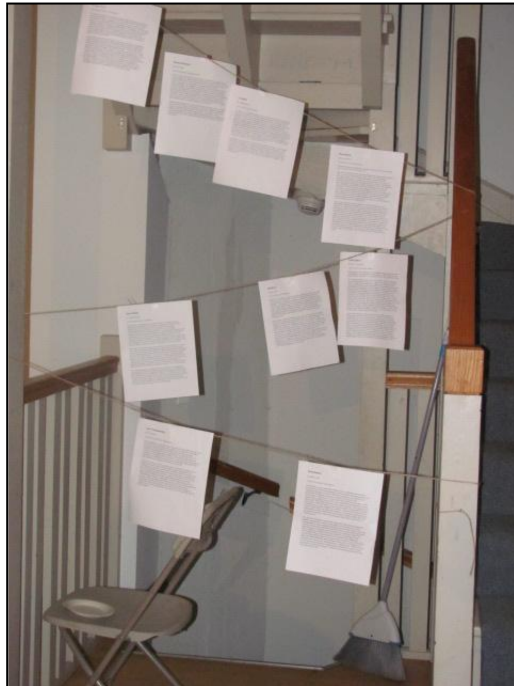
“Keywords for Sustainability”

Environmental Studies
Capstone Seminar

Spring 2014

Students in the Capstone Seminar selected significant “keywords” that emerged from the course readings and discussions throughout the semester. Below are definitions and interpretations of these keywords in the words of the students. These keyword definitions were displayed on a “clothesline” during the showcase event at the Kitao Gallery. Attendees were invited to ask questions and discuss these keyword texts with their authors.



Public Sphere

By Patrick Ammerman

I chose the keyword "public sphere."

When our class began thinking about developing an approach to environmental communication, we imagined the "public sphere" as a large, faceless, mass of people who are "out there." We imagined only the "media" could speak to them.

But, as communication scholar Robert Cox argues in his book, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, there is not a single, pre-existing public sphere "out there," but multiple public spheres that are continually forming, changing, and in the process of being made. For example, today's gathering in the Kitao Gallery is one example of a public sphere – perhaps some of you may take advantage of the occasion by discussing the ideas on sustainability that we have presented and your own ideas for how to make your own communities more sustainable. A more recognizable public sphere may include a city council meeting or Stu-Co meeting. But, so are the audiences who watch a TV show on climate change, or the conversation you may have had today at lunch with your friends about composting, or the lecture on fracking and water contamination that you heard in your last class. We're a part of public spheres all the time. Cox would describe these as consisting of any group of people communicating with one another in arguments, debates, questions, and conversation. We all have concerns about the environment. But unless we speak with one another – tell stories, share current events, debate and challenge one another – we cannot take the next steps towards actually addressing the issues at hand.

As our class readings by environmental writer Francis Moore Lappé have demonstrated, communities have the power of collectively building a more sustainable future. From transition towns, to organic farms, to environmental justice campaigns, there are people all around us meeting and speaking together and choosing to act on their concerns for the planet, and for the well-being of the people that depend on it. But when these concerns kept in the private sphere – when we do not talk about them and create new and informed public spheres – we do not give ourselves the chance build a more sustainable, resilient community. The environment in which we live is a *commons*, it is itself a public sphere in which we can either descend into climate disaster or in which we can thrive together. We can begin planting those seeds here at Swarthmore and beyond through our conversations with friends, peers, faculty, and neighbors – sharing our understandings, experiences, and hopes for a more sustainable place to live.

Thriveability

By Maggie Duszyk

The keyword I chose is "thriveability".

This term was coined by environmental writer Andres Edwards as a challenge to the word sustainability. In order to create a thriveable future we need to adapt a new worldview. While sustainability narrows our vision by simply aiming to minimize our environmental impacts, thriveability celebrates us as a part of nature, including our passion, enthusiasm, and adaptability. Thriveability sees the human connection with nature as something we can use to propel us into a greener and more prosperous future. When we understand that we are part of the world ecosystem and integrate ourselves into the web of life, we will be able to grow, prosper, and flourish through enrichment and abundance and in a way that is in harmony with the environment.

I was excited to learn about thriving cities around the world that are undertaking the most ambitious approaches to change, and rather than simply "minimizing" their environmental impacts, they are working towards having the least impact possible and becoming more interconnected with nature. As you will see in our presentation today, an excellent example of a city that is thriving is Oslo, Norway. Rather than just reducing CO_2 emissions associated with transportation, the city is in the process of developing a completely carbon-neutral public transportation system by 2050, and is expanding its incentives programs for private transportation to switch its energy consumption and fuel sources from gas to hydropower-generated electricity. To me, rather than just striving for "sustainability" to do "less bad," I think the concept of cities taking proactive steps toward the goal of thriveability – that is, to enhance the thriving of their inhabitants, their natural environment, and their built infrastructure – is much more exciting.

Storytelling

By Natalie Campen

The keyword I chose is "storytelling."

Storytelling is a powerful communication tool that can be used to generate alternative views regarding environmental sustainability. We read the work of thinkers who use storytelling as powerful examples to elicit change. Communication professor, Robert Cox describes how environmental communication is everywhere and that "the way we communicate with one another about the environment powerfully affects how we perceive both it and ourselves, and, therefore, how we define our relationship with the natural world." The writing of Frances Moore Lappé also influenced us greatly because she showcases stories from people's everyday lives to provide examples of ways in which we can live sustainably. For example, rather than rattling off statistics to explain her point, she uses a specific example of people working together to better their world.

Storytelling is a powerful mode of communication because it allows us to hear the voices that are often silenced in mainstream media discourse. We hear stories about communities that have been positively impacted by gardens and the struggles they face when operating in preexisting power structures. One story we read was about the "South Central Farm" – a 14-acre, multi-family, community garden located in Los Angeles' warehouse district that was cultivated for years by local residents, but was bulldozed in order to make way for a Big Box Store warehouse. Although this was a tragic story, it raised awareness of the importance of supporting community gardening in our urban environments. Storytelling allows these often overlooked stories to be heard and for these voices to be recognized.

In our separate groups we collected stories from people who are engaged in sustainable farming, who are working in community gardens, we heard a story from Swarthmore's new sustainability director, and we heard many other stories that we have shared in our publication. Stories are an important form of sharing information and communication with others. We hope that the stories that we have shared with you today engage you and facilitate a more personal and deeper connection with the issues at hand. Hopefully, these stories will inspire you to be involved in change and action in your own communities.

Localism

By Megan Brock

I chose the keyword "localism."

"Localism" is one of the big topics in the current conversation on sustainability. The focus on proximity to our food, products, and labor is of growing interest, especially in light of an increasingly globalized economy. Advocates of the localization of production processes argue that it is more sustainable for several reasons: It induces land conservation techniques by removing the need for chemical modifications to produce foods able to withstand long travel times. It promotes food justice and greater accessibility to local foods. And, it cuts down on transport pollutants such as CO_2, thereby reducing climate change, and particulate matter, and thus improving air quality and health. As sustainability scholar Andres Edwards wrote, "homegrown solutions are best suited for dealing with global issues facing communities." In our readings, we've seen that for some people, the idea of "going local," rather than advancing "modern society," can often connote "returning to nature" or even "going backwards."

Inspired by writer and activist Frances Moore Lappé, this semester we challenged each other to instead see *local* as growth, strength, empowerment, and as a core necessity for sustainability. Tonight, in keeping with the concept of *localism*, we encourage you to consider the Swarthmore College community's role, as well as your own, in the local food movement. How can we continue to build upon local initiatives on a global scale, as well as push for a re-framing of "localism" as one of progression?

Food Justice

By Kathryn Wu

I chose the keyword "food justice."

Food justice is a movement that seeks to unveil, challenge, and reshape a dominant food system that damages our environment and perpetuates social inequities through the ways in which food is produced, transported, and distributed. Food justice supporters question, for instance, why farmworkers— those who work every day to bring food to our tables – often themselves go hungry because they cannot afford the very food they produce and harvest. Food justice critiques the so-called "locavore" and organic foods movements, which rely upon a "vote with your dollar" strategy that is largely accessible only to upper middle class citizens. In their book, *Cultivating Food Justice*, writers Alkon and Agyeman note that: "low-income communities and communities of color often lack access to locally available healthy food, and what food is available is often more expensive than similar purchases in wealthier areas".

The spirit of food justice is beautifully expressed in the vibrant community gardens created by low income communities and communities of color coming together to grow healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food. This semester we met and worked with Serenity House, a community organization located in north Philadelphia, whose members are striving to build food justice in their own neighborhoods. By physically and metaphorically removing the sticks, rocks, and debris from the dirt, and by tilling and preparing the soil, the vision for the Serenity House garden is to cultivate not only vegetables and flowers, but also hope, healing, love, and change in this predominantly low-income, African American neighborhood. This is the heart of the meaning of food justice—empowering communities to produce their own food in a manner that supports, protects, and honors both the earth and the people that live in it.

Placemaking

By Lucy Whitacre

I chose the keyword "Placemaking."

Philosopher Simone Weil said that "rootedness in place is the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."

We were first introduced to the word 'placemaking' after reading Andres Edwards' book *Thriving Beyond Sustainability*. To me, when I hear placemaking, my immediate thought is that it's a verb. Placemaking is an action, requiring participation. Throughout the semester this concept has been relevant, as we've read about different communities' placemaking projects. I began researching more about Philadelphia and the range of initiatives throughout the city such as greening by the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS) and Reclaiming Vacant Lots. What drew me to this exploration of placemaking was the way community involvement can simultaneously bring people together and actively transform one's environment. Whether transforming vacant spaces into simple, open green spaces, parks, gardens, etc, the positive impact within the community goes beyond the surface of beautification, leaving behind deeper benefits. For example the reclaiming process results in a sense of pride and importance to a transformed site while also adding value to the neighborhood.

After talking with Bob Grossman, the director of PHS, he shared a story of a Philadelphia neighborhood that had a block of abandoned houses and vacant lots taken over by criminal activity. The community called for the demolition of the derelict houses and the creation of open, safe green spaces, thereby transforming the neighborhood physically and socially and reclaiming the space as their own. Previously residents wouldn't go near that block, but after the improvements, residents felt that associations with with those places were no longer negative (as a location for drug deals and crime). That perception of the community's "sense of place" shifted with the help of PHS, creating positive connections with green space and opportunities for participation in other activities (like community gardens) in the neighborhood. Placemaking projects create opportunities for neighbors and community members to meet, encourage discussion, and most importantly promote action. After all placemaking is a verb. It ultimately does require community members' desire to participate in order for change to occur, no matter how big or small.

Intergenerational

By Shen Wang

I chose the keyword “intergenerational.”

The Six Tribes of the Native Iroquois Peoples believe that “in every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the Seventh Generation into the future.” The word intergenerational directs us to think about the past, the present, and the future. For me, the very essence of sustainability is intergenerational. Thinking intergenerationally is the thought that our natural environment does not belong to us, but also belongs to our children, and to their children, and to our posterity. After the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Brazil, the terms sustainability and sustainable development were defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” and so I think this means we have an obligation to maintain and improve upon the Earth's condition in order for future generations to thrive and to have equitable access to the same resources as we do today.

Intergenerational reflects the concept that Earth does not belong to us but is merely in our hands for the present moment and every decision we make that affects the natural environment should be made with its impact in the future in mind. When I consider all the generations that will come after me, I hope that by working towards sustainability, we will leave the Earth better than when we occupied it, and each generation in the future will hold the same ideal and constantly work towards improvement.

Resilience

By Erin Lowe

I chose the keyword “Resilience”.

Resilience is the ability to recover from change, and because change is inevitable, for a system to be “sustainable” it must also be resilient. Resilient social and ecological systems are built on transparency and trust. They require close social networks—a community that can band together to overcome adversity. Resilient systems require tight feedbacks—an understanding of the full cycle of things like waste—so that if there is a problem with one part of a system, it can be quickly and easily addressed. Resilience requires diversity—diversity in social services (transportation, health, communication) and resources (such as diverse farming systems) to ensure that a disturbance in one part of the system does not mean disturbance in all.

But resilience is also about building systems that *avoid* disturbance. For example, it may be too late to prevent many changes caused by climate change, and we must prepare to withstand those changes. But we must also consider how we can redesign our systems, our management practices, our daily lives, so that they don’t cause as many disruptions—to actively participate in and sustain ecological cycles, and to learn to live within earth’s limits in a way that those limits are not limiting. Doing so requires thinking about the impact of our decisions in both the *present* and the *future*—to consider, as the Iroquois Six Nations Tribes do, the consequences and capacities for resilience for the next Seven Generations. And, in the words of Francis Moore Lappé, we must “keep foremost in our minds the question, ‘What conditions enhance life?’” (Lappé 2011: 174). Resilience is two-pronged. It requires adaptability in the face of disturbances outside of our control, but also requires thinking about the way we live and recognizing that we have as much ability to avoid causing disruptions as to cause them.

“Just” Sustainability

By Trish Zarate

My keyword is “Just” Sustainability.

Just sustainability is a concept rooted in social and environmental justice that seeks to nurture *thriveable* and resilient life-systems for all communities. Prominent environmental justice scholars Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman characterize the mainstream idea of “sustainability” as celebrating “The 3 Es”: *economic* growth through mutual dependency, *environmental* protection, and social *equity*. They argue, however, that the “E” in the social equity component (or the social justice component) continues to be systematically marginalized while white, middle-class environmental concerns are prioritized.

Thus, the movement for a more just sustainability recognizes and addresses the historical and current contexts of demographic-specific marginalization in environmental movements. In other words, members of those communities who have been historically marginalized (low-income communities, communities of color, and indigenous peoples) and those who have borne the lion’s share of the burden of the externalities of modern, industrial development are actively participating and calling for a sustainability movement that also includes their concerns. In this growing movement that connects social justice and sustainability, accessibility is prioritized while power and resources are more equitably redistributed. These goals facilitate a poly-vocal movement for creating and maintaining *just* and *environmentally-conscious* systems of living on the earth for all communities.