Lighting the Moral Imagination

Through the Facing History and Ourselves approach, students learn not only history, but also the skills needed for citizenship in a democracy.

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Students at Lausanne Collegiate School ponder their moral responsibilities.

Many high school students say that history is nonessential. The past seems distant, disconnected from the present. Students often picture headline-making events and the actions of world leaders from past centuries vaguely, as through a blurry telescope.

In the case-study approach to teaching history developed by Facing History and Ourselves, however, teachers urge students to reflect on connections between periods in history characterized by violent repression and the times students are living in now—and the choices students face. Class activities raise questions about human behavior, morality, and ethics. Explorations of decades-old atrocities become as relevant as the nightly news report on genocide in Africa—or the offensive joke overheard in the hallway.

"This is a far cry from the average history class most of our students have experienced," says Sheila Jacobson, a teacher at Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis, Tennessee, which offers a course centered on Facing History curriculum materials. "Students don't just look at history from an external lens—they question their own part in creating that history."

The Facing History Journey

The approach that Facing History and Ourselves has developed is now used by 25,000 teachers around the United States and in more than a dozen other countries to engage students in both the content and questions of social responsibility (Sleeper & Strom, 2006). The interdisciplinary instructional materials connected to this approach build on the methods of the humanities—inquiry, analysis, interpretation, and judgment (see "About Facing History and Ourselves" on p. 61 for more information on Facing History resources).

Our materials follow a sequence of study—what we call the Facing History Journey (see fig. 1)—that begins by urging learners to explore questions of

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Exploring personal identity is a key part of Facing History's approach.

identity and group membership. These lessons provide a framework for studying the breakdown of democracy in 20th-century Germany and other historical instances of mass violence and genocide (Strom, 1994). Students examine choices individuals and groups made in a particular time period and ponder connections to the present and future. The journey culminates with each student reflecting on how responsible civic participation can help preserve democracy.

Units of study offered through Facing History typically last from four weeks to a semester. Many teachers weave resources and themes from Facing History's professional development into their teaching throughout the year. To see this rigorous approach in action, let's look at how teachers incorporate Facing History's resources into their social studies and humanities classes.

Starting with Identity—One's Own

In middle and high school classrooms that use the Facing History approach, students explore individual decision making and practice making moral judgments. The pedagogy speaks to the concepts—newly discovered for most adolescents—of subjectivity and competing truths, along with adolescents' growing capacity to think hypothetically and their inclination to find personal meaning in events. Many young adults come to school already struggling with questions of obedience, loyalty, fairness, difference, and acceptance. Using a historical case study to explore such questions as why some people conform to the norms of a group—even when those norms encourage wrongdoing—whereas others resist helps students explore these issues in depth.

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The journey starts with the question of how identity influences behavior and shapes the way we see ourselves and others. These are relevant questions for students at Lausanne Collegiate School. Lausanne has a diverse student body—one-third of its students come from ethnic minority backgrounds and another 17 percent from immigrant families—but its students rarely discuss that diversity directly.

On the first day of the Facing History class, teacher Sheila Jacobson tells students that daily journal assignments will ask them to reflect on issues of race and membership in society and how those issues affect their own lives. (Facing History and Ourselves, 2002). Jacobson and the other teachers mentioned in this article have been trained by Facing History to lead these kinds of activities.

During an initial activity, Michael, a 10th grader, draws an outline of his hand on a sheet of paper and peppers the fingers with adjectives that describe how others label him—privileged, tall, goofy—and the palm with ways he sees himself—considerate, musical, hard-working. During discussion following this activity, another student, Tina, asks, "Why didn't you put *white* on your hand? I have *black* on mine."

"I guess I don't think of myself by skin color," Michael answers. "Is *black* on your fingers or your palm?"

"Both," Tina answers, "but not for the same reason."

Jacobson joins the conversation. "What do you mean, Tina?"

Tina thinks for a moment, then answers, "I see myself as black in a good way. But in the cafeteria, when I'm sitting at a table with my black friends, I don't know if that's how others look at the color of my skin."

In his journal reflection, Michael considers Tina's comment:

> I've never had to think about who I sit with in the cafeteria. But I've asked my friends why the black kids all sit together. Maybe I should have been asking a different question, like why I was sitting with who I was or why I wasn't sitting with [the black students].

About Facing History and Ourselves

Since 1976, Facing History and Ourselves has provided materials, professional development, and a model of teaching that helps teachers and students connect history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives, mainly through studying the Holocaust and other cases of genocide. More than 25,000 educators around the world have participated in Facing History seminars and more than 50,000 are part of Facing History's educator network.

Facing History has developed hundreds of lesson plans, teaching units, and resources (including books, study guides, curriculum outlines, videos, and interactive online learning modules). All are available for purchase, many are free online, and others can be borrowed from Facing History's large lending library.

Topics range from the Holocaust to the eugenics movement to how countries heal after periods of violence. Facing History's resource librarians guide educators in selecting resources.

To learn more about Facing History's work, visit www.facinghistory.org. To join the Educator Network, click "subscribe." Teachers who attend one or more seminars receive online resources as well as borrowing privileges.

Such conversations and reflections are not digressions in this class. This kind of discussion is intended to move students like Michael and Tina toward considering their own "universe of obligation," a Facing History and Ourselves term meaning a person's ethical responsibility to those beyond his or her immediate circle of acquaintance.

The next day, Jacobson engages the class in an activity-based discussion of moral responsibility. As students enter the class, they see a large grid taped to the floor with one of these phrases written in each of the quadrants: (1) *I have no objection to or responsibility for this*; (2) *I object, but I'm not responsible*; (3) *I object, and I am responsible for voicing disapproval*; and (4) *I am responsible for stopping this*. As Jacobson suggests the following social practices, students move to the quadrant that represents the position they would take on each practice:

- Eating at a self-segregated table in the school cafeteria.
- Seeing a classmate cheat on a test.
- Hearing a racist joke told by another student.
- Watching a younger student be physically bullied.

And, ultimately:

- Hiding a political fugitive in your home despite imminent danger to yourself and your family.

As students move from one space to another, each student begins to feel more comfortable defending his or her own position and asking others why they have chosen theirs. The grid enables Jacobson to balance the viewpoints. This activity links what students think about naturally—their personal decision making and agency—to historical inquiry.

Questioning Membership: "We and They"

These first steps lead Jacobson's students toward discussion of how the positive nature of identity can lead to the divisive practices of labeling or segregating others. Facing History materials help ground this discussion in historical events, leading to such questions as, On what basis did the Nazis—or the Hutu in Rwanda—separate and label groups? What role do propaganda, government, and citizen awareness play in the exacerbation of tensions between groups? How does this play out today? What has changed over the decades, and what has not?

Middle school students explore similar questions in the predominantly black public schools of Memphis—in which all 8th graders study a unit on the U.S. civil rights movement through a Facing History lens (Facing History and Ourselves, 2005). Eighth grade students in Sara Beth Gregory's class at White Station Middle School in Tennessee, for example, ponder the development of "we and they" groups after watching a video about Elizabeth Eckford's experience as one of the first black students to attend an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. What, they ask, caused U.S. citizens to turn racial identity into hatred of those whose skin color looked different? How is historical context important in understanding the groups that form during such conflicts?

Engaging with Historical Content

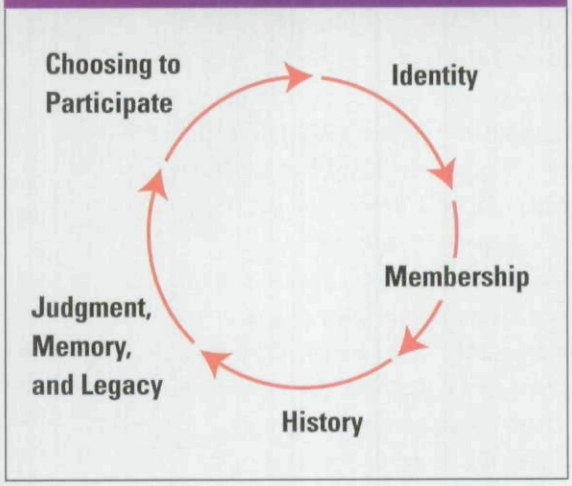
Lessons like these segue into in-depth study of conditions, characters, and events in historical periods, keeping questions about what it means to act responsibly in a democracy in the forefront. Students in Sheila Jacobson's class, for example, learn about the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, the rise of the Nazis, the curtailments of citizens' freedoms, and the beginnings of World War II. They study the lives of historical figures, including people who showed courage and compassion in resistance.

The approach leads students to connect imaginatively with historical material. Jacobson gives each student the name and short biography of a figure from the Holocaust: a Jew who hid in a

barn, a German citizen who sheltered a family, a soldier who forced Jews onto transports to concentration camps. The prompts students respond to as they write reflections on their assigned figures force them to consider aspects of such stories they might not previously have contemplated, such as how individuals might rationalize their own actions in a letter home or what fears such people might have harbored besides the obvious fear of physical danger.

Facing History has also created resources about the U.S. civil rights movement, the Armenian genocide during World War I, Chinese immigration to the United States, the debate on Muslim head scarves in France, and other topics connected to world history.

FIGURE 1. The Facing History Journey



Considering the Legacy

As students immerse themselves in particular historical case studies, they consider the legacy connected to that period. Facing History guides students to debate questions of fairness and judgment, but only after they learn about historical events, the actors' choices, and the implications of those choices.

The question of who's responsible troubles many teenagers. The study of historical atrocities adds depth and urgency to this question, as Adrianne Bock, who taught social studies to juniors and seniors at Lexington High School in Massachusetts, found. After a semester studying the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide, one of Bock's students struggled to decide whether nonresisters in Nazi Germany were culpable:

> I find it extremely difficult to assign levels of blame because the combination of all of the roles is what caused the Holocaust. Had one perpetrator not chosen to kill one or maybe 100 Jews, others may have followed. On some level I want to put everyone who didn't resist or rescue on a single level accepting total responsibility. . . . I hesitate to do this though because it would put Hitler on the same level as a bystander who simply took the Nazi oath, and I feel that there is a huge gap between the actual damage they caused.

Choosing to Participate

Classroom discussions and activities engage students' emotions, challenge their intellects, and promote ethical reflection. A goal of the Facing History approach is to let these three challenges lead naturally into students making decisions about individual civic participation. Students complete the journey by reflecting on the implications for their lives of what they've learned about the role of people's choices in a democracy. They talk openly about how they might participate in a democratic society as they face choices throughout their lives.

As the culmination of their Facing History semester, Bock has each student create a "toolbox" containing symbols of what that student will do to make a difference in the world. Items and responses found in each toolbox vary widely, reflecting each student's interests and ways of encountering the world. One student, Brian, includes his skateboard in his collection, writing that his board represents the "platform" he stands on as a privileged suburbanite and pledging to "spread education about racism." Some students display interest in psychology and sociology, pledging to explore what motivates one group of people to remain bystanders in the face of injustice while others resist. The inclusion of newspaper articles signals many students' commitment to keep learning about the world. The range of responses reassures Bock that students are truly confronting a range of choices and thinking about how they can make a difference.

Some students report on steps they've already taken toward social responsibility. One high school senior wrote in her journal:

> For a long time, the girls on my soccer team used the phrase "That's so gay" to talk about anything they didn't like. One day it would be the refs who were "gay," the next a missed goal. By the end of this course, I had the courage to say something about it to one girl on the team. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Facing the Overwhelming

Facing History's resources may be especially useful to social studies and language arts teachers. They offer a framework for discussing texts and events that include difficult and potentially overwhelming historical subject matter with a continual focus on the connection to the present. Rather than a formulaic method of approaching a subject, the approach is a way to orchestrate discussion and activities.

Discussion is at the heart of a Facing History and Ourselves course, but it is not the only goal. A course or lesson using this approach should (1) create a classroom culture of deep reflection in which students construct their own learning, (2) pose questions and urge students to pose their own questions, (3) promote a climate of respect and nurture student voice, and (4) honor

Facing History guides students to debate questions of fairness and judgment.

different learning styles (Miller, 2005).

Students are growing up in a world rife with conflict and extremism. It's our responsibility to give youth the tools to think critically, understand the connection between history and ethics, and grasp how the lessons of history help guide moral choices. At a time when some people feel powerless to do anything about the spread of religious and ethnic hatred in the world, Facing History students discover ways to link the past to the present, link themselves to others, and think about their role in creating a just world. EL

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