For the Educator

Rationale for Teaching about the Holocaust in Adult Education Classrooms  . . . . A1
A Brief History of the Project ......................................................... A2
The Purpose and Structure of the Toolkit ................................. A4
Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust ......................... A5
For the Educator

Rationale for Teaching about the Holocaust in Adult Education Classrooms

Prejudice and discrimination continue on their course through time. The people and circumstances change, but the destructive nature of hatred and intolerance is infallible.

The events in Europe between 1933 and 1945 are known as “The Holocaust.” The actions of these years exemplify prejudice and hatred taken to the extreme, but the attitudes and social structure behind this era were ensconced in the culture long before 1933. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust, and about the society that allowed these crimes to occur, is crucial to build awareness about current episodes of hatred in our own communities. We must learn to stand up for human rights for all people. We need to act against hatred in our society before intolerance approaches the level evident during the Holocaust. As the philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.”

Nationally, Holocaust education efforts have been directed at kindergarten through high school students, college and university students and faculty, and adults who take advantage of community education and cultural events. Missing from the audience are “undereducated” adults. One arena to reach this community is through adult education programs. In 1990, the Governors and President Bush established national education goals for improving our educational system. The literacy and lifelong learning goal strives to reach a time when:

\[
every \text{ adult will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.}
\]

Adult education programs nationally are challenged to excel, to teach both skills and content, and to teach learners to be effective citizens and community members. Civic responsibilities require that people stay informed, form and express opinions and ideas, learn to work together, and take action to strengthen communities.* Likewise, the directive of Holocaust education includes teaching and learning these same skills and responsibilities to reduce the likelihood of similar episodes in the future.

*The Equipped for the Future Initiative is developing a framework of the skills and knowledge which enable adults to carry out their roles as citizens, family members and workers. For more information, contact the Center for Literacy Studies.
At some time in their lives, every adult learner confronts some form of prejudice or discrimination, either resulting from their lack of formal education, or from their race, culture, sex, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation. Many learners, both knowingly and unknowingly, prejudge or harbor unfounded hatred against people who they view as “different” from themselves. However, most have little or no knowledge about the Holocaust and the lessons to be learned about unbridled racism, anti-Semitism, and prejudice. With a steadily growing population of adult learners, development of Holocaust education materials specifically addressing their academic abilities/needs, social maturity, and life experiences is imperative.

A Brief History of the Project

The Lessons from the Holocaust project grew out of general literacy and lifelong learning goals, a void in Holocaust materials for adult educators and their students, and a well-planted idea. In 1994, Dr. John Gaventa, a professor at the University of Tennessee and member of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, challenged The Commission to reach beyond the traditional boundaries of Holocaust education. As a result of this challenge, the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, Inc. funded the Center for Literacy Studies to develop Holocaust teaching materials specifically designed for adult education classrooms.

In 1996, five adult education practitioners applied to be part of the “project working group” for the Lessons from the Holocaust project. They taught in a variety of adult education settings including adult basic education, adult high school, English speakers of other languages, and GED preparation. They agreed to document their experiences and efforts at teaching about the Holocaust over the course of the year, as well as review and develop resources for other teachers. The group met monthly with members of the CLS staff to share their experiences and exchange ideas. Quarterly, an advisory group joined in to discuss some of the broader implications and finer nuances of Holocaust education.

Very early in the project, the teachers
discovered that they had overestimated most of their students’ awareness of the Holocaust. Many students had never heard the word “Holocaust.” Some had heard that “6 million Jews” were put in concentration camps. A few read *Anne Frank* when they attended traditional middle or high school classes. Their knowledge about this period was sketchy at best, non-existent at worst.

Along with slim prior knowledge, the teachers began to realize that many students’ feelings of hatred toward other groups of people were extremely close to the surface. A group of young male students in one class, after learning about groups of “other” Nazi victims, began to vocalize support for terrorizing homosexuals. To circumvent the hateful conversation, the teacher addressed whether a person’s “differences” justifies violence and hatred. Although the conversation eventually returned to the intended course, the teacher was shaken by its diversion.

In the course of working with their students, the project working group learned as much about themselves as they did about their students. They discovered their own knowledge gaps about the Holocaust and its veiled influence on their own upbringing. Their experiences with the project and teaching about the Holocaust in general increased their awareness of their family’s history, and its importance in shaping their personal outlooks.

Poignant survivor memoirs magnify the symbolic value of the “little things in life,” like family photographs and conversations with grandparents. As the project teachers worked with adult learners, they began to realize the importance of teaching about people—individuals whose histories are unique yet historically intertwined—who were forced to make critical decisions amid confusion and chaos. The “facts” of the Holocaust—like dates, places, and events—are important, but we learn the most from this history through an empathetic understanding of human experiences; therefore, the *Educators’ Toolkit* concentrates on putting these experiences in historical context, rather than replicating historic facts readily available from other sources.

In the Fall of 1997, seven adult education teachers from Middle and West Tennessee “piloted” the existing lessons in their classrooms, making suggestions for revisions and developing new ideas. The primary purpose of the pilot phase was to test the transferability of the already developed lessons. However, through the pilot phase teachers’ unending energy and enthusiasm, the results were much greater than predicted.

The addition of an electronic listserv accelerated the lesson development and

> When I first introduced the material to my reading class, I was surprised at their total lack of background information….While this lack of a knowledge base is disturbing, it also provides a justification for teaching content-centered classes such as this. The basic background materials included will enhance the learners’ overall knowledge base and can thus improve the potential score on the GED reading passages, especially in the area of social studies.
Lessons from the Holocaust

As a “starting point,” one educator showed her students 2 photographs from this period. Without giving her students any information, she asked them to write down ideas about the photographs. Then they went to the public library with an assignment to research these questions about the Holocaust—Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

“They did a good job of finding the resources and I could see that by reading about the Holocaust made the pictures come to life. They were beginning to understand.”

testing process. The pilot phase teachers used the listserv to brainstorm with each other, make suggestions, and, after trying the new ideas, provide each other with results. The listserv radically changed the dynamics of the project, allowing geographically distant teachers to work together as a close-knit group. Furthermore, the archived files of the listserv provide extensive documentation of the pilot phase efforts. Throughout this resource book, you will find quotes from the teachers who worked on both the development and pilot phases of the project.

The Purpose and Structure of the Toolkit

The Educators’ Toolkit is not intended as a curriculum, but instead is a collection of resources, ideas, and suggestions for teaching important lessons from the Holocaust to your adult education students. It provides a framework of facts, readings, photographs, and maps on which to develop your own materials. The Toolkit is designed for educators who want to emphasize: the importance of community awareness; taking action against prejudice, discrimination, and acts of hatred; and social responsibility. Although the lessons work well together, they are designed to stand alone if required. Likewise, they are not intended to be sequential, but some work better than others as starting points.

Like other adult education practitioners, the project working group encountered a number of systemic hazards: class turnover is rapid and unpredictable, students’ attendance is sometimes sporadic, class time is limited, and interruptions are frequent. These teaching conditions are likely to be evident in many, if not most, adult education classrooms; therefore, these resources were designed to be readily adaptable to a variety of conditions.

Adult students’ individual backgrounds present interesting challenges. Like all of us, their life experiences have shaped their outlook and beliefs. Tackling racism and hatred in adult classrooms can provoke unpredictable or disturbing situations. The Lessons from the Holocaust practitioners recorded their own teaching experiences—especially those least expected—in journals and on the listserv.

Excerpts from these records are included in the Toolkit to brace you for potential pitfalls and provide you with reassurance as you encounter similar difficulties.
Lessons from the Holocaust

Like the earlier practitioners, you are not expected to be an “instant” expert on the historic context and details of the Holocaust. The practitioners who worked on the initial stages of the project explained to their students that they would be acting as partners in learning new materials. This approach worked well; the students learned research methods and critical thinking skills as they uncovered new information with their teacher.

Most of the practitioners who have worked on this project express astonishment at their new awareness of both the historical events of the Holocaust and its links to today. Once the door is open to learning, for both the practitioner and the adult learner, the flood of ideas is boundless.

The Educators’ Resource Toolkit should be considered as a springboard for your teaching, rather than as an all-inclusive set of Holocaust teaching materials. Other excellent resources are available (many of which are referenced in this Resource Book), and more are being published or produced each year; thus, the contents of this set of resources will evolve over time.

Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust

Before you begin teaching about the Holocaust, important suggestions from other teachers’ experiences are available. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. developed a set of teaching guidelines which have proved useful for learners of all ages. Rather than rewriting their excellent “Methodological Considerations,” we include the 14 guidelines here, with their full descriptions located in Appendix A. We encourage you to read the Museum’s full descriptions and pay close attention to their logic.

Guidelines Specific to Teaching Adult Learners About the Holocaust

These considerations were developed specifically for teaching adult learners about this history and its lessons.

1. Teach your students more than just skills.

Most adult education students enter the classroom with a specific goal (or goals) in mind. Some want to learn to read, others want to pass the GED, and still others want to earn a high school diploma.

As you help your students reach their expressed goals by teach-

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust

1. Define what you mean by “Holocaust.”
2. Avoid comparisons of pain.
3. Avoid simple answers to complex history.
4. Just because it happened, doesn’t mean it was inevitable.
5. Strive for precision of language.
7. Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions.
8. Do not romanticize history to engage students’ interest.
9. Contextualize the history you are teaching.
10. Translate statistics into people.
11. Be sensitive to appropriate written and audio-visual content.
12. Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust.
13. Select appropriate learning activities.
14. Reinforce the objectives of your lesson plan.
“This has been a life-encompassing project. Everywhere I looked, something seemed to relate to the Holocaust. It was almost as if I had grown a set of antennae that picked up signals about relevant topics and interpreted seemingly unrelated materials in a relevant way.”

Adult Learners Speak Out

“It is a whole lot of thing I didn’t know about the Holocaust but I can learn.”

“It is learn me that we was not the only one getting treated badly in American.”

“I liked the details. They are really giving you a better understanding of what people had to live through, if they lived at all.”

“Content-based lessons, you can increase their ability to succeed in their community with content-based lessons. Teach your students to research an issue, to analyze their findings, to make informed decisions, and to be socially responsible while you reinforce specific academic skills.

Content-based lessons which introduce the events of the Holocaust era provide avenues for students to learn about human potential—at its worst and at its best. Lessons from this period require more emotional involvement from the learners, drawing them in to the process of learning voluntarily rather than forcibly.

2. Do not assume that your students have any prior knowledge of the Holocaust.
Many adult learners who participated in the early phases of this project had never heard of the Holocaust prior to this introduction, much to their teachers’ surprise. Some learners knew fragments of information but were significantly misinformed on the details. Although your students are adults, it is not safe to assume any prior knowledge about this period in history. An overview of the historical context is necessary for even the briefest unit on this subject, but context does not have to be taught first. Rather than boring learners with facts and details, draw them in with people’s experiences during this period. As your learners ask for more information, the facts and details will be welcomed.

3. Be aware that each of your students has their own “history” which may shape their reactions to the materials—in both negative and positive ways.
Many adult students have experienced difficult times in their own lives, ranging from the death of a loved one to being a victim of a hate crime. The students’ life experiences shape their reactions in both negative and positive ways. The Holocaust materials you introduce may re-open old wounds. For example, one of the project teachers introduced “A Letter Written to a Child by her Mother” to a student who was struggling with depression. She found that the exercise was too emotionally difficult for this particular student. Some lessons in the Educators’ Toolkit, like the ID Card project, provide avenues for you to learn more about your students’ personal histories, and may alert you to potential problems.

Your students’ past difficulties may help you teach empathy for the victims of the Holocaust, as well as other groups in today’s society. Students who recognize parallels to their experiences with prejudice and discrimination are quick to point out subtle commonalities. The Lessons from the Holocaust can help heal old emotional
injuries for students who begin to realize that events in their own history were sometimes beyond their control.

4. **Just because you can show adult students extremely graphic images from the Holocaust, doesn’t mean you should** (reinforcing the USHMM guideline number 11). Unlike teaching children, “parental permission” is not required for showing extremely graphic images to adult learners. Some exposure to the graphic images of the Holocaust catches the attention of adult students, but too much exposure may dull students’ senses to this atrocity. Rather than desensitizing students with a vast collection of graphic photos or films, carefully select a few images for use in your classroom. If students do further research independently, they undoubtedly will encounter more of the horrific images over time. Remember, some of the more compelling images of this period are not inherently horrific at all.

5. **The internet provides a wealth of information about the Holocaust, but BEWARE!**

In recent years, Holocaust teaching and learning materials have proliferated on the internet; however, Holocaust revisionists and deniers exploit this medium to spread their myths. The only internet addresses included in this Resource Book are those of reputable organizations. We recommend accessing these organizations’ web sites first to find links to other reliable Holocaust sites, rather than having students do broad-based “Holocaust” searches.

6. **It is impossible to teach or learn “everything” about the Holocaust, so embrace your successes.**

Do not expect to teach your students “everything” about the Holocaust. Often the lessons that reach adult learners best are those that focus on experiences of individuals, rather than lessons that explain the complicated sequence of events. Through individual experiences, adult learners see the relevance of past events to their own experiences. Then, they ask to learn more.

Learning about the Holocaust and its lessons is an ongoing challenge for all of us. If your efforts encourage students to ask questions; to open their eyes, ears, and mind to events of the past and present; to speak out against injustices; and to treat other people with renewed respect, you have taught the “lessons” from the Holocaust.

“One student was going to take the assignment home with him, but instead he started reading and did not stop until he had finished the assignment. Another took it home and reported that she read it with her boyfriend and discussed her responses.”

---

Educators’ Resource Toolkit

Center for Literacy Studies, The University of Tennessee