

Philosophy 203: American Indian Philosophies

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SYLLABUS

Assessment: There will be a gift to you point-wise *if* you participate in an assessment exercise. Just for participating you get 1.5 points out of a hundred added to your final score (the average of the whole semester), enough in some cases to take you from a B- to a B or a C- to a C, etc. for the class.

Okay the specifics: in the first few weeks you will be given a ten to fifteen minute set of questions: true/false, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions. Near the end of the course you will be given that same set of questions. You have to take *both* of them (in class) to get the 1.5 points out of a hundred. Both the first and the second times will be announced at least a week ahead of time. If you don't take one or the other, you don't get the points added to your overall final grade. You are not graded on the questions – you just get points if you take both.

Description of the course

Recently, in reapplying for Ethnic Studies credit for this course, I had to list course objectives. Hey, I thought, why not tell the students what they are? So here goes:

1. *To help students become aware that American Indians are not people of the past and correspondingly have not disappeared from the scene but instead are alive and well and are players on the US national scene. Similarly, to help students see that Indian cultures have adapted (not been 'assimilated').*
2. *To help students understand that some different non-white groups in the US have different issues in the racial structure of the US and that the history of relations with white people is also different.*
3. *To help students understand the systematic ways in which cultures (and subcultures) differ from each other. To use this to understand better their own culture (whichever that is) and to understand better cultures quite different from their own.*
4. *To help students to see how cultural differences lead to philosophic differences.*

5. *To enable students to see the definition of ‘religion,’ ‘nature,’ ‘individual’ and other key terms have different meanings in Indian cultures than in the larger US culture.*
6. *To enable students to understand the importance of oral tradition – no matter what their culture is.*
7. *To enable students to get some grasp of the history of Native peoples. In this course the focus tends to be on Native groups in Wisconsin since we are in Wisconsin [Hurray! I like it here] and there are three different language groups (Siouan, Iroquoian, Algonquian), four different languages (Menominee, Ojibwe-Potawatomi, Ho-chunk, and Oneida) and eleven Federally recognized bands within the state. [Wow.]*
8. *To help students to sense the integrity of certain other cultures (and thus of their own) and [I would add here] thereby gain respect for them.*

Caveat concerning the instructor

Usually, it is not a good idea to start a course by talking about the defects of the instructor, but here I think it helpful to do so. I do not have Native American background. My experience in touring “Indian Country” (where Native Americans predominate) has indicated to me (no one needed to say anything) that this is a significant drawback for teaching about it. I do have some idea of team-teaching this course at some point with a Native person, but money is a big issue for that right now.

My background in things Native: I attended the 10th Annual American Indian Studies Summer Institute this summer (a week at the end of June). The AISSI is run by Native teachers. I am a member of the Wisconsin Indian Education Association and somewhat active in that. I was part of a Wausau School District group of parents (both Native and non-Native) of Native children last year – and hope it renew this year. I taught philosophy three or four times at the tribal college in Keshena, Wisconsin – the College of the Menominee Nation. Talk about learning from your students! I have spent some time visiting in what is called “Indian Country.” I have been learning about Native cultures since 1994.

One can read all kinds of books (and I have), attend workshops (I have), but the best way, I have found, takes time – it involves hanging out with Native people and hanging out in Indian Country.

Let me make a comparison: for years I have taught a course in Women’s Studies and I have not experienced this world as a woman. What interests me is that there

the matter is less awkward for me than it is with this course. Why? Here's what I come up with: I have not been certified by any Native Americans to teach about their group (different Native American groups are different) – although the Institute this summer was a big help – but mostly it taught me that I was doing all right (I used it as a check on what I had put together). But that is not the same as getting certification by the Oneida to teach about Oneida culture and history, getting certification by the Ho-chunk to teach about Ho-chunk culture and history, etc. There is no such overall mechanism *yet*. In Women's Studies I have attended conferences and done reading and interviewed lots of women ("Women's Studies" did not exist when I came through the formal education system – ending with a PhD.) Secondly, no Native Americans examine (except by taking it) this course and check on what the instructor is doing (I do run some things past some of my Native friends). On the Women's Studies front I have had my class evaluated more than once by the Women's Studies program in the Colleges. Lastly, the classes I teach on American Indian thought have very few American Indians in them. In Women's Studies most of the students are women. All of those are checks on the instructor that I lack in American Indian Studies but that I have in the case of Women's Studies. The more I get into these matters, the more I think it important to get whatever certification and updates one can. Teaching about other cultures is very tricky – even if like me you are more interested in the contrasts as a way of trying to get some picture of contrasting cultures at the same time.

In this I am going up against other white professors who wonder why I would feel this way. That should be an interesting discussion – I think I will save it for class. I gave a 'learning circle' at a WIEA convention a couple of years ago on "White people teaching about Indians." I could tell it annoyed some white professor folks that I did this (they did not show up), others not.

What 'blows my mind' is that I did not have to leave Wisconsin to find views radically different from those I was raised with. There is a comment in the video you are scheduled to see on Wednesday the 24th of January ("In the Light of Reverence"); the comment runs something like this: "Five hundred years ago two cultures met and did not understand each other and they still don't." You may scoff at that now, but the hope is that through the course of the class you will see how that is quite probably true.

Wisconsin has riches! I hope in the course you will come appreciate that more than you do already. I find it utterly fascinating as a philosopher to reflect (and become aware of) some of the basic presuppositions of my thought. It is pretty much just that. I do not regard Indian cultures as a salvation for humanity; however I am remain fascinated by Indian cultures. In part it is the support they give me for things in my own culture I want to emphasize, and in part it is the understanding I get of my own culture.

As we go through some of the history of the last couple of hundred years, whites don't look very pretty. Further, even to those in Whiteland (as I might call it) a lot of things make sense in Indian cultures. So there will be a lot of things that sound like "Indians are good/Whites are bad" in this course, but please be patient. Some of that "Indians are good/Whites are bad" is needed because we start with the idea that Indians are *retarded*, folks. Whites might allow that Indians are good environmentalists but whites also think, "Hey them Indians need to be brought up to speed!" You don't get over that "up to speed" idea in a couple of seconds; it takes a while to *see* that this is not so - if you see it even then.

Because we are dealing with some fairly tough issues, I especially need to emphasize an openness to views in this class. It is my job to make the class a welcoming environment where a kind of respect is offered everyone in it. I hope I do a good job! Remember that this is a class in philosophy, so examination and cross-examination of the issues raised is what the class is about. The instructor has very definite opinions (and is capable of being a total snot about it), but that had better not be what you are graded or respect on. You can hold pretty much any position you like as long as you learn how to defend it and meet objections to it.

Course requirements

There is a 50-minute examination on February 21st (Wednesday) and a two-hour final (TBA). *In place of the final examination* you may write a four-to-five page paper. There are also two three-to-four page papers to write; one is due on March 16th and the other is due on April 13th. So you either will have two exams and two papers or you will have one exam and three papers. For all examinations, you are given study questions in advance. The examination is based on the questions. If you know the answers to the study questions, if you can answer them well, you will be able to do well on the examination – even though I almost never put a study question as an examination question. *All examinations are open-book and open-handouts*, by the way.

All assignments are given the same weight. Class participation is used to give you move you up a grade if you are between two grades (most people are). "Class participation" means that you have attended regularly and have participated frequently in class discussions, I remember that. If you are between two grades, I give you the higher grade because of your participation. If you feel at the end of the term that you qualify for this, I encourage you to tell me that.

For each paper you are given a number of topics to choose from. The topics are drawn from the issues that we are discussing at the time the paper is assigned.

Before any paper is due, you are invited to submit a draft of the paper to me for

review. After the first examination you will be inclined to do that, since you will probably write brilliantly but lose all sorts of points for not answering the question. It is fairly typical in philosophy to lose all sorts of points for not answering the question asked. I encourage people to come in with drafts of their papers to avoid “getting zapped.” I also like this process because I like to help people with the shaping the ideas that they have into a strong paper. One way to get comments on a paper is to e-mail it to me in time for me to read it, comment on it, and send it back. For some students this works very well; you don’t have to worry about finding me in my office.

I also allow a number of students to re-write a paper that they did very poorly on. Generally, re-writes are not for students that simply “BS-ed” their way through a paper (obviously had not attended class, did not do the relevant readings, slapped something off the web) but rather for students who honestly answered the question but in a misdirected way. If your returned paper does says, “May re-write” or “May re-write the second part,” you can re-write the paper or part of it.

Make-up policy

If you miss the exam – well, you missed it. I am not really happy about students who have a cavalier attitude about missing assignments, but some do. If you have a legitimate reason, see me ahead of time or get word to me or get word to student services about the predicament you are in. Getting a make-up is much, much harder after the fact.

On papers (except for the final paper) I have a late-paper policy, which is one point (out of 100) per day. But I stop after your paper is reduced below a C-/D+, so generally it is a good idea to do the paper – even at the end of the class.

Class attendance

In my courses there is no direct penalty for cutting class. I treat you as an adult, whether you are ready for that or not. I am not sure that I was really ready for college when I went to it. I found college very different from high school, because no one in college *cared* whether I turned in something or not. No one pestered me. There *was* a result, but it wasn’t right away. It was after the semester was over. That is a hard adjustment for a lot of us to make. However, my professors kept treating me as an adult, and eventually I became one. That now is my approach. I will warn you now and then about not attending, about not turning in work, etc. But that will be it.

You will find that class attendance helps you in a lot of ways – to get the times the assessment questions are going to be given, to understand the material, to get the hang of doing philosophy, and (very important) to *prime* you on discussions that are important for good performance on tests and papers. People that skip class

tend to blow the assignment because a good answer is based on something we covered in class (sometimes it is things students brought up in class). I encourage you strongly not want to miss class, because to succeed in the course you are going to have to undergo some conceptual changes. Those take time and repetition before they sink in.

If you have a legitimate reason for cutting class, I will go over the material of the class you missed with you. If you don't have a legitimate reason and you get someone else's notes and bring those to me, I will go over those with you. That is a good way to go over missed material.

Other teachers have different policies on this and you need to check with each instructor about that instructor's policy.

Seeing the instructor outside of class

Don't be shy about this. Don't think: "I can't bother him." If you have questions, get them answered. Just set something up with me. My office is Room 329. I am very happy to see students about anything dealing with the course or topics related to it. I set office hours; these are the times I will be in my office or leave a note telling where I am (and sometimes how to get there).

Office hours:

My office is Room 329. It is (roughly) above the Dean's office.

Monday 1:00pm – 1:50pm

Tuesday 1:30pm – 2:30pm

Wednesday 3:30 pm – 4:30 pm

Thursday 1:30pm – 2:30 pm

These are my "walk-in hours." I plan to be in my office then. Remember, it is easy for me to see you at other times. So don't be bashful.

Syllabus proper:

I am planning to supplement the classroom discussions with presentations from five speakers but none are scheduled yet. I have in mind discussions of

- (i) *the issues surrounding the practice of Native religion in a country that supposedly guarantees religious freedom (James Botsford),*
- (ii) *discussion of the legal relation of Federal recognized bands to the US government (Ron Lippi),*
- (iii) *discussion from a successful Native journalist (who is editor of a Native newspaper – and grew up in Wausau) (Paul DeMain),*
- (iv) *discussion about the Indian logo issue (Barb Munson),*

- (v) *the perspective of Native American who is on the Wausau City Council (Tom Miller),*
- (vi) *and maybe one more!*

First week: January 22, 24. Discussion of course; what is philosophy? Then: What do creation stories do? What is an oral culture? *Handout of Gill's chapter on creation stories and his chapter on orality from his Native American Religions. Handout of some Menominee Stories. Screening of video, "In the Light of Reverence" (Wednesday, January 24th)*

Second week: January 29, 31. Discussion of "In the Light of Reverence." What are some of the issues that you see in the movie? Continued discussion of orality and of creation stories. Discussion of what religion is. (Okay, we will do only a little on 'what is religion;' it takes a whole course to deal with that and it remains mysterious (I think) even after that.)
Black Elk Speaks to page 130.

Third week: February 5, 7. Examination of implicit philosophical positions in the creation stories. What are humans? What are they related to? How are they related to things above (or below) this world? Now to Black Elk: the early part of Black Elk's life, the manner of growing up, the vision. Discussion of modes of life and how they color one's thought and worldview (and vice versa). Discussion of visions and the various ways in which they can be significant. Black Elk's contact with the Wasichus. *Black Elk Speaks, page 131 to the end*

Fourth week: February 12, 14. Heyokas (contraries). The significance of contraries and clowns. The significance of the defeat of the Ghost dancing. The epoch that ends with Wounded Knee and the one that begins there. Whether or not Black Elk is truly defeated. *Study questions for the in-class examination*

Fifth week: February 19, 21. An attempt in 1911 to explain Indian thought to a White audience. *Eastman, Charles Alexander (Ohiyesa). The Soul of the Indian.*

*In-class examination February 21st. This consists of three essay questions, for which study questions have been given the previous week.
Paper topics for First paper handed out*

Sixth week: February 26, 28 Why history is important. Different approaches to history. History and features of Indian peoples of Wisconsin. *Patty Loew; Indian Nations of Wisconsin; preface ix to xii, Chapters 1 to 4, pages 1 to 53.*

Seventh week: March 5, 7. History and features of Indian peoples of Wisconsin continued. *Patty Loew; Indian Nations of Wisconsin; Chapters 5 to 8, and Beyond,*

pages 54 to 126.

Eighth week: March 12, 14. Contemporary Indian complaints.

Selections from Vine Deloria, Jr.'s book, Custer Died for Your Sins

First paper due (a three- to four-page paper on one of a number of assigned topics) March 16th (a Friday).

SPRING BREAK

Ninth week: March 26, 28. Discussion of concepts of time.

Article by Kathleen Pickering on Lakota use of time and my own handout on time.

Paper topics for second paper handed out

Tenth week: April 2, 4 A contemporary Indian-non-Indian issue: the logo issue ("Washington Redskins.") What lies in this? Is this important? [the actual place of this topic in the syllabus will depend on when the speaker dealing with it appears]

Eleventh week: April 9, 11 A look at how conceptual differences affect the outlooks of those in Indian Country and those outside of it.

Handout on my discussion of the Great Divide – systematic differences in the presuppositions of 'the larger culture' and the Native cultures nearby.

Second paper due: April 13th (Friday)

Twelfth week: April 16, 18. Environmentalism – in what sense are Indians environmentalists? How does this differ from non-Indian environmentalism? The difference between spirituality and ethics. *Handout on environmentalism Paper topics, study questions for final handed out.*

Thirteenth week: April 23, 25. The attempt to draw conclusions about commonalities in American Indian thought and the chief contrasts with and challenges to European-based thought.

Fourteenth week: April 30, May 2. Return to 'the Great Divide' – examining systematic differences in the presuppositions of thought in Indian Country and outside of it.

Fifteenth week: May 7, 9. Review of cultural differences and discussion of the implications for philosophic outlooks.

Final examination (TBA). Final papers due by the end of the exam.