

LAS 2: Communities in America
Fall 2010/Spring 2011
New England College
98 Bridge Street
Henniker, NH 03242

Exploring Community in Our Towns: The New Hampshire Town Meeting

Professors:

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Course Duration: Fall/Spring 2010-2011 (Classes will be held from October 26 to December 7, 2010 and January 25 to March 12, 2011. A final project will be due by the end of the spring semester for public exhibition).

Credits: 4 Credits. Students will receive the 4 credits at the end of spring 2011 semester. This course cannot be taken for 2 credits only.

So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.—This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.

- Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*

Course Description:

Like the stage manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (inspired by life in nearby Peterborough, NH) who believes that what is fundamental about a community is not its heroic deeds or great statesmen, but the quiet, routine acts of everyday life, we will explore the character of New Hampshire towns through the unique ritual of people gathering together each year and deciding their priorities as a community. The traditional town meeting in New Hampshire is disappearing. Today, only one-third of New Hampshire residents live in towns that conduct traditional town meetings, however, many towns in the vicinity of Henniker still do govern themselves in this way. For seven weeks in Fall semester (2010) students will meet once a week to discuss assigned readings which will include various texts, including a history of the New England Town Meeting, political and sociological studies of the tradition, as well as appropriate literary works (e.g. selections from Thoreau and Hawthorne, and Wilder's *Our Town*) and other writings and artistic works that explore community. Invited guests will include writers, historians and artists who will help educate students about the complexities of town government. During this course students make connections with town officials in preparation for the next semester's work.

In spring semester (2011) students will continue with their research as well as map out and plan their individual or collaborative projects that will integrate the concept of the New Hampshire

town meeting. They will also conduct interviews with town officials and residents, or become involved with the community in an area that is appropriate to their interests. Students work will be offered for public presentation and exhibition in the spring.

Required Texts:

Mansfield, Howard. *In the Memory House*. Colorado: Fulcrum Publishers, 1993.

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. New York: Samuel French Publishers, 2010.

In-Class Reading and Library Reserve Material Include (but not limited to) Whole Texts or Excerpts from:

Stephen Bloom and Peter Feldstein: *The Oxford Project* (Photography)

Frank Bryan: *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*

Harvey Pekar: *Studs Terkel's Working: A Graphic Adaptation*

Studs Terkel: *Working*

John Trumbull: "Town Meeting" from *M'Fingal*

Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass and Democracy*

Joseph Zimmerman: *The New England Town Meeting*

Course Objectives:

- Students will study and examine the NH town meeting, its traditions and process, specifically through the study and interaction of the Henniker, NH Town Meeting.
- Students will meet with a diverse group of experts on the NH Town Meeting process as to broaden their understanding of the definition and concept of community.
- Students will engage in a community project that demonstrates an understanding of the complexity and dynamics of the decision making process in communities.
- Students will bring the practices and knowledge of their own academic interests and disciplines (at whatever stage in their educational process) in responding to the NH Town Meeting.

LAS 2 Course Outcomes:

Students will:

- Define and analyze a specific community;
- Identify the benefits of the status quo within the community;
- Identify the dynamics of change for the community;
- Apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired from the course to an examination of their own lives, groups and communities.

Evaluation: This course is offered as a Pass/No Record

Students must successfully attend classes, participate in the Henniker, NH Town Meeting on March 12, 2011, and successfully complete a project for public exhibition in order to receive credit (4 credits) for this course.

Course Schedule

(Subject to change at the professors' discretion)

Fall 2010: (October 26 through December 7, 2010)

Week One: Introduction

During our first week we will outline specific goals for course participation and desired outcomes. We will read excerpts from course texts and discuss the variety of ways that the NH Town Meeting has been historically depicted in literature and art. Specifically we will focus on the evocative images, textual and visual, that have created the image of the NH Town Meeting. Discussion of the role of conformity and dissent in the decision making process will be included in our discussion. Reading will include: Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," and excerpts from Mansfield's *In the Memory House* and Wilder's *Our Town*

Week Two: Guest: Don Melander, Ph.D. Senior Professor of Literature: "Democracy and the Poetic and Visual Imagination."

For over thirty years, Professor Melander has been extensively involved in faculty governance issues at NEC. From 1977 to 1979, Professor Melander served as Director of the British Campus in Arundel, Sussex, and recently, in addition to his teaching duties, Don served as the Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Henniker campus before moving this year into his senior professor role. Currently he is involved in the NEC Honors' Program and teaches courses in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum. Over the past decades Don has been the recipient of numerous grants from the NH Humanities Council to promote book discussions across the state of NH on a variety of texts. During his time with us, Don will discuss the complexities of community governance by using examples from film and literature. Don will lead our discussion on "Democracy and the Poetic and Visual Imagination"

Week Three: Guest: Rebecca Rule, New Hampshire Writer, Humorist and Storyteller: "A Perspective on the New Hampshire Town Meeting." (Meet in Sayce Lounge in the Simon Center)

Becky Rule will visit us this week and present "A Perspective on the New Hampshire Town Meeting." Becky is the author of *Live Free and Eat Pie: A Storyteller's Guide to New Hampshire* (Islandport Press) and a collection titled *Could Have Been Worse: True Stories, Embellishments and Outright Lies*, (Plaidswede Press). Rule is known regionally for her humorous storytelling focusing on "New Hampshire Stories" She is a roster artist for the NH State Council on the Arts and for serves on the steering committee for the New Hampshire Young Writers Conference. She also hosts the interview show "The Authors Series" which airs occasionally on New Hampshire Public Television. She is currently at work on a project focused on the NH Town Meeting.

Week Four: Examination of the History and Process of the NH Town Meeting

During this week we will examine the history of the NH town meeting through the readings of excerpts from Joseph Zimmerman's *The New England Town Meeting* and Frank Bryan: *Real Democracy*:

The New England Town Meeting and How It Works. Students will study to gain an understanding of the legislative process involved in the NH Town meeting so as to be familiar with the political dynamics and processes experienced by town meeting officials and community members.

Week Five: Guest: Peter Flynn, Town Administrator, Henniker, NH

Peter will meet with students to discuss his observations and knowledge on the organizational structures and administrative process in a small NH town. He will bring a wealth of experience to our class and discuss ways in which NEC students might get involved in short and long term projects that benefit “Town/Gown” relationships. He will discuss the challenges and the rewards of small NH town governance and its relationship to the democratic structures that we have become acquainted with over the past four weeks. Students will be asked to prepare questions for Peter prior to class.

Week Six: Guest: Paul Wainwright: Photographer: *A Space for Faith: Colonial Meetinghouses of New England*

Paul Wainwright is a professional photographer living in NH whose forthcoming book, *A Space for Faith: Colonial Meetinghouses of New England*, visually explores the dynamic history of community meetinghouses throughout New England. The book which is part of the “Colonial Meetinghouse Project” includes large-format prints that examine the meetinghouse as a center of community and “an important point of contact for all.” Students will be asked to view the book prior to class and come to class with specific questions for our guest.

Week Seven: Semester Wrap Up

During this time we will meet as a group over dinner to reflect on our observations and the knowledge gained over the past weeks. During this meeting we will discuss ideas pertaining to our final projects and how we will best execute our ideas into action.



Spring 2011 Schedule (January 25 to March 12, 2011)

Week One: Review of Previous Semester

This week we will meet as a group and review our work during the fall 2010 semester. We will continue to discuss our ideas for our final projects.

Week Two: Guest: Howard Mansfield, author of *In the Memory House*

Howard Mansfield is the author of a number of books including: *The Same Ax Twice: Restoration and Renewal in a Throw-Away Age* (University Press of New England, 2000), *The Bones of the Earth* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), and *Turn and Jump: How Time and Place Fell Apart* (2010). Considered a “cultural historian,” Mansfield is highly regarded for his extensive publications that focus on American Community Traditions. Howard will meet with us as a small group to discuss his ideas about the NH Town Meeting and its concept and place in both our history and our imagination. A General Education event will follow our meeting.

Week Three: *Our Town*

Collective review and reading of *Our Town* text, and viewing of visual adaptation.

Week Four: Review of Stephen Bloom and Peter Feldstein's *The Oxford Project*

This week we will review *The Oxford Project* that entailed the photographing of residents in Oxford, Iowa in 1984 and culminated twenty years later when Feldstein re-photographed many of these original residents. The project includes not only the portraits of these residents but narrative observations from the residents on rural town life. In addition, we will examine other visual depictions of communities through the lens of visual artists in order to gain an aesthetic sense of how communities are captured by the artists' eyes.

Week Five: Guest: Catherine Kalob on the Interview Process

This week Catherine Kalob (Part-time faculty in Social Work at NEC) will come to our class to discuss how to best conduct interviews with members of the community at Town Meeting in March. Following the protocol found in the fields of Sociology and Psychology, Kalob will guide students in the protocol of gathering information and data that can be used in our final presentations. Specific areas will focus on protection of privacy when required and the formality of release rights from interview subjects for the public documentation of their language and ideas.

Week Six: Guest: Journalist and Photojournalist from *The Concord Monitor*

During this class period, we will meet with invited guests from *The Concord Monitor* (NH daily newspaper) who will share their experiences on the logistics of public documentation from a journalist and photojournalist standpoint. Our guests will have experience in the coverage of the NH Town Meeting and regional governance issues, and students will be asked to come to this class with specific questions as it pertains to individual or group projects.

Week Seven: Strategies for Town Meeting Day

This week we will meet to discuss our strategies for attending the Henniker Town Meeting on March 12. We will plan out a schedule of attendance and discuss materials needed for our attendance as it relates to our final projects. We will plan to have a group dinner the night before the meeting (March 11).

March 12 – Town Meeting

Late April – Meet for Update on Final Projects

May: Public Exhibition of Work

Your final projects will be exhibited for public viewing in Henniker in May. Specific details as it relates to this exhibit will be discussed and determined in April. You should plan to have your projects completed no later than April 30, 2011. Your professors will be available for meeting individually or in groups through the second half of March and in the month of April.