HNRS 4200: Living with Uncertainty

Kate Langan, Western Michigan University
HNRS 4200 / Living with Uncertainty
Spring 2014
Wednesdays 12:00 – 2:20 pm, LHC

Instructor
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Office Hours
Tuesdays & Wednesdays 2:30- 3:30 pm.
Waldo Library #1011
If these times are not convenient, please call or email to arrange another time.

Course Description

How certain are we of what the future will be? What awaits us? Is anything certain? Can we live in a world where we are sure of so little? Does uncertainty hold us back? Is it always a bad thing?

Today, in our increasingly complicated world of information, uncertainty is more relevant than ever before. All information carries some level of uncertainty. Acknowledging and integrating those facts with their implicit uncertainties is a testament to how we understand them.

To better understand the role of uncertainty in our personal and professional lives, students in this course will explore the topic of uncertainty and how it is defined, treated, and applied by various disciplines.

The content of the course is divided into three parts. The first part is a general study of uncertainty, starting with a probabilistic definition, but making the distinction between ‘uncertainty’ and ‘risk’. Part 2 is devoted to how uncertainty affects us. Here, we will explore the human affective dimension through the analysis of poetry, literature, and art works. The last part of the course is devoted to exploring different ways of coping and thriving in an uncertain world.

The class will combine weekly readings, talks by diverse faculty, and class discussions and debates. By the end of the semester, students will submit a final project on the meaning of uncertainty, its effects, and how to deal with it. Any form of expression is allowed for this project like, for example, a written research document, a literary piece, a work of music of art, etc.

Learning Objectives:
1. Apply information about uncertainty to your life.
2. Introduction to interdisciplinary and integrated analysis through weekly thematic/discipline-based discussions, lectures, and readings.
3. Critically analyze a particular aspect of uncertainty in a specific discipline.
4. Assess and compile relevant information in a meaningful way for a particular aspect of uncertainty.

Requirements to successfully complete this course

**E-learning**

This class uses E-learning. Check here often. We will post class notes, course assignments, grades, and other relevant information. We will also have the chat option open for group discussions.

**Reflective essays.** Through thematic/discipline-based discussions, lectures, and readings, students will write 2 reflective essays in which students organize their thoughts. Students will write a reflective essay and identify 3 sources and annotate them in a bibliography. 2-3 pages total. Each essay is worth 15 % of overall grade.


Reflective Essay # 2 due by noon Friday March 14, 2014 in the Elearning dropbox.

**Discussion leaders.** Each week a group of students will lead the class in a guided reading of an assigned article. The group of students will be responsible for presenting the main topics of the article, relate it to the overall question of the class, and provoke thoughtful and meaningful discussion in class. Students will sign up for 2 class sessions on the first day of class. Each group presentation is 12.5% of overall grade.

**Final project.** Students will produce original work, research paper, or creative work. Project to be approved by instructor. Students will also be required to give a 10-15 minute presentation on their final project to their classmates during the last few sessions of class. During this presentation, students will explain and identify uncertainty in their project as related to the lyceum lectures, readings, and individual research. Final Project Due: April 16. Final project and presentation: 35 % of overall grade.

Presentations of Final Project to be April 16. 10 minutes each. Sign up first day of class. You are expected to attend all of the presentations of your classmates.

**Course attendance and preparedness**

Attendance to all LHC Lyceum lectures as well as all class sessions is required. Unexcused absences to more than one class or seminar will be considered enough grounds fail the
course. Students are expected to come to class with all readings completed and prepared to discuss them. Preparedness includes submitting 2 provocative questions about the reading/viewing to E-learning the night before class meets. **Participation: 10% of overall grade.**

*There is no final for this course.*

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**Courtesy**

I expect you to be courteous to me and to your fellow students. This includes turning phones to silent (not buzz) before class. You can expect the instructor to be respectful, to answer questions to your satisfaction, and to be fair in assigning course grades. You are welcome to use laptops or tablets to take notes in class and access course readings if you wish to go paperless. I ask that you please stay on task.

**Academic Integrity**

Any student found cheating (or enabling another student to cheat) in this course will receive zero credit on the particular assignment and may receive an automatic failure of the course. The incident will also be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the policies and procedures in the Undergraduate Catalog that pertain to academic integrity. Please see:

**Caveat**

*I’ll do my best to adhere to the syllabus.* On occasion it is necessary to modify any aspect of this syllabus at any time if I believe that such a change will allow the students in this class to better meet the course goals. If I do change the syllabus I will explain the changes to the class immediately via university email and our e-learning site.

**Text and supplies**

There is no textbook assigned for this course. Instead, we have selected a collection of readings relevant to each topic of the weekly seminar. These readings will be available at the library under course reserve.

There will be a mixture of .pdf's to download, links to videos, or call numbers for book chapters to be read in the library. All print materials are at Waldo Library Circulation Desk. It is possible to scan any of the print items to a USB device on any of the library copy machines.

[http://www.wmich.edu/library/reserves](http://www.wmich.edu/library/reserves)

Search by instructor last name or course number (HNRS 4200)

**Course Password: Uncertainty**
Part One: Defining Uncertainty

Jan. 8
12-2:20: Go over syllabus, course expectations, assignments, Elearning, course reserves, sign up for group presentations. Discussion on defining “Uncertainty” Example annotated bibliography for projects. (No lyceum lecture)

In class reading: Weiss, Kenneth. “Agnotology: How can we handle what we don't know in a knowing way?” Evolutionary Anthropology. Available electronically on course reserve.

Jan. 15
12-1: Lyceum Lecture: by Dr. Meyer.
1:00 - 2:20 Class Meets / No group presentation


Jan. 22
12-1: Lyceum Lecture: Dual and Elusive Information by Dr. Bautista
1-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 1

Required Reading: Please watch the movie “Copenhagen” (2003) by Richard Fell. A DVD is on Course Reserve at Waldo. There are machines/computers in the library to watch this movie. It is NOT available for streaming on Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon. Please plan accordingly.

Jan. 29
1:00-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 2


Feb 5
12-1 “Nomos and Chaos: Exploring Peter Berger's The Sacred Canopy”, by Dr. Wilson
1:00-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 3, 4,

Feb 7  Essay # 1 due by noon Friday Feb. 7, 2014 in the e-learning dropbox. Please save your document to a .pdf format.

Part Two: Human Perception of Uncertainty

Feb 12
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: The Representation of Uncertainty in the Short Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges. By Dr. Montilla
1-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentations 5, 6

Required reading: "The South" a short story by Jorge Luis Borges in the collection “Ficciones”, "The Island at Noon" by Julio Cortázar the collection “All the Fires the Fire.” Available electronically on course reserve.

Feb 19
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: Ambiguity and the Arts by Mr. Brown.
1:00-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 7


Feb 26
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: Ambiguity at the Bedside, by Dr. Sharp.
1:00- 2:20: Class Meets / Group Presentation 8

Required reading: T.B.A.

March 5  No class

March 12
12-1 Lyceum Lecture Series: What do we really know? Living in a Wiki World by Professor Langan
1:00-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 9


March 14
Part Three: Coping and Thriving with Uncertainty

March 19
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: Higher Education: 800 Years of Uncertainty and Still Going Strong by Dr. Beach.
1-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 10


March 26
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: Uncertainty in a technological World by Dr. Mallak
1-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 11, 12


April 2
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: How Uncertainty Helps Successful Economics Decisions by Dr. McNamara
1-2:20 Class Meets / Group Presentation 13

Required Reading: T.B.A.

April 9
12-1 Lyceum Lecture: Paralysis of Analysis by Ms. Emmerich.
1-2:20 Class meets/ Group presentation 14

Required Reading: T.B.A

April 16
12-2:20 No Lyceum Lecture / Class meets for Final Presentations