



CONNEXIONS

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Searching For Oz: Teaching in the Shadow of 9/11

By Robert A. Smart

In an October 26th item in The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled, "The Changed Classroom, Post September 11th," author/ teacher Sven Birkets (Mount Holyoke) characterized the changed class dynamic this way: "There was a lack of an Oz behind the curtain; there was an interpretive void. A question had been asked that was so overwhelming that no kind of answer could be made—we were still looking for it . . ." Among the many academic testimonials to the dramatic impact of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks that The Chronicle has published since September 11th, this one comes closest to describing my dilemma at Quinnipiac University. All of my students came into class, no absences, on September 12th, and all of them—freshman and seniors—wanted to talk about the events that took place an hour and a half south of our campus. This was everyone's experience across campus, and my colleagues at other institutions have reported variations on the same grim "teachable moment."

For one of my classes, however, the questions were more pointed, and went directly to the heart of the class design. In my Historical Essay class, we had been examining the means by which an historian, or any historically minded prose essayist for that matter, uses history to bring sense and perspective to events that are too immediate or which are for the moment incomprehensible. We read the reassuring words of Barbara Tuchman (1981, p.34), that the job of historiography is to provide "insights into the human condition"; to focus on the events and personalities "that matter" in life (1981, p. 54). We talked about the uses of historical analogy, of reading (and writing) biography as history, of the dangers of accepting what the evidence purports to say without digging further to find context. Always, our unquestioned assumption was that history could furnish even the most traumatic events with perspective, context, an Archimedean lever by which to begin the slow and inevitable progress towards understanding. Then came September 11th.

Our second group assignment was supposed to be on the role of film and photographic evidence in the construction of "contemporary histories." Instead, I came into class with the following assignment:

I had not planned for us to deal with a disaster of such overwhelming dimensions, with loss of life on such a terrifying scale, with an assault on our sense of safety of such profound magnitude. But . . . perhaps our work, modest as it is, could bring understanding where now there

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President's Message

By Bruce Saulnier

On behalf of all of the members of ISETA, welcome to the first issue of *Connexions* for the 2001-2002 academic year. This is the first issue of our publication under the guidance of our new editor, Susan Henry of Clayton College and State University. I'm sure that you will find it highly informative.

And what a time for firsts! Never before in the history of our nation have our very shores been subject to attack. Our lives, and those of our students, have been substantively transformed, never again to be totally free from fear. Our students' innocence has been lost, and the comfortable rhythm of our semester has changed.

Our roles in the lives of our students have also changed since that fateful day. But what a teachable moment! Some in our profession make the case that we are professionally obligated to bring the reality of those events into our classrooms. Others claim that our students learn not by what we say but by what we do, and that as fellow travelers we are obligated to both provide emotional support to our students and model appropriate behavioral responses to the tragic events as they unfold.

I long ago stopped pretending that I have the answers to such difficult questions. I look to the contents of this special issue to help me find my way. I will read and hopefully remain teachable. I invite you to do the same: to read, savor, reflect, and learn.