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Seeing things differently: The use of atrocity images in teaching about the Holocaust

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Introduction

Atrocity images of the Holocaust have been in circulation across Europe and further afield since the Soviet and Allied liberation of concentration and death camps such as Majdanek, in July 1944, and Bergen-Belsen, in April 1945 (Struk 1998). However, with the digital turn of the late twentieth century and the rapid escalation of computer use, ‘smartphone’ technology and other internet-enabled electronic devices, such images have never been as widespread, familiar or readily accessible as they are today (Reading 2001; see also Walden 2015). Anyone, of any age, can search for ‘The Holocaust’ via the internet and quickly find images of atrocity without filter, context or careful pedagogic framing. Whether we like it or not, the images are out there, are pervasive, and, as Janina Struk and others have argued, now form the basis of much public consciousness of this history (Dean 2015; Struk 1998). Indeed, young people can also readily encounter atrocity images through many other common fora including the conventional textbook (Foster and Burgess 2013) or television documentary. It is against this reality that the question of whether images of atrocity should be included in secondary school teaching programmes about the Holocaust will be explored.

The chapter offers a disruptive perspective on the prevailing position among leading Holocaust education organisations: that atrocity
images have very limited, if any, place in the classroom. In 2004, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA, then the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research) published its ‘Guidelines for Teachers’. This document, which has been shared extensively since, was clear:

The Holocaust can be taught effectively without using any photographs of piles of naked bodies, and the overuse of such imagery can be harmful. Engendering shock and revulsion is unlikely to constitute a worthwhile learning experience.

(International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2004, 7)

In a similar manner, guidelines produced by the United Kingdom’s Holocaust Memorial Day Trust recommend that teachers ‘avoid unnecessary, repeated or inappropriate images of dead bodies or open graves’ or ‘images of Holocaust or genocide victims which dehumanise individuals’ (Holocaust Memorial Day Trust n.d., 3).

This chapter will consider these and other concerns that circulate within the field. Such concerns include anxiety that distressing images have the potential to harm students – both in terms of their emotional well-being and, relatedly, in terms of their capacity to learn. Critics also warn that atrocity photographs damage and distort the memory of the individual men, women and children depicted, imposing upon them an abstracted and dehumanising frame (see, for example, Crane 2008). However, the chapter will also explore a series of counterarguments which offer a challenge to the current consensus and suggest an important re-think in light of data drawn from the UCL student study (Foster et al. 2016).

Taking seriously young people’s own views when invited to consider the potential value and potential danger of using such material, the chapter argues against a blanket classroom ban. Instead, it insists that educators first return to fundamental questions about the aims and rationales for teaching about the Holocaust and invites its readers to question their expectations of young people and their capacity to confront profoundly difficult realities. On this basis, the chapter warns that avoiding the use of atrocity images entails its own risk. Denying young people the opportunity to encounter images that depict the horror of the Holocaust within a carefully considered – and carefully prepared for – educational context risks leaving them ill-equipped to move meaningfully beyond shock, distress or revulsion if – or more likely, when – they
encounter the same or similar images outside of the classroom. It also risks denying them an opportunity to begin to grapple with the actual horror – and full significance – of this history.

As indicated in the words above, if the educational potential of an atrocity image is to be realised, careful consideration and careful preparation on the part of teachers is key. The chapter therefore concludes with a number of suggestions for how such images could be used responsibly and with sound educational rationale. It advocates that teachers can ensure a duty of care, both to their students and to the historical record, by adequately preparing classes before they encounter potentially distressing imagery; offering young people autonomy as decision makers over what they feel is appropriate – or necessary – to view; providing adequate time for students to process their thoughts and responses; and presenting photographs in such a way that seeks to dignify the memory of the human beings captured within them. In doing so the chapter neither diminishes nor denies the concerns already raised but foregrounds the ultimate responsibility of educators to frame the use of any such image in a manner that enables rather than forecloses in-depth ‘meaning-making’ and ‘historical truthfulness’ (Crane 2008, 316).

‘Powerful knowledge’ and the exceptional educational importance of the Holocaust

Genocide and mass atrocity are by their very extremity exceptional, but the Holocaust is considered by many to be distinct and unprecedented. Not only is it set apart in public consciousness as the ultimate representation of unspeakable evil but on historical grounds too. Historian Yehuda Bauer argues this case not on the basis of a measure of suffering or degree of scale. Extreme forms of human suffering, he argues, are not comparable (Bauer 2002, 13). Rather, Bauer sets the Holocaust apart from the catalogue of mass violence that has befallen human history due to the intent of the perpetrators to annihilate every member of a single group for purely ideological reasons. He states:

there is something unprecedented, frightening about the Holocaust of the Jewish people that should be taught: for the first time in the blood stained history of the human race, a decision developed, in a modern state in the midst of a civilized continent, to track down, register, mark, isolate from their surroundings, dispossess, humiliate, concentrate, transport and murder every single person
of an ethnic group as defined not by them, but by the perpetrators; not just in the country where the monster arose, not just on the continent the monster first wished to control, but ultimately everywhere on earth, and for purely ideological reasons. There is no precedent for that.

(Bauer 2000)

For Bauer, understanding why the Holocaust happened — how vast numbers of ordinary people throughout Europe participated directly and indirectly in the murder of their Jewish neighbours and how this took place while the rest of the world was silent — is of crucial importance for understanding the world today. It is a ‘cornerstone of contemporary Western culture’ (Jinks 2016, 1) and a central reference point for understanding twentieth century European history and identity (Diner 2003). As a ‘paradigmatic genocide’, our understandings of the Holocaust and its precedents offer the potential to help us better comprehend — and perhaps even spot the warning signs of — other genocides, mass atrocities or human rights violations (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, online, no pagination). In the contemporary context, the rise in violent crime, violent extremism, antisemitism and increasingly regular episodes of denial, distortion and trivialisation of the Holocaust in the UK, Europe and elsewhere, all highlight the importance of ensuring young people know where such things can lead (Community Security Trust 2019; UNESCO and ODIHR 2018; Mulhall 2018). The Holocaust is, therefore, considered to be an essential component of young people’s compulsory education by several national governments and education departments across the globe (Eckmann et al. 2017).

However, in terms of its ultimate pedagogical power, the rationale for teaching school students about the Holocaust must quickly be accompanied by careful consideration, not only of what students should be taught about this history (as discussed, for example, by Foster in this volume), but also how. Michael Young and colleagues have written extensively about the transformative potential of what they characterise as ‘powerful knowledge’, that is knowledge ‘that provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world and [that] can provide learners with a language for engaging in political, moral, and other kinds of debates’ (Young 2008, 14; see also Young et al. 2014; and, for a discussion of ‘powerful knowledge’ and the Holocaust, Pettigrew 2017). Perhaps the most contentious contribution of this chapter is in posing the question, how ‘powerful’ or potentially transformative can
students’ knowledge of the Holocaust ever really be if they are too carefully shielded from its full atrocity? The chapter suggests that it is against this compelling educational potential that arguments against the use of atrocity images in the classroom must be weighed.

Using atrocity images to teach about the Holocaust: Opposition, opportunity and mitigating risk

Opposition

Reticence towards the use of atrocity images for teaching centres on three main issues: that images may traumatise young viewers; that they objectify the photographed subjects; and they dull the senses to the human consequence of the Nazi crime, thereby impeding learning and sensitive engagement. In the United Kingdom, all teachers have a legal as well as moral or ethical duty of care towards their students. The Institute of Education’s 2009 research with secondary school teachers in England reported that, ‘teaching about the Holocaust appeared to cause teachers to consider their pastoral relationships with students in ways that some had not necessarily experienced before’. As one teacher interviewed within the study characterised it, ‘you go into mother mode’ (Pettigrew et al. 2009, 96). As a consequence, it is perhaps entirely understandable – and appropriate – that teachers are wary of distressing their students; the notion of burdening young people with material likely to shock or disturb may seem unduly risky or inappropriate in the classroom.

Other teachers suggested that, rather than cause upset, the graphic nature of some readily available footage of the Holocaust could in fact serve to numb young people to its horror. These are concerns shared by many prominent Holocaust educators and historians, such as Elaine Culbertson, Cornelia Brink and Susan Crane. For Culbertson (2016, 143), for example, there is ‘no possible use for [atrocity images] in the classroom that can be justified’; while acknowledging that a picture is powerful in its ability to provide evidence, Culbertson nonetheless asserts that such images ‘have the ability to “desensitise students” into feeling absolutely nothing about the victims’. Brink (2000) in turn argues that looking at such images ‘paralyzes’ us and makes us emotionally ‘fall silent’.

Leading educator, Shulamit Imbar, of Yad Vashem – Israel’s Museum of the Holocaust – develops this anxiety further. Imbar asserts that images of piles of dead bodies only serve to dehumanise the victim and generate
negative responses in young people. She expresses concern for what the images do in relation to how the viewer sees the victims and argues that using the images in class does little to re-humanise them. She asks:

What do I know about that person when I see him as a body? I believe we have to rescue the individual from the pile of bodies.

(Interview conducted by the author with Shulamit Imbar in 2017)

Similarly, Hirsch suggests that images which capture death and suffering can ‘rupture’ the spirit and deaden the viewer’s ability to see the life that was lived before or facilitate any sort of real understanding or sympathetic response (Hirsch 2001, 6). She states: ‘They resist the work of mourning. They make it difficult to go back to a moment before death, or to recognize survival. They cannot be redeemed by irony, insight, or understanding’ (Hirsch 2001).

The concern of Crane (2008) rests on a worry that the images objectify the people caught in the image. She argues that since the end of the Second World War atrocity images of the Holocaust have become ‘atrocious objects of banal attention’ and warns that their use may well inhibit rather than facilitate learning and understanding of this history (Crane 2008, 309). In addition, she sees the act of viewing atrocity images as a re-visiting of the dehumanisation of the individuals, and finds little to justify doing so. Crane also questions the ethics of public displays of atrocity images of the Holocaust in classrooms corridors, exhibitions, art galleries or such like. She states that few if any of the victims pictured in the images were willing subjects and almost all are taken by the victims’ tormentors, save for those taken by the liberating forces and journalists (Crane 2008, 329). This certainly is an unsettling thought. The job of the Nazi photographers was to record the genocide of the Jews for a variety of reasons (see Figure 10.1). Often this was for propaganda purposes and was instructed on the orders of senior Nazi leaders. The Auschwitz Album found by Lilly Jacob at liberation contains photos taken at the end of May (or possibly June) 1944 and depicts scenes of the arrival, selection and final moments of thousands of Hungarian Jews (Yad Vashem, online). The album of photographs was the work of members of the SS whose main task was to take ID photos and fingerprints of the inmates who were selected for slave labour. From Crane’s perspective, the imbalance of power between the photographer and the subject renders the image itself an object of abuse. For her, the dehumanisation that played into
that abuse makes the actual photograph an instrument of genocide and therefore ethically too morally problematic to view (Crane 2008, 315).

**Opportunity and risk**

If the only images shown to young people took the form of those described with concern by Imbar, it would indeed seem very hard to ‘rescue the individual from the pile of bodies’ (Imbar, interview with author) or to restore any dignity and meaning to the lives once lived by the men, women and children pictured, for example, lying dead in a heap at Bergen-Belsen. For this we must engage with images, testimony, and footage, which speaks of the vibrancy and diversity of individuals before the Holocaust as well as their responses to the unfolding genocide (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2004). But images of Nazi atrocity also do something else – they offer visual evidence (albeit mediated by the motivation of the photographer and the partial view of the lens) of what happened. The first images that circulated after the liberation of camps documented the discovery of thousands upon thousands of unburied dead and provided photographic evidence of a crime that had shaken the liberating
forces and went on to shock a largely ignorant (at that time) wider public across Europe and beyond (Stone 2015).

Images on newreels and newspaper front pages were instrumental in enabling the world to begin to bear witness to the truth and full horror of the Holocaust (Zelizer 1998). As such, they served an invaluable purpose but there were concerns even then that the scenes of brutality and mass murder depicted were too traumatic to be seen. The British Ministry of Information, for example, commissioned Sidney Bernstein to make a documentary that would provide indisputable evidence of the Nazis’ crimes, yet when the reels were examined the film was shelved. It was considered too shocking and was only used in war crimes trials to corroborate survivors’ eyewitness accounts. Yet the filmmakers had conceived of their project in broader educational terms and the film’s script was to conclude with the words: ‘Unless the world learns the lessons these pictures teach, night will fall. But, by God’s grace, we who live will learn’ (Stone 2015).

Some of the images were to become iconic, such as the disturbing image of a child’s arrest during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or the British liberating soldier standing to attention beside a mass grave filled with a mangled heap of broken corpses. Through their familiarity, the power of images such as these has arguably become detached from their historical roots (Crane 2008). Because today’s students, more than any previous generation, live in a world where such images circulate freely, there is an important educational argument that schools should provide opportunities to help them discern their authentic provenance and to judge if and when they have been ‘used’ or taken out of context for good or ill.

While some critics, perhaps most famously Susan Sontag, have argued that the widespread proliferation of images of atrocity risks diminishing their impact through ‘densensitising’ viewers (Sontag 2003; see also Möller 2009), others argue that, more than any other medium, iconic images of atrocity retain enormous power. Susie Linfield, for example, argues compellingly that ‘photographs of grievous history’, ‘of defeat and atrocity’ ‘[tell us things we] urgently need to know’. She insists, ‘we need to respond to and learn from photographs’ (Linfield 2010, xiv). Moreover, following Jean Amery, Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi, Linfield suggests that ‘we cannot talk – at least in meaningful or realistic ways – about building a world of democracy, justice, and human rights without first understanding the experience of their negation’: ‘we need to look at, and look into what James Agee called “the cruel radiance of what is.” Photographs help us to do that’ (Linfield 2010, xv).
From this perspective, learning about this history without exposure to such images limits its educational potential and risks diminishing the ‘power’ of student knowledge of the Holocaust, shutting down opportunities for important, complex conversations (Young et al. 2014): conversations regarding our moral obligation to the memory of the past, for example, consideration of our responsibility to the individuals captured in the image, or questions relating to voyeurism and what the viewer brings of themselves when viewing any individual image. Ethical discourses like these, can, with the right teacher intervention, contribute to important learning experiences and help promote spiritual, moral and social awareness, arouse curiosity, and increase emotional literacy and awareness of self (Scribner 2019, 54). This fulfils the obligation to help young people witness suffering in the hope that it may, in a metaphorical sense if not a physical sense, prevent future crimes (Dean 2015).

Atrocity images of the Holocaust therefore provide a learning opportunity that, if mediated by informed teaching and guided questioning, can help students see the human suffering in the image rather than the nakedness and shame, the human tragedy rather than the lifeless corpses and inevitability of death. We have to help students encounter and ‘read’ these important photographs with empathy and emotional intelligence. For the reality is that the Holocaust is a profoundly ‘difficult’ history and learning about it must inevitably entail risk (Gross and Terra 2019, 4). The heinous Nazi crime and devastating void it created in all but entirely extinguishing Jewish life from Europe has to be ‘seen’ or otherwise confronted if young people are to know and comprehend the significance of what actually took place. When we teach about the Holocaust, we are teaching about the mass murder of innocent people on an unprecedented level. To take out or avoid that which evidences this risks leaving students struggling to make sense of what really happened. Shock and emotional pain are indeed a likely reaction and part of what makes the Holocaust such a challenging – and such an important – subject to teach.

But what of the concerns raised by teachers and others regarding distress potentially experienced by students? Here it is perhaps salutary to reflect upon our expectations of young people and their capacity to engage with difficult and complex realities. And while it is perhaps entirely understandable that teachers may want to protect their students from confronting trauma in their classrooms, it is important not to forget that young people arrive at school with their own life experiences and, for a significant number, these are far from trauma free. For example,
UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM estimates suggest that between January and June 2019, 94,040 children arrived in Europe seeking asylum from countries including Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (UNHCR et al. 2019). While it is very hard to compile accurate cross-national data on school enrolment, all of these children have a right to education under European Union law (UNHCR 2019). Other students may come to class with difficult experiences borne of poverty, illness, fragmented or unstable home and family relationships or with caring responsibilities that exceed their years (see, for example, Mulkami 2017).

The insights offered by the Polish-Jewish writer, doctor and pedagogue Janusz Korczak are especially resonant here. Korczak is renowned for his wholesale and extraordinary commitment to and respect for children, especially the 200 Jewish orphans with whom he lived and worked and was ultimately murdered alongside in the Warsaw ghetto and death camp of Treblinka (Lifton 1988). Central to Korczak’s pedagogy was an insistence that adults acknowledge and respect the rights and capabilities of all children for who they are as children, and not for who they will become: as ‘people of today and not tomorrow’. While Korczak embodied the belief that care will always be an essential component of any relationship between educator and student, he warned against the misinterpretation of care as ‘overprotection’ and the underestimation of children’s strength, judgement and resilience. As Gabriel Eichsteller summarises, for Korczak, ‘over protection disregards ... children’s right to freedom, self-experience and self-determination’ while ‘protecting them from hazards means all too often that children are kept from learning’ (Eichsteller 2009, 36). In the place of ‘over protection’ Korczak insisted on the importance of listening to the perspectives of young people themselves and respecting their own judgements. This makes the inclusion of school students’ voices from the UCL study a vitally important contribution to the debate.

As discussed in further detail below, those students often appeared to struggle to come to terms with the reality of what happened during the Holocaust. For some, atrocity images served at least in part to satisfy a need for a concrete visual tool, enabling them to see the Holocaust as a real event. Through them they could begin to grasp, not merely what happened, where it happened or why it happened but the fact that it happened, that it was carried out by real people and real people were its victims. As such, the images offer an important educational opportunity, one that many of the young people who took part in interview argued strongly that they and their contemporaries should not be denied.
What is an atrocity image?

For those who remain uncertain that the educational potential in allowing students this opportunity outweighs the risks of causing trauma, a further consideration is worth our attention here. For the notion of omitting imagery on the basis of avoiding upset is not as straightforward as it may at first seem. The line between ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ in classroom settings is not always easily determined and many images of the Holocaust have the potential to shock or distress students without depicting depravity. The atrocity element can be deceptive, its disturbing elements obscured. Horror may lurk beneath the surface, revealed only through contextual knowledge. For example, consider the image of Hungarian Jewish men, women and children gathered in a clearing at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 (Figure 10.2). No one in this image is stripped naked, bloodied, or beaten down; there is nothing that will obviously upset. Only a sense of displacement appears visible on the faces of the crowd. Yet, unbeknown to individuals pictured, they are being held there awaiting their murder in the nearby gas chambers. The horrific nature of the image is revealed through access to this important provenance. This is compounded by our sense that the photographer likely

![Figure 10.2 Hungarian Jews 1944 waiting in a clearing at Auschwitz Birkenau (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem).](image)
knew perfectly well of the imminent fate of the Jews he or she was photographing and that we are now looking through their lens – so to speak.

Another example of an image where atrocity is not immediately obvious is a rarely exhibited photograph of German SS auxiliaries partying away with gusto (Figure 10.3). It is hardly ‘atrocity’ in the conventional sense until one discovers the location and timing of the image: it was taken at Auschwitz sometime between May and December 1944, a place and time in which thousands of Jews were murdered day after day. So the people having fun are also murderers. Far from officers conducting their work in the death camp under duress – a misconception that young people often assume was the case (Foster et al. 2016) – they appear to be happy in the environment. The image becomes more disturbing as the layers of contextual knowledge reveal reality.

Determining exactly what constitutes an atrocity image is complicated further by the fact that emotional pain and tolerance are subjective and vary greatly in terms of how they are expressed (Izard 1991, 187). Different individuals find different things upsetting for a variety of reasons and to different extents. The image of a mother clinging to her child in Miedzyrzec Podlaski in 1942 or 1943 as a German soldier aims his rifle in their direction, is arguably so repellent it is hard not to
recoil. While most people would consider this particular photograph harrowingly graphic, some people may find it to be temporarily disturbing while, for others, emotions could be felt as ‘real pain’ (Izard 1991, 187). Sociologist Jack Mezirow, a pioneer of transformational learning theory, states that meaning is constructed through our perceptions of those experiences which are seen through the lens developed from past experiences (Taylor and Cranton 2012). Batchen warns that we bring so much of ourselves into the viewing of an image that it ceases to be a reliable historical record as what we see is partly what we construct (Batchen 2009). Thus, images that a teacher or a museum curator may not initially categorise as having the potential to emotionally disturb might in fact do so depending on who is viewing it, the life experience they bring and what of themselves they forge onto the image that they see. The connection is intuitive and the degree of the viewer’s ‘pain’ is dependent on the individual, their experience and their own deeply rooted emotional triggers. Perhaps the viewer is a parent, or has lost someone close, has been abandoned or isolated. On encountering the image, that pain may well be revisited through the vicarious engagement with the different moment in time and context to the one that the image presents. In a classroom context, individual students’ own personal biographies of forced travel or escape from conflict, for example, could likewise be ‘triggered’ in unanticipated ways.

This underlines again how far the selection of images for educational purposes is laden with complexity and risk. For example, is the photo of a teenager holding her head in her hands after arriving in the UK via Kindertransport (Figure 10.4) one that might cause distress to an individual who has endured displacement or fear? Perhaps the photograph of a Jewish woman in Germany in 1935 trying to hide her face from the unwelcome photographer who captures her as she sits on an isolated bench marked ‘for Jews only’ (Figure 10.5) might also arouse emotional pain?

There is also Crane’s (2008) perplexing question regarding the nature of the person behind the camera and for what purpose that person shot the image. Does the fact that it was taken by the perpetrator — thereby adding further to the humiliation and degradation of the victims — render such an image a reflection of atrocity? Looking through the lens of the perpetrator creates a particular distortion and moral conflict. Images taken by Jews or other victim groups were inevitably rare — most images were taken by the Nazis or collaborators. One exception is the highly significant, out-of-focus, set of photos taken secretly in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 with a smuggled camera by a Jewish Sonderkommando prisoner desperate to get word out of the
Figure 10.4  A Jewish youth, wearing a numbered tag, sits on a staircase with her head in her hands after her arrival in England with the second Kindertransport (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park).

Figure 10.5  Bench ‘for Jews only’ (courtesy of the Wiener Library, London).
annihilation of the Jewish people taking place. On first glance the images give little away, but deeper scrutiny reveals the disturbing reality. One image (Figure 10.6), for example, is framed by an irregular shape in which appear a number of figures in close proximity to one another. In fact, the framing comes from the photographer’s position, stood within a doorway inside a gas chamber at Crematoria V. What is shown is the burning of bodies of recently murdered people. The photographer took this at considerable risk, never knowing if it would make the perilous journey to achieve the photographer’s mission – to wake the world into action and bring an end to the suffering, which tragically it did not.

Historian Dan Stone describes the image as having ‘an emergency’ and ‘an immediacy’, which bears ‘full frontal atrocity’. He states that to even theorise about its representation is almost offensive (Stone 2001, 131).

Figure 10.6  Burning bodies of recently murdered victims, in a photograph taken furtively through a doorway (State Museum of Auschwitz Birkenau, Oswiecim, Poland).
While acknowledging that the images are still only representations, upon which the viewer socially constructs a ‘new reality’ rather than seeing the truth of what is depicted, Stone argues that the photographs provide ‘imprints of reality’ bringing a ‘closeness to the events’ enabling the viewer to draw meaning through the visceral impact these photographs have on us (Stone 2001, 131).

The Sonderkommando photos are without question harrowing images of atrocity but the unique value of them in terms of their closeness to the events, and their distinct provenance makes them highly significant and educationally essential. Not only do they evidence the Holocaust but also give agency to the Jews who, despite a common misconception to the contrary, fought to sabotage the actions of their murderers when possible.

So, are atrocity images to be excluded from students’ usage or not? On the one hand we have a duty of care towards student wellbeing and the need for respect toward the victims presented in the images. On the other hand, teachers have a responsibility to evidence what took place, with the best available sources, especially in a political and social climate of a rise in denial and antisemitism. Carolyn Dean states that this discourse ‘pits important if recent concepts of ostensibly transformative, if vexed political function – to “bear witness”, “never again” – against an aversion to the display of violated human dignity whose sources are psychic and cultural’ (Dean 2015, 239). Ultimately the judgement lies with individual teachers who will have to call on deep knowledge of their students, their school, their community and indeed their own views and coping strategies when selecting material for use in their individual classrooms. The discussions throughout this chapter are offered with the intention of helping teachers make such judgements from a position of critical reflection, understanding and respect.

Student reflections on encountering atrocity images of the Holocaust: Findings from the UCL study

So far this chapter has presented some of the pervading arguments against using atrocity images and explored a number of competing theoretical and pedagogical approaches. But returning to the perspective reflected across the work of Janusz Korczak, it is important to also ask, what do young people themselves think the value of encountering atrocity images might be? How do they respond to some of the criticisms presented by educators as to the appropriateness of their use? During the UCL student
study, described in further detail in earlier chapters, researchers conducted a number of focus group interviews with secondary school aged students. In 9 of these focus groups, students were explicitly invited to share their reflections on the use of atrocity images in school. In total, 35 students aged between 12 and 16 took part in such interviews – 23 girls and 12 boys from 4 different secondary schools (Foster et al. 2016). As this is a relatively small number of schools and students, any generalised claims can only be made with caution. However, some very consistent messages do emerge which provide important insight into the ways these particular students think about the use of atrocity images.

Students were in the main unwavering in their view that graphic images of the Holocaust have their place in helping them understand what happened in the Holocaust. Only 1 of the 72 students interviewed stated images need not be seen in order to comprehend the event but a number did suggest that much younger children might be disturbed by seeing them as these Year 9 students suggest:

Some people might get like shocked by it, some people might get a little bit too shocked, too scared.

I think that's why we study it in Year 9. You’re starting to become more mature in how you act around certain aspects and topics so I think it is appropriate from a certain age.

Students recognised the traumatic nature of the images but felt that this would not bring about an unreasonable or detrimental effect on them considering the history they were trying to comprehend. In fact some students felt that to truly engage with this history and the plight of the victims, feelings of upset were a necessary part of the learning process particularly with regard to promoting civic action and learning from the past. For example Joanna, a Year 9 student, explains:

I think it’s important to be upset about these things and if you are not upset, you’re not having empathy for the subject, and I think people should be upset about it because then you know what these people have experienced, it makes you want to stop it.

A Year 11 student went on to acknowledge that learning is not exclusively a cognitive activity but involves affective engagement: ‘You understand by being upset’. So whilst concerns exist about emotions standing in the way of understanding, here students explain how emotional engagement is actually how they learn.
When discussing the possibility that some teachers may have concerns about the effects of drawing on graphic images on their students’ emotional wellbeing, students revealed that they see the images outside class in any case through the internet, or while searching for material for a classroom homework project. They suggested that it was important to view such images in order to help them face the content.

Yes, because if you see piles of dead bodies. You can’t just ignore it.

In the discussion on whether they see it necessary for their teachers to use images as part of the classroom learning, Year 10 Saehna responded:

you’d understand it more, you wouldn’t be more scared of it, you’d be more understanding of it.

The idea was put to students that some teachers of the Holocaust may feel they have a duty to avoid using the images in class to protect students’ emotional wellbeing. In response some voiced consternation. Sophie, a Year 9 student, stated:

I feel like the school tries to shield the Holocaust in a way. Like they will tell us about it but they are not going to show you images that upset you. . . . So it’s almost shielded in a way.

A Year 10 student replied:

If you don’t learn about this now and you are just shielded from it then for the rest of your life, you never will learn about it.

When the students are asked how they think teachers should present the images, one student suggested that students be prepared in advance of the lesson:

Maybe ask the class how they feel about it before bringing them in, they could ask first, but I don’t think they should shield you if you don’t want to be shielded.

One student acknowledged that graphic images were inherently disturbing but were not the cause of unreasonable or inappropriate psychological discomfort, given the horrific nature of the past reality that
they were attempting to encounter. The students remarked on a sense of significance through the witnessing of the images:

   If it was real enough to happen it’s real enough for us to view it, I think. It’s important for us to see it.

Others spoke of the role of the visual image in deepening their comprehension:

   I think it also adds to your own, like, it being realistic to you and seeing consequences of it because lots of us are visual learners and we learn by seeing it.

Interestingly, most students raised the difficulty of truly realising that the Holocaust actually happened and how the atrocity images helped them grasp the reality of it. Billie, Sophie (both Year 12) and John (Year 13) discuss this here:

   Billie:  Yeah, as awful as the photos are you see that . . . it’s almost like . . . okay this is real: look this is it. I think people have to see it before even believing it and then it just hits you.

   Sarah:  Or you hear this was done and that was done, but without actually seeing the pictures you can’t actually translate it into a real event that happened in history. And so when we actually see the pictures we can make that link and see that it was actually something that happened.

   John:   It stops the idea of a story and a legend . . . it stops being a story: it makes it real.

This is further explored by Year 9 and 10 students as they articulate why images help them absorb that which otherwise appears incredulous.

   You’re shown something, you’re being shown evidence and it just connects everything that you’ve heard about, read about; and you look at that picture and . . .

   That’s true. It’s proof to what actually happened. If you have pictures from the time it shows that this actually happened and it shows the true horrors of what happened.

   I think even though it’s upsetting, it will give you like some . . . it’s official.
Put to the interviewees the fact that some professionals argue that showing these images could denigrate the memory of those pictured, their responses pivoted between agreement and an overriding sense that the importance of witnessing them was important too.

It’s really sad that they are textbook pictures now, but I suppose . . . . If in a newspaper, I wouldn’t agree with that. But if it’s educating future generations and it could have an impact and make society better, if I was I’d . . . well I wouldn’t get a choice on it; but I wouldn’t have a problem if it might have a chance of improving society.

Sarah (Year 13)

Daisy: I think it can be unrespectful, well it is. But it . . . if it helps some people understand the extent a bit more, then I feel that that . . .

Shannon: Yeah. The intentions are . . .

Daisy: The intention is good . . .

Stan: Not to be disrespectful . . .

Shannon: It’s not disrespectful if using it almost to teach, educate.

(Year 13)

No suggestion was made that the images dehumanised the Jewish people captured in them but Year 9 student Chandni explains that the images did much to remind students that this happened to real human beings:

It adds the human element to the teaching of history. You know when we look at the figures and it’s like millions died, but you never actually think about the people.

In summary, many students voiced a need to witness the atrocity image in order to grasp the reality of the Holocaust. They thought that viewing such images, whilst upsetting and disturbing, was not the same as experiencing what was pictured; and whilst seeing the images caused them upset it was not going to leave lasting damage. They also demonstrated sensitivity and concern in their conversations regarding the question of a possible responsibility they and their teachers may have towards the memory of the individuals captured in the photos in their classroom use but felt that if used with ‘good intent’ the educational importance of witnessing the images was paramount. There was a clear sense of grievance from some of the young people who felt it possible that their teachers were trying to shield them from the facts. Whilst the responses from this
small group of teenagers may be limited in number, the views and perspectives shown here help us to rethink and re-examine and re-open a conversation on the issue.

**Atrocity images of the Holocaust and education: Looking forward**

Are photographs of Nazi atrocity exceptional sources of information depicting a difficult history which can facilitate complex understanding? Or are they simply too much for the visual consumption of young people of secondary school age? I would argue that atrocity images of the Holocaust do have a place in students’ education about this catastrophic history – but not unconditionally. It remains important to consider the duty of care that needs to be in place to safeguard students from potential traumatisation, and teachers also require a framework that can protect and guide them in doing so. The following recommendations are intended as a useful starting point towards such a framework, advocating an approach in schools which supports teachers to responsibly and creatively navigate risk.

1. Schools could introduce guidelines for the use of potentially disturbing images within their whole-school teaching and learning or safeguarding policies. Incorporating the new IHRA recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust (described in further detail below) would be an excellent place to start.

2. An important aspect of any whole-school policy statement is the need for clear educational rationales whenever such images are introduced. It is insufficient and inappropriate, for example, to use such images only to engender shock.

3. In relation to the Holocaust, the policy may specify the type of images that an individual school believes should be avoided, if it wishes to determine them. ‘Permitted images’ could be further specified in terms of age appropriateness. Images of naked women and children, particularly those taken by the perpetrator, may fall into a ‘not permitted’ category, for example. Ideally, such decisions would be collectively formulated including input from teachers, senior leaders, parents, and crucially, following Korszak, should also include student voices. This strategy has the added strength of engaging students in questions relating to the emotional wellbeing of not just themselves but their wider school community.
4. Young people should be given adequate warning of teachers’ intention to bring to class images that are particularly graphic. They should be given the choice to view the image or look away and supported to themselves consider what is important and appropriate for them to see and why. This could include reflection on students’ potential sense of responsibility to the memory of the individuals depicted and the various forms this can take.

5. Students should be provided with adequate support in ‘reading’ graphic imagery, confidently ascertaining the provenance of photographs and coming to their own interpretations of their potential significance and poignancy. Historical contextualisation can enable students to better understand what is taking place in the image; what is known or unknown; what choices were or were not available to those depicted; and what actions taken could have changed the course of events that led to the moment caught in time. Helping young people to consider who is behind the lens and why the photo is being taken is also a valuable exploration. Juxtaposing, for example, the Jewish Sonderkommando photographs discussed earlier in this chapter – which depict the murder of Jews taken in an act of resistance – with a photo of a similar scene taken by a perpetrator in order to record the Nazis’ triumphs or to send back home as a souvenir, could inspire pertinent conversation about the past and present status of an image and the role of the photographer.

6. Supporting students to express their responses to potentially disturbing images is a further important consideration. What is necessary, in educational terms, is to find sensitive ways of handling all sources that testify to the Holocaust. It is appropriate that students are helped to discuss their responses openly should they wish to and to ruminate on ethical questions regarding the use of such images in classrooms and other contexts. Working through disturbance of this nature is a necessary part of emotional development and connecting to the suffering of others is important to knowing oneself. Students may express their reactions in very different and unexpected ways. It is important to be open and to support students’ emotional literacy. On seeing such images there is also a risk that the experience might reawaken emotional wounds unrelated to the image or subject being studied. Thoroughly knowing one’s individual students well – their particular strengths and vulnerabilities – is of paramount importance, whilst remaining ever conscious that young people are, in the main, incredibly resilient.
7. In order to ensure that exposure to the images does not dehumanise the victims, care and thought needs to be paid to planning and timing. The point at which the atrocity image is introduced within a scheme of work is critical. It should not, for example, be offered as a student’s first encounter with this history. Engagement with stories and visual encounters with individual Jewish men, women and children before the war is a necessary prerequisite. Only then, when students have had a chance to invest in the human story, can the images of what happened to individuals strike home the true tragedy of the Holocaust.

8. As part of a school’s safeguarding policy, schools could usefully invest time on teaching students e-safety and specifically on accessing images relating to the Holocaust. These could include how to responsibly search for images outside the safety of the school environment. This process might connect to other interventions made by schools to address antisemitism as images of the Holocaust are often used as psychological weapons to intimidate Jews today.

9. Drawing students into ethical, moral and civic debate about the images and how they are to be viewed can take students to deeper levels of understanding. Sontag has suggested that if there is an ethical duty to witness there is also a duty to do something with what you now know. She says active learning is a first step (Sontag 2003, 42). Perhaps this proposition would make a valuable starting point for young people to consider what action, if any, they feel they need to take in the light of their encounters with Holocaust history and representation.

**Conclusion**

For those concerned with the way secondary students come to understand and make sense of the Holocaust, the common presence of atrocity images can be a deeply troubling matter. However, a blanket ban on their use is also problematic. This chapter has sought to invite those who feel reticent about their use to further consider the issue. It has proposed that with due care and sound professional forethought from teachers, their use can be justified. Many justifications were in fact offered by young people themselves, through the UCL researchers’ focus group interviews. Alongside those students, the chapter suggests that there can be profound educational value in seeing the photos, carefully unpacking them,
asking questions of them, discovering how to learn from them. Indeed, it suggests that these things are vital if young people are going to engage seriously with the reality of this genocide. At a time when Holocaust distortion and trivialisation is increasing, the importance of knowing what the Holocaust was and what actually happened is especially pronounced. Images are of course only one form of representation, but for many students they appear particularly compelling and can teach us a great deal.

The chapter acknowledges that the use of graphic imagery is not without risk within the classroom but it also recognises that education itself is an inherently risky endeavour. Indeed, following Biesta (2013, 1) one could argue that if we take risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether, certainly in terms of its potentially transformative power. Korczak’s inspiring belief in the underestimated capabilities and ultimate resilience of all children suggests that we should protect children without shielding them, safeguard them without overprotecting. And while such images remain so widespread and ‘out there’, surely it is better that young people are given the opportunity to encounter them – to make meaning of and from them – in a supportive school environment, mediated by a teacher capable of constructing a learning experience that respects both the individuals depicted as victims and the individual children in their class.

In December 2019, a new set of guidelines for teachers was published by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance to replace those discussed at the very beginning of this chapter (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2019). It is instructive to note that, rather than take the more programmatic approach that characterises much of the 2004 document, these appear to place much more emphasis on the critical responsibility of teachers to make considered choices with clear educational rationales and with sensitivity to their students. In doing so it echoes one of the most important arguments of the chapter, that in seeking to ‘protect’ both the students in our classrooms and the memory of the 6 million individual men, women and children at the centre of this history, we risk undermining its most powerful educational potential. Susan Sontag warns us of the ‘shame’ of looking close up at real horror but crucially she reserves a caveat for those who do it in order to serve a greater purpose. She states:

> Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it . . . or those who can learn from it.

(Sontag 2003, 42)
Note

1. As documentary photographer Janina Struk alerts us, ‘a great number of photographs’ had in fact ‘been made available by official and unofficial sources in Nazi occupied Europe in the early years of the War’. For example, ‘In 1942 a book published in Britain by the Polish government in exile provided graphic accounts and photographs of the Nazi atrocities in occupied Poland’ (Struk 1998, 97). However, such images did not begin to reach a wider public audience until after the war.

References


