

Holocaust Education at Australian Universities: Reflections on a Roundtable

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FOR NEARLY A GENERATION, EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES CONCERNED WITH TEACHING and learning about the Holocaust in formal (and informal) settings have become more frequent and more visible in a growing number of countries. This globalising trend, by which the Holocaust has found its way into educational systems and sites of cultural pedagogy in nations both touched and untouched by the events themselves, is now beginning to be tracked by another development: namely, attempts to explore just what such teaching and learning entails, and examine the impact (or otherwise) it has.

These moves, as much as being logically back-to-front in terms of sequence, have been a long-time coming. Until recently, activities grouped under the umbrella of 'Holocaust education' tended to be constructed on belief rather than empirical foundations—delivered on instinct more than the result of reflexive practice. Meanwhile, candid debate about meanings and minutiae, about the purpose(s) of Holocaust education and its pedagogical realities, have commonly been overlooked or marginalised due to politics, practicalities, or a prioritisation of just getting the Holocaust into educational settings and worrying about the finer details later.

Now, however, spaces are opening up for more sophisticated ways of conceptualising teaching and learning about the Holocaust, and more intelligently,

research-informed practical approaches. Thanks to the work of a new generation of educators, scholars, cultural workers and public champions, we are coming to know more about the diverse, fragmented field of Holocaust education—learning, in the process, about its strengths and achievements, but also being forced to confront its shortcomings and underlying issues. Much remains to be done, of course. But opportunities for change are starting to present themselves.

The reflective pieces contained in this article are to be viewed within these contexts. While testament to how the Holocaust ‘had a global impact historically and an empathetically transnational character’ (Assmann 97), Australia’s contemporary Holocaust culture also speaks to the globalisation of Holocaust remembrance and education in recent years. That said, these pieces clearly indicate that teaching and learning about the Holocaust in Australian universities is no fad or foreign import. Rather, there is a tradition of teaching the Holocaust in the tertiary sector which actually pre-dates many of the events that galvanised the globalisation of Holocaust education in the 2000s. Accordingly, this long history vis-à-vis international trajectories suggests looking through the lenses of the antipodean experience can provide insight into how Holocaust education evolves in a national setting, how that setting impacts and imprints on practice, and how matters endemic to teaching and learning about the Holocaust play out within local contexts.

As one of the lead authors of a pioneering study into young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust in English secondary schools (Foster et al., 2016), I find it striking that the most common issue touched on by the contributors to this roundtable is that of subject knowledge. Just as we found in our research, this is not as straightforward as students ‘knowing’ or ‘not-knowing’ about the Holocaust; there are ‘various levels of previous knowledge’ (Láníček) within an overall landscape. Since this is marked by a ‘general lack of knowledge’ it engenders pernicious ‘historical gaps’ (Alba) and misconceptions. Even those who claim to have no knowledge are still in possession of what Ruth Balint calls a ‘ready databank of images’, with all students holding ideas and conceptions heavily influenced by wider culture.

This indicates the matter of knowledge is multi-dimensional. All agree there is a pressing need (and very real challenge) of achieving a baseline of historical knowledge across a group of students, but precisely because of existing gobbets of knowledge and frameworks of understanding it is necessary to undertake some degree of ‘unlearning’ (Láníček). Significantly, Matthew P. Fitzpatrick shows this applies even to those who may, in some areas, demonstrate a measure of historiographical competency, and while knowledge gaps will inevitably appear when students do not attend parts of a course, the possibility for absent

knowledge coexisting alongside accurate understanding (and vice versa) illustrates we are not dealing with a zero-sum game.

As this roundtable suggests, knowledge of the Holocaust must move beyond 'know that' to include metacognition ('know how') if students are to develop a required level of criticality. This is a tall ask. A key consideration concerns the students themselves—their demands and their expectations. On this, it is telling how many of the contributors gesture to the high number of students who are taking their courses: in a country so geographically and experientially distanced from the Holocaust, this is a remarkable achievement which reflects excellence in teaching. Yet as much as the level of students' interest is to be celebrated when viewed in the context of knowledge and understanding, this raises an elemental question: if, as a number of the authors suggest, students actually hold an understanding of the Holocaust which is at odds with historical reality, then just what is it that they are actually interested *in*? The Holocaust and the complexities of genocide? Or the 'simplified' version with its 'dangerous kind of banality' (Balint)?

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is arguably at its most effective when it is disruptive: when erroneous knowledge and understanding is challenged, when misconceptions are debunked, and when students—in the spirit of critical enquiry—come to be in possession of questions that resist immediate resolution. But these are uncomfortable processes, for they can fundamentally challenge the way people think, see and understand the world and their place in it. They must also, ultimately, have an identifiable purpose which will 'connect' students with this history in an understanding of 'how the history of the Holocaust informs the present' (Monteath). It is encouraging to find students are open to this; that they 'want to see the relevance of the Holocaust today' (Láníček). And it is equally positive to hear that when such encounters occur, they have a lasting and indelible impact (Lackerstein), with students seeing "'real world" application' (Alba).

Achieving such outcomes is never, and can never, be guaranteed, of course. But their possibility can be increased through thoughtful and considered pedagogy which departs from clearly identified aims and objectives, is cognisant of its specific disciplinary context and domains of knowledge, and works towards realistic, achievable goals. From the perspective of an outsider, these are features are present in all of the approaches outlined by the contributors. This in itself is impressive and further reinforces the notion that this particular case study provides much for others to learn. The pursuit of 'reflective learning' (Lackerstein), the inculcation of an 'ethics of spectatorship' (Balint), and the attempt to direct students' gaze to the shapes of 'public history' (Alba) are all instructive in this regard, with the capacity to advance our approach to Holocaust pedagogy.

By the same token, a distinguishing feature of many of these contributions is the innovative steps colleagues are taking to meet some of the particular challenges they face. In outlining these, contributors point both to issues that transcend national borders and issues that are specific to the Australian context. The pressures of having to maintain standards and cover key content in the face of compressed curriculum time, for example, is something many of us working in education will sadly recognise, as is the task of bridging spatial, temporal and experiential distances between the Holocaust in history and in the present. Yet how such challenges are configured at a local level, and how they intersect with national historical cultures, can and will differ. It is in the responses to these circumstances that we can move the field forward.

On this, the rationale for employing, for instance, film, site visitations to museums and survivor talks within curricula (Láníček, Balint, Alba, Frieze, Monteath) extends our understanding of how universal issues can be tackled in given contexts. Especially enlightening is the particular employment of ‘digital learning’, which not only allows for engagement with a huge number of students by transcending space and time, but can also encourage students to ‘learn digital literacy and create technologies to disseminate information’ (Frieze)—competencies increasingly essential not just in terms of Holocaust consciousness, but for ‘critical being’ (Barnett) generally in the contemporary world.

Thirty years ago, few would have countenanced that phrases like ‘Holocaust remembrance’ and ‘Holocaust education’ could exist within our lexicon as they do today, let alone that such terms would be attached to museums, memorial days and education systems found around the world. As popularised and institutionalised as these phenomena may now be, they remain—literally and figuratively—slippery, somewhat elusive concepts which we presuppose to know and understand but that are, in reality, far more complex than we would often care to realise. Arguably, we will never be able to claim mastery over them and, by all accounts, this is no bad thing. But if, as educators and historians, we are to uphold our responsibilities to the past, to the present and to the future, then it falls on us to provide educational experiences that connect our students with the Holocaust, confront them with its realities and create possibilities for them to learn reflectively and reflexively. None of that is easy. And these are challenges would be hard enough without the subject at hand being that of genocide. Yet making these objectives a reality begins with work such as that showcased by my colleagues here and with the conversations about teaching and learning this article opens up.

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Works Cited

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