

Teaching *Night* by Elie Wiesel

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Although I have always tried to incorporate new and innovative communicative language teaching techniques in my classes throughout my career, I realized last year that I was playing it safe with the reading material, class discussions, and presentations. Teaching international cadets from over a dozen different nations in an English for Academic Purposes course at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) presents challenges in finding relevant reading material. The theme of this academic writing course is, “War, Occupation, Culture, and Migration”, which aligns with the profession of arms. One section of the course is designed for semester-exchange students who are currently serving in their militaries. This past year, I had officers, ranging in age from 24 to 32, from Japan, Brazil, France, Colombia, Spain, Korea, and Chile, many of whom had been deployed multiple times and had direct experience in war zones as well as on peacekeeping missions. Cadets from Tunisia, Jordan, the Philippines, the Marshall Islands, Ghana, Niger, Sri Lanka, and Senegal are still in training and range in age from 17 to 22. The ages and backgrounds of the students made for highly varied class discussions and presentations. In this narrative I will focus on teaching *Night* by Elie Wiesel and how I refined some teaching strategies to address sensitive areas.

In his memoir of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel describes his forced incarceration as a teenager in Auschwitz and later Buchenwald with his family. Students in my class who were from Brazil, France, and Spain had a solid background in the history of WWII and the concentration camps, which is part of their curriculum. The majority of the other students in the class had a vague idea of the Holocaust and little knowledge about Judaism. Personal beliefs of the students this year included Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Atheism, which lends itself to lively class discussions, some of which can be quite sensitive.

I am a bit embarrassed to admit this, but in the past, I have avoided showing graphic videos, photographs, and personal testimonies until this year. In addition, I glossed over discussions that might make some in the room uncomfortable or challenge their beliefs. I tended to limit discussions depending on what countries were represented in the class. For example, in the past I did not spend too much time on the Japan's occupation of Korea, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the creation of the state of Israel. Since the Holocaust is not taught in depth in many countries, I found it necessary to assign numerous supplementary materials. According to Eckhardt Fuchs (2015), what is taught about the Holocaust varies widely and "...46 countries, such as Algeria and Japan, provide only context..." whereas, other countries such as, Egypt, Palestine, New Zealand, Iraq and Thailand make no reference in secondary school curricula (p. 2). I felt this reticence because I wanted to maintain a warm and inviting atmosphere in the classroom, but upon reflection this was an avoidance of difficult topics on my part. Now I begin the semester with an introduction to the course focusing on the sensitive nature of our topics and how all nations around the globe have parts of their history that are difficult to discuss and then give examples from the United States.

The publication titled, *Teaching Night* (2017), developed by the organization Facing History and Ourselves, greatly assisted me in being a more inclusive educator. Before developing course material, I usually search for lessons that have already been developed and are open access, which I can adapt to suit the needs of my students. According to their mission, "Facing History and Ourselves is an international education and professional development organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism,

prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry” (p. i). This study guide includes the central questions, “How is our identity shaped and reshaped by the circumstances we encounter?”; “How do tragedy and trauma influence an individual’s identity and choices?” (p. 1). These questions enabled students in my class to reflect on past and present conflicts in their own nations as well as their identity.

Over the course of 40 lessons, students are required to write fifteen 350-word journals for homework from a given prompt related to the book. Prompts included having students choose a quote to analyze and reflect upon from the Preface or Forward, finding an academic article in our class Library Guide related to the first several chapters and writing a summary and reaction, and choosing two photographs from the Auschwitz Album to analyze. This material is available through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/USHMM-Lesson-Hoecker-Auschwitz-Album.pdf>). In addition, students research some of the historical figures that Elie Wiesel honors in his Nobel Prize Speech, which is featured at the end of *Night*. There were four journal entries related to the memoir, which provided meaningful discussion to begin the first ten minutes of the class. Additional activities to help students achieve a greater understanding of the Holocaust and the experiences of Elie Wiesel included finding narratives of survivors and sharing their stories with the class. Students also conducted research and wrote a paper on a theme in the memoir in addition to viewing archival film footage. Students felt their perspectives were included because they could relate these personal stories to historical conflicts in which their own family members were involved in their home countries.

In addition to teaching students about the Holocaust, Wiesel’s memoir delves into the issue of faith and loss of faith during Wiesel’s incarceration; therefore, the class had many discussions relating this to their own belief systems. Most of the class had very little knowledge about Judaism, so the glossary provided by the study guide as well as a visit from the Jewish Chaplain were very helpful indeed. The Chaplain shared his family history and the loss and disappearance of family members in Europe during WWII as well as tracing their journeys to new countries. This personal account helped the students develop empathy as did all of the readings

and discussion. The students were very curious about Judaism and the Muslim students were particularly interested in comparing the traditions and beliefs of these two faith groups. I am hoping to increase the number of guest speakers in this class to address issues of diversity and to continue to challenge myself and my students to strive to achieve the USAFA Outcomes (2023) as follows:

Proficiencies	Class Assignments and Activities
Clear Communication Proficiency 1: Describe their own contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflective journals comparing historical events in their home countries and what Elie Wiesel experienced.• Mini-presentations on these entries.
Ethics and Respect for Human Dignity Proficiency 3: Describe how one’s own backgrounds, habits, values, assumptions, commitments and hubris may affect one’s perceptions of ethical standards and behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflective journals on their cultures and that of Elie Wiesel with visuals and short presentations.• Socratic seminar.• Critical essay on <i>Night</i> comparing their background to the events of the memoir.• Jewish Chaplain guest speaker.• Analysis of war footage, photographs, and videos.
The Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies Proficiency 2: Explain historical, cultural, societal, and political developments that have shaped their own identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflective journals on perspective taking.• Pair and whole class discussions with guiding questions.

By returning to these outcomes, I believe I can move forward in becoming a more inclusive educator.

References

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