

Incident in an inner-city high school auditorium: a well-respected survivor of Auschwitz is invited by several teachers to speak to their classes about the Holocaust. About thirty minutes into his presentation, pandemonium and chaos break out. Following the speaker's comments that the Holocaust was worse than slavery and that students have it easy compared to what Jews in Europe experienced, students begin yelling and screaming at the survivor. It is a particularly nasty scene with the speaker vowing never to return to that school. However, a later analysis of what actually caused this embarrassing event is one of the dilemmas of Holocaust teaching that this essay will deal with.

After teaching the Holocaust for forty years, I thought it would be a good idea to reflect on the experience of teaching this tragic subject but one so necessary for developing an ethical sense of citizenship and for understanding World War Two and contemporary discussions of genocide. Holocaust education is essential from the standpoint of knowledge and morality, but it has become an incredible challenge for teachers because of certain dilemmas they face in instruction.

I propose to analyze these dilemmas and give practical suggestions for teachers to develop Holocaust lessons and units that will be both rewarding to teach and interesting for students to learn.

First of all, there is no single right way to teach the Holocaust. It is an enlightening subject that, besides providing knowledge, helps adolescents develop into mature adults. There are, however, clearly some wrong ways to teach the Holocaust and these will be examined.

All dilemmas of Holocaust education involve teacher decision-making. You cannot escape the task and burden of making decisions, especially during the first year of developing a Holocaust unit. Even an established unit will be modified by decision-making during subsequent years as classes and ability levels change, new material and sources emerge, and a teacher's own attitude as to what is important and what to emphasize changes.

Dilemmas are not listed in order of importance, since the relative significance of each dilemma is dependent upon an individual's beliefs and teaching situation.

The first dilemma is to decide upon a definition of the Holocaust based on victimization. Should a teacher emphasize the exclusivity of Jewish victims or should other groups, Poles, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Roma (gypsies), be included in the category of Holocaust victims also? Resolving this dilemma means a teacher has to be familiar with general Holocaust history prior to developing a unit. Professional development in Holocaust education and reading is essential. Deciding about this dilemma is the difference between teaching about six or twelve million victims. However, students should be reminded that all Nazi victims, whatever the cause of their deaths, were individuals whose lives were important to themselves and others.

I believe that the Holocaust was Nazi Germany's program to rid the earth of Jews based upon a racial ideology that had 19<sup>th</sup> century roots in Social Darwinism, nationalism, and pseudo-scientific racial and eugenic theories popular in America and Europe. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these ideas developed into laws and programs based upon euthanasia, sterilization, and finally into mass extermination based on a fantasy of racial purification.

However, if a teacher disagrees with my definition, and decides, based upon his or her understanding of history, that other victims of the Nazis should be included in Holocaust education, the teacher should pursue this avenue of instruction. I would rather a broad definition of Holocaust victimization than no Holocaust instruction at all.

Deciding to include or exclude is one of those responsible choices a teacher makes based upon the idea that all teaching is decision-making. A teacher may inform students of contrasting Holocaust definitions and let them develop their own definitions.

Although the Wannsee Conference, held outside of Berlin in 1942, introduced representatives of various Nazi state agencies to Hitler's plan to exterminate Jews, what the conference minutes referred to as "the final solution of the Jewish question," it would not make sense, regardless of a teacher's point of view, to discourage students from reading about non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The important issue is for students to understand what Nazis believed and what they did. A lifetime of study by a professional historian could not categorize all the Nazi crimes against individuals, groups, and nations. One objective of Holocaust education is not total knowledge but, rather, recognition of

the Third Reich's crimes that will serve as a basis for a student's future studies and readings.

A second dilemma confronting a teacher is the initial decision as to study the Holocaust on its own or to study it by comparing and contrasting it with other genocides. The word "genocide," coined in 1944 by Rafael Lemkin, a Polish Jew living in America, is the most important vocabulary word in a Holocaust unit. It means the attempted extermination, in whole or part, of an ethnic group or nationality. Without question students must know that word's meaning. The term is pervasive in contemporary discussions of past and present human rights violations, e.g., Darfur.

Nevertheless, it is not essential that a teacher compare genocides. If a teacher wants to, unfortunately, there is no end to genocides to consider: Armenians during World War One, Ukrainians in the 1930s under Stalin, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Native Americans, and indigenous populations throughout Latin American history.

An educator may see the treatment of Native Americans as containing aspects of genocide, and that diminution of indigenous American populations through disease, although unintended by Europeans in the New World, was, in effect, genocidal.

The advantage of comparing the Holocaust with other genocides is that it provides students with historical perspective. Disadvantages are the demands it makes on a teacher in terms of preparation, unit time, and gathering sources. However, if a teacher decides to do this, after the first year, he/she will have a solid basis for a unit on genocides. Educationally, historically, and morally, studying the Holocaust by itself or in a unit on multiple genocides, are equally defensible approaches.

African slavery can be considered a form of genocide in that millions died in Africa and during the Middle Passage to the Americas, and that destruction of culture is part of a contemporary perspective on genocide. However, a narrower definition of genocide would place slavery outside of that category because the purpose of slavery was not to exterminate people but to make a profit on their unpaid labor.

Since Holocaust education is a moral responsibility for secondary school educators, deciding on definitions and what to include and exclude is a function of teacher decision-making. Therefore, the solution to the second dilemma is to decide one way or the other and not worry about your choice.

I taught the Holocaust by itself and not in comparison with other genocides. Slavery was taught as a separate unit. One year, as an experiment, I taught a unit on slavery in America followed by a unit on the Holocaust. The theme of both units was the effects of racism and intolerance, and the goal was to make students more tolerant. It worked extremely well as students were able to make astute comparisons between these two historical experiences, and their essays revealed maturing levels of toleration. Teaching about racism's effects leads to reduced racism in students.

Remember that our first dilemma- Were the victims of the Holocaust only Jews? and our second dilemma- Should other genocides be taught?- are resolved by teacher decision-making. Don't worry about what you decide because whatever is done is valuable for your students. The essence of history is interpretation and judgment anyway.

A third dilemma confronting teachers is how much time should be devoted to a Holocaust unit. This is a difficult decision, especially during a Holocaust unit's first year. Clearly, years can be devoted to Holocaust studies. At the college level, semester courses exist and even Holocaust majors. However, a teacher has to be realistic in terms of time. A teacher of American or world history has an enormous curriculum to cover along with other time restraints imposed by preparation for mandated standardized state exams. So what would be a reasonable amount of time?

Based upon my experience, a two to four week unit would work. The complexity of the topic, the need to assimilate and understand dreadful events, and the incredible emotional reactions of adolescents to this subject, necessitate a minimum of two weeks instruction. A unit can easily go on longer, and it should when student interest and ability are there. However, going beyond four weeks has disadvantages: students may lose interest, there are other topics to cover, and one should avoid too long a preoccupation with mass murder, although that, like so much else, is debatable.

A Holocaust unit serves as an introduction for students to a serious lifetime consideration of the effects of racism and intolerance. Although for many students it will be the only formal study of the Holocaust, a teacher should not feel guilty if he/she cannot cover everything.

There are two circumstances where going beyond two weeks can be easily justified. If two teachers decide to team teach the Holocaust, and they both come from

different disciplines, e.g., history and English being most reasonable, then an interdisciplinary unit can be longer. When literature is added to a Holocaust unit, more time is needed.

The Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford has sponsored Holocaust conferences for secondary school educators for many years. Outstanding interdisciplinary units longer than four weeks have been developed. However, even in that circumstance, no unit should last longer than one term or a quarter of a year. For a teacher working alone, with most classes and students, two to four weeks would be sufficient.

The other circumstance for a longer unit would be for a highly capable and motivated student to engage in independent study, either research or guided readings, about the Holocaust. One term should be the maximum for that.

Now we come to the biggest and most difficult dilemma of Holocaust teaching—what sources and materials should be used? The amount of material available for use is enormous and growing: Internet sources, PowerPoint presentations, books, articles, primary sources, pictures, films, and survivor accounts. There are sufficient amounts of historical sources to satisfy the interests of any teacher and to be useful for any ability level of students.

The burden on a teacher is one of careful selection, making decisions as what to use and when. As time goes on, an educator's collection of Holocaust material will grow year by year creating further opportunities to develop and refine a unit.

A beginning Holocaust educator will be overwhelmed at first by what is available. But that is good because it is better to have more choices than fewer ones. Once an educator decides which specific themes to emphasize, it becomes easier to select relevant instructional material to match those themes.

There are many places to acquire Holocaust material. Social Studies School Service's Holocaust catalog provides an excellent overview of what is available. The nearest Jewish Federation or Jewish Community Center should be contacted, both for information on available material and for lists of survivors still available to serve as guest speakers. Membership in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. is highly recommended because it has impressive amounts of free material for secondary school

educators. Two pamphlets from them that I have used successfully for many years are “The Holocaust-An Historical Summary” and “Children of the Holocaust”. They also have powerful pictures and charts to display in the classroom during the unit.

Material selected should be based on your unit’s themes, age and ability level of students, along with consideration of the unit’s duration. All material must be read or previewed by the teacher before it is presented to students. Readings should be interesting and understandable. Complicated readings can be made understandable by reviewing new vocabulary prior to reading and asking very specific questions for students to answer. Previewing of movies is necessary because of disturbing scenes in many documentaries.

Over the years I have found certain films to be excellent: “*Daniel’s Story*”, from the Holocaust Museum, as a short introduction, “*A Survivor Remembers*”, an academy award winner, and my favorite, “*Europa, Europa*”, a feature film based on a true story. That film, a story of an adolescent boy, personalizes the Holocaust for students. Six million dead is an abstraction, but individual cases are powerful. The classic documentary, “*Night and Fog*” is best shown towards the end of a unit when its horrifying images can be understood in historical context, and students have been prepared psychologically for it.

Selection of written sources provides many opportunities to engage students with Holocaust issues. Good secondary source summaries are tremendously reinforced by primary source accounts. Gradually, a teacher will develop a list of sources that are effective. As an introductory homework assignment, I use Hermann Graebe’s account, “Nazi Extermination of the Jews in the Ukraine”, October 1942, in *Eyewitness to History*, edited by John Casey. It is a powerful account.

New material about the Holocaust is always being discovered which makes selection of additional sources an interesting task no matter how many years you teach this subject. I read an account of a German-Ukrainian “action” (round up of Jews) in the Polish city of Bolechow on September 3-5, 1942 (Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, pp.227-229). This was the most moving and shocking account of a single Holocaust event I ever read. My students read this account for a homework assignment, and their written reactions reflected sensitivity, understanding, and shock. Teachers should regard the vast

and growing amount of Holocaust material as a challenging opportunity to pick relevant and appropriate material.

Our fifth dilemma is at what age should the Holocaust be taught? The easy answer is that the Holocaust is a subject most appropriate for secondary grades 7-12. Like all subjects, the older a student is, assuming normal academic development, the more in-depth one can go. Holocaust sources, both fiction and non-fiction, are generally described as grade specific in catalogs. An educator must always be sensitive to the student's level of emotional maturity.

Clearly, the lower the grade level, the more you should avoid graphically violent movies. You can get your message across with other films. When I taught the Holocaust to seventh and eighth graders, I used a film, based on a book, called *The Devil in Vienna*. The film related a story of an early adolescent friendship between a Jewish and a non-Jewish girl in Vienna in 1938. How their friendship was affected by Hitler's takeover of Austria was the movie's subject; the theme was the negative affects of prejudice.

I did have a successful experience teaching the Holocaust to sixth grade Hispanic students in a transitional bilingual program where vocabulary was strongly emphasized. The students responded very well to a Holocaust survivor who visited, and they wrote moving thank-you letters to him. However, although it worked, I am uneasy about teaching students younger than twelve year olds about the Holocaust. I would not recommend teaching the Holocaust to sixth graders unless you have at least two years experience in Holocaust education.

This leads to a dilemma within a dilemma- how many times should the Holocaust be taught within a curriculum framework?

Since teachers must teach so many important topics, even the study of an important topic must be limited. Presenting the Holocaust too many times can be counter-productive in that it may lead to indifference. All students grades 7-12 should be exposed to a well-developed Holocaust / Genocide unit once. Ideally, this should have a set place within a high school curriculum. However, I would never tell a teacher not to teach the Holocaust if he/she is highly motivated to develop a unit.

Besides history teachers, many English teachers teach the Holocaust using novels, short stories, poems, and memoirs, the most popular being Eli Wiesel's *Night*. An

English teacher who wants to use a Holocaust story, even if not part of a specific Holocaust unit, should be encouraged to do so as long as relevant historical background and vocabulary is presented. Interdisciplinary history/English units make for rewarding instruction as long as sufficient time for preparation and planning exists. Art teachers also can be involved in creative ways.

I oppose Holocaust instruction below grade six because of age appropriateness about the subject of mass murder. That is not to say that issues of race, toleration, and prejudice should not be taught in elementary school. They must be taught at that level, but in other ways. Kindergarteners need to be taught how to get along with one another, but they don't need to learn about the SS and Nazi Germany.

There is an interesting book called *The Terrible Things*, which is an allegory about the Holocaust for kindergarteners. Using that book would be pushing the envelope on age, but an early-elementary teacher could use it for lessons about prejudice.

Determining grade level appropriateness for Holocaust instruction is not an insurmountable obstacle. It just takes thoughtful consideration of where it would fit best into the curriculum. Since, unfortunately, not all students take world history, my view is to teach the Holocaust as part of the American history curriculum. Another consideration is whether a teacher wants to teach about the Holocaust, and the knowledge level of the educator on this subject. Finally, if the Holocaust is to be taught at both the middle school and high school levels, teachers should coordinate their syllabi in order to avoid duplication of content.

Our sixth dilemma about the Holocaust is how does one evaluate students? This is particularly difficult because contemporary classrooms are often heterogeneous, containing students with a wide range of abilities, special education students, and ELL pupils. A homogenous class is easier to teach, but one should be prepared for classes of mixed ability and attitude. The trend is to mainstream special education students into regular academic classes.

My typical American history class in Hartford contained students ranging from high ability to average to intellectually deficient with IQs below 90. Motivation levels differed, there were new arrivals from foreign countries, many special needs pupils, and

abused/emotionally disturbed students, plus students who had combinations of these factors.

Evaluation of students, therefore, is a great challenge. The way to handle this is to assign a wide variety of assessments that are used to differentiate and individualize evaluation based on students' needs and abilities. Essays, artwork, creative writing, exams, cooperative projects, power point presentations, independent study, and journals/diary writing all can be used. A variety of assessment approaches increases students' interest and encourages higher-level thinking.

Flexibility with instructional methods is essential. When I was teaching the Holocaust in Hartford, a majority of my students had serious academic deficiencies or low reading ability; many had part-time jobs, had little or no prior historical knowledge, histories of behavioral disorders, lived in shelters, were caring for family members, were pregnant or were taking care of their own children. A majority of my pupils were poor and were not living with their two natural parents.

My solution to this dilemma, which worked well over the years, was full group instruction with an essay exam at the end. Students were given a choice of essay topics prior to the exam and were allowed to use previous homework assignments, class notes, handouts, and primary sources while taking the essay exam. Special needs students would take the exam in another room with a special education teacher. They also had a choice of taking an exam with the rest of the class instead.

My objective was not to test memory but to allow each student to react to the Holocaust in his/her own way. By giving prior notice of exam topics, by providing direct instruction in history essay writing, and by showing how to use primary sources for information discovery and interpretation development, I was setting students up for success. It is very important for students to have sufficient time to develop personal thinking by reflecting on lectures, readings, films, and discussions. Teacher modeling of outlining and developing paragraph structure is essential prior to the exam. This works well with all students and is especially necessary with atypical students: special needs, English Language Learners, and low reading ability pupils.

Usually, an exam would consist of five to eight essay questions/topics. My favorite was "Compare and Contrast the Afro-American experience with the Holocaust".

I read incredibly thoughtful, analytical, and interesting essays. Regardless of prior academic performance, all students rose to the challenge of explaining what they learned and giving personal reactions to the Holocaust. Studying the Holocaust is extremely emotional for adolescents, and they wanted to express themselves. Providing opportunities for critical thinking, teaching writing, and letting students confront the Holocaust on their own terms, works.

Essays were easy to evaluate, e.g., one essay question was, “How was the Holocaust conducted and carried out?” I would read essays and give credit for paragraph structure, use of supporting evidence, well-developed ideas, and logical argumentation (after students were instructed in what logic was).

Whenever I read supporting evidence, a good paragraph, or a clear thought, I would place a checkmark on the essay itself. After all essays were read, I added up the checkmarks and placed them on a graph. More complex answers can be given a higher number of checkmarks for grading purposes. Differentiated grading is not difficult: special needs students receive an extra 10 points or letter grade in recognition of how hard they have to work.

Evaluation of special needs students involves allowing them more time to write an essay answer, allowing them to take the exam in a separate room with the help of a special education teacher and adjusting grades in accordance with IEPS (individual education plans). IEPs are legal documents and require students’ evaluations to be based on effort. Very often a special education teacher would tell me proudly that a pupil required no assistance during an exam and “...did it all himself...”

My experience was that special education teachers and students welcomed the challenge of dealing with a difficult and emotional subject like the Holocaust. Although it is somewhat strange and ironic, they enjoyed studying that. One of the most perceptive students I had was a girl with a history of sexual abuse. Studying the Holocaust can have a cathartic effect if taught with sensitivity, All students, regardless of ability, can learn on their own terms.

Every teacher will have individual ideas about evaluating students. My ideas are experience based but do not exclude other evaluative approaches. As I have been suggesting throughout when dealing with Holocaust teaching dilemmas, it is up to an

individual teacher to fine-tune his/her approach to Holocaust instruction and evaluation, based on the kaleidoscopic nature of students. “Take the players as they come” and do what works, and your evaluations will be fair, accurate, and valid.

Our final dilemma is how to avoid major problems during a Holocaust unit. Clearly, the key is preparation. More preparation increases chances of successful teaching. Reviewing prior dilemmas, emphasizing theme development, adjusting source material and assignments to students’ abilities, using differentiated types of student evaluation, and having a flexible outlook, will help refine and improve your instruction.

Certain approaches must be emphasized. At the start of this article, I described an incident involving a Holocaust survivor and hostile high school students. The lesson from that incident is this:

1) Never make judgments about which group of people suffered the most in history. Present the information and let students draw their own conclusions and they will. A teacher stating that one people suffered more than another gains nothing. You cannot say that a student who lost a relative or friend to drugs or gun violence suffered more or less than a person whose relative was murdered by Nazis, or that Armenians or Afro-Americans suffered more or less than Jews. Students are quite capable of reaching fair evaluations on their own.

2) Always preview Holocaust films and warn students in advance if there will be disturbing footage. Also, some films should not be shown in their entirety, e.g., Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. With that film it is better to show short excerpts and then discuss the role of propaganda. Showing that entire film would take too much time, is boring in parts, and actually might create pro-Nazi feelings for some by its emotional pageantry and scenes of health and strength.

3) If you are going to have a guest speaker, either a survivor or a history professor, speak to him/her beforehand to inform your speaker about the nature of your students and what they already have studied. You should have your students ready with questions also, and later have them write thank you notes.

4) Avoid glorification of Hitler and the Nazis. Fortunately, this does not happen that often, but I know of one case where a teacher began a Holocaust unit by appearing in an SS uniform, without any prior background instruction, in a school where the majority

of students were minority members and Jewish. A teacher should be sensitive to students and community. It is a good idea to send an introductory letter to parents informing them of your plans. This is in the “ounce of prevention” category.

5) Although some will find this debatable, I strongly recommend against using simulation games and student role-playing during a Holocaust unit. Firstly, no role-playing or simulation can ever, in any degree, capture the abject terror of being a Nazi victim. The Holocaust is not a game to be played, and all simulations are unrealistic.

There have been examples in the past where teachers divide a class along physical lines, e.g., eye color, and then discriminate against one group of student. This activity has been written about and even made into a documentary in order to show the strong emotional effects of discrimination on students. That, precisely, is the reason not to attempt simulations. You do not want to have students harmed, hurt, and disrespected in any manner. The study of the Holocaust is emotional enough without incurring even artificial psychological pain.

There is enough real discrimination in a high school based on gender roles, skin color, ethnicity, language, physical attractiveness, intelligence, sexual preferences, sub-cultures, cliques, etc., that a teacher does not have to add more. Students will understand Nazis discrimination and extermination policies by a reasonable factual presentation of them without adding an artificial, unrealistic, potentially harmful and distasteful simulation. Besides, a student can walk away from a simulation while Holocaust victims were murdered.

I hope this discussion has been helpful to teachers who wish to develop their own individual approaches to Holocaust education. Teachers should not be afraid to tackle this complex and emotional subject since the ultimate goal is to help students become more tolerant citizens who will be accepting of differences. Every teacher has particular interests and strengths that will contribute to his/her unit.

Finally, a survivor of Auschwitz, who lost scores of family members, told me that the most important thing a teacher can do is to teach students not to hate. That is more important than any standardized test results. Remember, at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, where the Nazis planned the Holocaust, seven out of 14 participants had Ph.D.s.