
INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO HOLOCAUST EDUCATION: ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCES THROUGH SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES, VIDEO GAMES, AND INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential for fostering democratic competences such as critical thinking, empathy, and an understanding of human rights. This education prompts students to reflect on the dangers of prejudice, discrimination, and unchecked power, helping them appreciate the importance of protecting democratic values like equality, justice, and respect for diversity. The handbook *Learning From The Past, Acting For The Future* advocates an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Holocaust education with human rights and intercultural education. This approach enables students to connect past atrocities with present-day issues, emphasizing the need for action against human rights violations and resistance to populist rhetoric. By examining the Holocaust through the lens of human rights, students are better prepared to contribute to democratic and intercultural societies where every individual can live with dignity. By examining effective strategies such as analyzing survivor testimonies, exploring Holocaust representations in video games, and utilizing immersive tools like the iWalk app, this article demonstrates how educators can enhance student engagement and understanding. The integration of these approaches not only makes the Holocaust more relatable but also equips students with critical thinking, empathy, and a commitment to democratic values.

Key Words: Holocaust Education, Interdisciplinary Approaches, iWalk App, Democratic Competences, Teaching Methods

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2024, we had the great opportunity to attend seminars organized by LEPL National Center for Teacher Professional Development of Georgia, the Education and Research Centre, and TOLI (The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights). The speakers were exceptionally experienced, highly qualified, and deeply knowledgeable in their fields. These seminars were incredibly beneficial for us - the teachers, as we gained valuable insights into the significance of Holocaust education. We also discovered some fascinating interdisciplinary approaches and methods that address this critical issue. In this article, we aim to share some of these approaches and emphasize the importance of teaching about the Holocaust to foster democratic competences and promote human rights.

The importance of teaching the Holocaust cannot be overstated, especially in today's world. Amber Tilley, a teacher at Northland Pines High School, has been educating her students about the Holocaust for 23 years and deeply understands its urgency. "I see the urgency in teaching students about this history so that they are better humans, more understanding, and will not stand down to wrongdoing at the hands of an oppressor," she emphasizes. Her experience at her first TOLI seminar in New York City in 2016 profoundly influenced her teaching approach. "It helped shape my own educational approach to incorporate more primary sources such as survivor testimony, diaries, and newspaper articles," she reflects. Tilley's perspective highlights the critical need to educate students about the Holocaust, not just as a historical event, but as a means to cultivate empathy, moral courage, and a commitment to justice in the face of oppression.

MAIN PART

Literature Review

Holocaust education is an essential element in cultivating empathy, critical thinking, and an understanding of human rights among students. As Adorno argues in *Education after Auschwitz*, "the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again." He emphasizes that Holocaust education should go beyond the transmission of historical facts and should aim to prevent the recurrence of such inhumanity by fostering critical awareness and moral responsibility among learners. Adorno's work highlights the importance of integrating Holocaust education into a broader ethical framework that challenges students to reflect on their role in society and their capacity to resist oppression.

Aalai explores the impact of Holocaust education on college students, particularly through the lens of complicity and collaboration. Her study, published in the *Journal of Transformative Education*, reveals that "the theme of complicity and collaboration in Holocaust education helps students understand that indifference and inaction can be as dangerous as active participation in atrocities." Aalai's research underscores the transformative

potential of Holocaust education in shaping students' understanding of moral responsibility and the consequences of passive complicity in the face of injustice.

In the context of Polish education, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs & Szuchta examine the challenges and opportunities in teaching the Holocaust in Poland, a country with a complex and painful relationship to this history. Their study in *Intercultural Education* highlights how Polish students' understanding of the Holocaust is shaped by the country's national narrative and the intricacies of confronting difficult aspects of local history. They argue that "teaching the Holocaust in Poland requires an approach that carefully balances historical accuracy with sensitivity to the local context, ensuring that students are encouraged to critically engage with their nation's past."

The intersection of Holocaust education and democratic competence is further explored by Barrett in his examination of the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. Published in the *London Review of Education*, Barrett's work outlines how Holocaust education can contribute to the development of critical democratic competences, such as empathy, respect for diversity, and critical thinking. By integrating these competences into Holocaust education, educators can help students understand the importance of democratic values in preventing future atrocities.

Totten & Feinberg, in their book *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust*, provide a comprehensive guide for educators on how to approach Holocaust education. They emphasize the importance of using a variety of pedagogical methods, including primary source analysis, survivor testimonies, and interdisciplinary approaches, to help students connect with the material on a deeper level. Totten and Feinberg advocate for a teaching approach that "not only imparts knowledge but also fosters a personal and emotional connection to the history, ensuring that students understand the human impact of the Holocaust."

Holocaust Education and Military Training

Holocaust education is particularly relevant in the context of military and defense training, as it underscores the vital importance of upholding human rights and ethical standards even in the most challenging circumstances. By studying the atrocities of the Holocaust, military personnel can gain a profound understanding of the consequences of blind obedience to authority and the dangers of dehumanization in warfare. This education fosters critical thinking and moral courage, essential qualities for military leaders who must navigate complex ethical dilemmas on the battlefield. Furthermore, it reinforces the commitment to the protection of civilian populations and the prevention of war crimes, aligning with the broader defense objectives of preserving peace and safeguarding human dignity.

Innovative Approaches to Holocaust Education

To begin with, it is crucial that students have access to accurate information about the Holocaust, starting with a historically precise definition of the event and correct usage of related terms. Engaging with primary sources is essential for helping students develop a more objective understanding of the Holocaust. However, a critical analysis of these sources is necessary, even when they originate from primary accounts. Many primary sources were created by the perpetrators themselves, so analyzing the motives and methods behind their creation enables learners to construct a meaningful understanding of this complex and deeply troubling period. Furthermore, Holocaust education should not be limited to mere facts and figures, as this would neglect the human dimension of the event. Conversely, presenting individual stories without providing a broader historical context can also be misleading. Incorporating diverse materials, such as literature, art, personal narratives, and film, can help students develop a more nuanced and balanced perspective. Understanding the historical context is vital as it illustrates that while Nazi persecution was deliberate, it was not inevitable (Polgar)

Moreover, studying the Holocaust often evokes intense emotions, necessitating careful reflection on one's thoughts and feelings. Students might experience a range of emotions such as helplessness, anger, and frustration. Recognizing and addressing these emotional responses can serve as a strong impetus for taking meaningful action in today's world. This emotional engagement can drive students to contribute to positive change in their current societies. Achieving this is possible only when students perceive the learning environment as both secure and engaging, and when they can relate their own identities and perspectives to the subjects being explored.

It should be mentioned that an interdisciplinary approach can stimulate students to engage in difficult conversations about history, the present, and the future. It can also motivate them to contribute to ensuring that the memory of people who were dehumanized in the past is preserved with dignity (Learning from the Past, Acting for the Future). The human rights perspective allows students to gain insight into the Holocaust by framing it through the lens of individual rights and justice. Rather than seeking simple answers, this approach encourages students to explore the deeper and more intricate aspects of the atrocity, helping them appreciate its complexity and understand the broader implications.

Integrating the Model of Competences for Democratic Culture with Holocaust teaching creates a powerful framework for fostering critical democratic values. This model emphasizes key competencies such as critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural understanding, which are crucial for comprehending the complexities of the Holocaust. By aligning Holocaust education with these competencies, students are not only equipped to grasp the historical and

human dimensions of the Holocaust but also encouraged to reflect on and engage with democratic principles. This approach helps students develop a more profound sense of responsibility and commitment to preventing future atrocities, reinforcing their role as informed and active citizens in a democratic society.

To illustrate effective methods for teaching about the Holocaust, I want to highlight several impactful approaches. One particularly valuable method is **analyzing survivor testimonies**.

Individual stories help students understand history from a human perspective, rather than a political, societal, cultural, religious or other perspective. Using testimonies in teaching is not only a powerful way to remember survivors and victims of the Holocaust, but also to develop students' empathy and deeper understanding of the impact of unjust and inhumane actions. In history learning, testimonies are usually included towards the end of the educational process, as a way to supplement what was learned from history books, archives and other sources. The approach presented in this Handbook proposes a process that works the other way around: students start from an individual story and then carry out research in order to understand the more general social and historical context in which the story unfolded.

This activity involves students watching or reading firsthand accounts from Holocaust survivors to deeply engage with the historical reality of the Holocaust. Asia Raberman's video, which features her personal reflections and experiences, is an excellent resource for this purpose. Asia Raberman's video, which features her personal reflections and experiences related to the Holocaust, can be a valuable resource. The video provides a vivid, personal narrative that illuminates the human side of the Holocaust, offering students a chance to connect with the lived experiences of a survivor. Teachers can use the video to spark discussions, guide students in analyzing the emotional and historical content, and relate these experiences to broader themes of human rights and democracy.

Teachers can integrate Asia Raberman's video into lessons by first providing context about her background and the significance of her testimony. After watching the video, students can participate in structured activities such as:

- **Discussion:** Facilitate a discussion where students reflect on their emotional responses and analyze the key themes presented in the video. Encourage students to connect these themes to democratic principles, such as human rights and the importance of combating prejudice.
- **Reflection Essays:** Assign students to write reflective essays on how the video impacted their understanding of the Holocaust and its relevance to contemporary issues related to human rights and democracy.
- **Group Projects:** Have students work in groups to create presentations or projects that explore the broader implications of the Holocaust testimony. For example, they might

investigate how survivor testimonies can influence contemporary human rights movements or educate about preventing future atrocities.

- **Critical Analysis:** Guide students in a critical analysis of the video, focusing on the narrative's authenticity, emotional impact, and the broader historical context. This helps students develop critical thinking skills and understand the complexities of historical narratives.

Outcome: Students gain a deeper emotional connection to the Holocaust through personal narratives, enhancing their understanding of the human dimension behind historical events. By relating these insights to democratic competences, such as empathy and critical engagement, students are better equipped to appreciate the significance of human rights and the importance of preventing future injustices. This approach encourages students to see the relevance of Holocaust education in fostering a more just and compassionate society.

I would like to highlight that Asia Raberman's testimony, along with many others, can be found on the educational platform **IWitness**. Developed by the USC Shoah Foundation, IWitness provides access to over 55,000 video testimonies of survivors and witnesses of genocides, including the Holocaust. This platform is a comprehensive educational tool that not only offers first-hand accounts of historical events but also integrates these powerful narratives into interactive activities, lessons, and projects. The platform's resources are designed to foster critical thinking, reflection, and discussions around human rights, social justice, and tolerance. With its user-friendly interface, multilingual accessibility, and a focus on both historical and contemporary issues, IWitness is an invaluable resource for educators and students alike, enabling a deeper understanding of history and its relevance to present-day challenges.

Another innovative method for teaching about the Holocaust is **Holocaust Through Video Games**. Video games have increasingly become a powerful medium for exploring historical events, including the Holocaust. Titles like "Call of Duty", "Wolfenstein", "My Memory of Us", "Through the Darkest of Times", "Tom Away", and "Company of Heroes" are notable examples that delve into various aspects of this complex history. These games, as products of popular culture, play a significant role in shaping both individual and collective understandings of the past. By engaging players in immersive narratives and interactive experiences, these video games offer unique insights into the Holocaust, making history accessible and impactful in ways that resonate deeply with contemporary audiences. This approach offers students an interactive and engaging way to explore historical contexts and experiences. By analyzing how the Holocaust is represented in these games, students can gain a deeper understanding of historical narratives and the ethical considerations involved.

To implement this activity, teachers can use a variety of methods:

Direct Methods:

- **Individual or Guided Gaming:** Allow students to play specific missions or scenarios from "Call of Duty" that relate to World War II. Provide them with guided questions or themes to focus on, such as the portrayal of wartime experiences and the moral dilemmas faced by characters.
- **Game Observation:** Organize sessions where students watch selected gameplay together. Facilitate discussions on the historical accuracy of the events depicted and how the game's narrative aligns with historical facts.
- **Commented Gaming:** Use a playthrough of the game where a teacher or guest speaker provides commentary on the historical context and its representation in the game. This method helps students connect the game's content to real historical events.

Indirect Methods:

- **Videos of Gameplay:** Show recorded gameplay videos to highlight specific aspects of the game related to the Holocaust and World War II. Analyze these videos to discuss historical accuracy and representation.
- **Screenshots:** Use screenshots from the game to prompt discussions about visual representation and historical context. Analyze how the game depicts key events and settings.
- **Marketing Materials:** Examine trailers, wallpapers, and other promotional materials to understand how the game markets its historical content. Discuss the impact of these materials on the portrayal of historical events.
- **Gaming Journals:** Review and discuss articles or reviews that critique the game's historical representation. This can provide additional perspectives on the accuracy and impact of the game's content.

The aim of this activity is to engage students with historical content in an interactive manner, helping them explore and analyze the representation of the Holocaust in video games. This method encourages students to think critically about how historical events are portrayed in media and to understand the broader implications of these portrayals.

The outcome of this activity is that students will develop a deeper understanding of historical events and their representations. They will enhance their critical thinking skills by evaluating the accuracy and impact of video game narratives and gain insight into the ethical considerations of depicting historical events in interactive media. The outcome includes not only a deeper understanding of historical events and their representations but also the development of key democratic competences. Students enhance their critical thinking skills,

empathy, and respect for diversity while gaining ethical awareness and media literacy. These competences are crucial for fostering informed, responsible, and engaged citizens in a democratic society.

Another compelling method for teaching about the Holocaust is the **iWalk app**. The **iWalk app** is an innovative tool designed to enhance historical education through immersive, location-based experiences. By using augmented reality and GPS technology, iWalk provides users with interactive walking tours that bring historical events to life. For Holocaust education, the app can offer virtual tours of significant sites, such as former ghettos or concentration camps, allowing students to engage with history in a deeply personal and meaningful way. As users explore these locations, they encounter rich multimedia content, including survivor testimonies, historical documents, and contextual information, which helps to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust's impact. This method not only makes history more accessible and engaging but also fosters a stronger connection to the past by integrating educational experiences with real-world exploration.

To integrate the iWalk app into classroom instruction, teachers can use it in several impactful ways:

- **Pre-Lesson Preparation:** Teachers can assign the iWalk app as a pre-lesson activity, where students explore virtual tours of Holocaust sites before coming to class. This prepares them with foundational knowledge and context for deeper in-class discussions.
- **Guided Tours:** During class, teachers can guide students through specific virtual tours using the app. By focusing on particular sites or themes, teachers can lead discussions on the historical significance of each location, incorporating multimedia content and survivor testimonies provided by the app.
- **Project-Based Learning:** Teachers can use the iWalk app as part of project-based learning assignments. Students might create presentations or reports based on their virtual tours, analyzing the historical context, personal stories, and impact of the Holocaust sites they explored.
- **Interactive Discussions:** Following virtual tours, teachers can facilitate interactive discussions and debates based on the content students encountered. This encourages critical thinking and deeper engagement with the material.
- **Assessment and Reflection:** Teachers can use the app's content as a basis for assessments, such as essays or quizzes, and encourage students to reflect on their experiences and learning outcomes. This can be complemented with assignments that require students to connect their virtual experiences with historical facts and broader themes.

Overall, the iWalk app provides a versatile and engaging tool for Holocaust education, enabling teachers to offer immersive, interactive learning experiences that enhance historical understanding, empathy, and critical thinking.

Relevance to Military Education

Integrating Holocaust education into military training programs offers unique opportunities to instil ethical decision-making and a deep understanding of human rights among future military leaders. The use of innovative tools such as the iWalk app and historically accurate video games, as highlighted in this article, can provide cadets and soldiers with immersive experiences that go beyond traditional historical instruction. These methods allow military personnel to engage with the complexities of moral choices during conflict, drawing parallels between the past and the ethical challenges they may face in modern operations. By experiencing historical events like the Holocaust through interactive platforms, military trainees can develop a stronger sense of responsibility and a commitment to upholding international laws of war, ultimately leading to more ethically grounded and culturally aware armed forces.

Implications for Modern Defense and Security

The application of Holocaust education in military contexts has significant implications for contemporary defense and security strategies. Understanding the catastrophic consequences of unchecked power and prejudice during the Holocaust can inform modern military conduct, particularly in preventing war crimes and ensuring the humane treatment of civilians in conflict zones. By incorporating these educational methods into their training, military institutions can foster a culture of accountability and respect for human rights, aligning with international humanitarian law. Moreover, the lessons learned from Holocaust education can contribute to the development of more effective and ethically sound military strategies, ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated and that armed forces are better equipped to navigate the moral dilemmas of modern warfare.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the seminars organized by LEPL National Centre for Teacher Professional Development of Georgia, the Education and Research Centre, and TOLI provided invaluable insights into Holocaust education. Attending these seminars has deepened our understanding of the significance of Holocaust teaching and introduced me to innovative and interdisciplinary methods that enhance student learning. Through approaches such as analyzing survivor testimonies, exploring Holocaust representations in video games, and using the iWalk app, educators can engage students in profound ways that foster empathy, critical thinking, and democratic competences. These methods not only make historical events more

relatable and accessible but also equip students with the skills and perspectives necessary to become informed and responsible citizens. We are grateful for the opportunity to have participated in these seminars and to share these effective teaching strategies, which underscore the vital importance of Holocaust education in promoting human rights and democratic values.

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