

Peter Haas, Case-Western Reserve University

This paper grows out of my experience co-chairing a faculty seminar at Vanderbilt University, which was charged with creating a high school and college level Holocaust curriculum for the twenty-first century. The seminar, funded partially by the Tennessee State Holocaust Commission and partly by a generous donation from the Raymond Zimmerman family, is made up of fifteen participants. Besides the two co-chairs, the seminar includes ten College faculty members chosen through a competitive application process. We looked for people who would represent a wide range of institutional and disciplinary backgrounds and who could thus contribute from a variety of different views and perspectives. In the end, these ten faculty members-came from such diverse educational institutions as Vanderbilt University, the University of Memphis, the University of the South and Middle Tennessee State University, and represent an array of fields and disciplines, including Bible, Criminology, German, History, Political Science, Psychology, and Religious Studies. In addition to the ten college faculty members and the two co-chairs, the seminar includes two local high school teachers and, as an ex-officio member, a representative of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission who was himself a refugee from Nazi Germany. The funding also allowed us to hire an outside consultant. We are delighted that John K. Roth, Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, and an active scholar in Holocaust studies, was able to fill this role for us.

The fifteen members of the seminar, with John Roth joining us on occasion, began its regular meetings in September 1999 at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities on the Vanderbilt University campus. Our charge was to produce a curriculum on the Holocaust and other genocides, to be finalized during the summer of 2000, in conjunction with a two-week high school teachers seminar.

One of the problems we faced at the very outset was how to make the transition from teaching the Holocaust in a college setting to doing so in a high school setting. This was not simply a matter of assuming less background or reducing assignment levels. For most of us teaching in universities, there is no problem in bringing up for discussion the deep moral and religious implications of the Holocaust. In fact, the airing of these sorts of issues is fairly standard in the college classroom. But this is not the situation in most high schools, public or private. It seemed to us that trying to create a curriculum that would teach the Holocaust while avoiding these issues was a futile exercise, while at the same time we were fully aware of the problems raising these questions could pose in the public school context. We eventually resolved to handle these questions in a separate section of the curriculum, as I shall explain below.

During the first semester, we found ourselves entangled in a series of foundational questions.

We began by asking what after all the term "Holocaust" entails; that is, what was it that we were to be teaching? At first glance the answer seemed to be self-evident, but the massive amount of material now available on the Holocaust, plus the diversity of fields in which the Holocaust is being studied, has rendered "Holocaust studies" virtually boundless. Did we want to teach just (or mainly) the history of the Holocaust, and if so, beginning when? In 1941 and the Wannsee Conference, in 1939 and the beginning of World War II, in 1933 and the appointment of Hitler as chancellor, or do we want to go back to World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, or even further? And in this history are we to focus only on Germans as perpetrators, or should we look at the collaboration of others, and if so which others? The complementary question also came up for discussion: do we look only at Jewish victims, or do we include other classes of victims as well? But these questions hardly exhausted the issue. While there was fairly widespread agreement that some history was important, there was also strong feeling that other aspects of the study of the Holocaust needed to be included. There were strong voices advocating the inclusion of literature written by victims and survivors, for example. Others felt that the curriculum ought to include how the Holocaust is portrayed and remembered in artistic representations of the Holocaust. Others felt strongly that we should introduce psychological studies of victims and/or perpetrators. And surely, many argued, any curriculum on the Holocaust has to devote some attention to the development of nationalism and racial anti-Semitism. Finally, we had to determine whether or not we were going to have the students face explicitly the moral issues raised by the Holocaust, or were these to be left implicit and for the teacher to bring to the surface. This whole debate about the boundaries of the task was made even more urgent in light of the fact that this was to be a curriculum, after all, of only limited duration in a crowded high school or college setting.

To solve this conundrum, we found ourselves drawn to what more and more appeared to be a prior foundational question, namely what, in the end, were we really hoping to teach. That is, what was our ultimate desired outcome? Again, no easy answer immediately presented itself and the seminar soon found itself tangled in a variety of interests. We all agreed pretty much from the start that just teaching about the Holocaust was not going to be sufficient. The curriculum would have to enable the teacher to point beyond the Holocaust itself to broader issues. In fact, our very mission was to teach the Holocaust and other genocides. But exactly what were those broader issues?

Part of the answer seemed obvious. The whole point of public education is to produce good citizens for our democracy, and teaching about the Holocaust and genocides, and how they can happen is a critical part of that education. But the answer in detail was not so easy. It seemed pointless to us to spend time simply telling students that genocide was wrong. What we wanted to make them aware of is how these things come about and what should be done to stop them. So for us, at least, the lessons of the Holocaust are accessible and urgent. But for the students in the American classroom, the Holocaust may not be such an obvious topic of discussion, and its lessons may seem irrelevant to students from non-white, non-European backgrounds. Before figuring out how to frame the objectives, then, we decided that we would need to define for

ourselves more closely the assumptions and interests the students would be bringing to the classroom.

This exercise of defining our intended audience, the users of this curriculum, was a fundamental question with its own unique challenges since all of us on the college side of the seminar were used to dealing with the Holocaust in a semester-long course in which the students were there because they wanted to be, because there was some inner drive and personal relevance to knowing more about the Holocaust in at least some of its dimensions. Further, most of the students we encounter in Holocaust classes on the college level already have some familiarity with the subject. None of this could be assumed of a public school student body. We were all aware that the population of students to whom this curriculum would be presented would be of a very mixed sort. Many would know little or nothing about the Holocaust. For some, say Asian-Americans, it would have nothing to do with their own backgrounds and cultural histories. And for others, say African-Americans, study of the "Jewish" Holocaust might well appear to be irrelevant or, worse, the imposition of one catastrophe into public discourse at the expense of another one much closer to home, namely, slavery and all that that entailed. Clearly these concerns of members of the intended class had to be taken into account and addressed in the curriculum if it was going to be effective. We all were agreed that simply talking about how Jews had suffered half a century or more ago would not yield a meaningful curriculum to the audience that we hoped to reach. We had to identify at the outset what elements of the Holocaust would attract the attention and interest of these students. At this point in the discussion we realized that we had come full circle. We were right back to the question of what exactly it was about the Holocaust that really needed to be taught in the first place. We had entered a vicious circle in which an answer to any one fundamental question depended on what the answer was to the other two. It took the first full semester of meetings, and much intellectual head-banging to solve the conundrum. It is a tribute to the participants that we were able eventually to reach a sort of consensus.

What emerged was an agreement that the core problematic was the issue of genocide in the twentieth century. This was a phenomenon which, unfortunately, all students would be able to relate to in terms of their own ethnic backgrounds, and which for us was to be the central problematic which the Holocaust raises. In other words, we wanted the students to come away from the class aware that genocides were a feature of the twentieth century that has affected all of us, and all of them, in some way. In fact, we wanted the students to be aware that it was only with the advances made in technology during the twentieth century that genocides on a massive scale became possible at all. Because of this, genocides are also in some way uniquely our problem. In particular, we wanted them to come away from the curriculum with some notion of how such things get started and what it means not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators. We wanted them also to be aware that when a genocide starts, there are no clean and clear borders as to where the damage ends. All the members of the group could also agree that, although not always for the same reason, the Holocaust would and should serve as the quintessential paradigmatic case. It was, after all, a thoroughly modern Western phenomenon,

and as such, relevant to the current culture of all of the students in the classroom. It is also the best documented and the most thoroughly represented in all its facets; it is by far the subject with the greatest number of readily available resources. But we all agreed that, to be effective, the curriculum would have to force the teacher to move beyond the Holocaust itself. It must lead the students naturally to a broader understanding of the process of twentieth century genocides. So, the curriculum would have to allow for easy transition to and comparison with other atrocities: the Armenian genocide; the self-destruction of Cambodia; the intertribal massacres in Rwanda; the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and so forth. Finally, we all concurred that while some history had as a matter of course to be included, we wanted to make it as easy as possible for the teachers to include discussions of artistic representations, whether in literature, film, memorials and so forth.

As it happened, the Tennessee Holocaust Commission was conducting a teacher in-service during the Fall just as our discussions entered their crucial phase. We were able to take advantage of the opportunity to put together a survey to determine what teachers across the state were in fact currently doing, or planning to do, in the classroom. We discovered what we had suspected, namely, that we could expect no uniformity whatsoever in terms of time or resources devoted to the subject. In fact, it turned out that whatever went on in the classroom in terms of teaching the Holocaust depended almost entirely on the teacher's own interest, preparation, and initiative. Time spent in the classroom ranged from including *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *Night*

in an English class, to devoting an entire semester to the Holocaust in an honors History class. The most common time period devoted to the Holocaust was three weeks, but even this was for only a minority of the teachers. Some classes were as long as a full six-week semester, as I mentioned, or as short as three or four days. The survey showed us that any curriculum that we produced would have to be modular, allowing for the diverse interests and competencies of the teachers, the abilities of the students, and the demands of the school administration.

With these data in hand, we found ourselves facing another consideration that had not occurred to us earlier. We had early on assumed that the curriculum could be made available on line with links to other resources like pictures, maps and even texts. In light of the survey, the high school teachers in the seminar stressed that we could not assume the availability of these resources to teachers and students even in big metropolitan districts, let alone small rural districts. So, the availability and accessibility of resources such as readings, slides, videos, and the like would have to be taken into account in constructing the curriculum. One suggestion was that some sort of resource kit or lending library be set up to support the curriculum.

These, then, were the parameters which emerged from our first semester of discussion, and within which the development of this new curriculum would have to take place.

In the end, we decided to break our curriculum into four segments, each with a number of readings and other resources from which the teacher could choose. A characteristic feature of the curriculum would be that each of the four segments would be designed to interact with, and in fact be complemented by, the other three. In this way, in light of the constraints within the classroom, the teacher could assemble a customized curriculum that would be internally coherent and could last from a few days to a whole semester.

The four major segments were:

- History of the Holocaust
- Representations of the Holocaust in art and literature
- Other genocides
- Ethical and moral issues raised by the Holocaust

We broke the seminar into four smaller working groups, each charged with developing one of these segments. These working groups were to report back regularly to the full seminar to ensure that, in the end, we will have a consistent and coherent package in which the four segments do relate to and reinforce each other.

We are at the stage now in which each subgroup is working on its piece of the larger whole. This has only raised new difficulties. On the one hand, each subgroup feels somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer volume and diversity of the material available in its area. The groups are struggling to control the material and focus it appropriately. On the one hand, by having four separate working subgroups, we are facing the danger of producing a huge, bulky, and jerry-built curriculum in which each part is fine but they do not work together. So, we have had to devise a schedule in which each subgroup works on its own, but then also meets with the larger group to ensure reasonable length, consistency of style, and integration across the final curriculum in whichever form the teacher might choose to use it.

There is another issue that has surfaced off and on throughout the project. It is to figure out how to raise the ethical and theological questions provoked by a study of the Holocaust in the context of a nonsectarian public school. It is difficult indeed to conceive of creating an introduction to the Holocaust without bringing in religious themes. The Holocaust was, after all, in many ways a war of German Christians, or people who regarded themselves as Christians, against, at first German Jews, and then against all Jews. Not only the rhetoric, but the very

intellectual foundation of the Nazi program was rooted in a theological tradition. At the same time, many of the Jewish and other victims could not ignore their own religious backgrounds in trying to make sense out of what was happening to them. Some of the most powerful responses to the Holocaust draw on religious language, imagery and ideas. But it is precisely this type of material that is difficult to bring into the American classroom. The problem is not only with the students and their parents, but with the teachers as well. Few teachers, if any, feel comfortable dealing in the classroom with questions of the nature and goodness of God, with doctrines of forgiveness, punishment, and the like. We are prepared, and even eager, to have these types of issues raised, but we are also aware that we can not make them an explicit part of the curriculum.

Although the seminar is still meeting as this essay is being written, enough experience has been gained so far into the process that a number of conclusions can be drawn. One is that we discovered that there are no obvious and universally agreed upon lessons that flow from the Holocaust — outside of the obvious, and even trivial one that it should not be allowed to happen again. We discovered that each of us, representing the character of our home fields and disciplines, took away different lessons. It took us a while to assimilate this fact and to achieve some consensus on what might be the universal lessons.

A second insight has to do with the relation of the Holocaust to other twentieth century genocides. I think for many of us who have taught the Holocaust out of our interest in Jewish Studies, the parallels and similarities with other atrocities of this century either were not visible, or were deemed irrelevant, or even compromising to the horror of the Holocaust. It was helpful to have this diverse group talk through that problem and develop ways to draw those connections.

The seminar also helped bring home to many of us that we are really entering a different generation of students of the Holocaust, and what that generational change means for the classroom. As the last of the survivors die, we are entering an age in which there will be no living connection with the Holocaust or World War II. On the other hand, other significant atrocities seem now much closer to home: Cambodia; Rwanda; the former Yugoslavia; and maybe even Chechnya. We are convinced that studying the Holocaust is important, but that importance needs to be re-articulated for students for whom it is no longer self-evident. For many of us, this seminar was a chance to face that issue anew.

There is, of course, a wider question behind our endeavors, and one the seminar has not really addressed, namely, how is public education supposed to produce good citizens for the next generation? It is thankfully not our job to work out that question in all its details. But we are

wrestling with one aspect of it: whether the Holocaust should be part of that enterprise, and if so, why and how. I am not sure we have teased out all the answers yet, but our long hours of discussion and work are forming an approach.