • Computer literacy	• Students will write in a variety of genres: self-exploration/personal reflection, observation/description, creative writing (fiction, poetry), analysis (of texts, images, events), and argumentative essay. Writing for the class will also range from spontaneous, ad-hoc “free writes” to major projects stretching over a term and involving several stages of planning, research, and revision. • A major focus winter term will be the analysis of visual images of nature, with a view towards both formal elements and interpretation of explicit and implicit meanings. In spring term, students will work with graphical presentation of information (maps, charts). • In fall and winter terms, we will look at the significance of quantification in the scientific method. In spring term, students’ study of environmental questions will include analysis of statistical and other quantitative information. • At least one major assignment will include a formal in-class presentation (e.g., of findings in a guided research project). Informal discussion, both in the “main” class and the mentor sections, will be a major part of the format. • Class discussion (see above) will occasionally include “meta-level” discussion of the process of discussion itself. There will be at least one major group-based project, probably the creation of a website-style “magazine” on a guided research topic. • Students will be regularly use computers for word processing (Word), e-mail (Groupwise), and web browsing/editing (Netscape) software, and they will be introduced to software applications for spreadsheets (Excel), graphics (e.g., Photoshop, Superpaint), and presentations (html-based presentations, PowerPoint).

Inquiry and critical thinking	In a certain sense, the purpose behind most or all components of the class is to foster critical thinking—questioning assumptions and conventional wisdom, appreciating multiple perspectives, analyzing complex concepts, problem-solving. Thus the major focus of the fall term is the multiple, often contrasting or conflicting perspectives on what constitutes “human nature.” A major conceptual thrust of the winter term will be the ways in which the seemingly concept of “nature” has changed over time and is itself, in some ways, a construct of human culture. Multidisciplinary problem-solving will be a key part of our work in spring term, as we address current issues of environmental policy.
The variety of human experience	One component of fall term will be a cross-cultural comparison of creation accounts and/or basic myths of what it means to be human. Our examination of the “nature/nurture” controversy fall term will necessarily touch on issues of diversity within human commonality, and how these diversities are best understood. In winter term, we will consider examples of how different cultures have represented the natural world in art and literature. In spring term, we will look at the similarities and differences of interactions with nature in several societies.
Ethical issues and social responsibility	The course moves towards a focus spring term on the environmental consequences of human actions. In discussion and assignments, students will be asked to explore possible answers, on a personal and societal level, for some of these dilemmas. A community-based learning project will probably form the basis of this exploration.

Science has not been explicitly designated as one of the FRINQ goals; however, we note that each term includes content aimed at increasing awareness of and critical thinking about scientific issues: human biology and the nature/nurture controversy in the fall term; the emergence of major scientific “world pictures” (Newtonian, Darwinian) in the winter term; ecological science and its social and political implications in the spring term.

III. Provisional course outline for Human / Nature, Freshman Inquiry Class for 1999-2000.

Instructors: Richard Beyler, Becky Boesch, Michael Toth, and an instructor to be named (TBN)

<p>Term I. What Is “Human Nature”</p> <p>A. Humans as biological organisms (genetics, physiology)</p> <p>B. Humans as language speakers</p> <p>C. Humans as constructors of and constructions of society and culture</p> <p>D. Accounts of human nature / creation stories in various religious traditions – a comparative view (Jewish/Christian, Native American, Buddhist, etc.)</p> <p>E. Summing up: the nurture/nature controversy: first attempt at a resolution</p>	<p>Beyler [and/or scientist TBN]</p> <p>Boesch</p> <p>Toth</p> <p>Beyler</p> <p>Beyler/Boesch/Toth</p>
<p>TERM II. Humans’ Representations of Nature</p> <p>A. Changing images of nature in literature and art</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ancient/medieval 2. Renaissance/Enlightenment (nature as garden, ...) 3. Romanticism 4. Turn-of-the-century 5. Non-Western conceptions 6. Modern/contemporary <p>B. Changing scientific models of nature</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Newtonian worldview: nature as clockwork 2. Classical Darwinian worldview: nature as “progress” 3. Ecological worldview: nature as system 	<p>Boesch [and/or artist TBN]</p> <p>Beyler [and/or scientist TBN]</p>
<p>TERM III. Humans’ Interactions with Nature: Problems and Prospects</p> <p>A. Is “the natural” the same as “the good”? Ethical perspectives</p> <p>B. Technological revolutions in historical perspective</p> <p>B. Images of “the natural” in contemporary media</p> <p>C. Humans as natural objects: genetic engineering, etc.</p> <p>D. Challenges of the current ecological crisis (probably linked with community-based-learning project)</p>	<p>Toth</p> <p>Beyler</p> <p>Boesch [and/or artist TBN]</p> <p>Beyler [and/or scientist TBN]</p> <p>Toth [and/or scientist TBN]</p>

IV. Preliminary Reading List

- Aitchison, Jean. *The Articulate Mammal (3rd Ed.)*. Routledge, 1992.
- Akmajain, A. et al. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication (4th Ed.)*. MIT Press, 1995.
- Becker, Ernest. *The Birth and Death of Meaning, 2nd Edition*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.
- Bickerton, Derek. *Language and Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Brownowski, J. *The Identity of Man*. Garden City, N.Y.: The Natural History Press, 1966.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- Diamond, Jared. *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.
- Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Fout, Roger. *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*. New York: Avon Books, 1997.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Nelkin, Dorothy, and Susan Lindee. *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon*. New York: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1996.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. New York: Harper Perennial 1994.
- Rölvaag, O. E. *Giants in the Earth*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.
- Rothenberg, David. *Hand's End: Technology and the Limits of Nature*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 1995.
- Rymer, Russ. "A Silent Childhood." *The New Yorker*.
- Wright, Robert. *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Vercors. *You Shall Know Them*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953.