**Best Practices in Humanitarian Action Education**

**Title of Course: Literature of the Holocaust**

**Professor: Gail Ostrow**

**Semester and year instructed: Fall 2015**

**Title of Best Practice** (e.g. module, project, activity):

*Please attach syllabus and relevant materials*

*Juhanonline.org promotes the dissemination of undergraduate humanitarian action programs, courses and pedagogies. Please use this form to describe a “best practice” in the course you identified above, such as a semester long project, special module for a week or two, a service-learning project, or a simulation. This best practice form along with the syllabus and other relevant materials will be featured on juhanonline.org under Teaching Tools—Best Practices.*

***Please respond to the following questions:***

**1. Describe the learning objectives of this course and the type of best practice that you are sharing.**

Literature of the Holocaust (EN113A) is a 100-level, elective English course that emphasizes extending EN 11 & 12 critical reading and writing skills, as well as mastering close reading of diverse fiction and non-fiction texts in a specific content area. The course is also included in the JUHAN and the Jewish Studies minor.

I use as much visual art as I can to capture and enhance my students’ different learning styles. Often a text can be understood on additional levels when combined with visual art and, given the difficult and disturbing content of the course, many of my lessons combine the visual arts and literature.

**2. Describe how you taught this best practice. What pedagogical strategies or tools did you use?**

Ekphrasis is a literary description of, or commentary on, a visual work of art.

Within the first two weeks of the course when students are asking “how could this happen?”, I display “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” by Pieter Breugel the Elder (c. 1558). We closely examine the painting and do pair-share discussion and then group discussion. Then there is a short “close-reading” writing exercise that describes the painting, the painterly elements, and what the painting means.

This is followed by reading W.H. Auden’s 1938 poem “Musée des Beaux Artes.” Moving between the painting and the poem, we make literary sense of Auden’s ekphrastic commentary about the people in the painting not seeing “something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,” and oblivious Europe as Hitler begins his build-up to war. After many small and large group discussion, there is a writing assignment that analyzes both the poem and the painting.

This lesson is repeated toward the end of the course with the iconic picture of the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising—in the center is the little boy with his hands in the air—and Peter L. Fischl’s post-war poem “To the Little Polish Boy Standing With His Arms Up.”

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**3. What challenges did you encounter in teaching this best practice?**

As expected, not many students bring positive experiences with reading literature in general and poetry in particular to the class. Few have an appreciation for and an understanding of poetry and does not choose to read it. So, I have to overcome preconceived biases and negativity, along with a sense of “I don’t know how to do this so there must be something wrong with me.”

The challenge is also to find poems that the students can “relate” to. Many have been allowed to dismiss a poem they don’t like because “I just can’t relate to this.”

**4. What successes, impacts or lessons have emerged from this best practice?**

I have learned to 1) meet my students where they are; 2) guide/steer them to get where I want them to be; and 3) work together with them, rather than teach them/drag them, to understand a poem and what makes it a poem and then be able to articulate with confidence why they like it or not!

I now include class time for students to locate and share a poem that speaks to their understanding of the course materials. Some students—even ones who began saying they never met a poem they liked--have gone so far as to write “found” poems for their final memorial project

5. How has teaching this best practice been formative for you as an educator?

I have stopped expecting my students to be enthralled by what enthralls me and have moved toward helping them find what enthralls them, all the while being sure they master the skills to read and understand this body of literature that attempts to describe and explain the inexplicable.

I now include tons of poetry from which they get to pick what they will read and analyze. Reading Primo Levi and the late, local poet Stephen Herz, for example, provides a masculine edginess that some students respond to in ways I hadn’t expected. Expanding the pool of poetry readings brings the students’ positive experiences more in line with their drama and novel readings.

I see how important it is to engage all the senses, even when the material is horrific and beyond our comprehension. In fact, utilizing all the senses increases our ability to be a witness, to stand in front of what is horrific and feel empathy and compassion rather than revulsion and morbid fascination.

I know I will keep on learning—my students last semester became very interested in learning about perpetrators and the two designed a final project that resulted in collage and found poems about perpetrators and their descendants, who are now writing about what it means to be the granddaughter of a Nazi war criminal, for example. Who knew? It was only 20 years or so ago that this canon began including literature from non-Jewish writers, such as Ursula Hegi and Bernhard Schlink.

Of course, fall 2015 provided numerous pictures and videos of endless lines of refugees and migrants trying to make their way across Eastern Europe to safety. One teachable moment after another, we saw the suffering, in this very moment, that we were reading about. The painting and the picture and the poems never grow old as we continue to repeat this history. Esther Krinitz’s needlework showing the long line of Polish Jews wending their way from their homes toward their deaths was mirrored daily on CNN and our FB news feeds. Soon, I will be adding new poems and pictures…and I am sure more after that. As Primo Levi wrote in *Survival in Auschwitz*, “here there is no why.”

**Note**: I prefer not to use full-length films in class as they eat up valuable reading, discussion, and writing time; however, this best practice could also be done with a short film or video clips, as well as posters, propaganda pieces, etc. Anything visual can be combined with text to offer another way into the material.

**Resources**

Auden poem and Breugel painting at

<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>

Fischl poem and picture at

<http://isurvived.org/SmallBoyCaptured.html>