

Not Everyone's First Year Seminar

Intentional Venom: Making Meaning of School Shootings

By Dr. Donna Decker, Prof. of English, Honors Director

In an odd synchronicity, the very last class meeting of our fall 2012 First Year Seminar, "Intentional Venom: Making Meaning of School Shootings," took place while the Newtown, Conn., school shooting was happening—December 14, 2012. What had been theoretical and historical and contained to our classroom became all too real. Days later, during our final exam – a fish-bowl dialogue format – we had the gruesome opportunity to bring our analytical skills to bear on a still-raw school massacre.

Within days of the killings, we opened up our formerly private course website to the press in order that a *USA Today* reporter might write about our work (an article that quickly became syndicated). Just days later, I was interviewed on NHPR's "The Exchange" about the killings and the course.

Having taught the seminar twice has proved to be a protean endeavor. We Skype with Dave Cullen, author of *Columbine*, and Jackson Katz, creator of the film *Tough Guise*. We investigate our own campus security to better understand our institution's disaster plan. We interview the local police to learn about their protocol regarding school shootings. One student traveled to Colorado over her winter break and returned with a PowerPoint presentation of photos and music, offering it to me *after* the course was over – not for a grade, but because the Columbine story changed her in significant ways.

Primarily, our class plunges into the details of four massacres: Columbine, Virginia Tech, the Montreal Massacre, and the Amish Schoolhouse shooting. We deconstruct the scholarship, the literature, and the media reportage. We ask questions. We seek answers. We conclude that there are more questions than answers regarding school shootings. There is, for example, no profile of a school shooter. The one characteristic they have in common is that virtually all are male. We ask why this is so.

The foremost learning outcomes of the course are inquiry and analysis, and information literacy. The content area of the course lends itself to easy buy-in; students always want to know more, and they want to know what is accurate. They wrestle with the scholarship. They rage against the paucity of resolutions offered by the government, academics, and experts. They encounter – often for the first time – scholars who disagree and lay down the gauntlet of contending data. They move from media myths about school shootings (shooters are bullied, bullies, Goths, mentally ill, etc.) to an ability – and a willingness – to scrutinize the media they so uncritically swallowed wholesale upon entering the classroom on the first day.

The following scenario illustrates what was one of many memorable teachable occasions. Emerson graduate Danny Ledone created the video game *Super Columbine Rampage RPG*, a role playing game in which players act as the two Columbine shooters and mount points by shooting classmates. Ledone had agreed to Skype with our class, but my students voted to decline the offer after intense class discussion and reading about the game and its controversies. The decision was not frivolous, but rather mindful – and morally potent.

I was inspired to create this course after spending the last five years writing a book on the 1989 Montreal Massacre. The book is nearing completion. The course is in its infancy. Together, my students and I have discovered that a topic that engenders horror, fear, and media frenzy (and sadly, irresponsibility), not only motivates inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, and information literacy, but fosters empathy for a world in which humans – too often – catapult the human out of humanity.



The *USA Today* article and NHPR's "The Exchange" show referenced in this article may be found on Franklin Pierce's "In the Press" website page: www.franklinpiercedu/about/news/news_press.htm