

Virtual High School - The Holocaust

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Virtual High School (VHS) is a collaborative of over 200 participating high schools offering semester online courses to high school students in 24 states and 8 countries. VHS offers 120 full semester courses including core, elective, advanced placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Participation in VHS instantly expands the curriculum of member schools without adding the cost of adding onsite classes. It meets the diverse needs of students, overcomes students scheduling challenges and it continually expands curriculum offerings. The mission of VHS is:

"...to break down the barriers to quality education for all... We want to expand educational opportunity by continuously enriching our curriculum offerings to member schools and by offering online teachers a wealth of professional development courses to expand, deepen and improve their instructional skills. We strive to develop innovative, student-centered online courses designed and delivered to meet and exceed nationally accepted standards for education. We believe in spreading the word about the benefits of online education, while also relentlessly striving to improve, adapt, and expand its value to schools, parents, teachers and students."

My Holocaust class is one of the many classes offered in the curriculum at VHS. In 1999 I was a Mandel Fellow .From the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. I developed this online class for my Mandel project that all participants are required to complete. At that time, I wondered where I was going with all of my Holocaust information? I had been part of Vladka Meed's Teachers Fellowship to Israel and Poland in 1997. I received the Joseph Zola Fellowship from the University of Hartford in CT. and I had an NEH (National Endowment of the Humanities) Grant to study "Cultural Responses to the Holocaust at Home and Abroad" in 2001. Again, where was I going with all this information?

I feel that total immersion in the subject of the Holocaust makes one ready to tackle the subject. According to an article by Karen Shawn, a leader in Holocaust Education "... the best scholarship and pedagogy is developed through total immersion in the subject." Ms. Shawn recommends that a teacher should take a course in Israel at Yad Vashem, similar to the one that I took this past summer. According to Shawn, "Implementing a sound, sequential, interdisciplinary Holocaust curriculum is a long-term and complex process." I can truly say that my curriculum evolved this way. As a Mandel Fellow, I was fortunate to have the resources of the United States Holocaust Museum staff helping me with my curricula issues throughout the long process.

At the same time that I was thinking of implementing this course, my high school was looking for a faculty member to design a class for Virtual High School. The fit seemed perfect. After a 12-credit online graduate class and many, many hours of hard work I developed my class. I can truly say that this is the highlight of my teaching career. I am not only pleased with the technology I was able to conquer, but the curriculum for this interdisciplinary class is extensive and all-inclusive. I

have the luxury as a teacher of having a 15-week class on the Holocaust. My course was created on Lotus Notes and viewed by my students at www.govhs.org. Only those signed up for the class can access it. However, you can view the syllabus and the overview of my course at this site.

The 15 weeks are divided into the following subject areas. I will discuss my reasons for choosing some of the topics throughout the paper
Schedule

Week 1 - Who Are We and Why are We Here?

Week 2 - History of Anti-Semitism

Week 3 - Life in Europe Before the War

Week 4 - Hitler's Rise to Power

Week 5 - Life in the Ghetto

Week 6 - Holocaust artists

Week 7 - Holocaust Poetry

Week 8 - Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders

Week 9 - Concentration Camps

Week 10 - Field Trip- US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Week 11 - Catch up Week

Week 12 - Activity Week

Week 13 - Nazi Medicine

Week 14 - Liberation

Week 15 - Final Projects Due

I feel that it is most important to discuss Life Before the Holocaust in order for my students to understand the rich European culture that existed prior to Hitler's reign. Antisemitism is a major theme early in the course. Most of the students are not Jewish and have no idea about this subject. Although they have heard about it, they do not know it has existed and still exists in the world. I discuss "Judaism and Anti- Judaism in Medieval Christianity," "The Rise of Modern Antisemitism in Europe in the 19th-20th Century" and a general overview of the topic. I stress that "Antisemitism is irrational, unexplainable and as long as there are Jews there will be Antisemitism." (Lectures given by Dr. Jeremy Cohen and Dr. Robert Wistrich at Yad Vashem as well as the writings of Telushkin are my sources).

One aspect of life before the Holocaust is the rich European culture and the Yiddish language. My student's are introduced to the Yiddish language by exploring a number of websites and learning a "bit if Yiddish." They are given assignments to translate certain phrases from English to Yiddish and vice versa. They are also introduced to Klezmar music, which also was prevalent at this time. Another assignment during this week is looking at pictures of families that were in tact prior to the Holocaust. Photos are important for students to explore. They get the sense that these are real people, just like themselves, who lived lives full of the many things that they too participate in. Many sites are available on line including www.ushmm.org, www.yadvashem.org.il and www.holocaustalbum.org (These are just a few sites that I have found useful).

It is most important to think about the reasons why we should teach Holocaust History. The United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC has said that the "History of the Holocaust provides one of the most effective and most extensively documented, subjects for a pedagogical examination of moral issues." By studying the Holocaust students can come to realize that:

- Democratic institutions and values are not Automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured and protected.

-Silence and indifference to the suffering of others, or to any society, can - however unintentionally perpetuate the problems and

-The Holocaust was not an accident in history- it occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred and ultimately, mass murder to occur (ushmm.org).

My reasons for covering certain topics vary. I do not teach the moral lessons off the Holocaust, per se, but want my students to decide these ideas throughout the class. They are encouraged to use critical thinking skills to determine the answer to these important questions.

I have given much thought to developing a comprehensive Holocaust Education Program. I used this as the basis for my curriculum choices. I am unsure of where I got the following sources, but have some handouts that were given to me at a conference I have used these often when giving teacher workshops and developing this class. I must give credit, where credit is due, but there is no name on this source.

A comprehensive Holocaust education program must include:

1. A survey of antisemitism and its historical roots, including Christian theology and church practices

An examination of Jewish life before the Holocaust. I like to use photos, diaries, memoirs, historical fiction newspapers and other sources

A thorough chronology of the war using maps, diaries, memoirs and photos to establish the verity of the incidents

An exploration of Nazi propaganda and its power to turn large groups of people into willing collaborators or perpetrators of genocide.

The ethics of genocide. How did doctors and scientists participate in the mass murders? What are the implications for bioethics toady's world?

A study of the ghettos, death camps, those in hiding and the partisans. How did the civilian populations aid or hinder the cause? Who knew what and when?

The other victims- who were they?

Spiritual resistance

Righteous gentiles

10. Liberation- what the allied soldiers found as they entered the camps. Liberation to what?

During week 4 we learn about Hitler's Rise to Power. The years 1933-1939 are important for the rise of the Dictatorship under the Third Reich, Kristallnacht, the early stages of persecution and the first concentration camps. One of the assignments that I give my students is to create a Time Line for Hitler's Rise to Power. This is critical for my students to understand. At first this assignment seems easy and mundane. My students learn so much about this time period and it makes sense that they put these events in chronological order to have a better understanding of the times. Another assignment, that is perhaps one of the most difficult that I give, is for my students to find articles from newspapers from a particular date. I generally pick the date and month and have them find primary source material. Students generally find this difficult, but when they do find the articles that are needed it is rewarding and makes them see the news was there- but no one was heeding the warning. I encourage them to find an article from the United States and one from Europe.

Also during the fourth week of the class my students are told about their final project which is to interview a survivor. It is often difficult to find a survivor in some areas throughout the country, However, I have been teaching this class for 6 semesters and so far everyone has found someone. It takes a lot of hard work on their parts as well as mine. Again, I have the Holocaust Museum in Washington as a resource and the survivor registry is helpful. Some students also complete on line interviews. They must clear all on line interviews with me first. I encourage them to use the Oral History Guideline from the Holocaust Museum in DC as a source of questions and techniques .We spend a great deal of time discussing how to handle themselves in an interview.

Another way I want my students to understand the Holocaust is through art, literature and poetry. Week 6 involves Holocaust Art.. Art played a major role in society not only for the purposes of propaganda but also how victims used artistic expression to communicate their protest, despair and hope. Living in the Boston area, I have had the opportunity to meet Samuel Bak, one of the foremost Holocaust artists. Bernie Pucker, who features Bak's works at the Pucker Gallery on Newberry Street in Boston, has been a source of information to me as well. Samuel Bak is one of my guest lecturers in my class. I have my students read a lecture by him that he delivered at Notre Dame University about his life and his work. The guest lecturer format enables my students to study Bak, and to hear first hand about his work. During the week that we do Holocaust art, the student also have to pick an artist to research. I encourage them to explore the different types of art: that created by Holocaust victims and survivors as a means of documenting diverse experiences, including life prior to the Holocaust, life inside the ghettos, the deportations and the myriad of experiences that took place in the camps Contemporary art that examines the interpretations of the Holocaust as expressed in art exhibits and memorials.

Their research includes a biography and also examples of their artwork.

Another assignment during the week that we do Holocaust art is to read and research Art Speigleman's Maus I and II. By this point they have a good background of the Holocaust. Maus does not teach a lot of information about the Holocaust, but it is a story about Artie and his father. It introduces my students to

"the Second Generation", something that is most interesting to me. I want my students to get a sense of Art Spiegelman's works by discussing his use of animal character and their Zoomorphic features. Another interesting point is how Speigleman lays out the pages. They are quite different from the Sunday comics. All the pages are done differently. I ask my students why Speigelman undertakes this book? His primary motivation is to (1) understand his father,(2) write a story and (3) reconnect with his father. The reader's job is to fill in the gaps. My students are to research and discuss "The Second Generation." They participate in-group discussion and come up with a thesis about the topic. They can get a lot of this information right from the artwork of Speigelman.

Poetry is yet another means of understanding the Holocaust. I introduce my students to Hilda Schiff's anthology of the Holocaust. She compiles poems by theme, an approach that I find useful and helpful to teach the subject. Some of the themes that she uses are: Alienation, Persecution, Destruction, Rescuers, Bystanders and Perpetrators. I in turn take her lead and use some of these poems. My students are asked to research a poet and give examples of their work. They are also asked to analyze "Death Fugue" a difficult poem by Paul Celan. This is a real challenge. His poem "Death Fugue" is based on what he heard in the camps. It is about an orchestra playing in Majdanek- a death camp in Poland. It is a juxtaposition of many images. The narrator speaks as someone in the camps. It is a narrative projection. My students find this to be a difficult assignment, but something that is well worth the work.

As a final assignment during the week of Holocaust poetry, my students write their own poetry as a creative assignment that some like and others do not. We then create an anthology of poetry that is rather powerful.

I have chosen 3 books that my students read during the semester. On Both Sides of the Wall by Vladka Meed, Night by Elie Wiesel and Gerda Wessmann Klein's All But My Life. I have chosen each of these books for different reasons. Vladka Meed is a friend and someone who I admire greatly. I have had the opportunity to meet her and spend time in Poland and Israel with her group. I feel that I can reach my students by sharing personal stories and my own memoirs about Vladka. It is also a realistic portrayal of life in the Warsaw Ghetto. She delves into resistance in a way that I want my students to know. The most frequently asked question is "Why didn't the Jews fight back? From reading this book it is clear that they did fight back. Elie Wiesel's book is perhaps the most important piece of Holocaust literature. This memoir is read during the week that we study the concentration camps. It depicts life as it truly was in the camps. Lastly I picked Gerda Weissmann' Klein's book also for personal reasons. I have met Gerda a number of times and have found her to be an incredible woman who has touched me in many ways. Many of the students in my high school (not a part of my Holocaust class) are working on her "No Hunger" curriculum. Gerda's book is taught during the week of liberation. Her story is one that adolescents relate well to. Although she was in the camps, she was going through adolescent issues that students can relate to. Her relationship with Abek and then with Kurt Klein tell a story that both male and female students connect with. Her story is a true love story. My students also learn about the

liberation of Vladka, Wiesel and Gerda Klein through their own personal testimonies of liberation. The connections are important.

My course is divided into 4 areas" Schedule, Media Center, CourseRoom and Profile.

Schedule- where a student gets assignments and hears from me about what the week will entail

Media Center similar to a library in a regular school; CourseRoom where the students participate in discussion and send in their assignments and Profiles where the students send in information about themselves and also receive their grades.

The Media Center is filled with articles lectures, websites, survivor testimony, memoirs, and short stories. I ask my students to print things out and keep an organized notebook, even though I can not see it or monitor what they are doing. This is a way for them to maintain an organized system, which is critical to learning. Another critical component of the class is the final exam. Like most educators in the field of Holocaust education, I do not believe in giving a multiple choice or true false exam. This merely trivializes the subject of the Holocaust. Virtual High School does require that I give a final exam. In order to comply with the standards of VHS, I give my students the opportunity to elaborate on one of the first assignments that they had in week one. This activity was a KWL chart. (What I Know, Want to Know and Have learned about the Holocaust.) There final is to write one- to two paragraphs about 12 things that they have learned throughout the semester. Specific details are required about the topics they have chosen. The culminating activity gives them the opportunity to review all that they have learned and to process the information in a written format. I also have them do an evaluation of the class. From this I always get good ideas on how to adapt or change activities or the way that they are presented. As stated earlier, VHS is the highlight of my teaching career and it gets better and better each semester. Developing a 15 week course on the Holocaust has afforded me the opportunity to utilize what I have learned and continue to learn about this subject.