**Thinking Monumentally: Making sense of Memorial Sites through Experiential Learning**

Derived from ["Norse Fantasies and American Foundings"](https://jhiblog.org/2018/10/15/norse-fantasies-and-american-foundings/) (*JHI* Blog, October 2018)

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Subject/Theme/Figure/Book: Monuments and memorial sites (lieux de mémoire); historical consciousness

Sources used to create lesson plan: Leif Erikson monument in Boston, MA. Any monument or memorial site on campus or nearby can work, but complex monuments (with both text and interesting aesthetic features) in dynamic public spaces--where students can walk around and interact with site and its surroundings--are most generative.

Age of students: From advanced middle school through university.

Learning Objective:

What will students be able to do by the end of this lesson? What new skills will they have gained?

1. Understand what the monument recognizes and why it does so;
2. Interpret how its aesthetic features and text serve the monument's purpose;
3. Analyze how the monument functions within the space around it;
4. Evaluate the consequence and significance of this monument.

Materials needed: A monument or other memorial site. The above article provides historical context for approaching the Leif Erikson statue in Boston, which intersects with the histories of immigration, urban development, and white nationalism; however, any lieu de mémoire that evokes important course themes can provide a powerful learning opportunity.

Discussion Questions:

Specific Comprehension Questions

1. What is the monument made of? How would you describe its aesthetic features? When was it made and by whom and in what context?
2. What does it recognize? How does it do so?
3. Are there other monuments nearby?

Analytical Questions (how does this study relate to broader historical questions?)

1. What is the relationship between its aesthetic features and the impact it has (or may intend to have) on the viewer?
2. Analyze the place the monument occupies in relationship to other monuments, buildings, green spaces, and the movement of people nearby.
3. What argument about history is the monument making or contributing to?

The case for putting experiential learning in your syllabus:

Save a dreary visit to Plymouth Plantation as a kid in Boston and the classic slog up the Statue of Liberty in eighth grade, I can't remember a history teacher ever making use of a memorial site. I also can't think of a campus that doesn't have its own or isn't proximate to some interesting memorial site. These seem like a wasted pedagogical resource, especially given how often monuments and questions about historical narratives come up when we teach history.

When we do analyze monuments from the vantage point of the classroom, the tendency is to focus on the monument itself, which crops out the space that it inhabits. Truncated so from its surroundings, it becomes an unreliable primary source. To wring meaning from the stone or metal of the statue alone discards its context, including the complex memorial landscape that may surround it. To make a classroom analogy: it is like drawing conclusions about the significance of *Godey's Lady's Book* after reading an article in one edition, rather than also thinking about who read it and how it was read, in what spaces, and why. This pitfall, I think, appears in any attempt to study a monument from afar. It short-changes students' potential to analyze the monument's context and ask higher-level questions about memorial landscapes and how we relate to them.

Fortunately for the teacher and student of history, memorials of many varieties often adorn or clutter cities, towns, and rural spaces throughout the U.S. This provides a relatively democratic teaching resource for classes who wish to physically enter a memorial landscape and make it their classroom. There, we encounter a special learning environment for student empowerment that can be harder to access in the traditional classroom. This experience is the opposite of Snapchat: as students focus for an extended moment on a space that itself has chronological layers, time is stretched rather than snipped; as students create their own momentum to navigate this space, they are not bound to read the site within the narrow confines of one medium or follow one narrative. The student has the chance not only to reflect on the monument in this fuller context, but to reflect on their own positionality and experience as they enter a memorial landscape.

For students, entering such a site has the potential to empower, because they can physically establish their own perspective in relation to it and, afterward, share their findings with others. Whether in collaborative small groups or individually, students can choose where to position themselves, what to gaze at, and how to see the different parts of the space in relationship to each other. In a sense, this is how we might hope that students approach a stationary text in the classroom. But in physically approaching a memorial landscape, we can also feel greater agency to both make original observations and then step back and critique ourselves as viewers and historians.

The article above refers to the statue of Leif Erikson in Boston, but the same pedagogical approach can be taken to many memorial sites. Basically, to make such a space one's classroom, it is important to extend some familiar features of pedagogy into that unfamiliar space. As with any effective reading assignment, before students engage with this site, they should be given or asked to generate questions that they can ask of it. I like to think of these questions in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives:

*-describe what type of memorial it is (***understand***)*

*-interpret what historical narrative this memorial tells or contributes to telling (***apply***) -examine text on the memorial, its location and orientation, size, and aesthetic features as they relate to the memorial's work telling history (***analyze***)*

*-explain how your memorial (its physical features and the history it tells) relates to memorials elsewhere in the square (***synthesize***)*

*-appraise how effective the memorial is at its main purpose (as you see it), including how the visitor engages with it, learns from it, and feels about it (***evaluate***)*

A reflect, pair, share approach to this can work well. Individual students, with a journal and pencil in hand, can spend 10 minutes ranging freely around the square, analyzing the site. Then, they can partner with someone else and teach that person what they observed, in 10 minutes or so. Next, the group can come together, piecing together different vantage points, looking for agreement and tensions among them. The final step can be the most meta, in which students discuss what it was like to engage with the site, and how this has influenced their thinking about monuments more broadly.