BUSINESS 9826: ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR
SPECIAL FIELD SEMINAR IN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

Winter 2020
Thursday 2:00-5:00, Room 2102

Instructor: Professor Mark Zbaracki
Office: 2310
Phone: 519-661-4270
E-mail: mzbaracki@ivey.uwo.ca

Faculty Assistant: Nicole McDonald
E-mail: nmcdonald@ivey.ca

COURSE OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES:

This course is an introduction to the major theoretical approaches and ongoing debates within organization theory. Organization theory draws on disciplinary roots in (alphabetically) economics, political science, psychology, and sociology to explain the origins, persistence, and disappearance of the structures (organizations, firms, networks, markets, and others) that we use to order our lives. We will read some of the classic statements of the major approaches and trace the history of ideas as the field has developed up to the present. Disparate roots imply disparate approaches to explanation, and thus there are many lively debates within the field that provide some of the frisson of current research.

The aim of the course will be to examine a number of perspectives, consider the strengths and weaknesses of each, and to look at the comparative ability of these models to explain a variety of organizational phenomena. Given that we only have one semester together, the course is necessarily limited, so we will touch lightly on some topics and neglect others completely. I am happy to suggest other readings if you would like.

The course objective is to develop your ability to assess organization theory and research both critically and comprehensively. By the conclusion of the course, you should (a) be familiar with important sources and references on fundamental issues in organization theory, (b) have a grasp of advanced theory and research on a breadth of topics, (c) have a better understanding of the process of developing theoretical articles, and (d) develop your ability to evaluate the contributions of various research streams to the field of organization theory. With this roadmap in hand, you should be well prepared to generate original research ideas that advance the discourse in your chosen area.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Discussion Questions / Overview / Moderator

Because this course is a seminar, most of the action takes place during class discussion. Each class member is responsible for leading the discussion on several topics (the actual number of topics is a function of the number of people enrolled). This involves preparation of discussion questions in
advance, providing the class with a written integration of the assigned readings, and leading the class discussion.

**Discussion questions:** Each discussion leader (or discussion team) must prepare a set of discussion questions for my review before distribution to the class. These must be submitted via email by Tuesday evening (5:00 pm) the week before our Thursday seminar. I will review the questions and suggest changes or additional questions as appropriate. The questions will be distributed to seminar members Thursday (a week before the actual meeting). These questions should provide guidance to your classmates in preparing for each session.

**Presentation/Moderating the Discussion:** Each discussion leader (or discussion team) is also responsible for moderating the discussion. While there will be differences in how everyone approaches the role of moderator, providing the following information would be a good starting point:

1. Review the assigned material collectively, identifying (as appropriate) key theoretical arguments, research questions, and methodologies.
2. Constructively critique the material that you read (on both sides of the issue, as appropriate) by considering
   a. What the material tells us;
   b. What questions remain to be answered; and
   c. Where the particular area or theory might go from here.
3. To the extent possible, it would be helpful to let us know how you view the relationships between your topic and previous topics discussed in the seminar.

I may intervene to consolidate arguments, point out missing links, and guide the conversation.

**Paper expert**

Doctoral courses help us establish an overview of different arguments in a field. In service of that goal, I have assigned 3-5 articles per session. One student will be assigned to each paper in each session as a paper expert. As paper expert, you should plan to invest more time in reading a particular paper. You should be prepared to describe major issues in the manuscript for the class. You should not just summarize the paper in class. In addition, you should prepare a one (1) page synopsis of the paper and post this to LEARN by 9 am the day of the class. You will find these synopses useful later on in your education and academic life.

*Some suggestions for outlines:* The objective is to produce a critical analysis of the reading. You should expect that we have all read the paper so you should not just recapitulate what is argued.

- For theoretical papers
  - How are the arguments presented, justified and developed?
  - Do you find the implications logical and consistent with the premises or assumptions?
  - What are the boundary conditions (stated or implied)?
  - Is the theory novel or is the theory “just so”? Do other (established) theories yield similar predictions using different jargon or assumptions?
- What do you think is missing from the theory? Does this constitute a major flaw undermining the internal coherence of the theory?

- For empirical papers:
  - What is the aim of the research? Specifically, what “big picture” question is highlighted and what more focused research question is addressed?
  - Are the hypotheses plausible in light of the theory or theories the papers draw from? How about the conclusions?
  - Are there major problems in terms of measurement, construct validity, estimation techniques, or interpretation of the results?

**Participation**

Each class member is expected to participate ACTIVELY in every class. You are expected to be prepared to discuss and comment on all of the required readings for each session. Pre-class preparation involves reading the material as well as reflecting upon the discussion questions assigned for that session.

As you do the readings, consider not only what the author did wrong—the usual stock-in-trade of graduate seminars—but what the author did right. What are the interesting ideas in the paper? If you disagree with an argument, what would it take to convince you? What are the scope conditions—under what circumstances is the argument meant to apply (e.g., only to U.S. non-profits; only to family businesses in Canada; etc.)? What modifications would be necessary to extend the argument? Are there critical differences between this author’s arguments and those of others we have read? Can these differences be resolved through empirical test? What would a study look like that did this?

*Your enthusiastic involvement is essential to the course. We want to develop an open, inviting, inclusive, but penetrating culture of discourse. That is what makes for a great seminar!*

**Response points**

We will do a considerable amount of writing in this class. Starting with week 2, each student will write a weekly half-page “response point” based on one of the assigned readings. The response point is to be shared with the class by 5:00 p.m. on the Wednesday before the session. The response point is simply a nagging thought, idea, argument, or question that you might want to pose during class discussion. (This means that you should plan to bring a copy to class as well!) You are allowed to miss two response points over the course of the semester. However, you should still plan to read the material and contribute to class discussion!

*The response points help ensure that we will all come with something interesting to contribute to the class discussion.*

**Reaction memos**

In addition to the weekly response points, you will also write 2-page ‘reaction memos’ every other week. (We will divide the class into two groups for this purpose.) Hardcopies of your response
papers are due by noon the Friday after class. This will allow you to further develop your response paper based on insights from our class discussion of the readings. You might choose to elaborate on your response point or, based on the discussion, you might choose to go in another direction. Regardless of what you choose to do, your reaction memo should include some kind of thought, criticism, argument, idea or application in response to the readings. It should not be a summary of the readings and it should go beyond what we discussed in class.

Regular writing is a fundamental means of intellectual growth! You should treat both your response points and your reaction memos as a grounding for your future research.

Term Paper

You are required to submit a term paper. The content of this will be centered on a topic in organizational theory related to what we have covered in the course. This paper must be original work. You should not submit a paper used to satisfy the requirements of another course or a research relationship with another faculty. These papers should be 15 to 20 pages, double-spaced, excluding references and any appendices, tables, and / or figures.

The term paper must contain: Part 1, theory (15 pages); and, Part 2, a research study design (5 pages).

Part 1: The paper should be theoretical or conceptual (e.g., no data), based on a specialized topic within the domain of the course. Most likely this part of the paper would, (1) develop a particular topic linked to one of the schools of thought we consider in the seminar; (2) integrate the perspectives from two or more schools of thought that might offer a unique conceptualization of an OT issue; or (3) use the various schools of thought discussed in the seminar to explain a current phenomenon in organizations. You should identify the problem or issue of interest and convince the reader of the importance of examining the issue further. That involves identifying a question, problem, or tension in the literature, arguing why the question is important and interesting, and then discussing how you intend to address the question, problem, or tension. You should review the appropriate literature and then use that literature to develop original theoretical arguments. Those arguments might lead to the specification of testable hypotheses or to a theoretical framework or model that could guide future research.

Part 2: An important part of your comprehensive exam is the ability to explain how you are going to design a study to test, explore, or investigate the 'gap' identified in the literature. This part of the paper should focus on how you would actually design a study to investigate the line of argument developed in part 1. These reflections should as a minimum focus on choices around: (1) the empirical context (if it is a field study), (2) data collection, including data sources (survey, interview etc.), (3) data analysis and method, (4) theory testing vs. theory development – basically, what type of study are you designing? Overall, you need to argue why this design is appropriate for answering your research question, and investigating the line of thinking developed in part 1.

EVALUATION

Your grade will be based on the following:
• Discussion Questions / Moderator 20%
• Weekly Seminar Contribution/10 Response Points 20%
• Reaction memos (4) 20%
• Term Paper 40%

ATTENDANCE

Attendance in all sessions of this course is mandatory. If you miss a class, you will not receive any contribution credit for that class; there is no way to “make up” for a missed day. A grade of zero will be assigned to those classes (the notification requirements must be met: see below). If absenteeism has reached 25 percent (3 or more classes), you will not be eligible to write the final exam, and you will fail the course. [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/exam/attendance.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/exam/attendance.pdf)

Missed classes, with the exception of religious holidays with advance notice or extended absences approved by the program office, will be included in the overall calculation for contribution.

NOTICE OF ABSENCE

I recognize that circumstances may arise that make it impossible for you to attend. For example, if you are unable to attend class for health reasons or religious holidays, I expect you to send me an email in advance with the reason for your absence. As a rule, there will be no way to make up your contributions for a missed class, even though you may be asked to complete an additional assignment to ensure you are keeping up with the assigned work. ([https://studentservices.uwo.ca/secure/index.cfm](https://studentservices.uwo.ca/secure/index.cfm)).

I will accommodate medical illness for work worth less than 10% of the total course grade by assigning additional course work. Medical documentation for such accommodation will be required. Such documentation must be submitted by the student directly to the appropriate PhD program office and not to the instructor. The PhD program office that will determine if accommodation is warranted.

ACADEMIC OFFENCES

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf).

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com ([http://www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com)).

HEALTH AND WELLNESS
As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their
health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help
you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For
example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in
Western’s Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year.
Please check out the Faculty of Music web page http://www.music.uwo.ca/, and our own McIntosh
Gallery http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca/. Information regarding health- and wellness-related
services available to students may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/

Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel
comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or
other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at
http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html

To help you learn more about mental health, Western has developed an interactive mental health
learning module, found here: http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/module.html. This module
is 30 minutes in length and provides participants with a basic understanding of mental health issues
and of available campus and community resources. Topics include stress, anxiety, depression,
suicide and eating disorders. After successful completion of the module, participants receive a
certificate confirming their participation.

REQUIRED BOOKS & MATERIAL

W. Richard Scott and Gerald F. Davis (2007). Organizations and organizing: Rational, natural,

Becker, Howard S. 2007 [1986]. Writing for Social Scientists (2nd Ed.). Chicago, IL: University of
Chicago Press. [Read chapters 1-8.]

Both books are available from Amazon.com. I strongly urge you to buy both books. Becker’s book
is the best book on writing that I know about. I still reread it when I struggle with writing. Scott and
Davis is a resource that you will use throughout your career. When I need to think about a topic on
organization theory, I will pick it up for guidance. Yes, it is overpriced. (Jerry always complains
about this.) Used copies are available.

Required readings you can obtain in electronic format.
COURSE OUTLINE – REQUIRED READINGS

January 9, 2020: Introduction to Organization Theory

Scott and Davis. 2007. Chapters 1-5.


January 16, 2020: Contingency Theory


January 23, 2020: Carnegie School


**January 30, 2020: Structure, agency and control**

Scott and Davis. 2007. Chapters 6-7.


**February 6, 2020: Resource dependence**

Scott and Davis, Chapter 9


**February 13, 2020: Organizational ecology**

Scott and Davis, Chapter 10


February 20, 2020: Reading week, no class.

February 27, 2020: Institutional Theory


March 5, 2020: Network approaches

Scott and Davis. 2007. Chapter 11.


March 12, 2020: Learning and the ambiguities of experience


March 19, 2020: Garbage cans, rationality and their discontents


March 26, 2020: Occupations, negotiated order and power


Supplemental reading:

Anteby, Michel, Curtis K. Chan, and Julia DiBenigno. “Three Lenses on Occupations and Professions in Organizations: Becoming, Doing, and Relating.” The Academy of Management Annals 10,
April 2, 2020: Work, markets, and forms of organizing


April 16, 2019: Final Paper Due at 5 p.m.