



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Seminars and Institutes application guidelines at

<http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/summer-seminars-and-institutes>

for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials. The page limit for the narrative description is now **fifteen** double-spaced pages.

Project Title: Existentialism
Institution: Mount Holyoke College
Project Director: Thomas Wartenberg
Grant Program: Summer Seminars and Institutes

NEH Summer Seminar for School Teachers

Existentialism

Thomas E. Wartenberg, Director

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Table of Contents	
2. Narrative Description	1
3. Budget	16
4. Appendices	17
a. Syllabus	17
b. Book List	19
c. Wartenberg Resume	20
5. Evaluations	25

NEH Summer Seminar for School Teachers on Existentialism
Thomas E. Wartenberg, Director
Narrative Description

1. Intellectual Rationale

Existentialism is one of the most important philosophical movements of the twentieth century. Centered in Paris during and after the Second World War, Existentialism sought to counter the development of philosophy into an academic specialty with a pretense of scientific objectivity, and to return it to its roots as a form of reflection upon human life that takes account of all of life's joys and travails. In developing their account of what they termed *existence*, the Existentialists drew on diverse thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition even as they sought to open people's eyes to the actual nature of their lives. The Existentialists sought to smash the idols they saw endemic to Western philosophy and culture in order to free people from domination by its ideas, a domination that they saw as causing unnecessary pain and suffering, and to encourage them to live freer lives.

As a result of this focus and unlike most developments in academic philosophy, Existentialism had a significant impact outside of the field of philosophy itself. There is almost no domain of twentieth-century European culture – from literature and theater to film and psychology – that was not fundamentally affected by Existentialism. Indeed, for many non-professionals, the term “philosophy” refers first and foremost to the ideas of the renegade twentieth-century thinkers who formed the Existentialist school.

There is, however, a curious dichotomy in the writings of the Existentialists. Although their novels, plays, and other popular pieces are widely read and appear quite easy to understand, their more strictly philosophical writings are quite dense and much

less accessible. The fact is, it is not really possible to grasp all the intricacies of, say, Jean-Paul Sartre's popular play, *No Exit*, without understanding his view of the nature of other people, something he expounds in complexly argued passages from his philosophical masterwork, *Being and Nothingness*. As a result of ignoring the philosophical foundations of the Existentialists' theories, there is widespread misunderstanding of the significance of their more popular writings, many of which are taught in secondary schools.

The goal of this seminar is to foster in its participants a clear understanding of Existentialist thought. This is an important goal in its own right. Existentialism is a school of philosophical thought that retains its appeal for many people because of its focus on the question of what it is to be a human being. Faced with the growing conformity of human beings in a society increasingly permeated with and dominated by technology, the Existentialists sought to provide human beings with a framework for understanding how to make sense of a world in which they felt alienated and displaced. Among the influential themes developed by the Existentialists are:

- an analysis of human freedom that explains why freedom is not only one of our most valued possessions, but also something we seek to avoid;
- an account of the role that other people play in our lives that treats them as both deeply significant and yet highly problematic in terms of our ability to live as we would choose to;
- a probing investigation of the significance of anxiety, an emotion that seemed to become central to human existence in the twentieth century;
- a more complete understanding of the nature of human finitude than that

developed by previous philosophers;

- a recognition of the limitations of human reason for understanding the nature of reality and the importance of recognizing the absurd as an element in human life;
- an account of the possibility of living a more full and authentic life by acknowledging all the difficult and troubling aspects of human existence.

Attaining a more comprehensive and detailed grasp of all of these aspects of Existentialism will enable the school teachers to come to a clearer understanding of a very significant intellectual and cultural movement in the twentieth century whose impact is still felt today.

There is also a more instrumental reason for acquainting school teachers with the philosophical underpinnings of Existentialist thought. Many students coming to college have a passing acquaintance with Existentialism, something they have acquired in, for example, a French language course, where they read Sartre's play, *No Exit*, or Camus' novel, *The Stranger*. By acquainting the teachers more fully with the philosophical ideas of the Existentialists, I hope to equip them to better convey to their students the unique and compelling ideas of these seminal philosophical thinkers.

In each of the summers of 2011 and 2014, I offered an NEH Summer Seminar for School Teachers on Existentialism. The participants were unanimous about how much they learned from the seminar and how useful it would be for their teaching. Not only were there over 50 applicants for each of the previous ones, but there also has been a growing interest among teachers in pre-college philosophy in general. As a result, there should be a good pool of school teachers and graduate students interested in attending a

seminar on Existentialism.

Based on prior experience the format of the current proposed seminar is being expanded from 4 to 5 weeks. This will allow the participants more time to assimilate the material and not require them to skimp on their preparations of the materials. It will also allow the film screenings to be included more naturally in the schedule, allowing for a fuller discussion of the films, which have proved to be an excellent vehicle for transmitting the content of the seminar.

My previous seminars have convinced me of the importance of teaching this material. A number of the participants in those seminars have become active in the recently formed organization for the teaching of pre-college philosophy, PLATO. Many of the former participants are very committed to teaching pre-college philosophy and have introduced new or expanded philosophy courses in their schools. Their commitment and enthusiasm for Existentialism motivates me to offer this seminar again.

2. Project content and implementation

The 2016 seminar will have a very similar structure to the previous one. We will meet four times a week (Monday-Thursday), although this time I will schedule the sessions from 1:30 until 4:30 to allow more time for the participants to do the reading. Sessions will generally be discussion based, although I will also provide a context for understanding and interpreting the texts we will discuss. After each session, there will be opportunity for more informal discussion.

The readings for each week will be drawn from both the central thinkers in the Existentialist movement and other important writers and philosophers who influenced or

were influenced by Existentialism: G.W.F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Franz Fanon.

To illustrate the breadth of Existentialism as a cultural movement as well as its impact on society more generally, we will watch a number of films that exemplify the influence of Existentialist ideas. I have chosen each film because it amplifies the theme we will be discussing that week and provides an accessible entrée into Existentialist thought.

After the seminar meetings, I will make myself available to the participants. I found that letting them know I would be available worked very well and all of them took advantage of that time to schedule individual meetings with me, some quite often and others less so. I will also have office hours in the morning and generally be available by appointment for meeting with the participants.

I will, of course, expect the participants to come to every seminar meeting having done the reading. Because I would like to have discussions and philosophical texts are notorious for their difficulty, I will ask the participants to come to each session ready to discuss a question that I pose on the website about the reading for that day. I will begin each session with small group discussions during which the participants will be able to refine their ideas through interaction with one another. Following these discussions, the seminar itself will reconvene. I will ask each group to report on their conversation and use these responses to organize a broader discussion of the issues the participants feel are most important in each text. Because the participants were all very serious about their commitment to the seminar, this format has been quite successful and led to many

probing, exciting discussions of the texts and ideas of the Existentialists.

When the discussion has come to a resting place, I will introduce some of the more difficult philosophical ideas with a quick lecture. Some of the background material simply requires this, but we will quickly return to a discussion format, seeking to keep the teachers involved in an examination of the ideas they have read about. The only time I will do more lecturing is on Heidegger's ideas (because of their difficulty and inaccessibility).

What follows is the basic program for the seminar: In order to give the participants a synoptic introduction to the ideas of the Existentialists, we will spend the first week reading the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, the most well-known and influential of the Existentialists. Sartre wrote dense philosophical texts as well as the literature more people are acquainted with. Our initial reading will be Sartre's great philosophical novel, *Nausea*. In this book, Sartre attempts to provide a first-hand description of some of the central experiences that underlie Existentialism as a philosophical outlook on life.

The novel's presentation of its protagonist's discovery is an excellent way to begin an investigation of this central claim of the Existentialists: that human beings generally run from a confrontation with the truth of their existence. The ideas in the novel will be explicated by selected readings from Sartre's philosophical work. We will read two sections from *Being and Nothingness*, in which Sartre presents his ideas in a more traditional philosophical manner, as well as his popular essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism," attempting to understand the essay's central thesis that "man's existence precedes his essence." I will also screen a film version of Sartre's popular play, *No Exit*, in which many of his abstract claims about the difficult role other people play in our lives

is given a vivid exemplification.

Following this introduction to Existentialist thought, we will go back to the movement's nineteenth-century precursors. The texts we will read are: Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage" dialectic from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The general theme we will explore through these readings is whether it is possible and, if so, how to reconcile faith in God with the facts of human existence, which include tremendous cruelty and suffering.

The "Lordship and Bondage" section of Hegel's *Phenomenology* introduces many central themes of Existentialism. In it, Hegel shows how humans encounter others as threats to their existence and develop various different ways of interacting with others to both acknowledge this threat and to overcome it.

Writing after Kant had argued that all theoretical attempts to prove the existence of God were futile, Kierkegaard develops an account of religious faith that sees it as operating in a sphere completely separate from rational discourse. We will explore what Kierkegaard means by such distinctive ideas as fear and trembling, the knight of faith, and the leap of faith, in an attempt to understand the nature of his reflection on human life and the possibility of religious faith.

Although Dostoevsky was himself a Christian, in *Crime and Punishment*, the next text we will consider, he paints an extraordinary portrait of a person attempting to live in a non-religious framework in which his immoral actions are justifiable. Dostoevsky then shows how Rashkolnikov cannot maintain this stance and ultimately bows to his fate by accepting God and, along with that, acknowledging his own guilt.

The film that we will watch this week is Woody Allen's *Crime and Misdemeanors*. As its name indicates, this film is a straightforward attempt to respond to Dostoyevsky's claim that one cannot commit a crime with impunity. The film will allow us to discuss the validity of Dostoyevsky's ideas in a contemporary context, specifically how successful he is at integrating an Existential hero into a Christian worldview.

The next text, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, exhibits many themes that are characteristic of Existentialism. Although presented as an analysis of the role of the chorus in Attic Greek tragedy, *The Birth of Tragedy* develops a complex theory of human history as guided by two basic principles, the Dionysiac and the Apolline. He contrasts the ecstatic Dionysiac principle with the formal and abstract Apolline one, arguing for the need to reinfuse contemporary Western culture with Dionysiac elements. Nietzsche's insightful cultural analysis emphasizes the broader social perspective of Existentialism, a theme the seminar will pick up in its final week.

With this intellectual background under our belts, we will return to the ideas of the twentieth-century Existentialists themselves. We will begin this section of the seminar with a brief look at Martin Heidegger's *magnum opus*, *Being and Time*. Although there has recently been much disagreement about Heidegger because of his sympathy for and participation in Nazism, there can be no doubt about the importance of his ideas in shaping Existentialism and, indeed, contemporary Continental philosophy. We will focus on two central ideas: the contrast he draws between our conformist everyday selves and the authentic selves we can become through the call of conscience, and the importance he attributes to the fact of our own mortality. As I mentioned earlier, Heidegger's prose is extremely dense, so I will eschew the small group discussions of his ideas and present the

ideas in a lecture. Once I have done that, we will engage in a general discussion of the validity of those ideas.

To help the participants understand Heidegger's claims, we will screen Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece, *Ikiru*. *Ikiru* portrays how a confrontation with a fatal disease causes an alienated civil servant to reclaim his life in an authentic manner. It provides a clear illustration of many of Heidegger's quite obscure claims about the significance that death can have for human beings. I have found that the film really helps the participants understand Heidegger's view of death and its role in creating authenticity.

Next, we will return to French Existentialism through a discussion of Albert Camus' philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and his novel, *The Stranger*. Our focus will be on the concept of the absurd – a concept central to Camus' vision. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus presents life's absurdity as the essential fact about being human. In turning to *The Stranger*, we will consider the role of the absurd in its portrait of its protagonist, Meursault, and his apparently arbitrary killing of an Arab. We will also explore the difference in Camus' essayistic and novelistic works, the question of whether they articulate the same worldview, and how they represent a development of themes we have found in other Existentialist thinkers.

The final segment of the seminar will be devoted to an exploration of the social and political dimensions of Existentialism that have only been touched on in previous weeks. Existentialism is often criticized for the absence of an ethical perspective, a charge that Simone de Beauvoir attempts to refute in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. De Beauvoir seeks to show that human beings' ambiguous nature as free beings constrained by their context does not preclude the establishment of an ethical perspective

that takes account of the existence of others. We will then consider the significance of her monumental work, *The Second Sex*, a book that develops its feminism through a rigorous confrontation with some of the key ideas of Heidegger and Sartre. We will consider the validity of de Beauvoir's critique of Heidegger's notion of conformity as well as of Sartre's claim about the impossibility of adequate relationships between human beings, as we explore her claims about the misogyny of Western culture.

We will conclude the week and the seminar with a discussion of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. In this book, Fanon uses ideas drawn from Sartre to understand the situation of the black man living in a former French colony. In particular, he adapts Sartre's famous analysis of "the look" from *Being and Nothingness* to understand the situation facing blacks in relation to the countries that colonized them. Despite his reliance on Sartre, Fanon is also critical of his mentor. Our discussion will consider the adequacy of using Existentialism, as Fanon does, to conceptualize the situation of oppressed people in the third world.

We will use the final meeting of the seminar for a comprehensive examination of Existentialism in which the participants will discuss the impact of their investigation of Existentialism on their thinking and teaching. During this session, I will pass out their certificates as well as the website for their evaluations.

I plan to host a trip to the Chester Theatre in Chester, MA, once again. This theatre puts on very provocative works that raise Existentialist themes. For example, the first year, they put on a theatrical version of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and last year they offered a play that raised the theme of death and authenticity. Because of the many different theatre venues in the Berkshires during the summer, it should be easy

to find a play that will connect with the content of the course. It is a very worthwhile outing from both intellectual and personal points of view.

3. Project faculty and staff

My own introduction to philosophy as a high school student was through an anthology of the writings of the Existentialists that I picked up at a bookstore in Manhattan because I had become interested in Camus' ideas during a debate on capital punishment in eighth grade. Although my own philosophical interests and pursuits have altered over the course of the years – I began my academic career as a Kant scholar and now work mainly in the fields of philosophy of film and philosophy for children – the appeal of Existentialism remains undiminished after all these years. I thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to acquaint undergraduate students with the breadth and depth of Existentialist thinking, as I have been doing for some thirty years now in a course that I offer every other fall. I was extremely gratified to have the opportunity to communicate my excitement about Existentialism to school teachers, and was thrilled that they uniformly took to it with great excitement.

Evidence of my continued interest in Existentialism is my recent publication of an introduction to Existentialist thought, *Existentialism: A Beginner's Guide*. This book is addressed to a wide public interested in understanding Existentialist philosophy. Unlike other introductions to Existentialism, I draw freely on the Existentialists' non-philosophical writings. I see the seminar as another forum in which to continue my ongoing interest in the question of the relevance of Existentialism to the contemporary world and look forward to hearing the views of the school teachers on this subject.

I have had a great deal of experience working with school teachers in conjunction

with my program of teaching philosophy through children's literature. For fifteen years, I have been very involved in bringing philosophy into elementary schools. During that time, I have worked closely with teachers both one-on-one and in the context of workshops and their classrooms. I have also worked with middle school teachers in my "What's the Big Idea?" program and, of course, had previous experience with high school teachers in this seminar. I am very committed to helping teachers bring philosophy into the pre-college curriculum and view the seminar as a continuation of that commitment.

My work with pre-college students has been broadly recognized. I received a Fulbright Fellowship to work in a school in Wellington, New Zealand. My program – Teaching Children Philosophy – won the 2011 APA/PDC Award for Innovation in Philosophy Programs and I was awarded the 2013 Merritt Prize for my contributions to the Philosophy of Education.

To assist me, I will employ our departmental assistant, Sue Rusiecki, who worked with me last time. I also will hire a recently graduated student to be the on-site assistant. The student will help the participants familiarize themselves with the campus and local area.

4. Participant selection

The committee to aid me in the selection of the participants will be composed of my colleague, Meredith Michaels, and one of the participants in the previous seminar, Stephen Miller. Meredith taught my Philosophy for Children course when I was on leave and did a great job with it. She also was on the committee last time. Steve Miller was an outstanding seminar participant and I hope he will be willing to serve on the committee. If not, there are a number of excellent former participants to whom I can turn.

As I mentioned earlier, I have worked closely with elementary school teachers in

my own project on teaching philosophy through children's literature. Although I expect participants in this seminar to be mainly secondary school teachers, I hope that some primary and middle school teachers will apply, and I will do my best to insure that they are included. In 2011, I had one elementary school teacher and two middle school teachers. None of them had any trouble with the material and they were all uniformly active participants. In 2013, there was one middle school teacher who was well-integrated into the group.

The criteria that we will look for in the applicants are an enthusiasm for learning and a commitment to teaching philosophical ideas to pre-college students. In addition, we will attempt to ensure geographic and ethnic diversity as well as gender balance in the seminar. In both the past seminars, we were able to achieve both of these goals because of the outstanding quality of the applicants.

5. Project Website

I have maintained my ownership of the seminar website – existentialismseminar.com – which I will use once again for application information for the seminar. During the actual seminar, we employed a Google site for the reading materials and other materials and will do so again. This time, I will make sure to have a group discussion list to enable participants to conduct virtual discussions throughout the seminar, something that we only used towards the end of the seminar last time but which proved invaluable.

Once again, I will have the participants work in pairs to develop materials for the EdSitement website. The Launchpads that were developed last time were quite good and I think having that project focused the participants' energies. They are currently being

uploaded to the EdSitement website. This time, the participants will develop Launchpads for other books. I should mention that the Launchpads are accessible at the PLATO website: <http://plato-philosophy.org/lesson-plans-2/pre-college-course-material/> (scroll down to “Existentialism.”)

6. Professional development for participants

I realize how important it is for some participants to receive professional development credit for attending the seminar. Along with their certificates of participation in the seminar, I will provide the participants with documentation describing the seminar. In addition to reporting on the time we spent in seminar meetings and the readings that were done, I will also outline the web materials that the participants developed. And, of course, when asked, I will write letters for individual teachers.

7. Institutional context

Participants in this seminar and their families will be housed in a dormitory on the Mount Holyoke College Campus as they were in the previous summers. The comprehensive fee for room and access to the library, college Internet, and gymnasium will be \$1420. (Commuters, if there are any, will pay \$314.) The Campus has extensive and well-equipped facilities, so that participants will be adequately provided for. The library is first rate. There is an elegant shopping area – the Village Commons – across the street from the Campus, to which participants and their families will have access. Included in the Commons are a number of restaurants, a delicatessen, and two movie theaters as well as a premier independent bookstore. The College's extensive athletic facilities will also be available to participants and their families.

Providing the participants with funds for Xeroxing and printing proved to be very

popular last time. I have once again included funds in the budget that will allow me to give each participant a card that will allow them to print or Xerox 400 pages during the seminar.

The dormitory in which the participants were housed enabled them to cook simple meals for themselves. Although there were some options for eating on campus, generally the participants preferred to fend for themselves.

Because the Mount Holyoke library is not open evenings and weekends, the college will provide quiet study space for the participants in the building where the seminar meets. Especially for participants with families, such an arrangement will be useful.

There are many cultural events available to the participants on the Mount Holyoke Campus and in the general area. The Five-College area – including Amherst College, Hampshire College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts as well as Mount Holyoke – is very beautiful, with numerous cultural activities during the summer. All of the campuses are within ten miles of one another, so they are quite accessible with a car, and participants will have access to the libraries at all of these institutions. Mount Holyoke is also in close proximity to the Berkshires where there are many summer cultural opportunities. In short, Mount Holyoke is located in an area with many cultural possibilities during the summer that seminar participants will find very interesting and intellectually stimulating.

Syllabus for 2016 NEH Summer Seminar on *Existentialism*

June 26: Arrival at Mount Holyoke College; Opening Reception 5-7 p.m.

June 27: Introduction to the Seminar, discussion of Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*

June 28: Sartre, *Nausea* (continued) and "Bad Faith" from *Being and Nothingness* (Resources)

June 29: Sartre, "The Look" from *Being and Nothingness* (Resources); "Existentialism is a Humanism" (Resources)

June 30: *No Exit* (film screening and discussion)

July 4: No class

July 5: Hegel, "Lordship and Bondage"

July 6: Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 1-46

July 7: Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 46-109

July 11: Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *Crime and Punishment*

July 12: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (film screening and discussion)

July 13: Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (part 1)

July 14: Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (part 2)

July 18: Heidegger, *Being and Time* §§46-57 (Resources), Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis" (Resources)

July 19: *Ikiru* (film screening and discussion)

July 20: Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 1-65, 119-123

July 21: Camus, *The Stranger*

July 25: de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* ("Ambiguity" and

"Conclusion") (Resources)

July 26: de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* ("Introduction," "Independent Woman," and

"Conclusion") (Resources)

July 27: Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. xi-xviii, Ch. 2 (89-119), Ch. 8

(198-206); suggested: Ch. 2 (24-44)

Farewell Banquet, Great Wall, Florence, MA , 6 p.m.

July 28: Concluding Discussion

Books for NEH Summer Seminar on Existentialism

- Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Vintage [978-0679733737]
-----, *The Stranger*, Vintage [978-0679720201]
*de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Citadel [978-0806501604]
*-----, *The Second Sex*, Vintage [978-0307277787]
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *Crime and Punishment*
Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press [978-0802143006]
*Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, SUNY Press [978-1438432762]
Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*, Cambridge University Press [978-0521612692]
Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge UP [978-0521639873]
*Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, Washington Square [978-0671867805]
-----, *Nausea*, New Directions [978-0811217002]
-----, *No Exit from No Exit and Three Other Plays*, Vintage [978-0679725169]
**Wartenberg, Thomas E., *Existentialism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oneworld [978-1851685936] (This is not required at all, but I list it for the convenience of participants. Previous participants said that the book was very helpful to them.)

An asterisk (*) indicates that the selections from this book that we will discuss in the seminar are on the course website. Some essays we will read are not listed here but will be available through the website.

This is a comprehensive list of the books we will discuss. I have recommended editions, but participants are free to use other ones if they already have a book.