

Peer-guiding – Experiences in the Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof, Alsace, France

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In [her recent article](#) in *Teaching History*, Kay Andrews questions ‘whether eastern European destinations that dominate Holocaust-related travel are necessarily the most appropriate for students’. Furthermore she considers that on the one hand ‘site visits might merely reinforce a perpetrator narrative instead of challenging it’, and on the other the result of such learning could be “limited to the dehumanisation of the victims and the mechanics of genocide”. Site visits, according to Andrews, should also be used “in order to construct or explore other narratives, including those that represent Jewish people as individuals and those that examine the impact of the post-war period on the interpretation of place’. She summarises: ‘one of the biggest challenges is therefore choosing where to visit. How can a visit do justice to a complex historical narrative when encompassing just one or two sites?’ Moreover, ‘when it comes to visiting Holocaust-related sites, how do we assure that the programme strikes a balance between reflecting on the past, commemoration and providing a wider historical narrative, without turning a tour into a macabre horror visit to sites of mass murder?’. How can we “reflect on a meaning for today”?¹

In response to these important and pressing questions, I would like to present my views in light of my experience of visiting the Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof with Year 10 pupils from a grammar school in North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. It is not my intention to present a solution to these important questions but rather put forward a proposal for discussion. My focus is specifically on a cross-curricular approach and the preparation of pupils in school to be peer-guides during the visit to the memorial as one part of the week long European Seminar in Strasbourg. I would question from the outset if a visit to any one site can really do justice to the historical complexity and the

present and future relevance of studying the Holocaust; teachers are ‘confronted with high expectation’ as Wolf Kaiser remarks and after all, isn’t there always a limited spectrum of aspects on which teachers can focus on these visits?² The notion of a pupil-guided tour to Natzweiler-Struthof makes reference to these high expectations, but it may nonetheless be a necessary step in a broader process of evaluation, modification and improvement.

The “European Seminar” in Strasbourg

In our school the week long European Seminar in Strasbourg is compulsory for Year 10 and about 90 to 110 pupils, aged 15 or 16 years-old take part. The Seminar takes place in the autumn term, 7 or 8 weeks after the summer holidays. The programme includes visits to the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, the Jewish Community, the Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof, various cultural and other notable sites in Strasbourg. Pupils can choose to participate in some parts of the programme, others are compulsory for all. Because of time constraints preparation for all pupils has to begin in the summer term – the last two or three months of Year 9 – and continues in Year 10 up until the beginning of the seminar. This preparation in school takes place in History, Geography, Politics, Art and French lessons for all pupils. Prior to the Seminar some of these pupils (around 15 to 25) volunteer to act as peer-guides and undertake extra preparation for the tour in the Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof during the European Seminar.

The educational value of peer-guiding

Peer-teaching underpins a learning process for pupils in which both teacher and pupil play different roles compared to teacher-guided education. Peer-teaching supports a subject-orientated learning process for pupils. It provides an opportunity for pupils to confront their visit to the memorial with the teacher taking the role of a facilitator. Peer-guides go from passive recipients to active participants in regard to their presentation, their choices, their perspective, their judgements and the content of their tour. The peer-guides are “experts” compared to their peers but they are able to

communicate on the same level as their peers. This subject-orientated learning process can be explained as a reciprocal and interdependent relationship between perception, reflection and expression.³

The relevance of prior understandings

In order to prepare the pupils for peer-teaching we can place emphasis on the importance of mapping pupils' prior understandings of the Holocaust.⁴ Naturally prejudices and gaps in knowledge almost certainly exist, but pupils have prejudices and gaps in their knowledge of other historical topics too. Although I have not investigated these prior understandings systematically as Christopher Edwards and Siobhan O'Dowd, past experiences in lessons and seminars have shown that some aspects of these prior understandings are of particular importance for the pupils' preparation. One common misconception is the stereotypical Hitler-centric view, as described by Kaiser, Edwards and O'Dowd;⁵ a second is linking concentration camps and death camps only with the murder of Jewish people, and neglecting to mention the other "victimised and targeted" groups⁶; a third is the lack of sensitivity for language and for reading of historical sources: we are not, for example, "visiting the concentration camp" (as students would put it) but the Memorial in Natzweiler-Struthof. Similarly, pupils have to avoid using Nazi terminology to describe and categorise victims⁷ and need to be conscious that terms such as "asocials" or "habitual criminals" are the ideological language of the perpetrators.⁸ Pupils also have to be aware of the perpetrator-perspective when analysing documents like photographs and films. All three patterns of previous knowledge are of relevance for the preparation of pupils who have volunteered to work as guides in the memorial Natzweiler-Struthof. As a result, the camp system is explained to them with the help of a map and written sources. Photos of victims taken by perpetrators are compared with family photos and considered alongside the Nazi prisoner classification chart, with the aim of highlighting the language of the Nazis and how they categorised people, and encouraging deep thinking about the ways in which the humanity of the victims was removed from them.⁹ During the visit of the Memorial the peer-guides also show and explain some of the photos and the chart to their classmates.

Parameters and Choice

The technical and conceptual parameters for peer-guiding are outlined to the pupils in several handouts in the summer term before the seminar. These frames of reference must be taken into consideration and are supposed to help pupils to decide if they would like to volunteer to be a guide and commit themselves to making the necessary preparation in advance. Those who choose to volunteer, then form small teams of peer-guides - two or three pupils - who work in school together with the support of a teacher, in advance of later guiding groups of 6 to 8 classmates through the memorial later during the European seminar. Peer-guides are required to plan several stops in the memorial, identify the information they would like to present at each point as well as the photos and biography of the victims and perpetrators they will use.

Technical support takes the form of advice on the division of labour within the guiding teams, how to organise the work with notes on cards, how to work with photographs and texts as documents and how to impart information to the group. Conceptual help is given with references to literature and documents (books, internet links) and by taking pupils through the central principles of peer-teaching. Books containing historical information on the concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof and examples for guides to the Memorial are provided and are of great help for the pupils' independent preparation.¹⁰ Furthermore the main conceptual principles of the site-visit are presented by the teacher to the peer-guides, by way of talking them through the following diagram:

Why there and then (historical context)



the site



here and now (present context)

victims



the individuals



perpetrators

By encouraging the peer-guides to reflect on these relationships and to think through and with them, we identify any gaps in prior knowledge and are able to address these. Practical, hands-on advice is also provided, with the peer-guides taught how to present photographs and biographies of victims¹¹ and perpetrators, as well as how to use photographs of the site to compare the present with the past. As a result of their studies peer-guides are confronted with examples of the extreme cruelty and inhumanity of the former camp, but to ensure that pupils are not traumatised by these teachers “pre-screen” the sources, give careful warnings about the materials, and are on hand to help provide emotional support and enable them to work through these resources. In turn they avoid coming to the conclusion that “the more violence I describe, the better my tour”, and instead ensure that the material that they do use is done so with sensitivity and purpose.

The European Journal

On their return from the seminar in Strasbourg each Year 10 pupil is required to write a “European Journal” about their experience.¹² Before writing their Journal each pupil receives a worksheet containing guidance on layout (e.g. how to design the cover page, the length of the Journal) and content. In essence, each pupil is required to reflect on

each part of the programme he or she participated in. This should not simply be a description of what they have seen and visited, but rather attempt to identify and analyse the European dimension of each part of the programme. For those who have worked as peer-guides there is the additional task of explaining their decision to volunteer, and evaluate their experiences both during their preparation and their guiding in the Memorial. The Journal is then marked by teachers who participated in the seminar and graded between 1-6 in accordance with the German marking system. The results are discussed in lessons thereafter.

Within the Journals there is space for pupils' to reflect both on their emotions during the visit and the historical context. Andrews asks how teachers should see their role: 'do we seek to elicit a purely emotional response, or do we want our students to have a deeper level of understanding of the events they are studying and the places they are visiting?'¹³ These outcomes are not, in my opinion, contradictory. It has been my experience that teachers don't need to elicit emotional responses. Emotions will come during the visit and they also are expressed in the Journal, but teachers do, however, provide pupils with the opportunity to express the emotions *and* give pupils the opportunity to study the complexity of the historical process.¹⁴ Pupils express their emotions differently; some sit alone for a while or in small groups, and talk about their feelings while others have a minute's silence in front of the "Aschengrube" or write words of memory in the "livre d'or" (visitor's book) of the Memorial. Frequently pupils discuss during the tour with the peer-guides or teacher their impressions and emotions.

Responses from pupils in their Journals confirm the emotional aspect of the visit and the positive effect of the peer-teaching on their learning but there is still evidence of a lack of sophistication in the language that they use. Fifteen-year-old Simon for example recalled how 'nobody talked' as they looked at the 'numerous photos in the museum', while Katharina wrote of how 'it seemed strange to me to walk like a tourist in a camp where cruel things happened'. On the issue of peer-guiding Fabienne argued that it was 'better' to be guided by a fellow pupil rather than an adult, since 'pupils were able to get the information across in a more relaxed atmosphere'. As for the peer-

guides themselves, they were also required to reflect in their Journals on their rationale for volunteering and what they drew from the experience. Fifteen-year-old Ayshe explained how she volunteered because she ‘was interested in the topic’ and wanted to get ‘a deeper understanding’. Emma, also fifteen, noted that she was ‘glad’ to have had the support of other peer-guides ‘because much of the material left me speechless’. She went on to concede that ‘my partner and I often disagreed on details but we were able to compromise and come to an agreement as to what to include’, suggesting that the experience of peer-guiding brought wider benefits that just deepening knowledge.

In addition to completing the Journal pupils were also asked to produce artistic responses of their impressions of the visit, which were to be accompanied by explanatory text. Some examples of these are as follows (Fig. 1 & 2):

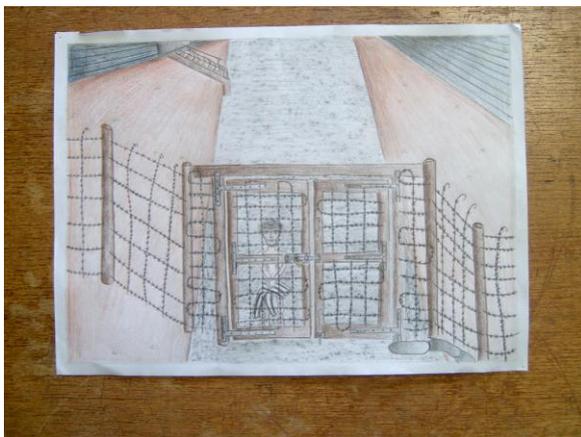


Figure 1: *The Prisoner*

The barbed wire fence takes up the whole picture in order to show that lives behind it were completely controlled.

Maria, aged 15.

Figure 2: *The Shadows of the Past*

I chose to do a night scene because the picture seems darker and more alarming. It should also make us think about things nowadays.

Sarah, aged 15.



Summary

The concept of peer-guiding with pupils in Holocaust-related sites like the Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof in France means a subject-orientated process of learning. That doesn't make teachers superfluous but puts them into the role of facilitators while pupils change from passive recipients to active participants in their learning. Teachers organise and select the materials to make this possible, but of course this method doesn't guarantee that all educational aims will be achieved. That said, there is no guarantee that this would necessarily occur if teachers or Holocaust educators were guiding either. Peer-guiding of pupils is only one small element of the school curriculum, and it needs to be accompanied by other forms of teaching and learning. Peer-guiding in Natzweiler-Struthof doesn't "reinforce a perpetrator narrative" but challenges it, just as Andrews demands. The use by peer-guides of biographical approaches that present prisoners of the camp in Natzweiler-Struthof not only as victims, support this movement away from a perpetrator-centric approach. On the other hand responses and reflections of pupils in their Journal also show that dehumanisation of the victims in the camp and emotional reaction of peer-guides and peers play a large but not exclusive part of the visit to the Memorial.

Visits to Holocaust-related sites are only one component in a wider process of learning. This also means that there is not *a* site which is an 'ideal' site to support this process. Therefore Andrews' questions are of fundamental relevance for learning processes in school as a whole and not only for visits to Holocaust related sites. Consequently I would extend her questions to the whole curriculum, for just how can we be sure that we are striking "a balance between reflecting on the past, commemoration and providing a wider historical narrative"?¹⁵

In 10 years experience I never heard or read peer-guides or their peers criticise this particular approach to site visitation. My impression from reading the Journals is that peer-guiding has a positive effect, improving pupils' skills and self-confidence which also provides cross-curricular benefits, and helps pupils to engage with the history of the site. For all of these reasons, peer-guiding seems to offer a rich alternative to

traditional strategies for visiting Memorial Natzweiler-Struthof.

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- ² Kaiser, W. (2010) 'Nazi Perpetrators in Holocaust Education', in Burn, K., Chapman, A., Counsell, C. (eds.) *Teaching History*, 141, pp. 27.
- ³ See Holzbrecher, A. (1997), *Wahrnehmung des Anderen*, Opladen: Leske+Budrich, p. 227.
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- ⁷ Edwards, C. & O'Dowd, S., *op. cit.*, 20; Kaiser, W., *op. cit.*, p. 35
- ⁸ The terms e.g. "Berufsverbrecher", "Bibelforscher", "politisch", "Asozial", "Homosexuell", "Emigrant" were used by the Nazis to categorise prisoners in concentration camps (habitual criminal, Jehovah's Witness, political, asocial, homosexual, emigrant) These prisoners had to wear typical badges (Winkel) on their uniform.. See the „Kennzeichentafel der Winkel“ in: *Ausgegrenzt. „Asoziale“ und „Kriminelle“ im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem. Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland. Heft 11. Bremen: Edition Temmen 2009, p.8; also United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Holocaust Encyclopaedia. Classification System in Nazi Concentration Camps, available via: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005378>*
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- ¹¹ The "Namen der Nummern" by Lang is of great help in this context.
- ¹² Moreover pupils have to write one page in English and one page in French.
- ¹³ Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
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