

Ordinary Things?

Discovering the Holocaust through historical artefacts



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Credits:

Photography
Child's shoe

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Introduction

To speak about the Holocaust is to relate a narrative of destruction: the destruction of men, women and children, but also the destruction of the evidence of that crime.

At first sight many of the objects that survived this destruction may seem banal to the casual viewer, for they can be everyday, ordinary things. But these artefacts that remain, these traces of the past, can hold a special power and can be mined for deep meaning. In our interaction with authentic artefacts it may be that we can create a space for an authentic encounter with the past.

This activity approaches the history of the Holocaust through one small shoe: 'an ordinary thing'. As pupils unravel the story of its owner, it is hoped that this shoe will help them to search for meaning in the past.

Viewing the PowerPoint presentation, you will see a number of photographs of a child's shoe. Notes on each slide anticipate pupils' responses; suggest ways to help learners interrogate the source; indicate questions that pupils may raise; and provide the narrative needed to locate this original artefact in its historical context.

Pupils are encouraged to examine and discuss this artefact, one of hundreds of thousands of shoes that were taken from people murdered at the Nazi death camp Auschwitz II - Birkenau. Through guided group discussion, pupils uncover details about the owner of this little shoe, and in so doing they are introduced to skills of deduction and the analysis of historical sources. Together with the historical narrative related by the educator this should provoke learners to ask significant and important questions about this history.

It is hoped that this deep personal reflection will enrich young people's creative responses to the Holocaust through the UN *Footprints for Hope Project* and that the questions raised will provide a stimulus for deeper exploration of the Holocaust in further classroom lessons.

Lesson outline

The activity comprises four distinct stages:

1. What can be said about the original artefact and the owner of this shoe?

[PowerPoint slide numbers one to eight: see notes accompanying these slides for the full elaboration of this first stage of the activity]

It is important that pupils focus only on what they can reasonably deduce from the object itself. The educator should say nothing about the Holocaust during this stage of the activity, and should steer the discussion away from any speculation about this history by pupils. The first stage is to remain with what can be gleaned from the source, without reference to its historical context.

2. What is the historical context?

[PowerPoint slide number nine]

Having already developed their own ideas about the child who wore this shoe, having invested something of themselves through the effort of making deductions from the artefact, most pupils should be ready to engage with the historical narrative of what happened to this child. It is important to let the object speak for itself; to relate accurately and soberly, without embellishment or drama, the story of what most likely happened to the owner of this shoe,

based upon information that we have from many other historical sources.

3. **Reflection on the learning process**

[PowerPoint slide number ten]

A schema outlining an approach to interrogating historical sources – ‘mining the evidence for meaning’.

4. **What are the ‘deeper layers of meaning’?**

[PowerPoint slide number eleven]

Pupils are invited to reflect upon the significance of this narrative, to consider what issues and themes are to be found in this history, to search for ‘deeper layers of meaning’ beyond the object and the given narrative account.

If pupils are allowed to arrive at their own conclusions, rather than have meaning imposed on them, then this may be a more ‘authentic’ encounter with the past. Pupils will have some ownership of these meanings, and internalise the conclusions that they draw from their own understanding of the historical narrative.

From this position of deeper reflection pupils should be better prepared to embark on the creative response in the UN *Footprints for Hope Project*. They may also raise questions that educators can respond to in further classroom lessons and activities.

Footprints: Learning about the Holocaust through historical artefacts

You might find it useful to watch this short educational film as part of your preparation for teaching this activity. It could also be an interesting resource to show to your pupils at the end of the activity, to compare the analysis of the shoe represented in the film with the thoughts and ideas developed by the pupils themselves.

Pedagogical overview

This activity is founded in an evidential historical approach to learning about the Holocaust and seeks to create an authentic encounter with the past. By an ‘authentic encounter’ I mean a space for learners to discern their own meaning in the events described.

This requires that we allow young people to draw their own conclusions and that we avoid an over-mediated presentation of the history. In other words, pupils should not be instructed in what moral or civic lessons the educator believes that they should draw from this history. Rather, learners are encouraged to reflect on what they learn about the Holocaust and to discern meaning for themselves. In this, the role of the educator is as facilitator and guide to learning rather than as the fount of knowledge and the imparter of meaning.

The educator also has a role in providing the historical narrative – essential in this process – as it is only with a sound understanding of what happened in the past that young people can locate the artefact in its historical context. However, it is crucial that the educator resists telling the learners what s/he feels are the ‘lessons’ of this history. It is for the learner to make sense of the past, to be provoked by this encounter, and to find their own questions as they search for meaning.

The 'lessons', then, may be very different for each individual learner and will reflect his/her own positionality – values, attitudes and outlook. The conclusions that young people draw and the questions they ask may be quite different from those in the mind of the educator, but they will be an *authentic* response if learners have arrived at those questions and conclusions for themselves.

The themes, issues and questions arrived at by the learner then create an opportunity for deeper and extended exploration and learning. This activity is founded on a theory that deep learning and understanding can come from a situation in which the learner's initial ideas and preconceptions are challenged, creating a sense of dissonance that needs resolution, and a belief that it is through this dissonance that we might reach deeper and more profound layers of meaning.