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Column: Heisenberg may have been here: Rancourt's activism course—an arts class in sheep's clothing? 📄

Written by Maureen Robinson, Features Editor

Heisenberg may have been here

Rancourt's activism course—an arts class in sheep's clothing?

THE NEVER-ENDING SAGA surrounding Dr. Denis Rancourt's "activism course" reached a stormy pinnacle last week in a crowded basement room in Gendron Hall (see full story page 5). A 40-strong gallery of observers, journalists, and frustrated students at the March 28 Faculty Council meeting vocally clashed with Faculty of Science administrators.



The stakes were high—the meeting was to determine the life or death of SCI1984 (Science, Activism, and Society), a much-loved/reviled course taught by Rancourt.

The controversy erupted when Dean of Science Christian Detellier abruptly cancelled the course on Sept. 21, 2005. What followed were many months of (very) public conflict, calls for the reassessment of the U of O's bureaucratic procedure and protocol, and zealous protest by Rancourt's incensed students (and Rancourt himself).

The latest developments boil down to this: Rancourt and his students are pushing the science faculty to approve the activism course, and the science faculty has given itself more time to reassess the course and its description (the issue will be revisited in the summer). Students are infuriated by this development, appealing to media outlets and the U of O community to expose this "hijacking of the democratic process".

I hate to be the asshole who sides with the administration, but I'm going to go ahead and state what most science students and staff are probably thinking: SCI1984 is not a science course, nor should it ever be.

Philosophically, science is the study of knowledge based on empirical methods—the investigation of things that can be measured, tested, calculated, and explained within definite parameters.

SCI1984 is a pass/fail course centred around debate, discussion, and guest speakers. The topics addressed are relevant to energetic students and young adults—and even, yes, to young scientists. But it doesn't belong in the science faculty. Science students can't even use it—the Faculty of Science Undergraduate Programs Committee unanimously agreed that SCI1984 cannot be taken by science students as a science elective.

I try not to be an elitist here—really: science credits for all!—but Rancourt and his irate students are lobbying the science faculty to approve SCI1984, the nature of which makes it inherently not a science course. At the U of O, bioethics is offered by the philosophy department. So is a course on scientific thought and social values. Research methods and

ethics can be found in the psychology department. You can't approach a faculty that has no established protocol for embracing subject matter outside of its mandate and expect the administrators to give a quick, favourable response.

The activists are hurting their own cause by committing this obvious misstep—and yet, they continue to fight the wrong battle with the wrong faculty.

Dr. Rancourt himself is quoted in *Xpress* as saying, "It was never intended to be a science course; it's a Faculty of Arts class open to everyone."

So we have a course that is, admittedly, "a Faculty of Arts class", that utilizes instructional approaches and testing methods that are completely foreign to the Faculty of Science, and that cannot even be taken by science students as a science course.

Which is why SCI1984 ultimately, and unfortunately, will die on the table.

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