How to teach the Holocaust in Schools

There can be no single 'correct' way of teaching any subject, no ideal methodology that is appropriate for all teachers and students. What is offered here are guidelines and advice that might prove useful to schoolteachers in constructing their own schemes of work, taking account the learning needs of individual students. It is an attempt to draw on current best practice from a number of institutions with expertise in teaching the Holocaust, to address some of the concerns teachers have about how to approach this very difficult subject, and to present possible ways forward.

Holocaust education stands upon advances in research and has changed significantly over the last three decades; this document seeks to reflect a continuing process of pedagogical development and improvement and, as such, is not intended as the final word on this subject.

Summary – click on any link for explanation and further guidance

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- Do not attempt to explain away the perpetrators as 'inhuman monsters'
- Be careful to distinguish between the perpetrators of the past and present day societies in Europe and elsewhere
- Encourage your students to study local, regional, national and global history and memory

- Ask your students to participate in and reflect upon national and local traditions of commemoration and remembrance
- Select appropriate learning activities and avoid using simulations that encourage students to identify with perpetrators or victims
- Avoid legitimising the denial of the past
- Be aware of the potential and also the limitations of all instructional materials, including the Internet
- Distinguish between historical and contemporary events and avoid ahistorical comparisons
- Be responsive to the concerns of your students

The Holocaust can be successfully taught to students; do not be afraid to approach this subject

Many teachers are reluctant to explore the history of the Holocaust with their students because of the perceived difficulties in teaching the subject. They are overwhelmed by how to convey the scale of the tragedy, the enormity of the numbers involved and the depths to which humanity can sink. They wonder how to move their students without traumatising them; they worry about their students' possible reactions to this subject and how to deal with 'inappropriate' behaviour in the classroom, such as giggling or expressing antisemitic and racist remarks.

Do not be afraid to approach this subject as, while it may appear daunting, experience has shown that the Holocaust can be successfully taught to students and may have very positive results.

Define the term Holocaust

A clear definition of the term 'Holocaust' is essential. Many teachers apply this term in a very broad sense to encompass all victims of Nazi persecution. Yet most historians of the period use a more precise definition.

Students should be aware that for many people the term 'Holocaust' is problematic. A holocaust is a biblical sacrifice and, from a Christian theological standpoint, it turns the mass murder of the Jews into a form of martyrdom. But there was nothing 'holy' about the Holocaust. Other terms should also be used with care. Speaking of the 'Final Solution' means taking up the killers' language; the word 'genocide' refers to the racial world conception of the Nazis. Many prefer the use of the Hebrew word 'Shoah' – meaning catastrophe – which is not loaded with religious meaning.

Create a positive learning environment, with an active pedagogy and a student-centred approach

The Holocaust challenges many assumptions that young people may have about the nature of society, progress, civilization and human behaviour. Students may have defensive reactions, negative feelings, or an unwillingness to go deeper into the history

of the Nazi period or of the Holocaust. A trusting atmosphere is important in order that such issues may be openly addressed and discussed.

It is important to create an open learning environment where students are given space and time to reflect, where they are encouraged to ask questions, to discuss their thoughts and fears, to share ideas, opinions and concerns.

Learning should be student-centred. The teacher's role should be to facilitate rather than to lecture, and young people should be encouraged to play an active role in their own learning. History is not a body of knowledge to be transmitted from the mind of the teacher to the minds of the students, but should be a journey of discovery where young people formulate their own lines of enquiry; analyse a variety of sources of information; question different interpretations and representations of events; and find their own answers to challenging historical and moral questions.

Individualise the history by translating statistics into personal stories

Statistical studies are important and teachers should find methods to make the scale of the Holocaust and the numbers involved real to their students. But many young people will find it difficult to relate to the tragedy of the Holocaust if it is presented only in statistical terms.

Students should be given opportunities to see those persecuted by the Nazis not as a faceless mass of victims but as individuals. Use case studies, survivor testimony, letters and diaries from the time to show the human experience and to ensure that students understand that each 'statistic' was a real person, an individual with a life before the Holocaust, friends and family. Emphasise the dignity of the victims at all times.

An exploration of the Holocaust which fails to challenge stereotypical views that all perpetrators were mad or sadistic; that all rescuers were heroic, brave, good and kind; that all bystanders were apathetic risks dehumanising people in the past and rendering them as caricatures rather than real human beings.

By focusing on the stories of individuals, of moral dilemmas faced and choices made, teachers can make the history of the Holocaust more immediate and interesting to young people and more relevant to their lives today.

Use witness testimony to make this history more 'real' to your students

Many countries still have Holocaust survivors living within their communities. If you are able to make contact with these survivors and invite them into your classroom you have the opportunity to provide your students with a special and powerful educational experience. Being in the presence of someone who experienced the unimaginable can create genuine empathy in the classroom. A number of organisations *[Hyper-link to the International Directory]* can assist you in arranging for a survivor to speak at your school.

However, with an aging survivor population it may not be possible for your students to have this direct personal contact. In such cases, teachers should explore the use of video

testimony to provide personal stories of the Holocaust. Other individuals who were directly involved in the Holocaust or who witnessed events at first hand also have powerful testimonies to give. If you are able to invite rescuers, liberators, and others into your classroom then their personal stories will also greatly enrich your students' understanding of the Holocaust.

If you decide to invite someone into your classroom to speak about their personal experiences, talk to that person before the session to ensure that they have the ability to speak to groups, and that they are clear about your educational objectives.

Do preparatory work with your class to ensure that your students are respectful and appreciative. Students should understand that although much time has elapsed since these events, the speaker will still find it painful to relate such intensely personal experiences.

Ensure that your students already have a secure grounding in the history of these events. The opportunity to meet witnesses should not be used primarily to transmit the historical events of the period – for the most part these people are not trained historians or teachers, nor might their experiences be 'typical' of the majority of people in the Holocaust. Instead, your students will have the rare privilege of meeting someone who witnessed and experienced these events first hand and to listen to their unique, personal testimony.

Encourage your students to ask the survivor about what happened to them during the Holocaust but also about their life before and after, so that they get a sense of the whole person and of how they have tried to live with their experiences.

While it is not possible to generalise from one person's story, the effect of meeting a Holocaust survivor, rescuer or liberator can be to make these historical events more real to your students, reinforcing that this was a tragedy that befell ordinary people.

A cross-curricular approach will enrich your students' understanding of the Holocaust

The events of the Holocaust touch upon so many aspects of human behaviour that it is profoundly relevant to teachers across a range of subject disciplines. While a sound understanding of the history must be the foundation for study of the Holocaust, historians do not have a monopoly on this subject. Imaginative links between departments can enhance a scheme of work by drawing on different areas of expertise, approaching the Holocaust from multiple perspectives and building upon ideas and knowledge gained in other lessons.

The narratives of the Holocaust illustrate the extremes of human behaviour, of hatred and cruelty but also of courage and humanity. Learning about the Holocaust through history evokes powerful emotions, which poetry, art and music can help students to express creatively and imaginatively. The Holocaust raises important moral, theological and ethical questions that your students could explore in their religious studies, citizenship or civics lessons.

By co-ordinating an inter-disciplinary approach and drawing upon the expertise of colleagues in other subject areas you will share the teaching workload and enrich your students' understanding of the Holocaust.

Contextualise the history

The occurrence of the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European and global history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that contributed to it.

Give broad and balanced coverage to this subject

The Holocaust was not a uniform event but varied considerably from country to country and at different points in time. See the Task Force guidelines on 'What to teach' for further advice on events and themes to include in your scheme of work.

Be precise in your use of language and urge your students to do the same

There are many myths about the Holocaust, and your students may come to this subject with many preconceived ideas. Ambiguities in your use of language may help to perpetuate misconceptions.

Avoid using the language of the perpetrators, which mirror their views. Terms like 'Final Solution' may be quoted and critically analysed but should not be used to describe the historical event.

Definitions are important because they demand accuracy and clear thinking. One example is the use of the term 'camp'. While people died at many camps created by the Nazis and their collaborators, not all camps were intentionally built as killing centers. There were concentration camps, slave labor camps, and transit camps, to name a few. Different camps functioned in different ways at different times. It is essential that teachers be very precise when describing the activities that occurred at the various camps associated with this history and avoid generalizing about 'camps'.

Distinguish between the history of the Holocaust and the lessons that might be learned from that history

Be careful to distinguish between the history of the Holocaust and the moral lessons one can draw from a study of that history. There is a danger that the historical narrative is distorted if it is oversimplified or shaped to better serve the particular moral lesson that teachers wish their students to learn.

Learning about these events *can* sensitise young people to modern day examples of prejudice and injustice; the Holocaust can confront students with stereotypes, myths and misconceptions and enable them to test received prejudices against historical evidence. But moral lessons will not be well founded unless they are based upon an accurate and objective reading of the historical record.

Historical enquiry of the kind we should expect of our students will reveal to them the complexities of a world in which such choices were made and decisions taken. Students should be confronted with real dilemmas faced by people in the past. Only then might people's actions (and inaction) be seen within the context of their own time, and only then might we begin to draw meaningful lessons for today.

Avoid simple answers to a complex history

A desire to 'learn lessons' risks over-simplistic explanations of the Holocaust that neglect to take into account the historical context in which decisions were made. Such an approach can reduce students' understanding of complex events to straightforward lessons of right and wrong – 'the Holocaust happened because people failed to make the correct moral choices' – and lead to a superficial reading of history.

Students should investigate historical questions. This might include asking why the fate of Jews in different countries varied so markedly and could explore the different types of German occupation regimes from country to country. Such enquiries will invariably raise moral issues but students should be encouraged to view the past with humility. It is easy to condemn those who refused to hide or help their Jewish neighbours, but easy moral judgements of the 'bystanders' will not create a deeper understanding of the history or make our students 'better citizens'.

Given the complexity of this history, students should have opportunities to study the Holocaust in depth, including the dilemmas of the rescuers, who every day had to decide whether or not to continue to risk their lives and those of their families to help those in hiding; to investigate why the Allies didn't do more to save the Jews; why some of the *Judenräte* drew up lists of their fellow Jews for deportation to the death camps; why the majority of people in occupied lands did nothing to help their Jewish neighbours; why ordinary men and women willingly participated in mass murder.

This complex subject matter does not always yield simple answers and many times more questions arise than actual answers. Indeed, it is important for young people to realise that for some questions there are no answers.

Provide your students with access to primary sources

It is in the letters, diaries, newspapers, and speeches, the works of art, orders and official documents of the time that the perpetrators, victims, rescuers and bystanders reveal themselves. Primary source material is essential for any meaningful exploration of the motivation, thoughts, feelings and actions of people in the past and for any serious attempt to understand the choices made and why events happened as they did.

Students should have opportunities to critically analyse original source material and to understand that analysis, interpretation and judgement must be based on a sound reading of the historical evidence.

Students should be alerted to the fact that the perpetrators produced much of the evidence of the Holocaust

Much of the evidence of the Holocaust – whether written documents, photographs or film – was produced by the Nazis so there is a danger of viewing the past only through the eyes of the perpetrators. If such material is not used carefully then we risk seeing the victims as the Nazis saw them, objectified, degraded, and dehumanised.

Such evidence needs to be contextualised and teachers must take into account the cognitive and emotional age of the child, ensuring that use of these images is appropriate, that students have been well prepared for the emotional impact they might have, and that young people are given space to reflect and to discuss their reactions afterward.

Care should be taken to balance these documents and photographs with the diaries, letters, photographs and other evidence from the victims themselves, in order that their voices are heard.

Encourage your students to critically analyse different interpretations of the Holocaust

Classroom learning is influenced by a broader cultural context and the Holocaust has entered the popular imagination through many and varied forms. Academic and popular histories, feature films, the mass media, documentaries, art, theatre, novels, memorials and museums all shape collective memory. Each interpretation is influenced by the circumstances in which it is produced, and may say as much about the time and place in which it was made as it does about the events it is portraying.

It is important that students consider how and why such representations of the past are produced, the selection of the evidence upon which they are based, and the intentions of those who have made them. Students should understand that although there are legitimate areas of historical debate, it does not follow that all interpretations are equally valid (see *Avoid legitimising the denial of the past*). *[Hyper-link to section later in document]*

Be responsive to the appropriateness of written and visual content and do not use horrific imagery to engage your students in a study of the Holocaust

The explicit use of Holocaust images with the intent to shock and horrify is both degrading to the victims and insensitive to students. Respect for both the victims of the Holocaust and for your 'captive audience' in the classroom demands a sensitive approach and careful thought to what constitutes appropriate material. Teachers who have spent much time in building a relationship with their students risk a betrayal of trust by subjecting them to the most horrific and disturbing images. It is also this type of material that may cause the stress and embarrassment that can lead to nervous laughter and inappropriate remarks in the classroom.

The Holocaust can be taught effectively without using any photographs of piles of naked bodies, and the overuse of such imagery can be harmful. Engendering shock and

revulsion is unlikely to constitute a worthwhile learning experience. It can, though, have a dehumanising effect and reinforce a view of 'Jews as victims'.

If teachers choose to use atrocity photographs, they should do so only where there is clear educational benefit to the students.

Avoid comparing the pain of any one group with that of another

If the universal lessons of studying this period are truly to be understood – if we argue that through a study of the Holocaust young people might be sensitised to persecution, discrimination and hatred in the world today – then the experience of *all* victims of Nazi persecution, and the ideological background to that persecution, should be included in your scheme of work.

In the particularity of the Jewish experience we see the discrimination, economic exploitation, persecution and murder that resulted from Nazi antisemitism, but for examples of other forms of hatred and intolerance – that are equally relevant to modern society – we need to look elsewhere: to the Nazi persecution and murder of Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, Communists, political dissenters and social non-conformists.

The suffering of all victims of Nazi persecution needs to be addressed without relativising the Jewish experience. There can be no hierarchy of suffering, either within the history of the Nazi period or between the Holocaust and other genocides.

The experience of the 'other victims' of Nazi persecution should not be relegated to a single 'add on' lesson, with each of these distinct groups treated as if all were the same. Instead the story of these groups should be integrated within the narrative of the persecution of the Jewish people, e.g. the similarities and differences between the genocide of the Jews and that of the Roma and Sinti could be explored; the link between the personnel and methods of the Euthanasia programme and the death camps of Eastern Europe could be investigated.

Such an approach should not only acknowledge the persecution of 'other victims' but also should contribute to an understanding of the particularity of the Jewish experience, and help to place the Holocaust within the broader historical context. Just as it is not possible to explain the mass murder of the Jewish people without the context of the Second World War, so it is inadequate to study this story in isolation from the persecution of other victim groups.

Allow your students to explore a variety of responses of the victims, including the many forms of resistance to the Nazis

There were many forms of resistance to Nazi persecution, from armed struggle to finding ways of maintaining human dignity even in the most extreme circumstances of the ghettos and the camps. The victims of the Nazis did not always passively accept their persecution. It is important to study how the victims responded, the limits on their freedom of action and the many different forms of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust.

Take care not to define the Jewish people solely in terms of the Holocaust

Events of the Holocaust should be placed in historical context. There is a need to show life before and after the Holocaust, in order to make it clear that the Jewish people have a long history and rich cultural heritage, and to ensure that students do not think of Jews only as the dehumanised and degraded victims of Nazi persecution. Young people should be aware of the enormous loss to contemporary world culture that resulted from the destruction of rich and vibrant Jewish communities in Europe.

Indicate that the Holocaust was not inevitable

Just because a historical event took place, and it was documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups and nations made decisions to act or not to act. By focusing on those decisions you gain an insight into history and human nature and can better help your students to become critical thinkers.

Do not attempt to explain away the perpetrators as 'inhuman monsters'

The Holocaust was a human event with human causes. There is a need to 'rehumanise' all the people in the Holocaust: to see victims, rescuers, collaborators, bystanders *and* perpetrators as ordinary human beings in extraordinary circumstances. This is not to normalise the perpetrators but to recognise that the majority were not sadistic psychopaths and that 'evil' will no longer do as sufficient explanation for the Holocaust.

The more difficult question is how was it humanly possible that ordinary men and women, loving fathers and husbands, could participate willingly in the murder of innocent men, women and children?

The motivation of the perpetrators needs to be studied in depth and students should use primary documents, case studies and individual biographies to weigh the relative importance of ideology, antisemitism, ambition, peer pressure, economic opportunism, criminal psychopathology, and other factors in explaining why people acted as they did.

Be careful to distinguish between the perpetrators of the past and present day societies in Europe and elsewhere

Students should not form the opinion that all Germans were Nazis, nor that the German people were uniquely disposed to genocide. They should have opportunities to study the varied responses of the German people to Nazi policies including enthusiastic support, cooperation, discontent, apathy, and active resistance.

Be careful to distinguish between the Germany of the past and Germany in the present. The events of the Holocaust need to be located in their historical context so that the people, politics, society and culture of modern Germany is clearly distinguished from that of its Nazi past.

Students should also recognise that antisemitism is a worldwide and centuries-old phenomenon and there were many non-German perpetrators and willing collaborators across Europe. Other nationals served alongside SS units or as concentration camp guards; local police assisted in the round-ups and deportations of Jews to the death camps; at times local people instigated pogroms against their Jewish neighbours or betrayed Jewish people in hiding. Governments allied to Nazi Germany assisted in the programme murders on their own initiative.

Encourage your students to study local, regional, national, and global history and memory

If you live in a country where the Holocaust has taken place, emphasise the specific events there in the context of the national history of that period, without disregarding the European dimension of the Holocaust. This investigation should include the experiences of victims, rescuers, perpetrators, collaborators, resisters and bystanders and should explore how far each of these has been incorporated into your local, regional or national memory and historical narratives.

If you live in a country that was one of the Allied powers or one that was neutral during the Second World War, encourage your students to re-examine your national narrative of this period. Why did countries not take more refugees in the 1930s and 1940s? Why did the Allies not make saving Jews one of their war aims? Could more have been done to save the Jews of Europe?

Ask your students to participate in and reflect upon national and local traditions of commemoration and remembrance

Events such as Holocaust Memorial Days provide opportunities for intergenerational projects, encourage discussion among family members of related contemporary issues, and facilitate other forms of ‘community learning’.

As well as enabling learning about the Holocaust to move from the classroom into the local community, such occasions can themselves become subject to investigation and learning. Students might be asked to consider how cultural influences shape memory and memorials; how their community chooses to reflect on its past, how different groups select from history and construct their own narratives; whether their nation addresses difficult aspects of its national history; and how such commemorations differ from those in other countries.

Select appropriate learning activities and avoid using simulations that encourage students to identify with perpetrators or victims

While empathetic activities can be very effective techniques for interesting young people in history by highlighting human experience and responses to events in the past, great care needs to be taken in selecting such activities when approaching such a sensitive subject as the Holocaust.

It may be useful, for example, for students to take on the role of someone from a neutral country, responding to these events: a journalist writing an article for her newspaper about the persecution of the Jews; a concerned citizen writing to her political representative; or a campaigner trying to mobilise public opinion. Such activities can be good motivators to learning and also highlight possible courses of action that students may take over events that concern them in the world today.

Teachers need to be aware, however, that some young people might over-identify with the events of the Holocaust, be excited by the power and even the 'glamour' of the Nazis, or demonstrate a morbid fascination for the suffering of the victims. Here lies the danger of creative writing or role-play exercises that encourage students to imagine they were directly involved in the Holocaust. Using the creative expression of students in a cross-curricular approach can be worthwhile but teachers should be clear in their aims. Often 'empathetic exercises' are in poor taste and pedagogically flawed as it is impossible for us really to be able to imagine – except in the most superficial sense – what it would feel like to be in circumstances so far removed from our own life experience.

Such techniques also pale alongside the genuine empathy many students are able to experience on encountering personal stories, case studies and survivor testimony.

Avoid legitimising the denial of the past

Holocaust denial is ideologically motivated. The deniers' strategy is to sow seeds of doubt through deliberate distortion and misrepresentation of the historical evidence. Teachers should be careful not to unwittingly legitimise the deniers through engaging in a false debate.

Care must be taken not to give a platform for deniers – do not treat the denial of the Holocaust as a legitimate historical argument, or seek to disprove the deniers' position through normal historical debate and rational argument.

However, many teachers feel that the phenomenon of Holocaust denial must be explored with their students, either because their young people raise the question themselves or because teachers are concerned that their students might come across these views later in life and be unprepared for the deniers' rhetorical techniques, and their ability to confuse or mislead.

If this is the case then Holocaust denial should be treated separately from the history of the Holocaust. It might be relevant to a separate unit on how forms of antisemitism have evolved over time, or as a media studies project exploring the manipulation, misrepresentation and distortion employed by groups for political, social or economic ends.

Be aware of the potential and also the limitations of all instructional materials including the Internet

Carefully evaluate the historical accuracy of all instructional materials. Antisemitism, homophobia and anti-Gypsy feeling are widespread in many societies and may be

present in your classroom. Be aware that such prejudices might exist among your students and be careful when choosing instructional materials that through the reproduction of Nazi propaganda and atrocity photographs they do not unwittingly reinforce negative views of the victims. Ensure that your instructional materials include personal stories and case studies that challenge and subvert negative stereotypes of the victim groups.

In addition to printed materials the Internet is potentially a valuable educational and research tool. However, teachers do need to be careful in their use of the Internet, as there are a very large number of seemingly plausible sites that are written and maintained by Holocaust deniers and antisemites. Teachers should warn young people about this, making them aware that some search engines can produce unreliable results and helping students to identify legitimate and authoritative sites.

Teachers should emphasise the need to critically evaluate all sources of information and to consider the context in which it was produced. Encourage students to ask questions such as who wrote the information? What is the purpose of the website? Is there an agenda? If so, how does this affect the selection and presentation of information?

Recommend authoritative sites that you have vetted. The websites of the organisations listed in the International Directory could be a useful starting point and each will have links to other reputable sites.

Distinguish between historical and contemporary events and avoid ahistorical comparisons

For many educators a key motivation for teaching about the Holocaust is that it can sensitise young people to examples of injustice, persecution, racism, antisemitism and other forms of hatred in the world today. The Holocaust is often seen as a moral touchstone, a paradigm of evil. However, while learning such universal lessons can be an important part of studying the Holocaust, students should also understand the differences between events, recognising the particular as well as the universal.

Today there is a tendency to use the term ‘holocaust’ as shorthand for all manner of terrible events, atrocities, and human tragedies. This is partly because of the limitations of language to adequately describe such events, and partly because of a lack of information and understanding about the history of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, through overuse the term ‘holocaust’ has sometimes become trivialised or even corrupted, and the misappropriation of that term risks diminishing the crimes of the Nazis through false comparisons.

Learning about the Holocaust *can* lead young people to make useful comparisons with the modern world: human rights violations that happened under the Nazis (especially those that occurred during the pre-war period) may well be comparable with modern examples of prejudice, discrimination and persecution.

Genocide, though, is clearly and fundamentally different and distinct from the loss of civil rights. Of course, there have been other examples of genocide and it *is* legitimate to ask, for example, what are the similarities and differences between the Holocaust and

the genocide in Rwanda. But students should be clear that not all tragic events constitute genocide and should beware of making false comparisons.

Guard against superficial comparisons, or the impression that we can decide upon our course of action today by simple reference to past events. We live in complex times and do our students a disservice if they believe that the lessons from history are so clear that they offer easy solutions in the present.

Be responsive to the concerns of your students

Students who feel that the suffering of their own people or group has not been addressed may be resistant to learning about the persecution and murder of others. It is important to study other histories of racism, enslavement, persecution or colonialism that are particularly relevant to your student body.

Some teachers are concerned that teaching the Holocaust may enflame young people who falsely equate the suffering of Jewish people under Nazi persecution with Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories. But this is not a reason for avoiding teaching about the Holocaust.

While it may be hoped that learning about the Holocaust might sensitise your students to examples of injustice, persecution, prejudice and violations of human rights today, teachers should guard against a politicisation of history, and an appropriation of the Holocaust to further some campaigning agenda.

Teachers must be sensitive to the feelings and opinions of students on issues of real concern to them. They should be prepared to examine the causes of conflict in the modern world and young people should be given opportunities to discuss these issues openly. But care must be taken to clearly distinguish between different conflicts, and on the causes and nature of each.

Of course we want our young people to become active and engaged members of society. But using the example of the Holocaust to encourage such positive attitudes may be counter-productive and lead to feelings of helplessness if students are not given opportunities to discuss *how* they may respond to issues of interest to them. Build in time into your scheme of work to explore together with your students methods of legitimate and peaceful actions that are available to your students on issues of interest to them.