Business 9774 – Business Sustainability

Fall / Winter 2020/21

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Tuesdays 8:00 to 11:00 AM EST
Zoom:
https://ivey-uvo.zoom.us/my/TimaBansal
(6 Sessions)

OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Business activities have amassed enormous economic wealth, which have helped to alleviate poverty worldwide – a central ambition of sustainable development. However, generating this economic wealth has also inadvertently undermined other tenets of sustainable development by contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss, and economic inequality.

In this 6-session course, we discuss these inconsistencies. We will first cover the basics of sustainable development and then discuss the taken-for-granted assumptions of most business theories, including: for whom are profits generated? Can growth be sustained? What governs the macro organizational context? We will conclude the course by discussing more contemporary forms of theorizing that cut across the social and natural sciences.

Whereas other business courses have a strong disciplinary focus, this course has implications across business disciplines (e.g. strategy, operations, finance) and bridges into non-business disciplines, including ecology, geography, and sociology. This theoretical plurality provides fertile ground to push intellectual boundaries.

This course should appeal to any scholar who wants to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue. If you are looking for neat, methodical answers, this is not the course for you. If you are interested in big ideas that sometimes leave you with more questions than answers, you will enjoy the course.

Dr. Tima Bansal has been studying sustainable development since the early 1990s, soon after the WCED coined the term ‘sustainable development’ in 1987, as economic development that "meets the needs of today, without compromising the needs of tomorrow" (WCED, 1987). This aspirational ideal has been embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals. Although much of civil society has embraced these goals, businesses have been slow to adopt them.

Our objectives for this course include:
1) to understand the economic assumptions of much contemporary business theorizing

2) to understand the challenges being surfaced by business sustainability scholars

3) to generate insights of the gaps in existing management theories and open up opportunities for meaningful contributions

There will be a lot of variance in the experiential and disciplinary foundations of students. Some students will be further along in their doctoral work at the business school, whereas others aren’t even enrolled in a business program. This theoretical and experiential plurality are welcome and I have designed the course to benefit from diversity, as long as students engage deeply in the materials.

APPROACH

The purpose of the course is not to provide a complete understanding of sustainability, but to expose you to some of the core issues that can inform your own research. The boundaries surrounding this field are porous, given sustainability’s broad disciplinary span. Sustainability can be seen within the boundaries of current management theorizing, or can be seen as challenging current management theorizing. I prefer taking the latter approach, using it to challenge my assumptions of business and management. It gets me to question not only the assumptions of existing theories, but the questions being asked.

Throughout this course, I hope that you will start to ask research questions that are relevant to both theory and practice. Your work, then, will span boundaries -- aiming to integrate across business and other disciplines to generate meaningful insights.

In keeping with this ambition, the class will be run in a ‘salon’ format. Initiated in the mid-1800s in revolutionary France, these social gatherings were intended to expand participants’ knowledge through conversation. You will prepare the material prior to class, and within class, we will engage in debate and discussion. The direction of conversation won’t be bilateral – from me to you – but multilateral with each other, as we all bring a unique and valued perspective. I will encourage active debate and thoughtful reflection. You need to feel comfortable drawing not only on the readings, but your own experiences. You are expected to come to class prepared to ensure not only that you learn, but you contribute to the learnings of others.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS / EVALUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Every week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Contributions</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Every week</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-class Reflections</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Every week</td>
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The weekly preparation for this course will be very heavy, but there is no end-of-term project or exam. In fact, the workload is front-loaded, so you won’t be dipping in your toes in the first week, but diving in head first.

**Essays**

Each week requires that you submit an essay on a topic salient to the topic. Details of each essay is noted within the week’s reading list. The essay must be uploaded to the Dropbox folder by midnight Sunday.

Essays will be graded with a letter grade, ranging from A+ to B-. An A+ far exceeds my expectations. It is well written and analytically insightful. It does more than simply synthesize the literature, it offers non-trivial insights. If you receive a B-, then you have not shown much effort in writing the essay or have executed badly. The essay is likely poorly researched and poorly written. Any essays not submitted on time will be given an F.

**Classroom Contribution**

All of the readings and essays will be available in the Bus9774 Sustainability Dropbox. You are expected to complete the pre-assigned readings and each others’ essays prior to class.

The class contribution grade will be based on a 4-point grading scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th># of students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Did not attend class</td>
<td>Ideally no one, but emergencies</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>happen</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Attended class, but remained silent</td>
<td>Ideally no one, but sicknesses</td>
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<td>happen so you are only</td>
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<td></td>
<td>comfortable listening</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Good contribution</td>
<td>Most students</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Excellent contributions</td>
<td>1-2 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Excellent contributions are inquisitive, thoughtful, analytical, insightful and respectful. To make such comments, you will have to prepare well for class and listen carefully to the discussion. You are encouraged to challenge ideas, not individuals. Classroom discussions should be fun, provocative and enlightening. You are being judged on the quality, not quantity of contributions; in fact, speaking too much means that other people have less opportunity to speak. So, contribute when you have something substantial to say or you feel there is a lull in the conversation.

Only emergencies should keep you away from class. If you know you cannot make one of the class dates, then please let me know in advance. I will start classes precisely on time, so please endeavour to arrive a few minutes early.
Post-class Reflections

By noon on the day of class, you will upload to the Dropbox your reflections on the class discussion. You can speak to your learnings and surprises from the readings or the class discussion, new connections you made, or any other interesting insights. This post-class reflection should be about 1-2 pages in length. You will be graded on the thoughtfulness of your reflections. This process will help cement the class discussion in your mind and develop your analytical skills.

If you had to miss class, you can ask to review the recording of the class and write the post-class reflection paper for a grade. If the post-class reflection paper is submitted in a timely way, there will be no penalty on this part of your grade.

ACADEMIC OFFENCES: PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism-detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (http://www.turnitin.com).

SUPPORT SERVICES: HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/ for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in Western’s Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year. Please check out the Faculty of Music web page http://www.music.uwo.ca, and our own McIntosh Gallery http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca. Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca.

Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html.
STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are encouraged to register with Student Accessibility Services, a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both SAS and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction. For more information, see http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd

OVERVIEW OF SESSIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sept 8</td>
<td>The Economic Foundations of Sustainable Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Sept 15</td>
<td>The Business Foundations of Business Sustainability</td>
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<td>3. Sept 22</td>
<td>Criticisms of Business Sustainability Research</td>
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<td>4. Sept 29</td>
<td>Business Sustainability Tensions: Real and Constructed</td>
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<td>5. Oct 6</td>
<td>Missing Dimensions in Management Studies: Time, Space, Place &amp; Scale</td>
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<td>6. Oct 13</td>
<td>Systems Approaches to Business</td>
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DETAILS OF SESSIONS

WEEK 1: The Economic Foundations of Sustainable Development

This first session is the heaviest of the course. It spans a wide range of topics that explain the emergence of sustainable development. To understand sustainable development, you need to understand to what it was revolting – specifically to neoclassical economics and neoliberalism (e.g. Hayek, Veblen, Friedman). If you don’t understand the foundations of neoclassical economics, you won’t fully appreciate the paradigm shift with sustainable development.

This first class is exceptionally heavy, so please be prepared.

1. Readings

These readings are all relatively short, but classics.


2. Essay

The assumptions of neoliberalism shape most business disciplines (e.g. strategy, marketing, operations) and the approach business takes to the economy, the planet and society. Therefore, I would like you to answer:

*Essay topic: What is neoliberalism and what are its basic assumptions?*

The essay should be no longer than 1200 words (about 4 pages), not including references. As you are simply synthesizing what you read on the web, not forging new ground, you will be graded on your ability to discern what is important and report accurately.

There is a wealth of information on the web, so I am asking you to search freely and engage actively with the material. I could have simply given you a remedial reading, but there is no single reading that captures these concepts and you will learn more by searching and writing about this concept and its assumptions.

3. Powerpoint presentation on a ‘critical’ body of work

In addition to the essay, each of you will be assigned to a body of work by now famous critics of neoclassical economists. You will be given 7 minutes to present the ideas and basic assumptions, followed by up to 15 minutes of class discussion. The body of work to which you will be assigned includes. I will assign you to a body of work, once we have a class list.
WEEK 2: The Business Foundations of Business Sustainability

1. Readings

This week’s readings shifts the conversation from economics to business – an important shift in the level of analysis. Choosing readings for this day was like identifying six pieces of straw from a pile of hay. Ultimately, I chose high quality articles that are either well cited or well crafted.

Overview


Individual Level


Organizational Level


Stakeholder Theory


Industry Self-Regulation


Institutional Theory

2. Essay

In this essay, I want you to focus your analytical skills on a real world topic of your choice. Pick something in the world that has intrigued you and talk about the role of or interactions with business.

**Essay topic: Describe a ‘real world’ phenomena and the implications to business**

This essay should be no longer than 750 words (about 2-3 pages), excluding references. I encourage you to engage the reader by describing the phenomena and ensuring it’s clear why it is interesting to you. I hope that the class’s essays will heighten your awareness of the span of issues that can be studied in the field. I anticipate that what we will find is that business researchers rarely cover the span of topics that could, or arguably, should be studied.

**WEEK 3: Criticisms of Business Sustainability Research**

Whereas the first week’s readings raised criticisms against economics, this week’s readings show that business scholars also raise criticisms against business sustainability research. These readings reflect different paradigms, one in which the purpose of business is for profits and another in which the purpose of business is sustainable development. The last two readings offer more ‘invisible’ aspects of sustainability that are often missed.

1. Readings

**Mainstream Business**


**Risk**


**The Indigenous Perspective and Colonization**


2. Essay

This essay intends to help you cement the ideas that pertain to the two different paradigms to business
sustainability. I encourage you to read a bit more broadly than the readings assigned and reflect on your own perspectives/opinions of what you have read.

**Essay topic:** Synthesize what you feel are the main criticisms to mainstream business approaches to sustainability

This essay should be no longer than 750 words (about 2-3 pages), excluding references.

**WEEK 4: Business Sustainability Tensions: Real and Constructed**

1. **Readings**

Sustainability scholars are attracted to conversations about tensions. The ambiguity and complexity that comes with sustainability research is comfortable ground for sustainability scholars. A junior scholar said to me recently that almost all the doctoral students attending a sustainability consortium were undertaking paradox research. For these reasons, I have included a set of readings that both speak to directly to tensions and paradox and just two areas of research that can generate paradox.

**Paradoxes**


**Robust Action**


**Industrial Ecology**


**The Anthropocene and Planetary Boundaries**


2. **Essay**

Tensions are everywhere, but we have a tendency to not see the tensions. This essay will help you surface inherent tensions and see them as entry points to research. In fact, my own research is often
catalyzed by unresolvable tensions, such as the tension between been different and yet conforming, or the tension between wanting change, yet seeking stability. This essay will not only help you see tensions, but understand the difference between tensions and paradox.

Essay topic: Describe a tension in business or management theory or practice and how that tension can be viewed as a paradox

This essay should be no longer than 750 words (about 2-3 pages), excluding references.

WEEK 5: Missing Dimensions in Management Studies: Time, Space, & Scale

1. Readings

This week’s readings indulge me. This topic is the one that I believe is at the frontier of sustainability research and can address the current inability for businesses to pursue sustainable development. The reason why mainstream business is unable to accommodate sustainability is because there are missing dimensions to both constructs and theorizing. Once we incorporate these dimensions into our theorizing, we can provide the motivation for organizations, within the business paradigm, to meet the needs of business and society, today and tomorrow.


2. Essay

This essay may be the most challenging so far to most of you, as it will test your analytical muscle. You not only have to grasp some business theories, you have to think about how the absence/presence of time, space, or scale has led to unsustainable outcomes. In other words, you have to think about time, space or scale either as causal conditions, mechanisms, outcomes, or a metatheory of some sort. If you do overcome the challenges, you will likely see the world in a new way. If you do not, you will see
examples from your peers, which is also part of the learning process.

**Essay topic: Why does the omission of time, space and scale in mainstream economics or business research contribute to sustainability related tensions or paradox (possibly borrowing heavily on readings from Weeks 1, 2 and 4)?**

This essay should be no longer than 1200 words (about 3-4 pages), excluding references.

### WEEK 6: Systems Approaches to Business

#### 1. Readings

This week’s topic takes us the furthest on the frontier of sustainability thinking in the business curriculum. Yet, those of you with a cross-disciplinary background may not find this week’s topic that challenging or interesting. This essay, being your last, requires you to integrate systems thinking with business thinking. It will, hopefully, offer something new to each of you.

**Systems Theory**


**Resiliency**


**Sustainability Transitions**


#### 2. Essay

The essay will hopefully push your thinking: for business students, systems thinking will be new; for non-business students, current approaches to business may be new. In any case, I am hoping that you will each learn something from writing the essay that you can share with the class.

**Essay: Identify some ways in which systems approaches to sustainability differ from more mainstream approaches to business (possibly borrowing from Week 2 readings).**
This essay should be no more than 750 words, not including references.