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ARTICLE

Traveling Teaching: Off-Campus Student Teaching as Student Learning

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Abstract

This article offers practical advice on how to encourage our own students to deliver dynamic presentations to local high school students as their final course projects. Based on years of experience teaching "The Holocaust in American Literature," I offer specific suggestions on how "traveling teaching" can accomplish memorable moments for our students and high school students alike, thereby providing examples of how a new national initiative that cements a closer relationship between higher education and K-12 schools might proceed.

Keywords: experiential teaching; publicly engaged scholarship; public humanities

I once taught my students exclusively in my own classroom; now, I also teach them by having *them* teach in a high school classroom. What follows is intended to encourage others to do the same and offers specifics on how to succeed.

In my course "The Holocaust in American Literature," which I have been teaching for over twenty years, students can choose to write a traditional final interpretive essay or craft a presentation that would introduce course material to a local high school class.[1] On average, half of my students choose to do a presentation. Occasionally, a student will go solo, but most choose to work collaboratively in groups of two to four. Presentations have compared the Holocaust to other genocides, described the largely neglected experiences of women in the Holocaust, explored Nazi medical practices, introduced the concept of "the banality of evil," or denied the Holocaust deniers. Some of the literary texts my students have presented include Art Spiegelman's MAUS, Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl," Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic," and such poems as Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Charles Reznikoff's "Holocaust," W. D. Snodgrass' "Magda Goebbels," Anthony Hecht's "The Book of Yolek," and Anne Sexton's "After Auschwitz." Because most high schoolers know little about the Holocaust (only a smattering have read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, or *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the two most widely read accounts of the Holocaust), I require my students to spend the first 10–15 minutes of each presentation defining and describing the Holocaust.

[1] All students produce a 4–6-page midterm interpretive essay, which they are strongly encouraged to rewrite; thus, every student is instructed in interpretive writing, regardless of their choice of final project.

Students are asked to commit to these projects around midterm, produce brief summaries of their plans by the 8th week of a 13-week semester, and begin working in earnest on their presentations with 2 or 3 weeks remaining. During this time, students do their research, assemble their material, and put together the audio and visual components of their presentations, usually by way of advanced (at least from my twentieth-century perspective) power points or other digital modes that feature photography, video clips, music, speeches, and dynamic graphics that include maps, charts, and attractive design features. Kahoots has been a popular way to conclude presentations. One group even devised a video game for their students. To better prepare the high school students, at times my students have sent along brief reading assignments several days in advance. Collaborating students divide labor on these tasks, as well as on the actual presentations. I schedule these during the last week of classes or during final exam week, in coordination with the high school teachers we are working with. Most presentations last from 30–45 minutes.

I have learned over the years that the key to ensuring successful student presentations is to insist on a rigorous review of their projects, culminating in a dress rehearsal. I do not, after all, want my students to do a presentation on Hannah *Ardent's* "banality of evil." In the rare instance that a presentation falls short of expectations, I will schedule an added rehearsal. These are real-time rehearsals in which students perform as though they are addressing a classroom of students. I serve as the audience as I quietly take notes, though I do occasionally intervene when necessary to correct more serious problems. When I began this initiative, I was content to have the students summarize the content of their presentations for me and did not require rehearsals, but this led to several less-than-optimal presentations that lacked fluidity, confidence, or accuracy. I learned I needed to monitor student work closely by offering detailed feedback following their practice runs. These critiques and the conversations they generated have proven indispensable. I have found students open to and grateful for my suggestions, as well as the suggestions of other students, and I have been consistently impressed by their ability to adapt and integrate improvements into their final efforts.

The entire process has displayed the admirable technical and communication skills that so many of our students possess. The results have been noteworthy. Under the pressure to perform in front of high schoolers who must learn *and* enjoy, my students have been consistently at their best. Because I emphasize the importance of establishing strong connections through clarity, coherence, eye contact, projection, and dynamism, my students invariably commit a good deal of material to memory, or at least become familiar enough with their material to avoid distracting hesitations, repetition, or tangents. My sense has been that these exercises have been learning experiences that have exceeded in intensity and meaningfulness the alternatives of preparing for a final exam or writing a final essay for the course.

This success has been confirmed innumerable times in the one-page assessments of their experience I have asked from each student over the years. Of the hundred or so students who have participated in the project, I have received suggestions for improvement, but I have never received a negative assessment. The vast majority, to the contrary, have been positive, and often effusive. For Aaron Rubinfeld (class of '27), "It was a unique experience and one that I will treasure for the rest of my life. Holocaust education has been important to me for as long as I can remember, and being able to share that with the students … was very meaningful to me." Emily Schmidt (class of '28) writes: "Not only did it benefit the students, but it benefited us … I had so much fun working on it with my classmates and got closer to my group members." Catalina Rivera (class of '26) claims "Being able to connect with the students on such a vital subject gave me a real sense of purpose, and it was nice to know

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that our efforts might encourage them to think critically, not only about the Holocaust, but about their impact in their world." Finally, Izzy Griffin (class of '27) asserts that "Teaching high school students about women in the Holocaust was an experience that deeply resonated with me, both professionally and personally.... Though it was difficult work, it was the most rewarding experience I have had as a college student" (Figure 1).

These few examples are typical of the kinds of assessments I have received. I should add that very few of my students have been involved in the kind of sustained student teaching required for a degree in education. Given my students' lack of experience as student teachers, or their lack of ambition to become teachers (though, in a few cases, the satisfaction of traveling teaching has encouraged students to think seriously about teaching as a profession), I have found the high quality of their presentations, as well as their maturity and poise, to be quite remarkable. Perhaps it is the students' commitment to the subject matter of the course, perhaps it is the opportunity to collaborate with their peers, or perhaps it is the opportunity to return to high school and leave a mark, but there is something magical about "traveling teaching" that brings out the best in students. As Lindsay Thurber ('25) notes, "I have never practiced teaching as an authority figure in a classroom setting.... Seeing the students think about the poems and nod when they saw the new connections we added onto theirs was such a powerful experience."

Beyond my students and their students, the other beneficiaries of traveling teaching are the high school teachers themselves, who are always eager to have their classroom teaching enhanced by guests. It has not been at all difficult to secure ongoing relationships with local

Figure 1. Students (left to right) Sarah Augustine (class of '26), Lindsay Thurber (class of '25), Izzy Griffin (class of '27), and Greta Kirby (class of '26) after delivering a presentation on "Women in the Holocaust" to Patrick McAvoy's 11th grade Writing 105 students at Cicero-North Syracuse High School.

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teachers and their students. They are eager to collaborate. I have been fortunate to have had former students teach in local school districts and have called on them to develop cooperative programming; they have also given me leads or put me in touch with colleagues whose classes and curriculum provide a better fit with what my students have to offer. Getting in touch is often no more difficult than sending an email or making a call. Occasionally, I have had to work through a school district's bureaucracy to find interested English departments and teachers, but once I have made contact the teachers have been very receptive.

In over a decade of such outreach, I have only been turned down once, and that was recently when my students wanted to compare reparations provided by Germany to Israel and individual Jewish survivors of the Holocaust to debates over reparations in the United States. Apparently, the fear of parental opposition to discussions of race and "wokism" caused this school to revoke its invitation to my students, who were duly disappointed but also enlightened about the dangers of censorship in our schools. In all other instances, our collaboration was fully supported: in one case, a large BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) class visited our campus to attend my students' presentations, along with additional classes and seminars on literature, writing, and college life in general.

My hope is that the initiative I have described might encourage others to find ways of doing something similar in their own classes. To this end, I am currently working with colleagues on a pilot project that will broaden the scope of my modest efforts. Our plan is for Syracuse University to host a Summer Academy that will bring interested local high school teachers and administrators to campus to collaborate on an expansion of traveling teaching to include many more classes, perhaps in partnership with Syracuse University Project Advance. And there may indeed be interest beyond the humanities, including STEM: with the Micron Corporation about to construct a vast computer chip manufacturing plant near Syracuse, our Department of Engineering is committed to dramatically upgrading its outreach, and this includes local community colleges and high schools. I hope to see several dozen class-to-class collaborations in the coming few years – perhaps to serve as a model for the rest of the country. When administered to scale on a national level involving tens of thousands of college and high school students in shared academic projects, we could make an enormous contribution to their education and to our myriad other efforts to transform the relationship between higher education and K-12 education, not to mention the relationship between the academic humanities and the broader public.

Traveling teaching represents a significant pedagogical response to the call for the profession to amplify its voice, combine its insights and discourses with those in the wider community, and generally enhance the public humanities.[2] It strengthens efforts to diminish privilege and elitism by teaching our students to develop knowledge and communication skills in a way that will engage students whose backgrounds are in many cases different from theirs. It develops skill sets that combine those of careful reading and interpretation with a range of digital and technical abilities applicable to a broad range of career and life experiences. By taking literature into the community, academics can model for students and citizens the best forms of communicative action and social life characteristic of a functioning democracy. The role of the university should be precisely to engender the

[2] The literature about the public humanities is vast. I have found the following accounts of the practicalities and theoretical and historical considerations of linking the academic humanities with the public particularly useful: Bender 1993; Boyte 2004; Brooks 2014; Dewey 1934; Du Bois 1926; Ellison and Eatman 2008; Emerson 1837; Fisher 2021; Habermas 1990; May-Curry and Oliver 2023; Shorris 2000; Sommer 2014; and Shusterman 2000. As for my own efforts, I've written three books: one on public intellectuals (Teres 1996), one appealing to academics to become public intellectuals (Teres 2011), and one that performs public intellectual work (Teres 2019).

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broadest possible collective of engaged participants and, to use a phrase of John Dewey's, to create a "conjoint communicated experience" in which personal experience becomes a mode of social experience, and sympathy and collective esthetic judgment and moral reasoning prevail.[3] Students and citizens in general respond well to traveling teaching's assumptions of their maturity and significance, and this response enables the transformative power of literature to assert itself at a time when intellect and spirit are so aggressively under attack. In his influential essay "Traveling Theory," Edward Said drew attention to the journey of Georg Lukàcs' notion of "reification" as it traveled from Budapest to Paris and the wider world, gaining recognition and acceptability.[4] That was a broader itinerary than the one I have described. However, as Said demonstrated, no matter the distance traveled, ideas and practices require that we map our territory, move into the larger political world, present the humanities as part of "the human venture," and build a "non-coercive human community."[5] These should all be central to our quest for renewal.

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[3] Dewey 1916, 87.
[4] Lukàcs 1922.
[5] Said 1983, 247.

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