HCOL186E: The Problem of Experience (CRN 11794)

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Spring 2015
Tu Th 11:30 a.m.-12:45 p.m.
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Course Description:

This seminar will examine the role of experience in human knowledge, with special attention to issues raised by religious experience. We will investigate experience from several angles, drawing upon accounts of extraordinary states of human consciousness (sometimes called “mystical” states), reflections on the challenges of intercultural understanding, and readings on the process of knowledge construction in the humanities and in the natural and social sciences.

The topic of religious experience is of particular interest because it highlights the tension between subjectivity and objectivity in human knowledge. Many accounts of religious experience grant a privileged status to the personal and subjective. Scholarly knowledge, in contrast, is commonly marked by its “public” character, whether this is defined by rigorous standards of empirical testing or by the broader criteria of publication and adherence to standards of rationality. We will explore this tension through a variety of texts, including a modern novel, an influential Buddhist text, scholarly essays drawn from several academic disciplines, and through conversations with visiting faculty who will discuss their research. Along the way we will consider questions such as:

- When is my personal experience a reliable basis for knowing the world?
- How does my gender shape the way I know myself and the world around me?
- What role does emotion play in gaining valid knowledge of the world?
- In what ways are my “personal” experience socially defined?
- Do empirical observation and rational analysis provide objective and universally applicable knowledge of the world?
- Does the fact that people grow up in different cultures mean that their experience of the world is fundamentally different, and, if so, what does this mean for efforts to attain objective knowledge about the world?

Thoughtful reflection on these sorts of questions should inform your own research activity as you write your major paper for the seminar.

Key learning goals of the course include:

- understanding how one’s cultural location shapes one’s efforts to know the world
- understanding how selected scholarly disciplines approach the pursuit of knowledge
- understanding some of the distinctive characteristics of religious knowledge
- developing effective research skills including use of relevant library resources, compilation of an annotated bibliography, development of a clear thesis or scholarly claim, and development of an effective scholarly argument
- developing effective oral presentation skills
Course Requirements:

This course is organized in a seminar format, which means that your consistent attendance, careful reading of the course materials, and thoughtful contributions to the class discussions are essential elements in the success of the course. This means no texting, e-mail, internet use, or other non-class activity during class time. Turn off phones during class. I know that not everyone is equally comfortable speaking in class, but please make the effort, even if you initially find it difficult. I expect seminar participants to attend every class, having read the assignments carefully and reflected upon them. To facilitate discussion, please bring the day’s readings to class, either as hard copy or on your computer.

Written requirements include the following:

- Five 2-page response papers, including four papers on questions that relate to the course readings (the readings are marked below with an asterisk); these should be stapled and double-spaced with one-inch margins to allow for my comments; they should also be proofread for spelling, grammar, and typographical errors; these must be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class on four of the following due dates, unless you are ill or have a family emergency: 1/22; 2/3; 2/19; 3/12; 3/26; 4/21; in addition, you must attend one outside musical event and write a 2-page reflection discussing your experience of the event as it relates to one of our course readings (e.g., the Becker reading for 3/24 or the Titon reading for 3/26); this paper is due one week after the event that you attend (see handout for prompts and guidelines).

- A substantial research paper (see below) on a topic of your choice, 12-15 pages in length; this will be the culmination of a process that begins early in the semester and that includes a topic statement, a substantial annotated bibliography, a 1-2-page research proposal, a complete first draft, and a revised final version of your research paper; I will provide a handout with detailed guidelines for this assignment.

- One-paragraph statement of a key point from each class reading, along with one question about the reading, submitted by e-mail to the instructor by 10 a.m. on the day the reading is due (these are not required on days that you submit formal response papers or lead class discussion).

All written requirements must be submitted in a timely fashion in order to pass the course. See the statement below concerning academic honesty. In addition, each seminar participant will be responsible for leading class discussion once during the semester, and will give a 12-minute presentation on their research project during one of our classes from 4/2-4/14 (I will provide guidelines for these assignments). The various assignments count toward your final grade as follows: class participation, postings to the Blackboard discussion list, research presentation, and leading class discussion—30%; written responses to readings—30%; research paper, including the annotated bibliography and the preliminary and final drafts—40%.

Religious Holidays: Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. Each semester students should submit in writing to their instructors by the end of the second full week of classes their documented religious holiday schedule for the semester. Faculty must permit students who miss work for the purpose of religious observance to make up this work.
The instructor reserves the right to modify the syllabus for pedagogical purposes as seems prudent; the most current version of syllabus can be found on the Blackboard course web site.

Course Assignments:

1/13: Introductions.

Science and Religion: A Novel Perspective
1/20: Mark Salzman, Lying Awake, pp. 3-92 (“God’s Mystery” through “The Call”).

Gender and Knowing

Cultural Knowledge: Objectivity, Subjectivity and Cultural Difference
2/5: Visiting scholar: TBA; research topic statement due in class.

Knowledge and Experience in a Buddhist Religious Text
2/17: Dhammapada, pp. 7-39 (Chapters 2-13 plus notes in second section as needed to understand the text).
2/19: Dhammapada, pp. 40-85 (Chapters 14-26 plus notes in second section as needed to understand the text).*
3/3, 5: No class: spring break.

Buddhism and Mind Science
3/12: Kabat-Zinn and Davidson, pp. 99-149; 173-221 (Session Three through Interlude Dialogue; Session Five through Epilogue).*
3/19: No class; instead you are required to attend the 5:30 viewing of “Free the Mind” and panel discussion, Marsh Life Sciences 235 (Benedict Auditorium); **e-mailed research proposal due by 5 p.m.**

Musical Experience and Knowledge


3/28: Outside event: The Nile Project, Lane Series Concert, 8:00 p.m., Flynn Center.
3/31: Visiting scholar, TBA.

4/2: Oral research reports.
4/7: Oral research reports.
4/9: Oral research reports; **first draft of research paper due in class.**
4/14: Oral research reports.

Experience and Education

4/21: Dewey, chs. 5-8.*
4/23: Visiting scholar: TBA.

4/28: Concluding discussion.

5/5: **Final version of research paper due by 5 p.m. at my office.**

The following texts are required and are available through the University Store, as well as from Amazon, including less expensive e-book editions that can be directly downloaded:

*John Dewey*, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997)


All other readings are available as pdf files on the Blackboard course web site.

It is the responsibility of all students enrolled in this course to be aware of and in compliance with the university’s regulations regarding academic honesty as stated in UVM’s [Code of Academic Integrity](#). If you have any questions about these regulations, you should speak to the instructor for further clarification. Ignorance will not be considered a legitimate excuse for infringement of these regulations. Violations of the standards of academic honesty will be reported to the Coordinator of Academic Integrity. A broader statement of students’ rights and responsibilities can be found here: [www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf).