

Artifacts and Active Learning

Eitan Novick

Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, Yeshiva University

Grade: 8th—10th

Rationale: One often-heard lament from Holocaust educators is that soon there will be no survivors left. Nothing can replace their firsthand stories, which is why it's crucial that testimonies be recorded. Artifacts, however, also present us with a powerful educational tool. Within artifacts there is always a story for us to unpack and discover. They allow us to narrow our focus to individuals and their stories and help us relate to them, not in their time of death but in their life. The use of artifacts also encourages active learning and historical authenticity as students have to work with documents, texts, and photos related to the artifact as they seek to uncover its story.

Goal: Students will relate to individuals and their stories through working with their artifacts; they will actively engage with the stories through those artifacts.

Time required: Two class periods, with a presentation piece on day two.

Materials: From the following sites or from the spring 2014 issue of *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* (<http://www.yu.edu/azrieli/research/prism-journal/>), choose a number of Holocaust artifacts, or pictures of artifacts, depending on the number of students:

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_list.php?MediaType=af&page=1

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/artifacts/>

Choose artifacts that tell the Jewish story, not the Nazi story; a pair of candlesticks used to light Shabbat candles in a ghetto tell a Jewish story, while an antisemitic newspaper cartoon tells the Nazi story. Copy or download and print those you choose. Xerox four copies of each and put each set of four in envelopes to be given to each of four or five groups.

Activities: This lesson is divided as follows:

- **Introduction:** Explain what can be done with artifacts and why they are important.
- **Individual work:** Students will think and write on their own, interacting with the artifact in a very personal way, focusing on what it evokes in them.

Group work: Students will work as a team to delve deeper into the background of the artifact and the story behind it and create some way of presenting that story.

Share-out: Each group will present the artifact they worked on and the story behind it.

Reflection: The class comes together to discuss their thoughts and conclusions about the value of working with artifacts.

Set Up: Arrange desks in pods of four or five and place student name cards on each desk. Around the perimeter of the room, set up 3 or 4 different stations, including one for research, poetry / song, and visual representation. As students enter, instruct them to sit by their place card and take out paper and pen (or laptop).

Introduction: Begin by explaining that students will be learning through actual artifacts from Jews in the Holocaust. To introduce the concept of artifacts, why they are important, and how we can use them as a learning tool, show the first three minutes of the video *Footprints: Discovering the Holocaust through Historical Artefacts*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=XWneASsotkc

Next, outline the structure and order of activities and procedures for transitions, and distribute one envelope with photos of artifacts to each pod. Describe each station; groups can use as many as they wish within the allotted time, or split up to cover multiple stations and regroup to assemble all they have created.

Individual Free-Writing (10 minutes): Ask a student at each pod to open the envelope and distribute the photo. Students should study their picture and then write just what comes to mind when looking at the artifact. What kind of person might have owned this artifact? Who was he or she? How old was the owner? What feelings, memories, or reactions does it evoke in you? What meaning do you see in it?

Group Work (30 minutes): Each group will design a brief presentation after sharing their thoughts about their artifact. They will investigate the stations set up around the room and decide which one they wish to use for their presentation.

Research Station: Here, students will learn more about the history of their specific artifact and its owner, and, more broadly, about the type of artifact. Sources provided here include information about each artifact, its history, and its owner. Ideally, this station should have headphones and computers or tablets on which certain tabs were open to direct students to certain online resources. If such tools are not available, material can be printed and filed according to the artifact. Potential resources for this station include.

- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem websites: Both have background stories for the artifacts.

IWitness (iwitness.usc.edu): This website contains a tremendous database of survivor testimony organized by topic. You can save your searches to set up the search results; students can see them when they log in. For example, if one group is working with a picture of *tefillin*, the teacher can save a search for “*tefillin*” and students can see any clips of survivors talking about *tefillin*. *PRISM* volume 6, Spring 2014: Each volume is fully downloadable at no cost.

Poetry Station: Here, students will react to the artifact using poetry. Provide examples of poetry written about artifacts to help guide students and spark ideas. Examples include:

- “My Father’s Souvenirs,” Elizabeth Rosner: *PRISM*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 78
- “Shoshana,” Reva Sharon: *PRISM*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 98
- “How She Learned,” Marge Piercy: *PRISM*, Vol. 3, p. 80.
- “The Archivist,” Judith Chalmer: *PRISM*, Vol. 3, p. 147.
- “Juliek’s Violin,” Cyrus Cassels: *PRISM*, Vol. 4, p. 81.

I recommend no more than two examples, as students should spend more time at this station creating than reading. Members of a group can work together or create individual poems. Students can use what they learned at the research station or can write about what the artifact evokes for them.

Visual Representation Station: Here, students will create a visual representation of the artifact that will illustrate a reaction to the artifact’s history and/or the students’ feelings about it. Materials at this station should include sketchpads, pencils and markers, clay, poster board, scissors, decorative material, etc. Students can finish their presentation with the group for homework if they wish, although class time should be sufficient.

Class 2: Share-out: Each group will be given five minutes to present their artifact and to explain the rationale for their choices.

Reflection: When students regroup, divide the board into two sections on the board, one titled “What did we learn?” and the other, “What questions do we still have?” Give each student two sticky-notes to respond; they can paste each in the relevant column. Read them and look for major themes, facilitating a discussion based on that.

If there is not enough time for a long reflection and discussion period, end with a quick wraparound in which each student has to say one thing in response to the lesson, such as what he or she gained, how the experience felt, what was learned, etc.

Direct the conversation or close with the idea that artifacts convey individual stories and are thus crucial in studying the Holocaust.

Conclusion: Of course, you can customize this lesson with your students in mind and your restrictions and realities. But its essence is to ask students to interact with artifacts and uncover the individuals and stories behind them. It should narrow the tremendous scope of the Holocaust and focus on individuals while providing opportunities for active, differentiated learning.