

J. Wingard  
ENGL 4319: Senior Experience

## **Discovering Houston: Collecting and Locating Ourselves and The City**

### **Course Description**

The purpose of this course is to help students develop advanced research and writing skills by allowing them to develop their own research questions and/or sites of inquiry about a place – Houston. It is goal of this course that the students forge meaningful connections between themselves and particular communities of interest, and also begin to reflect and think critically about how particular communities are located within the narratives told about Houston as a city. I have chosen the city and its outlying areas, as the focal point of the course because UH students have daily relationships with the city, its freeways, and its culture. They will therefore be able to find interesting and viable subjects for research and analysis from their own experiences and contacts with and within the city. Furthermore, students' connection to the city will allow for an exploration of how research and writing (either critical, creative or electronic) are deeply connected to our personal understandings and memories of places. The work of this class, then, will push students to use their writing, critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis skills, all the while asking them to become a part of communities of their choosing either inside or outside of the University.

The course will be taught as a community literacy and engagement course wherein the students will be asked to not only find areas of inquiry within Houston, but also find communities from which to locate themselves and their research. Instead of viewing this course as a traditional "Service Learning" course where the students log hours with a particular community group as a tutor, intern, or other "helper" and then write about the experience, this course will ask the students to find ways to forge ties and connections with particular communities and find "fits" between their questions and their desired "work" and the communities needs. Because this is a different model than the traditional "service learning model, we will spend time in class discussing the ethics of community engagement, as well as reflecting on the place of particular communities within Houston writ large. The course will be set up as a traditional course with only a minor amount "out of class" time required. And because of that, the service is not the focus of the students' engagement, but rather how they critically engage and reflect with that engagement and each other will become the focal point of the course.

### **Course Materials**

Required Texts:

- Mathieu, Paul. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Boynton/Cook, 2005.
- Scardino, Barrie et. al. *Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston*. U of Texas P, 2003.
- Theis, David, ed. *Literary Houston*. Texas Christian UP, 2010. ISBN 9780875654195
- Readings to be **Printed from WebCT**.
- Texts to be **Provided by Students**.

Recommended Texts:

- Los Angeles Conservatory. *Curating the City*. < <http://www.curatingthecity.org/>>.
- *Writing and C/Siting Houston*. Website.
- Dennis, Jana. *Palmyra Street*. The Neighborhood Story Project, New Orleans.
- *Placenames -- Houston*. The Charles W. Moore Center for the Study of Place. 2006.

### **A Quick Word About Reading**

Writing well depends upon reading well. And reading well depends on being prepared. This means you **must** print out and bring an annotated copy of the assigned articles on WebCT to class. The essays we will read will be challenging, but they will provide you with ideas and arguments, facts and statistics. But they also serve as a basis for shared understandings, a way to challenge and enrich your own project as well as the work of the course, and finally, they give us all a set of information and texts to explore rhetorically. Because the texts serve so many varied functions in the course, it is essential that they are present during our class conversations. So, I reiterate – **bring copies of required readings to class.**

### **Course Requirements**

Attendance and Active Engagement	10%
Weekly Critical Reflective Blogging*	20%
Locating Houston Paper*	15%
Community Engagement/Researching Resources Paper*	15%
<i>Research Proposal/Material Context(s) Paper</i>	10%
Research/Engagement Project*	30%

**\*Students MUST complete all major assignments to pass the course. Failure to turn in any assignment denoted with an (\*) will result in failure of this course.**

### **Major Course Assignments**

*Weekly Blogging/Critical Reflective Journaling* – For the duration of the course, we will maintain a course blog where we will discuss the readings for the week and, our own research and engagement with Houston, and push ourselves to not only understand them on their own terms, but also how they might help us in our own projects, as well as in connection to our experience as English majors. I do not mean to say that the blog is a space where we merely report on what we read, find, and do every week. Instead, we will try to do the difficult work of locating theoretical discussions, which are often situated in very different locations than our own, within our own experiences. We will rotate the responsibility of who begins the discussion each week, but we are all responsible for responding.

*Locating Houston Paper* – The purpose of this paper is to locate your research inquiry within a Houston based community. Inquiries, happenings, and events are never isolated occurrences. They happen within places, communities, sites. This paper is your chance to do the background research on your inquiry. Some questions that may guide you are: Who may be effected by this inquiry and why? Have others discussed this topic before me? If so, who? Can my inquiry be located on a map? Does that location have particular histories,

knowledges, practices that I should be aware of that may (or may not) engage with my inquiry?

*Community Engagement/Researching Resources Paper* – Once you have located your inquiry, you may want to find specific groups or communities with which to align or engage your research. This paper is a way to become more specific about who within your location you may want to engage with in order to forward your project in a more grounded way. In other words, this paper allows you to draw on some of the work discussed in Paula Mathieu's text, and find ways to engage local communities in your research productively.

*Research Proposal/Material Context(s) Paper* – This paper is the rationale and discussion of your methods, form, and context for your final research project. You should be as specific as possible in explaining what you are researching; what methods you are using to research and why; and what your final form will be and why feel it is the best means for representing the research you have done on Houston.

*Research/Engagement Project* – Your final project is a culmination of all the work you have done throughout the course of the semester. It should include a section where you state your inquiry/problem and discuss the located history you discovered about said problem. They you should discuss in detail your critique about the community with which you chose to partner for your project. Be sure to discuss not only how it forwarded your inquiry based research, but also how successful (or not) said engagement was as a community based endeavor. Finally, your paper should reflect on your position as an English major, and how the work as a community partner, as well as the work you did as a researcher, engaged the critical thinking and close reading skills you developed throughout your coursework at UH.