CSTC 9642: Information Overload, Stress Culture, and the Contemplative Turn

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Course Description

The reality of “information overload” seems to be an inescapable fact of techno-capitalist society today. We can never seem to keep up with all the latest developments in information technology and cannot successfully manage burgeoning amounts of digital information. Associated with this reality, we are seeing a rise of stress and stress-related illnesses throughout the world for various populations. One could argue that we live in a “stress culture.” In response to this culture of stress, we are seeing a resurgence of interest within the Western world in contemplative traditions, often ones with Eastern roots. For instance, yoga and Buddhist-inspired mindfulness meditation have become household words in Western popular culture.

This course examines the topics of information overload, stress management, and contemplation through multiple theoretical lenses, ranging from Marxist-inspired critiques of informational capitalism to Buddhist and yogic theories of the mind. This examination strengthens the links between these topics, and also questions the dominant framings of certain topics. For instance, is information overload a problem on its own, or simply a symptom of larger socio-political inequities? Other questions that this course explores include: How does the medicalization of stress affect how we view and respond to this phenomenon? Does the “management” of stress feed into dominant capitalist narratives of today? Are strategies of “disconnection” effective in combating issues of overload and stress? Are more collective and systemic changes needed? How can we theorize the roles of yoga and mindfulness meditation in the global consumer economy? What does the need for “balance” mean in a broader sociological context? Can the “contemplative turn” in society also be linked to broader social movements that can address some of the inequities and stresses of the digital age?

The course begins with an exploration of theories of the information society and information overload and progressively moves on to an examination of discourses of stress and stress management, theories of disconnection, various modes of contemporary contemplative practices, and finally interrogates the role of contemplation in social movements.
Course Requirements and Assignments

Reading Reflections

Every participant is expected to have read and be ready to discuss all the required readings for each week. A seminar-style class such as this one requires engaged participation from all class members. As part of the weekly reading, you will need to bring a one-page (single-spaced) journal entry, consisting of 1-2 questions for class discussion and some critical reflection on the readings.

Contemplative Practice Reflections

Since this course deals with topics that are also experiential in nature, students are required to take part in a contemplative practice throughout the course. This practice can be anything that the student wishes to undertake, either on one’s own or with a group. Please feel free to consult me if you have any questions or need feedback about what types of practice(s) you might want to pursue.

Based on the contemplative practice chosen for the semester, students are required to write up short (1 to 1.5 page single-spaced) weekly reflections on their practice, with the first one due on October 4. Print copies of these summaries are due at the beginning of each class. By the end of the semester, these reflections will amount to a type of “contemplative practice journal” that students can use for greater insight and understanding.

Class Leader Presentation

Each student will select one week’s topic/readings as the basis for a seminar presentation. The presentation should be approximately 50 minutes to one hour in length. You should be prepared to present: 1) a general analytic review of the readings, NOT a summary – in essence, your analysis of key issues, concepts, methods, assumptions, problems, and questions which emerge from the readings; and 2) a critical interpretation of the readings – strengths and weaknesses in terms of logic of argument, gaps or silences, assumptions, methodological implications, and so on. You will submit a 6 to 8 double-spaced page write-up along with the presentation, which details key arguments and themes from the presentation.

Final Paper

A final term paper, of approximately 20 to 25 double-spaced pages in length (exclusive of references), will be the final requirement for the course. This paper should relate to key themes from the course, and will also require a number of additional readings and outside sources. A preliminary 1-2 page outline of the paper with at least five to ten references will be due during class on November 1.

Class Format

We will start each class with a brief overview of individual reading reflections, and then move into the presentation and discussion for the day.
Course Evaluation

Reading reflections 15%
Contemplative practice reflections 10%
Class participation 10%
Class leader presentation 15%
Presentation write-up 15%
Final paper outline 5%
Final paper 30%

Course Readings

All readings will be made available in pdf format on the course website: http://owl.uwo.ca

Statement on Academic Offences

Each assignment must be uniquely your own work. Plagiarism is a serious offence, with serious consequences. Collaboration with other class members on assignments is not expected and will be penalized, as well as improperly passing off others’ work as one’s own.

In summary, scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following website: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

Course Outline

Week 1: September 13
Introduction to the Course; Discussion of student interests

Week 2: September 20
Understanding Post-industrial society/Information society

  Chapter 2 - “What is an information society?”, pp. 8-31
  Chapter 3 - “Post-industrial society: Daniel Bell,” pp. 32-59

  Chapter I - “From Industrial to Post-Industrial Society: Theories of Social Development,” pp. 49-119

Week 3: September 27
Informational Capitalism

  “General Introduction,” pp. 3-53
  Chapter 4 – “Dismantling the World of Work,” pp. 217-272

Selections from:

Selections from:

Week 4: October 4
Information Overload

  “Information Overload,” pp. 311-315

  “Epilogue,” pp. 413-426

Selections from:

  “Introduction,” pp. 1-3
  Chapter 1: Addiction to Speed,” pp. 1-36


Week 5: October 11
Stress and Stress Management


Selections from:

  Sections II and II, pp. 21-45

Chapter 9 – “Suicidal Wave,” pp. 155-184

**Week 6: October 18**

*Disconnection and Slowing Down*


“The Empathy Diaries,” pp. 3-19

“Solitude,” pp. 59-78

“Self-Reflection,” pp. 79-99

“The End of Forgetting,” pp. 356-362

Selections from:


Chapter 10 – “Meltdowns,” pp. 300-350

**Week 7: October 25**

*Theorizing Contemplation*


“Contemplation in a world of action,” pp. 157-165


Selections from:


**Week 8: November 1**

*Buddhist Contemplation*


Chapters 1-3, pp. 3-11

Chapter 11, “Right Mindfulness,” pp. 64-83


Chapter 1, “Awareness bound and unbound: On the nature of attention,” pp. 13-30
Selections from:

**Week 9: November 8**
*Yoga Philosophy*


Selections from:


**Week 10: November 15**
*Capitalist Contemplation*


  “Introduction,” pp. 1-29
  Chapter 4: “Selling the soul: the business of spirituality,” pp. 132-137

  Chapter 5: “Marketing Mindfulness: How is Mindfulness Turned into a Commercial Product?” pp. 133-158


**Week 11: November 22**
*The Pursuit of ‘Happiness’*

Selections from:

Introduction, pp. 1-13
Chapter 6: Positive psychology: the science of happiness, pp. 147-176

Selections from:

**Week 12: November 29**
*Contemplation and Activism*


Chapter 10: “Conclusion,” pp. 247-257

“Conclusion: Spirituality and Resistance,” pp. 169-182


**Week 13: December 6**
*Course Wrap-Up; Informal Paper Presentations; End of class celebration*