

Rationale for Women's Studies/English 282: Introduction to Queer Studies

This course has been designed to fulfill two GEC categories: 2.C.(3): Arts and Humanities: Cultures and Ideas; and 4(1): Diversity: Social Diversity in the United States. Below are rationales for both of these designations.

2.Breadth: C: Arts and Humanities **(3) Cultures and Ideas Expected Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students develop abilities to analyze, appreciate, and interpret major forms of human thought and expression.
2. Students develop abilities to understand how ideas influence the character of human beliefs, the perception of reality, and the norms, which guide human behavior.

1) How do the course objectives address the GEC category expected learning outcomes?

Queer theory is grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, meaning that it recognizes that discourse creates reality rather than merely describes it. Therefore, questions about “reality/realities” and the norms that guide human behavior are at the heart of queer theory/studies and necessarily permeate every aspect of the course. The course will teach students to consider ways in which norms about human desire and sexual expression emerge from a particular social practices and beliefs, and why those practices and beliefs have been challenged by some who have been marginalized by them. As Michael Warner, a founding figure of the field, states, the logic of our contemporary sexual order in the U.S. is so deeply embedded in a wide range of institutions that queer theory’s scope is almost limitless: gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body (Introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* xiii). Obviously no single course could cover this entire range of topics, but every offering of the course will touch on many of them. In addition, the course will provide students with considerable practice in applying the theory that is being presented, through both class discussion and written assignments.

2) How do the readings assigned address the GEC category expected learning outcomes?

The readings that have been selected on this sample syllabus are designed to introduce students to some of the founding principles of queer studies—for example, extended and rigorous analysis of social norms, especially those related to sexuality and desire, and challenges to essentialist views of identity. Theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick, and Gloria Anzaldúa lay out some of these foundational ideas, which connect significantly with learning outcomes related to analyzing human thought and understanding how ideas influence the character of human beliefs, reality, and norms. For instance, Sedgwick spends extended time reviewing reasons why literary scholars have refused to explore the same-sex desire of some of the most influential authors of the Western world, and then asks what our literary canons might look like if we didn’t refuse to look at that aspect of their lives and work. In addition, the syllabus covers some of the major recent challenges to “established” queer theory, challenges that have revealed some of its blind spots around race, gender, class, and nationality. A writer such as José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, writes about the ways in which sexually and racially marginalized people practice a kind of “disidentification” whereby they negotiate mainstream practices and thinking not by resisting them but by transforming them for their own purposes. Finally, students will gain practice in doing queer interpretations of cultural texts, such as film (*Tongues Untied* or *Milk*), poetry (poems by Audre Lorde and Essex Hemphill), short stories (Ernest Hemingway’s “The Sea Change”), and performance art (Marga Gomez’s “Marga Gomez is Pretty, Witty, and Gay”). Novels, art, music, videos, web sites, etc. could also be included on other versions of the course syllabus.

3) How do the topics address the GEC category expected learning outcomes?

As mentioned above, the course topics can cover a wide range of material, more than is included on the sample syllabus, but whatever approach is taken by a particular instructor, the course will always treat both of the learning outcomes related to the two objectives for this GEC. For instance, this syllabus introduces students to “canonical” queer theory but then focuses on the “queer of color critique” that has been leveled against that theory, so it will actually address ways in which queer theory’s challenge to normative thinking and behavior has been itself challenged as reproducing racial and class privilege. Other syllabi could address topics such as: what a queer approach to the same-sex marriage debate might look like, how dis/ability figures into queerness, how gender “outlaws” have advanced queer studies, and how queer studies have addressed space (such as the rural/urban divide) and time.

4) How do the written assignments address the GEC category expected learning outcomes?

The course will provide a number of opportunities for students to present effective written and oral communication. Contributions to class discussion will be required and assessed; students will write two significant essays and a comprehensive exam that will assess not only their understanding of the principles and methods of queer studies but also their ability to think critically and communicate that thinking through writing.

5) How does the course aim to sharpen students’ response, judgment, and evaluation skills?

By its very nature, queer studies push students to analyze and think critically about all kinds of information, including media transmissions, political and cultural messages, research methods used by various disciplines, and societal assumptions about identity. Students will thus be constantly exposed to contemporary information about our world and will develop explicit skills (deconstruction, disidentification, etc.) for analyzing it.

Queer studies can be challenging, and often evokes a range of disparate and divergent opinions. Class discussion will thus involve students in opportunities to negotiate differences of opinion and/or to learn to communicate skillfully with others with whom they disagree. In addition, exams and paper assignments will provoke students to provide well argued, well reasoned, well written responses to a variety of prompts.

4 (1): Diversity: Social Diversity in the United States

Goals: Courses in social diversity will foster students’ understanding of the pluralistic nature of institutions, society, and culture in the United States.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

1. Students describe the roles of such categories as race, gender, class, ethnicity and religion in the pluralistic institutions and cultures of the United States.
2. Students recognize the role of social diversity in shaping their own attitudes and values regarding appreciation, tolerance, and equality of others.

1) How do the course goals address the GEC category learning outcomes above?

Queer theory as it is currently formulated is based on an intersectional model of social difference and power. As the syllabus states, this means that race, sex, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and nationality are seen as mutually constitutive rather than as independent variables. Thus, a queer critique of any kind necessarily involves students in the complex analysis of ways in which

these categories shape individuals' lives, especially in regard to normalizing practices that give social power to some and devalue others. Such an approach will enable students to understand better the role that concepts such as appreciation, tolerance, and equality play in discourses about diversity and how they can sometimes foreclose the very opportunities and attitudes they're expected to foster.

2) How do the readings assigned address the GEC category expected learning outcomes above?

This syllabus is organized around a diverse group of voices, meaning not only diversity of opinion but also diversity of background and identity. More than half the authors on the syllabus are people of color writing about topics related to race, ethnicity, and racialization (e.g., Anzaldúa, Johnson, Riggs, Ferguson, Lorde, Hemphill, Muñoz, Delaney). Gender issues (including transgender issues) are also well represented as is class (e.g., Duggan's *Twilight of Equality*, which looks at the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S.). These writers—and others—deal with the core issues related to the learning outcomes of this GEC: social in/equality and privilege—and some provide ideas for altering those conditions so that the marginalized and disenfranchised can thrive.

3) How do the topics address the GEC category expected learning outcomes above?

The queer of color critique is a core topic for the course, as the syllabus demonstrates, since it is at the center of current formulations of queer theory. This critique argues that foundational queer theory—as presented in the early works of Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick, and others—and even some recent queer scholarship takes (ironically) a privileged perspective on stigmatization, oppression, and marginalization, ignoring racial, gender, and class differences. Such a critique is obviously relevant to this GEC's outcome of describing the roles of identity categories in U.S. institutions and discourse. The course deals with minorities of other kinds, such as sexual, and the normalizing practices that have organized our society and divided people into the fit and “unfit,” citizens and “aliens,” etc.

4) How do the written assignments address the GEC category learning outcomes above?

The answers given above (in regard to GEC 2C3) to this item can be duplicated here with the addition that all assignments will deal with topics of diversity. For example, the two essay assignments provided on the syllabus are directed at this very issue, with one dealing with identity politics, and the other covering notions of social construction as sexuality intersects with race, class, nationality, etc. The final exam will provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their expanded understanding of the multiple roles of social differences, identity norms, and social power as they impact individuals, communities, and the U.S. as a nation strategically situated in a global economy.