EUEC: INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINARS

Since the spring of 2014 the Emeritus College at Emory has held at least one interdisciplinary faculty seminar per year on broad topics ranging from “The Nature of Evidence” to “Individual and Community” and “The University in Crisis.” A recent seminar chose to focus on a single book whose “universal history” format itself crossed disciplinary boundaries – Yuval Harari’s Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (2015). (See below.)

Our next offering, in the fall semester of 2016, will consider the general subject of “20th-Century Paradigm Shifts.”

In each case, the intellectual enterprise is very much a cooperative venture, with participants drawn from across the rich array of disciplines to be found at a research university – philosophy and radiology, German studies and biochemistry, French and immunology, geology and nursing – and with each contributing his or her particular expertise to a mutually beneficial learning experience. Each seminar member chooses a particular topic and proposes appropriate readings on it to the group, then takes responsibility for leading the discussion in the seminar meeting devoted to it.

The overall goal of the seminars is to foster intellectual stimulation and continued growth in the life of the mind in a truly collegial atmosphere. All EUEC members are welcome to participate.

HOW TO SET UP AN INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR

1. You will need one person to take charge of the thing, someone devoted to the idea of high-level intellectual exchange. This person can do it all alone – it’s not that much trouble – or enlist help from other faculty volunteers or a staff person (if your organization has one).
2. Send out notice of the program and ask those interested to respond with suggestions for broad, general topics that would invite a multi-disciplinary approach.
3. In consultation with those expressing interest, narrow the list of topics down to three, then conduct a vote to see which topic prevails and announce the result.
4. Find out which day of the week is best for those participating, and set up a calendar that parallels the academic semester, with meetings once a week on that day for 2-3 hours.
5. Find a venue – ideally the same room for every meeting, and one that lends itself to a true seminar format, with participants facing each other around a large table, for example.
6. Ask each member of the seminar for a specific approach to the general topic, usually from his or her disciplinary perspective. Thus, the general topic of, say, “Inequality,” might elicit quite different approaches from emeriti in political science, women’s studies, ethics, or law.
7. Also ask each participant to supply 35-75 pages of reading pertinent to his or her “take” on the general topic. This will allow all in the seminar to have a shared beginning point for the discussion. This reading should be challenging but also appropriate for non-specialists. The reading can and should be circulated electronically via email. Appropriate online links may be shared as well.
8. The best format is for each participant to take a turn: he or she takes responsibility for one meeting, explaining the particular approach the assigned reading propounds and leading the discussion that follows, making sure each member of the seminar gets a chance to speak.
9. You should discourage participants from lecturing, which some academics unfortunately consider the only way to truth!
10. Before the seminar begins, prepare a paper syllabus, noting the names and affiliations of the members and the titles of their presentations, and listing the readings for each week.
During the fall semester of 2015, from September until a few weeks before Christmas, eleven members of the EUEC took part in weekly seminar meetings that focused initially on just one book, Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper Collins, 2015). As a kind of old-fashioned “universal history,” the book in fact raises some of the biggest questions we now face about ourselves as a species, and along the way it manages to invoke almost all the research disciplines and fields of study to be found in a modern university – from history to biogenetics, from economics to linguistics, from anthropology to literature. For that reason it promised to serve well as a jumping-off point for a thoroughly interdisciplinary series of discussions in what came to be called “The Sapiens Seminar.”

Members first read Harari’s book, then chose a prominent theme from it that seemed most pertinent to their own particular scholarly or personal interests. They also chose supporting materials from their own fields that related to that topic; these readings then became the foundation of each person’s seminar presentation of that topic and of the lively discussion that ensued.

The resulting “syllabus” for the course was an unruly but exciting grab-bag of intellectual explorations that continually inspired anticipation about what the next week’s meeting would bring. There was never any disappointment! Here are the topics we covered in order, with their presenters, all of them ultimately inspired by our foundational text, *Sapiens*:

- **Fiction-making as the source of our unrivaled success as a species** (John Bugge, English)
- **Progress in our understanding the role of DNA and genes in human evolution** (Don McCormick, Biochemistry)
- **The role of imperial visions in North America** (John Juricek, History)
- **Nature/Nurture: What’s really behind being the “Second Sex”** (Linda Hubert, English)
- **Climate and human evolution** (Woody Hickcox, Environmental Science)
- **The history of White people and the myth of race** (Marilynne McKay, Dermatology)
- **The Hanseatic League and the growth of mercantile capitalism** (Viola Westbrook, German)
- **“Othello” — racial, sexual, cultural conflict** (Gretchen Schulz, English)
- **Outsider archeology and prehistoric civilization** (Linda Gooding, Immunology)
- **Schiller’s “Aesthetic Education” as an antidote to contemporary scientific materialism** (Delia Nisbet, German and Italian)
- **The artist as maker — and victim — of myth** (Katherine Mitchell, Fine Arts)

A mere list of topics cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of the discussions the seminar actually germinated week after week, nor can it convey anything of the spirit of infectious collegiality that seemed to grow more cordial as the semester went on. We all learned a great deal from each other, and most of us were inspired to follow up on lines of inquiry that each seminar raised but could not fully satisfy in the brief space of two hours.

We concluded the semester by asking each other for suggestions about topics for future interdisciplinary seminars. If you have an idea for such a seminar, please don’t hesitate to submit it to the Emeritus College atemeriti@emory.edu.