

Seminar: *America at War*
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. A. Müller-Hartmann
Students: Anja Koppert
Term: WS 05/06

Teaching Unit “Peace Education”

Dispatches

Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg

Heidelberg, March 2006

Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
1.1 Topic relevance	2
1.2 Reference to the syllabus	2
2. Information about the author	3
3. Historical introduction	3
3.1 History of the Vietnam War	3
3.2 The Vietnam War from a Cultural Studies point of view – gender, race and class	7
3.2.1 Gender	7
3.2.2 Race	8
3.2.3 Class	8
4. Tasks for the classroom	9
4.1 Pre-reading tasks	9
4.1.1 Brain-storming about a book cover of <i>Dispatches</i>	9
4.1.2 Comparison of book covers	10
4.2 While-reading tasks	11
4.2.1 Reading journal	11
4.2.2 Portfolio	12
5. Bibliography	13

1. Introduction

1.1 Topic relevance

“Peace education” is one of the most important fields in foreign language learning. Its goal is to make students aware of how peace can be created and even more important how peace can be preserved.

One way to work towards this goal is to look at wars which happened in the past and find out how they are represented in different kinds of media (e.g. movies, literature, songs, etc.). The topic “Vietnam War” is one possibility to examine the representation of war in a society – especially in American society, a society which was engaged in many wars of which the motives were not always clear to the people and the soldiers fighting for the country.

1.2 Reference to the syllabus

To deal with such authentic texts (as we chose) can be a very demanding task for students. Therefore we would place the teaching unit in grade 9 of Hauptschule or even 10 of Werkrealschule. Here the linguistic skills are well developed and the students are familiar with a lot of different kinds of authentic texts.

Concerning the intercultural competences, the current syllabus for grade 9 in Hauptschule requests the competence of being able to have a good look at the target language and to compare it to one’s first language as well as the competence of being able to become aware of one’s own view of the world and to respect the view of the world of others. (cf. Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport 2004: 95)

As far as media competences are concerned, the current syllabus requests the competence to use the Internet to find information and to analyze it as well as the competence to present simple contents and results with traditional and modern media. (cf. Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport 2004: 95)

2. Information about the author

One reason to choose the book *Dispatches* by Michael Herr is because it represents a rather unusual view on the Vietnam War – the view of a war reporter, who went to Vietnam voluntarily.

Even though the language is very demanding and it needs support for the students to understand the specific language, it is a good choice because it offers many opportunities to work with.

Another reason for us to choose this book is that Michael Herr was also involved in shooting the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, which follows a very similar line as the book. One possibility to work with the book would therefore be to use scenes from the movie to compare it to the book and thus to give a visual support for the story.

3. Historical introduction

3.1 History of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War officially lasted from 1964 to 1975. It concerned South Vietnam, North Vietnam and bordering areas of Cambodia and Laos. There were two major fighting parties. On the one side there was a coalition of forces including the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea and on the other hand a coalition of forces including the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the National Liberation Front (a communist-led South Vietnamese guerrilla movement) – also known as Viet Cong. The former USSR provided military aid to the North Vietnamese and the NLF, but was not one of the military combatants. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/> ,12th January 2006)

Even though the official beginning of the war dates back to 1964, there are many voices that name the French Indochina War – or First Indochina War – as the real starting point of the following war. In the French Indochina War the French fought to maintain control of their colony in Indochina against an independence

movement led by Communist Party leader Ho Chi Minh. These incidents date back to the year of 1954. (cf. <http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index4.html>, 13th January 2006) The Viet Minh - the Vietnamese Communist forces – defeated the French colonial army at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the colony was granted independence. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/>, 12th January 2006) This battle lasted 55 days and thousands of French were killed and wounded. The Viet Minh suffered even worse.

Vietnam was divided. The communist North was ruled by Ho Chi Minh and the non-communist South was under control of Emperor Bao Dai until in 1955 the South Vietnamese monarchy was abolished and Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem became president of a new South Vietnamese republic. Every attempt to unify the two parts failed. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/>, 12th January 2006)

After the communists consolidated their power in the North, they formed the National Liberation Front known as NLF, or as the Americans called them, the Viet Cong, as a guerrilla movement in opposition to the South Vietnamese government known as the RVN. In response to the guerrilla war between the North and the South, the United States, led by President John F. Kennedy to that time, began sending military advisors in support of the government in the South. North Vietnam and the USSR therefore supported the NLF with arms and supplies, advisors, and regular units of the North Vietnamese Army. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/>, 12th January 2006)

After the U.S. Senate approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7th August 1964, the United States officially became involved in the war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution goes back to an alleged attack of an American submarine by the North Vietnamese. Due to this attack the American military had the right to attack without having permission by the U.S. Senate. In early 1965, 3,500 United States Marines became the first American combat troops to land in South Vietnam and by 1968 over 500,000 troops were stationed there. Not only on the ground there were troops, but also the air war escalated. In July of 1965, 4,000 101st Airborne

Division paratroopers arrived in Vietnam. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/>, 12th January 2006)

At the time of the Vietnam War many people felt that the government was misleading the American people about a war without a clear beginning or end. There were several hints that the entering of the United States into the Vietnam War was not legal and many people became distrustful of their government. All that led to a huge peace movement in the United States and finally all over the world. The supporters of the peace movement accused the U.S. government of leading an illegal war and of “feeding” innocent American soldiers to that war as well as to kill thousands of innocent Vietnamese for a war which did not have legitimacy. The horror of war led to an increasing refusal of young men to enter the military. Many of them even left the country to avoid the draft or tried to become ineligible to be drafted entered the Peace Corps or took advantage of a student deferment. All of these issues raised concerns about the fairness of who got selected for combat, since it was often the poor or those without connections who were assigned to combat units. (cf. <http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/>, 12th January 2006)

In 1968 Communist forces built up for the Tet Offensive – a combined assault by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army against U.S. positions. Many civilians and thousands of American soldiers lost their lives during the Tet. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

After the Tet Offensive, in March 1968, President Johnson announced on television that bombing north of the 20th parallel was going to stop and that he was not going to seek re-election in fall. Hanoi responded by de-escalating its insurgency efforts. In October Johnson ordered a total halt to bombing. The United States and Hanoi agreed to preliminary peace talks in Paris. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

In 1969 President Nixon finally started withdrawing U.S ground troops from Vietnam and in 1970 the peace talks started in Paris. In 1972 the withdrawal of the last U. S. troops was completed by March. In 1975 North Vietnamese troops invaded South Vietnam and took control of the whole country after South Vietnam surrendered. In April 1975 helicopters evacuated the last members of the U. S. embassy staff from the roof of the embassy. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

“The Vietnam War had many long term repercussions, especially for the American society and foreign policy”. (<http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

The Vietnam War was America’s first significant military defeat and was very damaging for America’s reputation as a global superpower, which had till then seemed almost invincible. The devastating result of the Vietnam War concerning the loss of soldiers on the American side created a great distaste for foreign wars among the American public. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

Politically, the poor planning of the war led to Congress reviewing current terms of war, and passing new legislations to guarantee them a larger, and more clearly defined role in the planning of any further Vietnam-style conflicts. The War Powers Act of 1973 restricted the President’s ability to commit troops to action without first obtaining the approval of Congress – as happened in Vietnam. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

Not only thousands of innocent civilian Vietnamese died in this unjustified War, the use of Napalm and other chemical substances led to sicknesses and birth defects to this day. The Americans left the country and the war behind, but the Vietnamese still have to suffer from the consequences of it.

“From a social point of view, the war was key time in the lives of many younger Americans, especially the so-called baby boom generation. Protestor and soldier alike, the war created many strong opinions in regards to American foreign policy and the justness of war. As a result, the Vietnam War was also significant in showing the degree that the public can influence government policy through mobilization and protest.” (<http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

Contrasting the huge anti-war movement throughout the War, service in the War soon became respected. Past service in Vietnam became important to the election of many American politicians later on. (cf. <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm>, 13th January 2006)

3.2 The Vietnam War from a Cultural Studies point of view – gender, race and class

3.2.1 Gender

At the time of the Vietnam War the only way for American women to enter the military was to serve in the medical department, e.g. as a nurse. Thus, when you look at texts, e.g. movies, literary texts, songs, etc., you can hardly find any descriptions of American women in Vietnam. The only American women in Herr's *Dispatches* “there'd be a lot of women up there, a few of them correspondents (...), most of them the wives and girls of reporters.” (Herr 1978: 187). This is the only passage where non-Vietnamese women are mentioned at all.

The issue of gender therefore refers more to the presentation of Vietnamese women who are either described as prostitutes and written about in a very rude and devaluated language or as some kind of snipers, e.g. “[t]hose nights there was a serious tiger lady going around on a Honda shooting American officers on

the street with a .45. (...) [A] .45 was 'an awful lot of gun for an itty bitty Vietnamese woman'" (Herr 1978: 40)

3.2.2 Race

In Michael Herr's *Dispatches* there is one important sequence dealing with the issue of race. It is when the soldiers hear about the death of Martin Luther King. It is said that "in the days that followed, there were a number of small, scattered riots, one or two stabbings, all of it denied officially. The Marine recreational facility in China Beach in Damang was put off-limits for a day, and at Stud we stood around the radio and listened to the sound of automatic-weapons fire being broadcast from a number of American cities." (cf. Herr 1978: 129)

At the time of the Vietnam War you could hardly find any African-American in a high position, and if there were some they had to fear that their positions were in danger. After King's death, there was hardly a black soldier who did not have to deal with the consequences of that.

Apart from some stories, which contain an appearance of some African-Americans, the issue of race is not mentioned at all. It is somehow denied that issues about race did appear in the military and in the war.

3.2.3 Class

Somehow you get the feeling that most of the soldiers serving in Vietnam are from the lower class. The language might be one hint for that. It is very informal and shows accents usually known from poorer neighborhoods in the United States.

Additionally, there is one passage in the book which tells you something about the origin of many of the soldiers: "You didn't meet that many who were deeply

religious, although you expected to, with so many kids from the South and the Midwest, from farms and small rural towns.” (cf. Herr 1978: 126)

4. Tasks for the classroom

4.1 Pre-reading tasks

Concrete task

1. Read through the key words. What do you think is the book about?
2. Create a cover for the book which reflects what you think is the content.
You can draw the cover or use pictures from magazines or the internet.

4.1.1 Brain-storming about a book cover of *Dispatches*

Context

There are several book covers for Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*. One of them shows a military helmet with graffiti on it. The graffiti consists of the peace sign and the phrase “Hell sucks”.

Purpose

The purpose is to make students aware of the topic “the Vietnam War” and its controversy within the war (e.g. wearing a military helmet – a sign that stands for potential war – with a peace symbol on it)

Procedure

The students are asked to write down their ideas, comments, or questions about the picture on the board. The students do not know anything about the book’s content yet. The only thing known is the topic “the Vietnam War” and the book cover.

Product

The product would be a piece of cardboard with the book cover in the middle and the mentioned ideas, comments, or questions arranged around the cover picture.

Concrete task

1. Look at the picture. What comes to your mind?
2. Write down your ideas, comments, or questions on the board.

4.1.2 Comparison of book covers

Context

As already mentioned, there are several different book covers for Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Two of them show concrete pictures and would be suitable for this task. One of them is mentioned above. The other one shows a black and white photograph of soldiers fighting.

Purpose

With the help of this task, you get the students to discuss war in general and – more concretely – the Vietnam War. You can first have them describe the two covers and have them guess about the reasons of using different book covers. Furthermore, you can have the students guess the content and the attitudes being compared in the book (e.g. Illustration 1: soldiers who actually want peace and are sick of fighting, Illustration 2: soldiers who have to fight to survive or are even eager to fight)

Procedure

You show the two book covers either as a transparency or as posters. You should first show them one after the other to give your students the chance to concentrate on one at a time and to describe it. Afterwards you show both of them at the same time and the students are asked to share their ideas about reasons of using different covers and for the meaning of the symbols (e.g. peace sign) on the covers.

Product

The product could be mind-maps or posters that have the covers on it with ideas, meanings, and questions around them.

Concrete task:

1. Look at the two covers. What do they show?
2. Why did the publishers use different covers for the same book?

4.2 While-reading tasks

4.2.1 Reading journal

Purpose

To support the understanding while reading the book it is useful to have the students write a reading journal. It helps to reflect the parts of the book already read as well as to develop ideas about the book. With the help of a reading journal you can always go back to your thoughts and ideas while the reading process develops. The students can write down whatever thoughts cross their minds about the book's content.

Procedure

The students are asked to write a reading journal while reading the book. They are instructed how to do a journal (e.g. to write down their ideas, thoughts or questions about the read passages at home) and what to use it for.

Product

The product would be a collection of diary entries written throughout the reading process, which show the students' development while reading and understanding the book.

Concrete Task:

Write down all your ideas, thoughts, comments or questions you have while reading. Collect them in a reading journal.

4.2.2 Portfolio**Purpose**

Another supporting factor for the students to understand the book is keeping a portfolio. It is also a very good basis for the teacher to assess the students' work and development throughout the unit.

Procedure

The students are asked to put all the material they created in class and at home in their portfolio and to write a reflection about their learning process.

Product

The product is a collection of all the materials the students created at home and in school. This can include:

- Working sheets
- Reading journal
- Mind-maps
- Collages
- Tasks
- a reflection

Concrete task:

1. Collect everything that seems important to you about the book or the author of the book in a Portfolio.
2. Write down what you've learned so far while discussing the book, what you experienced and what else you want to know.

5. Bibliography

Herr, Michael (1987). *Dispatches*. New York: Knopf.

Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden Württemberg. Bildungsplan 2004. Hauptschule. Villingen Schwenningen.

<http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/vietnam/timeline.htm> (13 January 2006)

<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index4.html> (13 January 2006)

<http://www.vietnam-war.info/summary/> (12 January 2006)