

ASYLUM TALK SHOW

Introduction: In this activity, students “role play” various real-life persons in the case of the SS St. Louis, a German ship containing Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi persecution in the late 1930s. Several western nations, including the United States, denied these refugees access to “safe haven”, and therefore many of the passengers were forced to return to Europe, where many later became victims of the Holocaust.

This case illustrates how moral, ethical, and political issues entered into whether these passengers should be granted asylum. It might be helpful for the teacher to enter into a discussion with the class about basic concepts of the Holocaust, including the plight of refugees during the World War II era. A suggested resource for general information about the period and the “human aspect” of the Holocaust is the Simon Wiesenthal Learning Center. (<http://wiesenthal.com/>). Other resources are also available online.

- **Standards**
- **Related Resources**
- **Method of Activity**
- **Assessment**

Standards: This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by **McREL** at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>:

Civics Standards. Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government. Understands the essential characteristics of limited and unlimited governments. Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good. Understands the concept of a constitution, the various purposes that constitutions serve, and the conditions that contribute to the establishment and maintenance of constitutional government.

What is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and to World Affairs?

Understands how the world is organized politically into nation-states, how nation-states interact with one another, and issues surrounding U.S. foreign policy.

Understands the impact of significant political and nonpolitical developments on the United States and other nations.

Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly multi-ethnic American society.

Related resources for this lesson include:

The Tragedy of the SS St. Louis (www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/stlouis.html)

SS St. Louis (<http://www2.prestel.co.uk/blchnr/>)

St. Louis: The Other Ship (<http://www.iearn.org/iearn/hgp/aeti/aeti-1997/st-louis.html>)

NEVER ANOTHER ST. LOUIS (<http://www.lchr.org/refugee/herald.htm>)

SS St. Louis Exhibit from the US Holocaust Museum website (<http://www.ushmm.org/stlouis/>)

Web page from US Holocaust Museum website which highlights SS St. Louis voyage route as well as US policy towards allowing the St. Louis permission to dock at an American port (<http://www.ushmm.org/stlouis/story/voyage/index.htm>)

A newspaper story from the Jerusalem Post, which documents the voyage of the SS St. Louis, as well as efforts to determine the fate of St. Louis passengers after their return to Europe. (<http://www.cdn-friends-icej.ca/antiholo/voyage.html>)

Highlights of several world nations' immigration policies regarding Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution (including the United States) (<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/grobim.html>)

P.O.V. website for "Well-Founded Fear" (includes case studies, an interactive game, information about the film and filmmakers, and other resources on asylum policy.) (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/wellfoundedfear/>)

Web-based materials for the PBS/WGBH *American Experience* presentation "America and the Holocaust". Pages include information on the film, historical evidence, a timeline, as well as teacher resources. (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/index.html>) (Main page), and (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/index.html>) (Reference materials).

In addition, it is suggested that student participants conduct their own web or text based searches for SS St. Louis materials. Links included in this activity were gathered primarily from two Internet search engines, Google (<http://www.google.com>), and Alta-Vista (<http://www.altavista.com>). However, teachers and students can easily use other search engines if they prefer.

Method of activity:

Prior to the teacher showing the program *Well-Founded Fear* to the class, the students should be led on a discussion about how US immigration and refugee policy has evolved over the course of U.S. History. Special emphasis should be placed on the issues of refugee status and political asylum. The purpose of the viewing is to allow students to make a comparison between current asylum policy and the historical evolution of that practice. The teacher might also make comparisons to the students regarding current issues and reasons for persons seeking asylum. (For example, what actually constitutes a "Well-Founded Fear"? Does religious persecution have more or less weight than political persecution, for example? Have the students debate whether or not some of the case studies in the program are worthy of protected status.)

Examples of change in asylum and refugee policy can be seen in the treatment of Soviet and "post-Soviet" Jews, as well as Chinese citizens. Other examples can be seen in current policies dealing with Central American refugees, similar to the case of Elian Gonzalez, which is mentioned below.

(Note: The teacher may also wish to mention and discuss the 1999-2000 case of Elian Gonzalez, a six year old Cuban boy who was rescued during an attempt by the child and his mother to cross from Cuba to the United States in a raft. The mother drowned. The child then became the focus of a major custody debate between his father, who remained in Cuba, and several relatives who live in Miami, Florida. Teachers may be able to find information about the case and the attempt of the "Florida relatives" to gain asylum for the boy at either the CNN website (<http://cnn.com>), or the ABC News website (<http://abcnews.go.com/>).

After the students watch the program, and learn about the criteria for acceptable (or unacceptable) claims for asylum, the teacher should explain the story of the St. Louis. Two sources the teacher may wish to duplicate are the "Tragedy of the SS St. Louis" (www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/stlouis.html), or the SS St. Louis web page (<http://www2.prestel.co.uk/blchnr/>). Both of these offer first person accounts of the voyage and provide a sound historic basis for the events of the voyage.

Once the students have had an opportunity to read through the material and understand the basic idea of what happened during the trip, the teacher could assign roles for some of the better-known persons on board the ship. Students will then assume those roles and discuss their positions and behavior based on the events of the voyage. Roles suggested here were developed from the “Tragedy of the SS St. Louis” website.

Those roles will include:

Aaron Pozner: a passenger who recently had been released from Dachau concentration camp. In order for him to gain passage on the St. Louis, his family pooled their money together. Pozner had to leave his wife and children behind to travel on the St. Louis.

Gustav Schroeder: captain of the St. Louis. He gave strict orders to the crew that the passengers on this voyage were to be treated as ordinary passengers.

Otto Schiendick: crew member who was opposed to the captain’s policy that passengers should be treated humanely. He was also a courier for the German Secret Police who had been assigned to pick up secret documents about the US military while in Cuba.

Recha Weiler: passenger whose husband, Moritz, a university professor, died en route to Cuba.

Frederico Laredo Bru: president of Cuba who blocked the St. Louis passengers from entering Cuba.

Martin Goldsmith: director of the Relief Committee in Cuba, financed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Attempted to get the Joint Committee to provide more money for refugees already in Cuba and for those about to arrive. The committee refused, but then realized the seriousness of the predicament, and sent professionals to help negotiate, but they would not arrive for 48 hours.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: President of the United States in 1939. His administration had to make the final decision concerning granting asylum status to St. Louis passengers.

(Other roles may be added, or eliminated from the list above, depending on the class size and amount of time the teacher wishes to use on this lesson.)

In addition to these roles, a student should also be appointed to be the “talk show” **host**, who will interview the participants and ask questions. It is suggested that audience members also be allowed to ask questions based on affidavits created from either the web sources listed above, or other sources. This not only would give an incentive for the participants to know the roles, but it would also give the audience a feeling of involvement through asking questions.

Conducting the “talk show”: Students should be prompted that while they may see some interesting (and sometimes outlandish) behavior on television talk shows, inappropriate behavior should not be acceptable in this format. The teacher may want to advise the students that the purpose of their “appearing” on the talk show is to sway public opinion to their point of view, and that inappropriate behavior will only serve to turn public opinion against their character and their view.

The classroom or area should be arranged in a manner that best fits the format. For example, the teacher may wish to bring in a group of chairs for the participants rather than using student desks. In addition, if technical facilities are available, the teacher may also wish to have the “talk show” set in a manner that the moderator might use a microphone (preferably a wireless microphone) to allow the audience to ask question and participants to answer those questions in a manner similar to professionally produced shows. Also, if facilities allow, students might also be utilized as “technical crewmembers”, assisting in such areas as lighting, sound, continuity, and so on. If the teacher wishes to either save the “show” in archival form, or wishes to duplicate the assignment with several classes, videotaping the show might be desirable.

Participants in the show as well as the audience should be well-briefed as to what the facts and issues of the *St. Louis* case concern. Obviously, the panel guests will need to have a sufficient knowledge of the roles they have been assigned in order to effectively convince the audience that they “are” that character.

Method of assessment: the teacher will want to develop some sort of strategy for assessing student work in this exercise. Perhaps the best way might be to grade participants on the skills they exhibit in actually “becoming” the character they represent in the talk show. The teacher could also require the remaining students to submit questions prior to the show which could be graded.

It may also be desirable for the teacher to develop a “rubric” to allow for easier grading and identification of criteria for assessment. While the teacher may wish to develop their own rubric and own criteria, a sample rubric is included below as a guideline:

“Asylum Talk Show” grade sheet

Knowledge of “character” (20 points): Has the student researched the character so that they appear “believable” in the role? Did the student need notes/prompting in order to complete the role? Did the student use acceptable “props” (clothing, etc.) in the role? _____ points awarded

Ability to synthesize information (20 points): How well does the student “think on his/her feet?” How effectively does the student answer questions? _____ points awarded.

Cooperation (20 points): While the student wants to make the character believable and wants the audience to be sympathetic to the character, the student must understand that others in the “talk show” have a view and agenda also. The student must be able to get their point across without being belligerent or hostile. How effective is the student in this? _____ points awarded.

Speaking ability (20 points): Does the student use correct grammar and does his/her voice “amplify” in order to be heard by the class or audience? _____ points awarded.

Lesson by Michael Hutchison. He is a social studies teacher at Lincoln High School in Vincennes, Indiana. A 22 year teaching veteran, he has been recognized nationally for his use of classroom technology and cable television in the classroom. In 1996 and 1997 he was named national winner of Rifkin and Associates 21st Century Teacher competition, and in 1998, he was a first place winner in the Compaq Teacher Lesson Plan contest. In 1999, he was named "Teacher of the Year" (Central US region) by Technology and Learning magazine