

## **SYNTHESIS STREAM SYLLABUS**

Integrated Studies 001

University of Pennsylvania

Fall 2012

Instructors:

- Dr. Aspen Brinton. 3440 Market St., Suite 300, office 327. Office Hours: Thursday in McClellan, 12:15-1:15p; Monday (at office) 12:30-2; and by appointment. Contact: [abrinton@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:abrinton@sas.upenn.edu)
- Dr. Lisa Messeri. Cohen Hall 175. Office Hours: Wednesday 3:30-4:30; Thursday 1-2; by appointment. Contact: [lmesseri@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:lmesseri@sas.upenn.edu)
- Dr. Julio Tuma. Cohen Hall 429. Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:15-1:15, Wednesdays 12:30-2, and by appointment. Contact: [tuma@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:tuma@sas.upenn.edu)

Please attend the section assigned to you by the registrar:

301: 11-11:50, Tuma, BENN 24

302: 11-11:50, Messeri, WILL 318

303: 12-12:50, Brinton, DRLB 4N30

304: 12-12:50, Tuma, BENN 20

305: 1-1:50, Brinton, BENN 24

306: 1-1:50, Messeri, BENN 20

This course is an intellectual journey. You will live with your classmates, attend extracurricular activities, and participate in intellectual dialogue with many different professors. It is a multi-faceted conversation about interrelated ideas, a conversation that requires deep levels of earnest participation. The Synthesis Stream and its Friday seminars are the cornerstone of this process, the main venue for your voice to be expressed and heard, and the most important time for receiving feedback about how your own thinking is developing. Each Friday we will continue to consider the questions raised at Thursday's Symposium, in addition to discussing the content of the streams and doing incremental preparations for the main assignments, the 'liberal arts labs.'

The goal of both Friday seminars and lab projects is to continue to learn how to use the tools of synthetic thinking to understand the world around you in ever more various and diverse ways. We will ask what ideas can be generated and what conclusions can be drawn by examining the interrelationships between different disciplines and concepts. This is a discussion-based seminar and each class will be shaped by student questions and concerns, therefore attendance is absolutely mandatory. We expect you to engage in serious debate, deep thinking, and courteous dialogue because we believe it will create a conversation where we can advance our understanding of ourselves as human beings and our relationship with the world around us.

### **PLAN OF ACTION:**

Each Friday you will be responsible for a reading assignment, a small project, or a short writing assignment (see below). Each assignment and reading is designed to help build towards the three main assignments for this stream, the liberal arts labs. You will receive these larger lab assignments one week in advance of their due date, and each will involve an

intellectual investigation and a longer writing component. All assignments are due Friday at 10 am on Blackboard unless otherwise communicated by the Professors.

### **REQUIREMENTS:**

Participation and attendance: 20%

Liberal arts labs: 15% each (45% total)

Fall Break Project: 15%

Mini-assignments: 20%

*Participation and attendance.* On Fridays, we will discuss your insights, questions, comments, and concerns. It is expected that you respond to your classmates with the sincerity, respect and attention you would like to receive. Attendance at Friday Synthesis seminars is mandatory; unexcused missed classes will impact your grade. (There are 12 Friday classes; your participation grade will drop by 1/12 for each missed class.) In addition to joining the discussion during Friday class time, you will have the opportunity to participate in various forums for online commentary within the course Blackboard site. These activities will evolve over the course of the semester and be determined by your individual synthesis professor, and may include commentaries on each other's essays, commentaries on current events, and the use of online discussion forums. Your participation grade also includes more general forms of participation within the ISP program, including (but not limited to): participating in lectures (showing up and asking questions when appropriate); participating at Thursday Symposium (showing up and joining in the discussion); coming to office hours. We are looking for "engagement" across all aspects of the course.

*Fall Break Project.* A group project will be due the Wednesday immediately after fall break. More details will be provided the week before. Please note that class will not meet on Wednesday in order to provide ample time to complete the project. [This project will be graded out of 15 pts.]

*Liberal Arts Labs:* Each of these labs will require you to draw upon your knowledge of all three streams of the ISP course to confront a practical problem. One project will be about secrets, one about predicting the future, and another about mapping the world you live in. The goal of each is to demonstrate that you have thought about the larger implications of the readings and lectures from all three streams with enough acuity and depth to draw together ideas in order to solve problems in the world around you. [Each lab will be graded out of 15 pts.]

*Mini-assignments:* Each week, a mini-assignment will be due. The assignment will ask you to either read or write something, often with a creative bent. These assignments are meant to prepare your thinking for the upcoming Liberal Arts Lab. We will drop the lowest mini-assignment, so have fun with these and take risks. [Each mini-assignment will be graded out of 4 pts.]

## READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments are due at 10 am on Blackboard unless otherwise communicated by the Professors. Readings are available in PDF format on Blackboard.

	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Mini-assignment</i>
Week 1 Sept. 14	Patterns	Draw (with words, pictures, or other medium) a map of the odyssey (biographical, metaphorical, and/or physical) that got you to Penn, including those things that set you off course temporarily that you then had to work around. As drawing a map necessitates making a pattern out of diverse and previously unordered locations, title your map with the one word that represents the dominant pattern of your journey. Be prepared to discuss this pattern when you share your map with the class.
Week 2 Sept. 21	Violating patterns	Thinking of Odysseus as he pretends to be someone he is not (is this violating a cultural pattern?), thinking of numbers as they become imaginary (does this violate a mathematical pattern?), and thinking of moments when hierarchies are transcended (does challenging hierarchies violate social patterns?), write the introductory paragraph to an essay where you plan to argue that it is sometimes alright 'not to be yourself'. As with any introduction to an essay, the reader should (1) learn the frame of reference you are working in (specify on what grounds this is a valid question), (2) be shown a hint of the examples you might use, and (3) most importantly, be persuaded by the structure of your argument.
Week 3 Sept. 28	Logics	The 'flow of logic' might seem like it is a universal concept, but this week we have seen examples where causal explanations of the same phenomenon can vary according to time, place, and perspective. Pretend you have to write a comparative essay about how two different cultures define 'secrecy.' Choose two cultures (very broadly conceived—maybe two societies, two companies, mathematicians vs. philosophers, Penn freshmen vs. Penn sophomores, Facebook vs. Google, Apple vs. PC, etc.) and make an outline—an outline only—of the comparison you plan to make. The outline [ONE PAGE only] should demonstrate the 'flow of logic' behind the argument you would present in your essay, and it should conclude with a thesis statement about the key explanation you will provide for the difference between, or similarity of, the two logics. Be self-conscious about your own use of logic as you set up an argument that compares two different logics.
Week 4 Oct. 5	Codes	Liberal Arts Lab 1

	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Assignment</i>
Week 5 Oct. 12	Infinity	<p>Scavenger hunt: find infinity. Bring to Friday class two works of visual art (or appropriate electronic reproduction of those works of art) that you think are asking the question, “How does an infinite understanding of time and space influence the present?” and which represent or try to articulate notions of infinity in two visually different forms.</p> <p>Hint: Keep in mind that ‘infinity’ means different things in different cultures, and (sometimes, though not always) is related to things above earth, beyond us mere humans, divine things and metaphysical things.</p> <p>Write one paragraph [300 words] explaining which work of art better articulates for you the relationship between infinity and ‘the future.’</p>
Week 6 Oct. 19	Prediction	<p>Read selections (see PDF) of Issac Asimov’s <i>Foundation</i>. This is a classic science fiction novel that rests on a concept called ‘psycho-history,’ a semi-mathematical way of predicting the future. Come to class prepared to discuss the implications of this concept for discerning the relationship between fact and fiction, present and future.</p>
Week 8 Nov. 2	Unpredictability	<p>An unpredictable US presidential election is upon us. Who is going to win? How do we know? How is our knowledge of possible outcomes generated? Public opinion polls are being cited all day long, but what are these polls, exactly? Can we trust them as ‘facts’? Early in the week you will be assigned a newspaper article about the election that contains statistical references to opinion polls. Using what you’ve learned from the math of statistics and this week’s other readings, be the gadfly to that article—come to class with a written list (to turn in) with at least three possible ways the article might be wrong. [ONE PAGE maximum]</p>
Week 9 Nov. 9	Self-reference	Liberal Arts Lab 2

	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Assignment</i>
Week 10 Nov. 16	Form	<p>The circle is a provocative form, prompting thinkers across time and place to reflect on it. In eastern traditions, mandalas (Sanskrit for “circles”) are often used as a meditation device. Emerson called the eye the “first circle.” (Optional Emerson reading, see Blackboard) Plato refers to the sphere as the most perfect shape. Using these or reference points from other cultures, offer your own (1 page maximum) meditation on a</p>

		circle.
Week 11	Mapping	<p>Think about the relationship between maps and your Thanksgiving holiday. Do you need to fly? Do airplanes use different maps in the sky? If you drive, do you need to follow a street map? How have dashboard GPS devices changed holiday travel? How does your family map out the table in serving turkey? Are you stuck in Philadelphia and needing a map to find some food?</p> <p>Think really, really hard about these questions, but don't do anything. Just enjoy the week off.</p>
Week 12 Nov. 30	Locus	Read Dennis Cosgrove's "Contested Global Visions" as a common text. Come prepared to discuss how he uses the idea of locus and place within his argument, and how his argument relates to the readings from the streams.
Week 13 Dec. 7	Cosmos	Liberal Arts Lab 3