**Holocaust education in post-Apartheid South Africa – impetus for social activism or a short-lived catharsis?**

**Tracey Petersen**

**Education Director**

**Cape Town Holocaust Centre, South Africa**

In this paper I will examine how the education programmes of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre approach the memory of the Holocaust in order to nurture a culture of human rights in South Africa, through encouraging social activism, and challenging apathy. I will explore the issues, challenges and opportunities these programmes have revealed and reflect on the impact the programmes appear to have had.

The Cape Town Holocaust Centre develops its programmes in the context of the shadow of Apartheid, and the shadow of the present xenophobia. This context makes it impossible, and irresponsible for our education programmes not to facilitate the connection of the past to the present, and to challenge apathy in the face of injustice. Our challenge lies in how we teach a traumatic history so that the history learnt can contribute towards the building of a society in which human rights are upheld and protected.

Our education programmes are built on the assumption that an understanding of the relevance of the Holocaust to the present will prevent the legacy of prejudice playing itself out over and over again. The Holocaust has left us with all-too tangible evidence of the destructive nature of prejudice endorsed, entrenched and left unchallenged in a society. However, we believe that if our education programmes do not make concrete the connection between the prejudice of the past and the prejudice of the present, then the only lesson the Holocaust will teach is that the past was terrible. The gravest consequence of such an approach, is that genocide and other gross human rights violations come to be seen as an inevitable part of the human experience. This perception robs young and old of a sense of agency. At best, the result is apathy. At worst: we need only begin with the breakdown of a sense of community in order to follow the sad trajectory of a society in which most citizens feel without control.

How has this thinking affected the educational programmes? The programmes were structured with the notion that while content knowledge of the Holocaust was vital, providing students and teachers with content alone would not suffice.

Why people are prejudiced, ignorant and/or racist is part of what we unpack in our workshops. Why might people choose to act out their prejudice? What conditions encourage such behaviour? What are the consequences of these choices? We believe that exploring these questions is essential in helping participants see themselves as agents and shapers of their world, capable of making a difference.

The issue of the construction of identity is integral. The Cape Town Holocaust Centre’s education programmes are designed to facilitate a greater understanding of the relationship between the construction of identity and behaviour. The programmes encourage participants to reflect on the assumptions that underpin their sense of personal identity, group identity and a national identity as something that is not fixed but fluid, impacting on each other. We hope in this way to create an understanding that participants do not only have agency, but that they have a moral responsibility to act in order to protect and enhance Human Rights.

Our programmes also allow participants to reflect on the obstacles they might encounter to appropriate action, and to develop practical strategies to overcome these obstacles. We consider it crucial that participants understand how to get from the aspirational “I should…” statements to “ I can” statements, if they are to move towards becoming activists for change.

Our goals are noble. However, we have to ask ourselves whether feelings of anguish and indignation aroused when learning about the Holocaust, are enough to galvanise and sustain social activism. James Young asks, “To what end are people moved? To what historical conclusions, to what understanding or actions in their own lives?” (1993, p13 and 2000, p11). Annegret Ehmann sounds a critical warning for Holocaust education: “…no empirical surveys on the direct or long-lasting effects of Holocaust education exist to support the assertion that knowledge about the atrocities suffered by Holocaust victims will guarantee that students make a successful transfer to desirable behaviour in a contemporary context: accepting diversity, respecting cultural differences, taking over responsibility, participating actively in democracy, defending actively human rights when they are violated, helping and caring for the discriminated and persecuted today.” (2001, p608)

We take seriously Ehmann’s concern and reflect on how the values that students appear to be grasping, can survive the bus journey from the Holocaust Centre back to school and home. It remains a challenge to develop a method of gauging the long-term impact of the programme on the students and teachers[[1]](#footnote-1). Anecdotally, at least, some teachers and students perceive our programmes to have affected and changed how they see their role in society and how they behave. We have had students contact us some time after they have attended the programme to tell us how they have implemented the call to action they felt their visit had inspired.

## The short-term impact should not be over-looked, however. What can be said of the short-term impact? Both school and teacher training programmes conclude with students and teachers completing evaluation forms. Presently, these evaluation forms are the only measure we have developed to gauge the impact of the programmes. From the evaluations, it would appear that the programmes are achieving the goal of encouraging social activism. However, while the evaluation forms provide a valuable measure of the day’s programme, the challenge remains how to translate the short-term impact into long-term understanding and internalisation.

## An important strategy in this regard, is to work with teachers who have the opportunity to engage with students on a daily basis. I would argue that without a collaborative relationship with teachers, programmes that encourage activism are unlikely to succeed. A student’s desire to ‘make a difference’, will wither if the classroom and teacher is hostile to the idea.

A number of areas that might undermine the budding student activist, have become clear since the first few teacher programmes: teachers generally lack confidence when it comes to knowledge of the period and are anxious about the availability of resources. This appears to compound their feelings of helplessness in dealing with issues of intolerance in their schools; teachers feel inadequately prepared to deal with issues of diversity and feel ambivalent about the place of human rights in the classroom, as they link a breakdown in discipline to too many rights being given to their students. This observation reflects a lack of understanding and knowledge about human rights. Teachers’ ambivalence towards human rights undermines the development of social activism of students.

So, in the face of this reality, what do we do? From comments made by teachers, it would appear that learning about the Holocaust in our programmes, has created the emotional space for teachers to speak frankly about their experiences of living under Apartheid, and what it means to teach in a democratic South Africa. This is a critical response, as it in turn creates a space for Cape Town Holocaust Centre facilitators to explore with the teachers what it means for them to teach through Human Rights, for Human Rights and about Human Rights.

An alternative to an authoritative teaching approach and teaching strategies are modelled throughout the programmes. Teachers experience how to approach the content in a manner appropriate for their students.

Our goal is to provide teachers with support that is sustainable and meaningful. To this end, we have expanded our training to include Curriculum/ Subject Advisors or Master Teachers.

Another obstacle we have observed, towards encouraging social activism, could be described as the “simplistic band-aid” approach. Some students and teachers suggested that the way they would avoid committing acts of prejudice was “simply (sic) to stick to your morals” or to “rely on your morals”. We believe that students need to understand the factors that encourage people to abandon their moral codes or to adopt a morality that will justify behaviour that infringes on Human Rights. We would argue that there are two reasons why it is critical for students to reach this understanding:

1. It is too easy to dismiss the actions of the Nazis and the bystanders by laying the blame on Nazi propaganda, or Hitler’s charisma. This conclusion must be challenged as it encourages an attitude of helplessness instead of agency.
2. If students don’t uncover the factors that impact on people’s behaviour, then they are not equipped to deal with any challenges to their moral codes, and remain vulnerable.

To address this “band-aid” response, the programme highlights the number of different responses to the same pressures (for example, examining resistance movements such as the White Rose Movement, as well as the letters written by members of the special mobile killing units) and workshop sessions have been lengthened. Lengthening the workshop session has allowed for deeper engagement with and between students.

A common thread in the testimony of rescuers is that they reacted because they felt they “had no choice” – it was a moral imperative. Our education programmes aim to engender such a reaction in the participants. However, we must identify and understand what the obstacles are in this regard. One obstacle could be a lack of empathy. The likelihood of this happening is made even greater when one remembers that the history of the Holocaust is removed in time and place from the experiences of the participants of our programmes.

In order to address this potential obstacle, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre’s education programmes employ a number of strategies to personalise the Holocaust. In this way, students respond to the history of injustice because it involves them as well, as members of the human family.

However, there is a danger of over-identification. Young (1993, 1994) and Brenner (2001) warn us that a blurring of identity between the ‘reader’ and the ‘text’, imagining oneself as a past victim, does not automatically lead to a re-assessment of the present or to action in defence of Human Rights, but can result in a paralysis. Confronted with the horror of the Holocaust, the reader gets frozen in the story of the victim of the Holocaust, and overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

Another common response recorded is that of avoidance. The impulse of some teachers might be to redeem the awfulness of the Holocaust by focusing on what Brenner calls “rescue testimonies” and downplaying testimonies of loss and pain. Brenner suggests instead that a “realisation of the inerasable injuries of victimization and a past that cannot be redeemed” (2001, p569) is to be welcomed as it forces teachers to consider how to facilitate the students’ response in a way which will not evade the horror, but will re-instil some sense of potency and engage the students in a constructive relationship with the world.” (Ibid)

To help students and teachers move though any paralysis/avoidance, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre’s programmes are peppered with debriefing and reflection sessions. Students need time to process the impact of studying the Holocaust, and develop a perspective that might enable an understanding of the implications of the history for themselves. To this end, we encourage teachers to view the Centre as a resource, rather than the sole source of information about the Holocaust. The Centre positions itself as part of a broader educational programme that begins before a visit to the Centre and continues after the visit, in the classroom.

Since photographs are the dominant text in the Cape Town Holocaust Centre’s exhibition, it is perhaps a useful moment here to reflect on an important aspect of the school programme viz. the visit to the exhibition. Some of our programmes are designed to allow for moments of silent contemplation and interactive engagement – however, time and space constraints continue to challenge us to find ways of letting students engage more actively with the exhibition than they do presently. (The exhibition is small, and we have about 60 students every day).

I have not examined the design of the exhibition, as this falls outside the scope of this paper. However of pertinence is the connection the literature makes between the presentation of text and the ‘paralysis’ effect. I would argue that the design of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre exhibition militates against a paralysis in a number of ways: the most obvious lies in its selection of photographs and visual material. Out of 270 photographs, only 15 could be described as graphic. I would argue that the exhibition does not overwhelm the visitor with ‘nightmarish images – gassing, cremation, rampant disease and hunger’ (Weiner, 2001, p37).

Finally I would like to return to an examination of one of our main concerns: what should we be considering if we wish to ensure that our educational programmes ‘effect attitudinal change’? (Ehmann, 2001, p608) To sustain the impact of our programmes, we have to work with teachers. It is critical to position the Centre as part of an educational collaboration with schools, teachers and the education department.

Secondly, an evaluation tool for assessing the longer-term impact of our programmes is vital if one is to gauge whether the programme achieves more than simple catharsis.

A common phrase that appears in the evaluations of both students and teachers is that the programme “opened” their eyes. The Cape Town Holocaust Centre sees its role as helping the students and their teachers open their eyes and face the ‘rupture’ that was the Holocaust, and by so doing, helping students engage critically with the past. In this way, our programmes encourage students and teachers to keep their eyes open and face the present so that they can realise their responsibility as members of the Human family.

References:

Brenner, R. F. (2001) “Teaching the Holocaust: the American Academic Setting” in

Remembering for the future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide, Vol 3 Hampshire: Palgrave, (p562 –577)

Ehmann, A. (2001) “Learning from History: Seminars on the Nazi era and the Holocaust for

Professionals” in Remembering for the future: The Holocaust in an Age of

Genocide, Vol 3 Hampshire: Palgrave (p 607 –616)

Weiner, S. (1992) “Teaching the Unteachable: Public Schools Teach the Holocaust” in

The Jewish Monthly

Young, J. E. (1993) The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, New Haven:

Yale University Press

Young, J. E. (1994) The Art of Memory, Ed. J. E. Young, New York: Prestel

1. A public servants’ strike in South Africa made it impossible to complete an impact study gauging student and teacher perceptions of the impact of the programme 6 months, and a year after their visit to the Centre, in time for the Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)