

Holocaust Education: Why Simulation Activities Should Not Be Used

Frequently, a news story will reach the press about a classroom lesson that set out to try to help build empathy for the victims of the Holocaust by having students role play situations of either being “persecuted” or “privileged.” Some of these simulations have gone so far as to have selected students wear a yellow star for a day and be subjected to enforced rules ranging from forcing them to stand at the back of the class or the end of long lunch lines, to barring them from using some bathrooms and preventing them from using school drinking fountains. In many cases, these well-intentioned efforts go awry, leading to upset, complaint, and distress for students, families, and the school community.

While simulation-type activities may appear on the surface to be a compelling way to engage students in the history of the Holocaust, the Anti-Defamation League and other institutions with expertise in teaching about the Holocaust *strongly caution* against using such activities for the following reasons:

- They are pedagogically unsound because they trivialize the experience of the victims and can leave students with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they actually know what it was like during the Holocaust.
- They stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality by reducing groups of people and their experiences and actions to one-dimensional representations.
- They can reinforce negative views of the victims.
- They impede critical analysis by oversimplifying complex historical events and human behavior, leaving students with a skewed view of history.
- They disconnect the Holocaust from the context of European and global history.

While we want students to think about their own choices and decisions, especially under difficult circumstances, we should also remember that we teach and learn about the Holocaust knowing “the end of the story,” while those who lived during this event did not have the benefit of such information. Asking students to consider what they would have done under the same circumstances is an artificial question as there is no way of knowing what decisions we will make until we are actually faced with them. Such an exercise also inherently judges the decisions that were made by individuals, decisions that were often “choiceless choices” where no decision was necessarily a good decision but a choice had to be made. Often such decisions—which had to be made very quickly—could mean the difference between life and death. There is no way to adequately or authentically replicate such situations, nor should we try.

Below are examples of effective and pedagogically sound methods that can be used to help foster a sense of empathy and help students begin to understand the motivations, thoughts, feelings, and actions of those who lived through the Holocaust.

- Provide ample opportunities for students to examine primary source materials, including photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, and visual history testimony. Such an exploration allows for a deeper level of interest and inquiry on a range of topics from many perspectives and in proper historical context.
- Assign reflective writing exercises or lead class discussions that explore various aspects of human behavior such as scapegoating or making difficult moral choices. These types of activities allow students to share how they feel about what they are learning and also consider how it has meaning in their own lives.
- Invite survivors and other eyewitnesses to share their stories with students.

One of the goals for teaching about the Holocaust should be for students to determine their own roles and responsibilities in the world around them. To advance this thinking and learning, we encourage teachers to provide students with opportunities to think about meaningful actions they can take in their schools and communities today when they see injustice or are faced with difficult moral and ethical decisions, not imagine what they might have done in the past.

Anti-Defamation League © 2016 Reprinted with Permission