INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORKS IN TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

Dr. David Lindquist is an assistant professor and coordinator of the undergraduate secondary education program in the School of Education at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). He is also co-director of IPFW's Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Formerly a high school social studies department chair, Dr. Lindquist is a Fellow of the Teacher Fellowship Program and a Regional Museum Educator for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He has participated in the Poland/Israel Holocaust study program sponsored by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and has been named a Distinguished Teacher by the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars.

ABSTRACT

Meaningful Holocaust curricula must be based on an awareness of the unique dynamics involved in teaching the subject including the need to develop instructional frameworks that allow the topic to be confronted inways that are interesting and academically challenging while observing various sensitivities that are inherent in studying the event. This article considers five such instructional frameworks.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Three components may be seen as critical to the development of any instructional unit. First, instructional frameworks provide multiple perspectives through which curricula are developed. Next, content-related decisions determine what information will be presented in employing the frameworks. Finally, pedagogical decision making involves selecting instructional activities that allow the frameworks and content to be presented successfully, Thus leading to student learning, comprehension, and understanding. As such, the approaches used in teaching any subject must evolve from the instructional frameworks and content on which a unit is founded.

This article focuses on the first of these components as it affects Holocaust education. While selecting appropriate instructional frameworks is vital to any instructional unit's success, the unique dynamics and potential pitfalls inherent in Holocaust education make a careful consideration of this component especially critical when planning units about the Shoah.1 Five frameworks are discussed: 1) a paradigm of evil; 2) introducing the topic; 3) the power of language; 4) contextualization; and 5) personalization. Paying careful attention to each framework leads to the development of interesting, effective, and appropriate Holocaust units while acknowledging various issues that influence the teaching of the subject.
Instructional Frameworks

A PARADIGM OF EVIL

Hopefully, a positive paradigm is central to most educational practices. Teachers encourage good behavior and study habits in their students and suggest efficient ways to do mathematics problems or conduct science experiments. In doing so, they are telling their students "This is how it should be done. Do likewise."

Conversely, Holocaust education is based on a paradigm of evil because it focuses on the premise that "Here is supreme evil, something awful that someone did." Thus, a negative model is established, and studying the Shoah becomes a lesson about what should not occur. Identifying this negative paradigm explains why the event has become the defining element in the contemporary world view of human behavior because, as Berenbaum states, "In a world of relativism, we don't know what's bad, and we don't know what's good, but the one thing we can agree upon is that this is absolute evil. It's become the standard by which we judge evil and, therefore, the standard by which we begin to establish values" (Anker, 2006).

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

Ravitch (2004) notes that most history textbooks used in American schools are bland and non-critical, and Lindquist (2006) holds that the factual and inferential accuracy of such books is marginal, at best. Given that textbooks drive social studies instruction (Martorella, 2005), it is not surprising that most students bring superficial experiences in studying history to their first encounters with the Shoah. Thus, an initial challenge in Holocaust teaching involves introducing unprecedented historical events to students who have not studied history intensively during previous academic experiences. Totten and Feinberg extend this situation, stating that "Opening and closing lessons in a study of the Holocaust are important because they set the tone for the entire course" (1995, p. 327). They continue by giving several examples of problems that can be avoided if a unit's opening lessons are designed carefully, with special attention being paid to establishing clearly-defined rationales for Holocaust education. Similarly, positive outcomes result from opening lessons that preview the Holocaust's complexity for students who are beginning their study of the event.

One introductory challenge involves taking students into a complicated world they are not prepared to encounter. To overcome this reality, teachers should ease their students into the study of the topic by taking measured steps, perhaps opening their units without making specific references to the Holocaust or by suggesting general connections to it. This approach may involve having students consider how they evaluate historical events, how they examine the human experience in general, or how historical events illustrate complex issues of human behavior. Using this format, students address the Holocaust initially along broad historical lines, enabling them to see the Shoah's relevancy to both historical and contemporary situations.

A discussion of the Holocaust's structure should be an integral part of introducing the subject. For this reason, a detailed definition of the Holocaust should be developed in order to establish the historical context of what occurred. This definition should consider such factors as the event's: 1) what; 2) when; 3) where; 4) how; 5) by whom; 6) against whom; 7) why; and 8) to what extent (USHMM, 2001). Hilberg's (1985) destruction process should also be considered early in any unit, thereby establishing the systematic nature of Nazi Germany's actions.

The Shoah may also be introduced by considering the question "Why are we studying this?" Tying this approach to a K-W-L session (Ogle, 1986) can help students develop an initial interest in the topic, although it should be noted that any misconceptions that students bring to their study of the event must be corrected as they surface (Totten, 2002).

Sensitivity, a critical factor in teaching the Holocaust, should be observed during a unit's early stages as students work into the study at a controlled pace. Thus, teachers should "err on the side of caution," especially in developing the opening lessons of a unit. The "horrors of the event" must be controlled as "a continuum of exposure" to the event's starkness is allowed to evolve during the unit.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Teachers must also consider the power of language in general and the power of Holocaust language in particular. Langer notes this imperative, stating that examining language allows readers' to "raise with such concise fervor two key issues that vex our imagination: the inner state of the murderers and the inner state of the victims" (1995, p. 5). Thus, teachers should consider both the event and its language as they help students "confront behavior that cannot be explained by prior notions of why we do what we do" (Langer, 1995, p. 5).

To confront that behavior, studying both the meaning and the dynamics of Holocaust language should be an essential factor in teaching the subject. In that regard, language must be used accurately, and the misuse of language must be avoided (USHMM, 2001, p. 3). The subtle nuances inherent in Holocaust language require that precise vocabulary be used to assure that the event's reality is transmitted accurately through the language used to describe what occurred.

The Nazis' skillful use of language must also be considered. Nazi-Deutsch (Michael and Doerr, 2002) was used to keep victims uninformed while providing psychological shields for perpetrators and bystanders. For example, it is one thing to say "We are relocating you to the

East" (a neutral statement) and quite another to state "We are sending you to a ghetto in Poland" (a statement implying disastrous consequences for people being transported). McGuinn (2000) holds that the Nazis' use of language led to "a fundamental assault on the integrity of words. … It is here, on the territory of language, that English teachers must initiate the counterattack against the forces which created the Holocaust" (pp. 119, 122). Therefore, Holocaust language must be used with great attention to accuracy and clarity (USHMM, 2001, p. 3), allowing students to understand the role language played in the Holocaust's evolution.

Survivors' use of language should also be stressed in teaching the Shoah, especially given its impact on students as they listen to oral histories. A survivor's testimony often hinges on one word or phrase that brings a sense of reality to students as they listen; that reality is often so strong that it may seem that the students are being carried back in time and place along with the survivor. Care must be taken, however, in using such terms as "unimaginable" and "unbelievable," words often used by survivors in describing the Shoah, because "What does it mean to say that an event is beyond the imagination? It was not beyond the imagination of the men who authorized it; or those who executed it; or those who suffered it. Once an event occurs, can it any longer be said to be 'beyond the imagination' " (Langer, 1978, p. 5)?

Describing concepts by using original German words can also be an effective teaching approach, especially in establishing the perpetrators' motivations. For example, the title *Scheismeister*, which translates as latrine master, was applied to orderlies who recorded how often prisoners used the latrine and how long it took them to do so (Epstein and Rosen, 1997). Such actions beg the question, "What implications can be drawn about a bureaucracy that records such minutiae?" Similarly, students can analyze how the Nazis applied their own connotations to every day words while developing complex euphemisms that cloaked what was happening behind carefully designed linguistic deceptions (Totten, 2001b). Studying the implications of Holocaust language provides a way for students to conceptualize the event's complex levels because "Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings" (USHMM, 2001, p. 4). As a result, students' understanding of the Shoah is enriched. In addition, studying Holocaust language helps students increase the sophistication with which they use and comprehend language in general.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

A failure to contextualize the event (i.e., decontextualization) occurs in many Holocaust units. Contextualization must be developed on three levels. First, the Shoah should be viewed as part of Western history's general continuum. Students must realize that antisemitism, racism, social Darwinism, extreme nationalism, industrialism, totalitarianism, and the nature of modern war all led to Nazism's rise and the Holocaust (Niewyk, 1995). Conversely, care must be taken to avoid implying that the Holocaust was inevitable (USHMM, 2001). While certain long-standing conditions made the event possible, students must understand that the event happened at a given time and in a given place because the perpetrators made conscious decisions to implement it (Crowe, 2001).

> "Raise with such concise fervor two key issues that vex our imagination: the inner state of the murderers and the inner state of the victims."

Second, contextualization must place the Holocaust within the framework of World War II, thereby avoiding the perspective that sees the Holocaust as tangential to the war (Dawidowicz, 1990). In that view, the war and Holocaust are seen as being loosely connected to each other, at best (Weinberg, 1998), a view that runs contrary to Bergen's (2003) thesis that "Without the war, the Holocaust would not - and could not - have happened" (p. ix). Conversely, situating the Shoah within the war's evolution avoids the myopia that sometimes occurs in teaching the Holocaust. This approach also allows students to study what happened to non-Jewish victims and to see the event "… as part of the greater moral, political, and social decadence that swept Europe at the time" (Crowe, 2001, p. 54).

Third, each individual situation that occurred during the Shoah must be placed into its proper context within the event's cumulative story. For example, a survivor's account of a particular occurrence must be considered in terms of that individual's situation when the circumstance occurred in addition to the general dynamics of the particular time and location involved because "Most [Holocaust] survivors reconstruct their experiences into very narrow terms, usually without reference to any larger historical contexts and with little attention to the larger events around them" (Edelheit, 1998, p. 2).

Using *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1997) to teach the Holocaust illustrates problems that occur when

individual occurrences are not viewed in relation to the event as a whole, thus leading to two factors that make teaching the diary problematic. First, students often lack the general knowledge of Holocaust history that is necessary for developing a historically-rooted understanding of the diary. Second, the events described in the diary were atypical of what happened to most victims, resulting in a distorted view for students for whom the diary is *the* Holocaust (Culbertson, 2001). Conversely, effective curricula establish the event's context on multiple levels as a precondition for all other aspects involved in studying the topic.

Contextualization is especially critical when the topic is taught through literature. Literature-based units should begin by discussing Holocaust history because "… it is imperative that teachers undergird the use of literature with a substantial amount of history" (Totten, 2001a, p. 27) for "Only when read within an historical context, with some knowledge and scope of the magnitude of the Holocaust, is the reader able to put the individual story into a more universal perspective" (Drew, 1989, p. 21).

Decontextualization also occurs in history-based curricula. Because many students have "little sense of historical time" (Drew, 1991, p. 128), an approach that stresses the event's chronology is often necessary. Feinberg advocates this format when he suggests that teachers should continually ask "Where does it [a given occurrence] belong?" in the Holocaust's overall history (Wieser, 2001, p 78).

PERSONALIZATION

Personalization of the event is the fifth instructional framework to consider in developing Holocaust units. Discussing what happened to individuals is vital if the event is to be transformed "from a welter of statistics, remote places, and events, to one that is immersed in the 'personal' and the 'particular' " (Totten, 1987, p. 63). Wilkins (1996) discusses this imperative, noting:

> The magnitude of the Holocaust … is beyond the comprehension of most of us. It is difficult to grasp the meaning of such enormous numbers. One tends to become detached, void of any kind of personal connection, with six million, or ten million, of anything. … And it is compounded by textbooks and photographs about the Holocaust, which often fail to convey the individual, personalized experiences of the victim—presenting the event instead in the aggregate. (p. 159)

Personalization thus becomes the key element in overcoming *the problem of numbers*, that is, the fact that the toll in human life that occurred during the Shoah was so large that it is beyond most people's ability to comprehend the magnitude of the losses that occurred.

Personalization is best achieved by using first-person accounts given by those who experienced the event, thereby developing history "from the inside" (Totten, 2001b, p. 107). Several types of resources, including various literary genre and survivor and rescuer testimony (often presented on film), may be used to implement this approach.

"The power of the individual human story within a persecutive or genocidal situation may thus engage students in a way no other type of information can, in part because of the deeply human aspects—including the passions and emotions—that are communicated."

Employing literature can be one of the most effective ways to personalize the event because it fosters a direct relationship between students and the people who experienced the Shoah. Diaries and memoirs provide insights into the depths of human emotions, establishing a lens that has the power to address humankind itself. Totten proposes this when he states, "The power of the individual human story within a persecutive or genocidal situation may thus engage students in a way no other type of information can, in part because of the deeply human aspects—including the passions and emotions—that are communicated" (Totten, 2001b, p. 111). Doing so allows students to begin to appreciate the Holocaust "as a human drama [that they] can [possibly begin] to understand" (Bauman, 1992, p. 21).

Several factors that complicate the use of first-person accounts should be noted. Decontextualization, which must be avoided, occurs for three reasons (Totten, 2001b). First, because each survivor's story is unique, it is often difficult to see how one person's story fits within a given situation's context. Second, when described by multiple individuals, each such occurrence will be described differently because each person's experience was unique even within the structure of a specific event. Third, each situation must be located within the Holocaust's overall context. Thus, personalization established through first-person accounts must be placed into ever-expanding contexts if those accounts are to be historically accurate and conducive to students' understanding of the Shoah.

In addition, concerns about historical accuracy are critical when using first-person accounts because "Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. … The memories which lie within us are not carved in stove. … Nevertheless, even under normal conditions a slow degradation is at work, an obfuscation of outlines, a so to speak psychological oblivion, which few memories resist" (Levi, 1986, pp. 23-24). For this reason, distinctions between significant and insignificant inaccuracies must be discussed.

Regardless of the limitations involved in their use, first-person accounts should be central to any meaningful Holocaust curricula because they establish the critical link between the event and the individuals whose lives were changed forever by it. As such, using first-hand accounts moves students past the tendency to view the Holocaust in stereotypical terms because each participant's story involves unique elements that can be examined.

Introducing students to persons who were involved in the Holocaust is critical if studying the Shoah is to achieve its maximum impact on those students. Doing so appropriately engenders an engaged empathy "… insofar as they help us build a bridge across the intervening abyss" (Langer, 1989, p. 296) between participants in the event and students who study it. Unless students understand that abyss, their study of the Holocaust is limited in comprehension and meaning. Bridging that fissure through the use of first-person accounts becomes a key component in any successful Holocaust curricula.

Personalization also accelerates the process of engaging students' moral sensitivities (Coles, 1989). Students learn that most victims, rescuers, and bystanders were ordinary people trying to live as normally as possible given the disruption caused by the war. Understanding this reality allows teachers to avoid asking students the trivializing question "What would you have done?" Instead, students begin to view the Holocaust as an event in which real people were forced to make life-or-death decisions, situating those decisions within historical, moral, and ethical frames of reference. Pondering those decisions moves each student's encounter with the Shoah to a uniquely personal level. This approach leads students to understand that no finite conclusions can be drawn about the experiences of those who were engulfed by the Holocaust, thereby demonstrating that each circumstance must be seen in terms of what each individual experienced.

Survivor and poetess Sonia Schreiber Weitz invites students of the Holocaust to join her in another time and place in order to view "the eclipse of humanity" (Facing History and Ourselves, 1994). Personalizing the Holocaust by examining the stories of individuals who experienced the event allows students to make that leap of time and place, thus beginning the process of understanding that the Holocaust is, above all, the story of an ultimate human catastrophe.

CONCLUSION

At an early stage of developing any curricula, teachers must consider what perspectives they want to present to students. Determining appropriate instructional frameworks provides those perspectives, thus establishing a conceptual grounding on which decisions regarding content to be included and pedagogies to be used can be based. The complex dynamics inherent in Holocaust education make it critical that carefully considered instructional frameworks are chosen as instructional units are being developed. Thus, considering the instructional frameworks discussed in this article can help educators conceptualize their Holocaust curricula so that they can make content and pedagogical decisions that will result in meaningful education about this vital topic.

NOTE

[1] The term *Shoah* is a Hebrew word meaning catastrophe. Many Holocaust scholars prefer to use Shoah instead of Holocaust, a Greek term meaning totally burnt offering or sacrifice (Nicosia and Niewyk, 2000). The terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

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