



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Centre for Community Engaged Learning
Student Affairs

2025/26



Student Directed Seminars: Program Guide



About Student Directed Seminars

Student Directed Seminars provides undergraduate students (third year or more) the opportunity to propose, coordinate, and facilitate their own three-credit seminar class with a small group of peers on a topic not currently offered at UBC.

Through this, students have the opportunity to collaborate with faculty, and develop skills such as curriculum-writing, peer-to-peer learning, and critical thinking.



Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of the members of the 2025/26 Advisory Committee:

- Dr. José Rodriguez Nunez, Program Chair, 2020 to present, Associate Professor of Teaching (Chemistry)
- Dr. Sarika Bose, Lecturer (English)
- Dr. Andrew Almas, Assistant Professor of Teaching (Urban Forestry)
- Dr. Nesrine Basheer, Assistant Professor of Teaching (Asian Studies)
- Dr. Santokh Singh, Professor of Teaching (Botany)
- Dr. Brianne Orr-Alvarez, Associate Professor of Teaching (Associate Head of Spanish Studies)
- Kyle Nelson, Community Engaged Learning Officer (CCEL)
- Jens Vent-Schmidt, PhD, Educational Consultant, Design & Facilitation
- Cindy Zhang, Student Coordinator 2023/24 (Psychology)
- Kaden Anderson-Hancock, Student Coordinator 2024/25 (Honours Political Science)
- Emmett Mark, Student Coordinator 2020/21 (Integrated Arts)
- Alex Martin, Student Coordinator 2022/23 (Forestry)
- Sheker Mammetgurban, Program Lead (CCEL)

Thank you to the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology for supporting the program. We are grateful for the support offered by the Centre, who offers their expertise and mentorship to student coordinators throughout the year.



Seminars Offered

Biochemical Pathways of Human Emotions	4
The Brain in Balance: Exploring Wellness Through a Neuroscientific Lens	5
Understanding Loss and Grief: An Interdisciplinary Approach	6
Neuroaesthetics: Your Brain on Art	7
Contemporary Feminism in Chinese Media	8
Postcolonial Considerations of Literature from the Caucasus and Central Asia	9
Biopsychosocial Model in Medicine: Integrating Mind, Body, and Society	10
Unhidden Currents: Media, Propaganda and the Architecture of Influence	11
Neuroscience of Free Will	12

Click on each course to sign up! 

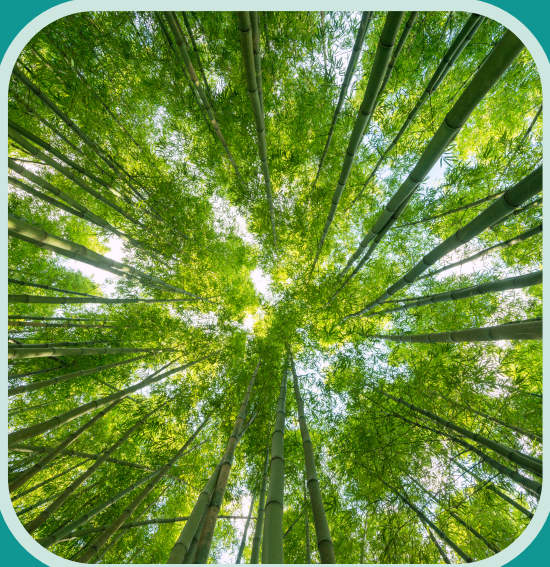


Biochemical Pathways of Human Emotions

TERM 2

ASTU 400K-001 🖱️ | Faculty Sponsor: Eden Fussner-Dupas

Biochemical Pathways of Human Emotions explores how emotions such as fear, bonding, and happiness arise from molecular signaling networks, neurochemical pathways, and endocrine systems. Students will analyze the biochemistry and neurophysiology of emotional states through scientific literature, pharmacological case studies, and interactive peer learning. Designed for students with a background in biochemistry, biology, or neuroscience, this seminar offers a rigorous, interdisciplinary investigation into the molecular basis of what we feel and why.



Lillian Pernitsky

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

I have over 30 house plants.

My favourite pastime is line dancing.

What are you most excited for?

The in class discussions.



The Brain in Balance: Exploring Wellness Through a Neuroscientific Lens

TERM 2

ASTU 400J-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Todd Handy

The Brain in Balance: Exploring Wellness Through a Neuroscientific Lens is a student-directed seminar that investigates the intersection of neuroscience, wellness, and technology. It explores how neuroscience informs understandings of mental health, resilience, and healing, focusing on neuroplasticity, stress regulation, and the mind-body connection. Attention is given to digital culture—particularly social media—examining both risks (e.g., digital addiction, cyberbullying) and emerging wellness tools (e.g., mindfulness apps, biofeedback, virtual therapy).



David Roberts

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

This is my third career change!
I dream of owning a cat
sanctuary.

What are you most excited for?

I am excited to learn about course
development and to collaborate with
other students in critically examining
an important topic.



Understanding Loss and Grief: An Interdisciplinary Approach

TERM 2

ASTU 400H-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Sunaina Assanand

What happens when we lose someone or something important to us? How do such painful losses shape our lives and communities? Grief is a complex and multidimensional response to many different forms of loss- not just death. In this seminar, we will explore the psychological, sociocultural, and neurobiological dimensions of grief, while considering how individual experiences of grief are shaped by broader systemic forces and contexts. Through engagement with diverse models of grief, in-class discussions, and interdisciplinary projects, students will develop a deep understanding of how loss and grief are experienced, expressed, and supported across different individuals and communities.



Atrina Shadgan

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

I've always been a horrible cook but I am currently on a mission to turn that around. I love my cat Coco more than anything in the world, but I am definitely a dog person

What are you most excited for?

I am most excited to dive deeper into grief by learning alongside fellow students in the class! It's a privilege to have this opportunity to learn so much about a topic of my own personal interest, while inspiring...others who also share the same curiosity...about grief.



Neuroaesthetics: Your Brain on Art

TERM 2

ASTU 400E-001 🖱️ | Faculty Sponsor: Steven Barnes

What makes something beautiful? How universal is the experience of beauty? This SDS will explore the field of neuroaesthetics – scientific study of the neural mechanisms of hedonic valuation, artistic creation, and aesthetic appreciation – allowing students to explore how their brains perceive and experience art (visual art, music, architecture, film, literature, etc.), and how art can affect their brain. The proposed SDS will include student-led discussions, multimodal generative assignments and in-class activities (e.g., visual art, reflective writing—both solo and collaborative), and visits by guest speakers.



Leo Chung | *Student Coordinator*

Fun facts

I used to keep bees and I can play a game of chess in my head but not the same way they do so in Queen's Gambit.

What are you most excited for?

I am excited to have the opportunity to help guide others on their educational journey in a field/topic which I am interested in.



Betty Bao | *Student Coordinator*

Fun facts

I like green grapes, and I'm taking a wine tasting class in first semester.

What are you most excited for?

I'm excited to explore new topics with my peers and to discuss interesting ideas.



Contemporary Feminism in Chinese Media

TERM 2

ASTU 400C-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Xiaoqiao Xu

What is the state of feminism in today's China? How shall one interpret its complex development and (increasingly) sensitive associations in a media context? In this seminar, we will engage with the most raw, compelling, and fascinating aspects of contemporary Chinese feminism through hands-on examinations of women's experiences as depicted and reflected in many facets of popular media. Topics covered range from the creation and reception of feminist filmmaking, TV, literature, and video games to how feminism in China navigates media censorship, expressions of sexuality, queer cultures, and more. We aim to gather a nuanced understanding of how Chinese women today pursue social justice. Anyone interested is welcome to the discussion, regardless of prior knowledge of the Chinese languages.



Clair Tang

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

1) I have never cut my hair in my life before, and 2) if you see me wearing black clothes, something is guaranteed wrong.

What are you most excited for?

I am very excited to hear the takes from other thoughtful individuals on the media pieces I've selected. I'm also looking forward to coordinating student discussions since I dream of being a professor one day. This seems like great practice.



Postcolonial Considerations of Literature from the Caucasus and Central Asia

TERM 2

ASTU 400F-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Katherine Bowers

This seminar considers Central Asian and Caucasian literature, as readily available resources to self-map and understand from the inside, through a postcolonial lens. It utilizes a postcolonial approach to center the so-called periphery. Specific themes include citizenship, identity, empire, and how they construct one another. How does literature inform or mirror these concepts? How does literary form build narratives, break them, and simultaneously revise them? Taking note of collective knowledge, literature acts as resistance through tangible practices of observation, note-taking, and documenting. How can we use literature in the field to map various texts out contrapuntally, as sums of a whole, moving beyond the “insularity and provincialism” of literature as stated by Edward Said?



Selin Berktaş

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

I love to paint. I went backpacking in Central Asia last summer.

What are you most excited for?

To talk about this region in an academic setting (with hopefully people who, too, are enthusiastic about the topic).



Biopsychosocial Model in Medicine: Integrating Mind, Body, and Society

TERM 2

ASTU 400L-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Benjamin Cheung

Through case studies, reflective writing, and dialogue with peers and community voices, students will explore how biological, psychological, and social factors intersect in health and illness, with particular attention to the experiences of marginalized communities. The course fosters collaborative learning, respectful discussion, and the development of patient-centered, integrative approaches to care. Although the biopsychosocial model is widely recognized in theory, its application in healthcare often falls short, with biomedical approaches dominating diagnosis and treatment. This student-led seminar critically examines the gap between theory and practice, drawing on psychology, biology, sociology, cultural studies, and medical ethics.



Lavleen Walia

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

I love 80's/vintage vibes. I'm a lover of stars and the universe.

What are you most excited for?

What excites me most is creating a space where students can challenge assumptions, generate new ideas, and begin holding themselves accountable as future healthcare professionals committed to more compassionate, holistic, and equitable care.



Unhidden Currents: Media, Propaganda and the Architecture of Influence

TERM 2

ENGL 336A-001 ✨ | Faculty Sponsor: Richard Cavell

How can cognitive autonomy survive under the attention economy? In an age of increasing technocracy and polarization, how might we mitigate widening ideological gaps, confront social atomization and question our own media consumption habits? These are pertinent questions discussed in popular culture, yet the societal and psychological effects of media in the digital age remain understudied in academia. This seminar aims to bridge that gap through an interdisciplinary inquiry into the often-invisible infrastructures of propaganda and persuasion in contemporary Western culture. Assignments involve critical readings, field research, and a collaborative digital humanities project.



Alicia Matthews

Student Coordinator

Fun facts

I am currently addicted to playing chess with Duolingo's AI but it has somehow made me the worst chess player alive. I enjoy collecting beautiful sounding words.

What are you most excited for?

The fieldwork! And discussing a relevant topic dear to me that hopefully resonates with/benefits other students too.



Neuroscience of Free Will

TERM 2

ISCI 490-202 🖱️ | Faculty Sponsor: Angela O'Neil

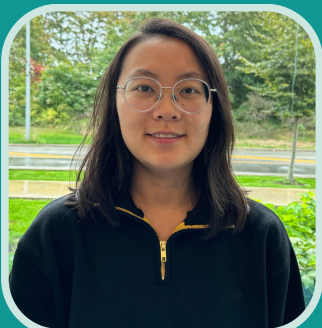
This course will explore free will, a controversial topic that lies at the interface between philosophy and neuroscience. Starting from the foundational philosophical arguments, students will be encouraged to share their own conceptions of free will, which will then be challenged through classical and contemporary neuroscientific experiments; from lesion case studies to priming effects to the neural underpinnings of decision-making. Additionally, the implications of free will be explored at the individual and societal levels with particular emphasis placed on the criminal justice system. In this way, the seminar will uniquely approach a traditional philosophical topic from a neuroscience perspective, underscoring the capacity for neuroscience to inform philosophical discourse.

**Alyssa Aguason** | *Student Coordinator***Fun facts**

My personal hot-take is that milk should be poured BEFORE the cereal. I once memorized 426 digits of pi, just to get free pie.

What are you most excited for?

I am most excited to hear what new arguments the students will bring to the table, and see how they can support or refute these arguments with the use of the course materials.

**Kiara Sun** | *Student Coordinator***Fun facts**

My favourite genre of music and movies are rap and horror, respectively. My favourite philosophical frameworks are existentialism, pragmatism, stoicism, process philosophy, and phenomenology.

What are you most excited for?

I am most excited to meet students from other faculties/majors and engage in meaningful discussions.



Contact Us

Email: student.seminars@ubc.ca

Centre for Community Engaged Learning
CIRS Building, Room 2131, 2260 West Mall
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4