GDES 440-001 Synthesis, Spring 2025
6 credits (studio)
synthes.ink

Wednesdays 9am–1:20pm 822 W Broad St
Fridays 9am–1:20pm Pollak 311

Instructor: Luiza Dale (she/her)
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Office hours by appointment

Course Description

This studio provides students the opportunity to synthesize knowledge, skill, and experiences accumulated over their progression through the program. Students are required to define and execute a capstone project that demonstrates their readiness and capacity to engage responsibly and creatively in the field. The class culminates in a public exhibition.

Learning Outcomes

Students are encouraged to assert their role as design practitioners, independently defining and managing capstone projects over a 15-week period, and receiving feedback from peers, instructors, external critics, and VCU faculty. Students present their initial proposals, research, and progress throughout the term for assessment, culminating in a showcase of their final work through a show, a publication, and a website.

This course has four objectives:

- To initiate and pursue a focused design inquiry
- To demonstrate that work, from conception to production, is held accountable to an internal logic established by the critical frameworks of the work
- To demonstrate a synthesis of knowledge through verbal, visual, and written articulation
- To engage meaningfully and productively within the studio and community

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Class Structure

Classes will be composed of 1-on-1 check-ins, presentations, group conversations and exercises, in-class work time, and occasional lectures.

Individually… You will work on your capstone project through independent work, 1-on-1 check-ins, developing a workshop that will take place in Multi Studio II, and a Synthesis presentation.

As a group… The class will work on showcasing work by developing and presenting a curatorial concept proposal, and participating in exhibition teams to produce the exhibition identity, website, catalog, and exhibition design.

Wednesdays will be more about individual work while Fridays will focus on collective work. *Remember to keep a close eye on our schedule!*

Weekly Progress

Every week, please fill out [this progress sheet](#) to provide a brief update on your progress over the course of the semester. How is your capstone project going? What have you been reading or watching? What is next or frustrating or new? Any setbacks? As weeks go by, your updates should cover three main areas: (1) your senior capstone project, (2) Multi-Studio II workshops, (3) your work with your exhibition team. This writing is supposed to be casual, not essayistic but more like informal notes to keep track of your work. *This should be useful for you!*

Work Documentation

In addition to taking note of your weekly progress, you are required to save your weekly work (design, research, notes, images, screenshots, everything) to our [class Drive](#).

You are expected to develop a clear system for naming and keeping track of your digital files. Please do not name files "book" or "finalfinal project." Be specific and clear so that you can document your progress and easily navigate your work archive. Do not upload working files (you should have a system for doing this for yourself), but exports instead (for example: .jpeg, .pdf).

Suggested file naming convention:
GDES440_Synthesis_NameLastname_ProjectTitle_Thing.suffix

Schedule
Colors: capstone/1-on-1/synthesis presos | curatorial concept | workshop | exhibition teams

    Week 1: Introduction + Revisiting your work from last semester

W   **1/15**
    What are we doing here?
    Introductions

Syllabus overview, setting expectations for the class, how it works with Multi Studio II
Getting set up: Class website walkthrough, Class agreement + People doc,
Progress sheet and Signups + Class Drive
Exercise: what is my work about?
For next class: Prepare for flash presentations

F   1/17
All sections meet together at 321 for collective introduction
Assign pairs for feedback/taking notes
Flash presentations *(remember to add your slides to this folder!)*
Signups for our first 1-on-1 check-ins next week (lottery)
For next class: Prepare for our first 1-on-1 check-ins

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 2: Making a plan for your capstone project

W   1/22
Feedback pairs discuss flash presentations from last class
1-on-1 check-ins + Open studio time/capstone project

F   1/24
1-on-1 check-ins + Open studio time/capstone project
Curatorial concept prompt introduction

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 3: Curatorial prompt + Prep for Multi II workshops

W   1/29
In-class work session: curatorial concepts
Multi II workshop prompt introduction and work + Exercise: workshop flyers

F   1/31
In-class work session: curatorial concepts
Getting set up for Multi II workshops starting on Tuesday 2/11

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 4: Third semester reviews + Optional check-ins

W   **2/5**
No class! Third semester reviews…
Use this time to work on your workshops for Multi II…

F   **2/7**
No class!
Optional 1-on-1 check-ins over Zoom, first-come first-serve, time window TBD
Use this time to work on your workshops for Multi II…

Week 5: Curatorial proposals due + Workshops happening in Multi II

W   **2/12**
In-class work session: curatorial concepts (finalize for Friday!)
Multi II workshop adjustments as needed
Open studio time/capstone project
Signups for 1-on-1 synthesis prep check-ins next week

F   **2/14**
Curatorial concept presentations and vote
Exhibition teams start

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 6: Workshops happening in Multi II + Prep for Synthesis presentations

W   **2/19**
1-on-1 check-ins: prep for synthesis presentations

F   **2/21**
Processing workshop feedback
In-class work session: prep for synthesis presentations
Exhibition team production schedules due

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

Week 7: Synthesis presentations happening in Multi II

W   **2/26**
Open studio time/capstone project

F   **2/28**
Open studio time/capstone project

Remember to… Update the [progress sheet](#) and upload work to the [class Drive](#)

Week 8: Synthesis presentations happening in Multi II

W   **3/5**
Open studio time/capstone project

F   **3/7**
Open studio time/capstone project

Remember to… Update the [progress sheet](#) and upload work to the [class Drive](#)

Week 9: Spring break

W   **3/12**
No class! Spring break…

F   **3/14**
No class! Spring break…

Note: the following dates are fluid at the semester start…
Plans will become more concrete after spring break.

Week 10

W   **3/19**
Getting back into it + Exercise: wait, what's my work again?
Open studio time/capstone project

F   3/21
All sections meet together at 321 for PROPRAC alumni panel
Exhibition team work

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive
Note: mid-term grades are due on this day + Luiza collects class feedback

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Week 11

W   3/26
In-class work session: job stuff (CV, portfolio, emailing, etc.)
Open studio time/capstone project

F   3/28
Exhibition team presentations

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 12

W   4/2
Open studio time/capstone project

F   4/4
Exhibition team work

Remember to… Update the progress sheet and upload work to the class Drive

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Week 13

W   4/9
Open studio time/capstone project

F   4/11
Exhibition team work

Remember to… Update the [progress sheet](#) and upload work to the [class Drive](#)

Week 14

W   **4/16**
No class! Luiza out of town…

F   **4/18**
Exhibition team work

Remember to… Update the [progress sheet](#) and upload work to the [class Drive](#)

Week 15: Exhibition install + Course conclusion

W   **4/23**
Class conclusion and reflection
Sign ups for Alumni Reviews, to come
Fill out senior exit questionnaire, to come
Fill out course evaluations, to come

F   **4/25**
Exhibition team work

Remember to… Update the [progress sheet](#) and upload work to the [class Drive](#)

Dates TBD: Sixth-semester reviews
Dates TBD: Senior Show
Dates TBD: De-install

Assignments

Flash presentations
A (very) quick and casual 5-minute overview of the research related to your capstone project, following on the work you completed for Critical Inquiry in the Fall. These presentations are for the class to get to know each other and for starting a conversation about what your capstone project may be, no matter its current state.

You can bring physical materials to class or present digitally using Google Slides or a PDF file. Please upload all digital files to this folder by class time and make sure share settings allow all users to view. Be mindful of time as we will stick with 5 minutes per person only.

Our first 1-on-1 check-in
A 20-minute in-depth conversation about your capstone project covering a plan of work for the semester, ideas for your workshop for Multi Studio II, and your Synthesis presentation.

1-on-1 check-ins
Casual touch bases where we discuss your capstone progress as the semester progresses, including how your project is represented within our group exhibition to come. Some will be scheduled (you will be prompted to sign up) while others will be impromptu on a first come first serve basis.

Curatorial concepts
The class will work in the 2 group configuration established for Multi Studio II. Each group will spend three weeks developing a curatorial concept for the senior exhibition. The exhibition location is TBD as of the start of the semester, more information to come. The curatorial concept will outline a general framework that can be applied to all aspects of the exhibition including the identity, catalog, website and installation. On Friday 2/14 all Synthesis class sections will come together to host curatorial concept presentations by all the student groups across the four sections. We will collectively decide on one concept to move forward with.

Multi Studio II workshops
A workshop is an interactive session that allows participants to engage with a specific topic actively. It's a dynamic platform where knowledge is shared, skills are developed, and collaborative learning takes center stage. For seniors, the Multi II workshops present a valuable opportunity to delve deeper into your capstone project, gain insights, and refine your ideas through teaching and leading.

We will use our time together in Synthesis to develop your workshops which will be then held as part of Multi Studio II in 3 consecutive sections. This repetition is so you can test out and iterate on (make edits and build upon) your work as needed, as well as gather as much feedback as possible towards your capstone project. At the end of the 3 workshop sessions, we will have a day of reflection where students will present their findings within Multi Studio II. Workshop duration and further details are still to be determined. More information will be shared as we move through the semester.

Synthesis presentations
A formal 15-minute articulation of your capstone project as part of Multi Studio II, to the Multi Studio I students as well as your peers. At this point in the semester, your capstone project should be clearly defined and not hypothetical, with a tangible form that can be understood and critiqued.

Exhibition team work

After a curatorial concept is decided upon, students will be split into exhibition teams to create the exhibition identity, catalog, website, and installation design. Each team will be guided by one Synthesis faculty: Steven for identity, Luiza for catalog, Herdimas for website, and HH for exhibition. Teams meet most Fridays after Spring Break. Schedule and tasks will be agreed upon and assigned as class progresses.

On Friday 2/21 exhibition team production schedules are due. The production schedule should outline the budget and a detailed timeline for realizing the group's deliverable of the exhibition. The document should also include which students are assigned as the two co-leaders of the exhibition team.

On Friday 3/28 exhibition team presentations will take place across Synthesis sections. These presentations are an opportunity for each group to check in and provide all necessary design templates and plan for the final realization of the exhibition.

Evaluation and Grading

Your class grade will be a reflection of the following aspects:
30%   Participation
30%   Process
40%   Realization

The above will be evaluated based on the following rubric:
- Consistent attendance and timeliness
- Active, generous, and constructive engagement
- Thoughtful responses to prompts
- Commitment to in-depth research and an iterative, critical, and experimental process
- Openness and responsiveness to feedback
- Purposeful articulation of design ideas and intentions
- Production, manufacture, and manipulation of prototypes and final artifacts
- Care for craft and presentation

There will be no grades shared for individual assignments but you will be graded on your body of work over the course of the semester. All assignments will be marked for timely completion. Students will receive an interim midterm grade to help with performance assessment.

Grades:
- A (4.0) = Exceptional achievement. Substantial effort and achievement in the areas of critical thinking, technique, and presentation.
- B (3.0) = Very good work that satisfies goals of course; clear and convincing structure of a project that is complex and unique.

- C (2.0) = Average. Original capstone project executed, but does not go beyond the minimum requirements.
- D (1.0) = Below average. Very little effort or is incomplete. Lacks full commitment.
- F (0) = Failure, no credit. The student exhibits an unsatisfactory ability to communicate and execute ideas and a pattern of low productivity.

Attendance

Attendance is essential and punctuality to all classes is expected. Please be in touch if you need to be absent and catch up on what you missed by consulting with other students. See also the university and departmental attendance policies.

This is an in-person synchronous course that meets on Wednesdays and Fridays from 9am to 1:20pm. You need to make yourself available during these times, even if we don't always meet the full duration of every class period. When exhibition team meetings start taking place as the semester progresses, you will be responsible for attending these meetings during our scheduled class times and moving around classrooms as needed.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

As students, designers, and educators, we must acknowledge the lineages of white supremacy, racial discrimination, and other forms of systemic oppression that exist within our society in the U.S. and abroad. We come to the classroom from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. It is important to be respectful and empathetic towards others, be open to criticism, and engage in new ways of learning. On the first day of class, we will write a group agreement that outlines our collective classroom standards for the course. We will be responsible for upholding the agreement throughout the semester.

VCU land acknowledgement: We acknowledge that the land each of us live, learn and thrive are the traditional, ancestral and unceded homelands of Indigenous and tribal nations. Our home and institution is on the original homelands of the Monocan tribal nation(s). We acknowledge the genocide and systems of oppression that have dispossessed Indigenous people of their lands and we honor and respect the diverse and beautiful peoples still connected to this land.

Technology Use

Do not let screens create a barrier from participating in class. Be respectful: silence cell phones, set messages to "Do Not Disturb," and abstain from checking email or social media. *Thank you!*

Links

- Class website: synthes.ink
- Signups
- Progress sheet *(write your weekly updates here!)*
- Class Drive *(upload your weekly work here!)*
- Class agreement
- Class playlist
- Zoom, if needed: https://vcu.zoom.us/my/luizadale
- objectsandmethods.net

Credit

This syllabus modifies and takes inspiration from many that have come before it. Thank you to my fellow Synthesis faculty Herdimas Anggara, HH Hiaasen, and Steven Hoskins for your collaboration. Thanks to David Shields, nicole killian, and Lauren Thorson for the generous notes and references in the planning of this course.

This syllabus is always in progress, with information being updated as class unfolds in real time. Check the class website for the most up-to-date information.

APPENDIX

Syllabus Statement

Students should visit http://go.vcu.edu/syllabus and thoroughly review all of the listed syllabus statement information. The full university syllabus statement includes information such as safety, registration, the VCU Honor Code, student conduct, withdrawal from courses, and more.

VCUarts Syllabus Addendum

The School of the Arts is deeply committed to the university's mission of advancing knowledge and student success. We do this in a number of ways, including fostering an inclusive environment and ensuring students' well-being. Students' needs and concerns are addressed by several university and VCUarts offices:

Safety

Use the VCU Classroom Safety icon on all VCU computers and the VCU Equity and Access Services link to seek help for anything ranging from health and wellness, threatening or disruptive behavior or other safety issues. You may request help for yourself or another student.

VCUarts Safety Guide offers comprehensive information on environmental, health and safety information as it relates to the visual and performing arts.

Note: VCUarts values artistic freedom and expression while also ensuring safety. Students should consult their instructor for guidance as they assess potential safety concerns related to a proposed project or performance. Any project or performance that is determined by the school to present an unreasonable safety risk, including to the physical safety of the artist or any other person or to property, will not be graded and may result in additional university administrative and disciplinary action under the The Student Code of Conduct and/or other university policies.

Health & Wellness

University Student Health Services offer a wide range of primary care services in the following areas: blood and/or body fluid exposures, immunizations, mental health & ADHD, nutrition consults, sexual health & wellness and more.

University Counseling Services provides comprehensive evaluation and consultation for mental health care, including: case management and referral services to a community provider, brief individual and couples therapy, group therapy, identity-based resources, consultation, and more.

The RecWell center offers a wide range of services and resources for students, including information on mindfulness, substance use, recovery support, mental health and nutrition.

Rams in Recovery is a collegiate recovery program on campus. The program offers a clubhouse, events and a wide range of support pointed towards student success.

VCUarts Posting Guidelines

Please review the VCUarts Posting Guidelines. As our guidelines state: "*The hallways and classrooms of VCU School of the Arts buildings are instructional spaces. Their primary function is to further the educational mission of VCU and VCUarts, and any materials posted outside of designated areas is subject to removal. Only VCUarts may*

post signs, posters, flyers or other materials throughout VCUarts buildings. In general, VCUarts displays only materials related to its own programs, services or events."

Please also review the [Interim Campus Expression and Space Utilization](#).

Equity & Access

Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity ([SAEO](#)) provides reasonable accommodations and services to students with disabilities enrolled in VCU's Monroe Park Campus.

Use this [form](#) if you/a student needs support or resources. Your concern will be routed to the Dean of Student Advocacy team to provide assistance.

[Equity and Access Services](#) respond to student and staff needs related to accessibility, equal opportunity, affirmative action, discrimination, harassment, protection of minors, and Title IX. Please review the specific content areas or, if you know what action you need to take, click on the appropriate link to begin the process you are interested in.

Gender inclusive restrooms within the university can be located with this online [map](#).

VCUarts Inclusion and Equity

[The VCUarts Office of Inclusion and Equity](#) is committed to improving diversity, inclusion, and equity at the VCU School of the Arts. The Office is committed to ensuring that individuals with different perspectives, life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social identities feel safe and welcomed. Assistant Dean Holly Alford, is available to provide assistance and support. Holly Alford can be reached at artsinclusive@vcu.edu or (804) 827-3476. Please include this email address as part of your contact list.

VCUarts statement on AI

Some of you have reached out to ask for support with a statement on the use of AI in your courses. We are providing the following statement for your consideration: "Artificial Intelligence platforms will/will not be permitted in this course. Please communicate with the course instructor to ensure you understand what is permitted for this course. Please refer to the [VCU Student Conduct and Academic Integrity policies](#) as you consider sourcing your work for each assignment."