TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST AT A DISTANCE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Holly McBride, Brandon Haas, Michael Berson, University of South Florida

Abstract

As technology continues to improve and online learning options proliferate throughout the United States, it is necessary for instructors to establish a sound understanding of proper pedagogical techniques for teaching in a digital environment. This phenomenon has ushered in a new era of education, thus bringing forth a myriad of new questions and issues that must be addressed. Social studies educators are faced with additional quandaries, such as teaching democratic processes for effective citizenship and the teaching of controversial topics. This exploration draws upon the scholarship and experience of experts in the field of social studies education, distance learning, and Holocaust studies to provide suggestions as to how teachers should approach controversial topics in a digital learning environment. A sample Holocaust lesson plan is also provided to showcase a successful integration of controversial issues into an online or blended learning high school social studies classroom.

Within the last two decades, the explosion of new technologies, state educational budget cuts, and e-learning mandates are among the several factors attributed to the ever-increasing K-12 virtual enrollment numbers (Ayas, 2006). The flexible and student-centered learning environment that virtual programs offer (Fish & Wickersham, 2009) provides a unique learning experience for students of the 21st century. In fact, 30 states and the District of Columbia have fully functioning K-12 virtual schools (Miron, Horvitz, & Guloso, 2013). Enrollments in distance education courses are estimated at 1,816,400 for the 2009-2010 school year, and the number of students enrolled in full-time virtual schools has increased from 200,000 to 310,000 (International Organization for K-12 Online Learning [iNACOL], 2013, p. 1). Further, it is projected that half of all high school courses will be fully conducted online by 2019 (Horn & Staker, 2011). Therefore, the duties and role of a 21st-century educator requires an alternative pedagogical approach as the learner group(s) are physically separated and communicate through a technological medium (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002; Watson et al., 2013).

The mission of social studies education is for students to build civic competencies, skills, and dispositions in order to become lifelong caring, active, and educated citizens (NCSS, 2014). Yet, social studies instructors are faced with a quandary when attempting to find effective and indirect techniques to teaching citizenship and democratic processes at a distance. To make matters even more complicated, social studies educators who are teaching via a computer
medium find themselves in another unfamiliar position when teaching topics in the curriculum that are controversial. For instance, curricular topics such as the Holocaust elicit strong emotions, require deep reflectivity, and extensive debriefing that typically best suits the face-to-face classroom. The Holocaust is, after all, a watershed moment in the history of our world and will always be studied because of its complex nature (economics, military, politics, culture, and geography). Students should feel comfortable to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and make meaning of the content (Batiste, 2011). However, the physical separation of e-learning students from their teachers and classmates in combination with nontraditional communication techniques provides a problematic milieu when attempting to deliver all aspects of the social studies curriculum.

The purpose of this exploration is to provide social studies teachers with valuable information and practical lesson plan ideas when teaching controversial topics online, such as the Holocaust. The scarcity of research and scholarship on this particular topic pushed us to draw upon the expertise and recommendations of prominent scholars, educators, and professionals to understand the proper pedagogic approaches for teaching the Holocaust and other controversial topics at a distance. According to Batiste (2011), one of our interviewees, prior research on this topic may still be lacking as the online academic community recognizes the abundance of emotion, chances of misinterpretation, and high numbers of concerns and risks that come with the “territory.” Our hope for this paper is to provide a baseline of information and an example lesson plan as a means of opening up new doors to successful pedagogical approaches and future research.

**Considerations for Virtual Social Studies Pedagogy**

Davies (2000) notes that the most difficult pedagogical decisions regarding teaching the Holocaust relate “to the choice that teachers have to make in deciding how to present the Holocaust and what sort of educational aims are valid” (p. 5). Totten and Feinberg (1995) argue that teachers must avoid simplistic explanations and avoid the pitfalls such as overuse of graphic imagery. One of the most powerful pedagogical methods for teaching the Holocaust or other controversial issues is through the use of classroom discussions. In fact, classroom discussions push students to analyze issues of the past while weighing evidence and opinions in a respectful and methodical fashion (Barton & McCully, 2007).

Virtual teachers can foster discussions in two formats: synchronous or asynchronous. Typically, asynchronous forums are the most widely utilized format because “students have extra time to respond to discussion topics, which allows for deeper levels of thinking” (Hou & Wu, 2011, p. 1460) and caters to all students’ schedules. Well-structured discussions in online courses permit students to share their experiences, construct new knowledge, and take an active role in the learning process. Feelings of social disconnection can occur at times for e-learning students so virtual teachers should make it a priority to create interactive learning experiences for their students (Zydney, deNoyelles, & Seo, 2012).

In terms of controversial topics, there are several advantages of having students engage in discussions such as “deep and meaningful understanding as well as content-specific critical inquiry abilities, skills, and dispositions” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2001, p. 2).
According to Meyer (2006), students who engage in discussions that focus on controversial topics feel more comfortable participating and offering their feelings and opinions in an online rather than a face-to-face classroom. To prevent a negative learning experience, Pace (2003) recommends for teachers to create structured and organized discussions. Teachers should begin a discussion with (a) an objective and sufficient background information on the controversial issue or topic, (b) offer multiple perspectives, (c) model how to address controversial issues, (d) contextualize the issue to ensure student comprehension, (e) allow students to practice discussing similar controversial issues prior to the planned discourse, and (e) provide ground rules for the class discussion.

Methodology

From the months of May through July of 2011, phone and email interviews were conducted with seven scholars and professionals in the social studies education and Holocaust studies fields. The interviews allowed for the research team to interact with experts from geographically remote locations and engage in rich dialogue (King & Horrocks, 2010). Each of the interviewees were asked two main questions to clarify how teachers in an online environment may properly and effectively teach controversial subjects: (a) What are the guiding principles, essential components, or best practices for teaching controversial social studies topics online? and (b) What is unacceptable when teaching controversial social studies topics online? Following the interviews, data was coded and analyzed for themes. It was then analyzed for themes across interviews in order to categorize the data into broader themes.

Each interviewee was carefully selected based upon their expertise in the area of Holocaust education, controversial topics, and distance education. The interviewees included:

- Dr. Thomas Fallace, who is an assistant professor in the department of secondary and middle school education at the William Paterson University and author of the Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools.
- Dr. Musa Olaka is the assistant library director at the Southeast Missouri State University. Olaka played a significant role in establishing a library and information science program at the Kigali Institute of Education in the country of Rwanda from 2000 to 2006. While working in Rwanda and meeting the victims of the genocide, he developed a passion for researching crimes against humanity and genocides. His current research is devoted to supporting genocide refugees.
- Dr. David Klevan is an education manager for technology and distance learning for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Dr. Peter Fredlake is the director of National Outreach for Teacher Initiatives for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The mission statement of the USHMM (2014) is to be “America’s national institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country’s memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust.” With that as a guide, Klevan and Fredlake’s expertise and line of work lie within the USHMM’s educational outreach programs.
• Deborah Batiste is the project director for Echoes and Reflections, an award-winning, multimedia resource guide designed to inform teachers and assist them to connect their students with the personal stories of Holocaust survivors. Batiste also works for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), one of the world’s leading organizations fighting hatred, prejudice, and bigotry.

• Sherry Bard is the former educational programs project director at the USC Shoah Foundation—The Institute for Visual History and Education. Her responsibilities included oversight of the institute’s U.S. educational programs, including Echoes and Reflections, in which the USC Shoah Foundation is a partner.

• Dr. Merry Merryfield is a professor of social studies and global education at the Ohio State University. Merryfield’s research is centered on global perspectives in K-12 and teacher education. Her most recent publication is entitled Theory and Research in Social Education. Her most recent award in 2004 was the National Technology Leadership Initiative Fellow Award, presented by the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education for her research on online cross-cultural learning.

**Question 1: What Are the Guiding Principles, Essential Components, or Best Practices for Teaching Controversial Social Studies Topics Online?**

**Considerations prior to implementing discussions**

Virtual instructors, according to Kleven, should get to know their students first and gauge their maturity level prior to discussing controversial topics. To gauge the readiness of the students, virtual instructors should encourage students to create personalized blogs, offer ice-breaker activities and discussions, and provide an orientation so students can become comfortable with their classmates and the course. Including media literacy and communication information and skills practice in course orientations are essential for students to learn while engaging in virtual discussions around controversial subjects. The chance of cyberbullying is much higher in an online course where students do not have much interaction or do not know each other very well. Therefore, teachers must lay specific ground rules for discussions that encourage active listening and empathetic discourse exchanges. Simply put, online settings are difficult, as one cannot grasp others’ tones, attitudes, and underlying values; so, equipping students with the skills and knowledge for executing effective discussions is imperative.

**The 4 Cs**

Batiste and Bard advise online instructors to commit to the four Cs when teaching about the Holocaust and controversial topics: Contextualize, Collect, Construct, and Communicate. Students must understand the controversial topic or the Holocaust in context, research and collect their own resources, construct a learning product that allows them to reflect on their learning experience, and communicate with their teachers and other students as a way to debrief, reflect, and critically think about this moral topic. More recently, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013) released the C3 Framework, providing guidance for educators to
implement Common Core through the Social Studies curriculum (2013). The new framework mirrors that of the 4 Cs referred to by Bard and Batiste, which demonstrates its soundness as an instructional model.

Online discussions, according to Fredlake, must have an active teacher in a moderating role and where they continually insert comments firmly and diplomatically at times to remind participants of the goals of the discussions. All too often, discussions can go off topic, students can become disrespectful, or use emotion rather than evidence to bolster their argument. The online instructor must be present on a daily basis to monitor the emotionally laden discussions to prevent a destructive learning environment.

**Multiple perspectives**

According to Merryfield, the Holocaust and controversial topics should be taught from multiple perspectives and put in a global context, as they are complex in nature. Online educators should rely on survivor testimonies as it makes the topic more relevant for the students. They are able to connect to the content and feel an emotional connection. Teachers should offer structured reflection on the implications of the Holocaust for current day issues (e.g., hate crimes in their own cities, responsibility of people standing up to injustice). Most importantly, teachers should link the Holocaust to teaching students to be good citizens.

In addition, Fredlake believes that teaching the Holocaust in an online setting offers more possibilities than the face-to-face classroom. Online teachers have the option to access more resources via the web, thus have fewer limitations and room for new perspectives and richer learning opportunities. Examples of powerful and safe websites for students to access information include IWitness, Echoes and Reflection, Facing History and Ourselves, and the USC Shoah Foundation’s online archive of photographs, interviews, testimonies, artifacts, and much more from the individuals involved in the Holocaust and other genocides. In fact, Fallace recommends that teachers incorporate visual, written, and firsthand testimonial courses when teaching controversial topics.

**Question 2: What Is Unacceptable When Teaching Controversial Social Studies Topics Online?**

**Downplaying the facts**

Olaka and Klevan both asserted that teachers should not have students compare pain from person to person or from one genocide to another genocide. This downplays the act of genocide and does not permit students from understanding the truth and complexities behind genocides. Klevan also emphasizes the importance of teachers preventing students from answering lower order thinking or short answers when discussing the Holocaust because it takes the emotion and “life” out of the topic.

Fredlake warns teachers to not oversimplify the Holocaust because there is a lot of gray area that could result in misinterpretation of the content by students. A teacher may say, for instance, that “Hitler is to blame for the Holocaust” but there were myriad more individuals involved.
and a much more complex situation than what it appears from the surface. Furthermore, it is important that those responsible for the Holocaust not be presented as monsters or inhuman. Teachers should contextualize the event in a manner that focuses on choices that people made based on circumstances of the time. The online exhibit from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity During the Holocaust, provides a look at the realities of the situation from the collaborator side of the coin, which can bring a new layer of discussion and reflection to a study of the Holocaust. If a teacher can demonstrate the complexity of topics such as the Holocaust, it can make the topic more relevant to their students who may find a connection to their own lives.

Avoid games, simulations, and fun activities
Klevan and Fredlake warn teachers to not use games or simulations when teaching the Holocaust. The Holocaust should not be romanticized, used for fun activities, or manipulated through simulations, either online or in a traditional classroom as discussed by Schweber (2004) in her analysis of using the simulation “Gestapo.” For instance, a teacher should not incorporate Holocaust crossword puzzles, online simulations, recreate Holocaust-like model concentration camps, online games, and so forth. These activities teach the essence of fun but nothing of substance. Batiste said that simulations can be harmful because simulations by nature imply judgment on the choices made by individuals at the time. You cannot and should not duplicate the Holocaust; those who were alive during the Holocaust did not understand the end result. Therefore, a teacher must design their course around the content and what they want their students to learn regardless of how “fun” it is. An online instructor should not emphasize the memorization of facts; rather, they should concentrate on meaningful lessons full of morals that can be used for students’ 21st-century futures.

Example Lesson Plan for Teaching the Holocaust at a Distance
The construction of this lesson plan was influenced by the union of best practices in the fields of distance education, Holocaust education, and social studies education. The recommendations by the scholars and experts interviewed, as well as our experiences teaching in the field of virtual social studies education and working with the USC Shoah Foundation, also influenced the construction of this lesson plan. Throughout the lesson, the 4Cs for each section are noted and ample primary and secondary resources provide context for students. This example lesson is broken into three parts (activating prior knowledge, Nazi Germany, and civil rights in America) over five days of online instruction. The nature of this lesson allows traditional and blended teachers to adapt for classroom use or split the lesson into individual case studies in order to suit their needs. Virtual teachers can modify the lesson plan to support their course layout and student needs.

Ample literature states that best practices in Holocaust and/or genocide education is to contextualize the events under examination (Parsons & Totten, 1993; Schweber, 2004; Totten & Feinberg, 1995). It is necessary for students to have a sound understanding of context in order to begin scaffolding for deeper analysis. Thus, the example lesson plan in the Appendix will
encourage students to analyze the racism under the context of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The lesson assumes that the teacher will provide background on the origins and central knowledge regarding the Holocaust and Civil Rights Movement. Teachers can find lessons and resources for the prerequisite information at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/) and Facing History and Ourselves (www.facing.org), among other reputable sites. Furthermore, this lesson plan utilizes the power of engaging students through the use of testimony in the classroom. Using testimony provides students with the opportunity to make personal connections with the content and to construct their learning based on personal experience and relevance.

**APPENDIX**

**Title: The Different Faces of Racism**

**Grade Level(s): 9-12**

**NCSS Standards:**
- II. Time, Continuity, and Change
- V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- VI. Power, Authority, and Governance
- X. Civic Ideals and Practices

**TIME FOR COMPLETION: 5 DAYS**

**Objective 1: Activating Prior Knowledge About Racism | Day 1, Part 1**

**Resource(s)**

1. Provide the following quote for your students from “Notes on the State of Virginia” by Thomas Jefferson:

   “I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind.”

**Procedure**

After students reflect on this quote, they will answer the document analysis questions below with a partner in a Google Doc:

A. Why do you think Thomas Jefferson made this claim? Do you think that there was evidence to support the claim? Why or why not?

B. What factors do you think shaped his opinion?

C. Define racism in your own words.
2. Introduce the final project to your students on Day 1 so they can work on the project slowly throughout the week.

Students will choose one of the following options for assessment. This project will be submitted at the end of the unit:

A. Choose one document, photo, and student comment or question(s) from the discussions that most influenced your thinking during the unit. Explain how and why each one resonated with you in a 400-word essay. Upload your essay to discussion forum #2. View and comment on a minimum of two classmates’ projects.

B. Design a poster or pamphlet that speaks out against racism. In addition to the historical context, make the poster relevant to your community. Design in PowerPoint, Keynote, or similar, and save as a PDF or create a Glogster (interactive online poster). Upload your poster to discussion forum #2 and provide a brief summary of what your poster is portraying. View and comment on a minimum of two classmates’ projects.

C. Using the Internet and other news sources, find examples of racism in contemporary society and create a Vodcast that details your research findings. The Vodcast must be at least three minutes long. Upload your Vodcast to discussion forum #2. View and comment on a minimum of two classmates’ projects.

• Special note: The 4 Cs addressed in the project are Collect and Construct.

Objective 2: Understanding Racism in Nazi Germany  |  Day 1, Part 1 & Day 2

1. Provide the following resources for your students to analyze.

   A. Racism: An Overview (USHMM)  

   B1. Anti-Jewish Legislation Overview  

   B2. Anti-Jewish Legislation and Timeline  
       http://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20091123-ljh-antisemitic-law.pdf

   C. Propaganda: Page from “The Poisonous Mushroom”  

   D. Cartoon Analysis Worksheet From the National Archives (PDF)  
      http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/

   E. Visual History Testimony Clips in IWitness: Judith Becker  
      http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/BrowseTopics.aspx
Day 1, Part 2

2. Instruct students to read the article “Racism: An Overview.” Each student should individually describe how race (racism) was viewed in Nazi Germany in 200-300 words in their (online) journal.

3. Instruct students to view the image from “A Poisonous Mushroom.” Use the cartoon analysis sheet from the National Archives (see link above) to have students individually analyze the cartoon.
   • Special note: The 4 Cs addressed are Consider and Collect.

Day 2

4a. Assign students the timeline of anti-Jewish legislation and one of the sets of laws found above in B.2. “Anti-Jewish Legislation and Timeline” (Reich Citizenship Law, Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, In the Name of the German People, Decree against Public Enemies).

4b. Students should summarize their assigned law, purpose, and implications of the law using supporting evidence from the text in 200-300 words in their (online) journal.

5. Ask students to view visual history testimony clips in IWitness. To view the following clip, visit http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/BrowseTopics.aspx and go to the topic “Racism.” Choose Judith Becker in “Watch” under “Racism.” Answer the following questions in discussion forum #1:

A. What does Judith’s story about her brother demonstrate about the racist views of Nazi Germany? (Think about the headmaster's decisions, the teacher's actions, and the students’ actions.)

B. What can you infer about the headmaster’s views?

*Optional Extension
Assign students to research a contemporary act of racism or anti-Semitism through various news sources globally. Create another discussion forum or provide a synchronous discussion for students to share their findings.

Objective 3: Gain Insight into Racism in America 1950’s-1960’s | Days 3-4

Resource(s)

1. Provide the following photos:
   A. Little Rock Desegregation Photo
   B. Freedom Riders Bus Firebombing
C. March on Washington
   http://life.time.com/history/march-on-washington-photos-from-an-epic-civil-rights-event/#2

2. Text of MLK “I Have a Dream” Speech Available at http://
   teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/i-have-a-dream-speech/

3. Malcolm X “The Ballot or the Bullet” http://teachingamericanhistory.org/
   library/document/the-ballot-or-the-bullet/

4. JFK Executive Order 10925 (Establish President’s Committee on Equal
   document/executive-order-10925/

5. Photo Analysis Worksheet
   http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/

   edu/SFI/BrowseTopics.aspx

---

Day 3

1. Instruct students to choose one of the following photos for analysis: Little
   Rock School Desegregation, Freedom Riders Bus Firebombing, or March
   on Washington. This can be accomplished individually or in groups using
   Google Docs or other collaboration sites.

   A. Students will use the photo analysis worksheet and list three details
      that stand out in the photo(s) and why.

      • Special note: The 4 Cs addressed are Consider and Collect.

2. Provide students with copies of the documents: Text of MLK “I Have a
   Dream” speech and Malcolm X “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Individually,
   students can compare and contrast the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. and
   Malcolm X using text from the documents as support. (Suggestion: Venn
   Diagram)

      • Special note: The 4 Cs addressed are Consider and Collect.

---

Day 4

3. Instruct students to read the “JFK Executive Order 10925 (Establish
   President’s Committee on Equal Opportunity Employment)”. Students
   will read this document in preparation for the discussion about JFK’s
   point of view. Students will be expected to use specific evidence from the
   document.
4. Students will watch the video clips of visual history testimony. Go to the IWitness “watch” page. (http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/BrowseTopics.aspx). Under the heading “Racism,” choose Leon Bass. Watch the clip and students will be expected to answer the questions provided below in discussion forum #2:

A. What does Leon’s testimony demonstrate about racism in the United States following WWII?

B. Do you find the abundance of racism during the 1940s-1960s ironic? Explain.

C. What does the testimony add that you cannot learn from the documents?
   - Special note: The 4 Cs addressed are Consider, Collect, and Communicate.

---

**Objective 4: Culminating Discussion and Assessment | Day 5**

**Culminating Discussion**

1. In a synchronous discussion, guide students through the following discussions:

   **Discussion 1:** Explain the underlying causes of racism. Why do you think people are so determined to separate into “us and them” as demonstrated in the two cases? How was the manifestation of racism in the two cases above similar and different?

   **Discussion 2:** What is the role of media in racism and stereotyping? How do the cartoons reinforce stereotypes? What role do the photos play? Use examples from both case studies.

   - Special note: The 4 C addressed is Communicate.

---

**Assessment**

2. Remind students of the due date of their final project (as shown in Day 1, Part 1) and the closing date of discussion forum #2.

   **Important reminder:** Teachers, please monitor and provide an online presence in discussion forum #1 and #2. Do not dominate the discussions but provide support and monitor all activity as the topics discussed are controversial and can arise various emotions.
Conclusion

As we maneuver further into the 21st century, we continue to see the proliferation of online and hybrid learning solutions developing, both as full-time courses and through the use of blended learning techniques. As a result, it is imperative that social studies teachers become increasingly familiar with effective pedagogy of teaching at a distance. With the mission of engaging students to become active citizens in the future, it is important to allow students the opportunity to think and discuss controversial topics, such as the Holocaust and other issues involving human and civil rights.

Effective online pedagogy may transcend the virtual classroom to strengthen students’ understanding of moral and ethical behavior in online settings such as Facebook and Twitter. Hahn (1999) points out the power of teaching controversial issues in the social studies classroom as a means of promoting relevance to students. Coupled with a constructivist learning approach, students engaging in discussion are reflecting and evaluating their thoughts and beliefs as they develop, as well as those of their classmates. This type of engagement leads to the cultivation of new knowledge and the broadening of worldviews as well as digital and global citizenship, thereby fulfilling the mission of social studies education.

Through a short investigation into the landscape of educating about the Holocaust and other controversial issues, teachers can begin developing a proper understanding of how to foster successful and meaningful discussions around such topics, in both a traditional and online settings. A commitment to the four C’s approach, as discussed by Batiste and Bard, provides teachers with a sound pedagogical model for effective instruction as their foundation. By utilizing various perspectives and resources, including visual history testimony and myriad other web resources, teachers begin to provide students with the necessary tools to make personal connections to the content and engaging them in creating a better world through a thoughtful and engaged citizenship.
References


Merryfield, M. (2011, June 20). Email interview.


