

# What to Expect

## Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue: Course Information

### Educational Framework

The Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue addresses what we believe is the principal challenge for contemporary education: to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility, encourage their passion to improve Canadian society, and develop innovative intellectual tools for effective problem solving. Each semester we develop an original and intensive learning experience that uses dialogue to focus student education on public issues.

The Semester is associated with the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue at SFU's Harbour Centre campus in downtown Vancouver. The Wosk Centre was conceived to encourage public assembly through dialogue-based programs and conferences that address social issues.

In each full-time, one-semester undergraduate Dialogue program we:

- Engage students with pressing public issues
- Foster interdisciplinary approaches
- Participate in active, discussion-based learning rather than lectures
- Encourage critical thinking and analysis
- Expose students to deep understanding of diverse viewpoints
- Develop a network of intriguing, experienced, and accomplished speaker/facilitators
- Offer intensive mentoring opportunities
- Provide small class sizes
- Focus on communication skills
- Encourage student involvement in project design and topic selection
- Link students from diverse backgrounds
- Build a blend of teamwork experience and individual initiative

### What is Dialogue?

Dialogue involves collaborative listening and learning to discover meaning among diverse participants, and is best conducted in the context of citizenship and civic engagement. Dialogue offers helpful ways to relate to one another, and can lead to better-quality outcomes than the adversarial, position-based discussions that typically characterize debate about complex issues. Dialogue can build deep relationships through free expression of views and respectful exploration of differences, with positive action emerging through mutual understanding around sources of agreement and disagreement.

We believe that dialogue-based learning can:

- forge strong links between coursework and community
- create a blend of attitudes, expertise, and intellectual dexterity that will be particularly suited to resolving the myriad and complex problems facing contemporary society.

- strategically enhance Simon Fraser University's mission to educate students into productive, creative, well-balanced, reflective, and engaged members of society.
- encourage young Canadians to care about the world around them
- provide students with the tools they need to be effective ambassadors for progress.

We have assembled a fully annotated database of dialogue resources that are available at the SFU library. You may access this online resource at: <http://stalefish.lib.sfu.ca/CitationManager/public.cgi?uid=2639> or via the "Links" page on the Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue website.

## Faculty

Core faculty for the program include Mark Winston and Janet Moore, one of whom teaches each semester. In addition, one or two other full-time faculty from SFU or the community teach each semester, as well as about 25 guests who come in for half-day dialogue sessions throughout the semester.

## A Typical Week

You must be available from 9:30-4:00 weekdays for the fall and spring semesters; Summer Institute hours may differ. Your time during weekdays is spent in dialogue with guests, meeting with faculty and project groups, conducting research, participating in debriefing sessions, attending formal sessions at the Centre for Dialogue, going on field trips, and other activities. We rarely schedule evening/weekend activities, and provide considerable notice when we do.

The Semester in Dialogue is a rigorous, intensive program, and your availability during course hours is essential. Not all time is scheduled, but quickly fills up with activities. Still, many students do maintain part-time jobs evenings and weekends, and we foster a perspective of balance so that you will have time for family and friends when class is not in session. Generally you can expect a workload similar to that of a typical full-time semester, although the nature and timing of the work will feel quite different. Note that you will **not** be able to take other courses during your Semester in Dialogue.

## Admission, Prerequisites, Credits, and Tuition

### Admission and Prerequisites

The Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue is open to students from all departments and faculties who have completed 45 credit hours prior to beginning the USD program. Twenty students from diverse departments and faculties are selected for each program. Our search image for students seeks disciplinary and experiential breadth, with admission criteria emphasizing motivation, community engagement, and accomplishments in addition to academic achievement. A typical semester will have students that represent 10 to 15 departments. A recent program included students from Archaeology, Anthropology, Biological Sciences, Communications,

Economics, English, History, Humanities, Kinesiology, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, Psychology, Sociology, and Women's Studies.

### **Credits and Tuition**

The Fall and Spring programs present a 15-credit curriculum as a seamless unit consisting of three simultaneous courses, DIAL 390, 391, and 392. The Summer Institute program is under development, but currently consists of a 10-credit, seven week program (DIAL 390, 391). The semester also can be taken post-graduation as a special student, and credits can be applied towards a post-baccalaureate diploma.

Students should consult with their major Department prior to their Dialogue semester to determine the application of DIAL credits to fulfill major, minor, or elective course requirements. Most departments accept the DIAL credits for electives, breadth, and writing requirements, and generally allow students to apply some or all of the credits towards minor or major requirements.

Tuition for the Semester in Dialogue is equivalent to tuition for standard SFU credits. There are no additional course fees. Students accepted into the program will be cleared for registration following acceptance, and you can then register as you would for any course.

## **Curriculum**

### **Guest Visits**

Both traditional university faculty and community partners participate together as teachers and dialogue facilitators. Invited guests from diverse professions and organizations engage in open and respectful discussions with students about the issues associated with the semester's focal topic. We intentionally structure the sessions to avoid lecture and question/answer format and encourage conversations in which students are on equal footing with guests. Many dialogue sessions are followed by debriefing, discussing how the session had proceeded, what worked well, and what we might have done differently to improve interactions and build trust. These experiences are designed to teach students skills in hearing a variety of perspectives and respectfully sharing their own views.

One or two students will be assigned to a class with a guest, to prepare a short document to be handed out to all students at least one week prior to the guest's visit. This should include a brief biography, suggestions for two readings on the topic and, discussion questions for the dialogue with the guest.

### **Assignments**

We have developed many unique assignments as part of the curriculum for the Semester in Dialogue. Not all of the assignments described below are used each semester, but your semester may include:

Photos and Student Biographies: Students work together in pairs on the first day of class to

interview one another and write a 200 word biography for their partner. Pairs work together on the writing and biographies are posted on the website.

First Paragraph Exercise: During the first week you will write one paragraph on the course topic (max 75 words), and print it out on an overhead. We will spend time editing the paragraphs the next day in a thoughtful way – learning how to give feedback and support each other in our writing. The exercise is anonymous.

Growing the Story: This assignment involves initially building a process for class work, then learning how to engage and facilitate dialogue. We begin the first day of class with a hypothetical scenario concerning a controversial issue, revisiting it a few weeks later. You then develop and present a skit demonstrating how the scenario might progress, using the principles of dialogue covered in earlier sessions. This exercise encourages careful consideration of how diverse groups might interact through adversarial compared to dialogue-based processes, both through the scenario and your own experiences working together as you explore the scenario. Details will be provided for you on the day these exercises begin, but note that the latter “growing the story” exercise will involve a 24 hr. assignment requiring evening work.

Reflective journal: You keep a regular journal with your reflections/observations concerning how the values, approaches, and experiences of the course provide insights into your own personal and professional growth. This assignment will not be read or graded, although we hope you will share some of your observations with the faculty and the class.

Reflections: You may be asked to hand in reflections throughout the semester (~one page in length) approximately one reflection every two weeks. These reflections are intended to help your writing and will be refinements of your personal journal. There will be opportunities to share your written reflections with the class.

750 word Op-Ed Piece for a daily newspaper: The goal is to engage with a controversial issue in a manner that is probing, thought provoking, and non-didactic, in a manner that invites discussion. This assignment has both an oral presentation and a written component. Initially, you will meet in small groups to discuss your piece verbally and receive feedback, followed by a similar session with the entire class. Then, you will produce a 750-word article to submit as an opinion/commentary piece to a major Canadian newspaper.

Power in (the City, Health, etc.): Students identify and interview the five people they would contact to assess how decisions for an ongoing community project are being made. For example, students in an urban-focused course might consider a new rapid transit line under consideration in Vancouver, and interview the CEO of Translink, a construction engineer, the director of a local community group opposed to the project in their neighbourhood, a city councilor, and a representative from Smart Growth B.C. Your objective is to determine “how the world works,” i.e. who wields real power on an issue, the dynamics of reaching consensus or conclusion, and the factors that encourage or inhibit progress. Your group will report back in an oral presentation in a format to be decided by the class.

"I Disagree": Interestingly, students frequently become so engrossed and successful at developing curiosity about the opinions of others that they can become uncomfortable at disagreeing with each other. There is a fine line between the spirit of dialogue and a reluctance to engage with controversial material that might disrupt dialogic interactions. This exercise is designed to foster the ability to disagree without becoming adversarial or nasty. We pair students up and one expresses a controversial opinion. The second begins his/her response with "I disagree," and continues on to express an opposing position but using language and approach that encourages continued conversation rather than polarization.

Thinking on Your Feet: We're all challenged to be heard amid the rapid pace of discussions and dialogue, and find conversations often pass us by before we have a chance to comment. This rapid-fire exercise works on drawing instantly on personal experience to participate in dialogue and/or answer questions. You'll be asked for immediate comment on a random issue, then we will reflect on methods of rapid response that work for you.

Class Projects: Each semester's students conduct focused projects in small groups and/or as an entire class. One group worked to redesign a Skytrain transit station that had been plagued by crime, and their submission was used by the city's planning department in presentations to city council. Another class was divided into two groups, one to rewrite the Canada Health Act and the second to produce a new provincial health budget that reflected values and priorities in the rewritten Act. In a third semester, students redesigned the alleyways of Vancouver for novel functions, winning a city-wide competition for their submission. A fourth class, Art and Community, developed and adjudicated a public art competition. A fifth "Changed the World in a Semester" by creating plans for social enterprises focused on sustainable community development.

Individual Final Projects: This final assignment asks each student to produce a 3000 word manuscript or equivalent in another media, suitable for submission to a major public outlet on a topic relevant to the course focus. Students submit a proposal and pitch their idea to the class midway through the semester. These projects have been remarkable in breadth and ambition. Examples include a stunning video documentary, shown in a local film festival, that used billboards to explore the history and current issues in a Vancouver neighbourhood, an eloquent essay about the reality television show *Survivor* based on the student's real-life experiences in the setting where the show was filmed, a quirky but fascinating piece on urban cemeteries that was published in a local newspaper, and a large oil painting titled *Dying Balance* about lost equilibrium and the increasingly destructive impact of human beings on our planet, artwork that now hangs in the Semester in Dialogue classroom.

Peer Mentoring Triads: In some semesters we may use a mentoring triad to work on your own personal goals for the term, peer-edit your projects, and brainstorm about your future. Suggestions and sample exercises will be handed out to help groups get started. Updates from the triads will occur throughout the semester.

Other assignments: Additional assignments may be developed throughout the semester, with your input.

## Grading and Feedback

We expect you to meet with faculty on a regular basis to discuss your projects and any issues relating to the course, as well as to receive feedback. We also schedule a more formal midterm feedback session about the sixth or seventh week of class. Many of your written assignments are reviewed and edited in a timely fashion by faculty, returned, rewritten, and resubmitted. Students also exchange manuscripts for constructive comments. Oral presentations will be critiqued both in class and privately.

Grading for the three courses is based on a model of collaboration rather than competition, and we expect you to work together with other students and faculty to produce strong outcomes. We build criteria and approaches for grading collaboratively but generally grading for courses is divided as follows:

Dial 390: Dialogue and verbal presentations

Dial 391: Seminar/written assignments

Dial 392: Final Project

## Readings

Our approach to general reading assignments is different than you may be used to in your previous coursework. To understand a public topic, you need to immerse yourselves in everything related, including books, articles/columns in daily newspapers and weekly/monthly magazines, and reports, documents, and academic studies in areas you are particularly interested in.

We generally assign a few books you should complete before the start of the semester. Read them for general background knowledge and as aids in developing your individual perspectives, not for detail. These are “pleasure books,” to be enjoyed and absorbed but not memorized, and are available through the SFU Bookstore (Harbour Centre) before the semester begins.

You also will accumulate a course package of readings throughout the semester, many contributed through your own research.

## Miscellaneous

### Classroom

The class meets at the Harbour Centre campus, room 3050. The room includes flexible meeting/work space, a phone, computers, a photocopier, a small refrigerator, and a lounge area. You have access to the room 24 hours a day, and use of the room is restricted to your semester. The classroom is secured with an access code that will be provided to you.

## Email Group

A mailing list specific to your semester will be created, open for all members to post notices to but restricted to course related business. Students are welcome to set up their own independent mail list for social and other purposes.

## The Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue Student Union (USDU)

Students in the Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue are provided with a budget each semester by the Simon Fraser Student Society to fund dialogue-related activities. A member of the dialogue student union sits on the SFSS forum, ensuring that dialogue students have an opportunity to express their interests and concerns within the broader university community. The USDU is initiated, organized, and operated by students each semester.

## Outcomes

The outcomes of the Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue are tangible, and we hope your experiences lead to outputs useful in the community, as well as in developing your own future perspectives and careers. Thus, assignments are designed for a public audience and many student projects have gained recognition and had impact beyond the university.

Students have had their op-ed assignments published in the Globe and Mail, National Post, Vancouver Sun, and Toronto Star, among others, typically three to six per semester from a class of 20.

One class, "Art and Community," had the unusual experience of creating Art Takes Route, a public art competition designed, advertised and adjudicated entirely by the students ([www.arttakesroute.com](http://www.arttakesroute.com)). This was the first-ever public art competition for UniverCity, a new urban development surrounding Simon Fraser University that is deeply connected with the university's ideals. \$22,000 in funds were provided by UniverCity with the open-ended objective to choose a work of art through submissions that would be built along the trail system at the city. Students developed a mission statement, issued a call for proposals that resulted in 21 submissions that in quality and artistic vision far exceeded even their high expectations. The class adjudicated the submissions, gave four short-list awards and an award for the winning project that currently is being constructed at UniverCity. The protocols they established also are being used for ongoing public art competitions at UniverCity.

Students in "The Urban Experience" submitted a winning proposal for Vancouver's "21 Ideas for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" competition. Their Second City project took on the task of re-imagining Vancouver's alleyways, incorporating policy and design components. Their designs were incorporated into a book and posters, featured in numerous radio and print media, and are being implemented by Vancouver's Planning Department in collaboration with the students ([www.secondcityproject.ca](http://www.secondcityproject.ca)). In addition, the project was presented by one student at a major

meeting in Toronto focused on innovative urban planning, "Creative Places and Spaces," put on by Artscape Toronto.

Another group of students organized and facilitated a public dialogue at which Alexandre Trudeau presented his documentary *Embedded in Baghdad*, and three students planned and conducted a conference on "Spirituality and the Environment," each dialogue attended by over 150 participants. Others regularly facilitated breakout sessions during public events at the Centre for Dialogue, such as the Vancouver Police Forums on Community Relations, and [Imagine BC](#).

We have observed similarly impressive outcomes for the individual students who have completed the program. For example, students have found employment researching urban sprawl, coordinating communications for a non-partisan youth voting project, managing projects in public consultation for clients such as the Greater Vancouver Regional District and the Ministry of Transportation, developing programs for Vancouver's Office of Cultural Affairs, writing for *Western Living* magazine, the *Vancouver Courier*, *Tyee*, and *Adbusters*, coordinating projects and liaising with members of the Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform, and soliciting community input for transit planning at the Vancouver region's transit provider TransLink, among many others. These outcomes were both indirect and direct, first through establishing a broader search image for jobs as the range of students' ambitions increased, and second through the tangible network of contacts developed during each semester.

Two students from the 2004-3 Urban Experience course became excited about social entrepreneurship, and are in the process of founding "Eonfire," a non-profit organization to foster social enterprise on Canadian campuses. Their vision is for a linked network of Canada-wide undergraduate students, with programming designed to provide tools, resources, funding, and events that encourage progressive businesses to emerge from our universities. Many others have gone on to professional schools in law, medicine, architecture, and urban planning, as well as entering diverse graduate programs.

Other outcomes may be less tangible, but as significant in developing effective and engaged citizens. Extensive student feedback indicates that students leave the Semester in Dialogue with new understandings of leadership, better communication skills and increased confidence in approaching leaders in positions of power. These surveys establish students' expectations entering the program and compare these with their attitudes and perceptions of the Dialogue Semester upon completion.

Students comment that the focus on public issues and the dialogues with community members demystify the workings of the world outside of university and establish a valuable network for their subsequent job searches. Similarly, exposure to multiple views on issues in open, respectful discussions reveals both the complexities of policy decisions and the necessity of being able to hear and accept other points of view.

Finally, students tell us that having a Semester in Dialogue on their resumes has been quite useful when seeking employment or opportunities for future studies.