

January, 2017

Dear Students in LLED 3461S/3461S-H,

Welcome to what I hope will be a stimulating class. My name is Peter Smagorinsky, and I will be your professor. But the class is designed to be primarily run by you, the students. I'll talk to you in detail about how the class will work on opening night, and briefly in this letter of welcome. Mostly, though, I'll introduce other aspects of the course.

If you're wondering what service-learning is, the UGA Office of Service-Learning has developed a nice, short introduction at [https://kaltura.uga.edu/media/t/1\\_ncwp76e6](https://kaltura.uga.edu/media/t/1_ncwp76e6). In essence, SL gives you an authentic community context (for us, the alternative HS in Athens, Classic City HS) in which you both serve (providing tutoring and mentoring for their students) and learn (in this case, learn about the lives of people who are very different from you, in anticipation of teaching classes across a typical school's tracking system, as you are likely to do). More on all that later.

### **Personal Introduction**

First, let me introduce myself. I have written a few autobiographical papers that will acquaint you with my life up to this point, or at least a few years ago. The most personal essay concerns my life in a family characterized by Asperger's Syndrome, obsessive-compulsiveness, chronic severe anxiety, and mild Tourette's, all of which are part of my own makeup. Much of my career is detailed at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/vita/vitaweb.htm>. At this online c.v., you'll find this memoir at:

Smagorinsky, P. (2011). Confessions of a mad professor: An autoethnographic consideration of neuroatypicality, extranormativity, and education. *Teachers College Record*, 113, 1701-1732. Available at <http://www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/TCR/TCR2011.pdf>

A second personal essay, this one describing my professional pathway, is here:

Smagorinsky, P. (2011). NCTE & me: Reflections on the Council's role in one teacher's life. *English Journal*, 101(1), 111-116. Available at [http://www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/EJ/EJ\\_Sept2011\\_Smagorinsky\\_NCTE\\_Me.pdf](http://www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/EJ/EJ_Sept2011_Smagorinsky_NCTE_Me.pdf)

Reading these essays, and anything else you find in this c.v., is optional. But students have often told me that they'd like to know more about the people teaching their classes. If you share that interest, these papers will help get you acquainted. The fancy words in the title of the first essay, neuroatypicality and extranormativity, refer to (a) not having a typical neurological makeup, and (b) falling outside the "normal" human range of mental functioning. Since I wrote this essay, I've shifted my language to the more widely used "neurodiversity," a term that asserts that nobody is "normal," but rather there is a broad spectrum of how people's mental and neurological systems function, each of which follows its own logic and ways of being human.

If you, too, are anxious or depressed or take medication to achieve a better balance, or are otherwise considered “abnormal” or “mentally ill” or anything else, you’re OK here. Meanwhile, it’s incumbent on everyone else to be understanding and to not stigmatize you for not following their norms. In other words, the classroom environment is designed to honor and respect and support each of our differences. That goal is not always easy to achieve, but in my view it’s an important disposition for an educator to achieve, and a critical component of any classroom that enrolls diverse students—that is, just about every classroom.

If I may reduce this goal to a statement of value: I hope that one outcome of this class is that you learn to take other people’s perspectives and at least try to understand the world from their point of view, both among classmates and at Classic City HS. There, you will engage with youth who did not fit in either of the two “regular” public high schools in Athens and so have enrolled in this alternative school. Most students who’ve taken 3461 have used the word “eye-opening” to characterize their experiences at Classic City HS. These kids are not like the students in the honors, AP, advanced, and other high-end classes that so many of you took throughout your education. School didn’t fit them, and they didn’t fit school. Learning why they hate school is among the most illuminating things you’ll learn this semester, because you will teach a lot of kids who feel this way.

### **General Course Description**

I’ll explain the class more clearly on the first night. The syllabus is available at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/index.html> and can give you a preliminary idea of how 3461 operates. For the most part, students have enjoyed the approach of using student-run book clubs, because it gives them an opportunity to begin thinking of themselves more as teachers than students. You also have a different set of obligations in this class. You are at least as accountable to one another as you are to me. If you show up to book club discussions without having read the book you chose, then you will be under peer pressure to get yourself in gear and be more responsible to them. So I’m not the primary person you need to impress in 3461. You need to be accountable to your classmates, who are likely to follow you through a series of classes in the next year or two, and with whom your relationships will be extended and important.

I always tell students that this class potentially will be the best class they’ve ever taken. Not because I’m a great teacher, but because the class is as good as you want to make it. If you want to make it a great class for yourself and others, then make good book selections, read them and be prepared to talk about them in the book clubs and then with all of your classmates, take your tutoring and mentoring at Classic City HS seriously and try to learn about teaching from developing a relationship with a student who is substantially different from yourself, and challenge yourself to think hard as you produce the course project you choose from the menu on the syllabus.

There’s something about being in charge of your own learning that motivates many students to want it to be a great experience. I hope that we have such a group this semester.

### **The Current Political Climate, Political Correctness, and Mutual Respect**

This letter will prepare you for other things you should know about the course, especially in this political climate that many people characterize as being complicated by the well-

documented [“raw emotions”](#) following the recent presidential election. Given that this course fulfills your “foundations” requirement, its purpose includes attention to why the broad range of cultural types enrolled in your classrooms have differences in perspective, ideology, needs, social practices, ways of learning and communicating, and other areas of diversity. In other words, our faculty consider it foundational to know the range of human types who attend public schools, in order to teach in ways that are equitable and inclusive to the widest range possible.

These issues of diversity have been at the heart of the high emotions that are implicated in 2016’s voting decisions, with some believing that diversity strips the nation of a national identity and singularity of purpose, and some believing that diversity is central to equity and the ongoing growth of the nation. The beliefs of you and your family may be quite strong in either direction. My purpose is not to make you agree with my values, but to provide an environment that allows you to articulate and refine your values as you undertake a career as an educator.

At <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/SLBookClubs.html>, you’ll find information about the book clubs that you’ll form to discuss the readings you select. In other words, there are no assigned readings. Rather, you will select three books for your book club to focus on for the semester, first with your book club of 4-5 class members, and then when you lead the class in a discussion of your book. [The schedule](#) shows how the class is structured for these discussions. Your engagement with these issues may challenge your understanding of people you may only know of through media images. At the same time, you might realize through the semester’s work that you disagree with the goals of diversity education and wish to remain where you were when you enrolled. Your trajectory is entirely in your hands and minds.

But however you emerge, it will be informed by a wide consideration of beliefs, including your own and those of your classmates, rather than relying on media for knowledge. The books on the book club list are mostly of the “scholarly” sort, and so tend to be much more clearly documented and responsible, and more rigorously vetted, than anything available in the media. This is a university class, not a coffeehouse chat, so our standards here require knowledge that has passed the test of scholarly review.

Please take a look at the list of topics, which is designed to address an array of what is known as “diversity” issues in the education business. I encourage you to choose books that take you out of your comfort zone and into new areas of understanding. Classrooms tend to enroll people from across the human spectrum, and few of us know a whole lot about the many demographic and neurological types that they will need to teach effectively. You are not required to select from any particular category. You and the others in your book club may decide to focus all of your reading in a single area, or may explore a different topic in each book. My advice is to think ahead and anticipate what you need to know more about to teach all of your students in ways that advance their learning.

On the book club list: It’s always expanding. If you see a need to add additional categories or books, please let me know, and if you wish to read something from off the list, please run it by me first. What I don’t want is simple ideological confirmation. So, neither of these books would be acceptable, because they consist of opinions and not scholarship:

Al Franken: *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*

Anne Coulter: *Adios, America: The Left's Plan to Turn Our Country into a Third World Hellhole*

You are more than welcome to read these books on your own, but they just don't cut it here, because ideology is paramount in each.

Like a lot of courses in a College of Education, this one runs the risk of being accused of "political correctness," which [President-elect Donald Trump has opposed openly throughout his campaign](#). It's possible that many of you share his views, and that you view college campuses as [liberal echo chambers—a concern among some liberals as well as conservatives](#).

I should state a few things about myself, not to try to convert you to my politics, but to let you know where I stand. I think it's only fair that you know where your professors are coming from, as long as you are then not obligated to adopt, or pretend to adopt, those views for the purposes of surviving the semester in good academic stead.

If you can respect the possibility that I come by my beliefs sincerely and honestly, then I can respect your ideology, no matter how different it is from my own. I hope that, given how hostile the nation has become over the last year to political differences, we can navigate a range of political orientations so that our purpose is to understand one another, rather than to defeat one another in a great battle of ideology. Just yelling "I'm right and you're wrong" won't work here, even though it seemed to serve as the primary means of persuasion throughout the presidential campaign. I hope that we are better than that.

So, just to let you know where I stand, I voted for Mrs. Clinton in both the primary and general election. If you are old enough to vote, and have voted, then you have done your civic duty and it doesn't matter to me which candidate you supported. I also rooted for Georgia to beat Georgia Tech, and my team lost that one too. It's my civic duty to accept the election's results and live in the society that follows from its consequences. I never claimed I'd burn the flag or move to Canada. I'm an American for life, whether some people want me here or not. I hope that we can all live with one another's perspectives, no matter how wrong we might think someone else in the room might be. To me, this accommodation of diverse beliefs serves as a principle that our nation was founded on, even if competing beliefs have proven to be contentious from the Founders to the present.

President-elect Trump, throughout his campaign, argued against something called "political correctness," the idea that we should find respectful ways of referring to people different from ourselves. I think that "political correctness" is not the nation's most pressing problem. I think that respecting other people's dignity is something to strive toward, not reject. But you may disagree. I'll list a couple of short essays I've written on this point below, along with a radio program I was invited to participate in following the AJC essay's publication. If you're interested, you can read them and decide for yourself, although they are optional.

[Smagorinsky, P. \(2015, September\). Political correctness and the future of society. \*Scholars Speak Out of the Journal of Language and Literacy Education\*.](#)

[Smagorinsky, P. \(2015, July 21\). To be or not to be politically correct: What was that question? \*Atlanta Journal-Constitution\*.](#)

[WABE \(NPR\) 90.5FM Atlanta: College PC Culture: It's Not About Offending But Respecting](#)

The good news is that you will decide what you will read and talk about this semester, no matter which candidate you supported. You will also talk with the other book clubs about their selections. And so the course structure prevents me from doing any political persuading or recruitment. *The content and process of how we talk about difficult social and ideological issues is entirely in your hands.* Your grade will NOT be based on whether or not you and I agree on human diversity as it intersects with school. It will be based on your participation in the book clubs, your tutoring at Classic City HS, and your course project. All of these components are detailed on the course syllabus.

### **Appendixes**

I'm adding a few appendixes to this letter. The first is an official statement from UGA's central administration regarding political pressure from professors in relation to how students express their beliefs. As I hope I've explained, I'm not out to turn you into ideological mini-me's. I hope that conservatives and liberals and those of any other orientation feel that they are in an environment that allows their intellects and social awareness to grow.

The second appendix replicates the text of a student-initiated watch list where politically conservative students may "out" liberal professors who impose their beliefs on them. If I'm guilty, then you have recourse on your course evaluation and initiatives of this sort. ([Many professors are trying to get added to this list to show their progressive bona-fides, but that's not my pathway to glory.](#)) But I hope that my own conduct is as respectful of diverse beliefs as I am asking you to be in your thinking, talking, and writing for this course.

A third appendix provides links to a relatively small sample of news stories that concern students' and teachers' conduct since the election. I tried to find a balance that demonstrates that either vocally supporting President-elect Trump's stated views on issues like immigration, or opposing them, can have consequences for your career. If you are accustomed to ranting on social media, note that [social media posts have cost a lot of people their jobs, both in education and in other work settings.](#) If you are accustomed to railing against the type of people you may eventually teach on social media, you may not be viewed in the hiring process as these students' ideal teacher. That's not my call, but it is my advice to begin developing a greater awareness of the role of social media in establishing and maintaining your reputation in both intended and unintended ways.

### **A Caution**

So now's a good time to begin seeing yourself as others see you, and moderating your social media presence to exclude references to alcohol, partying, sex, and other aspects of your personal life—in addition to strong political views that may raise suspicions about your judgment and ability to accommodate diverse students. Administrators who make faculty hires may learn of your social media posts and use them against you. A nearby

[teacher was recently fired for posting a photo of herself drinking a glass of wine in Europe over her summer break](#), even though it was posted to a password-protected part of her Facebook page. It's not fair, but it's life in the current era. So beware.

### **Our Work Together**

A friend of mine at another university teaches a class in race consciousness, and has been accused on evaluations of “shaming white people and not giving enough perspective to the other side,” given the course’s emphasis on inclusion and her critique of power relationships in society. I am not in the business of shaming people, so I hope that you don’t view discussions in which other people’s worldviews and experiences are honored as something you should feel ashamed about. Keep in mind that you and your classmates will run the discussions; I play a less overt role (but beware: I often forward news stories of current educational events to the class listserv). So how we talk is a collective decision. As long as you listen to your classmates, give your selected readings a fair hearing, and treat other views as sincere and informed, you will be fine.

I have high hopes for this course, and hope you do too. I have always found 3461 incredibly stimulating and uplifting, in large part because so many of the students make it that way for me. I designed this course nearly a decade ago to help prepare our high-achieving students for their work in regular school English classes where the students (1) might lack the same degree of investment in education as a goal to a better future, and (2) don’t take schoolwork as seriously as you have in order to get into your state’s finest public university. As an indication of my great satisfaction in offering this course, I’ll let you know that I hold a rank, Distinguished Research Professor, that is held by few who teach undergraduate courses voluntarily. Most people with this distinction only teach graduate students, preferably doctoral students. I teach them too. But I wouldn’t trade this course for anything.

If you wish to share this introduction with your parents or others, especially if they are likely to be opposed to my endorsement of political correctness as a matter of respecting other people’s dignity (see the short essays I link above), please do so. I’ve got nothing to hide about who I am or what I believe. I hope that you become comfortable and confident in your own disposition both through and beyond this class, whether you think like me or not.

See y’all soon.

Peter Smagorinsky



## **Appendix A: Employee Expression of Political Opinions**

Please see the guidance below provided by the University System of Georgia to University System presidents for distribution to campus faculty and staff.

As you are aware, the University System of Georgia (USG) has a number of policies regarding political activity. With the approach of the new year and the upcoming 2017 Legislative Session, the Office of Legal Affairs is providing the following guidance to address some specific areas as they relate to our institutions and campuses. Please feel free to share this information with your campus communities. If there are any questions or additional information is needed, the USG Office of Legal Affairs can be reached at (404) 962-3255.

### Employee Expression of Political Opinions

We respect the rights of our employees to share their own views on political issues. It is important, however, that they do so only in their personal capacities, and that it is done in a way that does not interfere with work, does not involve improper use of state resources, and does not create the appearance that the employee is speaking on behalf of the USG or its institutions. For example, employees desiring to express personal views to elected officials or other third parties: (1) must make it clear their views are personal in nature and do not represent the views of the USG or its institutions, and (2) may not use state resources (including work email) or work time to communicate these views.

In addition, employees are prohibited from using any USG registered trademarks when expressing personal opinions on issues, unless they are otherwise specifically authorized to do so.

### Employee Involvement in Political Campaigns

Individuals may not hold elective political office at the state or federal level while employed by the USG. Any employee seeking elective office must notify his or her direct supervisor and request a leave of absence without pay prior to qualifying as a candidate.

Employees are also prohibited from managing or taking an active part in political campaigns during work hours or where such involvement would otherwise interfere with work responsibilities. Under no circumstances may employees use any state property, resources, or materials in conjunction with any political campaigning.

## **Appendix B: Professor Watchlist**

<http://www.professorwatchlist.org/index.php/watch-list-directory/search-by-name>

Welcome to **Professor Watchlist**, a project of [Turning Point USA](#).

The mission of Professor Watchlist is to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.

This watchlist is an aggregated list of pre-existing news stories that were published by a variety of news organizations. While we accept tips for new additions on our website, we only publish profiles on incidents that have already been reported by a credible source.

TPUSA will continue to fight for free speech and the right for professors to say whatever they wish; however students, parents, and alumni deserve to know the specific incidents and names of professors that advance a radical agenda in lecture halls.

Below are professors currently featured on the watchlist. Check out [our full listing](#) to see if any of your professors have made the list.



## Appendix C: Small Sample of Post-election Education News Stories

<http://www.ajc.com/news/local-education/dekalb-teachers-resign-for-anti-immigration-remarks-after-trump-win/ab4duJjXQa8j34rPxWxqpJ/>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/12/13/a-professor-called-trumps-election-an-act-of-terrorism-death-threats-forced-her-to-flee/?tid=pm\\_local\\_pop&utm\\_term=.4f48756938ef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/12/13/a-professor-called-trumps-election-an-act-of-terrorism-death-threats-forced-her-to-flee/?tid=pm_local_pop&utm_term=.4f48756938ef)

[http://www.aei.org/publication/stop-teaching-anti-trump-bias/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=hess&utm\\_content=article](http://www.aei.org/publication/stop-teaching-anti-trump-bias/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=hess&utm_content=article)

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/12/post-election-spate-hate-crimes-worse-than-post-911-experts-say/93681294/>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/11/17/educators-get-blamed-for-everything-now-its-for-fanning-fear-of-trump/?utm\\_term=.9be4abc19e3f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/11/17/educators-get-blamed-for-everything-now-its-for-fanning-fear-of-trump/?utm_term=.9be4abc19e3f)

<https://www.romper.com/p/bullying-stats-after-trumps-election-show-a-disturbing-rise-in-hate-in-america-22790>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/us/at-iowa-high-school-election-results-ignite-tensions-and-protests.html>

<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/2016/11/12/hijab-wearing-u-m-student-threatened-being-set-fire/93726806/>

<http://billypenn.com/2016/11/14/latest-on-penn-n-er-lynching-group-texts-3-in-ok-implicated-and-thats-that/?platform=hootsuite>

<http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2016/11/09/racist-pro-trump-graffiti-maple-grove/>

<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/oakland/2016/11/15/seaholm-high-school-teacher-investigated-over-trump-tweets/93885928/>

<http://www.jpost.com/Us-Elections/Donald-Trump/California-teacher-suspended-after-comparing-Trump-to-Hitler-472568>

<http://wsls.com/2016/11/14/florida-teacher-suspended-after-trump-comments/>

[http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2016/11/report\\_teacher\\_being\\_investiga.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2016/11/report_teacher_being_investiga.html)

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-singer/teacher-suspended-for-cal\\_b\\_12151142.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-singer/teacher-suspended-for-cal_b_12151142.html)

<http://wgntv.com/2016/10/25/teacher-says-he-was-suspended-for-showing-video-critical-of-trump-endorsing-clinton/>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-right-shuts-down-free-speech-too/2016/12/15/745fa352-c30d-11e6-9578-0054287507db\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7794f6d05dfa&wpisrc=nl\\_opinions&wpm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-right-shuts-down-free-speech-too/2016/12/15/745fa352-c30d-11e6-9578-0054287507db_story.html?utm_term=.7794f6d05dfa&wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpm=1)

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/05/19/professor-who-pushed-reporters-camera-away-from-protesters-was-not-treated-fairly-investigation-suggests/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.3b786f87fdb9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/05/19/professor-who-pushed-reporters-camera-away-from-protesters-was-not-treated-fairly-investigation-suggests/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.3b786f87fdb9)

<https://www.creators.com/read/thomas-sowell/12/16/the-diversity-fraud>

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2016/12/21/gop-lawmakers-demand-uw-madison-drop-problem-whiteness-course/95694610/>