

Shifting Perspective: Adding Skin to Holocaust Education

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"Teaching the Holocaust"

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Shifting Perspective: Adding Skin to Holocaust Education

Agenda:

1. Rationale
 - what caused me to move in this direction?
 - what about the research?
2. Unit Overview
 - how does shifting perspective fit into Holocaust education?
 - where does shifting perspective fit into my Holocaust studies unit?
3. Student work
 - what does the end result look like?
 - how does this affect student thinking?
4. Experience It
 - can I shift my perspective?
 - how has this affected my thinking?

Objectives:

1. To explain the benefits of shifting perspective as a writing strategy within a Holocaust Studies unit.
2. To simplify the practice of shifting perspective as a supplement to any Holocaust Studies unit.

Rationale

In my first year of teaching I faced what I believed to be a daunting task: teach *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Reading the text would serve, for most of my students, as their formal introduction to the World War II/Holocaust period. Words cannot accurately express my fear that, through some stumble, I might allow for the trivialization of this period or this text. Added to this was the fear that my students would finish the unit thinking purely of huge numbers of casualties, sickening pictures, and a single family who spent two uncomfortable years in hiding.

Upon discovering ID Cards on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) website, I set one objective for the entire unit: move beyond the numbers and a single family experience to point out the variety of individual experiences during the Holocaust.

Now, after three years of practice with this learning activity, I've changed quite a bit, most significantly by placing the focus on defining identity and requiring the students to finish the unit with an action plan. Still, it always comes back to having the students read journals by individuals who lived during the Holocaust and then write journals as individuals who lived during the Holocaust. This is so, because Holocaust education starts with stories that take shape in literature, which at its core is multicultural literature, and ends with human beings more aware of and at home within themselves and their multicultural world.

Jean Ketter and Cynthia Lewis, found that "readings of multicultural literature that consciously consider the cultural and sociopolitical influences that shape authorship and interpretation can challenge a reader's perception of self and other." (Ketter and Lewis, "Already reading texts and contexts: Multicultural literature in a predominantly white rural community," 176). When students create an identity web, contemplating and sharing how they define themselves according to group membership, their perception of self can, at least for a short time, be clarified. Mirrored in this process though, is also the description of other, because of those left out of the identity web.

The other, in this case, includes victims of the Holocaust. So, how can we help our students to come to a greater understanding of the other? Well, Elizabeth Grauerholz and Gina M. Scuteri used role-taking in combination with sociological journals. They found that "role-taking is necessary for understanding and appreciating the values, behaviors, and attitudes of other persons and for interpersonal functioning and cooperation." (Grauerholz and Scuteri, "Learning to role-take: A teaching technique to enhance awareness of the 'Other,'" 480).

Journals serve as informal means for students to stretch their thoughts on any given subject. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young point out that "the significance of journals as records of thought cannot be underestimated by teachers who value independent thinking." (Fulwiler and Young, *Language connections: Writing and reading across the curriculum*, 18). Only one page earlier, Fulwiler and Young describe how individual journal entries can challenge writers by fostering the following self-questioning: "How far can I take this idea? How accurately can I describe or explain it? How can I make it make sense to me?" (Fulwiler and Young, 17).

With the impetus to use journal entries as the mode of shifting perspective, the importance of precise language increases. Grauerholz and Scuteri realized the transforming effects of language within role-taking. They admitted that use of “the term “other” acquires a special significance to students. They come to understand it as a social construction created and defined by members of the dominant group.” (Grauerholz and Scuteri, “Learning to role-take: A teaching technique to enhance awareness of the ‘Other,’” 480).

Along these same lines, Hunter Gehlbach, a researcher on social perspective taking, warned against viewing the “other” as homogenous, for when this occurs, those shifting their perspective (from self to other) will fall short of accuracy. To avoid this, Grauerholz and Scuteri point out that “the use of primary sources written by members of the group being studied, particularly diary and journal entries, greatly enhances the students’ ability to understand the issues and to acquire a different perspective. Without such information, students rely on the information they have, which is often stereotypical. By providing personal accounts and perspectives, the exercise becomes more realistic and more instructive.” (Grauerholz and Scuteri, “Learning to role-take: A teaching technique to enhance awareness of the ‘Other,’” 481).

Finally, Grauerholz and Scuteri found that “the benefits [of shifting perspective within journal writing] are clear: many students have a greater sensitivity to others and a stronger awareness of social issues. . . . Obviously, students can never understand fully what it means to be a member of a group to which they have never belonged, but assigning them to write journals from the perspective of the other can help them to gain better understanding of others’ situations, even to empathize with them.” (Grauerholz and Scuteri, “Learning to role-take: A teaching technique to enhance awareness of the ‘Other,’” 482-483).

Further research by Robert Selman supports Grauerholz and Scuteri’s findings. If you’re interested in this research, I’ve included an “Extras” section on my References page, which includes several of these extension items you might be interested in.

Lesson

Overview:

This lesson, which should serve as a supplement to an existing Holocaust studies unit, can serve middle school, high school, and college instructors in their pursuit of stretching their students' thinking about individual experiences during the Holocaust. After spending time studying the historical events of World War II and the Holocaust, teachers can narrow the focus of study to identity and perspective. Students create an identity web for themselves, shift perspective and journal as an individual during the Holocaust, create an identity web for the individual whose perspective they have taken, and conclude with a reflection and action plan.

Student Objectives:

- Students will produce an identity web by identifying five defining characteristics of themselves.
- Students will write journal entries from the perspective of an individual who lived during the Holocaust.
- Students will produce an identity web by identifying five defining characteristics of an individual who lived during the Holocaust.
- Students will assess their own level of learning during the shift in perspective.
- Students will develop a plan of action based of their learning.

In 8th grade Communication Arts, this lesson will meet the following Grade Level Expectations according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education:

- W3A – Write about personal experiences and revise by adding details and literary devices.
- IL2A – Synthesize two or more messages conveyed in various media.

Instructional Plan:

It is important to continue to note that this lesson should serve as a supplement to an existing Holocaust studies unit. Prior to detailing the lesson activities, I will provide a quick explanation of the foundational groundwork laid in my Holocaust studies unit.

Preparation:

1. Building the framework for this period is essential, especially if students have not studied the Holocaust previously. I recommend the teacher first build this framework by presenting information in a chronological order starting in the interwar period and concluding after the Nuremberg trials. More experienced or mature students may be able to approach this framework through research and presentations of their own, but it is important to recognize that the specialized vocabulary and the gruesomeness of the evidence found throughout research of the Holocaust may be more than younger, less experienced researchers, or less mature students can handle. With my middle school students I present prewar economic and sociopolitical issues leading to the Holocaust and describe the Nazi dependence upon World War II as a cover for their actions, and then allow the students to research, restricting them to the USHMM website, the following topics: Nuremberg laws, Kristallnacht, ghettos, concentration camps, extermination camps, liberation and displaced person camps, and the Nuremberg trials.

2. Slowly progress into issues of identity by reading at least the preface of *Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders* by Raul Hilberg. Dr. Hilberg presents a detailed and far-reaching analysis of individual culpability and victimization that mature readers and those motivated by this study will highly appreciate. With my middle school students we only read the preface, picking out contextually important vocabulary and discussing the possibility of and opportunity for an individual during the period to find him/herself in all three categories.
3. The linchpin in all Holocaust studies units that I have encountered is either *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, or *Night* by Elie Wiesel. My middle school curriculum provides for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, so we read this wonderful coming-of-age play with special focus on character studies and staging techniques. I find it most important, regardless of your situation, to focus upon the individuality of the experiences of both Anne Frank (and the others in hiding with her) and Elie Wiesel. Students should not finish either text with the opinion that the description they have just read exemplifies the typical individual experience during the Holocaust.
4. The progressive focus on identity moves front and center at this point. Students should read several different entries from *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust* edited by Alexandra Zapruder. The diaries presented offer students the privilege of witnessing, through rich language, a variety of experiences. I have my middle school students read entries in groups, and analyze organizational patterns and themes present in the diaries. We finish by all reading from the same diary entry and focusing on the individual experience. Upon reading this diary entry, I have the students create their identity web for themselves, and then we together create an identity web for the individual author of the diary entry previously read.

Shifting Perspective:

1. Teachers first must gather the ID Cards for assigning the students their identity. I use one main source, the USHMM's Division of Education:
<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/resource/pdf/idcards.pdf>. If this source does not offer enough variety for the numbers in a class, I then use the entire list of ID Cards that the USHMM has compiled: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/a2z.php?lang=en&type=idcard>. It is important for teachers to read every single ID Card that he/she plans to assign to students in order to ensure appropriateness. The ID Cards compiled by the USHMM were designed as booklets for use at the museum by visitors as they toured the exhibits. Each ID Card has five main sections: (1) a picture of the individual with the name, date of birth, and place of birth; (2) a biographical sketch of the individual; (3) information regarding the individual's experiences during the years 1933-1939; (4) information regarding the individual's experiences from 1940 to the end of the war; (5) information regarding the fate of the individual – whether they perished or survived.
2. Teachers should then assign identities (ID Cards) to their students. Male students are assigned male identities; female students are assigned female identities. I always keep an Excel spreadsheet tracking students with their assigned individuals; this saves me time over the course of five different days.

3. **Day 1** - I offer sections one and two from the ID Card. Prompts provided – “This is your first attempt, so try on his/her shoes. How old would you be today? What is your family like? Why are you beginning to write this journal/diary? Give voice to an individual without one. Be creative, be sensitive.” This initial step is about the students giving it a great first effort; it will not be easy, especially considering the information the students are synthesizing. The students may seem reluctant and slow at first, but if given time they will do well.
4. **Day 2** – I offer sections one, two, and three (all of the previous information as well as information regarding the years 1933-1939). Prompts provided – “How old were you on January 10, 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany (head of the government)? What do you remember? What about your family’s reaction? What Nuremberg laws do you remember being enforced viciously where you were during the time? What were the laws? How did this affect you? How old were you on Kristallnacht? Did you have to leave your home? Was your father arrested? How old were you on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, and the war began? Where were you when you heard about the start of the war? What were you doing?”
5. **Day 3** – I offer sections one, two, three, and four (all of the previous information as well as information regarding the years 1940-the end of the war). Prompts provided – “What did you think of Britain and France immediately declaring war on Germany? What did you think when France surrendered to Germany? Do you remember the order to evacuate your home in order to go to a ghetto? Do you remember living in the ghetto? Do you remember the guards, or the reactions of the other families? What do you remember when you heard about the United States finally entering the war? What did the cattle car smell like? As you arrived at a concentration camp, what do you remember seeing, hearing, thinking? Do you remember being excited about the invasion on D-Day (if you heard about it)?”
6. **Day 4** – I offer sections one through five (all of the previous information as well as the final bit of information regarding the fate of the individual). Prompts provided – “What do you remember from the end? What sites and sounds continually haunted you? Who do you want to thank for liberating you? What do you want to be remembered for? What is one thing you wish you could have done?”
7. **Day 5** – Reflection. Prompts provided – “Reread your ID card. Reread your journal. Refine any entries if necessary. What have you learned from this experience? How has journaling as this individual changed your view of life during the Holocaust?”

Action Plan:

1. **Preface** - The Holocaust as genocide, unfortunately, does not stand as a unique event in human history. Since the Holocaust, there have been at least four documented cases of genocide around the world: in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Rwanda, and now in Sudan. After the Holocaust, there was a slogan that became famous around the world: “Never again.” The only way humanity can make a claim like, “Never again” is to follow up with a change in action.
2. Immediately following the student reflection for their shifting perspective activity, students will be challenged to write an action plan. The action plan must specifically detail two items: (1) action taken when the student encounters stereotyping/prejudiced/racist behavior, and (2) pro-social behaviors the student can exhibit as an example for others.

Assessment:

- Assess student written journals regarding shifting perspective. Student journals should demonstrate a sophisticated synthesis of experiences which were studied throughout the Holocaust studies unit. Journals should be written with special emphasis on the 6+1 Writing Trait of Voice.
- Assess student generated plans of action. Plans of action should be specific regarding the action taken when stereotyping/prejudiced/racist behavior is encountered by the student. Plans of action should also detail specific pro-social behaviors students can exhibit as examples for others.

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Extras Resources on Role-Taking/Shifting Perspective

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