

## **Learning and Inquiry 1: Explorations**

### **Designing a Life Worth Living**

J. Ian Norris, PhD

Fall 2025

MW 8:40-10:30

#### **Office Hours:**

MW 10:30 – 11:30 AM

TR 2:00 – 3:00 PM

#### **Course Description**

Explorations introduces students to the joy of studying the liberal arts while cultivating the skills needed for future academic success. Each course investigates a subject of faculty choosing from beyond a single disciplinary approach, incorporating multiple ways of understanding that subject and working with evidence from different academic and popular sources. Students will engage in scholarly practices foundational to inquiry and future academic success, including reading, annotating, and taking notes on texts; analyzing and evaluating sources; drafting, revising, and editing writing; and working with peers. Assignments and activities will cultivate students' abilities to think analytically.

Where are you going, and how will you get there? These are the overarching questions that will define the next four years of your Berea College experience. On the one hand, you will be exploring majors, minors, co-curricular experiences, and specific courses of interest. Will you study your passion—history, philosophy, or art? Will you choose a discipline that provides a clearer path to financial security, like business or computer science? And how will you navigate the transition to young adulthood—your social and romantic relationships, your evolving relationship to your family, the decisions that you will have to make about how to care for yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually? In this course, we will read *Designing Your Life*, a blueprint for figuring out how to get what you want out of life. But we will also read *Life Worth Living*, which will help us understand what is worth wanting out of life and why. Through additional first-source readings from religion, philosophy, psychology, and social science, and through carefully constructed reflective and persuasive essay assignments, you will come to understand yourself holistically, as a person of inherent worth and value. You will explore your interests and passions in order to best determine what to study and how to construct your four-year college experience. But you will do so in a spiritually and psychologically-informed context as to who we are as human beings and what truly contributes to well-being.

#### **Course Principles**

- You matter. Your life matters. You have inherent worth and value as a human being.
- I am not a philosopher or a theologian. I will not tell you what to think. I do not have the answers we all seek. I do have the expertise in providing carefully selected readings and facilitating discussion of them.
- None of us *really* understand why we are here and for what purpose. We are all on a journey of unknowing and self-discovery together, myself included.

- That said, many have sought and provided compelling answers to life's great mysteries over millennia, and we will consult their views and consider them with respect for their massive sociohistorical impact.
- We will draw broadly on world religious and philosophical traditions, treating all of them as possibly true or containing elements of truth, and learn what we can from each of them.

### Course Questions

- How will I use the learning laboratory that is Berea College to explore in my interests, passions, hobbies, and strengths over the next four years?
- What courses of study will feed my soul and also allow me to pursue a sustainable career path?
- What is worth wanting in life, and how do I know?
- How should I structure and design my life in a way that will help me be best possible person version of myself that I can be? How will Berea help me grow personally, professionally, and spiritually?
- How do I balance my needs for financial success with spiritual and psychological well-being?
- What is my vision of a life worth living—one that is grounded both in my own passions and interests, but also ancient wisdom?

### Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to (these are common to all L&I 1 courses. I've made them specific to my course in the sub-bullets where appropriate):

- evaluate the quality and utility of a variety of sources;
  - *utilize course texts and supplemental readings to determine which principles, philosophies, and approaches best define your life worth living*
- analyze information through notetaking and/or annotation;
  - *provide evidence of reading, synthesizing, and critically evaluating course readings.*
- identify, analyze, and determine the validity of claims, reasons, and evidence within an academic context;
  - (I need to figure out how this might translate to a course that is not research-focused in this way)
- accurately incorporate source material using a formal citation style;
  - *integrate first-source material from thinkers, philosophers, and scholars into one's own perspective on various writing assignments.*
- compose texts for academic and non-academic audiences;
  - *articulate in a final written term assignment how chosen areas of study and co-curricular experiences during college, or a path to explore them, will enable you to pursue own vision of a life worth living.*

### Texts

Burnett & Evans (2017). *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*. New York: Knopf.

Volf, M., Croasmun, M., & McAnnally-Linz, R. (2023). *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*. Viking/Penguin Random House.

Other assigned texts are identified in the course calendar and posted in Moodle.

## Course Structure/Requirements/Assignments

This is a seminar course. There will be very little lecture beyond explaining difficult concepts from the text. You, as the student, in concert with your peers, will take the bulk of the responsibility for constructing the course “content”—which will be defined primarily by your contributions to class discussion. Most class periods will follow a familiar script:

1. Read prior to class. Most reading is assigned for Mondays, so that you have the weekend to do the bulk of it.
2. Come prepared with your reading discussion questions (explained below).
3. Complete any written assignments or activities that are submitted through Moodle.
4. Come with an open mind, ready to participate.

**Discussion Questions.** Every class period in which there are assigned readings you will submit two discussion questions in Moodle. For the first book, these will usually be prompts that come from activities and exercises in the book. For the second book, however, they will be more open-ended reflection questions. Specifically:

- a content-related or clarification question, allowing us to clear up misunderstandings of the content before we dive more deeply into discussion.
- a question that furthers the content in some way—this could be a thought experiment of some sort (“I wonder if...” or “If  $x$  were true, would  $y$  happen?”) or a connection to a personal experience, an outside reference, etc.—anything that takes us *beyond* the content. Please feel free to challenge and engage the texts and don’t just accept them at face value. You may agree or disagree in your responses. Challenge the authors where you feel appropriate. We are trying to achieve a deeper level of understanding. If possible, this should be phrased in a way that could be posed to the class for further discussion.

I would expect 2-3 sentences for each, so that you will write about a short paragraph-length entry each class period. You will be graded on a very simple rubric that reflects your level of engagement with these questions:

- 3 = thought-provoking, unique, original, important, etc.
- 2 = acceptable; meets requirements of the assignment
- 1 = insufficient or incomplete

**Reflection Journal.** Furthermore, when we read the Life Worth Living book, I ask that you write your responses to all of the reading reflection questions that follow each chapter (I have provided all of these questions to you in a single document to make this easy). My preference would be that keep your handwritten responses in a personal journal; this creates a closer engagement with the questions. However, you are also welcome to use the electronic file and answer the questions on your laptop. Just be aware that course policies do not allow you to reference them on your laptop in class.

I will not collect nor grade these responses. I want you to feel fully comfortable to engage in honest reflection that is personal and meaningful to you. I will often ask that people share their responses in discussion; however, it is up to you what, whether, and how much to share. Please note, however, that having these responses available to you will be essential for completing the various written assignments in the course.

You may also use your reflection journal to track your responses to the exercises in the *Designing Your Life* text as well as for in-class writing exercises that you will be given.

**Class Discussion.** Most classes we will hold a structured discussion over the readings, in addition to any instruction or debriefing on assignments that takes place. Sometimes this will happen in a class-wide format; often we may discuss in pairs or small groups. I will usually come with prepared questions, and will also expect everyone to be willing to share from their own discussion questions and reflection journal. I do not expect that everyone will participate all the time. I know some days you may not feel like talking, and other days you may have more to say. We will discuss big questions, and sometimes this content will be challenging. Sometimes it will feel very personal, and maybe sometimes even painful. At the same time, please also be respectful and conscientious of your level of participation as well to allow everyone the space to contribute in their own way at their own time.

**Reading Quizzes.** For the first text—*Designing Your Life*, we will have short 3-5 question reading quizzes each class period (based on how far we get in discussion day—probably two chapters per class period). When we get into the *Life Worth Living* text, these questions will look a little bit different—they will be more open-ended. I want you to read in a way that fosters engagement and not in a way that makes you stressed about remembering every little detail. Often, I may just ask what resonated with you, what surprised you, what stuck with you, etc. You will be able to use handwritten notes on these quizzes. It may help to write down your discussion questions in your journal so you have those available before you type them up and submit them in Moodle. These will be worth 5-10 points, depending on how many questions there are on any given quiz, and equated to a 100-point scale category in the Moodle gradebook.

**Activities and exercises.** Throughout the semester there will be several additional (simple) take-home exercises that you will complete. These will come primarily from the *Designing Your Life* text. Additional exercises will be administered in-class and will consist of notetaking, annotating, and low-stakes reflective writing activities. A small pool of points is available for these activities since they will be graded mostly on completion/participation.

**Short position papers.** Throughout the semester you will submit several short papers in response to specific writing prompts. These will usually address the course content more narrowly in a way that allows you to begin thinking and reflecting on your way to your own *Life Worth Living* vision.

The first paper will allow you to work with the *Designing Your Life* content, exploring how you will use the framework to choose a major, a desired career path, and to take full advantage of what Berea College offers you over the next four years.

The second paper will require you to compare and contrast the philosophy, perspectives, and approaches of the *Designing Your Life* and *Life Worth Living* frameworks.

The third and fourth papers will deal more specifically with Life Worth Living content. You may be asked to respond to specific prompts (e.g., “A life worth living is one that feels as good as possible”? “Is a Life Worth Living a religious life, or a secular life, and why?”) or to compare and contrast how different religions/philosophical traditions address specific questions.

These papers will allow you practice your writing, get feedback, and work toward your vision for your final paper assignment. Each one will be worth 25 points each, for a total 100 points across all four papers. They will be graded on the AAC&U Value Rubric for written communication, available in Moodle.

*More specific prompts and guidelines will be provided in Moodle for each paper.*

**Final Paper Assignment.** For the final assignment in this course, you will draft a vision of your own Life Worth Living. The **purpose** of this assignment is to help you connect the content from both of the major course readings with decisions you will have to make to navigate the next four years of college, so that you will be more intentional about choosing a post-college path in line with your interests, passions, and values.

This vision will be composed of three critical elements:

- What makes *your* life unique, valuable, and fulfilling? How does your vision of a Life Worth Living fit with your understanding of who we are, and why we are here?
- How will you fit this vision to the choices you will make regarding your college major, your career, your desired work-life balance, your family situation, where you hope to live, and other decisions that you will have to make as you enter adulthood?
- How can principles of Designing Your Life better enable you to make these decisions, and how will you use those principles to Design a Life Worth Living?

You can write a paper that addresses each prompt in turn, along with an introduction and conclusion, or you can weave them together into a broader narrative structure—the overarching goal is for you to produce something that is of value to yourself and your future.

A critical note: **This should be a living document.** You will likely change your major. You could very well end up in a totally different career than you envision or hope for yourself now. Life will throw you curve balls. The idea here is to begin to identify core values that will help you navigate through these changes, so that no matter what you do, you are on the path to creating meaning in your life. You should revisit this document often, and rewrite/re-envision as necessary.

**More specifically:**

- Your final assignment should be around 1500 words (about 5-6 pages, double-spaced), +/- 100 words.
- You will need to reference specific ideas from the course readings, including the main texts and supporting articles. Your paper should have a minimum of five references.
- You should include a cover page, a reference section, and utilize a formatting style most consistent with the discipline you plan to enter (APA, Chicago, or MLA).

- The paper is worth 100 points, on the following rubric (adapted from the AAC&U Value Rubric for written assignments, available in Moodle):
  - **Context/Purpose** (20%): Clearly meets the goals of the assignment and demonstrates understanding of them.
  - **Argument/Content Development** (40%): Depth of insight and reflection. Clear connections to course content and readings. Well-thought out, well-argued, convincing, original, unique. Contains a clear thesis that is well-supported by declarative statements (statements that can be supported by evidence).
  - **Conventions** (20%): Paper is stylistically appropriate to the essay format, reads and flows well, organized carefully and thoughtfully. Proper use of formatting style (APA, MLA, etc. Use of structure—introductory paragraph, conclusions, etc.
  - **Sources and Evidence** (10%): Meets the requirements for citation, citations are formatted properly and well-utilized.
  - **Syntax and Mechanics** (10%): Essay is free of grammatical errors and well-written.

Each criterion will be evaluated on the following 5 point scale:

5: Exceptional; 4: Very Good; 3: Acceptable; 2: Developing; 1 = Insufficient

**Presentation.** During the final exam period, you will present your version of a Life Worth Living. This will not be a formal Powerpoint presentation! It will be in a format of your choosing, and could involve multimedia of various sorts, music, art, performance, and prose. It should dovetail with your written vision, but should offer a complementary “embodied” vision of this. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

### Grade Rubric

• In-class and take-home exercises	40 points
• Final presentation	40 points
• Reading Quizzes	60 points
• Discussion Questions (3 points each)	60 points
• Short Position Papers (4 @ 25 points)	100 points
• Final Paper	100 points
Total =	400 points

A = 360-400    B = 320-359    C = 280-319    D = 240-279    F < = 239

A+ is 98-99; A is 92-97, A- is 90-91, and so on.

### Course Policies

- **Attendance.** This is a discussion-based course. You must be in class to participate in discussion. Furthermore, you are new to college, and establishing good attendance habits is essential. After two unexcused absences, your grade will be lowered by one letter grade. If you are more than five minutes late to class twice, it will count as an unexcused absence.

- **Missed quizzes/exams.** You can miss two quizzes (or drop your two lowest quizzes) so reading quizzes do not need to be made up.
- Discussion questions are due prior to class time: **Sundays and Tuesdays at 6 PM.** All other assignments are due by class time. Any assignment not submitted by class time will be considered late. An assignment may be submitted up to one day late for 10% penalty. Beyond that point, **any late assignments may be submitted up until the final class day (prior to finals week) for 50% credit.** Discussion questions cannot be submitted late.
- Communication. Please be professional in your communication—this is good practice for the real world. Emails should utilize proper grammar and include headings and salutations. I respond to email quickly during regular work hours. After regular work hours I will respond by the next day unless over a weekend.
- No smartphones out in class for any reason unless you tell me ahead of time you are expecting an important notification (such as a call about a sick child or a phone interview for an internship). You are adults, and you will increasingly find that it is not socially acceptable to use them in a professional setting. I expect such professional behavior from you and ask that you respect this classroom policy as a responsible adult.
- No laptops during any instruction or discussion unless we are doing a class activity that requires them. Especially on lecture days, you should come prepared with a notebook, ready to listen, participate, take notes, and engage. Laptops inevitably detract from these goals. **I expect you take notes by hand.** You should not have your laptops open during lecture at all, although you should bring them to class as we might need them from time to time for activities.
- Your active participation is encouraged and expected. If I am not hearing much from you, I may call on you. This may be more likely if you are falling asleep or not paying attention. I do not do this to single you out, but rather to get everyone in the class equally interested and engaged. Each of you has a valuable perspective to share. Likewise, I do not like the classroom to become dominated by a small number of voices—so please become aware of your own presence in the classroom. I love to have excited and enthusiastic students, so if I don't call on you, please don't be discouraged—I may just want to hear from others as well.
- I expect that you will be tolerant and respectful of one another. The best classroom experiences come from establishing an open and trusting classroom environment. I will do my best to create this environment, but I cannot do it alone!
- **YOUR SUCCESS.** There are many course objectives listed above, and I will provide you with more specific objectives for each unit. This is good educational practice, and also required of us as college educators. **At the end of the day, though, I only have one overarching course objective: Your success.** The entire course—everything in this syllabus and the course calendar is organized around this single objective. Obviously, I can't accomplish this objective alone! So, in order to best help me help you achieve maximal success in this course:

- Read the assigned reading before class. This is essential, as we will quiz over the reading before it is discussed in lecture. It will enable us to spend more time on discussion and applied activities, which will provide you a richer learning experience.
  - Take notes in class. This is the most important thing I can tell you. I expect that you have a notebook out and open at all times. Good notetaking is not easy, and it takes regular practice.
  - Clear your mind. Berea College students are busy. You have other classes, labor, and all the stress of figuring out how to become a well-adjusted, happy, adult. I hope my classroom is a bit of a respite for you. Check your mental baggage at the door. Sit down, close your eyes, take some deep breaths, and clear your mind. Open them and prepare to learn and have fun.
  - Visit me during office hours and/or your TA. In class, we can only attend so much to your personal learning needs—one-on-one, we can accomplish anything. Perhaps you have questions, or need me to run through examples, or explain something differently. Or maybe you just want to talk about your career or personal interests. More selfishly, I love to get to know each of you better this way.
- 
- **Disability Statement.** Berea College will provide reasonable accommodations for all students with disabilities to make all learning experiences accessible. If you experience physical or academic barriers based on a documented disability, please see Lisa Ladanyi to discuss your options. Students must provide their instructor(s) with an official accommodation letter when requesting accommodations. Accommodations will not be implemented retroactively. Please meet with your instructor(s) in a confidential environment to discuss your accommodations.
  
  - **Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. When take-home work is assigned, you are expected to complete work on your own without consulting your classmates. Cheating or plagiarism in any form will result in disciplinary action ranging from a minimum failure of the assignment to failure of the course. **All cases of plagiarism will result in a report** to the Student Admissions and Academic Standing Committee for the possibility of additional sanctions, including suspension. Please refer to the Berea College Catalog and Student Handbook for additional detail. **Utilizing AI tools such as ChatGPT constitutes plagiarism by my standards in this course.**
  
  - **Pregnant and Parenting Students:** Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, pregnant and parenting students may be afforded certain accommodations regarding their educational experience. If you believe that pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions are likely to impact your participation in this course, please contact Berea's Title IX Coordinator.

## COURSE CALENDAR (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Day	Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment
W	8.20	Class Introduction		
M	8.25	Introduction to Life Design	DYL Introduction	In-class AI writing exercise
W	8.27	Start Where You Are	DYL Chapters 1-2	
M	9.1	<b>Labor Day—No class</b>		
W	9.3	Wayfinding, Getting Unstuck	DYL Chapters 3-4	
M	9.8	Career Explorations	DYL Chapters 5-8	
W	9.10		<a href="#">The Rise of AI/Liberal Arts Degrees</a>	
M	9.15	A Well-Designed Life	DYL Chapters 9-11, Conclusion	Paper # 1 Due
W	9.17	Wallace, <i>This is Water</i>	Wallace, <i>This is Water</i> (in-class)	
M	9.22	What's Worth Wanting?	LWL Introduction, Chapter 1	
W	9.24		<i>Pew Research-<a href="#">What Makes Life Meaningful?</a></i>	
M	9.29	Where Are We Starting From?	LWL Chapter 2 Smith-There's More to Life Than Being Happy	
W	10.1			Paper # 2 Due
M	10.6	Who Do We Answer To?	LWL Chapters 3-4	
W	10.8	How Does a Good Life Feel?	Nozick, <i>The Experience Machine</i>	
M	10.13	What Should We Hope For?	LWL Chapters 5-6	
W	10.15	How Should We Live?	Mill, <i>On Liberty</i> (excerpt)	
M	10.20	The Recipe Test	LWL Chapters 7-8	
W	10.22	The Really Big Picture		Paper # 3 Due
M	10.27	When We Inevitably Botch It (Failure)	LWL Chapters 9-10	
W	10.29	When Life Hurts...		
M	11.3	...And There's No Fixing It	LWL Chapters 11-12	
W	11.5	When It Ends	Ted Chiang— <i>The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate</i>	
M	11.10	It Turns Out We Have Some Work to Do!	LWL Chapters 13-14	
W	11.12	Change is Hard		

M	11.17	Making it Stick	LWL Chapter 15	
W	11.19		LWL Epilogue	
M	11.24	<b>Peer Workshop Day</b>	Term Paper Draft Due	
W	11.26	Thanksgiving—No Class		
M	12.1	Paper Consultations		
W	12.3	Paper Consultations		
T	12.9	Final Exam Period: Presentations (8:30 AM)		Final Essay Due

Supplemental Reading List

Merton, Thomas,

Mill, John Stuart.

Nozick, The Experience Machine, from Anarchy, State, and Utopia.

Wallace, David Foster, This is Water.