



GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

Study of the Holocaust presents unique challenges and opportunities for both teachers and students. The Holocaust has immense historical significance and considerable contemporary relevance, but it is not an easy subject to teach about: teaching methods that are used for other topics may not be suitable or wholly effective for such a complex and sensitive event.

For teaching of the Holocaust to be purposeful, it must be grounded in secure historical knowledge and understanding. Not only is this proper practice for the study of any historical event; it is essential to avoid perpetuating common stereotypes and prevent misunderstanding of some of the most challenging issues raised by the Holocaust. Any approach which assumes that there are neatly-packaged “lessons” of the Holocaust which students can simply absorb runs the risk of decontextualising history and misunderstanding the complexities of learning. The Holocaust raises crucial and timeless questions which resist simple answers, but this characteristic of complicating our thinking makes it educationally invaluable.

The following general principles are intended to help educators in their teaching: detailed commentary on them can be found on the website of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (www.holocaustremembrance.com), which represents key Holocaust education practitioners from across the world. Teachers may find that similar educational principles are transferable to other histories that focus on sensitive and emotive topics.

- Create a positive, student-centred, cross-curricular approach informed by dialogue with colleagues and supported by collaboration between departments.
 - Consider the intended learning outcomes and contemporary significance, whilst avoiding ahistorical comparisons.
 - Avoid simple, reductive answers to complex questions and issues. Adopt an approach which is rooted in the historical events of the Holocaust. Contextualise this history – just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable. Historical contextualisation is imperative if the event is not to be removed from its historical foundations and become a free-floating universal symbol of whatever people want it to be.
 - Encourage students to consider, and assess the validity of, differing interpretations of the Holocaust.
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- Do not romanticise history. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust should not be redemptive but challenging
 - Be precise with language. Define the term Holocaust, being specific and avoiding an all-encompassing definition. Avoid stereotypical descriptions, such as seeing all Germans as Nazis.
 - Statistics are impersonal and difficult, if not impossible, to grasp. Focus on individual experiences to make understanding the enormity of the experience more personal.
 - Avoid defining Jewish people solely by the Holocaust – teach about Jewish life in Europe before the war. It is these ways of life that were lost. Equally, teaching Judaism does not automatically mean that the Holocaust should be taught: Judaism is not, and should not be, defined by the Holocaust.
 - It is important to see Jews (and others) not just as victims but also people who were also involved in resistance and rescue activities.
 - Ensure students are aware of the variety of cultural and religious communities across Europe.
 - Don't forget non-Jewish victims, but do not include them in a catch-all definition of the Holocaust as this obscures much about the different victim groups.
 - Teach about perpetrators as well as victims. Ensure that students do not assume that the Holocaust was merely conducted by Nazis; it was a continental event, which relied on the cooperation, collaboration, and acquiescence of many for its enactment. Teach about those nations and communities who collaborated in the events, and those who simply had knowledge of them. However, avoid categorising contemporaries in simplistic ways or judging their behaviour with the power of hindsight.
 - Re-humanise *all* involved – the Nazis were human beings not monsters.
 - Make use of possible primary source material wherever and whenever possible. Be mindful however that much of this may have been created by the perpetrators. Teaching in this manner can reveal the range and complexity of historical evidence to students. Where possible, use eyewitness testimony.
 - Choose resources carefully, with sensitivity to students, victims and survivors. This means avoiding the use of horrific imagery which can upset and desensitise students, dehumanise victims, and portray those who suffered in a light that would be recognisable to the perpetrators.
 - Make activities meaningful (no word searches or dot-to-dot games!). Be prepared to intentionally complicate students' thinking – there are few, if any, simple answers. Similarly, avoid role-play/empathy activities – we cannot imagine or expect students to imagine what it was like to be in the camps or on a transport.
 - Be a reflexive and informed practitioner who avoids perpetuating myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust, and continually updates their subject knowledge.

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