

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## GENOCIDE PREVENTION: GENOCIDE EDUCATION PROJECT NATIONAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL OF CAMBODIA

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**Article:** Riley, K., Totten, R., "Understanding Matters: Holocaust Curricula and the Social Studies Classroom", 30 *Theory and Research in Social Education* 4, 541-62 (2002).

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Note: Wording has been edited and even changed at certain points in order to facilitate translation.

### Historical Empathy, Historical Thinking, and the USHMM Guidelines

Studies on how children think about and/or understand history have informed the work on historical empathy and perspective taking. [...] Historical empathy as a process that incorporates four key components - introduction and analysis of a critical event, context and chronology, evidence, and construction of a narrative framework - owes much to the body of research on historical thinking. However, we find that this body of work, [...], has largely addressed historical problems faced by key individuals whose actions or intentions students analyze and then use in the construction of an historical narrative (e.g. Truman's decision to drop the bomb; or Neville Chamberlain's plan of appeasement). These historical vignettes (or designs or frameworks) allow students to focus on the actions of one historical figure and examine documents that relate to those actions. However, an historical empathy approach can easily be expanded to include sweeping historical events. For example, the political nature of the Holocaust naturally draws students to its key figures, especially the role of Adolf Hitler. Yet, mainstream historians of the Holocaust point to the actions or inactions of collaborators, bystanders, and ordinary people as key players in the Holocaust. Additionally, the great wartime bureaucracy of Nazi Germany is generally considered a key factor in the destruction of student focus on individuals versus institutions as answers to historical problems). Thus, context, including the antecedents to the context, tends to play a far greater role in student understanding that the individual actions of key players, including Adolf Hitler.

To undertake a study of the Holocaust is to engage in extended study. A list of memorized names, dates, and places will yield little in terms of understanding the event. Furthermore, Stern (1994) cautions us to avoid the three temptations of engaging in presentist thinking, telling only part of controversial stories, and

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underestimating students' ability to understand history's complications and ambiguities. Both the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's teachers' guidelines and the research on historical empathy offer us a set of frameworks with which to deal with these concerns and to help students begin the arduous task of examining multiple perspectives without imposing a personal bias or prejudice as they attempt to understand and interpret the paradoxes and ambiguities of the Holocaust.

Research on historical thinking and historical empathy usually deals with such notions as context, the nature of historical sources, detection of bias, conflicting accounts, and the ambiguous state of historical conclusions. While we do not make direct connections between historical thinking research and flaws in the curriculum guides under critique, we do acknowledge the collective role that researchers on historical thinking and empathy have played in prompting us to consider such important aspects of understanding as context, positionality, and the validity of sources. With that said, we maintain that the study and teaching of history, above all, must be predicated on historical accuracy and context. To be accurate in terms of dates, places, times, and the names of historical actors is the first requirement in a faithful interpretation of the past; a next step is the inclusion of robust contextual information in order to paint a richer portrait of "what things were like" in an historical era or event. In crafting an historical account, the historian must assign weight to all of these elements and more. How then can the student historian go about the daunting task of "putting it all together?"

[...]

Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust (Parsons and Totten, 1993), developed for the USHMM, complements the research on historical thinking and historical empathy. [...] They offer fourteen points on methodology that underscore problems pointed out by critics of Holocaust pre-packaged materials (see Riley, 2001). These fourteen points include:

- Define the term "Holocaust"
- Avoid comparisons of pain
- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language (e.g., "all Germans were killers")
- Make careful distinctions about sources of information
- Avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Avoid romanticizing history in order to engage students' interest
- Contextualize the history you are teaching
- Translate statistics into people
- Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content
- Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust
- Select appropriate learning activities
- Reinforce the objectives of your lesson plan

(Parsons and Totten, 1993).

An examination of Holocaust materials, then, can incorporate a number of the fourteen points above as well as components of Davis's et al (2001) discussion of empathy, especially context and chronology; evidence, including interpretations of other historians and the like perspectives of the historical actors; and construction of a narrative framework through which historical conclusions are reached. Our critique in the next section, though not an exhaustive application of each of these considerations, does emphasize several of their key issues.

### **Evaluation of Holocaust Curricula**

[The authors proceed to evaluate the curricula of various states in the United States. For purposes of this seminar, we will only look at one state: Virginia.]

#### *Virginia*

[...]

The introduction to the curriculum sets the stage for a “minimalist” approach to the study of Holocaust history: “Secondary social studies and English teachers, armed with their texts, the Constitution of the United States, and such literary works as *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, can tackle prejudice in its worst possible scenario as a crucial lesson in human nature and as an example of the inter-relationships of the actions of citizens and governments leading to the destruction of human rights” (Introduction). This approach is problematic for two main reasons. First, many history texts are known for their superficial coverage of most topics, including the Holocaust. Second, even while it stands as a major literary work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and clearly raises the crucial topic of the Nazi camps, Anne Frank's diary concludes prior to deportation. If the students used only their textbooks and the diary, they would miss out on a great deal of rich contextual and perspectival information on the camps.

Historical inaccuracy is evident in the guide's discussion of two timelines. It is suggested that an “exemplary activity might include the following: “How old was your father or mother in 1939? How old would you be if you could have been in Germany in 1938 when millions of people were being killed or persecuted?” (p. 5). Besides the puzzling nature of this latter question, it is also highly inaccurate and misleading. First, the “millions of Jews” referred to by the authors did not live in Germany. In fact, “In January 1933, on the eve of Hitler's rise to power, the Jewish population [...] numbered 522,000 Jews by religion. [...] Second, while it is true that tens of thousands of Jews were being persecuted in 1938, “millions” were not being killed at this point.

The primary historical interpretation of the Holocaust in this curriculum comes from an article entitled, “The Holocaust - A Historical Perspective” by Dr. Myron Berman. While Berman addresses a number of key points (e.g. the definition of anti-Semitism, the influence and significance of traditional Christian anti-

Semitism on Nazi thought, the systematic nature of the Nazis' destruction of the Jews, the role of the bystander, and resistance), he does not address numerous other key issues, including major historical trends that "combined to make the Holocaust possible: racism, social Darwinism, nationalism, totalitarianism, industrialism, and the nature of modern war." Neither does he provide the adequate contextual information on the origins of anti-Semitism and the specific role played by church leaders through the ages in fostering and inciting anti-semitic beliefs and practices among their congregations...

Out of thirty learning activities in the guide, only three deal with a specific aspect of Holocaust history, [...] and they clearly fall short in terms of helping students understand context, chronology, evidence, and perspective... No examination of sources is required... Moreover, questions such as "What was the title of the book written by Hitler" are easy to look up but require no depth of understanding of the book's significance.

[The authors proceed to analyze other curricula of which is being omitted from this reading.]

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this section, we offer some ways to think about addressing Holocaust curriculum guide problems in light of Davis's et al (2001) discussion of empathy, including the introduction of a critical historical event; context and chronology; evidence, including interpretations of other historians and the perspectives of the historical actors; and construction of a narrative framework through which historical conclusions are reached. With regard to the first component, an introduction to the topic of the Holocaust is set upon a wide historical stage with millions of historical actors, often categorized as perpetrators, collaborators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers. The problem many teachers encounter in introducing study of the Holocaust is dealing with the question, *how could something like this happen?* The vastness of this question may lead teachers away from inquiry and toward a one-dimensional account typically found in textbooks or curriculum guides. Yet, this need not be the case. By asking the question, *what will I have to understand*, before approaching the question, *how could something like this happen?*, one initiates the process of understanding by selecting categories for examination...

As a result, teachers might engage this first component - introduction of a critical historical event - by asking students to construct a list of categories or themes that can help them begin to organize the event both chronologically and conceptually. For example, students can ask, *why the Jews?* This question necessitates an understanding of historical anti-Semitism, not simply the Nazis' version of it or even 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-semitism. Thus, the question of historical antecedent plays a pivotal role in depth of understanding. Accordingly, the number of 6,000,000 has no real value in students' understanding of Jews or Jewish culture without an examination of the nature of Jewish life in Europe before the war; one

cannot understand what was lost if one does not understand what existed in the first place...The relationship of historical antecedents to the topic is paramount in the construction of a robust interpretation.

The importance of context, the second component, cannot be overstated...In order for teachers to teach context, they must help their students to abandon the impulse to impose current values on past times. In other words, historical understanding does not require either endorsement or condemnation. For example, when students attempt to evaluate or interpret the motivations of Holocaust rescuers such as Oskar Schindler, they must take into account the fact that he was at first a war profiteer who took advantage of Jews who had lost their factories and whose labor was purchased from Nazi officials...Student understanding requires neither endorsement of Schindler's wartime change of heart (when he decided to rescue Jews), nor condemnation for his earlier profiteering actions.

The third component is examination of a wide array of evidence. Clearly, teachers play a leading role in what students have an opportunity to learn...Yet the understandable desire of social studies teachers to determine what the appropriate or correct interpretation of an event should be may cause them to direct students toward evidence that supports that position, lest the students "get it wrong." [...] Barbara Stern (1998), in her study, used historical empathy as a framework for making sense of the experiences of non-Jewish women and their actions during the years of the Third Reich. She wanted to...analyze evidence related to the motivations of the [German women] to act as they did. She found that the concept of historical empathy as described here guided her to a clearer understanding of how and why these German women acted as they did, yet still she was able to retain her personal view of the Holocaust and its perpetrators...

...If student understanding of the Holocaust or any historical event depends on the evidence that he or she has the opportunity to analyze, then what if teachers do unwittingly contribute to the bias that is inherent in the source selection process?... It is especially helpful for teachers to assess their own positionality - for example, where they stand in terms of understanding the Holocaust - before they begin the process of selecting evidence.

Finally, the fourth component - constructing narratives of an historical event with conclusions drawn from the analysis of evidence - may actually pose more questions for investigation than render conclusions...If students only examine the actions of Adolf Hitler within the context of his times, they will miss the important centuries-old antecedents to 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-Semitism that laid the fertile ground for the hatred of the Jews. To conclude that Hitler was solely responsible for the Holocaust is to dismiss the role of other key figures, including Franklin Roosevelt, the failure of Evian (the conference held in the summer of 1938 in order to attempt a solution for the growing refugee problem as a result of [...] Nazi anti-Jewish policies), the constraints of a modern bureaucratic nation, technological advances, and history itself.

Therefore, in order to attempt to understand events such as the Holocaust, we need to begin with an all-encompassing question that will help us to build categories for investigation and encourage us to weave together antecedents, historical developments, context of the times, and the actions of major figures and communities of actors. The end result of such a process should demonstrate that we have considered context, evidence, and the nature of our position in weaving together an explanation of the past. It should also show how adherence to a framework or set of guidelines has guided our investigation, enabled us to view the actions of multiple historical actors without endorsement or condemnation, and allowed us to render a reasonable interpretation, keeping in mind that excluded sources of evidence might affect our interpretation....

END