

RADICAL TEACHER

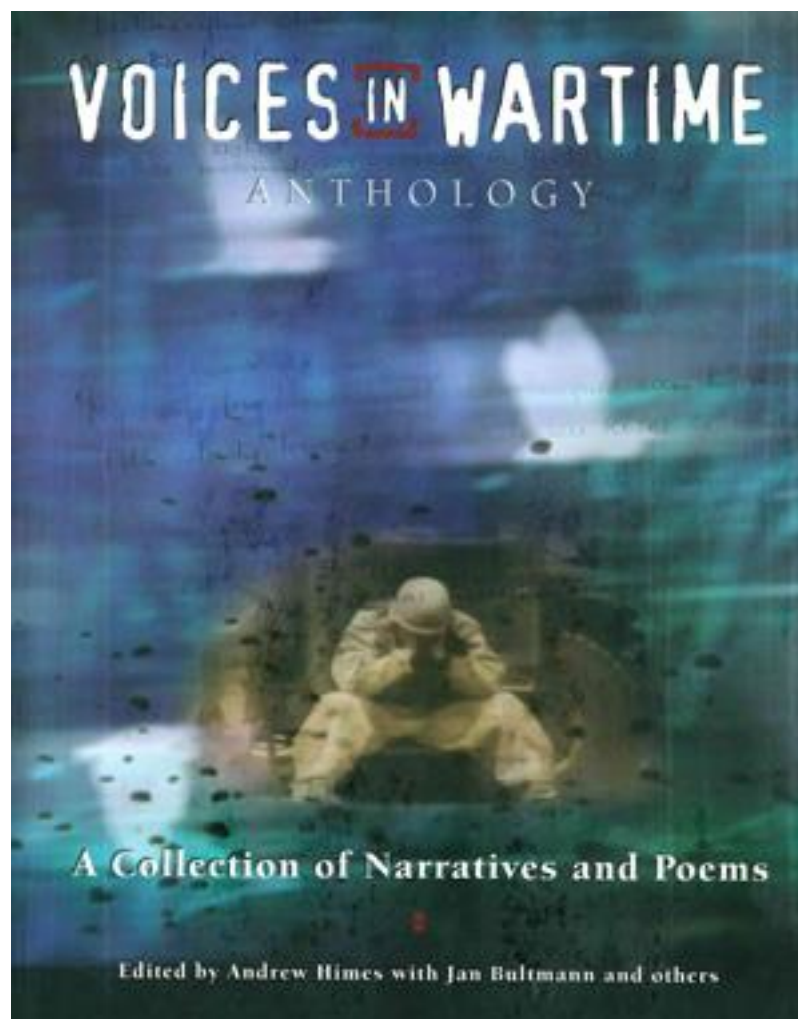
A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Raising Awareness of Social Justice and War Through

Film and Poetry

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by Veronica Gaylie



VOICES IN WARTIME, 2005

The Voices in Wartime Education project is a non-profit organization dedicated to exploring conflict through education and the arts. The 74-minute documentary *Voices in Wartime* juxtaposes images of war with the words of soldiers, poets, and others who experience armed conflict first hand. I ordered the DVD and decided to show the film to my student teachers at UBC Okanagan, a campus located in the predominantly suburban city of Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada.

After watching the film, my students were shaken to the core. Viewing the violent images in the context of poetry had a much greater impact than simply viewing distant photographs or films in the news or on news blogs. So far, our course topics had included teaching and learning around middle school methods, basic lesson planning, cooperative learning, integrating interdisciplinary coursework through technology, outdoor learning, and teacher professionalism.

I now invited the students to take a step towards developing empathetic, socially engaged classrooms. I wanted to incorporate public, community, mindful public action into my teacher education program. Spontaneity, and the unplanned aspects of lesson planning, was also part of the lesson. I knew the best way to get them thinking about empathy would be through poetry.

We watched relentless images from various wars and ravaged natural landscapes, many in developing world contexts. Afterwards, the students were dead silent, and troubled. The images of war were real; what they had seen and their reactions were important yet impossible to assess using a rubric; for the most part, they were not used to the classroom as a place that prompted such stark, emotional awareness. How does a teacher then respond to such a strong, unplanned response? The film comes with an extensive curriculum guide that includes debriefing activities intended to help students make sense of what they have seen. And yet, as the students experienced for themselves, the frustration of war is also its senselessness.

In the end, the film prompted us into spontaneous action. After giving the students a choice about de-briefing after the film -- whether we would write in journals, write poems, or form discussions in jigsaw groups -- the students decided on "the alternative option." They wanted to put their middle school teacher training into action with a hands-on, environment based, campus action. After some discussion, we decided to dedicate a "Peace Tree" on campus.

It was important for the students to gather and hold a symbolic ceremony based on acknowledging the existence of war while honoring the natural environment, right in our midst. It was unanimous: the tree in the courtyard at the Science building. As we went outside in the pouring rain, signed our names on a little "Peace Tree" sign, covered it in plastic, and tied it around the trunk, students were visible in

the science lab, walking around with test tubes and beakers. They did not even notice us.

The film, the poems, and the action allowed students to examine and channel their uncomfortable reactions, and perhaps encourage others to wonder about the Peace Tree. One of the students later told me that the day we watched the film everything changed; the student teachers moved from observers seeking information ... to participants constructing equitable, engaged, informed, globally inspired, peaceful interaction. The film *Voices in Wartime* comes with a teacher's guide with many excellent activities that could be used in middle or high school Humanities classes or in teacher training. We found that the best way to learn from the film is to let spontaneity, especially discomfort, be your guide. Taking up Wilfred Owen's poem from the film, the students learned how to engage in true, socially just action:

The poetry is in the pity.
All a poet can do today
is warn. That is why the
true poet must be
truthful.

[Information on ordering the film, the *Voices in Wartime Anthology*, and the curriculum guide can be found at: www.voicesinwartime.org]



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