



# UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSE OF OBLIGATION

*“Be compassionate, and take responsibility for each other. If we only learned those lessons, this world would be so much a better place.”*

-Morrie Schwartz

## OVERVIEW

Students discuss and reflect upon the term “universe of obligation”, and then explore their own personal sense of responsibility towards others along with that of an identity group to which they belong.

## LEVELS

- High School

## PLANNING FOR IT

## WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Within a history and/or social studies unit that focuses on marginalized groups and/or human rights issues
- To encourage students to think about how the concept of “universe of obligation” can help to cultivate a positive classroom and school community, especially at the beginning of the year

## TIME REQUIRED

- 50 minutes

## MATERIALS

- [Universe of Obligation Reading](#)
- [Universe of Obligation Handout](#)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Recognize that a society’s universe of obligation includes those people who society believes are deserving of respect and whose rights it believes are worthy of protection

- Understand that a society’s universe of obligation often changes, expanding or shrinking depending on circumstances such as peace and prosperity or war and economic depression

#### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

#### SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

#### SOURCE

Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit international educational and professional development organization. By integrating the study of history, literature, and human behavior with ethical decision-making and innovative teaching strategies, Facing History enables secondary school teachers to promote students’ historical understanding, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning. As students explore the complexities of history, and make connections to current events, they reflect on the choices they confront today and consider how they can make a difference.



#### HOW TO DO IT

##### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on your own “universe of obligation,” or those for whom you feel responsible. How is it determined who is in this “universe”? When and why might your universe of responsibility change?
- Expand your reflection to that of your school, community, and/or society’s universe of responsibility. Would you expand or limit anything within these “universes”?

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Click [here](#) for an overview of this lesson.

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#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How do groups, communities, and nations define who belongs and who does not?
- How do individuals define the continuum of people for whom they feel responsible?
- What factors influence the extent to which we feel an obligation to help others? How does the way we view others influence our feelings of responsibility toward them?

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## ACTIVITIES

- Respond to quotations
  - Begin the lesson by asking students to choose one of the following three quotations to write about in their journals:
    - Eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (as paraphrased by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks): “Our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society, and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them.”
    - Nineteenth-century sociologist William Graham Sumner: “Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is, to take care of his or her own self.”
    - Scholar and social activist Chuck Collins: “Of course, we have to respond to our immediate family, but, once they’re O.K., we need to expand the circle. A larger sense of family is a radical idea, but we get into trouble as a society when we don’t see that we’re in the same boat.”
  - After copying one of these quotations into their journals, students should respond to the following questions about it:
    - What is the author’s vision of community?
    - What responsibilities and obligations do individuals have to each other, according to this author?
    - Do you agree with the author’s statement? Are there any parts of the statement that make you feel uncomfortable?
  - After writing in their journals, students should discuss and share their thinking using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) teaching strategy.
- Illustrate an Individual “Universe of Obligation”
  - Read this [Universe of Obligation overview](#) with the class. Discuss the questions that follow the reading, and then give each student a copy of the [Universe of Obligation handout](#). Give students time to follow the instructions and complete the activity on the handout.
  - Have students meet in groups of two or three to discuss their experience of trying to illustrate their universes of obligation. In their discussions, they should address the following questions:
    - What was the experience of illustrating your universe of obligation like?
    - What did you think about when deciding where to place certain groups in your universe of obligation? Which decisions were difficult? Which were easy?
    - Under what conditions might your universe of responsibility shift?

- What is the difference between an individual’s universe of obligation and that of a school, community, or country?
- Illustrate a Group’s “Universe of Obligation”
  - Repeat the second activity, above, this time asking each student to choose a group to which he or she belongs—such as a school, neighborhood, or country—and illustrate that group’s universe of obligation. Again, students can conclude the activity by sharing their thinking with two or three classmates and discussing the same questions listed above, this time in relation to the group universe of obligation they illustrated.

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## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this practice? Do you notice a shift in the conversation about caring for others, whether they are friends, schoolmates, families, communities, or society? If so, describe the shift?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A group of researchers recently developed [“The Identification With All Humanity” scale \(IWAH\)](#) that assesses the degree to which someone identifies with “all humans everywhere.” “Identifying” includes things like feeling love toward, feeling similar to, and believing in, independent of how much they identify with people in their own community and country.

The researchers found that people who score high in IWAH are more concerned about global issues such as combating world hunger and addressing human rights violations, even when controlling for dispositional empathy and moral concern. High scorers also valued ingroup and outgroup lives more equally than low scorers. (Values placed on lives was measured by having participants choose

between policies that pit lives in one country against economic loss or gain in the other and comparing those policy preferences.)

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

It's an exciting time to live in this world, as it grows smaller and the divisions start to disappear. And yet, according to researchers, [empathy](#)—a critical quality that helps humans feel connected and compassionate towards one another—may be on the decline in students.

Cultivating students' global citizenship builds not only their [knowledge and skills](#), but also their interest in and empathy for people and issues outside their everyday lives. As our schools, workforce, and communities become more diverse, encouraging students to enlarge their circles of concern—reaching out to others in friendship and understanding—help us to create a kinder, more compassionate, and equitable world—one in which our “universe of obligation” is greatly expanded.

## TERMS OF USE

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