

In Jerusalem

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, in Jerusalem in January watching Kenneth Branagh in *Conspiracy* during lunch when the air sirens all over the city went off. Looking around the Visual Centre, I noticed that others were looking up from the screens at their booths and were pulling off their headsets. Security guards ran into the room and vanished into a space behind the information desk. No information was provided.

The sirens stopped. The headsets went back on. Life continued as before, but I felt that something had changed – if not in the outside world, then in my inner world. This seemed to be more than a wake-up call about the concerns of the war in Gaza, 200km away. My experiences in Israel would change the way I see myself, the world, and my role in the world. Later (much later), after my heart-rate resumed to normal, I got to thinking; *how can we, as teachers, use our life experiences to enrich our teaching?* I had three immediate answers.

A wise teacher from my past indirectly provided me with advice: never confuse intelligence with experience. As I experience more in life, it doesn't make me any more intelligent, only more experienced. Conversely, my students are not less intelligent because of their shorter years of life experience. As teachers, we can use our life experiences not simply to model story-telling skills, but to help students understand how their own experiences are framed with particular world-views, how our experiences are increasingly becoming informed by globalization, and how some of our experiences involve struggles with knowledge.

Let me offer three passages taken directly from my journal during my studies in Israel this winter to il-

lustrate each of these three ideas. I offer them to you with minimal editing. You'll be reading my unpolished impressions of traveling in a country at war and then returning to the daily life of teaching in rural Nova Scotia. You'll see my candid struggles as I try to come to terms with such juxtaposition.

Passage 1: How experiences are framed by world-views

Our new experiences are interpreted by our prior knowledge and experience. While this sounds simple, it is more challenging to hear how someone's prior knowledge influences their reaction or articulation to new experiences. Consider this passage from my journal and watch for assumptions that are embedded in my writing:

Evening at the hotel:
EXPLOSION outside our window. My roommate quickly says, "That was a bomb explosion." He would know. He survived a bus-bomb and wore human body parts. My mind races, thinking back to the two convoys for dignitaries that I passed as I walked back to the hotel from my workout at the gym. Those convoys would be passing on the street in front of this hotel. Would they have been a military target? We pause, and then go out on the deck. Down below, there are two police vans parked and blocking the street. I'm relieved - they were there at the outset / before the explosion

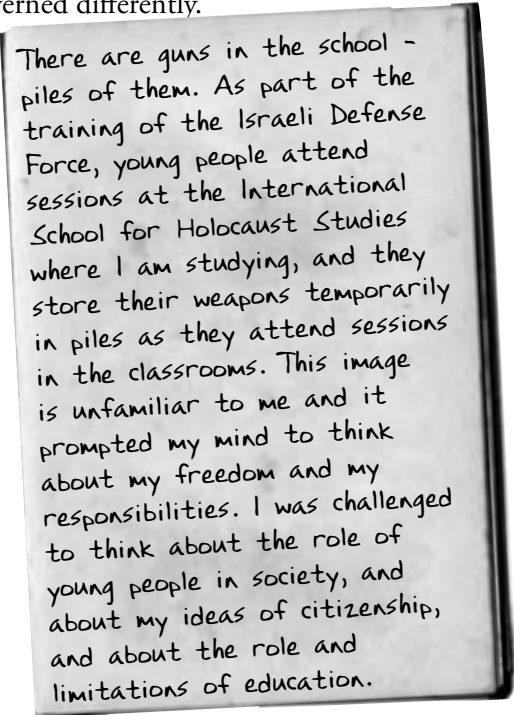
and I deduce that the explosion was not as random and unexpected as I had first imagined. My roommate looks and explains that this police unit responds to calls and explodes suspicious packages or objects. True enough, I can see police in bomb outfits. I can see the police now approaching the Blockbuster Store, six stories below. There's a backpack or something left outside the store. Should I go back inside? Move away from the glass door? Am I over-reacting? But by the time I have written this (immediately after the explosion), the traffic has returned to its normal pace. Normal: a strange word.

Were my reactions inconsistent with those of other people in this passage? How would you imagine you would respond to the incident being described? What were some of the assumptions that influenced my perspective? Can you anticipate what I have learned from this experience? Asking

such questions in the classroom encourages students to think about how perspectives are constructed, how they are different for different people, and how they are influenced by prior knowledge.

Passage 2: How globalization informs our thinking

Our perspectives are increasingly being informed by globalization – especially cultural and social forms of globalization. Our students need to learn about the ways young people live in other places in the world. Young people understand how their world is governed, but they may not be as aware that young people could be governed differently.



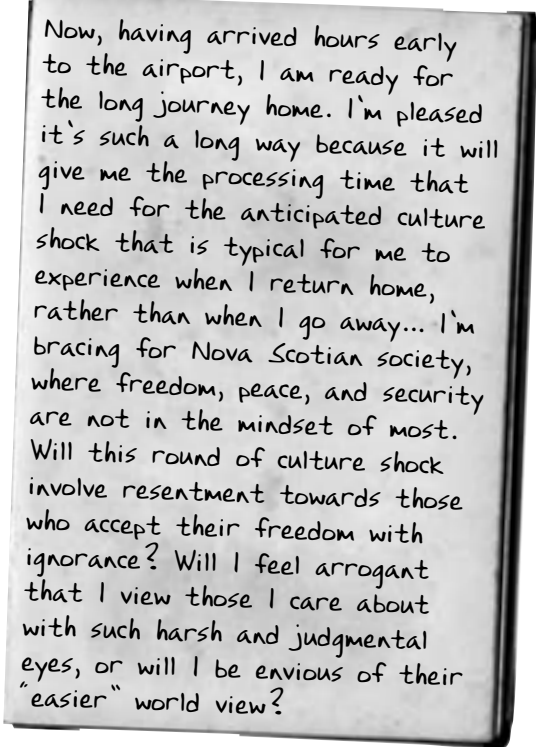
There are guns in the school - piles of them. As part of the training of the Israeli Defense Force, young people attend sessions at the International School for Holocaust Studies where I am studying, and they store their weapons temporarily in piles as they attend sessions in the classrooms. This image is unfamiliar to me and it prompted my mind to think about my freedom and my responsibilities. I was challenged to think about the role of young people in society, and about my ideas of citizenship, and about the role and limitations of education.

When presenting some lunch time mini-lectures to students and staff (okay, really it was a show-and-tell of some travel pictures), I noticed that students did not know that some countries expect their young people to serve in the military for a set period of time. This simple piece of knowledge seemed to change their perspective about their own lives although I didn't have time to explore their thinking too much at the time – the bell rang and lunch was over.

Passage 3: How struggles with knowledge need to be validated

Students need to know that we struggle with knowledge all of our lives. By struggling, I am referring to the work that you do with new experiences that aren't congruent with what you think you already know. As Yoda

says, "You must unlearn all that you have learned." Students need to know that adulthood continues with new challenges and perceptions and that learning continues. The following excerpt reveals my struggles about new experiences in Israel.



Now, having arrived hours early to the airport, I am ready for the long journey home. I'm pleased it's such a long way because it will give me the processing time that I need for the anticipated culture shock that is typical for me to experience when I return home, rather than when I go away... I'm bracing for Nova Scotian society, where freedom, peace, and security are not in the mindset of most. Will this round of culture shock involve resentment towards those who accept their freedom with ignorance? Will I feel arrogant that I view those I care about with such harsh and judgmental eyes, or will I be envious of their "easier" world view?

When I travel I often think about what experiences will be "classroom worthy." Of course, this means that I also have to be ready to answer questions like, "What was your favorite part of your trip?" I'll have to have some quick snippets ready. People like stories – especially short ones. I'll need to have stories that honour students' intelligence and offer them ways to think through their own experiences. Offering life's experiences to students need not be deeply personal, but it can be educational. By choosing to share our own moments of learning, we enrich our teaching because we are modeling how we reflect and learn from our experiences. I must confess that I polish the stories rather than present them in the form of journal ramblings. But then again, maybe I should share my changing reactions and thought processes more openly with students. Perhaps I need to unlearn.

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