

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Knowledge

A sample syllabus by Tiina C Rosenqvist

[This syllabus outlines a proposed introductory seminar on epistemology, approached from a cross-cultural perspective.]

1. Course Description

You probably think that you possess some knowledge. Maybe you know that $5-3=2$, or that you didn't sleep well last night, or that your friends are on their way to meet you. But how do you know these things? Did you see or hear something? Did you infer it from something else? Or did someone tell you? Are these reliable ways to gain knowledge? And what if you're dreaming or hallucinating? What justifies your beliefs, and what exactly is knowledge? This course offers an introduction to epistemology—the branch of philosophy that deals with questions like these.

The course is divided into six modules. In the first, we'll cover the basics: what philosophy is, what an argument is, and what kinds of questions epistemologists explore. In the second module, we'll dive into the nature of knowledge, starting with the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief, and examining thought experiments that challenge this view. The third module will focus on sources of knowledge, beginning with a classical Indian debate and then exploring three sources in detail. In the fourth module, we'll engage with skeptical challenges and examine philosophical responses to them. The fifth module will explore what the justification of beliefs, and the sixth module will be dedicated to review.

2. Course Objectives

Through active participation in this course, you will develop an understanding of key issues and debates in epistemology, improve your overall critical thinking skills, and practice constructing, reconstructing, and evaluating philosophical arguments, both orally and in writing.

3. Course Structure

In-person sessions:

The standard format for the in-person sessions is lecture and discussion. You are expected to participate actively in discussions and other in-class activities.

Working in groups, you will present one 5-minute recap of a previous class session (including both lecture & discussion). You will also present your public philosophy group project to the rest of the class.

There will be an in-class midterm and a final exam.

Out-of-class activities:

You are expected to do the assigned readings before class. Note that reading philosophy is a skill that takes practice and hard work, and even seasoned readers often have to read a text multiple times to genuinely understand it. Don't feel discouraged if a passage doesn't immediately make sense. Try again. If you're still having trouble, bring it up in class or office hours.

You are also expected to complete short reading quizzes on Canvas before the in-person session, write two papers, and complete on a public philosophy group project.

4. Assignments & Assessment

Individual assignments (80%)

- Attendance & Participation —10%
- Canvas Reading Quizzes —10%
- Paper 1 (800-1,200 words) —10%
- Midterm —10%
- Paper 2 (1,200-1,600 words) —20%
- Final Exam — 20%

Group assignments (20%)

- Lecture / Discussion Recap — 5%
- Public Philosophy Project - 15%

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed to miss up to two classes without prior notice, except on the day of the midterm, the day of the public philosophy project presentation, and the day of your 5-minute recap. If you anticipate missing more than two classes, you must provide prior notice and complete a make-up assignment. Failure to notify will likely result in a deduction from your participation grade. Repeated lateness may also negatively impact your participation grade.

Active and considerate participation in discussions and class activities is expected. This includes completing assigned readings beforehand, coming to class prepared with ideas and questions, adhering to discussion guidelines, and demonstrating engagement.

In-class participation is a critical component of the course and will be tracked throughout the term. I understand that participating in class can be challenging for various reasons. If you find in-class participation difficult, please let me know as soon as possible. We can discuss strategies to make you feel more comfortable and/or come up with alternative participation methods.

Reading Quizzes

You are required to take short reading quizzes on Canvas *before* the in-person sessions. There will be at least 15 quizzes, and only your 10 best scores count towards your grade.

The quizzes are untimed and open-book, and you have two attempts for each quiz (your **latest** score is the one that is recorded; this means that your recorded score can go down if your second attempt results in a lower score than the first).

The quizzes are designed to help you strengthen your philosophy reading skills and to give you a way to monitor your own progress.

Papers

You are required to write two papers. The first paper (800-1,000 words) is worth 10% of your final grade and the second (1,200-1,600 words) 20%. Prompts will be provided. I'm very happy to discuss your paper ideas in office hours.

Midterm and Final Exams

Both the midterm and final exams will consist of multiple-choice questions and a choice between two short essay questions. The essay questions will be randomly selected from four prompts provided in advance.

You may prepare and bring a one-sided cheat sheet on letter-size paper (8.5 inches × 11 inches) that contains notes. Please ensure that *you* write your own cheat sheet. You will be required to submit the cheat sheet along with your exam.

Lecture/Discussion Recap Presentation

You will work in groups to summarize the key points from a previous class session. Your group will create a handout, present a 5-minute recap, and pose a discussion question to the class. Note that you need to pay careful attention and take notes during the session that you've been assigned to recap.

Public Philosophy Project + Report

With the same group, you'll collaborate on a public philosophy project. Potential options include:

- Creating a YouTube video, podcast, or series of TikToks.
- Designing and distributing a zine.
- Engaging the broader Dartmouth community in epistemological discussions.
- Utilizing other online platforms (Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to engage non-course participants in epistemological discussions.

You will document your project and write a report explaining how it enhanced your understanding of the course material. You will also present your project to the rest of the class.

5. Workshops

Throughout the semester, we will workshop various skills that you need in order to succeed in this course. The workshops are marked with the label “WORKSHOP” on the class schedule. We will practice reconstructing and evaluating arguments, reading philosophy, writing philosophy papers, and having discussions and debates about philosophical topics. So don’t worry if this your first philosophy course; I’m not expecting you to already know how to do these things. And if you’ve taken philosophy courses before, there’s always room for improvement!

6. Course Policies

(Omitted from this sample, see other sample syllabi.)

7. Resources

(Omitted from this sample, see other sample syllabi.)

8. Class & Readings Schedule

Module I. Getting Started

In the first module, we’ll lay the groundwork for the course by exploring what philosophy is, what constitutes an argument, the types of questions epistemologists examine, and the rationale behind cross-cultural approaches to philosophical inquiry. The module will also include an in-class close reading of a short philosophical text.

- (1) Intro & Syllabus; What is philosophy
- (2) What is epistemology; **WORKSHOP:** *What (even) is an argument*
 - Metcalf (2020), “Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge,” *1000-word Philosophy*
 - YouTube: “Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction” (Jennifer Nagel)
- (3) Cross-cultural philosophy
 - Struhl (2010), “No (More) Philosophy Without Cross-Cultural Philosophy”
- (4) **WORKSHOP:** *How to read philosophy*
 - Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy”
 - In-class close reading of Ayer (1983), “Knowing as having the right to be sure”

Module II. What is Knowledge?

In the second module, we'll explore the nature of knowledge, beginning with the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. We'll then examine thought experiments that challenge this view, along with philosophical responses to those challenges.

(5) The Traditional Account of Knowledge: Justified True Belief (Quiz 1)

- Feldman (2003), *Epistemology*, Ch. 2: The Traditional Analysis of Knowledge

(6) Śrīharṣa, Dharmottara, Gettier (Quiz 2)

- Ganeri (2014), "Śrīharṣa's Dissident Epistemology: Of Knowledge as Assurance" (excerpts)
- Dreufys (1997), *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, pp. 292-293 (on Dharmottara)
- Gettier (1963), "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"

(7) Responses (Quiz 3)

- Feldman (2003), *Epistemology*, Ch. 3: Modifying the Traditional Account of Knowledge

(8) Indian epistemology (Quiz 4)

- Potter (1984), "Does Indian epistemology concern justified true belief?"

(9) Review; **WORKSHOP**: *How to write a philosophy paper*

Paper 1 –10%

Module III. Skepticism East & West

In the fourth module, we'll engage with skeptical challenges from around the world and examine philosophical responses to them.

(10) What can we know?; Zhuangzi (Quiz 5)

- Pojman, *What Can We Know: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 1-3 & 37-41
- Ziporyn (2020), *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings* [5th–3rd century BCE] (excerpts)

(11) Al-Ghazālī (Quiz 6)

- *Al-Ghazālī's Path to Sufism: His Deliverance from Error* [al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl, c. 1100], pp. 17-24

(12) Descartes (Quiz 7)

- Descartes (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First Meditation: What Can Be Called Into Doubt? (excerpts)

(13) Responses to the skeptic (Quiz 8)

- Feldman (2003), *Epistemology*, pp. 141-152
- Vogel (1990), "Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation"
- Moore (1962), "Proof of an External World" (excerpt)

(14) The goals of skepticism (Quiz 9)

- Nagel (2019) "Classical Indian Skepticism: Reforming or Rejecting Philosophy" (excerpt)

(15) *Midterm (10%)* in class

Module IV. Sources of Knowledge

The third module will focus on sources of knowledge, beginning with an overview of a classical Indian debate and then exploring three key sources—perception, inference, and testimony—in more detail.

(16) Pramāṇa-śāstra: the classical Indian debate on knowledge sources (Quiz 10)

- Phillips (2011), *Epistemology in Classical India: The Knowledge Sources of the Nyāya School*, Ch. 1: Historical and Conceptual Introduction

(17) Perception (Quiz 11)

- Russell (1912), *Problems of Philosophy*, Chs. 1-2 (pp. 1-10)
- Turner-Lauck Wernicki, IEP: Lokayata / Carvaka—Indian Materialism, Sect. 3 (a): Epistemology

(18) Inference (Quiz 12)

- Audi (2010), *Epistemology*, Ch. 6: Inference and the Extension of Knowledge (excerpts)
- Garfield (2015), *Engaging Buddhism*, Ch. 7: Epistemology, Sect. 1: Pramāṇa

(19) Testimony (Quiz 13)

- Nagel (2014), *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, Ch. 6: Testimony

(20) Review; **WORKSHOP**: *How to talk philosophy*

Paper 2 - 20%

Module V. Relationalism in epistemology

This module challenges the idea that to be objective is to remove yourself from the object of inquiry. Drawing from Daoist and Pragmatist traditions, as well as contemporary decolonial and Indigenous perspectives, the module emphasizes the importance of relationships—between subjects, environments, and systems of thought—in shaping knowledge.

(21) Objectivity (Quiz 14)

- Toole (2022), "Objectivity"

(22) Daoist relationalism (Quiz 15)

- Ziporyn (2020), *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings [5th–3rd century BCE]*, Ch. 2: Equalizing Assessments of Things

(23) American pragmatism

- Dewey (1929), *Experience and Nature*, Ch.1: "Experience and Philosophic Method"

(24) Decolonizing knowledge (*Quiz 16*)

- Mitova (2020), "Decolonising Knowledge Here and Now"

(25) Alternative epistemologies

- Whyte (2018), "Against Crisis Epistemology"

Public Philosophy Project - 15%

Module VI. Wrapping Up

The sixth module centers on course review.

(26) Public Philosophy Project Presentations in class (Gallery Walk)

(27) Final review

Final Exam - 20%