

Hamilton

If you aren't sick of the pandemic, Ontario universities offer COVID courses this fall

Schools teaching pandemic-themed courses in health, law, politics, art, economics

[Haydn Watters](#) · CBC News · Posted: Aug 26, 2020 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: August 26



A look inside artist Ilene Sova's classroom for the fall — her home office. She's teaching a course about responding to the pandemic using art at OCAD University in Toronto, just one of the new COVID-themed courses being offered around the province. (Submitted by Ilene Sova)

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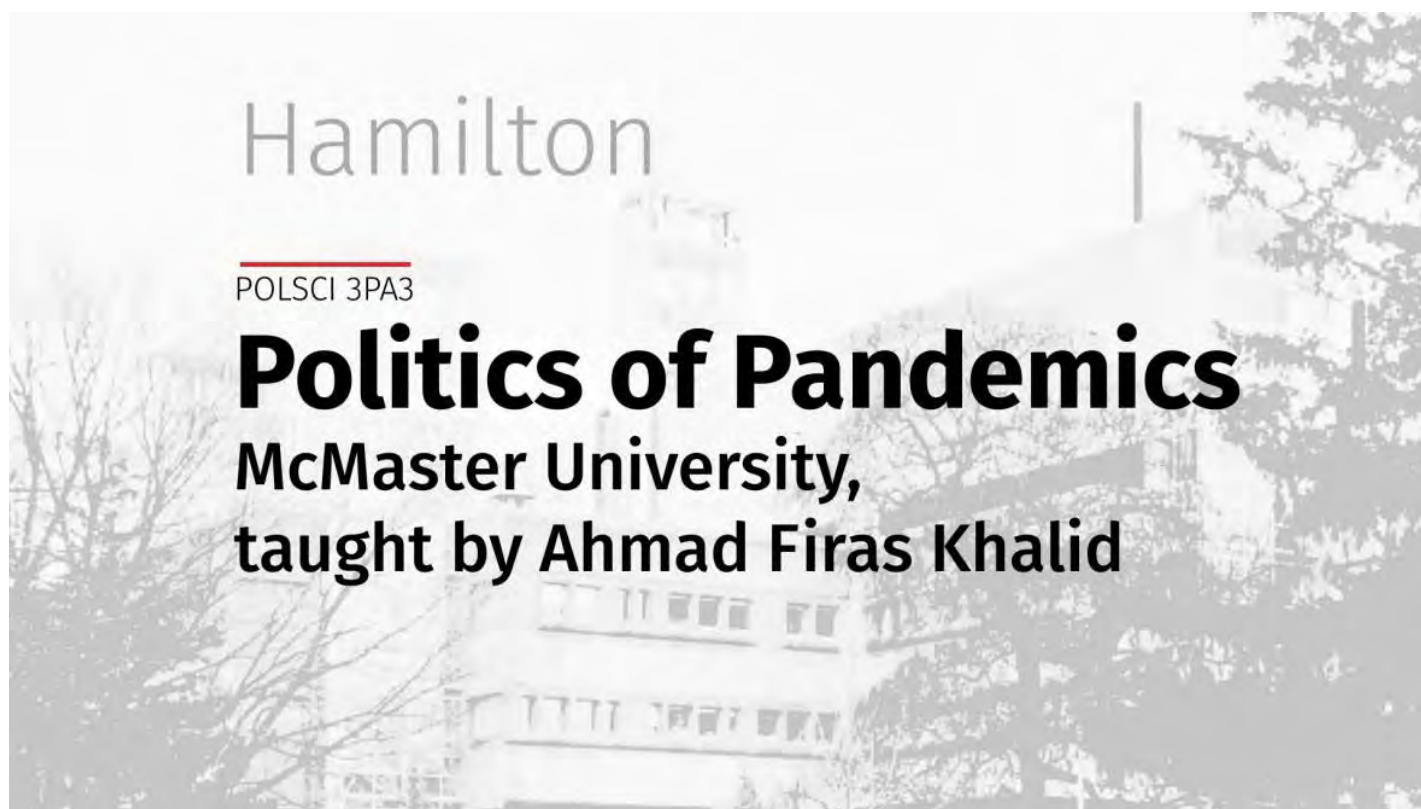
If you've haven't thought about COVID-19 enough this summer, you can study it this fall.

At least 11 universities around Ontario have scrambled to offer COVID-themed courses this coming semester, in subjects like health, law, politics, history, sociology, economics and art.

Many more instructors have incorporated COVID into their pre-existing classes or training, most which will happen remotely, as post-secondary schools continue to grapple with how to get students back on campus safely.

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Here's a look at some of the new courses — and how to teach about the pandemic while we're still in the midst of it.



Demand for COVID content high: Ahmad Firas Khalid is teaching four courses at Ontario universities this fall and all have a tie to COVID-19. He said when the pandemic started, students kept emailing to see if any courses would help them understand the virus better. Some of his courses now have waiting lists.

"It tells you we're feeding what people want," he said. "Students are hungry for the knowledge."

Unsure how to teach it: Khalid said developing this course was a "hot mess."

"It is like a mind puzzle," he said. "I would start creating it and then I would need to take a break and go for like a two hour run and just clear my head."

He landed on offering a simulation-based course, where students play different roles and work through pandemic challenges, like school closures and acquiring vaccines.



Ahmad Firas Khalid's McMaster course will focus on the political and global implications of epidemics. He said shifting to teaching online has been 'one of the biggest challenges' he's faced as an educator. (Submitted by Ahmad Firas Khalid)

Schools struggle to keep pace: It usually takes a long time to develop a new university course — some schools are busy planning their first COVID courses to roll out in the winter. But Khalid said universities need to fast-track course development so they can teach what's relevant.

"We can no longer offer the archaic model of teaching," he said. "When we tap on the pulse of the nation ... students are then interested." He has created room for flexibility in his syllabus, so any new COVID developments can be added.



Important to learn while it's happening: For instructor Kim Martin, it's pertinent students study past plights, so they can contextualize COVID. Topics include the Black Death and the AIDS epidemic.

"It's important for students to know that we recognize what we're going through," she said. "This gives them a chance to reflect on that and a way of thinking through history for something that's directly impacting them."

- [How some universities are doing frosh week amid a global pandemic](#)

How will COVID be remembered? It's difficult: She's not too sure what will mark this era, given the massive amount of information we're getting on COVID everyday.

"It's going to be up to more than historians to determine what sticks around," she said. "Librarians [and] archivists will have a big role in this. People who run social media companies will have a big role in it [with] what happens to their data."

**Ontario Morning from CBC Radio 4:31**

If you're not sick of COVID, you can study it this fall

At some universities around Ontario, COVID has become part of the curriculum. Haydn Watters meets the instructors teaching brand new COVID-19 courses in art, history, political science and law. 4:31

Worries with moving class online: Martin usually has small classes and makes a big effort to get to know her students. That will be much harder online. "I want to respect their privacy and I want to respect that they might not be comfortable sharing in the way they would in the classroom."

She wants to make students feel they are part of a group, even though they are learning from a screen.



Course inspired by pandemic experience: The pandemic prevented Ilene Sova from going to her studio, so she started making small collages based on what she had at home. "Then I thought to myself, wouldn't our students also have the same feeling?"

So she developed a course about making art responding to the pandemic. Students will study art made from other tumultuous experiences, like the 1918 pandemic and of Missing and

Murdered Indigenous Women — and then make their own.

No fancy supplies? No problem: Some students have worried about not having access to expensive paints, canvasses or brushes at school and whether they would still get a good mark. Sova has made the course open-ended and expects students use supplies from home, like tea, coffee grounds and spices.



Ilene Sova usually makes large scale oil portraits. But when the pandemic prevented her from going to her studio she started making small collages, with magazines, paper and markers she had at home. It helped inspire her new COVID-themed course. (Submitted by Ilene Sova)

"I've actually put into my class description that I expect that the work will have a DIY feel," she said. "I'm very excited to see what's going to happen."

She's nervous too: It's her first time teaching online, so she'll have to get used to it. She's been getting tips from a Facebook group, full of other arts educators, who are rooting each other on.

"I'm a really passionate teacher. I love being in the classroom so for me it's just going to be missing the students," she said. "It's going to be an adventure. And we're all very nervous but I'm feeling pretty optimistic about it."

Sault Ste. Marie

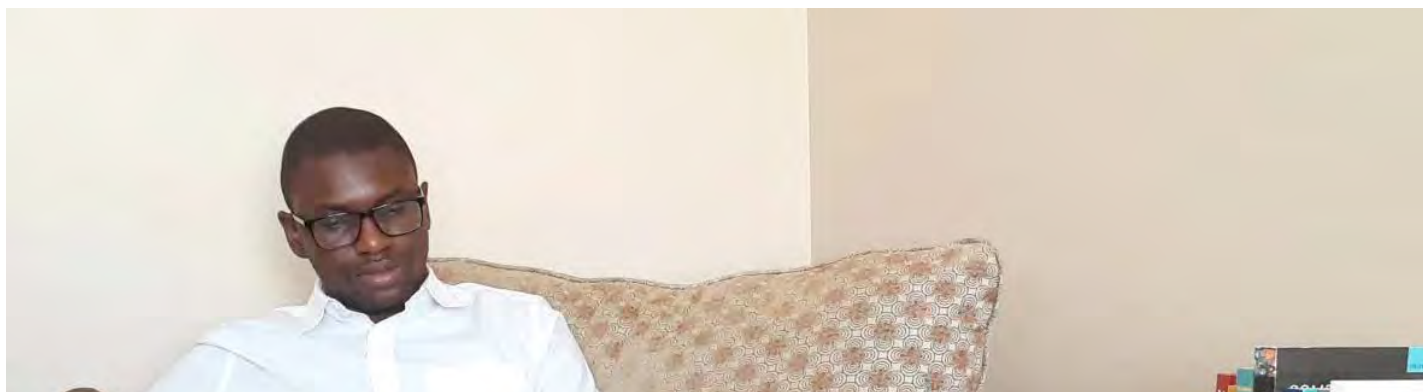
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Special Topics in Law and Justice II: Law/Politics of the COVID Pandemic Algoma University, taught by Olabanji Akinola

There's more to understanding COVID: Olabanji Akinola believes that to properly understand COVID, one needs to study the legal and political aspects of the pandemic — which he'll teach in this course.

"COVID-19 has been a very tough experience but we need to understand that it doesn't operate in a vacuum."

Always more to learn: He's spent the summer archiving and documenting COVID information that will help him teach his course. It's led him to even more questions about the virus.





Olabanji Akinola is used to teaching in-person, so this fall will be different with classes online. He's still determining exactly where he'll be teaching from, perhaps an empty classroom. 'My own advice to myself is to do my own very best to deliver a very effective class.' (Submitted by Olabanji Akinola)

Akinola wants to know specifics about how it could have been better managed globally and what could have been done differently.

"What exactly did the WHO not do? Or not do enough of?"

Crafting pandemic curriculum while in it is challenging: "That's the beauty of it. And that's the challenge of it all," he said.

"We're living witnesses to it. So we will be the textbooks for COVID going forward."

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