

Facing History and Ourselves

Through a probing deliberation of the Holocaust, students learn to think more critically, to challenge shallow reasoning, and to recognize the centrality of participation in a dynamic democracy.

Recent events in Eastern Europe have highlighted the active role of citizens in bringing about needed change in those countries. We saw our European neighbors, in the euphoria of the moment, speak fervently of freedom and hope and of the urge to participate in a democratic process. We could not help but feel that the model that inspired them was the United States of America.

Yet how well do we serve as a worthy example? Are we producing the responsible citizens that our European counterparts think us to be—and themselves yearn to be? Various reports on the state of American education have found that our young people suffer from historical amnesia, geographic disorientation, and civic ignorance. Statistics on adult civic behavior are no more reassuring: voter participation by Americans is the lowest among the industrialized countries of the West. The young don't know, while the adults won't do. We are something less than an inspiration.

Since the mid-1970s, the Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation has provided a powerful model for teaching history in a way that stimulates junior and senior high school students to ask questions, formulate beliefs, and challenge simplistic and long-held viewpoints. During that

Thousands of students and educators throughout the U.S. and Canada have had their consciousness raised through an in-depth study of the Nazi Holocaust and its message for today. Shown here is Kathy Greeley's middle school class at the Graham and Parks Alternative School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Photograph by Carol Palmer



time, the teacher training and resource center, based in Brookline, Massachusetts, has given workshops and provided materials to more than 30,000 educators in suburban, urban, and rural communities and in public, private, parochial, and vocational schools throughout the United States and Canada.¹

Lessons of the Holocaust

Facing History and Ourselves approaches citizenship education through a case study of the rise of totalitarianism that led to the Holocaust. We selected the history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust as the primary case study for the curriculum because it is a watershed historical event—one that is exceptionally well documented, that encompasses the full range of ethical choices and perspectives on human behavior, and that engaged every political, social, economic, and intellectual component and institution in society. Its issues defy simple answers and superficial treatment. By examining the circumstances of this piece of history, classes explore the fundamental issues of citizenship, responsibility, and decision making in a democracy.

The commitment to teach this history raises complex questions regarding teaching about racism and genocide. How, for example, does one convey a sense of the humiliation, dehumanization, and eventual destruction of the era without overwhelming students with a numbing list of brutalities that, in their minds, may be incredible but bear no relation to their personal worlds? How does one avoid reducing the complex issues of such an event to the simplistic one- or two-page passages that often appear in history textbooks? And, further, how can lessons such as these be used with teachers and students to probe the question, "Whose history is this?"

Teachers explore complex issues such as these in one- or two-day awareness workshops and during six-day summer institutes. As a vehicle for teacher training, however, Facing History goes well beyond the boundaries of typical staff development for a social studies or history curriculum. Teachers explore materials and methodology that elicit their own attitudes and



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beliefs about prejudice, obedience, and responsible action. Thus, teachers confront the most fundamental and difficult issues of pedagogy: how to address powerful issues of human behavior in the classroom without preaching; how to build an atmosphere of trust and respect for diverse opinions in a classroom; how to ask the additional question that complicates the simple answer and provokes critical thinking; and how to evaluate the learning of the content of citizenship, judgment, and participation.

Connecting History to Students' Lives

To bridge the lessons of the Holocaust to students' lives in the world today, Facing History and Ourselves identifies universal concerns of adolescents—loyalty, peer group pressure, scapegoating, labeling, conformity, and belonging—and uses them as pathways on which the students can encounter history and then travel back and forth between the past and the present. The opening sessions of the program translate those issues into an analytical framework and a vocabulary with which to investigate society and the individual. Students consider how an individual's identity is formed and what societal forces influence our decision making. The vocabulary and the perspective are constantly widened as the students approach the events of the case study. They examine the range of choices that confronted individuals at different points. Through continually challenging simple answers and posing probing questions, teachers help stu-

dents to examine and assess the options available to perpetrators of events, to victims, to resisters, and to bystanders.

In *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, the curriculum's resource manual, students discover the actual range of human responses made to Nazi ideology during the years of choice before the Holocaust began. Written materials, films, and resource speakers in person or on video continually examine the decision making of all participants in the events of the time. Seeing that the choices available in the early '30s were very different from those a decade later, they learn that evil and injustice begin with small steps of conforming, accepting, and not thinking about what is happening. When students realize how many years the Germans had to vote for or against policy, to decide whether to take an oath of allegiance, or to risk speaking out for dismissed friends and colleagues in their jobs, classes, or neighborhood, they begin to challenge strongly held myths of forced obedience and the inevitability of history. They confront the power of labeling, of *words*, to turn neighbor against neighbor.

To foster thinking about the type of education that might have counteracted the propaganda, indoctrination, and racial biases inherent in Nazi education, and support risk taking to achieve justice, the curriculum includes descriptions of lessons in Nazi schools. Students are also stimulated to reason about the implications for a society that abuses civil liberties and censors the freedom to think and speak. The recent headlines about President Havel's description of Czechoslovakia's "spoiled moral environment" take on new meaning.

As students turn to the events of Nuremberg, they discuss why philosopher-historian Hannah Arendt viewed these events as the bridge between thought and action, and they are constantly provoked to exercise their own faculty for making judgments. They also study about the Armenian Genocide and the power of denial to suppress the truth of the past. Finally, students return to matters of the individual and society and explore how

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their thinking, actions, and judgments can make a difference. These sections, expanded by a new resource book called *Choosing to Participate*, help students learn about diverse ways people can participate as citizens: in community work, in human service, in politics and social advocacy, and in other kinds of voluntary and nonprofit activity. They study examples of people in American history like Ida B. Wells, whose courage and civic leadership pushed state legislatures to pass anti-lynching laws and also continue to inspire many civil rights activists for generations to come. They also contemplate steps they might have to take to oppose intolerance, racism, and discrimination in their schools and communities. Ultimately, they come to understand why participation is vital to strong democracy.

In Search of Civic Courage

Calls for more history courses and more civics classes in junior and senior high schools will not produce responsible citizens. Citizenship education cannot be viewed as a by-product of the social studies: it must occupy center stage. If we are to serve as models for those who have not known freedom and justice and participation in government, then we must recognize that civic literacy alone will not do; it is civic *courage* we must seek. By stimulating students to confront history and its lessons today, we hope they will avoid the mistakes of the past and demonstrate that the United States is indeed a powerful inspiration for other nations seeking to live the principles of democracy □

¹For more information on Facing History training institutes and materials, please contact Facing History and Ourselves, 25 Kennard Rd., Brookline, MA 02146, (617) 232-1595.

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