Ideas That Change the World: Book Selection

Ideas that Change the World represents the beginning of your career as an honors student at UMass Amherst. In this discussion-based seminar, we will examine groundbreaking ideas that have shaped our world. Our primary texts will be influential works that raise issues of enduring importance. Throughout the semester we will also inquire into our own potential for transformative creativity, innovation, and leadership.

As an interdisciplinary seminar, this course illuminates ideas that cross the boundaries of the sciences and the humanities. Some of the fundamental questions we will ask throughout the semester are:

- Why do some ideas become influential?
- What social conditions tend to foster creative thinking?
- Under what circumstances can creativity transform societies?
- Across disciplines, what do innovators have in common?

The faculty of Commonwealth Honors College select the common texts for the course. While the common texts are subject to change occasionally, what they represent is perennial: ideas that have profoundly impacted the world we live in. Of course it is impossible for any course to represent all such ideas; there are thousands upon thousands of appropriate choices. The faculty consider many options and combinations before settling upon the final mix, which currently include works by Plato, Gandhi, Rachel Carson, and Orson Welles.

Models of Inquiry

“For to fear death, my friends, is only to think ourselves wise without really being wise, for it is to think that we know what we do not know. For no one knows whether death may not be the greatest good that can happen to man.”

- Plato’s Apology
The common texts for this unit are Plato’s Apology, Crito, and the cave allegory excerpted from Republic.

Readings in this unit are not about any particular field of thought but are about independent and critical inquiry, including models of courageous intellectual questioning, theories of knowledge and cognition, and conceptions of creativity.

Revolutionary Changes in Science and Technology

“Why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons, a home in insipid surroundings, a circle of acquaintances who are not quite our enemies, the noise of motors with just enough relief to prevent insanity?

Who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?”

- Rachel Carson's Silent Spring
The common reading for this unit is Silent Spring by Rachel Carson.

Readings in this section are on scientific and technological innovations that have made a large impact on society. Students often read about Newton, Darwin, and other major scientists in textbooks, but here the goal is to have students confront a primary source. The work will reveal nuances that textbook summaries often leave out. It will also be a chance for students to confront the author’s methods of persuasion.

Social Thought and Civic Action

“Real courage exists in not returning a kick for a kick.”

- Mahatma Gandhi’s The Essential Writings

The common reading for this unit is The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

This broad category opens up possibilities for discussing political theories that have been highly influential, the intellectual grounding of revolutions and social movements, and the ideas that make possible the sense of common citizenship and purposeful civic engagement.

The Power of the Arts
“If I hadn’t been very rich, I might’ve been a really great man.”

- Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane

The common viewing for this unit is Citizen Kane, directed by Orson Welles.

Readings or art works for this unit are chosen to as place to begin consideration of how art configures reality and shapes people’s perceptions of the world.

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