

Historical Empathy

A primer for history and social studies educators

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What is historical empathy?

- A process of attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people from the past, within their specific historical contexts.
- Both a cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) process—a range of feelings, emotions, and connections will be present alongside developing students' historical inquiry skills.

What learning outcomes can historical empathy support?

Historical empathy can support the development of understandings, skills, and dispositions related to prescribed learning outcomes (e.g., the curriculum) *and* a student's everyday life.

Historical thinking skills

- Understanding multiple & diverse perspectives
- Considering evidence & historical contexts
- Drawing inferences
- Forming ethical judgments

Historical consciousness

- Drawing connections between the past, present, & future
- Considering the meaning and legacies of past perspectives in the present

Citizenship

- Creating more caring, open-minded citizens who are willing to engage in making change
- Encountering perspectives that differ from one's own or seem hard to relate to

Decolonizing & anti-racism

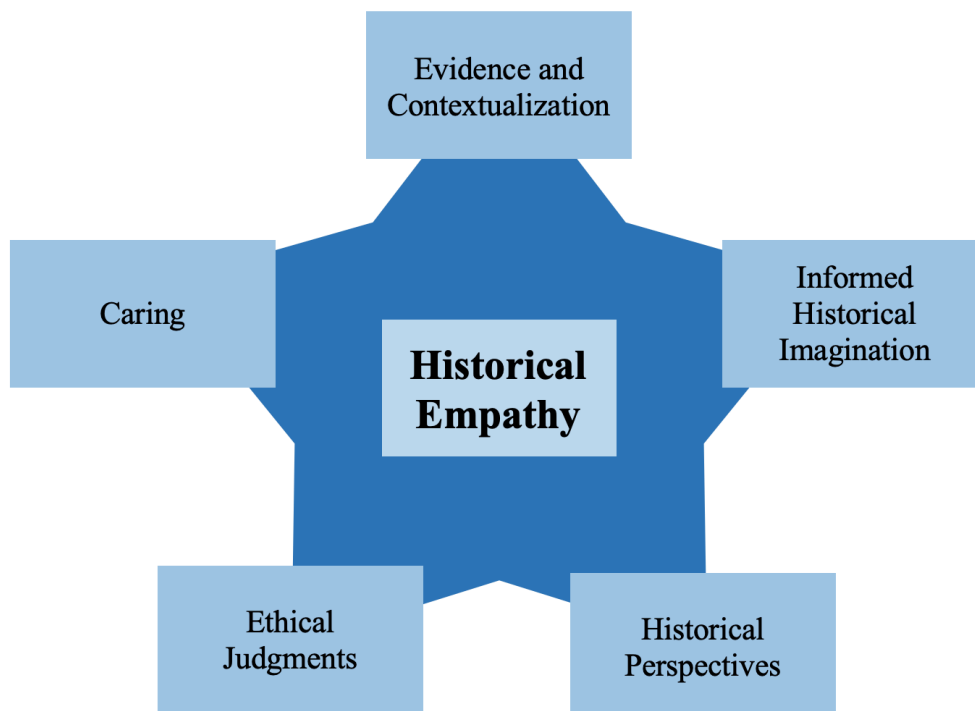
- Translating historical empathy into everyday empathy
- Changing attitudes, values, beliefs, & behaviours
- Supporting reconciliation & building solidarity among communities

What are some of the challenges of historical empathy?

- Distinguishing between “empathy” (attempting to understand others) and “sympathy” (feeling bad for others).
- Applying productive forms of presentism—recognizing that the knowledge and values we have in the present influence how we interpret the past.
- Emotions can be unexpected and may happen whether or not teachers plan for them.
- Dealing with difficult knowledges and histories may not necessarily lead to empathy in all students and could result in further harm and trauma for some.
- Discerning the extent to which imagination should be engaged when reconstructing past perspectives, behaviours, and actions.
- Forming fair judgments about values, decisions, and actions taken in the past.
- Recognizing that there are limits to what we can know about historical actors, and that demonstrating historical empathy does not necessarily mean we identify, or agree, with historical actors.

What are the various elements of historical empathy? How might teachers approach them to support student learning?

Historical empathy consists of five elements (Karn, 2023). Although the elements are presented in a particular order, they are not intended to be sequential—teachers and students are likely to find themselves engaging in many of them concurrently. A powerful pedagogical approach to historical empathy includes all five elements and integrates their cognitive and affective dimensions. Each element is described in more detail on the subsequent pages.



(Source: Karn, 2023)

Evidence and Contextualization

Empathizing with people in the past requires two closely related tasks: analyzing evidence and considering historical contexts. This involves:

- ✓ Gathering sufficient background information about historical events, people, and concepts.
- ✓ Considering a range of sources that highlight various historical perspectives (e.g., primary sources, oral histories, artefacts, textbooks, films, landscapes).
- ✓ Accounting for three different contexts, to the extent that the evidence allows:
 1. the personal (beliefs, perspectives, and values of a source’s author);
 2. the sociocultural (political, economic, and socio-cultural factors of the time), and;
 3. the contemporary (issues, values, and decisions in the present).

Students should consider contemporary contexts to “appreciate the ‘pastness’ of the past and potentially avoid imposing their own framework of meaning on others in their interpretations” (Lévesque, 2008, p. 166).

Tips for Teachers

1. Offer strategies for decoding texts and analyzing evidence.
2. Ask thought-provoking questions.
3. Shift away from exclusively Westernized thinking about historical evidence (include oral histories and land-based learning).
4. Prompt students to consider how their own positionalities—personal values, views, experiences, and contexts—shape their understandings of historical actors.

Possible Learning Outcomes

- Analyzing different types of primary and secondary sources.
- Understanding how context creates the conditions for people to think, feel, decide, or act in particular ways.
- Accounting for different and conflicting perspectives.
- Becoming more reflexive and critical thinkers.
- Gaining an increased level of self-awareness.

Informed Historical Imagination

Applying an informed historical imagination can help improve our understanding of and engagement with history, especially when we do not have explicit traces of historical actors' views and actions. This involves:

- ✓ Inferring details using available information, especially where evidence may be lacking or contradictory.
- ✓ Considering a range of possibilities that could account for the thoughts, feelings, values, actions, or decisions of historical figures.
- ✓ Generating different scenarios and evaluating their feasibility within a given historical context.

Historical empathy involves engaging in a sense of “wonderment about reasonable and possible meanings within, in a time that no one can really know” (Davis Jr., 2001, p. 3).

Tips for Teachers

1. Engage students' imaginations through rich storytelling.
2. Represent diverse perspectives, even when evidence is lacking.
3. Introduce historical fiction as an example of combining evidence and imagination to tell a story about the past.

Possible Learning Outcomes

- Inspiring a sense of wonder and imagination.
- Extrapolating details from evidence .
- Triangulating different types of sources.
- Imagining details within different contexts.
- Evaluating the feasibility of different scenarios.

Historical Perspectives

A consideration of historical perspectives promotes empathy through a combination of thinking and feeling. This involves:

- ✓ Generating evidence-based inferences about the thoughts and feelings of historical actors.
- ✓ Considering diverse and multiple historical perspectives, and whose voices were heard or not heard.
- ✓ Imagining the emotions and feelings that motivated people to act in certain ways.

“[A]ffectively mediated information appears to increase the likelihood that learners will consider alternative perspectives”
(Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 236).

Tips for Teachers

1. Discuss with students the differences between empathy (attempting to understand), sympathy (feeling bad for), and identification (drawing personal connections to).
2. Provide sources that reflect a wide range of perspectives on a topic, and examine whose voices are missing.
3. Promote perspective-taking through the careful use of writing tasks, discussions, simulations, field trips, and other activities.
4. Emphasize feelings and emotions—those of historical actors and the students themselves.

Possible Learning Outcomes

- Drawing inferences based on evidence and context.
- Understanding diverse perspectives.
- Evaluating perspectives for bias.
- Linking actions and consequences.
- Becoming open-minded towards multiple points of view in the present.
- Valuing diversity and accepting difference.

Ethical Judgments

An important part of historical empathy is forming ethical judgments about past perspectives and decisions. This involves:

- ✓ Uncovering the values and norms of a particular period to make fair judgments about past thoughts, beliefs, and actions.
- ✓ Critically assessing one's own positionality to better understand how beliefs in the present contribute to the judgments made about the past.
- ✓ Contextualizing past actions, analyzing relevant evidence, and inferring missing details.

“Our understanding of people in the past will only acquire meaning in our lives when our questioning of them occurs hand-in-hand with a questioning of ourselves” (Retz, 2013, p. 224).

Tips for Teachers

1. Guide students to carefully consider evidence and historical contexts.
2. Prompt students to form judgments based on past and contemporary worldviews.
3. Engage students in discussions and activities surrounding commemoration controversies.
4. Embrace discussions that shift towards the present and future in history classes.
5. Provide students opportunities to openly react to historical content.
6. Discuss with students that while we inherit the legacies of the past, those legacies need not define the present and future, and we have agency in creating change moving forward.

Possible Learning Outcomes

- Drawing connections between the past, present, and future.
- Developing historical consciousness.
- Considering the meaning of past decisions in the present.
- Reflecting on the consequences of their own actions.
- Making ethical decisions in the present and future.

Caring

Caring—and the range of emotions and feelings that may flow from it—engages students in wanting to learn about the past and to apply their learning both within and beyond the history classroom. This involves:

- ✓ *Caring about* people and events in the past.
- ✓ *Caring that* particular events took place and developing ethical responses.
- ✓ *Caring for* people in history who have suffered injustices or oppression and seeking retrospective justice.
- ✓ *Caring to* change our beliefs and behaviours in the present in light of studying the past.

“*Care* is a term that covers a variety of related meanings, but each involves some relationship between learners and the object of study, and these relationships often include emotional commitments or feelings or personal relevance” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 229, emphasis in original).

Tips for Teachers

1. Allow students to study topics with personal and family connections.
2. Teach histories involving children and adolescents to establish connections between students and the topics of study.
3. Draw explicit connections between caring for others in the past and the present.
4. Provide space for students to explore their emotions and feelings.
5. Remain sensitive to how students’ backgrounds and experiences inform the many ways they come to care.

Possible Learning Outcomes

- Engaging students in wanting to learn more about the past.
- Developing care for the wellbeing of others, including those different from oneself.
- Developing a willingness to effect change on ethical issues in the present.
- Evaluating consequences of past decision-making.
- Re-evaluating present-day decision-making.

References & Resources

Books

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Other Resources

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