

BEST PRACTICES (AND THEIR PITFALLS)

This text is adapted from the teaching guide titled *Enseigner l'Holocauste, Guide de soutien aux enseignants*, designed and developed by Sabrina Moisan (Université de Sherbrooke) and Sivane Hirsch (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières), with the collaboration of Cornélia Strickler, Education Coordinator at the Montreal Holocaust Museum.¹

1.

Engage students emotionally:

Although emotional engagement is key in sparking students' interest, it is important to do so by personalizing the event through the use of written or verbal testimonies of those who witnessed the events.

Pitfall: Using shock pedagogy. Photographs of piles of bodies or brutality can trouble students. Heightened emotions prevent students from thinking and learning.

2.

Encourage students to draw their own lessons:

Learning about genocide allows students to draw various lessons about the human condition, life in a pluralistic society and justice systems. Studying these mechanisms and ethical issues will help students understand how and why the event took place. They will draw their own lessons.

Pitfall: Taking a moralistic approach or repeating slogans (Never again!). Ready-made morality lessons should be avoided.

¹ Direction des services d'accueil et d'éducation interculturelle, Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (2016)

3.

Democracy does not protect people from everything

While some genocides took place under non-democratic regimes (e.g. the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet regime, Germany before World War I), others, such as the Holocaust or the genocide in Bosnia, took place in democratic (albeit fragile) societies.

Pitfall: Presenting genocide as the antithesis of our current moral and political reality. The possibility of genocide in contemporary democracies is still present.

4.

Think about the scope of the event today

Focusing on remembrance allows students to develop a critical view of the memories people have of the events and to answer the following questions: Why are people still talking about this event today? Who is talking about it and why? There are many possible answers to these questions depending on the context and the case.

Pitfall: Focusing on the duty to remember rather than remembrance. Slogans such as “Never again!”, although laudable, are insufficient in education. Students must understand the historical event, as well as its meaning and complexity.



5.

Present the system underlying the genocide

An entire system and thousands of people helped organize and perpetrate the genocide, not just the political or military authorities.

Pitfall: Focusing solely on the role of a political leader to explain the genocide. Although these leaders always play a key role in hate mongering, it is not true that the genocide lies solely on their shoulders.

6.

Explain the genocidal ideology

It is important to focus on an explanation of the racist ideology, the ways in which it was applied and the impact it had on victims and witnesses in terms of life in society.

Pitfall: Focusing on statistics and the technical means of the genocide. Giving the number of victims or the percentage of deaths by country and presenting the “practical” aspects of the genocide are ineffective in helping students understand the event. These figures on their own explain nothing and can even generate indifference in the students, who may have difficulty imagining what these large numbers of deaths mean. This approach can also result in a dubious comparison between genocides based on the number of deaths or the cruelty of the perpetrators.

7.

Give voices to the various actors

There are thousands of written and oral accounts by perpetrators, victims and witnesses. Survivors of more recent genocides sometimes visit schools to tell their story. These accounts can also be recreated by analyzing iconographic and written documents. If students are engaged in a story about the effects of the genocide on the lives of ordinary people, they are more likely to understand the upheaval caused by the loss of civic rights and what it must have been like for victims trying to survive and before they were killed.

Pitfall: Presenting “both sides of the story.” Although there are several actors involved, teaching about genocide cannot legitimize every side of the story. It is important to avoid presenting the “benefits” or positive aspects of a genocide for some of the groups involved.



8. Genocide can be explained, just like its various manifestations

The various genocides, despite their specificities, can be explained as a more general phenomenon. Comparison can be made, but it is important to take into account the characteristics and context of each of the events. There is nothing to be gained, for example, by comparing levels of suffering. Every lost human life is a tragedy.

Pitfall: Making the genocide sacred. Refusing to compare a genocide with other, similar events under the pretext that it is unique does not help students understand the phenomenon, which, unfortunately, is not unique in history.



9. Compare different genocides

Comparing genocides must help students understand the process, as well as the similarities and differences between the events compared.

Pitfall: Trivializing the event. Not all violations of human rights constitute genocide, and the use of the word to describe any tragic event is inappropriate. Bullying in school has very little to do with genocide. Similarly, comparing genocides, which could be a particularly useful pedagogical tool, is ineffective if the aim is merely to compare the genocidal measures taken and the number of victims.

10. Simplify while retaining the essential:

Historical events must be simplified before they are taught. The teaching guide illustrates a key process:

- defining the genocide
- describing the context at the time and the ideology that made the genocide possible
- studying the six stages of the genocidal process and equipping students with a chart they can use on a daily basis
- focusing on the issues of racism, prevention and justice to enhance students' knowledge and allow them to take part in social deliberation in an informed and critical manner

Pitfall: Oversimplifying



FOUR APPROACHES TO TEACHING ABOUT GENOCIDE

Different educational approaches can be used to address genocide in the classroom. The following is a summary of the educational aims of each of these approaches. For more information about these approaches and their use in the classroom, see Sabrina Moisan, Sivane Hirsch and Geneviève Audet, "Holocaust Education in Québec: Teachers' Positioning and Practices."²

HISTORICAL CONTEXT-BASED APPROACH

This approach focuses mainly on a historical explanation of the event. Ideally, the goal is to help students understand the event and its chronological unfolding while incorporating the racist world view/ideology that led to the genocide, the victims' experiences, acts of resistance and the actions taken to save lives. The reactions of other countries, including Canada, could also be explored to gain a more complex understanding of the issue, as well as the issues raised by the genocide elsewhere in the world (for example, by exploring the forms of anti-Semitism present in Canada and Québec during the Holocaust, or the welcoming of genocide survivors). The Case Study instructional tool was developed with this in mind.

² *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill* 50, no. 2-3 (Spring-Fall 2015): 247-268

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION-BASED APPROACH

This approach aims to help students understand genocide by focusing mainly on the human rights issues involved, as well as the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity. The goal is to allow students to think about the event in terms of human dignity, freedom and fundamental rights and to study the political or judicial institutions tasked with protecting individuals before, during and after the genocide. An understanding of the functioning of these institutions, which are responsible for protecting and defending human rights, helps students understand the role of citizens in monitoring these institutions. The *Racism, Prevention, Justice* instructional tool was developed with this in mind.

INTERCULTURAL/ ANTIRACIST ELEMENTS-BASED APPROACH

This approach focuses on the eminently racist nature of all genocides. Teachers want to raise awareness of racism and to help students understand the concept and be able to recognize its various manifestations. Here genocide is viewed from the angle of the racist ideology that led the perpetrators to carry out the genocide. The implementation of a mechanism for systemic discrimination in society is the central issue. The event and the actions/inaction of the actors involved are analyzed through the prism of this concept. The *Racism, Prevention, Justice* instructional tool was developed with this in mind.

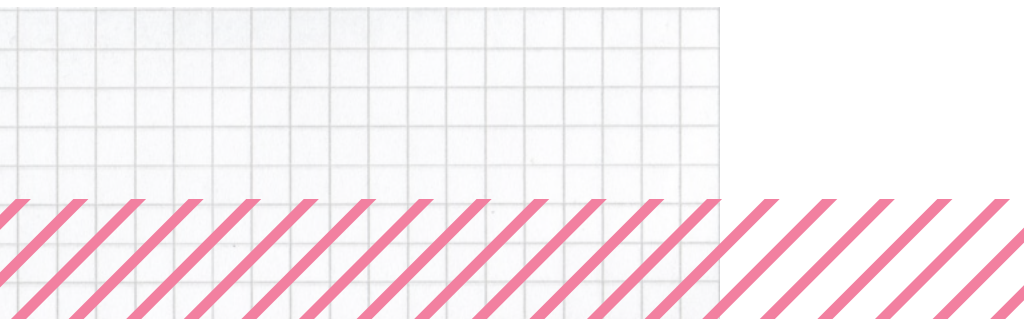




ETHICS-BASED APPROACH

This approach helps students understand the dilemmas of an ethical nature faced by the various actors involved in the event, notably the perpetrators, victims and witnesses, but also police officers, townspeople, lawyers, the businesspeople who profited from the forced labour of prisoners or who made a fortune selling equipment to the perpetrators, the leaders of collaborating, neutral and enemy countries, the people who agreed to hide victims while risking their own lives, etc. This approach prompts reflection on ethics in terms of human nature.

The following table illustrates these four approaches, indicating their goals, the types of questions asked, essential content and concepts, the types of documents that might be useful and links to relevant educational resources.



	Historical Context	Human Rights Education	Intercultural/Antiracist Elements	Ethics
Main goal	Help students understand the history of the genocide studied	Help students understand issues related to human rights and the need to fight for equality	Help students understand the phenomenon of racism and the need to fight against discrimination and for equality	Help students see the moral and ethical issues underlying the genocide
Questions to ask students	What is a genocide?			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > How and why was the genocide studied possible? > Who? > What? > Where? > When? > How? > Why? > What were the consequences? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > How is the genocide studied a human rights issue? > How were the victims' human rights violated? > What impact do the violations of human rights have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on victims? • on perpetrators? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What role did racism and discrimination play in the genocide studied? > What is structural racism? > What forms of racism are expressed in the genocide studied? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What moral or ethical dilemmas did the actors at the time faced? What values, principles or moral duties were in conflict? > Why did individuals choose to collaborate in the genocide? > Were all members of society at the time guilty? > Should Canadians feel guilty?
Essential content and concepts to be developed and applied	The historical context and the genocide process grid (the six stages of genocide) should always be addressed in order to facilitate more in-depth reflection on the other aspects.			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Racist ideology > Application of ideology in policies and actions > Propaganda, authoritarianism > Impact on victims > Resistance of victims and witnesses > Collaboration > Rescue and intervention by foreign governments > Survivors' lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Individual rights (violation) > Collective rights (crimes against humanity) > Racist ideology > Prevention of genocide > Intervention by foreign governments and resistance > Victims' lives after justice has been served (trials for crimes against humanity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Racism (different types and levels) and racist ideology > Resistance activities > Intervention by foreign governments to rescue victims > Victims' lives afterwards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Human nature (dignity, dehumanization) > Critical thinking > Conformism > Justice > Propaganda > Authoritarian society > Future of the society