

It provides a counter perspective  
os.

2006, 130 pages, age 16–college),  
e Baghdad Zoo after an American  
on a true story of a pride of lions  
an bombing, the story is also quite  
aqi people, living in a continuous  
violence and sexuality.

Embedded journalist – Evan Wright  
ines at the spearhead of the 2003  
ral and used by HBO to design a  
erican soldiers had distinguishing  
etence of leaders and commands,  
from the viewpoint of American  
nd it generated discussion about

# 6

## EMBEDDED

### Teaching the Iraq War

*Jeffrey A. Patterson*<sup>1</sup>

#### A Starting Point

The husband of one of my grade 12 English students (aged 17–18 years) recently witnessed a fellow soldier stationed in Iraq shot in the head by a sniper. My student brought this up during a class discussion about the war – her husband told her the story the night before, while they were talking to each other on Skype. I knew that Stacy’s husband was serving in Iraq, along with the husband of Jen, another student in the same class. Stacy had mentioned her husband’s military assignment at the beginning of the school year, and, at that time in September, I asked her how her husband described being in Iraq. Josh had told Stacy that the situation wasn’t as bad as it had been in the past, that soldiers were now just “cleaning things up” and “getting people back home.” Stacy told me that she had found comfort in his assurances. Now, for Stacy, the sniper story had changed things.

Stacy and Jen are seventeen years old and students in the alternative school where I teach English in a small town in south west Michigan. Students attend our school for a variety of reasons: some have been expelled from their traditional school; some are transitioning from being home-schooled, some attend because they didn’t fit in at their previous school; and some come to our school because they’ve heard good things – energetic caring staff, small numbers of students per classroom, and creative teaching methods for non-traditional learners. So we have an interesting mix of students: an honor student from a small rural school who has been expelled for having weed in his locker, sitting next to a sub-literate gang member from a large semi-urban school expelled for hitting a teacher, sitting next to a shy, formerly home-schooled girl who has been sort of bug-eyed since opening day, but is now starting to find that these people actually have thoughts and values in common with her. Some are teen parents; a small number like Stacy and Beth are already married, to husbands the same age or only a year or two older. The young people

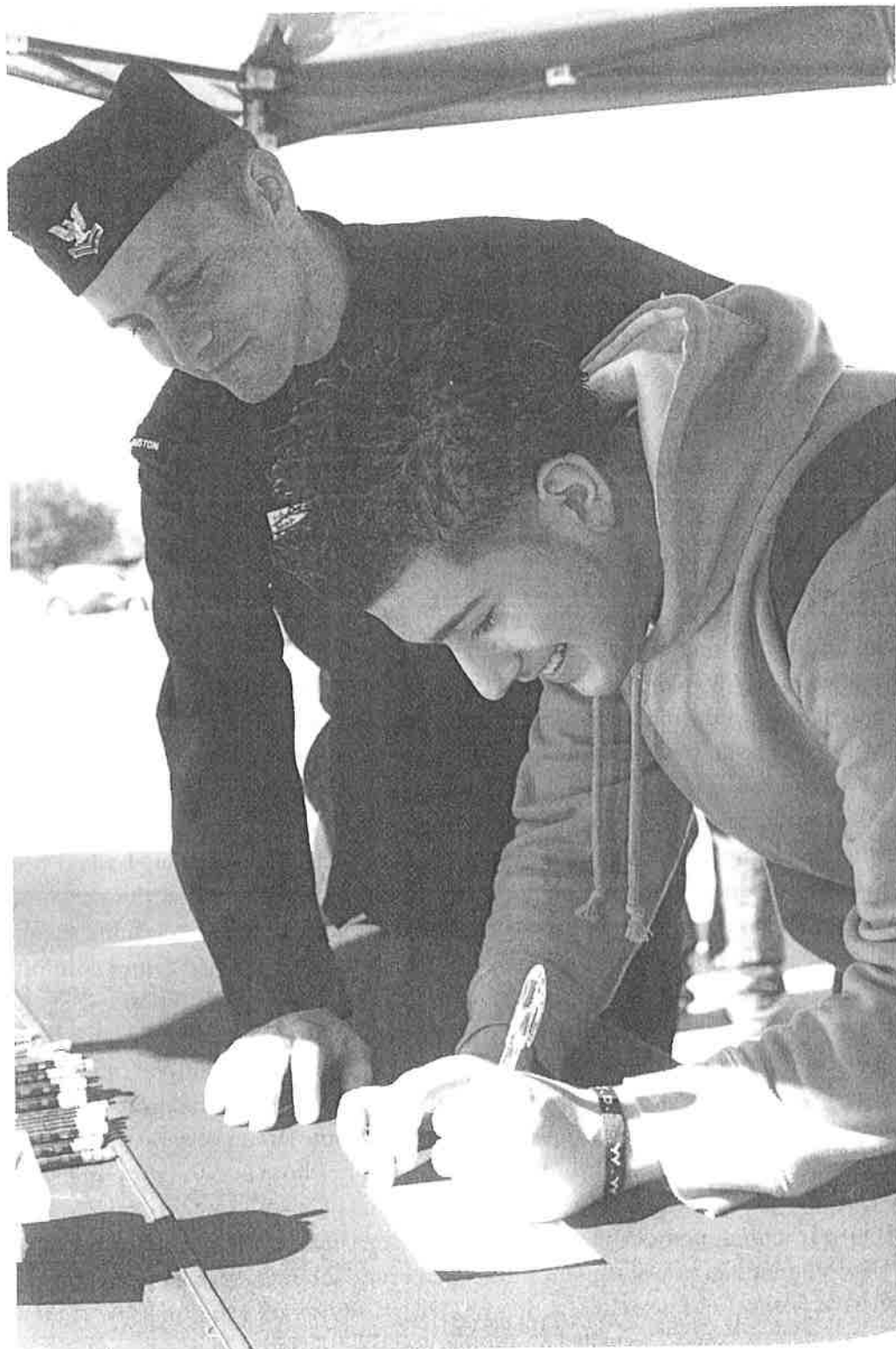


FIGURE 6.1 Recruiting Officer Helps High School Student

in my classes are from  
options like attending

Because of the  
increasingly concern  
about the impact it had  
on my students, their  
I am dedicated to ex  
engagement with re  
textbook on the she  
from the war in Iraq

Still I wasn't su  
experiencing, and th  
to. What is the right  
I was prepared to te  
measure in an abstra  
agenda and call for t  
What was I going to  
was happening on t  
connected to them an

Further, this ever  
situation in Iraq. I wa  
a young adult nove  
experiences in Iraq.  
are scared and confu  
fine example of the k  
still, the time we had  
the topic urgent. On  
why were we there?  
The reality check t  
approach to dealing  
read a couple of boo

I realized that I w  
class; I decided that  
we set out to develo  
was to attack the topic  
in their chosen area.  
in researching the effe  
stereotypes of Iraqis;  
that some students – s  
in fact eager to invest  
their lives.

Sadly, not everyon  
than a few students w

in my classes are frequently recruited to join the military, and often they do, as options like attending college or finding a high paying job are remote.

Because of the heavy military recruiting at my school, I have become increasingly concerned about the war in Iraq and conflicts in the Middle East, about the impact it has on Iraqis, on America's image in the world, and the impact on my students, their family, and friends who are serving there. So precisely because I am dedicated to exceeding state standards, rigorous education, and serious student engagement with reading and writing, I decided this last year to put our traditional textbook on the shelf for a while, and start with a new unit addressing literature from the war in Iraq.

Still I wasn't sure how to respond to the heightened fear that Stacy was experiencing, and the powerful realities she was helping the other students attend to. What is the right way to deal with these traumatic feelings in the classroom? I was prepared to teach a lesson on war, but I had been thinking of war in some measure in an abstract sense – war as literature. I was prepared to push my own agenda and call for tolerance and understanding, but this incident left me at a loss. What was I going to teach these girls, and the rest of my students, about what was happening on the other side of the world that was, at the same time, so connected to them and their isolated, but not so sheltered, lives in middle America?

Further, this event forced me to acknowledge my limited knowledge of the situation in Iraq. I was prepared to walk the students through *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, a young adult novel written by Walter Dean Myers about a young soldier's experiences in Iraq. The novel showed us that some of America's soldiers in Iraq are scared and confused, and that war is bad, often unnecessary – the novel is a fine example of the kind of war literature we should be teaching today. But even still, the time we had together in this class was precious and the need to address the topic urgent. Once the subject was opened, students wanted to find answers: why were we there? Is the war worth the staggering amount of debt and deaths? The reality check that Stacy was giving us meant I needed to rethink my approach to dealing with the conflict in my classroom. We just couldn't simply read a couple of books and move on to the next topic.

I realized that I was not capable of being the one with all the answers in this class; I decided that we would need to engage in research together. As a class, we set out to develop a better understanding of the situation in Iraq. The idea was to attack the topic from many different angles. Students would become experts in their chosen area. For example, the two military wives expressed an interest in researching the effect of war on the soldiers; another student wanted to examine stereotypes of Iraqis; another wanted to research war profiteers. I discovered that some students – students who had lost interest in traditional schooling – were in fact eager to investigate this issue that was in the news and touched some of their lives.

Sadly, not everyone was on board: the class seemed divided. There were more than a few students who didn't find relevance in researching the conflict in Iraq.



In fact, I soon discovered that they couldn't care less about the war. It didn't matter to them. The war was something that they were able to turn off whenever it was on television and shut it out of their mind. Or, if they did have an opinion about the conflict, it was something ignorant, along the lines of, as one student put it, "we should kill all the towel heads."

Some of my students see no problem in using a term like "towel head," or even worse, to describe a person from the Middle East. When I asked why students feel that it is OK to use terms like this, the response is often the same: they attacked us; we are at war. The more I pressed students to articulate reasons behind their views, the more I began to realize that many students had created or adopted a sort of mythology connecting to the little they know about the events of September 11, 2001. For many of my students the war and the current global situation could be summed up in one sentence: Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden led a team of terrorists who were out to kill every American citizen. This mythology has perpetuated fear-based racism toward Arabs among many of my students.

What was also disconcerting was my realization that students are being raised in a culture where developing negative attitudes towards Arabs has become acceptable. In mainstream American media, Arabic people have been vilified. From movies, to video games, to comedy routines, Arabs continue to be presented in a negative light. Citizens of our country are being conditioned to fear, suspect, and even hate people from the Middle East.

I decided that the first step in this research project would be to confront stereotypes associated with Arabs. First, I gave a brief, open-ended survey about Arabs, 9/11, and the Middle East. The results were what I had expected. Students responded in the following ways:

The girls wear veils and the men wear turbans.

They look like dirty people.

Women are treated like crap.

They are short, have brown hair, talk with phlegm, and wear turbans.

The Arabs, towel heads, Al-quida (sic), and Saddam Hussein were responsible for 9/11.

It was evident that the students knew close to nothing about Iraq or its people, even though our country has been involved in a war there since before some of them were born. It was clear that the students' preconceived ideas about the Middle East included an idea that Iraq is an emerging nation filled with primitive people. One student remarked that the citizens, "dressed like Aladdin." I had students generate a list of questions about the people of Iraq. Students had a variety of inquiries: Do they live in huts? How do they cook their food? What sort of sports

do they play? What are their "prior knowledge" stereotypes should

## An Iraqi on YouTube

The first resource I found was a video of an American citizen who traveled to Iraq. The video was simply, "Talk to an Iraqi" on YouTube (video). I was curious about the American citizen's perspective on watching American citizens, politics, and culture. I found that many Iraqis have stereotypes, video games,

In the segment, the United States occurred at home, and female developers for two notions of life in Iraq. This clip were



FIGURE 6.2 Talk to

do they play? What are their homes like? What kind of clothes do they wear? Their “prior knowledge” and simple questions made it evident that dismantling stereotypes should be the next step in our research process.

### An Iraqi on YouTube

The first resource for dismantling stereotypes came from the Showtime series *This American Life*. Ira Glass heard the story of Haider Hamza, a former Iraqi citizen who travels the country and sets up a portable booth with a placard reading simply, “Talk to an Iraqi” – short clips my students could watch were available on YouTube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPEX0PnV-LU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPEX0PnV-LU)). In the clips, curious Americans approach Hamza’s booth and have conversations with him. Watching Americans talk with Hamza, it quickly becomes evident that most American citizens, of all ages and backgrounds, know precious little about the people, politics, or daily lives of Iraqi citizens. My students are astounded to find that many Iraqis live in homes with possessions similar to their own: televisions, stereos, video game consoles, even Oprah’s magazine.

In the segment, viewers see news reports from Hamza’s life before and after United States occupation. They see Iraqi students at college, families relaxing at home, and female Iraqis with freedom and jobs – Hamza’s mother was a software developer for twenty years. Even with this first step, my students’ preconceived notions of life in the Middle East were beginning to crumble, and their responses to this clip were starting to become more thoughtful:

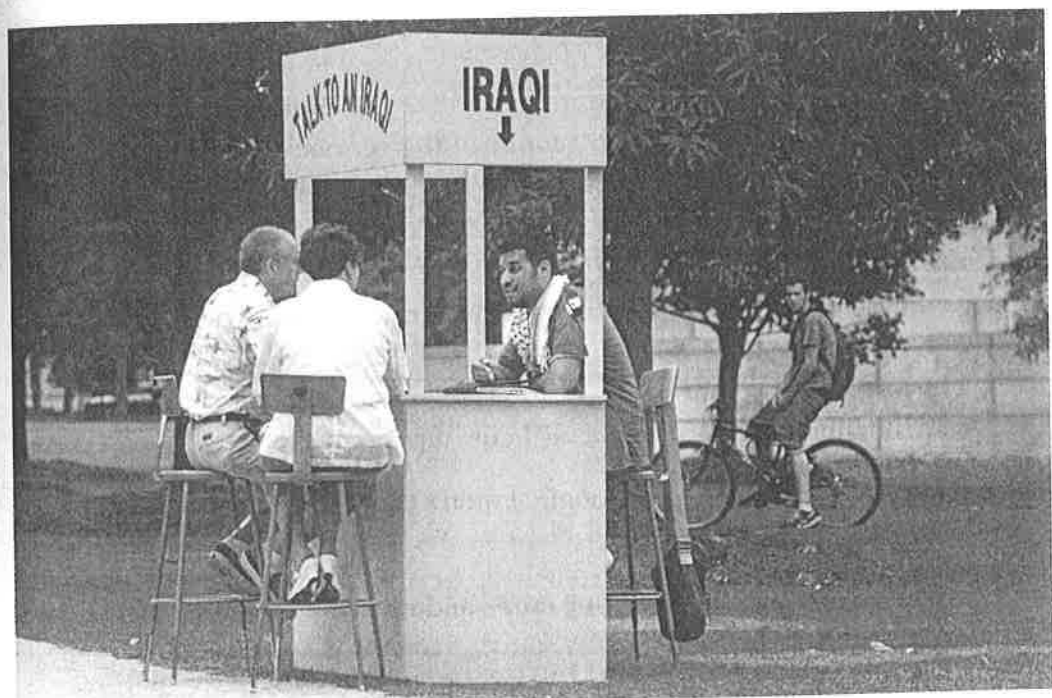


FIGURE 6.2 Talk to an Iraqi

I learned that they lost jobs after the invasion, just like we are losing jobs. This could lead to crime and selling drugs. It's not their fault it's the government's fault.

I thought that people in Iraq were different than us. He seemed calm. I was expecting an Iraqi to be angry. Americans are rude and they think that they know stuff that they don't.

Maybe Iraqis aren't all that different from us. They're just trying to make it like we are.

He is answering questions that the media isn't answering. It is brave of him to get outside of his comfort zone.

I didn't know that women could get jobs. I also thought everyone in Iraq was raised to be in the war.

They don't live in mud huts. We didn't see any camels. They have colleges.

## Iraqi Blog

The second resource was a collection of blogs by the anonymous blogger, Riverbend. Riverbend was living in Baghdad during the 2003 U.S. invasion. She used her blog to vent her frustration and terror during that time, and also show her sense of humor. Students had the opportunity to see, again, the realities of life in Iraq. Riverbend listens to Nirvana, goes to the cinema to see American films, and even uses Google. After my students started to develop a real sense of life in Iraq, they were able to connect with the humor in a section of one of Riverbend's blogs. One blogger, commenting on one of Riverbend's posts, stated that she could not be an Iraqi because Iraqis didn't use computers or speak English (Riverbend, 6). The ignorance of the comment became a joke among my students, who were beginning to develop a more educated view of Iraqis. After reading blogs from Riverbend, students wrote the following responses:

They don't have confidence in their government. She was antiwar. The war is draining her. I thought all Iraqis supported the war.

Iraqis have computers and Google. I didn't think that they had technology, jobs, and clothes like we do.

I didn't know that they had our music and movies over there. She said she listens to Nirvana.

Riverbend is upset about her country being ruined. I would be, too if someone tried to take over America.

I could see  
of Iraq. The ci  
terrorist, to sor  
even agreeme

## Recording a

Along with t  
videotaping th  
in Iraq. At fir  
their discussio  
My students v  
where, at the  
in school hall

At the beg  
camera and ex  
them. A majo  
war in Iraq an  
a few of the s

The eco

I feel u

The wa

As this proce  
students know  
things more  
nonsensical d  
remarks for f  
and focused  
permanence o  
themselves sa  
and articulate  
immediate gr  
created the fo

It will

You g  
because

Other  
about v

I could see that my students were starting to change their ideas about the people of Iraq. The citizens of Iraq went from a cross between Aladdin and a Hollywood terrorist, to someone with whom they might find life similarities, common interest, even agreement on a variety of social and political issues.

### Recording and Organizing our Thinking

Along with the reading, writing, and viewing, in my class I had students videotaping themselves discussing their emerging knowledge about the situation in Iraq. At first the video sections were awkward, but after a while, continuing their discussions while the camera was running became almost second nature. My students were raised with technology and the idea that cameras are everywhere, at the convenience store, on the street corner, on the school bus, even in school hallways.

At the beginning of the first quarter, students were asked to look into the camera and explain what they know about the situation in Iraq and how it affects them. A majority of the students claimed that they didn't know much about the war in Iraq and that the events in the Middle East did not affect them. Of course, a few of the students had opinions:

The economy is affected by the war and my dad has lost his job.

I feel unsafe because of the war.

The war affects me because gas prices keep going up.

As this process of filming continued, I noticed something that happens when students know that they are presenting for the video camera – they seem to take things more seriously. A student who may say something thoughtless or nonsensical during camera-less class discussion will take time and structure his remarks for film. One student, who is usually the class clown, became serious and focused while presenting for the camera. There is something about the permanence of video; they are on record and able to look into the mirror to see themselves saying something. I have found this makes students more thoughtful and articulate as they realize that they have a potential audience beyond their immediate group. Writing about the experience in front of the camera, students created the following responses:

It will be good to see how much we changed.

You get nervous, you start to get more stage ready. You prepare more because you don't want to sound stupid.

Other people see this instead of informal conversation. We need to think about what we are saying.



As we moved forward, I realized that I needed to structure my student's research process, so I developed a class Ning in an effort to create a publicly accessible pool of research. The Ning emerged as a great resource for many reasons. A Ning is an enhanced social networking tool, so in this format students were able to communicate with me, and with each other, share a wide variety of writing, images, resources, and links. They can keep this information in a central location in cyberspace, where they – and anyone – can have access to it at any time. Plus, simply, my kids like technology, and the Ning, like the filming, was another way to capture their interest, develop their speaking, writing, and research abilities – and their confidence. (In 2010 Ning suspended its free service. Teachers could set up something similar where students could share writing using a wiki site, such as Wikispaces.)

### Multigenre Research

When the class became more thoughtful in their perception of the conflict, some students started to investigate the situation outside of the classroom, on their own time. They returned to class armed with Internet-searched accounts of events, statistics, and graphs. Wikipedia was a source for information about events starting with the first Gulf War, September 11, then the second Gulf War. One student brought in a timeline. I was glad to see these beginnings, but it seemed to me that to really understand what is happening in Iraq and how it is affecting people, we needed to look past the typical maps and graphs. I wanted students to make connections to the people involved in the conflict.

After looking over the timelines and viewing the conflict from a historical perspective, the students were asked to choose individual texts to use as a start to their research. I didn't want them to simply regurgitate the Wikipedia information. I wanted them to find a way in for themselves and to take ownership of what they were studying. Multigenre research seemed like something that would help students explore the various issues related to the war in a way that would help them understand multiple perspectives on the issues. Students found texts that covered a variety of issues associated with Iraq, from the history of the region, to the food, to American soldiers' experiences in Iraq, to the story of a librarian in Baghdad trying to save her collection of books. They were supposed to read these choice texts and then present information to the group. We would be learning from one another, and becoming experts together.

I used the Melinda Putz book, *The Teachers Guide to the Multigenre Research Project*. In it, she recommends using FQI (facts, questions, and interpretations) sheets to organize research (Putz, 46). The sheets encourage students to cite their research in MLA format, list facts, develop questions, and decide upon an interpretation for the presentation of their new knowledge. Putz even has handouts that teachers can copy and give to students. I found that students enjoyed creating their own versions of these documents, instead of using the ones from

the book. Students  
customize their  
to develop an  
but soon became

FQI helped  
topic.

If you could  
organize

I customized

After a few  
sheets, it seemed  
standing of the  
from having  
ing thoughtful  
discussion be  
contribute co  
the camera:

Since we  
the war  
like it was  
want to  
America

I read  
weapons  
are nu  
wanted  
the tro

I've been  
demon  
will th

The v  
have  
rights  
situat

I learned  
war s  
In my  
that



the book. Students created FQI templates in Microsoft Word and were able to customize them to suit their needs. For each resource they found, students needed to develop an FQI sheet. This was met with some resistance at the beginning, but soon became second nature. I asked students about their FQI sheet:

FQI helps to keep me focus on my topic instead of going outside of the topic.

If you customize for yourself the research makes sense to you. It is more organized.

I customized because it is easier to do it my way.

After a few weeks of accumulating research, and with the help of the FQI sheets, it seemed to me that students were beginning to develop a better understanding of the conflict in Iraq and to drop some of the stereotypes. They went from having little knowledge to asking crucial questions. Some were developing thoughtful opinions about issues associated with the conflict and class discussion became passionate and informed. Even those students who didn't often contribute couldn't resist. Students were asked to talk about their research for the camera:

Since we've begun our project I've been wondering about the children. If the war is going on, how are they able to attend school? It doesn't seem like it would be safe. I wondered how their parents feel about that. I wouldn't want to attend school where there are bombs going off everywhere. Before America invaded, it seems like it was safer.

I read today that President Obama and Russia want to prevent nuclear weapons from being developed in Iran. Why are our troops in Iraq if there are nuclear weapons in Iran? Isn't the reason that we are there because we wanted to get rid of weapons of mass destruction? Why don't we move the troops to Iran?

I've been, personally, thinking about Iraq's history of warfare. Is the democracy that Bush wanted to establish going to last after we leave or will there be more war and it will just be blown away again?

The women in Iraq are not as disrespected as we think they are. The women have more rights than I thought they did. They have struggled for their rights for a long time. But since America invaded, after the whole 9/11 situation, their rights have been moving backwards.

I learned that a lot of people had the opportunity to leave Iraq when the war started, but they didn't go. And I wondered why they chose to stay. In my book, I read that some older people didn't want to move away, and that a grandmother was telling her grandchildren that the missiles were

coming, but it wasn't going to get any worse. But it did and then they couldn't leave. The Iraqis didn't think that America was going to ruin their cities and separate their families.

I learned that Saddam Hussein had a pretty solid grip on his country. They had good education and a solid infrastructure. He did some horrible things, but he was in no way related to Osama Bin Laden. In fact, Osama had openly stated that Saddam was an infidel, which is a major curse in their tongue. They were just not related to each other. So I wondered why we are in Iraq. It seems like an excuse to finish what Bush's father started.

I noticed students were starting to wonder about aspects of the conflict that they had never considered before. In only a few weeks they had gone from not knowing or even caring about Iraq, to becoming concerned, even angry. It was a small first step, but an important one in their understanding of one of the biggest issues that they, as American citizens, are currently facing. In the official State of Michigan Language Arts Standards and Content Expectations that my class is supposed to be following, English 12 students are asked to "identify and apply their leadership skills and prepare for responsible action as American citizens in the context of a global world" (Michigan). Looking back on the semester, I think my students were, in fact, meeting Michigan expectations, even if my curriculum may be unlike most other English 12 courses across the state. In my view, the task of the teacher is to prepare the next generation so that they can, in a thoughtful and informed way become responsible for the conduct of our nation. Tragically, the conflict in Iraq isn't going to end soon, perhaps not for decades. And others like it may also arise. Some might ask if a semester-long focus on literature of the Iraq War is appropriate. I have come to wonder the opposite. Is it responsible teaching for educators to avoid discussion of our nation's role in Iraq and the decisions that our leaders have made? Is it responsible to allow our students to accept falsehoods and stereotypes about Iraq, the Middle East, and its people?

During the last few weeks of school, I spoke with my English 12 students about our Iraq project. I would like to say that they were still deeply engaged in research and keeping up to date on current events in Iraq. This wasn't the case. For most, the Iraq semester was over and they had moved on to other things. Like yesterday's top story of *CNN's* news cycle, Iraq was no longer the lead in the students' minds. Frankly, it wasn't in my mind either. Daily life had been keeping my thoughts away from the war and our project. Sadly, Jen and Stacy had both stopped attending school, figuring that the money their husbands were sending home from Iraq was enough to make a high school diploma unnecessary. Our Ning was sitting out there in cyberspace, untouched for some weeks. We had just finished *Frankenstein*. Graduation was days away. I was disheartened.

I called my cousin Amy, a special agent for the government who investigates fraud. She had recently returned from a two-year assignment in Iraq. During our

semester of school, I learned about how useful faux bulletproof vest stories. I told them to stay up-to-date the way as my smartphone, "It could be. And maybe I took a break from a good hard We found a media that is important and maybe even know. I was information to make an those files are

## Note

1. High school students and the war in

semester of study, she had been a valuable resource. She had told horrific stories about how unsafe it was over there and the corrupt companies who were selling faux bulletproof vests and personnel carriers. Students had been captivated by her stories. I told her how I was feeling a little upset that the students didn't continue to stay up-to-date about the war. Amy told me that she sometimes feels the same way as my students. "You can't stay embedded 24/7, Jeff," she said over the phone, "It can begin to be too much. You need to find a balance."

And maybe that's what the Iraq unit was for the students that semester. We took a break from being distracted by classic novels, plays, and poetry and took a good hard look at something horrible that is actually happening in our world. We found a counterbalance to the distractions from a pop culture and mainstream media that encourages us to believe that everything is fine. And though it is important and relevant, it's hard to stare at something like that for a long time, maybe even harder if you're a teen with enough troubles of your own. I don't know. I want to believe that the students in English 12 left with a file of information from that semester stored in their brains, and when the time comes to make an informed choice or opinion about their world, that they can access those files and use the information stored there. On good days, I do.

### Note

1. High school teacher Jeff Patterson describes how his curriculum changed to address the war in Iraq.