

# A Creative Response to the Holocaust, Genocide, and Injustice

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## ABSTRACT

*The overall aim for this cross-curricular unit is for students to investigate and respond to gained understandings about the Holocaust, genocide, and injustice, through research, creative process, and performance. Developed for students in a high school performing arts academy, the unit is implemented in the final marking period, allowing students to draw on explored movement vocabulary, acting methodologies, and performance experiences from throughout the year. Furthermore, they are afforded the opportunity to work creatively and collaboratively, understanding how art can be used as a conduit for activism and to bring awareness to historical and present-day occurrences of injustice. The lessons meet New Jersey Core Curriculum Content and National Standards in Dance, Theatre, Social Studies and Language Arts.*

Present-day injustices continue to magnify the need for a greater impartation of cultural sensitivity and acceptance practices. Legislation and school districts are mandating the inclusion of instruction that will reshape behaviors and ideologies resembling prejudice and hatred. The proven capabilities of arts pedagogy provide a ready-made pathway for curricular expansion and an environment for guided expression.

I teach at a public high school in New Jersey with more than 1,800 students, diverse in culture and economic status. For the past four years, I have implemented a cross-curricular unit on the Holocaust, genocide, and injustice for students in our Dance II, Dance III, Acting II, and Acting III courses. (Three is the highest level in our academy and placement is based on skill, not grade.) I have always taken notice of events that implicate injustice and sociopolitical discrepancy. I also realize that my awareness and pursuit to analyze such has been heightened through literature, testimony, media, and artistic presentation. I am highly in-

vested in interdisciplinary practices, which is why this unit integrates both dance and theatrical elements. Three of my implemented units have merged dance and acting students. The academy's acting teacher collaborates in observing the groups in process, ensuring successful integration of theatrical elements, facilitating discussions, and assessing final compositions.

My ability to authentically and ethically implement this unit relies on my commitment to an ongoing exploration of the themes and historical events being integrated. I have accumulated knowledge, perspectives, and resources by attending professional development workshops, visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Cape Town Holocaust Centre (South Africa), Apartheid Museum (South Africa), Robben Island Museum (South Africa), and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library). I also review documentaries, media sources, books, and articles in preparation for each unit. In 2016, I completed a yearlong certificate program in Holocaust

and Genocide Education at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey. The program's courses explored the history of the Holocaust, occurrences of genocide, curriculum development, arts and culture, theology, and ethics. The information I gained has been essential to the ways in which I introduce, explore, and fuse the content with artistic practice.

## UNIT RATIONALE

I solidified my unit's rationale during my year in the Holocaust and Genocide Education certificate program. My coursework and research gave me insight on how to integrate themes and events efficiently and with cultural sensitivity. The curriculum unit identifies the importance of student education and awareness of historical events relative to human injustice, including the Holocaust (executed by the Nazi regime) and occurrences of genocide. According to New Jersey's Holocaust and genocide mandate, which was signed into law in 1994, "every board of education shall include instruction on the Holocaust and genocides in an appropriate place in the curriculum of all elementary and secondary school pupils" (New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education 2016). Additionally, the mandate states:

The instruction shall enable pupils to identify and analyze applicable theories concerning human nature and behavior; to understand that genocide is a consequence of prejudice and discrimination; and to understand that issues of moral dilemma and conscience have a profound impact on life. The instruction shall further emphasize the personal responsibility that each citizen bears to fight racism and hatred whenever and wherever it happens. (New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education 2016)

In this unit, I encourage student self-assessment of human nature and behavior through identification of roles played in the Holocaust. I work with an interdisciplinary structure using various mediums to encourage student engagement, reflection, and debate. In addition, I employ approaches addressing individual learning preferences and affinities of my diverse group of students, reflective of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. By using these structures and strategies, I work to arouse receptivity from a wide range of students, including those who view historical events as mundane and irrelevant. During the unit, students investigate and analyze data and sources, which provides factual stimuli for lesson activities and the final project.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

One of the most important tasks in facilitating this unit is to keep the students open minded, reflective, and empathetic. I start each unit with "Do Now" prompts that evoke memory,

in addition to grouping activities, which work well as openers. In my most recent facilitation of this unit, I began with two activities.

Activity 1 prompts the students to find peers in the class who share their ethnicity. Once in groups, or alone, they answer a series of questions that identify traditions, folklore, and social norms. The students then join another group where they complete a comparison and contrast worksheet. Afterward, the class convenes and shares their findings. In my last teaching of this unit, although we were all captivated by the pride displayed and the distinctive norms of each group, there was a collective amazement of the similarities between them all.

In Activity 2, often referred to as the Awareness Circle, the students form a circle and are instructed not to speak until the entire activity is over. They are also informed that they could choose not to respond to a prompt if they are uncomfortable. I then proceed to direct the students to step into the circle if they have experienced the scenarios I describe.

A few prompts I use in this activity are as follows.

- ◆ Step into the circle if you have been discriminated against because of your race.
- ◆ Step into the circle if you have been discriminated against because of your religion.
- ◆ Step into the circle if you have been judged because of your economic status.
- ◆ Step into the circle if you have been judged because of where you live.

At the end of each prompt any student who has stepped inside of the circle will reset and listen for the next. Prompts used in this activity identify those who have been judged or discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, disability, housing, or physical features. This immediately brings the students into focus and becomes a seamless segue into the content. Furthermore, we are able to reflect on this activity throughout the lessons.

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## CONTENT INVESTIGATION

After the introductory activities, I inform the students that they will use their gained understandings as stimuli to create dance theatre works based on our exploration of events surrounding the Holocaust, perpetrated by the Nazi regime. We then proceed to brainstorm what students might know about the Holocaust, in the form of a discussion. This allows the students to recall previously learned facts and allows me to assess their knowledge. Next, I share with them the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's definition:

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2017)

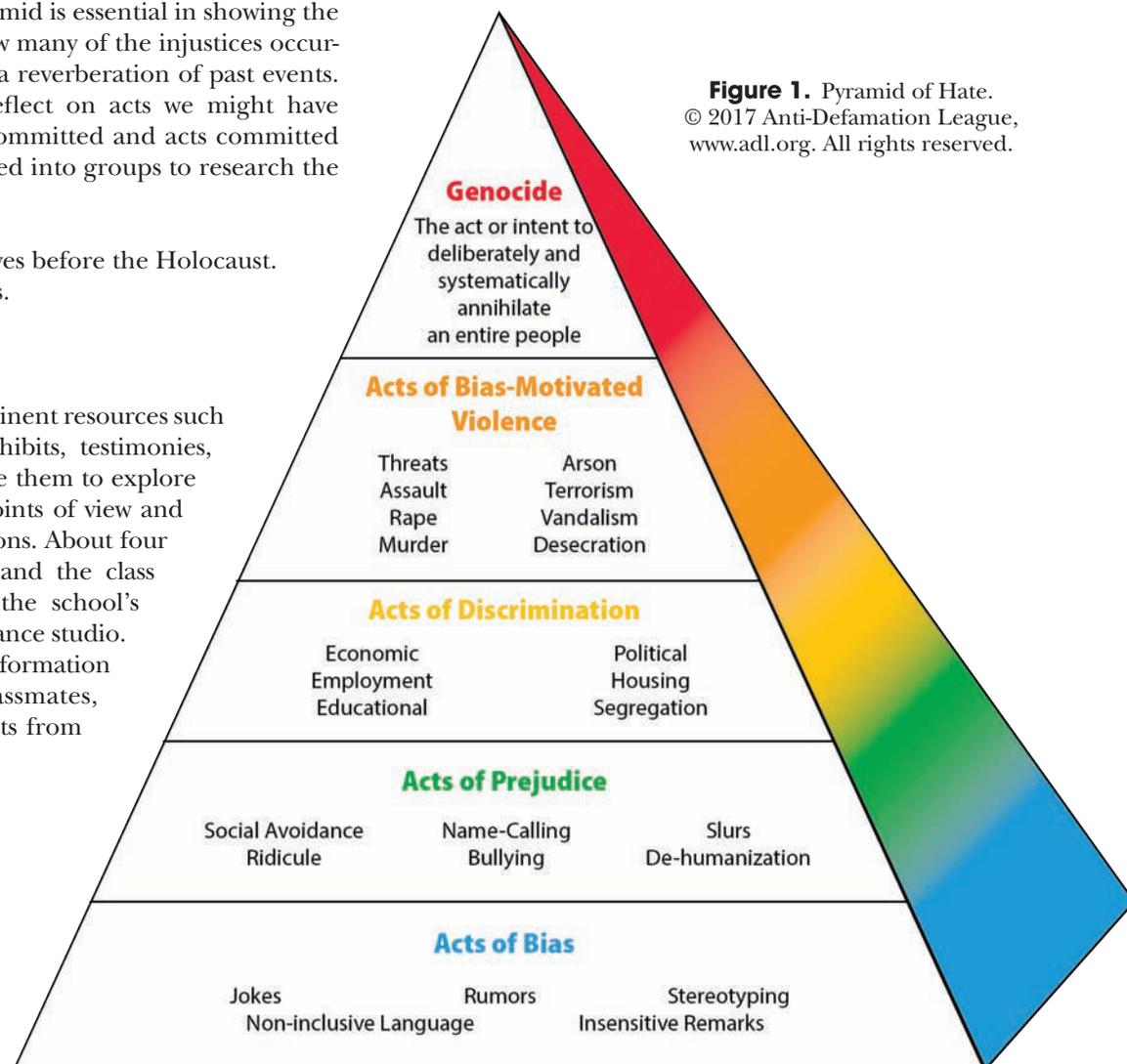
Next, we view the Anti-Defamation League's *Pyramid of Hate*, which illuminates the magnitude of the Holocaust, defines key terms, and shows how biases can progress to genocide. (see Figure 1). The pyramid is essential in showing the relevance of this unit and how many of the injustices occurring in our society today are a reverberation of past events. Referencing Figure 1, we reflect on acts we might have knowingly or inadvertently committed and acts committed against us. Students are divided into groups to research the following themes:

- ◆ The victims and their lives before the Holocaust.
- ◆ Agents and perpetrators.
- ◆ Geography.
- ◆ Acts of resistance.

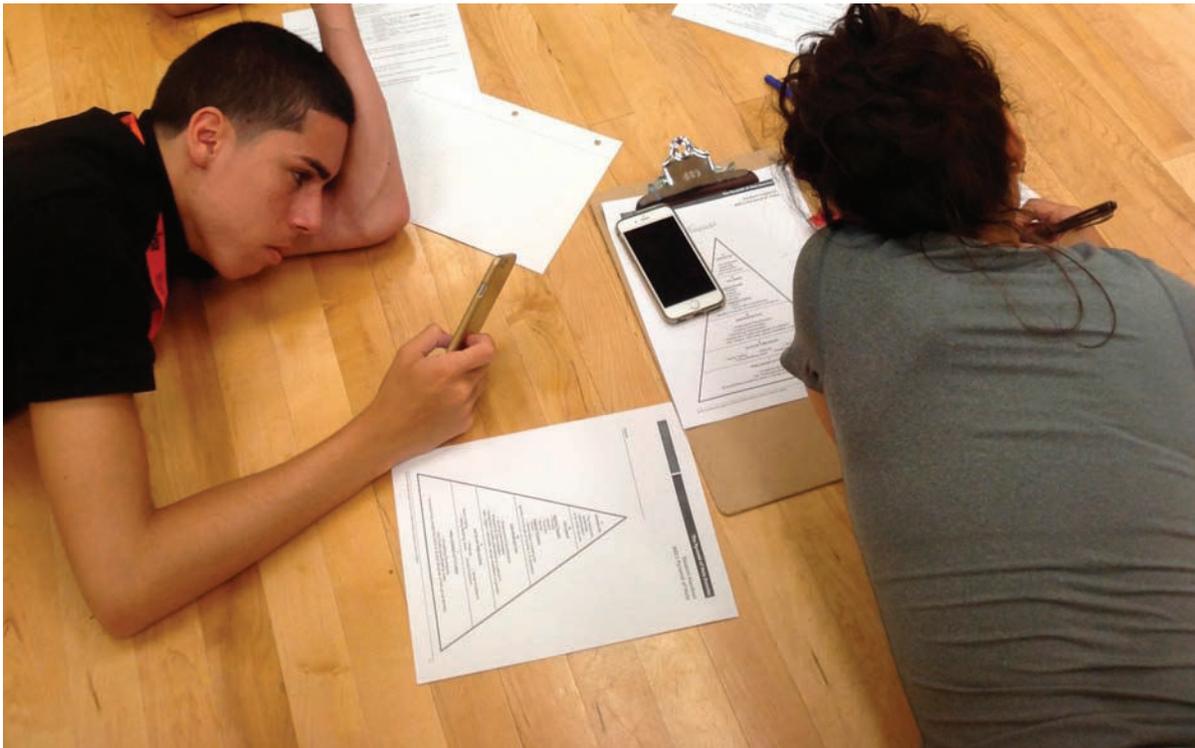
I provide each group with pertinent resources such as documentaries, online exhibits, testimonies, and literary excerpts to enable them to explore the Holocaust from varied points of view and then answer a series of questions. About four class blocks are designated, and the class location alternates between the school's media center or library and dance studio. The student groups gather information and present it to their classmates, including at least two excerpts from

testimonies they have viewed. For instance, students assigned the theme Acts of Resistance are given a link to the IWitness: USC Shoah Foundation site, where they access video testimonies of survivors and their stories of resistance. The site defines resistance as "acts carried out by civilians in opposition to the policies, stability, or authority of those in power" (IWitness). Each testimony page provides the survivor's birth date and date of the interview, as well as the location. This generates a vital discussion and dispels the notion that victims do not employ strategies to contest their oppressors.

In a past unit, we were privileged to have Holocaust survivor Maud Dahme visit our school, share a live testimony with the students, and participate in a question-and-answer session. The students were attentive, emotionally responsive, and excited about sharing the information they learned with peers and family. They were also eager to incorporate the themes into the performance works they would be developing.



**Figure 1.** Pyramid of Hate.  
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Memorial High School Performing Arts Academy Students. Photo: Zakiya Atkinson.

## CREATIVE PROCESS

After exploring a substantial amount of content and presenting it to their peers, the students begin formulating creative responses. Because this segment of the unit is designed to transition into composition, I review the elements of dance, effort qualities, and choreographic structure. I also reference Jacqueline Smith-Autard's (2004) classifications of *Stimuli for Dance*, providing what she called "a comprehensible structure for students to begin the creative process." The students learn that stimuli for dance compositions can be auditory, visual, ideational, tactile, or kinesthetic (Smith-Autard 2004; see Figure 2).

### Tableau: Making a Picture

The class draws on knowledge, poetry, and images to create tableaus using each of the following prompts:

- ◆ Create a tableau that portrays resistance.
- ◆ Read *Child of the Book* by Dina Pearlman, found at <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/>, and discuss

what the writer is trying to relay. Create four sequential tableaus that depict the poem from beginning to end.

- ◆ Go to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website home page (<https://www.ushmm.org>) and click the Introduction to the Holocaust link. Read the content, then click the View Photographs link. Select one photograph from the gallery, read the caption, and respond to it with one tableau. Save the photograph and be prepared to share it with the class.

### Improvising: Reflecting With the Body

The class performs a series of structured improvisation tasks, responding to key words and prompts evoked from the unit. Although the demonstration of sophisticated technical proficiency is not discouraged, I place a greater emphasis on the display of dance elements (body, action, space, time, energy), dynamics, and character projection.

- ◆ Imagine that you are trying to escape. Travel from Point A to Point B using low-level movement. The exercise is repeated using various pathways and in pairs.

Classification	Auditory	Visual	Ideational
Examples	Testimonies, Words, Songs, Poems	Pictures, Artwork, Media, Films	Ideas, Themes, Events

Figure 2. Types of stimuli used in this unit.

Students determine who they are (character), what they are escaping, how they are escaping, and where they are going.

- ◆ Using only axial movements, perform continuous gestures that portray resistance.
- ◆ In groups of four to six, select one group member and transport his or her body from Point A to Point B. The group determines who they are transporting, why they are transporting them, and what their relationship is to them.
- ◆ Travel from Point A to Point B integrating elevation (jumping movements), with one or both hands covering your mouth at all times.

### Phrase Work: Merging Elements

I direct the students to generate phrases that incorporate elements that will be required in their final composition. I also encourage them to incorporate movement generated in the tableau and improvisation tasks. This allows me to assess their ability to demonstrate spatial patterns, levels, motifs, relationships, dynamics, and more. This segment of the unit is helpful, considering that the groups might include acting students, with differing movement vocabulary. I have the students generate anywhere from thirty seconds to two minutes of material. At the end of the lessons we have a quick showing and each group briefly discusses their process, after which their classmates give feedback.

## U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

One of my considerations in this project has been the preferences adolescents have for obtaining information and how to make the content as tangible as possible. For instance, my students find field trips extremely stimulating. Granted a Holocaust Remembrance Journey from the Morris Rubell Foundation, some of our most compelling investigations occurred at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. We boarded a bus with nearly fifty students, five teachers from varying subjects, facilitator Michael Rubell (the son of deceased Holocaust survivor Morris Rubell), and Holocaust survivors Fred Heyman and Peter Fleischmann. We traveled to the museum watching a video about Morris Rubell and listening to the accounts of the survivors while onboard the bus. When we entered the museum, we were each given an identification card, chronicling the experience of a Holocaust victim. This as the museum indicates, would “personalize the historical events of the time” for us (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2017). Photographs, exhibits, video, and audio displays were stirring and eliminated any misinterpretation of the Holocaust’s outcome. Most of the students were engaged, but some withdrew, becoming emotionally disturbed and fearful of what they would see next. There were also students who remained by the facilitator and survivors, seeking constant explanation.



Memorial High School Performing Arts Academy Students at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photo: Zakiya Atkinson.

As is common with field trips, the euphoria of traveling beyond school walls was certainly present, but it did not diminish what was achieved at the trip’s conclusion. We collectively returned to the studio ready to decipher, discuss, and respond to the evidence.

## COMPOSING THE WORK

I divide the class into groups with approximately six students per group. They begin devising three- to five-minute compositions that include components specified on their composition question sheets, which they will eventually use to discuss their classmates’ final projects (see Figure 3).

The acting teacher and myself float among the groups, ensuring that the students are working collaboratively, exuding an appropriate level of artistry, and effectively incorporating themes. How well students comprehend the thematic and artistic requirements of the assignment is quickly evident. Lack of specificity, haphazard motifs, and ambiguous character projection typically indicate lack of research or understanding. On occasion, it is necessary for students to be rerouted back to their notes, complete a neglected assignment, or re-explore some of the creative process activities.

In the various iterations of the project, the students have created compositions including various dance styles, with the acting students becoming vital contributors to the development of characters. The integration of text is required and includes monologues, words, poetry, and narratives. After the process is at its midpoint, I provide a list of composers for music selection. Students are also given access to the academy’s prop and costume closet.

### Composition Structures

To expand the possibilities for innovation and support the objective for the work to be narrative, I give the following

Teacher will upload three performance works into Google Classroom

The following questions will be posted:

- ◆ Is this piece a Dramatic Dance (Smith-Autard), Dance Drama (Smith-Autard), or Dance Theatre?
- ◆ What evident components and elements influenced your decision?
- ◆ What themes were present in the work?
- ◆ Do you think the choreographer or director projected a specific stance or perception? Explain your answer.

Google Classroom settings will enable students to view each other's responses after they have posted their own.

**Figure 3.** Composition question sheet.

outline of possible structures to the students. These structures allow for concentrated development and projection of themes, as well as the integration of interdisciplinary devices.

- ◆ Dramatic dance (Smith-Autard 2004)
  - ◇ Is powerful, exciting, dynamic, tense.
  - ◇ Can involve conflict between people or within the individual.
  - ◇ Concentrates on a happening or mood that does not unfold a story.
  - ◇ Shows characterization.
- ◆ Dance drama (Smith-Autard 2004)
  - ◇ Tells a story.
  - ◇ Contains dramatic dance episodes or scenes sequentially arranged.
  - ◇ Shows characterization.
- ◆ Dance theatre or *tanztheatre* (Roland Langer)
  - ◇ Uses German expressive movement.
  - ◇ Combines dance, speaking, singing and chanting, and conventional theater.
  - ◇ Uses props, sets, and costumes.
  - ◇ Is performed by trained dancers.
  - ◇ Has no narrative plot.
  - ◇ Presents specific situations, fears, and human conflicts.

## ASSESSMENTS

The National Core Arts Standards align seamlessly with the unit's connection of arts practices with selected content

(NCAS 2014). During the lessons, I have witnessed an increase in content curiosity and student engagement. As a result, measurable learning outcomes are readily met. In the area of dance, students are able to analyze a dance that is related to content learned in other subjects, research its context, share new ideas about its impact on their perspective (DA:Cn10.1.1.a; NCAS 2014); synthesize content generated from stimulus material to choreograph dances (DA:Cr1.1.1.a; NCAS 2014); and in the final stages, work individually and collaboratively to design and implement a variety of choreographic devices and dance structures to develop original dances (DA:Cr2.1.1; NCAS 2014). In the area of theatre, students use personal experiences and knowledge to develop a character that is believable and authentic in a drama or theatre work (TH:Cr1.1.1; NCAS 2014); explore physical, vocal, and psychological choices to develop a performance that is believable, authentic, and relevant to drama or theatre work (TH:Cr3.1.1.b; NCAS 2014); and develop a drama or theatre work that identifies and questions cultural, global, and historic belief systems (TH:Cn11.2.11.a, TH:Cn11.2.11.b; NCAS 2014).

Student assessment occurs daily, in accordance with the dance program's daily assessment rubric (see Figure 4). Selected activities and assignments are also assessed and graded. A final composition rubric is given to students and each component is reviewed so that students understand the expected outcome of the work (see Figure 5). All the required components are explored during the school year or in the unit. Although expected performance and technical outcomes are not included in the final composition rubric, students have always demonstrated a suitable commitment to those areas. This is a result of regular in-class performance assessments and the students' completion of three to four staged performances during the year.

## PERFORMANCE

With performance being the culminating goal, each year I have conducted this project, students have had a diversity of performance opportunities. In past years, we have concluded with in-class performance showings, a performance at the Morris Rubell Remembrance Journeys Youth Leadership Seminar, and

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## DAILY RUBRIC

The maximum points that a student can earn a day is 10. Five points can be earned for meeting academic/artistic objectives and five points can be earned for preparedness.

### Academic/Artistic Objectives

5 points	Student fully engages in class, self-corrects, applies given corrections, and challenges their abilities. Student is successful in achieving the lesson's objectives. Student is compliant and respectful of teacher, peers, and space.
4 points	Student fully engages in class and applies given corrections. Student is highly committed to achieving the lesson's objectives. Student is compliant and respectful of teacher, peers, and space.
3 points	Student engages in class. Student is committed to achieving the lesson's objectives. Student is compliant and respectful of teacher, peers, and space.
2 points	Student is present in class but needs reminders to stay on task or work to their full potential. Student is respectful of teacher, peers, and space.
1 point	Student is present in the class but is disengaged and needs constant prompting to stay on task or work to their full potential. Student does not achieve the lesson's objectives. Student is respectful of teacher, peers, and space.

### Preparedness

1 point	Student is punctual for class and begins stretching after entering the studio.
1 point	Student has on the proper dance attire for their level and technique class. This includes appropriate shoes.
1 point	Any needed materials, homework assignments, forms, and so on, are brought into the classroom at the start of class.
1 point	Hair is pulled back away from the face and fastened securely at the start of the lesson.
1 point	As a safety precaution, large jewelry and accessories are removed before entering the studio.

### Students will receive zero points if the following occur:

- ◆ No dance attire
- ◆ Disrespect to the teacher, peers, or space
- ◆ Not contributing to group work
- ◆ Use of cell phone
- ◆ Completing other work during class
- ◆ Arriving to class late without documentation

**Figure 4.** Daily assessment rubric.

an evening event. In 2015, the evening event was held in our school district and widely attended by high school students, parents, and faculty. To begin the evening, our high school's peer mediation class facilitated an awareness circle experience for audience members. The performance that followed included a unit composition on the Holocaust collaboratively composed by the Dance III class, monologues about the Holocaust generated by select acting students, and an interdisciplinary performance work by Zaman Dance Theatre Collective. As the artistic director of Zaman Dance Theatre Collective, I was excited to have the company share the stage with my students. The collective is comprised of interdisciplinary artists committed to exploring sociopolitical themes and injustices through artistic practice. The students' works were expressive, demon-

strating clear thematic intent. They employed pedestrian movement along with more technical elements in dance and well-thought-through characters to tell their stories based on their Holocaust research. Their emotional investment was conveyed through facial expression, vocal inflection, and dynamics. Attendees gave significant feedback, with many indicating their newness to this sort of artistic presentation. Many were deeply emotionally affected by the themes presented in the works. The academy student performers saw that presenting their understandings and reflections about the Holocaust, genocide, and injustice through performance was valued by their peers. They compared performances to lectures and suggested that the first could be a segue to the latter to increase student engagement in the subject.

<b>4 points</b> <b>Highly effective demonstration and integration</b>	<b>3 points</b> <b>Effective demonstration and integration</b>	<b>2 points</b> <b>Basic demonstration and integration</b>	<b>1 point</b> <b>Minimal or ineffective demonstration and integration</b>	<b>0 points</b> <b>No evidence of integration or understanding of the component</b>
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Evident Style Dance Drama, Dramatic Dance, or Dance Theatre	Thematic Intent Evidence of assigned theme	Climax	Character Development	Character Relationships
Inclusion of: Monologue, Narrative, Poetry, or Text	Costumes/ Props	Musical Accompaniment	Tableau	Motif
Body	Action	Space	Time	Energy
Cannon	Repetition	Unison	Retrograde	Transitions

**Figure 5.** Final composition rubric.



Memorial High School Performing Arts Academy Students. Photo: Richelieu Del Rio.



Memorial High School Performing Arts Academy Students. Photo: Richelieu Del Rio.

## CONCLUSION

I am grateful for the human and artistic growth occurring within our academy, as a result of this unit. I have witnessed an enhanced understanding of “ensemble” and appreciation of interdisciplinary collaboration. With guidance, the students have been able to embody such roles as director, choreographer, teacher, and performer. Final compositions, student dialogue, and assessments affirm the students’ increased understanding of historical and present-day injustice. The students began to discover themselves as artists, capable of bringing awareness to sociopolitical issues and injustices with their art. In our reflection discussions, students attributed their investment in the lessons to the fact that they could learn creatively. They recognize their artistry to be a medium, capable of exploring humanity and inhumanity, which is one of the most valued learning outcomes to me as an educator. As philosopher bell hooks (1994) explained, “When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education” (44). This quote vocalizes my most imperative goals as an educator. My hope is that my students will evolve as empowered and creative beings, with the tools and desire to be agents of change.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://www.ushmm.org/>
- Women and the Holocaust: <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/>
- IWitness USC Shoah Foundation: <http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>
- Anti-Defamation League: <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Pyramid-of-Hate.pdf>

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