

Joanna L. Dyl
Sample syllabus

Natural Disasters

Course Overview

This course explores the history of natural disasters and disaster policy from the colonial era to the present. The course focuses on the United States, but some readings address disasters in Latin America and the Global South more broadly. We will read both case studies and theoretical work on disasters drawn from a variety of social science disciplines including history, geography, anthropology, and sociology to engage in a broad exploration of disasters across geographic, temporal, and disciplinary lines.

The course will consider questions such as: Do “natural” disasters in fact stem from natural causes? How have disasters shaped societies in different time periods and regions of the globe? How have understandings of disasters changed, and how does disaster science relate to culture and to policy? Are some regions of the globe more susceptible to disasters than others, and if so, why? How does the concept of vulnerability help us understand the impacts of disasters? How have different societies adapted to and recovered from disasters? How can policymakers plan for disasters and improve relief and recovery efforts?

In addition to the assigned reading and in-class discussion, students will write a research paper on a topic of their choice related to disaster studies. Papers must be based on independent research, and topics may come from any geographical region or time period. We will break down the process of conceptualizing, researching, writing, and revising a research project over the course of the semester.

After taking this course, students will be able to:

1. Summarize and critically evaluate theory and scholarship on disasters in social science disciplines;
2. Compare and contrast disasters and their impacts across different time periods and parts of the globe;
3. Understand environmental history as an approach to the study of history using the example of natural disasters;
4. Conceptualize, research, and write a research paper using evidence to develop and support an argument.

Books Assigned

- Mark Carey, *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society* (Oxford University Press, 2010);
- Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (Verso, 2001);

- Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2000);
- Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

These books can be purchased at the bookstore or through other booksellers. Other assigned readings will be available on the web, on Canvas, or through the library website.

Course Format

This course is a discussion-based class. This means that the majority of the learning process will take place through in-class discussion of the readings. It is essential that you bring the day's readings (both books and shorter pieces from Canvas or the web) to each class session so that we can easily reference specific quotes and sections during our discussions. The success of our discussions depends largely on your careful reading of texts, consistent attendance, and engagement with each other during class.

Obviously, a prerequisite to good discussions is a basic respect for others and their opinions. Disagreement is fine (even good), but please remember to be courteous and respectful toward your classmates at all times. Respect for the instructor and your classmates also demands that you: 1) be on time to class; 2) remain silent when others (including the professor) are speaking; 3) refrain from eating during class; 4) minimize disruptions by turning off your cell phone and using your laptop only to take notes. As college students, I expect you to behave like courteous adults and will treat you like adults in turn.

For any of you who are uncomfortable with participating in class because of shyness or other concerns, please come and speak to me. Because class participation is such a major part of the course – and because the ability to articulate your ideas verbally is an important skill to develop – you will need to work to overcome your discomfort. However, I am happy to make accommodations to help you feel more comfortable with speaking up in class or demonstrate that you are participating as a listener even if you are quiet in class.

Students with disabilities (visible or invisible) are encouraged to consult with me as soon as possible. If accommodations are needed, you should obtain a letter from the Disability Services Coordinator in the Office of the Dean of the College.

I encourage all students to take advantage of my office hours. If you are not available during office hours, I am happy to schedule another time to meet with you. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have questions about course material, assignments, your progress, or other topics related to the course or your studies at F&M.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. You may be able to make up excused absences (those cleared with me in advance and resulting from illness, religious observances, family emergencies, or travel for college activities). Arrangements for make-up work should be made with me individually and will usually involve an additional writing assignment. Because we have very few class sessions and because of the centrality of in-class discussion to this course, more than three absences – for any reason – will result in a failing grade for the course. Note that we do have class the week of Thanksgiving, and you are expected to attend.

Assignments

1.) Participation – 25 percent

Discussions are a very important part of the course, and class participation therefore represents 25 percent of your grade in the class. Your grade will be based on evidence of your reasoned engagement with the course materials. Posing useful questions is often more valuable to good discussion than having the “right” answer, and evidence of listening to your classmates and engaging with their questions will boost your grade at least as much as the frequency of your comments.

We will begin most class sessions with the “minute around” in which each student has one minute to present her or his reactions to the week’s material. What did you find most interesting in the readings? What did you find confusing or surprising? How does this material relate to readings from previous weeks? This is your chance to have the floor to raise issues for discussion, and your comments in the “minute around” will contribute to your participation grade for the week.

I reserve the right to incorporate in-class quizzes on the readings (either announced or unannounced) and/or in-class writing assignments as part of your participation grade.

2.) Eight short (2-3 pages) reflective essays - 30 percent

You are required to submit a short paper reflecting on the assigned reading at the beginning of any eight classes in which we are discussing reading. You may submit up to ten essays, and if you submit more than eight, I will drop your lowest grades. These should be analytical essays, not simply book reports that summarize a text or stream-of-consciousness reactions to the reading. They may address any one or more of the week’s readings, and they should be written in your best prose and double-spaced. Your essays should pinpoint the author’s argument and analyze some aspect of the work. I also encourage you to connect multiple readings from the week or relate the week’s readings to previous material. Thoughtful reflective essays will help prepare you to contribute to discussion in class.

3.) Research paper – total 45 percent

- a. Prospectus and preliminary bibliography – required (part of pre-writing 5 percent)

- b. Draft of literature review and updated bibliography – required (part of pre-writing 5 percent)
- c. Draft of research paper – required (part of pre-writing 5 percent)
- d. Peer review comments for other students – required (part of pre-writing 5 percent)
- e. Final research paper – 35 percent
- f. Presentation – 5 percent

The primary assignment for this class is a research paper on some aspect of disaster studies. The paper should consist of original analysis of primary source material, and it should connect that material to existing scholarship, including relevant course readings. It should be 12-15 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font).

Because research is time-consuming, you should begin to develop your topic as soon as possible. A short (1-2 page) prospectus and preliminary bibliography (including both primary and secondary sources) are due week 5. A draft literature review discussing the existing scholarship relevant to your topic and an updated bibliography are due week 9. The pre-writing stages of this assignment (prospectus, literature review, draft, and peer review) will combine for 5 percent of your grade.

In order to encourage revision and strengthen your writing, you will be divided into small groups in which you will read drafts of each other's papers and provide constructive criticism. You will be expected to provide written comments (with guidance from the professor), and you will submit a copy of those comments for evaluation. You will also meet with your small group to provide feedback in person. Many scholars (and authors) find this "writing group" model to be a useful way to receive feedback and support through the writing process. Drafts will be due on Friday, December 4, and peer review groups will meet the next week outside of class.

The final class session will be devoted to student presentations of your research. You should prepare an organized ten-minute presentation describing your work and your conclusions. Your presentation will be worth 5 percent of your final grade and will be evaluated for both content and presentation quality.

Grading

My intention with graded work is to challenge you and provide you with an honest evaluation of your performance and your progress. Grades in the A-range represent excellent work, those in the B-range reflect good work, and those in the C-range represent satisfactory work. Written work that is submitted late will lose 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late (for example, from a B+ to a B), unless I have granted an extension in advance. Extensions will be granted in exceptional circumstances only.

I take plagiarism and academic dishonesty very seriously. Academic integrity lies at the foundation of the learning process and is central to the mission of critical inquiry within higher education. It is also, of course, a matter of personal ethics. Cases of plagiarism

will result in a failing grade on the assignment and will be reported to the Dean of Students. The Writing Center offers a helpful guide to the correct use and citation of sources: [“Using Outside Sources”](#)

Week 1 – September 8

Introductions

Elizabeth Kolbert, “Aftershock: The Shaky Science Behind Predicting Earthquakes,” *Smithsonian* (June 2015): 36-43.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/shaky-science-behind-predicting-earthquakes-180955296/>

Kathryn Shultz, “The Really Big One,” *The New Yorker* (July 20, 2015).

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-really-big-one>

Gary Rivlin, “Why the Lower Ninth Ward Looks Like the Hurricane Just Hit,” *The Nation* (August 31/September 7, 2015).

<http://www.thenation.com/article/why-the-lower-ninth-ward-looks-like-the-hurricane-just-hit/>

Week 2 – September 15

American Disasters

Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, entire.

Week 3 – September 22

Theorizing Disaster History

Kenneth Hewitt, “The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age,” in *Interpretations of Calamity From the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, ed. Kenneth Hewitt (Allen & Unwin Inc., 1983): 3-32. (Canvas)

Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture,” in *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, eds. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (School of American Research Press, 2002): 23-47. (Canvas)

Sara B. Pritchard, “An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima,” *Environmental History* 17 (April 2012): 219-243. (E-journal)

<http://envhis.oxfordjournals.org/content/17/2/219.full.pdf+html>

Week 4 – September 29

Colonial Disasters

Library information session 1:30-2:30

Matthew Mulcahy, “‘A Tempestuous Spirit Called Hurri Cano’: Hurricanes and Colonial Society in the British Greater Caribbean,” in *American Disasters*, ed. Steven Biel (New York University Press, 2001): pp. 11-38. (Canvas)

Alan Taylor, “‘The Hungry Year’: 1789 on the Northern Border of Revolutionary America,” in *Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Alessa Johns (Routledge, 1999): pp. 145-181. (Canvas)

Week 5 - October 6
Vulnerability and Differential Impacts

Kathleen Tierney, “Social Inequality, Hazards, and Disasters,” in *On Risk and Disaster: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina*, eds. Ronald J. Daniels, Donald F. Kettl, and Howard Kunreuther (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 109-128. (Canvas)

Mohammad Q. Zaman, “Vulnerability, Disaster, and Survival in Bangladesh: Three Case Studies,” *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, eds. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman (Routledge, 1999): 192-212. (Canvas)

Rob Nixon, “Introduction,” *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 1-44. (Canvas)

Research paper prospectus and preliminary bibliography due

October 13 No class – Fall break

Week 6 – October 20
Science, History, and Memory

Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*, entire.

Week 7 – October 27
Global Impacts

Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, preface and definitions, ch. 1-2, 4-9 (other chapters are optional).

Week 8 – November 3
Past, Present, and Future Climate Disasters

Mark Carey, *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society*, entire.

Week 9 – November 10

Disaster Cultures

Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003): 1-17, 31-60, 152-183. (Canvas)

Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (Viking, 2009), 1-10, 134-180, 305-313. (Canvas)

Draft of literature review and revised bibliography due

Week 10 – November 17

Disaster Narratives and the Media

Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 604(1) (March 2006): 57-81. (Canvas)

Andrea Miller, Shearon Roberts, and Victoria LaPoe, “Visuals of Disaster,” *Oil and Water: Media Lessons from Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster*, 125-144. (Canvas)

Required reflective essay: Find a recent article on a disaster, and analyze it using the ideas drawn from today’s assigned reading and your own thoughts about media coverage of disasters. You should turn in a copy of your article along with your essay.

Week 11 - November 24

Disaster Capitalism

Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2008), 3-25. (Canvas)

Kevin Rozario, “What Comes Down Must Go Up: Why Disasters Have Been Good for American Capitalism,” in *American Disasters*, 72-102. (Canvas)

Kevin Fox Graham and Miriam Greenberg, “Comparing the Incomparable: Toward a Theory of Crisis Cities” and “Landscapes of Risk and Resilience: From Lower Manhattan to the Lower Ninth Ward,” *Crisis Cities: Disaster and Redevelopment in New York and New Orleans* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 1-23, 134-180. (Canvas)

Week 12 – December 1

Recovery, Planning, and Policy

Raymond J. Burby, “Hurricane Katrina and the Paradoxes of Government Disaster Policy: Bringing about Wise Governmental Decisions for Hazardous Areas,” *Annals of*

the American Academy of Political and Social Science 604 (March 2006): 171-191.
(Canvas)

Marla Nelson, Renia Ehrenfeucht, and Shirley Laska, "Planning, Plans, and People: Professional Expertise, Local Knowledge, and Governmental Action in Post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans," *Cityscape* 9, no. 3 (2007): 23-52.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20868630>

Drafts of research papers due Friday, December 4 at noon

Week 13 – December 8

Student presentations of research

This week, students meet in small groups outside of class for peer review of drafts

Final research papers due Wednesday, December 16