Psychology 311 – Critical Issues in Psychology – Winter 2012

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Please Turn Off All Cell Phones!!!

Required Texts:  


Additional Readings: TBA

Course Description: The course is designed to be an intensive and academically demanding examination of certain critical conceptual issues in contemporary psychological theory and practice. As such it is organized around three major undertakings: (1) A careful consideration of the nature and role of theory and philosophy in psychology. Much of the course is, thus, aimed at enabling you to understand and appreciate many of the underlying philosophical assumptions at work in the various schools of mainstream psychological thought; (2) an increased understanding of and appreciation for some of the more sophisticated and influential approaches to conceptualizing the nature and meaning of human being that have been advanced by the discipline both historically and in more recent decades; and (3) the development of the ability to think and write critically, analytically, and clearly – skills that are far too often missing in the writing and thinking of those in the discipline of psychology.

The goal of this course, then, is to both deepen your acquaintance with the discipline of psychology and to help integrate what you have learned in other courses by providing a meaningful historical, philosophical, and conceptual context. This will be done not only by articulating the many important philosophical and theoretical issues with which the discipline continues to struggle, but also by providing numerous conceptual tools for making sense of the discipline and its theoretical commitments and judging between competing philosophical or conceptual claims. **Be forewarned!** This course is likely to be very different from others that you may have taken in the department. The subject matter of this course is critical thinking about psychology as an intellectual enterprise, its claims, findings, and its metaphysical and moral commitments. Thus, there will be a significant demand that you not only to strive for a high level of intellectual sophistication and critical concern, but also that you be willing to suspend (for the sake of careful and probing examination) some concepts and ideas you may have thus far taken for granted.

Learning Outcomes: Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and describe basic assumptions (and the implications of those assumptions) that underlie the major theories, methods, practices, and schools of contemporary psychology. *Measurement*: Reading Summaries/Reviews and Short Analytical Essay assignments.
- Identify and critically evaluate these basic assumptions in the published writings of psychologists. *Measurement*: Reading Summaries/Reviews and Short Analytical Essay assignments.
- Compare and contrast alternative assumptions (and the implications of those assumptions) to those associated with the major theories, methods, practices, and schools of contemporary psychology, especially as they may be relevant to a Christian perspective. *Measurement*: Reading Summaries/Reviews and Short Analytical Essay assignments.
Course Expectations: You will be expected to read and write extensively. You are expected to be current in your reading of the required text, in addition to any other readings that may be assigned periodically during the course of the semester. To assist you in this endeavor, you will be required to write a short (1 page) review of the argument at the core of each class’s assigned reading. In addition, you will be expected to come to every class prepared to ask questions and discuss issues relevant to the particular reading assigned for that day’s discussion. Further, you will be expected to write several short analytic essays on various topics, in which you grapple with some important issue in contemporary psychology at a fairly sophisticated level (see below). Finally, due to the nature of the course, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that active and insightful PARTICIPATION MATTERS!!!

REQUIREMENTS:

1. You will be required to complete at least six (6) short essay assignments in this course. These assignments will be limited to a MAXIMUM of 2 pages in length. Other writing assignments MAY be required depending on the needs of the course and the students and will be assigned on an “as needed” basis.

   You will be graded on the quality of your writing as well as the substance because style and content cannot be meaningfully separated. Excerpts may be lifted from student papers and used (anonymously and with permission) in class examples as we discuss ways to improve conceptual analysis and writing skills. You would be well-warned not to take these assignments lightly. Despite the short length of these writing assignments, they will likely prove to be among the most difficult you will experience in your undergraduate career and should not be taken lightly.

2. You will be required to provide a short (1) page analytic summary of each assigned reading, in which you outline the essential features and structure of the argument/analysis being made by the author of the assigned reading. These reviews should contain not only a recounting of the key elements of the author’s argument, but should also exhibit some critical assessment of that argument. Unlike the short essay assignments, these will be more outline or summative in nature. These short reviews will be worth 10 points each. The scores of all of these reviews combined will be considered the equivalent of two essay papers.

3. The final examination will simply consist of your final paper topic and will be due at the time of the conclusion of the university scheduled final exam time for this class (10:00am on Monday, April 22nd). Late work will not be accepted – absolutely no exception!

4. It is absolutely essential that you keep current with the reading. You will need to attend class regularly in order to keep current as to what if any additional assigned readings there may be each week.

5. Late work is unacceptable. You are expected to hand in all work when it is due. For each day late, writing assignments will be penalized by a one grade-step reduction (e.g., “B” to “B-”) in the case of analytical essays, or 2 points in the case of reading reviews. The only exceptions to this policy are for illness, mental or physical, where a licensed health practitioner writes a note indicating the reason for the lateness.

6. Grade Appeal: If you feel you have a legitimate complaint about a grade on a paper, you are encouraged to appeal the grade. This requires submitting a well-reasoned and highly specific explanation of what you feel is the problem and why you feel that your paper deserves a different grade. After reviewing your appeal, I will then reread your entire paper. If this results in an alteration of your grade (higher or lower), then I will change the original grade. Grade appeals can only be made within the one week period following the return of the paper.

7. Classroom Courtesy: Please turn off your cell phones before class begins! Discourteous classroom behavior also includes: frequently arriving late for class, talking or sleeping or studying other materials (including the newspaper or homework) in class, and leaving class early. The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “It is an insult to a meeting for persons to leave just before its close” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 287). Please be courteous in your class behavior. Laptop computers are welcome so long as they are being used to take notes and do not distract others. If you wish to surf the internet for funny videos, information that is not relevant to the class discussion, or just to play some games, please don’t bother coming to class to do so. Furthermore, texting during class is inappropriate so please turn off your phones and put them away when class begins. I reserve the right to lower your final grade for consistently discourteous class behavior.
THE ESSAYS: The essays that you will be required to write are to be analytical essays. You will be expected to come to grips with the topic of the essay on a fairly sophisticated level, and show by reason, argument, and careful analysis what might sensibly be said about the issue. These essays are not to be simple "information dumps," wherein you report back to me what I reported to you in class, or what the author may have reported in your text. However, neither are these essays to be literary exercises in "stream of consciousness" or fictional creativity. I am not particularly interested in subjective impressions, opinions and/or personal feelings. What I am interested in is careful, analytical considerations of issues, with an eye to important ramifications for what it means to be a human being and for the discipline of psychology.

As stated above, there is no defensible distinction between what you say and how you say it. Consequently, essays full of mixed metaphors, grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, “purple prose,” pseudo-intellectual jargon, incoherent sentences, formless paragraphs, dangling and unsupported assertions, other psychologist's opinions, and information reports will most definitely yield low grades.

Extra Credit: There is no extra credit (please don’t ask). Use the time that you would spend on doing extra credit to complete assigned readings and adequately prepare for the essays. The course requirements are clearly stated in this syllabus. If you remain in the class, it means that you accept these requirements. This syllabus is a type of contract between the instructor and the student. It protects you from unfair treatment (i.e., I can’t assign you additional material without due reason) and it protects me from unfair treatment (i.e., student wheedling and whining!).

Learning Outcomes: Each program at BYU has developed a set of expected student learning outcomes. These will help you understand the objectives of the curriculum in the program, including this class. To learn the expected student outcomes for the programs in the psychology department and college go to http://learningoutcomes.byu.edu and click on the College of Family, Home and Social Sciences and then the psychology department. We welcome feedback on the expected student learning outcomes. Any comments or suggestions you have can be sent to <FHSS@byu.edu>.

Special Needs: Any student with special needs or any student requiring special assistance should talk with me as soon as possible. Every effort will be made to accommodate your needs. In addition, any student with concerns or problems with the course materials is encouraged to discuss them with either me or the TA. We are committed to helping you succeed in the class, hopefully you will be as well.

Academic and Moral Integrity: “We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul – We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (Article of Faith 13; see also Brigham Young University Honor Code in the BYU 1999-2000 Undergraduate Catalog, pp. 6-9).

While all students sign the honor code, there are still specific skills most students need to master over time in order to correctly cite sources, especially in this new age of the internet; as well as deal with the stress and strain of college life without resorting to cheating. Please know that as your professor I will notice instance of cheating on exams or plagiarizing on papers. See http://www.byu.edu/stlife/campuslife/honorcode/honcode.html for specific examples of intentional, inadvertent plagiarism, and fabrication, falsification.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination against any participant in an educational program or activity that receives federal funds. The act is intended to eliminate sex discrimination in education. Title IX covers discrimination in programs admissions, activities, and student-to-student sexual harassment. BYU’s policy against sexual harassment extends not only to employees of the university but to students as well. If you encounter unlawful sexual harassment or gender based discrimination, please either speak to me about it, contact the Equal Employment Office (378-5895 or 367-5689), or contact the Honor Code Office (378-2847).
Ten Reasons You Might Consider Dropping This Course:

1) The reading in this course is often difficult and will usually require that you read it two or three times in order to adequately master the ideas and the arguments being made. If you typically do not take the time to do a careful reading of course material, you may want to consider dropping this course.

2) You cannot memorize the material of this course, nor will merely “knowing” the material be sufficient. You will need to think about and articulate concisely the material in order to get a decent grade. If you usually rely on memorizing points or cramming at the last minute, you may want to consider dropping the course.

3) Your grade is based heavily on brief analytical essays. If you do not take the time to write the essays well – revising and redrafting several times – you will not do well on these essays. If you do not plan to make the time necessary, or do not wish to do the hard work necessary to improve your writing and thinking, you should probably consider dropping the course.

4) The material is different from and more philosophical than most other psychology courses you may have taken. If you do not wish to learn new ideas in depth and be challenged by new ways of thinking, then you should probably consider dropping the course.

6) Your grade on the papers will be lowered if you do not hand them in on time. Late work is severely penalized. If you tend to be tardy with your work, you may want to consider dropping the course.

7) The material of the course is so difficult that most students find it absolutely necessary to attend class and discuss the material with the instructor, the TAs, and their fellow students. (You have only to ask those who have taken the course previously to be assured of this.) If you tend to miss classes, you may want to consider dropping the course.

8) It is essential to developing good critical thinking skills that you articulate your ideas out loud, as well as in writing. Therefore, it is expected that all students will actively participate in the give-and-take, debate-oriented nature of class discussions. If you do not enjoy discussing (i.e., advancing, defending, and critiquing) ideas in front of others, or have a very “thin skin” when faced with critical analysis or feedback of your ideas, then you may want to consider dropping the course.

9) This is not a class on writing, per se; it is a class in which writing skills are expected. The TAs and I will not always be able to make extensive comments on your papers. If you need extensive assistance with your writing, then you may want to consider dropping this course.

10) Because it takes time and energy to complete the reading and writing assignments in this course, it is best if you are not carrying a very heavy course load this semester, and are not spread too thin with work and/or family related obligations. If you tend to have too many demands on your time, or are poor at managing your time, then you may want to consider dropping this course.