

Reflecting on the purposes of history education Raquel F., a high school student from Brazil who took a Facing History and Ourselves course at International High School in Queens, New York, explained:

"Sometimes school in Brazil was like sitting in a classroom with steamed up windows. Light came in but you cannot see out. History, when taught well, can make that glass transparent. You can see and make clear the relationship between what we learn in school and our own lives."

"I know that we don't learn history to place blame. The members of my stepmother's family are all German. Am I to blame her for what happened during the Holocaust? How many generations of people can we hold responsible for the past? I'm responsible for what I do, not for what my ancestors have done."

"Now let's think about what history we learn. It is important that we learn the uncomfortable parts. It is from the uncomfortable parts that we really learn. It's there that we can find the conflicts that help us to understand ourselves."

Raquel's voice reminds us of a fundamental truth about young people: they have both the capacity and the tendency to connect historical issues to their own lives. That is how they make sense of the past. In addition to the cognitive components noted below, history education must help students to develop their burgeoning moral philosophy – their unique voices - in complex, academically rigorous and personal ways. By connecting history to themselves, students can build an intellectual and ethical vocabulary to apply to their study history and to think about its meaning for the decisions encompassed in their own civic environments.

History comes to life when students make connections with their own worlds that help them to relate to its protagonists and make sense of their motivations, decisions, and actions. At the same time, students gain new perspective on what is happening today – in their personal lives and in the larger world. This dynamic of moving back and forth between a study of history and a study of today holds special urgency for adolescents, who are beginning to see and define themselves as part of a larger history and often are seeking ways to "make a difference." It has been an integral part of the Facing History and Ourselves pedagogy since the organization's founding¹.



That said, studying history in relation to present-day social and civic issues presents continuing intellectual challenges: understanding events within their own historical context, avoiding simple parallels between events that share a superficial similarity, and coming to understand how events in the past have (or have not) influenced the present. It involves bringing historical concepts and methods of inquiry to bear on understanding a particular history and assessing its universal implications. It also means seeing oneself as shaped by history and as a player in its ongoing creation.

In order to help students "face history," it is essential to consider how they are likely to understand the material, given their personal and educational backgrounds and levels of cognitive development; it is important to craft lessons and assignments that address their articulated questions and unarticulated concerns, thus helping them build a deeper understanding of history and of themselves. At the same time, as teachers, we need to be careful not to assume that we know how students will respond to a particular piece of content or the questions they will raise. That means, creating a space for students reflect on the content in writing, and in class discussion.

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To help teachers and students make essential, civic and ethical connections, secondary school history courses are best built around a common core. This structure, which Facing History and Ourselves calls its “scope and sequence,” organizes the inquiry and shapes the journey that students and teachers will take together. It is often depicted as a circle or spiral; each phase of the journey not only builds upon previous elements but leads to their expanded and deepened understanding. In one sense, a Facing History and Ourselves journey moves from consideration of identity and group membership through historical study to a fuller understanding of the individual’s role in society. In another sense, the journey is more like a double helix, with a constant active interplay between “facing history” and “facing ourselves” – where each informs the other².

Scholar and human rights activist Samantha Power has applauded history courses in which the traditional focus on the actions of nation-states and empires and of their leaders

and official representatives has given way in these courses to a more nuanced, disaggregated view that focuses on the stories of people whose individual and collective decisions shaped the course of events. Seen in this way, history is not static, not fixed and inevitable but active, always in flux. People – both famous and not – are its drivers. What happened could have happened differently had different choices been made. Similarly, the history of episodes of collective violence, such as those taught by Facing History and Ourselves, are not merely or even primarily stories of perpetrators and victims. Few people play these roles on a world stage. Rather, a history that is vital – alive, accessible, pertinent, and important – highlights a range of human responses along a moral continuum from bystander to “upstander.” Learning such histories with engagement and reflection stirs youthful idealism, as young people see that they have a role to play in making history.

One effective instructional approach involves helping students understand how ideas, processes, and institutions from the past are affected by the passage of time – a concept historians refer to as “continuity and change.” This concept suggests that while certain tendencies in the human condition are linked to the past as well as the present, the nature of these linkages change over time. Take the process of dehumanization, for example, which Facing History examines in several of its case studies. Dehumanization is a recognized “signifier” of the steps that, little by little, can lead to genocide. In this context, the dehumanization of the Jews by the Nazis can be seen to share certain dynamic features with the dehumanization of the Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide. That said, the particular methods and strategies of dehumanization manifested themselves differently in each of these time periods and social contexts.

The challenge for teachers is to help students explore how such ideas and institutions “continue” as well as “change” across time. More ambitiously, it is to help students see this paradox as an integral part of any deep exploration of the past and the present.

Young people often see history as “the way things were” rather than as a process involving influenced by multiple factors, including the actions of individuals, groups, and societies. They often take historical accounts at face value, without placing them into any sort of context. They may employ one-dimensional models of agency and causality,

asserting, for example, that the Holocaust was “caused” by a madman named Hitler, and seeking to understand “why he killed all the Jews.” Shocked by actions that they see as clearly senseless and immoral by present-day standards, they tend to empathize with victims, blame identifiable perpetrators and bystanders, and resist distinctions and explanations that could cloud their moral vision.

At a more complex level, students create composite pictures. They bring together multiple sources of evidence. They understand that events can have multiple causes and that a force for change may meet resistance which may or may not be strong enough to overcome. They see individuals’ beliefs and actions as influenced but not determined by what is happening around them. They may wonder why people made the choices they did and what they would have done in their place. As they link past and present, they may work hard to put themselves in others’ shoes. Recognizing that they do not always live up to their own ideals, they can be generous in their judgments of others. At the same time, they, as budding moral philosophers, expect people – past and present – to acknowledge their common humanity, recognize each other’s needs and take them into account, and to care about those beyond their immediate circle.

With a still more sophisticated perspective, adolescents and adults can see history through multiple lenses. They understand that individual choices and actions are influenced and constrained by interacting factors and look for patterns that are common across diverse settings, circumstances, and historical periods. They recognize that reported “facts” are often filtered through perceptions that are influenced by culture, ideology, and experience. Thus there can be many view points on a story, but they do not necessarily carry equal weight. Scholars can honestly disagree about why something happened and about what might have happened had other courses been taken, yet it is possible for students to critically evaluate their accounts and explanatory theories. An authentic understanding of history requires an honest attempt to piece together historical evidence and assess its significance.

Mining the historical record, students can draw conclusions about human nature. Yet they need not be trapped in moral relativism, cynicism, or despair; as they make informed and thoughtful judgments and consider the difficulties they will inevitably encounter in living up to their ideals, they can

commit instead to proactive awareness, reflection, and carefully considered actions.

Making informed comparisons between the past and the present in Facing History classrooms need not be – and indeed, must not be – a dry, academic exercise. The empathy, concern, anger, and moral outrage that historic and contemporary accounts evoke play a vital role in engaged analysis and understanding. As we encourage students to read, watch, and listen with care (in all senses of that word), we can ask them to temporarily suspend judgment, listen to other voices, bring more contextual information to bear on their analysis, and reflect upon their own thinking without undermining their moral passion. Indeed, by helping students to develop disciplined habits of mind that seek authentic understanding while we also support emotional engagement and ethical reflection, we enhance their ability to craft thoughtful moral arguments and make informed judgments and commitments.

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in newly introduced phenomena. In order to make sense of the present and future, students need an opportunity to find meaning in the past and to examine history in all of its complexities, including its legacies of prejudice and discrimination, resilience and courage. Our task, as history

educators is to facilitate that study and to do so in a way that taps their moral potential and inspires their moral imaginations about their civic role in the communities, societies and world in which they inhabit.

Footnotes

1. Alan Stoskopf, "Core Concepts in Historical Understanding" unpublished briefing paper, Facing history and Ourselves, 2005
2. For a complete description of Facing history and Ourselves see Martin E. Sleeper and Margot Stern Strom, "Facing history and Ourselves" in Maurice Elias and Harriett Arnold, eds, *The Educator's Guide to Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement* (Corwin Press, 2006) pp. 240-246

Adam Strom is the Director of Research and Development at Facing History and Ourselves. He is the author and editor of numerous Facing History publications including: 'Fundamental Freedoms: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' and 'Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World'. He may be contacted at Adam_Strom@facing.org

Martin Sleeper is the Associate Executive Director of Facing History and Ourselves. Before joining the Facing History staff, he was the Principal of the Runkle School in Brookline, MA. He has written and published numerous articles on history, civics, and moral education. He may be contacted at marty_sleeper@facing.org

