GOVERNMENT 490-001: Spring 2015

Dr Hugh Sockett
hsockett@gmu.edu

Innovation 133

Monday and Wednesday 10.30 – 11.45

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Recommended texts can be purchased at the Bookstore. They are also listed in Blackboard under Course Content.

There are no office hours but appointments with me can be made at our mutual convenience.

My office is Robinson A 217. Phone 38310

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NOTE

Students registering for this course should know that it is a Mason Core Synthesis Course primarily for seniors in Government and International Affairs. You must be completing your Mason Core requirements this semester, which may include taking other such courses, or have already done so.

January 2016
Overview of the Course

I: Democracy and Education

This course offers students the opportunity through class discussion, reading, intensive writing, and work in groups to:

1. reflect on their experience of the historical and contemporary purposes of education in a democratic society;
2. extend their understanding of democratic citizenship and its education;
3. extend their understanding of, and to be able to think critically about, controversial issues in American society, using their general education and specialist knowledge of political theory and government,
4. realize the Mason Core Synthesis Course Objectives within a writing-intensive course.

These objectives are achieved through weekly written assignments (one page each) following group discussion of the topic; group presentations at the end of the semester, and three main essays (two book reviews and an essay on a topic within a group presentation.

II: Introduction - The Mason Core

George Mason University's Mason Core is designed to complement work in a student’s chosen area of study. These classes serve as a means of discovery for students, providing a foundation for learning, connecting to potential new areas of interest and building tools for success in whatever field a student pursues. Learning outcomes are guided by the qualities every student should develop as they move toward graduating with a George Mason degree. The Mason Core program helps students to become:

Critical and Creative Scholars
Students who have a love of and capacity for learning. Their understanding of fundamental principles in a variety of disciplines, and their mastery of quantitative and communication tools, enables them to think creatively and productively. They are inquisitive, open-minded, capable, informed, and able to integrate diverse bodies of knowledge and perspectives.

Self-Reflective Learners
Students who develop the capacity to think well. They can identify and articulate individual beliefs, strengths and weaknesses, critically reflect on these beliefs and integrate this understanding into their daily living.

Ethical, Inquiry-Based Citizens
Students who are tolerant and understanding. They can conceptualize and communicate about problems of local, national and global significance, using research and evaluative perspectives to contribute to the common good.

**Thinkers and Problem-Solvers**

Students who are able to discover and understand natural, physical, and social phenomena; who can articulate their application to real world challenges; and who approach problem-solving from various vantage points. They can demonstrate capability for inquiry, reason, and imagination and see connections in historical, literary and artistic fields.

**Government 490 is a Synthesis Course.**

The purpose of the synthesis course is to provide students with the opportunity to synthesize the knowledge, skills and values gained from the Mason Core curriculum. Synthesis courses strive to expand students’ ability to master new content, think critically, and develop life-long learning skills across the disciplines. While it is not feasible to design courses that cover "all" areas of the Mason Core, synthesis courses should function as a careful alignment of disciplinary goals with a range of general education learning outcomes.

A Mason Core synthesis course must address outcomes 1 and 2, and at least one outcome under 3.  
Upon completing a synthesis course, students will be able to:

1. Communicate effectively in both oral and written forms, applying appropriate rhetorical standards (e.g., audience adaptation, language, argument, organization, evidence, etc.)

2. Using perspectives from two or more disciplines, connect issues in a given field to wider intellectual, community or societal concerns,

3. Apply critical thinking skills to:

   a. Evaluate the quality, credibility and limitations of an argument or a solution using appropriate evidence or resources, OR,

   b. Judge the quality or value of an idea, work, or principle based on appropriate analytics and standards.

**III: Government 490-001: Becoming a critical thinker**

In particular, the course emphasizes the critical thinker, a person characterized by the following dispositions and habits of mind:

a. A profound commitment to search for the truth and understanding that knowledge is often provisional;
b. Consistent self-monitoring in respect of open-mindedness and impartiality through always assessing alternatives;

c. Empathy with the perspectives of others and fairness in evaluating those differences;

d. Realistic self-appraisal of one’s strengths and weaknesses.

e. Having a conscience about what one believes – ought I to believe this?

IV. Texts for the Course


Robert Putnam: *Our Kids*


Richard Bellamy: *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. $11.95

These main texts should be purchased and all should be available in the Bookstore. There are also readings and weblinks on Blackboard.

Additional Book for Review (as an assignment):

Jonathan Sacks. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Continuum Press (on Amazon at $11.50)

V. CLASS RULES AND EXPECTATIONS:

1. ATTENDANCE:

Attendance is compulsory. You will not have had the benefit of the class discussion on the topic and your weekly assignments will be graded differently. Without an explained absence notified in advance, there will be an increasing points penalty on assignments: 1 point for the first instance, 2 for the second and 3 for any remaining absences.
2. PRE-READING:
YOU ARE EXPECTED TO HAVE READ THOSE ITEMS IDENTIFIED FOR EACH SESSION BEFORE CLASS.

THE PROGRAM SCHEDULE

Part I: Introduction (January 21, 26)

January 21: Introduction: The Program and the Syllabus
The Critical Thinker
Book Reviews
Presentations
Group Discussion


Finalize Group Formation

Part II: Democracy and Education: (January 29 - April 20)

Each student prepares a one-page paper (single spaced) as an answer to the questions indicated below in red. Both MUST be submitted on Blackboard by the Monday class time following the previous week’s discussions. 5 points each.

January 28: Visit of Elena Chiru. Careers Talk:
Democratic Citizenship and the Critical Thinker: further discussion.

February 2: The Humanities and Democratic Citizenship
Assignment 2. Does democracy need the Humanities? (Nussbaum.)

February 4: Assignment 3. Are there limits to the use of argument? If so, what are they? How do we learn to argue? (Nussbaum.)

February 9: Assignment 4. How do we describe the basics of social justice? Barry, chapters 1, 2 and 3.

February 11: Assignment 5. What is wrong with the view that I can’t do anything to influence the government? See Miller, chapter 1.
February 16: **Preliminary discussion of group presentation topics.**


February 18: Assignment 7. *What are the conditions for equality of educational opportunity?* Barry: chapters 4 through 7.

February 23: Assignment 8. **Should schools be vehicles for social justice?** Barry 4-7
Specifically Barry chapter 5

February 25: Selection of Presentation Topics and Group construction.

March 2: Assignment 9. *What do political judgments require and are citizens competent to make them?* Miller, chapters 2 and 3: Bellamy, Chapter 5.

March 4: Assignment 10. *Do rights define the relationship between citizens, civil society and government in a democratic society?* Miller, chapter 4: Clapham, chapter 5 and 6: Bellamy, chapters 1 and 4: Barry 1 through 12.


March 18 Barry, chapters 16-20. Group Discussion

March 23: Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: sections VII and VIII*

March 25: Assignment 12. *What kinds of speech should not be tolerated in a democratic society?* Miller, chapter 6: Nussbaum, chapter 2 and 3

March 30: Group Meetings on Presentation Preparation

April 1: Assignment 13. *Should minorities in a democracy be protected? If so, how?* Miller, chapters 2 and 3, Bellamy, chapter 5


April 8 Group Meetings on Presentation Preparation: outline proposals submitted

April 13 Book Review Discussion: Jonathan Sacks: *The Dignity of Difference*

April 15: Summary Book discussion; Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters*:
Assignment 15: Essay Review on Sacks due.

PART III: GROUP PRESENTATIONS (April 20, April 22, April 27, April 29, May 4)

6 groups will give presentations on separate controversial themes about which they should both research detail and critically assess the issue. Each presentation will be followed by discussion.

GROUP PRESENTATION

1. The Presentation as an event: assessed as a group effort with all students in the group getting the same score. (15 points)

2. The Individual’s contribution to the event: assessed by individual. (10 points)

Note: Authors of Presentations and Essays should demonstrate the central characteristics of critical thought on which assessments will be made. They should:

- Clearly identify and make explicit the controversial issue
- Explain the assumptions behind the way in which problems are identified
- Use relevant credible sources accurately
- Tie conclusions to evidence
- Articulate and consider alternative viewpoints with care and objectivity
- Identify the limitations contained in the presentation or essay, and
- Integrate ideals into a coherent argument.

ASSESSMENT and DUE DATES

Points are awarded as follows. Due dates indicated:

FEBRUARY 15
Essay Review of Nussbaum Not for Profit: 1,500 words (20 points):

By the next class date:
15 one-pagers: (75 points, 5 each)

APRIL 20 – MAY 4
Group Presentation: (15 points)
Individual contribution to Group Presentation (10 points)

APRIL 15:
Essay Review of Sacks: 2,000 words. (20 points)
MAY 7

DUE: Essay on Presentation topic: 1,500 words (10)
Presentation Critiques (10 points)

Total: 150

LITERAL AND NUMERICAL GRADES

A+: 146-150  A: 139-145  A-: 131-138  B+: 122-130,  B: 113-121  B-: 104-112
C+: 85-103  C: 75-84,  D: 69-74  F: 68 and below.