

# Standing Next to Anne Frank to Promote Social and Emotional Learning

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*I think we are trying to give them that connection that we are trying to find at the same time, because with empathizing you usually have to try to find a connection to your life and since none of us have actually experienced or seen the Holocaust, it's very difficult even when it comes to stepping into someone else's shoes [as an actor]. It's like trying to find a point where you can connect the dots, but if we can get that down . . . these kids in the audience can relate to us, so we can help them find that connection.*

—Calvin, eighth-grade student who used drama to respond to *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition*

Calvin's comments emphasize the social and emotional learning he experienced while reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 2003) and other Holocaust texts. For Calvin, drama was a vehicle for empathizing—first as he responded to challenging topics as a reader and next as he engaged an audience in learning and empathizing. As Calvin describes, in dramatic performance students use empathy to “connect the dots” between their lives as eighth graders and the complex characters and historical figures they encounter

and portray. In this paper, we share insights we gained from Calvin and other eighth-grade ELA students about how topic, character, and community are sites of potential for making social, emotional, and academic connections that allow students to explore what it means to empathize.

In the following sections, we draw on examples from a multi-year research project in four eighth-grade classrooms where drama, visual arts, and music were prominent means for learning to “bear witness” to Anne Frank. We consider *The Diary of Anne Frank* (which we refer to as *The Diary*) a *challenging text* because its content is emotionally troubling, it includes topics that are unsanctioned in many schools,

and teachers may feel un- or under prepared to teach about the history of the Holocaust and Judaism or to answer students' difficult questions (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018a). “In many ways, the challenge of teaching about Anne Frank is a challenge of empathy. Teachers and students are asked initially to hold at arm's length the millions of victims, survivors, resisters, bystanders and perpetrators as they create a relationship with one adolescent girl” (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018a, p. 15). We share these classroom stories to make visible the central role of empathy and empathizing in learning about challenging texts, which ELA teachers take up with their students every day. We offer ELA educators instructional strategies that mobilize emotion as an intellectual resource (Lewis & Tierney, 2013) to support adolescent readers' meaning making.

Given that introducing the topic of the Holocaust with Anne Frank's diary creates a number of complex challenges for students and teachers alike, we advocate an approach that blends academic, social, and emotional learning through the arts. The arts promote new ways of seeing and meaning making (Harste, 2014), which can help to create “thick air” (Landay & Wootton, 2012) around

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a topic as serious as the Holocaust. The arts provide a powerful approach to academic, social, and emotional learning because they often require students to take content in one medium and adapt it for use in another. Such movement can generate new meanings (Siegel, 1995)—and therefore, more complex thinking—about the content being studied as students recast ideas from the language of a diary, for example, into the language of a painting or dance or musical composition. In the following sections, we consider how topic, community, and character mattered as students took empathetic stances during the project. We illustrate these moments with examples of three arts-based strategies—Cordel, Pantomime, and Fictional Journal Writing. We realize and theorize that engaging students with challenging texts like *The Diary* can promote social and emotional learning by inviting students to “stand next to” the characters and historical figures they encounter in the ELA classroom.

### **Topic Matters in Promoting Social and Emotional Learning with Challenging Texts**

The topic matters when inviting students to accomplish academic, social, and emotional learning. The Holocaust is a topic about which much is known and much continues to be discovered. Yet, the Holocaust is a difficult topic to take up in many classrooms because teachers need so much content knowledge (that they may not have) to do justice to the topic, and the content is emotionally overwhelming and often taboo. At least four topics—death, genocide, religion, and sexuality—are implicit and often quite explicit elements of *The Diary*. Although it is the canonical Holocaust text in ELA middle school classrooms and often the first exposure students have to the Holocaust in the curriculum, the difficulty of the topic may lead some teachers to avoid the text altogether (Prose, 2009). We argue, however,

that challenging texts, both historic and contemporary, are those most necessary because challenging texts offer opportunities for social and emotional learning that have effects beyond the reading experience.

Cordel is particularly effective as a means to support students’ social and emotional engagement before they read a challenging text like *The Diary*. The cordel is a makeshift clothesline stretched across the classroom. On it, teachers in our research hung photographs, maps, poetic and informational texts, propaganda posters, and excerpts from *The Diary* to contextualize the historical period in which Anne Frank wrote. During Cordel, students walked up to take a close look at these written and visual texts. Slowly and solemnly, they walked from one end of the cordel to the other, hovering around particular texts that caught their attention.

We took countless digital images throughout this process and used these images to stimulate discussions about students’ social and emotional learning during follow-up interviews with small groups of students (see Figure 1) (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018b). As students later discussed the photographs of themselves and their classmates during arts-based learning like Cordel, they regularly mentioned how “serious,” “sensitive,” and “important” the topic is and recognized the Holocaust as a “tragic” human event. Although it may not be surprising to connect these terms with a study of this topic, students framed these characteristics as consequential to their meaning making.

For example, Lauren, an eighth-grade student, wrote in response to an image of her classmates during Cordel: “As you can see from the picture, everyone was being very quiet. This is because this is a very powerful subject and I think it is better to understand something if you are quiet and are thinking to yourself.” Lauren connected this quiet with the power of the subject matter.

Isabel said in discussion that “those pictures helped out a lot because reality ‘smacks you in the face’ and actually proves to you how bad the Holocaust was.” She continued, “This activity was risky but sometimes we need to do risky things to learn and understand things better.” Lauren’s and Isabel’s responses illustrate how social and emotional learning, respectively, were essential in their academic learning about Anne Frank and the Holocaust.

Quiet and silent expressive responses reflected students’ engagement with the topic and their realization of its importance both



**Figure 1.** Students examined texts during Cordel.

historically and in their contemporary lives. Students’ reflections also indicated their recognition that serious topics and real engagement are atypical for school. Yasmine noted, for example, that “all the people were, like, actually reading the cordel and they were paying attention to what was on it; instead of like just skimming the pieces they’re actually reading it to get a good understanding.” Cordel honored the social and emotional complexity of the topic and invited students to take time and space to reflect on the significance of it. Approaching challenging texts with others, in quiet and deep in thought, allowed students to develop respect for the topic they were examining and immediately validated their emotions as part of their active reading.

### **Classroom Community Matters in Promoting Social and Emotional Learning with Challenging Texts**

Co-constructing a strong classroom community with students also supports social and emotional learning about challenging texts (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018a). Our research indicated the ways in which students’ physical proximity to each other during arts-based activities influenced their perceptions about the community that supported their social and emotional learning about the Holocaust. As they reflected on arts-based activities in their classrooms, students often emphasized their proximity to one another as an indicator of community. Comments like “I felt a sense of community. Everybody is like, together, reading about a serious topic” and frequent

mention of “togetherness” indicated their sense that the Holocaust, as a challenging topic, is best approached as a group to increase academic understanding via social and emotional support for one another.

Throughout our research project, pantomime was an arts-based instructional strategy that increased community and activated students’ bodies and emotions. In Pantomime, small groups of students

selected excerpts from *The Diary* and used their bodies—preferably in ensemble and often in silence—to make a scene or physical shape that conveyed the excerpt’s meaning. Pantomime was especially effective when it was completed rather quickly, for an audience of peers, and as part of a regular classroom period rather than as a formal performance. A debriefing about what the audience members and actors were thinking during the composition and performance of Pantomime was also productive. Figure 2 shows Maggie, Cassie, and Nick as they embodied the following line from Anne Frank’s diary: “Extraordinary things can happen to people who go into hiding” (Frank, 2003, p. 277). As their teacher read the passage aloud, Maggie clenched her hands behind her head and crouched down toward the floor, and Cassie enclosed Maggie with her arms. Behind them, Nick knelt on the ground. He turned his face upward toward the ceiling and opened his body, physically conveying the contrasting meanings embedded in the sentence. As students became adept with Pantomime, they composed increasingly abstract and intensified body positions like this small group did.

### **Characters Matter in Promoting Social and Emotional Learning with Challenging Texts**

Students helped us understand how historical and fictional characters mattered as they studied challenging Holocaust literature. During Fictional Journal Writing, students in one classroom wrote from the perspective of one of the seven persons living in the annex with Anne Frank. Declan wrote from the perspective of Peter van Daan, the boy with whom Anne developed a close relationship during the years their families hid together. Declan reflected on how emotion influenced his reading of Peter’s circumstances while he engaged with Fictional Journal Writing:

I feel like putting myself in his shoes, seeing what he did, and I really did,



**Figure 2.** Students responded to a diary excerpt in Pantomime.

like, grow with his character. It was sort of hard to end the diary entries . . . I was reading at the end of the book to see how they died, and he like disappeared walking, and I just realized how real it was. ‘Cause the whole time you’re going over thinking these characters are cool and you’re thinking, “characters, characters,” but they’re real people. And when you realize they really died and it’s over, it’s like . . . it’s hard to take it in, it’s hard to accept that they are dead.

Clearly, Declan’s academic engagement carried the emotional weight of the Holocaust. His writing demonstrated empathy for Peter, as a “character” in Anne Frank’s diary with whom he developed a unique perspective as he wrote from Peter’s vantage point. But Declan also realized that “they’re real people” and extended his empathetic response to the other people in *The Diary* and to Holocaust victims in general. Other students’ comments similarly demonstrated how taking a first-person perspective during arts-based learning experiences produced emotion—particularly empathy—as they read *The Diary*.

### **Empathizing by Standing Next to Anne Frank**

Doing justice to the topic of the Holocaust and representing its content well were concerns for the students and teachers in our research who used the arts to mediate their learning about Anne Frank’s diary. A number of students we worked with represented their efforts to dramatize and depict historical characters and events via arts-based activities as “hard.” Calvin said, in reference to drama, “I think it’s harder because it’s a sensitive topic and you can’t get it wrong, so you [worry] how do I do this so I accurately represent it and don’t, you know, in any way poke fun at it? Don’t undersize it. Don’t make it less than it actually is.” The arts prompted social and emotional accountability for Calvin to the disciplinary standards for performance, to the audience to whom he was communicating, and

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to Anne’s story that he was helping to keep alive. We recognize in Calvin’s questions a sophisticated metacognitive perspective on academic learning and how social and emotional factors act in the quality of that learning.

The students described their learning about historical figures in the Holocaust with phrases such as “stepping into the shoes [of Anne],” “she’s our friend,” “she was so close to us,” and “we’ve like taken them in.” Students connected, as many readers do, to Anne’s station in life—her complicated relationship with her mother, sibling rivalry, having a crush, and everyday annoyances. Danielle empathized with Anne’s emotional state as she read *The Diary* and drew on that emotional connection: “I felt really connected when she really expressed how angry she was and when we got into a circle and talked about how things in this book can and are happening in our lives.” Anger is typically managed and contained in schools, and yet this particular emotion resonated most with Danielle and created an authentic point of connection with Anne Frank. All of these social and emotional connections informed the students’ emerging and complex understandings of the text and topic.

Eighth-grade students taught us, through their bodies, their words, and their thoughts, that by the end of their study of the Holocaust they felt connected to Anne Frank. We theorize these connections as “standing next to” Anne and suggest that when students stand next to a strong, heroic character, they position themselves to take risks as readers and learners. We argue that creating

arts-based learning opportunities for students to “stand next to” Anne, Peter, and other strong figures from challenging literature, invited and validated social and emotional learning as integral to academic learning. Students helped us see how and why challenging (“hard”) topics, strong communities of learners, and compelling characters all matter for social, emotional, and academic learning through the arts. ●

Join the conversation!

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