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Historical Empathy: Judging the People of the Past in a Secondary Social Studies Classroom

Thomas D. Ellenwood Jr.

Abstract: Historical empathy is a structural element of the study of history that needs to be taught in every secondary history classroom. It is important not only for the sake of accuracy in our studies, but also because helping students develop historical empathy has been proven to help improve their historical understanding and increase their interest in the study of history. Instructional strategies like reading and interpreting primary sources, role-playing, and engaging in writing that requires empathetic understanding have been found to be the most beneficial in fostering historical empathy in the classroom. It is also imperative to teach students how to engage in historical empathy in order that they can more accurately interpret history and judge the people of the past more fairly.

Introduction

“You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it,” (Lee, 1960, p. 30).

Passing judgment on others is an interesting thing, because we do it almost immediately unless we have been very well trained not to. We judge others through our own perspectives, according to our own standards, using our own experiences, often without sharing the standards and criteria for which we apply judgment. Reading this, it seems unfair, right? As a society we fight against it, reminding our fellow citizens not to judge others until they understand the other person well, a feat we generally consider nearly impossible. Yet, we quickly judge historical people and events in history without considering their emotions, experiences, knowledge, or context. This is unfair both to the historical figures and likewise to learners of history, who are judging them. In order to prevent this rush to judgment, history and social studies teachers must help their students develop historical empathy.

Consider a classroom where historical empathy is missing. You may have a hard time thinking of what that looks like because it does not change the physical classroom. In fact, even the most appealing classroom with active discussion and hands on activities can be missing historical empathy entirely. Historical empathy happens within our minds, and without it, we begin learning history the wrong way. When historical empathy is absent from study, history dries up into an un-relatable subject; it becomes the unintelligible past, filled with people that made bad decisions, and sometimes were nearly evil, considering some of the things they did. When we forget to consider the context surrounding those events, our vision of past may be skewed.

Defining historical empathy poses a problem, as experts do not have one agreed upon definition. One useful definition comes from Endacott (2013), who described historical empathy as “the process of students’ cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions,” (p. 41). Historical empathy, much like psychological empathy, allows a person to connect with another person in order to understand the emotions and actions of the other person. The major difference between the two has to do with the time and context. In psychological empathy,

we relate to each other in the present period, and often share a common context. To feel historical empathy, students must think about the difference between present and past, and consider the context of the past instead of their own present context. This is unquestionably a challenging task for students. Nevertheless, the concept of historical empathy is important in history education because without utilizing it, we generate judgment and interpretation of historical events and people based on our own present context and not on the historical context that should be used, resulting in false interpretation and unfair judgments.

The Importance of Teaching Historical Empathy

Go into a classroom and talk about the founding fathers. You can mention all the great things they did, the great ideas they had, and the impact they had on this country. Then mention that many of them owned slaves; students become confused about why such revered people did something we consider so obviously wrong. Nowadays there is widespread agreement that slavery is bad and should be banned, yet many of the founders of the United States were slave owners; this may seem incongruous to students. Fostering historical empathy allows students to consider the “why” in the situation, taking on the perspective of the founders.

“Empathy is central to history, one might say structural, in that without it history cannot begin,” (Lee, 1983, as cited in Cunningham, 2009, p. 40). According to Lee, history is the “story of us” and we have to be able to connect to the people of the past in order to fully understand what history is. Historical empathy allows us to connect to the people of the past and using it when studying history is important because it allows us to arrive at accurate and fair interpretations of why people behaved as they did, how they made their decisions, and why events occurred in a particular manner. The “why” of history is the essential component in history education if we are to take anything from the study of the past other than names, dates, and facts. With historical empathy, students of history will more accurately interpret historical events without interpreting and jumping to judgments based on their own context and emotions.

Historical empathy is not only taught for the sake of understanding history in context, although that is a good enough reason as any. According to Brooks (2011), engaging students in using historical empathy in the classroom has been shown to increase the amount of care students have for the subject. This is because students find connections to the past, which in turn triggers emotional reactions and interest. When students care more about history, because they can relate to it better, they tend to take more interest in the subject and work harder, which means that fostering historical empathy is also a way to improve student performance in your classroom.

Requirements for Historical Empathy

Historical empathy means more, though, than just recognizing the difference between the present and the past and then trying to assume the perspective of the figure in study. It relies on three different factors that must work together in order for one to achieve meaningful historical empathy. According to Endacott (2013), historical empathy relies on three interconnected factors. The first is historical contextualization: recognizing the time difference

and understanding of the norms of the time period in study. The second is perspective taking: understanding another's experiences, attitudes, and beliefs and how these things affect their decisions. The third is affective connection: consideration of the emotional reaction of the person being studied and similar responses in one's self (p. 43). Each of these are powerful tools in the Social Studies classroom individually but fail to reach the full potential of historical empathy when used separately.

As an example, when studying the Great Depression, a topic that is commonly taught is the New Deal, and more specifically, teachers usually cover the Works Progress Administration program. Historically, the New Deal was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic solution to the Great Depression. It consisted of significant spending on government projects, such as the Works Progress Administration, in order to get money to the people of the United States; this was expected to increase demand for goods, stimulating the economy. Currently in the U.S., some argue the New Deal was a waste of money and did not contribute to the ending of the Great Depression. Without getting into the arguments about the success of the New Deal, we can still use it as an example of how to foster historical empathy in terms of the three requirements.

In order to help students empathize those taking part in historical events, we must identify the three interrelated factors and how they apply to the event. Using the Works Progress Administration, a sub-topic of the New Deal, as the example, it is necessary for students to engage in historical contextualization and recognize the difference in time period between the present and the time of the Great Depression. They must know what the Great Depression was, what life was like before and during the time period, what events transpired prior to the establishment of the Works Progress Administration, and understand many other historical events and facts that give us our basis for understanding. Secondly, with perspective taking, students can take the perspective of individuals including the President, the chief policymaker of the period, and begin to investigate the position that he was in, stepping into his role and assuming his mindset. For example, President Roosevelt wanted to help the people by reviving the economy, and he had previous success with a similar program as governor of New York. Further, Roosevelt was under a great deal of pressure to fix the economy, pressure that came from his own political party as well as the American people. Students could also take the perspective of a Works Progress Administration worker. Students could look at the life of the worker and make a decision on whether or not the program was a solution for the worker's issues. Finally, through an affective connection, students begin to build an emotional connection between themselves and Roosevelt or other people from the time. They should think about how they would feel if in those positions. Students should have to face emotional questions such as how would it feel to have the power to fix the problems your people are dealing with or how it would feel to be a worker and find out that you get to go back to work. Stress, sympathy, and relief would be first in the emotional reactions and are something the learners can relate to. When engagement with all three factors is successful, students are likely to develop historical empathy.

This example only applies to one aspect of historical empathy through the perspective of Roosevelt or the workers. Historical empathy can further be fostered between students and

other people taking part in events. This example is meant to begin answering the question, “what can I do in the classroom to foster historical empathy?”

Instructional Strategies to Foster Historical Empathy

Primary Sources. One instructional strategy that is of focus in history education is the use of primary sources in the classroom. Interpreting primary sources begins being taught early in history education and rightfully so. Primary sources are sources from the time period that historians use to come to conclusions about history. Getting such information in front of the students is helpful in completing the goals of history education, as well as meeting state and national standards. Moreover, in respect to historical empathy, Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson, and Morris (1998), found that exposure to primary sources yields the most gain in terms of developing historical empathy skills.

Yeager et al. (1998), contrasted primary sources with textbooks to investigate the use of historical empathy in students. Their goal was to explore whether the development of historical empathy is an active process that is part of historical study (p.8). The results indicated that primary sources fostered historical empathy more than textbooks. To analyze the results, they read open-ended question to students, and found that students who had read the textbook restated the information from the textbook, and did not consider other perspectives or challenge the decisions that had been made in the relevant time period. In contrast, the primary source readers got to read various documents, all from different points of view. This led the students to open their thought process to interpretations from multiple perspectives and options the historical figure had and why they chose the one they did.

This is convenient for teachers because the use of primary sources is commonly part of the history education standards and these sources should therefore already be present in the classroom. Thus, few materials or resources would have to be added to the classroom in order to start purposefully developing historical empathy. The goal is not to discredit secondary sources, but throughout the research, primary sources tend to yield more favorable results in terms of historical empathy (Yeager et al., 1998; Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

Role-plays. Primary sources are great to use for literacy purposes, they provide raw information from the source. However, some students will learn better from hands-on strategies rather than literacy strategies. Endacott and Pelekanos (2015) conducted a case study in a seventh-grade classroom in which the teacher taught a unit on Ancient Greece and Athens. After learning about the Athenian government and culture, students were given a role and organized into the Athenian Senate, charged with making important decisions for the country. The teacher found that assigning students roles of actual people and making them research those individuals led student to be more engaged in class and to display more historical empathy on the assessment after the role-play was complete. Accordingly, this study suggests that history teachers can utilize role-playing as an instructional strategy for any period in history, and that role-playing is yet another useful strategy to foster historical empathy.

Writing. Writing is regarded as the most beneficial and easiest way to both develop and measure skills in historical empathy (Yeager et al., 1998; Downey, 1994, as cited in Brooks,

2008). Yeager et al. conducted a study in which the teacher gave one group of students multiple primary sources with varying perspectives and another group of students a popular high school social studies textbook, all with the topic of the end of World War II. After the students read their assigned readings, they were given open-ended questions to answer, such as “What forces affected Truman’s decision?”, and application questions such as, “You are charged with designing an exhibit over the bombings in Japan, what the exhibit would include?” (¶4). Responses to the prompts showed positive results empathetic for those using primary sources, which they explained contributed to the student’s ability to explain their thinking instead of feeling locked into a specific answer dictated by history textbooks. Because empathetic reactions are individual, in terms of historical empathy, giving students specific responses could block them in and limit their emotional reaction.

In order to foster historical empathy, question and prompts must therefore be tailored to activate an empathetic response by students. Such questions are usually open-ended allowing the student to develop their own answer without much restriction. Endacott and Brooks (2013), provide sample questions that teachers have used to foster historical empathy. The examples include questions that activate moral judgment like, “how do we determine what was right or wrong in the past?” or ask students to compare and contrast time periods (p. 54). Reflective questions are also asked to engage students in historical empathy. Another question asked, “how has our view of this historical situation changed over time?” (p. 54).

Conclusion

Historical empathy is a powerful skill in historical study and should be fostered in the classroom in order to increase historical understanding and engagement. Historical empathy may seem like something that develops naturally, but without teacher facilitation and the use of the proper resources, such as those mentioned above, students will not engage in historical empathy and will accordingly judge history from their current perspective and context (Yeager et al., 1998). To support historical empathy in their students, teachers can follow the model by Endacott (2013) which outlines the three requirements for historical empathy: historical contextualization, perspective taking, affective connection.

The development of historical empathy is shown to increase interest in historical topics and in return, increased grades that students achieved (Brooks, 2011). Without a focus on developing historical empathy, students are more likely to restate facts or copy direct quotes from the textbook instead of developing their own interpretations. Teaching skills in historical empathy and utilizing them in the study of history leads to a deep understanding of history and more fair judgments about historical figures, as well as more insightful understanding of historical events in the times and places in which they occurred.

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