

# What Will Students Remember? Closing a Lesson on the Holocaust

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ONE OF MY KEY GOALS in teaching about the Holocaust is to plant seeds in my students' minds and hearts—seeds that germinate, bloom, and grow over a lifetime. What kind of seeds? Seeds of concern. Seeds that create lingering questions about what happened during the Holocaust and why. Seeds that sprout into questions about prejudice, anti-Semitism, racism, hate, fairness, and justice. And, finally, seeds that bloom into ongoing consideration about our place in the world and what it means to be citizens in a democracy.

To encourage students to think about this history in an in-depth and reflective manner, I strive to craft all aspects of the study of the Holocaust carefully. This is as important for

the close of a lesson as it is for the introduction or the body. Many teachers tend to close lessons on the Holocaust with a quiz or exam. More often than not, these don't assist students to truly synthesize, let alone reflect on, what they have learned.

Yet there are numerous activities to help teachers complete a study of the Holocaust. Some are ideal for use prior to or in conjunction with traditional assessments, whereas others stand on their own. Teachers can choose from a range of activities to guide their students in accomplishing one or more of the following goals: (1) synthesize what they have learned; (2) reflect on what they have learned, especially as it pertains to their own lives and the world in which they live; and (3) plant seeds for ongoing rumination. In this essay, I will discuss various closing activities that

colleagues, as well as Holocaust specialists, and I have used.

## Closing Lesson Discussions

One way to set the stage for a final discussion or for student-designed extension projects is to have students reflect on a number of issues. They might write answers to any or all of the following questions: Is there anything you are still perplexed about regarding this history; if so, what is it and why? What issues or events do you feel you need to learn more about, and why? Are there any issues or concerns that you would be interested in researching on your own, and why? What are the most significant insights, concepts, or pieces of information you have gleaned from your study, and why? These questions will help prepare students for a final discussion on the Holocaust.



East Tennessee students straighten flags on a Holocaust exhibit.

Teachers may want to lead a final discussion around even more thought-provoking questions: Can any lessons be learned from the Holocaust? If so, what are they? If not, why not? After the Holocaust, can it be said that the history of humanity has been a history of progress in human relations? Why or why not? Does the idea of technical progress correlate to human behavior? Why should we, humanity living after the fact, even care about the Holocaust? Now that you know about the Holocaust, do you feel you have a responsibility to be more aware or concerned about human rights abuses and genocide perpetrated during your own lifetime? If not, why not? And if so, how will you act differently?

These and other open-ended questions help students reflect on what they have learned. The discussions help make the study of the Holocaust more personal. They also prod students to reflect on how the Holocaust relates to their own lives and society.

#### First Reflections: What They Never Want to Forget

A simple but powerful closing activity is to have students write down facts, concepts, events, issues, and images that they never want to forget about the Holocaust. This activity allows students to process what they have learned, and also allows teachers to find out what made the most powerful impact on students. Such information can provide valuable insight as teachers revise and hone lessons for future classes.

#### Writing Letters

For a more structured and in-depth approach to closing the unit, teachers can ask students to write a letter to their parents or guardians in regard to what they have learned about the Holocaust, and what they are unlikely to forget and why. Alternatively, students may write a letter to themselves and seal it. Sometime in the future—perhaps after they turn twenty-one, graduate from college, or have a child—they may open it and reflect on their earlier thoughts. This encourages students to reflect on which ideas they deem most worthy of remembering.

Students may choose to share their letters with the class. Initially, they could share in small groups of three or four (often a more comfortable setting for sharing personal insights). Following the small-group activity, teachers can hold a whole-class session.

The sharing of letters in both small and large groups should be voluntary only.

Another thought-provoking exercise involves students writing letters to a larger audience about what they have gleaned from their study of the Holocaust. At the outset, teachers might wish to share the following letter:

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 human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.

Once they read and discuss the letter, students should reflect on what they ardently wish to share with others. Students should jot down key words, phrases, and thoughts that come to mind. Next, students should pair up and discuss their insights. Then, each student should write a letter to whomever he or she wants—a letter to the editor of a local, regional, or national newspaper; the congregation of a church, synagogue, or mosque; the local school board; or younger students in their school. Students should succinctly but powerfully convey their thoughts, ideas, and warnings.

#### Webbing or Clustering

A cluster (also referred to as a mind-map, web, or conceptual map) is an effective way to help students show their depth of knowledge. A cluster is “a nonlinear brainstorming process that generates ideas, images, and feelings around a stimulus word until a pattern becomes discernible.”<sup>1</sup> Clustering is a more graphic and engaging method for students to delineate what they know about a topic than, say, an outline.<sup>2</sup> Students can develop a cluster around the “target” word/event “Holocaust.”

Teachers should first create a simple cluster on a topic other than the Holocaust (e.g., the school’s sports program) to help students understand the concept, and then create a more complex cluster on the same topic. Once teachers explain the process, they should encourage students to develop the most detailed, comprehensive, and accurate cluster possible. Students should delineate the connections, when appropriate, between and among the various items, concepts, events, and ideas.

More specifically, students write “Holocaust” in the center of a piece of paper (a minimum of 8½" x 11"), circle it, and then draw spokes out from the circle on which they add related ideas. Each time they add a term, they should circle it and connect it with a line to related terms or concepts. Each new or related idea should lead to a new clustering of ideas. As Rico points out, “A cluster is an expanding universe, and each word is a potential galaxy; each galaxy, in turn, may throw out its own universes. As students cluster around a stimulus word, the encircled words rapidly radiate outward until a sudden shift takes place, a sort of ‘Aha!’ that signals a sudden awareness of that tentative whole.”<sup>3</sup>

After students develop their own clusters on the Holocaust, teachers can group students in three or four. Each person in the group should explain his or her cluster to the other members. Students should provide a succinct overview of key points, noting why they included certain ideas, and provide a brief explanation regarding the connections between ideas. Next, each group should design a group cluster. Students must not simply reproduce what each person has said; rather, they must develop a new cluster that uses the correct ideas/connections on each map to create a final map that is, ideally, much stronger, more accurate, and more sophisticated in its depiction of key ideas and connections. To accomplish this, they will need to discuss the breadth, depth, and accuracy of their collective body of information, then plot how to develop the most sophisticated cluster possible. Finally, everyone should sign his or her name to the cluster.

If time permits, this activity may be carried at least one step further. Each group can share its cluster with the larger group. The group members should note why they included various items and why they made their connections. The class should then posit questions about the group’s cluster and, when appropriate, chal-

length the students' inclusion of information and connections.

Clusters enable students to synthesize their knowledge and the connections they make between and among various concepts, facts, events, antecedents, and causes and effects. Clusters also provide teachers with a vivid illustration of both the students' depth of knowledge and the sophistication of their conceptual framework of a subject. Teachers are also able to ascertain the accuracy of their students' knowledge, as well as any misconceptions or myths that they may still hold. Clustering also provides students with a unique method to express their ideas; thus, tapping into (to borrow from Howard Gardner<sup>4</sup>) "spatial intelligence" rather than the typical writing (linguistic) intelligence.

### Multiple Intelligence Activities

Another powerful way to help students synthesize their newfound knowledge about the Holocaust is to have them engage in activities that require multiple "intelligences" (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal).<sup>5</sup> Prior to undertaking these activities, however, students must have a deep knowledge of the Holocaust, as well as a strong sense of the seriousness, rigor, and commitment needed to complete such projects.

Students might create a poster or a collage, write and act out a group play, write and conduct a choral reading, develop and deliver a speech on the Holocaust to another class or a community organization, or complete a series of paintings or drawings. Such activities can serve as a powerful precursor to a final exam and can help students not only to review but also to synthesize what they have learned. Once the directions and criteria (or rubrics) for the project are designed, teachers should encourage students to work individually, in pairs, or in medium-sized groups (three to five students) to bring to bear various "intelligences" for the purpose of synthesizing their ideas.

Steve Feinberg, a former social studies teacher who currently works in the education department of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, has developed the following variation on the assignment:

While it is essential that students realize the particularity of this history, it is also important for them to relate this

history to today's world. . . . One way of accomplishing this goal is to have students create works (posters and collages, for example) that address these implications. Connecting the history of the Holocaust to the world in which they live today encourages students to continue to explore this remarkable history.<sup>6</sup>

### Developing an Encyclopedia Article

Developing an encyclopedia-like article also helps students summarize what they have learned. Teachers should first photocopy a lengthy entry from a respected encyclopedia and assist students in examining how to construct a solid encyclopedic entry. Ideally, the entry should be on a topic that the students have studied earlier in the semester (other than the Holocaust), thus enabling them to critique the thoroughness and accuracy of the entry. The teacher should point out the succinctness of the writing; explain that the article is packed with key (versus superfluous) information; inform students of how the roles of key personages are delineated; and describe how the chronology of events is interwoven into the fabric of the article.

Next, the class should design a rubric showing the type of information that the summary should include. This can be generated in various ways: individual students may develop lists and come together as a class to finalize the rubric; small groups of three to four students may develop a rubric and then come together as a class to develop a class rubric; or the class may, from the outset, develop the rubric.

In developing the rubric, students need to consider the following: the historical trends that made the Holocaust possible (e.g., anti-Semitism, racism, social Darwinism, extreme nationalism, totalitarianism, industrialism); the chronology of the Holocaust; the various groups involved or affected by the events, including the victims, perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders; the different stages of the Holocaust period, including but not limited to the Nazis' rise to power (and various events and incidents that influenced such a rise, e.g., Germany's loss in World War I, the ramifications of the Versailles Treaty, the Depression); the discrimination against Jews and others; the laws created to isolate and ostracize the Jews; the ghettoization of the Jews; the deportations; the first systematic killing by the Nazis (e.g., the

so-called euthanasia of mentally and physically disabled persons); the plight of other victims, such as the Gypsies, Poles, other Slavs, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, and disabled persons; the plight of the children; the evolution of the mass murder/genocide of the Jews, beginning with the actions of the German *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) in the Soviet Union; the discussion at the Wannsee Conference of the decision to systematically kill the Jews; the establishment of death camps; the world's response to the mass killings; liberation of the concentration camps; and the Nuremberg Trials. Ultimately, each entry needs to address the "whys, hows, whens, wheres, and whos" of the Holocaust.

Once the class agrees on the rubric, pairs or triads of students should team up to write the encyclopedic entry. After the students complete their entries, several things can be done. Groups can exchange their entries for critiquing, and these critiques could be used to revise the entries. Or, the teacher could read each entry and make suggestions for revisions, and each revised entry could be placed in a booklet for future classes. Student entries could also be compared to similar entries found in various encyclopedias.

### A Concluding Speaker

Bringing in a knowledgeable guest speaker (e.g., a Holocaust survivor or a camp liberator) toward the end of a study adds a special dimension to the concluding activities. Survivors and liberators provide unique, firsthand insights that students are unlikely to find anywhere else. If neither a survivor nor a liberator is available, another option is to invite a history professor from a local college or university.

Such guest speakers can either set the stage for the final assessment or, conversely, conclude the study by speaking after the final assessment. Either way, students should be informed of the speaker's background several days prior to the presentation and be required to prepare questions.<sup>7</sup>

### Addressing a Key Quote

Steve Feinberg and I are strong advocates of concluding exercises that are reflective in nature. Feinberg suggests having students write reflective journal entries or final essays as a way to synthesize their new knowledge about the Holocaust:

Providing students with an evocative

quote and asking them to respond to the quote is a solid way to accomplish the above. For example, Gerda Lerner has said that, “It is not the function of history to drum ethical lessons into our brains. The only thing one can learn from history is that actions have consequences and that certain choices once made are irretrievable.”<sup>8</sup>

Students can respond to this quote (or others like it) in either essay or journal form using the information they have examined in their Holocaust unit. Hopefully, the general historical nature of such quotes will serve as a catalyst for thinking reflectively about the history of the Holocaust.

### The Final Exam

Teachers who wish to use a final essay examination might ask each student to develop a minimum of two essay questions for possible use on the exam. Ask students to consider questions that truly address what the class has studied; are neither too narrow nor too broad; are thought provoking and require respondents to draw on both broad and deep knowledge of the subject; and do not call for mere recitation of facts but force an analysis of facts, concepts, ideas, and issues.

Students should be informed that the teacher reserves the right to refine or combine questions for the exam. Teachers might like to choose a wide array of questions (perhaps six to eight) so that students have ample choice. Students can then select a single question to answer.

Having students design their own questions forces them to wrestle with what they have studied. To emphasize the seriousness of developing these questions, teachers might choose to give a grade for the students’ efforts. Designing such questions also lets students have a say in the exam. Most students find this refreshing—and they also like the idea that they may answer their own question if it is included on the exam.

Well thought-out and carefully crafted open-book essay exams (whether take-home or in-class) are another excellent way for students to synthesize knowledge. William Fernekes, a high school social studies supervisor and teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey, teaches an elective course titled the “Holocaust and Human

Behavior.” He says that essays are useful for assessing students’ knowledge. Concerning the essay exams he assigns, Fernekes says:

Students are assigned a take-home essay constituting 50 percent of their final exam grade in the course. The essay topic integrates learning from the entire course while permitting flexibility in the choice of sources to support the student arguments. A critical requirement for the essay is the application of key course concepts regarding human behavior: prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, in group/out group relationships, psychological distancing and compensating behaviors, and the creation of “the other” (dehumanization). Students must employ evidence from their two outside reading books (survivor memoirs) as well as a selection of three or more eyewitness accounts by participants in the Holocaust (perpetrators, victims, rescuers or bystanders).<sup>9</sup>

An actual question Fernekes has used is as follows:

The Holocaust can be viewed as the outgrowth of choices made by individuals and groups in a wide variety of situations. Drawing primarily upon personal eyewitness accounts, explain what you consider to be (1) the key factors that significantly influenced the choices made by perpetrators and victims groups; and (2) the most important insight for understanding human behavior in today’s world based upon your analysis of these factors and the choices that were made.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

I never underestimate the importance of a strong closing unit on the Holocaust. As previously mentioned, my goal for this unit is twofold: first, to assist students in synthesizing their new knowledge and, second, to plant seeds that will remain in their minds and hearts long after the study of the Holocaust has concluded. If these two goals are accomplished, then the study of the Holocaust will not be just one of the thousands of lessons “learned” today and forgotten tomorrow. G

### Notes

1. Gabrielle Rico, “Clustering: A Prewriting Process,” in Carol Booth Olson, ed., *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education), 17.
2. For some excellent discussions by classroom teachers on clustering, see Carol Booth Olson’s *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1996).
3. Rico, 17.
4. See Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
5. For a theoretical discussion of multiple intelligences, see Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind*. For a detailed discussion of multiple intelligences and how to incorporate them into the instructional process, see Howard Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* and Thomas Armstrong’s *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994).
6. Steve Feinberg, personal correspondence (1998).
7. For a detailed discussion of issues related to guest speakers, see Samuel Totten’s “The Use of First-Person Accounts in Teaching About the Holocaust,” in Samuel Totten and Stephen Feinberg, eds., *Teaching and Studying About the Holocaust* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon Publishers, 2001).
8. Steve Feinberg, personal correspondence (1998).
9. William Fernekes, personal correspondence (1998).
10. *Ibid.*

### Other Resources

- Niewyk, Donald L. “Holocaust: The Genocide of the Jews.” In *Genocide in the Twentieth Century: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, edited by Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, 167-207. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Totten, Samuel. “The Start Is as Important as the Finish: Establishing a Foundation for Study of the Holocaust.” *Social Education* 62, no. 2 (1998): 70-76.
- Wiggins, Grant. “Creating a Thought-Provoking Curriculum.” *American Educator* 11 (Winter 1987): 4.
- Wiggins, Grant. “A True Test: Toward Authentic and Equitable Assessment.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 70 (May 1989): 9.

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