

Scholar's Electives 1100F: On Certainty/Uncertainty and Meaning/Meaninglessness (2021-2022, Fall Term)

Tuesdays, 16:30-18:30 (Section 001) Conron Hall & 18:30-20:30 (Section 002)
Conron Hall

Instructor: Professor Laurence de Looze, UC 2310. Office hours: Tues., 2:30-3:30, and Wed., 12:00-1:00.

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TAs: Christopher Paul Austin: office hours: TBA

Abhi Acharya: office hours: TBA

Please note that due to the exceptional circumstances brought on by the covid-19 crisis, this syllabus is provisional and subject to changes as the health and safety situation may require.

In the event of a COVID-19 resurgence during the course that necessitates the course delivery moving away from face-to-face interaction, all remaining course content will be delivered entirely online, either synchronously (i.e., at the times indicated in the timetable) or asynchronously (e.g., posted on OWL for students to view at their convenience). The grading scheme will **not** change. Any remaining assessments will also be conducted online as determined by the course instructor.

Description:

This course interrogates the limits of human knowledge in the arts, the social sciences, and the sciences and it asks questions about the tools we use to arrive at “meaning.” It poses the question not only of how we know what we know, but also of how we can be *sure* that we know what we know. What, in other words, does it mean “to know”? Do we control outcomes, or are they due partly or entirely to chance? Does our world actually have meaning or do we just create meanings? How, finally, does the creation of meaning take place?

We will examine a number of approaches to these questions in different places and periods, from Ancient Greece to late 20th-century science to Indigenous approaches. In the course of the semester, we will consider attempts to understand our world, various views on the role of chance in our experience, and discussions of the relationship between language/writing and reality.

Learning Outcomes:

This course is designed to guide you in learning to engage critically with readings and with issues and to formulate cogent responses both orally and in writing. By the end of the course, you should have acquired and/or refined your ability to grasp the salient points of an argument whether of an oral or written nature and to summarize, reiterate, and analyze those points. You should also be in a position to appreciate the complexity of the causes and influences that have made for major shifts in thinking at different points along the historical timeline and in different cultures.

Assignments: (All assignments are to be uploaded to the Assignments section of our OWL site in WORD).

a) 30% -- a 150-200 word summary of the key points or issues in the readings for the week. Due by the beginning of each class on Tuesday (uploaded on OWL). Full sentences – no bullet/point form. **NB: There is no summary due for the first day of class, but there ARE two texts on the OWL to read and be ready to discuss (under “Resources”)**

b) 20% -- participation. Participation entails not only reading the weekly material but also taking notes on it as an aide-mémoire. If a student was in class every week, and was clearly prepared, but was so shy about speaking that s/he never said a word, s/he would nevertheless come very close (78) to the A range for participation. For the student who is always prepared and always in class and also speaks up, it can only get better. In other words, I am interested to hear your ideas, but I understand that some people are more comfortable with speaking aloud than others. You are also free to email me with your ideas, and I will count that as participation. I consider participation not just in quantitative terms but also qualitative ones.

c) 50% -- two 1000-word (approximately) essays (25% each), the first being due by 26 October and the second due on or before the last day of class (7 December). You will need to delineate a topic that picks up issues and/or themes from at least two of our class readings/sessions. You are required to discuss any potential topics with your TA or the professor before you begin writing. The second essay will need to use material from weeks 8-13 of the course.

NB: All assignments must be completed. The weakest assignment from a) will be dropped from the final mark, **but only if you do them all.**

Penalties:

Any assignment submitted late will be penalized 5%/day and will not be accepted at all 5 days after the due date.

Readings:

With one exception, all of the readings are available on the Weldon library website or on the course OWL site online. The one exception is the play *Copenhagen*, which must be bought at the university bookstore (Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury edition).

Tentative program

I: Humanity: The Nature of Meaning: Words.... (or: What do we name when we name something?)

Week 1: 14 September

Nominalism and Realism:

Reading: Michael J. Loux, "The Existence of Universals." *Universals and Particulars: Readings in Ontology*. 3-24. (on OWL)

Categories:

Eleanor Rosch, "Principles of Categorization" in *Cognition and Categorization*, 27-47 (on OWL)

(If you want a more extended discussion of nominalism and realism, you can also read: Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics* Chapters 1 & 2 [19-89], online at Western Libraries)

Week 2: 21 September

Ferdinand de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 65-70 (on OWL) and

John Joseph, "The Linguistic Sign" in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*: Chapter 4 (online at Western Libraries)

And Music....

Week 3: 28 September

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91512-musical-language/> (podcast)

Daniel J. Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music*, Introduction, Chaps 8&9 (on Owl)

Week 4: 5 October

Oliver Sacks, "In the Moment: Music and Amnesia" from *Musicophilia* (2007), 201-31. (on Owl)

Podcast: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91569-memory-and-forgetting/>

Week 5: 12 October:

SAFETalk

Rebecca Smith, SAFETalk

II: Uncertainty and Ways of "thinking/perception"

Week 6: 19 October

Henri Poincaré: "Chance" *Science and Method* (1908) (on Owl)

The Darwin/Gray correspondence (1857-1869): James G. Lennox, "The Darwin/Gray Correspondence 1857-1869: An Intelligent Discussion about Chance and Design." (on Owl)

Extra reading for those who want it: *Darwin's Dice: The Idea of Chance in the Thought of Charles Darwin* (Chapt. 5)

Week 7: 26 October

Read: *Copenhagen* (play)

Watch Richard Feynman's Cornell Univ. lecture on "Probability and Uncertainty" at:

<http://io9.com/watch-a-series-of-seven-brilliant-lectures-by-richard-f-5894600>

First Essay Due

Week 8: 2 November

No class (Reading Week)

Week 9: 9 November

Hannah Arendt, "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man." It is the final essay in her book, *BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE*. (Course Readings, Western Libraries)

Week 10: 16 November

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91859-the-multi-universes/> (podcast)

Read: Michel de Montaigne, "To the Reader," "On Custom," "On Cannibals," (on OWL)

Week 11: 23 November

Braiding Sweetgrass, Robin Wall Kimmerer (online at UWO libraries): "Maple Sugar Moon," 63-71; "Three sisters," 128-140; "*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*," 156-166.

Threats of the Meaningless

Week 12: 30 November

Albert Camus: "Absurdity and Suicide" and "The Myth of Sisyphus" [the first is at the beginning of the book, the second is toward the end, just before the appendix] in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1942; Eng trans. 1955) (on Owl)

Albert Camus: "The Guest" (on Owl)

Week 13: 7 December

John Barth: "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968) (on Owl)

Conclusion

Final Essay Due

Please Note: You are responsible for ensuring that you have successfully completed all course prerequisites (or have special permission from your Dean to waive the prerequisite) and that you have not taken an antirequisite course. If you are not eligible for the course, you may be removed from it at any time, and it will be

deleted from your record. In addition, you will receive no adjustment to your fees. These decisions cannot be appealed.

Scholastic Offences:

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_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see Scholastic Offense Policy in the Western Academic Calendar). Plagiarism is the inclusion of someone else's **verbatim** or **paraphrased** text in one's own written work without immediate reference. Verbatim text must be surrounded by quotation marks or indented if it is longer than four lines. A reference must follow right after borrowed material (usually the author's name and page number). Without immediate reference to borrowed material, a list of sources at the end of a written assignment does not protect a writer against the possible charge of plagiarism. 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>).

Absenteeism

For UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and a downloadable SMC see: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf [downloadable Student Medical Certificate (SMC):

<https://studentservices.uwo.ca/>
under the Medical Documentation heading]

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department.

For assignments worth less than 10%, the student will work out a reasonable solution directly with the professor.

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

Etiquette for any online meetings:

Some components of this course may involve online interactions. This may include “office hours” or class meetings (in the event we had to go to online classes). To ensure the best experience for both you and your classmates, please honour the following rules of etiquette:

- please “arrive” to class on time
- please use your computer and/or laptop if possible (as opposed to a cell phone or tablet)
- ensure that you are in a private location to protect the confidentiality of discussions in the event that a class discussion deals with sensitive or personal material
- to minimize background noise, kindly mute your microphone for the entire class until you are invited to speak, unless directed otherwise
- [suggested for classes larger than 30 students] In order to give us optimum bandwidth and web quality, please turn off your video camera for the entire class unless you are invited to speak
- [suggested for cases where video is used] please be prepared to turn your video camera off at the instructor’s request if the internet connection becomes unstable
- unless invited by your instructor, do **not** share your screen in the meeting

The course instructor will act as moderator for the class and will deal with any questions from participants. To participate please consider the following:

- if you wish to speak, use the “raise hand” function and wait for the instructor to acknowledge you before beginning your comment or question
- remember to unmute your microphone and turn on your video camera before speaking
- self-identify when speaking.
- remember to mute your mic and turn off your video camera after speaking (unless directed otherwise)

General considerations of “netiquette”:

- Keep in mind the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students in the course.
- Be courteous toward the instructor, your colleagues, and authors whose work you are discussing.
- Be respectful of the diversity of viewpoints that you will encounter in the class and in your readings. The exchange of diverse ideas and opinions is part of the scholarly environment. “Flaming” is never appropriate.
- Be professional and scholarly in all online postings. Cite the ideas of others appropriately.

Note that disruptive behaviour of any type during online classes, including inappropriate use of the chat function, is unacceptable. Students found guilty of Zoom-bombing a class or of other serious online offenses may be subject to disciplinary measures under the Code of Student Conduct.

If we have to go to online class sessions, the remote learning sessions for this course will be recorded. The data captured during these recordings may include your image, voice recordings, chat logs and personal identifiers (name displayed on the screen). The recordings will be used for educational purposes related to this course, including evaluations. The recordings may be disclosed to other individuals under special circumstances. Please contact the instructor if you have any concerns related to session recordings.

Participants in this course are not permitted to record the sessions, except where recording is an approved accommodation, or the participant has the prior written permission of the instructor.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#).

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

Students will have up to two (2) opportunities during the regular academic year to use an on-line portal to self-report an absence during the term, provided the following conditions are met: the absence is no more than 48 hours in duration, and the assessment for which consideration is being sought is worth 30% or less of the student's final grade. Students are expected to contact their instructors within 24 hours of the end of the period of the self-reported absence, unless noted on the syllabus. Students are not able to use the self-reporting option in the following circumstances:

- for exams scheduled by the Office of the Registrar (e.g., December and April exams)
- absence of a duration greater than 48 hours,
- assessments worth more than 30% of the student's final grade,
- if a student has already used the self-reporting portal twice during the academic year

If the conditions for a Self-Reported Absence are *not* met, students will need to provide a Student Medical Certificate if the absence is medical, or provide appropriate documentation if there are compassionate grounds for the absence in question. Students are encouraged to contact their Faculty academic counselling office to obtain more information about the relevant documentation.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for consideration on medical grounds, or for other reasons. **All documentation required for absences that are not covered by the Self-Reported Absence Policy must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's Home Faculty.**

For Western University policy on Consideration for Student Absence, see [Policy on Academic Consideration for Student Absences - Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#)

and for the Student Medical Certificate (SMC), see:

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

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the [Western Multicultural Calendar](#).

Western University is situated on First Nations territory. The Great Lakes woodland region of Turtle Island has been home to many Nations over centuries, and at different times, including the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapēwak and Chonnonton (Neutral) peoples. The Huron-

Wendat peoples also have a history of living in this territory. The Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum has served as an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek for the sharing of hunting territory, thus ensuring the viability of this land into the future. After contact, treaty-making between the Anishinaabek and Britain took place. In the London area, there were the Treaty 6 London Township, Treaty 7 Sombra Township, and Treaty 21 Longwoods. By recognizing First Nation peoples' relationships to this land and London, Ontario, Canada, we make explicit Indigenous peoples' ongoing presence on this land and in this place, and their rights to self-determination.