

Re: English H597.04 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Narrative in the Contemporary World U 5.

Dear Colleges of the Arts and Sciences Curriculum and Honors Committee:

I write to propose for consideration H597.04 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Narrative in the Contemporary World: Variable topics in the interdisciplinary study of narrative's role in contemporary culture; topics include narrative and cognition; narrative and emotion; narrative and ethics.

**Background:** With the success every year of my Freshman Seminar "Your Brain on Fiction" (Arts&Sciences) when the University Honors and Scholars announced a competition to develop new Honors and Scholars courses in the summer of 2008, I began to develop a course that would function as a bookend of sorts to the Freshman Seminar. I have noticed that Freshmen end up traveling in many different directions in their undergraduate career—pre-law, biology, physics, philosophy, literature, history, for instance—and that the tools taught in this initial stage of their development offer certain edge and critical insight within their chosen discipline of study. As I have crossed paths with a number of these students and even worked closely with some of them, I have seen first hand how such an interdisciplinary approach offers views and concepts that they have used to ask serious questions within their chosen fields of study.

As a capstone honors course, the proposed H597.04 would take advanced students from across the campus would go more deeply into concepts and empirical findings generated from research in disciplines such as ethics, neurobiology, and the cognitive sciences to explore and enrich our understanding of narrative in our contemporary world. The course in turn will allow internationally renowned specialists in narrative theory in the English department to bring certain interdisciplinary approaches to the study of narrative as launched from the different platforms of cognition, emotion, and ethics.

The University Honors and Scholar Program approved the proposal to develop the on December 3, 2008. During the initial period when the English H597.04 Capstone Honors Course gets off the ground, the University Honors and Scholar Program agreed to buy out faculty teaching the course in the first two years.

H597.04 has received approval by the English Department at a faculty meeting on February, 13, 2009.

**Overview:** English H597.04 will serve as a GEC Issues in the Contemporary World capstone honors course. H597.04 starts from the observation that narrative is one of the primary forms of communication and artistic expression in contemporary culture: it is the principle underlying not just novels and films but also most television shows, news reports, advertisements, political campaigns, and more. In its various iterations the course will allow advanced undergraduate honors students (a maximum of 20 per course) to investigate important dimensions of the production and consumption of contemporary narrative. As the sample syllabi indicate, the course uses specific interdisciplinary

research areas—for example, cognition, emotion, and ethics-- to focus not just on interdisciplinary narrative theory but even more on how those ways of thinking can help address narrative's role in contemporary culture. The "user friendly" interdisciplinarity of the course will appeal to honors students in the arts and humanities as well as the social and natural sciences. The interdisciplinary study of narrative offers a model for honors students from across the campus to see how we can build a more precise knowledge of ourselves and of our experiences in the contemporary world.

Given that we do not have a non-honors course version of this, we have followed the lead of Anthropology (H597.03) by slotting H597.04 into the existing series of decimalized courses offered under the rubric English 597 Issues of the Contemporary World. (See Appendix A.) By offering this course as H597.04 it will offer a clear visibility in the department and ASC curriculum offerings that will bring honors students readily to the course.

**Appeal:** By offering accessible readings in narrative theory and ethics as well as in the philosophy, cognitive science, neurobiology, and developmental psychology of the emotion and cognition systems, students will be able to explore in a systematic way a wide range of concepts, theories, and empirical findings without needing previously any specialized knowledge within these disciplines. Equipped with these tools and applying them to the study of narrative they will acquire solid knowledge about how narrative is produced by authors and understood and experienced by readers and audiences in our contemporary world.

The students can learn from the aforementioned disciplines and research programs as directed specifically to the study of the functioning of narrative and the ways audiences grasp and are moved by narrative fiction, and apply this knowledge in their future disciplinary choices. As indicated below, internationally recognized scholars of narrative theory at the "Full Professor" rank will bring into play their different areas of expertise teaching the course: Jim Phelan, David Herman, Robyn Warhol-Down, and Frederick Aldama. (See included sample syllabi.)

**Rationale:** By means of theoretical and empirical texts, together with significant narratives instantiated in many and diverse forms, students in this capstone honors course will become acquainted with certain workings of art and science, knowledge and imagination, in a unified manner. This approach is based on the observation that narratives in our age in the form of fictional media such as literature, graphic novels, t.v. film as well as nonfictional narrative media such as political treatise, journalism, news media implicitly or explicitly contain worldviews, ethical stances, cognitive approaches, and emotions. Also, implicitly or explicitly, they are all situated in time and space, overdetermined by history and geography, so to speak. Studying how these different elements come together in specific instances contributes powerfully to our general understanding of the production and reception of narrative in our contemporary world. In each course students will be asked to explore in their respective readings, written assignments, and discussions the interface between of narrative, cognition, emotion, and ethics to current events and controversies. Each iteration of the respective courses will ask the students to keep centrally in mind: how does studying narrative and cognition,

narrative and emotion, narrative and ethics inform your understanding of some aspect of our contemporary world?

The English H597.04 Capstone Honors Course will be taught every year in one of its iterations (“Narrative, Cognition, and the Contemporary World”, “Narrative, Emotion, and the Contemporary World”, and “Narrative, Ethics, and the Contemporary World”). Indeed, we are dealing here with one course that is presented in three versions, where each version focuses on one main ingredient or conceptual area pertaining to narrative as a whole. This unity is underlined in each of its versions, as can be seen in the attached syllabi.

For instance, concerning the H597.04 “Narrative, Cognition, and the Contemporary World”, Professor Herman explains:

This course aims to introduce advanced undergraduate students to the benefits of integrating research on cognition and consciousness into the study of narrative, while also demonstrating how frameworks for narrative inquiry can contribute to cross-disciplinary conversations about the nature of mind. In this way, the course aims to equip students with the tools needed to engage in debates about the nature of art in general and fiction in particular, while also allowing them to participate in the study of contemporary global issues that cut across the arts and sciences.

With respect to the H597.04 “Narrative, Emotion, and the Contemporary World”, Professor Aldama proposes the following:

The course combines literary analysis, science (especially cognitive and neurobiological based), and the study of current narrative forms and the contemporary events they depict as launched from the study of emotion and its interface with dreaming, theory of mind, aggression, and cruelty. The trajectory of the course is meant to complete an arch that begins in the socially and historically conditioned mind/brain as producer and consumer of contemporary fiction as art and ends in the analysis and experiencing of certain “significant works of art” in our contemporary world.

Last, concerning the H597.04 “Narrative, Ethics, and the Contemporary World” version, Jim Phelan explains:

As noted above, the juxtaposition of fiction and nonfiction encourages deeper critical thinking and reflection about ethics and about the distinctive powers of each genre in the contemporary world. More specifically, the sequence of topics within the two broad units—technique and ethics; the ethics of unreliability; writing about oneself; writing about others; rhetoric, ethics, and aesthetics—provides one model of how to break down a critical problem into its component parts and then synthesize the results.

**Advertising:** While the course has been approved for funding by the Honors College, we hope to move the course through the administrative pipeline so as to be able to advertize its offerings early to meet students from across arts and sciences: law, political science, biology, psychology, musicology, the fine arts, for instance.

In addition to our efforts, given that this is a new Honors and Scholars course, the University Honors and Scholars Program will help get the news (via fliers, posters, and advertisements sent through the online Honors & Scholars Net) about the course out to

students. Additionally, it will be announced at their quarterly Honors scheduling event that informs Honors students of available Honors courses.

**Five Year Schedule:** 4 internationally renowned specialists on narrative theory at the “Full Professor” rank are committed to teaching this course every year. We have agreed to the following rotation to ensure that students will have the opportunity to take one of the various iterations of H597.04 every year as well as to ensure that we will be able to cover courses within our respective teaching areas in the English Department:

- Year 1: Frederick Aldama “Narrative and Ethics”
- Year 2: Frederick Aldama “Narrative and Emotion”
- Year 3: David Herman “Narrative and Cognition”
- Year 4: Jim Phelan “Narrative and Ethics”
- Year 5: Robyn Warhol-Down “Narrative and Emotion”

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Frederick Luis Aldama  
Professor of English