The Social Foundations of Public Issues

(VSS.0690)

Morse Academic Plan--Societies and the Social Sciences

Underlying Goals and Assumptions of the Course Design

This course introduces students to the ideas, methods, and analytical strategies of the social sciences through material focused on current public controversies. Issues such as the death penalty, welfare, abortion, and affirmative action force everyone to choose sides. In this course, we will explore these issues much more carefully than most of us otherwise have the time and interest to do. With each issue, students will be challenged to think critically and analytically about their own beliefs, confronting their opinions with realistic findings and theories derived from social research. Through this process, students will learn how social scientists think about and study such issues and how responsible citizens can use social science effectively. But students will also learn even more. This class uses an innovative approach that lets you learn how to work in groups (which is a principal form of work in the modern world), lets you do research over the Internet, asks you to analyze social issues rather than just read about them, and, as a bonus, lets you make friends in the process.

The Approach to the Material

This class uses an approach that stresses self-directed learning within collaborative groups. Throughout the class, you will pursue a scenario in which you have been hired as a consultant for a candidate running for President. Working with a team of other consultants, you have to prepare position papers for the candidate that recommend ways to resolve public disputes over divisive social issues. You have to research each issue's history, how other countries have responded, what explains which side people take, which "facts" used by advocates are true and which are false, and what we can predict about the effects of alternative policies. Your group has to decide how to conduct this research and then integrate your results and ideas into a joint paper. For each of the four main issues, you will work with a different group of people. Along with the usual library work, you will do a lot of research over the Internet, and all the position papers and commentaries will be exchanged on the class WWW site. This learning experience is intensive, social, self-directed, and probably completely different from what you have seen before.

We will begin each topic with a combined lecture and discussion in which we start to
explore the outlines of the issue. *Students must read the required material for each topic prior to the first class meeting on that topic.* The class will then divide up into work groups, each with 4-5 students. The instructors will assign students to the work groups and the composition of these groups will change for each topic covered during the course. The key task is to prepare a position paper (described in a separate memorandum). This position paper will be submitted on the last lecture class devoted to the topic. On this final day for each topic, we will have a general class discussion in which we compare and debate the conclusions reached by the groups.

*During each research group meeting,* students will 1) try to formulate a solution given their current knowledge of the issue, 2) identify what they need to know to move forward, 3) create a list of these information needs or learning issues, 4) rank these learning issues according to their apparent importance, and 5) allocate responsibility for gathering needed information before their next meeting. The group has to decide which learning tasks should be pursued by everyone, and which should be assigned to individuals or pairs. To help students find needed information, relevant pages on the class web site will give a strong start on internet sources. Also, a bibliography of additional readings on each topic is available on the class web site--most of these printed materials will be on reserve at the library. Students are free to research as far afield as they feel appropriate. Students must also decide how they want to allocate responsibility for writing for the position paper among the group members.

*Workgroups are the center of this class and part of each class meeting (except the final discussion meeting on each topic) will be devoted to these workgroups. (Students will, of course, also meet together at other times.)* While the students are meeting as workgroups in the classroom, the instructors will circulate among the groups. We will mainly listen, then we will ask questions or recommend actions if we think it will help move you forward. Our aim is to facilitate the process by which you work out the problems. We are not there to give you the answers, but to help you find them for yourselves.

Some class time will also be allocated to traditional lecture and discussion. New material and ideas will be presented during the lectures, and students are responsible for knowing it. The assigned readings will be addressed in the discussion sections.

An important caveat. This *is* a different kind of class. Students and instructors must all be flexible and prepared to make adjustments.

**Course Requirements**

Students must write four group "position" papers (one on each topic). Papers must be on time and well written. When papers are submitted, the group must include: 1) one copy signed on the cover page by all members, 2) two additional copies, and 3) a copy of the paper in "html" format on a computer diskette (PC, not Macintosh, format). At the time that students hand in workgroup position papers, they will also submit peer reviews, in which they evaluate the contribution of each member of their group. Students will also be asked to write brief answers to "quiz" questions asked at the beginning of many class meetings.

**Grades**

Grades will depend on the quality of the group papers and each student's individual contribution to them, as well as the student's participation in class. The papers and the students' class performance will be evaluated by the instructors. Each student's relative
contribution to group papers will be assessed by the students who form the group through peer evaluations.

**Attendance at both lecture and discussion class meetings is required.**

✔ **Course Materials (to purchase from NYU Book Store)**

- All readings are from McGraw-Hill *Primis* Collection for *Social Foundations of Public Issues*

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✔ **Course Outline: Topics and Readings**

I. Introduction: Public Disputes and the Origins of the Social Sciences

II. Should We Use the Death Sentence?

Ernest van den Haag, "On Deterrence and the Death Penalty"
Data Package: Characteristics of the Criminal Justice SystemHirschi: Crime

III. Should We Provide More or Less Welfare for the Poor?


IV. Should Abortions Be More or Less Available?

Staggenborg: Abortion as a Social Problem (Essay)Luker, "Motherhood and Morality in America"Joel Feinberg, from "Abortion"Roger Rosenblatt, "How to End the Abortion War"Schwartz: Sex as a Social Problem (Chapter)Has the Legalization of Abortion Contributed to the Falling Crime Rate?

V. Should We Use Affirmative Action to Fight Inequality?
A Question of Color: A Debate on Race in the U.S. Workplace
A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling
Yetman: Race and Ethnicity (Chapter)
Greeley, "The Ethnic Miracle"
Faludi, "The Undeclared War on Women"
Becker, "How Is Affirmative Action Like Crop Subsidies?"
England: Work for Pay and Work at Home: Women's Double
Disadvantage
Bowen, Bok, Burkhart, "A Report Card on Diversity"

VI. Conclusion: Science, Morality, and the Resolution of Public Issues