

Developing a memory studies program: Lessons and challenges

Memory Studies

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Abstract

The article results from the creation and implementation of a 1-year online Memory Studies Certificate Program at UCLouvain (Belgium). It describes the program designed by a team of researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds (i.e. sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy) and with different pedagogical styles. After this description, the article highlights key lessons informed by data from lecturers' internal discussions and a survey involving the pioneer student cohort enrolled during the 2021–2022 academic year. This experience shows the importance of teaching as a way of contributing to field of Memory studies. As a counterpoint to the relentless publish-or-perish ethos, which often favors expedited dissemination of fragmented knowledge, creating a study program necessitates deep understanding and cohesive dialogue.

Keywords

ethics of memory, pedagogy, politics of memory, psychology of memory, sociology of memory

Developing a Memory Studies curriculum has a distinctive performative dimension—it is an exercise in presenting a field while simultaneously constructing it. As educators and scholars, we engage in constant self-reflection, aiming to incorporate the essential aspects of a growing

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discipline while acknowledging that the particular methods and topics used help define the discipline itself.

In this essay, we journey through the creation and implementation of a 1-year online Memory Studies Certificate Program at UCLouvain (Belgium). We cover the following four key topics: (1) Initial considerations, (2) our perspective on Memory Studies, (3) program design, and (4) lessons learned. The presentation is informed by data from lecturers' internal discussions and a survey involving the pioneer student cohort enrolled during the 2021–2022 academic year.

The team behind the certificate comprises a group of researchers with different perspectives on the study of memory (i.e. sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy) and with different pedagogical styles. In addition, their expertise covers multiple geographical regions, historical contexts, and diverse disciplinary and methodological approaches. After working together in collaborative projects, the idea of creating a 1-year program in Memory Studies became an evident outlet to advance the field.

The curriculum covers the following four primary domains: (1) Sociology of memory, (2) psychology of memory, (3) politics of memory, and (4) ethics of memory. Initial concerns emerged regarding potential overlap between memory dynamics covered across courses. The certificate program, encompassing 20 ECTS points,¹ can be completed within one academic year, and it is primarily envisaged as a supplementary education rather than a full master's degree.²

Teaching adopts a hybrid approach, combining online lectures with in-person meetings. We provide online content that students can discover at their own pace and complement it with online meetings, field trips, as well as student-led classes. Finally, we organize one full-day student conference where participants present their research and the connection between their "ordinary" work. Each teaching module involves small practical tasks such as quizzes and essays. At the end of the certificate, students are asked to hand in a final essay that should include approaches, concepts, and methods from at least two different disciplines.

The first cohort of students that responded to our call was quite diverse. The length of time since completing a bachelor's degree varied significantly among students, and so did the extent of their professional experience. Our program garnered interest not only from students in memory-related fields such as history, political science, and sociology, but also from practitioners, activists, artists, attorneys, mediators, and human rights advocates, all engaged in a range of practical issues that demand a nuanced comprehension of memory and memorialization. As of now, our program has welcomed two cohorts spanning three continents.

Initial considerations

Defining the scope and limits of "memory" is a debate at the heart of Memory Studies. While numerous authors examined the definition of "memory" and its various derivatives, the field has progressively taken an inclusive posture toward many disciplines and their approach to the topic (e.g. Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Barnier and Hoskins, 2018; Erll, 2011; Heux et al., 2023; Hirst and Manier, 2008; Tota and Hagen, 2016). With the emergence of the journal "Memory Studies" in 2008, followed by its association (MSA) in 2016, the interdisciplinary orientation of the field became even more strengthened. However, attempting to create bridges across disciplines is not always easy, and approaches that genuinely combine different methods are still rare (Cordonnier et al., 2022). We suggest that one of the reasons for this lack of integration comes from the inherent complexity of acquiring knowledge outside of one's field. An additional obstacle can be the homonymy of analytical concepts applied to memory—the usage of the same terms, which nonetheless carry significantly different meanings within each field of study. In his interview for our interdisciplinary module, William Hirst (2022) describes this challenge well:

As I reach across disciplinary boundaries, I often have trouble understanding what other people are saying. It takes me a long time. [. . .] I can absorb very quickly stuff in psychology, in my field. I can't do that as easily [in other disciplines]. Because often, [. . .] it takes me a while to understand where they start. Sometimes, the vocabulary is obscure.

Even at the doctoral level, educational paths tend to remain discipline centric; interdisciplinary work is rarely taught. Thus, an openness to other disciplines requires a certain amount of effort, respect, and curiosity, all while maintaining a healthy dose of intellectual humility.

For Memory Studies, a comprehensive program spanning various disciplines is paramount to equip scholars with the foundational tools to navigate diverse literature and foster cross-disciplinary connections. To the best of our knowledge at the time of our inquiry, no such program existed online, prompting us to construct one ourselves and thus commence addressing this critical lacuna in the field's educational repertoire.

Our perspective on memory studies

Rather than enforcing a rigid structure, we chose a more adaptable approach highlighting the diverse viewpoints that inform the discussion of memory. Our program aims not only to educate students on the significant discussions surrounding memory but also to empower them to engage in and shape the field of Memory Studies. In this light, there are four main facets included in the study program.

Memory as a process

As Halbwachs (1980) said, "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (p. 48). Understanding how memory works at the individual level is thus one of the key elements to understand memory at other levels. In that sense, memory can be examined as a combination of processes by which information, events or narratives are encoded, transformed and recalled. This approach teaches students the basic principles of individual memory, how social contexts influence it, and the frameworks we use to make sense of it. We focus particularly on the malleability of memory seen from a functional perspective (Conway, 2005). The way we remember past events, either at the individual or the collective level, highly depends on the reason(s) why we recall it in the first place (Bluck and Alea, 2002; Burnell et al., 2023). Other influences are also discussed, such as the role of personal and social identity (Liu and Hilton, 2005), memory's multidirectionality (Rothberg, 2009), or how social influences can lead to forgetting or false memory (Loftus, 2005). Overall, students are introduced to psychological elements of remembering and, more generally, are given some of the necessary tools to read and understand a scientific approach to the study of memory.

Memory as a topic

Here, we delve into themes that are implicitly or explicitly connected to the processes of remembrance and commemoration. On one hand, we examine diverse and heterogeneous research objects, such as national identity, monuments, museums, or trauma. On the other hand, we engage with a range of analytical and heuristic concepts like "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1980; Olick, 1999), "social memory" (Dimbath and Heinlein, 2022), "cultural memory" (Assmann, 2011), and "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2001), to name just a few. One goal of the program is to acquaint students with the richness of the field and equip them with conceptual tools to understand and examine the

phenomena competently. Rather than emphasizing students' mastery of precise definitions, we promote in our educational strategy a hands-on approach. From the outset, we encourage students to explore the topics and cases that intrigue them, utilizing concepts discussed throughout the program as well as analytical tools capable of adaptation and expansion. This approach positions students as active participants in the memory field, not just recipients of "approved" knowledge.

Memory as a method

One of the challenges of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of memory is the different methodologies used in creating and validating knowledge. In addition to presenting diverse methods such as participant observation, narrative analysis, large-scale surveys, and experimental approaches, we consider *memory as a method in itself*. Here, memory is not solely a referent object but an analytical lens for examining various phenomena. Conceptualizing memory as a method is an approach embodied throughout diverse segments of the curriculum. This encompasses both theoretical facets of the program as well as modules with a more pragmatic orientation, like those that probe the intersections of memory with politics, museology, or ethics.

For instance, when examining reconciliation, memory methodology can illuminate the genesis of propositions articulated by various parties, the ambiguities within their content, and relationships to other phenomena (such as identity), values (such as honor or dignity), or ultimate goals (e.g. justice). The use of memory methodology, therefore, enhances our understanding of differences, overlaps, potential points of contact and negotiation, as well as incompatible elements within each narrative. Conversely, memory methodology can help us identify dimensions of a conflict that are fueled by unreflected memory constructs instead of pragmatic concerns. These are conflicts where a *distinction without a difference* is at the core of the disagreement. These coexisting narratives about the past, or coexisting "truths," often impede transitional justice to advance (Adler, 2018).

Memory as a research field

Memory Studies is considered not as a derivative of another academic discipline but as a distinct study program in its own right. Although interconnected with other fields (primarily humanities and social sciences), Memory Studies fosters its own research traditions, theories, and analytical tools. Every burgeoning field of study undergoes an initial phase of prolific production. The "memory boom" over the last two decades has resulted in numerous publications dedicated to memory (Olick et al., 2011). The principal challenge at this moment lies in the transition from memory as an object of study to the establishment of Memory Studies as a field of study. This transition demands coordination among various researchers, developing communication channels, coordinating converging research agendas, and effectively managing the signal-to-noise ratio. Specialized programs in Memory Studies play a vital role in this progression, and thus another main objective of the program is to contribute to cohesive dialogues within the field.

Lessons learned

The program's inaugural year allows us to highlight eight key lessons.

Overlaps are not necessarily problematic

Although redundancy may hinder learning outcomes, the thematic overlap is less concerning. Memory-related overlaps between disciplines are inevitable, reflecting the reality that memory issues cannot be

neatly compartmentalized within academic boundaries. A degree of overlap can be beneficial, reinforcing learning and familiarizing students with recurring questions in Memory Studies. It also serves as a cohesive element for the program. As one student noted, the overlap helped them to “internalize some challenging topics.” For another respondent, it “helped bring together the entire certificate.”

Online teaching should be supplemented with in-person contact

While online certificates offer time-management flexibility, a lack of in-person communication and peer support can diminish motivation. This is further exacerbated by post-COVID “screen fatigue” and the general abundance of unsupervised MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) programs. The survey results emphasized the importance of regular live conversations and contact (online or in-person) for successful progression. These activities provide a forum for discussion, fostering accountability and community, setting the certificate apart from other online courses.

Students value involvement in concrete memory projects

Live sessions can be designed to present real memory case studies. Respondents suggested integrating ongoing memory projects and “good practice” presentations within courses. Since most lecturers are active in ongoing memory projects, devising short internship programs could provide a distinct advantage, allowing participants to grasp the practical challenges and grow through them. An alternative approach could involve creating scalable multi-year memory projects. Each cohort would be invited to contribute and generate publishable results, thereby elevating their profile as well as the program’s visibility.

Memory Studies programs should offer diverse teaching tools

Catering to varied learning preferences, instructors should provide materials through different didactic media, such as videos, transcripts, and PowerPoint-style presentations. Though this may increase the initial workload for instructors, it allows students to engage with the medium they favor and utilize them synergistically. For instance, video lectures could be accompanied by transcripts and time-stamped summary points. This is what we tried to achieve.

Students come from varied backgrounds and with diverse needs

As online certificates such as ours are open to anyone and not only people in academia, it is a challenge to create content that can be accessible to novices and stimulating enough for people with a certain amount of prior knowledge. Online learning is particularly apt to try and overcome this issue as we can propose different entry levels into the topic. For example, beginners might prefer introductory videos, while intermediate students could go straight into reading or exploring more practical case studies. However, it is essential not to presume prior knowledge, which is what we tried to achieve. In answering our question about whether they felt that students needed some prior knowledge or skills in order to complete the program successfully, one responded, “No, not at all. This is one of the strengths of the certificate: that everything is brought on a plate in an understandable way, even statistics in the psychology classes!” This leads us to our next point.

Critical thinking skills should be taught alongside content

Academic ways of thinking may seem like a given to us, but they can be very obscure for people who are not scholars. This is particularly true for Memory Studies, as the range of approaches is

very diverse. The strengths of an interdisciplinary program such as ours reside in our capacity to provide students with all the necessary tools they would need later on to further their ventures within the meanderings of memory.

It is important to stimulate curiosity

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that the program broadened their perspectives on memory and increased their awareness of memory's complexity and role in social life. One student wrote,

Before I perceived memory as stories from the past to be told to heal and repair and possibly prevent future problems. After the program, I consider memory as a knowledge field that can be studied and that impacts many other fields.

Other responses echoed these sentiments: “[M]emory issues are more present in both everyday situations and unusual situations than I thought,” and “[t]he program has really changed my understanding and perception of my surroundings and of society in general.” Memory Studies programs can serve as privileged platforms where memory is presented as a knowledge field *reflective of and susceptible to* complex social dynamics rather than simply a curious topic or a solution for social problems.

The presence of practitioners coming from different continents is fruitful

Expectations and assumptions can differ among participants, requiring us to scrutinize and clarify our own. From a cosmopolitan perspective, the presence of both Russian and Ukrainian participants (related to the Russian NGO *Memorial* and the Ukrainian Academia) in our study program helps us stay grounded in reality of ongoing conflicts, develop empathy, and a sense of nuance. The struggles over memories linked to the historical episodes of extreme violence often persist over generations. This observation, echoing the experience of students coming from conflict-affected regions, should not lead us to defeatism. Rather, it underscores the necessity of embracing a growth-oriented mindset. Unlike a fixed one, this mindset is amenable to long-term progress, despite the presence of impediments.

In conclusion, we believe that if Memory Studies want to define themselves as a proper interdisciplinary field, a panoply of programs offering a comprehensive and multidisciplinary introduction to the topic is essential. While our certificate may not encompass all the memory related disciplines, we aspire for it to serve as a starting point. The response of our initial cohort of participants was remarkably positive, motivating us to further refine the program in the future. This experience also reminds us of the importance of teaching as a way of shaping and contributing to our field of study. As a counterpoint to the relentless publish-or-perish ethos, which often favors expedited dissemination of fragmented knowledge, creating a study program necessitates deep understanding and cohesive dialogue. This process, ideally, leads to synergic teaching experiences, and fosters dialogue about the discipline's structure and future developments.

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Notes

1. ECTS stands for “European Credit Transfer and accumulation System.” It allows credits given by one higher education institution to be counted toward a qualification studied for at another European institution.
2. A full master's degree usually requires 120 ECTS.

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