

Challenges and Advantages of Team-Teaching the Holocaust Face to Face and in the Cloud

Donna-Lee Frieze

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY IN MELBOURNE IS A MULTI-CAMPUS UNIVERSITY THAT TEACHES off-campus students via a Cloud presence. As such, digital learning is one of its pedagogical strengths. Its city campus is located in Melbourne with three regional campuses plus the Cloud. 'The Holocaust', located as a History unit, originally ran over two semesters when it commenced about 15 years ago, allowing students an in-depth study of the origins of antisemitism. At its inception, about 50 to 100 students enrolled. As the number of enrolments increased over the years, the unit's length decreased, defying logic. When the university changed from semesters to trimesters, 'The Holocaust' unit's teaching weeks were reduced from 24 to 13; now, the unit only runs for 11 weeks. As a result, teaching methods and accepted learning outcomes have had to adapt. At the time of writing, the course has approximately 400 students enrolled, with the largest cohort at the city campus, an impressive statistic given that the unit is an elective. Students studying from any discipline and any undergraduate year may enrol.

Originally, the unit was facilitated by one full-time staff member with occasional help from adjunct staff. Today, although centrally administered from one person, the unit is team-taught and organised. The same team has been working together for about the last six years. The team members are all historians, except one who is a genocide studies scholar. We focus on a chronological understanding of the Holocaust, with an emphasis on the history of antisemitism; Germany in the

1930s; the occupation in both Western and Eastern Europe; Holocaust denial; and war crimes trials. Genocide case-studies are also covered, as are issues of Holocaust representation.

While we try to create an even learning experience for all students, there is the risk that Cloud students may feel they are at a disadvantage studying at a distance. The Holocaust unit is approximately 90 per cent online and Cloud students are offered a weekly online discussion with a member of the teaching team, which is conducted via video. These sessions are usually small so students have the benefit of an online discussion usually centred around their assignments.

One of the challenges faced by the cut in length was responding to the format of the unit, which, for many years, consisted of a lecture (recorded for Cloud students) followed by tutorials, each of which consisted of about 25 students. As the unit grew in numbers, but was shortened in length, the team found that the tutorials were too short. The tutorials were replaced by longer two-hour seminars, with larger groups of students, and 'on the spot' assignments. This meant students had to complete the readings each week to satisfactorily finish the in-class assignments. The Cloud students were given equivalent assessment tasks. The longer seminars meant that we could conduct debates and role plays, and delve deeper into topics that would normally be rushed over in shorter tutorials. Cloud students are given a longer period to complete the essays. Each of these five short assessments over five seminars was worth 10 per cent. For the final 50 per cent assessment task, students were asked to create an audio-visual presentation about one of the topics in the unit.

While we like to think that word-of-mouth has prompted the rise in student numbers over the years, students often elect the Holocaust unit because they have visited the Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC) as a high-school student, or because there are personal connections to the Holocaust. Only a few students are Jewish, but of the rest, the majority have Polish, German or some other European background and families who were affected by the Holocaust in some way. We also have an increasing number of Muslim students.

Prior to the final assessment, students visit the JHC in Melbourne. This is not a compulsory aspect of the unit, but a voluntary activity, although students are strongly encouraged to attend. There are two important aspects to this learning activity: students are invited to bring family members and/or friends with them to the JHC and they meet Holocaust survivors. These two-pronged experiences are an enriching and stimulating learning experience as they allow students to discuss their learning activities with their companions. This is particularly valuable for Cloud students, who have not previously met the teaching staff in person. As this generation is the last who will meet a Holocaust survivor, the face-to-face

encounter inspires students to pursue graduate research into the Holocaust or other genocides. For instance, each year we have several students (both Cloud and on-campus) who apply for Honours in history with a focus on the Holocaust. Those who are accepted usually continue with graduate research in the Holocaust. It also encourages reflective learning and the experience is often an inspiring one for their final audio-visual assignment.

The audio-visual assignment allows students to express themselves in a creative way. While the assignment prompt is chosen from one of the topics in the unit, the five-minute presentation gives the student to think about the Holocaust as a visual presentation and this also means they must think about their words carefully as they read the script that accompanies their images. Students learn digital literacy and create technologies to disseminate information. For most, it is an empathic learning experience. Some of the strongest creative assignments over the years have derived from the visit to the JHC. One of the topics, becoming increasingly popular over the years, is testimonies. After listening to face-to-face testimonies at the JHC, many students will focus their audio-visual presentation on these particular survivors, creating an affective link to the lives of the people they have been studying. We have found that going outside the classroom to teach in the classroom is a powerful tool. This benefits all students across all the campuses.

Of course, while most students are engaged with the topic and thus the unit, there are a few who are not. Some pedagogical problems that we have encountered over the years include the following: students who are World War II enthusiasts and are thus unable or unwilling to engage in theoretical genocide studies; students who are only motivated by character-driven learning and show interest in monstrous or legendary (Nazi) characters; those who see the Holocaust as occurring too far in the past to be relevant for their lives; and teaching historiography to students who have never studied a history topic during their studies. One of the ways to overcome these issues is to discuss one-on-one with the students why they have voluntarily chosen the topic and steering the topic around their interests. For instance, for character driven students, we focus on extraordinary (for better or worse) Jewish people (such as Chaim Rumkowski, Adam Czerniakow, Primo Levi or Raphael Lemkin) in order to gain their interest and provide a learning experience. We often find that students who feel that the Holocaust is not relevant to their lives change their attitude after visiting the JHC and meeting a survivor. Of course, our challenge will be, like all Holocaust educators worldwide, to confront this when survivors are no longer living. With a strong team who have taught the Holocaust together over many years, we are confident that current discussions regarding this change to the curriculum will involve innovative tasks and challenges for student learning.

DONNA-LEE FRIEZE is a genocide studies scholar with the Contemporary Histories Research Group at Deakin University. She has published widely on twentieth century genocides in relation to philosophy and cultural studies.