



Part 1: Teaching focused narratives

Katharine Terrell¹

Abstract

This paper introduces the first section of the special issue, focusing on teaching narratives. There is exploration of the move to online learning during wartime, which was partly enabled by the pivot to online during Covid. Drawing on the cited articles, there is also a focus on student wellbeing, and students as agents for change.

Keywords

teaching in wartime, crisis education, online learning

In this first section, five authors reflect on their experiences of teaching during war. Most of us in Scotland could never imagine what it would be like to wake up to our country being invaded in a full-scale war. Just like Veretelnyk, we would hardly be thinking about going to class when waking up to this news. Yet, as Shuhai shows us, Ukrainians needed to find a “new normal”: living their lives despite war raging. Even while living in fear of bombs falling, some routines – like making a morning coffee to start the day – stay the same and help people to feel normal. This is despite the blackouts described by Vyshenska: people find ways to cope and manage. Despite its challenges, for Martsenyuk, the “new normal” provided opportunities, too. Despite people’s focus on surviving, she describes how the war also encouraged Ukrainians to reflect on deeper issues, and even provided opportunities to promote knowledge and understanding of Ukraine internationally. A number of authors in this section and throughout the special edition point out the importance of “soft power” in the war, through Ukrainian culture, writing, music and more. As Badior explains, writing is not just academic but a powerful tool for change. We should not lose sight of the power of our words in our academic practice. For Veretelnyk, words on stage, as well as on the page, provide a powerful demonstration of Ukrainian language and culture. For, as he describes, the war is fought not only through weapons but through culture. The continuation of normal life involves both bombs and theatre in striking juxtaposition: each life lost is also a small part of Ukrainian culture that is extinguished.

Against this background of life continuing amongst death, how might we respond as teachers? The writers in this section, having no rulebook to play by, did their best to

¹ University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Corresponding Author:

Katharine Terrell, Academic and Digital Development, University of Glasgow, 64 Southpark Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8LB, UK

Email: Katharine.Terrell@glasgow.ac.uk

continue teaching with necessary adaptations. Vyshenska (like others) points out that the experience of moving to online teaching at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic helped prepare lecturers and students for moving online again at the outbreak of the war. The authors describe various ways they adapted their teaching even in the most difficult circumstances, demonstrating the adaptability and flexibility of university teachers. Vyshenska, for example, teaching natural sciences, adapted fieldwork so that students could undertake the activities in their local environment, instead of needing to travel. As Badior prompts us to consider, how can we extend our own teaching beyond classroom walls or the confines of a video call? Meanwhile, Martsenyuk was determined to continue her approach of teaching gender studies through research with Non-Governmental Organisations – when more is this needed than in wartime? But the final report sidelined local voices rather than seeing Ukrainians as experts in Ukraine. Martsenyuk offers concrete suggestions for listening to Ukrainians and offering solidarity as teachers internationally. How can we take up this call as educators?

Central to the adaptation to teaching is the authors' concern for students' wellbeing. Shuhai reflects on the effect of the war on learning and what it means to be safe to learn. Often, higher education educators do not think about the emotions in the room when we teach, but occasionally we are forced to. Shuhai's powerful description of "crying, talking, supporting" with university students surely shows us the power of education beyond formal learning: in her words, "stability, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing resilience in young minds". Perhaps we should all consider an approach like Veretelnyk, whether teaching through war or not: not censoring students, recognising the role of academic and literary understandings of war, but also recognising with compassion that each student comes to learning with their own, complex, often hidden experiences. In current discussions about censorship and free speech on campus, it is sobering to hear the example of removing literature related to war from a syllabus to support and protect students, as "During an online class you would never know where students were and in what circumstances, but also what they and those close to them had experienced and were experiencing". For Badior, listening to students and understanding their wellbeing went beyond the classroom and became a project in itself, a way to take seriously and honour students' experiences. How can we do the same, while balancing the need, sometimes, to discuss the difficult and the uncomfortable?

Of course, we must not forget the impact of war on different groups. Shuhai reminds us that children have their own social lives outside of adults and experience the war in their own way. Adults may realise that what children need is the stability and security that education provides. Martsenyuk also reflects on how academia can support people in war, particularly women and young people, especially when issues of equality seem to take a back seat in the urgency of war. She goes on to talk about the important role that young people have to play in Ukraine (and in any country), and of women's agency in the war. Young people and women are not just helpless victims: they are agents for change. And, as these authors powerfully remind us, academia can and must be part of that change.

Cultural notes

Shuhai references "Holodomor" (Голодомор), which comes from the Ukrainian words for hunger (holod) + extermination (mor). It refers to a devastating man-made famine in 1932-1933 which led to the deaths of almost four million Ukrainians and one million others in the Soviet Union. It was caused by Stalin's policies designed to punish Ukrainian

resistance to his collectivisation plans. (Stebelsky et al, 2025). The United Kingdom's Guardian newspaper informed the British public of the famine in the USSR's "breadbasket" in March 1933 in a series of articles by Malcolm Muggeridge which can be accessed online. He described how Ukraine's previously "tolerably comfortable" quality of life had been ruined by Moscow (Muggeridge, 2022).

References

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