

An Integrated Approach to SEL and Social Studies

by **Mary Hendra**

Mary Hendra is Southern California Program Director for Facing History and Ourselves. She presents at conferences and workshops across California, collaborating with districts, cultural institutions, and CA County Offices of Education. She co-authored “Do our choices matter?...” in NCSS’s Teaching the C3 Framework, and regularly contributes to Learn+Teach+Share (lanetwork.facinghistory.org).

Abstract

An attention to SEL can be integrated into the social studies classroom to strengthen/deepen study of historical and contemporary events, better engage and meet students' needs, and facilitate connections. In fact, SEL deepens the learning of history, and history learning with an attention to individuals provides ways to broaden students' understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their responsibilities to others in society.¹ This article will include examples of an integrative approach, setting up a receptive and reflective classroom environment, and choosing/framing pieces which will build students SEL capacity.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) sets students up to be better learners.² In analysis of over 200 studies exploring the impact of explicitly teaching SEL skills, evidence showed significant improvement in academic achievement alongside student behavior, feelings about school, and school safety.³ However, SEL doesn't come from a single day, one-time lesson. Even for adults, SEL happens throughout the day and needs to be built and reinforced over time. That doesn't mean it needs to take away from core academic learning. To the contrary, incorporating an attention to SEL deepens historical understanding while simultaneously creating a more engaged and invested classroom.

Choosing Interesting Stories

Teaching history is essentially the sharing

of stories. We tell both overarching arcs of history such as “the development of Western Civilization” and stories more limited in chronological scope such as the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas or the family behind the court case *Mendez v. Westminster*. The latter may illustrate particular points in history, controversies, and shifts in human perspectives.

The stories we choose to tell and the depth with which we explore these individual moments in history, can offer students examples of self- and social- awareness, decision-making, and relationship skills. When given the opportunity to explore in greater depth the views and choices of “ordinary people” in historical moments, students can consider:

- Different perspectives and the impact of having a different point of view (an aspect of social awareness),

- How one's commitments or values influenced the choice made in a moment (a contributing factor to self-awareness), and
- The way trust or loyalty was built over time (one element in more explicitly considering the growth of a relationship).

In exploring the lives of others, students can develop their own maturity in building positive relationships and making decisions which reflect a deeper awareness of self and others.

What might this look like in a history class?

Consider the Holocaust. It is naturally important to understand the big ideas and movements which resulted in the violence of World War II and the particular targeting that resulted in genocide. But we can also learn from individuals faced with the decision of whether to go along with the Nazi party or not. This wasn't a one-time decision for many individuals, but a daily choice. Here's an example of two boys.

Alfons Heck joined the Hitler Youth (HY) when a boy in Germany in the 1930s. It was a natural choice at the time and ultimately became mandatory for German boys. Alfons was attracted and excited by the independence he received - being away from his parents, being treated as an adult.⁴ Feeling a strong sense of belonging is something our students also often seek. So, considering Alfons' choice and actions at the time can help students explore the factors that might influence decision-making. At the time, the agenda-driven information given by the Nazi

leadership limited feedback from others on the impact of his decisions, and students might see from this a limited social awareness. After the war ended, Alfons reflected on the betrayal he felt when truly understanding the impact of their efforts, which gives students an opportunity to see an individual grow in awareness of how he had been used and influenced as well as the perspectives of others. Hans Scholl joined the HY as well, but became disillusioned even in his youth. While he began his HY involvement with

great enthusiasm. "He and his boys had sewn themselves a magnificent flag with a mythical beast in the center. The flag was something very special. It had been dedicated to the Führer himself."⁵ In short time, however, Hans saw the things he valued dismissed and disparaged. The folk songs he loved collecting were banned. A favorite book was taken away. The flag itself was ordered replaced with the standard, prescribed flag. Hans had to grapple with competing loyalties. Was loyalty to another more important to loyalty to one's self? Was loyalty to a group - or even to the state - more important than loyalty to his own values and beliefs?

In studying these two boys - the choices they made as the world around them shifted, the relationships they prioritized, and the thinking they articulated in the moment and in retrospect - we gain a deeper understanding of how the Holocaust could have happened. That in itself is an important goal for us as history teachers. At the same time by engaging students in reflection and analysis on the factors that motivated others in history - stepping into their shoes, trying to



understand what led them to act the way they did - we support the students' development of self awareness and perspective taking.

Setting up your learning environment

To take greatest advantage of this approach, in addition to choosing content like this it is important to create a learning environment which fosters reflective, inclusive, deliberative, and participatory behaviors. Facing History and Ourselves has a number of strategies which can help with this. In one study, students shared these comments about the open learning environment created with Facing History:

- The teacher encourages students to discuss political and social topics about which people have different opinions.
- The teacher listens to students' ideas.
- The teacher treats students as individuals, not as members of groups to which they belong.

Social Emotional Learning happens in that particular space that balances both the challenge of new ideas (rigorous academic content) and emotional safety.⁶ In order to examine our own assumptions, we have to be free to be reflective. And, we need to really hear the experiences of others with some level of empathy. Teachers play a critical role in this by incorporating a pedagogy which complements the content in teaching SEL skills.⁷ Some of my favorite strategies for this approach (all from facinghistory.org) include:

- **Rapid-fire writing**

After reading a particularly resonant and complex text, I like having teachers or students do the steps of Rapid-fire Writing. In it, students re-read the text and their own writing several times—building self-awareness alongside close

reading skills. They ultimately focus themselves through the process, which contributes to self-management. If followed by group or class discussion about the issues that emerged for others, they can also build social awareness around how this particular issue is seen or felt by people with a range of perspectives.

- **Listen to Learn, Learn to Listen**

When it comes to current events, students come into the classroom with opinions formed to some degree already. In step one of this strategy, students get to write their own thoughts - deepening their self awareness. As Joan Didion wrote, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." This is followed by listening to others - building both the self-management to keep the focus on learning from another, and the social awareness to understand their partner's perspective. This could also be a time to be attentive to relationship skills as appropriate for the grade level. The final writing opportunity lets students consider what they learned as well as what they originally wrote, and perhaps come to a more nuanced understanding or decision. Imagine if this were to happen across political perspectives and around critical issues facing us today?

- **Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-World connections**

This strategy asks students to be conscious of the connections they are making, and to seek understanding of themselves and the historical piece by making those connections visible for further inquiry. In doing so, students build awareness of themselves and others, examine and manage their own thinking, and explore relationships from history to today.

A Final Example

Last summer, during a seminar that ex-

plored Migration in the United States with an eye towards identity, Belonging, and Citizenship, we delved into the film and study guide for *Becoming American: the Chinese Experience*. In one piece, the story of Anna May Wong is related. Wong was an American movie star, landing roles alongside Douglas Fairbanks and others. However, the restrictions against interracial kissing meant she could never be a leading lady on film. Instead, she was regularly limited to roles that reinforced negative stereotypes of Chinese while white actors played more nuanced or positive Asian roles. Here's how exploration of that one moment in history - one individual's perspective and experience of the historical moment - could be leveraged for SEL alongside historical understanding.

- **Text-to-Text**

The movie *The Farewell* came out a few weeks after the seminar, and I made a text-to-text connection comparing the portrayal of Chinese culture in this all-Chinese cast to the roles relegated to Wong. In contrast to a single image of what it means to be Chinese, *The Farewell* shows a diversity of experience and opinion among Chinese family members in relation to this one personal moment. Looking at the two films together allows a comparison of Chinese and American economic growth over time, an opportunity to consider motives and impact of migration, and, for social emotional skill development, a consideration of how one person's choices influences others they may or may not already know. This can help students heighten

their social awareness.

- **Text-to-World**

An immediate connection students might make is to #OscarsSoWhite and other contemporary discussion about media representation. I also considered the impact of film in shaping perspectives. When I lived in the Soviet Union as a student, I was told by a Russian man that I really should consider marrying while there, because, he said, "we don't hit our women." I had never been hit by an American man, and was taken aback by the comment until I thought about the two most popular American films in the Soviet Union: *Rambo* and *Gone with the Wind*. As this shows, students making a text-to-world connection can both practice perspective-taking and more clearly identify how their own position and perspective has been influenced by outside factors.

- **Text-to-Self**

My thoughts went beyond media for this question. As I considered how Anna May Wong was given role after role that reinforced negative stereotype, I asked when I had been put into particular roles based on gender norms. Similar to the impact Wong's playing those roles had on other Chinese Americans, I wondered if my stepping into gendered norms had an impact on others. Asking questions like this is one step towards greater self-awareness and an attention towards decision-making that holds us responsible to others as well as ourselves.

Endnotes

¹S Jones and J Kahn, "The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development," Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists (Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017). National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2018). Committee on *How People Learn, A Targeted Report for Teachers, How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Washington, The National Academies Press, 2005).

- ²National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” (Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019). Available at www.NationatHope.org.
- J Durlak, R Weissberg, A Dymnicki, R Taylor, and K. Schellinger, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405-432.
- ³S Jones and J Kahn, “The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development,” Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists (Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017).
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2018).
- Committee on *How People Learn, A Targeted Report for Teachers, How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Washington, The National Academies Press, 2005).
- ⁴“Joining the Hitler Youth,” Holocaust and Human Behavior (2017). Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.
- ⁵“Disillusionment in the Hitler Youth,” Holocaust and Human Behavior (2017). Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.
- ⁶R. Berger, S. Berman, J. Garcia, and J. Deasy, “A Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens,” (Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019). Available at www.NationatHope.org.
- ⁷National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope.”; L. Darling-Hammond, L. Flook, C. Cook-Harvey, B. Barron, and D. Osher, “Implications for Practice of the Science of Learning and Development,” *Applied Developmental Science* (in press).

References

- Becoming American study guide*. (2003). Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.
- Berger, R., Berman, S., Garcia, J., and Deasy, J. (2019). A practice agenda in support of how learning happens. Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Available at www.NationatHope.org.
- Chin, M. (Director). (2003). *Becoming American: The Chinese experience* (TV Series). USA: Public Affairs Television and Thomas Lennon Films.
- Committee on *How People Learn, A Targeted Report for Teachers, How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*. (2005). Washington, The National Academies Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., and Osher, D., Implications for practice of the science of learning and development,” *Applied Developmental Science* (in press).
- Disillusionment in the Hitler Youth. (2017). *Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.
- Durlak, J., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A, Taylor, R and Schellinger, K., (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development* 82(1). 405-432.
- Holch, A. (Producer) & Heck, A. (Writer). (1991). *Heil Hitler: Confessions of a Hitler youth* (TV Short). Germany.
- Joining the Hitler youth, *Holocaust and Human Behavior* (2017). Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.

Jones, S and Kahn, J. (2017). The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development, Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists. Washington: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. (2018). Washington: The National Academies Press.

Romer, A.L. & Byun, S. (2017). [A quasi-experimental study of Facing History electives in three urban high schools](#). Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.

Spying on family and friends. (2017). *Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc.

In addition to the historical pieces referenced in this article, Facing History and Ourselves provides many other educator resources to help students consider historical moments and complex ethical decision-making. They can be accessed free on the website: facinghistory.org.

 **EDUCATION**

Cultivating the Next Generation
of Citizen - Leaders

Visit our Booth at CCSS

Scholarships

University Credit

Field Trips

Action Civics

Curriculum

Leadership

www.reaganfoundation.org/education