Teaching 9/11

Irving Epstein
Professor of Educational Studies
Illinois Wesleyan University

Teaching 9/11 was an experimental course that I developed in the spring of 2006 for teacher certification students at Illinois Wesleyan University. The course was created for the purpose of introducing students to the Library of Congress website as part of the Adventures of the American Mind initiative, an initiative that is now titled Teaching with Primary Sources. Although I had previously encouraged my students to use the Library of Congress website on a sporadic basis, I believed that by creating a course focused upon 9/11, the website could be used to specific advantage.

At the same time, I wanted to model best teaching practices to my future students with regard to curricular development principles. I thus planned the course in ways that would demonstrate the strengths of interdisciplinary inquiry, drawing from a wide range of curricular specializations and fields. Also, I wanted students to become emotionally invested in the subject matter. It was my expectation and hope that the topics discussed would move students to examine 9/11 in more detail at a later point and re-examine their own roles of citizen and prospective teacher. But above all, I wanted my students to appreciate the interconnection of ideas, and to acknowledge the need for teachers to present concepts in ways that allow for simplification when necessary while also encouraging the pursuit of deeper and more complex understandings. The following summary of formal course readings and assignments gives a further illustration of these goals.

Students were introduced to the 9/11 literature by reading Richard Bernstein's *Out of the Blue: A Narrative of September 11, 2001* and Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn's *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers.* Bernstein, Dwyer, and Flynn are *New York Times* reporters and, together, their works offered students macro and micro narratives of the immediate events surrounding 9/11.

Although a few of Bernstein's factual claims have now been challenged, both books have held up well over the years. For students, upon reading *Out of the Blue*, they gained a deeper appreciation of the intersection of individual personality and historical event as they learned about the terrorists and their victims as people, whose lives were shaped around the events with which we have become familiar.

Through reading *102 Minutes*, students were able to appreciate the terror of the day, particularly for those who were trapped within the Twin Towers. Their appreciation was enhanced through the authors' meticulous descriptions of many of the individuals who worked in the towers along with police and firefighters as they slowly reveal who was saved and who perished, after giving their readers detailed personal histories of their lives. At the same time, students learned of engineering flaws within the towers, nonremediated fire code violations, inadequate exits and escape routes, questionable use of building materials in the construction of the buildings, poor communication technology between the New York City police and firefighters, the inability to adequately fight fires in large skyscrapers due to faulty water pressure, etc.

Class discussions based upon these readings led to further questions involving overall responsibility for the events of 9/11, so we then read selections from *The 9/11 National Commission Report*, written by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. Many of these chapters proved difficult for students whose understanding of the specific functions of governmental organizations was minimal. Nonetheless, students presented graphic organizers and charts portraying chains of command and agency jurisdictions with regard to national security issues. For some students, it was difficult to hear criticism of government agencies or of government leaders. Moreover, they were exposed to findings that critically spoke about the failures of large bureaucracies, including a tendency to engage in overspecialization without considering the larger consequences of action and/or inaction, an unwillingness to share information with sister agencies, and the inability of leaders to make quick decisions or to plan for the possibility of terrorist attack before its occurrence.

At this point in the semester, it became important for students to learn more about the root causes of terrorism and to examine the events

of 9/11 within a broader international context. To that end, students were asked to read Eric Hershberg and Kevin Moore's *Critical Views of September 11*, a series of essays commissioned by the Social Science Research Council.

As a result of reading selected essays from this volume, we discussed a variety of issues, including the nature of terrorism and whether there was a difference between state terrorism and terrorism perpetuated by an individual or small group. We examined the U.S. Iranian hostage crisis and the ensuing Iranian revolution as a foundational series of events encouraging the development of Islamic fundamentalism; and we examined the U.S. role in the Soviet war in Afghanistan, U.S. support for Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War from 1980-1988, and the first U.S. Iraq War in 1991 as a means of understanding how U.S. foreign policy created enemies in the region. Finally, we discussed the growth of Wahabbism and differences in approach between Sunni and Sh'iah versions of Islam.

We then switched focus and concentrated upon the humanities and media studies as venues in order to explore interpretations of the meanings of the events of 9/11 from differing perspectives. We thus read as a class a play created by Stuyvesant High School students, whose school was located in direct proximity to Ground Zero (Annie Thoms' *With Their Eyes*), and individuals selected and read aloud their favorite poetry from the anthology by William Heyen, *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*. Finally, we read selections from Wheeler Dixon's *Film and Television after 9/11*, which led to discussions about the impact of September 11th upon popular culture and discourse. In support of these themes, we watched and critiqued Michael Moore's film, *Farenheit 9/11*, and an episode of the television program *24*.

Class assignments included oral presentations and critiques of readings, and culminated in a class-produced website where resources were gathered and listed, images were collected, and lesson plans were created. There was a strong feeling among class participants that the knowledge they had gained during the course should be disseminated in a practical manner so as to be useful for other novice and experienced teachers. The class website can be accessed at the following address: http://titan.iwu.edu/~9-11site/Teaching%20 9_11.html.

The class website is distinctive in its reliance upon the Library of Congress website for graphics, including a child's drawing of the Twin Towers crying and holding hands, with a backdrop of the American flag on the homepage. In addition, the importance of using Library of Congress materials is highlighted in a lesson plan applicable to 6th to 8th graders devoted to understanding the functions of various government agencies.

The most important benefit of the website project, however, was to give students a chance to express their personal feelings about the subject matter. Two students traveled to New York City during their 2006 spring break and took photos of the ground zero site that appear on the website along with another student's photos that were taken in 2002. Others collected their favorite music that was composed in reaction to the 9/11 events. Because the creation of the website involved every class member, it proved to be a vehicle for unifying the class, encouraging students to take ownership of the subject matter in deeply personal ways.

Nevertheless, there were challenges that remained unresolved in the teaching of the course. Many students, lacking a firm background in political science, international relations, and area studies, had difficulty assimilating content related to the international dimensions of the events of 9/11. Perhaps inadvertently, the course design, by highlighting 9/11 as a U.S. tragedy, reinforced an insularity among students with regard to their willingness to explore the broader contexts in which 9/11 occurred. Some students were unwilling to consider stringent criticisms of the performance of the U.S. government in failing to plan for a terrorist attack, for its failure to locate terrorists within the country, or for the failure of agencies to cooperate with one another in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The Library of Congress website, so useful for the students in their efforts to locate visual imagery, personal narratives, and journalistic accounts of the events, is somewhat limited with regard to international sourcing and general coverage of these events from a non-U.S. perspective.

Finally, the desire of the students to create resources, lesson plans, and activities that could address what they viewed as the practical needs of teachers encouraged an instrumentalist view as to what was significant and important within the subject matter that was covered.

At times, conceptual complexity and a deepening understanding of the issues surrounding 9/11 and its aftermath were sacrificed.

In spite of the above-mentioned caveats, the design and implementation of the *Teaching 9/11* course was a very positive experience for both the instructor and the students. Many of the instructional goals that were essential to the course design were indeed fulfilled; student evaluations of the course were uniformly positive, and many students commented that the course included extremely useful and important learning experiences. The use of the Library of Congress website, although designed to supplement formal course readings, proved essential in giving students access to material culture artifacts that enhanced their understanding of the significance of the concepts to which they were exposed. In spite of the limited background knowledge of some of the participants in this course, all of the students gained an appreciation for the ways in which multiple concepts interconnect with one another. They were able to experience the benefits of interdisciplinary inquiry in intimate ways. A modified syllabus of the course is included in the Appendix, and comments as well as suggestions for improving the course would be most welcomed.

Education 370: Teaching 9/11

Instructor: Irv Epstein
Office Hours: CLA 116
Tuesday, Thursday, 1:00-2:00 pm
Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 2:00-3:00 pm

Course Introduction

Few historical events have shaped the consciousness of the American people as did those of September 11th, 2001. These events have forced us to rethink the meaning of terrorism and of atrocity; they have forced us to re-examine the relationship between the protection of personal freedom and national security. They have had a strong influence in redirecting American foreign policy, and have raised issues involving the nature of globalization and the ways that the U.S. government and its citizens conceive of religious and cultural difference. An examination of the aftermath of September 11th can also demonstrate how the media and different forms of artistic expression are used to express collective grief. How we remember September 11th, and how we analyze its antecedents and its impact not only speak to how historical memory is shaped, these processes also contribute to an evolving process whereby U.S. citizens continually redefine themselves, their politics, and their society.

As prospective educators, how then do we put these events into appropriate educational contexts? How do we present them in ways that encourage our students to examine issues that speak to our politics and social and cultural interactions reflexively? And, how do we teach in ways that allow our students to help shape the evolving discourses that they are studying? In this course, we will spend a great deal of time examining the events of 9/11 and their implications for our society. We will also look at ways of presenting material relevant to those events in ways that can be justified as educationally sound. In addition to reading a number of texts, we will spend a considerable amount of time examining internet resources, primarily those gathered by the Library of Congress in support of the Adventures of the American Mind initiative.

Texts

1. Bernstein, Richard. *Out of the Blue: A Narrative of September 11, 2001.* New York: Times Books, 2002.

2. Dixon, Wheeler Winston, ed. *Film and Television After 9/11.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

3. Dwyer, Jim, and Kevin Flynn. *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers.* New York: Times Books, 2005.

4. Hershberg, Eric, and Kevin Moore. *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World.* New York: Norton, 2002.

5. Heyen, William, et al. *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond.* New York: Etruscan Press, 2002.

6. Thoms, Annie. *With Their Eyes: September 11th—The View from a High School at Ground Zero.* New York: HarperTempest, 2002.

7. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.

Websites

Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov
American Memory Collection: http://memory.loc.gov
AAM Project: http://www.aamprogram.org
PBS: http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/soc_stud.htm
NEH: http://edsitement.neh.gov/websites_all.asp
National Archives: http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/

Assignments

1. *Website* – As a class we will create a website dedicated to teaching about 9/11. Students will be divided into groups that will have specific themes and areas of responsibility. The website will, for example, include lesson plans, resources and links to other sites,

book and article reviews, photographs, music, and art. It will serve as a collective statement on the part of the class as to what 9/11 signifies.

2. *Creation of a 9/11 Teaching Unit, Including Unit and Lesson Plans* – Each student will create her/his lesson plans and a unit plan to cover a number of aspects of the theme. The unit will be interdisciplinary in focus and the lesson plans will reflect this characteristic. The lesson plans will also borrow liberally from class readings and internet websites, particularly the Library of Congress and American Memory collections. At least one lesson plan must focus upon one issue covered by the National Commission on Terrorist Acts.

3. *Annotated Bibliography of Internet Resources* – In pairs, students will look at various website resources, focusing upon but not limited to the Library of Congress and American Memory collections' documents and resources. Students will critique twenty websites, evaluating their functional utility and potential classroom use. The resources must include some mixed and multi-media components.

4. *Microteaching* – Students will be asked to present much of the material covered in class to their fellow classmates. Student presentations will include a) summaries of themes to be covered, b) a list of discussion questions, and c) advance organizers including Venn diagrams and concept maps that will be useful in elucidating discussion.

5. *Attendance and Participation* – As this class will be run as a seminar, it is imperative that all students attend regularly and participate actively.

About the Author

Irving Epstein is a professor of educational studies at Illinois Wesleyan University. He teaches educational policy, curriculum and instruction, and secondary education courses. He is currently editing an encyclopedia on international children's issues.

