IVEY PhD Business School
WESTERN UNIVERSITY · CANADA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Business 9776 – Grand Challenges

Fall 2026

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Wednesdays 1:00 to 4:00 PM EST
3102 / Zoom
(6 Sessions)

OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

The charter of business has been radically rethought in August 2019, and continues to co-evolve as we confront a growing range of Grand Challenges (GC). As we co-orient towards the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as guideposts of decisions that affect (un)desirable futures, the meaning of sustainability extends far beyond the earlier pillars of corporate social responsibility to include moral rights and duties to anticipate and respond to (un)planned system changes, (un)expected extreme events, and slow catastrophes (climate change and planetary boundaries).

In this 6-session course, we explore a subset of GCs that intersect with organizations and organizing. We start with the basics to lay the conceptual foundation of how GCs have been conceptualized and operationalized. Given the nature of GCs, our focus in this course is on problems (meta-, wicked) more than solutions. Because GCs far exceed the capabilities of single actors, we pay particular attention to collaborative approaches, from goal (re)setting to activism and collective action. We end with emerging theories about seeing, coordinating and making (alternative) futures.

We dedicate the topical sessions in between to four impact areas deemed critical to Ivey and Western: 1) climate change, 2) biodiversity (planetary boundaries, nature-based problems and solutions, regeneration), 3) inequality and 4) dignity. For each of these four topics, we sample the growing repertoire of emerging theories and methodologies being brought to bear on this subset of GCs and invite hopeful, playful and impactful modalities of scholarship within your respective disciplines.

Whereas other business courses have a strong disciplinary focus, this course has implications across business disciplines (e.g. strategy, operations, finance) and bridges into non-business disciplines, including anthropology, biology, psychology and sociology. This plurality provides fertile ground to cross intellectual boundaries and encourages theoretical blending across disciplines. Because the same concept (events, crises, resilience, regeneration) often has distinct meanings, and implications, depending on the ontological heritage of each field, careful consideration of underlying assumption is a must, and a core skill, you will develop in this course.

This course should appeal to any scholar who wants to "be the change" and develop a model of impactful scholarship by addressing timely and relevant problems. GC scholarship goes beyond specific problem-solution combinations to seek and yield new insights into novel forms of collective organizing that enable actors to come together in the face of unprecedented suffering.
If you are looking for formulaic research and quick wins, this is not the course for you. If you are interested in developing your point of view, and using your time and voice to orchestrate change, you will enjoy the course.

Professor Branzei has been studying collaborative cross-sector solutions to GCs since the early 2000s. She has led multiple large-scale research initiatives on GCs in the contexts of inequality and dignity (abilities, poverty, mental health and war) and is currently devoting most of her time and attention to addressing climate change and the biodiversity crisis.

Our objectives for this course include:

1) to understand the intellectual heritage of grand challenges
2) to appreciate the progress to date in documenting organizing in response to grand challenges
3) to open up opportunities for meaningful and impactful contributions at the yet-unexplored interstices among different disciplines, by discovering new ways of knowing, doing and being

There will be a lot of variance in the experiential and disciplinary foundations of students. Some students will be further along in their doctoral work at the business school, whereas others aren't even enrolled in a business program. This theoretical and experiential plurality are welcome and I have designed the course to benefit from diversity, as long as students engage deeply in the materials.

APPROACH

The purpose of the course is not to provide a complete understanding of all grand challenges, but rather to expose you to the most recent discoveries as you begin to think critically and programmatically about the teams and types of collaboration needed to re-orient organizing for a future different from the past. In keeping with this ambition, the class will be run in a 'salon' format. Initiated in the mid-1800s in revolutionary France, these social gatherings were intended to expand participants' knowledge through conversation. You will prepare the material prior to class, and within class, we will engage in debate and discussion. The direction of conversation won't be bilateral – from me to you – but multilateral with each other, as we all bring a unique and valued perspective. I will encourage active debate and thoughtful reflection. You need to feel comfortable drawing not only on the readings, but your own experiences. You are expected to come to class prepared to ensure not only that you learn, but you contribute to the learnings of others.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS / EVALUATION

Activity	Grade	Due Date
Pre-class Essays (6)	18%	Mondays by 11:59 pm (closed)
Classroom Contributions (6)	36%	Wednesdays 1-4 pm ET (live)
Post-class Reflections (6)	18%	Thursdays by 11:59 pm (open)
Final Exam (2 questions in 3 hours)	28%	In-person (handwritten)

The weekly preparation for this course deliberately trains different types of scholarly voice.

Essays *(Mondays)*

Each essay must be uploaded to LEARN by 11:59 pm Mondays before each Wednesday's scheduled class. Each essay should be blog-sized, about 600 words (2 pages) in length. Please focus on the question asked for each essay, and heed the suggested approach. The aim of the essays is to stimulate your curiosity and help you begin to craft your own point of view before you arrive to class.

Each pre-class essay contributes 3% of the final course grade (18% combined).

Essays will be graded using a 5-point scale with % equivalent. Grades above 4 reflect that the essay has been well written and analytically insightful. It does more than simply synthesize the literature, it offers non-trivial insights. If you receive under 3, then you have not shown much effort in writing the essay or have executed badly. The essay is likely poorly researched and poorly written. Any essays not submitted on time will not earn any points. You will receive my personalized feedback by 11:59 pm on Tuesdays.

Classroom Contribution *(Wednesdays)*

All assigned readings are linked from each session's page on LEARN. You are expected to complete these assigned readings before each class. Please pay attention to the suggested preparation guide, which varies from session to session to optimize learning for each topics and exercise different scholarly skills.

The class contribution grade will be based on a 5-point grading scale.

Grade	Performance	# of students
0	*Did not attend class*	*Ideally no one, but emergencies happen*
1	Attended class, but remained silent	Ideally no one, but if not prepared one can take the opportunity to practice listening
2	Acceptable contribution	Partially prepared students
3	Good contribution	Most well-prepared students
4	Excellent contributions	1-2 highly engaged students
5	Extraordinary engagement	Rare and noteworthy

Excellent contributions are inquisitive, thoughtful, analytical, insightful and respectful. To make such comments, you will have to *prepare well* for class and *listen carefully* to the discussion. You are encouraged to challenge ideas, not individuals. Classroom discussions should be fun, provocative and enlightening. You are being judged on the quality, not quantity of contributions; in fact, speaking too much means that other people have less opportunity to speak. So, contribute when you have something substantial to say or you feel there is a lull in the conversation.

Only emergencies should keep you away from class. If you know you cannot make one of the class dates, then please let me know in advance. I will start classes precisely on time, so please endeavour to arrive a few minutes early. If you had to miss class, you can review the recording of the class, but there is no make-up option for the contribution grade for any missed classes.

Post-session Reflections *(Thursdays)*

By 11:59 pm ET on Thursdays following each session, you will upload to the Discussion on LEARN your reflections from that class. This is the perfect place to synthesize your *ahas* based on your discoveries from the readings and/or the class discussion. Aim to avoid formulaic research (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013), say something meaningful (Alvesson, 2012), and construct mystery (Alvesson & Karraman, 2007). Each post-class reflection should be short (300 words or about 1 page) in length. You will be graded based on your own take on the topic. Please write in your own style, from your own experience, and towards your own research agenda. The "best in class" post will be discussed in our next class in order to model how we can celebrate individual successes while building on one another's efforts.

Each post-class reflection contributes 3% of the final course grade (18% combined).

Final Written Take-home Exam

The final exam will include 2 questions to be answered within 2.5 hours (one hour each – extra time budgeted for outlining the answers). It is in-person and handwritten (closed book) and must reflect individual and independent effort.

You can use whatever notes or articles you want to bring to class, but no devices or AI-generated content of any sort will be permitted. The exam will not be based on memory, but on understanding the basic concepts learned in class. I will be looking for your understanding of the material and for your ability to build an argument.

Each question contributes 14% of the total course grade (28% combined).

OVERVIEW OF SESSIONS

Date	Topic
1. November 11	Grand Challenges
2. November 18	Climate Change
3. November 25	Biodiversity
4. December 2	Inequality
5. December 9	Dignity
6. December 16	Futures

MATERIALS/REQUIRED READING

All materials will be available on LEARN as well as downloaded on ONE DRIVE. Please copy the materials in the folder into your own private folder. Otherwise, there is a risk that you will inadvertently change files or the folder.

USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

A word before the rules. AI is an extraordinarily powerful tool. Used wisely, it will make you sharper; used improperly, it will offer you a short-term gain with a heavy long-term cost. Students who use it wisely will accelerate their learning and those who do not will be left behind. It's your choice.

What is permitted. You may use generative AI tools for only two uses. First, you can use it for background research when preparing your essays: identifying relevant literature, orienting yourself to an unfamiliar body of work, or identifying scholars and debates you should know about. Second, you may also use AI for minor copy editing of text you have already written, including spelling, grammar, and punctuation. AI can be used to flag errors, but you must make the edits yourself.

What is not permitted. There are three prohibitions in this course. First, all writing submitted in this course must be exclusively your own. You may not use AI to draft, paraphrase, restructure, expand, or generate any portion of your written work. Second, you may not use AI to read or interpret course readings, which includes summarizing an article, explaining its argument, extracting its contribution, or clarifying a passage you find difficult. Third, you may not use AI in class.

Laptops in class. To support the learning environment, laptops will not be used in seminar. Bring your readings and take notes on paper. I recognize this means printing more than I would like, and I have made my peace with the trade-off. Students with an accessibility accommodation requiring a device should speak with me; accommodations will of course be honoured.

Why these rules. Doctoral training builds mental muscles that take years to develop: the ability to read a difficult text closely enough to see what it actually claims and where it is vulnerable, and the ability to write in a voice that is recognizably your own. Both are built through struggle. AI removes that struggle. It is also a convergence machine. It pulls everyone toward the same language, the same framings, the same critiques, the same literatures. And, it does so invisibly. Success in our field is determined by independent thought and voice. I want you to build the mental muscles that will set you up for success.

Disclosure. If you use AI for background research or copy editing, include a brief note at the end of your essay stating which tool you used and what for (e.g., "I used Claude to identify literature on polycentric governance; all searching decisions, reading, and writing were my own."). I will not penalize disclosure, but I will penalize the failure to disclose.

Consequences. Use of generative AI outside these boundaries constitutes a breach of academic integrity and will be handled under Western's academic misconduct policies, in the same manner as plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration.

ENROLLMENT RESTRICTIONS

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in the Ivey PhD Program, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the Scholastic Offences policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence.

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 between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com.

GENDER-BASED SEXUAL VIOLENCE SUPPORT

"Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the Wellness and Wellbeing website. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca."

HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES

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. See https://www.uwo.ca/health.

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support at Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program. Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education (AE), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AE and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations may include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

A FINAL WELCOME AND REQUEST OF STUDENTS

I welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ability, and other visible and nonvisible differences. I consider this classroom to be a place where you will be treated with respect. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class. If it is appropriate to our learning and you feel comfortable doing so, I ask that you share your unique point of view as we explore the course content.