Research article

Designing historical empathy learning experiences: a pedagogical tool for history teachers

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Abstract

This article explores the pedagogies that history teachers use to foster historical empathy, drawing from interviews with secondary school history teachers in Canada. The findings highlight that historical empathy is nurtured by teachers over time using a variety of different teaching approaches and activities, tasks and projects. The article begins by examining the pedagogical choices that teachers make when designing and implementing historical empathy lessons, categorised as implicit, thematic, student-centred, scaffolded and comparative approaches. Next, consideration is given to the types of learning experiences that teachers use to develop historical empathy, and some of the opportunities and challenges involved. These learning experiences include role plays and simulations, first- and third-person writing tasks, experiential learning and virtual reality, and collaborative and project-based learning. The perspectives shared by the teachers in this study contributed towards the development of a research-informed pedagogical tool to guide the future design of learning experiences that foster historical empathy, which may be applied by teachers across educational jurisdictions, and adapted for various grade levels.

Introduction

Imagine, for a moment, a history teacher sitting down to design a learning experience that fosters historical empathy – defined here as a cognitive-affective process (in which thinking and feeling cannot be separated) of attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions and actions of people in the past, within their specific historical contexts (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Endacott and Brooks, 2013; Karn, 2023a). The teacher selects a topic within their current unit of study, and they have an idea about the activities and discussions they would like to facilitate with their students. But they are facing some difficulties with knowing where to begin, and they do not have access to many high-quality, teacher-friendly resources to support them. What if this teacher had a research-informed pedagogical tool to guide the design of historical empathy learning experiences, which was developed through conversations with other history teachers?

For many of the history teachers I spoke with as part of this study (described in more detail below), this scenario was the reality they faced in their teaching. Despite being seasoned teachers, they sometimes struggled to incorporate historical empathy explicitly into their teaching, due to a lack of resources to support their pedagogical approaches, particularly when it comes to engaging the affective dimensions (emotions, feelings, connections) of learning about the past. Although scholars have placed different emphasis on cognitive (grounded in the historical method) and affective (feelings and emotions) elements of historical empathy, more recent scholarship tends to agree that historical empathy is a process that involves a range of feelings, emotions and connections alongside historical inquiry (Bartelds et al., 2022; Barton and Levstik, 2004; Davison, 2017; Endacott and Brooks, 2013; Kohlmeier, 2006).

In Canada, where the teachers I interviewed are located, historical empathy and its associated affective dimensions have been marginalised within historical thinking research and practice. Instead, the more cognitive-oriented term 'historical perspectives' is used in the historical thinking framework conceptualised by Peter Seixas (Seixas, 2017; Seixas and Morton, 2013). Although Seixas's earlier framework of historical understanding included empathy (Seixas, 1996), his later work no longer references historical empathy, due to concerns 'that empathy would give rise to the belief among teachers that they were being encouraged to cultivate affective or emotional bonds with historical agents' (Retz, 2018: 195). In part because of the exclusion of the affective dimensions of historical empathy from this historical thinking framework, at the time of this study, little was known about how teachers in Canada approached historical empathy in their history classes, if at all.

This study inquires into the pedagogies that history teachers use to foster historical empathy, drawing on interviews with secondary school history teachers in Canada. In doing so, I share insight into the range of pedagogical approaches to historical empathy the teachers employed, despite the noted absence of resources to support them. The findings highlight that historical empathy is nurtured by teachers over time using a variety of different approaches and activities, tasks and projects. This article begins by examining the pedagogical choices teachers make when designing and implementing historical empathy activities, expanding upon Deborah Cunningham's (2007, 2009) focus on small-scale discourse strategies in teaching. Then I consider the types of learning experiences that teachers use to foster historical empathy, and their associated opportunities and challenges, adding to and expanding upon those identified in previous studies (for example, Bartelds et al., 2020; Brauer, 2016; Brooks, 2008, 2011; Doppen, 2000; Endacott and Pelekanos, 2015; Innes and Sharp, 2021; Jensen, 2008; Kohlmeier, 2006; Patterson et al., 2022; Rantala, 2011; Shemilt, 1984; Sweeney et al., 2018; Uppin and Timoštšuk, 2019; Yeager and Doppen, 2001). The teachers' perspectives contributed towards the development of a pedagogical tool for designing historical empathy lessons, presented in the final section, which may be taken up across educational jurisdictions and adapted for various grade levels.

Context of the study

The data that inform this article were collected as part of a larger study of historical empathy (Karn, 2023b), and here I draw specifically from the results of interviews with seven secondary school history teachers in

the province of Ontario, Canada. The participants were required to have five or more years of teaching experience, self-identify as being interested in historical empathy and historical thinking approaches to teaching history, and teach (or have previously taught) Canadian history. As displayed in Table 1, the teacher participants have a variety of expertise, and teach in a range of contexts. All the teachers have more than 15 years of experience, and their undergraduate studies (which correlate to qualified teaching subjects in Ontario) span beyond history to include the arts, languages, political science and economics. (Although secondary school teachers in Ontario are qualified to teach certain subjects, they may also teach other subjects they did not specialise in during their undergraduate degrees, as the need arises.) All but one of the teachers are located in public schools in the province. Collectively, they teach in a variety of school settings, ranging from urban to rural, and they predominantly teach Caucasian students, with more ethnic diversity in schools located in urban areas.

Table 1. Demographic information for teacher participants

Name *	Years of experience	Undergraduate major/minor	Location	School type	Student demographics
Andrea	>15	History, French	Urban	Public	Ethnic diversity
Bradley	>15	History	Rural	Public	Unknown
Emily	>15	History, dramatic arts	Rural	Public	Predominantly Caucasian; conservative
Henry	>15	Political science, history	Urban	Private	Predominantly Caucasian; some ethnic diversity
Lydia	>15	English, history	Rural/suburban	Public	Predominantly Caucasian; conservative
Olivia	>15	Music, computer science	Rural/urban	Public	Predominantly Caucasian
Todd	>15	Political science, resource economics	Rural	Public	Unknown

* All teacher participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Each teacher participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on the teachers' approaches to teaching history and how they conceptualise historical empathy. The second interview invited teachers to share classroom lessons and resources that highlight the purposes, approaches, benefits and challenges of teaching and learning with historical empathy. The data were analysed through a combination of inductive (data-driven) and deductive (literature- and theory-driven) approaches, using NVivo to code and categorise the data. As I searched for themes and patterns, I began to identify overall themes related to teachers' pedagogical approaches to historical empathy.

In my initial framing of this research, I intended to explore the activities, tasks and projects that history teachers use to foster historical empathy. However, as I began analysing the interviews, I realised that my analysis of 'pedagogies' needed to be broken down further into: (1) teachers' pedagogical choices; and (2) activities, tasks and projects that elicit empathy. I was also reminded of Cunningham's (2009: 693) assertion that 'studies of teaching for empathy may miss much of the action by attending only to the culminating activity and display of understanding'. In an attempt to avoid overlooking a significant element of pedagogical approaches, this article also focuses on the choices teachers make in the process of developing and implementing lessons on historical empathy.

Teachers' pedagogical choices

At present, there are only a few studies that reveal the pedagogical choices that teachers make while designing and implementing historical empathy activities (Bartelds et al., 2020; Brooks, 2011; Cunningham, 2007, 2009; Endacott and Sturtz, 2015; Grant, 2001). Although they all contribute to understanding how teachers approach historical empathy in practice, Cunningham's (2007, 2009) study of four history teachers in England is most relevant to the present study, because it was the first to recognise discourse strategies for fostering historical empathy. This is significant because previous studies (for example, Shemilt, 1984) attended only to the culminating activity, or how students displayed their understanding, which overlooked other, small-scale methods that teachers use to develop historical empathy. Cunningham (2009) differentiates between empathy activities (such as discussions and role plays) and discourse strategies (such as language use and verbal devices), the latter of which are categorised further into three groups that aim at different goals: to encourage empathetic thought processes, to establish relevance, and to dramatise or enliven history. There are alignments between Cunningham's (2009) findings and the results presented here; however, I broaden from 'small-scale discourse strategies' to also include other choices that teachers make during lesson design and instruction, from their perspectives.

The teachers I interviewed shed light on the various pedagogical choices that they make in developing and implementing lessons on historical empathy. Teachers used their own professional knowledge and experience with teaching history, as well as that of their peers, to inform their pedagogical choices, which placed student learning and other interests at the heart of their decisions. Through my analysis, five categories emerged from the data, which I refer to as: (1) implicit approaches; (2) thematic approaches; (3) student-centred approaches; (4) scaffolded approaches; and (5) comparative approaches.

Implicit approaches

When asked about how they approach teaching historical empathy, the teachers began by prefacing their answers with a discussion about whether they explicitly use the term historical empathy:

> Well, the word empathy has come up. If I've used the term historical empathy, I don't know. (Bradley)

> I think it arises indirectly, whereas the other six historical thinking concepts I would say I explicitly go through with them [students]. (Emily)

> The more specific version of empathy that you've described, historical empathy, I think I'm doing it but it's not probably something that I am being as deliberate about as I might like to be. (Henry)

As these quotations highlight, in most cases, the teachers admitted that they do not explicitly use the term historical empathy when teaching their students history. These findings corroborate Hanneke Bartelds et al.'s (2020) study, which found that 70 per cent of the teachers interviewed reported that they did not provide explicit instruction on historical empathy. However, through our conversations, it became clear that the teachers in my study were familiar with the idea of historical empathy and could articulate their related pedagogical approaches, even if they may not always make things transparent to their students.

Through our conversations, I gathered that teachers also approached empathy implicitly in the ways they modelled empathy themselves, whether towards historical actors or through their relationships with other people in the present. They were especially inclined to model the affective dimensions by being open about their own emotional responses to difficult histories surrounding war, conflict and genocide. One teacher was particularly aware of how they embody empathy in their relationships with students and other teachers within the school community. Lydia expressed: 'I hope in those implicit relationships they see empathy, as well. So, I think it comes from both sources. It comes from the material we review, but it also comes from the relationships we have with each other.' With this, Lydia presents a strong argument for teachers being aware of their interactions with others, and how they exhibit empathy towards people in the present, in order to implicitly model approaches to historical empathy for students.

These findings corroborate other studies that describe how teachers model empathy. For instance, Sarah Brooks (2011) observed a teacher thinking aloud to model how students might come to view a historical actor's perspective as legitimate, rather than disregarding historical contexts to dismiss or condemn such perspectives. Similarly, Cunningham (2009: 698, emphasis in original) found that teachers 'guided students toward empathy by what they *said* – their language in the classroom and how they used it'. While teachers in my study may not have frequently used the term historical empathy, they implicitly fostered empathy through their words and actions within the classroom and school community.

Thematic approaches

An ongoing discussion within history education involves the extent to which emphasis should be placed on chronological (studying historical events, people and circumstances in sequence) or thematic (studying central themes across time) approaches to history (Turan, 2020).   From my conversations with teachers, I learned that they and their colleagues have been experimenting with more thematic approaches (for example, units on Indigenous histories, women's histories and LGBTQ2S+ histories). As such, a few teachers discussed their observation that thematic approaches hold greater potential for evoking empathy than chronological approaches. Henry explained that one year his units were thematic, 'where we were hopscotching around in terms of the timeline', and although it could be confusing at times, he noticed that students developed stronger historical thinking skills. He also noted, 'That's where I saw themes like empathy really come to the fore.' By focusing on certain themes that highlight human experiences (for example, immigration histories), Henry's students were able to understand continuities in racial injustices over time, and to consider ways of reconciling historical wrongs in the present.

According to teachers, thematic approaches can also help slow down the pace of learning, while at the same time ensuring that students learn to empathise with historical actors across a variety of time periods. As Andrea described, following a thematic approach allowed her students to become familiar with perspectives and experiences throughout the twentieth century, rather than remain stuck in the minutiae of a single historical period:

> We're not on the clock. That's why thematic teaching is awesome because if you don't get to all the case studies, so what? If you don't get to the end of the historical timeline, you're going to get there at some point because you're carrying the narratives forward to the present day … but when we were teaching from a chronological perspective, how many of our colleagues never got beyond the Second World War?

Andrea's students were able to take the time they needed to empathise with the perspectives and experiences of diverse groups, focusing on one thematic case study at a time. Slowing down the pace of learning in this way can provide students with an opportunity to sit with their emotions and take time for careful thought.

The teachers in my study found that thematic approaches emphasise diverse human experiences and perspectives over time, and, for these reasons, may be best suited to developing empathy in students.   This is a significant contribution to the literature, as previous studies have focused predominantly on how the structure of individual lessons contributes to historical empathy (for example, see the four-part instructional model presented by Endacott and Brooks, 2013) rather than throughout an entire unit or course. Further research into thematic approaches to units of study may help refocus the lens, zooming out to understand how historical empathy is developed over extended periods of time.

Student-centred approaches

To centre students within their approaches to historical empathy, teachers may begin by accounting for their students' prior knowledge – including their interests, experiences and identities – in relation to the topic of study (Dulberg, 2002; Endacott and Brooks, 2013). In fact, Cunningham (2007: 618) discovered that teachers used 'knowledge packages', including student factors, to inform their pedagogical reasoning surrounding historical empathy lessons.   The teachers in my study also highlighted the importance of considering a variety of student factors. For example, teachers commented that their students' prior knowledge often shapes the way they understand various perspectives and experiences in the past and present, as well as their emotional responses to the histories they are learning.

Prior knowledge can enable learning, as students may already be interested in a topic or know something about it, but it also can be a barrier for new learning, because students often hold certain preconceptions about people and circumstances in the past (Levstik and Barton, 1997). One teacher I spoke with explained how their students' views are often informed by their parents, and so it can be difficult as a teacher to present other perspectives that may differ from, and even challenge, those with which students are familiar. It follows that a first step for teachers involves working to understand students' preconceived ideas on a topic and where their perspectives originate from. According to Lévesque and Croteau (2020: 161), educators should 'explore students' identity, prior knowledge, and historical beliefs – in other words, what they accept, ignore, or (dis)miss in their understandings of the past'. Teachers may also engage in these reflections alongside their students to increase awareness of how their views and assumptions influence their approaches to historical empathy.

The teachers also discussed approaching historical empathy in ways that centre students by intentionally 'hooking' them from the beginning of the lesson or unit. Sometimes, this might involve starting with certain content areas that students are interested in or know more about, such as family histories (Barton and Levstik, 2004; von Heyking, 2014). In other cases, it is more about the approach teachers take within the first few minutes to discuss the significance of a new topic and why students might care about it. To incorporate historical empathy, Emily begins lessons by discussing with students how the topic impacts them, to help them connect to the ideas. She displays the questions, 'Why does it affect me? Why do I care?' for students to consider. Emily said: 'I think that can incorporate historical empathy quite nicely', because she and her students discuss the desire to 'understand why people made the choices that they did'. She went on to explain how foregrounding the impacts for students today can increase empathy and engagement: 'You do see that empathy start to grow a little bit more with students and they tend to ask more questions, they are more engaged in the lessons.' When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are often more motivated to learn (Barton, 2012).

Scaffolded approaches

In outlining a series of essential elements for empathy activities, Stuart Foster (2001) emphasises the importance of teachers scaffolding student learning. Teachers in my study were intentional about signalling to their students the direction of a particular lesson or unit, in order to scaffold the development of empathy and other historical thinking concepts and learning skills. Andrea provides her students with a clear outline of each unit to indicate the direction in which their learning is headed:

> I don't think that you can easily teach empathy unless people are present and unless there is an understanding of where the narrative is going … Students do better when they know that the outcome is a presentation, a project, we're going to answer a big question, you're going to do this together or independently.

While big or 'essential questions' are useful for students in many learning situations in history (Lattimer, 2008), in relation to historical empathy, these questions can clarify who and what students are learning about, which may help them empathise with people's lived experiences and perspectives.

In addition to the verbal discourse strategies that teachers draw from in historical empathy lessons (such as questioning, using analogies, making then/now comparisons, language choice) (Cunningham, 2009), some of the teachers in this study also accounted for visual cues. For example, Lydia assigns each of the historical thinking concepts, and historical empathy, a different colour, and her slideshows and handouts feature the corresponding colour throughout. These visual cues serve to remind students which concepts they are considering in a given lesson. This is an example of a heuristic teachers employ that is memorable for students and that, therefore, may aid in their learning. Making these scaffolded approaches commonplace practices for teachers when approaching historical empathy can help students better understand the direction and purpose of their learning, while gaining a deeper sense of care for who and what they are learning about.

Comparative approaches

Another approach that seems to be effective, from the perspective of the teachers I interviewed, is to highlight similarities and differences between certain perspectives and experiences in the past and present. Other studies of historical empathy have also found that teachers used the strategies of

'then/now comparisons' (Cunningham, 2009) and 'drawing attention to the historical roots of present-day perspectives, practices, or circumstances' (Brooks, 2011: 177) to great effect. Teachers in my study frequently discussed drawing comparisons between historical and current (or more recent) events to help students connect with situations that historical actors have faced in the past. According to Olivia: 'I feel like that comparison allows them to have the empathy for what this person is going through.'

To provide one example, when teaching about the Cold War, Olivia relates to her students by drawing comparisons between school safety drills during the 1950s–1960s and today. She shows students an educational film about the 'duck and cover' drill, which instructed Canadian students on how to hide under their desks to protect themselves in the event of a nuclear attack. According to Olivia, her students often react with scepticism, and conclude that hiding under a desk would not save anyone from a nuclear warhead. To help students understand the thinking behind these drills, she draws comparisons to fire, tornado and lockdown drills, which have become commonplace for many students today. She asks, 'Why would teachers show this video and make students do these drills, even if it might not save them?' After reflecting on how school safety drills make them feel (for example, more prepared for real situations, if they should occur), students realise that these drills gave many people in the past a sense of comfort and control. In drawing comparisons between safety drills in the past and present, Olivia's students were able to reflect on their own feelings and use this information to infer how students in the past might have felt about the 'duck and cover' drills, and therefore why teachers during the Cold War may have been motivated to teach their students about them. Such an approach can be particularly useful in cases where there are no or few first-hand accounts in which historical actors explicitly discussed their innermost thoughts and feelings.

Teachers provided a number of other relevant examples for how they build empathy through discussions of similarities and differences. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers encouraged their students to draw comparisons with the 1918–19 influenza pandemic, and to consider past and present experiences with public health emergencies. According to Henry:

> The more that students are able to connect to something from their own experience, or even not from their own experience but from what they see around them today … they can see and draw from other folks' experiences that seem to be readily available to them. That seems to connect well [with students].

In addition to becoming more engaged in learning, drawing these personal connections can also help students avoid making uninformed judgements. As Olivia explained, when students learned about instances where people in the past defied public health recommendations, they drew similarities to today, and thereby avoided judging people as simply 'uninformed' or less advanced, as students have been found to do by some researchers (Barton and Levstik, 2004). The students were aware that there are people in society today who are anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers, despite the scientific and medical knowledge that people have in the present. This led students to seek out further examples to illustrate similarities and differences between how people in the past and present have held certain views, and have taken particular actions in the face of public health emergencies.

Activities, tasks and projects that elicit empathy

This section turns to exploring specific activities, tasks and projects that elicit empathy, from teachers' perspectives. Over the past two decades, scholars have examined a range of different pedagogical approaches to historical empathy, including first- and third-person writing tasks (Brooks, 2008; de Leur et al., 2015, 2017), discussions (Bartelds et al., 2020; Brooks, 2011; Doppen, 2000; Kohlmeier, 2006), debates (Jensen, 2008), eyewitnesses (Bartelds et al., 2022), role plays and simulations (Endacott and Pelekanos, 2015; Geneser, 2005; Rantala, 2011; Rantala et al., 2016), multi-genre research projects (D'Adamo and Fallace, 2011), field trips (Bartelds et al., 2020; Cunningham, 2009), museum visits (Brauer, 2016; Innes and Sharp, 2021; Uppin and Timoštšuk, 2019) and virtual/augmented reality (Patterson et al., 2022; Sweeney et al., 2018). These studies highlight the affordances and limitations that various pedagogical approaches – situated within and beyond the classroom setting – offer for fostering historical empathy.

The participants in my study identified a number of different activities, tasks and projects that they use to develop empathy in their history classes. For the purposes of this study, 'activities' refers

to sustained engagement in a learning opportunity (for example, role plays, virtual reality), 'tasks' are assigned pieces of work that students complete and that are usually contained within a shorter time frame (for example, first- and third-person writing tasks), and 'projects' take place over a longer period of time (for example, research projects). The teachers discussed examples of each of these pedagogical approaches, which fall into four overall categories: (1) role plays and simulations; (2) first- and third-person writing tasks; (3) experiential learning and virtual reality; and (4) collaborative and project-based learning. Collectively, these discussions build from other studies of historical empathy, and provide an idea of the range of activities, tasks and projects that teachers currently use and might continue using to nurture historical empathy.

Role plays and simulations

According to Jukka Rantala (2011: 59), 'simulations provide a natural basis for empathy exercises, since they often set out from historically authentic situations and the participants aim to assume a specific role'. For the teachers in my study, role plays and simulations seemed to be synonymous with historical empathy when it came to discussing pedagogical approaches. When asked about the approaches they use to foster empathy, nearly every teacher immediately began by discussing the benefits and limitations of role plays and simulations. More than one teacher discussed a simulation involving the Stock Market Crash in 1929, as it can be an effective way for students to understand individuals' and companies' decision making. They emphasised the learning opportunities that can arise through these activities, especially students gaining a deeper understanding of different perspectives and experiences in the past. These views align with Pamela Geneser's (2005) findings, which suggest that students were more motivated to learn about history by participating in simulations.

Despite these pedagogical possibilities, there were also strong critiques of role plays and simulation activities that require perspective taking and attempting to 'walk in the shoes' of someone in the past. According to some teachers, problems with role plays and simulations may arise when students are asked to assume the perspectives of real people who lived in the past. In imagining that they are that person, students may be putting words into a historical actor's mouth, without consideration for the circumstances and contexts in which that person lived. Further, it can be highly problematic to have students role play situations in which trauma, harm and injustice was inflicted upon particular groups, because this could cause additional suffering and victimisation (Gibson, 2020; Wright-Maley, 2015). Other notable challenges include students projecting modern-day thinking and attitudes onto the past, an inability to link their knowledge of historical events to the actions of individual people, and student hesitancy to engage in the activity due to 'stage fright' (Rantala et al., 2016). In order to overcome some of these challenges, teachers might consider role playing and imagining activities that adopt the perspective of a historical object, instead of that of a historical actor.

For example, Andrea has her students write first-hand narratives from the perspective of an object that would have been present during the period under study. One year, she had students write about the D-Day landings in 1944 from the perspective of an Allied landing craft: What did it see? Hear? Smell? Touch? Taste? Students began by reading primary accounts from soldiers who landed on the beach to gather evidence of what it was like to be there. From the perspective of the landing craft, students wrote about hearing soldiers praying that they would land safely on the beach, smelling soldiers vomiting in the boat, and seeing German bunkers and machine guns raining down bullets on the beaches. The historical object acts as an omniscient 'being' that takes multiple perspectives into consideration. Andrea finds that this activity allows students to have some distance from the realities of warfare, while also requiring them to draw conclusions about what it was like to participate in the Normandy Invasion. To avoid fabricating history, she emphasises using evidence from multiple sources to help students understand historical perspectives, and to infer the thoughts and feelings that may have been prompted by a particular historical circumstance or event.

In our conversations, Andrea shared other related ideas; for instance, considering what a battlefield or historical monument might say about the events that took place there. There is also potential for this type of activity to shift focus away from exclusively human perspectives in history and towards more-than-human perspectives (plants, animals), creating opportunities for what Claudia Eppert (2023) terms 'ecological witnessing'. Through the use of imagination, these activities can also bring voice to elements of the environment that have not been attributed sentience within Western/Eurocentric world views, such as rocks and soils, thereby disrupting 'understandings of witnessing focused on sentience'

(Eppert, 2023: 3). This is a novel approach to role play and simulation activities, and one that could be explored further in future research on historical empathy.

First- and third-person writing tasks

Another pedagogical approach to historical empathy involves first-person ('Imagine you are in the past') and third-person ('Imagine someone in the past') writing tasks (de Leur et al., 2017). Studies have found that each type of writing task elicits different responses from students. While third-person writing tasks prompt students to focus more on providing accurate historical information (Brooks, 2008) and to demonstrate evidence of thinking historically (de Leur et al., 2015), with first-person writing tasks, students apply more inferential thinking (Brooks, 2008), but are more likely to engage in presentism (de Leur et al., 2017). Foster (2001: 169) offers a strong critique of first-person activities, arguing that they lead to an 'irresponsible and erroneous understanding of our past'. The teachers in my study did not acknowledge any differences in student responses to these types of tasks, but overall they discussed third-person writing tasks more frequently than first-person writing tasks.

To prepare students for writing tasks, the teachers ensured that their students had access to enough background information, provided through documentaries and primary source documents. From there, students use a combination of evidence and imagination to understand the historical actors' perspectives, feelings and experiences. In some cases, there may not be explicit descriptions of how individuals felt at the time, so students need to draw inferences based on the evidence. Todd gives his students the following prompt to help with this process: 'Based on this evidence, I can imagine that they would be feeling … '. Purposefully engaging students in imagining historical actors' feelings can help them to incorporate the affective dimensions in their writing (de Leur et al., 2017).

Teachers also highlighted a number of difficulties and challenges they face with writing tasks. In particular, teachers struggled with the wide range of responses they receive from students. For instance, Emily explained that depending on her group of students, she receives a different quality of work: 'Some of the pieces become very contrived and literal, sort of regurgitating points in the lesson without getting that empathetic piece.' Emily tries to prompt her students not just to retell information, but also to write about the sensory experiences a historical actor might have had (for example: How might it feel to be dirty in a trench? How might it feel to hear guns and explosions?). As a result, she often battles with time constraints and deciding how long to spend on these types of tasks, to allow students enough time to empathise with historical actors on a deeper level.

Emily also raised a point about the difficulties in deciding which topics are appropriate for writing tasks. From her perspective, it is obvious to most teachers that they should not have their students pretend to be in a concentration camp or an Indian Residential School. She stated: 'You don't want to diminish the experience of survivors that have gone through such trauma and atrocities in moments of history. But could you say a soldier's experience wasn't traumatic? So, who's deciding?' Emily raised an important ethical question that demonstrates how difficult it can be for teachers to make these pedagogical choices, especially in light of the lack of empirical research to support their decision making in this area.

Another challenge that the teachers highlighted in relation to writing tasks is providing students with a variety of sources that represent different perspectives. Henry admitted that when his students arrive at conclusions that may not be supported by evidence, 'it's reflective of whether I've done a good enough job of giving them enough, you know, if the buffet table was long enough with different samples … to make the claims they make'. For students to represent different voices in their writing pieces, they must identify various perspectives using appropriate evidence (Brooks, 2008; de Leur et al., 2017; Harris and Foreman-Peck, 2004). Many times, marginalised voices can be more difficult to access, but it is important that teachers do the work of trying to uncover them, alongside their students. This may involve rethinking Western/Eurocentric notions of what constitutes historical evidence (Anderson, 2017; Dion, 2009; Donald, 2012; Marker, 2011). For instance, Andrea, gave a particularly useful example within the historical context of Indian Residential Schools in Canada, by explaining how her class examined photographs of graffiti left by students on the walls of the school buildings as a form of resistance. These considerations illustrate how writing tasks may be approached in ways that account for evidence and contextualisation, imagining and inferencing, diverse and multiple perspectives, and the affective dimensions of historical empathy.

Experiential learning and virtual reality

While experiential learning has been understudied in research on historical empathy (some exceptions are Bartelds et al., 2020; Cunningham, 2009; Karn, 2024), many of the teachers who took part in my study valued these learning opportunities for their ability to foster empathy in authentic ways. Teachers highlighted the importance of bringing students outside of the classroom to interact with historic sites, monuments and landscapes, whether in their local communities or on overseas trips. There were many contexts in which experiential learning was discussed, including community walking tours centred on different themes, a Water Walk to bring awareness of unclean drinking water in Indigenous communities, or battlefield tours in Europe. However, the majority of their discussions focused on the value of experiential learning for promoting an understanding of local histories, a connection that has not been emphasised enough in other studies of historical empathy.

At the same time, the teachers also recognised that this type of experience may not always be available for students (due to cost, time, safety and accessibility, among other factors), and so they also discussed the potential for virtual reality (VR) experiences to develop historical empathy. Emily shared about a resource she used, the Within App, through which students were able to interact with immersive stories, including children's experiences in a refugee camp. She also had her students take virtual tours of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France: 'I can show my pictures [of the Vimy monument] and everything but students being able to move around having that sort of kinaesthetic feeling really sort of felt like they were there. And the feedback from using VR was that it really enhanced their experience.' The possibilities for virtual and augmented reality technology to enhance historical empathy has recently become an area of focus for empirical studies (Patterson et al., 2022; Sweeney et al., 2018). Important for the present study, Timothy Patterson et al. (2022) found that virtual reality should be used in combination with direct instruction that elaborates on historical contexts, examining primary source documents, as well as writing tasks and other activities that allow students to demonstrate historical empathy. In Canada, the Digital Oral Histories for Reconciliation project explored the potential for oral histories and virtual reality to support reconciliation for African Nova Scotians (Smith et al., 2020). Although possibilities for developing empathy were not explicitly considered as part of the project, building right relations between communities involves listening to and understanding others, which are also part of the process of empathising with others. As these immersive technologies become more widely available to teachers and students, future studies might consider how different combinations of the pedagogical approaches outlined in this section may be used alongside virtual reality. The teachers in my study demonstrated that, whether interacting with historic sites and landscapes outside of the classroom or using virtual reality to bring these opportunities into the classroom, experiential learning of all forms has been embraced by teachers in ways that elicit empathy.

Collaborative and project-based learning

Another way to promote historical empathy through a more experiential approach is by engaging students in collaborative learning projects that involve community partners, such as museums. As Bradley argued: 'I think sometimes the longer one spends to really get into a project-based activity might even bring out more of that empathy.' Many of the teachers discussed not only bringing students to museums, which has also been considered in other studies of historical empathy (Brauer, 2016; Innes and Sharp, 2021; Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017; Uppin and Timoštšuk, 2019), but also extending learning by engaging students in creating their own exhibits to put on display in local museums.

These types of projects demonstrate the potential that local history connections can have for students' development of historical empathy, heretofore unrecognised in other studies. According to Bradley, local history connections can increase the 'buy-in and relevance it [a historical topic] has to the student' and, thereby, develop a greater sense of empathy. For example, his students were excited to learn that a First World War soldier's former house still existed in their community. This led students to learn more about the individual's wartime experiences and perspectives. Lydia engages her students in similar projects that involve researching historical actors within the local community, but then takes the learning one step further to integrate it throughout the entire course. Each student keeps their soldier or nursing sister photograph and biography, and, as they progress through the course, they revisit this individual to consider how the historical actor might have thought about and experienced whatever event

or circumstance the class is exploring. This helps students to consider history from the perspective of a real person who, in many cases, had different identities, backgrounds and experiences than their own.

Other teachers brought together local histories and project-based learning in ways that fostered empathy in students. Andrea discussed one project she has engaged her students in, focused on commemorating the Second World War within their local neighbourhood. Students choose an individual and learn about the war from their perspective, using military records. Then students create an object of commemoration (such as a piece of poetry or a letter), which is displayed on a poster. During the week of Remembrance Day, students find the last recorded address of the individual they have researched, and hang the posters on telephone poles nearby. From this experience, students are able to identify personal connections to the Second World War, because they can see how it impacted people within their own community from diverse backgrounds. For instance, one student was surprised to learn about an individual from Singapore (where the student was also from) who enlisted in the Canadian military. When students researched individuals with the same cultural backgrounds as them, 'they wanted to honour that person's story', and they wrote 'very heartfelt' letters and poems to tell their community about the individual (Andrea). Other studies (D'Adamo and Fallace, 2011: 75) have also found that research projects 'increased students' understanding of the differences in historical perspectives', and revealed the cross-curricular possibilities of collaborative and project-based learning.
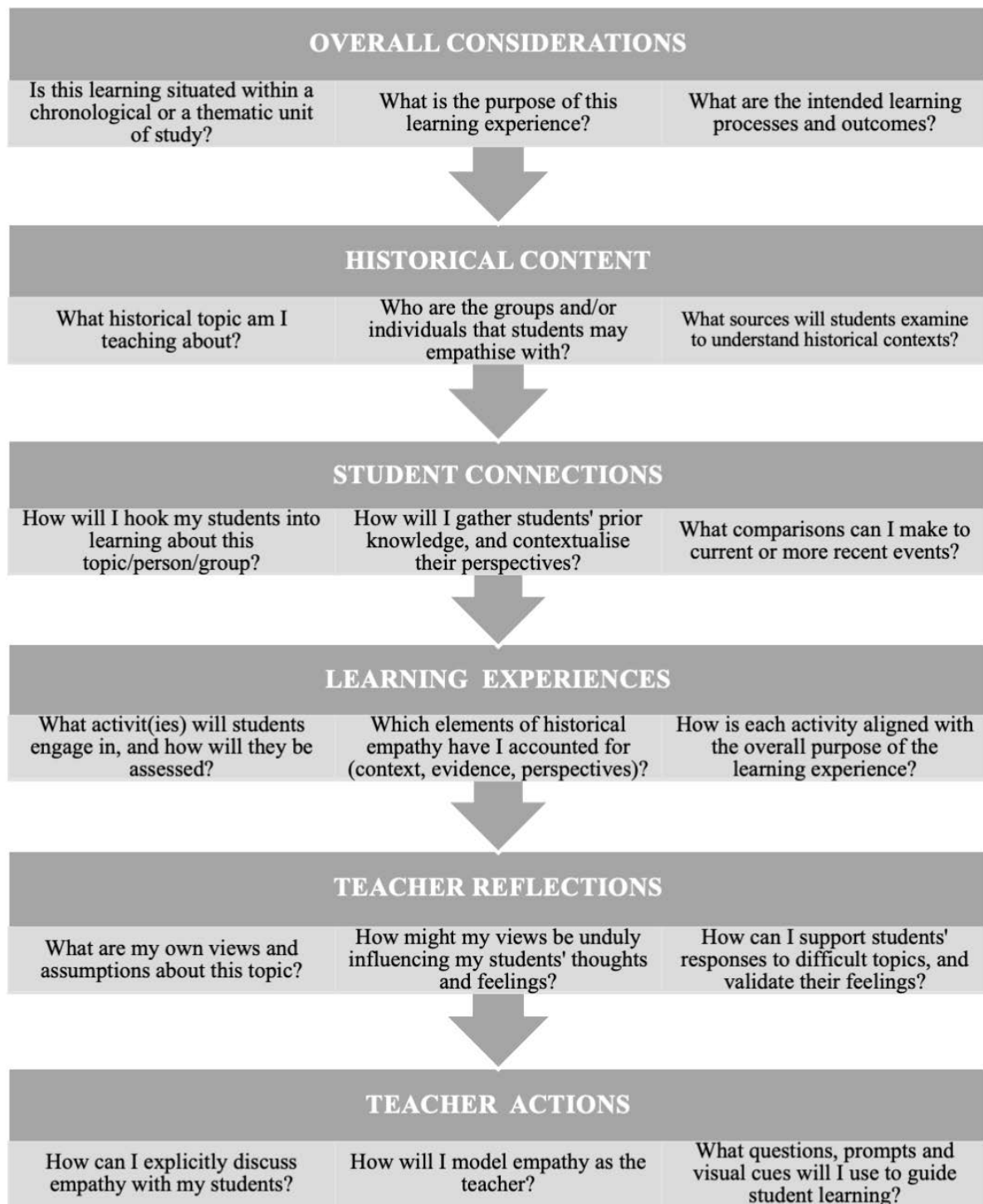
Presenting a pedagogical tool

Here, I draw together the findings from the previous sections to present a research-informed pedagogical tool (see Figure 1) that can support teachers in designing learning experiences that foster historical empathy. I use the term 'learning experience' because it encompasses everything from smaller activities and tasks to larger projects, lessons and entire units. Many of the teachers I spoke with expressed a need for resources to support their pedagogical approaches, especially in making historical empathy more explicit to their students. Other studies have also emphasised the importance of explicit instruction on historical empathy (Bartelds et al., 2022), and this tool can serve as a guide for teachers. It is likely to be useful in addressing the reality that engaging students in historical empathy learning experiences often requires significant time and resources (Foster, 2001).

The intention behind this pedagogical tool is to summarise the key takeaways related to pedagogical choices and activities, tasks and projects, and to present a teacher-friendly diagram that offers educators a starting place for developing new learning experiences. These takeaways are grouped into six different categories, generated from the findings: overall considerations, historical content, student connections, learning experiences, teacher reflections and teacher actions. Each of these is associated with a series of questions that teachers can ask themselves, to present this pedagogical tool as part of an ongoing conversation and reflective exercise. Although the categories are presented as a series of steps, teachers are likely to flow back and forth between them, and they may use their discretion about where within the diagram they might start the design process for any given learning experience.

This pedagogical tool is intended to be used in combination with Endacott and Brooks's (2013) instructional model, which has proven to be effective in structuring historical empathy lessons (Endacott, 2014; Endacott and Pelekanos, 2015; Endacott and Sturtz, 2015). Their model includes: (1) an introductory phase to introduce students to historical topics and figures; (2) an investigation phase that involves students examining primary and secondary sources; (3) a display phase in which students demonstrate their learning; and (4) a reflection phase which brings learning into the present (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). If their model is meant to 'clarify the elements of instruction that should be included if historical empathy, and its potential benefits for students, is to be truly realized' (Endacott and Brooks, 2013: 46), then this pedagogical tool scaffolds teachers' decision making within and beyond each of these four instructional phases.

Figure 1. A pedagogical tool for designing historical empathy learning experiences

OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

Is this learning situated within a chronological or a thematic unit of study?	What is the purpose of this learning experience?	What are the intended learning processes and outcomes?

HISTORICAL CONTENT

What historical topic am I teaching about?	Who are the groups and/or individuals that students may empathise with?	What sources will students examine to understand historical contexts?

STUDENT CONNECTIONS

How will I hook my students into learning about this topic/person/group?	How will I gather students' prior knowledge, and contextualise their perspectives?	What comparisons can I make to current or more recent events?

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

What activit(ies) will students engage in, and how will they be assessed?	Which elements of historical empathy have I accounted for (context, evidence, perspectives)?	How is each activity aligned with the overall purpose of the learning experience?

TEACHER REFLECTIONS

What are my own views and assumptions about this topic?	How might my views be unduly influencing my students' thoughts and feelings?	How can I support students' responses to difficult topics, and validate their feelings?

TEACHER ACTIONS

How can I explicitly discuss empathy with my students?	How will I model empathy as the teacher?	What questions, prompts and visual cues will I use to guide student learning?

Guided by the categories in the diagram, teachers can purposefully design lessons that elicit historical empathy, while making learning more engaging, meaningful and explicit for students. It also prompts teachers to reflect on their own positionality, and how their views and assumptions shape their approaches throughout the planning and implementation process. Teachers should be mindful of their responses to students' engagement with historical empathy, and how their own views may be unduly

influencing students' thoughts and feelings. Teachers may draw from their past teaching experiences to identify any problematic approaches when encountering difficult topics, and work to contextualise students' perspectives. To avoid communicating that only certain emotions are welcome in the history classroom, it is also important for teachers to validate and support students' affective responses (Boler, 1999). These safeguards, presented as a series of questions for teachers' reflection within the diagram, are meant to address ethical concerns expressed by some scholars (Low-Beer, 1989) surrounding the manipulation of students' feelings when approaching the affective dimensions of historical empathy. Overall, this visual, informed by the findings from the interviews I conducted with teachers, provides a comprehensive view of how historical empathy has been – and may continue to be – approached by teachers in practice.

Conclusions

This study has reinforced the notion that there is no single lesson or approach that holds the 'key' to historical empathy, but it is rather a combination of ideas that contribute towards the process of attempting to understand historical actors. In other words, 'Historical empathy … is not a once-and-forever matter' (Davis Jr, 2001: 3). This is demonstrated by the diversity of choices that teachers described, and their emphasis on sustained efforts and different entry points to developing empathy over time. These findings align with Lisa Buchanan's (2014: 91) conclusion that empathy 'is an ongoing process that cannot be packaged or reduced to a few lessons about one topic or theme'. In presenting the teachers' choices, and the activities, tasks and projects they engage their students in, the aim is for history educators to have a plethora of ideas to draw from and adapt for their own teaching contexts.

It should be acknowledged that these findings are the result of discussions with teachers that shed light on their *perspectives* on how they approach historical empathy; without observing their teaching, we cannot know how they *actually* approach historical empathy in practice. While this may be a limitation of the study, the categories identified through conversations with teachers could be used in future studies involving classroom observations. As part of such studies, the effectiveness of teachers' approaches to each strategy could be evaluated by researchers, and other strategies may arise in the process of observation. For instance, it is likely that there are other pedagogical choices that teachers make before and during their lessons that they may not be consciously aware of, and that they therefore did not discuss as part of the interviews.

Moving forward, empirical studies could contribute to additional refinement of these pedagogical approaches by examining their use in practice. In particular, there is a need for more studies of the pedagogical value of experiential learning and local history for developing historical empathy. There are also opportunities to conduct studies that consider how effective the pedagogical tool is for teachers in practice, and ways that it may be expanded to address other considerations, challenges and approaches. In the meantime, the ideas offered by teachers in this study provide other teachers with starting points for planning learning experiences centred on the development of historical empathy.

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The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

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Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

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