Geography 9998a/9999a
Philosophies of Geography
Seminars: Thursdays, 12.30 – 2.30 pm
Location SSC 1059

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Description: Introduces students to the diversity of philosophical and theoretical approaches within Geography. Students learn how different paradigms guide geographical research practice, and thus how to locate their own research within a wider intellectual and disciplinary context. 2 seminar hours, 0.5 course (mandatory).

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and theory lie at the intellectual core of all academic enquiry. How we perceive and define our objects of study, how we design and carry out data collection, how we analyse our data and communicate our findings, and what we regard as valid and meaningful knowledge are all determined by the philosophical and theoretical frameworks within which we operate.

This course aims to enable you to position your own geographical research within the larger context of Geography as an academic discipline, as well as to make you aware of the strengths and limitations of the philosophical and theoretical approaches that you and others employ. This will not only provide you with the breadth of knowledge expected of someone with a graduate degree in Geography but, more importantly, lead you to re-examine and refine your own approach to geographical research.

FORMAT

The course is based on active learning and student engagement, much of it in group-based, student-led seminars and peer teaching. The pedagogical approach is not to impart knowledge from instructor to student, but to facilitate personal intellectual growth and development of your own research philosophy. Individually and in groups, you are expected to have done the necessary preparation for each class (which run Sept. 11 to Dec. 11). In addition to the group presentations, each student will also submit two significant pieces of written work and make an individual presentation (see Evaluation below).
Please keep in mind that these seminars are intellectual forums in which to openly debate, question and critique the geographical and philosophical literature and any issues or ideas that arise in class discussion. With your active participation and engagement, the process should prove not only stimulating and interesting, but useful as you conceptualize and plan your own research and become part of the larger scholarly community of geographers.

PURPOSE

This course has several objectives:

- To expose you to a wide range of **philosophical and theoretical approaches** to geographical enquiry and the production of knowledge.
- To introduce and interrogate various **geographic concepts** and themes.
- To engage in **intellectual discussion**, thereby promoting critical and independent thought.
- To encourage **independent learning and thinking**.
- To exercise and develop **critical reading, writing and verbal skills**.
- To promote a **professional and collegial spirit** of scholarship by
  - learning about the similarities and differences among the many geographical theories, approaches, and sub-fields in our discipline, and
  - practising respect for differing ideas, interpretations, and ways of thinking, including those expressed by your peers.

Fulfilling these objectives will enable you to

- Exercise and improve your **verbal, presentation and writing skills** in expressing and critiquing abstract thought.
- Situate your own area of research specialization in the **larger theoretical, philosophical and methodological contexts** of geographical enquiry.
- Approach the discipline of Geography and the work of academic geographers with a **more open and informed perspective** on the plurality of ways geographers think, question, analyse and interpret.
- **Critique** the ideas and research of geographers, including your own work, in a balanced, reasoned and constructive fashion.
- Conduct original geographic research with an understanding of the **philosophical framework** that informs your research design and practice.
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<tr>
<th>WEEKLY SEMINAR TOPICS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>I: Introduction and Setting the Scene</strong></td>
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<td>Sept 11</td>
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| Sept 18 | Ways of Understanding and Means of Explanation in Geographical Research  
*Assign groups for first student-led seminar.* |
| **II: Sub-Disciplinary Perspectives** |
| Sept 25 | Preparatory group work in research “clusters”¹ |
| Oct 2 | Preparatory group work in research “clusters” |
| Oct 9 | Student-Led Seminar I: Key philosophical debates and directions in Clusters A and B |
| Oct 16 | Student-Led Seminar I: Key philosophical debates and directions in Clusters C and D |
| **III: Review and Consolidation** |
| Oct 23 | Ontology, Epistemology, Theory, Methodology  
*First assignment due. Assign groups for second student-led seminar.* |
| **IV: Paradigmatic Approaches in Geographical Research** |
| Oct 30 | No class: Study break. Use week for group preparation. |
| Nov 6 | Student-Led Seminar II: Paradigm-based presentations |
| Nov 13 | Student-Led Seminar II: Paradigm-based presentations |
| **V: Critical Reflections and Next Steps** |
| Nov 20 | In-class discussion: Consolidation from Student-led Seminars I and II  
Preparation for individual term paper |
| Nov 27 | Critical Reflections on Philosophy and Theory in Geographical Research |
| Dec 4 | Moving Forward: Applying Philosophy and Theory in Research Design and Practice |
| Dec 11 | No class. Individual consultation with instructors as required on term papers. |
| Dec 18 | *Second assignment due* |

¹ “Clusters” refer to the four research clusters within the department: Physical Geography; Geographic Information Science; Urban Studies; and Environment, Development and Health.
WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>First paper</td>
<td>Philosophical and theoretical appraisal of a published, research-based article on a geographical topic</td>
<td>Oct 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second paper</td>
<td>Locating your own research in a theoretical and philosophical framework</td>
<td>Dec 18</td>
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EVALUATION

Evaluation is based on two written individual assignments and preparation and presentation of two group seminars. Details of topics, format requirements and evaluation criteria will be provided at a later date. Although no marks are allocated directly for attendance and participation, failure to attend and participate in the seminars will result in a reduction of up to 10% in the final course grade.

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student-led seminars</td>
<td>40% (2x20%)</td>
<td>Various dates</td>
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<tr>
<td>First paper (Article review)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Thursday, October 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second paper (Locating your research)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Thursday, December 18</td>
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How do we grade? In accordance with the School of Graduate Studies, a mark of ‘B+’ (78%) is expected as a minimum level of performance: an acceptable and general understanding of the course material has been demonstrated through the formal assignments and seminar participation. An ‘A’ level performance (80%+) exceeds this minimal standard by demonstrating a thorough knowledge of course material, and the ability to engage key concepts in an effective, logical and informed fashion. Diligence and demonstrable effort are necessary but not, by themselves, sufficient to warrant an ‘A.’ An ‘A+’ (90%+) reflects an outstanding performance in the seminars and written work, an exceptional command of written and oral communication skills, and a critical mind capable of synthesizing complex ideas and generating astute conclusions.

ATTENDANCE AT GRADUATE CLASSES

Your attendance at all classes is crucial to the delivery and success of this course and to your own success in it. Unanticipated absence for medical or personal reasons will be sympathetically dealt with according to University and departmental procedures, which may require submission of supporting documentary evidence such as a doctor’s letter. You may seek permission to be absent from class for academic-related activities such as conference attendance and research activity that requires you to be away from London. Those planning on being absent at any stage during the term should, as soon as possible, request permission to be absent, informing the instructors of the dates of the absence, the reason for the absence and the steps taken to fulfill the course requirements. If assignments cannot be submitted due to a planned absence, an effort should be made to submit prior to departure (see “Late Assignments” below). Note that unapproved absence from class may result in deduction of marks from your final grade.
READING AND OTHER PREPARATION

Instructions regarding readings or other preparatory tasks will be provided as required for the following week’s class. You can expect to do several hours of preparatory reading each week in order to understand the material sufficiently to engage meaningfully in class discussion. For the student-led seminars, each designated group of students will be responsible for assigning reading or other preparation, with assistance and guidance from the Instructors.

Technology and copyright permitting, materials will be made available electronically via Sakai. Please bring a digital or hard copy of each reading to the seminar so that we can refer back to the material in discussion.

The following “philosophy of geography” books are useful sources and will be drawn at various times during the course. Each of these is available on reserve in the Weldon Library or as e-book in the Western Libraries catalogue. The titles are:


If you find any of the above textbooks especially helpful or appealing, you may wish to purchase them, both for the purposes of this course and for future reading and reference.

HELPFUL ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The dictionaries cited below, all available in the Weldon Library, provide definitions, explanations and suggested readings for numerous philosophical approaches and concepts in geography. They are excellent references for this course and for your future intellectual explorations.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS, EXTENSIONS, PLAGIARISM, RE-EVALUATIONS, APPEALS

To avoid misunderstanding, confusion and disappointment, please note the following:

You are advised to read the relevant sections of the Western Academic Handbook and SGPS Regulations to familiarise yourself with Western's regulations and procedures concerning appeals, grades, regulations, penalties and such: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/ and http://grad.uwo.ca/calendar.htm.

Papers are due on the dates indicated above. A late assignment will lose 5% per day. An assignment submitted five or more days beyond the deadline will be graded for your educational benefit but will NOT count toward your final course grade.

We are very sympathetic to extensions of several days, but they must be made in writing at least seven days before the initial due date. In your letter we need only the current date, your name and student number, and the requested extension date.

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf.

Plagiarism is unacceptable and those who tempt fate will be persecuted to the fullest extent allowed under the university’s regulations. Please, avoid this situation and do your own work. If you are uncertain what constitutes plagiarism, please ask us or consult the following: http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/pdf/academicintegrity.pdf

Requests to have an assignment re-evaluated must be submitted to us in writing within one week of receiving the graded assignment. In this written request for reappraisal, the specifics of what you would like re-visited and the justification for doing so must be clearly and concisely stated.

Should you still feel that any grade that you receive in the course is biased, inaccurate or unfair, you do have the right to appeal. Please refer to the SGPS Regulations on Student Academic Appeals prior to doing so: http://grad.uwo.ca/current_students/graduate_regulations/section_11.htm.

Please, never slip assignments under our doors. If you are submitting a paper and we are not in our offices, please place it in one of our mailboxes in the main Geography office. If the office is closed, submit it electronically and then submit a hard copy the following day.

MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

You can expect us to arrive punctually and prepared for all class sessions. We will strive to promote a collegial atmosphere of mutual respect conducive to the exchange of ideas and learning. We expect the same from you. This entails respecting the opinions and questions of others and behaving in a courteous manner.

If you have problems with any aspect of the course, please come and talk to either instructor during our respective office hours or by making an appointment. We are approachable, we welcome your comments and questions, and we very much want you to succeed in the course. Suggestions and constructive criticisms to improve the course are particularly welcomed.