

**Spring 2008**  
**GDS 395 – Sustainable Development in Costa Rica**

**Group Meeting:**

T/Thu 2:15-4:05  
BCA 269

**Professor:** Monty Roper

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**Office Hours:** M/W 2:30-5:00; Th 11-12 (Non-convo days). During office hours, you are welcome to stop by without an appointment. On some days, however, I will be attending 4:15 talks, so it is best to e-mail or call ahead if you are planning on coming after 4:00. During non-office hours, you are also welcome to stop by, but I will often be occupied and unable to meet. I will be happy, however, to schedule appointments during non-office hours. If you are having problems with course materials for any reason, I strongly encourage you to come see me.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** Any student eligible for and needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability is requested to speak with the professor no later than Feb 20th. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Associate Dean and Director of Academic Advising, Joyce Stern, located in the lower level of the Forum (x3702).

**Course Description and Goals**

The goal of this course is to gain a better understanding of the theory and application of sustainable development, with a particular emphasis on grassroots rural development and Costa Rica. Students will be required to review a number of distinct theories related to development, as well as methodological approaches used in undertaking diagnostic assessment and in participatory planning. A number of issues most relevant to development in Costa Rica will be reviewed both from historical and descriptive perspectives (understanding the situation in Costa Rica) as well as from theoretical/comparative perspectives (understanding the issue more broadly).

**The course will primarily be run in a workshop fashion as an extended role playing exercise.** The context of the course is as follows.

All members of the class represent team members in an NGO that has accepted a contract to produce a series of papers that will help to provide a development diagnosis for the community of El Silencio in Costa Rica. The community would like the papers to focus on a number of themes relevant to the community's economic and social development. Each paper is expected to provide:

- A. a comparative/theoretical review of how the theme or issue being examined relates to development in general (the community is interested in the experiences of others and in learning more of the theoretical debates that relate to their lives);
- B. an assessment of the current situation in the community of El Silencio;
- C. a review of the challenges and opportunities that the community faces;
- D. a set of recommendations.

Funding permits only a single visit of one week to the community. The team will work to prepare for that fieldwork and to prepare the final papers by identifying issues to address and literature to read. Class time will be used to plan out our activities and discuss any readings selected for a given day. The professor will serve as the Director of the NGO, but it is largely up to the team as a whole what direction the meetings take. It would certainly make sense to regularly consider the direction we have chosen, and make any alterations deemed necessary.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. Review Essay on development theory (15% Each): Students will be provided with a set of readings on development theory on the course blackboard page. There is no plan to systematically discuss these in the class as a whole, though we can if the team would like to do so. I will be available to discuss these outside of class. Each student will prepare an essay that compares and contrasts the different theoretical approaches to development, and considers how these might be applicable to our case study, El Silencio.
2. Review Essay on Costa Rica's development context (15%): Each student will prepare an essay that reviews the major issues relevant to Costa Rica's rural development. I expect that this will primarily be a review of readings that we have done for in-class discussion.
3. Final Paper (30% of grade): As outlined above, each team member will write a research paper that examines in detail an issue related to sustainable development in Costa Rica, focusing this examination on its relevance to our case study, El Silencio.
4. Participation: (40% of grade). Everyone's active participation is going to be critical to make this workshop format work. There are a number of key expectations in this regard.
  - *Identifying Readings*: Each team member is expected to actively seek out and provide relevant readings on a weekly basis that will go into our blackboard library, providing a one or two sentence overview of the focus of the article. These readings should relate to issues that are on the agenda for the weeks to come.
  - *Class Discussion*: Each team member is expected to thoroughly read the assigned readings for a given day and come to our meetings prepared to share thoughts and ideas with others as we review the readings and discuss how they are relevant to our assignment.
  - *Meeting Secretary*: Team members will take turns as secretary for group meetings. It will be particularly important to take clear notes on our decisions regarding the timeline of preparation, issues to discuss, things to do, etc. We will likely spend some time at the beginning of each meeting checking our progress. The notes from each day should be typed out and posted on the course blackboard page.
  - *Selecting readings and leading the meeting*: Once we begin discussing the issues directly relevant to development in El Silencio, team members that have chosen to focus on a given issue will select the readings for the assigned time slot and lead the discussion of these.

- *Self-assessment:* Each student will prepare a self-assessment at the end of the semester that reflects on what has been learned over the course of the semester, and assesses participation and personal development through the course.
- *Comportment in the Field:* While in Costa Rica, team members will continue to be responsible for participating in group discussions. Team members will also be expected to prepare for and carry out relevant field research through interviews, surveys, or other means. Importantly, team members will also be held to a very high standard of appropriate behavior while in the community of El Silencio. More information will be provided on this later in the semester.

## **GDS Seminar Final Project**

### **A Poster**

Poster due: Monday, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 8am.

Poster Presentations: Tuesday, May 13<sup>th</sup> from 3-5 pm.

Note on posters. The poster is a formal presentation. One ought to be able to look at it and know your question, your thesis and your main supporting arguments. It should NOT, however, have all of the detail of your paper. This is why you are standing by to answer questions. As with a paper, there should not be graphics (including pictures) in a poster that do NOT serve to support the thesis and its constituent arguments. I will make a separate poster with some pictures on it that shows what we did on the trip.

### **And A Paper**

Paper Due: Friday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 5p.m. Paper should be 7-10 pages double spaced.

### **Content:**

The goal of the paper is to provide a recommendation for the community of El Silencio related to its future development. This should be based off of what you perceive to be an opportunity or threat to the community. This might be an OT that the community itself has identified and that you agree with, or it might be something that no one mentioned but that you perceive. This might also be an existing strength or weakness in the community that presents an opportunity or threat looking into the future.

So, your thesis is basically a recommendation for the community that will enable the community to take advantage of one or more opportunities and/or resolve one or more threats. You should probably start (or have started) by thinking of a threat or opportunity. Then you need to figure out how this could be addressed. Again, it may be that several related threats can be solved by one recommendation. Or several opportunities may coalesce around a single recommendation.

You will need to bring in data from the community (i.e. our field work and the literature) as well as comparative literature and theory for your argument. The data from the community will be used to show what the current situation is and to support that the recommendation that you suggest is likely to be applicable to THIS community. The literature will be necessary to support that the situation that you see or that is coming (based on our field data) is indeed a threat/opportunity. You need to show this based on other cases and the development theory. The literature also serves to support your argument that given the kind of community we have, your recommendation is likely to work. So, you will be using both our field data and the literature in order to make an argument that a certain threat/opportunity exists, and that your recommendation makes sense is will likely be efficacious.

I am HAPPY to answer questions about this. Please send them and I will respond to everyone. SEE FAQS on the next page:

## FAQs:

Q. To whom am I making this recommendation?

A. This would likely depend on what you perceive to be the best recommendation given the opportunity or threat you are considering. I suspect that most recommendations will be directed at the 'community'. But they might also be directed at subgroups of the community, or even at the government of Costa Rica. It would be nice if they were helpful to the community.

Q. How realistic does my recommendation have to be?

A. It should be totally realistic. A big part of your paper will be to support the argument that the recommendation makes sense given the situation on the ground and the broader theory and other cases. For example, is the solution to El Silencio's health problems a full time doctor in the community? Well, one might make that argument, but you have to take into account what this recommendation is suggesting. Even the most developed countries don't have more than 2 doctors per thousand people. Here you would be suggesting one for a few hundred? Is it realistic?

Q. Can the solution have come from someone else in the community?

A. Sure, but you need to make it your own. In other words, you are responsible for showing that it is efficacious.

**GDS 395: Sustainable Development in Costa Rica**  
**Course Self Evaluation**  
**J.M Roper**

**Goals of the Course**

The basic goals of the course were to:

1. review theoretical and comparative literature related to development;
2. consider how this material relates to Costa Rica, and explore in more detail specific issues most relevant to the country and more specifically to the region to which we intended to travel;
3. undertake a hands on case study that would enable students to gain a greater appreciation for the materials and to practice a methodology commonly employed in development research;
4. create an experience that students would remember and could continue to reflect on throughout their lives.

**The Course Structure**

The course was undertaken as an extended role play and in a workshop format and involved a two-week visit to Costa Rica over spring break. Students were told that they represented members of an NGO that accepted a contract to produce a development diagnostic for the community of El Silencio in Costa Rica. They were charged with producing a single comprehensive diagnostic together with a set of smaller papers representing specific recommendations for the community. They were provided with a broad set of theoretical background reading on development for which they were responsible, but told that what the class did leading up to the field trip was up to them.

The course was broken down into three time periods, each of which made use of tools or methods relatively uncommon to Grinnell courses.

1. **Preparation.** In the first part of the course, students took the lead in selecting and discussing literature deemed relevant to identifying key issues for the community and generating research questions. A wiki page was generated for each class meeting where students posted articles that they had read along with brief descriptions. A wiki page was also used to collectively generate research questions.
2. **Fieldwork.** While in the community, students lived with families and volunteered at a number of community projects. The group undertook a form of rapid rural assessment using interviews and participant observation to collect data.
3. **Analysis and Writing.** On returning to Grinnell, the class chose a coding structure for their fieldnotes, coded their notes, and then shared these with the class. Different members of the class took primary responsibility for writing parts of the development diagnostic, while all took responsibility for editing. This was initially done using a single Google Document. In the final stages of editing, the document was converted to Word format. The diagnostic identified the present state of being as well as strengths and weaknesses related to infrastructure, organization of the community, economic activities, health, and education. Individual papers and poster presentations were prepared by each individual concerning a specific recommendation, which built off the diagnostic.

### **What Worked**

Overall, the course was a success. Students were forced to think about how theory related to practice, how different issues related to one another (i.e. interdisciplinarity), and how knowledge of an area is constructed. The fact that students were responsible for many of the decisions of the course required them to struggle with what was relevant and what was not, how communities function, and many of the complexities of research methodology and qualitative data analysis. I believe that students gained a lot from living with families and working in the community. Much of what was learned likely relates to the process of research and analysis.

### **What I would Change**

I would change a number of facets of the course.

- Students needed more direction and more structure. They were often frustrated by the lack of clear expectations that came with me telling them to ‘figure it out,’ that they were in charge. I would not likely put them ‘in charge’ again. While this led to considerable learning related to process, it was at the expense of a more efficient scaffolding of theory and case study materials leading up to the field work.
- I would focus the course on one or two issues rather than focusing broadly on development. If I had to do this over again, I would probably focus the course on tourism development and/or agricultural development.
- I think that I would not try to do the project as a large group exercise. This sometimes became confusing concerning who had responsibility for what information. I think that I would go back to what was an initial inclination to have students develop research questions and then pursue these in the field.
- I would do more to prepare students with methodology – particularly interview and fieldnote taking.
- In Costa Rica, we had two day trips around San Jose before we went into the community. Each examined a different aspect of development. I would focus the course only on the one community rather than visit several places before going into the community.

### **Student Learning**

Attached are the learning summaries prepared by the students.