

University of Vermont  
Honors College

## Syllabus

HCOL 95A

The Pursuit of Knowledge: Disciplines, Universities, and Engagement

Fall 2009

Class meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, ___ in Room 34F University Heights North	Professor ___
Plenary lectures: Thursdays, 5:30–6:30, Fleming Museum Auditorium, Room 101	Office hours: ___, ___
	Email: ___ Phone: ___

In the Fall semester of this year-long course for first-year Honors College students, we consider responses to the following problem. Initially, the world around us can seem like a confusing place. How then can we come to understand it? How do we become knowledgeable about it? These questions have been answered in different ways in different disciplines and professions. We will explore some of these responses. Students will come to see some of the typical approaches taken to the creation of knowledge and understanding in the natural and social sciences, in music, history, and medicine, and in works of fiction. They will explore the commonalities and differences, the strengths and drawbacks, of these approaches. The overall goal of the semester is to make students more conscious of the distinctiveness and value of different approaches to knowledge.

This semester also serves as the basis for the next. At the beginning of the Spring semester students will learn about the role of the university in the process of knowledge creation and transmission. Then, by studying intellectual autobiographies, they will come to see how knowledge, education, and the intellectual life relate to engagement with the world, with personal and professional life, and with citizenship. In this way, the year-long course moves from varieties of knowledge and the context of its creation to the role it plays in our lives.

Students attend a single seminar section of the course. But they come together on Thursday evenings for a plenary lecture. The plenary lectures feature a variety of

speakers who will give students an opportunity to discuss relevant issues with them. Students are taught from a common syllabus. While each instructor may make some changes with respect to readings and requirements, students from different sections will be able to discuss course topics with each other outside of classes. Students are expected to defend their opinions verbally and in writing. The course is designed to be writing intensive, and students will find that committing words to paper will help them express opinions verbally.

### Required texts

- David Sloan Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone* (Delta) (summer reading)
- Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy, 4th Ed.* (Hackett)
- David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Hackett)
- Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
- Yann Martell, *Life of Pi*, student edition (Harcourt)
- Course packet

### Assignments and grades

Students must attend all class meetings and plenary lectures having read assigned material and being ready to discuss it. Other requirements are:

- Five short papers (two pages, double spaced) during the first part of the semester. These papers are designed to improve your writing and thinking. They increase your engagement in the course material and prepare you for the longer paper. The first short paper is on the summer reading and is due in the first class. For others, assignments are distributed one week in advance of the due date.
- Longer paper (five to ten pages, double spaced). This paper allows you to explore a topic of your interest in more depth. The first draft (weighted 1/3) is due in early November, and the final draft (weighted 2/3) one month later, in the last week of classes. Students will need to choose topics well in advance of these dates. Precise due dates are listed below.
- Midterm exam during the week of October 19.
- Final exam given during finals week.

Final grades, which at each instructor's discretion may be adjusted for contribution to class discussion or quizzes, are derived using the following weights: short papers (1/4), longer paper (1/4), midterm exam (1/4), final exam (1/4).

This syllabus attempts to be complete, but the instructor reserves the right to make appropriate changes during the course.

Schedule

Week	Date	Topic	Reading	Plenary Lecture	Assignment
1	Sep 1	Natural Science 1: Evolution	David Sloan Wilson, <i>Evolution for Everyone</i>		Short paper 1 due
	Sep 3		Wilson, continued	Students only: Survey and follow-up	
2	Sep 8		Wilson, continued		
	Sep 10		Wilson, continued	David Wilson, Binghamton University, "Evolution for Everyone"	
3	Sep 15	Frameworks 1: Rationalism	Descartes, <i>Discourse, Parts 1,2,5, and 6</i>		
	Sep 17		Descartes, <i>Meditations #'s 1,2, and 6</i>	Students only: Mentor-Mentee Match-up	Short paper 2 due
4	Sep 22	Frameworks 2: Empiricism	David Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, sections 2, 3</i>		
	Sep 24		Hume, <i>Enquiry,</i>	Bill Falls,	Short

			sections 4, 5, 6	Psychology, "Formulating Scientific Questions"	paper 3 due
5	Sep 29		Hume, <i>Enquiry</i> , sections 9, 12		
	Oct 1	Frameworks 3: Narrative and Form	Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality"	Emily Bernard, English, "Memoir, Narrative and Reality"	Short paper 4 due
6	Oct 6		Caleb Crain, "Twilight of the Books: What Will Life Be Like if People Stop Reading?"		
	Oct 8	Natural Science 2: Neuroscience, Environmental Science	V.S. Ramachandran, "A Pain in the Brain"	None	Short paper 5 due
7	Oct 13		Bill McKibben, "Warning on Warming"  Coby Beck, "How to Talk to a Climate Skeptic" (on the web)		
	Oct 15			None	Midterm
8	Oct 20	Social Science 1: Sociology	C. Wright Mills, "The Human Variety" and "On Intellectual Craftmanship" from <i>The Sociological</i>		

			<i>Imagination</i>		
	Oct 22	Social Science 2: Economics	George Akerlof and Robert Schiller, <i>Animal Spirits</i> , Chs. 1-3	Students only: Registration Advising	
9	Oct 27		<i>Animal Spirits</i> , Chs. 4-6,		
	Oct 29		<i>Animal Spirits</i> , Chs. 7 and postscript, 13	Sara Solnick, Economics, "Behavioral and Experimental Economics"	
10	Nov 3	Music	Edward Rothstein, "Prelude: The Need for Metaphor"  Roger Sessions, "The Composer and His Message"		
	Nov 5		W.A. Mozart, "A Letter"  Edward Said, "Glenn Gould: The Virtuoso as Intellectual"	T.L. Read, Music (emeritus), two solo violin pieces	
11	Nov 10	History	Lepore, "Just the Facts"  Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin"		
	Nov 12		Alfred Kazin,	Robert	

			"The Self as History"	Mcauley, College of Medicine, "Knowledge of Illness"	
12	Nov 17	Medicine	Anne Fadiman, <i>The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down</i>		Long paper draft due
	Nov 19		<i>The Spirit Catches You</i>	None	
13	Nov 24		<i>The Spirit Catches You</i>		Paper draft handed back
	Nov 26	Thanksgiving	NO	CLASS	
14	Dec 1	Fiction	Yann Martel, <i>Life of Pi</i>		
	Dec 3		<i>Life of Pi</i>	None	Longer paper final version due
15	Dec 8		<i>Life of Pi</i>		
	Dec ____, ---				Final exam