

The Extreme *Real* Example: Classrooms after the Events of September 11, 2001

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What Happened

A few minutes before 9 A. M. on September 11th 2001, four planes were hijacked shortly after take off from airports in the United States. One plane flew into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. A second flew into the south tower of the World Trade Center. By 10 A. M., both towers had fallen to the ground, killing almost 4,000 individuals. A third plane flew into the Pentagon in Washington D. C.; over 200 perished. Passengers interrupted a fourth attempt on another Federal building; the plane nose-dived into the ground outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. All of the passengers, the crew and the hijackers lost their lives.

Public schools and universities across the United States cancelled classes and closed for the day. At 11:30, campus police at the university where I work shuttled all faculty and students who live in the state off university grounds; international students and out-of-state students were locked into their residence halls. I drove home and, like my family, friends and colleagues, watched the news all day and all night.

Returning to the Classroom

Classes resumed at many universities on September 12th. That day, my colleagues and I, like many of our colleagues across the globe, stood in the hallways talking about what we should do in our courses. Some were committed to sticking with their syllabi; others completely changed their course plans; still others, unable to focus on the work for that day, created a new assignment. This kind of conversation was not unusual. Discussions about modifying lesson plans and syllabi took place among professors working at many American and international universities. More than one article appeared in the New York Times reporting on changes to secondary school and college and university curricula in response to the events of September 11th. The Chronicle of Higher Education also published an issue that noted the creation of new courses in Middle Eastern studies at many universities after September 11th and the addition of interdisciplinary courses examining ideas such as terrorism, disaster, or violence. These changes occurred, in part, as a response to shock, the need to know, and the desire to construct relevant classes; but they were also intended to accomplish a sort of healing. Jen Sens, a photojournalism student at the University of Florida during the fall semester 2001, is quoted in John Freeman's essay, "Grief and Sorrow: When Pictures Are Worth More than a Thousand Words," attesting to her compulsion to do what she knew how to do - take pictures - because "it was a kind of therapy for me." Like those professors and students that participated in teach-ins during the Viet Nam Era, professors and their students, Freeman and his journalism students, for example, created new contexts for teaching and learning after

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September 11th. No other international or domestic event since the 1970's has resulted in the number of changes to college and university curricula that September 11th has prompted. This collection of essays aims to document some of these changes and to offer theoretical and practical reasons for making them. Reflecting upon the work that took place in their classrooms following September 11th, the authors of these essays demonstrate their efforts to facilitate both the addressing of a public crisis and the production of knowledge in student-centered classrooms, changed by the events and their aftermath. In other words, the essays are testimony, bearing witness to the ways in which teachers and students mattered differently to each other than they had before on that day and after.

Crisis and Pedagogy

Shoshana Felman's article "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" is one of the few pieces of scholarship that discusses the relationship between pedagogy and crisis and perhaps the only that offers a theoretical examination of the classroom in crisis. The event she refers to in her article follows class viewing of two videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors. She attests that "something happened, toward the conclusion of the class, which took me completely by surprise" (47). The "striking, vivid and extreme real example carried the class beyond a limit" and "the class itself broke out into a crisis" (47). Like the crisis that occurred in Felman's 1984 graduate seminar "Literature and Testimony: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History," that which occurred during the fall semester 2001 was striking, vivid and extremely real. Unlike fall 2001 classes, in which professors and students were viewers of and witnesses to events that took place outside of the classroom and discussed material that was not on course syllabi, Felman's class was carried beyond a limit in response to course material. But the essays in this collection suggest that this distinction is less significant than it might at first appear. Like Shoshana Felman's experience teaching her graduate seminar in 1984, the experience of teaching during the fall semester 2001 was an "uncanny pedagogical experience" (7), one that was "unforgettable, but not in ways that anyone could have predicted" (6). Professors across all disciplines did not simply teach September 11th to their students during the fall semester 2001, but they enacted, as Felman and her graduate students also did, "an event of life: of life itself as the perpetual necessity - and the perpetual predicament - of a learning that in fact can never end" (55).

In his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future," which appeared in the December, 2001 issue of *Harpers*, Don DeLillo insists that everything changed on September 11th. The way that we view ourselves as individuals and as citizens of the United States and of the world changed, the way that we think about our jobs and social roles changed, and the way that we use and interpret language also changed - and will continue to change if words persist as the medium for representing the events of that day. Through his discussion of the woman praying, DeLillo suggests that the nature of queries about others changed, too. Perhaps, in the midst of these changes, we are more cautious; perhaps we are less, losing control over language and acts of representation, falling into cliché and stereotype. In either case, DeLillo encourages efforts "to understand what this day has done to us." Although "we seem pressed for time, all of us," his concern prompts the same sense of urgency two years later. The events of September 11th, as Felman observes of all events of life, necessitate perpetual learning. Less chaotic perhaps than they would have been if written on that day, the reflections recorded here document a moment in that process.

The Collection: Trauma and Disciplinarity

Regardless of discipline, professors had something in the common on the days following September 11th: they were all in the position of deciding whether or not (and how) to do the work that is not

normally the work of the teacher, but the work of the documentarian. Faced with an event as it unfolded, with the absence of academic, even critical, representations of the event, professors found themselves confronted with “the two-fold struggle” of the documentarian: trying to “ascertain what is, what can be noted, recorded, pictured; and that of presentation: how to elicit the interest of others, and how to provide a context, so that an incident, for instance, is connected to the conditions that informed and prompted its occurrence” (Coles 20). Teachers are familiar with the notion of presentation - it is the central work of the classroom.

However, for many professors, the effort to capture “what is” on September 11th, and not being able to fully do so, created unusual, and discomfoting, classroom experiences, not unlike the one recounted in Felman’s essay. Beginning with a question about the relation between trauma and pedagogy - “Can the process of bearing witness to a crisis be made use of in the classroom situation?” (13) - Felman concludes that “teaching takes place precisely only through a crisis” (55). The challenge for the teacher is “to recontextualize the crisis and to put it back into perspective, to relate the present to the past and to the future and to thus reintegrate the crisis in a transformed frame of meaning” (56). The essays in this collection demonstrate that the events that occurred on September 11th discombobulated professors. The unexpected, unprecedented, and horrifying nature of these events placed unanticipated demands on teachers, demands that they could not always satisfy easily. In other words, classes that met immediately after September 11th may have failed to progress according to their syllabi, but succeeded because professor and students worked together to create meaning out of their shock, experiencing the real as a challenge to pedagogy, historical understanding, and sometimes personal identity. Timothy Draper and Peter Beidler, for example, write about just this kind of success in failure. In his essay, “Terror, Memory, and Meaning,” Draper reports telling his history students to watch television, an effort that, although not on-task, allowed him to connect “the epic-making, globalized history on the television with the apparently mundane, ordinary lives of my students” later on in the semester. Beidler, too, turned away from his syllabus. He reflects that “I did not have the presence of mind to find a lesson for my students in Chaucer’s “Shipman’s Tale” on September 12th 2001, “but I think that I could do so, now,” he adds. Two years later, he sees the relevance of “The Shipman’s Tale” to the events of September 11th 2001. Beidler writes, to conclude “Terror + 48: First-Year Students Respond to the Attack on America:”

Have we in America, I might have asked my students, become that genial businessman? Are we, like him, vulnerable to attack as we pursue so eagerly our desire for money, and then still more money? Have we, like him, grown so complacent that we are vulnerable to betrayal by a world to whom we give money, a world we do not take the time to understand?

No essay in this collection can claim, as Felman is able to do, that “the crisis, in effect, had been worked through and overcome and that a resolution had been reached, both on an intellectual and on a vital level” (55). The authors of the essays in this collection were not less skilled teachers than Felman; the crisis had a different point of origin. Her course began with a “constellation of texts” that, she argues, “[did] not simply report facts but, in different ways, encounter - and make us encounter - strangeness” (7). September 11th, though, entered our classrooms as an event without a text. As Leonard Cassuto points out in “Language and Knowing,” the first essay in this collection, “the greatest difficulty in teaching this crisis lies, in short, in language and knowing,” having to use the language that we know to describe what we do not. This strangeness has not disappeared two years later despite the appearance of texts aiming either to explain the events, to memorialize the losses, or to normalize the United States’ response.

On September 11th, professors and their students were not entirely without mediation, as Draper’s essay demonstrates. They had television sets, morning newspapers, weekly magazines, which contained moments of critical response, and they had the conversations in classroom and hallways.

They had, in other words, the events as represented in the popular media, as incorporated into personal stories, and as they made themselves into that body of teaching-knowledge that composition theorist Stephen North calls “lore,” that untested knowledge that teachers pass from one to another, “driven first by a pragmatic logic: It is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching” (North 23). These were the texts with which classes worked in those few days and weeks after September 11th. What professors and students brought to them was their own invention. Their inventions characterize this “teachable moment.” Clearly, *The Extreme Real Example: Classrooms after the Events of September 11th 2001* captures this moment: one that is ultimately teachable, but not simply so.

The work of the documentarian is complicated, in this case, by students’ and professors’ personal reactions to the overwhelming nature of the events. As Judith Herman explains in her introduction to *Trauma and Recovery*, atrocities typically produce conflicted responses, the dialectical tension between talking and silence characteristic of psychological trauma (Herman 1). The events of September 11th were atrocious and unimaginable and, as with any other kind of historical trauma, including the kind of trauma Felman’s students witnessed in the videotaped testimony of Holocaust survivors, equalizes witnesses, survivors and victims. As the essays in this collection attest, witnessing trauma also equalizes professors and students when the trauma is either represented in course material or enters the classroom in the form of a mediated news story, a personal testimony, or a real event. Returning to classrooms on the days following September 11th, professors and students newly encountered each other through the recognition not only that they had all witnessed the attacks but that they were also all affected by what they had seen and, as Draper explains, compelled to do the work of the historian. This knowledge transformed the classroom space whether classes proceeded according to syllabi or not. The essays collected here describe professors facing classrooms full of students not knowing whether to talk about the events or to teach their subject matter, the compulsion to talk and the will to silence motivating both professors and students.

Professors asked questions in classes following September 11th, though, that were often guided by disciplinary concerns and the particularities of their course subject matter. For example, Fiona Nelson knew on September 11th that “my vision for the first week of this class will have to change.” She reports in her essay, “War in the Women’s Studies Classroom: Feminist Approaches to September 11th,” however, that she was able to re-conceive her women’s studies course by asking what her discipline offered “to thinking about, questioning, and explaining the events of September 11th and their aftermath?” As a result, this collection is divided into sections associated with the work of academic disciplines. These groupings suggest distinct connections between disciplines, critical questioning and tools of analysis. At the same time, the groupings also suggest the ways in which September 11th prompted professors to move outside of their disciplines for pedagogical resources and content. This movement beyond disciplinary boundaries produced the kind of confusion that is the documentarian’s, confusion, which is always interdisciplinary, even as it reaches and grasps for someplace in which to locate itself. “The issue of location—how a particular writer or researcher decides to commit himself or herself with respect to those others being studied, watched, heard, made the subject of a writing [or teaching] initiative” (Coles 32), while central to the documentarian’s relationship to events, is also central to this collection. In the aftermath of September 11th, this teaching initiative became, therefore, both what professors shared, despite discipline, and what teachers struggled against in an effort to preserve disciplinary objectives. The desire to introduce relevant material into classes, even if found outside of the discipline, and the attendant sense of disciplinary dislocation, made classes during the fall semester 2001 less securely discipline-bound perhaps, but more reflective.

Words and Silence at Ground Zero

This section is designed to contain essays by professors working in New York City, and the “teachable moments” explored here are often concerned with the ways in which students and professors might do the work of communicating September 11th to others. Concerned with representation while also faced with the job of documentation, the essays in this section discuss how students, as well as teachers confront this challenge, often seen as a responsibility to recognize, appreciate and question the communication work done in their disciplines. Lessons are learned, though they are often more about the discipline than the events, sometimes confirming the importance of the discipline’s work, sometimes reaching outside it for answers to new questions. In either case, as Leonard Cassuto’s essay demonstrates, professors and their students found themselves in the position of exploring how words can and cannot, in the wake of September 11th, create meaning.

In the forthcoming essays for this section, the tension between words and silence is often a personal battle, one concerned mainly with private understandings. The challenge of representing September 11th is, perhaps, at its most personal and subjective in these essays, as teachers turn to journal and free-writing, creative projects and personal pieces that work, by the act of publicizing the personal, to help process trauma. This move to the private informs many of the essays in this section, especially at those moments when students and teachers choose silence instead of words or when they are unable to speak, involuntarily falling into silence. From this tension between talking and silence, both teachers and students come to realize the importance of the work their discipline does with words. As well, they find new questions to ask of their discipline, and often they communicate with a silence that is as powerful, as meaningful, and ultimately as necessary as that which finds its way into language.

Seeing and Meaning

In this section, professors discuss their struggles with students to place the events of September 11th within a larger historical context. A central concern of the essays in this section is the use and fashioning of frameworks through which students and teachers can both witness and record. Sometimes the frameworks are theoretical; Beidler constructs classes that make use of writing pedagogy and composition theory. At other times, the frameworks derive from the familiarities of the “normal;” Draper, for instance, urges his students to watch the news. In Ruby Nell’s forthcoming essay, “A Studio Project Based on the Events of September 11th,” the frameworks are spatial, as she and her students’ struggle with the visual tension produced by the desire to see familiar sights in the context of their absence. Always, however, these essays concern themselves with temporality, and September 11th provides an opportunity, though problematic and horrifying, to take history out of the classroom as well as to put the classroom into history.

Voices from Outside the United States

The essays in this section feature professors and students working in classrooms outside the United States. Their struggle to make meaning out of the events of September 11th, while similar in some ways to those taking place in the United States, differs because their sense of implication differs. In other words, the United States is not the same kind of symbolic reference in these essays that it is in the previous ones. Read in conjunction with the other essays in the collection, Nelson’s and the forthcoming piece by Salwa Ghaly, “Meeting the Third Millennial Other through the Literature of Antiquity” offer perspectives that both challenge the move to the private and globalize the fall into silence. The trauma of the events of September 11th puts not only classrooms in the United States

into history but they also put classrooms in the United States into historic relation with classrooms outside. Students and professors, regardless of national identity and national location, have become, as these essays suggest, knowledge makers, fashioners of the language that documents this event and shapes the future after this event. The classroom challenge, then, becomes, in the aftermath of September 11th, a collaborative one, one that cannot be accomplished in a single semester, in a single course, in a single university, in a single nation, but one that will only produce a transformed frame of meaning over time and as a result of global conversations.

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