

## CrCrTh 645 Biology in Society: Critical Thinking, Spring 2019 Students' Synthetic Statements, from the Final Course Evaluation

*The synthetic statement is the fourth question on formal course evaluations for the Critical and Creative Thinking Graduate Program. See questions 1-3 listed on <http://bit.ly/CCTEval>*

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Question 4: "Building on your comments from Questions 1-3 in the formal evaluation, compose a synthetic statement (1 or 2 paragraphs) evaluating this course. (Imagine readers who might not be willing to wade through all the answers to Qs 1-3, but are willing to read more than simply the numerical averages of standard course evaluations.) Please make comments that help the instructor develop the course in the future and that enable some third party appreciate the course's strengths and weaknesses. Among other things you might comment on the overall content and progression of classes, the session activities, and the use of mentors to support the learning in the course."

Below are the Synthetic Statements from the respondents who gave permission for these comments to be shared on the web.

- This course was, in hindsight, one of the more difficult courses I have taken in the CCT courses. The requirements in our writings were more specific than I had expected, and even now I am unsure if I was able to meet all of them. However, I appreciate how patient and helpful the instructors were with me, and I found the class itself to be very lively and full of energy. The instructors were of great help to me and the other students in better understanding the course and the CCT program as a whole.
- Overall, this course was very challenging for me. I had to reshape the way I have been taught to think for my entire life, which is not an easy task to overcome in one semester. I thought the activities and discussions that were held in class were relevant with the theme of the week, and I understand why each was significant leading towards connecting themes in a final project. I found the mentors extremely helpful and willing to be there whenever possible. I found myself using office hours more often in this class than perhaps my entire undergraduate/graduate career thus far. I also appreciated the constant peer check-ins when we could discuss how everything is going in the class with our peers. I do wonder if a check-in period at the end of class as well might be helpful to some students, maybe to initially bounce ideas off each other after we have completed the week's activity. This would enable students to begin to make connections with what the class had just done to their installment for the week, because for me, with some of the installments, I felt very lost trying to adapt the theme to my personal project. Maybe more peer dialogue immediately following the activity would have helped stimulate those connections. I appreciated how the weeks seemed to build upon one another throughout the course, and I especially liked the THINK activities. Another small frustration I had was doing everything on the blog. I just think for me, the way the blog and syllabus are set up can get a little confusing. I'm sure transferring to blackboard wouldn't be an easy switch but there were times when I got very lost trying to figure out where to go among all the different pages (chapters page vs. week's page vs. reading page vs syllabus page vs. blog post about chapter etc)
- This course will test you. It will test your patience, your organization, and your ability to connect themes and find patterns. You will develop your critical thinking skills. You need to be willing to be a bit uncomfortable and just "try something" in order to make any progress in this class. The themes are interesting and relevant, and you will learn a lot about how science is

influenced by the scientists who perform it. Start looking at the syllabus early and get familiar with it. It is complicated, and although well organized, I did not find it easy to navigate. Make use of the course assignment checklist so you don't miss anything. Prepare to feel frustrated and be okay with it if the course is not redesigned.

- This course provides a wonderful opportunity for both life-sciences students and non-science students to engage with material related to science in a way that allows beyond-the-box thinking and exploration of ideas, in a number of ways that prove exciting, enriching and educational. The science student may find opportunities to experience familiar ideas from a very new perspective and non-science students a way to work with material that might be too field specific in other arenas to engage with in a meaningful and educational way, that feels accessible and exciting.
- I have learned a lot about critical thinking but am still early on the road to mastering it. Doing this course again, I would do fewer other courses at the same time so I could devote more time to the thinking and reflection this course needs. I have felt my attention tested throughout the semester by a course load that has been too ambitious. The instructors try to make the course engaging for everyone, and I think the constraints of the Zoom system actually focus our attention. I admire the care that the instructors have put into making the course work for such a broad group of students coming at the subject from diverse backgrounds. It is very special to study critical thinking in itself. In this regard the course exceeded my expectations and I just wish I'd had more time to take advantage of it. I think initially like most students I struggled to know 'what to do' but I found when I reached out for help it was there. I think I have learned that I have a lot to UN-learn, including how to 'hold back' from leaping to conclusions. The class schedule and expectations very closely followed the course description and the syllabus. I think a little more guidance at the beginning of the semester about ways to apply the themes/clear examples would not be detrimental to the learning aims of the course. I think this would be more helpful than just giving us access to previous blogs and expecting us to find meaning in them while navigating.
- Be afraid, but be confident you won't continue to be afraid. The course might seem intimidating and that the resources to foster your critical thinking skills aren't concretely there. They are, but it is up to you to find them. Think of critical thinking and this course not as something you "learn" but as something you "learn to utilize." We all have a car, you just have to put the gas in it. Rest assured that feeling a little lost or confused is part of the process and there is a light on the other side. At first I thought I would never "get it." What the teachers wanted, what the themes were, etc. I realized that there is nothing to "get"! Just as I was afraid I didn't have original thought. Your journey with critical thinking is subjective and overcoming that fear is part of the necessary process.
- This course is challenging, but will absolutely help you grow as a critical thinker. It is different from many of the other CCT courses in that it promotes you staying in the unknown, instead of developing a final project. You may have difficulty with the workload that is presented in this course from preparing for class sessions, commenting on other students work, writing installments, and revising past installments. My advice would be to revise as soon as a comment is made, and remember that the instructors are trying to get you to think critically about your topic. Also, if the class is still done in a hybrid fashion, with two instructors, I would recommend trying to go face-to-face if possible. It was hard because I felt as though there was some disconnect between the two.
- This course was demanding in workload and asked a lot of students - which was fantastic in terms of fostering independent study and growing resourcefulness. Taking this course demands a lot of mental energy and time (perhaps moreso than other CCT courses), as the content is

dense with weekly assignments which typically require revisions the following week as well - working out to two weekly assignments, plus any readings and class preparation. This particular cohort was co-taught and I especially appreciated Morgan's openness to hearing student feedback and providing moral support through the learning process, which is sometimes frustrating and confusing as we develop competencies. In terms of content, there was a heavy emphasis on historical case studies connected to life sciences; current examples often came about through independent research for assignments. These historical examples were sometimes more philosophical in nature and/or required students to make connections themselves about how contexts inform scientific progress. As a very specific piece of feedback, this course would be easier to navigate and be successful in with a restructuring of the syllabus. It is a strong offering within the CCT program but prospective students should be prepared to devote more time and energy and be proactive in seeking out support from instructors.

- The chapter themes were quite interesting, and detailed areas of Biology in society that I would not have investigated (perhaps ever in life) had I not taken this course. Some chapter sessions tied to others clearly, and some initiated their own more separate investigative journeys in relation to my chosen theme. Both Morgan and Peter contributed to my thinking and learning process; and I enjoyed the different styles of feedback received from both instructors as it assisted my investigation in unique ways. While I know there was immense coordination needed, I liked the setup of dual professors running the course as there were more opportunities for direct communication and guidance. A word of caution; this course is quite a lot of work as far as CCT courses go, what with requested revisions being common.
- I found this course to be inventive, informative, and open to creative ideas. I enjoyed the content and readings as well as the challenge of leading your own learning. Some things I would improve upon are the syllabus, the blog, and class structure in order to make the course more clear and intentional.