Syllabus: PhD Seminar on Models of Organizational Cognition
Strategy 898, Winter B 2016 — Mondays 9:00am–12:00am, Room W2719
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Description

The goal of this seminar is to study some of the processes by which organizations make decisions. The seminar focuses on how different micro-level processes (e.g., individual biases and organizational structure) affect macro-level outcomes that are relevant to the strategy and organizations literatures (e.g., profitability and innovation).

The research covered in this seminar builds on the seminal ideas of the Carnegie tradition. This tradition, with its focus on modeling information processing and decision making in organizations has played a fundamental role in shaping the strategy and organizations fields: concepts such as bounded rationality, exploration/exploitation, organization design, organizational learning, absorptive capacity, routines, and imperfect contracting, all core elements of strategy and organizations fields, were all developed by students of the Carnegie tradition.

Most of the research covered in this seminar can be catalogued under a “Neo-Carnegie” label: research that revisits classic questions of the original Carnegie tradition, now armed with more powerful methodological and theoretical lenses. Among the methodological improvements of the Neo-Carnegie approach, mathematical models (both computational and closed-form) play a central role, as they allow to rigorously describe and analyze central constructs of the Carnegie tradition, such as complexity, search, organizational structure, group decision making, and organizational learning. Among the theoretical improvements, the Neo-Carnegie literature extends the Carnegie tradition, by incorporating recent developments in organizational economics and cognitive science.

Objectives for the seminar

- Study the main ways in which the Neo-Carnegie research contributes to the strategy and organizations literatures.
- Become familiar with a basic set of approaches to model cognition and decision making in organizations: search models, project selection models, and models of organizational structure.
- Explore ways in which your own research may illuminate fundamental questions of the Carnegie tradition as well as ways in which Neo-Carnegie research may illuminate your work.
Requirements

Although the readings have a strong bias toward conceptual and modeling papers, it is not necessary for you to have done any modeling work in the past. The readings, which will be accompanied with short in-class tutorials, will be sufficiently self-explanatory.

You are required to read all the assigned materials for each session and be prepared to actively participate in the discussions. In addition, the course has three other requirements:

1. Reaction notes. For four sessions of the course (you choose which ones), you should prepare a one-page document with your critical thoughts about the readings assigned to that session. Do not write a summary of the readings (doing so will be penalized), but provide your own thoughts on what you find particularly remarkable or problematic about the readings, and what novel connections or extensions the readings spark on you. Please upload this document to our shared folder before 5pm of the day before the corresponding session.¹

2. Paper discussion. All the readings of the course will be evenly split among the students, so that each student will be in charge of leading the discussion of at most one reading per session.² For each reading prepare no more than six slides (or an equivalent text outline) with the following suggested headings: (1) main question and why it matters; (2) method; (3) result; (4) implications; (5) discussion (i.e., thoughtful questions and ideas you pose to the class regarding key assumptions, problems, extensions, connections, etc.). You can add a sixth heading anywhere in the structure to delve into further detail about any other aspect of the paper you consider particularly relevant. Please bring to class enough printouts of this document for all the participants (if you prepare slides, print at two slides per page). Also, please upload this document to our shared folder before the beginning of the corresponding session.

3. Term paper. Each student is responsible for an individual research project. The project is due on session #6, at which time you should deliver a 10-minute presentation and a write up no longer than 30 pages of double spaced text. Please clear your proposed topic with me before session #4. Your research project should consist of the front end of a paper (i.e., introduction and theoretical motivation) plus an outline of the rest of the paper. For instance, if in the front end of the paper you propose a model, the outline for the rest of the paper could consist of a first draft of the model, a simple analysis, and a preliminary discussion of the results; or if in the front end you propose an empirical test, then the outline for the rest of the paper could discuss the dataset you would use, examples of analyses you would run, and a preliminary discussion. Note: there will be no ‘incomplete’ grades—if you do not complete the paper in time, you will fail the course.

¹The Internet address of the folder will be shared prior to the first session. All documents you upload to this folder must be in PDF format. Please include your last name in the file name.

²I will assign the readings for session #1, for all the other sessions, you are in charge of assigning the readings among yourselves. All of the readings will be available in the course shared folder.
Grading

The final grade is computed using the following weights:

- Class participation 20%
- Paper discussions 20%
- Reaction notes 20%
- Term paper 40%

Reading List

Note: for each session, all the readings are required, except those that appear below a horizontal bar, which are optional.

Session 1: Introduction

[Monday, March 14]


Session 2: Organizations as Interdependent Systems

[Monday, March 21]

Session 3: Organizational Structure and Group Decision Making

[Monday, March 28]
Session 4: Cognition in Organizations (I)

[Monday, April 4]


Session 5: Cognition in Organizations (II)

[Monday, April 11]

Session 6: Knowledge and Learning & Final Presentations

[Monday, April 18]


