



GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE

Mass atrocity is not inevitable, but it is predictable and preventable. Education allows for safe space to encounter difficult history and remember. We teach difficult history to recognize individual and collective responsibility while building resiliency to confront contemporary challenges. We do not despair. When you have extraordinary events, the human mind seeks extraordinary explanations. Genocide is an extraordinary event, but the product of ordinary behavior. Mass atrocity is a process, not an event. We must identify moments when prevention can make a difference.

DEFINE THE TERM “HOLOCAUST’

Historically accurate definitions are important in order to clarify context and scope. Any definition should include target groups; motive and intent; and process. You can assess students’ understanding, depth of knowledge, misconceptions and create avenues of discussion by comparing the following three definitions:

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

The Holocaust was unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The primary motivation was the Nazis’ antisemitic racist ideology. Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi Germany pursued a policy that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and their property, followed by the branding and concentration of the Jewish population. This policy gained broad support in Germany and much of occupied Europe. In 1941, following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis and their collaborators launched the systematic mass murder of the Jews. By 1945, nearly six million Jews had been murdered.

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DEFINE THE TERM “GENOCIDE’

It is helpful to place the terms War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity and Genocide under the broader umbrella of Crimes of Mass Atrocity. Genocide is the only crime designed for prevention. There is no hierarchy of crimes – each are criminal.

War Crimes are acts committed in the context of war or armed conflict. Evidence of intent is not required nor are the crimes limited to specific targeted groups.

Crimes Against Humanity (1945 Nuremberg and UN Charter) are defined as “Murder, extermination, enslavement, deprivation, or any other inhuman act committed against an entire civilian population before or during the war, or persecution for political, racial, or religious reasons.” Certain acts purposely committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian or an identifiable part of a civilian population in war or peacetime.

Genocide (as adapted in the 1951 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide) is intended to “prevent and punish” genocide. Any of the following acts undertaken with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such. (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group to one of the four protected ones.

We must be more flexible with the definition of genocide if we wish to utilize it as a tool of prevention. As genocide is the process of perpetrators stripping away, reducing, and assigning identities, we must help students recognize that prevention begins not in choosing which term applies best to a given atrocity or potential atrocity, but by simply asking, is there a target group and what can we do? According to James Waller in *Confronting Evil*, it is important to see the Genocide Convention “as dynamic and evolving, rather than static and inflexible”. Adding “such as” allows us to better confront the dynamic of the perpetrator and protect anyone who is assigned a group membership, whether it is “protected” or not. The International Criminal Tribunals (Rwanda, Yugoslavia) have furthered the jurisprudence of genocide and the ICC issued its first warrant of arrest for sexual violence committed in furtherance of the crime of genocide in 2010. Assigning group membership (even to unprotected groups) is what matters and the crimes are not limited to five categories.

SHOULD WE COMPARE?

Careful! Godwin's law (of Hitler analogies) maintains that if any online discussion continues long enough, someone will almost certainly compare someone else to Hitler. As history is complex, incorrect analogies to Hitler and the Nazis limit our understanding of the actual context and facts we seek to understand. Each event has its own unique context. And yet, patterns of behavior and motive are similar. It is important to study the past to draw conclusions about political threats, human behavior, choice, and motives. It is therefore appropriate to compare by critically comparing *and* contrasting the context of historical events. It is important for students to see similarity but also be able to draw distinctions. Contrasting allows us to raise important questions.

BUILD DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCIES

The Criteria for an Adequate Education in N.H. includes “knowledge of civics and government, economics, geography, history, and Holocaust and genocide education to enable students to participate in the democratic process and to make informed choices as responsible citizens”. Instruction and activities are designed to enable students to: “Identify and evaluate the power of individual choices in preventing political repression, intolerance, bigotry, antisemitism, and national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred”. Teaching difficult history develops democratic values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge through a critical understand of the past.

CONFRONT ANTISEMITISM, BIGOTRY, HATE

The act of justifying “otherness” is the moral compass of a would-be perpetrator. Democratic societies create safe space for difficult conversation but also empowers us to identify and respond to hate. It is important to frame hatred as a danger to all. When a group is targeted all society suffers. Using Hitler as an example, his antisemitism began a world war that would kill at least 6 million targeted Jews, but also 35 million non-Jews. Antisemitism and hate are toxic for democracy and spreads destruction beyond the target group. Antisemitism (Jew hatred), like other hatreds, begins its momentum with small acts of casual cruelty (slurs, jokes, graffiti) and expands and accelerates in its scope and power to inflict harm.

Antisemitism does not operate in isolation. It is a symptom of societal crisis and begins with intolerance of difference and the spreads to conspiracy theory lies that grow to encompass and target anyone perceived and identified as different. There are many ways to define antisemitism. For our purpose we will use the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition that is accepted by the U.S. Dept of State, the U.S. Dept of Education Office of Civil Rights, and New Hampshire (<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>). The strength of this definition is its attempt to identify behaviors and actions that are antisemitic to foster awareness and discussion rather than villainize and isolate someone who participated or enacted it. The goal is to educate. This is useful for all hate crimes.

Working Definition:

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity and is often used to blame Jews for “why things go wrong.” It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits. Stereotypes work because they create oversimplified generalizations, reinforce confirmation bias, shore up someone’s wounded sense of self, and justifies actions based on prejudice as “right”. Examples include:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
- Making dishonest and baseless, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions, or a disease contagion myth.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism.
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, the state of Israel, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.

Israel: Criticism of Israel as a political actor is not necessarily antisemitic. However, antisemitism is often expressed and “legitimized” by:

- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interest of their own nations.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Blaming Israel for all inter-religious or political tensions.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.

Antisemitism, hate, bigotry, and racism reveals more about the individual, the perpetrator and believer than it does about any target group. Hate is a choice. Just because a group exists does not mean that hatred of it is a natural outcome. On the contrary, although antisemitism is an ongoing and complex phenomenon, it is important to note that in most places and times there was no Jew hatred.

USE AND LIMITATIONS OF CATEGORIES

Categories (perpetrator, bystander, victim, rescuer...) are useful tools in reducing complexity of human behavior that gives an entry point to engage history. Categories should open broader discussions about identities being transient, interconnected, fluid, porous, and even assigned. There is a danger in oversimplifying human behavior and limiting the questions that are raised. It is important to discuss the complexities of social identities that define a person and that are stripped away, reduced, or forbidden by the perpetrator.

VICTIM OR SURVIVOR?

Anyone targeted by a perpetrator is a victim. The traumatic impact of victimization is devastating and ongoing. However, “victimhood” is often the language a perpetrator uses to justify their crimes. As “victims”, perpetrators argue that they and their followers are acting “morally” because they are acting in “self-defense”. There is also the anger that presenting targeted groups only as victims creates social and psychological distance that reinforces a social identity of “other”. Students should wrestle with these terms and recognize how many victims of atrocity crimes choose to be seen as survivors not “victims”. A survivor seeks to rebuild their world and life. Importantly, survivors often reject the victimhood justifications and actions of the perpetrator. Teaching about resiliency requires us to teach about survivors.

AVOID COMPARISONS OF PAIN

We compare to contrast. We talk about the difference or blurred line between victim and survivor. We do so to recognize that every experience is uniquely personal. Anyone who suffers, suffers the most. There is no hierarchy of suffering.

CONTEXTUALIZE

Learning dates, facts, and contexts are important. When students ask a question it is helpful to respond with “when” and “where” to add context. Context can be within the timeline of an event, its geography, or the time period itself.

HUMANIZE

It is important that we do not reinforce false narratives to distance ourselves from the reality that crimes of mass atrocity are not someone else’s problem. When using categories to describe behavior and choice it is important to see that these are human actors with complicated social identities and motives. We should not start by showing the victimization of targeted groups and individuals, but by connecting to their humanity. An excellent lesson to begin and model any study of mass atrocity crimes is the Exemplary Lesson: Pre-World War II European Jewish Life found on the USHMM website (<https://www.ushmm.org/teach/holocaust-lesson-plans/exploring-pre-world-war-ii-jewish-life>). Connecting students to life rather than victimization is an important first step to empathy. It also raises awareness that a targeted group can include anyone the perpetrator designates. It has little or nothing to do with what choices an individual thinks they are making. Additionally, we are all capable of becoming perpetrators. Teachers can illustrate motive by asking, How would you describe the people who would do such a thing (perpetrators)? These answers could reveal a sense of the evil, monstrous “other”. Teachers can then ask, how do you think they would describe themselves? We must explore the moral universe of the perpetrator. We have a dual responsibility to teach the magnitude and the personal nature of what happened. We must humanize the history to put people above statistics.

BALANCING PERSPECTIVES

It is important to balance whose perspective informs our study. We must begin with humanizing the targets and developing empathy for and embrace of difference. We should discuss motives of perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, as well as rescuers.

WITNESSING NOT CLAIMING

As one survivor warned, “one can visit Auschwitz, but one can never be in Auschwitz”. We must help students to recognize the distance between their experiences and the experiences of those they are studying. This is not to dismiss the trauma any student may be facing, but to develop empathy by recognizing other peoples’ suffering. If students journal about what they are learning (an important assessment tool) they must be encouraged not to wonder what it would be like if they were there. Rather, the focus must always be on the people who suffered the atrocity they are studying. Using first person accounts is important. Our goal is to remember and witness for them and in turn, for ourselves.

WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

Hitler and his collaborators were fighting two wars: the war for “race and space” and the “war against the Jews”. We cannot separate the two events. Contextually, the Allies were fighting a singular war and had difficulty perceiving Nazi motives, policies, and outcomes. The war itself has a tremendous impact on shaping and escalating Nazi practices and decision-making.

BE CAREFUL ABOUT SOURCES AND CAREFULLY INTERPRET THEM

We cannot let the perpetrators frame the perspective of our study. Students must make careful distinctions about what they are seeing and hearing. Recognizing the framing of atrocity from the perspective of the perpetrator allows for media literacy and reveals motive, intent, and rationalization of atrocity crimes. We cannot allow the Nazis to shape the perception of reality or historical memory through their pictures, interpretations, and stereotypes. We must be sensitive to appropriate written and audio-visual content.

SELECT APPROPRIATE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

There should be no simulations that try to help students image what an atrocity was like. Any simulations reduce reality. It is appropriate to use a survivor’s account to encounter the past, but inappropriate to assume we can imagine what it was like on a cattle car, in a camp, or in hiding. We should not try to replicate or “recreate” atrocity in our classroom. As one survivor clarified, “one can visit Auschwitz, but one can never be in Auschwitz”. Additionally, teachers should not try to add trauma to students’ lives. We are teaching resiliency not perpetrating trauma. Instead, have students examine railway maps showing the locations of camps and examine the records kept by Germans of arrivals at the camp. Use testimony from the Visual History Archive (VHA). Rather than construct models of camps, have students examine primary source documents that will reveal motive, plans, actions and ideologies of the perpetrators.

BE CAREFUL ABOUT EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Not all empathetic responses lead to civic reflection, engagement, or contextual evaluation. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, for example, manipulates students' emotions in a fable disengaged from any reality. As the impossible scenario is created in the story, the actual history, roles of the perpetrators, experiences of the victims are disregarded to create emotional empathy, and therefore somehow a morality tale, with and for the perpetrators. There is plentiful factual evidence and testimony available for authentic encounters with history. Just because a student shows emotion does not reveal what type of emotion is being felt. One student cried after watching *Schindler's List*, not with empathy for the victims and survivors, but as a revelatory moment of how he could inflict pain on those who wished to target. It is important to teach students to mourn, not for themselves, but for the victims. It is important to monitor journals so that students are learning not to despair or direct the trauma inwards, but to recognize the responsibility to leave a matzeva, or marker, for others.

BE CAREFUL ABOUT ROMANTICIZING HISTORY

Romanticizing the past is another emotional manipulation that reduces complex encounters with difficult history. We should not romanticize actions as a way to engage students. Danish rescue, for example, must be taught in its complexities. Danish rescuers are rightly praised for their heroism and example, but some Danes collaborated. Other Danes profited from its contracts with the German military while a small number profited from transporting Jews to freedom in Sweden. Danish rescue must be placed in its proper context geographically and its unique circumstances during the war. The actions of Danish rescue and resistance (before, during, and after) are not lessened by the context.

DISCUSS MORAL DILEMMAS AND AVOID SIMPLE ANSWERS

We must discuss the complicated moral dilemmas. Human behavior and choices are complicated. This is not to dismiss or justify behavior but to recognize motives and pressures and respond responsibly. We must avoid simple answers to complex history and human behavior.

BUILD RESILIENCY AND CAPACITY TO INTERVENE AND PREVENT

Although these topics are filled with despair, pain, and grief it is important that your classroom is safe space where, when leaving, students feel dignity, direction, and empowerment. Democracy must be defended and its promise of human dignity must continue to expand. Education allows us to confront difficult topics while shaping civic behavior and modeling how to confront difficult history. We must bring our students (and ourselves) in with peace and leave with peace in trauma-informed classrooms that foster empathy and responsibility. We must take care of ourselves and our students.