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Circle of Considerations: Teaching Holocaust Literature with Fidelity to History and Humanity

ANNE PIONTKOWSKI (DONATO) AND JONATHAN E. BUSH WITH RUTH BERGMAN

I swore never to be silent whenever, wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.” (Wiesel, 1986).

In his 1986 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel spoke of the importance of remembrance, and of advocacy when confronted with inhumanity. In doing so, he helped us understand and conceptualize the intricacies of teaching about such complex topics. Wiesel broadened our understanding of teaching issues within—and beyond—the specific historical and cultural event he and his work so deeply associated with: the Holocaust.

Let’s be clear: *Teaching about the Holocaust is difficult*. Discussions about the Holocaust can never be neutral, and they can never be dispassionate. When we teach the Holocaust, we are engaging in a complex conversation that includes understanding not only the historical events of the era, but also knowing the underlying ideologies and then considering those concepts within our teaching contexts and objectives.

While the power of Holocaust education is unquestioned, teachers must also be aware of the emotional and intellectual considerations involved

in engaging young people with such issues and topics, and, while doing so, know the best practices of various teaching disciplines. In an ideal situation, the practitioners of Holocaust education would be highly prepared and highly-experienced. They would possess a deep knowledge both of the pedagogies and practices of Holocaust education, while also having a strong understanding of its history. Antisemitism, and related historical trends would also be considered. Outside of detail, a good example of how complex the teaching of the Holocaust can be is discussed in Hilton and Patt’s influential text, *Understanding and Teaching the Holocaust*. At minimum, as they plan, teachers need to consider five foundational elements, including:

- understanding the historical arc of the Holocaust including “the full landscape of persecution and wartime experiences, from concentration camps to ghettos, labor camps, extermination camps, and death marches, as well as life in hiding, seeking refuge, and life in the aftermath.”
- considering ways to frame discussions, including questions about the roots of antisemitism, the rise of Nazism and fascism, and other on-going core contexts
- the relationship of the Holocaust to other genocides and genocidal events, and conceptions of the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish event
- the emotional and psychological difficulties of the subject, asking questions such as “What is the appropriate balance between encouraging comprehension and running

the risk of numbing students when images and information become overwhelming?”

According to Dr. Kathryn Malone, associate professor at Ferris State University, “When people are traumatized, their brains go into fight/flight/freeze mode and they are unable to react with logical, linear memory. If students are traumatized by material they experience in the classroom, their memory is stored in fragments, not in a linear way. They may literally be unable to speak about the material, process it intellectually, and apply the learning in the classroom.” It is imperative to be mindful not only of the literary content, but the emotional capacity of your students when engaging in reading materials exposing traumatic content.

And, finally,

- reflection on the objective; “While there are a host of reasons educators at all different levels teach this topic, keeping cognizant of this while teaching the course is crucially important.” (8-10)

There are great opportunities in teaching the Holocaust to adolescents, but huge challenges as well. As a Holocaust educator, you are delving into territory that can challenge your students pre-existing views, and those of their families. You can create new insights into humanity, culture, and ideology. This is particularly true from an English language arts perspective. In this article, we present a framework based on best practices in Holocaust education, including the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust and additional teacher-centered materials, all of which contextualize and teach literatures of the Holocaust, particularly within English language arts classrooms. Using this framework can help teachers avoid common pitfalls and engage in productive dialogue with students and others through literatures of, and about, the Holocaust.

The Holocaust and English Language Arts: Problems and Possibilities

Anne represents the Holocaust Memorial Center (HMC) as an Education Professional Development Specialist after an extensive career

in K-12 education spanning almost three decades. In her role at the HMC, she designs and facilitates teacher professional development workshop content, which includes implementation of ELA and trauma informed practices in educational delivery methods. The workshops include HMC created content and advanced workshops provided to community education partners, as well as the creation of new content for advanced professional development with professors of pre-service teachers at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her most recent design project, *Safely Prepare, Explore, and Conclude (SPEC)*, in collaboration with Ms. Ruth Bergman, focuses on thoughtful implementation of Holocaust and traumatic literature/content, primarily at secondary and collegiate levels. Together, they collaborate with university colleague Dr. Kathryn Malone of Ferris State University, an expert in best educational practices regarding memory and trauma.

Jonathan is an English educator at Western Michigan University. His primary responsibilities include teaching methods and theory classes in English language arts (ELA), primarily in grades 6-12, for preservice teachers. He also teaches English education doctoral courses, primarily consisting of middle and high school teachers studying to become English education scholars and instructors. Jonathan’s connection to Holocaust education first began through the Holocaust Educators’ Network of Michigan (HEN), which is a part of TOLI (The Olga Lengyel Institute), a program that began through the National Writing Project and the Third Coast Writing Project. Through this work, he was invited and attended the Holocaust Institute for Teacher Educators (HITE) at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Although the course that first grew into the growing partnership between Western Michigan University and HMC was *Introduction to English Education*, the partnership has grown to include Holocaust education elements and interaction with HMC educators in several other courses at both advanced undergraduate and graduate levels.

In the Spring of 2020, the *Kappy Family Anne Frank Art and Writing Competition* was getting into full swing at the Holocaust Memorial Center. Pieces of art and samples of writing, all focused on

the theme of “Power of Choice,” were flowing into the center, with hundreds of works submitted from middle and high school students across the state of Michigan. These works required the review and voice of seasoned educators to act as judges experienced in ELA, at both the secondary and university levels. As a result, Jonathan was contacted. After the competition completed, Anne reached back out to Jonathan, and they became natural thought partners on many ELA projects simmering at both institutions. The foundation of a partnership centered in ELA-based Holocaust education was set. We learned of our many commonalities and connections. In our respective roles as an ELA teacher education specialist at a Holocaust Memorial Museum focused on connecting historical context with narratives and as a university English educator focused on undergraduate teacher preparation, we work regularly with teachers and future teachers to help them prepare, plan, and implement lessons that integrate Holocaust education into their English language arts classes. We have learned through our experiences that many of our colleagues and students, although extraordinarily well-meaning and committed to the topics and purposes of teaching the Holocaust in their classrooms, are often not prepared to consider the complexities involved. Ironically, this has been exacerbated by well-meaning mandates to include Holocaust education. In Michigan, for example, since 2016-2017, schools are expected to

ensure that the school district’s or public school academy’s social studies curriculum for grades 8 to 12 includes age- and grade-appropriate instruction about genocide, including, but not limited to, the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. The legislature recommends a combined total of 6 hours of this instruction during grades 8 to 12. (PA-170 of 2016, State of Michigan).

It is not uncommon either for teachers to choose on their own, or be directed to teach, a literary work focused on the Holocaust in order to fulfill this mandate. While the mandate firmly opens the door for including Holocaust education in curriculum delivery, this moment is part of a global consideration towards humanity. The United Nations very clearly states in its foundational documents, Article 5, “No

one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). We also note that the majority of the teaching that meets this mandate, both in Michigan and throughout the United States, occurs more commonly in the English language arts classroom, and through literature, than it does in social studies classes.

It is our desire to add context and considerations for ELA teachers to safely and soundly engage learners in Holocaust literature that honors the dignity of life while highlighting the fragility of humanity, both in protagonist and antagonist context. The breadth and depth of literary choices is wide and rich for both learner and teacher. Thus, in this article, we begin to address this need of selecting high quality literary material focused on the Holocaust by providing some initial decision-making frameworks for English language arts teachers through the *Circle of Considerations*. Developed by Dr. Anne Piontkowski (Donato) and Ruth Bergman, the *Circle of Considerations* shows how it can be used in concert with *US Holocaust Memorial Museum Guidelines for Teaching* to select texts, develop directions, activities, and projects, and guide interactions with students. We conclude by directing teachers to additional teacher focused, and ELA-specific resources for further exploration.

Providing background context is essential to understanding any narrative. The foundation of the *Circle of Considerations* rests in thoughtful pedagogical practices that highlight sound historical context within Holocaust literature. As educators of Holocaust narratives, it is imperative that we anchor our lessons in delivery approaches that honor fidelity to accurate accounts of the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC has sensitively put forth *Guidelines For Teaching About The Holocaust*. Their belief is that “teaching Holocaust history requires a high level of sensitivity and keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter.” We agree.

The following are the nine core components of the [USHMM Guidelines](#):

- Define the term “Holocaust”
- Understand the Holocaust was not inevitable

- Avoid simple answers to complex questions
- Strive for precision language
- Balance the perspectives that inform your study
- Avoid comparisons of pain
- Contextualize the history
- Translate statistics into people
- Avoid romanticizing history

We know that the power of textual voice provides an extraordinary window into the history and the humanity of the Holocaust. English language arts is an important place for Holocaust education to occur. Our title strategically draws attention to our goal of honoring both the history and the humanity of the Holocaust, and we believe that English language arts provides the window to accomplish both of these. We see English language arts as being a place to explore the voices of the Holocaust, learning about the individuals involved as well as the historical contexts in which they lived. We know that some of the most powerful means of Holocaust education can be found through the use of literatures—and by this we mean far more than just fiction. Memoirs, diaries, poetry, technical documents, propaganda, news reports, and others all provide extraordinary opportunities to learn, engage, and grow with our students. Unfortunately, a good amount of ELA instruction falls short of the ideals and practices that comprise effective Holocaust education.

Let's consider one of the most commonly used Holocaust literary texts: *Anne Frank's Diary of a Young Girl*. Too often, we see *Anne Frank* taught as a decontextualized narrative of a young girl with little connection to the arc of history. And, to be clear, we agree that on its face, it's an engaging story of a child's struggles into adolescence during a trying moment. But that is only a tiny fraction of the *Anne Frank* narrative, and how that narrative fits within the broader arc of the Holocaust. Immediate contextualities to consider include: why Anne and her family were in the Netherlands, how the Jewish diaspora reacted and resisted, how the Nazi regime demonized, dehumanized and forced those with means to leave their sphere of influence, all while pursuing, emphasizing, and industrializing their deaths. Existential issues include how historical

European antisemitism developed, and how it was weaponized through laws, propaganda, selfishness, and coercion by the Nazi regime in order to mobilize an entire population against their Jewish neighbors and friends. As teachers of the Holocaust, we need to recognize that there's much more to the Holocaust than what Anne is expressing in her diary. We need to wrap history around her entries. And when we do that, we then need to wrap humanity around our history.

Our model of focused instruction and decision-making, the *Circle of Considerations*, broadens such reflective teaching approaches to reach deeply into the classroom in order to consider time, place, setting and emotion as reading occurs—both for the student and the literary work itself. These elements require thoughtful consideration while planning the teaching of a Holocaust narrative. The model seeks to help teachers approach Holocaust literature with fidelity to history while honoring responsibility to humanity. With that said, it is important to consider the capacity of the learner as the tragic chapter of the Holocaust in history is presented. It is imperative to keep the learner at the center of the circle.

The Circle of Considerations

Literature is a powerful tool for teaching about the Holocaust. It sheds light on the importance of our choices and actions as we interact with humanity on a global scale and our neighbors sitting next to us. The ideas put forth, when surrounded by historical truths and clear contexts, allow teachers to put ELA pedagogy into practice while maintaining fidelity to history, revealing or dissipating shadows in content. "Most people think that shadows follow, precede, or surround beings or objects. The truth is that they also surround words, ideas, desires, deeds, impulses and memories" (Wiesel, 1986). You are not teaching history, per se, in your ELA classroom. You are teaching how to feel history, experience history, and hear another person's point of view and experience moments in history through the relevance of time, place, and various settings, all through the lens of the Holocaust. These four considerations of context are the core of connecting prose with history.

At the center of the *Circle of Considerations* is the learner and literature—together. When an individual reads a particular literary work or historical piece of prose, it is a personal experience. It is affected by four main elements: cultural environment, emotional capacity, specificity and reflection. First, consider the cultural environment. The environment in which someone comes from personally in their home life shapes literary paradigms they hold from an early age—how literacy and reading material are shared and developed, time for reading, reading with each other, talking about books, if discussion leads to further learning and inquiry, if reading is modeled in the home, etc. The list is endless as opportunities for literary opportunity are endless. With this in mind, as educators, to create a literary cultural environment within our learning spaces supports discussion and robust literary connections. Ralph Webster (2016) from *A Smile in One Eye, A Tear in the Other* shared that the unbelievable became the believable, and, ultimately, the normal. It is important to continually consider the impact of expectation, as well as intention. As educators, considering an intentional learning environment which supports inquiry within a safe space for students creates a foundation to connect the learner with the literature. Consider....

...*why you chose a particular book*. Was it for the time period featured? The place of the Holocaust? The events that were occurring? The human story highlighted? Themes that connect to elements of other literary works you are using? To teach a global, humanitarian lesson? The characters would be more relatable to your students? There are myriad reasons for consideration. Use the *Rubric for Selection of Holocaust Literature for Use in the Classroom* (Bush, Donato, and Bergman, from Totten, Feinberg and Roth, 2001) to provide personal clarity to this literary choice for your students.

...*the breadth of your students' prior knowledge*. This includes the courses they have taken, discussions that have occurred, exposure to, and use of, various resources, as well as personal background/experience with the literary content

...*keeping place and time in context*. This includes providing the historical context to events of the storylines within the text, the relevance of

where events are occurring within the narrative, the ages of the characters and how this plays into their participation in, and understanding of, an event.

...*audience paradigms*. Consider the various environments and backgrounds of your students and build their educational and social paradigms over time. It is important to keep this in mind as the text is read. Students may not be familiar with the places and characters developed in the text. Depending on the age of your students, students may hold political views and/or societal understandings that will play into a reading of the text. Acknowledgement of these paradigms will allow students to be recognized while allowing the reading to move forward with the understanding that the documented events of the Holocaust are part of the research of the text.

...*the developmental focus of characters, author, audience*. How do the characters develop in the story? What is the focus of this development? Their age? Their maturity? Their personal connections? Their lack of? What literary devices does the author use to make the narrative come to life for the reader? How does this device work with the subject matter? What is its effectiveness?

...*focusing on the many points of choice-making throughout the text*. Narratives through literature have points of choice that pivot the narrative in one direction or the other. It is important for the reader to understand that the choice of the author to move the narrative in a particular direction differs from the choices made by the characters once that direction has been decided. Within the historical context of the Holocaust, what choices were available? What were the consequences? What needed to be considered by the character in order to make a given choice?

...*reference normal life*. In order for readers to understand the gravity of the narrative, they must understand what was at stake for the characters, what was left behind, and what they face as the narrative moves forward. The tension that is created by the author is only enhanced when the complete context of time prior to the current events is shared.

Concluding: A Rubric for Selection and Planning

We conclude by sharing a rubric that for

teachers to consider when selecting and approaching appropriate Holocaust texts within the circle of consideration. This rubric encompasses and codifies many of our concepts within the *Circle of Considerations*. Continually considering the learners' abilities as thoughtful participants in the reading of a chosen text is imperative. The full rubric is available at <https://tinyurl.com/3hahb6ba>.

Literature is meant to reach the hearts of all who read the words and, as educators, we provide the bridge between the written word and our learners' understandings. This is true of all genres of literature, from poetry to fiction, memoir to free verse. This is also true of various tragedies and persecutions. Literature is acting as a bridge to tell the human story, to move to the space that Elie Wiesel (1986) speaks of in his opening quote, "Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe." Literature can allow a preview into a space that most people would not be privy to, would not be able to reach, not be able to experience—nor would they normally desire such an experience. The characters in books take the reader to places inaccessible otherwise, both within the character and the setting...deep into the heart of the universe of that given atrocity.

The Rubric for the Selection of Literature provides a series of considerations for ELA educators to ponder, to reference, to filter a literature selection through to reach assurance that the literary work is of highest historical accuracy when depicting the Holocaust. The Rubric also acknowledges the needs of the learner at the center of the circle, putting it at the forefront of the document. The Rubric also helps teachers contextualize the history and the humanity of the text and consider how to connect it within discussions and activities focusing on larger scale issues of the Holocaust. Then, extension outward into additional concepts of current injustice, social trends and attitudes, and other relevant perspectives are possible.

It is important to come full circle in order to connect best practice throughout daily teaching experience. The *Circle of Considerations* introduces English language arts teachers to resources and

practices that will help them contextualize the Holocaust and more effectively choose, approach, and teach texts in their classrooms. Additionally, we also hope it opens up a world of discourse on Holocaust education, including core resources available in Michigan—and more broadly. If this discussion has interested you, we hope that you reach out to either or both of us. We also hope that you begin to explore resources and opportunities for teachers. Below are a few beginning points that are either Michigan-focused, along with some others that we regularly engage. This is but a small slice of the vast resource library available for Holocaust education. We would love to hear from you about others—enlarging the *Circle of Considerations* for all.

Michigan Resources

- Holocaust Education Network of Michigan (<https://www.henofmichigan.com>). Affiliated with the Olga Llungel Institute for Holocaust Studies (<https://www.toli.us>), HEN provides an intensive residential institute for teachers in Michigan each summer along with additional ongoing professional development programs.
- The Holocaust Memorial Center (<https://www.holocaustcenter.org>) is a world-class museum and education center that provides education and outreach for Michigan and elsewhere.
- Michigan Governor's Council on Genocide and Holocaust Education (<https://www.mhge.org>) was created as part of Michigan Public Act 170 and is tasked with helping teachers and students learn and teach about the Holocaust.

Additional Teaching Resources

- US Holocaust Memorial Center (<https://www.ushmm.org>) has a vast resources for teachers. The annual Belfer National Conference for Educators provides additional opportunities for intensive professional development (<https://www.ushmm.org/teach/opportunities-for-educators/belfer-educators-conference>)

- Echoes and Reflections (<http://echoesandreflections.org>) provides a massive set of resources for teachers of all levels, and also conducts on-site and online seminars.
- The USC Shoah Foundation (<https://sfi.usc.edu>) curates a large set of curriculum and support materials free to teachers.

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