

## **Teaching about Media and Genocide Across Political and Cultural Divides**

### **Abstract**

Communication across political and cultural fault lines requires a global outlook and deep empathy that transcends national affiliations. We explore challenges of teaching about media and genocide (using the Holocaust as a case) to a multinational group through a pedagogy built over 11 years. The program sought to humanize global issues, understand how media systems and dehumanizing narratives are implicated in genocide, and encourage taking responsibility for change.

### **Introduction and Learning Objectives**

We have been involved in exploring issues of genocide as they relate to media, as part of a larger media literacy program for college students from around the world. We utilize the local setting in Austria to humanize global issues, understand how media are implicated in genocide, and encourage taking personal responsibility for change. We consider the special pedagogical challenges—social, intellectual and emotional—of presenting this material to a diverse global classroom, particularly in communicating the Holocaust to students from different backgrounds. We developed the pedagogy over 11 years and assessed its outcomes through student feedback.<sup>1</sup> The findings demonstrate the difficulties of communicating genocide across national lines, yet show the added value of pushing students out of their comfort zones and into a global citizen perspective and a common human rights narrative that highlight the role of media systems and

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<sup>1</sup> We used a cross-sectional, self-administered online survey that combined close-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was sent via email to all former participants of the academy since its inception in 2007 until its most recent session in 2017. A total of 688 students were sent email invitations along with six reminders over a period of two months (5/14-7/16, 2018). A total of 165 participants (24% response rate) completed the questionnaire.

dehumanizing narratives—the main learning objectives of the program.

### **Activity Description and Rationale**

Launched in 2007, the study-abroad program provides students from five continents a global perspective on media literacy. After students/faculty have bonded and learned media literacy basics, we devote two days to issues of genocide (and media). In approaching the challenging subject, the program provides a unique intersection of local geography, history, media, and current global political trends. This is a typical study-abroad strategy that exploits local settings to bring insights more vividly to life. However, the activity has proven particularly taxing for both students and faculty, as we wrestle with the difficult issues, including how to transcend national affiliations and perceptions of regional injustice.

The genocide program has four sequential components:

1. Faculty introductions contextualize and justify the program and its importance, keeping it from becoming a primarily emotional experience.
2. A graphic documentary, acting as a stimulus, triggers important emotions and memories that elevate the topic's gravity.
3. A discussion offers a venue to express perspectives, allowing diverse individuals to discuss difficult topics under high emotional pressure, with civility and open-mindedness.
4. A concentration camp visit offers a dimension of material reality beyond pedagogical abstractions.

Faculty introductions explain important ground-rules and provide some brief historical context, sharing some trigger warnings that parts of the film are graphic. To define genocide, we refer to the UN General Assembly Resolution, cautioning that every case has its own historical context. Because genocide is a societal project, we need to understand the larger systems that

yield these cases, emphasizing that genocide depends on dehumanization—usually through media. We note that the media issue also revolves around bearing witness. We then focus on the specific historical case of the Holocaust, as framework for understanding genocide. We ask: How could an industrialized, cultured society descend into such evil? The German experience shows how anti-Semitism, as ideology, was used to justify injustice and naturalize oppression using means of total cultural leadership (including media), which led to mass systematic violence.

The choice of film is *Night and Fog*, a short 1955 documentary featuring the abandoned Auschwitz grounds and graphic images of prisoners. Other films were declined for either being too long or introducing too many issues.

The most difficult part is leading the post-film discussion. In previous years, the discussion was short and informal. Currently, the authors conduct more structured moderation with stipulations: This is an open, safe space; no direct response to others; share ideas but don't be critical of others; it's not a debate; speak from your own experience....

The following day's visit to a nearby concentration camp includes a guided tour of the grounds and memorials to the victims from various countries.

### **Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

Our assessment shows that the program's learning outcomes had a number of positive impacts, particularly teaching students how to think outside their own national and cultural limitations, adopt a global citizen perspective and a common human rights narrative, and critically examine the role of media systems and dehumanizing narratives in genocide. It also raised one of the most difficult challenges of teaching a multinational group: How can one specific event (the Holocaust) be a case for a group with dramatically different cultural

understandings? Over time, we placed additional emphasis on other genocides, but students continued to point to this challenge. For some, any emphasis on the Holocaust without an equal discussion of their own “Holocaust” is unacceptable. For others this attempt to extrapolate from the Holocaust to broader lessons diminished the Holocaust’s unique Jewish character. In addition, some students questioned the value of any historical case for understanding the present. One student flatly preferred to “move on,” to put the painful past behind, while others noted there are more “actionable” and current problems. One US alumnus objected to the attention to the Holocaust while ignoring current atrocities in the Middle East and South America. The third-rail proved to be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially as it involved Arab students. Although most accepted it as an educational lesson, they had a hard time accepting that its use did not diminish modern injustice close to home. This highlights the fact that past injustices continue to carry heavy present political relevance.

But almost all students agreed that these contentious political dimensions, when structured carefully, offered students added learning values. It not only educated them about human rights and past atrocities, but also offered a complex narrative about the conditions that led to them, the possibility of their reoccurrence, the importance of witnessing and remembering them, the dangers of forgetting and denying them, and the politics of abusing them to justify present and future injustices.