

ANTH 4200/5200: MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT THEORY AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MIND

MEET PROFESSOR OVERMANN

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Karenleigh A. Overmann directs the Center for Cognitive Archaeology at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She earned her doctorate in archaeology at the University of Oxford as a Clarendon scholar in 2016. She completed two years of postdoctoral research at the University of Bergen from 2018 to 2020 as a Marie Curie Research Fellow. Her research focuses on how societies become numerate and literate by using and modifying material forms over generations of collaborative effort. She has published five books, the most recent of which are *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Archaeology* (Oxford University Press, 2024, co-edited with Thomas Wynn and Frederick Coolidge) and *The Materiality of Numbers: Emergence and Elaboration from Prehistory to Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Course Overview

Material Engagement Theory is a recent and highly influential approach to the study of the ancient mind from cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris. As Colin Renfrew notes in his foreword to Malafouris' 2013 book, *How Things Shape the Mind*, the theoretical framework provided by Material Engagement Theory "qualifies as one of the most important contributions of recent years to the study of human origins ... [and it] clearly makes a major contribution to the emerging field of cognitive archaeology—the archaeology of mind" (Renfrew, 2013, p. ix). While the archaeological inquiry into the ancient mind and the cognitive evolution of the human lineage are associated with theoretical and methodological issues, the questions Malafouris tackles in this foundational work are fundamental: just what *is* the mind, where is it located, what does it include or consist of, and what role, if any, do material forms have in it?

As set out in *How Things Shape the Mind*, this course examines Material Engagement Theory through its three central commitments. The first is that cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive (4E). The second is that materiality has agency, the capacity of an agent to act in the world, and thus influences both what we do and how we think. The third is that things acquire meaning because of what they are and what we do with them ("enactive signification"). Also examined are key concepts like metaplasticity, affordances, and conceptual blending. Each week, students will read a chapter of *How Things Shape the Mind*, along with readings by other authors selected to highlight or contrast key concepts and aspects of the debates and issues presented in the book.

The course also looks at three case studies, archaeological inquiries that use Material Engagement Theory as their theoretical framework. The first is the work of cognitive

archaeologist Thomas Wynn in 4E cognition in the Lower Palaeolithic, the second is the inquiry of archaeologist and material scientist Patrick Roberts into the concept of modernity, and the third is the work of cognitive archaeologist Karenleigh Overmann in the development of literacy from early writing. The course concludes with two lengthy critiques of Material Engagement Theory.

Evaluation

Each of the numbered assignments has two components. First, students will write an essay of 500–1,000 words in response to the prompts provided in the lessons. These should be submitted at the end of each week. The course is designed for students to complete one essay per week for fifteen weeks, and submission dates in Canvas will be set accordingly. Students will be able to submit essays before the due date, but not after (without extenuating circumstances). Second, students will write a brief annotated bibliographic entry for each of the readings. Students will keep and accumulate these entries until the end of the course, when they will submit all of them as a complete bibliography.

Graduate students will also complete a research paper on a topic to be proposed by the student and approved by the professor no later than Week 6. Research papers should be at least 6,000 words and no more than 8,000 words in length, not including references, and use APA format for citations. Research papers are due in Week 15 of the course. For graduate credit, the essays will count 75% and the research paper 25%.

Grading Rubric

Written assignments (essays, bibliography, and graduate research paper) will be graded on how well they answer the assigned question, attention to detail, and use of examples from the reading. Answers must be typewritten and double spaced. Points will be awarded as follows:

1. **Focus:** The essay answers the questions that are asked and avoids discursions into unrelated topics.
2. **Support:** The essay includes examples from the reading that are relevant to the assigned question and provides definitions and evidence.
3. **Organized:** The essay includes a thesis statement, topic sentences, development following the thesis, and a conclusion that does not introduce new ideas.
4. **Scientific:** The essay avoids statements that begin “I think that” or “I would like” (this criterion includes essays that have asked for the author’s personal opinion).
5. **Clarity:** The essay answers the assigned question in clear, concise, understandable writing and was checked/proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

By UCCS policy, students are permitted to use AI tools like ChatGPT, but they must identify the involvement of AI assistance when assignments are submitted. **The use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited, using quotation marks or other appropriate indicators of quoted material when appropriate, in order to stay within university policies on academic honesty. These assignments will be graded as assisted rather than original work.** Students are responsible for the information they submit based on an AI query (for example, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content).

Students wanting assistance with writing should consult the University Writing Center (Columbine Hall 316; see <https://writingcenter.uccs.edu/> for contact and scheduling information).

Grading Policy

Student grades will be determined by weekly essays, each of which will cover the primary reading material plus additional readings expanding on the week's topic (15 points each); the complete bibliography (75 points); and (for graduate students only) the research paper (100 points). Final grades are determined by the number of points received out of the possible total.

For undergraduate students: final grades are determined by the number of points received out of a possible 300 points (225 points on the essays and 75 points for the bibliography):

A 270–300 Points

B 239–269 Points

C 224–338 Points

D 209–223 Points

F 000–208 Points

For graduate students: final grades are determined by the number of points received out of a possible 400 points (225 points on the essays, 75 points for the bibliography, and 100 points for the research paper):

A 360–400 Points

B 319–359 Points

C 299–318 Points

D 279–298 Points

F 000–278 Points

Course Overview and Readings

Note: For convenience, the pdf containing the chapter notes, references, and index to *How Things Shape the Mind* is provided externally to the weekly lessons.

- **Week 1: Can archaeology investigate the mind?**
 - Leach, E. R. (1973). Concluding address. In C. Renfrew (Ed.), *The explanation of culture change* (pp. 761–771). Gerald Duckworth.
 - Renfrew, C. (1982). *Towards an archaeology of mind*. Cambridge University Press.
 - Wynn, T. (2014). The cognitive life of things. *Current Anthropology*, 55(4), 491–492.
- **Week 2: An archaeology of mind**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 1
 - Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge. [Chapter 3]
- **Week 3: Rethinking the archaeology of mind**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 2
 - Hawkes, C. (1954). Archeological theory and method. *American Anthropologist*, 56(2), 155–168.
- **Week 4: The material-engagement approach**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 3

- Malafouris, L. (2015). Metaplasticity and the primacy of material engagement. *Time and Mind*, 8(4), 351–371.
- **Week 5: The extended mind**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 4
 - Clark, A., & Chalmers, D. J. (1998). The extended mind. *Analysis*, 58(1), 7–19.
- **Week 6: The enactive sign**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 5
 - Hutchins, E. (2005). Material anchors for conceptual blends. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37(10), 1555–1577.
- **Week 7: Material agency**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 6
 - Gibson, J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, acting, and knowing* (pp. 67–82). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- **Week 8: Knapping intentions and the handmade mind**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 7
 - Wynn, T. (1995). Handaxe enigmas. *World Archaeology*, 27(1), 10–24.
- **Week 9: Thoughtful marks, lines, and signs**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 8
 - D’Errico, F. (1998). Palaeolithic origins of artificial memory systems. In C. Renfrew & C. Scarre (Eds.), *Cognition and material culture* (pp. 19–50). McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- **Week 10: Becoming one with the clay**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 9
 - Malafouris, L. (2008). At the potter’s wheel. In C. Knappett & L. Malafouris (Eds.), *Material agency* (pp. 19–36). Springer.
- **Week 11: How do things shape the mind?**
 - *How Things Shape the Mind*, Chapter 10
 - Ihde, D., & Malafouris, L. (2019). *Homo faber Philosophy & Technology*, 32, 195–214.
- **Week 12: Case study 1: 4E cognition in the Lower Palaeolithic**
 - Wynn, T. (2021). Ergonomic clusters and displaced affordances in early lithic technology. *Adaptive Behavior*, 29(2), 181–195.
 - Wynn, T., Overmann, K. A., & Malafouris, L. (2021). 4E cognition in the Lower Palaeolithic: An introduction. *Adaptive Behavior*, 29(2), 99–106.
- **Week 13: Case study 2: The question of ‘modernity’**
 - McBrearty, S., & Brooks, A. S. (2000). The revolution that wasn’t: A new interpretation of the origin of modern human behavior. *Journal of Human Evolution*, 39(5), 453–563.
 - Roberts, P. (2016). ‘We have never been behaviourally modern’. *Quaternary International*, 405, 8–20.
- **Week 14: Case study 3: Literacy from early writing**
 - Overmann, K. A. (2016). Beyond writing: The development of literacy in the ancient Near East. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 26(2), 285–303.

- Overmann, K. A. (2024). Writing as an extended cognitive system. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1–21.
- **Week 15: Reviews and criticisms**
 - Garofoli, D. (2013). Reviewed work: *How things shape the mind*. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 34(3/4), 299–309.
 - Mendoza-Collazos, J. C. (2020). On the importance of things: A relational approach to agency. *Cognitive Semiotics*, 13(2), 1–11.

Graduate Requirements

Graduate students will complete a 10–12 page research paper (about 6,000 to 8,000 words, not counting the references) in APA format, due at the end of the semester. The topic selected for the paper must be approved by the professor no later than Week 6.

Due Dates and Deadlines

This syllabus contains the deadline for each module and specifies the dates by which the essay must be completed. For each deadline, students have until 11:59 PM on the deadline day. Remember, these are deadlines. Students are encouraged to stay well ahead of them.

Students should complete each module by the specific date in the Canvas version of the syllabus. Once that date has passed, students can still access the material in the module, but will no longer be able to submit the essay associated with that module. For example, if Lesson 3 must be completed by February 3, students must submit their essay by 11:59 PM MST on February 3; once the deadline has passed, the essay submission option will no longer be available in Canvas. Students should notify the instructor immediately of any extenuating circumstances that do not allow them to meet course due dates.

Attendance and Participation

Students are expected to complete all readings, essays, and assignments. Students who choose to withdraw from the course are responsible for completing the necessary withdrawal forms. Students who stop attending without formally withdrawing still appear on the final grade roster and must be assigned a grade. Consult the UCCS semester calendar for additional information and withdrawal dates.

Preparation

Students should prepare for the weekly lesson by reading the material listed for each session. Students should have a general grasp of the relevant ideas introduced in the material. Students should be prepared to apply reading assignments and material presented in previous weeks to the current week's essay.

Academic Conduct

Students should read the University Bulletin and make note of campus policies regarding breaches of the honor system and academic honesty. Misuse of academic materials will not be tolerated. For additional information on academic conduct, see the [university website](#).

Academic Calendar

Please refer to the [Academic Calendar](#) for important logistical information such as the last day a class can be added during the semester, the census date, the final day a class can be dropped while still receiving a refund, fee deadlines, holidays, etc.

Course Evaluation

The UCCS Anthropology Department is committed to providing the best possible learning experience to every student. A key mechanism to provide ongoing excellence in teaching and learning is to gather student thoughts on each course and the effectiveness of our faculty. Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing an online evaluation, typically during the last two weeks of the semester. These faculty evaluations are called Faculty Course Questionnaires (FCQs). They are forwarded to the course professors after final grades are submitted and contain no identifying information in regard to individual students (i.e., they are anonymous). Additional instructions will be provided via a notification sent to student UCCS email accounts later in the semester. Please know that student feedback is extremely valuable to your professor, the Anthropology Department, and UCCS as a whole. In particular, constructive comments guide the enhancement of future versions of this course.

Excel Centers

For students who feel their performance in this class would benefit from additional tutelage, UCCS offers a network of five centers, each offering a unique program of academic support to help all UCCS students succeed in every aspect of their academic careers.

Disabilities

A student with a disability who will need accommodations for this course must contact and register with the Disability Services Office, and provide them with documentation of the disability, so that appropriate accommodations for the student's situation can be determined. To avoid any delay in the receipt of accommodations, the student should contact the Disability Services Offices as soon as possible. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and that disability accommodations cannot be provided until an accommodation letter has been given to the faculty member. The student may contact Disability Services at Main Hall, room 105, 719-255-3354 or dservice@uccs.edu for more information about receiving accommodations. For additional information on disability services, see the [disability services](#).

Military Service

Students who are active or reserve military with the potential of being called to service and/or training during the course should coordinate with the instructor during the first week to discuss accommodations. For additional information on military student support, see the [veteran and military affairs](#).

The Professor's Expectations for Students

During completion of this course, students must abide by the [UCCS Student Conduct Code](#). This code specifies what is considered proper and improper student conduct, including matters such as cheating and inappropriate behavior. Students who do not abide by the code can receive sanctions ranging up to expulsion from the course or the university.

Remember that this is a 3 credit-hour course at either the senior (4000) or graduate (5000) level. Please plan on spending a lot of time working on this class. This time will include reviewing the material and completing assignments. Students should plan to spend at least 10 hours per week on average (or 20 hours per week for the accelerated summer version).

Of course, the amount of time spent does not guarantee any particular grade. Final letter grades will reflect the amount of material learned, as reflected in test scores and the overall quality of student contributions to the course.

Solving Technical Difficulties

Students experiencing technical difficulties (e.g., pages not loading, connectivity problems, not able to view images, things not working as they should, etc.) should contact the 24/7 Canvas Telephone Support at 844.802.9230 or online at the [Canvas Support Community](#)[Links to an external site.](#) page. Please note this service is separate from the [UCCS IT Helpdesk](#).

Help Understanding Course Material

Students with questions regarding course material, policies, grading criteria, quiz administration, etc. are encouraged to post them to the Discussion Board for that module. Personal or sensitive matters should be referred to the professor via email.