

# The Dean's Seminar

## Social Sciences Interdisciplinary: SSID 300

### Course Outline: Fall 2015

**Course Description:** Close reading and critical evaluation, through roundtable discussion, of a significant work pertinent to the social sciences. Students will receive a Pass or Fail on the basis of participation alone. This 1-credit course involves no lectures, examinations or written assignments, and may be repeated up to three times with a different topic.

**Prerequisite:** Third-year standing in a declared Major or Minor in the Faculty of Social Sciences, and one of the following: mention in the Deans' Honour List or invitation from the Dean. To apply for such an invitation, please obtain a recommendation from a faculty member familiar with your best work.

**Seminar Facilitator:** John Black, Dean of Social Sciences: [john.black@viu.ca](mailto:john.black@viu.ca); 740-6391.

**Location and Time:** Building 355, Room 108; Mondays 1:00-2:30 pm.

**Office Hours:** Building 356, Room 312; Mondays 2:30-3:00 pm or by appointment.

**Text:** Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; online at <http://pm.nlx.com/>. Find Wittgenstein in the list of authors and click on Collected Works. Having selected the book by title on the left of the page, and using the Table of Contents panel and Print View button, you should print each reading as we come to it. A version containing occasional typographical errors, but easier to print, is available at <http://gormendizer.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Ludwig.Wittgenstein.-.Philosophical.Investigations.pdf>. You may also buy the book in print form. **However, there are no copies in the VIU Bookstore.**

For a very helpful account of Wittgenstein's life and views it is recommended that during the summer you read Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Penguin, 1991.

#### Nature and Purpose of the Course

The goal of the course is to promote participants' development as articulate practitioners of their own disciplines, skilled in their specialist critical and creative methodologies, and also as generalists with the intellectual breadth to acknowledge the due relevance of other, related disciplines. The medium for this skill-development is conversation, of a kind that is focused, sophisticated, evaluative and, above all, reasoned. Through examining controversial works of broad significance to the social sciences in general, viewing them sometimes in their own terms and sometimes from the perspective of an outsider, we hope to position ourselves better as social scientists, highly-skilled employees and engaged citizens.

To these ends, regular attendance is mandatory, and the onus is on every member to contribute not only to the conversation, but also to what the topic on any given day will be. The Dean facilitates discussion, and participates himself on the same basis as others, but does not predetermine the topic, save by insisting that it be focused and related to the material selected. In order to allow for constructive discussion in which all are involved, enrolment is restricted to 15. Students must be prepared for the demands for active engagement that such a format places on them. Please see the Notes on Seminar Participation below.

The particular topic for Fall 2015 is the mature work of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, as captured in his posthumous book *Philosophical Investigations*. In his youth a devotee of a logico-scientific approach to philosophy, Wittgenstein later abandoned its fundamental assumptions, and his own important contributions to the field, in favour of a much more sophisticated view of the complexity of ordinary language and its implications for philosophy. In his treatment, akin more to therapy than to theorising, philosophical problems are dissolved by close attention to how and why we use words in our daily, human lives. His writing is often aphoristic, but always deep in insight and evocative in expression.

Among the topics Wittgenstein covers in the *Investigations* are knowledge of the external world and of other minds, skepticism, the nature of truth, meaning and interpretation, and the various ways – from informal to scientific – we explain behaviour and justify actions. His thoughtful and painstaking exploration of these themes is relevant not only to philosophy, but also to psychology and all other social sciences.

### **Tentative Reading Schedule**

The reading to be assigned week-by-week will be handled very flexibly, in accordance with the naturally developing direction and pace of the ongoing discussion. The following is a rough guide as to the size of the reading demands, but the seminar will be successful even if we omit some readings, or include others. The general principle is to support *close* reading, that is to say, reading of high analytical quality: the text should be read multiple times.

**Please note: the numbers after “§§” below refer to sections of the text, and not to pages.**

Sep 14	Course Introduction – no reading
Sep 21	Editors’ Note, Preface, and Part I §§ 1 - 52
Sep 28	Part I §§ 52 - 142
Oct 5	Part I §§ 142 - 240
Oct 12	<i>Thanksgiving Holiday – No Class</i>
Oct 19	Part I §§ 240 - 352
Oct 26	Part I §§ 352 - 464
Nov 2	Part I §§ 464 - 569
Nov 9	Part I §§ 569 - 693
Nov 16	Part II §§ i - x
Nov 23	Part II §§ xi – up to p. 214, paragraph ending “ten times over?”
Nov 30	Part II §§ xi – remainder, and xii-xiv
Dec 7	Taking Stock – no reading

### **Notes on Seminar Participation**

Seminar participation is not a competitive sport wherein some individuals win only because others lose. Nor is it a spectator sport where most enjoy watching while others play. It is best played by a team in which each individual does her best, with her own unique talents and understanding, to keep the game going for everyone. The seminar is a study group where all of us meet to discuss a work that we have read thoughtfully before we arrive. Our goal is to enhance one another’s understanding of the issues raised by the text. This is done best when we focus on one topic at a time. Listening and responding specifically and effectively to what others say will keep the discussion focused and ensure that, when the topic changes, everyone will understand where it is going and why.

While seminar participants will treat one another with respect and courtesy, this requirement by no means excludes serious debate around the text and the issues it raises. The opinions expressed around the seminar table become the common property of the group. The group functions best when it gives these opinions a fair hearing and examines them together. You should feel free to ask your colleagues to explain and defend opinions they have expressed and should expect that, from time to time, you will fail to persuade your colleagues to adopt particular positions. You should not feel deflated when this happens. One of the most important services that your peers can perform for you is to help you examine the strengths and weaknesses of your own ideas. If they prove weak, you and others who initially agree with you will have learned something important. If they prove strong, you will benefit your colleagues. The seminar, like any study group, is a place to test out many positions and approaches to fascinating issues and questions. The privilege of being invited to examine the opinions of others comes with the responsibility of examining, with their help, your own. As long as opinions and positions are being tested out honestly and without defensiveness, the seminar will function in a productive way.

It is important to remember that the seminar is not a counselling group. We are there to discuss the selected work, and your job is to support your comments and opinions with evidence drawn directly from the text. While participants will occasionally draw upon personal experiences to illustrate something they want to say, the focus of the group should always be on the topic under discussion and never on a particular member of the seminar.

Remember, good participation is not a matter of how much you say but of the value of what you say as a contribution to shared understanding. Dominating the discussion will not allow others to express their ideas or to examine yours. Never having much to say will deprive the seminar of your valuable ideas and critical abilities. Straying off topic and speaking without listening can derail what might otherwise be a profitable discussion. Further, good seminar participation involves not only having an idea to share but also gently encouraging quiet colleagues to speak; politely but firmly requesting dominating members to let others respond; pointing out from time to time when the focus has switched too abruptly or is missing; and asking for clarification when you can't remember or figure out what's being talked about.

An intellectually satisfying experience, then, is absolutely central to what the Dean's Seminar is trying to achieve, and we are very concerned to see that students all contribute effectively, especially those who may still find themselves somewhat reluctant to speak up in a group discussion. Anyone who continues to find this a problem should discuss the matter thoroughly with the Dean, so that together they can work out some ways of resolving the difficulties.

The most important components in the Dean's assessment of your performance in the seminar are the following: attendance, preparation for the seminar (evidence of thoughtful completion of the required reading), and the quality and quantity of your participation in the seminar discussions.

### **Preparing for the Seminar**

To get the most out of the seminar experience, you should be thoroughly prepared. Give yourself lots of time to read the material carefully; the following is an ideal method:

- Read the assigned material once through to get its general direction and gist.

- Read it a second time more thoroughly, paying attention to the lines of argument presented and evaluating them as you go: Are there hidden assumptions which one might question? Are the reasons or pieces of evidence given for a particular conclusion themselves (likely to be) true? Assuming for the sake of argument that they are (or were) true, do (or would) they give us no rational choice but to accept the conclusion?
- Formulate one question about the reading material which you would like to put to the seminar when it assembles.

The subject-matter of the seminar is thus the reading material assigned and *your* responses to it. The purpose of the seminar is to enable you to enhance *your* critical skills. Therefore you should NOT prepare by reading secondary scholarship or other sources dealing with the work or author we are discussing. Relying on the opinions of others, no matter how well-founded they are, will restrict your ability to develop your own skills.

### **Evaluation: Attendance and Participation**

Successful completion will result in a Pass (CR), unsuccessful in a Fail (F). The Dean will base the allocation of these grades on the scale explained below for rating performance in each seminar. To receive the Pass grade, a student's marks must average at least 3 out of 6.

Failure to attend will be heavily penalised, unless it is explained by *documented* personal reasons such as illness. The first unexplained absence will earn a mark of 0 for that session, the second a mark of -1, the third a mark of -2, and so forth, with the penalty increasing by one on each occasion.

The following scale gives a guide to the factors the Dean will consider in evaluating seminar participation, as well as a picture of their impact on your mark:

0 or less: Absence; the student is physically absent without a documented reason.

1: Mere attendance, with no contribution to the discussion; the student is physically present, but otherwise absent.

2: Participation, but without significant contribution to the discussion; the student takes part in the conversation, but is ineffective because poorly prepared, insensitive, or uncooperative in the group setting.

3: Significant but limited contribution; the student offers some useful contributions, but they are limited in quantity or quality.

4: Thoroughly satisfactory contribution; the student is well prepared, and offers useful comments (which might yet be more incisive, or more relevant, or further developed).

5: Excellent contribution; the student is very well prepared, maintains a good relationship with others (i.e., contributes actively to the dynamics of the seminar), and offers useful comments in a constructive way.

6: Exemplary contribution; the student makes a major contribution and not just to the understanding of the material but to the social dynamics of the session, a contribution which it would be difficult to imagine being any better.

## **Plagiarism**

That there is no written work in the course does not mean plagiarism is impossible. If in discussion you rely on ideas or analyses derived from another source, you must be honest about this by identifying the source as far as you can.

## **Future Dean's Seminars**

As far as the demands of his position allow, the Dean will offer a Seminar on one of a range of different topics and texts each Fall and Spring semester (at least, until he retires after the Spring 2017 semester!). Students may take the seminar up to three times on different topics. In this way you can build up the equivalent of a standard elective in your degree. The Dean is open to suggestions for topics and texts to be explored in future seminars.