

Meeting a Moral Imperative: A Rationale for Teaching the Holocaust

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Abstract: A primary rationale for studying the Holocaust (Shoah) involves the opportunity to consider the moral implications that can be drawn from examining the event. Studying the Shoah forces students to consider what it means to be human and humane by examining the full continuum of individual behavior, from *ultimate evil* to *ultimate good*. This article discusses several implications involved in studying the event, while proposing that a moral imperative exists for the presence of Holocaust education in contemporary classrooms.

Keywords: Holocaust education, Holocaust rationales, Holocaust impact on society, Holocaust curriculum

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 more human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane. (quoted in Ginott 1972, 317)

In defining the motivation on which his educational philosophy was based, a newly appointed principal gave this letter to his teachers on the day he assumed his duties at a private high school. The letter can be extended to introduce the idea that examining the Holo-

caust provides unique opportunities to study complex moral and ethical problems that play a fundamental role in understanding the world in which we live. Therefore, planning a Holocaust unit must involve a sophisticated understanding of the complexities involved in teaching about the event, not the least of which is an examination of the moral and ethical realities that are confronted when studying the Shoah.¹

Approaching the Study of the Holocaust

The importance of studying the Shoah cannot be overstated. Survivor and Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel holds that “Auschwitz [used as a metaphor for the Holocaust in general] is a watershed event, a before and an after; after Auschwitz, nothing can ever be the same again” (Ward 1993). Totten, Feinberg, and Fernekes (2001) propose that ignoring the Holocaust distorts history, leaving critical gaps in experience and knowledge that affect how people view the world in which they live. This view aligns with Eisner’s (1979, 83) null theory of education, which states that “ignorance is not simply a void, it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider.” Thus, the Shoah must be taught because, as Berenbaum says:

The Holocaust has become the negative absolute in American society. In a world of relativism, we don’t know what’s bad, and we don’t know what’s good, but the one thing we can agree upon is that this is absolute evil, and it has become the standard by which we judge evil and, therefore, the standard by which we begin to establish values. (interviewed in Anker 2004)

One compelling aspect involved in studying the Holocaust is the opportunity that considering the event provides for examining every possibility of human behavior, spanning a continuum ranging from *ultimate evil*

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to *ultimate good*. As a result, confronting the Holocaust forces students to address seminal questions that deal with the essence of what it means to be a human being, a point Wiesel ponders when he discusses “perfect victims . . . perfect killers, and the bystanders” (Ward 1993). The Holocaust, therefore, is more than a typical historical event that can be studied in terms of time, place, activity, and result. It is a vehicle by which the central essence of the human condition can be examined.

The importance of asking fundamental questions about the nature of humanity can be juxtaposed against the contemporary tendency to refrain from taking substantive positions on ethical matters in the guise of being fair-minded and nonjudgmental. In this context, Simon (1997, 48) discusses problems he encounters in moving college students past “absolutophobia.” Similarly, Friedlander (1988) describes the reluctance of scholars in the then Federal Republic of Germany to come to terms with Germany’s Nazi past. With reference to assigning accountability for World War II in general and for the Holocaust in particular, he notes that West German historians relativized Germany’s responsibility for the Nazi era by proposing a global culpability for both the war and the Shoah. Commenting on Friedlander’s perspective, Ozick (1988, 280) holds that, “he gave us an account of intellectual nihilism; he told us the story of the negation of all moral valuation. Moral, immoral, amoral—all wiped away.”

Beyond gaining historical knowledge, what is to be gained from immersing oneself in a subject that is at both intellectually interesting and emotionally and psychologically challenging? Perhaps it is the realization that education involves a call to action because “Education without courage is useless . . . The course of human history is determined by what people believe, by the values they hold, and most of all by whether or not they will act upon them” (Regnery 1996, 24, 26). Studying the Holocaust thus provides a lens through which students can examine their values, giving them an opportunity to ask themselves what they would do in a moment of moral crisis.

Acknowledging that using the word *better* is highly subjective, can studying the Holocaust make students better people? While there is no definitive answer to that question, confronting the Shoah does provide an opportunity for students to engage in introspective, nuanced thinking that may lead to the development of concepts about personal behavior and responsibility that are designed to help rather than harm one’s fellow human beings. In discussing the relevance of the study of Nazism to the modern world, Meltzer (1976, xvi) addresses this concept when he writes “we need to expand our knowledge of human nature to understand why people were infected by Nazism . . . The question has to do with good and evil, with our inner being, with our power to make moral choices.”

Care must be taken, however, that establishing this perspective does not result in a reliance on prescriptive clichés that often appear in Holocaust education (Totten 2001). Using such phrases as “never again!” and “those who do not remember the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them” trivializes both the study of the Shoah and the memory of the victims and survivors, resulting in “a ritualized reminder of expectations and aspirations now tacitly abandoned” by contemporary governments and societies (Novick 1999, 257).

Haas (2001, 105) proposes that a practical value can be found in studying the Holocaust, holding that “I came to the conclusion, in brief, that one of the most disturbing implications of the Holocaust for moral theory is that we can no longer assume that there is a universal moral truth to which all normal people will naturally respond.” As a result, the Holocaust provides a platform on which contemporary Western thought can address cultural mindsets that are not founded on the humanistic worldview that is central to that thought. This concurs with the opinion that “the student’s universe of good and evil may be permanently altered by the impact of the course [on the Holocaust] . . . and his personal quest for truth and meaning may be shaped by it” (Hirschfeld 1981, 26). Students thus have the opportunity to evaluate themselves and their world openly, honestly, and without foregone assumptions when they study the Holocaust.

Goals of Holocaust Education

Beyond such philosophical generalities, precise goals to be achieved in Holocaust education must be identified. Rossel (1992) notes four such goals that focus on the idea of moral implication. First, it is important that students study the Holocaust so that they realize that the Nazis’ attempt to annihilate European Jewry was an official state policy. In doing so, students confront the question of what action should be taken when a government’s policies violate morally validated rationales, perceptions, and principles. Second, the toll in human life that was the Shoah’s central reality gives a unique, lasting significance to studying the Holocaust as students wrestle with the concept of humanity’s potential for inhumanity, an ultimate statement of moral culpability.

Third, studying the Holocaust provides students with an opportunity to consider how the interrelationship of psychology and sociology, which coalesced into the pseudoscientific racism that resulted in the Holocaust, was enhanced by characteristics found in technologically advanced societies. Rossel (1992, vii) thus contends that “a continuing study of the worst possible scenario of their use [technological advances] cannot help but claim our attention.” Therefore, students who study the Shoah must consider the implications of living in modern mass societies whose structure and function

are based on a moral *tableau rosa*. Fourth, the human element is at the core of studying the Holocaust. Far more than examining numbers that are beyond the human capacity to comprehend, Rossel (1992, vii) says that Holocaust education must focus on the concept that "the Holocaust was not a statistical event. It involved human beings . . . Students of the Holocaust must inevitably ask of themselves whether they too are living a dream of liberty subject to a forceful shattering." This, too, is a dilemma that must be considered.

Rationales for Holocaust Education

Berenbaum proposes a corollary rationale for studying the Holocaust. He says that Holocaust education raises issues that are critically important to contemporary American society, leading to classroom discourse that might not occur otherwise (Curtis 2000).

As a result, studying the Shoah becomes a vehicle that allows students to engage in sophisticated conversations that stretch their understanding of the world and their ability to evaluate the many complex, multilayered moral situations they will encounter as adults.

Adams and colleagues (1985) believe that the most important rationale for Holocaust education is that understanding the event helps prepare students to live in a fragmented world that lacks concern for others. Studying the Holocaust allows students to "explain that they have the choice of accepting or rejecting evil; recognize that the suffering of another human being may later result in their own suffering; and appreciate the specialness of each person living on earth" (312). As such, personalizing the event should be a key aspect of Holocaust education, acting in opposition to the amorality present in modern, depersonalized mass societies.

In discussing rationales for teaching the Shoah, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2001) emphasizes how studying the event can lead students to consider critical moral issues, human behavior, and the dynamics of being a citizen in a democratic society. Students thus grasp the need to confront the moral implications that are implicit in studying the event because:

Most students demonstrate a high level of interest in studying the Holocaust precisely because the subject raises questions of fairness, justice, individual identity, peer pressure, conformity, indifference, and obedience—issues that adolescents confront in their daily lives. Students are also struck by the magnitude of the Holocaust and by the fact that so many people acting as collaborators, perpetrators, and bystanders allowed this genocide to occur by failing to protest or resist. (1)

Implications for Secondary School Teachers and Teacher Educators

The moral imperative to teach the Holocaust discussed in this article cannot be accepted casually by secondary school teachers, nor should teacher educators urge the preservice teachers with whom they work to en-

ter the world of Holocaust education without carefully considering the implications involved in the decision to do so. Teachers who incorporate extensive Holocaust study in their curricula must realize that the topic requires them to consider difficult questions because the Shoah, perhaps more than any other subject, can engender strong reactions in students, some of whom may be overcome by the topic's intensity. With most topics, the choice of specific information to be taught and the strategies used in that teaching are judged in terms of how effectively subject-matter content is learned cognitively. In Holocaust education, however, cognitive aspects of the teaching/learning situation are matched and often superseded by affective, and possibly intrusive, elements. Through understanding the presence of this factor in Holocaust education and acknowledging the need to make all content and methodological decisions based on that factor, teachers commit themselves to a special level of decision making in planning and implementing Holocaust curricula.

Many Holocaust educators see the Shoah as a (perhaps *the*) critical element that defines their overall approach to teaching. In this regard, it should be noted that many teachers become immersed in the topic professionally and personally. As such, teachers who consider devoting considerable time and energy to the topic must be willing to accept the potential risks that are inherent in teaching the subject. In this regard, poetess and Holocaust survivor Sonia Schreiber Weitz (1994) asks teachers to join her in:

The Giant Leap

Come and take this giant leap with me

Into the other world, the other place

and trace the eclipse of humanity,

Where children burned while mankind stood by,

and the universe has yet to learn why,

has yet to learn why.

Educators must accept, therefore, the moral imperative implicit in teaching the Holocaust if they are to present the topic effectively and appropriately. That imperative involves great challenges and equally great rewards for teachers whose students mature intellectually, cognitively, and ethically as they study the topic. Thus, Sydnor (1987, A52), when asked, "How can you bear to teach the Holocaust?", gave as his response 'How can we not?' "

Summary

The Holocaust is a fascinating, compelling topic in which to immerse one's intellectual energies because it forces students to debate the dilemmas they face in their

daily lives, and will continue to face in expanding contexts as they become adults. As one observer notes, “the Holocaust is the paramount question facing humanity today. It grabs you by the lapels of history and asks ‘Why?’” (Bieber 1993). This is, after all, an ultimate moral question that students must consider. Studying the Holocaust becomes the vehicle through which that question may be approached.

Note

1. The Hebrew word *Shoah* means catastrophe, destruction, or complete ruination and is the preferred term in Israel for the event commonly known as the Holocaust. In this article the words *Shoah* and *Holocaust* are used interchangeably.

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Resources for Use in Teaching about the Holocaust

Historical Texts

Bauer, Y. 1982. *A history of the Holocaust*. Danbury, CT: Franklin Watts Publishing. Bauer's text remains a classic of Holocaust history. It

moves chronologically through the event's development, touching on key topics that should be studied by teachers who wish to develop their historical expertise regarding the Shoah.

- Berenbaum, M. 2005. *The world must know: The history of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This book develops Holocaust history by taking the reader through the museum's permanent exhibition. The Shoah's evolution is set chronologically and thematically. An extensive annotated bibliography is included.
- Bergen, D. L. 2009. *War and genocide: A concise history of the Holocaust*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. This short text provides an excellent overview of Holocaust history. Its structure highlights critical themes while presenting substantial analysis as it describes the movement of the Holocaust through various stages.

Pedagogical Works on Teaching the Holocaust

- Totten, S. 2001. *Teaching Holocaust literature*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. This anthology's 11 essays discuss various components of Holocaust literature. Topics include using novels, short stories, poetry, drama, and memoirs/first-person accounts in teaching about the Shoah. Each essay includes an extensive reference list.
- Totten, S. 2003. *Holocaust education: Issues and approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. This book examines many issues that may hinder the effective teaching of the Holocaust. It includes 10 essays on such topics as “Common Misconceptions and Inaccuracies That Plague Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust,” “Do Jews Constitute a Race? An Issue Holocaust Educators Must Get Right,” and “Diminishing the Complexity and Horror of the Holocaust: Using Simulations in an Attempt to Convey Personal and Historical Experiences.” Each essay includes an extensive reference list.
- Totten, S., and S. Feinberg. 2001. *Teaching and studying the Holocaust*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. This text's 13 essays cover various topics including rationale statements, instructional strategies, and using literature, film, the Internet, art, and music in Holocaust education. Each article includes an extensive reference list.

Curriculum Units

- Anti-Defamation League. 2005. *Echoes and reflections: A multimedia curriculum on the Holocaust*. New York: Anti-Defamation League. Developed cooperatively by the Anti-Defamation League, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, and Yad Vashem, this package includes extensive survivor testimony and a 400-page teacher's guide. Its 10 lessons focus on key themes (e.g., antisemitism, the ghettos, the “Final Solution”), and the unit includes a glossary, chronology, and extensive material on such topics as rationales, procedures, and suggested extensions.
- Rabinsky, L. B., and C. Danks, eds. 1994. *The Holocaust: Prejudice unleashed*. Columbus: Ohio Council on Holocaust Education. Developed by secondary school classroom teachers, this 10-lesson unit includes multiple resources, instructional objectives, background articles, and procedures for implementing the lessons. Lesson titles include “The Culture of a People,” “Responses to the Holocaust,” and “The Meaning of the Holocaust in Today's World.”
- Steinfeldt, I. 2002. *How was it humanly possible? A study of perpetrators and bystanders during the Holocaust*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem. As described by its title, this publication focuses on various roles played by individuals during the Holocaust. It is organized as a series of case studies and includes extensive teaching suggestions, ancillary materials, and numerous photographs that support the unit's narrative.

Web Sites

- Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. <http://www.chgs.umn.edu>. This Web site, hosted by the University of Minnesota, includes extensive educational resources, historical narratives, bibliographies, links to other Web sites, and a visual museum that focuses on artistic representations from and about the Holocaust. The visual museum is especially useful when incorporating art in a study of the Shoah.

The Holocaust Chronicle. <http://www.holocaustchronicle.org>. This Web site provides the entire text of a book by the same name. It is organized on a year-by-year basis (1933-1946), with additional chapters titled "Prologue" and "Aftermath." Various internal search engines provide a user-friendly format.

A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust. <http://fcit.usf.edu/Holocaust>. Hosted by the University of South Florida, this Web site provides resources and primary-source documents on various Holocaust topics. The Web site is well indexed and user friendly.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org>. This Web site is the definitive Internet source for Holocaust information. It includes numerous articles, maps, filmed survivor testimonies (oral histories), online exhibitions, and teaching suggestions.

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. <http://www.yadvashem.org>. Yad Vashem, the Israeli state Holocaust institution, hosts this Web site. It includes historical narratives, teaching suggestions, online exhibitions, and links to other Yad Vashem resources.