**RPOS250: Current Policy Debates Viewed Through a Critical Thinking Lens**

Fall 2017

Meets: MWF 1:40-2:35; Room, HU 109

A-E graded.

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**Course Description**

So what’s this about? Current Policy Debates Viewed Through a Critical Thinking Lens? Doesn’t sound like it will be your favorite class?

But think about our course title a little more carefully. What it’s saying in what at first seems to be off-putting language comes down to no more than what we want to do anyway. We want better solutions to current policy debates; we want to understand these debates from different perspectives to better formulate our own opinions; and we want to develop skills to help us figure out and clearly communicate those positions. If we want to be effective advocates for our views, it’s important to be more systematic in our thinking.

To get the most out of those arguments, we also need to get better at the “critical thinking” skills, and we need to think systematically about how to communicate our ideas.

While for purposes of this course, we will focus on critical thinking as related to policy/political issues, the hope is that these skills will be broadly applicable to a wide range of situations, including those in your personal life (which we won’t necessarily discuss in class)!

The course is organized as follows. After a couple of weeks of introduction/laying out the terrain, we will examine four or five (depending on time) current policy debates. For each, we will examine different perspectives; we will critically evaluate the arguments and evidence proposed by each author. By the end of each unit, you will be expected to develop clear
statements of your own positions and will be expected to present those positions to the class in written and oral form.

The course satisfies the university’s general education requirements for writing (several short papers), oral discourse (presentations to the class) and information literacy (several library “quests,” the completion of which will earn you a broadening horizons badge for your resume).

**Learning Objectives**

1. To develop a better understanding of some key current policy and political debates.
2. To become a more careful consumer and evaluator of other people’s work as we examine diverse perspectives and diverse sources on each of the issues we discuss.
3. To become a “producer of information and arguments in your own right” through formulating your own opinions and communicating reasoned arguments and recommendations of your own.
4. To have fun! Yes, it might sound intimidating, you’re learning and practicing new skills. You’re being asked to engage in “critical thinking.” It’s not all that bad, and doing “serious” things doesn’t have to mean you can’t enjoy the process.

Note: As is clear from the requirements below and from our need to satisfy the oral discourse requirement, this course will require a good deal of in-class participation. Yes it’s ok if you’re on the quiet side, but you’ll want to get involved so your voice can be part of the debate. It goes without saying that all opinions and perspectives will be heard and respected.

**Required Readings**

There is no single required text for the class. …But of course there is reading! A collection of articles is available on Blackboard, and for the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class. Additionally, there will be several classes where you will be asked to bring in readings that will contribute to class discussion.

**Course Requirements**

As you can see below, the class is structured so that you have many and varied chances to succeed; your final grade depends on your consistency of effort more so than your performance on one particular activity. Additionally, since you will be developing skills, you can expect that your work will get better and come easier as the course proceeds.

1. 4 short writing assignments; approximately 3 pages each, 45%. These will be selected from the 5 topics which we will be discussing throughout the semester. Unless otherwise excused, late papers will be downgraded half a grade per day and will not be accepted after two days.
2. Final paper; 20%.
3. Attendance, class participation, quizzes and short writing assignments; 15%.
4. Quests; 20%. Please note that unless otherwise specified, the topic of any particular quest needs to reflect the particular topic we are currently discussing in class. Completion of all quests will result in a metaliteracy/broadening horizons badge for your resume. Quests need to be turned in prior to class, and late quests will not be accepted.

Course Policies

Attendance: It matters. You are allowed one unexcused absence. Any other absence must be excused by the instructor before the absence or excused afterwards based on a medical note.

Plagiarism: The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me before submitting assignments for grading and/or reference the undergraduate bulletin at: http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html

It is required by the University that I report any violations; should this be your first violation, the report simply sits in a file. A record of several violations will result in disciplinary actions. In terms of class, violations of academic integrity will minimally result in failing the specific assignment.

Students with Disabilities: If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize university resources as needed, and please let me know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

Course Schedule and Readings

*all readings available on Blackboard

*dates subject to change depending on our interests and needs

I. Getting Started (8/28-9/8)

8/28. Course Overview. Views on Confederate Monuments


9/1. Bring in your own article to deepen our understanding of the issue

9/6. What is critical thinking anyway? Assignment: “Reevaluate Quest”; come to class prepared to discuss.
9/8. Presentation about Information Literacy/description of quests. Before-class activity to be announced.

II. **Income Inequality (viewed from a broader equality perspective; (9/11-9/22)**

Critical thinking skills; The Importance of Defining Terms; what are we really talking about. Deciding what’s important. Developing your own positions

9/11. Feulner and Tracy: *The American Spirit* (2012); Ch. 17 (Capitalism)


9/20. Digression: Initial discussion on writing and Giving Credit Quest

*See writing checklist*

9/22. Free-for-all discussion; everyone will be asked to bring in two relevant articles (from different sources).

III. **Generations: What are they and how do they matter? (9/2-10/13)**

Critical thinking skills; practice developing your own arguments; a first look at how political scientists do research

9/25. Generations: Examples and Initial Definitions

*Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation (1998), profiles of George H.W. bush; Julia Child; Andy Rooney; Bob Dole


9/27. Formative Experiences

Clausen and Oxley. *Public Opinion*. Ch. 2

Keater et al “Habits from Home; Lessons from School; Influence on Youth Civic Engagement”; PS 2003

9/29. No Class, No reading; first paper—on income inequality—due

10/2. CQ Researcher: The Millennial Generation

10/4. Some Experiences of the Millennial Generation

Miroff Debating Democracy, Ch. 9, the impact of the internet on democracy.
10/6. Ellis and Nelson, Debating Reform, debate on national service requirements
10/11-10/13. First Broadening Horizons Quest and presentations

IV. **Issue of Class choice (10/16 – 11/3)**
Readings TBD
Unit will include Curation Quest #2 and Messaging Quest.
Paper Due 11/3

V. **Globalization and the U.S. place in the World (11/6 – 11/21)**
*Readings subject to change, more to come
Critical thinking skills; the basics: becoming informed; arguing your stand
11/6. Defining the terrain; Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat*, Introduction
11/8. Brexit; what is the European Union? The Consequences of a Brexit (skim all and focus on the two you most agree with)
11/10. Trade and trade agreements; CQ Researcher
11/13. Foreign Aid. CQ Researcher.
11/15. Human rights and other treaties (Have Human Rights Treaties Failed),
11/17. Presentation of global audience quests

VI. **Political Participation (10/16 – 11/3)**
Readings TBD.
12/6 – 12/8. Design Your Own Quest!
12/11. Last Class Review and Conclusion.
12/19. Final paper due (the day the University has scheduled our final exam)