"I feel your pain"
Fiction and the Evolution of the Human Mind

How do people understand each other – or think they do? How is it that we can slip into the shoes of someone else, even though we may not know them at all? And how, when reading fiction, do the emotions of fictional beings come to life as if they are just like us—and yet in some ways remain different? Is it perhaps this ability to slip into the shoes of someone else that makes man different even from most other apes? What abilities does one need to understand someone else – and who lacks them?

This class will turn you into researchers of a new and growing field that includes elements of literature, psychology, and cognitive science. Your task will be to devise a theory for what triggers and what blocks human empathy. By empathy we mean the sense that we’re ‘slipping into the shoes of another,’ be it a real person or a fictional character, seeming to understand—and even feel—their emotions.

The course will introduce you to several theories of empathy and “mind-reading.” At the same time, we encourage you to develop your own theory of understanding others. You will have the option to closely examine a literary text (or a movie) to reach a conclusion for how this medium aims to get you involved. You may also base this theory on a selection of recent scientific texts about the so-called mirror neurons that appear to enable empathy (you would read these texts independently). You can also conduct experiments of your own or redo famous experiments, such as the “False Belief Task” that led to the so-called “Theory of Mind,” which we will consider in class.

To be sure, I am a professor of the humanities and do not have a research lab. However, we will have guests in the class that will discuss their work in brain science.
Your teachers

Professor Breithaupt, that is: Fritz, teaches literature, philosophy, and culture in the Department of Germanic Studies. His latest research project is on “Culture of Empathy”—and this course is part of it. As always, Fritz hopes that his IFS class will capture the Ultimate Frisbee Trophy. He has three young kids. When Fritz was an undergrad, he did not know which major to take and ended up entering various degree programs in many fields (Law, Fine Arts, and the Humanities). His true passion during his undergrad years was traveling around the globe.

Tarlise Townsend (“Tarlie”): Tarlie, a rising sophomore majoring in neuroscience, German, and mathematics, is much too interested in too many subjects to ever accomplish anything satisfactorily. She is both thoughtful and exuberant, quiet and excited—but regardless of her mood, she is ready for some provocative discussion and wholehearted jollity in IFS this summer! A self-proclaimed foodie, you can come to Tarlie for recommendations of the best local coffee stops and eateries, although she’ll probably give you so many delightful-sounding options that you’ll be even worse off afterward. In addition to interning with Fritz, Tarlie will be spending her summer relearning to play the piano, playing with 30,000 puzzles at the Lilly Library (check it out! They have Sylvia Plath’s ponytail!), and gallivanting through Europe. You can find her on Facebook or e-mail her at townsent@indiana.edu.

Objectives of this class

1) The course will introduce you to an interdisciplinary examination of empathy, mind-reading, “theory of mind” and social interaction between people. This includes giving you the skills to evaluate research, experiments, and speculations from several fields.

2) We want to empower you to trust in your own skills. Hence, we want YOU to define empathy, YOU to devise experiments that could create knowledge and YOU to tell us what the reading of literature may tell us about knowing others. Hence, we will send you on your way in this adventure, be it literally to send you to the Zoo to observe animals (both human and non-human animals, that is) or by giving you assignments that will show you that you can do the work of real researchers. We hope the course will be a true experience.

3) We want to smooth your transition into college by giving you hints on basic college skills, ranging from essay writing to college survival and study groups.

4) The course and the IFS program are meant to provide you with a first positive experience of higher education. This includes having fun, meeting people, challenging yourself and easing your anxieties.

Policies

In this course, we will also provide you with an overview of some of the big Nos, such as plagiarism. Academic dishonesty (this includes cheating and plagiarism) will not be tolerated and will be dealt with according to university policy. Please see the Code of Student Rights,
Responsibilities and Conduct for university policies on academic misconduct.

http://www.dsa.indiana.edu/Code/

For IU’s official definition of plagiarism, see:

http://www.indiana.edu/~istd/definition.html

**Group Work:** Research on university learning shows that students who engage in group work activity do better than students who don’t. Hence, we would like to encourage you to do some or all of the assignments in small groups. ALL written work, including homework assignments and essays, can be produced with one partner. This will not change our grading policy or the length requirements of the assignments (both get the same grade). We only ask you to truly work on all parts of the paper jointly (no dividing up).

**Written Homework:** You will be asked to complete TWO, one-page (250-word), written assignments; FIVE writing prompts will be given—you choose which two you would like to complete. However, if you choose to do more than two assignments, your two highest scores will be counted.

These short essays serve several purposes:

1) They will get you thinking more deeply and critically about recent class discussions, developing your ideas in a direction different from that of the class.
2) They will help you organize your thoughts, preparing you for the next day’s discussion.
3) They offer an opportunity to practice writing and receiving feedback on your writing prior to the two major essays.

*These assignments will be e-mailed to BOTH Fritz (fbreitha@indiana.edu) and Tarlie (townsent@indiana.edu) by 10 p.m. on the night they are assigned. In addition, we ask that you bring two printed copies of the assignment to class with you.*

NOTE: In addition to the essays, several mandatory written assignments will be given.

**Grading**

Your final grade will be computed as follows:

- **20%** First Essay (re-write option that can improve ONE grade step, B to B+)
- **20%** Second Essay (no rewrite option)
- **15%** Final
- **25%** Participation
- **10%** Group Projects
- **10%** Homework (5 total, each 2%)