Introducing the WPR approach:
What's the problem represented to be?

**Presenter:** Professor Emerita Carol Bacchi, Politics Discipline, School of History and Politics

**Scope:** The WPR approach offers an analytic strategy for critical thinking that can be applied in a wide range of fields, including public policy, health sciences, geography, law, psychology and accounting/finance.

**Overview:** The course introduces a new methodology for policy analysis that treats policy 'problems' as problematizations, constituted in discourse. The methodology, called 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (or WPR approach), offers both a novel way of thinking and a new way of analyzing policy. As a way of thinking the approach mounts a challenge to the current dominant intellectual paradigm that focuses on solving 'problems'. As a novel approach to policy analysis it challenges the conventional view that public policies are responses or reactions to problems that sit outside the policy process, waiting to be discovered and solved. By contrast, the WPR approach argues that policies contain implicit representations of the 'problems' they appear to address. The goal of the approach is to subject these problem representations to critical scrutiny.

To this end, the approach offers six questions which together probe the following issues: the conceptual premises underpinning specific problem representations, the contingent practices and processes through which particular problem representations have gained authenticity and authority, the effects or implications of specific problem representations, and the possible benefits of alternatives. A key part of the methodology is an undertaking to apply the same mode of analysis to one's own proposals, instituting a practice of self-problematization.

**Outline:** The course consist of four sessions which:
- locate the WPR approach in relation to existing social theory;
- explain the purposes of the six questions and the undertaking to apply them to one's own proposals;
- offer more detail on key concepts: discourse, problematization, governmentality;
- apply the approach to exemplars.

**Who will benefit:** PhD students in a range of fields, especially those who engage at some level with public policy, would benefit from this course: students in Politics and History, but more broadly all students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Postgraduate students in other faculties, including the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of the Professions, would find the WPR methodology helpful.

**Recent interest and application:** The WPR approach has attracted wide interest among PhD students in a number of countries, including Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. In January 2013 Professor Bacchi offered a short course introducing the approach to PhD students at the prestigious Essex School of Discourse Analysis, University of Essex. In March 2013 she presented a similar course to the School of Business, Victoria University, Wellington. She regularly receives emails asking for more guidance on how to apply the approach. The course is addressed to this need.

**Case study material (for Session 4)**


PROGRAM:

Thursday 10 April 2014

9.15 am – Welcome

9.30 – 10.30 am - Locating the WPR approach

10.30 – 11.00 am – Coffee

11.00 – 12.30 pm – A close look at the six questions and the undertaking to apply them to one’s own proposals.

12.30 – 1 pm – Questions and discussion

Friday 11 April 2014

9.15 – 9.30 am - Welcome

9.30 - 10.30 am - Explicating key concepts: discourse, problematization, governmentality

10.30 – 10.45 am - Putting the WPR approach to work (exemplars): introduction

10.45 – 11.30 pm - Coffee + group work

11.30 – 12.15 pm – Group reports

12.15 – 1.00 pm – Comments on exemplars + conclusion

• A list of pre-reading materials will be provided upon registration.

• A list of references used in the course will be made available to participants.