

The Importance of Empathy

Goals

- Identify and recognize the emotion of empathy
- Personally reflect on a historic act of shaming, intolerance and dehumanization and make a contemporary connection
- Recognize that individual choices can have positive or negative impacts on others

Duration

Up to 60 minutes to complete

Prerequisites

- Completion of the AchieveWORKS® Skills assessment or the AchieveWORKS Intelligences assessment, or both. Students will need a copy of their *summary report(s)* for one or both of the assessments, or a device to view these results online
- Students should be familiar with the Holocaust of the Second World War. See separate handout, Resources for Learning about the Holocaust. This sets the background for the short film and can be teacher led or self-directed

Materials and Preparation

Students will need:

- a laptop or mobile device, *if viewing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) silent film as individuals*
- paper and a writing utensil

You will also need:

- a projector or other device to display the film, *if viewing it as a class*
- a class set of copies of the Empathy student reflection worksheet
- a class set of copies of the Resources for Learning about the Holocaust handout

Please print and modify as needed to use these guided activities with your students. Note, however, that this content, or any portion thereof, may not be copied, distributed, republished, uploaded, posted or transmitted without the express written permission of Human eSources Ltd.

Method

Motivational Set (5 minutes)

1. Open a short discussion and elicit student responses to the question, What is empathy?
2. Ask students to think about a time when they have felt ostracized, shamed, abandoned, neglected or alone, with nobody on their side.

Introduction (10 minutes)

1. Set the context for the short silent film, Public Humiliation of a Teenage Couple, available on the USHMM website:
<http://somewereighbors.ushmm.org/#/exhibitions/teenagers/UN1967>
(*Film Credit:* Państwowy Instytut Naukowy – Instytut Śląski w Opolu)

You can use the film's subtitles and accompanying text to describe the setting and situation:

Steindorf (present day Ścinawa Nyska) in German-occupied Silesia, Poland, 1941

Town leaders and young people organize the public shaming of a teenage couple for having a "mixed race" relationship

Sixteen-year-old Bronia was an ethnic Pole serving as a forced laborer in German-occupied Poland. Nineteen-year-old Gerhard Greschok was an ethnic German field hand working on the same farm.

After their forbidden "interracial" romance was discovered, local townspeople subjected them to the public humiliation shown in this film. As punishment, Gerhard was sent to the Soviet front, and Bronia to a concentration camp. Bronia's fate is unknown. Gerhard and his mother are buried in Ścinawa Nyska.

2. Hand out the Empathy student reflection worksheets, and show the film or have students view it on their device.

Activity and Student Self-Reflection (10 minutes)

1. After watching the film once, have the students independently reflect and begin to answer questions 1-6 on the reflection worksheet. Show the film a second time and have students continue to record, or edit, their notes while it is playing.
2. After the second showing, encourage the students to continue recording their own answers to the questions *before* starting any discussion.

Discussion (10-15 minutes)

1. Begin an open discussion of the film. Have the students share their answers, and emphasize that students are free to change their answers after hearing others. This is what learning is all about.
2. Refer to question 7 on the worksheet and have an open discussion about it. Display the following quotations to the class and have students discuss their meaning:

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident

“We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere....”

~ Elie Wiesel, Romanian-born American Jewish writer, professor, political activist, Nobel Laureate, and Holocaust survivor

3. Turning to current times, have students consider where victims exist in their everyday lives. Ask the question, What qualities or traits might help people sense when others are being victimized?

There are many possible answers. If students hit on the word "empathy", focus the discussion there. If they don't, try to lead them there gently. Then present the following working definition of empathy:

Empathy: The ability to understand *and* share the feelings of another, especially someone whose experiences are different from your own.

Explain that empathy differs from sympathy, which is feeling bad for someone. Empathy requires something that is difficult for most people: to suppress their own biases and instead see the world through someone else's eyes.

Access AchieveWORKS Results (10 minutes)

1. Tell students that empathy is difficult to measure directly, but there are measurable traits and skills that contribute to it. Have students look at their assessment reports and review what is measured. Discuss which characteristics might contribute to having empathy. Some typical responses could include:

AchieveWORKS Skills

- a. Skill: Social-Emotional
- b. Skill Facets: Consideration, Modesty, Self-Awareness

AchieveWORKS Intelligences

- a. Interpersonal and Intrapersonal intelligences
- b. Existential Intelligence
- c. Emotional Intelligence

Note that other skills and intelligences can play a role too. For example, Critical Thinking may allow people to recognize bias where it is not obvious and can help one recognize when others are being victimized.

2. Encourage students to draw connections between empathy, or recognizing injustice or oppression, and any of the assessment characteristics. Tell students that, using their assessment reports, they should be able to identify areas where they can develop better empathy.

Closing Activity (10 minutes)

Have students reflect on whether they have always had empathy for others. Then have them complete questions 8-10 of their worksheets. They can do this independently or with others.

Handout

Reflection worksheet: Empathy

1. While watching the silent film, what emotions and feelings did you experience?	2. From your personal point of view and perspective, what did you just watch and witness?
3. What choices did the variety of individuals in the film make?	4. What events (locally, nationally or internationally) do you see happening currently that have similarities to the event you just watched?

5. What overall message do you take away from the film?
6. Why did no one intervene to help Bronia (the Polish girl) or Gerhard (the German boy)?
7. Do you agree with the following statement?

A person may have empathy for another but still take no action to help or change things. In the film, there may have been people in the town who felt the couple's pain and understood what was being done to them was wrong but did nothing to stop it. In fact, people with strong empathy *may* have been even more afraid to act, because they truly understood how frightening and humiliating it was and did not want to be subjected to the same treatment.

8. What traits or skills contribute to empathy?
9. Why is empathy important?
10. How can you develop your empathy?

Handout

Resources for Learning about the Holocaust

Source: Imperial War Museum, London, UK

Under the cover of the Second World War, for the sake of their “new order”, the Nazis sought to destroy all the Jews of Europe. For the first time in history, industrial methods were used for the mass extermination of an entire population. Six million were murdered, including 1.5 million children. This event is called the Holocaust.

The Nazis enslaved and murdered millions of others as well. Romani people (often called gypsies), people with physical and mental disabilities, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, trade unionists, political opponents, prisoners of conscience, homosexuals and others were killed in vast numbers.

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, USA

The Holocaust refers to a specific genocidal event in 20th-century history: the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

Jews were the primary victims: six million were murdered. Gypsies (Roma), the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

Source: Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel

The Holocaust was the murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination.

Because Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler’s accession to power in January 1933, many historians consider this the start of the Holocaust era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler’s regime, but they were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely.

Websites

- **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC**
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>
- **Yad Vashem, Israel**
<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-videos/video-toolbox/hevt-what-is.html#1>
- **Imperial War Museum**
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-holocaust>