

*An Evaluation of the  
Character Education  
Classroom Instruction Method  
Facing History and Ourselves*

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*Why should we study history?  
Because we are the only species on the planet that can.*  
Benedetto Croce (1919)

Almost a full century ago, the great historian/philosopher wrote those words. It is still one of the most compelling reasons to study the past. However, Croce also believed that as a species, we often do a very poor job of studying something so important. Many historians, and history teachers, justify studying history so that we can learn from the mistakes of the past. Yet, out of the other corner of their mouth, they argue that history repeats itself. Croce condemns this justification as obviously flawed. The two logical arguments contradict themselves when spoken together, which all occurs too often in classrooms around the country. According to the great historian/philosopher, the major reason history repeats itself is because we never take the time to make value judgments about the past and the people involved in making the decisions that have shaped history and apply them to present situations. Too often, humans want to glorify the past while hiding its mistakes, which makes learning from the mistakes of our ancestors difficult (Croce, 1919). Therefore, Croce's arguments make the perfect justification for using character education methods to teach history

Recently, the Character Education Partnership located in Washington DC published a list of 33 scientifically proven character education methods that principals and teachers can use to promote positive character development in students (Berkowitz and Bier, 2005). Listed among the 33 is the *Facing History and Ourselves* method for social studies teachers to use as a means of achieving that positive character development outcome. The program teaches the tragedies and failures in human history by examining past instances of racism, prejudice and anti-Semitism "in order to promote the

development of a more humane and informed citizenry” (facinghistory.org). In addition, the lessons can fit seamlessly into almost any social studies/history curriculum, which makes them even more effective as a character education method (Lickona, 2004).

*Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO)* traces its roots to 1976 when two teachers collaborated on a Holocaust curriculum in their Brookline, Massachusetts classrooms. The goal of those two teachers, Margot Stern Strom and William Parsons, was to give students a moral education as they studied history in order to give them an emotional connection to the events they studied, which would transform their current critical thinking (*Boston Globe*, 2001). Since its humble beginnings in those Brookline classrooms, *FHAO* has grown into an international organization that trains middle school and high school social studies teachers in order to equip them with the tools necessary to teach history in a way that Croce philosophized was the most effective way to study the past. Since 1976, 16,000 educators from around the world have taken training workshops and institutes offered by the organization. Through this reach, the organization estimates that 1,600,000 students each year experience at least one unit per year taught with a *FHAO* curriculum (facinghistory.org). As more time goes by, and more teachers become aware of what *FHAO* has to offer, its reach and scope will continue to grow.

The most common curriculum used by teachers using *FHAO* is the 10-week Holocaust unit published by the organization (Shultz, Barr and Selman, 2001; Brabeck, Kenny, 1994). The unit begins with a self-examination that forces students to examine themselves and their actions within groups. By experiencing this in the very first week of the unit, the curriculum pulls the student into thinking about their own behaviors before they begin to examine the behaviors of others. This activity helps students develop into

empathetic thinkers, a core character education trait (Lickona, 2004), before they begin their historical journey. The self-reflections continue as the students develop an in-depth understanding of the events that led to the fall of the Weimer Republic and the rise of the Nazi Germany. As the unit progresses, students begin to study individuals involved in what developed into one of the greatest genocides in world history.

When the teachers exposes the students to the victims, resisters, perpetrators and others in Germany during the 1930s, they must make decisions concerning the morality of decisions made by these people. At the same time, the active self-reflection forces students into identifying the characteristics they share with the people they study, both positive and negative. Not only are the students studying one of the greatest historical nightmares of the twentieth century, but they must also compare themselves and their actions to the decisions and actions made by people in Nazi Germany. (Shultz, Barr and Selman, 2001; Brabeck and Kenny, 1994). Outcomes that will help students develop an understanding of the past in order to avoid repeating those mistakes. Benedetto Croce would be proud of what *FHAO* attempts to do with this history curriculum.

While the Holocaust unit has been the center of the *FHAO* curriculum, the organization has developed other curricula centering on other human tragedies of the past. Teachers can expose students the Ottoman Empire's genocide of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century in a unit almost as detailed as the Holocaust unit. Students also can learn of the eugenics movement in the United States in the 1920s and the problems associated with genetic purification ideas. In a mini-unit of four lessons, students examine the murder of Emmitt Till, a black man from Mississippi killed in the

1950s. During these lessons, students confront the same issues that the Nazi Holocaust unit examines with the same character and academic outcome goals.

Not only are the curricula published by *FHAO* an in-depth analysis of history and its decision-makers, it has been shown as scientifically effective. In a 2001 study published in the *Journal of Moral Education*, the eighth-grade students who had a teacher lead them through the *FHAO* Holocaust unit had increases in relationship maturity while showing decreases in racist attitudes and fighting behaviors when compared to students not in an *FHAO* classroom (Shultz, Barr and Selman, 2001). Although the study bases itself on self-reported beliefs of the students, it does indicate that students in an *FHAO* classroom are more aware of their actions than those students not in such a classroom. While these findings may never fully satisfy all educators, they do reinforce what Croce believed was an important reason for the study of history, learning about the mistakes of the past in order to improve oneself and the decisions that person makes during the course of their life.

Fully facing the past, both its glories and failure, is a crucial element in the teaching of history. Making these connections as real as possible for students is just as important. Students who believe they understand slavery are always shocked when they read *The Life of Gustavus Vassa* and his account of being on a slave ship from West Africa to the United States. Strom, one of the founders of *FHAO*, reports that she never learned the “bad history” in her classes (Pollard, 2002). This is too common today. Students have looks of shock on their face when they learn the “real” story of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas. There are other such stories that every dedicated history

could tell about what happens when their students have to come to grips with historical reality as opposed to the historical myths they have been taught at earlier ages.

Compounding the problem is that it is the responsibility of the teacher to fix this imbalance with little outside help. This is because textbooks used in high schools fall terribly short in confronting the mistakes of the past (Loewen, 1996). The textbook used by the Hazelwood School District for high school American History, for instance, makes absolutely no mention of the eugenics movement in early twentieth century America. Nor does it mention any of the respected people of the time that pushed the eugenics philosophy, people such as Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Lindbergh and W.E.B. Du Bois. In order to develop such an important unit, the teacher must go beyond the textbook, and sometimes outside the district curriculum based on that book, which is what *FHAO* has done for teachers interested in developing a real historical understanding for their students.

There is nothing wrong with historical “cheerleading,” but only when it is appropriate. When people have done great good for humanity, they must be recognized and celebrated. From this, students gain an understanding of greatness in the face of hardships. However, a focus on just the great achievements of humanity would lead students on a path that would not allow them to learn from the mistakes of the past. *FHAO* allows for this development. Although it does take a time commitment on the part of the teacher, by not tiptoeing around past atrocities and forcing students to confront the immoral actions of others based on their own personal behaviors and experiences, *FHAO* delivers solid curricula that enhances not only the educational traits of students, but also enhances their positive character and moral development. For the beginning teacher, or

the teacher needing to develop the counterbalance of the positive cheerleading that their history books develop, *FHAO* is a great curriculum to begin positively affecting their students' behavioral advancement and become great citizens of the world's oldest democracy while meeting the purpose of historical study set forth by Benedetto Croce.

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