ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER
Exemplary LESSONS initiative

TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING FOR TRANSFORMATION

BY RON RITCHHART AND VERONICA BOIX-MANSILLA, PROJECT ZERO, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, CONSULTANTS FOR BELFER EXEMPLARY LESSONS INITIATIVE

As teachers, one of our greatest dreams is that over time our students will understand the importance of the topics we teach and come to care as passionately about these topics as we do ourselves. Toward that end, we strive to help students grasp the complexities of our subject matter and use the information that we share with them in meaningful and creative ways. We work to ensure that students will engage fully in mastering the content of our lessons in thoughtful and personally meaningful ways. As our reward, during our most effective moments, we get a glimpse of our students being deeply transformed by their learning experiences in a way that facilitates their becoming full and active participants in the world today.

We know all too well that teaching for understanding and transformation is not an easy endeavor or one taken on lightly. Such teaching requires not only the selection of important and worthwhile topics but also the crafting of instruction. Teaching for understanding will take students deeply into topics in a way that challenges misconceptions, moves beyond stereotypes, and avoids superficiality. Teaching for transformation touches the core of who students are and who they will become as individuals. Nowhere are the possibilities and challenges of teaching for understanding and transformation more relevant than in the teaching of the Holocaust.

When it comes to teaching the Holocaust, the invitations to seek understanding and the opportunities to be touched deeply are as relevant as the risks of misunderstanding and apathy. Confronting the unprecedented failure of modern society to sustain basic principles of justice and empathy calls for active engagement and raises our need to inquire. Why did ordinary Germans come to engage in mass murder? How did the Jews and other minorities maintain their integrity through systematic dehumanization? Thinking about the meaning of these events as we engage in the world today sets the stage for a fruitful self-reflection. At the same time, in exploring the Holocaust we are concerned about reducing persons to numbers, narrowing worldviews to stereotypes, and reducing genocide to a linear sequence of events. Furthermore, we worry about the risk of remaining untouched—viewing this ghastly period as too removed a tragedy to have any significant bearing on our contemporary lives. Clearly, in teaching the Holocaust for understanding and transformation only a carefully crafted and thoughtful approach will do.

Fortunately, throughout the world today many educators are willing to grapple with constructing such approaches on a daily basis, striving to craft lessons that engage students with important issues of history while transforming their view of the world and their place in it. The Belfer Exemplary Lessons Initiative sought to identify and disseminate some of the excellent work being

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
10 YEARS
EDUCATION REMEMBRANCE CONSCIENCE

done by these teachers in teaching the Holocaust while illuminating the issues of lesson design that need to be addressed by all educators aiming to teach for understanding and transformation.

What you'll find in the sample lessons presented here are examples of different ways in which teachers address the issue of teaching the Holocaust for understanding and transformation. These lessons were chosen specifically to help raise awareness of important qualities of instruction. The following qualities served as the overarching criteria that guided the Belfer panel's lesson selection. First and foremost, lessons aimed at understanding and transformation need to be *historically accurate* and *promote deep understanding.* That is, these lessons must provide a proper representation of knowledge and modes of thinking that are central to the discipline of history and to any other discipline involved. They must offer rich opportunities for *student engagement* in using such knowledge and modes of thinking flexibly and in personally meaningful ways. In addition, it is important that lessons encourage *critical thinking* from students, helping them move beyond common sense and immediate reaction. Finally, a lesson's *innovative approach* and *broad applicability* should seek to provide a rich learning experience to a diverse range of students.

As you read through these sample lessons, you also will find several core elements: You will see students engaging in actions that advance their understandings as they think with the information given them to create new products, explanations or insights about the particular problem under study. You will notice close attention to the particular aspect of this time period as well as awareness of the learning challenges that the lessons seek to confront—such as stereotyping, presentism, or a lack of personal identification. You will find carefully crafted assessment, focusing not on grading but on how students are constructing the desired understandings. You will appreciate teachers' sensitivity to small and important opportunities for deeper transformation—for a shaping of students' own worldviews and dispositions to act in historically informed and mindful ways. Finally, you will find these sample lessons a resource for addressing several of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's 10th Anniversary themes of renewal, response, rescue, and resistance.