

Professional Learning Experiences for K-12 Educators on Effective Instruction of Difficult Topics Through Inquiry



PennState

**HOLOCAUST, GENOCIDE AND
HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION INITIATIVE**

Teaming up with school districts, the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State enables K-12 educators to effectively teach difficult topics such as racism and trauma. The Initiative partners with school districts to offer research-based programming for educators throughout Pennsylvania and beyond. Participating educators join inquiry communities, explore interactive online modules, and engage with Penn State faculty and partners who share their expertise in historical and contemporary subjects.

The Initiative collaborates with school districts to support educators as they and their students adopt an inquiry stance toward challenges that impact their lives and communities. As they systematically investigate difficult topics, students develop their voice and sharpen vital life skills such as active listening and critical thinking (Clayton & Kilbane, 2020; Kreuzer & Dreesmann, 2017). Students grow their capacity for civic discourse surrounding complex social issues (Middaugh, 2019; Rubin et al., 2019). They can also gain insights into the human condition, cultivating authentic empathy toward others (Haas, 2020).

Inquiry empowers K-12 students to claim ownership of their learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Through the guidance of teachers who participate in the Initiative's programs, students investigate questions that matter to them, then collect and critically analyze information from primary and secondary sources. Over time, students develop, refine, and justify their conclusions about the difficult topics they are investigating, choosing for themselves how to respond to their deepening insights. Through this process, students can develop their sense of agency and take informed action to strengthen their schools and communities (Molebash et al., 2019).

To support educators in guiding K-12 students' inquiries into difficult topics, the Initiative breaks the mold of the one-shot workshop by creating and helping to sustain inquiry communities. Traditional professional development often fails because it is disconnected from teachers' day-to-day work and rarely involves follow-up support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). In contrast, the Initiative's high-quality professional learning is intensive and sustained (Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 2016) to inform teachers' practice and their work with students. Each of the Initiative's programs integrates core characteristics of effective professional learning (Glickman & Burns, 2020; Learning Forward, 2011), including:

- Content-rich learning linked directly to classroom application
- Active participation in collaborative groups facilitated by professional learning experts
- Explicit connections to the real-world needs of teachers, students, and local contexts
- Positioning of teachers as knowledge creators with agency in their practice

To do so, the Initiative's flagship programs engage teachers in a school year of inquiry-based professional learning, informed by the latest research and scholarship (e.g., Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020; Willegems et al., 2017). The Initiative works with school districts to customize each program to meet their educators' and students' needs. Most programs begin with a summer launch and continue with regular meetings throughout the school year. Educators experience the inquiry process by investigating their practice. They transfer their learning to engage students in inquiry. The program culminates in a celebration and sharing of learning that involves educators, K-12 students, and community members. A growing body of research illustrates how this approach can support teachers and students in creating transformational change in their schools and communities while fully addressing state standards, curriculum requirements, and teacher evaluation processes (e.g., Parkhouse et al., 2021; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2017).





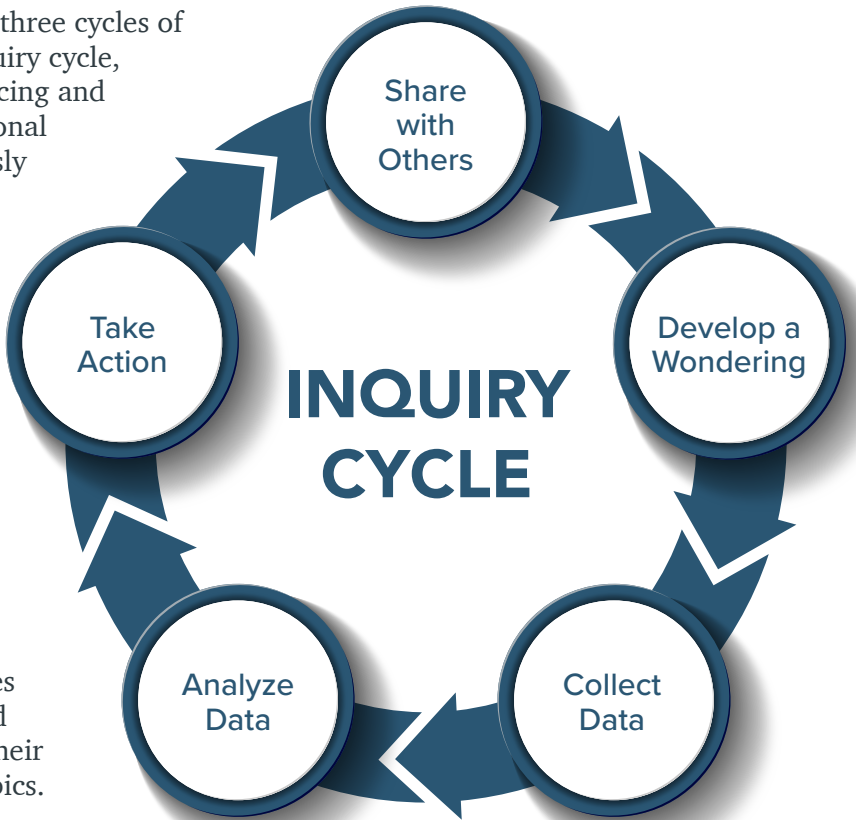
INQUIRY COMMUNITIES FOCUSED ON DIFFICULT TOPICS

Customizing professional learning to meet districts’ and individual participants’ needs is the core of the Initiative’s collaborative approach. The Initiative works closely with districts to tailor each program’s topical focus, duration, and structure. From the outset, Initiative personnel help participants identify what they need and want to accomplish. The Initiative also helps participants save time with curated resources and one-on-one support to meet other professional requirements, such as preparing for teacher evaluations, designing lessons that address the content standards they already teach, and completing Student Performance Measures (SPMs) and/or earning Act 48 credits (for Pennsylvania educators).

Once a program structure has been established, the Initiative’s professional learning experts build and sustain inquiry communities of K-12 educators from any content area over one or more school years. These communities support educators as they implement their learning about content and pedagogy in their classrooms and schools (Rutten, 2021; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2020). They also provide the resources and professional guidance that teachers need to engage in powerful inquiries with their students about difficult topics (Butville et al., 2021).

The Initiative’s yearlong programs involve three cycles of inquiry. The year begins with a shared inquiry cycle, sparked by difficult topics educators are facing and guided by content, pedagogy, and professional learning experts. Participants simultaneously generate compelling questions for a cycle of inquiry about their individual practices. For example, after working with an Initiative expert to learn about the role of language in historical genocides, participants generate questions about how they use language in their teaching practice. In both inquiries, participants collect and analyze data, draw initial conclusions, take informed action to grow their practices, and share their findings with their colleagues and school community. Throughout the process, participants engage in critical reflection on current practices in relation to principles of educational equity and trauma-informed teaching. Ultimately, participants engage their students in inquiry on relevant difficult topics.

Although inquiry communities can be developed over varying lengths of time, the Initiative’s programs are most impactful when they convene educators to collaborate throughout an entire school year, either at the building level or across content areas and grade-level bands. The Initiative’s professional learning experts facilitate each program primarily face-to-face in school district buildings, while selected components are offered remotely. Beginning with one or two inquiry communities in each district, these initial programs are refined and expanded in subsequent school years. The table on the next page provides a sample outline of a yearlong program that could be tailored to assist a school district in achieving its goals.



Inquiry cycle, adapted from Dana et al. (2011).

Prior to Program Launch		
<p>The Initiative and the district work together to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designate days and times for educators to participate (30-45 hours distributed across the summer and upcoming school year) • Determine a budget that fits the district’s needs • Identify opportunities for participating educators to meet professional requirements (e.g., teaching evaluations, SPMs, Act 48 hours) • Invite one or more cohorts of 12-25 teachers within a building or other shared context to form inquiry communities to begin during the summer • Design a customized, yearlong program focused on investigating the difficult topics that are most relevant to the district’s students and educators 		
Summer	Fall	Winter/Spring
<p>Initiative personnel lead a program launch focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing the process of inquiry • Building a sustainable inquiry community • Identifying the difficult topics that participants share in their teaching and practice • Providing opportunities to learn and/or review foundational content in trauma-informed practices and educational equity related to the program <p>Initiative personnel meet with participants one-on-one to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know their interests and needs related to integrating trauma-informed practices and educational equity into their classroom practices • Identify difficult topics they teach or encounter individually • Determine how the program can support them through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Building a strong inquiry community o Meeting their needs and fulfilling professional requirements o Connecting with the Initiative’s experts in content, pedagogy, and professional learning o Designing inquiry-based, trauma-informed units and lessons o Accessing resources and curricular materials o Providing ongoing support (e.g., one-on-one check-ins, co-planning, co-teaching, classroom support and observations) 	<p>Educators experience the process of inquiry by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating and refining their own wonderings about the difficult topics that they teach or encounter • Collecting and analyzing data • Considering how to integrate a trauma-informed lens and core concepts in educational equity • Critically evaluating current practices and taking informed action • Sharing insights from their Fall inquiries <p>Educators prepare to engage their students in inquiry by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying difficult topics that matter to students within their curricula and classroom communities • Working with Penn State faculty to deepen their content knowledge about difficult topics • Exploring pedagogy that supports inquiry with students, including structured talk around difficult topics 	<p>Educators apply inquiry in their curricular content areas by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing inquiry-based, trauma-informed units and lessons around difficult topics • Evaluating the effectiveness of their inquiry-based teaching • Sharing insights from their inquiries with students <p>Educators engage students in inquiry by helping them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate wonderings about difficult topics in their curriculum and/or that matter to them • Collect and analyze data • Critically evaluate information • Engage in structured talk • Take informed action <p>Students and educators share their learning with others through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-engaged events • Presentations within their classrooms and inquiry communities • Presentations for community members and district leaders • Conferences • Writing for publication
	<p>Initiative personnel continue to provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing support for designing inquiry-based units and lessons • Ongoing access to experts in content, pedagogy, and professional learning • Additional resources and curricular materials • Group and individual sessions in response to participant needs 	



THE INITIATIVE'S RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Penn State Faculty and Internal Partners

Participating educators enjoy 360-degree support from Penn State's unparalleled institutional resources. The Initiative's affiliated faculty contribute expertise in teaching difficult social and historical topics, use of media in the classroom, trauma-informed pedagogy, equity and diversity, race and identity, the Holocaust, gender studies, human rights violations, international law, art education, and more. Educators connect with experts from the College of Education, the College of Liberal Arts, Penn State Law, the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, the Center for Science and the Schools, the Jewish Studies Program, and the Humanities Institute.

Online Professional Learning Modules

Educators can access self-paced, free professional learning through the Initiative's interactive online modules, such as the recently published Trauma-Informed Practices (holocaust-ed-initiative.psu.edu/course/trauma). The modules introduce educators and school personnel to research-based frameworks for inquiry-based learning and teaching difficult topics with a trauma-informed lens. They provide concrete examples and opportunities for critical reflection that help educators apply their professional learning within their local contexts and roles. The modules also connect educators with a wealth of resources to use and share. Certified Pennsylvania educators who complete the Initiative's modules and provide their PPIDs earn continuing education units that satisfy Act 48 requirements.

Instructional Materials for Teaching Difficult Topics

The Initiative develops resources to support teachers' effective use of media as they teach difficult topics in the classroom. These resources utilize compelling media such as Penn State faculty's documentaries and the Humanities Institute's HumIn Focus web series to propel inquiry-based, trauma-informed learning. Instructional material developed by the Initiative is reviewed from a trauma-informed perspective and annotated where appropriate with trauma-informed considerations for teachers.

Resources From the Initiative's External Partners

The Initiative compiles and shares helpful resources from outside agencies and organizations to support educators implementing trauma-informed practices in their contexts. The Initiative's partners include the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League, Echoes & Reflections, and the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh.

The Initiative's Content & Professional Learning Experts



Dr. Eliyana Adler is an historian of the modern Jewish experience in Eastern Europe with particular interests in the history of education, religion, gender studies, Holocaust historiography and memory. Her first book, *In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia* (2011) traced the emergence and development of formal schooling for Jewish girls in pre-revolutionary Russia. More recently, she published *Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union* (2020), about the experiences and memory of a large group of Polish Jews who spent WWII in the unoccupied regions of the USSR. At present, Dr. Adler is researching memorial books as well as working on other related projects.



Dr. Danielle Butville, Education Program Specialist, is a former classroom teacher whose work explores inquiry as a stance and as pedagogy in K-12 classrooms. Her current research examines practitioner inquiry and its impacts on preservice teachers' dispositions and stance towards teaching once they enter the classroom. To the Initiative Dr. Butville contributes expertise in the integration of school curricula with students' curiosities to create inquiry communities in classrooms. In recognition of her student-centered scholarship, Dr. Butville was recently awarded a grant from the Conference on English Educators (CEE) and the James Moffett Memorial Award by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).



Boaz Dvir directs the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State. He served as operations manager at the University of Florida's Lastinger Center for Learning, which provides professional development to educators in several states. An award-winning filmmaker, Dvir tells the stories of ordinary people who transform into trailblazers. They include an inner-city schoolteacher who emerges as a disruptive innovator and a national model (*Discovering Gloria*); a World War II flight engineer who transforms into the leader of a secret operation to prevent a second Holocaust (*A Wing and a Prayer*); a truck driver who becomes an effective child-protection activist (*Jessie's Dad*); and a Holocaust survivor who sets out to kill his father's Nazi executioner (*Cojot*).



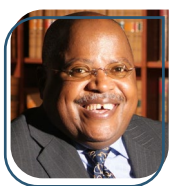
Dr. Russell Frank worked as a reporter and editor at newspapers in California and Pennsylvania for 13 years before joining the journalism faculty of the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State. A folklorist by training (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania), Dr. Frank's primary interest is in the telling of true stories, orally and in writing. He has twice been a Fulbright Scholar, in Ukraine in 2012-13, and in Greece in 2019-20. During his time in Greece, he was researching the lives of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa until the COVID pandemic forced his early departure.



Dr. Kathleen Hill, Associate Professor of Science Education, is a former environmental scientist, and science teacher who currently works with scientists and engineers to design and implement STEM education outreach programs that bridge cutting-edge science and engineering research and K-12 classrooms. She worked in environmental consulting for 10 years, which involved a wide variety of projects across the desert southwest region of the United States. She then transitioned to teaching middle and high school science and served as a teacher leader on the NASA Phoenix Student Internship Program as well as coordinator for a school-wide middle school science and engineering fair. Her research has focused on teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and specialized content knowledge.



Brooklyn Leo is a dual-title doctoral candidate in the Philosophy and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments at Penn State. Brooklyn's research sits at the intersections of phenomenology, decolonial theory, and trans philosophy, focusing on the impact of racial trauma on the body schema and intersubjectivity. They also study the role of trauma-informed educational spaces and aesthetic-art practices in processing collective memory. Brooklyn has worked as Graduate Assistant and Program Support Specialist for the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative, where they have served as lead content developer and curator on trauma-informed curriculum. Brooklyn is a teaching-artist-in-residence, leading spoken word poetry workshops and mural painting programs for LGBTQ+ students.



Dr. Tiyanjana Maluwa is the H. Laddie Montague Chair in Law. He previously worked as the legal counsel of the OAU (now African Union) and, subsequently, as the legal adviser to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Prior to joining the AU, he was Professor of Law at the University of Cape Town, and Extraordinary Professor of Law at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Professor Maluwa served as the inaugural director of the Penn State School of International Affairs from 2007 to 2015. In 2017, he was a Senior Fellow at the Kolleg-Forschegruppe (KFG) based at Humboldt University, Berlin. In August 2021, he was elected a member of the Institute of International Law. He holds a Ph.D. degree in International Law from the University of Cambridge.



Lori McGarry, Education Program Specialist, is a former classroom teacher in secondary social studies and elementary education. With a background in resource economics and policy, her current areas of scholarship include educational equity, deliberative pedagogy, and interdisciplinary and community-based learning. Her work with students has been featured in *Civic Education in the Elementary Grades: Promoting Student Engagement in an Era of Accountability* (Mitra & Serriere, 2015), *From Inquiry to Action: Civic Engagement with Project-Based Learning in All Content Areas* (Zemelman, 2016), and *Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools* (Molnar-Main, 2017). McGarry serves on the Kettering Foundation's Civic Education Workgroup and was recognized as Pennsylvania History Teacher of the Year by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.



Dr. Scott Alan Metzger is Associate Professor of Social Studies Education at Penn State University and a scholar of history education. He was a high-school teacher before earning his Ph.D. from Michigan State University and now works with undergraduate and graduate students in secondary (7-12) social-studies teacher certification and courses on history and social studies topics. With research expertise in history teaching, learning and curriculum, Dr. Metzger's work focuses on what and how people learn and think about the past, including media/technology and classroom discussion of social and historical difficult topics.



Dr. Ashley Patterson is an Assistant Professor of Education with expertise in equity and diversity. Dr. Patterson's work in the educational field began as an elementary level inclusive special educator. She is committed to preparing educators who take up a critical lens to working with children and best serving their needs while seeking ways to deconstruct inequities woven into the US's existing public school system and structure. Broadly, Dr. Patterson's research interests consider intersections between identity and education, considering the dialogic relationship that exists as the ways we think about ourselves impact our educational experiences while our educational experiences impact the ways we think about ourselves. Employing an intersectional approach to considering identity, Dr. Patterson's research examines race conjointly with a host of other contextually important and influential identity markers.



Dr. Logan Rutten, Postdoctoral Scholar in the Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State, is a teacher educator whose research examines practitioner inquiry as a form of professional learning for educators across the career span and particularly within school-university partnerships such as professional development schools. In recognition of his contributions to teacher education, Dr. Rutten was recently awarded the Robert E. Stevenson Memorial Scholarship by the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) and the Arthur Blumberg/Edward Pajak Memorial Scholarship by the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision (COPIS). Dr. Rutten currently serves as Associate Editor of the *Cambridge Handbook of Research, Policy, and Practice in School-University Partnerships* and as Co-Chair of Communications for the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS).



About the Initiative

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State enables K-12 educators to effectively teach difficult topics. The Initiative offers sustained and customized professional development programs supported by online learning modules, instructional materials, and Penn State faculty and partners. Using an inquiry-based, trauma-informed approach, the Initiative's programs help K-12 teachers use compelling questions to drive their professional growth and students' learning. In each of its programs, the Initiative's professional learning experts guide teachers to foster empathy, critical thinking, agency, and civic-discourse skills among their students by applying inquiry-based approaches to the instruction of difficult topics. Over time, these approaches can transform schools and communities by revealing opportunities to design more equitable education systems where all children can learn, grow, and thrive.

For more information email us or visit our website:

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