

Teaching the Holocaust in the English Classroom: Connecting Students to Develop Their Empathy

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The inscription on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum wall read, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness--Elie Wiesel.” That quote stuck with me all the way back to Wisconsin. What did it mean to “bear witness”? Who was I to carry out this sort of work in my rural Wisconsin high school? I understood its importance, having taught *Night* for several years. But I had no direct understanding of the Holocaust, no true training in Jewish studies, and no firsthand contact with anyone who did. Yet, Wiesel’s task stayed in the forefront of my teaching...to bear witness.

Getting to Know the Holocaust: My Journey

When I started teaching in rural northern Wisconsin, I found a stack of copies of *Night*, read the book, and had decided right away that it merited teaching to the sophomore class. I did not know much about the Holocaust except for what I researched. No other English teacher in my school taught Holocaust literature, and, at the time, it was touched on only briefly in history classes. At first, teaching *Night* was not a matter of my students lacking empathy or experience, it was a matter of student interest level, convenience, and resources. They were very interested, and I had the books right there before me. That first year, they had questions--I also had questions--and we did our best to find answers. In my second year of teaching *Night*, I vividly remember a student sitting in the front row. He fired off question after question about the “why” of the Holocaust. Our attempts to find information online were only somewhat successful. I had some detail and databases of first-hand accounts, but there was no one I could talk to.

This sparked my journey of trying to find answers and ultimately set me on my way of seeking a truer educational experience in order to provide students with a deeper understanding. The [Holocaust Education Resource Center \(HERC\)](#) in Milwaukee was one

of the first organizations from which I sought knowledge. It has a vast Holocaust survivors speakers bureau and connects teachers and their students with those who have first-hand or educational experience in Holocaust education. Through its programs, I traveled first to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and connected with other teachers who had interest and desire to be Holocaust educators. HERC then provided the opportunity to travel to Poland, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic and to visit Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka, and Majdanek. I toured the ghettos in Warsaw and Lublin. I looked at the pits at Ponar. Reflection in this process is key, and to be there where *they*--the victims of the Holocaust--walked, died or survived...what an experience to be able to relate back to my students! A couple years later, HERC offered another trip, and this time I traveled to Israel to study with scholars at Yad Vashem. HERC has proven an invaluable resource to my Holocaust studies.

Two years later, I studied with Holocaust scholars in New York City at a summer institute sponsored by The Olga Lengyel Institute (TOLI), named for the author of *Five Chimneys*, the first Holocaust memoir published after the Holocaust in 1946. Every summer, TOLI offers 12-day seminars including discussions with Holocaust survivors and Holocaust rescuers, scholars, several authors; collaborations with fellow Holocaust educators; research into Jewish history and life today; and so much more. This experience added more depth to my knowledge and connected me with amazing peers in the field.

TOLI also offers a one-week Satellite Seminar Program across the country, FREE to educators at all grade levels, and we have one right here in Wisconsin. I attended the seminar in Fox Point, which included discussions with Holocaust survivors and a local rabbi, information about the history of Anti-Judaism, and a visit to the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. I received books and materials to take back to the classroom as well. During the summer of 2017, I co-facilitated this seminar. Again, the connections to people and experiences was invaluable.

Learning from HERC, TOLI, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Yad Vashem helps create a new, deeper understanding for educators and networks of

colleagues. Taking the travel experience into the classroom, students can now hear what it is like to step foot in a cattle car, to walk the grounds of Auschwitz, and to hear more about survivors. My educational experiences have also had a ripple effect: not only do my students learn what I have learned, but so do my colleagues and educators state-wide at conferences and the TOLI Summer Seminar-Wisconsin.

All of the instruction, experience, travel, and tools have shaped our curriculum. My colleagues and I now have the tools to teach the Holocaust and, through that, empathy.

Holocaust Education in My School Today: Connecting Students

At Northland Pines High School, students get their first understanding of the Holocaust in US History classes. However, the English classroom is where they get the most instruction--and experience--in understanding and connecting to the Holocaust. Today, our English curriculum dedicates a quarter of the sophomore year to Holocaust and genocide studies. As my department and I continued teaching *Night*, we came to understand how much students really connect to the Holocaust and Elie Wiesel's account. We discovered that we not only were able to cover the mandatory curriculum requirements of the classroom, but we could also teach empathy.

Gradually, we expanded the Holocaust unit from just *Night* and related readings and videos to the full nine weeks. During the unit, students choose one novel from this list:

--Wiesel, *Night*

--Opdyke, *In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer*

--Spiegelman, *Maus*

--Sharenow, *Berlin Boxing Club*

--Gourevitch: *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*

Once they have chosen their book, we group them accordingly. They create their own reading calendars and come to class having annotated their books (usually with sticky notes) ready for Socratic seminars, largely organized by students with one as a note-taker and all others participating in a roundtable discussion. As they discuss their books, they ask meaningful questions, share reactions, and read whatever passages they found to be important or significant. Afterwards, they complete a summative assessment group presentation when they share out main plot points and themes.



Besides reading nonfiction and historical fiction, they also watch a variety of short testimonials and read poems and stories. Many of these are discussed in small and large groups, often through writing assignments. They watch the documentaries *I'm Still Here: Real Diaries of Young People Who Lived during the Holocaust* (MTV) and *One Day in Auschwitz* (USC Shoah Foundation). The culminating assessment comes in the form of a research project: students investigate both the life of a Holocaust victim and a victim of a different genocide, and they cite sources and present their findings on a poster shared with a small group of peers. This is rolled out in a research phase when students investigate survivor testimonials on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, USC Shoah Foundation, Echoes and Reflections, and Yad Vashem websites, which have

excellent testimonial archives. They then create a timeline of the victims on large posters, citing information, and deliver presentations in small groups. Through this project, they get to know their victims well and also get to hear about other testimonials as well.

Towards the end of the unit, my students visit Wiesel's quote, "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." We discuss the meaning of this quote and what it means to bear witness. How can students bear witness in their own lives? By being an upstander for what is right and good? By being empathetic to others in a tough situation? By keeping in mind the lessons of the Holocaust? Students reflect on these questions in writing.

Finally, keeping in mind the teachings of the Jewish tradition, they learn about the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, which means *to repair the world*. They reflect on what they have learned in the Holocaust unit and think of a way they can "repair the world." They pledge to make a change for the better, such as socially, environmentally, or spiritually. This dedication to making the world a better place ends the Holocaust and genocide unit.

In all, students learn about the Holocaust in depth in English classes. They acquire an understanding of the depth of the atrocity, and they learn the difference between bystanders and upstanders, that is, what to do if they see wrong on any level. They read about people much like themselves who find themselves in impossible situations. They make connections, which builds the empathy. They also understand the depth of the atrocity, which helps their understanding of humanity.

Measuring Achievement: Do Students Understand the Holocaust Better? Do They Become More Empathetic?

Through reading and watching the texts--through research, writing, and discussions--students get to know the victims of the Holocaust personally. This connection--not only to words on a page but to the humans behind those words--makes the experiences more tangible. The lessons can be applied not only to English class, but the experience transcends into other areas of the students' lives as well. By having traveled to the places

of the Holocaust and having mindfully planned lessons, I make sure the students learn about the Holocaust more deeply than when I first taught Holocaust literature.

Do students become more empathetic through learning this material, and how do I know? Besides being a part of student growth of understanding as observed in student behaviors, writing, and attitudes, I do ask them to write about what they learned. The question is, “What is the importance of learning about historical events like Holocaust and genocide in general?” Some answers from students recently:

When I was reading *Night*, I found it hard to keep reading it at times because of the depth, but after reading the book I realized that through the literature I got to feel what Elie was going through. It became a lot more real than just hearing what happened or learning it through some kind of lecture. This kind of learning brings a new maturity to students. We can understand what students, people from the past have gone through. It brings a sense of appreciation. And it teaches us to do something when we see people being treated unfairly.--Meaghan L.

At the beginning of the unit, I heard a student saying something under his breath about why do we have to learn about this. He was making jokes. At the end of the unit, he understood. He had a new perspective. He was over making the jokes. This type of deep learning, reading, brings people into the conversation. Now people understand the points of view of others.”

--Nicole R.

Overall Impact

Wiesel’s words changed my focus in class and inspired my travels and investigation into the Holocaust and bettering my teaching practices. Inscribed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and also on the wall of my classroom, his words, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness,” are often at the forefront of my mind. Being

charged to bear witness, I decided to focus on teaching the Holocaust more mindfully, and in addition, to teach other educators in order to make connections in Wisconsin and help them improve their curriculum as well. This educational topic has shaped my students to be globally aware of issues of social justice of the past and present, and to be aware of red flags for injustice in the future. Knowing the history and repercussions of being a bystander or perpetrator makes many students have a better understanding of themselves and others.