Syllabus

Welcome to college.

This is your first-year Critical Inquiry seminar, "Objectivity…Is the Truth Out There?" ID1 section 28. Class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11 to 12:15 in Carnegie 12. I am Peter Kung; my home department is Philosophy. You are more than welcome to come by my office – Pearsons 209 – to chat. I'll definitely be in there Wednesdays from 1:30 to 3:30 and I'll frequently (unless there's an interesting talk somewhere) be there Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4 to 5. You can always make an appointment to see me; the best way to get in touch with me is via email, Peter.Kung@pomona.edu.

There is a Sakai site for this course, http://sakai.claremont.edu. You team should also have its own project site in Sakai.

What this course is about…

Here's the advertised description, the one that enticed you to sign up:

Disagreement is commonplace: you have your opinion, and I have mine. But surely that need not be the end of the story. In some cases it seems like we can settle which one of us is right and which one of us is wrong. We run an experiment; we consult the *New York Times*; we check the textbook. However, some recent – and probably familiar – debates challenge whether there is an objective set of facts to know. In this seminar, we will examine philosophical discussions of objectivity in some of these debates: about science (who is science to tell us not to teach intelligent design?), about journalism (are news inherently biased?), about grammar (why should I follow these peculiar rules?), about morality (we think torture is wrong…but is it really wrong?). Throughout the course we'll bear in mind more abstract questions about truth generally. Do we discover truth or make it? Is it out there?

Figure 1 – Is it? Really?

What this course is also about…

Your Critical Inquiry seminar is *writing* seminar. The study of philosophy offers an excellent opportunity to focus on one feature of good academic writing, clear and precise presentation of arguments. In this course you will work on:

- Formulating positions and distinctions
- Explaining arguments for or against a position
- Critically evaluating distinctions, positions, and arguments

In casual conversation and in class discussions you sometimes have a point or question — you know what you want to say — but you can't quite put it into words. While this is fine for conversation, in your formal writing you are expected to present your considered thoughts on an issue. Throughout your professional life (and, more immediately, in college) you will frequently be evaluated not on what you think but rather on what you can articulate.

Organization

This course will use a Problem Based Learning framework, a framework that emphasizes collaboration and self-directed learning. Your will work with your team on a series of cases; each case will cover a major topic in the course and will require your team to work together to propose solutions to a real world (-ish) problem. There is no set reading list for the course. Your team will decide how you wish to tackle the case, what issues are important, what outside readings you need to consult, and what kinds of analyses you need to bring to bear to complete the case.

Why organize a course this way? First, very rarely in your life after Pomona when faced with a problem will you receive a list of readings with the assurance that the list contains all the answers you seek. It is far more likely that you will have to find your own primary sources, cull those sources down to a manageable number, and then use your Pomona training to make what you realize is a less-than-ideal analysis. You will, in short, be doing PBL. Second, PBL fits the theme of our course. Is there such a thing as "the right answer"? We won't prejudge the issue by beginning with an authoritative set of readings that are supposed to contain the right answer to the "right answer" question.

Because of PBL, both attendance and participation are *required*. There will be four units and a final paper.

i.   First unit: intelligent design (15%)
ii.   Second unit: grammar (20%)
iii.   Third unit: journalism (20%)
iv.   Fourth unit: morality (20%)
v.   Final Paper (25%)

For each unit you will be evaluated on the work that your team does as a whole (team writing, team collaboration) and on the work that you do individually (individual writing, individual participation).

Fine Print

Lateness is bad, very bad. Missing deadlines makes life more difficult for you, for your team, and for me; more practically, because of the steady stream of assigned writing in this course, it will be rather difficult to catch up. So: *no late work will be accepted*. I will of course make exceptions for documented emergencies.

I will distribute an orange paper with Pomona's statement on academic honesty and it should go without saying that you are expected to abide by the code. We will discuss the application of the code to specific assignments as they approach, but in brief, any work that is submitted as your own but written in whole or in part by someone else is plagiarism. Just for the record: violation of the honesty code results in an F for the course and is subject to further disciplinary action.

Reading

To write well you must read well. It is important for you to learn to read critically and this is a skill, like any other, that takes practice. I find Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" helpful.

http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html