Making Sense of College

Professor Jennifer McCrickerd
Medbury 214 x2250  jennifer.mccrickerd@drake.edu
T 12:30-2; R 9-10
By Appointment

The value of an education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling people to enjoy the culture of their society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way provide for people a secure sense of their individual worth. — John Rawls, A Theory of Justice

Intent of Class

As a first year seminar, this course is designed to solidify your preparation for success in college. We will work on the skills of writing, reading and critical thinking and speaking. We will do all of this in this course as we work to develop a better understanding both of higher education in the United States and what to expect and how to flourish as a college student. We will do this by looking at higher education in the US by way of a wide variety of disciplines (history, economics, politics, popular culture, psychology, etc.)

Format of course

This course is a seminar which means class time will be spent having conversations building on the reading that we’ve all done in preparation for the class meeting. It also means you will be sharing your work, written work, with others in class and we will discuss the ideas in the work to help each other develop our ideas and together make progress in our understanding of the topic

Generic Learning Goals:

- Improve your ability to read for understanding and development of informed responses to the reading
- Improve ability to unpack and understand arguments presented by others
- Improve ability to take seriously ideas and arguments that might be initially viewed as mistaken
- Improve ability to articulate ideas
- Improve ability to investigate support you have for your beliefs
- Improve ability to arrive at, tentative, conclusions using evidence and good arguments
- Develop ability to speak persuasively, clearly, and in a way that draws on what others have said and written
- Develop ability to listen carefully, understand and assess what you are hearing
- Develop ability to read generously and in a way that brings out the best in the text Develop ability to empathize
- Develop ability to ask questions to get at important issues
- Develop ability to write persuasively, clearly and in a way that synthesizes material relevant to the topic
- Develop ability to work with others in the pursuit of a goal
Fall 2015

- Learn to assess arguments
- Learn patience with texts, others, yourself

Course Requirements

All written material unless told otherwise should be submitted to me on google.drive. This way (a) I don’t have stacks of paper or papers on my hard drive and, most importantly, (b) I can easily comment on the papers and you will get the comments immediately. It makes for incredible convenience for me. And, don’t create a folder that you share with me, share the documents (folders that get shared seem to get ‘lost’). I will walk you through using google drive.

Incompletes will not be awarded on the basis of your being overwhelmed by the usual stress of college life though I am always happy to discuss with you ways to decrease stress in your life and manage this class in a way that doesn’t contribute to your stress. Please come and speak with me if you are feeling overwhelmed so that we can discuss strategies to decrease anxiety. Students have taken me up on the offer in the past and tell me that it has helped with their stress level. I strenuously encourage you to take me up on this offer.

All of the assignments given in the class are given to provide you with an opportunity to both learn and to demonstrate your learning. If you believe either (a) that a particular assignment will accomplish neither of these goals, please let me know so that I can explain my thinking and we can, together move forward or (b) you have an idea of an alternative assignment which will better accomplish the goals of learning and demonstration of learning, please let me know so we can talk about it and, possibly, offer it as an alternative to all in the class.

Expectations of students

If you intend to not attend class or attend class only rarely, it will eliminate much pain and suffering on everyone’s part if you withdraw from the class now as lack of attendance or rare attendance will result in failure of the course – regardless of how brilliant your submitted work may be. Your presence in class is important insofar as I can facilitate your learning and you can contribute to the class experience and learning of all. Your attendance is not solely about what you can get from class but also about what you contribute to class and your participation in our collaborative effort to learn. The fact that you have enrolled in this class means that you are committed to being a member of the classroom community. Not attending class is a violation of a promise. If you promise to help someone move a couch or to take them to the airport and then don’t show up, well, not coming to class is along these lines.

All students must:

- Come to class prepared to have a conversation about the topics of the readings, informed by careful and thoughtful reading of the assigned texts
- Come to class prepared to be challenged and respond thoughtfully to challenges
- Come to class prepared to engage others and challenge others to think more deeply
- Treat others with respect (this does not mean always agreeing but does mean always taking the position that other ideas are worthwhile and worth exploring)
Fall 2015

- Work with others in the class to make the class the best it can be — that is, if you have concerns about the class, you will NOT merely complain about the class but will, instead, speak to JMc about your concerns

Informed contribution to class, of course

If you participate in an informed way not only will you enjoy the class far more than you otherwise would, you will learn for more than if you do not.

Your participation in class is akin to a semester long oral exam. At least this is how I think of it. In that vein, make certain that you come to class prepared to discuss and that you actually do discuss. If you don’t participate, regardless of how well you know the material, you will not get a good grade on this ongoing, semester long oral exam. Of course, the exam is not an exam of what you have ultimately learned, but on how well you can read, interpret, ask questions, work together to better understand what you’ve read.

Just as when you miss an oral exam it doesn’t really matter why you’ve missed it insofar as it can’t be made up so is the case with class. So, do your best to miss a minimum of classes.

Informed contribution requires, by definition, that you (1) contribute and (2) be informed. Contribution involves adding something to the conversation in class (which does mean that you have to actually attend class). Sitting and listening is not contributing (I do know that some of you need to sit with ideas longer before you feel comfortable to contribute your ideas….if conversations are going too quickly, please let us know and ask us to slow down — we want to hear your ideas).

I am far more interested in (and it is far more interesting to discuss) productive mistakes than you having the right answer (whatever that might mean the context of our conversations). We only learn if we make mistakes and then work to understand why the mistakes were made so we can better understand. If we do not learn from mistakes we are squandering learning opportunities. If we do not make mistakes, we are not even providing opportunities. We will spend much of class time finding and discussing mistakes and what we can learn about how we’ve been reading and thinking so we can improve upon these skills.

Contribution does not require that you completely understand the material. A well-formed question frequently contributes more to a discussion than an explanation of the material. Even the ability to identify what in particular is confusing you can be a highly valued contribution to class as frequently that which is confusing you is the core of the argument and helps us to identify the crucial aspect of the text. This is to say that the most valuable knowledge you can have for class discussion is knowing what you don’t understand so that we can work to facilitate your understanding.

Because your contribution is not just about enhancing your learning, though it will, but it is also about being a good classroom community member, I do take attendance. However, I do not directly penalize you for not attending (you will be indirectly penalized insofar as your contribution will not be terribly high nor will you do well on assignments). Note, however, that informed participation is part of your grade. I will do my best to facilitate your informed participation so that you do not have to struggle to accomplish this aspect of the course.

One way to think about discussion (and conversation more generally) is to think about it from the perspective of improv. In improvisational theater or comedy, the primary rule is to always say ‘yes and…’ The idea is to ‘catch’ what the other person has given you and then develop it — ideally in a direction that will give the next person a good deal to work with. To let something that someone else has said ‘drop’ and
then start tossing something new is something to avoid. Of course, ‘catching’ what someone gives you means not only listening to what they have said but also to what they haven’t said. And, a simple rule in at least beginning discussion is to always identify what it is that you have caught that you are working off of, so that everyone knows what’s going on.

Just as when you miss an oral exam it doesn’t really matter why you’ve missed it insofar as it can’t be made up so is the case with class. So, do your best to miss a minimum of classes.

Again, let me emphasize that I know that all of us in the class will be more or less comfortable moving at different speeds through material. If things are going too quickly for you to either follow or feel able to contribute, please let me know. Your voice is important in the discussion and I want to be able to get it in, but I might need your help to make this happen.

Again, engaged class participation is a requirement for this class. This means that you come to class having done the preparatory work and that you work with the rest of us to grow in our understanding of the texts and ideas of the course. Sitting and listening but not participating is a way for you to, perhaps, learn from us but it is not a way for you to work with us. This class is a team sport. Sitting and listening is akin to the player who stands on the field or court and watches but does not play or the member of the orchestra who sits and listens but does not play. In keeping with the metaphor of being a member of a larger group, keep in mind that not only do you have to do well to bring out the best of the group but you also must make space (and provide encouragement) for others to do their best to bring out the best in the group.

If you do not actually regularly participate in class discussions, you will not get a grade of more than a C.

And, again, the reason for this is that when you routinely participate in an informed way, you will enjoy the class and learn more. And, the class as a whole will be a more positive experience for everyone.

Intellectual Risk-taking

In my experience, students have learned that trying new things can be detrimental to grades. This is unfortunate because advances in any area are the consequence of taking risks, making mistakes, learning from them and then trying again. Advances happen because people have been willing to continue to veer from the path of safety and do the truly difficult task of trying (thought through) new and interesting things.

Important to all pursuits is to stretch yourself and take risks. The idea isn’t to avoid making mistakes but to make sure that any mistakes you make are productive mistakes — mistakes that you can learn from, mistakes that give you an opportunity to improve the way you are thinking about something. Mistakes borne out of laziness are rarely productive mistakes whereas mistakes resulting from a good faith attempt to reach further are good mistakes (as long as something is learned).

As such, students must take risks in this class and be able to point, at the end of the semester to a pattern of productive mistakes they have made and how they have learned from these mistakes. Again, this is my way of encouraging you to do something that you have likely spent your educational career avoiding in an effort to get the ‘right answer.’ Taking the safe route of seeking only right answers will not lead to you making the most out of this class, your college experience nor will it lead to you being a valued member of any group you are a part of.
Contribution to Joint Course document

For each class meeting you must post, at least 4 hours prior to class, a discussion question on the reading we will be discussing that class period. This question should not be focused in on a detail that is either not relevant to the larger points of the reading or that can be easily answered through an internet search. Instead, this question should be conceptual in nature and should be a question that will generate good conversation. Your question should not significantly duplicate a question that one of your classmates posts before you (thus, there is an incentive to not putting this off).

On-Line Personal Journal (on google.docs) **This work is probably the most important aspect of this class. This work is where you have the greatest opportunity to demonstrate and enhance your learning. Not doing this work will lead to a grade no higher than a D.**

Previous students have requested that I emphasize the importance of this on-line journal. Consider it, thus, emphasized!

You must post in your personal journal once a week

You must, throughout the semester, keep an on-line ‘journal’ in which you record your running thoughts, questions and reflections about the material we are discuss in class. You should be posting at least once a week.

The idea behind this requirement is that it will force you to consistently be collecting your thoughts — well enough to at least write them down — which will aid all of us in class discussion and also help you to get more out of the class. Also, this will provide evidence of your learning which is important to your overall grade in the course.

In its simplest form, you should take advantage of the questions being generated on the class group document and choose one of those each week to answer. And, in so answering, make sure you are providing evidence of having taken the reading and class discussion seriously.

Previous students have requested that I emphasize the importance of this on-line journal — in terms of its learning opportunities and also a source for providing evidence of learning for end of the semester grades. Consider it, again, emphasized!

This individual journal will be a place for you to (1) practice writing to someone who will read and take your ideas seriously; (2) explore your ideas in more depth than class may have allowed you to; (3) get individualized feedback from me intermittently throughout the semester. In many ways, this journal will be an on-going conversation between you and me throughout the term. In keeping with this, these posts may be generally informal in form (that is, they don't need to have a thesis statement, introductions, etc.). I do expect that they will be written in grammatically correct English (this is so I am better able to easily understand them) and that you will do your best to be as clear as possible so I can understand your thinking.

These entries should *not* merely be comments on your feelings or discussions of writing style and should, instead, focus on the main points relevant to the overall class focus and particular issues we have been discussing.
Also, the idea here is that you focus on deepening your understanding of the text. This is not to say that you shouldn’t identify what you think you disagree with or what you think are implications of their positions. But all of this should be done with the goal of improving understanding, not the goal of proving your superiority over these authors. When you discuss what you think you disagree with or what you think is an implication, make sure you make a case for your interpretation of what the author is saying. Many times when someone thinks an author is obviously wrong, a misreading of the text has happened. None of these authors is going to be obviously wrong (though they may be wrong).

In your journal, you should also be making connections to other readings and conversations we’ve had. That is, you should be working to see the big picture. It might make more sense to post on particular reading after we have discussed it in class, but I leave up to you what you post on. Please do not refrain from posting because you think you have nothing worthwhile to say. Your journal entries are the best way I have to know where confusions are coming up and, thus, give me an opportunity to help out.

Do not under-estimate the importance of this on-line journal. Students who stay on top of this are vastly more likely to do well in class than those who don’t. I’d even go so far as to say that maintaining this journal throughout the semester is necessary to doing well in this class. Lastly, it is always better to post something than to post nothing. And it is always better to start posting after you haven’t been posting than to continue not posting. Your grade for the class will draw extensively from your journal. If you have not kept a journal, your grade will significantly suffer — as noted above, you will not get higher than a D in the course.

Again, the point of the journal is to enhance your learning. If it is starting to feel like busywork, let me know and we can figure out a way to make it more meaningful for you. The journal is a place for you to explore ideas away from class and to provide evidence of your ongoing reflection and engagement with the ideas and texts of the course.

Routine writing

In many class meetings, you may be doing some in-class writing or have done some preparatory work prior to class. This writing is intended to enhance your learning by giving you the opportunity to work through ideas.

Papers (for all of these more instruction will be provided)

In addition to the more informal writing noted above, you will have 5 more formal papers to write. You will get information on these papers as necessary.

Self-Assessments:

As the semester progresses (at the end of the 4th and 8th week) each student must submit an assessment on the progress in the course, providing evidence in support of your assessment. This
will culminate with your final assessment (portfolio) at the end of the semester in which you will make the case for the grade that you deserve.

The idea here is that by thinking about your learning you will, in fact, become better at learning. And, if you create goals and strategies to meet these goals, you will again get more out of the class.

In these self-assessments, you should be evaluating your process of learning. This means that you must identify what you are doing as a learner and how well you are doing it. Reflecting upon your learning is doing more than simply describing your learning. Reflecting upon it means that you are looking at what you are doing from a critical stance — much in the way that an athlete or artist might look at their work and talk through what they were thinking when they were doing certain things. Are you doing adequately, better than adequately or worse than adequately?

You must identify areas where you are doing well and explain what makes you think you are doing well and what it is that making it possible for you to do well. You must also identify areas in which you need to improve and then set goals for ways to improve by the next self-assessment and articulating specific strategies for achieving these goals (it would be appropriate to look at the grading criteria for these purposes). Of course, you should also assess how you have done in terms of your last self-assessment and the goals and strategies you developed. And, lastly, you should use these as a place to make recommendations for how the class might be improved.

Because there are no grades given throughout the semester, you are urged to speak with JMc if you are concerned that your grade might not be in sync with your learning.

You should be looking at the end of the semester grading criteria articulated in detail in the ‘grading information’ document and noting your progress in the different areas. While I am interested in your assessment of your learning of the particular course material, I am particularly interested in the way you are thinking about the material and your reflection on how you are learning. I’m interested in your assessment of where you are, to what extent you are improving and what you can do to further improve.

The more thoughtful your reflections as you assess, the more likely I am to take them seriously when determining your final grade. Thus, it is the reflections that are most important. You should, at the end of the semester, be able to make considerable use of these self-assessments when you are making the case for your grade.

The idea here is, first, you are in the best position to tell me how you are changing because of the class and, second, by keeping in mind the goals of the class you will be more likely to work toward them (athletes & musicians who forget what they're doing midway rarely score or finish their pieces).

---

**Final Portfolio** This is you culminating assessment of your learning in the class. In this portfolio you will make the case (by drawing on specific assignments — via links, quotes, etc) that you deserve a particular grade because you have achieved a certain level of learning and you have put in the corresponding amount of work for the grade you believe you deserve. You should keep in mind that this portfolio is in your future as you make choices about what and how you work in this class throughout the semester. See additional materials in separate document regarding portfolio (document titled “grading information”). *This is how your final grade is determined.*
Grading

The guiding principle in this approach to grading is that your grade should match up with your learning. This method of grading focuses on you collecting evidence at the end of the semester to make the case for having met the criteria for a particular grade (the criteria are detailed in the “grading information” document). My intention is for you to have significant input in determining your grade by way of you providing evidence and explaining how the evidence demonstrates your learning.

Your grade in this class reflects my assessment of your engagement with the material in the class, the quality of your contribution to class discussion and the learning of your classmates, the depth of your understanding of the material and your ability to move beyond the material to develop your own ideas that take seriously the material but are not simply a repetition of what is in the reading or what others have said in class. I will also be assessing your development of certain dispositions the acquisition of which are crucial to continued success in all areas of life. As I develop my assessment throughout the semester I will rely extensively on your assessment of your development both with regard to understanding of the particulars of this course, your progress in the different skills and dispositions that you should be working on and your learning. Thus, your thoughtful effort on your self-assessments is very important. In particular, your portfolio submitted at the end of the semester will be taken very seriously (and is more likely to be conducive to your desired grade if you submit these assessments throughout the semester).

If you work hard in this class then you should get an A in this class — insofar as your hard work should be paying off. If you find that you are working very hard and not progressing satisfactorily, please come and talk with me so that we can figure out together what is going on. Remember, I am here to help you. I chose this career because I enjoy teaching, I enjoy working with students to help you in different areas of growth.

Assignments will be commented on, but not graded, and you are encouraged to rework all of your assignments in response to the comments.

As such, there is no strict percentage of what each component of this class is worth as all components will be viewed as providing evidence of your standing in the above mentioned areas.

If at any point in the semester, you would like to check in about anything (including how to improve in the class or your grade at the moment) please do not hesitate to come and speak with me.

You will receive a set of documents that articulates all grading criteria (document titled “grading information”). See these additional materials which provide details on this.

Note on Plagiarism

Dante, famous for placing wrong-doers of different sorts in different levels of hell in his Inferno, puts liars and thieves in the 8th circle of Hell and puts those who betray others (family, friends or guests) in the 9th (and worst) circle of Hell and the punishments each suffers in their respective places are not pleasant. I’m not certain whether plagiarizers are more appropriately labeled thieves or betrayers, but any plagiarism (i.e., knowingly presenting someone else’s idea as your own) in this class will result in at minimum failing the class. Err on the side of citing everything that is not your own idea (that is, everything that (a) you needed to go “find” in order to include it in what you’ve written; (b) I may not know and so want to find; (c) is an interpretation of something you’ve read so I can find what you are interpreting; (d) an idea, phrasing, word you are fairly certain you have because you’ve heard it from someone else) to avoid failing
because of plagiarism and to avoid any possible unpleasant eternal punishments (at least that stem from this class) should Dante have been correct. If you have questions or concerns on this front, don’t hesitate to ask me so you can feel confident that you are giving credit where credit is due.

Academic Integrity:

This requires not only the relatively low standard of not presenting someone else’s work or ideas as your own (doing so will result, at minimum, in you failing this class – see above discussion of Dante), but also taking all that we read seriously and assuming that what you are reading makes sense and is a worthwhile contribution to the conversation. If you think that something you have read is simply stupid, consider the possibility that you have misunderstood what is going on; these authors are not fools. Also, remember that even if something is ultimately mistaken, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t anything to learn from what has been done. It is vastly easier to criticize something you disagree with, it’s more difficult, but more useful and a sign of intellectual maturity, to take the time to learn from everything you encounter. Your first task in all reading in this course is to understand and appreciate what is going on and what can be learned. This is part of what it means to treat these authors with respect. Read these articles in the same way you would like others to read what you have written. These authors have spent a great deal of time and energy thinking through these ideas, articulating them in the way they think is best. Treating them with respect means doing the best you can to work with them on the project, to understand what they are saying, why they might have taken the direction that they did in their argument and read what they say in the best possible light. Of course, taking an author seriously also means holding them to a high standard and not just accepting what they’ve said because they’ve said it. Identify and look closely at the arguments to see if they hold up under scrutiny. But do it with respect. Likewise, treat your classmates’ ideas in the same way.

What you can expect from me

That I will...

- ...read your journals intermittently, comment on them and think about them as I develop the structure of classes.
- ...treat your ideas with respect and take you seriously. This means that I will believe you have thought carefully about your ideas and push you to defend it, bringing up possible objections to your position. All the while, however, I assume that you will be working to develop responses – even if it take a few days and you have to work together.
- ...push you to improve upon where you are
- ...explain why I’m doing what I’m doing
- ...answer questions you ask me
- ...prioritize student learning over everything else in the classroom
- ...come to class prepared and work to make sure you are understanding the material
- ...take your concerns seriously
- ...treat you with kindness and make time for you
- ...assume that you have good reasons for your beliefs, even if I don’t agree with them, and help you to articulate what those good reasons are
- .....always allow for the opportunity for you to alter your position in the face of good reasons
- ...assume that you can think for yourself and will not assume that my beliefs are correct just because their mine
- ...not favor those who agree with me or treat with disrespect those who don't share my beliefs
- ...be charitable in my understanding of what you are saying putting it in the most positive light I can
- ...comment on your submitted work thoughtfully
- ...work in good faith to bring out the best in you and myself
A final note: While ratemyprofessor.com is not a very reliable source for feedback (or self-esteem 😊), it has been alleged there that I have one or more of the following flaws: (a) lacking clarity; (b) unkind/mean-spirited; (c) only interested in you agreeing with me; (d) tardiness getting papers graded; (e) insufficient comments on papers; (f) not enough time spent going over reading. If you experience (a) or believe that (b), (c), (e) or (f) is true, please do something to (gently) make me aware of these facts so that I can correct them. I am aware of my room for improvement regarding (d) and believe that on-line submission of papers facilitates some needed improvement in this area; nonetheless, gentle encouragement is never resented.

Reading academic texts is a skill that take time to develop (as do all skills). One thing that might help you is listening to someone else reading the text as you read along. Below are places to find audio versions of some of the texts we will be using in class. Some of these are free while others may cost a bit. It might be a good idea to take advantage of this not only for this class but for developing your general reading skills.

Lastly, reading non-fiction is more like reading a map or a thermometer than reading a novel or music. It isn't important that the reading be done from beginning to end. It is frequently more helpful to find what you are looking for, wherever it is, and then work to figure out how the writer got there. This can mean that you are flipping back and forth in the book scanning for key words, explanations, etc.. Similar to reading a map, you may sometimes want to ‘zoom out’ and look at chapter and section headings, to figure out where you want to, then, ‘zoom in’ and see the details.

We will discuss reading in class, but if you are having difficulties please don’t hesitate to come and talk to me.
## Bloom’s Taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest level</th>
<th>Creating/Developing/Synthesizing</th>
<th>Evidence of meeting it</th>
<th>Questions at this level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adding to the conversation or idea by building on it</td>
<td>What if we were to also take into account…..?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating/Assessing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Looking at evidence for different parts of argument and able to assess evidence</td>
<td>Does this argument really lead to the conclusion? Is this evidence good evidence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding argument for conclusion</td>
<td>How did the author support this conclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td></td>
<td>Using, noting implications, novel uses</td>
<td>Would this also mean….?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining, paraphrasing, summarizing</td>
<td>What did the conclusion mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest level</td>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>Listing, describing, naming, etc.</td>
<td>What did the author conclude? What did the author say?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>