PHIL 209N – Know Thyself: Wisdom Through Cognitive Science (i-series course)

2106 Tydings, Mondays & Wednesdays 11.00-11.50 + Friday discussion sections

Instructor: Peter Carruthers pcarruth@umd.edu
Office: Skinner 1122B. Office Hours: Thursdays 12.00-2.00.

TA: Michael McCourt mccourt.139@gmail.com
Office: Skinner ?????. Office Hours: ????.

1. Course Description
How do we improve our decision making? Cognitive science demonstrates that self-knowledge isn't as easy as we think, and that there are numerous biases and fallacies that impact our decision-making in ways that are hard for us to be aware of. In this course you will learn what some of these are and how they have been discovered, and you will explore potential strategies for avoiding these fallacies and for making wiser choices.

By the end of the course you should have a better idea of how discoveries in cognitive science can impact both personal decisions and public policies. You should also be capable of seeking out relevant findings and interpreting the results. Most important, you should have begun to form habits of reflection (both in general and concerning the practical importance of cognitive science), and you should be better able to express the results of those reflections in a cogent form.

2. Expectations of Students
The plenary Monday/Wednesday sessions will involve a mixture (in varying proportions) of lecturing, questioning, and open discussion; the Friday sections will involve a mixture of discussion and group work. Students are expected to attend regularly, and to be actively involved throughout. All laptops, cellphones, and other electronic devices will need to be turned off during all classes. This is both to facilitate active learning and as a courtesy to other learners. In addition, there is evidence that people learn better when they take hand-written notes. (See Mueller & Oppenheimer, “The pen is mightier than the keyboard”, Psychological Science, 2014.)

3. Course Materials
All required readings for the course are available on the course ELMS course site (under “Files”). These will need to be studied in advance of the relevant Friday section, following the schedule outlined in #6 below. These readings should be printed and brought with you to your Friday section, since laptops will not be permitted. (Note that the cost of printing is the only cost associated with the course.)

Most of these readings are empirical studies, or surveys of such studies. Read judiciously. (For example, understanding the stats sections isn’t relevant for our purposes.) Try to understand the design of the experiments, what the results show, and how they fit into the existing literature and relate to existing theories. More important, think hard about how the results might bear on practical matters of personal or public life.

Powerpoint slides will be posted on ELMS following each lecture (under “Files”) to help you
organize and review your notes. In general the slides will not be intelligible to those who did not attend the lecture, so they should not be substituted for attendance (and preferably active participation) at the lectures.

4. Course Requirements & Assessment

Assessment for the course will be as follows: weekly quizzes in Friday sections (15%), one class exam (15%), selection of one group-project topic (5%), one group-project literature-search and outline (10%), one group-project report (20%), and a final exam (35%). Where possible, grading will be conducted anonymously. For group activities, members of each group will be asked to evaluate the contributions of other group members, impacting their grade. Details and dates/deadlines are as follows:

*Weekly Quizzes (15%)* — Starting on Friday January 29 and continuing through Friday May 6, there will be a short quiz on the readings and lectures for that week. (The quiz will be held at the start of the Friday section, so be sure to arrive promptly.) This is to encourage you to do the reading each week and to engage with the lectures, extracting at least the main points.

*Monday, February 22 — Class exam (15%).* You will be asked to answer a number of questions to gauge your understanding of the material covered in the first four weeks of the class, and to encourage you to be reflective about its significance. Answers should be written in clear plain English, and will be evaluated for understanding displayed and for thoughtfulness and creativity shown. Grading will be anonymous.

The question paper will be pre-released after class on Friday February 19 via email and ELMS. You should therefore prepare your answers in advance. However, you will not be permitted to bring papers or other written materials into the exam.

*Group projects* — These will be constructed and evaluated in stages (see below), with advice and feedback given after the first two stages. In each case projects should take the form of an advisory document aimed at some suitable authority (e.g. a federal agency or an employer) urging the adoption of a policy designed to mitigate the effects of a documented human weakness, *selected from any of the topics covered in class* (or to be covered: feel free to look ahead). (E.g. the influence of incidental affect on decision making, the difficulties involved in knowing one’s own desires or values, the effects of implicit bias and social stereotypes.)

Additional supporting readings will need to be researched (generally using Google Scholar). Projects should be between 4,000 and 5,000 words long. Deadlines are as follows:

*Friday, March 25 — Group project topics due (5%).* These should take the form of a short (one-paragraph) description of the nature of the report to be written, its intended audience, and the overall goal of the report.

These descriptions need to be submitted by email to the TA before 10 am, in Word or PDF format. (Note that emails are time-stamped.) Late submissions will be penalized by one grade increment (e.g. B+ to B) for each day or portion of a day after this. Topic statements will be evaluated for understanding of the relevant topic, creativity in choice of topic and target audience, and for the overall promise of the project. Topic proposals will be returned with comments.
**Friday, April 8 — Group project outlines due** (10%). These should be at least a couple of pages long, should describe the overall goal of the report in some detail, and should contain brief descriptions of the main studies to be relied on in support of the report’s conclusions. **Use continuous prose writing, not bullet-points.**

These outlines need to be submitted by email to the TA before 10 am, in Word or PDF format. (Note that emails are time-stamped.). Late submissions will be penalized by one grade increment (e.g. B+ to B) for each day or portion of a day after this. The outlines will be evaluated for understanding displayed, the promise of support for the report’s intended conclusion, and for effective choices of the supporting studies. Outlines will be returned with comments.

**Monday, April 25 — Group projects due** (20%). Projects should take the form of an advisory document aimed at some suitable authority (e.g. a federal agency or an employer) urging the adoption of a policy designed to mitigate the effects of a documented human weakness. They should be between 4,000 and 5,000 words in length.

The projects need to be submitted by email to the TA before 11 am, in Word or PDF format. (Note that emails are time-stamped.). Late submissions will be penalized by one grade increment (e.g. B+ to B) for each day or portion of a day after this. Projects will be evaluated for the quality of the writing, understanding displayed, creativity, and effectiveness of argumentation.

**Saturday May 14, 8.00-10.00 am — Final exam** (35%). You will be required to write four essays on topics covered from March onwards. Essays will be graded anonymously. One of your answers might overlap somewhat with the topic of your group project. This is acceptable. But your answer should be in your own voice and express your own views, and should be directed toward the question asked.

The exam paper will be released in class on Monday May 11. You should therefore prepare your answers in advance. However, you will not be permitted to bring papers or other written materials into the exam.

Once grades for all the components of the course have been assigned, the instructor reserves the right to make adjustments before grades are submitted to UMEG. This may be to correct for a skew in the overall distribution of grades, for example, or to credit someone who has shown dramatic improvement through the course.

**Note:** If you are experiencing difficulties in keeping up with the academic demands of this course, contact the Learning Assistance Service, 2202 Shoemaker Building, 301-314-7693. Their educational counselors can help with time management, reading, learning-skills, note-taking, and exam preparation skills. All their services are free to UMD students.

5. **Assessment policy**

In general, grades will be assigned in accordance with the following criteria. There are five broad dimensions of assessment:

1. **Presentation, literacy, and organization** (including spelling, grammar, and punctuation; answers should have a beginning, middle, and end, and should work towards a clear goal in a systematic fashion);
2. *clarity* and *relevance* (ideas and arguments should be explained clearly and fully; all and only material relevant to answering the question should be included);

3. *knowledge and understanding* (how much you know about the subject matter and how well you have researched it; a good understanding of the material under discussion also needs to be displayed);

4. *quality of argument* (give strong arguments, and avoid invalidity);

5. *independence, critical stance, and creativity* (the extent to which you evaluate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas under discussion for yourself, how insightful and creative you are in thinking about how empirical findings might impact real life policies and choices).

For purposes of averaging and calculating final grades, the following conversion will be used:

\[ A+: 98, \ A: 95, \ A-: 92, \ B+: 88, \ B: 85, \ B-: 82, \ C+: 78, \ C: 75, \ C-: 72, \ D+: 68, \ D: 65, \ D-: 62, \ F: 55 \]

You should note that undergraduate grades at 100 and 200 levels at the University of Maryland have recently followed roughly the following distribution: A: ±40  B: ±35%  C: ±15%  Other (D, F, W): ±10%

This normal distribution will be borne in mind when assigning the grades for this course, and when curving the grades at the end.

6. **Schedule of Reading**

   In each case reading should be completed in advance of the dates given below. Come to class prepared to discuss and ask questions, bringing printed copies with you. Also be prepared to answer questions in the week’s quiz. All items are accessible on the ELMS site.


   **Mon Feb 22** — **Class exam** on material from previous four weeks.


**note:** prior to this date all students should take the implicit attitudes test (pertaining to race) at: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/


Mar 14-18 — **Spring Break**


— **Group project topics submitted by email to the TA by 10 am.**


— **Group project outlines and literature search submitted by email to TA by 10 am.**


Mon Apr 25 — **Completed group projects submitted by email to the TA by 11 am.**


— **Final exam questions released during the afternoon via email & ELMS.**
Mon May 9 — Final wrap-up & answering questions relating to the final exam.
Sat May 14 — **Final Exam**: 8.00 am – 10.00 am in Tydings 2106.

7. **Students with Disabilities**
If you have a disability of any sort that requires an accommodation to be made in the arrangements for the course, you should inform the TA at the start of the course, who will then consult with the University’s Disability Support Service.

8. **Religious Observances and other Absences**
It is the student’s responsibility to inform their TA and/or Instructor of any intended absences for religious observances *in advance*. Students who need to be absent for personal reasons should seek permission *in advance* from the TA or Instructor. For every medically necessary absence from class, a reasonable effort should be made to notify the TA or instructor in advance of the class. When returning to class, students must bring a note identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate. If a student is absent more than twice, the instructor may require documentation signed by a health care professional. If a student is absent on days when tests, debates, etc. are scheduled he or she is required to notify the TA or instructor in advance, and upon returning to class, bring documentation of the illness, signed by a health care professional. Students who have an excused reason for being unable to contribute to group work will be given another assignment.

9. **Academic Integrity**
All students are expected to comply with the University’s code of academic integrity. Academic dishonesty of any kind will automatically result in a grade of XF for the course. The following statement is from the University: The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit:
http://www.shc.umd.edu/SHC/

10. **Snow Plan: University closure due to bad weather**
(a) If class cannot be held on a Monday or Wednesday, the instructor will post an elaborated version of the powerpoint slides for the day as soon as possible, and will answer questions via ELMS. The quiz for that week will proceed as normal, and deadlines for group projects etc. will remain unchanged.
(b) If class cannot be held on a Friday students should log into the ELMS site during normal class hours to ask questions of the TA and engage in online discussion. The quiz for that week will be cancelled.