

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

Exemplary LESSONS

i n i t i a t i v e

A POETIC FINALE

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

A central goal of Holocaust education is to inspire new generations to bear witness. Renewal—one of the themes of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s 10th Anniversary—is central to this process. As we face the challenge of educating the young to bear witness and foster renewal we can count on the natural inquisitiveness and inherent desire for fairness of students as forming the foundation for this unique job. This lesson is designed to give individual students the chance to craft a poetic response to the Holocaust as a form of bearing witness.

Because this lesson is primarily a reflective activity, it presupposes that students have taken notes in a learning journal and saved past Holocaust-related assignments. Rereading one’s journal, past assignments, and other documents will be a key element in the writing process.

This lesson is designed as a way to conclude a unit on the Holocaust, to give voice to the new witness. A Jewish rapper, Remedy, wrote a song titled “Never Again” after he learned of his family’s experiences in the Holocaust. Like the young people we encounter in our classrooms, Remedy was too young to experience the Holocaust. Remedy’s song stems from his growing understanding of Holocaust as a historical and human tragedy and serves as the seed from which this lesson grew. Likewise, the lesson capitalizes on the Holocaust content that students have encountered inside and outside the classroom, inviting them to produce a poetic synthesis that allows them to bear witness.

One may ask, why poetry? Dennis Loy Johnson, when discussing the importance of poetry after the events of September 11, 2001, provided an eloquent rationale for poetry in the wake of horror:

Reading the descriptions, seeing the pictures—all it did was breed questions and spiritual angst, and add to the grief. Not that reading those descriptions and knowing what happened fully isn't important, but clearly, the sudden surfeit of poetry meant people felt there was something lacking in all that prose, something going uncovered.

(Source: http://www.mobylikes.com/Why_poetry.html)

This lesson takes approximately five class periods. It can be used to conclude a two-week unit study or a two-month unit of study.

The majority of my teaching career has taken place in urban centers. I designed this lesson while teaching at a small community high school for at-risk high school students in Milwaukee. About

LESSON BY

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GRADE LEVEL

9–12

GRADE-LEVEL APPLICABILITY

9–12

SUBJECT

ENGLISH

TIME REQUIRED

FIVE CLASS PERIODS

75 percent of my students are Latino, many with an interest in and/or knowledge of hip-hop/rap music, a subculture with roots in the neighborhoods of the South Bronx.

Hip-hop culture entertains and provides a powerful forum for young people's self-expression. Its relevance to young people rivals that of rock 'n' roll for earlier generations of young people. Like rock 'n' roll and jazz before it, hip-hop is often misunderstood or abhorred by older generations. To be clear, some popular hip-hop artists' lyrics are preoccupied with money, power, sex, and/or violence. However, it would be unfair to stereotype something as large as hip-hop culture based on the work of a few artists. There have always been rappers who are visionaries, who refuse to simply fixate on the negative, who strive to see not simply *what is* but *what could be*. Some of these progressive hip-hop artists include Kurtis Blow, KRS-ONE of Boogie Down Productions, Chuck D, Queen Latifah, and Speech.

One of the first things my students notice when studying the Holocaust is the word *ghetto*. *Ghetto* is a key word in their urban lexicon. Students in other communities may find other entry points into the vast subject of study that is the Holocaust. This lesson grew directly from my students. In the spring of 2000, Juan S. approached me with a CD. "Hey Mr. Leibold, there's a Jewish rapper on here talking about the Holocaust. Track 13." I borrowed the CD, a compilation of different rappers titled *Wu Tang Killa Bees—The Swarm, Volume One*, listened to the song "Never Again" by Remedy, and immediately made plans to use the song some time during my lesson on the Holocaust.

This lesson may seem to require that teachers know a lot about rap culture. Although I would encourage any teachers to make a sincere effort to educate themselves about the interests of their students, I want to make it clear that this lesson's real focus is not rap music but poetry. Rapping is only one modern permutation of humanity's love of language.

PURPOSE OF LESSON

With this lesson, I want to give students a chance to express themselves about the Holocaust in a form that is meaningful to them. As educators, we sometimes have a rather limited sense of what our students are really thinking, or how they are experiencing an emotional topic like the Holocaust. A research paper may allow students to demonstrate their reasoning about this complex period. However, this form of writing is not usually the best forum for self-expression. Poetry, on the other hand, *is* self-expression. It invites students to synthesize core human experiences, bringing thought and emotion seamlessly together in meaningful ways.

In the PBS program *Fooling with Words*, poet Mark Doty elaborates on the need to create when confronted with obstacles: "You can't do anything to stop a terminal illness. You can't stop the course of time. But ... I could make something to serve as a kind of vessel for what I felt, a representation in that moment in time. And there I had some authority ... It is a small gesture against loss. And yet, over time, that gesture becomes a larger one because that work of making something for yourself becomes translated into a gift for other people" (Source: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_tv.html). Responding to the Holocaust with poetry can give students a chance to create their own representations of the event and to offer a gift to future learners, the gift of witness.

Despite poetry's expressive power, all too often students resist this communicative form. In addressing this challenge, this lesson uses Remedy's rap song as a bridge. As the author of *Inside City Schools: Investigating Literacy in Multicultural Classrooms* suggests, "A multicultural curriculum that connects explicitly to the lives of those students who have not been well represented in the traditional curriculum and who have not before shown an interest in the academic content of the school is especially helpful for motivating students to both read and write" (Chapter 12, p. 227, *Learning from M-Class: Thoughts for the Future Inside City Schools: Investigating Literacy in Multicultural Classrooms*, ed. Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Elizabeth Radin Simons, and Julie Shalhope Kalnin [New York City: M-Class Teams Teachers College Press, 1999]). In my experience, learning that someone from the world of hip-hop has connected poetry and Holocaust content inspires students to make their own connections.

By considering and valuing a cultural form—rap music—that is often dismissed as a basic manifestation of a shallow popular culture, this lesson seeks to emphasize students' experience and intimately inform their identity formation. As described in *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, our challenge and responsibility as educators becomes one of learning to "understand, affirm, and analyze such experience. This means not only understanding the cultural and social forms through which students learn to define themselves, but also understanding how to use that student experience in ways that neither unqualifiedly endorse nor delegitimize it" (p. 217, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, 3rd ed. [New York: Peter McLaren Longman (an imprint of Addison Wesley Longman), 1998]).

GOALS FOR STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

- The student will understand written and oral techniques needed to write a poem and present it to an audience of peers.
- The student will understand how to use poetry to convey both meaning and emotion.
- The student will understand the emotional impact of the Holocaust on both individuals and society, past and present.

STATE STANDARDS

This project connects to several Wisconsin Model Academic Standards.

- Social Studies: Political Science and Citizenship

Describe and analyze the origins and consequences of slavery, genocide, and other forms of persecution, including the Holocaust (C.12.14)

- English: Writing

Compose and publish analytic and reflective writing that conveys knowledge, experience, insights, and opinions to an intended audience (B.12.1)

- English: Reading/Literature

Develop and articulate, orally and in writing, defensible points of view on individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts (A.12.3)

- English: Oral Language

Demonstrate confidence and poise during presentations, interacting effectively with the audience, and selecting language and gestures mindful of their effect (C.12.1)

For more information on Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, go to <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/standards/index.html>.

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: BACKGROUND MATERIALS

A profile of the rapper Remedy titled "Jewish Rapper Takes Chai Road Here 'to Spread Word'" can be found on the Web site for Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. <http://www.hillel.org/hillel/NewHille.nsf/>. Click on "About Hillel," then "Hillel News," "News Archives," and scroll to Dec. 1, 2001.

The lyrics to Remedy's song "Never Again" can be found at http://members.tripod.com/irish_mac/lyricsneveragain.html

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: MATERIALS USED

Goldsmith, Aleza. "Jewish Rapper Takes Chai Road Here 'to Spread Word.'" Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. 1 December 2001. 1 April 2003 at <http://www.hillel.org/hillel/NewHille.nsf/>. Click on "About Hillel," then "Hillel News," "News Archives," and scroll to Dec. 1, 2001.

Remedy. "Never Again." *REMEDY LYRICS "Never Again."* 1 April 2003 at http://members.tripod.com/irish_mac/lyricsneveragain.html.

Remedy. "Never Again." *RZA Presents Wu Tang Killa Bees—The Swarm, Volume One*. Priority, 1998.

Note: If you are not able to obtain the actual song for any reason, the lyrics alone could be still be read as an example of contemporary Holocaust poetry.

Handouts

- *Lesson Introduction: A Poetic Finale*
- *Remedy/Holocaust Connections*
- *Remedy's Use of Poetic Techniques*
- *Rubric: A Poetic Finale*
- *Reflecting on Poetic Finales*

LESSON NARRATIVE

Day 1: Introducing the lesson to my students (approximately one 50-minute class period)

- Where does the word “ghetto” come from?

After giving each student a copy of the form *Lesson Introduction: A Poetic Finale* (Student Handout 1), I begin the lesson by reviewing the etymology of the word “ghetto.”

The Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.geocities.com/etymonline/g2etym.htm>) offers this origin of the word ghetto:

1611, from It. ghetto “part of a city to which Jews are restricted,” various theories of its origin include: Yiddish get “deed of separation;” special use of Venetian getto “foundry” (there was one near the site of that city’s ghetto); Egitto, from L. Aegyptus “Egypt” (presumably in memory of the exile); or It. borghetto “small section of a town” (dim. of borgo “borough”). **Extended 1892 to crowded urban quarters of other minority groups.**

I tell students they will be using a form of expression born in the modern American ghetto, rap music, to inspire the conclusion of our Holocaust unit.

- Introducing the assignment

Next I share the following quote from the Boogie Down Productions song “Poetry” to help put my students in the right frame of mind for what they will be doing:

Well now you’re forced to listen to the teacher and the lesson.
Class is in session so you can stop guessin’
If this is a tape or a written down memo.
See I am a professional, this is not a demo.
In fact, call it a lecture, a visual picture.

I tell the students I want them to use poetry to illustrate what they have learned during our Holocaust unit.

- Providing a model: Remedy

I provide a model for this type of expression, a song by the Jewish rapper Remedy titled “Never Again.”

I preface the song with a quote from a profile of the artist published at www.hillel.org:

Remedy grows increasingly animated as he explains how the track came about—how he learned from his 95-year-old grandmother, before she died, that members of his own family had perished in the Holocaust. This was a way to memorialize them.

To add another layer to the original objective of using poetry to illustrate what has been learned about the Holocaust, I say, “Not only should your poem function as an illustration of what you’ve learned, but it should also act as a memorial or a tribute to the victims of the Holocaust. After studying the Holocaust, you are now a witness. How will you keep the victims alive in the minds of future generations?”

The last thing I share with the students before playing Remedy’s song is some wisdom from rapper KRS-ONE’s song, “Knowledge Reigns Supreme”:

Do your knowledge,
Do your knowledge,
Stop studying your knowledge,
And do your knowledge!

Students then listen to the Remedy song. I provide each student with a copy of the lyrics before asking the class to listen quietly while the song is played.

- Reflecting on the song using study guides

After listening to the song twice, I give students some time to complete the two study guides. The first one is titled *Remedy/Holocaust Connections*. It focuses on connections that can be made between the song and Holocaust content. The second is titled *Remedy’s Use of Poetic Techniques*. (In teaching this lesson in your own classroom, you may find that you want to reverse the order of these two study guides or to have students complete them simultaneously.) Completing the guides can be done individually or with a partner. The study guides will prepare the students for our discussion of the song. I encourage students to share connections they have made between the song and texts (books, movies, etc.) we have read and to point out Remedy’s use of poetic techniques. Study guides are checked for completion but are not handed in. Students will need these notes as they work on their poems.

Before leaving class, each student writes a brief reflection on the song and the class discussion. By the end of class many are curious about Remedy. He is not a household hip-hop name like Tupac Shakur or Eminem. To satisfy this curiosity, I hand each student a copy of the Hillel.org profile of Remedy as class ends.

- Homework: Due Day 2

Each student should reread his or her learning journal and any past Holocaust-related assignments and have a draft of a poem about the Holocaust to share with a peer revision group. I suggest experimenting with found poetry—borrowing words and phrases from the texts we have read. In the hip-hop realm, this is called sampling. All samples must be credited. (See Student Work Samples for an example of found poetry titled “Words That Hurt.”)

Day 2: Writing and Revision (approximately one 50-minute class period)

- What has been going on?

After closely reading Remedy's song and making connections to Holocaust texts, students begin writing rap lyrics/poems inspired by personally important and meaningful moments, facts, and people from our study of the Holocaust.

- What poetic techniques did Remedy use?

Students should use several poetic techniques in their poems. I begin class by reviewing the previous day's discussion of the poetic techniques Remedy employs in his song:

- o Alliteration: "Death before dishonor for those who were brave"
- o Assonance: "homes" and "bones" ("Forced from our families, taken from our homes/Moved from our God then burned of our bones")
- o Metaphor: "Moving targets who walk with the star on their sleeve"
- o Repetition: "There is nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide"
- o Rhyme: "Mass extermination/Total annihilation/Shipped into the ghetto and prepared for liquidation"
- o Simile: "I can't express the pain/That was felt in the train/To Auschwitz, tears poured down like rain"

- Drafting

Students use the second day to continue writing their poems. I remind them that their pieces do not have to be memorized, that they may read from a hard copy of the poem.

- Revision

I divide the class into groups of four. Students should bring to the group their rough drafts.

Small peer revision groups meet during the last 15 minutes of class. Groups appoint a revision group leader who will promote discussion and maintain a positive, supportive atmosphere. To aid in this, I give each group leader a copy of the handout titled *Revision Group Guidelines*. Students read their drafts to the group. The group offers advice and suggestions based on a rubric I provide (Student Handout 5).

Note: Revision groups may need more than 15 minutes.

- Homework: Due Day 3

Many students will need to finish their poems as homework.

Day 3: Performance

Videotape students as they read their poems to the class. On this day, the tables are put away and chairs are arranged in rows, like chairs in an auditorium or theater. Student may read from behind a lectern or, for students who really want to get into the act, I have a microphone ready. For more rap-oriented poets, I have a stereo ready with an instrumental hip-hop song for

students who want it as backup music. Students presenting more traditional poems may still choose complementary background music. Soundtracks to Holocaust movies such as *The Pianist* and *Life Is Beautiful* are appropriate.

Days 4 and 5: Evaluation

During the last two days of the lesson, we watch the performances from Day 3, critiquing them and discussing issues brought up by the students' poems. For the most part, I allow the content of the students' poems to fuel discussion. However, given the nature of the assignment, I like to ask the class the following questions as we wrap up the activity and our Holocaust unit:

- Why is it important to use individually meaningful forms of expression when dealing with an emotional and historically significant event like the Holocaust?
- How did the poems differ? Did any poem strongly embody the personality of its writer?
- How will this activity help you bear witness in the future?
- Did the poems allow us to understand something new about the Holocaust and our role as witnesses?

Students receive two evaluations from their peers and one from me. See Rubric: Poetic Finale.

Note: Because poems legitimately invite multiple interpretations, it can be useful to include a more extended reflection on the link between the poem and the historical period and human experience. When students use the rubric to give feedback to the presenting poets, they could take into account the links defined by the author as well as some new personal links that they experience in reading the poems. Students are also asked to reflect on the activity using the handout titled *Reflecting on the Poetic Finale* (Student Handout 6).

A NOTE ON TIME

In theory, this lesson can be done in five 50-minute class periods. However, many factors may cause the lesson to take longer. In my experience, I have noticed student motivation increase right before a deadline. If students seem motivated and you can give them more time, do so.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLES

Forced

Forced to be prisoners
Nazis not willing to be listeners
Thinking they were visitors
Hearing their people's cries of surrender
Feeling no other thought but neglect
Hoping to be sent in the right direction
Having no one there for protection
Made weak from labor
Hearts full of deception
Emotions in a collision
Forced to be in a prison

D. Rios

* * *

Anja

A victim of the Holocaust
A prisoner of Hitler
Trying to stay alive by
Eating other people's bread.

A victim of the Holocaust
Her husband Vladek helping her,
Saving his bread
To give to her and
Working hard in the kitchen.

A victim of the Holocaust
Free at last
But still remembers being
A victim of the Holocaust.

Inspired by *Maus I* and *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman

M. Arredondo

* * *

Jews and Nazis

Arrival

Surprised, taken

Undressed, tattooed, confused

Jews, captured, Nazis, violating

Men, women, children

Killed, survived

Holocaust

I. Rivera

* * *

Words That Hurt

Hey! You! Stop!

Stop! Or I will kill you!

Schnell! Schnell! Schnell!

Stop! Jews!

Shut up!

Hey! You! Stop!

Who were you talking to?

N-nobody.

Get inside.

Eins! Zwei! Drei!

The gas chamber!

Halt or we'll shoot!

Go away! I don't want to
get involved!

We thought Hitler finished
you off!

Go away! Jew! This is our
bakery!

This is a found poem. I borrowed words from *Maus I* and *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman.

A. Hernandez

* * *

TEACHER COMMENTARY

As someone once said, “Words mean things.” Young people are sensitive to the power of words. Adults build up a tolerance to harsh language. Though cruel words can still hurt an adult, a child is inherently vulnerable to names, taunts, and teasing. In a poem like “Words That Hurt,” a student can express his or her understanding of pain caused, not by physical torture, but by ethereal, intangible words. The most obvious sign that a group has been marginalized is the group’s label. Sometimes that label is not even derogatory in origin, but acquires pejorative qualities when used by an oppressor. In “Words That Hurt,” one of the hurtful words is “Jew.”

The author of the poem displays an understanding of how dehumanization begins with words, labels, and categories. Writing poetry allows students to show off—to use the words of Howard Gardner—their interpersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence goes hand in hand with empathy. A lack of empathy is the first prerequisite for genocidal events like the Holocaust.

ASSESSMENT

I use a rubric (below) and a reflection guide (also below). Students receive two rubrics from their peers and one from me.

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

Exemplary

LESSONS

i n i t i a t i v e

A POETIC FINALE

Name _____

Date _____

RUBRIC: POETIC FINALE

1. The poem artfully illustrates the writer's conclusions about the Holocaust.

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

2. The conclusions expressed in the poem are historically appropriate.

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

3. The poem maintains a respectful tone, honoring the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

4. The poem utilizes various poetic techniques (assonance, alliteration metaphor, repetition, rhyme, simile, onomatopoeia).

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

5. The person delivers the poem with flair (volume, enunciation, inflection, appropriate gestures/body language).

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

Exemplary
LESSONS
i n i t i a t i v e

A POETIC FINALE

Name _____

Date _____

REFLECTING ON THE POETIC FINALE

Please take some time to answer the questions below thoughtfully.

1. What did you like about this activity? _____

2. What did you not like about this activity? _____

3. Is there anything you would have done differently if you were the teacher? _____

4. What was the most challenging part of this activity? _____

5. What was the easiest part of this activity? _____

6. What do you think you will remember most about the Holocaust? _____

7. What do you think you will remember most about our Holocaust unit? _____

8. How will you bear witness to the Holocaust (and other genocidal events) in the future?

TEACHER REFLECTION

I believe the lesson gives students a chance to be creative. The act of the creation is cathartic. As teachers, we can only guess how studying the Holocaust actually affects our students. I once had a student admit to me that studying the Holocaust gave her nightmares. She loved studying the topic. She often participated in discussions, took pride in her work, and asked a multitude of questions. This was one student who was brave enough to admit to me, via her journal, that it gave her bad dreams. How were other students affected? A creative assignment, whether it is a poem or an art project, allows students to experience a catharsis. Their anxieties and questions can be turned into *something*, something to be proud of.

I have noticed that this lesson, not to mention a full Holocaust unit, requires time. Although I suggest this lesson can be done in five days, it could easily be stretched to seven. It is difficult for students to align their creative timetables to the teacher's timetables.

The challenge this lesson presents for me as a teacher is to stay in touch with my students. What music do they listen to? What TV shows did they watch last night? What movies did they see last weekend? I always want to be on the lookout for something that will allow me to make a natural connection between my students' lives and the lives of the millions of people murdered in the Holocaust.