

EDUCATION AND MEMORY:
TEACHING ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR

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ABSTRACT:

The paper consists of a brief analysis of the educational dynamics and teaching strategy of a class on "The Impact of the Vietnam War" that was established on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California in 1979, and currently regularly enrolls nearly 1000 undergraduate students. Initiated as an attempt to come to terms with the Vietnam War, and, most particularly, to trace its continuing impact on American cultural values, the class became a means and instrument through which responses to the war were formulated. Veterans of the war enrolled in the class voluntarily, and asked to share their impressions with the students. Since the two groups (veterans and students) were engaged in a process of assimilation and interpretation together, the class came to serve as a nexus point between veterans, students, former anti-war protestors, conscientious objectors, women who had served in Vietnam, Vietnamese people, Gold-Star mothers, and others. Before long, the subject under discussion was approached through the multi-layered dialogue that was transpiring between these various groups of interested parties. The pedagogical theory involved combines insights from Paul Fussell (author of *THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY*), Studs Terkel (cf. his "wisdom of ordinary Americans"), Jerome Bruner (cf. his "routes into memory" and "recipes for structuring experience itself"), and the Image-Psychology school. Portions of the "60 Minutes" program on which the class was featured will be shown.

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This paper consists of a brief analysis of the educational dynamics of a class on "The Impact of the Vietnam War." The class was started in 1979 on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, and is currently one among approximately 300 classes in American higher education that focus on a subject which, in many institutions, is simply called "The Vietnam Experience." The Santa Barbara class is like many of the others, with the added distinction that it may have been the first such class on the subject, and, many have written, it must be among the most popular. It regularly enrolls nearly 1000 students, with several hundred others on its waiting list. Because of the size of the class, and by virtue of the subject with which it deals, the class was made the focus of a CBS Television's "60 Minutes" program on October 4, 1987. But all of this, in some respects, represents the externals.

The purpose of the class, from the first, has been to reconstruct the situation that led the United States to become militarily involved in Southeast Asia, to trace the progress of the war, to describe the social and political atmosphere that prevailed at home during the period, to chart the continuing affects of the war on those who were directly involved (regardless of the convictions and stances they represent), and to assess the impact of the war on the national spirit. The class was given the name "The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Culture," and was designed to fit the undergraduate curriculum in the Department of Religious Studies. Forty students enrolled the first year it was offered. Some must have recognized that the topic under study and discussion remained controversial, but the educational venture did not

create much of a stir on campus. It was as if the pressures that belonged to the war period had lost their intensity, now that the Americans were no longer directly involved.

Yet, along the way, it became apparent that the subject of the war could not be addressed in the past tense. For the class came to function not only as a way of chronicling and interpreting events that had already taken place, but as a cultivated and trusted collective instrument through which those same events could be remembered, mediated and assimilated. This occurred because this exercise in assessing the impact of the Vietnam War was being undertaken at the very time that the terms and conditions of that impact were being worked out.

Thus a class that had been designed as a commentary on the war experience became a response to the war. Very soon, students were enrolling not only to acquire more information about the war, but to draw upon the resourcefulness of this educational venture to come to terms with the event for themselves. Though the majority of these were hardly familiar with the history of the war in detail, a number of them had family members -- fathers, uncles, cousins, older brothers, even aunts -- who had served in Vietnam. So, in addition to having opinions about the propriety of the war, these students had direct personal connections. Moreover, though few knew many of the specifics, the majority was prepared to entertain the premise that the Vietnam War was a major event in American history, and that its influence on society, culture and religious beliefs and attitudes was no doubt extensive and profound.

Along the way, as the class was struggling to find itself, a num-

ber of veterans asked if they might sit in. Not surprisingly, their approach to the subject was both like and unlike that of the students. Like the students, they had limited factual knowledge of the history of the war, for the majority of them, though they had been in Vietnam, had not studied the war in any comprehensive scholarly way. But, unlike the students, they entered the class with a full awareness that they were an important component of the subject being studied. If the class was an analysis and interpretation of the Vietnam War, and its impact on American values, they were included in its scope. And they, like the students, began using the materials of the class, schematized by the Tuesday/Thursday schedule, to formulate and/or deepen and extend their own responses to the war.

Since the two groups were engaged in these processes of assimilation and interpretation together, the class came to serve as a nexus point between the warriors and the students, and eventually between the warriors and the students and those who had refused to become warriors, and then between the warriors and the students and those who had refused to become warriors and the Vietnamese people who had left their homeland, following the war, to live in the United States. Before long, the subject under discussion was approached through the multi-layered dialogue that was transpiring between these various groups of interested parties.

Paul Fussell writes in his award-winning The Great War and Modern Memory that it was exceedingly difficult for the military strategists in World War I to know how to fight the war until they had been given strong and effective assistance in knowing how to

portray or depict the war. It is as if the visualization of a war needs to be created before the persons directly involved in it can know what action is appropriate. A portion of this same interpretive sequence is implicit in the class on the Vietnam War. When the warriors were there, and when the warriors returned, they repeatedly attested that "it don't mean nothin'." Using Fussell's insights, we can interpret this statement to be communicating an important literal truth. To say that the war doesn't mean anything is to acknowledge that one can't or, at least, hasn't yet found any meaning in it. And this might mean that the event transcends meaning, or that it is in conflict with the usual or expected patterns of meaning, or, perhaps, that it stands as an affront to or an assault upon meaning. But the experience of the warriors was shared by millions of people who witnessed the war from afar, that is, from home. For them, too, the war didn't mean what wars are expected to mean. The tested analogs that make wars meaningful could not easily be applied to the instance of the Vietnam War. The political and socio-psychological conflict concerning the propriety and morality of the United States military involvement in Southeast Asian ran so deep and was so pervasive within the society that whatever traditional meaning can be attributed to warfare was never strong enough to break through the conflict. So the Vietnam War "didn't mean," and "it don't mean..." for many who fought, and for many engaged in the war at home.

At the time, hawks complained that the war didn't mean because the interference of the protestors at home was strong enough to cripple the military effort by a persistent second-guessing. And the doves at

home complained that because the war didn't mean, the war should be halted, and the troops returned home, because it wasn't a war at all, but, instead, a misguided and mistaken military escapade inspired by a penchant for ideological imperialism and/or excessive fears about potential threats to the nation's vitality. And when the war didn't mean for hawks and doves, the war didn't mean for the society either. And, in quick succession, the society didn't mean, and the country didn't mean, and everyone who carried responsibility -- warriors, protestors, strategists -- became victims of the event.

The principle may hold here too, as Paul Fussell has illustrated, that wars don't mean until they have been appropriately visualized. That is, there can be no compelling understanding unless and until there is also appropriate, effective and compelling depiction and portrayal. And, if this be the case, then a class on "the impact of the Vietnam War" provides the occasion for this interpretive work to occur. For, one cannot tell the story of the war without constructing a story to be told. One cannot provide an eye-witness account without ordering some selected incidents in a way that makes some sequential narrative sense. For, in telling the story of the war, the teller is subject to some of the formal dynamics and requirements of the story; that is, the depiction of events and/or experience is recounted in a manner that comes under the rules of chronology, plot, suspense, and resolution of plot.

Therefore, what appears to be happening in a class on the impact of the Vietnam War was that memory (both individual and collective) was being tapped while being shaped to bring meaning,

after the fact, to an event and a network of experiences that defied meaning when they first occurred. And, as the Fussell insight teaches, it was difficult to make sense of the event until the techniques could be cultivated by means of which the event could be portrayed and depicted. Confusion prevailed when attempts were made to depict and portray the events as they happened. The interpretive task had to be accomplished retrospectively.

Thus, to Paul Fussell's insights can be added the observations of Jerome Bruner, the psychologist, that the words and images individuals choose in designing a framework within which to place seemingly unconnected events in their lives shape the way they experience life itself. When Bruner analyzes ways in which human beings both discover and create meaning, he perceives story-telling to disclose the "recipes for structuring experience itself," which interpretive process is powerfully dependent upon the establishment of "routes into memory." Bruner proposes that perceptions are "the mental images shaped by the meaning to the individual of what is perceived." Such mental images open the door to meaning, as it were, and attach content to the mental framework so that meaning can be given opportunity.

When Bruner's proposals about how meaning is acquired are linked to Fussell's insights into the dynamics of the cognitive process according to which wars come to meaning something, one can better appreciate the inherent dynamics of a class on "the impact of the Vietnam War." The fundamental principle is that the meaning of the war cannot be grasped until the event is made visual, and the process of visualization involves the designing of frameworks to establish and

protect those creative "routes into memory" so that selected mental images can acquire and carry the status of meaning. The visualizations of the war that prevailed when the military hostilities were occurring were ambiguous, confusing and revolting. Such visualizations did not bring meaning to the war, but only reinforced the realization that the Vietnam War didn't mean in the ways that had been expected. We call the Vietnam War "an unfinished war" because the interpretive visual work was not complete -- since it presented only partial pictures -- by the time that direct United States military involvement had come to an end. And there was a period of prolonged silence following the war, a quiet time, when the mental imagery was being sorted out and sorted through. It took some time for the development of the visual portrayals to occur. But they came, little by little at first, then in rapidly increasing numbers, as eye-witnesses to the war prepared records of their own recollections. Much of this recollective work took the form of first-person narrative accounts, offered by those who had experienced the war at close range. And, as they engaged in this manifestly reconstructive interpretive work, they cultivated trustworthy pathways and routes into memory, where they selected the appropriate mental images to envelop the events with meaning.

Along the way, as the national response to the war was gathering momentum, the classroom came increasingly to serve as the place, the occasion and the catalyst for this reconstructive interpretive work. And the sequence that prevailed is one that both Fussell and Bruner might have predicted. The interpretation of the war was offered in

visual terms first. That is, students were invited to "see it" before they were expected to begin to understand it. And the veterans themselves tried to see it too, by repicturing it, that is, by following selected pathways into memory so that mental images could be formed so that the experience could be portrayed and depicted. Thus, the class came to have the function of monitoring the national response to the war, while serving as a medium to reflect that response, and while functioning as an instrument to help shape that response. Under such circumstances, the monitoring of responses to the war -- which requires visualizations that had not been conscious before -- came to acquire a kind of cathartic function. Though, from the beginning, the educational expectations were simply expository, analytical and interpretive -- as befits a solid intellectual undertaking -- the class also acquired some abilities to contribute to the healing process. It was the place where healing could occur -- or, more accurately, healing could begin -- since it was a place where the appropriate mental images were discovered so that an effective response to the war could be initiated. For when those who are pursuing such "routes into memory" came to see their experience in the light of the visual portrayals they knew to be authentic and compelling, it was as if they had found their way home at last. They could return because they had found meaning. Or was it that they could find meaning because they had come to a place where they could see where they were?