

THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY  
CORE 102 HISTORY AND THE MODERN WORLD  
ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY  
GHH G 05 T, TH 9:30 - 10:50  
CAS 220 T, F 2:00 - 3:20  
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## Course Introduction

I can start by introducing myself, I guess. I'm Mike Swanson of the American Studies and History programs in the Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences. My background is cultural history. I took my Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland Ohio, majoring in American Studies. I began here in the American Studies program in 1972 (wow, that's a long time ago). I've always had an interest in material culture (the study of things people make) as well as intellectual history, and that interest took me into the historic preservation field about twenty years ago. I proposed the first Historic Preservation major here, and I expect to continue teaching in it from time to time, though I returned to my roots here in the College of Arts and Sciences in the fall of 2000.

### About the Core Program itself:

The Core Program at Roger Williams University centers on three recurring questions in Western thought: "Who am I?" "What can I know?", and "Based on what I know, how should I act?". No single academic experience can provide satisfactory answers to these questions: five of them, working in concert, at least introduce the perspectives, which traditionally have provided tentative answers to these questions. Core 102 uses the disciplines of History and Political Science to look at socio/political answers to the question "Who am I?", the methodology of history and political science to explore "what can I know?", and at the results of behavior based on former answers to these questions to suggest avenues of responsible action in today's society

The course description gives an insight into the content of Core 102. It is more opaque concerning the rationale for a Core Curriculum in the first place. There was a time when the idea of a Core Curriculum would have made no sense: not because the idea seemed ridiculous, but because there was within the western world, at least, a universal agreement concerning what constituted a fit education. Throughout most of the periods we're studying, this was the case.

Though the content varied across time, the categories of content proved remarkably stable. It wasn't until a little over a century ago that the idea of "electives" was put forth in academic circles. The culprit was a President of Harvard University.

A decade or two before, the idea of specialties began: not as an undergraduate mode of investigation, but as what one did in graduate school. Here, the first American venture was based on a German model, and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was the grand innovator. Now, of course, specialty education is shattering the cohesion of what Thomas Jefferson called the "Academical Village". Perhaps that's a bit too strong: "threatening to shatter" might be a more appropriate turn of phrase.

Core Curricula such as the one at Roger Williams University are responses to this sense of fragmentation. We are participating in an attempt to forge a universal educational experience for all members of the Roger Williams student community, regardless of major, regardless of age, regardless of the majors they take or the schools in which those majors are located. This might be a brilliant exercise: it might also be a noble folly. I have the kind of mind that can hold both of these views simultaneously. It is worth the effort, in my judgment, to bring this diverse group into a common enterprise. I'm planning to have a good time doing it.

Each faculty member of the Core 102 team shapes the general content of the course to his or her individual interests and expertise. My sections will use different materials and in a different sequence, than you'll find in the other sections. At this stage of its development, the Internet is perhaps the most democratic medium ever invented. It is certainly the most potent educator since the invention of moveable type. I make that statement fully recognizing we've a few other means of disseminating information which have been invented since Gutenberg's day: movies, radio, television, to name the big three. Yet none of these allows the level of public access that the Internet does.

I teach two sections of this course, because I like teaching Freshmen. This year my two sections are going to be quite different from each other. The Tuesday-Thursday section is a "learning community" Members of that section will be taking two courses together: this one, and *Introduction to Academic Writing*. My teaching partner and I may visit each other's class occasionally, and we'll work to make the two courses complement each other. We hope this will help the transfer of skills, ideas, and information back and forth.

My Tuesday - Friday section will host a number of international students from Roger Williams University's *Bridge Program*. I've had the privilege of teaching a class of this sort for several years now, and it has been a very enjoyable experience for me, and I hope for the students as well. As I type this, I don't have final numbers, but I'm expecting the class to be about half international students and half students from the United States. What a great opportunity we have to really explore the idea of Democracy with a diverse community like this one.

The content of the two sections will be quite similar, but the schedules will be a little different. There will be some calendar complexities to deal with and if they get too troublesome I'll just modify one or the other as the situation requires.

My convictions about the potential of the Internet have caused me to emphasize its use in all the courses I teach, including this one. My sections of Core 102 have their own website:

<http://ideaofdemocracy.homestead.com>

Notes on each week's reading and discussion activities will be found there. Assignments and links to additional resources will, be there, as well. *Bookmark the URL*. There will be one page of notes and assignments per week, and these will develop as the semester progresses. There will be an index on the home page at the left, with links to the page appropriate for the week's work, and I'll publish these one week in advance. So make sure you read the right page. All required reading assignments will be posted on the class website. Shortly I will cease distributing a paper version of the syllabus. Those who want to have a paper copy can print the Internet version for themselves. A printer friendly copy can be found by clicking the button, top center, of the web version.

## The Work Ahead

### The Core Readings:

At the center of this course are a series of classic readings related to the idea, "democracy". The earliest of these documents dates to nearly five centuries B.C.E. The most recent dates to last spring. Faculty refer to this collection as the "Core Canon". (Canon is a word used to describe a collection of representative and authoritative texts on a subject, ...in this case, Democracy.) Several years ago we began the posting the "Core Canon" online. The experiment worked very well, and we are repeating this procedure this year. The entire canon can be found at <http://corematerials.homestead.com>. We won't be using all the documents in the Core Canon: It would be a good idea to look the list of documents over, however. The documents are published as

Portable Document Format (.pdf) files. This format is useful because it maintains formatting regardless of which browser or printer one has. Pdf. files are read by the Adobe Acrobat Reader. Most computers come with this software installed. Should you not have it, you can get it at <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readermain.html>. The download is free.

If you do not have a computer and printer there are free machines available for use in the library and on the second floor of the Gabelli School of Business

Critical Thinking as an Academic Method.

*Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions, and points of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical, and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.*

Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Foundation for Critical Thinking*

One of the objectives of Core 102 is to introduce college freshmen to the kinds of thinking behaviors which are rewarded in college. These may be quite different from those which are rewarded in other environments—workplaces, for example, and even other educational levels.

There are a number of different Critical Thinking techniques. There are a number of excellent sources on the internet, including [Critical Thinking on the Web](#). Acquiring and consistently practicing these techniques will make a significant difference in your academic success. The Foundation for Critical Thinking has many resources available, and they're not expensive. You might find some of them useful to you. Check them out at <http://criticalthinking.org>. There are other aids, too. If you're interested, drop by the office and I'll point some out to you.

You will not have to purchase any other books for this section. Be aware that other teachers do require supplemental readings. If you have purchased a book by mistake, you can return it to the University Bookstore for a refund if you haven't marked it up. You will need to purchase a large, three-ring, notebook. I also recommend you purchase a three-hole punch, though you can find those for use around the campus if you don't wish to make that particular investment. The central assignment for this course will be to download and annotate the required readings (using highlighters and marginal notes) according to principles I'll explain as the course progresses. On the basis of your analysis of these readings you'll be doing informal writing in an Online Journal. More

about that later. The resulting notebook and journal will be graded, and the work you do here will help in the two papers you'll write for me.

### Your Responsibilities in Core 102

- 1. Woody Allen once said that 90% of success in life is simply showing up. In here, expand that idea to "showing up prepared". Being prepared means reading the readings, and annotating them before the class in which they're to form the basis for discussion. As I indicated above, each week I will prepare a study guide for the following week's work. These will be posted to <http://ideaofdemocracy.homestead.com>. When you go to the website early in the semester you'll notice that most of the linked web pages are empty. By the end of the semester, they'll all be filled. At the top of each page, underneath the heading, is a large horizontal button. That button links to a printer-friendly version of the page, for those who like that sort of thing. NOTE: THE HARD COPY VERSION IS A SIMPLIFIED AND INCOMPLETE VERSION OF THE WEB VERSION, WHICH IS LINKED TO MANY SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS. Initially I will pass out a hard copy as well as direct your attention to the electronic copy. Shortly, however, I will stop distributing the hard copy, though it will be available to anyone who wishes to print it off. In nearly every instance the I will have the next week's work posted to the Internet by 9:00 Wednesday Evening. You are responsible for visiting the website familiarizing yourself with it before Thursday's (or Friday's) class. It is my habit to introduce the new page and talk about it briefly. If you have any questions, just ask away..
- 2. Note that there is a special e-mail address for this course: [Ideaofdemocracy@gmail.com](mailto:Ideaofdemocracy@gmail.com) Use this e-mail address if you need to ask me to clarify an assignment, if you need to be excused for an absence, or if you want me to preview something you're working on.
- 3. Read, analyze, and thoroughly mark up the assigned readings before the class on which the document is to be discussed. Then write briefly about what kinds of ideas the reading stimulated, questions it might have raised in your mind, points where you agreed, and/or points you disagreed with the author and his/her ideas. Initially, these informal writings should be a *minimum* of one hundred words in length. Post them to your journal before class. About the first of October the minimum free writing will

increase to 150 and there will be an additional increase around the first of November—you'll have more to write about by then. (This paragraph is 113 words long).

- 4. Attendance will be taken and excessive absences will have a negative effect on a person's grade. Attendance means coming prepared. If your copy of the assigned reading isn't in front of you, marked up for discussion, and your journal entry isn't posted, you won't be given credit for attending. I have a liberal policy as far as excused absences is concerned. Absence for illness is excused: I trust you to be honest about this, and I don't need a note from a doctor or nurse. I also excuse absences based on family emergency or participation in official University events (athletic participation, for example) PROVIDED I'M NOTIFIED IN ADVANCE!. IF you know you're going to be absent, put the assigned work in my electronic mailbox before your absence.
- 5. This semester I'm linking the class to the Blackboard system. Every Roger Williams University student has a Blackboard account. Teachers who opt to use this system have a number of useful communications tools, including e-mailing abilities, message boards, augmented calendar possibilities and a "mailbox" which allows easy delivery of student papers. I will survey you the first class period to determine how many of you are familiar with Blackboard. If it looks like the class needs more tuition on how to use it than I can give, I'll arrange for the blackboard administrator to come and give a tutorial. Reach Blackboard through <http://www.rwu.edu>, clicking on "My RWU" and following instructions.

ALL WORK FOR THIS COURSE WHICH IS WRITTEN OUTSIDE OF CLASS MUST BE SUBMITTED THROUGH THE BLACKBOARD *UNLESS* OTHER INSTRUCTIONS ARE GIVEN. IF BLACKBOARD GIVES YOU PROBLEMS I'LL BE HAPPY TO COACH YOU ON HOW TO USE IT.

## Evaluation and Grades

I don't like to do it but it comes with the territory. One of my goals for this course is to help you become more articulate and persuasive in presenting your ideas at the same time you are learning to frame questions, access information and form judgments and solutions. Consequently I'm going to have you do as much writing for me as I can find time to evaluate. Your Mid-term Examination and your final examination will be done outside of class. In terms of proportions of your grade, I expect to use the following:

MID TERM (date to be announced) 20% This must be submitted through Blackboard.

FINAL EXAM (date to be announced) 25% The take-home part of this must also be submitted through Blackboard.

TWO PAPERS. Together, these will count 30% of your grade. I will weigh the second of these more heavily than I weigh the first (10% for the first, 20% for the second). I will preview drafts of papers if they are submitted to me in timely fashion. I will expect these papers to be constructed in a workmanlike fashion, conforming to standard academic writing practice. More about that later.

YOUR NOTEBOOK and a BLACKBOARD JOURNAL (Blog) will count 20% for its content: how well you solved the problems or thought about the issues involved in the readings. The completeness of the notebook will count as well, both here, and as I evaluate your Class Participation.

ACTIVE LEARNING, CLASS PARTICIPATION *Including Preparation for Class*, 5%. I will have one hard point of data here: your signatures on the class sign in sheets. Another will be your turning in your work on time! In addition, I will recognize your frequency of participation in class, your use of e-mail to clarify what you're working on, your use of my office hours your online journal (blog) , and other evidence of the level of work you're putting into things.

## Classroom Practices and Procedures

The primary objective of this course is to trace the development of a number of ideas associated with the central idea, Democracy. Historians understand that ideas don't just "pop up" out of nowhere, fully developed and isolated from what happened before. Ideas have antecedents and ideas have consequences. Consequently, we can create "genealogies" of ideas and thereby understand them better.

This year we're going to begin with President Barack Obama's [Address at Cairo University, "A New Beginning"](#). We'll spend several class periods coming to understand the ideas in this document thoroughly and

in great detail, including using our critical thinking to understand how he attempts to prove his case and convince his readers.. The remainder of the course will be devoted to investigating issues raised by Obama, and understanding the complexities and nuances involved in the *Idea of Democracy*: in order to see what relevance they may have for us, or how they're being used as the inspiration of and justification for ideas and actions in recent years. You'll help to identify and select those issues.

**ALWAYS BRING YOUR NOTEBOOKS WITH ASSIGNED READINGS WITH YOU**

Generally my classes are pretty informal. I talk, you talk, and out of the conversation comes knowledge of a sort. We are not going to construct a linear narrative this semester. I am aiming to provide you with a richer, more complex, and more sophisticated understanding of *The Democratic Idea*. Much of your final understanding will result from what you piece together yourself. Some of you will be much more comfortable with this approach than others will be, at least initially. If you are a person who requires a lot of structure you're going to have to switch gears and trust the system I'm using. But give the system a fair trial, and you may be surprised at how your skills grow through practice.

#### Attendance Policy

I do take attendance on a regular basis, using a sign-in sheet which circulates around the room. Your prepared work for the day is your passport to the assignment sheet. To receive full credit for attendance you must prepare before class. If you come, but come unprepared, you will receive partial credit, because you'll still be able to benefit from the work of your peers. You are responsible for making sure you sign in on the sheet. I try to be as liberal in excusing absences as I can be. Excuses for illness, family emergency, and the like are freely given, as long as I am notified by email.

**USE THE CLASS E-MAIL ADDRESS. [Ideaofdemocracy@gmail.com](mailto:Ideaofdemocracy@gmail.com).**

Despite any absence, you are still required to keep up with what's going on. If you must be absent you can demonstrate you were prepared either by dropping off the assigned reading in my office or by coming to see me during my office hours as soon as you are able to do so.

Use the website to keep informed.

The class meets twice a week, so each unexcused absence is the equivalent of a half week's work missed. More than three un-excused absences will have a negative impact upon your grade. More than five un-excused absences and I'll suggest you withdraw from the course.

Undergraduate Pledge to Academic Integrity

*We, the undergraduate students of Roger Williams University, commit ourselves to academic integrity. We promise to pursue the highest ideals of academic life, to challenge ourselves with the most rigorous standards, to be honest in any academic endeavor, to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support*

For a number of years now, this pledge has been the centerpiece of the convocation which begins the fall term. It is worthwhile taking a minute or two to reflect on what it says. The twin supports of Academic Life are collaboration and independence of thought. In this class, there is no curve. In the largest sense, you're not in competition with each other, and to the degree that you can assist each other in learning you'll win nothing but praise from me. For those of you in the Living Learning Community, this is the whole reason for that experiment.

Yet it is equally important that each student exercise his/her own independent judgment, and have confidence in his/her own mind. Plagiarism defeats the whole purpose of the enterprise, and the University will not tolerate this particular form of intellectual theft. For the university statement on plagiarism, and for a general exposition of its Academic Standards, consult the [University Website](#).

You will learn appropriate techniques for incorporating ideas from others with your own in writing classes and elsewhere. When in doubt about something you've written, don't hesitate to show it to me or any other professor and ask for an opinion. [The Roger Williams University Writing Center](#) is very helpful to those who make the effort to use it. It has also posted a number of helpful documents online.

*I'm looking forward to meeting you all and getting to know you. I hope you'll be able to tell that I love the way I make a living, and that meeting with and teaching a group of students such as yourselves is as pleasurable way to spend a few hours as I can possibly imagine. Good luck this semester, and if there's anything I can do to be helpful to you, call upon me.*