



To Harm or to Be Harmed?

A disciplinary literacy lesson via the writings of Hannah Arendt

PRE-LESSON WORK

1) Information about the text selected and copy of the text

The text used in this lesson comes from two sources authored by Hannah Arendt. The sources are *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1961) and *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* (1964).

2) What is the historical significance of this text? Why is it worth spending time doing a close reading and text analysis of it?

These texts were revolutionary at changing the conversation regarding conventional wisdom related to the Holocaust—specifically the character of those who participated (actively or passively) and those who resisted the policies of Nazi Germany.

3) What are some of the potential difficulties students may encounter when engaging with this text?

The particular difficulty of this text lies in the use of pronouns and the difficulty in challenging conventional wisdom. Arendt frequently refers to different groups without identifying *them* through more than subtle hints. Students will need help in deciphering *who* Arendt is discussing. In regards to “challenging conventional wisdom” students will most likely encounter difficulty with Arendt’s argument that those that hold fast to moral norms are actually more prone to committing atrocities than those that consistently challenge and question steadfast ideologies. The purpose of the lesson is not to force students to accept Arendt’s argument, but to have students reflect on the danger of merely accepting an ideology without question.

National Council for the Social Studies standards covered by this lesson

**V Individuals, Groups
and Institutions**
Performance
Expectations: b, d and f

**X Civic Ideas and
Practices**
Performance
Expectations: b, d and e

**VI Power, Authority
and Governance**
Performance
Expectations: a and d

*Credit must be given to
Mariana Achugar of
Carnegie-Mellon for this
lesson template, as well
as for her assistance in
schooling me in the
methodology of
disciplinary literacy.*

LESSON DESIGN WORK

Include the following information when writing your lesson plan.

Goals

What are students going to learn?

- Students will learn to analyze and discuss the common characteristics of participants and resisters to the Holocaust.
- Students will learn a method to “unpack” a historically significant, collegiate-level text. In this instance, through the use of pronouns.
- Students will evaluate their own “thoughtless” tendencies and reflect upon the significance of conformity/nonconformity in society.

Background knowledge diagnosis

How will you find out what students know about this topic or what connections they can make to things they already know?

- The issue at hand revolves around religiosity and conformity. High school students will likely have some experience with one of both of these concepts. Students will also have (most likely) received this lesson near the end of (or in the midst of) a unit of study on the Holocaust.

Challenges

What general obstacles or difficulties do you foresee in the lesson? How are you going to try to address them in your lesson? What strategies or tasks have you designed to deal with them?

- The text is a bit dry and vague. The instructor will have to SELL this material. It will be important to explain the goals of the lesson prior to engaging. The opening activity, or “hook,” should assist in remedying this issue.

Actions

What activities have you planned to support learning? In particular, what are some language learning opportunities? How long will you spend on each of these activities?

- The lesson will begin with student being asked to individually write a response to the prompt:
 - “Is it better to harm or to be harmed?” (5 minutes; 88 remaining)
 - Students will be asked to justify their positions. This justification may be performed via philosophical chairs or another activity the instructor is familiar with to encourage dialogue. (5; 83)
 - The above activity is designed merely to initiate thought related to the expression of the text/topic to follow.
- The first handout will be distributed. Students should attempt to work on the selection individually. (5; 78) It will look like ...

The following excerpt was written by Hannah Arendt in 1964 from her work entitled *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*. Arendt refers to three groups of people throughout the passage

Participants those who take part in committing, or endorsing the commitment of, acts of genocide (in this case, the Holocaust).

Refusers those who refused to participate, or endorse, acts of genocide.

Humans all of us. The author uses this distinction to refer to humans in general.

“... those who _____ cherish values and hold fast to moral norms and standards are not reliable: we _____ know now that moral norms and standards can be changed overnight, and that all that then will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something. Much more reliable will be the doubters and skeptics _____, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because they _____ are used to examine things and to make up their own minds. Best of all will be those _____ who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we _____ live we _____ shall have to live together with ourselves.”

—*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* (1964), p. 45

Have students work on the below section of text in pairs. Students should continue to use the terminology of participant, refuser and human. They should then answer the questions beneath the passage. (10; 63)

“On the contrary, all our _____ experiences tell us _____ that it was precisely the members of *respectable* society, who _____ had not been touched by the intellectual and moral upheaval in the early stages of the Nazi period, who _____ were first to yield. They _____ simply exchanged one system of values against another. I _____ therefore suggest that the nonparticipants were those whose consciences did not function in this, as it were, automatic way _____ as though we _____ dispose of a set of learned or innate rules which we _____ then apply to the particular case as it arises, so that every new experience or situation is already prejudged and we _____ need only act out of whatever we _____ learned or possessed beforehand. Their _____ criterion, I think, was a different one: they asked themselves to what extent they _____ would be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they _____ decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they _____ go on living with themselves at all. Hence, they _____ also chose to die when they _____ were forced to participate. To put it crudely, they _____ refused to murder, not so much because they _____ still held fast to the command ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but because they _____ were unwilling to live together with a murderer—themselves.”

—*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* (1964), p. 44

1. What possible words could be used as synonyms for participant and refuser?
 2. Based on the above descriptions, would you classify yourself as a candidate to participate or to refuse?
-

Go over the selection as a class. Once the correct answers are given (obviously, through the process of allowing students to participate in the process), ask student to provide their answers to the two questions. Discuss student suggestions. If the words *conformist* and *nonconformist* do not come up via student suggestions, be sure to introduce the usage of these terms. Then discuss the second question through the lens of the issue of conformity. Facilitate an HONEST dialogue about how much of our lives are rooted in conformity. High school students should be full of applicable examples.

Following this discussion, ask the students what would happen if “conformity” required a new moral value of “Thou shalt kill!” What would happen? What would it take to defy an accepted moral ideal? Be sure to introduce the concept of THINKING if it’s not offered-up by student comments/questions. Thought and consciousness defined as the ability “to think from the standpoint of somebody else.” *Eichmann in Jerusalem* p. 49 and the practice/habit of critical (even cynical) thought. (15; 48)

Then use the below excerpt from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to illustrate the sweeping conformity that emerged in Nazi Germany. Explain the trial and Eichmann’s role in general. Discussion should ensue. (15; 33)

Read the Storfer example from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* p. 51 to the class. (Distribute a copy to them.)

Such was the story told by Eichmann during the police examination about the unlucky Kommerzialrat Storfer of Vienna, one of the representatives of the Jewish community. Eichmann had received a telegram from Rudolf Hoss, Commandant of Auschwitz, telling him that Storfer had arrived and had urgently requested to see Eichmann. “I said to myself: OK, this man has always behaved well, that is worth my while... I’ll go there myself and see what is the matter with him. And I go to Ebner [chief of the Gestapo in Vienna]. And Ebner says—I remember it only vaguely—‘If only he had not been so clumsy; he [Storfer] went into hiding and tried to escape,’ something of the sort. And the police arrested him and sent him to the concentration camp, and, according to the orders of the Reichsführer [Himmler], no one could get out once he was in. Nothing could be done, neither Dr. Ebner or I no anybody else could do anything about it. I went to Auschwitz and asked Hoss to see Storfer. ‘Yes, Yes [Hoss said], he is in one of the labor gangs.’ **With Storfer afterward, well, it was normal and human, we had a normal human encounter.** He told me all his grief and sorrow: I said: ‘Well, my dear old friend, we certainly got it! What rotten luck! And I also said: ‘Look, I really cannot help you, because according to orders from the Reichsführer nobody can get out. I can’t get you out. Dr. Ebner can’t get you out. I hear you made a mistake, that you went into hiding or wanted to bolt, which, after all, you did not need to do.’ [Eichmann meant that Storfer, as a Jewish functionary, had immunity from deportation.] I forget what his reply to this was. And then I asked him how he was. And he said, yes, he wondered if he couldn’t be let off work, it was very heavy work. And then I

talked to Hoss: ‘Work—Storfer won’t have to work!’ But Hoss said: ‘Everyone works here.’ So I said: ‘O.K.,’ I said, ‘I’ll make out a chit to the effect that Storfer has to keep the gravel paths in order with a broom,’ there were little gravel paths there, ‘and that he has a right to sit down with his broom on one of the benches.’ [To Storfer] I said: ‘Will that be all right, Mr. Storfer? Will that suit you?’ Whereupon he was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom and sat down on the bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak to each other.”

Six weeks after this normal human encounter, Storfer was dead—not gassed, apparently, but shot.

In groups, create a modern parallel to this idea of thoughtlessness. When do people act thoughtless? In other words, when do they fail to see the world through the eyes of another? (7; 26)

Should be interesting to hear responses of students. School bullying is likely to arise as a topic in the discussion. (10; 16)

Now turn the conversation on its head. Get to heart of why the lesson is being presented.

“There were finally, the two peasant boys ... who were drafted into the S.S. at the end of the war and refused to sign; they were sentenced to death, and on the way of their execution they wrote in their last letter to their families: ‘We two would rather die than burden our conscience with such terrible things. We know what the S.S. must carry out.’”

—*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 104

Class discussion Was their death in vain? Practically useless? Did their act stop the Holocaust? (5; 11)

“The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be ‘practically useless,’ at least, not in the long run. It would be of great practical usefulness for Germany today, not merely for her prestige abroad but for her sadly confused inner condition, if there were more such stories to be told. For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not [emphasis added], just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that ‘it could happen’ in most places but it did not happen everywhere. Humanely speaking, no more is required, and no more reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.”

—*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 232-4

Discuss So what is one’s responsibility when living under a dictatorship? When living in general? (End class with this discussion and homework assignment on the blog)

Answer To think (from the position of another) and to CHOOSE whether or not to participate or to not participate. That is personal responsibility.

Return to original writing, have students blog about “personal responsibility”—“Is it better to harm or to be harmed?”



TEACHING TOLERANCE

tolerance.org

HANDOUT A

Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship

The following excerpt was written by Hannah Arendt in 1964 from her work entitled *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*.

Arendt refers to three groups of people throughout the passage

Participants those who take part in committing, or endorsing the commitment of, acts of genocide (in this case, the Holocaust).

Refusers those who refused to participate, or endorse, acts of genocide.

Humans all of us. The author uses this distinction to refer to humans in general.

Working alone, try to fill in the blanks below one of the three categories above.

“... **those who** _____ cherish values and hold fast to moral norms and standards are not reliable: **we** _____ know now that moral norms and standards can be changed overnight, and that all that then will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something. Much more reliable will be the doubters and skeptics _____, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because **they** _____ are used to examine things and to make up their own minds. Best of all will be **those who** _____ know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as **we** _____ live **we** _____ shall have to live together with ourselves.”

—*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* (1964), p. 45



TEACHING TOLERANCE

tolerance.org

HANDOUT B

Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship

The following excerpt was written by Hannah Arendt in 1964 from her work entitled *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*.

Arendt refers to three groups of people throughout the passage

Participants those who take part in committing, or endorsing the commitment of, acts of genocide (in this case, the Holocaust).

Refusers those who refused to participate, or endorse, acts of genocide.

Humans all of us. The author uses this distinction to refer to humans in general.

Working in pairs or small groups, try to fill in the blanks below with one of the three categories above. Then answer the questions below the passage.

“On the contrary, all our _____ experiences tell us
_____ that it was precisely the members of *respectable* society,
who _____ had not been touched by the intellectual and moral
upheaval in the early stages of the Nazi period, who _____ were
first to yield. **They** _____ simply exchanged one system of
values against another. I (Hannah Arendt) therefore suggest that the
nonparticipants were those whose consciences did not function in this, as it
were, automatic way—as though we _____ dispose of a set of
learned or innate rules which we _____ then apply to the
particular case as it arises, so that every new experience or situation is already
prejudged and we _____ need only act out of whatever we
_____ learned or possessed beforehand. **Their**
_____ criterion, I think, was a different one: **they**
_____ asked themselves to what

extent **they** _____ would be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and **they** _____ decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could **they** _____ go on living with themselves at all. Hence, **they** _____ also chose to die when **they** _____ were forced to participate. To put it crudely, **they** _____ refused to murder, not so much because **they** _____ still held fast to the command ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but because **they** _____ were unwilling to live together with a murderer—themselves.”

—*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* (1964), p. 44

1. What possible words could be used as synonyms for participant and refuser?

2. Based on the above descriptions, would you classify yourself as a candidate to participate or to refuse?



TEACHING TOLERANCE

tolerance.org

HANDOUT C

Eichman in Jerusalem

The following excerpt is taken from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1961 by Hannah Arendt.

Such was the story told by Eichmann during the police examination about the unlucky Kommerzialrat Storfer of Vienna, one of the representatives of the Jewish community. Eichmann had received a telegram from Rudolf Hoss, Commandant of Auschwitz, telling him that Storfer had arrived and had urgently requested to see Eichmann. “I said to myself: OK, this man has always behaved well, that is worth my while... I’ll go there myself and see what is the matter with him. And I go to Ebner [chief of the Gestapo in Vienna]. And Ebner says—I remember it only vaguely—‘If only he had not been so clumsy; he [Storfer] went into hiding and tried to escape,’ something of the sort. And the police arrested him and sent him to the concentration camp, and, according to the orders of the Reichsführer [Himmler], no one could get out once he was in. Nothing could be done, neither Dr. Ebner or I no anybody else could do anything about it. I went to Auschwitz and asked Hoss to see Storfer. ‘Yes, Yes [Hoss said], he is in one of the labor gangs.’ **With Storfer afterward, well, it was normal and human, we had a normal human encounter.** He told me all his grief and sorrow: I said: ‘Well, my dear old friend, we certainly got it! What rotten luck! And I also said: ‘Look, I really cannot help you, because according to orders from the Reichsführer nobody can get out. I can’t get you out. Dr. Ebner can’t get you out. I hear you made a mistake, that you went into hiding or wanted to bolt, which, after all, you did not need to do.’ [Eichmann meant that Storfer, as a Jewish functionary, had immunity from deportation.] I forget what his reply to this was. And then I asked him how he was. And he said, yes, he wondered if he couldn’t be let off work, it was very heavy work. And then I talked to Hoss: ‘Work—Storfer won’t have to work!’ But Hoss said: ‘Everyone works here.’ So I said: ‘O.K.,’ I said, ‘I’ll make out a chit to the effect that Storfer has to keep the gravel paths in order with a broom,’ there were little gravel paths there, ‘and that he has a right to sit down with his broom on one of the benches.’ [To Storfer] I said: ‘Will that be all right, Mr. Storfer? Will that suit you?’ Whereupon he was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom and sat down on the bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak to each other.”

Six weeks after this normal human encounter, Storfer was dead—not gassed, apparently, but shot.