

# **BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**

## **Aspects of Humanism**

**An eight week course**

**Tutor's Course Book**

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## Introduction

We intend these course materials to be a resource for you to use as you think best. Feel free to adapt and adopt, criticise and contradict what you find here. Humanists have no holy book, and the central aim of the course is to help participants to work out their own thoughts and judgments. At the same time, there is much agreement between humanists as to the content of contemporary Humanism and our course materials reflect that consensus to a considerable extent.

You can explain to your group that these course materials are not the final word and that contributions from participants are welcome. Indeed, they are essential — the course cannot work unless the participants *participate*, and that includes taking issue and finding fault with the course materials (and for that matter the views of the course leader).

## Aims and Outcomes

The central aim of the course is to help participants to think about and engage with Humanism. It will help you to plan and organise if you specify some learning aims and outcomes in more detail. The distinction between aims and outcomes is a matter of educational theory but, roughly, it is that outcomes should be testable or measurable. For example, a history course might have 'increase students' facility for historical judgment' as an aim, and 'students will understand the principal accounts of the causes of the First World War' as an outcome.

Here are some suggestions:

### Aims:

- To increase knowledge about Humanism among interested members of the public and among humanists wanting to deepen their knowledge.
- To facilitate and encourage reflection on the value and meaning of human life, as individuals and collectively.

### Outcomes:

By the end of the course, participants will:

- Have a basic understanding of Humanism.
- Be aware of some tensions and dilemmas within Humanist thought.
- Have developed resources to undertake their own reflections on questions arising from our lives as thinking, social and natural animals.

It is also a good idea to specify outcomes for each week. For example:

By the end of this session, participants will...

- |               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 1</b> | understand the principal historical and contemporary senses of the word 'humanism'.                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Week 2</b> | have an outline of the relative strengths of the principal arguments against theism.                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Week 3</b> | a) understand the case for the independence of ethics from religion and<br>b) understand in outline answers to the question of whether ethics needs a basis and if so, what sort.                                |
| <b>Week 4</b> | understand the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal tradition in political philosophy.                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Week 5</b> | a) grasp some of the tensions in the notion of universal human rights and<br>b) understand the case for freedom of expression.                                                                                   |
| <b>Week 6</b> | have a broad understanding of the concept of 'faith' in religious and non-religious contexts.                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Week 7</b> | understand the issues arising from the conjunction of naturalism and Humanism.                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Week 8</b> | a) grasp the distinction between viewing life from a human perspective and viewing it under the aspect of eternity, and<br>b) have reflected on the roles of ritual and ceremony in sustaining meaningful lives. |

As always, these are suggestions that you may modify or replace.

You may wish to share the aims and outcomes with the participants. Reasons for doing so would include that your participants may feel more engaged in the learning if they know what the point of it is; reasons against doing so include that your participants may become distracted by the aims and outcomes from the course content itself. Ultimately it is up to you whether to share the aims and outcomes week by week or not.

### **Planning**

For each week, you must have a plan. This is your principal responsibility as course-leader. You should design your plans to fit into a 2.5 hour structure with an interval. It is important to keep to time – people have homes, families and other commitments. Therefore, if a discussion is particularly useful or vital, you may need to be flexible with the programme to ensure that you finish on time.

Your participants are relying on you to provide a clear structure and progression through the session. Try to keep more or less the same structure from week to week. That way, you avoid burdening people with the double task of understanding the course content *and* the structure of the activities.

Here is a typical plan for the first week of the course:

<b>What</b>	<b>Why</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<p><b>Introductions</b> by tutor and members of the group.</p> <p>Participants explain why they have come to the course and what they hope to learn.</p> <p>Tutor shares his or her background and involvement in humanism.</p>	<p>To create a sense of comfort and facilitate later discussions.</p> <p>To help the tutor to understand people's perspectives and identify the topics they would like to explore.</p>	5 minutes
<p>Check that everyone has an outline of the course and give some information about what happen each week.</p> <p>Answer any questions they may have.</p>	So participants know what to expect on which week.	5 minutes.
<p><b>Setting Guidelines</b></p> <p>As a group, agree some guidelines for how you will interact with each other on the course.</p> <p>Write these up on a flip chart and ask the group to commit to the guidelines by raising their hands.</p>	<p>To create a safe space for dialogue.</p> <p>To help the group to own the space and set boundaries for interacting with one another in a respectful way</p>	10 minutes
<p><b>Reading</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, read and discuss the Amsterdam Declaration.</p>	To begin a discussion on the key points/principles of Humanism.	10 minutes
<p><b>Feedback</b></p> <p>Each group reports its findings.</p>	To share the outcomes of the reading and discussion of the Amsterdam Declaration.	10 minutes
<p><b>Reading</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, read the Russell extract. Consider the questions on the reading in the course-guide.</p>	To discuss the extent to which one can have grounds for being a Humanist.	15 minutes
<p><b>Feedback</b> Each group reports its findings.</p> <p>Whole-group discussion.</p>	To share the outcomes of the reading and discussion of Russell.	10 minutes
<b>Short break</b>		20 minutes
<p><b>Tutor Presentation</b></p> <p>This could be a version of the audio lecture or a commentary on it. You could just play the audio lecture, though this is likely to put people to</p>	Delivery of course content	25 minutes

sleep and undermine your authority.		
<p><b>Discussion of the presentation</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, identify key points. Pay particular attention to points that seemed unclear, false or un-Humanist. Work through the Discussion Questions set out in the course-guide.</p>	To introduce critical engagement with the philosophy of Humanism	20 minutes
<p><b>Feedback</b> Each group reports its findings.</p>	To share the outcomes of the previous exercise.	10 minutes
<p><b>Looking ahead</b></p> <p>Comment on the synopsis of next week's material.</p>	To introduce next week's theme.	5 minutes.
Close session by asking the group for one word each on the experience of their first session of the course.	<p>To get a feel for how they enjoyed the first part.</p> <p>To close the session in a structured way.</p>	5 minutes.
<b>Total time</b>		<b>2h 30 minutes</b>

The first week is a little unusual as it is full of introductions, so here is a plan for a more typical week, week two:

<b>What</b>	<b>Why</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Re-cap last week's theme and lay out this week's plan.	So that the participants experience the course as a unity and know where they are in it.	10 minutes
<p><b>Reading</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, read and discuss the Renan extract. Work through the questions on the reading in the course-guide.</p>	To appreciate the emergence of critical Biblical history.	20 minutes
<p><b>Feedback</b></p> <p>Each group reports its findings.</p>	To share the outcomes of the reading and discussion.	10 minutes
<b>Tutor Presentation</b>	Delivery of course content	25 minutes
<b>Short break</b>		20 minutes

<p><b>Presentation Analysis</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, make a list of the key points of the presentation. What is its main message?</p>	<p>To ensure that participants understood the presentation.</p>	<p>20 minutes</p>
<p><b>Feedback</b> Each group reports its findings. Identify emerging themes.</p>	<p>To share the outcomes of the previous exercise.</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
<p><b>Critical Discussion</b></p> <p>In groups of 3 or 4, work through the discussion questions in the course-guide.</p>	<p>To develop participants views on these matters.</p>	<p>20 minutes</p>
<p><b>Feedback</b> to the rest of the group. Identify emerging themes.</p>	<p>To share the outcomes of the previous exercise.</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
<p><b>Looking ahead</b></p> <p>Comment on the synopsis of next week's material.</p>	<p>To introduce next week's theme.</p>	<p>5 minutes.</p>
<p><b>Total time</b></p>		<p><b>2h 30 minutes</b></p>

When you have worked out a plan for a given week, check it against the outcome for that week. Is the plan likely to achieve the outcome? Perhaps the outcome may need modification in the light of the planning experience.

The details of your plans will depend on you, your group and your particular interests and expertise. The fundamental questions to ask when devising your plans are: why have these people bothered to gather in one room? What will they do together that they could not do alone?

Each week, you should share your plan with the group and stick to it.

Regarding the practicalities, there are some basic principles you should follow:

- Timings will depend on the size of your group—obviously, the more small groups you have, the longer it will take to feed back at the end of a small-group exercise. The timings in the sample plans assume a group no bigger than ten. Twenty is about the maximum number for successful seminar-style teaching.
- You must spend some time delivering content. People expect to go home with some thoughts that they did not bring themselves. However, studies show that the human brain cannot concentrate for more than 40 minutes, however interesting the material. Long lectures encourage passivity and so inhibit learning.
- Include plenty of small-group (3 or 4 members) discussions. Whole-group discussions tend to be dominated by a very small number of confident speakers. Small-group discussions allow everyone to talk.
- Small-group activities should never last longer than 20 minutes.

- Follow every small-group exercise with a whole-group feedback session, so that the various groups can compare notes. This demonstrates that what happened in the small groups is important to everyone.
- Be firm about time! People never keep time, even if they have clear instructions, with a persuasive rationale, and accurate watches on their wrists.
- Some people will arrive back from the break late, every week. Do not be afraid to start without them—they have only themselves to blame and they (not you) are responsible for the disturbance they cause by returning late.
- If you include a reading exercise, put it towards the beginning of the session, so that those who did not find time to do the reading in advance catch up.
- Ensure that theory and practice do not conflict. For example, do not insist dogmatically that Humanism is undogmatic.
- Create opportunities to explore the content practically. For example, the final session discusses ceremonies and rituals. So, ask whether any rituals have grown up over the eight weeks of the course. This course does not result in a qualification, but you should mark its completion somehow. Perhaps the participants could design their own course-completion ceremony. (You might mention that on some dance courses, the final session is a showcase of student performances followed by the presentation of gifts to the teacher and effusive speeches of gratitude for his or her exceptionally inspiring teaching.)

For each week, I have given some discussion questions. Like everything else, these are merely suggestions to help you to structure the sessions. Similarly, I have suggested weekly readings from Margaret Knight's *Humanist Anthology*. You can use these for reading exercises if you wish. These can focus discussion—'What did you think of the reading?' is a more concrete and educationally productive question than 'What do you think about faith?' The extracts recommended in this course have been collected together in a 'Sourcebook' accompanying the 'Student Handbook'.

It is up to you to decide what use to make of the audio recordings. My experience is that students like to have them well in advance, so that they can listen to them before the meetings. This allows the course leader to spend much less time lecturing and give more time to group discussion. However, not everyone has the necessary technology, so if you do structure the course this way, you run the risk of excluding people who do not have personal computers and digital audio players.

**Most participants will wish to prepare.** Ensure that they all receive the course outline and any other materials you intend to use (including the audio recordings) *before* the start of the course. Otherwise, people will spend most of the first session reading the course outline you have just given them.

### Guidance on Running an Effective Discussion

Here is a checklist of points to consider:

- Physical comfort and atmosphere. Is the room an appropriate size (too big is not much better than too small)? Is it well lit and ventilated? People work best out of draughts and with air and refreshments.
- Remove physical barriers. Do away with desks and set up a circle of chairs. If there is a fixed lectern or desk, **do not** hide behind it.
- Discussions work best when everyone in the room becomes both teacher and learner. You can encourage this by sharing your own experiences in an honest and friendly way.
- You may find it useful to ask the group to set some rules about how you will work together. Draw them up during your first session and stick to them. People may mention such issues as

confidentiality, respect, and not talking over others. It is important that the group creates these rules, not you, although you can make suggestions. Get someone to write these rules down and ask everyone to raise their hands or sign the sheet to indicate their commitment to keeping and policing them. This helps to create an environment in which everyone feels safe.

- In discussions, notice those who say little and encourage them to share their thoughts. On the other hand, some people will talk endlessly unless someone stops them. That someone must be you, and you must (politely but firmly) ensure a fair division of airtime.
- Encourage note-taking, and make time for it. Whenever you give your group a question to discuss, ask your participants to write down their conclusions with an aide-mémoire of their reasons, so that they develop a (private!) journal of their thinking. Take every opportunity to refer to previous discussions and make time for participants to re-read what they wrote on topics related to the present discussion. That way, the participants will make their own connections rather than relying on you to tie the course together.
- Set a good example of rational discussion. Always look to separate objective points from personal character and motive. Remember, a bad person can make a good point, and a virtuous person can talk rubbish in a good cause. If someone makes a good point against your view, acknowledge it. Even better, if *you* think of a good point against your own position, bring it up and talk about it.

Finally, do not worry! No-one attends courses like this reluctantly. Participants start from a position of trust and goodwill. The normal experience is that they will freely grant you the authority you need to lead the course.

The participants may look to you as the expert, but that does not mean you have to be infallible or all-knowing. As long as you use your authority fairly and maintain a high level of organisation, they will forgive minor glitches or gaps in your knowledge. As adults, the participants will have plenty of knowledge and experience to draw on. Some of them may be experts on matters under discussion. It is perfectly fine to answer a question by saying, "I don't know — does anyone else?" If no-one in the room knows the answer, promise to find out for the following session. Or better still, ask a participant to find out for the next session. Remember, telling people things is not your principal role. Your role is to facilitate learning. (Note: if you do find a volunteer to look something up between sessions, do the research yourself as well, in case the volunteer forgets and also to maintain your own authority.)

I am interested to hear your experiences of running this course and your thoughts about how it might be improved. Please feel free to raise any matter connected with this course by e-mail: [b.p.larvor@herts.ac.uk](mailto:b.p.larvor@herts.ac.uk)

Good luck!

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