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AUTHOR Johannessen, Larry R.
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ABSTRACT

Starting a unit on Vietnam War literature by having students view slides of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and listen to letters left there is just the first step in how an English teacher uses the arts to enhance student learning about the Vietnam War and its literature. After discussing their reactions to the slides and the offerings left at the memorial, the students review 13 topics for oral reports that involve music, visual arts, and the performing arts of the period. Through these oral reports that involve the arts, students are able to respond in English class in ways other than through linguistic expression. As a follow-up activity, students relate the art they have researched and reported on orally to the literature they have studied in class. Student responses to the follow-up activity indicated that what the artists and writers were trying to say about the Vietnam War was the common thread through which students were able to make connections between the art and literature. Student responses also illustrate the impact that the art of the war can have and how studying the art can help them make meaning out of the literature. (Contains 15 references and 6 student responses. An appendix describes the 13 oral presentation topics.)
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Using the Arts to Teach Vietnam War Literature

Larry R. Johannessen
Associate Professor of Education

Benedictine University
5700 College Road
Lisle, Illinois 60532-0900

Telephone: (630) 829-6286
Fax: (630) 960-1126

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Session L09:
Focus on Reflecting and Connecting

Chicago, Illinois

November 24, 1996

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By
 Larry R. Johannessen
 Associate Professor of Education
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With the lights out and shades drawn, I turn on the slide projector and click the forward button that projects the first of a series of slides of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. on the screen. "Hey, what's going on?" a student asks. I don't answer. I don't need to because a hush comes over my students as they scan the thousands of names chiseled into the V-shaped memorial's black granite walls.

I click to the next slide that clearly shows a few of the many offerings, numbering now more than 40,000--a single blood-red rose, a Purple Heart medal, a key chain, a pair of worn jungle boots, a bag of M&Ms, a poem, an unopened sardine can, a prom picture, a pair of cowboy boots, a wedding ring, a birthday card, and a stuffed bear--that are left at the memorial each day, and I begin reading from one of the letters left each day: "I came down today to pay respects to two good friends of mine. Go down and visit them sometime. They are on panel 42E, lines 22 and 26. I think you will like them" (Lopes 1987, 34). "What?" I hear a student voice mutter.

I tell my students, "Watch and listen," and I click to the next slide, and begin reading again: "I see your name on a black wall. A name I gave you as I held you so close after your were born, never dreaming of the too few years I was to have with you" (Allen, 1995, 95).

I click to the next slide, and begin reading again: "Dad, it's nearly impossible to write what I feel today. I may never know why things happened the way they did..." (Lopes, 1987, 63). "Does anyone have a reaction?" I call out. Silence.

I click to the next slide, and read: "...We Did what we could but it was not enough because I found you here. You are not just a name on this wall. You are alive. You are blood on my hands. You are screams in my ears. You are eyes in my soul. I told you you'd be all right, but I lied, and please forgive me" (Allen, 1995, 96). "Tell me what you are thinking?" I ask them.

"How many names do you think are there?" One student tentatively asks.

"Take a guess," I say, as I click to the next slide and read some more: "My dearest Paul: I finally got here--a beautiful monument for you. I miss you--and I know you're watching over me. I love you, Your wife" (Allen, 1995, 95).

"It looks like hundreds, maybe thousands," a student says.

"No, it's more like thousands and thousands," someone else answers, as I go on to the next slide and begin reading an excerpt from a four page letter that was addressed to the 101st Airborne Division: "...The worst memory for me is the day I sent the 76 men out of your 85 to their deaths. I have to explain and pray to God you will understand" (Allen, 1995, 98).

"What are those names for?" another student asks.

"They are the names of the soldiers who died in Vietnam," a student sitting near me calls out.

"No! That's crazy," comments still another. I click to the next slide.

"It's true," a student in the front of the room says. "They all died in Vietnam."

"So many names," someone says. "So many."

My students are moved in much the same way as the more than 75,000 people who come each week to the nation's capital to visit the memorial, or what has become America's wailing wall.

This might seem like a strange way to start a literature unit, but this is no ordinary unit. It is my unit on the literature of the Vietnam War, and the student reactions in this activity illustrates the impact that the art that has come out of the war can have on students. In fact, critic Samuel Freedman (1985) argues that the Vietnam War was the first war fought on television and to a rock-and-roll soundtrack. It is because of this that Freedman maintains that it is through the art, particularly visual and sound, that we may come to understand the war and its aftermath. In addition, because the war was fought on television and to a rock-and-roll beat, the literature of the war reflects these influences. In fact, a number of scholars (Anisfield 1988, Gilman 1988, Christie 1989, and Johannessen 1992) point to rock music as a major influence on this literature, an influence that gives it a remarkable intensity, makes it very appealing to students, and distinguishes it from the literature of previous wars.

For these reasons, starting my unit on Vietnam War literature by having my students view slides of and listen to letters left at the most visible and powerful visual work of art to come out of the war is just the first step in how I use the arts to enhance student learning about the Vietnam War and the literature of the war.

After discussing student reactions to the slides of the memorial and offerings left at the memorial, I inform the class that they will be doing oral reports on the music, dance, art, theater, and photography of the war and that we will be studying some of the literature written about the war. I explain that just as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had a powerful impact on them, they will be studying some of the arts to see how it affects them and how this art is reflected in the literature.

Then, I pass out the assignment sheet, "The Vietnam War and the Arts: Topics and Oral Presentation Assignment." (See Appendix, pp. 13-14. This assignment is adapted from Johannessen 1992, 153-154.) After going over the assignment and topics, I give students some time to think about them before picking one. While students might do this assignment on their own, I have them do it in pairs or small groups because the school

and/or local libraries may not have enough materials for every student in a class. I usually assign students to pairs or small groups based on their interest in particular topics. The final reports are due while the class is reading literature dealing with the war.

This activity works in a number of ways. First, many of the thirteen topics have tremendous appeal to students. For example, students who are interested in rock-and-roll are fascinated to discover how this music reflects the sentiments of the anti-war movement during the 1960s and early 70s (assignments #1, #2, #7, & #9). In their reports they note that draft resistance became a favorite theme in songs such as Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant" and Phil Ochs's "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore." They are equally fascinated to discover how the music of Bruce Springsteen and others reflect the changing attitudes of Americans toward those who served in Vietnam (Assignment #9). In addition, as they examine the music in light of the literature they are studying, they discover a number of important connections. For example, in reading Tim O'Brien's memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, they note that O'Brien was opposed to the war and yet rejected the call by the anti-war movement to resist the draft or desert the military. It is much easier for students to understand O'Brien's opposition to the war as a result of the connections they make between the popular music of the day and the attitudes of many young people concerning the war in Vietnam. They also note that while his memoir is not necessarily an anti-war book, it nevertheless asks readers to consider whether the war was worth the cost. Some students point out that his change in attitude towards those who fought in the war is reminiscent of the point of view reflected in songs such as Billy Joel's "Goodnight Saigon" and Huey Lewis's "Walking on a Thin Line." Students are able to connect the literature with art and see how these in turn reflect the ideological civil war that raged across the land and led to a questioning of the national character. In addition, they see how the art and literature speak to the aftermath of the war and how the war continues to have an impact on their lives. (See for example, Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." and Bobbie Ann

Mason's *In Country*, which deal with some of the legacies--Mason uses the song as a frame for her story and Bruce Springsteen serves as a central image in the novel.)

Studying the art of the Vietnam War has other rewards as well. For example, one pair of students who began looking at films produced in the late 1970's were very upset to discover that early post-Vietnam films such as "Taxi Driver" portrayed Vietnam veterans as psychopaths. This led them to examine later films such as "Uncommon Valor" and Sylvester Stalone's Rambo films in an attempt to understand the change in attitude toward Vietnam veterans. They were able to see how films reflect public attitudes and sentiments and how they play an important role in cultural myth-making. Ultimately, they were able to apply their knowledge to Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country*. They were better able to understand the characters, particularly the Vietnam veterans, in her novel.

Another important benefit of having students study this art is that it gives students an opportunity to respond in English class in ways other than through linguistic expression. As Peter Smagorinsky (1991) argues, bringing the arts into the English classroom is one way to provide students whose linguistic intelligence might be the weakest in their repertoire other vehicles through which to communicate understanding. Further, studying the arts enables students to transport knowledge gained in one domain to another. They begin to see how the different subject areas are related.

In a follow-up class discussion of the Vietnam War and the arts, I ask students to draw conclusions. Many are often quick to point out how the war politicized American fine artists and how the art in recent years, like the literature that deals with the war, seems to be an attempt at healing some of the wounds of the war. However, some students note that controversies still exist. For example, students who reported on the visual art (Assignments #3, #8, & #10) note that while popular films such as the Chuck Norris "Missing in Action" films portray the Vietnam veteran as a warrior-hero, many of the paintings, photographs and sculptures created by Vietnam veterans show a different view. They point to the exhibit "Vietnam: Reflexes and Reflections," which toured the country in

the 1980s, and is now on permanent display in Chicago (at the **Vietnam Veterans Art Museum**, 1801 S. Indiana Ave., Chicago; Hours: 11 to 6 daily, open till 9 p.m. on Wednesday. Phone: [312] 326-0270) as an example of the art produced by veterans that shows the agony of the veterans and the Vietnamese people. "This art," one student said, "reveals that the veterans don't feel like heroes, and it doesn't show any victory like some of the popular films." In addition, students who reported on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial discuss some of the controversies over the memorial. They point to the fact that the nation could not agree on a single memorial to the Vietnam War in Washington. It needed both the somber wall, engraved with the names of the fallen, and a statue of three soldiers, innocents who look one year out of high school, and now a third statue that pays tribute to the women who served in the war as been added. This discussion reveals the importance of having students study the art of the Vietnam War. Students have gained a sophisticated understanding of the role of art in society.

As a follow-up writing activity, I often ask students to relate the art they have researched and reported on orally to the literature we have studied in class. The first example is from a student paper on Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, the second James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, and the third is Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Note how these examples reflect the strong thematic connection between the arts these students studied and the literature they read, and studying the arts helped them to better understand the literature they studied in class:

Student Response #1: Many of the Vietnam veteran artists such as David Smith who had works in *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Arts Look at the War* (1991) saw the war in similar ways as Philip Caputo in his memoir, *A Rumor of War*. The pain and sadness expressed in many of the paintings by Vietnam veterans, such as David Smith's "Little Hero of War" (1989), remind me of Caputo's hollow comment when he leaves Vietnam: 'We had done nothing more than endure. We had survived, and that was our only victory' (1977, 320). There are no victory parades for Caputo or for these artists. There is only survival and pain and sadness.

Student Response #2: The songs that were written and sung by soldiers in Vietnam allowed the singers to express their fear and sadness in acceptable ways, which is how James Webb portrays marines singing songs in his novel, *Fields of*

Fire (1978). For example, a song like Tobey Hughes's "Will There be a Tomorrow?" *In Country: Folk Songs of Americans in the Vietnam War*. In *Country Review*. LP. Flying Fish, 1991), describes a pilot's fear of dying in a strange land before he flies a mission into Laos. It is just like what Goodrich does before his platoon is scheduled to go out on a major operation. He sings a series of protest and other popular songs for the platoon that capture the frustrations, bitterness and agony that he and the rest of the men in the platoon felt after months in the bush and the fear that they all felt in anticipation of the upcoming operation (315-16).

Student Response #3: Many of the works in the 'Vietnam: Reflexes and Reflections' exhibit seem to closely parallel what O'Brien seems to be trying to say in his memoir [*If I Die in a Combat Zone*]. The theme of many of the works in the exhibit is anguish. For example, the images in the exhibit include the skull of a G.I. impaled on a stake, a rural mother receiving the news her son is dead, and a soldier cradling a dead Vietnamese child. This is exactly the theme O'Brien keeps returning to again and again in his work: in "The Centurion," when the platoon tie up three old men and then beat them because they find a weapon in a well; in "The Man at the Well," which involves one member of the platoon brutalizing a blind old man for no apparent reason; in "Mora," when one of the men shoots an enemy soldier who turns out to be an enemy nurse; and, in the end, when O'Brien writes that war doesn't leave you pure and free, innocent and fresh. You can't come home 'barefoot' because a part of you has changed for all time. The agony of the Vietnam War will be etched forever upon a soldier's mind, a soldier's soul, a soldier's heart.

One point I want to make with these examples relates to an important issue regarding connecting literature and the arts. I recently completed a curriculum consulting project with a local school district that wanted me to help them integrate the fine arts into their English curriculum, and we ran into a bit a problem because some of the teachers kept gravitating toward terminology from some of the arts, like, balance, movement, counterpoint, and color, and they seemed to be trying to connect literature and the arts by indicating that, for example, balance in a painting is just like balance in a poem or novel or something, and then they wanted to try to teach this to students. They seemed to believe that the only way to connect the arts is by means of these technical concepts or terms. One problem is, I am not sure that the two concepts mean the same thing in painting and in literature, and if you look at the student examples I just showed you that students wrote after doing the arts project I showed you earlier, the connection isn't through teaching students about color or balance or anything like that, it is by means of theme. Clearly one

thing that the arts have in common with literature is that artists and writers try to say something about a subject. I had students explore what these artists and writers were trying to say about the Vietnam War. That is the common thread through which students were able to make connections between the art and literature. Students don't need to study and memorize technical terms from the arts.

Some other examples of student responses illustrate another important way that studying the art of the war influenced students. The first response is to Tim O'Brien's memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and the next two are responses to the documentary film *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*.

Student Response #4: Before I studied the music of the time, I really didn't understand how O'Brien could be opposed to the war and believe that he was a coward for not refusing to fight and fleeing to Canada. But, after listening to and reading about the protest songs of the time, it is much easier to understand how Tim O'Brien, who was just a young college student, could feel the way he did about the war. For example, opposition to the war and draft resistance were favorite themes in popular songs such as Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant," Phil Ochs's "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore," and the Doors's "The Unknown Soldier."

Student Response #5: This film was wrenching for me in that it presents what amounts to a whole alternate world of experience that was going on while most young Americans were leading a very different life. This is made especially poignant to me by the film's very affecting use of the music of that era. From the opening scene, showing young soldiers surfing at China Beach, the term "wipe out" from the popular song by the same title takes on a whole new connotation. While life went on normally for many young Americans--going to a first dance, buying a first car, dreaming of college and the future--part of the Vietnam generation was being wiped out.

Student Response #6: The images on their faces, in combat footage and in the home-movie excerpts showing them trying to make the best of a horrible situation, are very painful. All they wanted was to somehow get through it, go home to their loved ones, and continue their normal lives. For some, this was not to be; and I just looked at them and wondered, "Did you make it?" and felt very sad. During the song, "I Shall Be Released," some of the lyrics of which are, "They say everything can be replaced," a letter writer tells about the shock and impact of finding that a very badly torn-up body brought in belongs to a good friend. "Today the heavens cried for him," he says, and it was, "the hardest rain I've ever seen." The dead cannot be replaced, and for the living, their release would be a long time coming.

These excerpts from student papers illustrate the impact that the art of the war can have on students and how studying the art can help them make meaning out of the literature. After students have completed their study of the art and literature of the Vietnam War, they have a much more sophisticated understanding of the war and the literature and art dealing with the war. As one student recently said in his report about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: “The tone in many of the artifacts that are now being left at the memorial is one of an on-going connection, as the Vietnam generation gives way to the next generation. And they in turn seem to be staying part of a larger, ongoing Vietnam experience as can be seen in the following letter, along with a small hand-tinted photograph of a Vietnamese man and young girl, that was left at the memorial in the fall of 1994: ‘For twenty two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam.... So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter, I suspect. Each time my heart and gutts [*sic*] would burn with the pain of guilt. I have two daughters myself now. One is twenty. The other one is twenty-two, and has blessed me with two granddaughters.... For me Sir, I shall try to live my life to the fullest, an opportunity that you and many others were denied.’”

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APPENDIX

Topics for Research and Oral Presentation Assignment

The Vietnam War and the Arts: Topics and Oral Presentation Assignment

Directions: Select one of the following topics, and then using the information you gather, prepare and give an oral presentation that answers the questions posed in your topic. In your presentation, you must show the art, photography or other visual works, play the music, or read or perform a cutting from the play that is the focus of your report.

1. The protest songs of the 1960s reflect events that were taking place. How do these songs reflect the political controversies over the Vietnam War? How is this music reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War? Which songs and/or artists seem to be most important? Why?
2. Many rock-and-roll songs were popular with GIs who fought in Vietnam. Which rock-and-roll songs and/or artists were most popular with those who served in Vietnam? Why? How is this music reflected in Vietnam War literature? How does this music reflect the political controversies of the time?
3. In the 1960s and early 1970s artists began depicting the war in Vietnam. How do artists like Peter Saul and others portray the Vietnam War? How do these works reflect the political controversies of the time? Which artists and/or words of art seem to be most important? Why? How are these portrayals of the war reflected in Vietnam War literature?
4. Magazines, newspapers, and television brought images of the war into American homes on a daily basis. Some of these images became touchstones for the growing unrest at home over the war. How did television news cameras and photographers portray the war in Vietnam? Which images were most important in terms of the political controversies of the time? How are these images reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War?
5. Classical music was also influenced by the war in Vietnam. The music of Leonard Bernstein and Richard Wernick are two notable examples. How does this music reflect the political controversies of the time? Which music and/or artists seem to be most important and why? How is this music or the themes in this music reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War?
6. Dance was not exempt from the Vietnam War. Yvonne Rainer and others were influenced by the war. How did dance reflect the issues surrounding the Vietnam War? Which artists seem to be most important and why? How are the themes of dance reflected in the literature of the War?
7. As early as 1972, some pop music began to deal with a new issue, the Vietnam veteran. How is this issue reflected in the music of artists such as Marvin Gay and Curtis Mayfield, and how is this subject treated in pop music of the 1980s? How is this music reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War? How does it reflect changing attitudes toward the war and Vietnam veterans? Which artists and/or music seem most important in terms of this issue? Why?

8. The visual art produced by combat artists during the war and that produced by Vietnam veterans and other American and Vietnamese artists depict the war and its aftermath in striking ways. How does this art depict the war and its aftermath? Which works and/or artists seem most important? Why? How are these views of the war reflected in the literature? How do they reflect the controversies or issues of the time or changing attitudes toward the war?
9. Popular music in the 1980's illustrates new attitudes toward and views of the Vietnam War and those who served in the war. How does this music see the war in Vietnam and the Vietnam veteran? Which songs and/or artists seem most important in this regard? Why? How does this music reflect the change in attitudes and views in society? How is this music reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War?
10. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. has been called everything from the "black ditch" to a powerful work of art. How does this memorial reflect the lingering wounds of the Vietnam War? What is your assessment of this Memorial? Is it a "black gash of shame" or a work of art that has the potential to help heal the wounds of the war? How is the controversy over the memorial and/or the meaning of the memorial reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War?
11. Since the early days of the war, documentary films and television programs have dealt with a number of issues and controversies of the war. Some of these films and programs have won critical acclaim, influenced public opinion, and brought about public awareness of issues related to the war. Which of these films and/or television programs are most important? Why? How are the issues, themes, and/or controversies dealt with in these films and programs reflected in the literature of the Vietnam War?
12. Directly or indirectly popular films and television shows have dealt with the war since the mid 1960's. In fact, as with rock music, these films and television shows not only reflect the political controversies, but also reflect changing attitudes toward the war and in the Vietnam veteran. Select a time period, such as 1964-72, 1973-1982, or 1983-1996, and answer the following questions about the feature films and/or weekly television shows of that time period. How do the feature films and/or weekly television shows portray the Vietnam War? How do these works reflect the political controversies of the time? Which films and/or television programs seem to be most important? Why? How are the issues, themes, controversies, and views of the war reflected in Vietnam War literature?
13. From the early days of the war with plays such as "MacBird!" and "Viet Rock" to recent popular productions such as Cameron Mackintosh's "Miss Saigon" and Shirley Lauro's "Piece of My Heart," the theater has dealt with the Vietnam War. How do the plays during the Vietnam War reflect the political controversies of the time? How have Vietnam veterans and others portrayed the war and its aftermath? Which playwrights and/or plays seem to be most important and why? How are the political controversies or themes and issues in these dramas reflected in the fiction and nonfiction of the Vietnam War?

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