

STS223/323: The politics of medicine and health

Spring session, 2002

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These notes, plus additional information, are posted at
<http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/classes/>

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Making contact. You sometimes can find me in my office, especially in the afternoons. You are welcome to contact me by phone (at home after 8am and before 9pm, please), fax or email, to discuss any issue or make an appointment.

Subject objectives

As a result of involvement in the activities of this subject, you should be able to:

1. Demonstrate understanding of a substantive body of theories relevant to the politics of medicine and health;
2. Identify and characterise different theoretical approaches to the analysis of medical knowledge and practice, and assess the advantages, problems and implications of these approaches;
3. Apply some of these theoretical approaches and appropriate sociological concepts to examples of health and medical issues;
4. Identify the roles of various groups and social institutions in creating, perpetuating or challenging interpretations of health problems and issues and of the principal debates, contending viewpoints and claims concerning them;
5. Critically examine and evaluate examples of contemporary debates in medicine and health.

In addition you will have developed your skills

- (i) in finding and using arguments and information;
- (ii) in summarising and critically evaluating such material;
- (iii) in essay writing and seminar presentation.

Introduction

This subject will expose you to a variety of issues and theories relevant to medicine and health. You are expected to use your initiative in reading about both issues and theories and in writing the essay, with guidance and support from me.

In the first few weeks of class I will run some exercises on issues and theories. We will spend plenty of time working on formulating your essay topics. Working out the idea for a good essay is sometimes harder than actually doing it! A vital aspect of the subject is group activity. I will be available to consult with groups during class time and at other times as required.

Classes

Mondays, 3.30-6.30pm, room 19.2061

Classes will include discussions, guest lectures, student-designed activities, a field trip and other activities to be decided.

Assessment

Class activity, 30%

Journal, 20%

Essay draft, 10%

Essay, 40%

Attendance (see notes below)

Class activity

Students will self-select into groups of 2 to 4. Each group will pick—with my approval—a topic in the field of medicine and health, such as nutrition, mental health, quality assurance or technology in health care. During weeks 5 to 8, each group will coordinate a “class activity” around their chosen topic, to help others understand the topic in its social context. To deal with the “social context,” you can either explicitly use a theory (such as professional dominance, corporatisation, political economy or sociology of medical knowledge) or show how your topic fits into a “big picture” of health and medicine (namely how it relates to other topics and perspectives in the field).

Avoid lecturing and instead consider using debates, quizzes, role plays and small group exercises. Consider using overheads, handouts, tapes and videos. Try to relate your topic to the experiences of class members. You should also include some method to evaluate how well everyone has understood what you are trying to get across. Time allocated for each class event will be at least 30 minutes times the number of group members, e.g. 90 minutes for a three-person group.

Class activities will be assessed using these criteria

- knowledge of topic
- quantity and quality of audience involvement
- aids (handouts, overheads, posters, videos, etc.)
- design (fitting together of activities—role plays, debates, quizzes, etc.—with subject matter, to make an effective learning experience)
- methods of evaluating how well class members have understood your message.

Journal

For each of weeks 3 through 9, you should complete by class time a journal entry of 250 to 500 words. You should discuss two items from newspapers, radio, television, public life (such as a public meeting), personal experience or a class activity (during weeks when they are held).

Journals will be collected during class in weeks 5 and 9. Assessment will be based half on the entry for a week chosen randomly from 3 through 5 and half on the entry for a week chosen randomly from 6 through 9.

Journals will be assessed using these criteria

- selection of items to discuss
- understanding of the items
- use of a conceptual framework for assessing the items
- drawing of conclusions based on values and experience
- quality of writing (clarity, grammar, spelling, etc.)

Essay draft and essay

You are encouraged to work in a group. (It could be the same group as for the class activity, but could be different.) Pick an issue involving medicine and health. (This could be a current issue or, through detailed records, an historical one.) Collect first hand and secondary information relating to the issue, for example through personal experience, observation of conversations or behaviours, formal interviews, questionnaires, articles, books and statistical data. Analyse the information you obtain using a theoretical framework such as:

- professions;
- capitalism;
- sociology of medical knowledge;
- social construction of social problems.

Include in your essay:

- information about the issue (include at least 4 references);
- discussion of the theoretical framework used (include at least 4 references);
- how you obtained information about the issue;
- your analysis of the issue and your recommendations or assessments.

Length: 3000 words

Option 1: individual essays. Students each write their own separate essays, drawing on information from and activities of the group.

Option 2: combined essays. Two or three students (no more) can, by mutual agreement, submit a single essay. The word limit is the same. Joint authors should say how marks are to be allocated (equally or some specified non-equal manner).

You should submit a full-length draft. I will give you detailed comments on cassette tape. You then make revisions. The final revised essay will be marked by someone else.

Due date for draft: 3.30pm Monday 21 October

Due date for final version: noon Monday 11 November

Where: in class (21 October), under the door to my office (19.2059) or in my mail box in room 19.1048. Alternatively, mail the essay to me by express post no later than noon of the due date.

Essay drafts, received on time and if full length, will receive the same mark as the essay.

Resubmission Anyone whose essay does not receive a mark of 50 or more will have the option of resubmitting it.

Essays will be assessed using these criteria

- understanding of the topic
- understanding of the theoretical framework
- application of the framework to the topic
- use of information obtained
- argument (starting from clearly articulated premises, mobilising evidence and logic towards a conclusion; recognising assumptions made and limitations)
- quality of writing (clarity, grammar, spelling, etc.)

Extra essay requirement for STS323 students

Option A Use a second theoretical framework in your analysis (include at least 3 additional references). Compare and contrast the theories in terms of how they do and/or don't provide insights into the issue, and comment about what insights studying the issue provides into the strengths and weaknesses of the theories.

Option B Apply your chosen theory to a second, distinct issue in medicine and health ((include at least 3 additional references). Compare the insights (and/or lack of insights) provided by the theory for the two issues, and comment on what insights studying the two issues provides into the strengths and weaknesses of the theory.

Attendance

You are expected to attend at least 80% of scheduled classes. (Classes are omitted from the calculation when a certificate is provided justifying absence on medical or compassionate grounds.) If you are present for only part of a class, that counts as fractional attendance. For those with less than 80% attendance, a corresponding percentage will be subtracted from the overall mark. For example, with 72% attendance, $80\% - 72\% = 8\%$ will be subtracted.

Additional information

The STS Program Handbook should be considered a supplement to these subject notes. Consult the handbook for policy on late submission, plagiarism, etc. Staff are committed to the use of nonsexist and nonracist language in all work submitted for assessment. I reserve the right to hold an additional oral examination for any piece of assessment.