Overview

The world is a complex and confusing place. How do we try to understand it without oversimplifying the complexity? In HCOL 085, we explore what it means to “know,” through classic and contemporary texts that present a wide range of perspectives on what we can know about the world and how we know it.

We start with Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a book that all UVM students were asked to read this summer. The text is especially critical for us as it aptly depicts what can happen when different modes of knowing, and forms of knowledge, come into collision.

From Fadiman, the course moves to three foundational Western approaches to knowledge. First is René Descartes, whom many consider to be the founder of a “modern” approach to knowledge as springing from the mind (“rationalism”). Descartes is followed by David Hume, an important thinker in a tradition that opposes Descartes’ rationalism by claiming that we come to know the world first and foremost through our senses (“empiricism”). A third approach argues that we construct our knowledge of the world by creating narratives – that is, we build stories, assign specific patterns to our experiences, in order to give them coherence and meaning. We’ll examine the relative merits of these three approaches by reading primary texts and a range of accompanying material.

In the latter section of the course, we’ll delve into a fascinating stream of contemporary research, much of it conducted in the disciplines of psychology and economics, aiming to describe how humans actually perceive the world and make decisions. We conclude with a brief examination of some of the moral and ethical considerations involved in the pursuit of knowledge by reading an essay by the great twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

We will, ourselves, be constructing some knowledge as we go, and you will contribute by expressing and supporting your ideas and your interpretations of our readings. HCOL 085 is not a lecture course: it relies on your active and informed participation in every single class session. To deepen this informed participation and build your confidence about the ideas you bring to the table, HCOL 085 is designed as a writing course as well. In addition to long-form expository essays, we’ll be doing a good deal of shorter, more informal writing, designed with a few core purposes in mind:

- To bring your thoughts and questions from course readings and plenaries to seminar discussions;
- To build a habit of reading actively, critically, and with curiosity;
- To turn a collection of observations about a text into a concise summary;
- To develop your (appropriately) tentative initial thoughts and opinions from seminar discussions into a confident voice on the page, and into focused, well-supported arguments;
- To use feedback and new perspectives in revising an initial draft.

This practice will lead to a multi-draft writing assignment that asks you to engage critically (and creatively!) with course texts (and, if you like, with additional material), in a longer essay. That assignment will start as a draft, undergo a substantial revision after feedback from your seminar instructor and colleagues, and eventually take the form of a final term paper for the course.
The Plenaries

All first-year Honors College students attend a seminar section of HCOL 085. Meanwhile, the entire first-year group comes together on Wednesday evenings for a plenary session, from 5:05-6:20, usually in Billings Lecture Hall. (Please note: There will be no plenary on Wednesday, September 16, but we will attend a talk on Tuesday, September 15). While the content of plenaries vary, most feature speakers telling their own stories, explaining their research or other creative work, and thinking for us about the nature of knowledge. A few take advantage of having us all in a room together to provide you with useful information about making the transition to college and navigating the first year successfully.

Required texts

Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997)
Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)
Course packet (in the UVM Bookstore, as are all the books on this list)

Note: Required readings are either in the books listed above, or in the course-pack. Students will also be asked to read additional material at the discretion of the instructor.

Assignments and grades

Students must attend all class meetings and plenary lectures having read assigned material, having completed any assigned homework, and being ready to discuss the material in class. Other requirements are:

- **Four short papers** (about 700 words, double spaced). Designed to improve your thinking and writing, these papers will ask you to engage with the course material in different ways. The first short paper, due on the first day of class and ungraded, deals with our summer reading, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. For the others, assignments are distributed at least one week before the due date.

- **Capstone paper** (five to ten pages, double spaced). This paper allows you to explore a course-related topic of your interest in more depth. The first draft (worth one-third of the paper grade) is due in mid-November, and the final draft (worth two-thirds of the paper grade) is due on the last day of class. Students will choose topics well in advance of these dates. Estimated due dates are provided below.

- **Homework.** Short, informal writing assignments are an integral part of the course. These will often deal with our readings, but they may also be related to class discussions, plenaries, and things that surface during the semester. The frequency and content of these are determined by individual instructors, but you can expect to be asked to complete a number of these over the semester.

- **Final Exam.** The schedule for final examinations will be determined by the Registrar. The
date and time for your section’s final will be communicated by your instructor after the Registrar publishes the schedule. Please note: it is not possible to reschedule the date or time of your final exam. Keep this in mind when making travel arrangements for the winter break.

Final grades are derived using the following weights: short papers 30% (10% per graded paper), homework 15%, capstone paper 20%, final exam 20%, and class participation 15%.

Course Objectives

You should finish this course having:

- begun the transition to college in an intellectually rigorous, safe, and supported environment
- explored some of the ways knowledge is deployed in varying contexts
- experienced some healthy disruption of your own disciplinary comfort zone in order to foster greater intellectual curiosity
- gained practice in reading and annotating texts for effective understanding and critical thinking
- gained proficiency in paraphrasing and summarizing the arguments of others
- learned to draw connections between different texts and different ways of thinking
- practiced developing an argument from evidence
- practiced using the feedback of others, new information, and your own changing ideas to revise your written work
- practiced locating ideas and information relevant to a research question in UVM’s digital and print archives
- gained experience in evaluating the effectiveness of an argument (both yours and others’)
- improved your ability to communicate ideas, both in conversation and in writing

In short, we hope by the end of the semester that you will have cultivated a set of academic “habits” crucial to success as a student and a career professional, particularly active and critical reading, writing as a learning process, and engaged participation.

Classroom Rules and Expectations

- Attendance is mandatory: you must come to every class and every scheduled plenary. Any unexcused absence will affect your participation grade. Habitual tardiness will also affect your participation grade.
- Listen carefully and respectfully to others; contribute to class discussion regularly (but be careful not to dominate); learn everyone’s name, and use those names in class.
- Always come prepared for class.
- Additional rules and expectations, including those regarding participation, may be added by individual faculty members.
Schedule of Assignments

Weeks I and 2 - Introduction: Culture and Knowledge

Aug. 31 – Sept. 4

- Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (selections chosen by instructor).
- **Paper # 1 due, first day of class.**

*Plenary, Wednesday Sept. 2: Introductory Plenary*

Sept. 8 - Sept. 11

- Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (selections chosen by instructor).

*Plenary, Wednesday Sept. 9: Dr. Page Hudson, “Hard Work and Humanity: Disconnect and Integration”*

Weeks 3 and 4 - Framework I: Rationalism

Sept. 14 – Sept. 18

- Descartes, Discourse on Method (selections chosen by instructor).
- **Paper # 2 due this week.**

*Anne Fadiman talk, Tuesday Sept. 15, 7:00 pm. No Plenary on Wednesday Sept. 16*

Sept. 21 – Sept. 25

- Descartes, Discourse and Meditations (selections chosen by instructor).
- Excerpts from The Correspondence Between Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (Shapiro ed., 2007), p. 61-69 [course-pack].

*Plenary, Wednesday Sept. 23: Prof. Chris Danforth, “Measuring Happiness: Social Media as Laboratory”*
Weeks 5 and 6 - Framework II: Empiricism

Sept. 28 – Oct. 2


**Plenary, Wednesday Sept. 30: Alyssa Mastromonaco - former Deputy Chief of Staff for the Obama White House**

Oct. 5 – Oct. 9

- Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (selections chosen by instructor)

**Plenary, Wednesday Oct. 7: Prof. Jennifer Eberhardt**

Weeks 7 and 8 - Framework III: Narrative Knowledge

Oct. 12 – Oct. 16

- Additional material TBA.
- Paper # 3 due this week.


Oct. 19 – Oct 23

- Additional material TBA.

Week 9 - Case Study: Music as a Way of Knowing

Oct. 26 – Oct. 30

- Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (musical recording).
- Arnold Schoenberg, “The Relationship to the Text,” from *Style and Idea* (1912) [course-pack]

*Plenary, Wednesday Oct. 28: Sylvia Parker*

Weeks 10 and 11 - How Do We Think? The Contemporary Study of Rationality

Nov. 2 – Nov. 6

- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (chapters chosen by instructor).
- Capstone paper proposal due.

*Plenary, Wednesday Nov. 4: TBA*

Nov. 9 – Nov. 13

- Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (chapters chosen by instructor).
- Capstone paper draft due.

*Plenary, Wednesday Nov. 11: Dr. Bob Macauley, “The ICU: Introduction to Clinical Uncertainty”*

Weeks 12 and 13 - Thinking and Moral Considerations

Nov. 16 – Nov. 20

- Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (from *Social Research*, 1971) [course-pack]

*Plenary, Wednesday Nov. 18: Prof. Josh Bongard, “What Robots can Teach us about Evolution, Language, and the Mind”*

[Thanksgiving Recess, Nov. 23-27]
Nov. 30 – Dec. 4

- *Frankenstein*, conclude.
- Final draft of capstone paper due.

*Plenary, Wednesday Dec. 2: “Bride of Frankenstein” (movie)*

Week 14: Course Conclusions

Dec. 7 – Dec. 9

- Assignments TBA

*No plenary on Wednesday, Dec. 9*

Dec 11-18: Final Exams (dates TBA)