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CHAPTER 7

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Teaching About Genocide

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching about genocide is a complex and difficult task. Not only is the subject matter often horrific, but the issues are often extremely technical and/or thorny.

Different instructors, of course, approach the subject matter in different ways and use vastly different techniques and resources to assist their students to gain an understanding of key theories, concepts, issues, policies and actions. That said, the pedagogy used in such a study should be one that is student-centered—one in which the students are not passive but rather actively engaged in the study. It should be a study that, in the best sense of the word, “complicates” the students’ thinking, engages them in critical and creative thought, and involves in-depth versus superficial coverage of information. It should also involve students in reading and examining primary sources (e.g., contemporaneous documents issued during the genocide under study, diaries and letters written by the

victims and others, trial records, etc.). Using such resources, in conjunction with first-person accounts by survivors and other witnesses, can help students examine the broader historical themes in powerful and personal ways. Any and all genocides are difficult to comprehend, therefore it is critical that educators choose resources that not only facilitate the achievement of course goals, but help students grapple with the choices, decisions, actions and inaction made by perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, victims, and others. Secondary sources, as well, should not be overlooked—particularly those that were issued/published during the period of the genocide, such as newspaper articles and editorials, newsreels, and political cartoons. Certain feature films (such as “The Killing Fields” about the Cambodia genocide) and literature by the victims, survivors, and others (e.g., novels, shorts stories, poetry, drama) are also valuable sources for use in the classroom.

The rest of this chapter highlights some of the more powerful learning activities and teaching strategies that this author, his colleagues, and others have used in their courses on genocide.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES USEFUL FOR INTRODUCING A STUDY OF GENOCIDE

At the outset of any study, it is important to ascertain the students’ knowledge base about the topic (e.g., what they know and do not know). To neglect to do so may result in a waste of time (e.g., possibly addressing information the students already know), not to mention potential frustration on both the students’ part (e.g., their attempting to learn something that does not mesh with their present understanding) as well as the teacher’s (e.g., not accomplishing one’s goals and objectives). It is also important for students to have an opportunity to posit any questions or issues they want addressed during the course of the study.

Developing a Cluster/Mind-Map

An engaging and effective strategy for ascertaining the depth of student knowledge vis-à-vis any aspect of genocide (or for that matter, any topic) is to have them develop a cluster (alternatively referred to as a mind-map, web or conceptual map) around a “target” word or concept (e.g., “genocide”) or event (e.g., a specific genocide such as the Armenian genocide). A cluster has been defined as “a nonlinear brainstorming process that generates ideas, images, and feelings around a stimulus word until a pattern becomes discernible” (Rico, 1987, p. 17).

To develop a cluster around the concept of genocide, for example, have students write the term “genocide” in the center of a piece of paper (a

minimum of 8-1/2" by 11"), circle it, and then draw spokes out from the circle on which to place related terms or ideas. Each time a term is added, it should be circled and new spokes should be drawn out from it in order to delineate related terms and concepts. Each new or related idea may thus lead to a new clustering of ideas. As Rico (1987) points out: “A cluster is an expanding universe, and each word is a potential galaxy; each galaxy, in turn, may throw out its own universes. As students cluster around a stimulus word, the encircled words rapidly radiate outward until a sudden shift takes place, a sort of ‘Aha!’ that signals a sudden awareness of that tentative whole” (p. 17). Furthermore, “[s]ince a cluster draws on primary impressions—yet simultaneously on a sense of the overall design—clustering actually generates structure, shaping one thought into a starburst of other thoughts, each somehow related to the whole” (Rico, 1987, p. 18.)

Clustering is a more graphic, generally easier and more engaging way to delineate what one knows about a topic than by outlining it. That said, some students may prefer to use outlining rather than clustering, and that option should be available to them.¹

To help students understand both the purpose for and the method of clustering, the instructor should choose a topic and demonstrate the development of a cluster, progressing from simple to more complex stages (see Figure 7.1). More specifically, the teacher should first create a simple, almost perfunctory, cluster and then a second, more complex,

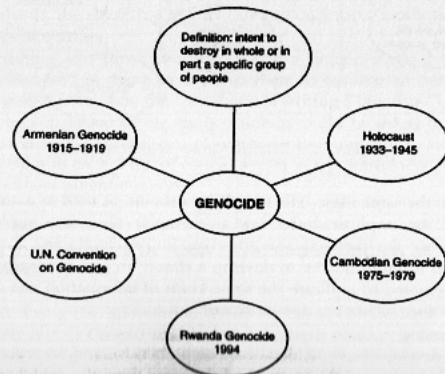


Figure 7.1. Simple Cluster Map Example

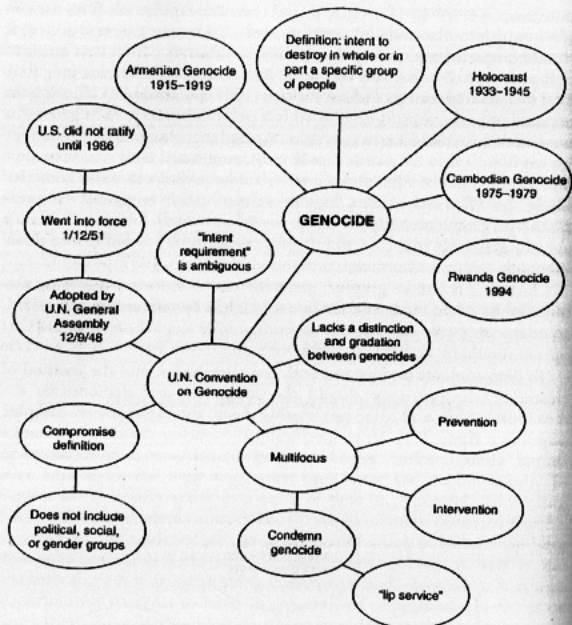


Figure 7.2. Detailed Cluster Map Example

cluster on the same topic. The two clusters should be used as a nonexemplar (e.g., the simplistic cluster) and an exemplar (the more complex cluster) of what the students should strive for in developing their own clusters. It is important *not* to develop a cluster on genocide, as students may be tempted to replicate the same kinds of information and connections that the teacher has demonstrated.

In directing students to develop a cluster, instructors should encourage them to develop the most detailed, comprehensive and accurate cluster possible (see Figure 7.2). At one and the same time, the students should be encouraged to strive to delineate the connections between or among

key items, concepts, events, and ideas. If such directions are not given *and emphasized*, then many students are likely to develop very simple and perfunctory, if not simplistic, clusters.

Once each student has completed a cluster, groups comprised of three to four students should meet in order to share and discuss their individual clusters. Each student should be given time (two to three minutes) to explain his/her cluster by noting the key points, issues, and connections. Instructors will need to emphasize that the students need not—and, indeed, should not—go over each and every word/phrase on his/her cluster as that would be extremely time-consuming and boring for the other group members to sit through.

As individual students present their clusters, others in the group may add items to their own clusters—in a color other than the one used originally in order to indicate the number and type of ideas gleaned/borrowed from their peers. At the end of this session, all of the clusters may be taped to the classroom wall or stored for revisiting at various points during the course of study.

Developing clusters serves a number of key purposes. First, it may assist a student to recognize what he/she does and does not know about the subject. Second, the instructor gains a vivid illustration of a student's depth of knowledge (or lack thereof) of the subject, as well as the sophistication of his/her conceptual framework. Third, the instructor is able to pinpoint specific inaccuracies, misconceptions, and/or myths that students hold about the concept of genocide and/or the facts of a specific genocide. In other words, the clustering activity can and does serve as a powerful pre-assessment exercise.

Clustering also provides students with a unique method to express their ideas; and in doing so, it allows them to tap into an "intelligence" (e.g., spatial) other than the typical one of writing ("linguistic").

At the conclusion of the study, students could be asked to complete another cluster, and required to compare and contrast, in writing, the information in each. This, of course, serves as a powerful way of conducting a postassessment exercise.

Using the Cluster to Develop a Working Definition of "Genocide"

Next, using the information (facts, concepts, connections) they have included in their clusters, students can develop a working definition of the term/concept "genocide." The students should be instructed to look carefully at all of the components of their cluster and then make every effort to develop the most comprehensive and accurate definition they possibly can

based on the information they have delineated in their cluster. The students should also be informed that if they discover, as they develop their definition, they have left out key facts, concepts or connections in their clusters, then they should add such information to their clusters.

Once everyone has developed a definition, students should be placed in groups of three to four (either the original or new groups) to share their definitions. A recorder in each group should take down the salient points of the discussion that ensues. At the conclusion of the small group discussions, a general class discussion can be held during which any questions or points the students still have can be placed on a large sheet of paper with the heading "Genocide: Issues to Resolve and/or Examine in More Detail." As the class proceeds with its study it can return to such questions and concerns and attempt to answer them.

Again, just as the clusters do, the development of student definitions of genocide provides the instructor with valuable insights into his/her students' basic understanding of the concept of genocide (or the genocidal event under study), including their depth of knowledge, misconceptions, and so forth. This, of course, serves as another powerful preassessment exercise.

Positing Burning Questions About the Concept of Genocide or the Genocidal Event Under Study

Another powerful strategy is to have students write down (anonymously) three to five "burning questions" they have about the concept of genocide or the particular genocide under study. They should be informed that their questions can be about any and all facets of the concept of genocide or the genocidal event, and that throughout the study a real attempt will be made to locate answers to the questions.

Soliciting students' questions and concerns helps to make the study of genocide more focused and personal. Moreover, it encourages students to become active researchers versus passive participants in a class. By raising their own questions, students can actively join in seeking answers to their questions.

Among some of the many questions (all quoted exactly as they were written) that my students have posited over the years are as follows:

Questions Posited in Regard to the Definition of Genocide

- What is the exact difference between a massacre and genocide?
- What is the point of the term genocide? Why not just use mass killing?
- Who coined the term genocide, and when and why?

Questions Posited in Regard to the Perpetration of Genocide

- When do historians think the first genocide was committed? By whom and why?
- What are the main causes of genocide?
- Who (on the outside) decides when a genocide is taking place and how?
- Has a genocide ever been prevented?
- Other than outright war is there any way to stave off genocide?

Questions Posited in Regard to The Holocaust

- Why exactly did the Holocaust happen?
- What was the main factor that caused this genocide?
- Why were Jews blamed in the first place?
- How did Hitler get into office?
- Why did Hitler have so much power?
- What was Hitler's main motive for killing all the Jews?
- Why didn't all the people in the camps rebel at once, so that their (sic) may have been a (sic) hope for freedom?
- Was there any dissent (sic) among the German ranks regarding following orders which lead to the mass extermination of Jews?
- Why didn't the United States try and step in sooner?
- What are the warning signs of something like the Holocaust, and how can we stop it from happening again?
- Why???

Questions Posited in Regard to the Rwandan Genocide

- Where was the rest of the world?
- Why didn't the United States step in to stop it?
- Why was the genocide committed?
- What has happened to the murderers?

Even a "misinformed" question is valuable as it provides the instructor with additional insights to his/her students' knowledge base.

At the conclusion of the study, it is wise to ascertain whether all of the students have had their questions answered; and if they have not, the instructor should try to set aside time to address them with the class.

Three Unique Strategies for Introducing a Course of Genocide: A Mathematical Approach, A Philosophical Approach, An Existential/ Autobiographical Approach

Herewith are three strategies that Dr. Henry Huttenbach, Professor of History at the City University of New York, has devised on how to introduce a course on genocide.

- *The Arithmetical Approach or The Mathematics of Genocide:* This approach is designed to concretize mass killing. It consists of several exercises: (a) one and a half million Armenians died between 1915-1916; six million Jews died between 1941-1945, and half a million Roma in the same time span; 800,000 Tutsis in four months in 1994. What is the killing rate per day, per week, per month, per year for each group? (b) If a gas chamber holds 150 people and it takes one hour to load and empty, how long will it take to kill one million Jews, who perished in Auschwitz as against, a gas-truck which holds 50 persons and requires 35 minutes to kill them? (c) In Riga, in a 12-hour shift, 14,000 Jews were shot. What is the average rate of killing per hour, per minute? (d) One and half million Jewish children were killed: how many classrooms of 25 students does this come to?
- *Philosophical Approach:* After showing extracts from *The Triumph of the Will* and newsreels of the British liberation of Bergen-Belsen, the question is posed: "What did you see?" "What is the relationship of the Hitlerian 1935 utopian vision of a race-perfect society to the piles of bodies filmed in 1945?" "What lessons do you draw from this?"
- *The Existential Autobiographical Approach:* I announce I should not be, I was labeled for death. I then show a family tree and illustrate how my life/death existentially affects my five children, 12 grandchildren and two great grandchildren. All of them would not be if certain circumstances had not saved me. Was it luck? Chance? Clever thinking by my parents? God's protecting me? and so forth (H. Huttenbach, personal communication, April 10, 2003).

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES IDEAL FOR USE THROUGHOUT THE STUDY OF GENOCIDE

A Method to Assist Students to Develop a Deep Understanding of the Definition of Genocide

Clive Foss, Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, engages his students in the following activity in order to assist them to gain a solid understanding of the definition of genocide:

I ask my students at the beginning of the seminar (on genocide) what they think genocide is. They think all sorts of things. Then I ask them to read the press continually and to bring in all examples of the term they can find. The results are amazing: Genocide is used to mean almost anything (usually something the writer doesn't like) from the mistreatment of cats and dogs to any number of real and imagined criminal activities.

Throughout the course I ask them to work out a definition on the basis of case studies.... [In relation to each case of genocide, the following questions are asked: Who did it? Why did they do it? How did they do it? Who were the victims? How did they react? What was the result? In each case, too, the central question—"Was this a genocide?"—will be asked, so that a suitable definition can be worked out during the course of the discussion].

At the end, I ask them to write a definition on the basis of what they have learned. (Foss, 1992a/b, pp. 3, 27)

A Comparative Study of Genocide

A comparative study of genocide provides students with an opportunity to examine the similarities and differences between different cases of genocide. During the course of such a study, students should, ideally, glean unique insights into a wealth of issues, including but not limited to the following: the preconditions of genocide; the motives and reasons for the genocide (in other words, the "why" behind the policies and actions); and the different types (or typologies) of genocide. Ultimately, such a study should assist students to glean insights into "the patterns and causes of genocide" (Fein, 1992, p. 11).²

Processing Information, Concepts, Ideas, and Thorny Issues

Eric Markusen, Professor of Sociology at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota, believes, and rightly so, that it is imperative to provide ample time for students in classes on genocide and human rights to engage in small group discussions. More specifically,

Given the emotionally as well as intellectually challenging subject matter of such courses, students need time to process what they're confronting in readings and lectures. My class meets once a week for two and a half hours, and I generally have between three and five discussion sessions during the semester.

Generally, there are about 20 to 25 students in the class. I randomly divide them into groups of about eight students. Students remain in the same group for the duration of the term, thus allowing them to get to know each other [fairly well]. For each session, one student serves as "recorder" and lists the names of students who participate and records responses to the question under discussion.

All groups are given the same question. Examples of the kinds of questions I ask are: "If you were to return to your high school to give a talk to the senior social studies class about what you have learned about genocide [or on a particular genocide], what would be the five most important facts/issues

that you would focus on, and why?"; "What are the five most surprising aspects you have learned about genocide [or a particular genocide] thus far in our class, and why?"; "Identify at least five reasons why you feel it is important to learn about genocide"; and "Based on what you have learned in class, identify five approaches to reducing the threat of future genocides."

After the groups have had about a half hour to discuss the question and list their responses, all the groups come together and the recorder writes each group's list on the board. This enables each group to see what the other groups have come up with. I then lead the discussion by examining the points listed by all of the groups, broaching other relevant points and concerns, and probing students for the reasons for their choices. The entire exercise takes about 50 minutes. (E. Markusen, personal communication, April 5, 2003)

A Microcosmic Case Study-within-a-Case Study

Paul Bartrop, a historian based in Melbourne, Australia, notes that his

approach to teaching about the Bosnian war and the accompanying genocide of 1992-1995 begins with a chronological outline of the events leading up to Bosnia's secession from the Yugoslav federation in April 1992. That is followed by a discussion of the complex, and often confusing, ethnic and religious environment, along with the principal players. The latter, I have found, must also be thoroughly explained and understood before attempting to move on to any meaningful analysis. Once the students and I are speaking the same contextual language, we delve into such matters as expulsion, rape warfare, killing, concentration camps, and the notion of "ethnic cleansing."

It is via the case study approach, however, that the true drama and horror of the war and the ethnic cleansing and genocide come through, for both students and teacher. Accordingly, I make use of a video entitled *Srebrenica: A Cry from the Grave* (Woodhead, 2000). With accounts related in a very personal way by many of the participants (though not from the Serbs' side), and interspersed with contemporary news footage and film taken of the most intimate—and heartrending—negotiations, the film relates the story of the nine days during which the city fell to the Bosnian Serbs when the Dutch U.N. peacekeeping force stood aside and allowed the ethnic cleansing to take place. Without a single exception during the years I have shown this video, students have been thoroughly transfixed by the drama unfolding before them.

The real work for the teacher begins, of course, once the viewing has finished. My educational approach is largely one of wide-ranging discussion based on a full appreciation of historical detail. I supplement the students' viewing with readings, lectures (and hopefully, a corresponding degree of note taking!), and the constant revisiting of key points via short quizzes.

Broader assessment takes the form of an essay in which students can choose one of the major players in the Srebrenica story—for example, the United Nations, the Dutch peacekeepers, the Bosnian Serb forces, the Bosnian Muslim population—and engage in detailed research on the fall of the town and the subsequent massacre from the perspective of the group or organization they have chosen. By the time of the final examination, there is barely a stone that has been left unturned on the topic of Srebrenica specifically, and the Bosnian conflict more generally.

Why do I light upon this classroom topic in particular? Many of us use videos in our teaching, and a single documentary about Srebrenica is far from the only (or last) word on the war in Bosnia. Yet I find something particularly alluring about the use of a microcosmic case study-within-a-case study; it not only reduces the great blooming, buzzing confusion of a near-contemporary event to manageable proportions, it also serves to humanize the conflict by introducing a localized dimension which students can understand and with which they can often readily identify. The viewing of one video does not a genocide scholar make, to be sure; but by utilizing the video as the centerpiece of a wider topic of study in which an array of educational devices is employed, students can tease out an array of issues and truly begin to "own" the learning process. (P. Bartrop, personal communication, April 14, 2003)

Homework Assignments and Research Projects/Papers

Succinctly highlighted below are several homework assignments, research projects and papers that various educators have assigned or required in their courses on genocide. Two excellent sources for additional information along this line are the two books of course syllabi that Joyce Apstel and Helen Fein edited in 1992 and 2002, respectively. The complete bibliographical information for both books is located in the references section of this chapter and a description of each is included in the annotated bibliography at the end of this book.

Homework Assignments:

- "Each student should prepare a typed journal entry of at least 1,000 words for weeks 2 through 10. It should contain her/his reactions to and reflections on the readings and topics of discussion for the previous week. . . . Students are free and encouraged to balance scholarly reflection with personal/emotional, ethical, and political reflections" (Theriault, 2002, p. 23).
- "Please answer these questions [which are listed on the class schedule and unique and germane to the week's reading, lecture and discussion] as you read each weekly assignment and come to class prepared to discuss your answer to them and to present your own

analyses ... [Example from Week One, which is entitled Part One: The Conceptual Framework]: 1. Why is it important to have a precise and rigorous definition of genocide?; 2. What is a typology?; ... 4. What were the major components of Raphael Lemkin's definition of genocide?; 5. How did the General Assembly of the United Nations characterize genocide in 1946? How did the General Assembly modify its earlier definition of genocide in 1948 when it adopted the United Nations Genocide Convention" (Chalk, 2002, p. 59).

- "A two to three page written critique of the readings [is due each week. It need not] be a long and detailed summary; a brief review of the major strengths and weaknesses of the readings [shall suffice].... These critiques will provide the basis for much classroom discussion.... At the end of the semester, I will review all the critiques in order to determine a grade for them" (Alvarez, 2002, p. 173).

Research Papers/Projects

- "Each student will research and write a paper on some aspect of genocide such as: comparative approaches to the study of genocide; analyses of causes and types of genocide—religious, colonization, decolonization, ideological; the aftermath and consequences of genocide in general or a particular genocide, including the problem of denial; attempts to prevent the crimes of genocide; and proposals relating to early warning-signals and intervention. The papers should be approximately 25-30 pages" (Hovannisian, 1992, p. 40).
- "The research paper in this course will be based on your examination and analysis of original sources.... This assignment should contribute to your ability to find evidence, to evaluate sources, to assess contradictory evidence, and to write a coherent presentation of your findings accompanied by your reasoned conclusions, with emphasis on your argument in favor of those conclusions" (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1992, p. 50).
- "[William Fernekes] integrate the issues of genocide and massive human rights violations into U. S. History classes by helping the students examine how the world responded to genocide, specifically national governments and international organizations such as the United Nations. The central question posed is: How have and how should individual governments and international organizations respond[ed] to the problem of genocide?"

"I introduce the unit by utilizing an activity I designed dealing with multiple definitions of genocide ('Defining Genocide: A

Model Unit,' *Social Education*, 1991). After students have grappled with the difficulty of establishing a single, all-encompassing definition of genocide, we examine specific cases of genocide where national governments planned and implemented genocides, paying particular attention to the stages of implementation. During the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge-perpetrated genocide in Cambodia, each national government in its role as perpetrator identified their targeted group(s), isolated them, removed their material basis for existence, and then sought to annihilate them. Such stages are detailed quite clearly in Hilberg's monumental study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*; and on a broad scale, they are equally applicable to each case noted above. Incorporated into our study is content about the response(s) of targeted victim groups, relying heavily on survivor testimonies, eyewitness accounts by observers, and survivor memoirs. I believe that it is critical to provide students with diverse sources, not only from the victims, but from the perpetrators and bystanders as well, as this places the complexity of each case in high profile.

"Students regularly ask 'so what did the U.S./world do' about each case? Rather than give them the answer, I provide them with materials that illustrate the policies of governments and organizations that responded to each genocidal case, either aggressively (very few) or timidly (most). For example, we employ the Harbord Report, written by a U.S. military expert about whether the U.S. should accept a League of Nations mandate for Armenia in the post World War I era, along with dispatches by Ambassador Morgenthau and news reports from U.S. newspapers that detailed the suffering of the Armenians during the genocide. Regarding the Holocaust, the international response to the refugee crisis of the 1930s and the failure of the U.S. and other Allied powers to intervene and attempt to rescue Jews in Occupied Europe can be, given the huge amount of material available, thoroughly studied. As for Cambodia, the growing literature on that genocide, both in survivor accounts and in the study of the almost nonexistent world response to the killings of the Khmer Rouge, provides ample resource material.

"The culminating assessment for the unit is posed as a scenario where each student is invited to write a memo recommending how the U.S. government should respond to a potential genocide that may be imminent in one area of the world. Specific conditions evident in the three cases prior to the onset of mass killing are included in the description of the potential genocide, and the stu-

dent is asked to recommend how the U.S. government should respond—alone, or in concert with other world states and international organizations. The student must draw upon historical examples and frame a recommendation that reflects their understanding of U.S. foreign policy priorities during the twentieth century (for example, the tension between isolation and internationalism) and the continuing problem of genocide and massive human rights violations (W. Fernekes, personal communication, April 15, 2003).

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES FOR CLOSING THE UNIT OF STUDY

All aspects of a study of genocide or a genocidal act should be carefully crafted to encourage, guide, and even prod students to think about the concept and/or history in an in-depth and reflective manner. Nothing in such a study should be perfunctory. This is as true for the close of a lesson or unit as it is for the introduction or the body of the lesson or unit.

In closing lessons and units on genocide, some teachers may be satisfied to conclude the study by giving a traditional quiz or examination. Examinations can, of course, be designed in a way that challenge students to truly synthesize as well as ponder and wrestle with what they have learned. However, as Wiggins (1989) notes and then asks: “[C]ompetence [or mastery of a subject] can be shown in various, sometime idiosyncratic ways. Why must all students show what they know and can do in the same standardized way?” (p. 48). It seems as if this is a question that all educators should contemplate.

There are, in fact, numerous concluding activities that can be used to complete a study of genocide. Some are ideal for use prior to and/or in conjunction with traditional or authentic assessments, while others are capable of standing on their own. Instructors need to use their own judgment in selecting the type of closing activities that will guide their students in accomplishing one or more of the following three goals: (1) synthesize what they have learned, (2) reflect on what they have learned, especially as it pertains to their own lives and the world in which they reside, and (3) plant seeds for on-going rumination about their newfound knowledge.

Various closing activities that have been effective in completing a study of genocide are discussed below.

Prelude to the Conclusion of a Study of Genocide

An engaging and valuable way to set the stage for a final discussion of genocide (which could last one or more class sessions) and/or student-designed extension projects is to have the students address any and/or all of the following issues in writing: Is there anything you are still perplexed about in regard to the specific aspect of genocide we have studied; and if so, what is it and why? What issues and concerns still elude you in your effort to gain a clear understanding of the whats, whys, hows, wheres, and whens of the genocide under study? What concepts, issues, events, and concerns do you still feel the need to learn more about, and why? What are the most significant insights, concepts or pieces of information you have gleaned from your study of genocide and why?

Closing Discussion Based on Probing/Philosophical Questions

In addition to addressing the questions broached in the “Prelude to the Conclusion of a Study,” a final discussion around such questions as the following can be useful: (1) Can any lessons at all be learned from the genocide we have studied? If so, what are they and why? If not, why not? (2) Can it be said that the history of humanity has been a history of progress in human relations? Why or why not? (3) Why should those far from (via great expanses of time, land, ocean, and/or culture) the perpetration of genocide even care about genocide? (4) Now that you have a deeper understanding of genocide, do you think or feel you have a responsibility to be more aware and/or concerned about human rights abuses and genocide perpetrated in your own life time? Why or why not? If you do, what will that look like in regard to your own actions? These and other open-ended questions can serve as a means for the students to reflect on what they have learned from their study of genocide, as well as how the study has impacted them as human beings.

Having Students Note What They Never Want to Forget About a Particular Genocide

A simple but powerful closing activity is to have the students, individually, write down those facts, concepts, events, issues, and images that they *never want to forget* in regard to what they have learned during the course of their study of genocide. Taking part in such an activity prods students to articulate that which is most meaningful to them as a result of their

study. It also has the potential of planting the seeds for on-going concern about the ubiquitous deprivation of human rights across the globe.

This activity also provides the instructor with a sense of those facts, ideas, concepts, issues, events, discussions, films, and so forth, that most powerfully impacted students. Such information, obviously, can provide invaluable insights for him or her as he/she revises and hones the focus of the lessons, unit, or course.

A Letter Assignment

A thought-provoking exercise involves each student in writing a letter to a larger audience about what he/she has gleaned as a result of studying genocide. At the outset of this activity, the teacher might wish to share the following letter with his/her students:

Dear Teacher, I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.

Once the above letter has been read and discussed, students should reflect on what *they* ardently wish to share with others in regard to what they gleaned from their study. After reflecting on what they have learned, the students should jot down key words, phrases, and thoughts that come to mind. Next, students should pair up and discuss their insights. Then, each student should write a letter to whomever they want (a letter to the editor of a local, regional, or national newspaper; the congregation of a church, synagogue, or mosque; the local school board; their parents; students in other classes within the school) in which they succinctly but powerfully convey thoughts, ideas and/or warnings that they would like others to ponder and heed.³

Developing an Encyclopedia Entry/Article

An excellent synthesizing activity is to form groups of two to three students for the purpose of having them develop an encyclopedia-like entry/

article that thoroughly and accurately summarizes what they have learned about genocide. Prior to assigning the task, the instructor should select and copy a rather lengthy entry from a respected academic encyclopedia (that is, one that addresses a single subject such as the Holocaust), and assist the students in examining how a solid encyclopedic entry is constructed. During the examination of the entry, the instructor should also direct the students' attention to the following: the succinctness of the writing; how the entry/article is comprised of key—*versus* superfluous—information; how the role of key personages is delineated; and how the chronology of events is interwoven into the fabric of the entry/article.⁴

After the students complete their entries, any number of things could be done with them: they could be exchanged with other groups for the purpose of having them critiqued, and subsequently the critiques could be used for the purposes of revision; the instructor could read each, make suggestions for revisions, and upon revision, each could be placed in a booklet for use by future classes; or the pieces generated by the students could be compared and contrasted with entries on the same topic found in various encyclopedias.

Addressing a Key Quote for the Purpose of Synthesizing and Reflecting on One's New Knowledge of the Holocaust

Both Steve Feinberg, a noted Holocaust educator, and this author are strong advocates of concluding exercises that are reflective in nature. Two ways in which Feinberg has prompted students to both synthesize their new knowledge about the Holocaust and to reflect on its meaning for them is through reflective journal entries and final essays. More specifically, he states that:

Concluding activities should encourage students to reflect upon the history and/or literature studied in the unit. Students need to be encouraged to combine the various elements of their study of the Holocaust into a coherent whole. Activities that can assist students in this synthesis of information is a reflective journal-writing assignment or a reflective essay. This activity permits students to blend and unify their thoughts about this particular history into an integrated whole.

Providing students with an evocative quote and asking them to respond to the quote is a solid way to accomplish the above. For example, Gerda Lerner has said that "It is not the function of history to drum ethical lessons into our brains. The only thing one can learn from history is that actions have consequences and that certain choices once made are irretrievable" (quoted in Lerner, 1997). Students can be asked to respond to this quote (or others like it) in either essay or journal form, using the information they have

examined in their Holocaust unit. Hopefully, the general historical nature of such quotes will serve as a catalyst for thinking reflectively about the history of the Holocaust. (S. Feinberg, personal communication, March, 2000)

Again, *with some adaptation*, this is an ideal assignment/task for the conclusion of any study of genocide.

Student-Developed Questions for the Final Examination

For those teachers who wish to use a final essay examination at the completion of a study of genocide, an engaging activity is to have each student develop a minimum of two essay questions, with the understanding that *they might be used on the final exam*. Students need to be given directions as to what constitutes a sound question: a question that truly addresses what the class has studied and not something so far afield that a fellow student would not have the knowledge base to answer the question; one that is not so narrow or so broad that an individual would have a torturous time addressing it; one that is thought-provoking and requires the writer to bring to bear both a broad and deep knowledge base about the subject; a question that does not call for rote recitation of facts but an analysis and/or synthesis of facts, concepts, ideas, issues; and one that is crystal clear in regard to what the respondent needs to address in his/her paper. *If such criteria is not provided then many students are likely to write questions that are of little value or use.*

Students should be informed that the instructor will select those questions that are well written, comprehensive, and most thought-provoking. They should also be told that the instructor reserves the right to revise and/or combine questions for use on the exam. When selecting the final set of questions (a total of six to eight from which the students select a single question to answer), an instructor needs to make sure that he/she includes a wide variety of questions so that students have ample choice in regard to what they choose to write about.

Having the students design their own questions is, in and of itself, an excellent synthesizing activity. The act of creating solid questions forces students to wrestle with what they have studied. In order to emphasize the seriousness of developing these questions, a grade can be given for the students' efforts.

Designing such questions also provides students with an opportunity to have a real say about the exam. Most students find this refreshing.

Finally, nothing, of course, precludes a student from answering his/her own question on the exam. This, too, is often enticing to students.

A Challenging Essay Examination

Well thought-out and carefully crafted, open-book essay examinations (whether take-home or in-class) are also an excellent means for students to synthesize their new-found knowledge. William Fernekes, a high school social studies supervisor and teacher at Hunterdon Central High School in New Jersey, finds that such essays are extremely useful for assessing his students' knowledge in an elective course entitled "The Holocaust and Human Behavior." Speaking of such an exam, he states that

Students are assigned a take-home essay constituting 50% of their final exam grade in the course. The essay topic integrates learning from the entire course while permitting flexibility in the choice of sources to support the student's arguments. A critical requirement for the essay is the application of key course concepts regarding human behavior: prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, in group/out group relationships, psychological distancing and compensating behaviors, and the creation of "the other" (dehumanization). Students must employ evidence from their two outside readings (survivor memoirs) as well as a selection of three or more additional eyewitness accounts by participants in the Holocaust (perpetrators, victims, rescuers, or bystanders).

The following question is one that Fernekes has required his students to answer:

The Holocaust can be viewed as the outgrowth of choices made by individuals and groups in a wide variety of situations. Drawing primarily upon personal eyewitness accounts, explain what you consider to be (1) the key factors which significantly influenced the choices made by perpetrators and victims groups, and (2) the most important insight for understanding human behavior in today's world based upon your analysis of these factors and the choices that were made. (W. Fernekes, personal communication, October, 2002).

Yet again, such an assignment/task could be adapted for use with any study of genocide.

Performance-based Assessment

Noted educator TheodoreSizer observes that performances and exhibitions "serve at once as evaluative agent and expressive tool: We expect people to show us and explain to us how they use content—it's more than mere memory. It's the first real step towards coming up with some

ideas of their own.... In its original form, the exhibition was the public expression by a student of real command over what she'd learned" (Coalition of Essential Schools, 1990, p. 1). And, as Grant Wiggins (1989) has pointed out in a thought-provoking article entitled "The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance," a good way of assisting students to ultimately develop such demonstrations of mastery is to frame the study of a subject and the assessment of the study around key or "essential" questions such as: "'What must my students actually demonstrate to reveal whether they have a thoughtful as opposed to thoughtless grasp of the essentials?' and 'What will 'successful' student understanding (with limited experience and background) actually look like?'" (p. 208).⁵

Such performances or exhibitions may take many different forms (e.g., an individual project, a group project, a preparation of a portfolio, or an oral presentation and "defense"). No matter what form it takes, though, "the performance must engage the student in real intellectual work, not just memorization or recall. The 'content' the students master in the process is the means to an end, not the end itself" (Coalition of Essentials Schools, 1990, pp. 3-4).

Even an abbreviated list of some of the Coalition's "qualities of 'authentic performances'" provides a good sense of the rigor factored into well-structured performances and exhibitions of mastery. More specifically, each should: "require some collaboration with others; [be] constructed to point the student toward more sophisticated use of his/her skills or knowledge; [consist of] contextualized, complex intellectual challenges, not 'atomized' tasks corresponding to isolated 'outcomes'; involve the student's own research or use of knowledge, for which 'content' is a means; assess student habits and repertoires, not mere recall or plug-in skills; [constitute] representative challenges—designed to emphasize depth more than breadth; [be] engaging and educational; involve criteria that assesses essentials, not easily counted but relatively unimportant errors; [be] graded not on a curve but in reference to performance standards (criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced); make self-assessment a part of the assessment; use a multifaceted scoring system instead of one aggregate grade; ferret out and identify (perhaps hidden) strengths; minimize needless, unfair, and demoralizing comparisons; allow appropriate room for student learning styles, aptitudes, and interests; [be] attempted by all students, with the test 'scaffolded up,' not 'dumbed down,' as necessary; and reverse typical test-design procedures. A model task is first specified; then, a fair and reliable plan for scoring is devised" (Coalition of Essential Schools, 1990, p. 2).

CONCLUSION

Again, the pedagogical strategies and learning activities described in this chapter are only a few of the many ways in which an instructor can effectively engage his or her students in rich and meaningful interactions during a study of genocide. Ultimately, it is hoped that through the use of one or more of them, *students will gain valuable insights into the issue of genocide and glean powerful insights into the human condition—and themselves.* If they do, then such a unit or course will be worth all of the time, effort, and stress involved in teaching and studying such complex concepts and horrific events.

NOTES

1. For excellent and thought-provoking discussions by classroom teachers regarding the clustering method, see Olson (1987).
2. For a detailed discussion as to how to undertake a comparative study of genocide, see Chapter 8 (this volume), "Conducting a Comparative Study of Genocide: Rationale and Methodology," by Henry Huttenbach.
3. The "danger" in sharing the above letter with the students is that they may latch on to the format and thoughts presented therein, and then simply present a rough facsimile as their own. Thus, instructors who share the letter with their students must urge them to create their own format and incorporate their own thoughts and voice into their respective letters.
4. *It is important that the students have a rubric as a guide of sorts for developing their entry.* In developing the rubric, the following should be taken into consideration: the historical trends that conjoined and resulted in the genocide; the chronology of the genocide; the various groups involved and/or impacted by the events, including: the victims, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders; the different stages of the genocidal period; the world's response to the mass killings; and the aftermath of the genocide. Ultimately, each and every entry needs to address the "whys, hows, whens, wheres, and whos" of the genocide, otherwise the entry is bound to be incomplete and inaccurate.
5. Teachers who are interested in developing a project- or performance-based assessment may wish to contact The Coalition of Essential Schools project at Brown University, Box 1938, Providence, Rhode Island 02912, and request their materials on "demonstrations (performances and exhibitions) of mastery." The coalition has developed numerous outstanding and detailed models for the development of rigorous performances that, when implemented with care and thought, can truly tap students' critical and creative faculties.

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