The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies

Volume 73
Number 2 *Volume 73 No. 2 (2012)*

Article 4

June 2012

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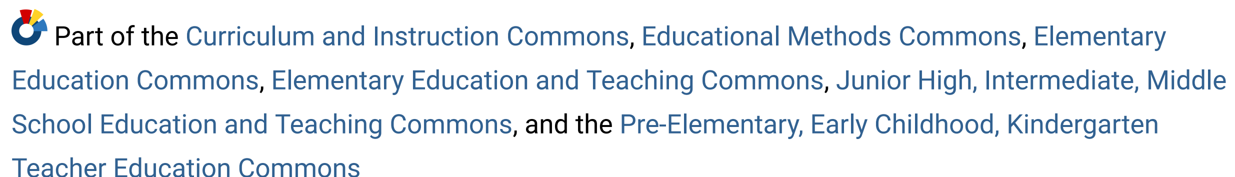

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Recommended Citation

Lindquist, David (2012) "A Holocaust-Based Investigative Project: Historical Research for Secondary School Students," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 4.
Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol73/iss2/4

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Illinois Council of Social Studies

A Holocaust-Based Investigative Project: Historical Research for Secondary School Students

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Introduction

Providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful research should be a prime objective of middle school and high school social studies instruction. However, what passes for research in secondary classes often results in projects that merely restate what the student has read, leading to "traditional reports and research papers [that] are high on clerical effort but low on mental exertion" (Blasingame and Bushman, 2005, p. 59-60). This article presents a project that moves beyond the usual format found in secondary school research by involving students in investigating the impact of the Holocaust on individuals who were affected by that event. As such, students learn and implement research skills, practice historical inquiry, and build historical content knowledge. In addition, the project moves classroom activities toward student-centered instruction and encourages the development of historical empathy, a central idea on which the study of history should be based (Barton and Levstik, 2009). Perhaps most importantly, the project focuses on the impact of the Holocaust on individuals, a desired goal for curricula that focus on the Shoah.[1]

Implementing Student-Centered Instruction: A Social Studies Best Practice

Secondary school social studies practice should move instruction from its traditional teacher-centered base to one that is student-driven, thus allowing students to take control of their own learning (Powell, 2005). Regarding the project described in this article, each student decides the focus of his/her study; determines what information can be learned about that focus; draws conclusions about the Shoah based on that information; and determines how to present his/her findings to the other students in the class and, possibly, to external audiences. Students thus assume the primary responsibility for both what they learn and how that learning is demonstrated. This approach contradicts the traditional social studies instructional model that is "mired in trivia and limited to a chronological recounting of events" in which history becomes little more than "a string of isolated dates and questions at the end of a deadly dull textbook chapter" (Levstik and Barton, 2005, p. 4). Instead, the project focuses on learning through disciplined inquiry, a methodology that transcends the transmission model of education in which the teacher determines what should be learned and then transfers that information to students who are passive receptors of what they are told they need to know (Levstik and Barton, 2005). Moreover,

the project's model provides students with a framework on which they construct knowledge and then determine what they consider to be important regarding that knowledge. This approach allows "Teachers [to] capitalize on children's natural enthusiasm for learning by making their classrooms places where students explore important and meaningful questions," allowing them [students] to "... use and apply knowledge in authentic situations" (Levstik and Barton, 2005, p. 19).

As a result, the project enhances student knowledge about the Holocaust in particular and the study of history in general while promoting the development of authentic research skills. It directs students' foci on the Shoah toward a nuanced, sophisticated historical understanding based on the development of both a broadly based content knowledge (through the general historical study that precedes the project) and an individually focused historical empathy that evolves as students' wrestle with the individual circumstances that affected the persons whose life histories they encounter.

Developing Historical Empathy

According to Barton and Levstik (2009), historical empathy "involves imagining the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspectives" (p. 206) but should not imply that "we imagine another's experience as if it were our own" (p. 207). Regarding this paradigm, the project leads to the development of an historical empathy that bonds the student to the person whose story is being studied. As such, the student begins to *"know" the victim on the victim's own terms* [italics added for emphasis].

The Imperative to Personalize Holocaust Education

Personalizing the Holocaust, a process that moves the study of the Shoah beyond an emphasis on the its magnitude, is a critical approach that allows students to evaluate its central reality, that is, how the event affected individuals whose lives were overtaken by it. In this regard, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) (2001) suggests that teachers should "translate statistics into people" (p. 6). This approach is needed because a conceptually valid understanding of the Shoah is difficult to develop when curricula focus on "a welter of statistics, remote places and events" (Totten, 1987, p. 63) instead of studying the individual stories that are hidden within the numbers often associated with the topic. Conversely, focusing Holocaust units on individual stories provides meaningful experiences for students because it makes the event comprehensible (at least to some extent) (Gouri, 1994).

Study of the Holocaust Prior to the Introduction of the Project

A well-developed general unit about the Shoah should precede the introduction of the

project because students must have a solid knowledge of the event's history before beginning their research. In developing this unit, the teacher is directed to two sections on the USHMM's website (www.ushmm.org), the "Holocaust Encyclopedia" and "The Holocaust: A Learning Site for Students." Appendix A also contains a detailed list of suggested sources that teachers can use in developing their Holocaust units.

ID Cards: The Resource Base for the Project

The USHMM website includes a section titled "Browse All ID Cards."[2] This section contains 598 personal accounts, with each account outlining one person's Holocaust experience. Each card provides a person's name; date and place of birth; brief biography; and an overview of what happened to the person prior to and during the Holocaust (and after the event if he/she survived). Additional primary and secondary source information (e.g., web pages, artifacts, music, photographs, historical films, historical documents, maps, and animated maps) may be accessed by using the search function located in the upper right-hand corner of the website's home page. This function thus provides information that is critical to understanding a given person's story (i.e., the overall historical context into which the individual's experiences may be placed). In some cases, information about individuals whose stories are told on the ID cards can also be accessed using the search function; for example, a search for Nesse Galperin (Card # 135) will lead to web pages, video testimonies, and photographs.

This resource base allows each student to select a person of his/her choosing based on several criteria (e.g., gender, age, location, or personal interests). The number of cards available allows each student to research a different person, thus leading to the investigation of varied backgrounds and experiences. The diversity of circumstances considered through this process leads students to understand the uniqueness of each person's story, thus avoiding the tendency to see the Holocaust only in terms of its massive scope, a factor that may lead to the event being seen as an incomprehensible circumstance (Totten, 1987).

Implementing the Project

Having selected a person to research, each student develops a case study based on his/her subject. Each case study may be as expansive as the teacher and student desire, thus allowing for individual approaches and the inclusion of different themes and historical contexts; this format also allows the teacher to promote differentiated learning based upon each student's abilities, learning style, and interests. Using the USHMM website and focusing on the experiences of the person being studied, the student investigates such topics as: 1) geographic locale(s); 2) pre-Holocaust life; 3) larger contexts (e.g., the Holocaust, the Nazi era, and World War II) as they affected the person; 4) the timeline of the person's involvement with the Shoah located within the event's general chronology; 5) eventual outcome of the Holocaust relative to the person; and 6) the

person's post-Holocaust life (if he/she survived). Each student's project should "go where the subject's story takes it," an approach that results in varied explorations based on the dynamics of the individual stories that are researched. In this regard, each subject's unique experiences should be stressed as the project develops, thus fulfilling the need to humanize the events that occurred (Totten, 2001).

Students should use a "search and find" strategy as they explore the website. The website supports this method by providing extensive primary and secondary sources including still and animated maps, photographs, historical film footage, video-taped oral histories, historical documents, music, artifacts, and research articles; these resources can be located using the website's search function. Other sections of the website (e.g., the "Holocaust Encyclopedia," online exhibitions) also provide valuable background information about both general and specific topics.

In order to allow students to develop comprehensive projects, the teacher should allot several class periods for in-class work. Students should also be allowed to conduct research in out-of-class settings, when possible; however, they should be required to use only the USHMM website and any other resources suggested by the teacher. This approach is necessary if teachers are to ensure that only accurate and appropriate information is included in students' work.

As suggested by Davis (1998), the teacher plays an active but non-prescriptive role in the project. The teacher provides research and technical assistance; suggestions about topics to explore; content knowledge; and cautions about if and how to include sensitive material. He/she continually reminds the student that the project's central objective is to build a narrative that is descriptive of and faithful to the story of the individual being studied. The teacher thus plays a supporting role while allowing each student to make critical decisions about the substance and form of his/her project.

Debriefing after the Completion of the Project

A post-project debriefing session in which students discuss what they have learned about the research process should be scheduled. During this time, students compare notes about the many factors involved in doing research; aspects of that process that they found especially challenging, enjoyable, or problematic; and techniques and approaches that they found useful. The debriefing session can be described in terms of "What I know now that I wish I had known then," thus denoting that process as well as product is critical to the project's success.

Presenting the Projects

Students may present their projects through various formats, including: 1) traditional written reports; 2) computer-based portfolios; 3) paper-based portfolios; 4) photographic and film

essays with accompanying narratives; 5) graphic organizers; and 6) artistic collages. The presentations may be as sophisticated, extensive, and multi-dimensional as time and supporting resources permit. Regardless of format, each student's project should include a detailed analysis that considers the sum total of what was experienced by the person whose story was investigated; this analysis should also contextualize the subject's story within the Shoah's overall history. Projects should be presented to the class, thus allowing students to examine each other's work. If possible, a time for "History on Display" should also be provided; during this time, students from other classes, school personnel, parents, and other interested persons can visit the "history museum" that has been created.

These formats allow each student to choose a presentation model suited to his/her ability level, learning style, and interests. As such, the project becomes a vehicle through which differentiation can be achieved during both the work and evaluation phases of the activity.

Impact on Students' Thinking Processes

Contrary to traditional assessment approaches that often employ "contrived and artificial" evaluations (Savage, Savage, and Armstrong, 2012, p. 137), the ID card project allows (or, perhaps, forces) the teacher to use performance-based assessments that evaluate whether or not students have developed and implemented vital " 'habits of mind,' such as critical thinking, problem-solving, making effective presentations based on data, applying knowledge to new situations and working with others" (p. 137). Based upon the assignment of authentic tasks, this approach "… requires the student to assume a specific role and to develop a product that is directed to the accomplishment of a clear goal and [that] addresses a specific audience" (p. 138).

The project also enhances the development of historical thinking by including such factors as using non-textbook sources to enhance learning, dealing with the complexity of the historical process, forming historical narratives, using media-driven technologies, and implementing non-traditional means of assessment (Wineburg, 2001). In addition, the project requires students to make judgments about what approaches to take and what information to include, a format that often results in "the steps and missteps that lead to the formation of historical interpretations and conclusions" (p. 52). As such, the project asks students to do what historians do, albeit on a limited scale.

Evaluation of the Research

A rubric that supports the format noted above should be developed in order to implement a performance-based assessment model. While this rubric identifies specific requirements to be included in the project presentations, it should also allow for considerable flexibility based on each student's approach to the project as well as the specific story being investigated. Each project

should be evaluated on such factors as: 1) historical accuracy; 2) depth of coverage; 3) sophistication of the analysis of the general historical situations that are reported; 4) sophistication of the analysis of the subject's unique story, particularly as that story relates to the larger historical context in which the person found him/herself as the Shoah evolved; and 5) creativity and style of the presentation.

Use of the Project for Classroom Assessment

The project can fulfill several assessment roles within the structure of a Holocaust unit. First, it can be a summative instrument, serving as the principle tool for evaluating student learning at the end of the unit while building on other assessments that are used as the study progresses. Second, the project can be utilized as a supplemental tool to be evaluated in association with standard instruments such as homework, quizzes, and a summative test. Third, the project can be the sole evaluation device in the unit. Regardless of the evaluation model chosen, the project supports differentiation in assessment given the variety of ways in which students can present their projects.

Supporting Authentic Research

The project requires students "to interpret, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information" (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010, p. 163). As such, several critical thinking skills suggested by the NCSS (e.g., locating and exploring information; using multiple types of sources, organizing information in various forms; using computer-based information systems; interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information) will develop as students devise, initiate, expand, refine, and complete their projects. In addition, each student determines the "what" and the "how" of his/her work, thus introducing the concept that research is a personal endeavor that leads to expanded academic skills and content knowledge.

Summary

The ID card project implements a learning approach in which students use authentic primary and secondary sources to build a second tier of knowledge (an individual's story and its place within the Shoah) that is grounded on a first tier of knowledge (the story of the Holocaust in general). Its constructivist format thus replaces the student passivity that often occurs in whole class instruction with student-directed learning that leads to heightened involvement and higher-order thinking (Chapin, 2011). Through this format, students enhance their historical knowledge while learning research skills and engaging with people whose lives were forever changed by an event whose ongoing presence continues to influence the world in which today's students live. As such, students take a critical step along a path that leads to historical competency as they move beyond purely academic cognition and toward an understanding of the experiences of individuals

whose lives were very different from their own.

Notes

[1] Shoah (literally catastrophe) is a Hebrew word that denotes the destruction of European Jewry during the Nazi era. Some scholars, especially in Israel, prefer to use Shoah instead of Holocaust when describing the event. The terms are used interchangeably in this paper.
[2] The ID card section is found by accessing: 1) www.ushmm.org; 2) "Holocaust Encyclopedia"; and 3) "Browse All ID Cards." The cards (which are actually one page files) may be printed using the standard PDF format.

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Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Appendix A: Resources for Use in Teaching about the Holocaust

Pedagogical Works

Glanz, J. (2001). *Holocaust handbook for educators*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
Totten, S. (Ed.) (2001). *Teaching Holocaust literature*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
_____ (2002). *Holocaust education: Issues and answers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
Totten, S., and Feinberg, S. (Eds.) (2001). *Teaching and studying the Holocaust*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2001). *Teaching about the Holocaust: A resource book for educators*. Washington, DC: Author.

Historical Reference Works

Berenbaum, M. (Ed.) (1997). *Witness to the Holocaust: An illustrated documentary history in the words of its victims, perpetrators, and bystanders*. New York: William Morrow.
Gilbert, M. (1993). *Atlas of the Holocaust*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
Hogan, D. J. (Ed.) (2000). *The Holocaust chronicle: A history in words and pictures*. Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International. (Available online at www.holocaustchronicle.org.)
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General Historical Texts

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Hilberg, R. (1982). *Perpetrators, victims, bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe 1933-1945*. New York: Harper Collins.
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Literary Anthologies

Brown, J. E., Stephens, E. C., and Rubin, J. E. (Eds.) (1997). *Images from the Holocaust: A*

literature anthology. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group.
Friedlander, A. H. (Ed.) (1999) *Out of the whirlwind: A reader of Holocaust literature.* New York: Urj Press.
Langer, L. (Ed.) (1995). *Art from the ashes: A Holocaust anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Shawn, K., and Goldfrad, K. (Eds.), and Younglove, W. (Assoc. Ed.) (2008). *The call of memory: Learning about the Holocaust through narrative*. Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press.
Zapruder, A. (Ed.) (2004). *Salvaged pages: Young writers' diaries of the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

General (Overview) Films

Bieber, J. (Producer/Director) (1993). *For the living* [VHS]. Washington, DC: WETA.
Darlow, M. (Producer) (1982). *The world at war, Volume XX: Genocide, 1941-1945* [VHS]. New York: HBO Video.
Schwartzman, A. (Director) (1981/2004). *Genocide* [DVD]. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles, CA: Simon Wiesenthal Center.
Ward, J. (Executive Producer) (1993). *The Holocaust: In memory of millions* [VHS]. Arlington, VA: Discovery Channel.