

Lesson 1

To deepen your understanding of the ideas in this lesson, read the preface and introduction in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

Introduction to the Unit

WHY teach this material?

Rationale:

The purpose of this lesson is to help the classroom community develop a safe, productive environment to support the learning and sharing of ideas that will take place throughout the unit. Prior to exploring the historical case study of this unit—the collapse of democracy in Germany and the steps leading up to the Holocaust—it is important that students and teachers spend some time reviewing class norms. Throughout this unit, students will be talking about how sensitive topics, such as prejudice and discrimination, have impacted historical events and students’ own lives. Facing History teachers have found that establishing and nurturing classroom norms of respect and openmindedness is one way to help students have productive, safe conversations about these concepts. This lesson provides an opportunity to reinforce the rules you may have already established, as well as the opportunity to develop new expectations. While we urge you to consider the language and expectations that are most appropriate for your classroom context, in the appendix of this lesson, we have provided ideas of the kinds of class norms Facing History teachers have used to support a reflective classroom community.

LEARNING GOALS

The purpose of this lesson is to help students:

- Reflect on this **guiding question**:
 - *What do we need to happen in this class to make it a place where we feel comfortable sharing our ideas and asking questions?*
- Practice these **interdisciplinary skills**:
 - *Expressing ideas in writing, especially in a journal*
 - *Developing new vocabulary*
 - *Working with others to reach consensus*
- Deepen understanding of these **key terms**:
 - *Facing History and Ourselves*
 - *Expectations/norms/rules*
 - *Contract*
 - *Consequences*

(See the main glossary in the unit’s “Introduction” for definitions of these key terms.)

WHAT is this lesson about?

Facing History conceives of its program as a journey—a journey that provides a unique and engaging way for students to study history and the world around them. Describing their experiences taking the Facing History journey, students have remarked, “Something about our Facing History class felt different. We were studying the very things I was afraid of: being singled out, teased, and bullied; stereotyping; neighbors against neighbors in Nazi Germany. . . . Students couldn’t react angrily to how people treated each other in history and then turn around and do these very things to me.” When reflecting on her Facing History experience, another student shared, “I’ve had 13 math classes, 20 English classes, 6 or 7 science classes, art, P.E., Spanish . . . but in all the time I’ve been in school, I’ve had only class about being more human.” We have written students a letter to welcome them on this journey, and to help them understand that the goal of this journey is to touch their hearts and minds. Through helping students develop as moral philosophers, critical consumers of information and civic agents, we hope to change the way they see themselves as individuals in a larger society.

It takes a particular kind of learning environment to help students achieve these objectives. We conceive of these environments as “reflective classroom communities.” In reflective classroom communities, teaching and learning is a shared endeavor where a healthy exchange of ideas is welcome. Students are encouraged to voice their own opinions and to actively listen to others; to treat different perspectives with patience and respect; and to recognize that there are always more perspectives and more to learn. These characteristics may be helpful in teaching many different units of study, but they are essential to teaching Facing History and Ourselves.

The habits of behavior found in a reflective classroom community—attentive listening to diverse viewpoints, voicing clear ideas, and raising relevant questions—not only help students deeply understand historical content, but also require them to practice skills essential for their role as engaged citizens. Philosopher John Dewey wrote that classrooms are not the training grounds for future democratic action, but rather places where democracy is already enacted. Perhaps this is why Professor Diane Moore has argued that “encouraging students to take themselves seriously and inspiring in them the confidence to do so are two of the most important roles of an educator in a multicultural democracy.”¹



The resource book Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior is the central text used in this unit.

Related readings from

Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior

Preface, pp. xiii–xix

Introduction, pp. xx–xxv

HOW can we help students engage with this material?

Duration: one class period

Materials

Handout 1: Letter to students

Handout 2: Have you ever . . . ?

Handout 3: Sample Facing History classroom expectations

Handout 4: Letter to parents/guardians

Opener

The main activities of this lesson provide suggestions about how to help students and teachers write a class contract, or review an existing class contract, with the goal of nurturing a reflective classroom community. Before beginning these activities, students need some context about why this unit requires students to commit to norms of respect and community. Therefore, we suggest starting this lesson by explaining to students that they are about to begin a unit called “Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.” Write this title on the board. Then, introduce students to this unit by asking them to read the “Letter to students” written by Facing History’s Executive Director, Margot Stern Strom, and the director of the Memphis office, Rachel Shankman. Alternatively, you can write your own letter to students introducing them to this unit. We suggest asking a volunteer to read the letter aloud. As one student reads, ask the class to circle or highlight any words or phrases that stand out to them.

Then pass out journals to students. The journal is an essential part of this unit and provides an opportunity to mark this unit as unique and special. (Refer to the introduction of this unit for ideas about how to use the journal to enhance students’ literacy skills and historical understanding.) Ask students to react to this letter in their journals. Specific questions you can use to prompt students’ writing include:

- What does the title “Facing History and Ourselves” mean to you?
- What does “Holocaust and Human Behavior” mean to you? What do you know about the Holocaust? What does it mean to study human behavior?
- What do you think the student meant when she said that her Facing History class was about being “more human”?
- What does it mean to have to use both your head and your heart while learning?
- What does it mean for a classroom to be a “community of learners”? In what ways is your classroom like a community? What might help it feel more like a community?

Give students the opportunity to share what they have written, if they want to. This is an appropriate time to establish the expectation that journal responses do not have to be shared publicly.

Main Activities

It is particularly useful to go over the phrase “head and heart” before writing your class contract because having clear guidelines about respectful behavior is especially important in any classroom experience that hopes to engage students both intellectually and emotionally. Explain that before students begin exploring new material, the class needs to agree on some rules, norms, or expectations. You can strengthen students’ vocabulary by spending a few moments asking them to define one or more of these terms. Students can record definitions in their journals. When a community agrees on norms or expectations for behavior, these are often articulated in a code of conduct or a contract. Students can add the term *contract* to their working definitions. A contract implies that all parties have a responsibility in upholding the agreement. Students can think about what it means for a classroom to have a contract.

To prepare students to develop a class contract, ask them to reflect on their experiences as students in a classroom community. You might use a prompt like this one to structure students’ reflection:

- Identify when you have felt comfortable sharing your ideas and questions in a class. What happened in those moments to help you feel comfortable?
- Identify when you have had ideas or questions but have not shared them. Why not? What was happening at those moments?

The handout “Have you ever . . . ?” included at the end of this lesson provides another way to help students think about their experiences as part of a classroom community.

Facing History teachers have found that useful class contracts typically include several clearly defined rules or expectations and consequences for those who do not fulfill their obligations as members of the classroom community. There are many ways to proceed with developing a classroom contract. For example, you can ask small groups of students to work together to write rules or “expectations” for the classroom community. We suggest keeping the list brief (e.g., three to five items) so that the norms can be easily remembered. As groups present, you can organize their ideas by theme. If there are any tensions or contradictions in the expectations that have been suggested, you can discuss them as a class. While the process is inclusive of students’ ideas, ultimately it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the ideas that make it to the final contract are those that will best nurture a safe learning environment.

Another way to help students develop a classroom contract is to have them envision what they would like to have happen during certain scenarios. Scenarios could be drawn from students’ own experiences. They might include situations such as:

When we have an idea or question we would like to share, we can . . .

When we have an idea, but do not feel comfortable sharing it out loud, we can . . .

When someone says something that we appreciate, we can . . .

When someone says something that might be confusing or offensive, we can . . .

To make sure all students have the opportunity to participate in a class discussion, we can . . .

If we read or watch something that makes us feel sad or angry, we can . . .

To show respect for the ideas of others, we can . . .

Follow-Through (in class or at home)

To initiate the classroom contract, you can have students participate in a celebratory signing ceremony. Students can sign their own copies or a large copy that is posted in the room. You might allow for brief remarks from students about how they think the contract will help provide a safe, productive learning community. If possible, you could share some festive treats as well. In addition to sharing a class document, rituals also provide groups with a sense of community. This celebration might begin a ritual that you extend throughout this unit.

Another important way to follow through with this introduction to the unit is to have students bring the “Letter to parents/guardians” home. You can use the letter we provide or write your own. Ask students to discuss this letter with their parents/guardians. Being sensitive to parent/guardian schedules, be sure to give students several days to complete this assignment.

The activities in this lesson exemplify one of the core principles of Facing History: students’ ideas and experiences are a central part of the curriculum. You can end this lesson by asking students to return to the journal entry that they wrote at the beginning of this class. After this lesson, what more do they know about this unit? What other questions have been raised? You might also have students write about how it felt to be part of a discussion about classroom norms and why they think you have taken the time to include them in this process. One way to phrase this question is as follows: If you were the teacher of this class, how would you involve students in setting a classroom contract? Why?

Assessment(s)

Having a final product that can be posted on the wall lets everyone know that the class had achieved the goal of this lesson. The real measurement of understanding, however, resides in students’ effort to abide by the contract throughout this unit.

Informally reviewing students’ journal entries can help you know the questions that are on students’ minds about this unit and can also help you correct any misconceptions about what they will be learning.

Extensions

Students’ journals are an essential component of this unit. Since a major theme of this unit is “identity,” you might invite students to personalize their journals with images or words that represent their identities. Journals can be decorated with markers or by pasting pictures from magazines. We suggest setting some limits around what may not be appropriate to put on a journal. Referring to your school’s dress code may provide some guidance. In Lesson 3, students begin talking about their own identities. This provides another opportunity for the personalization of journals.

Lesson 1: Handout 1

Letter to students

Dear students,

Welcome to the unit *Decision-Making in Times of Injustice: A Unit to Supplement Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. You are about to join a community of thousands of students from around the world who have explored the same questions you are about to explore—questions such as: Who am I? What shapes my identity? Why do people form groups? What does it mean to belong? What happens when people are excluded from membership?

After taking part in a unit similar to the one you are about to study, one student said, “I’ve had 13 math classes, 20 English classes, 6 or 7 science classes, art, P.E., Spanish . . . but in all the time I’ve been in school, I’ve had only class about being more human.” In the next few weeks, you will be learning a lot about the choices made by people living in Germany before and during the Holocaust, a tragic event in which millions of children, women, and men were murdered. At the same time, you will also be learning about yourselves and the world around you. That is why we call this unit *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Another former Facing History student explains, “When I took the Facing History course back in 8th grade, it helped me understand that history was a part of me and that I was a part of history. If I understood why people made the choices they did, I could better understand how I make choices and hopefully make the right ones.”

This unit may be different than others you have experienced. In this unit, you will be asked to share your own ideas and questions—in discussions and through writing in a journal. You will be asked to listen carefully to the voices of others—of people in your classroom community as well as the voices of people in the history you are studying. In this unit, you may hear things that spark powerful emotions, such as anger or sadness. You will be asked to use both your head and your heart to make sense of the choices people have made in the past, and the choices people continue to make today.

At Facing History, we like to think of a unit as a journey. When taking this journey, you need to bring your journals, curiosity, an open mind, and a willingness to share. As you embark on this journey with the students and teacher in your classroom, it is important for you to support each other along the way so that everyone can do his/her best learning. We wish you a meaningful journey where you learn about the past and the present, about yourself and about others. You may even find that you have changed as a result of this experience. Actor Matt Damon, a student of Facing History just like you, said, “I owe so much to this curriculum. So much of who I am comes out of this experience and this particular time in my life.”

Thank you for participating in this journey with us,

Margot Stern Strom, Executive Director and Founder, Facing History and Ourselves
Rachel Shankman, Director, Memphis Office of Facing History and Ourselves

Lesson 1: Handout 2

Have you ever . . . ?

Directions: Check the box that best matches your experience as a student.

Part 1:

As a student in a classroom, have you ever . . .

1. Shared an idea or question out loud? yes no
2. Shared an idea or question that you thought might be unpopular or “stupid”? yes no
3. Had an idea or answer to a question but decided not to share it? yes no
4. Felt “put down” after sharing an idea or asking a question? yes no
5. Felt smart or appreciated after sharing an idea or asking a question? yes no
6. Asked for help understanding something? yes no
7. Been confused, but have not asked for help? yes no
8. Interrupted others when they have been speaking? yes no
9. Been interrupted by others when you have been speaking? yes no
10. Said something that you thought might have hurt someone’s feelings? yes no
11. Thought about your classroom as a community? yes no

Part 2:

What do you think should happen in a classroom for the best learning to take place?

A. What can students and teachers do to support your learning?

B. What can you do to support others’ learning?

Lesson 1: Handout 3

Sample Facing History classroom expectations

- Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment.
- Make comments using “I” statements.
- If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought in your journal. You can share the idea with your teacher first and together come up with a safe way to share the idea.
- If someone says an idea or question that helps your own learning, say “thank you.”
- If someone says something that hurts or offends you, do not attack the person. Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings and explain why.
- Put-downs are never okay.
- If you don’t understand something, ask a question.
- Think with your head and your heart.
- Share the talking time—provide room for others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
- Write thoughts in your journal if you don’t have time to say them during class.
- Journal responses do not have to be shared publicly.

Lesson 1: Handout 4

Letter to parents/guardians

Dear Parents:

It is my pleasure to welcome you as your child embarks on a Facing History and Ourselves unit of study. Facing History is an international educational and professional development organization with over thirty years of experience. The Memphis office located on the campus of Christian Brothers University opened in 1992 and has trained over 2,000 teachers. For more information, please visit our website, www.facinghistory.org.

Facing History is committed to helping students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they face as adolescents. We know students are grappling with key questions such as: Who am I as it relates to my identity? How do I fit into my community as well as the larger world? How can I make a difference? All of these questions will be explored through looking deeply at a historical moment when individuals made decisions about their own lives and the lives of their neighbors. Your student will begin his or her Facing History journey by looking at issues of identity and community. This introduction prepares them for a study of the events that led up to the Holocaust. Years of research has shown that a study of this history helps students understand how their decisions influence others and strengthens their ability to take multiple perspectives and consider the ethical implications of their choices.

In the creation of the material, you can be assured that great care has been given to the age appropriateness of the content and the pedagogical tools teachers will need to insure adequate time for discussion and reflection. Facing History staff will be providing a series of seminars and ongoing consultation for educators implementing the curriculum. We hope that your child's participation in this unit invites many meaningful conversations between you and your child. A parent of a Facing History student sums it up best:

In no other course was she [my daughter] exposed to real dilemmas as complex and challenging [as in Facing History]. In no other course has she been inspired to use the whole of her spiritual, moral, and intellectual resources to solve a problem. In no other course has she been so sure that the materials mattered so seriously for her development as a responsible person.

—A parent of a student in a Facing History and Ourselves classroom

Sincerely,

Rachel Shankman, Senior Director
Facing History and Ourselves, Memphis office

Notes

- ¹ Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Multicultural Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 11.