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On Open Questions in Holocaust Education

Extended summary

Even though recent decades have borne witness to an increased educational interest in teaching the Holocaust, academic stances on why the topic should be taught still vary significantly. The aim of this paper is to present the benefits of using open and controversial questions as well as historical topics as a basis for teaching about the Holocaust. The paper offers arguments supporting the assumption that open questions enable simultaneous combination of a number of teaching aims. Using concrete teaching units as an example, the research demonstrates how open questions can be used to analyze historical processes, the development of critical thinking, the culture of dialogue, and debating skills. The same teaching contents were developed to point to importance and role of civic activism and reconsideration of one's own moral attitudes. The literature dealing with the ways of approaching controversial issues, teaching about the Holocaust, and discussing the causes and consequences in history teaching was used for developing the teaching units. In addition, the paper is based on academic achievements related to the goals of education in a broader sense.

This study contains original teaching ideas expressed in three teaching units, each of which being based on one open question. The first one is aimed at discussing the possibilities of a more precise identification of the boundary among heroes, victims, and passive bystanders in the context of the Holocaust, the goal of which is an overall and complex analysis of some of the key terms related to the Holocaust. It was envisaged that the knowledge of history, serving as a basis, should be supplemented with two teaching units, followed by a gradual introduction of more complex sociological and philosophical concepts. In this manner, the following

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teaching unit is directed at analyzing the causes and consequences of the Holocaust, bearing in mind the open questions of their hierarchy and classification. The goal of the last teaching unit is to review the responsibility of the Allies for the escalation of the Holocaust. The lesson plans for each of the three units were developed in line with the recommendations that teaching open questions should include students' freedom of choice. In this context, teachers should help their students to develop their own opinions and select one of the acceptable answers to every question.

The teaching content presented in this paper was designed in a manner that encourages students to analyze, drawing upon their everyday knowledge, historical processes and facts, as well as abstract concepts. With this goal in mind, the lessons were designed to include a number of historical and philosophical topics. Given that the analysis of historical processes is one of the key aims of each lesson, the content presented in the paper is most suitable for history lessons. However, many of the ideas are suitable for democracy/civic education lessons, while some others can be adapted for the needs of other school subjects of social orientation, primarily philosophy. Given that the required time for each of the three teaching units is 90 minutes, they are for technical reasons most suitable for additional lessons, history school clubs, as well as regular history classes in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.

Keywords: Holocaust education, history education, teaching aims, controversial issues, open questions

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