

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL
Spring, 2012

First-Year Seminar: Difficult Dialogues

(SOCI 89)

Section 003 Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00–12:15 Hamilton 523

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COURSE OVERVIEW

In public life today there are many areas of intense disagreement. People disagree about moral issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and end-of-life care. They disagree about economic matters like how high taxes should be and what government should do with taxes. They disagree about America's role in the world and in military actions around the world. They disagree about religion, corporate responsibility, education, and more. But most of the time the disagreement is either buried or ignored. Professional disagreeers in the media—and their audiences—trumpet talking points and angry rhetoric without considering their opponents' concerns much at all. Meanwhile sober voices champion “civility,” all too often preferring good manners to serious engagement. In this seminar, we will develop rules and practices for talking about, and listening to, big issues that inspire passionate disagreement. We will tackle three such issues during the semester, and for each we will learn enough to have a vigorous, frank, and smart conversation. Each conversation will result in one or more collaborative discussion papers, to be posted online, that detail the contours of the issue, the remaining points of disagreement and agreement, and one or more conclusion(s).

COURSE GOALS

In this course, you will learn to:

1. Research independently the ideas and background of important issues of the day
2. Develop thoughtful, considered opinions about those issues
3. Express those opinions in a convincing, appropriate manner
4. Listen to and carefully consider the views and opinions of others
5. Write well and convincingly for a broad audience

EXPECTATIONS

All our work in the class will be team-oriented. As part of a research and inquiry team, you must participate actively in every step of the process of developing the collaborative discussion papers produced by the class. You must:

- Be present for all class discussions;
- Complete all reading assignments thoroughly and on time;
- Engage actively in class discussions;
- Listen carefully and thoughtfully to classmates' views; and
- Be an active part of each research and inquiry team to which you are assigned.

Your work on each team and as a member of the class will be evaluated by your peers and by me. Evaluation will take place at the end of each of the three topic sessions, and your final grade will be determined as an average of the grades you receive in each of these sessions. **Adequate completion of all the class requirements will earn a grade of B-. Performance above and beyond the requirements will earn a grade of B or higher; performance that is less than adequate will earn a grade of C+ or lower.**

HONOR

Your participation in this course is covered by the Honor Code. Any violation of the honor code will result in your being referred to the Student Attorney General for prosecution. If you have any questions or doubts about intellectual honesty, plagiarism, or other matters of honor, discuss them with me or check <http://honor.unc.edu> for more information.

READINGS

There are no required books or readers for the class. A few foundational readings are available on the class [sakai](#) site, where we will also conduct our internal discussions. All other readings will be discovered by the class during the course of the research.

You should read one or more of the following newspapers on a **daily** basis:

- *The New York Times*
- *The Wall Street Journal*
- *The Washington Post*
- *The Raleigh News & Observer*

CLASS SCHEDULE

I. Rules for Argument and Engagement

During the first two weeks of class, we will be discussing how to discuss. The class, as a whole, will come up with a set of guidelines for the rest of the classroom conversation. These guidelines will include:

- How we will go about developing class-wide approaches to problems;
- What kinds of conversation are expected and prohibited;
- Differences and distinctions among facts, arguments, opinions, and core values; and
- How we will handle deep disagreement among class members.

January 10 Introductions

January 12 Results and discussion of class poll

HOMEWORK: take the class poll linked from [sakai](#).

January 17 Begin work on “This I Believe” essays

January 19 Discuss “This I Believe” essays

HOMEWORK: 1–2 page “This I Believe” essay due in class.

January 24 Discussion: Rules and Habits of Difficult Dialogues

READINGS: (all available on Sakai)

(a) Wilson, Lydia. “Putting Ideas in Their Heads.” *Carolina Alumni Review* November/December, 2011.

(b) Michael Schudson, “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14:4 (1997): 297–309.

January 26 Topic decisions and team assignments

II. Topic I

January 31 Introductory discussion: What do we think now? Why?

February 2 Team meetings: research planning and strategy

February 7 Team meetings: information assessment and argument development

February 9 Mid-project discussion: What do we think now?

February 14 Team meetings: conclusions and formulations

February 16 Team presentations and discussion

III. Topic II

February 21 Introductory discussion: What do we think now? Why?

February 23 Team meetings: research planning and strategy

February 28 Team meetings: information assessment and argument development

March 1 Mid-project discussion: What do we think now?

SPRING BREAK

March 13 Team meetings: conclusions and formulations

March 15 Team presentations and discussion

IV. The Federal Budget

Many commentators have noted that the federal budget is a “moral document”—it contains the values and judgments about priorities of the federal government and, by extension, the public. For the final topic, we will consider the federal budget, including taxation, deficits, and spending priorities. We will spend a small amount of time on the historical dimensions of the budget but the primary consideration will be on making decisions about the FY2012 budget.

March 20 Team meetings: research planning and strategy

March 22 Team meetings: information assessment and argument

March 27 Mid-Project Discussion: Prioritizing

March 29 Team meetings: conclusions and formulations

April 3 Team presentations and discussion

April 5 Class workshop: a proposed federal budget

V. Wrap up

April 10 Revisit Topic I

April 12 Revisit Topic II

April 17 Revisit Federal Budget

April 19 Lessons for Difficult Dialogues

April 24 Class evaluation and wrap-up