

Just Open The Damn Door! Multiple Perspectives on the Value of Holocaust Education in Today's Classrooms

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Abstract

It has been seventy-two years since its conclusion, yet the Holocaust remains an important subject in today's classrooms. In addition to a historical approach, *Just Open the Damn Door! Multiple Perspectives on the Value of Holocaust Education in Today's Classrooms* looks at the Holocaust's relevancy from four perspectives: contemporary connections, multi-dimensional causation, personal stories, and the importance of individuals and their choices. The paper emphasizes the importance of educating high school students about the horrors of the Holocaust and genocide in general. With the British Columbia Ministry of Education now offering a provincial Genocide 12 course, there is dedicated time to teach this subject in a more thorough manner, one that moves beyond historical dates, numbers, and statistics. Weaving classroom experience with research-based analysis of effective Holocaust pedagogy, this paper gives both personal and professional perspectives on why teaching the Holocaust is crucial in modern social studies curricula.

Keywords: Holocaust, Genocide studies, core competencies

1. Background

Genocide Studies 12 is but one of the senior Social Studies courses I teach on the semester system at Kelowna Secondary School. For the 2017/2018 KSS school year, Genocide 12 is

running with three blocks in its final year as a British Columbia Ministry of Education draft course. British Columbia Social Studies Professional Association (BCSSTA) President, Dale Martelli, states the new Ministry of Education Genocide 12 course was:

... primarily built from Graeme Stacey's work on Holocaust studies. As with all the new grad courses our (the writing team was composed primarily of secondary teachers from across the province), emphasis is on the core competencies, blending Peter Seixas's, Tom Morton's, and Roland Case's work on historical and geographical meta-cognitive thinking constructs ... (Martelli, Dale).

Genocide 12's content and pedagogy embraces the above referenced core competencies. The core competencies of communication, creative and critical thinking, and personal and social awareness and responsibility are sets of intellectual, personal, social, and emotional proficiencies that students are encouraged to develop in order to engage in deep, life-long learning.¹

Like Yehuda Bauer, Professor Emeritus of History and Holocaust Studies at Hebrew University, I believe in engaging students in the study of the Holocaust because "the impact of the Holocaust is growing, not diminishing." In 2004, after teaching history and social studies for nine years, and feeling that the British Columbia social studies curriculum did not provide a greater focus on the Holocaust, I proposed a grade 12 BAA course dedicated to an in-depth study of the Holocaust. "Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies" was accepted, and over the past thirteen years, I have delivered it to approximately 1,020 students and have been committed to sharing my course with colleagues and acquaintances abroad. I have made Holocaust curriculum presentations to Gonzaga University masters students, UBC Okanagan pre-service teachers, and at numerous professional development workshops across British Columbia. I have also given presentations about the Holocaust at the Okanagan Jewish Community Center, to School District No. 23 students at Human Rights symposiums, and within various classrooms across Kelowna. I pursue educational opportunities to improve my understanding of the Holocaust and my ability to teach it by attending local, provincial, national, and international Holocaust Symposia. I have attended Yad Vashem's International School of Holocaust Studies (Jerusalem), Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC) professional development, the University of Southern California Teacher Forum on Holocaust Education (USHMM sponsored), and Yad Vashem Canada's alumni conference. Further, I have taken my students on field trips to the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre's student symposium on the Holocaust, hosted Holocaust survivors, and am a 2016 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Seattle Holocaust Center for Humanity Powell Fellow. In September 2018, Genocide 12 will go beyond the 2004 board authorized and approved (BAA) "Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies" elective status and become a provincially recognized Ministry of Education core course, which is accepted as a post-secondary social studies graduation requirement.

At the beginning of Genocide 12 (formerly "Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies"), I provide students with an essential focus question: *How and why did the Holocaust and subsequent genocides occur?* This offers students a lens through which to study the Holocaust. When I first began teaching "Holocaust 12," I used a multiple-choice final exam to gauge what students had learned. This one-dimensional form of assessment is no longer my practice. Hearing Simone Schweber speak at the VHEC Shafran conference in 2008, and subsequently reading her Holocaust education insights in *Making Sense of the Holocaust*, it became clear that in order for students to see the bigger picture, they needed to get away from a focus on "mastery" of what I deemed essential to understanding the Holocaust. Schweber, quoting Howard Gardner (1999) states, "Attaining historical mastery of the Holocaust is not equivalent to its moral dimensions" (p. 183). She feels both must be taught if either stands a

¹ For a detailed look at Genocide 12's content competencies, see: https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/10-12/social-studies/en_ss_12_gns_elab.pdf.

chance of being learned (p. 7). I now assess students on a semester-end, collaborative genocide photo narrative. This eight-lesson final assessment culminates in the personalized photo narrative. It is designed to allow students to collaborate and to demonstrate, both individually and collectively, their learning as it relates to the Big Ideas of the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Genocide Studies 12 curriculum.² With guided teacher direction, this cumulative assessment approach allows students to improve and personalize their understanding of how and why the Holocaust and subsequent genocides happened.

Students in British Columbia schools are introduced to the Holocaust in a number of grades and to varying degrees. In my experience, students registered in Genocide 12 have much Holocaust knowledge but are curious and interested to learn more. They tend to be much less familiar, however, with the concept of genocides generally. Whether it is the study of the Holocaust or other genocides, I require students to move beyond the mere regurgitation of facts and dates, and I teach in a way that debunks any notion that genocides “just happen.” A six-stage pyramid of escalation, titled *A Pyramid of Hate*, is used as a framework to demonstrate the progression, players, decisions, and similarities and differences amongst genocides. *A Pyramid of Hate* serves two purposes: to show the “evolution” and progression from bias and prejudice towards mass murder and genocide, and to recognize the players in a Holocaust. These players include, but are not limited to, perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and interveners / upstanders and the complex interplay between them. Studying the Holocaust and genocide by referencing the escalating pyramid of hate is an attempt to address its multidimensional nature and the many factors behind how and why it happened. Moreover, the personal stories of those involved allow the students create a connection to the victims beyond simple numbers. Study of the Holocaust demonstrates that we all have choices—between being the bystander and the intervener in the *Pyramid of Hate*, for example—that we can make a difference, and that we can “open the damn door.”

2. Teaching the Holocaust has Contemporary Connections

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum defines the Holocaust as:

... the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators... 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. (Introduction to the Holocaust)

The USHMM goes on to state that:

Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews from Germany, from occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its Axis allies to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities. In the final months of the war, SS guards moved camp inmates by train or on forced marches, often called “death marches,” in an attempt to prevent the Allied liberation of large numbers of prisoners. As Allied forces moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Germany, they began to encounter and liberate concentration camp prisoners, as well as prisoners en route by forced march from one camp to another. The marches continued until May 7, 1945, the day the German armed forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. (Introduction to the Holocaust)

Despite the fact that this unprecedented event ended seventy-two years ago, it is as relevant as ever. The roots of the industrialized genocide described above have an ostensibly benign starting point: I teach this in Genocide 12 as stage one of the *Pyramid of Hate*. Stage one

² See: https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/10-12/social-studies/en_ss_12_gns_elab.pdf.

encompasses stereotyping, racial intolerance, ignorance, bullying and bigotry. In its simplest form, this may appear as a racist joke: the stereotyping of a group rather than taking the time to get to know individuals or situation before making judgments. Unchecked, moulded, taken advantage of, and based on circumstance, a crafty and opportunistic individual intent on power and domination can capitalize on the conditions upon which stage one is built. Barbara Coloroso, in her book *Extraordinary Evil*, researched and chronicled the initial roots of genocide:

Genocide [The Holocaust being but one example] is not outside the realm of ordinary human behaviour ... it is the most extreme form of bullying – a far too common behaviour that is learned in childhood and rooted in contempt for another human being who has been deemed to be, by the bully or his accomplices, worthless, inferior, and undeserving of respect. (p. xxi)

Coloroso's insights have contemporary connections for our students as they live in a society with the aforementioned stage one characteristics. When addressing high school students at a VHEC high school symposium on the Holocaust in 2013, Chris Friedrichs, Professor of History at the University of British Columbia, emphasized the relevance and importance of the Holocaust as a history lesson with contemporary connections:

And one of your major jobs as adults will be to try to make sure that things like the Holocaust do not happen in your lifetime ... keep in mind that it is not *my* generation that will be responsible for making sure that things like this do not happen in the future. With every passing year, it will become more and more the responsibility of *your* generation to make sure that things like this do not happen in Canada and in the world in the years to come. And that is why knowing about the Holocaust, even though it ended seventy years ago, is more important than ever. (Friedrichs, 2013)

In 2013, I attended a Holocaust and Genocide Forum at the University of Southern California where I was exposed to a quote which reiterates the relevance of the Holocaust as a subject of study for today's classrooms. A school principal expressed this idea in a letter he sent out on the first day of the school year to his staff. It was a letter given to him by a Holocaust survivor:

Dear Teacher:
I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:
Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.
So, I am suspicious of education.
My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human. (Education and the Future)

There is no argument to support that Holocaust and genocide studies are less important or contemporary than any other high school course, especially as injustice and human rights violations, at whatever level, are a present and constant issue today.

3. Analysis of The Holocaust Reveals The Multidimensional Factors Behind How And Why It Happened

Over my twenty-one years of teaching, I have become familiar with some of the all-too-common oversimplifications of how the Holocaust is taught—namely, the dogma that the Nazis carried it out and the Jews were the victims. "I teach the Holocaust, I show *The Boy In The Striped Pajamas*," teachers say, or, "I show *Schindler's List*," or, most recently, "I press play on *The Book Thief*." This surface approach, one that does not explore the complexity of the Holocaust, enacts exactly what Peter Longerich cautions against in his book, *The Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution of The Jews*. Longerich states, "The battles between one-dimensional explanations can no longer do justice to the complexity of the study of the systematic murder of European Jews" (p. 3). It is imperative that students engage in an exploration of the multidimensional aspects of the Holocaust in order to see a more complete picture; regurgitating facts and numbers do not adequately address such key questions as, "What is the Holocaust?" and "Why did the Holocaust happen?" Teaching the Holocaust by addressing the multiple dimensions allows for a twofold freedom; the teacher gets to explore with students a myriad of factors without the pressure that students know "everything" (that is, dates and figures), and the students get to think critically about these multiple factors. In doing so, students make reasoned arguments and come to their own understanding of both how and why the Holocaust happened. This pedagogical approach is guided by the following USHMM statement:

We agree that the Holocaust did not happen overnight but was the result of incremental actions and decisions made over time based on the choices made by individuals, professional, institutions, and governments. Ordinary people made incremental compromises in their values, slowly normalizing and accommodating Nazi ideology and policy, and eventually contributing to ... the mass murder of Jews and other targeted minorities in Germany and across German-occupied areas of Europe ...

We seek to understand and examine the motivations and pressures – whether personal, professional, situational, and societal – for the actions and decisions made that ultimately contributed to the Holocaust ... people – individually and as part of a community, nation, group, or professional association – made choices based on greed, belief, revenge, apathy and other "ordinary" human, reasons rather than the common assertion that they acted out of fear. ("Why the Holocaust happened?")

Simplistic, one-word answers do not suffice to truly explain *how* and *why* the Holocaust happened, which are the two most common questions I have had to address for students—and personally wrestled with in my teaching of the subject. Peter Hayes writes in his book *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* that "people interested in the subject need a comprehensive stocktaking directed squarely at answering the most central and enduring questions about why and how the massacre of European Jewry unfolded" (p. 6). I am affirmed and relieved to encounter such Holocaust questions as these. They are not justifiably answered with one-word responses nor gauged by tests based on factual recall alone. Rather, the multidimensional teaching approach and assessments that move beyond multiple choice questions set up the curious student for lifelong learning as they continue to ponder the how and why of the Holocaust's injustices.

4. The Stories of Those Involved Create A Connection To The Victims Beyond Simple Numbers

The overwhelming numbers and statistics associated with genocide can inadvertently blind what they actually represent. A micro example to bring alive individuality within numbers, be it six million, or thirty, can be demonstrated in high school classrooms through an "identity activity." Each student has an identity and story that makes them unique. In order to see individual identities amongst a classroom of thirty students, an introductory identity activity at the start of the course allows students show their uniqueness. This individualized profile activity is based on three things that help identify each individual student. Students bring three items they

are comfortable sharing and paste them on a piece of paper with as much colour and creativity they feel comfortable sharing. When completed, students are asked to speak to their images, but are limited in their explanation of these three identity pieces to three minutes. This is a fantastic way for students to recognize how unique a classroom of thirty is, and it breaks down barriers, cliques, and stereotypes amongst students. Thirty individuals coming together with their own stories helps to create a sense of community in our class and school community. For example, in 2016 a student spoke about a birthmark that is her own; to her it is part of her beauty. Another spoke of shaving her head for cancer week as her hair alone did not identify who she was. Another spoke about a picture of nature and how nature offers freedom from his troubles at home. This activity is a segue to the fact that every victim of the Holocaust had their own identify and their own personal story.

When students in Holocaust 12 have the opportunity to meet survivors and make personal connections with them, they come to truly see past the facts and statistics that so often muddy Holocaust teaching. I witnessed the positive effect of students meeting a survivor first-hand in November 2012 when Sidney Eger came to Kelowna Secondary School. Mr. Eger was a prisoner of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz (prisoner #168277), and death march survivor who spoke to Holocaust 12 students, media, and administrators at KSS. Mr. Eger had never shared his complete story before. Even Sidney's own grandson, a student in the class, had never heard the story to the degree which was shared that day. Further, no student in attendance had heard a Holocaust survivor speak in person. When Sidney was finished, lunch bell long since having rung, students patiently waited in line to shake his hand. They thanked him for sharing his story, and divulged personal stories themselves. Watching students, so engaged in Sidney's story, was a true testament to the impact of Holocaust survivors' stories. Survivor testaments bring a dimension of humanity and subjectivity to Holocaust studies, and make a difference for students, who identify with their personal experiences.

The impact and connections made when hearing personal stories of those involved in the Holocaust goes beyond high school students. In 2013, I spoke at the Yad Vashem Canada alumni conference. My presentation, *Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies Reflections and Insights Into A BAA course (Practical Applications & Connections to the Classroom)* was just prior to Holocaust survivor Felix Opatowski's testimony. Felix Opatowski was born in Lodz, Poland on June 15, 1924. He was liberated from the Nazis in Austria by the US army on May 9, 1945. He passed away in 2017.³ At the conclusion of Felix's testimony (available today in his Azrieli Foundation book and video *Gatehouse To Hell*), he stated that some people watch a movie or some read a book when teaching the Holocaust, but that he tells his story with his whole heart. As an educator who has gained most of my knowledge of the Holocaust through reading and research, hearing Felix Opatowski speak was a reminder of the critical value in learning from first person accounts.

Every Holocaust story has something that resonates, effects, or leaves an impression on individuals. In a November 9, 2016 submission to the Globe and Mail, Rachel Rothstein, self-described moody seventeen-year-old girl, epitomized the impact a study of the Holocaust can, and does, have on students in our classrooms. She wrote about a Holocaust education trip opening her eyes to suffering and evil. Even though she "found [her] self in the shadows of a catastrophe that has no direct connection to [her] current life" (Rothstein, Nov. 2016), Rachel "...developed an appreciation of what it means to have family, to be healthy, to be alive" (Rothstein, Nov. 2016).

5. Study of the Holocaust Demonstrates That We All Have Choices, That We Can Make A Difference, And That We Can Open The Damn Door!

My hope is that in taking Genocide 12, students will recognize their own power to be a change maker, whatever this may look like. When I spoke to a cohort of Gonzaga masters

³ See <http://memoirs.azrielifoundation.org/survivor/felix-opatowski> to learn more about his life.

students in 2009 they asked what difference and impact my course made for students. Some examples include: local, provincial, and national student essay winners such as the VHEC's 2005 Kron award for the top Holocaust essay (*Genocide: The Paroxysm of Human Hatred and Intolerance*), self-initiated student travel to Holocaust and genocide sites across Europe, Africa, and Asia to experience the places and events we studied, and students engaging in letter-writing projects, advocacy, and correspondence with now deceased Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. I received the following note from a 2010 student who excelled in Holocaust studies and won the 2010 UBCO Holocaust Symposium contest top prize: "When I signed up for *Holocaust* I had no idea what I was getting into ... you really get beyond the facts to the psychological side, which is what I find the most interesting ..." Another student contacted me with a note highlighting the important lessons learned from the course: "[*Holocaust 12*] taught me lessons crucial to life as you do not restrict your teaching to the school district's criteria. You explore your own apprehensions while challenging myself and the class each lesson. You are a realist who teaches us the truth, as tragic as it may be". These few examples speak to the difference that *Holocaust 12* has made for students, as do the words from a 2012 graduate: "Thank you for being passionate about the topics you teach instead of focusing on the textbook, I can honestly say that the only time I have ever taken a class because of a teacher is with *Holocaust 12*."

I strive towards becoming an excellent teacher, sparking curiosity and questions on the part of my students to encourage them to be active and involved citizens. The more I learn, the more I realize how little I truly understand about the Holocaust and genocide. This is an area of study that demands lifelong learning, and it is my hope that continued studies will further my passion and answer some of the many questions I continue to have. Samantha Nutt, founder and Executive Director of War Child Canada and physician with more than sixteen years of experience working in war zones, stated:

Teachers change lives. So what makes a great teacher? Well, it comes down to one quality; one fundamental attribute that the best teachers possess and nurture in their students ... it's curiosity. It's that extraordinary ability to find newness in something you've done 430 times. It's the conviction that learning is not so much a task but an experience ... (BCSSTA Provincial Conference Keynote, October 2014).

The choices and actions we take, or do not take, reflect what we believe. Over the last twenty-one years I have met a range of students, from the proactive, tolerant, engaged and curious, to students who are passive and indifferent. In teaching the Holocaust I have witnessed students change in impressive ways: moving towards a tone of tolerance, positive citizenship, and most rewardingly, seeing personal growth. This course does not function as a top-down apparatus. I do not enforce perspectives or opinions; instead the curriculum encourages a multitude of perspectives and factors to the acts of man. By exposing this complexity students naturally come to their own conclusions about what tolerance, social justice, and citizenship may look like.

At the conclusion of my Holocaust course in 2011 a student who had completed a pyramid of harmony, in contrast to previously made pyramids of hate, summarized the role the study of the Holocaust plays in breaking cycles of hatred—a cycle that continues to exist within our society. The Holocaust is rooted in hatred, bigotry, stereotyping, and ignorance. But in this student's words, by simply "opening the damn door," regardless of who you are opening it for, you are making a positive difference to promote respect, tolerance, and dignity. We all have a choice in how we act and conduct ourselves. As Rachel Rothstein reflected following her school trip to Auschwitz, "after your few seconds of reflection to mourn tragedy that isn't directly related to you, think of how lucky you are to be alive and remember that your potential to bring goodness to the world has no limit" (Rothstein, Nov. 2016).

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