

WHEN POLITICS BECOME APOLITICAL, IT'S TIME TO THINK AGAIN: CONSIDERING A COURSE ON LITERATURE FROM THE VIETNAM WAR

Diana George

Every year I teach courses in which the students seem to say most important and interesting things. In their journals the students tell me what their tests and formal papers cannot: that they have been changed by the material, that they have much to say about what we have been reading. When I write about teaching, I want those student voices to be heard—I want the students to say what I cannot. So I understand why Barry Kroll was moved to write *Teaching Hearts and Minds*. For three years (January 1986 to December 1989), Kroll taught a literature and composition course based on literature prompted by the Vietnam War. The students in these courses knew very little about that war and its impact on the men and women who were a part of it, yet, not surprisingly, they said serious and profound and sometimes maddening things. In their journals and the interviews Kroll conducted with his students, they spoke much more profoundly about their learning experience than any teacher or researcher could. As one of those students

wrote early in this course, "I was basically clueless concerning all aspects of the war" (3). By the time the course ended, these students did not have a history of Vietnam or (from what I can tell) a clear understanding of the complicated politics of that war. They were, however, moved to think seriously about issues that had seemed to them only vague history before they began the course. They accomplished in the course what Kroll set out to teach, not the history of this war but, as he writes, "connected, critical, literary, and ethical inquiry" (20), and he wanted to teach that with materials written by veterans from Vietnam about their experience of Vietnam. Kroll's book is a testimony to the power of the stories of those men and women who served in that war.

What Kroll describes in this book is a course that moved students through stages of intellectual, ethical, and critical development by asking them to relate to American soldiers' responses to war and to confront the complexities of a war this nation has yet to deal with openly and honestly. That is a heavy load for any one course, so it should not be surprising that, in the end, Kroll's interpretation of what happened to his students is made in the context of developmental education rather than radical pedagogy which also, at least in part, informs this course. Kroll does not pretend to be writing an objective study here, but his background in educational research does seem to demand that he define what this book is for an audience that might be expecting something different. What Kroll would like to call this work is "investigative journalism" (viii). He tries, he tells us, "to embrace both 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity,'" working both as an observer of evidence and as a reporter of students' experiences as they were able to relate them in interviews and journals. As investigative journalism, however, it is very difficult to read *Hearts and Minds* because Kroll always keeps his readers in the realm of developmental education, continually reminding us of the course's goals, explaining again and again how the literature and assignments were meant to meet these goals, and (it sometimes seems) avoiding the most difficult part of teaching any course about Vietnam: Somehow, he managed to steer clear of the politics of this most political event in our country's history. So I cannot read *Teaching Hearts and Minds* as investigative journalism.

Instead I find myself thinking about the more formalistic goals of this course and wondering how these students now respond to the politics of war.

Although Kroll warns that his book "is not, strictly speaking, a pedagogical work," he does intend the work to examine "college students' processes of reflective inquiry" (vii). In other words, this study was prompted by something Kroll noticed as his students struggled to comprehend and respond to what they were reading about Vietnam. It does not pretend to be an extended theoretical argument, but it is a discussion of the role reflective thinking can play in a composition classroom. Like many composition instructors engaged in teaching critical inquiry, Kroll distinguishes between dispensing "facts" and encouraging students to question and examine the things they read. "My goal," Kroll writes, "was not . . . to get students to *acquire* a body of information about the war; rather, I wanted them to *inquire* into the issues raised by literature of the Vietnam experience" (10). Based primarily on John Dewey's description of reflective thinking (*How We Think*), Kroll's course sought to encourage students to "suspend judgement as they inquire[d] more deeply into alternatives" (10). But, as Kroll reminds us, Dewey's is not a simple model. He insists that learners can become reflective thinkers only in the context of personal committed inquiry. That meant Kroll had to discover a way to convince his students that Vietnam could move them, that they could have a personal stake in history. The challenge, of course, was connecting these students to something that was foreign to any experience most of them had ever had.

Kroll begins his investigation by examining student journals in order to understand "what was happening in [his] students' hearts and minds as they inquired into some of the issues raised by the Vietnam war and its literature" (viii). By reading student journals, Kroll had to acknowledge what his own goals in the course were, how his assignments were meant to meet those goals, and how well the students in the courses met those goals. Influenced by developmental psychology, Kroll moved his students through the literature in a way designed to elicit personal response first and critical inquiry toward the conclusion of the term. Early readings (primarily memoirs) were used to help students understand how those engaged in the war felt

about what they did and saw. Like most students, Kroll's responded most easily and emotionally to first-hand accounts:

At the beginning of the course, I looked for sincerity and frankness in my students' reactions, agreeing with [Louise] Rosenblatt [*Literature as Exploration*] that the basic measure of a student's response to a text should be 'the genuineness of the ideas and reactions he expresses' (Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* 70). But I wanted to find ways to elicit more than emotional reactions, however sincere. One strategy was to deepen students' connections to the soldiers and their experiences The other strategy was to engage students in critical reflection, asking them to make comparative and evaluative judgements about a series of increasingly demanding texts. Thus I aimed for an approach that would not only support the 'core of direct emotional experience at the heart of the critical process' (Rosenblatt 121), but would also challenge students to exercise reflective judgement. (46)

Connected inquiry, it seems, was accomplished early and fairly easily with the use of memoirs. Many students, Kroll tells us, could relate to at least one of the memoir writers. They identified with the anger and fear and frustration these writers conveyed. They even attempted to connect their own daily experiences with the pain or anger they read in the memoirs.

In fact, some students identified so closely with the American soldiers that they found themselves hating the Vietnamese since, as Kroll admits, "Sometimes the stories confirmed the racial stereotypes and exacerbated students' prejudices," (29); and while it is true that Kroll tried to encourage other points of view, those other views came from other Americans, never from the Vietnamese themselves. Students responded, I think, in a normal way to emotional stories whose authors they could identify with. When they truly connected, they adopted the attitudes of the writers. As one student writes, almost in warning to Kroll, "as sad as it sounds . . . through these stories I have gained a negative, maybe even prejudiced feeling towards the Vietnamese people. I have read so many negative stories about them through American

accounts" (29). That the students identified so strongly with the American soldiers early in the term might explain why, when asked to make decisions about how to act in battle, most took the position most clearly identifiable as the American soldier's position.

A second aim of the course was to enable students to understand how they might read literary inquiry, stories that aim for truth in a very different way than news reports or historical accounts: "My course was structured around a sequence of different types of writing about the Vietnam War: personal narratives, factual reports, novels, and sometimes poems. But whether 'fact' or 'fiction,' traditional or unconventional, all of the books purported to 'tell it,' to represent what the war had been like and how it affected the soldiers who were most deeply involved in it" (45). In his description of how students responded to many of the writers, I found myself wanting to challenge Kroll's judgments about what students valued and what they did not value. For example, many of the students responded most favorably to Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning*, a memoir written by a former nurse in Vietnam. As Kroll tells us, "the most frequently cited feature of *Home Before Morning* was its dramatic and emotionally compelling scenes" (47). Students took the vivid detail and open emotion for truth. They believed Van Devanter. By contrast, many students questioned Philip Caputo's credibility because his memoir *Rumor of War* seemed too distant, too rational. As one student wrote, "Caputo remembers too much" (49). And, students distrusted Caputo's motives. They felt he wrote a book to vindicate himself for his own actions. Either response, it seems to me, is legitimate, but as I read *Hearts and Minds*, I could not help getting the impression that Kroll was disappointed that more students did not respond favorably to Caputo, that, in fact, Kroll valued Caputo's work more than Van Devanter's. As Kroll writes,

I tried to encourage those minority views. Nevertheless, most of my students preferred Van Devanter's style of writing, with its emotional episodes, its focus on people and relationships, and its unadorned style, to Caputo's artful ruminations on killing and dying. The consensus in

every class I taught was that Caputo's book was difficult and pretentious, and that those qualities somehow confirmed suspicions about Caputo's lack of sincerity and authenticity. Conversely, most students viewed Van Devanter's memoir as a personal, accessible, and therefore trustworthy account of a young woman's difficult year in Vietnam. (53)

Van Devanter's was clearly a more emotional account, Caputo's more rational. Kroll seems to be suggesting that more sophisticated readers will value the rational over the emotional, but I find myself wondering why that should be when the topic is death and dying.

In order to challenge students' reflective judgement, Kroll designed a series of exercises which asked students to make decisions about truth and ethical action. One, an exercise which the class did early on and returned to at the end of the term, Kroll called the Rifleman's Dilemma. In this created scenario, a private is stationed as a lookout to protect his squad as they move along a trail in enemy territory. While he is watching, he sees a Vietnamese woman on the trail just ahead of the squad. She leans over the edge of the trail and then moves quickly back into the bush. Students are asked, "What should Private Johnson do: hold his fire or shoot the woman? Why is that the right thing for him to do?" It is a serious question and one that troubles students throughout the course. Again, most students thought (both at the beginning and at the end of the course) that the only right action was for Private Johnson to shoot the Vietnamese woman. These students, after all, have been reading about what it is like to be in battle. They have read stories of soldiers losing friends and being afraid and facing responsibility for the lives of others. Given those circumstances and the fact that few American students are likely to ask questions about what put American soldiers in Vietnam (or in any battlefield today) in the first place, the most likely response is one that most students gave. True, their reasoning about Private Johnson's dilemma became more sophisticated as they read more about moral dilemmas in battle. Still, their initial judgments seemed to go unchallenged.

In the second exercise, the Battle of Ap Bac, students were

encouraged to decide which of two conflicting accounts of a battle they believed to be more accurate. With this exercise, Kroll hoped to "identify some of the assumptions about knowledge that students brought into the course, especially their beliefs about the nature of historical knowledge. [His] interest in students' epistemological assumptions was informed by two models of intellectual development in the college years: the 'Perry Scheme' and the 'Reflective Judgement Model.' Despite some key differences, both models agree that students enter a world in which their assumptions are challenged and, in many cases, their orientations are altered" (83). What Kroll discovered was that his students were able to bring a variety of legitimate strategies to bear on the question of which account they chose to believe. They demonstrated increasing ability to make judgements about the "truth" of a given account:

When students were asked to make a decision about the accounts, they tended to base those judgments on such criteria as credibility of sources, consistency with known facts, quality of factual evidence, and plausibility of claims. Thus, while they often lacked sophistication—tending, for example, to rely too heavily on their intuitions about credibility or their impressions of plausibility—the freshmen in my courses were, on the whole, able to judge competing accounts on the basis of one or more appropriate criteria. These findings seemed to support the view that college freshmen, far from being mired in dogmatism or paralyzed by skepticism, are able to practice some of the tactics of critical analysis. (92-93)

It is here that I agree most strongly with Barry Kroll. College students are able to make tough judgements. They are definitely able to practice tactics of critical analysis. They are able to confront hard problems. I suppose my disappointment with *Teaching Hearts and Minds* is that the critical inquiry lessons that were taught in this course could have been taught using any topic—television, say, or advertising, or Romantic poetry. But Vietnam is not just any topic. Years ago, war resistor A.J. Muste wrote, "The problem after a war is with the victor. He thinks he had just proved that war and violence pay.

Who will now teach him a lesson?" America was no victor in the Vietnam War, yet very often this nation acts as if it were, and it seems to me that this war taught an odd lesson to the leaders of this country. It was not a lesson about violence or intervention or personal and public loss. It was a lesson about truth, the lesson we applied in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf: Keep the media away from the fighting, and the people will believe. Today's military strategists teach that those pictures of war, those voices of dying soldiers, those protesters in the streets lost the war in Vietnam. The United States is not likely to let that happen again. Thus a course like the one Kroll describes in this book is one that can make a difference in our collective memory of an event like the war in Vietnam. And, yet, I am left with the strong impression that these students will not see that the questions raised by Ap Bac or the Rifleman's Dilemma go beyond "Who do you believe?" or "Should he shoot?"

In the end what really bothers me about the course and the way Professor Kroll writes about it is that this is "war" literature, and yet Vietnam was so much more than Americans fighting in another country. Vietnam was a part of the men and women who did fight and those who did not—those who fought against it. Even though Ron Kovic's autobiography (*Born on the Fourth of July*) was used during one term, it is a viewpoint that is largely missing in this course. Students do get a sense of the experience of fighting a war, but this could be any war. It could be any group of fighting people. The Vietnam War, whether we like it or not, was fought at home as well as abroad, and that is what the course misses. Barry Kroll's students worked hard at coming to difficult decisions, and they did their work well. I'm still not sure, though, what they actually learned about a piece of history that continues to haunt the American consciousness.