

Facing history and ourselves in post-conflict societies

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...we need to see that we are laying the bricks, and we are constantly doing this. We must not expect that after one module in grade 9 on the Holocaust and apartheid that the learners are now going to be changed. Some might. But others might not. Something, though, has probably been planted. We need to see that it is an on-going process that continues in different lessons, in different Learning Areas and in different grades. We need to remember to bring these issues back to their lives and their experiences where it makes sense.

This excerpt is from the reflections of a South African teacher participating in a 'Facing History and Ourselves' (FHO) professional development seminar. FHO has been working in secondary schools and classrooms in North America and Europe for over three decades, providing a model of educational intervention and professional development that helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. Through in-depth study of cases of mass atrocity and genocide, FHO engages teachers and students in a critical exploration of the steps that led to full scale violence and destruction, as well as strategies for prevention and positive participation to sustain democracy.

Since 2003, the global work of FHO has included the facilitation of teacher training seminars in South Africa, Rwanda and Northern Ireland and the development of appropriate follow-up strategies tailored to each country's needs and educational context. Importantly, each of these countries is emerging from a history of violence, division and betrayal and each is at a significant point in the process of transition. These countries are places where the leftovers of recent conflict remain painfully present, and where teachers, charged with the responsibility of imparting to their student historical narrative that is itself still the subject of intense controversy, are struggling with the burden of their own memories. FHO's experience in each of these countries demonstrates the enormous challenges that confront educators, who, too often, are left to address conflicts and to promote reconciliation without the necessary tools and support.

Our work in South Africa – through our Western Cape based collaboration, 'Facing the Past' (FTP) – over the past six year illuminates many of the issues. As in other post-violence¹ societies where the program has been introduced, FHO, working as an outside organization in South Africa, has acted as a medium for bringing together individuals and groups who have been on opposite sides of the

conflict. Its approach to history education meets the need to look at history from multiple perspectives, to explore issues of ethics and decision-making, to not treat historical events as inevitable, to locate individual, moral agency and to understand the process of history-making itself. By introducing a discussion of historiography, teachers are brought into the process of transition within the context of history education, providing them with tools to understand and deconstruct the official narrative as well as to better understand the basis and background for the curriculum they have been given to teach. Understanding the role of historical narrative in the aftermath of conflict is vital, for it not only helps teachers better understand how history education is being used in the transition into post-conflict society, but also clarifies their own critical role in that process.

Grappling with that role, however, involves confronting difficult and painful recent history that is often within the memory of the educators who now must impart its meaning in their classrooms. During the period of apartheid in South Africa, history and civic education were used for the purposes of indoctrination. In 1996, *Curriculum 2005* (named for the year in which its provisions would be fully implemented), one of the first curricula interventions in the post apartheid period, removed history from the required course of study. Over the next five years, amidst a new socio-political context, dramatized by the ongoing hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation commission as well as increased violence and more distance from the transition, and, importantly, the appointment of a new Minister of Education, a series of proposals and reports on curricula revision called for the re-emergence of history – but framed as human rights education with a clear emphasis on the ideals and practices of a democratic society. The revision further emphasized that history education would best be done through a process of inquiry and assumed that teachers and students would acquire both the skills and the dispositions necessary to subject versions of historical truth to rigorous analysis. Yet, as Gail Weldon, senior curriculum planner (history) for the Western Cape Education Department, has pointed out:

A society emerging from conflict is relationally fragile. Rebuilding what has fallen apart is centrally the process of rebuilding relational spaces that hold society together, and lasting peace requires changes in the attitudes of people in each group towards the other and changes in ways of handling conflict. For education to succeed in inculcating new democratic values in a non-racial society, it is the attitudes of educators, forged by apartheid racism, that need to change in order for the trans-generational transfer of racial ‘knowledge’ to be interrupted in the classroom. What is currently being demanded of history teachers in South Africa is that they become change agents for democracy, teaching new values and civic responsibility.

However, little regard has been given to the years of conditioning of attitudes and prejudices under apartheid; to the extent to which the trauma is still raw; and the ghosts of the past that are refusing to be exorcised. Change at classroom level is the most difficult to achieve, and yet it is there where it matters the most, not only in terms of curricular knowledge, but for inculcating the democratic values for the new society.²

It was in this context that FHO began working in South Africa, beginning as a partnership with South African organizations to create a teacher support program called 'Facing the Past – Transforming our Future' (FTP).³ The program was specifically designed to align with the required curriculum for Years 9 and 11, and to meet a gap that the current education system could not fill. Using the model created by FHO, FTP created resources to teach about the history of apartheid in South Africa. It also offered professional development in the form of in-depth seminars to help teachers confront a divided past and then to think about how to engage their students in approaching that history and think about its legacies for their present and future. In addition, follow-up workshops and individualized follow-up not only help teachers to implement the resources and methodology, but also provided a critical medium for support.

In 2003, when FHO began being used in professional development seminars, memories of division, discrimination, hatred and violence in South Africa were still very clear and remain so today. 'Teaching apartheid is like removing a big stone hanging around your neck', wrote one seminar participant. 'It feels like discussing the feelings that you were not allowed to speak about. Your experiences and how you dealt with them should be used sensitively so as not to incite learners but to warn them against the dangers of judging others negatively'.⁴ The seminars undoubtedly represented the first time that teachers experienced professional development in a racially and culturally diverse setting. The FHO model further offered teachers the opportunity to both intellectually and emotionally connect to their past by examining a distant case study – namely the range of behaviors that were manifested during the Weimar period in Germany and the subsequent steps leading to the Holocaust. In those seminars, teachers remarked frequently upon how the lens of that history provided the language and the perspective to talk about the vast effects of apartheid, particularly the daily humiliations. The constant interchange between facing the present and confronting history allowed participants in professional development seminars to reflect upon their own identities, to think about the impact of identity on behavior, to contemplate how such thinking and actions can produce a sense of 'we and they' and to use those reflections as entry points to their own history.

Both the content and the methodology that teachers and students experienced in the professional development seminars and the classrooms of FHO provoked thinking about complex questions of citizenship and human behavior. The focal case study is an in-depth study of the failure of democracy in Germany and the events leading to the Holocaust. The core resource text, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* embodies a sequence of study that begins with identity – first individual identity and then group and national identities with their definitions of membership.⁵ From there the materials examine the failure of democracy in Germany and the steps leading to the Holocaust – the most documented case of 20th century indifference, dehumanization, hatred, racism, antisemitism, and mass murder. It goes on to explore difficult questions of judgment, memory, and legacy, and the necessity for responsible civic participation to prevent injustice and protect democracy in the present and future. The language and vocabulary that are taught throughout are tools for entry into the history – words like perpetrator, victim, defender, bystander, opportunist, rescuer, and upstander. Students learn that terms like identity, membership, legacy, denial, responsibility, and judgment can help them understand complicated history, as well as connect the lessons of that history to the questions they face in their own worlds. Moreover, 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 – FHO offers students a framework and a vocabulary for making connections and to ask how they can make difference in the present and future.

Using a case study of another time and place, in which universal themes of human behavior, choice and decision-making are embedded, which is the core of FHO, was critical to eliciting significant discussion, analysis and reflection about that history. The case study does not ask teachers to make facile comparisons to South African history and the period of apartheid. Rather, the resources allow educators to engage in critical discussions and to identify universal themes, resonant historical patterns and aspects of human behavior. Examining the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, the rise of the Nazis, the role of propaganda, conformity and obedience in turning neighbor against neighbor, and examples of courage, compassion and resistance have provided the needed perspective to talk about both the past and the present. In one seminar session, for example, participants read a description of education in Weimar Germany from the FHO resource book called *What did you learn in school today?*

They then discussed a series of questions:

What could leaders have done to have prevented the rise of Hitler and who were those leaders? What was the role of churches during Weimar? The role

of labor unions? Increasingly, the group drew on their own experience in SA and asked questions of Weimar based on how individuals and groups made a difference in the fight against apartheid. They pondered the role of antisemitism, they wondered what the curriculum looked like, they wondered if the international community coming from the energy that drove the League of Nations could have done something. We also explored the fear of communism and the role of social democrats as well as the desire for a charismatic leader and the effects of humiliation.⁶

Studying resources such as an interview with a concentration camp commander; a story of a university professor in Germany; and a video about a village in France where Jews were hidden, have offered entry points for discussion of perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers as well as the meaning of ethical decision-making in both a particular and a universal context, all with a distance that talking about their own history does not yet allow.

The necessity of careful, thorough professional development and support for educators in the transition has also been made abundantly clear. The initial seminars showed the power of connecting through the violence of the Holocaust and through some identity pieces such as the poem *Masks* by Maya Angelou to South Africa's violent past. Teachers remarked frequently upon their ability to talk about the vast effects of apartheid, particularly the daily humiliations. There was also an underlying questioning of whether the white participants could really understand the work of apartheid on all its levels and legacies. Even the use of a personal journal, normally a basic component of FHO classrooms and seminars, was considered unsafe by some South African teachers, whose past experience had caused them to remain careful about writing something down since, if it was in writing, it could be used against them.

Seminar facilitators note, however, that teacher participants are now showing a tendency to move beyond their own histories in which they saw themselves as victims or bystanders to recognize that they are citizens who have a role to play in their democracy today. For example, a teacher used a connection to resources on obedience and conformity not to talk about the South African past but instead about the African National Congress today and how he felt that it was the role of citizens in a democracy to criticize the political parties and leaders and that criticism is essential to the health of the country.

The recent outbreak of xenophobia and violence in South Africa occasioned a workshop for FHO teachers, which again highlighted the issue of participation within a society under stress. I think we also want to highlight the fact that the workshop was follow-up work – recognition that a crisis was taking place and that teachers were literally on the front lines and needed support. How were they

going to talk about these issues in the classroom? They were witnessing major violence, including the use of methods such as necklacing, which were common during apartheid. How do they create a safe space for discussion without scolding and shaming? How do they provide students with the opportunity to reflect critically on what was taking place in their communities? How do they inspire a response – not prescribe one? The leaders used the video *Not in Our Town*, an FHO resource that describes how the citizens of Billings, Montana, stood up for their neighbors in response to a series of hate crimes in their community.

They found it to be the perfect connection for teachers. In the specificity of Billings, Montana, these teachers, three thousand miles away and in crisis, found a community and a group of individuals they could identify with and whose story could be the basis for looking at what was taking place in their schools, on their streets and in their communities. That session led to a discussion of what is possible ... what can teachers, schools and school communities do to make a positive difference right now ... what role do they play in addressing the issue of xenophobia and citizenship in the longer term.⁷

Nevertheless, the challenges that lie ahead for professional development for educators in South Africa are significant. As stated in a recent FTP seminar report:

Fourteen years after South Africa's democratic elections we are suffering from a crisis in our educational system; one that cannot be remedied by pledges, a focus on maths and science, or one laptop per child. Our seminar was only a small snapshot of South African educational history – a room that included teachers educated in the 'homelands' or forced out of school because of rioting and boycotts as well as teachers who experienced white, rural Christian schooling, top-flight private school education and a deeply Afrikaans focused educational environment.

The new curriculum is exciting in its focus on democratic, student-centred methodologies and content that includes human rights, critical events in South African history (apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) as well as events that have shaped world history and which help our learners to see their history and experiences in context. What is impossible to measure, however, is the preparedness of teachers to teach this curriculum or any other. It is not just that a disproportionate percentage of black and coloured teachers have 50 learners in their classes. Nor is it only that the language of instruction often does not match the language that learners speak and read fluently. We are also dealing with the fact that many of our teachers do not have the background content knowledge that they need. There are those amazing, passionate souls who have dedicated themselves to teaching and who will read and plan lessons all night, through the weekend and on every break. They would never think of their work

in terms of ‘catching up’, but surely they are, and it would help us if we approached our work in divided societies, particularly here, with that explicit recognition.⁸

Teachers in South Africa are being asked to play a critical role in the efforts toward transition and reconciliation, at a point when, in addition to struggling with their own memories, the political climate in which they work is still uncertain, and thus articulating a particular historical narrative and perspectives may well be risky. At the same time curricula revision and reform generally calls for classroom methodology that is student-centered and democratic to replace traditional, teacher centered pedagogy. Teachers need the tools and the ongoing support to implement that methodology in ways that allow them to help their students confront the complex lessons of the past.

The FHO professional development seminars often represent the first time that teachers are afforded the opportunity to engage in discussions about the past tailored for them as professionals. Indeed, in order to teach young people about the violent past and in order to help their students develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate decision-making in the past and their own decision-making today, teachers need first to practice these things themselves. In all three countries (South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland), traditional pedagogies, with an emphasis on lecturing and exams, have played a dominant role both within the context of the violent past and during the transition. Increasingly, education departments are recognizing that interactive strategies and participatory methods represent an opportunity for modeling and practicing democracy. Again, however, teachers must first learn these skills themselves and practice them. The seminars provide that opportunity – to develop new skills and to engage difficult, often controversial, content in a safe, facilitated environment.

The goal must continue to be to provide professional development (quality resources and pedagogical training) for South African educators that gives them the skills they need to confront and teach about the past to new generations of students and help them make the connections to the present and future. The comment we hear most often and read most frequently on evaluations is that teachers feel *confident* to do this work, confident to teach. And, these are not new teachers, many of them are 20 year veterans who only now feel that they are fully prepared. In one FHO seminar, teachers watched a video about apartheid. The comments of the seminar facilitator are noteworthy:

One teacher was particularly moved by the video. He was crying afterwards. He wanted to know what the youth today can do to make up for the wrongs of the past – that their ‘white’ parents had committed and/or benefited from. Another participant responded to him by saying that it is not about blaming or judging. ‘We need to move beyond looking at this history and the effects

and our future in terms of race. We need to not see that certain race groups need to do certain things. We as South Africans need to do things to create a better future.’ She said that we need to focus on the positives. ‘This is a great country. We need to embrace that. We need to feel proud as South Africans.’⁹

Their interchange reminded me of the point that was made a while back that educators have the resources within themselves to deal with these difficult issues. And, that if a supportive community has been created (as is the case with these teachers), those in the community will help each other.

References

1. While ‘post-conflict’ is more common terminology, post-violence more accurately captures the context of countries such as South Africa, Northern Ireland and Rwanda. The major violence has ended but the ingredients of conflict are very much at work.
2. **Gail Weldon (2008):** *History Education and the democratic nation in post-apartheid South Africa*. Paper presented at the Ninth Berlin Roundtable on Transnationality-Civic Education in Divided Societies. (October, 2008) pp9-10.
3. The project began among the Western Cape Education Department, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and Facing History and Ourselves. As of 2005, the non-profit Shikaya has taken on the day-to-day management of the project and serves as a lead partner with Facing History.
4. Old Mutual Business School.
5. **Margot Strom (1994):** *Facing History and Ourselves Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation.
6. February 2008 seminar report.
7. Workshop report.
8. February 2008 seminar report.
9. Amandail workshop.

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