FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

Margaret Wells is an instructor in the Initial Teacher Education Program at OISE, University of Toronto and the chair of the board of directors for Facing History and Ourselves in Canada. Margaret has been involved with FHAO since 1982 when she attended a summer seminar and appreciated the opportunities for enhancing her teaching practice and to be a part of a network of educators who value self-reflection and continuing their own learning.

Leora Schaefer directs the Canadian program of Facing History and Ourselves, which includes professional development opportunities for teachers, curricular initiatives, and educational events for the greater community. Leora works with public and Catholic school boards across Canada. Leora oversees and facilitates summer seminars for educators as well as workshops on teaching practice and pedagogy. She has written study guides to accompany films, most recently for a new documentary on the life of Hannah Senesh. Leora has been a member of adjunct summer faculty at several institutes of higher learning and has presented at conferences throughout North America. Leora has a Bachelor's in Education from the University of Winnipeg and Masters of Arts from Brandeis University.

ABSTRACT

Facing History and Ourselves is an international educational and professional development organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of genocide and collective violence, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives.This article examines how Facing History's methodology and resources are implemented in Canadian schools; specifically the challenges and opportunities that Canadian educators face when making connection between the core case study of the Holocaust and Canadian history.

RÉSUMÉ

Facing History and Ourselves est un organisme international de développement éducationnel et professionel dont la mission est d'impliquer des étudiants d'origines diverses dans une évaluation du racisme, des préjugés et de l'antisémitisme afin de promouvoir le développement d'une citoyenneté plus humaniste et plus informée. En étudiant le développement historique de l'Holocauste et d'autres exemples de génocides et de violence collective, les élèves font des liens essentiels entre l'histoire et les choix moraux auxquels ils font face dans leurs vies. Ce texte examine comment la méthodologie et les ressources de *Facing History* sont mises en place dans les écoles canadiennes et plus spécifiquement les défis et les opportunités rencontrés par les éducateurs canadiens qui doivent lier l'étude de l'Holocauste et l'histoire canadienne.

Since 1976 Facing History and Ourselves (Facing History) has provided resources and professional learning opportunities to educators across North America and Europe. Here in Canada, Facing History and Ourselves has worked informally with teachers, school administrations, and school boards for over two decades, with a formal office opening in Toronto in 2008. Our materials and pedagogy have been integrated in middle and high school classrooms and across curricular areas, including History, English, Social Studies, Civics Law and Politics.

Facing History classes employ a carefully structured methodology that continually provokes thinking about complex questions of citizenship and human behavior.[1] The primary case study examines the failure of democracy in Germany, the systematic process of de-humanization of a group of people, the rise and domination of Nazism, and the steps that led to genocide and the events of the Holocaust. To study and teach about this history is to investigate the deepest questions and issues of human behavior; to wrestle with the fullest range of moral and ethical choices and judgments; and to examine a history that engaged all of the political, economic, cultural, religious, and educational institutions of a society. In no other history are the steps that resulted in totalitarianism and ultimately genocide so carefully documented by the perpetrators, victims and bystanders. It is also a history that reveals the fragility of democracy and the critical role that choices made by all citizens play in building and preserving democratic institutions.

Much of the program's content is laid out in the Facing History and Ourselves primary resource book, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.* After the opening chapters on identity and membership, the program explores the history of the Weimar Republic in post World War I Germany and the rise of the Nazis. Students examine the societal conditions that put democracy at risk and learn how messages of hatred, racism and anti-Semitism that were initially put forth by fringe groups penetrated and eventually dominated mainstream thinking. They also encounter the range of responses to Nazi ideology and confront the power of propaganda and indoctrination. They think about the choices that people had for making a difference and learn that the available choices during the decades of the 1920's and 1930's were very different from those in later years. They read about the decisions that German citizens had to make about whether to take an oath of allegiance, befriend a classmate singled out for official ridicule or speak out in favor of a colleague in danger of being dismissed from a job or position. They confront the small steps that led to the total transformation of a society.

Facing History materials draw on content from history, literature, art and science. One document used in classrooms to study the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party is an excerpt from the 25 Point Nazi Party Platform issued in 1920. As students read the document, they refer to underlying factors like 19th century notions of race, anti-Semitism, World War I, and its legacies in the Versailles Peace Treaty. Students are asked how this party platform was used and why many Germans found the points of the platform to be so appealing. They examine other historical resources, such as propaganda posters that demonstrate the power of labeling and the use of words to turn neighbor against neighbor. Examples of actual lesson plans that taught anti-Semitism and racism which were used in schools in Germany provoke thinking about the roots of hatred and the type of education that is necessary to counteract prejudice and racism in a society. Throughout the unit, students learn and practice the skills of in-depth historical thinking and understanding, including knowledge of chronology, analyzing historical context, evaluating evidence, determining causality and confronting multiple perspectives.

Students learn that violence and injustice begin with small steps of indifference, conformity, accepting and not thinking about what is happening. They discuss what words like perpetrator, victim and bystander can mean in the context of both everyday and extreme situations. First person narrative, as expressed in writings, video testimonies and guest speakers, constitute a compelling core to the program. Holocaust survivors as well as victims of the genocides in Cambodia or Rwanda tell of their experiences and talk about the need to confront and to bear witness to history. Students also hear about individuals whom Samantha Powers, in her writing about international response to genocide, calls "upstanders": people whose actions reflect courage and resilience and whose determination to stand up for human rights have influenced subsequent public policy.

Students think about the question of legacy and how history is preserved, interpreted and taught to future generations. In the latter parts of their study, Facing History classes often examine the role of monuments and memorials in a society. "They are the signposts of past wrongs we don't want to repeat in the next generation," wrote one student about the role of monuments in promoting historical memory. "We need to know what happened in the past to clearly understand what we face in the future."

Connections between the history and choices that are faced today take on deeper meaning as students move from thinking about history to confronting issues of responsibility and judgment. They ask: "Who knew? Who was responsible? How do we judge the actions and inactions of people in another time? What is the difference between being held guilty, as were the defendants at the Nuremburg Trials, and being responsible, as when someone knows about something wrong that is happening and does nothing about it?"

The concluding sections of the program examine the issue of participation in ways that can make a difference. Students are asked to think about individuals and groups who have taken small steps to build just and inclusive communities. In learning about these "upstanders", students consider the tools that each utilized in creating change. They identify issues about which they feel passionate, which may be on a local level in their school communities, neighbourhoods, or city or on a larger scale nationally or globally. Students are moved to action not from an imposed "community service" model, but rather from a place of genuine motivation, passion and sense of moral outrage.

In Facing History and Ourselves classrooms, middle and high school students learn to think about individual decision making and to exercise the faculty of making moral judgments. The pedagogy speaks to the adolescent's newly discovered ideas of subjectivity, competing truths and differing perspectives, along with the growing capacity to think hypothetically and the inclination to find personal meaning in newly introduced phenomena. Young people come to their schooling already struggling with matters of obedience, loyalty, fairness, difference, and acceptance, rooted in their own identities and experience. By exploring a question in an historical case – such

as why some people willingly conform to the norms of a group even when those norms encourage wrongdoing, while others speak out and resist. Facing History offers students a framework and a vocabulary for making connections and to ask how they can make a difference in the present and future.

Although Facing History and Ourselves began its work with teachers in the United States, the organization now works globally in schools in countries as diverse as Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Germany, France, England and Canada. While the core content and pedagogy in a Facing History course is the same in every country where we work, each country's own history helps to shape the way a classroom engages with the material. In Facing History classrooms across Canada educators and students make connections not only to their own lives and experiences, but also to Canadian history. These bridges are critical as they add to the impact that the course has on students. It is the role of the educator, however, with the support that the program staff at Facing History continually offers, to insure that any associations are not oversimplified or facile in nature, but rather serve to deepen the understanding of connections between past and present, and of universal themes in human behavior.

The vocabulary that students develop in a Facing History classroom, terms such as perpetrator, victim, bystander, judgment, forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation, offers a language which can help them think about other moments in history which encompassed collective violence based upon prejudice and de-humanization Using the case study of the failure of democracy in Weimar Germany and the steps leading to the Holocaust as its core, Facing History and Ourselves has developed additional resource books and educational materials that examine such times, including the Armenian Genocide, the history of the eugenics movement, the Civil Rights struggle in the United States, resistance in Pinochet's Chile, and most recently the controversy surrounding women wearing head scarves in France. Each of these case studies not only introduces students to new content but also deepens their understanding of Facing History themes, and concepts. In the same way, when teachers and students who are learning about the Holocaust in a Facing History course make bridges to Canadian history in appropriate and meaningful ways it brings further depth and richness to the learning experience.

In Facing History course students make connections not only between the history that they are studying and their own lives, but also to other historical moments that they may have learned about. As students make these bridges to other histories, teachers face the challenge of balancing the universal themes and ideas from a study of the Holocaust with the particulars of each specific history. For example, as students learn about the process of separation and de-humanization through which ghettos were established in Nazi Germany, they may legitimately wonder about the establishment of the Reservation system in Canada. While there may be many parallels between Ghettos and Reservations, and much can be learned by examination of the similarities, it is also critical to study each in its specifics and unique historical context. It is important that students learn to examine and define similarities as well as differences between historical moments in ways that adds depth to the study of any historical case study.

Bridging between historical moments is one way that a Facing History course may connect to Canadian content. In addition to these connections, Canadian current events will also make their way into the classroom. A Canadian student may read or hear about, court cases, social issues, or politics and make links to the content that they are studying. For example, many Facing History classes examine ways in which countries like South Africa or Rwanda that have experienced collective violence are now attempting to promote healing and renewal through truth and reconciliation commissions. As Canada engages in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Residential schools, students will certainly be comparing and connecting to those that have been held in other countries.

To support teachers as they look at current events in their classrooms, Facing History has developed a section on their website, www.facinghistory.org, called *Facing Today*. This resource is a compilation of global events, with links to helpful articles and teaching strategies. The site provides media literacy strategies as well as teaching techniques which will be helpful to teachers in Canada.

As Facing History and Ourselves program staff work in classrooms across Canada we anticipate that it will the teachers and students in those classrooms that will help us sharpen and deepen connections to Canadian History and current events. As we continue to develop our Canadian presence, we look forward to developing resources specifically developed for Canadian educational settings.

NOTE

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.