New course teaches sign language

By AMELIA ACOSTA
The Dartmouth Staff

While some may learn French or Spanish in college, a class new to the College campus this spring has given a group of students the opportunity to learn to speak and translate American Sign Language and meet with the nation's top deaf poets and performers.

Polansky supplements the guest teachers with his own lectures given in signed English, he said.

"When I teach, I try to explain a lot of foundational work that the guests might not cover," he said. "I try to touch on some classic performances and elements of culture.

"The class includes four weeks in which visiting deaf faculty come in to teach for the entire week and offer Wednesday night performances at the Hood Museum that are open to the public," he said. "They are very interested in talking about their own work, but their own work also involves information on the deaf experience, deaf culture and linguistic issues."

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50 Cents/Free for students

TODAY
Showers - High 55°

TONIGHT
Showers - Low 49°

TOMORROW
Rain - High 52°

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POLANSKY USES GRANT FOR NEW CLASS ON DEAF LITERATURE, CULTURE

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"When I teach, I try to explain a lot of foundational work that the guests might not cover," he said. "I try to touch on some classic performances and elements of culture." The literature aspect of the course includes an immersive ASL lab with local deaf scholar Mary Essex to help students learn the language, Polansky said. While the lab is taught entirely in sign language, the class is not solely focused on language acquisition, according to Polansky.

"You didn't speak a word of French, and you were teaching a class on 19th century French poems," he said. "In the class you're studying the literature, with accompanying classes in the language. But with ASL, it's even harder because it's so much more foreign — the kids have no idea what it means to sign the language until they actually start doing it." Coursework includes journal entries, readings, translation of ASL poetry and video recordings using ASL vocabulary, according to Sibylia Kintz 13. Most students' initial unfamiliarity with ASL and deaf culture made the workload heavier in the beginning of the term, she said. The second half of the course has focused on reflections on the guests' speakers and improving ASL proficiency, Kintz said.

"We really learn a lot from focusing on the speakers' experiences and attending the events outside of class," she said. The course's unique structure and subject matter make it a "phenomenal experience," according to Gabriela Meade 14.

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People are very surprised to hear that ASL poetry is even possible, and it's so fun and unique to delve into a world that defies some of our general ideas about what literature is," Meade said. "We'll do readings or watch movies about famous poets like [Grayhill] and the next day you're in class having a one-on-one conversation with him. It's refreshing and fun, and I don't really feel like I'm coming to class."

A primary focus of the class is to highlight the "parallel world" of deaf culture and many people are unaware of, according to guest lecturer Dennis Colley, the director of the ASL program at Northeastern University.

"Take every facet of society and you've got thieves, murderers, who are extremely cultured and everywhhich group in the world," Colley said. "If you take that whole spectrum, you've got the exact same thing with deaf people, and we really don't know a lot about that world."

The class can also serve to spotlight larger issues of inclusion on a college campus, Polansky said.

"My goal is to use this language as a vehicle for communicating about a part of American culture that most of Dartmouth and most of America knows nothing about," he said. "Any college needs to grapple with its handling of diversity and accessibility and this class has really helped begin a lot of conversations at all levels."

The class will hopefully serve as a model for future Dartmouth courses and as an informational source to increase awareness of ASL literature, Polansky said.

"This class was a pilot program, and it worked really well," he said. "Films and photos of the class are archived on the web so that someone who has an idea like this and wants to cross this bridge has some data that really doesn't exist anywhere else."

Polansky said he envisions a continuation of the class with an expanded administrative system and the hiring of a permanent deaf faculty member to co-teach the course.

"The administrative reality of the class is hard, because I'm a one-person department dealing with faculty that often has very different needs from other faculty," Polansky said. "I don't think I'm really qualified to teach this class, but if we hired a highly-qualified deaf faculty member I could serve as a liaison to the greater Dartmouth community."

Many of Polansky's students hope to see the College contribute more resources to the class in the future, according to Jackson Shultz, a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies graduate student enrolled in the course.

"This class isn't well-funded because the administration doesn't realize how important classes like these are," he said. "I wish there was an opportunity to include a drill component, because there is a heavy language component. The administration needs to provide more funding and exposure so that they want their students to be world-class citizens."