How SoTL Can Inform Teaching Traumatic Histories: Findings from a Holocaust Education Study

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ABSTRACT

Educators charged with teaching histories marked by oppression and violence navigate a challenging duality: they must foster critical engagement and deep analysis of traumatic events without causing secondary trauma to their students, all within the context of growing political pressures on history curriculum in K-12 and higher education. This article, based on the results of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) study in a college-level war and society course, explores student-identified challenges to learning about the Holocaust as well as their strategies for navigating emotional distress associated with that learning process. The article also considers SoTL-informed pedagogical interventions for teaching hard histories with a trauma-informed approach sharing student reactions to an oral history podcast assignment for supporting thoughtful and effective communication about sensitive topics. Among other results, this study found that students approached learning about the Holocaust with varied and self-aware strategies for emotional regulation, despite the common expectation that it would be difficult to hear about the tragic experiences of others. Students also expressed both general and specific benefits to learning this content, despite the significant challenge of navigating sensitive topics with careful language.
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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the efficacy of Holocaust education highlighted by both a marked increase in antisemitic events and public debates about the role of Holocaust education in combating antisemitism. A 2022 audit by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that acts of antisemitism increased 36 percent from 2021 to 2022 with the total number of incidents representing the highest number since the ADL began tracking them in 1979.\(^1\) While many Holocaust education scholars agree that effective Holocaust education is no antidote for modern discrimination and antisemitism, the public discourse suggests that it is commonly looked to as an intervention in those moments.\(^2\) Further, the use of the Holocaust as a unifying lesson on morality or “standing up to bullies” can actually be harmful in its reductiveness.\(^3\)

In addition, the politicization of K-12 and college-level curriculum around the country, especially related to the teaching of hard histories, adds to the pressures and anxieties instructors face. The banning of books and “education gag orders” have increased over 250 percent between January 2021 and January 2022 according to the United States House of Representatives Oversight Committee.\(^4\) Oddly though, and adding to these pressures on educators, legislators across the US are passing Holocaust education mandates simultaneously as curriculum restrictions are being passed against other deeply valuable hard histories.\(^5\) Yet, even as these mandates are passed, educators face school district bans on important texts for teaching the Holocaust and conflicting teaching expectations.\(^6\) For example, school districts in Tennessee and Texas have banned the graphic novel Maus: A Survivor’s Tale (1986) from classrooms and a school administrator in Texas was forced to apologize after stating that teachers should teach “both sides” of the Holocaust.\(^7\) As historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries has said of the study of slavery in the US, we “have a deep-seated aversion to hard history because we are uncomfortable with the implications it raises about the past as well as the present.”\(^8\) Similarly, the study of the Holocaust forces students to reckon with the historical existence and modern-day persistence of harmful and oppressive ideologies. In their exploration of these topics, students must confront inhumane, violent, and oppressive actions of ordinary humans while also recognizing the lingering versions of discrimination and dehumanization that made these large-scale atrocities possible.\(^9\) Lastly, students around the country and the world are also struggling to make sense of the brutality of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel and Israeli acts of violence against Palestinians. Though students are desperate to understand and explore these upsetting and complex occurrences, many local school districts and universities are prohibiting teachers from discussing the events and leaving their students searching for answers. Given this complex pedagogical, social, and political backdrop, educators who seek to apply trauma-informed teaching strategies are left wondering not only what they can teach but also how they can best teach it without doing harm to their students or drawing unwanted attention from politicians.

As instructors and educational developers, we were eager to explore, through the lens of...


9. The term "ordinary" is used here as a nod to historian Christopher R. Browning’s work in Ordinary Men and his argument that it was ordinary folks who carried out the atrocities of the Holocaust, stating that “ultimately, the Holocaust took place because at the most basic level, individual human beings killed other human beings in large numbers over an extended period of time.” Christopher R. Browning, Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), xvi.


12. Carello and Butler, "Potentially trauma-informed pedagogies, how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) might inform and elevate this ongoing dialogue. We wished to consult students about the barriers and challenges they perceived when studying the Holocaust, their abilities to remain engaged in educational activities and regulate emotional responses when the topic of study is violent, unjust, or oppressive; and the impact of a group project featuring the exploration of oral histories on student abilities to engage with content. Given the ongoing political conversations about appropriate curriculum in the history classroom, and assumptions about the affective impact these subjects have on students, it is important that we ask students about their perceptions. In addition, researchers have found that 73.1 percent of high schoolers younger than eighteen years old reported experiencing one or more potentially traumatic events during the pandemic.\(^{10}\) Given growing mental health concerns among students and the increased likelihood of preexisting exposure to trauma, a SoTL study that explores student perceptions of secondary traumatic stress in educational settings is vital.

Generally, being trauma informed “is to understand how violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have figured into the lives of the individuals” and then using that knowledge to “accommodate the needs and vulnerabilities of trauma survivors” to avoid secondary traumatization.\(^{11}\) Holocaust educators face questions about the potential their content carries for secondary trauma on students.\(^{12}\) Historian Angus Johnston characterizes the dilemma by stating that “it’s my responsibility to teach students about incidents that were catastrophic for the historical actors involved—one can hardly teach history without discussing that kind of ‘traumatic event.’ But it’s also my responsibility to teach about those events in ways that foster a productive engagement with the material.”\(^{13}\) A 2023 study of the potential for vicarious trauma among high school student visitors to Holocaust museums showed that “students who experienced violent adverse childhood experiences tended to have a less immersive museum experience.”\(^{14}\) Put simply, they found that students with prior experiences of trauma had more difficulty engaging productively when learning about traumatic experiences of others: as a result, it is critical that instructors are able to tailor their approaches through a trauma-informed lens to support students’ ability to learn about traumatic content.\(^{15}\)

In a politically charged era where antisemitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are on the rise, the need for critical exploration of historical events of oppression remains paramount. But intellectual guidance through these traumatic historical experiences also warrants attention to the potential for secondary trauma, the impact it can have on students’ motivations to learn, and the importance of trauma-informed teaching to mitigate potential ill effects to make space for meaningful learning.

To that end we designed an SoTL study with two aims. The first aim was to explore challenges students identified in their study of the Holocaust and, accordingly, the strategies they used to navigate emotional responses to learning. Our second aim was to assess the impact of an oral history assignment and relevant scaffolding intentionally designed by the instructor to support students’ abilities to make meaning despite the weight of content they explored.\(^{16}\) Related questions also allowed students to comment on the affective impact of encountering this content. In what follows, we share pilot data about the way students articulated the importance of learning about the Holocaust, the challenges they anticipated and experienced,
and their strategies for navigating those challenges. We also share students’ assessments of an assignment that asked them to listen to first-hand experiences of Holocaust survivors and then communicate those stories to a contemporary audience through the creation of a podcast.

**Method**

**Design**

This mixed-method pilot study used a pre/post survey design to probe students’ responses and reflections before and after learning about the Holocaust. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kentucky.

During that unit, students encountered two thirty-minute thematic lectures on the role of antisemitism and the progression of Nazi policies from discrimination to genocide; Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (volumes 1 and 2); excerpts from historian Christopher R. Browning’s *Ordinary Men*; a recorded survivor testimony from a local survivor living in Kentucky; and readings about Jewish resistance efforts in the ghettos of Białystok and Warsaw, Poland. They also completed two major assignments for the unit, both in small groups. One was a visual comparison presentation using images from *Maus* and digital photo archives. The other was the oral history podcast project that was included as part of this study.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited within the “War and Society, 1914–1945” course at the University of Kentucky, a large public land-grant university in the South. To qualify for inclusion in this study, participants were required to be enrolled in the course and be at least eighteen years old. For both the pre- and post-survey, twenty-three students completed and provided consent for their responses to be used for research.

A research team member who is not the instructor introduced the study to students in the course while the teacher left the room. Students were briefed about the nature of the survey and the study procedure (i.e., completing a pre- and post-survey). Students were informed that they would be awarded extra credit for participating and that they would not be penalized for opting out. Students were then offered the opportunity to complete the pre-survey during class time. After the unit was complete, the research team member returned while the instructor left the room, and students were offered the opportunity to complete the post-survey in class.

Protecting students’ anonymity was a priority in this process: as a result, the instructor was not present during survey administration, and the data was cleaned and de-identified (i.e., names and identifying information were removed) by the third author who had no known contact with students in the course. Additionally, the instructor was unable to view raw data until after grades were submitted, and even then, they were only able to view de-identified data.
Measures

The surveys were developed by Jill Abney with support from Kate Collins and Isabelle Blaber: survey items were adapted from and inspired by Timothy G. Black’s survey for students on teaching traumatic content. Our surveys were designed to be implemented before and after the unit focusing on the Holocaust. The surveys included both quantitative rating scales and qualitative open-response items, designed to address the aims of this study. The pre-survey included sixteen questions; the post-survey included nineteen questions. Both surveys were conducted in Qualtrics and were each estimated to take around fifteen minutes to complete.

The quantitative items were intended to supplement the qualitative questions, in response to the aims of this pilot study. As a result, the quantitative items in both the pre- and post-surveys focused on assessing students’ existing knowledge of—and familiarity with—the Holocaust, students’ confidence in their ability to communicate about the Holocaust, emotion navigation strategies and responses that students might use when learning about hard histories, and the degree of trauma exposure that students experienced in the unit.

In addition to the rating scale items, participants were asked to respond to a variety of open-ended questions in both the pre- and post-surveys. For the purpose of this article, the open-ended items of note from the pre-survey included:

- What are some of the challenges that you anticipate facing when learning about the Holocaust? Please give specific examples.
- What are your go-to practices for navigating emotional distress associated with engaging with topics (e.g., learning about histories) that might be upsetting?

The post-survey included these same items (modified to past tense), as well as the following:

- Tell us about a time when you felt particularly challenged during this course.
- How, if at all, did interacting with oral histories affect your learning about the Holocaust?
- How, if at all, did creating a podcast featuring a Holocaust survivor’s story help you make sense of the Holocaust?

Data Analysis and Coding

We examined students’ rating scale responses to get a sense of the impact of a course unit about the Holocaust—involving creating a podcast using oral histories—on students’ knowledge of the Holocaust and confidence in communicating about the Holocaust. We also examined their strategies for emotionally navigating the course and the degree of trauma exposure in the course. We were particularly interested in whether their responses might have changed over time. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 29.0. Analysis included generating descriptive statistics, specifically frequency tables of relevant items for the purpose of this project. Additionally, we explored the correlations between students’ familiarity with the Holocaust and
their confidence in discussing the Holocaust with others.

We used thematic analysis to examine the participants’ responses to the qualitative open-ended items of interest. Each team member familiarized themselves with the data and developed preliminary codes and associated themes. The team then collaborated on an overarching thematic structure to capture the participants’ perspectives: this process entailed iteratively comparing the codes and data until consensus was reached around the thematic structure.

Results

Aim 1: Challenges and Strategies

Student Challenges

In their qualitative responses to the pre-survey, when asked what challenges they anticipated when learning about the Holocaust, students overwhelmingly cited “hearing about or seeing images of difficult experiences of others.” Out of the twenty-three students who responded to the pre-survey, fifteen suggested that that would be a key challenge for them. Responses that fell within this code included mention of “violence,” “the gruesome treatment of some people,” “hearing stories,” and the potential “emotional toll.” The next most frequent code for responses was no challenges identified (n=4). Three students mentioned wrestling with the general magnitude of such an event while another three students suggested that the intellectual depth of the content would be a struggle for them.

In the post-survey, when students were encouraged to reflect back on their learning and identify specifically the challenges that they encountered, hearing about or seeing images of difficult experiences of others again emerged as the most frequent response (n=10). More students (n=6) suggested that grappling with the magnitude of the event was a challenge for them. Three additional types of challenges were mentioned that were not present in anticipated concerns: students feeling challenged by the need for attention to careful articulation and language (n=4), frustration they felt about misinformed peers (n=1), and an inability to relate to the victims (n=2).

We anticipated that one of the challenges of the course might be the degree of exposure to traumatic content. As a result, in the quantitative part of the study, we asked students at the post-survey, “How would you rate the amount of exposure to traumatic material during the Holocaust portion of this course?” with response options on a 5-point scale, including “none,” “small,” “moderate,” “heavy,” and “overwhelming.” Five students indicated a small amount of exposure to traumatic material, while seven students reported a moderate amount. Four students indicated that they experienced a heavy amount of exposure to traumatic material during the Holocaust portion of the course.

Students were asked, “How much do you feel being exposed to the traumatic material of this course (i.e., oral histories, stories, images) affected your ability to stay engaged?” with four response options on a 4-point scale, including “not at all,” “sometimes,” “moderately,” and “often.” A majority of the students (n=12) indicated that the exposure to traumatic course material did not affect their ability to stay engaged. Six students reported that the traumatic course content
sometimes affected their ability to stay engaged, while two reported that it moderately affected their ability to stay engaged.

Strategies for Navigating Emotional Distress

In pre-survey responses to the question about strategies for navigating emotional distress, the most commonly coded responses were “stepping away or distancing from the material” (n=5), “talking with others” (n=4), and adopting a stance of “accepting historical reality” as fixed (n=4). These students who anticipated using a strategy of acceptance appeared to use their inability to change the past as a means of distancing themselves. For instance, one student said that “I try to remember what’s done is done and there is no way to change the past.” Likewise, another student said, “I try to tell myself there isn’t anything I could do about the past.” On the other hand, two students in the pre-survey seemed to take a counter-position to that of acceptance. They indicated that a commitment to learning more or understanding the event was how they hoped to manage any emotional distress, with one student stating that “I try to think about the lessons from this terrible event that everyone in the world should learn from, so it doesn’t happen again.”

In their post-survey responses about strategies for navigating emotional distress, “talking to others” and “stepping away/distancing” remained the most common codes (n=6 for both). More students (n=5) articulated a reliance on their “quest to learn more” as a means of coping. Notably, only two students mentioned an acceptance of historical reality in the post-survey. Even one of those students who did reiterate an inability to “reverse what happened” articulated finding purpose in “learning about the stories of the Holocaust and being able to respectfully share those stories is the best way we can show respect to those who suffered.”

Students were shown a list of seven quantitative measures that included a variety of potential emotional navigation strategies and/or responses to difficult emotions that they might engage when learning about violent or oppressive historical events. For example, “I disengage from the class or activities.” On the pre-survey, they were asked the extent to which they agreed that they would likely use/experience each item, and on the post-survey they indicated the extent to which they agreed that they had used/experienced each item.

The juxtaposition of their reactions between the two surveys shows what they anticipated did not actually play out. For instance, in the case of students’ interest in talking with their instructor about working through emotionally distressing content, the number of students who disagreed that they would want to share with their instructor decreased from six to three between the two surveys. Likewise, the number of students interested in sharing with classmates also decreased from eight to five (table 1).
Table 1. Students’ anticipated and actual strategies or experience when navigating emotionally distressing material in Holocaust unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want[ed] to share or discuss with my classmates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want[ed] to share or discuss with my instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I keep [kept] my emotions to myself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disengage[d] from the class or activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I change[d] the way I think [thought] about it so that I’m [I was] able to stay engaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel [felt] a sense of powelessness</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel [felt] a sense of guilt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Brackets in items text denote past tense phrasing for post-survey

a Students’ responses from pre-survey (prior to unit)

b Students’ responses from post-survey (after the unit)
Aim 2: Student Assessment of the Usefulness of Oral History Podcasts

During the post-survey, students were asked to assess how their interaction with oral histories from survivors affected their learning about the Holocaust. The vast majority of students characterized their encounters with those interviews as adding depth and value to their exploration. Only one student out of the nineteen who wrote responses for that item said "N/A," which we interpreted as having no impact. The rest of the eighteen responses characterized the experience as providing a deeper or more detailed understanding, making the content feel "real," or facilitating a feeling of connection to survivors.

The encounter with the oral history interview was only one portion of the podcast assignment. The other major portion was to then use the survivor’s story to create a podcast that communicated key findings and connected them with the themes of the course. Of the twenty-one responses students shared assessing the impact of the podcast assignment on helping them make sense of the Holocaust, only four students said that it did not help.

To assess student perceptions about their preexisting knowledge, they were asked to react to a series of quantitative measures gauging their familiarity with the content in general and individual survivor stories. They were also asked to rate their confidence in communicating about the Holocaust with others outside the class.

Participants were asked, "How familiar are you with the stories of individual Holocaust survivors?" at the pre-survey, on a 6-point scale, including “not at all familiar,” “mostly unfamiliar,” “slightly unfamiliar,” “slightly familiar,” “mostly familiar,” and “completely familiar.” Most participants (n=14) reported being slightly familiar with stories of individual Holocaust survivors. Two students reported feeling mostly familiar, while the remainder reported being slightly (n=4) or mostly (n=3) unfamiliar. At the post-survey, students were asked the same question regarding their familiarity with Holocaust survivor stories: most students reported feeling either slightly familiar (n=8) or mostly familiar (n=7). A few (n=4) students reported being very familiar with Holocaust survivor stories, while one student reported feeling slightly unfamiliar. Upon further analysis, we found that students’ familiarity with survivor stories was significantly related to their confidence in discussing the Holocaust with friends and family members, r = .57, p <.01. This correlation, while notable, is unsurprising given that students’ knowledge of individual stories and experiences likely contributed to their depth of knowledge and ability to talk about the Holocaust with others.
Table 2. Students’ reported confidence in their knowledge of and communication about the Holocaust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How confident are you...</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
<th>Mostly unconfident</th>
<th>Slightly unconfident</th>
<th>Slightly confident</th>
<th>Mostly confident</th>
<th>Completely confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In your current knowledge of the Holocaust?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your ability to discuss the Holocaust outside of a classroom setting (i.e., with friends or family in conversation)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your ability to speak meaningfully about the experiences of victims of the Holocaust?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

To explore the implications of our data, we need to delve a bit deeper into the context of Holocaust education. Ongoing conversations about Holocaust education pedagogy reveal multifaceted and, at times, paradoxical approaches for meaningful instruction. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) urges instructors to practice “responsible methodological choices” that “do not exploit the students’ emotional vulnerability.”

Thus, instructors must balance student use of primary sources and survivor testimonies with the risk of invoking student emotional responses. These responses can cause students to shut down or disengage, but they can also lead to “illusory identification” with victims hindering student learning.

Scholars and social critics also disagree on the appropriate role of empathy. For instance, historian Nancy Bristow recognizes “the interconnection between intellect and emotion and the importance of empathy in students’ learning” and assumes that “many of [her] students will have powerful and even emotional responses to the material.” Yet others argue that passive empathy can cause students to remain at a superficial, sentimentalized level of investigation.
Author Dara Horn has criticized Holocaust educators as "obsessed with building empathy" and suggests a focus instead on "curiosity" as the key to ideal Holocaust education.  

**Challenges and Strategies**

Our data show that these college students, whether through previous learning experiences or other knowledge of the Holocaust, came in expecting to engage with difficult materials. Their responses suggest that students experienced anticipatory compassion toward the victims of the Holocaust even before they approached the content. They also came in with a range of strategies to navigate the challenges they expected to face. We cannot know if they would admittedly identify these as regulatory practices or to what extent they were effective, but many of the strategies they shared were varied, introspective, and reflective.

Some strategies, on the other hand, may initially seem callous, insensitive or disappointing. For example, a student in the pre-survey suggested a strategy of focusing on “the positive aspects of the tragedy and the people who survived.” This choice of wording may unintentionally imply that there was a positive side to such a terrible event. Yet the latter part of this response hints at the student’s effort to cope with an emotional response by valuing the lives and experiences of survivors. Similarly, the student response suggesting that our current actions cannot rectify historical atrocities could be interpreted as defeatism. However, these strategies could also be understood as ways of creating emotional distance from the most harrowing aspects of the subject, thereby enabling the students to stay sufficiently engaged for learning.

Strategies that help students distance or step away from content are unsurprising given that “research on the relationship between identity and teaching and learning difficult histories suggests that historical injustice with ongoing legacies provoke strong emotions among both teachers and students,” including “guilt, innocence, anger, resentment, or shame based on the explicit and implicit ethical judgements that are being made.”  

Research about learning and hard histories has identified concepts of guilt and complicity as insufficient in examining the impact of learning about hard histories on learners. But it is also important to note that "perceived responsibility does not necessarily coincide with actual responsibility" and may even reflect “irrational beliefs” of one’s connection to events. Furthermore, because the political discourse has come to rely on ill-defined concepts, such as “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress,” it is pertinent that we consider what students actually have to say about their experiences.

As students explored the Holocaust in more depth, they were asked to reckon with the broader global implications of antisemitism and its role in perpetuating the event, thus posing a chance for the development of certain feelings of powerlessness, guilt, or shame. For example, students learned about restricted immigration quotas in the US and other Allied nations, the role of Jim Crow laws as a model for Adolf Hitler’s discriminatory policies, and the part American companies like IBM played in the identification of potential victims. As a result, students must recognize the varied extent of complicity of many nations in the murder of millions of European Jews.

However, no student mentioned in their written responses anticipating feelings of guilt (see table 1), and none wrote about any such challenges retrospectively. Their responses to the
pre-survey’s quantitative questions revealed mixed expectations about potential feelings of guilt and powerlessness when learning about difficult histories. Initially, eight students somewhat agreed that they expected to feel guilty during the Holocaust unit. After completing the unit, when students were asked whether or not they experienced these feelings, the number of students decreased slightly to seven. In terms of feelings of powerlessness, six students anticipated this emotion before the unit, but only four reported experiencing it in retrospect. The small sample size limits definitive conclusions but indicates considerable variation among students regarding the emotional impact they expected. Moreover, it seems that the educational experience did not significantly increase instances of students actually feeling guilt or powerlessness. We are eager to analyze a more extensive data set from the current iteration of this study to evaluate these proposed observations. The pairing of the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that students recognized the complexity of their emotional and psychological reactions brought on by this topic. Given contemporary attempts to prohibit the teaching of valuable hard histories by using vague arguments about feelings of “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress,” we posit that similar SoTL projects about those histories would be useful in providing a data-informed retort to the narrative of assumption currently driving that debate.

Not all students relied on distancing or indicated that guilt or powerlessness were concerns. These other students relied more heavily on prioritizing learning as a way of navigating emotional distress. Two students in the pre-survey along with three additional students in the post-survey seemed to find direction in what they saw as a greater moral quest. Specifically, students listed thinking about “respectfully shar[ing] those stories” and “prevent[ing] atrocities like this in the future” as strategies for navigating their own emotional distress. These strategies also seem to move beyond individual approaches to coping and toward social responsibility. Similarly, one student stated in the post-survey that seeking to “understand the people and what they were going through, even though I never could, helped me navigate the emotional stress.” There is a recognition here that in many ways, the things we seek to learn and accomplish when learning about hard histories are actually impossible. But that impossibility does not reduce the importance of it. Julie J. Golding, in her assessment of vicarious trauma at Holocaust museums, notes that “many Holocaust educators speak anecdotally about students who are unable to process what they learn about the Holocaust, some who respond negatively to the information, and others who become obsessed with a need to learn more.” The responses from our survey participants would support those reflections.

Post-survey open-ended responses show that students experienced the unexpected challenge of paying careful attention to language when discussing the Holocaust. It can be disconcerting to discuss the traumatic historical experiences of groups and individuals in a thoughtful manner. These responses support the necessity of intellectual exercises where students wrestle with discomforting content in community. The instructor explicitly discussed the priority of using insightful and precise language throughout the course—not just in the unit about the Holocaust—and coached students on how to make effective communicative choices to that effect. While this balance is difficult to strike, it is critical to avoid making students so nervous about saying the “right” thing that they do not participate. Student comments seem to suggest that they bought into this priority and recognized the value of meeting this challenge. One student said a challenge for them was “being mindful of what words to use and how to address things that happened such as bombings and traumatic events to not make someone uncomfortable or upset.” Another
student pointed to “how sensitive the situations were and” how important it was “to talk about it appropriately.” Still another stated that “I realized that talking about how serious it was came with a new vocabulary of sorts.” While this concern about language could be interpreted as evidence of heightened anxiousness, we argue that this is indicative of how willing students were to engage because they were actively thinking how they might discuss it effectively, respectfully, and appropriately. These comments do not suggest frustration with this task, nor did the course evaluations at the end of the semester. But rather, students naturally accepted that when we talk about hard things, we must do so mindfully.

This attention to language and to mindfulness of communication in community does not come without its obstacles. Even though this course section occurred before the most recent eruptions of violence in the Middle East, students still had to confront communicating with students who have varying levels of knowledge about—and personal connection to—the region and of the history being discussed. At times, misinformation or lack of education appeared in the form of failed modern-day analogies. One student even pointed to “misinformed peers about modern events or inaccurate language being used” as a challenge they faced. Another student cited that the challenges they had in communicating with their peers in the class informed their practice of talking with their family. They admitted, “I did not feel that a supportive relationship was formed over the semester where I could talk openly about these things.” Again, these different obstacles that students identified, as well as the various strategies they admitted to using, indicate that they sought to maintain their emotional regulation to continue the intellectual work of the course even though it was difficult. They also reveal that students clearly recognized the importance of conversation in this process even if they had to seek other spaces for that dialogue.

The Oral History Podcast Assignment

According to the quantitative results of the pre-survey (table 1), the majority of students were either neutral or uninterested in processing what they learned with their classmates or instructor, but in instructional spaces like this course, such shared communication and processing are vital. The struggle to grasp traumatic historical events pushes students to ask significant questions (e.g., why continue to learn about this if it is over and in the past? what can we do about it now?) that are best explored in partnership with others. Strategies for mitigating possible secondary trauma include communicating with others, working with groups, and reflecting together with those who are experiencing similar content.33 These opportunities to share with one another help with the development of a classroom community that can provide an environment of safety necessary for students to process and voice these emotions about traumatic exposures. Social support is paramount in cultivating individual resilience and is a protective factor against developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) especially for those who have experienced “human-generated traumatic events.”34 A strong, supportive community can provide and protect space to process emotions, encouraging students to engage in productive discussion rather than an emotional shutdown.

To facilitate this meaningful conversation and collaboration, the instructor designed a podcast assignment to scaffolded opportunities for students to work in small groups to tackle tough questions together in community, especially those students who ask the challenging “what now?” questions (see appendices 1 and 2 for assignment description). It also was a pedagogical


intervention to pull students into encounters with survivors whose stories help to humanize the often overwhelming statistics and numbers. Historian Andrea Eidinger articulates the potential frustration, aptly stating that “we are often implored to ‘never forget,’ but we seldom take a moment to talk about what and how we are supposed to remember.”\textsuperscript{35} The podcast is representative of the act of bearing witness in that students must listen through the oral history of their choice and then communicate key points to a modern audience (in this case, their classmate) through a modern medium like a podcast. As first-generation survivors pass away, students will grow increasingly dependent on recorded survivor stories for the humanizing first-hand accounts of these atrocities. But more than that, we argue that students also play a role in communicating these stories and lessons to others. Finally, the podcast also gives students the opportunity to practice thoughtful, careful language as they explore these topics—something they were asked to do throughout the semester.

Students had to choose an oral history interview or recorded survivor testimony found in the University of Kentucky’s Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, which includes several interviews of survivors living in Kentucky, or from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) collection of testimonies. They listened closely to their chosen recording, studying it and comparing what they learned there with the themes from the course. Then they were tasked with creating a podcast where they featured excerpts from the oral history interview along with their commentary and conversation that connected the story to some key themes from the course. Specifically, students were to explore how oral history demonstrates the impact of war on individuals, what role survivor stories play in the study of the Holocaust, and how the information in the oral history interview compared with themes and information of the course.

Student responses to the assignment were generally positive and suggested that it did support them in the development of skills in communicating about hard histories. The quantitative data support that students’ familiarity with Holocaust survivor stories was significantly related to their confidence in discussing the Holocaust with friends and family members. When asked how, if at all, did interacting with oral histories affect their learning about the Holocaust, the emphasis on gaining a deeper, more “real” understanding and gaining a proximity or familiarity with the victims turned up time and again. Part of that depth, of course, certainly came in the form of the “sad and eye-opening” experiences of individuals. Multiple students used the metaphor of having one’s eyes opened. Students also mentioned the encounters going beyond the textbook and “reinforcing” the content they had learned elsewhere. It is also notable that students mentioned that they appreciated the “freedom in picking which audio source” they used. Student choice is one of seven principles of trauma-informed teaching (adapted from trauma-informed care). Giving students the option of which survivor stories they wished to encounter gave them control over the content they would need to engage closely with thus contributing to their feelings of safety.\textsuperscript{36}

When students were asked how, if at all, creating a podcast featuring a Holocaust survivor’s story helped them make sense of the Holocaust, the majority shared some ways that it enhanced their learning. Of the four who said it did not help, one aptly stated that “it didn’t really help me make sense of the Holocaust. I don’t think I will ever actually understand it, though.” Another student cited the podcast creation software as too difficult. Much of the impact noted in reference to the oral histories was echoed in the assessment of the podcast as well, with


students citing how it added to the “realness” of the content, allowing them to connect with survivors, explore more details, and communicate with others. Notably, three students claimed that the assignment helped them stay focused and engaged. Students named the podcast creation process as a potential site for reflection and meaning making, stating that “it was nice to talk to a partner about it ... and to hear other perspectives.” In the quantitative data, students’ confidence in discussing the Holocaust with their friends and family increased after the unit (see table 2). While we can only speculate at correlation here, we feel that any practice students had in gleaning meaning and sharing with a different audience helps increase that confidence and might translate to their ability and willingness to share what they learn with others, possibly even advocating for others who are oppressed or marginalized in some way.

Conclusion

As instructors of hard histories continue to scrutinize their approaches to teaching in ways that are trauma-informed and reflective, it is useful to consider the practices for helping students maintain emotional regulation as they work through these topics. At times, this can seem like an impossible task in that, although we can make responsible pedagogical choices, we cannot necessarily control our students’ dysregulation since different things cause dysregulation in different people. But we can support them in the development of their own agency of regulation by asking them to reflect on strategies they might use ahead of time, encouraging them to consider other strategies for regulation if their initial attempts are insufficient, and continuing to empower them to do so in class contexts. The instructor’s explicit acknowledgment of the trauma of the content and approaching it in the most responsible way possible is a vital step, but pulling students into the process is key. By communicating that it is okay for them to have an emotional response to the content and to employ strategies that help them cope, students are empowered to identify where they are approaching the edges of their window of tolerance—where learning happens best—and take action to mitigate potential dysregulation. In addition, coaching students to do the hard but valuable work of communicating carefully and thoughtfully in dealing with these histories pulls them into the work of bearing witness, remembering, and meaning making.

Hard histories are indeed hard, and they stretch our capacity to find logic and reason in the actions of others when sometimes there is none to be found. But this study demonstrates that students are willing and able to lean into the discomfort of challenging educational work and there are pedagogical approaches we can take as instructors to support them in that process. Not only that, but they want to explore these histories as they look for answers and paths forward into the future where hopefully we have more power to prevent such atrocities.

Appendix 1: Oral History Podcast Assignment Prompt

To submit this assignment please follow the instructions in this video starting around minute 8. You will upload the file of your audio recording to either your UKY OneDrive or Google Drive. Then generate a shareable link and post that link as the Canvas assignment submission.

Working with a partner or on your own, use GarageBand to create an 8–10 minute podcast in which you explore an oral history interview of a Holocaust survivor and connect that survivor’s story with what you’ve learned and read for this course. The podcast should include at least two short clips from the survivor’s recording OR direct quotations read by the presenters.

The interview can come from UK’s Nunn Center or the USHMM archive and must be preapproved by the instructor. Your podcast should explore how the interview contributes to your understanding of war and society. The podcast should be conversational but demonstrate careful listening/reading, thought, and planning. The podcast should answer the following questions:

• How do the stories in the oral history demonstrate the impact of war on individual human beings?

• What role do survivor stories like this play in the historical study of the Holocaust?

• In your opinion, what was the most interesting aspect of your selected interview?

• How does the information and insight provided by this interview compare with the themes and information from the readings, lectures, and discussions in this course?

Be sure to verbally cite the location where the interview is housed, the date it was recorded, the survivor’s name and biographic information (if available), and any other key demographic information.

Some notes on podcast creation: be yourself and be creative. If you are working with a partner, consider using an interview or “talk-show” style format. Feel free to add intro or transition music. Do one single audio clip or use different segments. You can do this however you want. Speak naturally but slow enough that I can understand what you are saying.

Note: The assignment prompt also includes links to a video tutorial of how to use GarageBand created by the instructor.
## Appendix 2: Podcast Assignment Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Point Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast begins with an introduction including the description of the interview and the points/arguments that will be covered.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oral history analysis</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast provides an overview of the oral history, an in-depth look at some of the specific stories from the recording, and what oral histories provide to the study of the Holocaust. Includes at least two clips from the recording.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of war</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The podcast offers a clear discussion of the impact of war on individuals. This discussion should be organized and clear, using themes and transitions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class comparison</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast offers some commentary on how findings from the source compare to the content explored in class.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elements of clarity</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast includes several elements that contribute to the clarity of the message (e.g., a brief recap or summary at the end, transitions, appropriate tone, speed of speech, music when appropriate).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AUTHOR BIO

Jill M. Abney is the associate director of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) and an instructor of history at the University of Kentucky. In her educational development role, she supports instructors as they seek to foster community, equity, and belonging in their courses. As an instructor, she teaches war and society and history research methods.

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