

EXPLORING SURVIVOR STORIES THROUGH DRAMA



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY TRUST

This activity uses drama techniques to explore the experiences of Holocaust and genocide survivors.

This lesson provides drama activities pioneered by Bertolt Brecht, which help the audience to learn facts about what happened, and protect performers from trying to re-enact traumatic situations.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- All students will identify experiences of some survivors during genocide and consider their emotions
- All students will give examples of Bertolt Brecht's life and his theatrical techniques
- Some students will comment on the question of how powerful our words are, and how we can use them for good in society today
- Some students will create a piece for performance to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day

YOU WILL NEED:

- Henry Wermuth life story
- Jo Ingabire life story
- *Character mapping* worksheet (one per group)
- Brecht bingo sheet

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:

This activity would work well for a youth or community theatre group, or a Key Stage 3 or 4 drama class. Some basic background knowledge of genocide and the Holocaust is helpful but not essential. Our lesson *An introduction to genocide* at hmd.org.uk/interactive might be a good starting point for this activity.

Background information sheets are provided for teachers on the Holocaust and the Genocide in Rwanda to help you answer students' questions.

TEACHER NOTES:

We have been careful in this resource to suggest ways of using drama to tell stories from the Holocaust and genocide without the use of 'empathetic techniques' such as asking students to imagine themselves in the position of victims or perpetrators. These exercises, while useful in other drama lessons, are problematic in teaching about the Holocaust, as trying to imagine themselves in unimaginable situations may cause stress to students or performers and limit their ability to absorb information about the history.

By safely engaging students with real life stories, we inspire a more genuine empathy that leaves them wanting to learn more and share the stories they have explored.

Teacher notes - about Bertolt Brecht



© Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-W0409-300 / Kolbe, Jörg / CC-BY-SA 3.0 [CC BY-SA 3.0 de

Bertolt Brecht was a German playwright born in 1898. His work is highly political, and he used his writing to express his anti-fascist beliefs and to criticise the German government, who banned his plays. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Brecht fled Germany knowing that he would be persecuted for his writing. The Nazis formally removed his citizenship and destroyed his work in public book burnings.

Brecht's techniques aim to remind the audience that they are watching theatre, not real life, and to make them think. He wanted to keep audiences engaged in the action but avoid emotional investment, to help them to consider the meaning of what they are watching.

This makes his exercises particularly useful when exploring stories of genocide, as actors are not asked to 'represent' the unimaginable violence and loss in the stories. His techniques help us to explore real experiences and discuss what we can learn from them.

Introduction to Holocaust Memorial Day

Each year on 27 January we mark Holocaust Memorial Day to remember:

- the six million Jewish people who were systematically persecuted and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust.
- the Nazis' other victims, including Roma and Sinti people, disabled people, gay people, political opponents and many others who faced persecution and death at the hands of the Nazis.
- the millions of men, women and children, who have been murdered in the genocides which followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

Life stories

In this activity, students will explore the life stories of Henry Wermuth and Jo Ingabire. Two versions (easy to read and full formats) are included at the end of this lesson plan for you to choose from, according to the level of your learners and the time you have available.

Differentiation

Smaller groups or lower ability students: The whole group should explore one easy to read life story together.

Medium ability students: Split the group in half so that both easy to read life stories are being explored.

Higher ability students can read the full versions of each life story.

Hand out copies of the life stories and *Character mapping* worksheets.

Read through the life story together or in groups.

Ask students to fill out the *Character maps* in small groups, listing what they know about the main person and the environment they lived in.

Character mapping extension questions if you have more time:

1. How were words used for good or evil in this story?
2. What have you learnt about the genocide from reading this person's story?
3. What can we learn from these stories to apply to our own lives and actions?
4. What would you like to say to this person?

Whole group discussion:

1. What do we need to think about when using drama to tell a real person's story?

Answers may include: trying to remain factual; showing respect to the person; telling the story in an engaging way so the audience remains interested.

2. What are the particularly sensitive parts of these stories?

Answers may include: the deaths of family members; people suffering; how we represent victims and perpetrators without being simplistic.

Teacher note – Your students may have questions at this stage about the Holocaust and the Genocide in Rwanda. We have provided you with a fact sheet on each to help you to give them an overview and answer their questions.

Learning about Bertolt Brecht

'Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.'

- Bertolt Brecht

Discuss this quote. What does this reveal to us about Brecht's reasons for writing and producing plays? What does he aim to achieve?

Answers may include:

- He wants his plays to change the world (How?)
- He wants people to leave the play thinking
- He does not want the audience to be comfortably watching what they already know
- He wants to solve problems in society

Brecht facts bingo

1. In advance, print and cut up the Brecht facts bingo sheet.
2. Give each student an A or a B slip.
3. Instruct students to go around the room and find the other half of their fact.
4. Once all the students are paired up they should tell the rest of the group their fact.

Brechtian Techniques

Bertolt Brecht used specific techniques in his plays to remind the audience to think about political messages, instead of getting drawn into the characters and story. We will try some of these techniques with the life stories we have read.

Exercise One - Speaking in the third person

In small groups, set up a hot-seating exercise. Make use of the *Character maps* made earlier.

1. One student is on the hot seat with the *Character map* in front of them.
2. Other students ask questions about the survivor from the life story.
3. The student on the hot seat replies in the third person using the survivor's name instead of 'I am...' (For example: **Question:** 'Where were you born?' **Answer:** 'Jo Ingabire was born in Rwanda.')
4. Students swap around to give different people a chance in the hot seat.

Choosing scenes

Exercises two and three below ask students to choose a part of the story to turn into a scene. Instruct students to avoid the most violent parts of the story – the killings and the concentration camps. Some suggestions are provided below:

Jo Ingabire

- Her childhood, when her neighbours are like family.
- The scene in the classroom when the Hutus and Tutsis are made to stand on opposite sides of the room.
- Listening to the radio saying hateful things about Tutsis – how would the family have reacted? How might Hutu listeners have reacted?
- The family moving their beds into the hallway and boarding up the windows.
- The 14-year-old neighbour coming to help them after the shooting.

Henry Wermuth

- Henry's surprise as a patriotic German boy hearing soldiers singing in the streets about killing Jews.
- Being woken up in the middle of the night and forced to move to Poland.
- Having to wear Star of David armbands and clear the streets of snow and ice.
- Making the hiding place for Ida and Hanna and leaving them behind. Finding their pictures.
- Blocking the train track thinking it would derail Hitler's train.

Exercise Two - Placards

1. In small groups, choose a moment from the life story you are exploring, and create a tableau (freeze frame) showing this part of the story.

Think about:

- Who is in the scene?
 - What are they doing?
 - What are the relationships between the different people in the scene?
 - What are they thinking or feeling?
 - How can you show all of this using your body position and facial expressions?
2. Once you have practised your tableau, each write a 'placard' with a fact about the survivor from the story. This can be anything – something everyday, or something about how they feel.
 3. Go back into your tableau, this time holding up your placards.
 4. Take it in turns to read your placard aloud in the third person. You can step out of the tableau to read it or stay in position. (You could encourage students to discuss what differences these creative choices make.)
 5. Practice this, and show the speaking tableaux to the rest of the group. Discuss each one.

Exercise Three - Short script

In your groups, choose a different part of the story to the ones shared in the tableaux.

Create a scene telling this part of the story. Each character must have a line, but can only speak once.

You can also use placards and third person techniques in your scene. If it is helpful, you could add a narrator character.

Share these scenes with the rest of the group and give feedback on how each group has used the Brechtian techniques we have learned. As a group, discuss the following questions:

- How are these scenes different to more naturalistic styles of performance?
- What effect does this have on what we, as audience members, learn and focus on in the scene?

Whole group discussion of next steps:

- Can we put these scenes together and add some more to tell the whole story of a survivor?
- What message do we want the audience to take away from seeing the survivor's experiences?
- How do Brecht's techniques help the audience understand the message?

Extension activity:

Use these scenes and techniques to complete and rehearse a whole group presentation that tells a survivor's life story.

Consider adding a narrator character to give the audience some contextual information about the genocide and to link the different scenes together.

Perform this presentation to other students, staff or parents as part of an event or assembly for Holocaust Memorial Day.

TAKE THE LEARNING FURTHER:

You can find a Holocaust Memorial Day assembly, and other lesson plans and activities including a lesson to explore language through poetry at hmd.org.uk/educators

You can find books suitable for children and young people that further explore these themes at hmd.org.uk/resources/books-young-people

You can read more life stories of survivors, rescuers and people who were killed in genocides at hmd.org.uk/lifestories

Our online platform **HMDT Interactive** has lessons that give students background knowledge about the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and other genocides: hmd.org.uk/interactive

With thanks to Jon Gibson for his help and support with this lesson plan.



Find out more...

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: hmd.org.uk

Order an activity pack or resources: hmd.org.uk/activitypack

Resources for educators: hmd.org.uk/educators

CHARACTER MAPPING

You can answer these questions about the story as a whole or a particular moment.

Head:

What were they thinking about?

Eyes and ears:

What did they see and hear?

Arms:

What actions did they take?

Mouth:

What words were said or written to hurt or help them?

Legs:

How did they escape or survive?

Heart:

How do you think they felt?

Environment

What is happening around this person?



BRECHT FACTS BINGO

Cut these facts out in advance. Give each student an A or a B and ask them to find the other half of their fact by comparing information with other members of the group.

Make sure you keep a copy of the full sentences in case students get stuck.

A: Brecht was born in 1898 in...	B: ... Bavaria (south-east Germany)
A: Brecht was nearly expelled from school for...	B: ... writing an essay criticising World War One
A: In 1924 Brecht moved to Berlin to...	B: ... pursue a career writing and producing plays
A: Brecht wrote political films and plays which...	B: ... attacked Nazism and German society
A: Brecht's plays were...	B: ... banned by the Government
A: Brecht fled Germany in 1933 when...	B: ... Hitler came to power
A: The Nazi party held mass book-burnings of books that were against the government, and...	B: ... Brecht's works were destroyed