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## **Business 9774 – Business Sustainability**

**Fall 2022**

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**Mondays 9:00 am to 12:00 pm EST (6 Sessions)  
September 12 to October 24 (no class on Oct 10)**

**Room: 2120, Ivey Building**

**If required: Zoom: <https://ivey-uwo.zoom.us/my/TimaBansal>**

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### **OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES**

The economic paradigm has helped business to amass enormous wealth and 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 course is not 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, which is economic development that "meets the needs of today, without compromising the needs of tomorrow" (WCED, 1987). A conventional approach to economic development focuses on short-term growth; sustainable development asks that economic activities serve not just the present generation, but future generations by ensuring that natural resources not be compromised. 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 assumptions of much contemporary business theorizing
- 2) to understand the challenges to contemporary business theorizing by business sustainability scholars
- 3) to theorize different ways in which the gaps in contemporary business theorizing can be closed

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**

These 6 sessions cannot provide a complete understanding of business sustainability. Rather, it aims to sensitize you of inherent assumptions that are made in contemporary business theorizing. I will have achieved my objective if you start to see the world through a new lens, which can inform your own research. I hope that you will start to ask research questions that can inform your own theorizing and empirical work.

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. This course, then, while grounded in business strategy is relevant to students within any discipline – business or otherwise.

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**

Activity	Grade	Due Date
Essays	40%	Every week
Classroom Contributions	25%	Every week
Post-class Reflections	25%	Every week
Final Reflection	10%	October 28

The weekly preparation for this course is admittedly heavy, but the end-of-term essay is quite light. Unlikely many courses, the workload for this course is front-loaded. You won't be dipping in your toes into the content, but diving headfirst.

**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 6 am 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, but also offers non-trivial insights. If you receive a B-, then you have not shown a good understanding of the week's readings, have merely summarized rather than synthesized them, and have not shown much effort in writing the essay or have executed badly. Any essays not submitted on time will be given an F.

You should upload the essay to the Bus9774 Sustainability Dropbox, with a file name with the following format <surname>\_<Week#>.doc. For example, my essay in Week 1 would be Bansal\_Week1.doc. You are expected to complete the pre-assigned readings and each others' essays prior to class.

**Classroom Contribution**

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

Grade	Performance	# of students
0	Did not attend class	Ideally no one, but emergencies happen. You cannot make up the classes you miss.
1	Attended class, but remained silent	Ideally everyone contributes, but there are days that you only want to listen.
2	Good contribution	Most students
3	Excellent contributions	1-2 students. Based on quality, not quantity. You have elevated the conversation to a high level. You are inquisitive, thoughtful, analytical, insightful and respectful. You have <i>prepared well</i> for class and <i>listened carefully</i> 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 (email is best), so we are not wondering where you are. I will start classes precisely on time, so please endeavour to arrive a few minutes early.

### **Post-class Reflections**

By 2 pm 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 and your attentiveness to the discussion. 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.

### **Final Reflection**

In this final essay, you must view the problem you described in the second week of class through one of the theoretical lenses we discussed in class. You are not expected to develop new theory, merely see and express the phenomena through theory. Doing so will develop an important research muscle.

For example, if you might be fascinated by climate change or poverty and want to express it as a systems issue, so you would describe some of its systems properties. Or, you might want to apply institutional theory by describing the institutional dynamics. You will want to read a bit more in the theoretical frame that you use, but you are not expected to do a deep dive into the theory. This essay is intended to be exploratory, not definitive.

You should end the essay with 2-3 provocative questions that are exposed through this lens that you could have explored, should you have undertaken a research project in this area.

The essay should not exceed 1200 words (including tables, but excluding figures and references) – about 4 pages.

### **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](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](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

Date	Topic
1. Sept 12	Economic Theories for Sustainable Development
2. Sept 19	Management Theories for Business Sustainability
3. Sept 26	Criticisms of Business Sustainability
4. Oct 3	Tensions, Tradeoffs and Synergies: Real and Constructed
5. Oct 17	Undertheorized Dimensions: Time, Space, Place & Scale
6. Oct 24	Systems Approaches to Business

## DETAILS OF SESSIONS

### WEEK 1: Economic Theories for 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 not only understand what it is, but to what it was reacting – 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

This reading introduces the concept of sustainable development, both to this class, but also the world. Before 1987, there were few mentions in the public press or academic discourse. Even though this reading is old, it's amazingly prescient.

Brundtland, G., Khalid, M., Agnelli, S., Al-Athel, S., Chidzero, B., Fadika, L., ... & Okita, S. (1987). [Our Common Future](#), 'Brundtland report'. *Read only Part 1*.

These readings are relatively short, but classic in neoclassical economics.

Friedman, M. (1970). [The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits](#), *New York Times Magazine*.

Hardin, G. (1968). [The Tragedy of the Commons](#), *Science*. 162 (3859): 1243-1248.

## 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 neoclassical economics 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. I will assign you to a body of work, once we have a class list.

Behavioral Economics

Environmental Economics

Ecological Economics

Amartya Sen and Development Economics

Elinor Ostrom and Governing the Commons

## WEEK 2: Management Theories for Business Sustainability

### 1. Readings

This week's readings shifts the conversation from economics to business – which reflects a shift in the 'actor'. 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. Even though we are focused on management articles, they reflect differences in levels of analysis.

The overview readings are important. The one on levels of analysis is important in your work, as it illuminates why there are different disciplines. Within management, we see organizational behavior (micro), strategy (organizational), and economics (macro). Across disciplines, we see psychology (micro) and economics and sociology (macro). Seeing levels of analysis will help you in your work, but also spot patterns in new ways. This will be a theme throughout the course.

The reading on business sustainability is admittedly long. What you need to discern from this reading is to understand business sustainability and disambiguate from CSR.

For the remaining readings, it's important to not get lost in the details. For each reading, step back and ask yourself (a) what part of the jigsaw puzzle of sustainability is this type of article illuminating; (b) the overall assumptions being made in the arguments; (c) the insights offered and the limitations of the empirical approach, if there are data. On the last of these points, only 4 articles are empirical and they are all very different. We will have a brief discussion in class about the different methodological approaches, so try to make some sense of the assumptions made by the methods.

### Levels of Analysis

Kozlowski, S. W., & Klein, K. J. (2000). A multilevel approach to theory and research in organizations: Contextual, temporal, and emergent processes.

### What is Business Sustainability?

Bansal, P & Song, H (2017), Similar but not the Same: Differentiating between Corporate Sustainability and Corporate Responsibility, *Academy of Management Annals*: 11(1): 105-149.

### Individual Level

Jones, R.G. (2020). *The Applied Psychology of Sustainability* (2nd ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429488382>. <Read chapter 4 for this class. If you are unfamiliar with this space, I encourage you to skim chapters 1-3.>

### Organizational Level

Flammer, C. (2015). Does corporate social responsibility lead to superior financial performance? A regression discontinuity approach. *Management Science*, 61(11), 2549-2568.

### Stakeholder Theory

Hörisch, J., Freeman, R. E., & Schaltegger, S. (2014). Applying stakeholder theory in sustainability management: Links, similarities, dissimilarities, and a conceptual framework. *Organization & Environment*, 27(4), 328-346.

### Industry Self-Regulation

Barnett, M. L., & King, A. A. (2008). Good fences make good neighbors: A longitudinal analysis of an industry self-regulatory institution. *Academy of Management*



*Journal*, 51(6), 1150-1170.

### *Institutional Theory*

Ansari, S., Wijen, F., & Gray, B. (2013). Constructing a climate change logic: An institutional perspective on the “tragedy of the commons”. *Organization Science*, 24(4), 1014-1040.

### *Supplementary <only for keeners>*

As this is the area that has received the most attention in management scholarship, I thought I would give the keeners a couple more articles.

Hoffman, A. J., & Jennings, P. D. (2018). *Re-engaging with sustainability in the Anthropocene era: An institutional approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Schüssler, E., Ruling, C. C., & Wittneben, B. B. (2014). On melting summits: The limitations of field-configuring events as catalysts of change in transnational climate policy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(1), 140-171.

Zietsma, C., & Lawrence, T. B. (2010). Institutional work in the transformation of an organizational field: The interplay of boundary work and practice work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55(2), 189-221.

## **2. Essay**

In this essay, I want you to focus your analytical skills on a wicked problem (or grand challenge) 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 wicked problem and the implications to business*

This essay should be no longer than 750 words (about 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. The first part of the essay should describe the issue and why it is important – not only to business, but the world. I encourage you to move beyond rhetoric and hyperboles. Describe deeply the issue, using either data or stories. The second part of the essay should describe why it is important to business and organizations.

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**

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

Gladwin, T. N., Kennelly, J. J., & Krause, T. S. (1995). Shifting paradigms for sustainable development: Implications for management theory and research. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 874-907.

DesJardins, J. (2016). Is it time to jump off the sustainability bandwagon? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 26(1), 117–135

Banerjee, S. B. (2011). Embedding Sustainability Across the Organization: A Critical Perspective. *Organization Studies*, 29(12), 1541-1563.

### An Indigenous Perspective and Colonization

Berkes, F., Colding, J., & Folke, C. (2000). Rediscovery of traditional ecological knowledge as adaptive management. *Ecological applications*, 10(5), 1251-1262.

Whiteman, G., & Cooper, W. H. (2000) Ecological embeddedness. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(6): 1265-1282.

## 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: Tensions, Tradeoffs and Synergies: 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

Hahn, T., & Knight, E. (2019). The ontology of organizational paradox: a quantum approach. *Academy of Management Review*, (ja).

Schad, J., & Bansal, P. (2018). Seeing the forest and the trees: How a systems perspective informs paradox research. *Journal of Management Studies*, 55(8), 1490-1506.

Smith, W. K., & Besharov, M. L. (2019). Bowing before dual gods: How structured flexibility sustains organizational hybridity. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 64(1), 1-44.

### Robust Action

Ferraro, F., Etzion, D., & Gehman, J. (2015). Tackling grand challenges pragmatically: Robust action revisited. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 363-390.

### Industrial Ecology

Corvellec, H., Stowell, A. F., & Johansson, N. (2022). Critiques of the circular economy. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 26(2), 421-432.

### The Anthropocene and Planetary Boundaries

Hoffman, A. J., & Jennings, P. D. (2021). Institutional-political scenarios for Anthropocene society. *Business & Society*, 60(1), 57-94.

## **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 being 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.

Time

Bansal, P., & DesJardine, M. R. (2014). Business sustainability: It is about time. *Strategic Organization*, 12(1), 70-78.

Slawinski, N., & Bansal, P. (2015). Short on Time: Intertemporal Tensions in Business Sustainability. *Organization Science*, 26(2), 531-549.

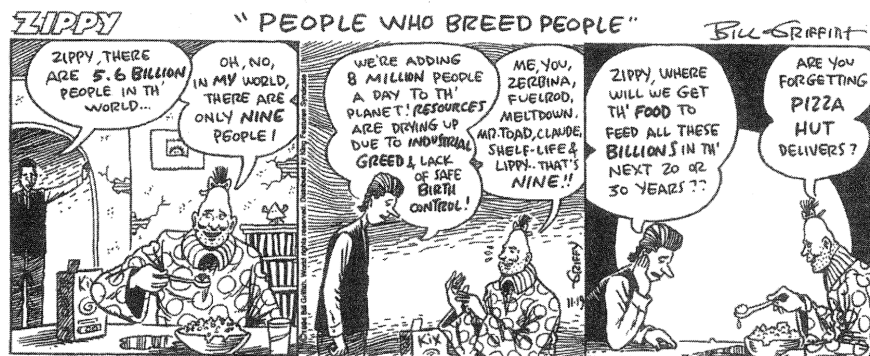
Rahmandad, H., Henderson, R., & Repenning, N. P. (2018). Making the numbers? “Short termism” and the puzzle of only occasional disaster. *Management Science*, 64(3), 1328-1347. (You only need a superficial look at the modeling)

Space and Place

Guthey, G. T., Whiteman, G., & Elmes, M. (2014). Place and sense of place: Implications for organizational studies of sustainability. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(3), 254-265.

Scale

Bansal, P., Kim, A., & Wood, M. O. (2018). Hidden in plain sight: The importance of scale in organizations’ attention to issues. *Academy of Management Review*, 43(2), 217-241.



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## 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

Akoff, Russell. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgEelG8aPPk> (approx. 12 minutes).

Sterman, J. D. (2001). System dynamics modeling. *California Management Review*, 43(4), 8-25.

Williams, A., Kennedy, S., Philipp, F., & Whiteman, G. (2017). Systems thinking: A review of sustainability management research. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 148, 866-881.

#### Risk & Resilience

Hardy, C. et al, (2020) Organizing risk: Organization and management theory for the risk society, *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(2): 1032-1086.

Holling, C. S. (2001). Understanding the complexity of economic, ecological, and social systems. *Ecosystems*, 4(5), 390-405.

Ortiz-de-Mandojana, N. and Bansal, P. (2016), The Long-Term Benefits of Organizational Resilience through Sustainable Business Practices, *Strategic Management*

*Journal*, 37: 1615-1631.

*Sustainability Transitions*

Geels, F. W., & Schot, J. (2007). Typology of sociotechnical transition pathways. *Research Policy*, 36(3), 399-417.

**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.