

# Teaching the Holocaust to Diverse Student Cohorts

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**T**HE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY, OFFERS HOLOCAUST-RELATED courses at all levels of our undergraduate program. There is a long tradition of Holocaust education at UNSW.<sup>1</sup> We currently have a level-two unit that is entirely devoted to a comprehensive history of the Holocaust, which I discuss more in detail below. Holocaust-related topics are also included in the general modern history survey at level one, and in particular in our level-three courses on Nazi Germany (taught separately from the History of the Holocaust course), *Confronting the Past in Contemporary Europe*, and *Documentary History and Film*.<sup>2</sup> We do not currently offer any courses that teach the Holocaust in a comparative perspective with other cases of genocides, though our modern history units introduce students to various cases of gross human rights violations, such as the history of the Armenian genocide, the Soviet *Holodomor*, and so on.

I have been teaching Holocaust-related courses at UNSW Sydney since my appointment in 2012. The core unit I discuss here is a level-two course that

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<sup>1</sup> Courses related to the history of the Holocaust were taught by Professor Konrad Kwiet (now resident historian at the Sydney Jewish Museum and Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney), Associate Professor Julie Kalman (currently at Monash University), Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod (Sydney) and Dr Ari Lander (Sydney Jewish Museum).

<sup>2</sup> The *Documentary History and Film* course is discussed separately in this roundtable by Dr Ruth Balint. The other courses are taught by Dr Zora Simic, Dr Robert Buch and Dr Andrew Beattie.

introduces the students to the complex history of the Nazi Holocaust (The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath). There has been a growing interest among students in the course since 2016, when I transformed it from a summer course into a regular course (2014/15: 27 students; 2016: 62 students; 2017: 79 students). This is a challenging subject, which touches upon sensitive topics, but which also addresses students' preconceived ideas about the history of Nazi genocides.

One of the key challenges that we, as educators at Australian Universities, face is that we need to cater to both humanities and non-humanities students. Driven by the need to increase the enrolments in our classes, we make our courses attractive to students who take them as part of their core curriculum as well as those who enrol purely out of interest, or as part of their general education. Courses on modern history, World War II and the Holocaust tend to attract a large number of non-history students. I conducted a survey in my class in Semester 1, 2017 and out of 79 students, only 22 had declared history as their major or minor at the time, while 34 students clearly came from non-humanities disciplines—often, for example, from media, law and fine arts—but there was also a sizeable cohort of science students. This has been a completely new experience for me, as a person educated in the Czech Republic and Britain, where we enjoyed the luxury of small classes with just history students.

The composition of our student cohorts means that we face various challenges in terms of how we design our curriculum, how much stress we put on methodological practice, what kind of in-class exercises we prepare to stimulate students' interest in the class, and also how much time we spend on historical background to ensure that all students can benefit from the lectures and tutorials. At the same time, I would argue that the diversity of our student cohort is beneficial for our teaching practice as it allows us to develop new approaches to the subject matter that make the course inclusive to all who enrol. In the following, I will introduce the structure of the Holocaust history course I teach and then I will briefly outline two educational approaches I use to encourage deeper student engagement with the study material.

I divide the structure of the course into two parts. The aim of my lectures is to offer a long historical overview of the history of the Holocaust, including the origins of religious anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism at the beginning of the course, and then a brief history of the aftermath at the end of the course. Tutorials are more thematic, each introducing students to a particular topic (for example, the role of Nazi propaganda in the Holocaust; current representation in film), a specific concept (for example, bystanders), or a historiographical debate (Goldhagen-Browning; Origins of the Final Solution; Jewish 'collaboration' and resistance, and so on).

I have elicited feedback on the course design from my students. In 2017, I designed a survey with the aim of learning more about students' academic backgrounds and their expectations—for example, in terms of topics they would like to discuss in the course. A number of students confirmed that they had no background knowledge about the Holocaust and what they did know often came from films, novels and media, or from their trips to Holocaust museums and sites of former concentration and extermination camps. They also noted that their previous knowledge was skewed by media and the film industry and that they wanted to learn 'what happened' during the war. On the other hand, only a small number of them gave specific suggestions about what they would like to learn. If they made suggestions, they proposed topics that are often not covered in Holocaust courses, or at least not as thoroughly as other topics. They would like to discuss the aftermath of the Holocaust (topics such as the survivors' trauma and the impact of the Holocaust on human rights discourses). Another topic that appeared in the questionnaire was on the Allies and the Holocaust, as a case study of how the world responds to genocides and to gross human rights violations. The most important message of this survey is that students want to see the relevance of the Holocaust today. They do not want a purely historical course. While the survey yielded much food for thought, we need to take into consideration the low response rate and hence further research is necessary to confirm these conclusions.

The following two examples illustrate the ways I have been addressing the educational challenges outlined above, particularly the diversity of the student cohort and students' preconceived ideas about the Holocaust.

Example 1: hands-on history. I have stressed the need for the students to engage with an integrated history of the Holocaust that includes voices of the victims and which introduces students to everyday experiences of life under the Nazis. My aim is to complement scholarly historiographical discussions with examples of real-life stories from the Holocaust in the form of video testimonies (as well as written testimonies). One of the main highlights of this course, according to students' testimonials, has been a guest talk by a Holocaust survivor (Peter Rossler, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz, and other smaller camps). Students also visit the Sydney Jewish Museum's comprehensive Holocaust exhibition. Students have consistently commended this methodological approach, which we can call 'hands-on history'. This approach has made the study material easily accessible to non-humanities students also.

Example 2: in-class formative exercise and students' unlearning. We live in a world where we are constantly reminded about the Nazi crimes as the epitome of gross human rights violations. However, it also means that we, as educators, need to

challenge students' preconceived ideas that are often based on the tabloid press and Hollywood film industry. Students' unlearning thus forms a significant part of my teaching practice in ARTS2285. For example, the case of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust is one of the most intriguing topics of Holocaust historiography and of Holocaust teaching and learning. Students often come to the classroom with the belief that Jews did not resist the Nazi persecution, which often implicitly leads to a portion of the guilt being placed on the victims (the infamous statement that they were 'led like sheep to the slaughter'; students sometimes voice these sentiments even in the classroom).

I have devised an in-class exercise that allows for a deeper learning experience, tests higher levels of Bloom's learning taxonomy (Armstrong) and challenges students' preconceived ideas about the Holocaust. In preparation, students read an article by Yehuda Bauer ('Jewish Resistance'), who offers a very broad definition of resistance, which they are asked to critique. I open the tutorial by presenting the students with three complex stories from the Holocaust: a) Zivia Lubetkin and Rachel Rudnitzki, female ghetto prisoners, who actively joined armed resistance against the Germans; b) Emanuel Ringelblum, a male historian, who, during the war, collected documentary material in the Warsaw ghetto; and c) the story of Janusz Korczak, a famous Jewish educator, who decided to join his orphaned pupils on the way to the death camp even though he could have saved his own life (I play a video clip from a feature film by Andrzej Wajda). After presenting these stories I ask students to debate which, if any, of these cases were acts of resistance and whether we can relate them to the concepts introduced by Bauer, such as *Amidah* and sanctification of life. This exercise, in combination with the prescribed readings, contributes to a lively discussion that broadens students' understanding of the term 'resistance' and of the Jewish experience during the war. It allows me to include a perhaps challenging interpretation of the term 'resistance' (that challenges the strong belief that students have concerning the Jews not fighting during the war); it allows for critical thinking about the concept in relation to the social life in the ghetto; and it is also a suitable way to include a gender-balanced view of the Holocaust.

The main challenges that I encounter in the classroom are the diversity of the student cohort and the various levels of previous knowledge on the subject, and these have shaped the ways in which I have developed and structured my curriculum. The current structure of the course has allowed me to create an inclusive environment that caters to various students' needs, giving a broad historical overview to some, while challenging others.

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The research reveals that teachers adopt a diverse set of approaches to this challenging and complex subject. In the report, teachers' perceptions, perspectives and practice are presented and a range of challenges and issues encountered by teachers across the country are explicitly identified. The research shows that, although most teachers believe that it is important to teach about the Holocaust, very few have received specialist professional development in this area. 1. Teaching about the Holocaust appears to take place in a wide variety of subject areas within English secondary schools. If a student encounters the Holocaust at school in Years 7 and 8, it is likely that this will take place in a subject other than history, most notably within RE. 1. The students used Tilt Brush to draw their 3D images – a program that among many other features also syncs sound and movement – a perfect match for the eerie vibrations of the theremin, an instrument creating sound from electrical waves. Children were filmed with volumetric video – a technique capturing three-dimensional space, allowing for the images to be transformed directly into 3D where these same images would later react to sound waves. Allow students to contemplate the various factors which contributed to the Holocaust; do not attempt to reduce Holocaust history to one or two catalysts in isolation from the other factors which came into play. For example, the Holocaust was not simply the logical and inevitable consequence of unbridled racism. As in all teaching situations, the opening and closing lessons are critically important. A strong opening should serve to dispel misinformation students may have prior to studying the Holocaust. It should set a reflective tone, move students from passive to active learners, indicate to students that their ideas and opinions matter, and establish that this history has multiple ramifications for themselves as individuals and as members of society as a whole. It is a complex task teaching the Holocaust to students of any grade level, but teaching the powerful, essential lessons are why we got into this profession. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website offers incredible resources for teachers and learners, including a compelling video about the Holocaust that you can show your students today. Go here to watch the film *The Path to Nazi Genocide* and receive a free copy. More. It is a complex task teaching the Holocaust to our students, of any grade level, but teaching the big, powerful, essential lessons are why we got into this profession. A structured inquiry into the history of the Holocaust provides one of the most effective subjects for students' examinations of basic moral issues and human behavior