

GEOGRAPHY 801* (FALL 2011 – WINTER 2012)¹

Conceptual and Methodological Bases of Geography

Or

Elements of Geography: Philosophy, Methodology and Alchemy

Instructor:	Dr. Joyce Davidson
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Office hours:	Wednesday 11:30 – 1:00, or by appointment
Course time:	Tuesday, 1:00 – 4:00
Course location:	Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Room E310 (Joint sessions with GPHY 857 will take place in M-C D214)

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course examines the conceptual and methodological bases of geography, and requires an engaged and active geographical imagination! During a number of themed seminars, we will work with a particular geographical theme to *create something new* from a variety of existing elements (course form and content are ‘experimental’ in more ways than one).

A number of seminars will engage with key debates usually involving a human as well as a physical geographical approach to a particular ‘element’ of geography, themed, for example around ‘earth’, ‘air’, ‘water’ or ‘fire’. For each, we should try and imagine how our own theoretical and methodological leanings (not to mention our individual concerns) would influence our own approach to studying that topic. There are of course many diverse approaches within geography, and each seminar will provide opportunities to consider ways in which some of these might be thought to be in opposition to, or compatible with, each other. While some elements – drawn from paleo-ecology or political geography, hydrology or health geography – will mix more readily than others, there will always be productive tensions (perhaps suspensions) that help us better understand the dynamic and ongoing production of geographical knowledge.

By thus employing a wide range of methods and materials from inter- and sub-disciplinary perspectives, we will critically examine the nature and *culture* of our discipline. We will do so by questioning its intellectual histories and scientific foundations, and by blending together insights that emerge to better understand how our work and our selves are positioned within geographical traditions. Throughout the course, we will continually question what geography *is*, where (and when) it comes from, and how it continues to be transformed. We will ask who and what geographers are - from their own and others’ perspectives - and how and why they do what they do. In ways such as these, we will explore how geography is situated in relation to other social and natural sciences and humanities, travelling to different geographical locations (from Australia to the Arctic) and through varied intellectual traditions (from positivism to post-modernism) as we go.

¹ Abbreviated version - please contact Joyce Davidson for full course outline.

In week 2, for example, we will explore philosophical connections between magic and mechanics in early scientific endeavour ('natural philosophy'), examining transmutations of materials and ideas into substances of other kinds. Each seminar that follows will usually be three hours in length, divided into two main parts (see course outline, below, for details). Part 1 will begin with a presentation prepared by class members (20 mins), followed by in-depth engagement and critical discussion of selected readings (60 mins). Following a short break (10 mins), we will then reconvene for Part 2, joining with graduate colleagues in GPHY 857 for a practical and / or professional presentation or workshop (90 mins). In this way, the course involves blending elements of the theory, practice and the profession of geography to create new and productive understandings of – and engagements with – our discipline.

There are many possible topics for each element of the course – we could have considered pollution instead of wind farms for our discussion of *air*, and we could instead have approached *water* in terms of its power to harm (think Waterton) or heal (think spas and hot springs). I encourage you to think of your own alternative examples, and other forms of conceptual and methodological connections in relations to each themed seminar topic. Such involvement by class members will expand and enrich our understandings of the many materials that matter for geographers. I'm also happy to consider alternative suggestions or additional readings for each week, and you should feel free to bring new elements of your own into the mix!

While I certainly intend for this course to be enjoyed, it will be challenging and somewhat different from what we are used to in a number of ways (for a start, performing acts of alchemy for ourselves and each other will be an important part of our activities). The course is intended to be an intellectual stretch for all of us, forcing us outside the relatively comfortable framework of (sub)disciplinary thinking we are used to. While the coursework and assigned reading will be substantial, you should expect proportionally significant rewards. I expect you to depart the territory of GPHY 801 in the Spring of 2012 with considerable insights into the theory, practice and profession of geography, and to find yourself well placed on the path to a doctoral degree.

READINGS

Required text: David N. Livingstone (1992) *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (Blackwells: Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA).

You should purchase and **read this book in its entirety during the Fall Term**, and plan to weave discussion of the historical, theoretical and methodological overview presented throughout the individual topic based seminars. You will also be required to submit a critical review of this text for evaluation (details below). *The Geographical Tradition* is essential background preparation, and there really is no better intellectual history of geography as a discipline available. It should prove a very rewarding – if sometimes challenging – read. You may also wish to consider the following discussions and reviews for context:

Reflections on *The Geographical Tradition*, Classics in Human Geography Revisited, *Progress in Human Geography* 28(2): 227-234.

Collection of articles in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1995, 20) by David Matless; Felix Driver; Gillian Rose; Clive Barnett and David Livingstone (403-422).

In specific preparation for each of the themed seminars we will examine three or four associated readings (journal articles or book chapters, which can be located online or will be distributed electronically in advance of each class). These readings are drawn from a variety of inter- and sub-disciplinary perspectives, intended to introduce us to genuinely different ways of thinking about the particular element of geography in question.

TEACHING METHODS AND LEARNING STYLES

Discussion and active participation (worth 20% of final grade) will be encouraged throughout, drawing on readings by course participants, together with their own experiences of, beliefs about, and attitudes towards the theory, practice and profession of geography. The course therefore positions participants as knowledgeable actors, and offers opportunities for critical self-reflection on their experiences. To enable the development of this critical capacity, the course draws on a substantial body of scholarship and research in the fields of physical and human geography. Throughout the course, students are encouraged to reflect on their individual learning styles, and to clarify and develop their own particular interests within the geographical fields covered by this course.

EVALUATION

The evaluation components of this course provide opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject and your ability to communicate your understandings and ideas in verbal and written forms. Each of the following requires, above all, that you develop and justify your own views, and show that you can think for yourself! Students will be evaluated on the basis of:

- Seminar attendance and participation (20%);
- Seminar presentation (15%);
- Ethnographic report (10%, Due November 29);
- Critical report on Livingston (15%, Due January 10);
- Presentations of draft research proposal (No grade, January 24, April 3);
- Research proposal (40%, Due April 13).

Throughout the course, you should be willing to work hard in preparing and understanding all of the required readings for each seminar, and you should be flexible in the way you think about the theories and opinions encountered in the readings and in the classroom; an open mind about the approaches taken by others is key to success in this course, and academic enterprise in general. You should be inquisitive and keen to make connections between various readings, elements and debates, and **this approach should not be limited to the content of individual seminars**. Efforts to draw connections between current readings and those encountered earlier in the course - e.g. the Livingstone text you will read during the Fall Term - and indeed other relevant courses, will be rewarding for all.