**Analyzing Communities With *Cannery Row*
*By Diane Hofsess, Southfield High School, Southfield, Michigan, 2013***

**Grade Level: High School**

This lesson uses the novel *Cannery Row* and the science of ecology to help students understand the concept of community. After completing the lesson, students should understand the following:

* Communities consist of inter-related groups and individuals.
* *Cannery Row* depicts the relationships between multiple groups within a community.
* Like Cannery Row, a school community also consists of inter-related groups and individuals.
* Zooming in on a group within a community (such as Mack and the boys from Cannery Row or the school band from a school community) allows the viewer (scientist) to see the relationships between the parts and their whole; zooming out allows the viewer to see the phalanx, or group man.
* The zooming in and zooming out process allows a reader or scientist to view a subject in a more specific context (setting or habitat) or a more general context (setting or habitat) to gain greater understanding of how groups and communities are inter-related.
* The world is comprised on inter-connected communities.

**Overview**

This exercise brings together literature and ecology to help students better understand a complex world. It is intended to be done in three steps: before, during, and after reading *Cannery Row.* It uses an interdisciplinary approach by combining scientific and literary methods of analysis to create a deeper understanding of literature and its relevance to life. The first (pre-reading) exercise is done together as a class, the second (during reading) is meant to be revisited orally during discussions of the book, and the last is done post-reading.

**Procedures:**

* **Before reading** the book, have students as a class analyze their school community by listing the groups within the school. Perhaps draw a giant circle on the board and ask each student to go to the board and add the name of a group within that school community. This should generate a list of organizations such as band, football, cheerleaders, school store, Parent-Teacher Group, staff, Robotics Team, French Club, etc.). Ask students to explain how one group in that community either depends on another group or helps another group. How are they connected and inter-related? Why do certain “creatures” such as football teams exist in schools? What ecological conditions exist that make it likely to find a football team in a school community? What makes these inter-related groups a community? Take a digital photo of that brainstorm session for later use. For an assessment grade, give participation points. Explain to the class that they are about to read a novel about a community called Cannery Row and tell them that they should read with an eye on groups within that community and how they depend on each other.
* **During the reading of the novel,** keep a large circle on the board labeled “Cannery Row Community” and ask students to contribute to the list of groups within that community. Their list should include the obvious: Mack and the boys, Dora Flood and the girls, Lee Chong and his grocery patrons, the sardine canneries, Western Biological Laboratory and its customers. But the teacher might have to help the students see the less obvious groups: the animal specimens at Ed Ricketts’s lab, the frogs in the nearby frog pond, Frankie’s dysfunctional family, and the other residents of the area. Ask students to explain how one group in that community either depends on another group or helps another group. How are they connected and inter-related? What makes them a community?
* **After reading the novel,** ask students to “zoom in” and select one group from their school community to analyze, as if under a microscope, to see the connections within that group. (Now is the time to show the photo you took of the class’s earlier brainstorm session on groups within the school.) How are the parts related to the whole (group man, or phalanx)? For example, have a band student explain how the marching band has a director, drum majors, flag carriers, a percussion section with its own section leader, a saxophone section with its own section leader, etc. How are they inter-connected? How is the individual saxophone player different from the band (phalanx) as a whole? How are they a community? What parallels can be drawn between this community, Cannery Row, and the world as a whole? If desired, students could work in pairs on this assignment. Have students make class presentations about their chosen groups. Require a creative visual component to the presentation as well as an oral component and direct references to the novel during their presentation.

**Word to the Wise**

* To better convey phalanx concept, consider showing images of phalanx formations found on the Internet.
* It would be useful to have a map of the United States and of California posted in the classroom during this lesson.
* Gifted students could be asked to use a computer to create visual representations of the relationships between their chosen groups. They can create flow charts with Microsoft Word on the computer, or use a more art-based program, if available, such as Adobe Illustrator, to create the visuals.
* Special needs students can be paired with other students and / or given extra time to complete this assignment to ensure success.

**Sources**

* *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck
* “Four Levels of Ecology” excerpt from “The Outer Shores Transcript” by Ed Ricketts and John Steinbeck
* John Steinbeck’s letter to Carlton Sheffield of 6/30/33 about the phalanx theory
* John Steinbeck’s Appendix: About Ed Ricketts in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* by Steinbeck

**Useful Website Source:**

* Images of phalanx formations:

<http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=phalanx+formation&qpvt=phalanx+formation&FORM=IGRE>