"Research & Practice" features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Tsafrir Goldberg to share his research on teaching difficult histories. He defines difficult histories and describes the challenges and opportunities afforded by teaching such histories.

-Patricia G. Avery, "Research & Practice" Editor, University of Minnesota

Delving into Difficulty:Are Teachers Evading or Embracing Difficult Histories?

Tsafrir Goldberg

In a recent cross-national study of history teachers' perceptions of sensitive and difficult historical issues,1 we asked our respondents to write about an issue they considered teaching, but finally avoided or felt unsure to teach. A substantial part (almost half of the 720 respondents) produced varied reports of diverse issues, from the Holocaust to interethnic wars, and from the history of Islam to the issue of Immigration. However, what is especially noteworthy is the fact that the majority of the teachers did not report such an instance. Furthermore, unbidden, a significant number of the teachers who didn't report evading a historical issue, chose to use the open question to express vehement support for teaching sensitive and difficult issues: "I will never avoid [such an issue]"; "I avoid no subject—I debate with my students"; "I think it is important to open these issues"; "I do not ask myself if these are Taboos. On the contrary..."; "I think such teaching inherent to the nature of discipline, and to our commitment as educators, I only wish I had more opportunities to deal with 'Sensitive' issues."

Such reactions cut across the collaborating countries, from France to Serbia

and from Finland to Israel. While respondents may have been involved to some degree in an attempt to boast of self-confidence, their reactions may also be representative of a more general phenomenon: the "international difficult history boom."2 In the last three decades, established and new democracies all over the world show increasing interest in troubling aspects of the national past. Monuments, museums, commemorations and curricula engage with histories of collective trauma and victimhood. This includes instances in which the nation perpetrated harm unto its own citizens or an ethnic majority group was involved in atrocities towards minorities.3 Such issues were traditionally downplayed in national narratives. What is it that makes these difficult histories? Perhaps more intriguingly—what draws educational policymakers, teachers, and students to difficult histories? And can social education research suggest guidelines for best practice and offer caution against potential pitfalls?

What's a Difficult History?

First, we should note that the "difficulty," or sensitivity, of a historical issue is essentially dependent on the learner and the

context. However, having said that, we can also point to some basic theoretical assumptions about the characteristics of difficult histories. Some of these assumptions draw from the psychoanalytical and popular notion of trauma.4 Difficult histories expose learners to historical suffering and victimization that constitute a collective trauma. The difficulty stems from the strong emotional reactions or ethical responses learners may evince, undermining their trust in security and morality of this world. The paradigmatic difficult history in this sense is learning about the Holocaust.⁵ Indeed, engagement with Holocaust survivor testimony and Holocaust education form the basis of much of theoretical and practical knowledge on teaching difficult histories. As Simon and Eppert suggest, learners are to some degree (re)traumatized by the difficult knowledge when witnessing a survivor's testimony.6

However, difficult histories may also expose learners to instances in which their own nation, or the ethnic/social group to which they belong, played the role of perpetrator. Learning that their nation, and implicitly even their direct ancestors, victimized a minority, enslaved or behaved atrociously

The Korean War and Its Legacy: Teaching about Korea through Inquiry

Korean War Legacy Foundation. 231 pages. 2019

News headlines regularly remind us of the importance of the Korean Peninsula and the challenges facing U.S. policy on North Korea.

The tensions in Korea are part of the legacy of the Korean War, which culminated in an armistice in 1953, but has never been concluded by a peace treaty. Often described as the "Forgotten War," it had significant consequences for the United States and the world. Even though more than a million U.S. soldiers fought in the Korean War, and 28,000 U.S. forces are still stationed in South Korea, it only receives limited coverage in history textbooks.

This book fills an important gap by presenting rich primary resources in the form of oral histories, photos, and official documents of the Korean War that enable teachers and students to explore the war through the eyes of those who experienced its intensity and hardships. The contributors to the book also offer important background information about contemporary Korea and the challenges facing United States diplomacy in the Korean Peninsula.

Member price: \$19.95 / List price: \$29.95 Item 190900, ISBN 978-0-87986-115-5

Korea's Place in Teaching World History

World History Digital Education Foundation 208 pages, 2018

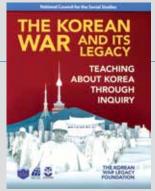
This unique publication provides high school teachers of world history with primary sources, background information, and engaging class activities about historical and contemporary Korea.

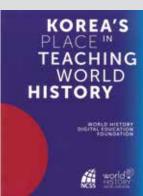
While the book provides important information on premodern Korean history, most of its lessons focus on the period since the Korean War. Students will be fascinated to learn about the different economic, ideological, and political paths followed by North and South Korea, and the reasons for the "Great Divergence" between the two states that resulted from South Korea's fast-growing economy and political democratization.

Member/List Price: \$19.95 / \$29.95



Purchase 10 or more copies and save 20% off the non-member price. Order online at www.socialstudies.org/store. To order by phone, call 1-800-683-0812. To order by purchase order, please email as attachments to bookstore@ncss.org; fax to 301-779-8596, or mail to NCSS Publications, 3570 Bladensburg Rd., Brentwood, MD 20722. Any order including a check as payment should be sent to: NCSS, P.O. Box 79078, Baltimore, MD 21279-0078.







towards a group of people, oppressed and conquered other nations, may arouse in learners a sense of collective guilt. This perspective on difficult history draws from basic assumptions of social psychology.⁷ The difficulty here stems, not just from the unsettling emotion, but from the blow to the individual's self-esteem stemming from the negative image of the group. Such a history is difficult because it collides with learners' need to identify with their nation or ethnic group and to view it as inherently benevolent. The major examples of difficult histories from this perspective are accounts of slavery and racial discrimination, or of Native Americans' expatriation in the United States. History of colonialism, collaboration with the Nazis, or rise of local dictatorships and violent civil war may be seen as difficult histories in Europe and South America (as well as Holocaust education in Germany).8

Fear of Difficult Histories

Thus, it may seem clear why difficult histories have either been evaded or considered "taboo topics" by policymakers and educators. Policymakers may deem engagement with historical events of suffering to be harmful to the mental well-being of students. Governments may fear fostering dissent and dis-identification with the nation among youths encountering the unflattering face of their national history. Or in some cases it may fear increasing a rift between descendants of oppressor groups and oppressed groups.10 Until the last decades, even liberal democracies avoided shedding light on state or founding fathers' wrongdoing, or even commemorating the suffering of victimized minorities. Currently, highlighting difficult histories is still discouraged, at times even legally sanctioned, especially in emerging democracies such as the post-Soviet East European regimes. Poland's right-wing government party recently attempted to criminalize mention of Polish participation in the Nazi persecution of Jews. $^{\rm II}$

Teachers, too, may prefer not to broach difficult histories for parallel reasons—fear of traumatizing their students, or wanting to maintain a positive image of the nation and community. Teachers may also feel threatened by sanctions from their superiors, their colleagues, or their community (a fear not totally unfounded in some countries). For example, Polish teachers who taught about the Holocaust and Polish collaboration reported harsh reactions from their colleagues.12 Similarly, the Israeli minister of education publicly admonished a principal for having let a teacher present the Palestinian perspective on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem alongside the Israeli perspective.¹³ However, such experiences are rare. In our survey and interviews, we found little evidence of sanctions, formal or informal. If at all, teachers sometimes seemed intimidated by their students' reactions to difficult histories.14

While avoiding difficult histories may seem understandable, there's growing evidence of an increased frequency in which policymakers, NGOs, teachers, and students are embracing the study of difficult histories

Difficult Attraction

Commemoration of difficult episodes begins many times informally, initiated by committed individuals, victimized communities and non-profit organizations. To some degree this applies also to history education. At the college level, books by Howard Zinn and Iames Loewen that expose the unflattering side of national history are perennial best sellers. Non-profits like Facing History and Ourselves and the Southern Poverty Law Center create teaching materials and advocate educational engagement with difficult histories such as the Holocaust and slavery.¹⁵ However, some governments are beginning to embrace the teaching

of difficult histories, integrating them into history curriculum. The expansion of Holocaust Education across the world is one important example.¹⁶ This topic poses a difficult engagement with trauma and suffering in every educational context. However, it also demands confrontation with the in-group as perpetrator, in Germany, which has the most extensive mandatory Holocaust Education curriculum, or in Eastern Europe, where issues of collaboration surface. In a similar vein, the teaching of American history in the United States is increasingly focusing study on the uprooting of Native Americans, the institution of slavery and racial discrimination. A governmental initiative in the Netherlands explores the Dutch role in the slave trade and in World War II collaboration.17

However, the heightened interest in difficult history is not just fueled from top-down initiatives. Teachers are central to this phenomenon. As mentioned previously, teachers show immense interest in teaching difficult histories, as evidenced by the increasing popularity and use of revisionist histories such as Howard Zinn's in college and high school level courses.¹⁸ Another indicator is the "curricular creep" of Holocaust Education into the lower grades as Simone Schweber terms it.19 Teachers flock to professional development courses on topics such as colonialism and slavery or on the Vietnam War. In Israel, all Jewish respondents to the survey of sensitive historical issues reported teaching the history of the Palestinian refugees' uprooting and prevention of return.²⁰ Following the publicized denunciation of teaching the Palestinian perspective mentioned earlier, over one hundred Jewish Israeli teachers registered for professional development on "how to teach the Nagba (Arabic for catastrophe, the Palestinian name for the defeat and collapse of Palestinian society in 1948) in Hebrew."21 In Ireland, Kitson and McCully identified a growing number of teachers as activist "risk takers" tackling the troubled history of interethnic violence.²²

What's So Attractive About Difficult History?

Why are policymakers and educators drawn to difficult histories? There appear to be a host of complementary factors. First, and possibly foremost, is the rise of the global ideology of human rights, within which identification with victimhood and suffering is imbued with a prestigious moral status.23 Nations and communities vie for the role of victim in what has been termed "Competitive Victimhood," at times seeming to indulge in collective trauma, but they also try to engage with others' suffering. In Europe, in conjunction with this trend. Holocaust remembrance has become the new unifying narrative of the EU, a symbol of the emerging European identity, but also of the Western democratic allegiance more generally. EU leaders have made Holocaust Education a precondition for Eastern European nations entering the Union, and U.S. embassies emphatically advocate the implementation of Holocaust education in NATO candidates.²⁴ Those engaging with difficult histories may view it as a moral action that bestows an ethical status on its participants, offering a step in the path to reconciliation. Simon and Eppert²⁵ conceptualize the pedagogy of Holocaust Education as an ethics of listening to testimony and becoming its carriers, a commitment to commemorate trauma and prevent the recurrence of atrocity. Post-colonialism as critical theory and ideology has inverted European pride in imperialist expansion and substituted it for self-flagellation over oppression of third world nations. Educators may see engagement with dominated peoples' suffering as a trajectory for self-cleansing and action for social justice. They may see themselves Parrhesiastes,



"speaking truth to power," and curing their communities through critical selfreflection on the past.²⁶

The increasing proportion of immigrant children from former colonies in European schools may also influence teachers to focus on the perspectives of the colonized. Teachers may see this focus as culturally responsive, offering topics to which minority students may authentically relate.²⁷ Last, but not least, we should note that many social studies teachers see difficult histories as a stimulator of student engagement. Difficult histories answer the strong need for emotion in history teaching.²⁸ It provides the essential "identification stance" in history teaching, accessible apparently not just through evincing pride in the nation's heroic achievements but also through empathizing with suffering of others.²⁹

Getting Your Grip on Difficult Histories

Clarifying Aims

It's important for educators to deliberate prior to teaching difficult histories. First, teachers should be clear, to themselves and to their students, about why they are entering this challenging experience and what they seek to achieve, especially if the topic is not part of a mandatory, test-oriented curriculum. "You have to know" may not suffice. Is the aim to prevent a recurrence and promote taking a stance on human rights issues? If so, teachers should give thought in advance to activities that represent stance taking as a follow up-such as advocacy for reparations or service learning with survivors. If remembrance is an aim in itself, consider taking part in commemorative or documentation activity. If expanding capacities for empathy is a goal, teachers should consider whether they are seeking cognitive competence or an emotional identification, and to whom they expect students to apply it.

Learning from Others' Difficult Experience

While many teachers see the value of engaging with difficult histories, they

do not always feel prepared to do so. Teaching difficult histories isn't commonly taught in pre-service training, and teachers, especially novice teachers, are not always sure of the best approach. In these cases, trial and error may lead to outcomes that would discourage future attempts. Some published guidelines are: the British "Teaching Emotive and Controversial Histories," Oxfam's "Teaching Controversial Issues" guide, and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Holocaust education guidelines.³⁰ The abundance of initiatives has also led to the accumulation of some empirical and practical knowledge.

Conditions, Context, Curriculum

Sheppard stresses the importance of creating a safe and respectful environment in which learners can engage with difficult histories and share their emotional reactions.31 Attention to context also means keeping in mind that a history may be difficult in diverse ways to diverse students. In Europe, a look at Europeans as oppressors constitutes a difficult history for majority students, confronted with their nation's atrocities. For minority students, it may present an exposure to victimhood not necessarily discussed in countries of origin and underscore their otherness in ways they did not seek. This underscores an essential practice in teaching difficult histories: relating to learners' emotional and ethical response. Therefore, it's important to reserve time and structure activities for this purpose. Teachers should elicit students' reactions not just to identify cases of stress, but because connecting to others' emotions and taking a moral stance is a goal of difficult history teaching.

Documenting and sharing family histories of disruptive historical events is an important part of history teaching aimed at affirmation and reconciliation in conflict-ridden societies.³² I used this method repeatedly and successfully with my Jewish and Arab students and even with high schoolers, arousing empathy and mutual affirmation. While Jewish

students overwhelmingly recounted narratives of the Holocaust or challenging immigration, most Arab students tell stories of family uprooting. Both groups are surprised at how deep collective traumatic histories permeated ordinary people's lives.

When teaching about mass atrocities and extreme suffering, teachers must use authoritative and diverse sources to counter any tendency towards disbelief. While survivor testimony is usually the most compelling, this is one situation in which textbooks, usually frowned upon by competent teachers, may be of help. Students still view textbooks as the most authoritative "objective" source of information (if curriculum integrates difficult histories). Combining academic studies with more emotive sources like video testimony, film and art may help overcome the tendency to reject the incomprehensible. Note that this does not necessarily mean bringing in conflicting accounts and defending them, as in teaching controversial issues. (Students need not debate whether the Holocaust occurred or whether slavery was justified.)33

Cautions

Almost any well-intentioned aspect of teaching difficult history carries its perils and pitfalls. First and foremost is the issue of age appropriateness (middle school is usually considered the earliest starting point). However, like the notion in psychoanalysis of the "difficult return" of repressed trauma, difficult histories threaten learners with the sense that the traumatic past may return and repeat. While this threat may be real and contribute to learners' ethical commitment to a "never again" stance, it may also heighten learners' sense of vulnerability. This risk is made more prevalent by the inherent tendency in difficult histories to connect past to present. I have mentioned an example to this risk in a discussion of the newly initiated Israeli elementary and kindergarten Holocaust Education curriculum.34 Coming home from kindergarten on Holocaust Memorial day, my six-year-old daughter burst into our

children's room, hugged her baby sister, crying in relief: "You've survived! I've just learned the Nazis wanted to kill all Jewish children!"

Teachers will need to tread carefully as far as personal testimonies are concerned, especially family histories. Students are strongly connected to their personal family narratives of hardship and persecution, understandably considering them more reliable than academic historical research, and therefore immune to critical inquiry. Applying critical historical thinking practices, which most history teachers would like to set as the norm in their classes, in this context, may arouse indignation and be perceived as disrespect to family elders and narratives. On the other hand, difficult histories should be based on the most up-to-date and reliable academic knowledge relying on critical inquiry. Thus, history educators working on difficult histories find themselves applying two different pedagogies

at once—a pedagogy of reverence and a pedagogy of criticism. Indeed, if we can end in a phrase summarizing the force and challenge of difficult histories, it is to combine critical stance-taker thinking with reverence for trauma that transcends understanding.

Notes

- Tsafrir Goldberg, Wolfgang Wagner, and Nebojša Petrovi, "From Sensitive Historical Issues to History Teachers' Sensibility: A Look Across and Within Countries," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27 (January 2019): 1, 7–38.
- Bain Attwood, "The International Difficult Histories Boom, the Democratization of History, and The National Museum of Australia," in *The* International Handbooks of Museum Studies, eds. Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 61–83.
- Sharon McDonald, Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond (NY: Routledge, 2008).
- Deborah P. Britzman, "If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge," in Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma, eds. R. I. Simon, S. Rosenberg, and C. Eppert (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 27–55.

- Maia G. Sheppard, "Difficult Histories in an Urban Classroom" (Doctoral dissertation, 2010). Retrieved from https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11 299/ 04166
- Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert, "Remembering Obligation: Pedagogy and the Witnessing of Testimony of Historical Trauma," Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation (1997): 175–191.
- Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertrand Doojse, Collective Guilt: International Perspectives (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Michal Bilewicz, Maria Witkowska, Stephan Stubig, M. Beneda, and Roland Imhoff, "How to Teach about the Holocaust? Psychological Obstacles in Historical Education in Poland and Germany," in History Education and Conflict Transformation, eds. Charis Psaltis, Mario Carretero, and Sabina ehaji -Clancy (Springer, 2017), 169–197.
- Ronald W. Evans, Patricia G. Avery, and Patricia Velde Pederson, "Taboo Topics: Cultural Restraint on Teaching Social Issues," *The Social Studies* 90, no. 5 (1999): 218–224.
- 10. Tsafrir Goldberg and David Gerwin, "Israeli History Curriculum and the Conservative Liberal Pendulum," *International Journal of Historical Teaching, Learning and Research* 11, no. 2 (2013): 111–124.
- Magdalena H. Gross and Luke Terra, "What Makes Difficult History Difficult?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 8 (May 2018): 51–56.

FREE Summer Professional Development Opportunities!





Presidential and Congressional Academies for American History and Civics CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION



- Noted Political Science and History Scholars
- Field Trips to Historical Sites
- Stipend for Participants
- Join us July 11-25th!

Apply Today at civiced.org/academies

- Free Set of Textbooks
- Stipend for Participants
- Contribute to a Nationwide Research Project

Learn How to Apply in Your Region at civiced.org/pc-program/project-citizen-research-program



The American History and Civics Academies and the Project Citizen Research Program grants are funded by the U.S. Department of Education

- 12. Magdalena H. Gross, "To Teach the Holocaust in Poland: Understanding Teachers' Motivations to Engage the Painful Past," *Intercultural Education* 24, no. 1–2 (2013): 103–120.
- Orr Kashti, "Education Ministry Bans Textbook That Offers Palestinian Narrative," Haaretz (2010).
- Geerte M. Savenije and Tsafrir Goldberg, "Silences in a Climate of Voicing: Teachers' Perceptions of Societal and Self-Silencing Regarding Sensitive Historical Issues," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27, no. 1 (January 2019): 39–64.
- 15. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery Teaching Tolerance" [cited 2019 Aug 29]. Available from www.tolerance. org/magazine/publications/teaching-hard-history-american-slavery; Facing History and Ourselves, "Facing History and Ourselves" (2019) [cited 2019 Aug 30]. Available from: www.facinghistory.org/.
- Bryan L. Davis and Eliane Rubinstein-Avila, "Holocaust Education: Global Forces Shaping Curricula Integration and Implementation," *Intercultural Education* 24, no. 1–02 (May 2013): 149–166.
- 17. Geerte M. Savenije, Carla van Boxtel, and Maria Grever, "Learning About Sensitive History: 'Heritage' of Slavery as a Resource," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 42, no. 4 (October 2014): 516–547.
- Sam Wineburg, Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- Simone Schweber, "What Happened to Their Pets?": Third Graders Encounter the Holocaust," Teachers College Record 110, no. 10 (2008): 2073– 2115.
- 20. Goldberg, Wagner and Petroic. However, responses on the Israeli mandatory history matriculation exam show only five percent of the students opted answering this topic. A proportion that either sheds doubt on teachers' actual commitment to teaching the topic, or indicates students' aversion to it (Israeli ministry of education baccalaureate database 2013).

- Ron Blumenfeld, "Teachers Who Aren't Afraid to Teach About the Naqba: The Refugees Didn't Just Evaporate," Walla News (April 2015).
- Alison Kitson and Alan McCully, "'You Hear About it for Real in School.' Avoiding, Containing and Risk-Taking in the History Classroom," *Teaching History* 120 (2005): 32–37.
- Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 24. Bryan L. Davis and Eliane Rubinstein-Avila, "Holocaust Education: Global Forces Shaping Curricula Integration and Implementation," Intercultural Education 24, no. 1-02 (May 2013): 149–166; Thomas Misco, "Holocaust Curriculum Development for Latvian Schools: Arriving at Purposes, Aims, and Goals Through Curriculum Deliberation," Theory & Research in Social Education 35, no. 3 (2007): 393–426.
- 25. Simon and Eppert.
- 26. Giovanna Leone and Mauro Sarrica, "Making Room for Negative Emotions About the National Past: An Explorative Study of Effects of Parrhesia on Italian Colonial Crimes," *International Journal* of Intercultural Relations 43 (2014): 126–138.
- 27. Sheppard.
- 28. Keith C. Barton, "The Denial of Desire," in National History Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History, eds. Linda Symcox and Arie Wilschut (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age, 2009), 261–278.
- Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004).
- 30. Andrew Wrenn, Alf Wilkinson, Alison Webb, Helena Gillespie, Michael Riley, Penelope Harnett, Richard Harris, and Tim Lomas, *Teaching Emotive and Controversial History*, 3–19 (London: British Historical Association, 2007); International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, "How to Teach about the Holocaust in Schools" (2010), 2015; G. C. Guides, "Teaching Controversial Issues," Oxfam GB (2006).

- Maia G. Sheppard, "Creating a Caring Classroom in Which to Teach Difficult Histories," *The History Teacher* (2010): 411 – 426.
- 32. Dan Bar-On, "Storytelling and Multiple Narratives in Conflict Situations: From the TRT Group in the German-Jewish Context to the Dual-Narrative Approach of PRIME," in *Handbook on Peace Education*, eds. Gabriel Salomon and Ed Cairns (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), 199–212.
- 33. See discussion of the confluence of difficult histories and controversial issues at the end of Tsafrir Goldberg and Geerte M. Savenije, "Teaching Controversial Historical Issues," in *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*, eds. Scott Alan Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018), 503–526.
- 34. Yair Ziv, Deborah Golden, and Tsafrir Goldberg, "Teaching Traumatic History to Young Children: The Case of Holocaust Studies in Israeli Kindergartens," *Early Education and Development* 26, no. 4 (2015), 520–533.

TSAFRIR GOLDBERG is Professor of Learning and Instruction at the Department of Learning, Instruction and Teacher Education, University of Haifa, Israel. His research focuses on the relations of learning and social identity in history education, and on teachers' learning, identity and perceptions of their work. He can be contacted at tgoldberg@edu.haifa.ac.il.

For inquiries about advertising, call Rachel Barkin at 202-367-2329 or e-mail

rbarkin@townsend-group.com

Information about advertising rates and specs can also be found at www.socialstudies.org/advertising

ADVERTISING INDEX

C-SPAN Classroom	Back Cover
Center for Civic Education	135
Dar al Islam	107
Izzit.org	108-109
University of Nebraska Online	132/133