

University of Toronto, School of the Environment
ENV1001: Environmental Decision-Making
Fall 2025
Thursday, 1pm – 4pm

Course instructor

Michael Classens

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Room location

Available on Quercus

Office location

Available on Quercus

Office hours

Generally Thursdays from 10am – 12pm, but best to arrange a meeting

Course overview

Course description

ENV1001 is the core course for the graduate Collaborative Specialization in Environmental Studies at the School of the Environment. This course addresses the topic of “environmental decision-making,” which we understand broadly as the challenging process of how humans engage with the natural world, and the many iterative (and sometimes invisible) decisions we make about how to organize human societies and activities. While decision-making is itself a field of study, this course takes a more flexible interpretation of the term, involving choices about, and affecting, the environment.

Drawing on insights from across a range of disciplines—throughout the humanities, social sciences, and natural and applied sciences—and with attention to fields beyond academia, we will listen deeply and consider multiple perspectives on the environment. Our investigation will be carried out through bi-weekly guest lectures, student presentations, group projects, and individual written assignments.

Students should emerge from the course with a broader perspective on environmental and social challenges, enhanced communication skills across disciplines, and additional experience working in diverse teams. In addition, students should also leave the course more confident about the options for interdisciplinary collaboration. The central goal in the course and the Collaborative Specialization program is to enable conversations to take place within and beyond the classroom about the challenges of human-environment relationships, with new ideas on creative and just approaches to social and political decisions.

Course structure

This is a weekly, 3-hour seminar course. The course is aligned with the School of the Environment's Environment Seminar Series, so six of the twelve weeks of class will have an invited guest lecturer. These seminars will be open to the public and they are held online. However, we will still meet in the classroom these days. Any changes to the schedule will be announced by email and posted on Quercus. Please note that this is a seminar course, rather than a lecture course; active classroom engagement is expected and crucial to the value of the course. Please also note that there is quite a bit of reading and other work outside of our weekly classes—full engagement and preparation will make our class sessions better.

Assignments

Summary

- **Weekly participation – 25% (Ongoing)**
 - Attendance, active listening, collegial contribution
- **Guest seminar speaker facilitation – 25% (Various)**
 - Pre-seminar reflection/questions
 - Facilitation of the webinar
 - Facilitation of post-webinar discussion
- **3-minute thesis – 20% (Week 5 – October 2)**
 - A brief presentation on your graduate project
- **Final assignment**
 - **Photovoice essay – 30% (Week 12 – November 27)**
 - A visual and written essay on a topic of your choosing
 - A brief presentation of your essay
 - **OR** some other mutually agreeable output

Details

Weekly participation – 25% (Ongoing)

I hope we can challenge the individualism held in such high esteem in many academic spaces by creating a collegial and collaborative co-learning environment in our time together. Toward these ends, I want to encourage participating in ways that exemplify support, mutual aid, and gratitude. In part this means actively, respectfully, and supportively engaging in class discussions (in class, and on Quercus). This also implies, of course, attending class. If you're to miss class, for whatever reason, please talk to me and we'll make arrangements.

Guest seminar speaker facilitation – 25% (Various)

Working in small groups of 4-6 people you will facilitate one of the six guest speakers. There are three parts to this.

1. Before the seminar: Prepare a reflection paper and discussion questions and submit to Quercus by midnight on the Wednesday before the seminar.

By midnight the Wednesday before the seminar, you should post (a) a short discussion paper (~500-750 words) and, (b) a series of 3-4 questions on the readings and theme of the week. You'll need to work with your group to determine the approach and to prepare the discussion paper and questions. The discussion paper shouldn't simply be a summary of the reading(s) or theme, but instead you should aim to engage intellectually with the reading(s)/theme. For example, you might consider the significance of the materials; reflect on the questions they raise and/or attempt to address; examine how they fit with, challenge, reflect/concur, and/or link with other readings and approaches taken in the course material, etc.

2. During the seminar: Welcome and introduce the speaker, facilitate the discussion.

Within your group you will determine a division of labour to effectively run the seminar. See Appendix A at the end of this syllabus for notes on facilitation prepared by one of Prof Kate Neville's former Research Assistants. Consider other webinars you have attended and reflect on what made them successful. You might consider this (non-exhaustive) list of roles/duties as you plan: Land Acknowledgment / welcome; a lead host; introducing the speaker; a facilitator for the Q&A portion; someone to advance slides; monitoring the chat, etc.

3. After the seminar: Facilitate class discussion / activities.

We'll have a short break after the public portion of the seminar, and then your group will facilitate the rest of the class. You can use the discussion questions from your reflection paper to spur discussion, prepare an exercise that prompts further engagement with readings/themes, use smaller break-out groups, etc. You can take whatever approach you feel is most effective.

3-minute thesis – 20% (Week 5 – October 5)

You will prepare a 3-minute presentation based on your own work, field of research, and/or area of interest. Keep in mind that you'll be presenting to an interdisciplinary group, so design your presentation accordingly. Please submit any related materials (speaking notes, slides, etc.) to Quercus.

Final Assignment

For the final assignment you can choose one of the following:

1. Photovoice essay – 30% (Week 12 – November 27)

One of the objectives of this seminar is to explore and scrutinize the different (often unexamined) logics that contribute to and rationalize environmental decisions. I also want

us to think about hierarchies of “knowledge” – what counts as knowledge and “acceptable” forms of mobilizing knowledge. For this assignment, I want you to engage with photovoice. Over the course of the semester you will curate a series of images that document your experiences with, thoughts about, decisions regarding “the environment”. You will share an image or two, along with a brief oral reflection, 2-3 times throughout the semester. You will also prepare a photovoice essay, comprised of at least 10 images and 250-500 words of written text **for each** image. Your written text should describe the image, but also engage beyond simple description to include conceptualization, contextualization, theorization, etc. We’ll discuss strategies for compiling photovoice essays in class.

2. Or something else

I understand, in some cases, the need to be rigorously instrumental in having your course work advance your thesis/dissertation project. If you find yourself in this position, please do consider submitting ~something else~ for the final assignment. This could be a range of things, a literature review, a grant application, etc. If you do want to do this, I only insist that you check in with me first about the details, and that the work you submit is original.

Class topics and readings

**Subject to modification throughout the semester*

Summary

Week 1 – September 4: Introductions, parameters of collaboration

Week 2 – September 11: Guest Speaker, Dr. Jennie Stephens

Week 3 – September 18: Intellectual reproduction, the production of environmental knowledge, and decision making

Week 4 – September 25: Guest Speaker, Dr. Anne Spice

Week 5 – October 2: 3-minute thesis

Week 6 – October 9: Guest Speaker, Hannah Beckler

Week 7 – October 16: Hospicing as an approach to decision making

Week 8 – October 23: Guest Speaker, Paul Helm

October 30 Reading week / No class

Week 9 – November 6: Guest speaker, Kerry Anne Charles

Week 10 – November 13: Temporality, spatiality, and decision making

Week 11 – November 20: Guest Speaker, Molly Segal

Week 12 – November 27: Wrap up and photovoice presentations

Details

**All readings are available on Quercus or through the University of Toronto library system. Additional readings may be added week-to-week and will be added to Quercus.*

Week 1 – September 4: Introductions, parameters of collaboration

In the first week of class we'll get to know each other and collaboratively establish some principles of engagement to guide our time together. We'll review the syllabus and discuss the key themes of the course. We'll also get into groups for the Seminar Series.

- The syllabus
- Solnit, R. (July 15, 2016). 'Hope is an embrace of the unknown': Rebecca Solnit on living in dark times. *The Guardian*.
- Gannon, K. (2020). "Classrooms of death", in *Radical hope: A teaching manifesto*, West Virginia University Press, 9-27.

Week 2 – September 11: Guest Speaker, Dr. Jennie Stephens

In week two we'll engage with, and hear from, Dr. Jennie Stephens, Professor of Climate Justice at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. In preparation for this class we'll read the first 5 chapters of Dr. Stephens' latest book, *Climate Justice and the University*.

- Stephens, J. (2024). *Climate justice and the university: Shaping a hopeful future for all*. Johns Hopkins University Press
 - Read the Introduction and chapters 1 through 4 (so, ppg 1-151)

Week 3 – September 18: Intellectual reproduction and decision making in age of polycrisis

In the third week we'll reflect further on the site of intellectual reproduction – the university specifically – and consider how the dynamics of postsecondary education shape the terms of environmental decision making.

- Freire, P. (1994/2021). Opening words. In Freire, Paulo., Barr, Robert R., trans. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 15-20.
- Giroux, H. (2021). Paulo Freire's pedagogy of hope in dark times. In Freire, Paulo., Barr, Robert R., trans. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 1-14.
- Verlie, B. (2019). Bearing worlds: Learning to live-with climate change. *Environmental Education Research*, 25(5), 751-766.

Week 4 - September 25: Guest Speaker, Dr. Anne Spice

In week 4 we'll scrutinize the epistemological basis of (much of) mainstream environmental decision making. We'll be joined by Dr. Anne Space, Assistant Professor in the Anthropology Department at University of Toronto Mississauga. Dr. Spice is inland Tlingit, Deishuhíttan clan (Carcross Tagish/ Tlingit), and a member of Kwanlin Dün First Nation.

- C. Geralda Armstrong, A. Spice, J. Ridsdale, J. Welch (2023). Liberating trails and travel routes in Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en territories from the tyrannies of heritage management regimes. *American Anthropologist*, 125(2), 361-376.
- Spice, Anne. (2021). *blood memory: the criminalization of Indigenous land defense*. *Critical Ethnic Studies* vol. 7(1). [Available here](#).
- Sultana, F. (2021). Critical climate justice. *The Geographical Journal*, 188(1), 118–124.
- Sultana, F. (2022). The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography*, 22, 1-14.
- Todd, Z. (2014). “Indigenizing the Anthropocene”, in *Art in the Anthropocene*, Open Humanities Press, 241–254.

Week 5 – October 2: 3-minute thesis

This week you'll all share a short presentation about your respective graduate projects. We'll have time for questions, answers, discussion, and collaborative inter/trans-disciplinary learning.

Week 6 – October 9: Guest Speaker, Hannah Beckler

In week 6 we'll be joined by Hannah Beckler, Senior Editor of the investigation team with Business Insider. Hannah's reporting on attack-trained prison patrol dogs won a 2024 National Magazine Award and a 2024 Hillman Award in Newspaper Journalism, among others. Hannah recently led an investigation into the unequal environmental impacts of the energy use needed for the burgeoning AI sector.

- Beckler, H., Ho, R., & Thomas, E. (2025, Jun 18). AI runs on dirty power — and the public pays the price. *Business Insider*.
- O'Donnell, J., and Crownhart, C. (2025). We did the math on AI's energy footprint. Here's the story you haven't heard. *MIT Technology Review*.
<https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/05/20/1116327/ai-energy-usage-climate-footprint-big-tech/>
- van der Ven, H., Corry, D., Elnur, R., Provost, V.J., and Syukron, M; Generative AI and Social Media May Exacerbate the Climate Crisis. *Global Environmental Politics* 2024; 24 (2): 9–18.
- Waldron, I. (2018). Re-thinking waste: mapping racial geographies of violence on the colonial landscape. *Environmental Sociology*, 4(1), 36–53.

Week 7 – October 16: Hospicing as an approach to decision making

What if the world we think we know is already gone? How would this shape our thinking around environmental decision making? What does it mean to let one world go while ushering in (an)other(s)? In week seven we'll consider the work of hospicing and world-building.

- Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). “Part 1: Warm-up / prep work”, in *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanities wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.
 - Read pages 3 – 61 (all of Part 1). (*Available digitally through the library*)
- Rheem, C.S. “Sol”. (2024). Hospicing the broken Earth: World-building stories as worlding stories. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 1-23.

Week 8 – October 23: Guest Speaker, Paul Helm

In week 8 we’ll be joined by Paul Helm. Dr. Helm is a Senior Research Scientist for contaminant issues in the Great Lakes with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment in the Water Monitoring Section of the Environmental Monitoring & Reporting Branch.

- Ballent, A., Corcoran, P.L., Madden, O., Helm, P., and Longstaffe, F.J. (2016). Sources and sinks of microplastics in Canadian Lake Ontario nearshore tributary and beach sediments. *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 110, 383-395.
- Grbić, J., Helm, P., Athey, S., and Rochman, M.C. (2020). Microplastics entering northwestern Lake Ontario are diverse and linked to urban sources. *Water Research* 174, 1-10.
- Liboiron, M. (2021). “Introduction” and “Land, nature, resource, property”, in *Pollution is colonialism*. Duke University Press.
 - Read pages 1- 79.

October 30 – READING WEEK – NO CLASS

Week 9 – November 6: Guest speaker, Kerry-Ann Charles

Kerry-Ann Charles is founder and Executive Director of Ne’ikaanigaana Inc. and former Environment Partnership Coordinator with Cambium Indigenous Professional Services. Kerry Ann, a citizen of Georgina Island First Nation, has worked on a diversity social and environmental issues, from waste management and housing to environmental protection and stewardship. She’ll join us in week 9 to tell us about her inspiring environmental work.

- Charles, K.A. (2020). An Indigenous lens on climate change adaptation planning. <https://www.indigenouseaware.com/indigenous-climate-change-adaptation>
- Charles, K.A. (2022). What does sweetgrass look like? <https://www.indigenouseaware.com/post/what-does-sweetgrass-look-like>
- Simpson, L.B. (2017). As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance. University of Minnesota Press.
 - Read pages 1- 70.

Week 10 – November 13: Temporality, spatiality, and decision making

Media often frame climate change, and resistance to it, as spectacular events – floods, protests, fires, direction action. While these are indeed expressions of the socio-ecological milieu of climate change, focusing on these alone risks obscuring the slower, accretive, quieter dynamics of climate change. This week, we'll think with Nixon, Neville, Martin, Escobar and others to consider the dynamics of slow violence and slow justice and how these impact environmental decision making.

- Nixon, R. (2011). "Introduction", in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
 - Read pages 1-44.
- Neville, K.J. & Martin, S.J. (2022): Slow justice: a framework for tracing diffusion and legacies of resistance, *Social Movement Studies*, 1-21.
- Escobar, A. (2016). Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial struggles and the ontological dimension of the epistemologies of the South. *Revista de Anthropologia Iberoamericana* 11(1), 11-32.

Week 11 – November 20: Guest Speaker, Molly Segal

In week 11 we'll be joined by Molly Segal, an award-winning journalist who covers climate change for CBC Radio's What On Earth. Molly was a 2019-2020 Knight Science Journalism Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has covered a range of climate change issues in Canada.

- Segal, M. (October 8, 2022). What working together to save the ozone layer tells us about climate action today. CBC What On Earth, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whatearth/montreal-protocol-climate-action-1.6609919> (Read and/or listen)
- Segal, M. (August 2, 2022). The polar bear became an 'accidental icon' of climate change. Is it time to rethink that? CBC What On Earth, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whatearth/retire-polar-bear-as-climate-icon-1.6555579> (Read and/or listen)
- Wetts, R., Morris, H., et al. (2025). Climate media amidst technopolitical change: Challenges, transformations, and new directions. *Climate Change* 178, 1-23.

Week 12 – November 27: Wrap up and presentations

In the final week of the course, we'll share food and ideas. You'll give a short presentation on your final projects for the course. There are no assigned readings for this week.

Course Policies

A note on the use of AI/ChatGPT: I want us to consider our responsibilities to each other as members within a community of learning and think about how using AI tools may impact/undermine that. I also want us to consider the hidden environmental impacts of all digital tools (particularly those that rely on very large servers, like AI). The ecological

impacts of AI, while out of view, are nonetheless (increasingly) destructive. We should also keep in mind the invisibleized labour – often done by racialized people in the majority world – that maintains these digital infrastructures. Finally, drawing on Métis scholar [Max Liboiron](#), I want us to consider the *citational politics* of using AI. Who we cite in our work and who we chose to be in scholarly conversation with, are always political choices. I expect that the work you submit for this class is thoughtful, critical, original, and your own. I want to acknowledge [Sarah Martin](#), whose inspiring thinking on AI I draw on here.

Deadlines: Please do your very best to submit your work on time. In this class, perhaps more than most, your peers will be relying on you to complete your work in a timely fashion. Late penalties of up to 2% per day may apply in cases where work is not submitted on time. If you need extra time for an assignment, please do not hesitate to ask – and please try to do so at least a week in advance of the deadline.

Institutional Policies

Academic integrity

The University of Toronto is committed to the free and open exchange of ideas, and to the values of independent inquiry. Academic integrity is fundamental to our university community's intellectual life. What does it mean to act with academic integrity? U of T supports the International Centre for Academic Integrity's [definition of academic integrity](#) as acting in all academic matters with **honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage**. For an Indigenous perspective on these values, you might also like to [read more about the Seven Grandfathers approaches to academic integrity](#).

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments:

- Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor.
- Making up sources or facts.
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment (this includes working in groups on assignments that are supposed to be individual work).

On tests and exams:

- Using or possessing any unauthorized aid, including a cell phone.
- Looking at someone else's answers.
- Letting someone else look at your answers.

- Misrepresenting your identity.
- Submitting an altered test for re-grading.

Misrepresentation:

- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes.
- Falsifying institutional documents or grades.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following the procedures outlined in the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters*. If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you have questions about appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out additional information from me or other available campus resources like the University's [Writing Centres](#) or the [Centre for Learning Strategy Support](#).

Use of turnitin (plagiarism detection tool)

Turnitin is a very highly recommended tool directly integrated into Quercus that will assist in detecting textual similarities between compared works. Students must be informed at the start of the course that the instructor will be using Turnitin. If you plant to use this tool, the course syllabus must include the following statement (as is):

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

Copyright

If a student wishes to copy or reproduce lecture presentations, course notes or other similar materials provided by instructors, he or she must obtain the instructor's written consent beforehand. Otherwise all such reproduction is an infringement of copyright and is absolutely prohibited. More information regarding this is available here: <https://teaching.utoronto.ca/resources/recording-of-lectures-and-class-sessions/>

Accessibility needs

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact [Accessibility Services](#) as soon as possible.

The University is committed to developing an accessible learning environment that provides reasonable accommodations to enable students with disabilities to meet the

essential academic requirements of the University's course and programs. Please be aware of the Vice-Provost's [academic accommodation policies and resources page](#).

Additional resources for students

Academics

- [College Registrar](#)
- [School of the Environment Undergraduate Office](#) (for ENV support)
- [Writing Centres & Workshops at the University of Toronto](#)
- [Academic Integrity](#)
- [Accessibility Services](#)
- [Library Resources](#), including writing, research, and workshops
- [Centre for Learning Strategy Support](#)

Health & Wellness

- [Student Life Office](#)
- [Health & Wellness](#)
 - [Feeling Distressed?](#)
- [Student Mental Health Resource](#)
- [Sexual & Gender Diversity Office](#)

Additional Support

- [First Nations House](#)
- [Centre for International Experience](#)

Appendix #1 – How to Facilitate Meetings

What does ‘moderating’ mean?

- If you have ever attended a panel discussion at a conference, a debate or a webinar, you have seen a moderator. The moderator is like a *hiking trail*: guiding people in an interesting direction, helping avoid them getting lost, and occasionally pointing out interesting things along the way. But you're not a tour guide -- you're steering the hike, but you're not providing the commentary.
- The moderator's main role is to keep the conversation lively, on topic and balanced.
- A moderator needs to "read the room". If occasionally someone wanders off the trail, it's okay to encourage them back to it. But if people start leaving the hiking trail en masse, it means the trail is no longer taking them in a direction they want to go.

How can I be a good moderator?

- Be present, engaged, and attentive. Sit/stand comfortably. It's not rocket science, and it also does not have to be perfect.
- Your goal is to facilitate the conversation: we want to reflect on seminar content, dive deeper in the specific topic, and hear people's original ideas, while also meeting peers!
 - If someone answers with a short, vague answer, you can say "Yes, thank you for sharing. We have a bit more time, would you be able to elaborate on that point?"
 - If someone goes off track, you can gently bring back the conversation "This is a very interesting point, but I think it's a little beyond our scope. Could we focus on the initial question, and maybe talk about your point at the end if we have time?"
- **Balance is crucial**: some folks speak more than others, even though everyone in the class has something interesting to say. Try to pay attention to whom has already spoken a few times and whom has never been able to speak. Notice if the conversation becomes dominated by a smaller group and do your best to restore balance.
 - It is okay for you to say: "Hey [peer name], I think you spoke a few times already. Let's go first to those who haven't spoken and get back to you afterwards!" - it's not rude, it's your "job"!

- Use your judgment for when to intervene, and when to let things go. This can be hard to do, so do reflect afterwards on whether your judgment calls were effective.
- You don't need to know the answers. If a colleague asks a question, you can answer as a student, open it up to everyone to see if anyone has the answer, and say "It seems like none of us know the answer here, I'll write it down and bring it back to the whole group". Moderation works better if the moderator *doesn't* try to provide the answers.
 - Don't feel you need to fill all the silences. Sometimes people need space to think before they speak. But if the silence drags on, be prepared to offer another prompt to get things going again.
- You can establish a system that works for you: you might have those who want to speak raise their hand, or indicate that they'd like to intervene by putting a note in the chat, etc.... whatever works for you, and allows people to have a chance to speak without interrupting each other.
- You are not expected to be an 'expert' -- just an engaged peer who is making sure the conversation has a direction, is participatory, and is coherent.