

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching Note
We Are Not Your Soldiers

by Stephanie Rugoff



ENOUGH !!!

"ENOUGH!" BY CHRIS STAIN (2018) VIA JUSTSEEDS

We Are Not Your Soldiers – What is it?

A project of World Can't Wait¹, which opposes U.S. aggression against other countries and the criminal acts carried out in our names, We Are Not Your Soldiers brings veterans into high school and college classrooms to share their experiences in the U.S. military where they were part of the vast machine carrying out policies of domination via wars, interventions, police actions, surveillance, drones, or bases. While the rest of the world knows first-hand what happens, it is the people in the United States who know so little about how members of the U.S. military are trained, and then what actually occurs when another country is attacked. Hearing directly from veterans speaking from their hearts, often revealing very personal insights, is therefore a life-changing experience for many students.

How Did We Are Not Your Soldiers Develop?

We Are Not Your Soldiers unofficially started in 2006, at the height of anti-war activity here in the United States, when World Can't Wait began visiting high schools with recent veterans. Along with being the apex of the anti-war movement, it was also when the military was at its most desperate to recruit young people and was putting out its dragnet as widely as possible. In 2008, the organized We Are Not Your Soldiers project officially began, and the "tours" really got going when some veterans at a World Can't Wait meeting got into a discussion about reactions when people thank them "for their service."

To give a sense of the broad reach of our program, since the 2014-15 academic year, we have visited and often revisited some 40 educational institutions, primarily high schools and colleges but also a couple of middle schools and a youth program. In those visits, we have spoken with about 250 classes (including JROTC, GED and after-school programs), engaging in in-depth discussions on the U.S. military with thousands of young people. While these visits were largely in New York state, especially New York City, we also have gone to Philadelphia and spoken at schools in North Carolina, Maine, Nebraska and Indiana.

What Happens at a We Are Not Your Soldiers Visit?

The veterans share vivid stories of how they were affected by the military and of the wars where so many have lost their humanity or their lives. They also speak about the effects on people in the countries under attack. Most of the veterans were part of the "War of Terror," although one of our speakers served in the 1990s and another in Vietnam in the late 1960s.

The effects on these veterans and on the people in the countries where they were deployed share many similarities despite considerable differences in time or space. Students are encouraged to voice ideas and questions in an environment where each person speaking is treated with

respect. The students respond, showing great empathy for the veterans while also expressing shock at the information they communicate. Responses are profound and questions are many, the most frequent being about PTS and whether the veteran would enlist again if given the choice.

In college classes, most of the time, students who are veterans will nod their heads in agreement but not say very much. From time to time, they will disagree with some things, but the discussion has always been respectful in both directions. On one unusual occasion, one of the veterans/students came with us to the following class and joined us in the presentation.

In both high school and college, at times differences are voiced by the students, mainly questioning what can be done other than using the military to settle disputes between countries. In one case, a high school student who lived on a military base with his family felt that we were implying that his father must be abusive. This came out in a private conversation after class when we noticed that the student looked upset during the presentation, and we asked him what bothered him about it. The veteran speaker clarified that he had described his personal experiences and when speaking beyond that was speaking systemically and not about every individual involved. It was a beneficial conversation where we all left feeling we could empathize with the other viewpoint and not take it as a personal insult.

We utilize multimedia as well as storytelling: video clips, music and poetry written and performed by the veterans, slide shows, photos, maps, etc. Students are exposed to highly personal and emotional narratives and a perspective about which they otherwise would not know. This includes bringing the lives of the other inhabitants of the world into the classroom, so that students can see them as people and not as enemies to hate and kill.

We work with educators to develop customized presentations linked to curriculum as needed. As stated in the Common Core State Standards on critical thinking, students can integrate information from diverse sources. Students can delineate and evaluate the arguments and claims to which they are exposed. We provide resources for the educators to both prepare for and follow up on our visits.

We have been invited to speak to students by conservative teachers and administrators and even by a few JROTC teachers who don't agree with all or much of what we say but who do feel that it's important that students hear all sides and make their own informed decisions on what to do with their lives. They are people who care about their students and are aware of the suicide rate among veterans of about 22 a day.

We begin each presentation by telling students not to believe us just because we are guests in their classroom, any more than they should believe any other "authority figures." We urge them to do their own research to verify information – whether from us, the media, or other sources. Again, this has given us the possibility to present in schools where administrators believe in the free exchange of information but not necessarily with our analysis. They also know, from their own friends and family, the difficulties that veterans often face, physically and/or emotionally upon their

return home. Therefore, they can accept much of what is shared with the students when veterans speak openly about their own lives, honestly revealing, as a number of students point out (especially surprised that men can do this), their own vulnerabilities. Since 2008, we only have had two experiences where we were barred from returning to a school.

How Do We Connect to the Students?

We start by asking the students if any have family or close friends currently serving in the military, if they have veterans in their families, if any have been in a war situation, and if anyone is considering enlistment. In college classes we also ask if anyone is currently in the National Guard or a veteran. We raise the possibility that some family members may have had similar experiences to our speaker but that most people find it very hard to talk about them. We then suggest that perhaps the students can use any insights gained during the presentation to open up a discussion with family members in a supportive manner.

We focus the students at the start of the visit with some essential questions or words. One is "morality," knowing the difference between right and wrong and considering what to do if you know something is wrong. Often, the other is "enemy." If there is an enemy, can you describe who that is? If there isn't, why do you think we are led to believe we have an enemy?

Story-telling is an important way to connect. And engaging in discussion, sometimes very deep discussion, is a major part of what we do. For the students, hearing the voices of the veterans can prove incredibly powerful.

We make it clear that we understand what students face in terms of the high cost of post-secondary education and the difficulties of finding a job, let alone one that pays a living wage. Yet we ask them to consider what it means to go into someone else's country, where people have even worse living conditions than we have here, and bring them violence and destruction. What does that do to those people? What can it do to the students we're speaking with, both physically and emotionally?

Speaking openly and forthrightly is difficult and not many veterans can do this. We are very grateful to each of our speakers. All of them, in one way or another during their presentations, speak to the racism, misogyny, brutality and the brainwashing of basic training. Anti-war activist veterans, like many other veterans, struggle with post-traumatic stress, unemployment or underemployment, housing or family disruptions, and a myriad of other difficulties. On top of that they tend to suffer from moral injury.

The COVID 19 pandemic has also been a challenge for us to the degree that it has been challenging for educators and students. We have therefore had more difficulties in arranging visits. On the other hand, distance visits to places

that had been beyond our travel capacities have, with additional planning, been conducted via remote technology. Such remote visits have become routine for local schools too, and we are now prepared to do any visits easily, if need be, via whatever remote technology a particular educational institution is utilizing.

How Do We Reach Teachers?

We constantly reach out to educators so we can interact with more students offering our program, which entails no charge to the schools due to our constant fundraising. We network through former colleagues, friends, and family as well as other anti-war or peace organizations. We meet teachers at demonstrations and events. We attend educational conferences. We email and call administrators and counselors – and follow up regularly. We join educator list-serves and utilize the email list of World Can't Wait. Of course, we have our website, WeAreNotYourSoldiers.org, and Facebook page. We encourage all the readers of this article to visit these sources where much more information can be found. Contact us if you'd like to arrange a visit to your class.

Notes

1. <https://www.worldcantwait.net/>
2. <https://www.wearenotyoursoldiers.org/>
3. <https://www.wbai.org/archive/program/episode/?id=18830>
4. <https://www.wearenotyoursoldiers.org/meet-the-veterans-in-we-are-not-your-soldiers/>
5. <https://www.facebook.com/wearenotyoursoldiers>



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