

Project Death: Community Engagement and Ethical Inquiry

ISIH 3000 (4 credits)

IHP Death & Dying: Perspectives, Practices & Policies

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This program incorporates two modalities of project-based learning -- community action and self-directed inquiry -- to enhance students' understanding of death and dying. At each location, students will have opportunities to engage with local organizations and contribute to relevant community-initiated projects. Through their participation, students will gain experience in respectful collaboration and intercultural communication as they gain insights into how local communities care for their dead, dying, and bereaved. Students will further apply what they have learned about ethical and appropriate engagement with host communities to their inquiry-based projects wherein they explore divergent responses to their research questions. Through these forms of project-based learning, students will develop a holistic and informed perspective on death and dying.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze the complexities surrounding appropriate community engagement, including how to navigate personal positionality, community dynamics, and reciprocal relationships.
- Delineate the ethical considerations related to the study of death and dying, including issues such as cultural appropriation, respect for diverse beliefs, and the potential impact of research and collaboration on communities.
- Interact with host communities and individuals with respect and cultural humility.
- Initiate informed conversations about death and dying in intercultural settings with sensitivity and an ability to listen actively to verbal and non-verbal expressions.
- Demonstrate critical thinking skills by posing and investigating questions to formulate a multi-dimensional perspective on death and dying.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of venues and regional locales.

Instructional Methods

SIT's philosophy of education is rooted in experiential learning model, which drives the design of this class. Each module allows for experience, reflection, and application. Experiences range from class discussions, interactions with host communities, and project-based learning on location. Reflection occurs throughout the learning process in various forms, such as formal written assignments and reflexive components in papers/projects. Through reflection, students are encouraged to become aware of their process of learning, to make sense of their experiences, and connect the learning acquired on the program with previous experiences and information. Application activities reinforce learning by practicing communication skills, experimenting with theories, and preparing to transfer learning to future contexts.

Required Texts

- Excerpts from the Forum on Education Abroad's *Guidelines for Community Engaged Learning Abroad*
- Articles on Course Reserve as determined by faculty

Assignments and Evaluation

Community Engagement Projects

- Field Notes 30% (3 @ 10%)

Inquiry-based Project

- Project Proposal 10%
- Progress Report 10%
- Final Project 35%
- Presentation 15%

Community Engagement Projects: Country teams in coordination with the Program Director will identify appropriate community-initiated projects. Depending on the project and the organizers' needs, students may contribute individually, in small groups, or as a class. Students will receive a briefing on the project, organization, and community need addressed. Prior to participation, students will learn about local norms and discuss the ethical dimension of their engagement with local communities. After each community engagement project, students will capture their observations and reflect on their experience in field notes. Field notes will be evaluated based on the depth of their observation, analysis of their positionality, and clarity of expression. Additional details on the specific projects, field notes requirements, and grading criteria will be provided on site.

Inquiry-based Project: Students will have the opportunity to synthesize their learning in a culminating inquiry-driven project that utilizes ethically appropriate techniques to explore a line of inquiry into the cross-cultural dimensions of death and dying. Projects may be in the form of a written paper (case study analysis, essay, autoethnography, etc.) or an alternative such as a portfolio, proposal for a community project, or creative work based in the humanities, performing arts, or studio arts. Alternative projects must be accompanied by a formal literature review and a creator's statement about the project. To support the project development process, this assignment includes preliminary stages where students will submit a **project proposal** and a **progress report**. In addition to reinforcing project management and time

management skills, these assignments provide opportunities for constructive feedback on their works-in-progress. Students will also share their projects in a 20-minute **presentation** followed by a 10-minute question and answer session. Additional assignment details for all stages of the inquiry-based project will be provided during the semester.

Note on Attendance and Participation: Due to the nature of this experiential program, full participation in all classes and program activities is required. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the Program Director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, which may impact grades. Excessive, unexcused absences could result in program dismissal. Alternative work for absences will be expected.

Note on Late Assignments: IHP programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis with approval from the Program Director or other designated staff person. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. Students who do not submit their work within the extension period will receive a failing grade.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Program Expectations

In order to make the most of the opportunities presented in the class and across the semester program, communicate respectfully, prepare for student success, and demonstrate best possible engagement, SIT has the following expectations:

- **Content Considerations:** The texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or

participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.

- **Learning Community:** Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across differences and consider other perspectives with respect.
- **Presence.** Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- **Engage.** Ask questions in class. Interact with the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- **Be Honest.** Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- **Store Your Work:** Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- **Course Communication:** Course documents and assignments will be posted on the learning management system, Canvas. Although the course calendar provides a broad overview and the general sequence of work and assignments for the course, what we accomplish in class will vary, and revisions to the calendar will be posted at the course site. You will need to check the course site regularly. You are responsible for letting me know about any network-related problems that prevent you from accessing or submitting assignments.
- **Recording Policy:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the Policies section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research](#)

[support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Note: This is a suggested sequence of modules and topics based on the texts suggested above. Faculty should appropriately adapt how these topics are taught and select local texts, case studies, guest speakers, and site visits that are relevant to the context and CGI. This course framework is designed to be adaptable to local context.

MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

Session 1: Ethics, Etiquette, and Fieldwork (USA): How to interact in sites of memorial and mourning

Required Texts:

- Cemetery tourism: an ethical traveller's guide to graveyards <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/how-to-visit-a-cemetery-responsibly>
- Cemetery Photography: Capturing the Beauty and Serenity of Graveyards <https://mycatholiccemetery.org/2023/07/24/cemetery-photography-capturing-the-beauty-and-serenity-of-graveyards/#:~:text=Ethics%20and%20Sensitivity%20in%20Cemetery,toward%20the%20graves%20and%20memorials>.
- Photography Ethics Centre, Statement of Ethics <https://www.photoethics.org/ethics>
- National Park Service. (2022). Cemetery Preservation Course: Ethics. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/cemetery-preservation-course-ethics.htm>
- Writing Field Notes. <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/assignments/fieldnotes>

Session 2: Project Ideation

- Guided in-class activity to identify lines of inquiry and project options
- Concept creation
- Faculty feedback: conversations with faculty about concept and directions

MODULE #2: GHANA

As a continent, Africa is a popular destination for global service learning whether through academic programs or religious groups. With Ghana as our case in point, we will investigate the possibilities of learning through community action projects as we navigate the complexities and controversies associated with these kinds of learning experiences. We will also learn how to study death in culturally appropriate ways.

Session 3: Ethics & Etiquette (Ghana Edition)

- Local guide to culturally appropriate interactions with the dying, living, and care-giving communities
- Local guide to culturally appropriate conversations about death
- Local guide to visiting cemeteries in Ghana and sites associated with death and dying

Required Text:

- Silverman, G. S., Baroiller, A., & Hemer, S. R. (2021). Culture and grief: Ethnographic perspectives on ritual, relationships and remembering. *Death Studies*, 45(1), 1–8. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2020.1851885>
- Excerpts from the Forum on Education Abroad's *Guidelines for Community Engaged Learning Abroad*

Session 4: Project Planning & Proposal Development

- Assessing information / data needs and appropriate methods
- Secondary research skills
- Developing the proposal

Assignment

- Project Proposal

Session 5: Ethical Engagement with Host Communities - Ghana

- Global service learning, voluntourism, and reciprocal community engagement.
- Recognizing the gaps between good intentions and good outcomes.

Required Texts:

- Video: Prather, C. (2017). Volunteer Trip To Ghana, Africa: Life Changing 30 Days. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSbzh0r9IV4&ab_channel=CourtneyPrather
- Video: The Mighty Roar. (2022). Volunteering in Ghana. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFmIV5REUHU&ab_channel=TheMightyRoar
- Video: BBC World Focus on Africa: Africa for Norway. (2012). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmbcnXD1DM&ab_channel=iKind4Media
- Video: SAIH Norway. (2014). Who wants to be a volunteer? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcflrj_rRc&t=8s&ab_channel=SAIHNorway

Learning on Location

- Contribute to appropriate community-initiated project(s) organized by country team

Assignment

- Field Notes #1

Session 6: Project Development

Learning on Location

- Dedicated time to explore local resources, conduct interviews, or otherwise work on the Ghana segment of their project.

MODULE #3: MEXICO

As the preeminent dark tourism destination, Mexico is an excellent case study to delineate cultural appreciation from cultural appropriation. It also provides opportunities for students to engage ethically and respectfully in communal celebrations and projects.

Session 7: Ethics & Etiquette (Day of the Dead Edition, Fall Semester)

- Day of the Dead: cultural appreciation vs. cultural appropriation.

Required Texts:

- Barr, S. (2019). 'It is not Mexican Halloween': How to celebrate the Day of the Dead with cultural sensitivity. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/dia-de-los-muertos-day-of-dead-mexican-culture-tradition-respect-appropriation-halloween-a9179661.html>
- Video: Picky Girl Travels the World. (2023). Celebrating Día de Muertos in Oaxaca, Mexico 2023 | Black Women Abroad https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK9JZF_RLCE&ab_channel=PickyGirlTravelstheWorld
- Video: Crosby Grace Travels. (2023). Day of the Dead in Oaxaca City MX (what it's really like). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE2FCQgj0IM&ab_channel=CrosbyGraceTravels

Session 8: Project Development

Learning on Location

- Dedicated time to explore local resources, conduct interviews, or otherwise work on the Mexico segment of their project.

Assignment

- Progress report

Session 9: Ethical Engagement with Host Communities – Mexico

Learning on Location

- Contribute to appropriate community-initiated project(s) organized by country team

Assignment

- Field Notes #2

MODULE #4: INDONESIA

Indonesia in general and Bali in particular with its tight-knit neighborhoods and villages provides ample opportunities to examine the impact of global service learning on host communities and visiting students. Through our community action projects, we will interrogate how positionality and power inform interactions and outcomes. We will also learn how to study death in culturally appropriate ways.

Session 10: Ethics & Etiquette (Indonesia Edition)

- Local guide to culturally appropriate interactions with the dying, living, and care-giving communities
- Local guide to culturally appropriate conversations about death
- Local guide to visiting cemeteries, memorials, and other sites associated with death and dying

Session 11: Ethical Engagement with Host Communities – Bali

- Positionality, power, and participation.
- Interactions between US students and local communities.

Required Texts:

- Vorstermans, J., & MacDonald, K. (2022). Essential participants: Centering the experiences of southern hosts in global service-learning pedagogy and practice. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 34(3), 94–122. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.36366/frontiers.v34i3.666>
- Taylor, S. R. (2020). Ethnographers and collaborators in the voluntourism encounter. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 44(2), 180–185. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1111/napa.12148>

Learning on Location

- Contribute to appropriate community-initiated project(s) organized by country team

Assignment

- Field Notes #3

Session 12: Project

Learning on Location

- Dedicated time to explore local resources, conduct interviews, or otherwise work on the Indonesia segment of their project.

Assignments:

- Final Project
- Presentation