
Bergen-Belsen

Pedagogical Approaches

BELSEN

80

About Pedagogical Approaches

Here you will find an overview of the pedagogical approach we adopt in these School Resources, alongside frequently asked questions which address concerns that you may have when teaching this difficult and emotive topic. Emphasis is placed on the importance of student and teacher well-being whilst maintaining high expectations of knowledge and understanding.

Section 1 outlines educational opportunities and challenges, Section 2 provides you with guidance on overarching principles to guide practice. In Section 3 you will find advice on addressing a number of challenges that can arise when teaching sensitive topics such as Bergen-Belsen – for example, the questions around the use of atrocity images in the classroom.

Contents

About Pedagogical Approaches	2
1. Bergen-Belsen: Educational Opportunities and Challenges	4
2. Principles for practice	4
2.1 Raising the bar	4
2.2 Authentic encounters with the past.....	4
2.3 Research into practice and addressing myths and misconceptions	4
2.4 Duty of care / Safe learning environments	4
2.5 The Importance of a knowledge-led approach.....	4
2.6 Importance to draw out opportunities for affective learning – SMSC, Cultural literacy, Values ...	5
3. Addressing the challenges	5
3.1 How can I ensure that my own knowledge is secure?.....	5
3.2 How can I prepare myself to handle emotionally demanding content?.....	5
3.3 How should images of Bergen Belsen be used in the classroom?	5
3.4 How can I ensure that all of my students engage with the learning?	6
3.5 How do I provide appropriate support for individual students?	6
3.6 How do I know that my students have made progress?.....	6
3.7 How can I create a safe and secure learning environment when dealing with sensitive topics? .	7
3.8 How do I deal with difficult questions?	7
3.9 How do I deal with inappropriate comments or responses?.....	7
3.10 Is it OK to ask students to put themselves in other people's shoes?	7
3.11 How do I enable my students to recognise the significance of the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen?	7
4. References.....	8

1. Bergen-Belsen: Educational Opportunities and Challenges

The liberation of Bergen-Belsen is a heavily documented event, which reveals the range of human behaviour, from appalling acts of hatred to extraordinary courage. It raises questions about the human condition, making it valuable to the educational experience of students.

Learning about the liberation, the events that led to it and what took place during and afterwards can be particularly disturbing but being able to skilfully and sensitively confront the reality of what took place can help students grow both in terms of building powerful knowledge as well as emotional literacy.

2. Principles for practice

2.1 Raising the bar

It is important to maintain high expectations of student achievement both in relation to levels of knowledge and understanding as well as in terms of students' capacity to respond intelligently to ethical and moral questions. We should avoid simplistic answers to complex questions. We hope that the lessons outlined in this pack will support you to this end.

2.2 Authentic encounters with the past

This pack makes extensive use of primary source material to ensure students have an accurate and authentic encounter with this history. This use of primary material is intended to humanise individual victims amidst the enormous death toll at Bergen-Belsen and to enable student enquiry. We should be careful with our use of language and perpetrator material to avoid reinforcing the worldview of the perpetrators.

2.3 Research into practice and addressing myths and misconceptions

Our research indicates that students have many problematic misconceptions about the Holocaust. [This link](#) will take you to UCL's ground-breaking 2016 research with young people that provides guidance on the implication of these findings and how to address them in your teaching.

2.4 Duty of care / Safe learning environments

It is important to be conscious of our duty to support young people when encountering potentially disturbing material. Knowing your students well will help you determine whether extra care or a particular type of care should be offered to students before, during and after lessons/assemblies/tutor periods focused on this history. Teachers have a duty to themselves too and need to prepare themselves well for the difficult content that cannot be avoided when teaching about Bergen-Belsen.

Never use any of these School Resources in school without first viewing them carefully, reading our planning guidance and considering the particular needs and stage of development of the students you will be using the materials with.

2.5 The Importance of a knowledge-led approach

If students are to make sense of this difficult past and respond in a meaningful and intelligent way, they need to acquire knowledge. The richer that knowledge is, in nuance and complexity, the more

likely it is they will be able to draw informed conclusions and make sense of the importance of Bergen-Belsen to mark its liberation. Our pedagogy and lesson materials take a 'knowledge-led' approach, although we are primarily concerned, in this pack, with the development of substantive rather than disciplinary knowledge (Counsell, 2018).

2.6 Importance to draw out opportunities for affective learning – SMSC, Cultural literacy, Values

In addition to secure historical knowledge, students can benefit in terms of personal growth through confronting and exploring the humanity and inhumanity exhibited in Bergen-Belsen.

By drawing upon the knowledge of Bergen-Belsen and its associated history, students should be able to:

- Build cultural literacy relating to the significance of the liberation in Britain's consciousness and how it is understood in arts, politics and social engagement;
- Recognise why remembering the Holocaust, Bergen-Belsen and its liberation is significant today to us today;
- Recognise the values that keep British society safe: democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect; and
- Strengthen personal resilience to use knowledge to inspire and empower agency and action to work to promoting compassion and the protection of human rights and freedoms.

3. Addressing the challenges

3.1 How can I ensure that my own knowledge is secure?

All of the Belsen 80 materials have been designed to be delivered by teachers of all subject specialisms and of all levels of experience. Where topics or concepts are more complex, additional teacher notes have been provided alongside the teacher material. A Short History of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen has been included in these Schools Resources and it provides information about the history of the camp and of its wider context. For further information, we have included a list of recommended, accessible reading materials and publications as part of this Short History.

3.2 How can I prepare myself to handle emotionally demanding content?

Much of the Belsen 80 material is emotionally challenging. In addition to considering students' wellbeing, it is important that teachers consider their own emotional wellbeing when approaching these sessions. Teachers should familiarise themselves with the material that they are going to be using beforehand. Where possible teachers should plan collaboratively with colleagues and seek support for any issues that this topic raises that may cause emotional distress. Preparation will help teachers to feel more confident when dealing with emotionally challenging content in the classroom. When establishing a safe learning environment it is advisable to make students aware of the emotionally challenging content that they will encounter and reassure them that this will be approached together in a mutually supportive way.

3.3 How should images of Bergen Belsen be used in the classroom?

Atrocity images should not be used gratuitously or to simply shock. Choose images carefully so that each image is there for a sound educational reason. Humanising the victims is important and that goal is compromised when there is a disproportionate number of images that depict distorted, mangled and nameless bodies. This could temporarily traumatise students or inhibit meaningful engagement as they may become numbed to a nuanced and empathetic response. Give them a choice as to whether to look at the images/footage/hear the testimony or not. It will be important to provide students with an alternative learning resource where necessary.

Knowing your students is key to safeguarding and in this applies in relation to disturbing subject matter. It is important to consider carefully the nature of the student their background and personal experience. Vulnerable learners and those 'hard to reach' students may require additional support in the run up to study and during it, as well as extra support in the follow-up stage.

It is important to help students understand these images in context and the power that they had for contemporary audiences encountering them in newsreel and newspapers. It is important that students are aware that images circulated much less frequently in the past, before the widespread ownership of television and before social media.

For further guidance, see the [IHRA recommendations](#).

3.4 How can I ensure that all of my students engage with the learning?

All materials and activities have been designed to be accessible to students. Certain activities and materials are explicitly targeted towards students in a particular key stage. Within the resources, you will find that provision has been made for Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 students. Using your prior knowledge of your students will enable you to select the materials and activities that would be best suited to them. Opportunities for support and challenge students have been included throughout the pack.

3.5 How do I provide appropriate support for individual students?

Teachers cannot be expected to know everything about every student but it is best practice prior to exploring sensitive and challenging content in advance of teaching. Considering what might be a trigger in a session for those in your care is crucial. Speaking to colleagues in the pastoral or SEND teams, support staff, or Head of Year or phase, even the designated safeguarding lead can often be helpful in your preparation. Vulnerable learners and students with SEND will benefit from teacher's modelling or acknowledging how emotion can be expressed through words, tone, body language and facial expression.

3.6 How do I know that my students have made progress?

Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through feedback and discussion as part of the lesson activities and the whole school activities. Students will be able to apply their knowledge and understanding through various the various tasks that are included in the lesson activities and the whole school activities. They will also be able to demonstrate

and explore their responses to Belsen 80 in a number of creative ways, as set out in the Legacy Project Guide in the Commemoration section of the Resources Hub.¹

3.7 How can I create a safe and secure learning environment when dealing with sensitive topics?

A safe learning environment that enables freedom of speech and expression must also preserve truth and evidence. This is achieved by setting clear classroom expectations. It is strongly recommended that students spend time in developing a class agreement, or revisit pre-existing principles within school so as clear expectations of values and behaviour are established ahead of exploring the Belsen 80 resources, or indeed any such sensitive and challenging content. In so doing, values are linked to practice.

3.8 How do I deal with difficult questions?

Students will naturally have a great deal of questions about the materials covered in the Belsen 80 Information Pack and their curiosity should be encouraged. Teachers should allow space and time for pupils to reflect on and question the material. In the event of students asking a question where the teacher feels their knowledge is insufficient, they could offer to research the question with the student.

3.9 How do I deal with inappropriate comments or responses?

People often respond to disturbing or horrific material in a variety of ways. The immediate response may be to laugh or make fun or otherwise behave inappropriately. This often expresses discomfort and is not necessarily a true reflection of the student's response to this challenging history. A teacher should model an appropriate and respectful way to respond to the strong emotions evoked by this material. A teacher should give time for students to process these strong emotions. If students are persistently inappropriate, remind them of the principles of your class agreement. As before, it is critical that you have strong knowledge of your students and their backgrounds to support you in this.

3.10 Is it OK to ask students to put themselves in other people's shoes?

It is impossible for us to imagine what it would feel like to experience the horror of the Holocaust and the experiences of the liberated and the liberators of Bergen-Belsen. Any attempt to do so would therefore be superficial and disrespectful to the memory of those that experienced this first hand. Sympathetic and meaningful understanding is best found through consideration and understanding of the context of authentic personal stories. Students should be encouraged to engage with the experiences of these individuals in order to facilitate genuine empathy for them and respect for their memory.

3.11 How do I enable my students to recognise the significance of the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen?

Teachers will surely recognise the significance of the Belsen 80 School Resources for students: the stories that they help to tell demonstrate the end-result of extremism and racial intolerance in a

¹ Please see the section on Progression and Routes through the Lessons later in Chapter 4 of these School Resources for more information on progression.

previously democratic society and will underpin your students' understanding of the values necessary to advance peaceful community cohesion.

You could explore through the *Images and Representation* tutor time materials [See Chapter 6 of these School Resources] with your students to understand the efforts made by Bergen-Belsen liberators to ensure their footage and photography would be believed, and their efforts to demonstrate the reality of Bergen-Belsen to local German people. The activities in these resources require students to think critically, identify bias and interrogate source material that also supports this aim. You can enhance your students' understanding of fundamental British values by the discussions in the *Encountering the Holocaust* and the *Antisemitism Then and Now* sessions [See Chapter 4 of these School Resources] which should help prepare students to be more active and engaged citizens in their community, and should equip them to recognise and address extremism, racial hatred and antisemitism. Teachers can use the *Suffering and Survival* materials [See Chapter 6 of these School Resources] to begin to explore the experience of survivors and their expression of those experiences.

There is also extensive guidance on building on the material in these School Resources in the Legacy Project Guide [See the Commemoration section of the Resources Hub].

4. References

Counsell, C. (2018). Taking curriculum seriously. *Impact: Journal of the Chartered College of Teaching*, (4). Retrieved from <https://impact.chartered.college/article/taking-curriculum-seriously/>

IHRA. (2019). *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about The Holocaust*. Retrieved from IHRA website: <https://holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/IHRA-Recommendations-Teaching-and-Learning-about-Holocaust.pdf>



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