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AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00

Experiential Learning and the Holocaust for Deaf and Hearing Students

by

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Rationale: The following guidelines were developed to assist the teacher of the deaf in creating effective teaching strategies in the study of the Holocaust. The focus of this project, **relevance** and **experiential learning**, are two pedagogical concepts that are consistently employed in instructional models for deaf learners.

I. Creating Relevance

As teachers of the deaf, we seek to bring deaf learners closer to an academic study of history. In order to do this successfully, it becomes increasingly necessary to create a sense of relevance to historical events. In terms of the Holocaust, pedagogical principles need to involve developing this sense of relevance without taking away from the uniqueness of the Holocaust. A teacher can accomplish this task in the following ways:

- The study of euthanasia and eugenics provides relevance for the deaf learner. As noted in Robert Proctor's book, *Racial Hygiene*, the deaf and other handicapped victims were victims of Nazi persecution. Proctor highlights Nazi propaganda that clearly distinguishes the deaf as being the most costly handicapped individuals to maintain and a large burden to society. The study of this propaganda provides the deaf learner with the workings of Nazi policy as well as an opportunity to identify with a relevant aspect of the Holocaust era.
- Engaging the deaf learner is always a challenge for the teacher. The opportunity to create learning environments that allow deaf students to feel comfortable with the learning process and to encourage them to engage in discussions about Holocaust related issues is critical. Deaf learners clearly interact with other deaf individuals in a much more involving way due to the comfort of communication. Therefore, it is necessary to create an opportunity for deaf learners to experience oral testimony of deaf Holocaust survivors.
- All students benefit from hearing Holocaust survivors. However, deaf students will gain more from a deaf Holocaust survivor because they will not feel intimidated by a non-signing individual, hence, they will interact naturally with the deaf survivor.

II. Experiential Learning

Educators of the deaf strive to provide experiential opportunities for learning as an effective means for processing and internalizing information. Therefore, in the study of

the Holocaust, it is important to provide an opportunity for deaf learners to study the Holocaust at concentration camps, memorials and museums in Eastern Europe as well as to gain a sense of Jewish life in Eastern Europe pre and post Holocaust era.

The framework provided below is an instructional model for experiential learning. It deals with effective ways in which educators can structure the content of a study mission abroad and ways in which students can effectively process the catastrophic events that took place almost sixty years ago.

- Our journey begins with students submitting an application for acceptance into the program. Students are evaluated on their general knowledge, personal reflection essays and teacher and community recommendations. Since the trip is fully funded by private and corporate sponsors, the application process is primarily a measure of knowledge and commitment.
- During our 1998 Holocaust Study Mission, students had the opportunity to study at Holocaust sites in Prague, Krakow and Warsaw as well as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Terezin and Treblinka. In addition, students were afforded the opportunity to visit the Krakow and Warsaw Ghettos. The 1999 Holocaust Study Mission will take our students to Budapest, Krakow and Prague.
- In Budapest our students will have a rare opportunity to meet deaf Holocaust survivors. The four survivors are among only twelve still living in Eastern Europe.

Preparation: Begin in the Classroom

The first step in any learning experience is for students to understand the value of what they are to learn. It is a disservice to students to drop them into a situation without background knowledge and appropriate expectations. The teacher, an important guide, should expose students to initial information that becomes a lens through which they will view, reflect upon, and evaluate subsequent information and experience

During the preparation stage, we focus on providing students with a knowledge base that would allow them to gain the most they can from the visit to the camps. The foundation for our academic focus is cultivated in a full year collaborative course entitled *The Holocaust and Human Behavior*. In this course of study the students are engaged in an in depth study of the Holocaust and genocide. This academic study addresses the historical, sociological and psychological implications of the Holocaust as well as its impact on human behavior. More specifically the course involves the study of the origins of the Holocaust, the role of antisemitism and racism; who were the perpetrators, victims and bystanders; patterns of resistance; the response of the United States and other countries; and the universal lessons for today.

Our goal at this stage – to understand aspects of the Holocaust –is repeated throughout our preparation, study and reflection. In addition, the students engage in eight after school workshops designed to specifically address their visits to Holocaust sites in Eastern Europe.

Framework: Establish a Framework that can Grow

Perhaps no other element of experiential learning is as significant as providing students with a framework. Just as instruction centers around an objective, experiential learning requires that students have perspective through which to filter their experience. We want to encourage students to understand not only significant events of the Holocaust, but also the underlying attitudes, including abdication of personal responsibility that allowed these events to occur. Furthermore, we want students to be able to examine the Holocaust in relation to undercurrents of exclusivity, racism and intolerance that existed in the Nazi era and are still prevalent in our society today.

Our unique group, deaf, hard of hearing and hearing teenagers, has dealt personally and in a variety of ways with exclusivity and intolerance. With both groups of students experiencing a deaf culture within a hearing school, albeit from different positions, they have unique perspectives in understanding these issues. Further, our school- where diverse elements of the population enter the deaf program within a homogenous surrounding community – continually presents “teachable moments” in which students can explore their own attitudes and behaviors in dealing with people who are different from themselves.

The framework focuses on building knowledge and prepares students to become immersed in the learning environment. We attempt to move the students from a historical perspective to a humanitarian perspective and challenge them to look more deeply at the complexities of this horrific assault against humanity. Students are asked to look at the Holocaust through several perspectives including those of Nazis, Jews, people with disabilities and people who hid the Jews. In addition, students are asked to reflect upon three essential questions prior to the experience;

- What are your learning expectations for this experience?
- How do you plan to use your newly acquired knowledge about the Holocaust?
- Who was responsible for the events that caused the Holocaust? (open-ended question)

Throughout their experience the students will continue to focus on these questions. They will be asked to continually compare their responses before, during and after the experience. This self-analysis allows the learner an opportunity to synthesize knowledge and apply it to his/her established framework.

Immersion – The Search for Personal Meaning

As we begin our journey together, we are cognizant of the fact that the emotional impact of this experience will be difficult for the students. Therefore, we opt to vary each day’s activities to allow for some light-hearted time, informal discussion and formal reflection. We visit several Holocaust sites and through the talents of our gifted guide, Mr. Shalmi Barmore, the former Director of Education at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem and currently the Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, our students are afforded the opportunity to study the Holocaust with a renowned Holocaust scholar. Not only does this provide the students with in depth historical discussions; this also gives them the opportunity to hear

Mr. Barmore's many accounts of survivors interviewed during his tenure at Yad Vashem. The sense of story that these personal accounts provide for the learner parallels the content studied and gives deep personal meaning to the experience.

The framework established before the trip continues to be our guide. As we go through each site we challenge students to empathize with those who were there sixty years ago, to better understand their dilemmas and hardships. Each site confronts students with different issues, symbols and environments with which to grapple. Our guide, through the use of first person accounts and the recollections of Holocaust survivors, exposes students to stories of fear, betrayal, loss, love and, occasionally, hope. Each story and each emotion allows students to search for some personal meaning and create a sense of relevance.

This sense of relevance is one factor that enables students to intellectually and emotionally internalize the events of the Holocaust.

Each student deals with the heavy nature of our study in different ways and his/her own personality and learning style dictated the way in which he/she processes the experience. Accordingly, we offer a variety of vehicles in which participants can find meaning in the experience. A certain degree of sharing is an integral part of the learning process as we journey together. We offer students forums in which they can raise questions, discuss their emotions and feelings and make connections to their own lives and the present day. While we try to provide some focus to each discussion, we also afford students the opportunity to facilitate these discussions. Formal and informal discussions are coupled with more structured reflections aimed at focusing the students' intellectual knowledge as well as focusing their thoughts and emotions.

Reflection: Writing for Expression and Exploration

The product of our journey is most evident in the shared reflections of each student. Each student is required to keep a journal in order to document historical data, process emotional reactions to the experience and reflect upon his or her own personal growth during the mission. The journals are private reflections and are not shared unless the student chooses to. However, the journal will later serve as the primary source for presentations that will be given upon our return from the study mission. Each evening, however, we will ask students to focus on certain experiences of the day and spend time extending their knowledge and reflecting upon their emotions, feelings and reactions. Each evening students are also asked to write a brief one-page response to specific events of the day. This response serves as a meter for assessing student learning. It also allows us to determine what follow up or more defined focus is needed to address content or the emotional impact this experience is having on the students.

The reflection process gives students the opportunity to immediately process their experience and enables the students to deal with this experience in greater depth.

Sharing – An Experience Grows

Upon return to school, students are asked to engage in three final activities to synthesize their experiential learning opportunity. Their first task is to evaluate the experience. This evaluation comes in a structured form that requires students to tell us what was most beneficial about the experience and what were their difficulties in terms of processing the content of the experience. Second, students write a final reflection essay which weaves together what they gained from the experience, what they plan to do with this new knowledge and finally an analysis of the essential questions. Continued examination of these essential questions before, during and after the experience provides a framework for this formal reflective essay. Finally, students are asked to share all they have learned. This sharing comes on many levels, both formal and informal. Whether it is a discussion with friends, family or a teacher or a formal presentation to a class, the Board of Education or our sponsors, each student is expected to share what they had gained through this experience. This sharing helps each student to continually redefine and further examine their ideas and beliefs and most importantly their actions as they seek to take these worthy lessons and incorporate them into who they are and who they wish to be.

Evaluation – Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is part of the belief system of all educators of the deaf who strive to provide opportunities that enable deaf learners to process and internalize information. Providing a full year course on the Holocaust, which allows students to study this history in depth, establishes a sophisticated framework for students to become critical learners in this very complex study.

Moreover, this intensive study is the framework that enables these students to successfully grapple with the historical content and emotional impact of a Holocaust study mission.

Finally, experiential learning provides increased opportunities for students to construct an historical framework, delve into their feelings, attitudes and beliefs and ultimately affect attitudinal change.

