

How the Vietnam War Still Touches Us – A High School Field Trip to The Wall

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For three days each spring semester, my students and I are nowhere to be found on the Millbrook High School campus in Raleigh, North Carolina. Our cadre of about 30 high school seniors, several chaperones (including local veterans), myself and another courageous teacher leave behind the classroom, our families and busy routines for an escape to our nation's capitol. It is here in Washington, DC, crouched close to The Wall (Figure 1), that students in my *Lessons of Vietnam* (LOV) class are touched in ways they have not experienced in the classroom. We have many veterans visit our classroom throughout the semester who share their personal stories and experiences (Poling, 2000). But, it is here, at The Wall, that emotions are stirred within my students that they will never forget. It is a defining experience, perhaps as powerful as when immigrants to our nation first cast their eyes on the *Statue of Liberty*. The adults are also moved. A parent wrote at the end of the 1999 LOV class field trip:

“I was like a child seeing history come alive! The Wall moved me to tears, especially when my roommate did a rubbing of someone she knew. I kept thinking, ‘How did intelligent men get us into this?’”

Understanding the hard truths

What better way is there to help students comprehend the sacrifices of war than expose them to the 58,183 names engraved on The Vietnam Veterans Memorial? It is an experience that causes them to question our government's commitment of nearly 2.7 million American men and women to a war in Southeast Asia that was the longest in our nation's history. High School seniors who have just turned 18 are doubly impacted when they learn that the average age of those who served was 19 years old. One student reflected,

“You learn that it was people my age who were killed, and you realize death is forever.”



Figure 1. A LOV class student rubs a special name of a North Carolinian on *The Wall*.

Here, they are able to comprehend the personal and historical magnitude of the Vietnam era. Another student commented:

“I understand now more than ever how this war affected everyone who was involved. Many of the parents, not to mention the veterans, and even our bus driver, all experienced this war in different ways. So, if it affected these people so traumatically, it is easier to imagine how it changed an entire country only 25 years ago.”

Why make the effort?

Rather than devote this entire article to a discussion of how a field trip can promote creative thinking and even greater student achievement on tests, I feel that it is also important for me to make explicit the hoops we jump through to “pull this off”. The most serious problems we face in organizing and conducting the LOV class field trip are related to time and funding. We are time-starved because we have more students to

teach, more tests to give (and grade) under new accountability standards and fewer classroom teacher aides. School budget cuts have hammered the “non-essential” extracurricular activities. In these less “teacher-friendly” times we are even being forced to dig into our own pockets for basic classroom supplies. So why do my colleague, Senior Class Advisor Vickie Christos, and I go up against all of this to take 30 to 40 high school seniors on a three-day, two-night field trip to Washington, DC? We do it because we believe that a visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is one of the most powerful ways we have for helping students connect the past with *their future*. At *The Wall*, our students cannot hear the mortar fire, or see the anguished faces of the dying, but they can better understand the enduring costs of the Vietnam War by helping a veteran-chaperone rub the name of a lost buddy (Figure 2). As one student commented following this experience of rubbing names:

“I got a deeper understanding of the reality. You can hear ‘58,000 people died’ all day long, but it really makes an impact when you see it. It hits hard!”



Figure 2. Helping a veteran-chaperone rub the name of a lost buddy.

Another student who particularly appreciated the 2000 LOV class’s visit to Arlington National Cemetery (Figure 3), wrote afterwards:

“I cannot even explain what this trip meant to me. I will remember it above anything I did in all four years of high school...including spring break and parties. It has taught me the true lessons of life, good and bad...It taught me the value of life.”



Figure 3. Former Arlington National Cemetery Historian Phil Bigler discusses the sacrifices of war with Millbrook High School students.

As interpreted by Bob Isenburg, Senior Administrator, Staff Development for Wake County Public Schools:

“The whole experience enriches students’ academic knowledge and inquiry skills—yet the real lessons are lifelong lessons in character, in understanding, and in building bridges to the community.”

Student preparation

A field trip is an out-of-the-classroom experience that can be associated with many special learning opportunities and important outcomes, but PREPARATION is the key. A parent chaperone confided to me after the Spring 2000 Field Trip,

“I was apprehensive about *going off* with a group of seniors, but I had a wonderful adventure. The kids had great preparation.”

I have found it prudent not to oversell the idea of a field trip. Before students even sign up for the *Lessons of Vietnam* elective, they learn in an orientation that this is a very demanding course. They are informed that there is much reading, writing, independent research, classroom debating, correspondence with carefully assigned veteran “links”(interviewees), group and solo projects – all critiqued and graded. I do inform them of the financial costs associated with the field trip (about \$175 per student), and I also let them know that participation in the field trip is encouraged, but not a course requirement.

What I teach my students about the Vietnam era will not count for much if they do not know how to act respectfully towards our congressional delegation, special tour guides, parent and veteran chaperones, teacher coordinators, and **each other**. Before loading a group of high school seniors on a charter bus for a trip to our nation’s capitol, it is important to spend quality time with your students to make sure that they understand your expectations of appropriate behavior. I devote some time in the classroom and in after school meetings, assisted by **my co-coordinator and chaperones**, to discuss the importance of being polite, courteous, and inclusive of others. Immature behavior on the part of just one or two students in a congressional policy briefing will not only leave a bad impression on a congressman, but “the welcome mat” for a return visit by future classes may be also be removed. It is essential to have each student and his/her parent or guardian read and sign a summary statement of “expectations of good conduct” for the field trip. This signed form should be included in each student’s trip information packet which also contains the program itinerary and background information on historical sites.

This careful preparation, or “trust-building,” as Ms. Christos and I call it, enables our students to “get the most” out of our special itinerary which also includes: dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant; a candlelight ceremony at The Wall honoring fallen soldiers from Wake County, NC; visits to the Korean War, Lincoln, and FDR Memorials; a guided tour of Arlington National Cemetery; and a “free afternoon” to visit the various Smithsonian Museums, the White House, FBI Building, Holocaust Museum, or National Gallery of Art, etc. We have a philosophy of “not umpiring the game too closely” at times. We have learned from student evaluations that the second most popular activity (rubbings at The Wall is #1) is having “free time to tour Washington, DC.” Many of our

students have never been to our nation's capitol, and during this free afternoon they can visit historic sites and national museums of their choice (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Classmates enjoy “free time” to visit the Newseum in Arlington, VA.

Advance preparation for our field trip also includes student development of questions for a foreign policy briefing with NC Senator John Edwards (see our web site for more detail on student interview guidelines). Part of our mission is to expose students to different perspectives on complicated world issues, such as current US policy in the Balkans or trade relations with China. For our 2001 field trip, students will raise questions such as, “Just what are our goals?” or “Could this be another Vietnam?” regarding the prudence of sending “military advisors” into Colombia.

Get help

The organization and planning of a one day class field trip is challenging enough for a time-starved teacher. But a three-day field trip for 30+ students, plus approximately 12 adults is only made manageable by having additional support from another teacher, or

perhaps a highly dedicated parent volunteer or veteran who can help oversee all of the logistics of the field trip. My job is to provide the logistical coordinator with a clear trip itinerary as well as identify our approximate spending limits for transportation, lodging, and special meals. You should also get the support of your administration right from the start. They can often provide budget support for substitute teacher(s) as well as advise you on various policies that govern school field trips (liability issues, parental consent forms, etc.).

Conclusion

As classroom educators, we can help our students master essential curricula, but let us not forget our other responsibility of providing a well balanced education – an education that considers a student’s potential in the broader sense of nurturing their intellectual curiosity, civic responsibility and character. I have learned that a field trip to *The Wall* can be a defining life experience for high school seniors. It is here that they see and touch history, and many of them start the process of connecting our nation’s past with *their future*.

Notes

1. Lindy G. Poling, *The Real World: Community Speakers in the Classroom*. Middle Level Learning. National Council for the Social Studies. May/June 2000, 8:8-10. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, *Echoes from the Wall: History, Learning and Leadership Through the Lens of the Vietnam War Era* (1999): is available at vvmf.org
2. *The Wall: A Day at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Peter Meyer and the Editors of *Life*, 1996 edition, Wings Books, Avenel, NJ (96 p), is an exquisitely produced book that expresses and reflects the unity of the past and present, of tragedy and hope.