

Reflecting on Genocide: Teaching Trainee Officers at UNSW, Canberra

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I TEACH COURSES ON MODERN GENOCIDE AT UNSW CANBERRA TO BOTH UNDERGRADUATE and postgraduate students. My undergraduate students are trainee officers in the Army, Navy and Air Force at the Australian Defence Force Academy. I first taught a version of the course in 2001, which has since become the longest continuous course on genocide in Australia (though it was not the first—such foresight belongs to Professor Colin Tatz). I currently teach genocide at the Master's level in distance mode to a mix of military and civilian students. Enrolments in both courses are normally between 30 and 50. While my approach to the subject is historical, the courses are open to students of political and international science at undergraduate level and to Master's students studying military history, strategic studies and humanitarian law. My focus here is on my undergraduate course.

That I teach students who might be deployed to a genocidal context informs my approach to the subject: it is both a privilege and a challenge. My students are more likely than most to be placed in a genocidal context: Australian military personnel have served as peacekeepers in post-genocide situations in Rwanda, Cambodia and Darfur. In explaining the learning outcomes of the course, I point out that General Roméo Dallaire, head of the United Nations peacekeeping forces during the Rwandan genocide, was so overwhelmed by the horror surrounding him that he failed to recognise it as genocide: understanding the concept came to him as a

necessary 'slap in the face' (Power 358). I teach genocide with the conviction that students will recognise it when they see it, even in the fog of war.

Complexity of the Crime of Crimes

Genocide is not an easy choice of subject for the student. The inhumanity and brutal realities of genocide can inhibit analysis and understanding. The prospect of studying the history of modern genocide in chronological sequence can seem relentlessly awful. Popular perception of genocide is that it is the worst possible crime against humanity, but the international community has consistently failed to identify or prevent it and modern warfare constantly tests its boundaries. Genocide has a precise definition in international law and yet each historical instance of genocide is unique. All these considerations indicate the complexity of genocide and the challenges it presents to the educator.

I address this complexity through a course structure that combines theory and historical enquiry. The structure is not strictly chronological but aims to capture the concept as a whole while bringing out the unique aspects of each case. The course begins with the theory of genocide: with Lemkin's early attempts to define a crime in international law (Lemkin); an analysis of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide that resulted from postwar, great-power compromise; the first- and second-generation critics of the Convention; and the proliferation of terms that now surround the definition. The course then discusses seven questions of genocide as case studies: the Armenian genocide; the Holocaust; Cambodia; Bosnia and Kosovo; Rwanda; Colonial Genocide and Australia; and Sudan and Darfur. Beginning with the theory immediately identifies some of the difficulties in identifying genocide. The placing of the colonial and Australian question is deliberate: it aims to reflect the development of the scholarship on the nature of genocide and to demonstrate the historical dialogue between contemporary debates and reinterpretations of past events. Lectures also cover questions of genocide that we do not study in tutorials (although students have an option to choose other case studies): Communist state-based killing in USSR and China; and Timor Leste. The course concludes with efforts to strengthen international intervention and prevention and with current events that raise the spectre of genocide.

This is a great deal to cover in thirteen weeks. With the expansion of potential questions of genocide, the scholarly literature has increased enormously in less than two decades, raising the perennial question for the educator of how to balance breadth of coverage with depth of understanding. Clear learning outcomes go some way towards addressing this challenge. The most important learning outcome in my teaching is understanding that genocides are complex: each instance will have both generic and unique qualities; genocide will look

different from the various perspectives of perpetrator, victim and bystander; 'the face of genocide' will change; and for all these reasons, as well as strategic and great-power politics, prevention, intervention and punishment are difficult.

Reflecting on Genocide

I have found that reflective learning is the most effective method of encouraging students to grasp the complexity of genocide. Reflective learning is one of the ten nationally defined Threshold Learning Outcomes for the discipline of history. The theory behind it is not new, but its transformative processes and application to subjects that address the key role of emotion in learning is still being explored in higher education scholarship (Brockbank and McGill). Reflective learning challenges students to re-examine their thinking and to reflect critically on the process by which their understanding changes. As a result, students are more likely to remember what they learn. Reflective learning is particularly effective for the study of genocide in which the subject material is emotional and defies linear and rational understanding. A reflective dialogue supports learning across several case studies in a subject in which memory and commemoration are crucial.

Reflection is, however, difficult to build into shrinking teaching space. Decreasing expectations of what we can ask students to read have particular effects on a subject as complex as genocide. Time for deep thought, careful reading and considered pace of learning are all under challenge in the current education environment. While technology and social media can facilitate regular reflection, I have not found that these methods encourage depth. Reflection can also be difficult to assess, particularly because the emotional and personal responses that studying genocide often elicit can take the focus away from scholarly analysis.

I attempt to seize the opportunities and address the challenges of reflective learning by building it into the course assessment. Beginning with an assessment on theories and definitions can be difficult, but it encourages students to take an initial position. The case studies then challenge their understanding and definitions of genocide. The final assessment in the course is a reflection on their initial understanding and how and why it has changed (or not), with reference to each case study and to key scholarly interpretations.

That reflective learning encourages lifelong learning is often brought home to me in a powerful way. Our military students are deployed across the country and worldwide soon after graduation and we seldom have contact with them again. The exception, for me, has always been students of genocide. I often get emails telling me, as in the extract below, that they are still reflecting on genocide: as educators, we cannot ask for more.

It has been years since I undertook this course, but it stays with me like it was yesterday and like no other ... I frequently think about your classes when I listen to the news ... because of your teachings I don't think genocide is occurring [in this case] ... but I feel educated enough now to say so ... I think all servicemen and women should take your course. (email from a former student, 2015, five years after he completed the course).

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