



Included in study programme: PhD in pedagogical resources and learning processes in kindergarten and school

Course name: **Vulnerability: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Education**

Course code: **PHDVUL**

Course level: PhD level, elective Course- 900

Course scope and organization:

Number of credits: 5

Number of semesters: 1

Language of instruction: English

Course organization: Three full days, Campus Drammen

Academic content

The course is anchored in interdisciplinary humanistic research on vulnerability. Vulnerability studies has become an established field of research that contributes to a better understanding of what vulnerability is, why vulnerability obligates, who has the main responsibility for responding to vulnerability and how best to fulfill our obligations towards the vulnerable. These questions are central to a democratic, inclusive, and sustainable society and education.

Researchers in political philosophy and ethics point out that vulnerability is an ontological, phenomenological, and situational phenomenon closely linked to power structures. All people are vulnerable, but some are always more vulnerable than others due to individual and structural factors around them. For example, social and political mechanisms and institutions can increase or decrease one's ability to handle difficult situations and adversity. Certain groups, such as children, refugees, and minorities, are at risk of becoming extra vulnerable when their vulnerability can be used as a pretext to control them and refute their claims. Furthermore, those in positions of power can use vulnerability as an argument to protect their own privileges which they fear they are about to lose. While vulnerability is inherent to the social and political body, the term is also commonly used in connection to non-human systems such as the environment and computing. From an educational perspective, vulnerability is a highly relevant perspective both because of what vulnerability can teach us about ourselves, the society we are part of and the environment, but also because vulnerability is what makes learning possible. For learning to occur, one needs to embrace one's vulnerability in the sense that one is open to being unknowing, unfamiliar, wrong, and even uncomfortable.

Literature, here understood as narratives in various genres and media with an intrinsic aesthetic value, functions as a portal into the many facets and ambiguity of vulnerability. Vulnerability is a major theme in literature, not least in children's and youth literature, but it is not only in terms of content that literature is interesting to look at when trying to better understand what it means to be vulnerable and how vulnerability should and can be handled. The literary form and the actual encounter with literature provide important



insights into the cultural politics and ethics of vulnerability. For example, texts are vulnerable to misinterpretation and misuse. Literary genres in the gray zone between fiction and reality can trigger vulnerability in the reader as well as in the author.

Using examples mainly from Nordic literature, the course aims to give participants insights into the complexity of vulnerability, sharpen their conceptual apparatus and show how vulnerability can be much more than a weakness. In certain situations, vulnerability can act as a resource to make resistance, demand rights, ask critical questions, learn, and deal with change. The course has a general focus on the potential and risks of vulnerability and on the application of the theoretical approaches presented and discussed to the analysis of various kinds of texts. It also provides a platform for participants to discuss and receive feedback on theory-related aspects of their own PhD-projects.

Learning outcome

Knowledge

The candidate:

- is at the forefront of knowledge in humanistic research and has a thorough understanding of theoretical perspectives in vulnerability studies.
- can assess the need for humanistic research to shed light on complex bodily and social phenomena and solve societal challenges related to alienation, discrimination, and injustice. can contribute to the development of new knowledge, theories, methods, and interpretations within humanistic research.
- has knowledge of how text analysis can be used in relevant contexts in society as well as in teaching and learning contexts.

Skills

The candidate:

- can formulate research questions, plan, develop and complete research.
- can do research and development work at a high international level.
- can handle complex questions and challenge established knowledge and practice in humanistic research.

General competences

The candidate:

- can identify relevant ethical questions and carry out research with professional integrity.
- can manage complex interdisciplinary project tasks and projects.
- can participate in debates within humanistic research in conference settings.
- can assess the need for and take the initiative to make innovation.

Learning activities

In this course, we use various teaching methods and approaches: lectures followed by plenary discussions, panel discussions, seminars with oral presentations held by the

participants in which they situate their own projects in dialog with vulnerability theory, immersive walks, and individual study of a selection of theoretical texts that participants read in advance of the course.

Participation/Compulsory work requirements

The participants are required to read a selection of theoretical texts prior to the course, participate in at least 80 % of the lectures and engage actively in the plenary discussions of lectures and other participants' projects.

Forms of assessment

The participants are assessed based on three assignments:

- **Abstract (300 words)**, in which they explain their own research project and how vulnerability can be a productive theoretical framework for it. The abstract shall be sent to course leader minimum a week before the start date of the course.
- **Oral presentation** about theory-related aspects of their own research projects in which they come in dialog with vulnerability theory from the reading list of the course. The presentation will be delivered during the course, in a conventional conference setting (15 minutes presentation, 15 minutes discussion).
- **A cohesive written version of their oral presentation** manuscript in which they incorporate feedback received during the course. To be handed in electronically after the end date of the course.

The abstract, the oral presentation, and the written text are assessed together as Passed/Not Passed.

Literature (reading list)

In bold, articles that are obligatory. In normal font, articles that are recommended.

Butler, J. (2016). Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti & L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (p. 12–27). Duke University Press.

Bergenmar, J. (2020). Vulnerability and Disability in Contemporary Nordic Literature: Linn Ullmann's *Grace* and Sofi Oksanen's *Baby Jane*. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 151-171). Palgrave Macmillan.

Boler, M. (1997). The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's Gaze. *Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 253–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389700490141>.

Brown, W. (2019). Introduction. In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (p. 1-22). Columbia University Press.

Brown, W. (2019). Chapter 1: Society Must Be Dismantled & Chapter 5: No Future for White Men: Nihilism, Fatalism, and Ressentiment. In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (p. 23-54 & p. 161-188). Columbia University Press.

- Cole, A. (2016).** All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique. *Critical Horizons. A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, 17(2), 260–277.
- Dancus, A. M. (2019). Women, Vulnerability and First-Person Film-making. In *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women* (p. 1-22). Intellect/The University of Chicago Press.
- Dancus, A. M., Hyvönen, M. & Karlsson, M. (2020).** Mobilizing Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 1-15). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dodds, S. (2014).** Dependence, Care, and Vulnerability. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 181–203). Oxford University Press.
- Fineman, M. A. (2013).** Equality, Autonomy, and the Vulnerable Subject in Law and Politics. In M. A. Fineman & A. Grear (Eds), *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics* (p. 13–28). Routledge.
- Ganteau, J.-M & Onega, S. (2017).** Introduction. In *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (p. 1-18). Routledge.
- Gilson, E. C. (2014).** Vulnerability Beyond Opposition. In *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (p. 127-147). Routledge.
- Grønstad, A. (2020). Conditional Vulnerability in the Films of Ruben Östlund. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.) *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 19-31). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kittay, E.F. (2019).** Vulnerability and the Moral Nature of Dependency Relations. In *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. 2nd Edition (p. 57-81). Routledge.
- Koivunen, A., Kyrölä, K. & Ryberg, I. (2018).** Vulnerability as a Political Language. In A. Koivunen, K. Kyrölä & I Ryberg (Eds.) *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilizing Affect in Feminist Queer and Anti-racist Media Cultures* (p. 1-26). Manchester University Press.
- Kulick, D., & Rydström, J. (2015).** The Roots of Engagement. In *Loneliness and Its Opposite: Sex, Disability, and the Ethics of Engagement* (p. 39-77). Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.
- Leake, E. (2014). The (Un)Knowable Self and Others: Critical Empathy and Expressivism. In T. Roeder & R. Gatto (Red.), *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom* (p. 166–195). Parlor Press.
- Levinas, E. (1999).** Ethics and the Face. In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (p. 194-219). Duquesne University Press.

- Levinas, E. (1989). Ethics as First Philosophy. In S. Hand (Ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (p. 75-87). Blackwell.
- Mackenzie, C. (2014). The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 33–59). Oxford University Press.
- Mackenzie, C. (2017). Vulnerability, Needs, and Moral Obligation. I C. Straehle (Ed.), *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics* (p. 83–100). Routledge.
- Mackenzie, C., W. Rogers & S. Dodds (2014). Introduction: What is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?. In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (p. 1–32). Oxford University Press.
- Miller, S.C. (2014). The Moral Significance of Needs. In *The Ethics of Need. Agency, Dignity, and Obligation* (p. 15-44). Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). The Narrative Imagination. In *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (p. 85–112). Harvard University Press.
- Tønnessen, E.S. (2020). Life of a Fatso: Young, Fat and Vulnerable in a Scandinavian Society of Perfection. In A.M Dancus, M. Hyvönen & M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture* (p. 173-194). Palgrave Macmillan.