

Teaching the Holocaust: A Traveling Suitcase

Before I begin, I'd like to briefly introduce myself, and to give you some of the rationale for this project.

I grew up in South America and in Canada. I earned an International Baccalaureate in Ecuador, a Bachelor of Arts at Guelph, Canada, a Bachelor of Education at University of Toronto, and in April 2007, a Master of Education at University of Victoria.

I first became aware of the Holocaust at age 12, when I noticed numbers tattooed on the arm of an elderly Jewish relative. That event marks the birth of a crusade to learn about the Holocaust, and much later of course, to teach my students about it. For many years, I have studied this atrocity and have come to know many survivors and their stories. I have also visited a number of Holocaust education museums, monuments, ghettos, concentration camps, and memorial sites.

I have been a school teacher for 34 years. Currently, I teach Grade 8-12 English and Spanish at St. Andrew's Regional High School in Victoria. I teach about the Holocaust in my Grade 8 English classes, where my students study *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Hana's Suitcase*.

I am an active member of the Holocaust Remembrance & Education Society here in Victoria, and I have helped them to produce their annual symposium as well. In 1998, I directed a local Symposium on the Holocaust at St. Andrew's High School. I also help to produce the local ceremonies of remembrance for Kristallnacht and Yom Hashoah for the VHRES.

In 2006, I won the Meyer and Ghita Kron Award for Excellence in Holocaust Education, given by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Society in recognition of my efforts to develop this curriculum. In 2004, I was awarded an Imperial War Museum Fellowship in Holocaust

Education; in addition, I have twice given papers on my teaching practice at the International Conference for Holocaust Educators at Yad Vashem in Israel, in 2002, and again in 2004.

In 2007, I completed a master's degree in curriculum design. I have worked long and hard to produce a Holocaust education teaching kit for teachers and students on Vancouver Island. This kit has developed into a traveling suitcase which focuses on the inclusion of Holocaust education in the English 8 curriculum.

When I began my research into creating this unit of study, I was moved by the very lack of resources and support systems available to teachers in Victoria. Certainly, I had personal sources of information – after all, I have Jewish family members who know, from personal experience, the impact of anti-Semitism and xenophobia during the Holocaust. I also have a number of friends and acquaintances who have shared their Holocaust experiences with me. My personal library of books and films has also helped inform me. Sadly, I came to realize that other teachers had not benefited from the same wealth of information or experience. It was no wonder, then, that so few of my colleagues were *really* prepared to teach about *The Diary of Anne Frank* as anything other than a work of literature, devoid of historical context!

I determined at that time to ensure that my students at least would understand more about Anne Frank than had previously been covered in the curricular unit I had been given. Naturally, this determination would require a great deal of research, experimentation, and development. Gradually, the concept of a curricular unit which other teachers might use developed into a Master's project, and I entered the MEd. program in the summer of 2003. As I traveled and communicated with a number of Holocaust educators around the world, I came to envision the creation of a suitcase which teachers might use, and then pass on to their

colleagues. A very generous grant from the Waldman Foundation in Vancouver has made it possible to duplicate my own suitcase and to provide replicas to the local school boards. Thus, teachers in Victoria, Saanich, Sooke, and the Island Catholic Schools now have access to a complete teaching unit on the Holocaust, a unit which contains a theoretical framework, lesson plans, picture books, artifacts, novels, films, and biographies.

This unit has taken me over four years to create, and has required trips to England, Holland, and Israel; I have received assistance and advice from scholars of Holocaust Education in Seattle, Miami, Washington DC, Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, the Imperial War Museum in London, the Holocaust Education Department at the University of Leicester, and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. This traveling suitcase addresses almost all of the *intended learning outcomes* contained in the BC *IRP* for English 8; it has been piloted both in my own classes, as well as in other English teachers' classes here in Victoria and in Duncan; in addition, this unit has been designed to be adapted to suit the needs and interests of students of all levels of ability, whether gifted, average, or learning challenged, through a variety of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile components and activities.

My traveling suitcase is a complex teaching and learning tool. I begin by inviting my students to visit the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – USHMM.org – and to bring back to class at least one piece of information for discussion. (In my experience, students love to surf the net, and most of them willingly accept this invitation). For students who do not have access to a computer at home, I make available computer access at the school. The following class, students reveal their information to the class, and I write it on the chalkboard, in the form of a brainstorming session. Naturally, students will be confused about

some of the items they see on the chalkboard, and some will have been misinformed as well. As a teacher, it then becomes my job to sort through the information, expand upon individual items if necessary, and eliminate the misinformation.

Following this exercise, I inform the students that they are about to hear some true stories about 2 or 3 people who lived through those terrible times. As I tell my students the stories of Peter and Svi, I begin to engage them to take interest in the lives of individual human beings, children whose lives were completely disrupted, whose families were destroyed, and who struggled to survive in a very hostile world. I try to avoid repeating meaningless statistics – what does it matter whether the number of victims was 6 million or 5 million, or 8 million? (Any of these numbers is incomprehensible, and not just for children, but for adults.) Students must come to understand that every one of the victims was a human being with a name, a personality, a family, a home; every one of those victims had the right to a life!

Lest the students come to believe that the Holocaust was limited to these 2 or 3 victims, however, I continue introducing them to other individual children through the use of printed single-page biographies produced by the USHMM. Each student receives the story of an individual child, pre-selected by the teacher to match the gender of the student. In this manner, each student has the opportunity to read about and to identify with one child, a child who now, belongs exclusively to them. In the discussion which follows the reading, students are invited to tell the class about “their” children – where they lived, who they lived with, what happened to them. They learn that the Holocaust did not happen just in Germany, that some children actually survived, and of course, that most of the children died horrible deaths. The number 1.5 million dead children becomes more comprehensible, it is no longer just a statistic.

A subsequent lesson in this teaching unit involves the use of a variety of beautiful picture books, stories which I have selected from a number of authors and illustrators. Each picture book highlights the experience of one or two young children who experienced the Holocaust. The children came from a variety of countries and social backgrounds, but all are united in the commonalities of their experience. Like the children of the biographies earlier presented, the children of these picture books experience a variety of fates; some survive in hiding, some escape to safety, some die in the camps and ghettos.

The rich illustrations in these picture books are very appealing to my students, as are the stories of courage and hardship which their subjects endure. Students work in small groups to read these books aloud to one another, and then to present short oral book reports to the class. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills are all components of this lesson. Following these brief presentations by the students, I read to them a short story which I have also included in the traveling suitcase, *The Shoebox*. In this story, a young boy is instructed by his mother to pack some important personal items into a shoebox; she reminds him that a Jew must always be prepared to flee. Abraham goes up to his bedroom and finds not one but two shoeboxes under his bed. In the first, he packs socks, underwear, mittens, a scarf, and a wool hat; he ties the box with a piece of string and hides it under his bed. In the second shoebox, he packs his favorite bag of marbles, a photo of his Mama and Papa, another photo of his Grandpapa with him on his Bar Mitzvah, a coin his grandmama gave him, and his favorite story book. That night, (Kristallnacht) Abraham awakens to the sound of breaking glass and angry shouting. Quickly and quietly, he dresses and follows his parents outside, stopping only to grab a shoebox. The story tells us that it was only the following day, that Abraham realized he

had taken the wrong shoebox. Students are left to wonder and to discuss which shoebox Abraham took with him, and why it might have been the wrong shoebox; they are also invited to consider and to talk about what they would want to take with them if they found they had to leave home suddenly.

Yet another component of this traveling suitcase is the collection of artifacts I have collected. The suitcase contains a tiny baby's sweater, a child's shoe, a broken pair of child's eyeglasses, a wedding ring, a well-worn teddy bear, and the photograph of 2 children with their dog. Students are invited to work in small groups, and to examine one of the artifacts. They are asked to work collaboratively to create the story of the person who had at one time owned the artifact; students are also instructed to create a poem about the loss of that object, and to present that poem to the class. Over the years, I have collected a number of their poems, but I would like to read to you 2 of those poems now:

"Into the Gas" – inspired by a small yellow baby sweater

Pressure building up around me
Life slowly escaping from my lips
Time elapsing
The faces around me slowly fade away
We fall, my mother and I.
Me in her arms,
She in God's
Fear enwraps me,
The blanket I have come to know so well.
The light slowly leaves our eyes.
Farewell hardship,
We shall never meet again.
(R. Maxwell)

“How Matthi Died” – inspired by an old brown teddy bear

This is the story of Matthi
A nice young little boy
He had a little teddy bear
It was his favorite toy.
One day, the Nazis invaded his town
And took him far away
To a horrible concentration camp
Where Matthi died that very day.

(B. Corrigal, T. Paterson, J. Tabbernor)

Another major component of the suitcase is a collection of Holocaust-related novels. Students engage in a 3-week literature circle, in which groups of 5 or 6 students choose to read a single novel, and meet once a week to discuss the portion they have read during that time. Students also share with one another their response journals, containing poetry, observations, questions, literary maps, and character studies. Through their discussions, students further practice many of the learning objectives of the *IRP* as well.

The final, and perhaps culminating component of the traveling suitcase is *The Diary of Anne Frank*, comprising the 2002 DVD of Anne Frank, another DVD in biography form, and of course, her famous diary. For the teacher, I have included detailed lesson plans of selected readings, suggested teaching strategies, vocabulary, and worksheets for the students to complete in the form of a journal. This entire component has been designed to be a guided reading of Anne’s diary, rather than an independent reading assignment.

As they read / hear the diary read aloud, and view the film of Anne's life, students come to know and to identify with Anne Frank. They recognize the very real injustices of her life, and in their own words, they come to recognize and to appreciate the rights and privileges they themselves enjoy. The knowledge they have acquired in the first few weeks of this unit prepare them to better understand Anne and the difficulties she faces. Students write they are "glad to live when and where they do", and that they now understand that "they must not judge people by their appearances, culture, or religion, but by the way they treat others".

At the end of this unit, I have included a comprehensive test which teachers may use to evaluate their students' learning. As well, I have made myself available to in-service teachers, whether on line or in person, and I have tried to elicit their feedback on the unit. With sufficient funding, I have continued to modify the contents of the suitcase to better suit the needs of those teachers who use it.

Teachers who prefer to do so may choose to teach the story of Hana and George Brady, through the use of a teaching unit based on *Hana's Suitcase*. These children were living with their family in a small town in Czechoslovakia when the Nazi forces destroyed their family, imprisoned and murdered their parents, and confined the two siblings in the prison camp at Terezin, a camp known by the Germans as Theresienstadt. Sadly, the students will learn that while George Brady survived his ordeal, his sister Hana did not.

Your support of this project is invaluable, and is greatly appreciated. I want to finish by sharing with you one final poem, so that you may more fully understand the impact this unit can have on the students who learn about it. This poem was written by a Grade 8 student who

learned about the Holocaust through her experience with *The Traveling Suitcase in Holocaust Education*.

"We Will Still be Heard"

We hear the black monsters thundering toward us as we walk in thick, noisy columns.
We are squeezed together like sardines in a can.
With packs in frozen hands.
The monsters begin to roll.
Babes crying, as they do not know where they stop.
Lurch, we are pushed off the great beast.
Barbs line this strange place, as well as our frightened souls.
Clinging to each other are the families.
"Women and children this way, and men to the left!!!" a Gendarme bellows.

Women and Children;
We walk silently, frightened by our own shadows.
A smell so putrid reaches our cold nostrils as we see a beautiful orange fiery sky before us.
The Gendarme suddenly stops at a cold looking door.
He tells us that this is "the shower"
we are to take off our star-ridden clothes.

Men;
They take us to the cold filth that is to be our home, for God knows how long.
Lice and disease cover the skin and bone of the motionless clumps lying
on the slender mats they call beds.
Our things are gone, taken away, never to be seen again.
Pictures of loved ones lost,
our most prized possessions counted and appraised.
We walk outside to see ditches filled with the dead and decaying;
men, women, and children.
Humiliated, starved, and degraded;
are we really this horrible?
What did we do?
Being hung and tortured are the people around us.

Men, Women, and Children;
"Where are they?
Where are my MOST prized possessions?
Lord, please watch over them as I may never see them again!"
We think to ourselves solemnly

as the screaming pierces our ears, and the cold starts to bite.

C. Aitken