

**Department of English and Writing Studies  
Western University**

**PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN AESTHETICS**

ENGLISH 9133A (Fall 2017)

Class: Wednesday, 12:30-3:30pm (Lawson 2205)

Office Hours: Wednesday, 4:00-6:00pm and by apt (AHB 3G12)

kate.stanley@uwo.ca

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course traces the legacy of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism in American aesthetics and culture from the Puritans to the present with a special focus on pedagogy. At the heart of this course are the foundational essays and lectures by William James and John Dewey, which introduce the tenets of classical pragmatism. We will study the fraught relationship between pragmatism and literature as it intersects in the classroom and in the genre of the lecture. With its emphasis on clear thinking and practical action, the “pragmatic method” of inquiry can seem hostile to literary experimentation. We will turn to William James’s exchanges with his godfather Ralph Waldo Emerson and his student Gertrude Stein to consider sites of intersection and divergence between proponents of “the official philosophy of America” and the nation’s literary innovators at the turn of the century. Next we will turn to Dewey’s influential yet hotly contested account of “art as experience.” We will examine his claim that aesthetic experience should be continuous with daily life alongside counter-claims for art’s autonomous status outside the everyday. Our approach to this debate will be grounded in studies of artists and musicians who influenced or emerged out of the experimental arts school, Black Mountain College (including Marcel Duchamp, Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, Robert Morris, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, John Cage, Bryce Dessner, Richard Reed Perry, and Caroline Shaw).

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

Course Reader

William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (Penguin)

John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigree)

\*All texts available in the Western Bookstore. Please use Penguin edition of James.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSIGNMENTS**

Participation	15%	
Primary Text Presentation	20%	
Lit Crit Presentation	10%	
Research Paper (4500-5000 words)	55%	[DUE: December 6, 2017]

***Participation:***

Attentive reading and reflective discussion are at the heart of this seminar. Your attendance, preparation, and participation are essential. Being prepared means you have completed the reading, reflected on it, and have come to class with your book in hand, ready to discuss your thoughts and questions. Each absence without prior explanation will result in a 2% deduction in your participation grade. You will also be expected to hand in a reading journal at several points during the semester and at the end of term.

**Primary Text Presentation:**

This assignment has two parts--

(1) *Seminar Introduction* (10%): You will open class by presenting a focused argument on one of the assigned primary readings. Your presentation should be designed to engage the attention of your classmates with the goal of provoking generative discussion. You are free to take whatever approach to presenting you think will be most productive and stimulating. Your task is to frame the central critical problems, paradoxes, and questions that the reading raises for the class. Please limit your formal presentation to 15 minutes. At least 48 hours before your presentation please send an email outlining your plan for the class. You are asked to provide a handout that outlines major points, arguments, and questions.

(2) *Position Paper* (10%): By the Sunday following your presentation you are required to email me a four- or five-page position paper (1200-1500 words) that recapitulates the essential points and arguments outlined in your remarks to the class. This paper might also incorporate and develop insights that arose in class discussion.

**Lit Crit Presentation:**

For this presentation you are asked to summarize the argument of a selected piece of literary criticism for the class in a clear and engaging way. You should also suggest how this reading connects to the other assigned readings for that day and to larger questions guiding the class. Conclude with some questions for your classmates with the goal of sparking thoughtful discussion. Reports should be no longer than 15 minutes. Please provide a handout that outlines the reading's key points and arguments.

These presentations will be done in pairs. It is your responsibility to contact your partner to plan the presentation. At least 48 hours before your presentation please send an email that provides an outline of the key points you plan to present along with a brief summary of how the work was divided.

Presentations are intended to help you to develop and practice strategies for engaging colleagues and students—in the classroom as well as in conference presentations. You will be evaluated on how clearly, actively, inventively and persuasively you present the material and involve your classmates in discussion.

**Research Paper:**

For your final research paper you are responsible for formulating a focused and compelling research question on a topic of your choosing focused on one or more of the class's required readings. If you want to write on material you have presented on previously, please ensure that your essay takes a different angle or shows a marked development of thought. The paper should be between 4500 and 5000 words.

- Please hand in a hard copy of your proposal outlining your research question and topic by November 1, 2017.
- We will schedule a meeting to discuss the introductory paragraphs of your paper on November 8 and 9. Please bring a hard copy.
- We will workshop a rough but full draft of your paper in class on November 22.
- The final paper is due on December 6. 1% will be deducted each day it is late.

## COURSE POLICIES

### **Laptops**

I do not permit the use of laptops in the classroom unless a student has received accommodation (in which case please come talk to me). Please print out hard copies of the readings to bring to class.

### **Academic Offenses**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf)

### **Plagiarism**

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

### **Mental Health**

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

(S) = Supplemental – Reading provided in pdf form. Please print and bring to class.

(R) = Course Reader

### Sept 13: INTRODUCTION

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (S)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from "Nature," "Circles" (S)

Joan Richardson, "Chapter One. Introduction: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Pragmatism" (R/S) (from *Pragmatism and American Experience*)

### Sept 20: EMERSONIAN EDUCATION

Reuben Brower, "Reading in Slow Motion," from *In Defense of Reading* (S)

Richard Poirier, "Reading Pragmatically," from *Poetry and Pragmatism* (R/S)

Ross Posnock, "Reading Poirier Pragmatically" (S)

Emerson, "The American Scholar" (S)

### Sept 27: JAMESIAN EDUCATION

William James, "The Stream of Thought," "Methods" (from *Principles of Psychology*) (R)

James, "The Gospel of Relaxation" (R), "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," "What Makes a Life Significant" (from *Talks to Students*); "Address at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson"

Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (R)

Oct 4: No Class (make-up TBA)

Oct 11: Fall Break

Oct 18: JAMESIAN PRAGMATISM

James, *Pragmatism*; "A World of Pure Experience"

Oct 25: HABITS OF PRAGMATIST ATTENTION

James, "Attention," "Habit," (from *Principles of Psychology*) (R)

John Dewey, from *Human Nature and Conduct* (S)

*Lit Crit Presentation*: Lisi Schoenbach, from *Pragmatic Modernism* (S)

Nov 1: STEIN CONT.

Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" (R); "Portraits and Repetition" (from *Lectures in America*) (R), from *Narration* (S), "If I Told Him" (R)

*Lit Crit Presentation*: Adam Frank, "Thinking Confusion" (R)

Nov 8: PRAGMATISM & ART

Dewey, *Art as Experience*

*Lit Crit Presentation*: Richard Shusterman, from *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (S)

Nov 15: DEWEY CONT.

Dewey, *Art as Experience* cont.

Nov 22: PAPER WORKSHOP (bring a hard copy of a draft of your paper to class)

Nov 29: DEWEYAN EDUCATION

Dewey, from "Democracy and Education" (S)

"Black Mountain College Prospectus" (S)

Ruth Erickson, "A Progressive Education" (S)

Eva Diaz, from *The Experimenters* (S)

Case studies from Bauhaus, Dadaism, and Minimalism

*Lit Crit Presentation*: Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (R)

Dec 6: PRAGMATISM & MUSIC - **FINAL PAPER DUE**

John Cage, 4'33"; "Lecture on Nothing" (R)

Richard Reed Parry, *Music for Heart and Breath*

Bryce Dessner, *Black Mountain Songs*

Caroline Shaw and Roomful of Teeth, *Partita for 8 Voices*

*Lit Crit Presentation*: Joan Retallack, from *The Poethical Wager* (R)