Stefanie Graefe

Analytical Essay

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**Introduction**

Building off a constructivist understanding of teaching and learning, I am constantly considering how I can transform my classroom into an environment where the focus is placed on individual cognitive development as opposed to simply content knowledge. As a history teacher, I often find myself in the trap of creating lesson plans centered around the content; so focused on covering the vast amounts of world history information that I often ignore aspects of constructivist education that are important to me. In my brief experience teaching, I have found that developing simulation and role-play activities has returned my focus to developing students’ cognitive abilities as opposed to purely increasing their content knowledge. These activities in the classroom allow students to build off their already developed ‘funds of knowledge’ but also contribute to new ‘schemas’ of understanding so they can truly perceive and analyze the world around them.

My portfolio explores the value of simulation and role-play activities as it relates to the theoretical concepts of historical empathy and imagination. While these theories elucidate the unique skills of experienced academic historians, they also have the potential to be truly embraced at the high school level. I examine how practicing these skills can build students’ interpersonal intelligence and possibly generate a greater commitment to an empathetic, pluralist morality of the modern world.

My established method of analysis for artifact analysis delves deeply into each of my students’ ability to practice historical empathy and historical imagination. I compare at both the individual and group levels with both quantitative and qualitative approaches [See Method of Analysis]. My artifacts range from student work to mentor observation notes. Ultimately, however, my conclusions about simulation and role-play activities do not focus solely on historical imagination and empathy. I recognize that for students to practice these skills I also need to address the interaction of other factors in my role-play activities. For example, my analysis considers the value of perceived ‘safety’ of the assignments and the importance creative space. Role-play and simulation activities not only have the potential to build students’ imaginative and empathetic skills, but also their ability to demonstrate critical thinking. However, the context of the classroom and the experiences of individual students should inform any decisions about choosing and implementing methods. My portfolio considers the benefits and pitfalls of using simulation and role-play activities to inspire empathy and imagination in addition to the many factors that an educator should consider for specific classroom contexts.

**Placing my Inquiry in my Larger Teaching Practice and Pedagogy**

While I am still in the process (and most likely always will be) of understanding what it means to teach through a constructivist framework, I am particularly drawn to scholars; Tomlinson and McTighe’s definition and conceptualization,

…there is a need for a balance between student construction of meaning and teacher guidance…we encourage teachers to balance student opportunities to make sense of the big ideas of content, to monitor the evolution of student understandings, and engage in teacher-guided student reflection…(2006, p. 85).

A teacher needs to balance being a direct instructor and a facilitator. Early in my student teaching, I felt confident in my abilities as a direct instructor. What I still struggle with, and what I still want to develop, is my role as a facilitator; guiding but not directing my students to greater understandings of the world around them.

I consistently incorporate multiple “facilitative/constructivist methods” into my classroom including, “discussion”, “graphic representation”, “problem-based learning” and “open-ended questions” (Tomlison & Mctighe, 2006, p.87). Two constructivist methods, role-play and simulation activities, have emerged as informative (possibly even transformative) for both students as well as myself. I define role-play as any situation in which students are asked to take on the perspective of a historical actor separate from their own perspective. Role-play activities can be written, interactive or verbal activities. A more in-depth role-play is a simulation activity. Simulation activities require students to adopt roles and interact with each other in a specifically defined context and scenario.

Role-play activities, both R.A.F.T. assignments and simulation activities, have been received well by the class as a whole. A survey I conducted in my class indicates that both activities were rated positively by a vast majority of the students. The simulation activity in particular, scored well above all other activities on the survey [See Artifact 1, Student Surveys]. While student enthusiasm for a particular activity does not ensure mastery of a subject, having student investment in the class could contribute to students’ making more concerted efforts to construct, analyze and apply meaning.

I truly believe that it is my responsibility as a teacher to transform my content material, enduring understandings and skill-building objectives into lesson plans that have the real potential to engage and excite. Making clear connections between history and the present developed this engagement. However, my observations and student surveys have demonstrated to me that, by far, creative role-play activities are the most effective in sparking students’ interest and creativity. Students articulated their interest and engagement in the survey, “I liked the Tiffs a lot! Class was really fun and exciting”, “I really like the Middle Passage Letter of Protest and the Tiffs Simulation activity because I like writing creatively and working in groups where we talked about the subject.” [See Artifact Journal 1, Student Survey Quotes]. These quotes represent the expressed feelings of a significant majority of the class. By establishing student engagement, I decided to focus my inquiry on ensuring that my students exhibit true understanding.

Wiggens and Mctighe’s six facets of understanding influence how I view authentic learning in my classroom. I often refer back to these six elements when constructing lessons; “explain, interpret, apply, perspective, empathy and self-knowledge” (as cited in Tomlison and McTighe, 2006, p. 67). A normal lesson in my class easily addresses the first three facets of understanding. Primary source analysis (both group and individual), as well as graphic representations, paper writing, and lecture discussions let students exhibit their ability to explain, interpret and apply.

While these are essential components of understanding, I would like my classroom to particularly channel and refine my students’ ability to understand perspective, practice empathy and reach self-knowledge. As a social studies teacher, it is one of my primary goals to teach tolerance, and to help students situate themselves in both community and global contexts, understanding their roles and responsibilities. The final three facets of understanding are essential if I want to achieve this goal. In my brief time teaching I have found that R.A.F.T and simulation role-play activities allow students to practice empathy and understand different perspectives

**The Pedagogical Value of Simulation and Role-Play Activities**

Not all scholars would agree with my perceived value of role-play and simulation activities. Singer, a prominent researcher in the field of social studies education, has critiqued role-play activities. While I appreciate his critique, he does not consider how role-play could succeed in classrooms that have established safe spaces.

Singer’s establishes his argument by suggesting that role-play activities induce unsafe competitiveness. In his critique, he uses a particularly famous simulation example, the brown eye/ blue eye experiment. In this experiments the teacher creates a scenario that simulates discrimination and segregation. (Singer, 2003) I would clearly never conduct such a potentially dangerous and traumatizing role-play. In his critique, Singer does not consider safer simulations or simulations that exist with an established, safe space.

Singer’s competition argument only considers the extreme example. I do not grade on a norm-based scale; I structure the majority of my class in a way to emphasize cooperation over competition. However, as a whole, my students respond well to competition, it excites them and encourages them to engage [See Tiffs Lesson Plan, Observation Notes]. Competitive activities, therefore, should balance engagement with a larger goal of cooperation. Teachers can allow competition in some activities, but assessment and grades should never consider the “winners” or “losers” in the simulation. Instead, simulation grades should focus on creative attempts at problem solving as well as student reflection.

Singer also argues that role-play is dangerous because it implies that students will know how it feels to be a character in history when they clearly never will (Singer, 2003). I agree that students will never truly know what it was like experience the Middle Passage. A teacher should never encourage the notion that just because a person can imagine something, they can truly experience it. However, encouraging imagination and empathy pushes students to consider the perspectives, cultures and values of people unlike themselves. Simple teacher mediation could mitigate Singer’s fear, and allow students to benefit from the challenging task of role-play activities.

When teacher mediation eliminates the possible negative effects of role-play simulation, true historical inquiry can take place. Scholars, Mandell and Malone, have established historical categories of inquiry including “Cause and effect, change and continuity, using the past, turning points, and through their eyes” (2007, pg. 7). The category of historical inquiry, “through their eyes”, acknowledges that its “necessary and fascinating to examine the ways in which people of different times, places and conditions made sense of their world” (Mandell &Malone, 2007, pg. 7). Thinking like a historian, therefore, requires the understanding of empathy and perspective that could be developed in a role-play activity.

Role-play activities also help balance the problem of scale in history curriculums. There is a “tension between large-scale and small-scale history” (Nueman, 2010, pg. 186). In a world history curriculum there is a clear imbalance in favor of large-scale history because of the vast amount of information that needs to be covered. Role-play activities, particularly R.A.F.T. assignments, have the potential to balance out this disparity. When students consider the impact of large historical movements on specific individuals, they can connect historical study to the particular. Such a process could incite a level of connection (emotional or intellectual) to that particular.

Singer’s critique of role-play and simulation has made a large impact on my process of justifying their value. In addition to the above reasoning, two theoretical concepts should be thoughtfully addressed when considering the value of simulation and role-play activities. The concepts of historical imagination and historical empathy are invaluable to historical study as well as students’ larger critical thinking and social skills. Through exploring the connection between simulation/role-play activities to historical imagination and empathy, I hope to further the conversation of the value of role-play and simulation activities beyond just student engagement and novelty. While student engagement is still an essential part of my pedagogy, I also want to ensure the development of authentic critical thinking.

**Evolving Definitions: Historical Imagination**

My initial reflections and research led me to two theoretical concepts, historical imagination and historical empathy. Both concepts, unique to the practice of history, require high levels of critical thinking and ingenuity. Historical imagination is broader in scope. The concept recognizes that a historians’ creativity, although limited by context, must be refined and thoughtful to create a larger narrative or understanding of a historical event. This element of creativity in the historians’ work intrigued me. Too often, we focus on the strictly logical, almost mathematical skills of a historian. But there is artistry as well; the ability to weave together sources and ideas to create a larger more comprehensive narrative, a narrative that at its most basic level is a story. Historians are storytellers that must understand the perceptions of others. But unlike a novelist, their imagination is restricted. This restriction requires unique critical thinking skills. When I discovered Collingwood’s theory of ‘historical imagination’, I felt like I finally found the concept that accurately defined the unique job of a historian.

R.E. Collingwood’s concept of “historical imagination” explains why, unlike scientific disciplines, history requires the student to use of level of imagination and empathy to consider the impact of what is unobservable. For example, a historian may write about how a president viewed the potential impact of legislation when no primary source directly addresses the research question. This level of creative thinking requires students and historians to use the limited available evidence and construct a larger image or narrative of an event. Historical imagination is bound by time and context, as well as the available primary source evidence. (as cited in Lemisko, 2004.)

According to Collingwood, historical imagination includes three main functions, to re-enact, interpolate and interrogate. Re-enacting is best described as “to understand and imagine past human actions and thought, we must think ourselves into the situation - that is, we re-think the thoughts of the persons engaged in the situation.” (Lemisko, 2004.) This portion of historical imagination starkly resembles historical empathy.

Interpolation requires a student to fill the gaps of the historical record (Lemisko, 2004). Since a historian has a limited amount of primary sources on any one event or person, he or she must make educated guesses about what is not written. This responsibility is not boundless. Once, again historians are restrained by historical context. And even then, this imagination must be restrained or at the very least, acknowledged by the historian as speculation.

The final component of historical imagination is the skill of interrogation. Interrogating involves historians and students critically analyzing the sources, looking for the more hidden biases and messages that can only be identified if the students correctly imagine the proper historical context. (as cited in Lemisko, 2004). Interrogation requires a level of re-enactment. To consider the biases inherent in the available sources, one must imagine the perspectives of the authors and artists.

All of these elements of historical imagination require a large amount of initial research on the historical context. Considering and incorporating outside sources and knowledge is a necessity. My inquiry focuses on analyzing whether the students’ imagination, although creative, still restricts itself to the context. I have used Collingwood’s three criteria of historical imagination in my student work analysis [See Method of Analysis].

**Evolving Definitions: Historical Empathy**

In addition to examining interrogation, interpolation and re-enactment, an educator should also consider the concept of “historical empathy”. This concept strongly relates to Collingwood’s definition of re-enactment but delves slightly deeper into all of the requirements and implications. Downey developed thoughtful criteria for assessing a students’ ability to demonstrate empathy.

Students must 1) indicate that the past is different from the present and a historical outcome is specific to a time and event 2) explain the perspectives they take and the consequences for the historical participants involved 3) develop factually accurate perspectives on the basis of historical evidence 4) judge whether the student is demonstrating the ability to distinguish between past perspectives and shift skillfully from one perspective to another. (as cited in Yilmaz, 2007, p. 5).

My inquiry uses Downey’s requirements of historical empathy to analyze my students’ work in simulation and role-play activities [See Method of Analysis]. However, throughout my research, I have found that this definition does not fully encompass my notion of empathy. The criteria may outline the necessary skills to practice historical empathy, but they do not fully describe my desired goals for the practice. When considering the term ‘empathy’, larger societal definitions, especially in respect to character development and morality, come to mind. In my opinion, it is not entirely possible to fully separate these associated definitions and feelings from the theoretical concept.

Teaching someone to consider another’s perspective is not just a research or academic skill, it is a moral action. I intend to explore this notion of morality in my findings. However, scholar, Steven Fosters’ interpretation of teaching empathy, provides a good starting point for my own understanding of the term.

Finally, historical empathy requires a respect for, an appreciation of, and sensitivity toward, the complexity of human action and achievement. Students must be aware that historical study is not a scientific process and that no absolute rules apply to the actions of humans in the past. (Foster, 2009, pg. 19)

Later, the analysis addresses this notion of respect and sensitivity. Beyond Fosters’ definition, however, I did not discover a significant amount of research that ventured into this nebulous ‘feelings and morality’ territory. The following analysis examines both the more practical advantages and disadvantages of role-play activities in addition to the larger pedagogical implications.

**Writing-to-Learn in Simulation and Role-Play Assignments**

This inquiry has validated the significant role of writing-to-learn activities in my larger pedagogy. As you can observe in my artifact analyses, writing activities are the best way for me to ensure that all of my students practiced the skills of historical empathy and imagination. Beyond my own assessment needs, in writing-to-learn activities “students understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing.” (Bazerman et al. 2005, pg. 57) When properly structured, role-play writing activities are the most effective and safe avenues for students to demonstrate historical empathy and imagination. While active simulations engage students, writing-to-learn activities really require each student to thoughtfully assess their own understanding of an event or historical character.

The Tiffs Group Paper was an early point on my larger learning curve as a teacher. Without a rubric and detailed instructions, the writing-to-learn activity was not scaffolded properly. Each student should have spoke as a member of his or her earthling and Tiff group, but most did not understand what this role adoption entailed [See Artifact 3 Tiffs Paper, Student Work Analysis]. The unclear instructions and the lack of rubric created varied results. Some students did not work as a group; others did not adopt a defined role. The final question in the instructions, “How does it feel to be the imperializing force or the imperialized force?” was left largely unanswered by a majority of the students.

If students need to truly demonstrate historical imagination and empathy the teacher must create an extremely thorough and explicit assignment sheet and rubric. Such an approach can eliminate the fear that students develop over how their papers may be assessed. While many students may have completed creative role-play assignments in previous educational experiences, they do not necessarily understand how to adapt those skills for the context of the history classroom. In the case of the Tiffs Paper, there were elements of creativity in papers but confusion over how it needed to be tailored to the specific assignment.

Writing-to-Learn activities also require teachers to rank priorities. Since my inquiry assessed students’ ability to demonstrate historical empathy and imagination, I learned how to create the proper supports or clarifications that emphasized the importance of re-enactment, interpolation and interrogation. ‘Targeted writing strategies’ and ‘RAFT’ work allowed me to create and emphasize these priorities. The Tiffs Paper had little scaffolding and did not emphasize adopting a role. Instituting a RAFT form, “Role, Audience, Format, Topic”, in the Letters of Protest and the Trial of Socrates Papers, required students to focus on re-enactment and role-play (Holston & Santa, 1985). In both cases, the class filled out the RAFT form together, discussing how each category related to that specific assignment.

Additionally, I added targeted writing skills (TWS) that asked the students to focus on specific aspects of their writing (McCoy, 2003). Some of these TWS’s focused on simple writing skills like thesis writing and organization. Other TWS’s provided hints and strategies that could help students practice historical empathy and imagination. For example, I gave the following TWS’s for the Trial of Socrates Paper.

*1) Speaking to Citizens of Ancient Athens so use FORMAL LANGUAGE  
2) INTRODUCTION- Intriguing intro that pulls the audience in  
3) THESIS- A 1-2 sentence thesis that explains what you will argue  
4) ORGANIZATION- Use paragraphs!* [See Artifact 6: Trial Paper, Introductions and Explanations]

In these TWS’s, there was only one skill that really focused on historical empathy and imagination, point one. Focusing on eliminating anachronistic language is a successful strategy to emphasize to students that they need to truly adopt a role different from their own.

In the two activities where I included RAFT or TWS, students were far more likely to practice successful re-enactment and historical empathy. In the Tiffs paper, of the three samples I analyzed, the students averaged a score of 2.3 out of five for the ability to re-enact a role and the ability to develop a perspective distinct from their own [See Artifact 3: Tiffs Paper, Student Work Analysis]. In contrast, the Letter of Protest assignment included RAFT guidance. With the RAFT guidance the entire classes group scores averaged 3.6 out of 5 for both re-enactment and for adopting a different perspective [See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis, Full Group Quantitative analysis]. The Trial of Socrates included the most supports, with both RAFT and TWS’s. For the Trial of Socrates paper, the entire class’s averaged score came out to 4 for re-enactment and 3.8 for adopting a perspective [Artifact 6: Trial of Socrates Papers, Student Sample Analysis, Trial Paper Analysis Full Group].

**Accessing Funds of Knowledge**

Beyond the importance of utilizing specific writing strategies, the artifact analyses demonstrate that through simulation and role-play activities students have a chance to access their funds of knowledge. Moll et al. define the term, funds of knowledge, as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (as cited in Lopez, 2013). In the process of practicing historical empathy and imagination, students occasionally have the opportunity to tap into their funds of knowledge developed outside of the classroom.

For example, in the letter of protest assignment, one student had the chance to incorporate her own language and understanding of Spanish Catholicism in her creative writing assignment. All the students were asked to adopt the role of a European writing a letter of protest concerning the slave trade to the King of Spain. Maria, a quiet and sometimes disconnected student, flourished in this assignment [See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis].

In her letter, Maria referenced the influence of Catholicism on her character’s perspective. The ex slave-trader attempted to appeal to the King of Spain’s religious duty, “You a practicing catholic should know what sins should and shouldn’t be committed, this is one of them…Think closely and pray on it.”[See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis] The sources never indicated the Catholic influence on Spain so Maria clearly incorporated her own background knowledge. Additionally, Maria creatively integrated Spanish words in the letter including “Adios Mi Rey” and “Sinceramente” [See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis] Maria accessed her own funds of knowledge without it interfering with her ability to practice historical empathy or imagination. She clearly adopted a perspective distinct from her own because she attempted to understand why a person would willingly participate in the slave trade. But at the same time, she accessed her own funds of knowledge by referencing Catholicism and using Spanish language words. She also identified when it was appropriate to use these funds of knowledge without compromising her established historical character.

Creative writing assignments that ask students to role-play provide significant space for students to bring in their outside knowledge. Mathew, an extremely high achieving student, consistently took advantage of this creative space. For example, in the letter of protest assignment, Mathew created a detailed persona and character that clearly required previous knowledge of British history [See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis].

Mathew’s work consistently demonstrated an ability to bring in outside knowledge and vocabulary.

But this brings me to a larger issue present in all of my artifacts; role-play writing activities still tend to favor traditionally successful students. Mathew and Ariel both come from middle class, white families with strong academic backgrounds. Both of their work is featured heavily in my analyses as ‘successful’ examples (Letter of Protest, WWI Letters, Aquinas Classwork).

Unfortunately, examples like Maria’s are less common. Students with funds of knowledge outside of the traditional white, middle class experience have had less of an opportunity to share their funds of knowledge. The comparison between Ariel’s work and Mitchell’s work in the Aquinas Artifact Analysis highlights this discrepancy. Ariel did not need scaffolds to create a response that was thoughtful and significantly ecclesiastical for her adopted role as St. Thomas Aquinas. In contrast, Mitchell, although able to demonstrate critical thinking through interpolation, did not significantly adopt a formal religious voice that imitated Aquinas’s devotion to the Christian god [See Artifact Analysis 7: Aquinas Classwork, Student Sample Analysis].

This trend was also present in the Trial of Socrates papers and the Letter of Protest assignment. Lucy’s letter of protest paper was far less developed than her peers. A former ELL student from China, Lucy struggled to adopt a role because of her still limited language skills. She also had less of a connection to the material than Mathew or Maria. [See Artifact Analysis 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis]. Similarly, Tamara’s Trial of Socrates Paper did not demonstrate high levels of historical imagination or empathy [See Artifact Analysis 6: Student Sample Analysis]. Like Mitchell and Lucy, she may have needed more scaffolds in place so she could understand the expectations.

This highlights an area of improvement in my own teaching practice. There are multiple explanations for this problem, and a few possible routes that may correct the problem in the future. A majority of the world history curriculum is Eurocentric. The curriculum itself could benefit from more non-western themes and topics so students with varying funds of knowledge have a chance to participate. There also could be a differentiation and scaffolding approach. Mitchell was more than capable of creating a thoughtful response, but unlike Ariel, he may have been unaware of the level of role-play that I wanted him to undertake. Ultimately, my practice could benefit from including both solutions.

**Multiple Intelligences**

While the writing activities still may favor my traditionally high-achieving students, the active simulation activities engaged a vast majority of the class. Active simulation activities have the potential to address students with certain intelligences that are not often valued in the traditional classroom setting. Students with high kinesthetic/spatial and interpersonal intelligences really excelled in these active simulation activities, demonstrating a high level of historical empathy and imagination that was not present in their written work. When these students revealed their strengths, all of the class benefitted from their work.

In my lesson on WWI alliances, I had the specific intention of creating an activity that addressed my very tactile and kinesthetic learners. Students created a physical diagram of the multiple alliance systems with yarn and desks [See Artifact 8 WWI Alliances: Images, Reflections and Improving Practice]. The student leaders I chose to create these ‘yarn alliances’ were tactile learners that often struggled in class. In this activity these students were able to not only create a magnificent diagram; their classmates also benefitted from their work. The pictures demonstrate how all of the students used the yarn alliances as a resource both for their notes and for their ‘formal declarations of war’ Ultimately, the diagram helped students practice historical empathy, understanding the motivations of their country’s leaders.

Simulation activities also have the potential to access the knowledge of students with very verbal and interpersonal intelligences. In the Trial of Socrates I had a group of talkative boys, who often learn through conversations, act as justices for the Trial. “…Students who are struggling in traditional classroom work, can take their simulation role-play extremely seriously. They corrected an anachronistic analogy given by the defense and they asked more questions than the requirement.” [See Artifact 5: Trial of Socrates Observation Notes, Reflections and Improving Practice].

Upon reflection, I should not have been surprised that this particular group of boys excelled in a debate-like activity. Through their question and answer session, they demonstrated how to stay in character while forming new questions without preparation. Additionally, they were able to act as a check on their peers. When they identified an anachronistic analogy they helped emphasize to the entire class that historically appropriate language and comparisons is essential in empathetic role-play. This was a particularly exciting moment in my teaching experience so far. The students contributed to the entire class’s understanding of historical empathy and imagination.

Throughout my work with RAFT assignments, I have also noticed that simulation and role-play activities do more than just provide the space to reach learners of multiple intelligences. RAFT assignments also allow all students to build an intelligence often neglected in the strictly academic setting, interpersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence essentially considers how we relate to and understand others (Campbell et al, 1996). Historical empathy and imagination, therefore, directly accesses this intelligence. The final RAFT assignment, the WWI Letters, highlighted that a majority of my students dedicated themselves to creating believable characters and stories. The details of these characters life were personal and thoughtful. Most students were able to then reinterpret events and historical evidence from these characters’ perspectives [Artifact 9: WWI Letters, Reflections]. For me, these letters demonstrated sincere growth in a majority of my students’ interpersonal intelligence.

**Prioritizing Historical Imagination and Empathy Concepts**

Simulation and Role-play activities provide great spaces for all learners to practice historical empathy and imagination. However, the artifacts demonstrate that while the two theoretical concepts often compliment each other, it is not always possible for all aspects of both concepts to be present in students’ work.

Clearly if a project requires re-enactment, a student is also required to practice historical empathy and take another’s perspective. The qualitative group data in multiple assignments demonstrate that high re-enactment scores (historical imagination) correlate with high role-adoption scores (historical empathy). Similarly, if students successfully adopt the role of a historical figure, they are also likely to limit their role to the historical context and incorporate relevant primary/secondary sources. [See Artifact 4: Letter of Protest, Student Sample Analysis and Artifact 6: Trial of Socrates Papers, Student Sample Analysis].

But the historical imagination concepts, interpolation and interrogation, do not always compliment re-enactment and empathy as clearly. In some cases they have conflicting goals. For example, the Trial of Socrates paper demonstrates that the skill of interrogation is not always needed in a role-play writing assignment. In fact, it can hinder a student’s ability to adopt the perspective of a historical actor “For example, Mathew received high marks at interrogation and interpolation but his academic voice and anachronistic terms prohibited him from presenting his argument in an Athenian perspective.” [See Artifact Analysis 6: Trial of Socrates, Reflections and Improving Practice]

The example does not suggest that interrogation is a futile concept, or that simulation and role-play activities cannot improve a student’s interrogation skills. But it does reveals that it is not always beneficial for assignments to require all aspects of historical imagination and empathy at the same time. The Trial would have benefited from another activity that practiced interrogation separately. Then students should have moved onto the written role-play work after they interrogated the sources as a historian not a historical actor.

Unfortunately, this brings us to a possible restriction, time limits. Simulation and role-play activities in the classroom already have a tendency to take up more time than traditional class work. Therefore, it may be necessary to prioritize aspects of historical empathy and imagination for each assignment. Each activity should not necessarily address re-enactment, interrogation, interpolation and all of Downy’s historical empathy criteria at once.

The Aquinas Classwork assignment provides another useful case for the need to prioritize goals. The students were required to practice empathy by assuming the role of the philosopher. But they were also required to practice interpolation by guessing how he may have answered the three political philosophy questions that the class had studied. Initially I was frustrated by my students’ short answers but I realized that given the short time a majority of the students chose to focus solely on the most pertinent task, interpolation. As you can see in my overall class analysis, a vast majority of students practiced some level of interpolation, the average score was a 4.05 (out of 5) [See Artifact 7: Aquinas Classwork, Student Sample Analysis]. They did correctly fill in the gaps, but their arguments were not as well formed as I would have liked. Mitchell’s paper really highlights this problem. Given the time restraints, the students actually focused on the harder critical thinking component of the assignment (interpolation). In the future I will give them more time, or just have the class focus on interpolation.

In my method of analysis form, one can already observe my prioritizing efforts. Despite having the standard incorporated into my method of analysis, I was never able to rate students on their ability “distinguish between past perspectives and to shift from one another from a relatively detached point of view” [See Method of Analysis]. In all of my group quantitative tables, the category is labeled N/A. Due to time constraints I decided to leave out this criterion because I needed to examine other aspects of the theoretical concepts first. Despite never being able to address this aspect of historical empathy in my portfolio, I intend to explore this concept in future inquiry work.

**Matching Priorities with Specific Simulation and Role-Play Categories**

After establishing the necessity of prioritizing goals, I found that the further categorization of simulation and role-play activities can help match suitable activities to specific thematic units and groups of students. While the scope of these activities are too large to define completely, three themes consistently resurfaced throughout the artifact analyses; simulation context, level of guidance, and safety.

The success of a simulation relies heavily on establishing the context and the protocol of that context. In the social studies classroom there are two context categories, historical and non-historical. The Tiffs Alien activity was the only non-historical context simulation within the artifact analyses. While the simulation encouraged significant engagement [See Artifact 2: Tiffs Lesson Plan], by the paper writing stage the historical themes and greater goals of the assignment were lost [See Artifact 3: Tiffs Paper]. It was far easier to maintain a focus on the greater historical themes and problems in those simulation activities that already existed within the historical context [See Artifact 5: Trial of Socrates Observation Notes].

This is not to say that non-historical context simulations do not have the potential to be meaningful. But they should probably not be the class’s first simulation. A class should already have experience with the protocol and importance of simulations before they attempt the Tiffs activity. Additionally, the teacher should have experience properly scaffolding simulation activities. The message can be easily lost behind the novelty of the experience, especially when the activity is not grounded in a specific historical circumstance.

In addition to considering students’ experience with simulations when picking an activity, a teacher should also consider how much historical content a class needs to acquire by the assessment stage. In cases where a significant amount of content needs to recorded and understood, teachers should consider creating heavily guided simulations. For example, in my WWI alliance game, I provided students with the opportunities to voice their own strategies and suggestions. However, by the end of the simulation, I guided them to correct alliances [See Artifact 8: WWI Alliances]. Balancing the thematic need of diplomacy with the content need of specific alliances, I decided that students could still grasp the theme while I placed a greater emphasis on the specifics of that historical situation.

Similarly, teachers should consider heavily guiding role-play and simulation activities when first introducing the concepts of historical empathy and imagination. Students were far more successful at adopting roles when I added the TWS and RAFT stages to the process [See Artifact 6: Trial of Socrates Paper]. It was not until much later did I take some of those scaffolds out, and only when students had the experience to understand what they could do in a greater creative space [See Artifact 9: WWI Letters, Images and Reflection].

In addition to context and guidance, Teachers should also consider the level of ‘safety’ each activity provides for students. In the WWI simulation activity, two students chose not to speak or provide suggestions to the larger class because they clearly felt uncomfortable [See Artifact 9: WWI Letters, Images and Reflection]. In some cases, when I recognized that students would feel uncomfortable in a situation, I gave them the option to not participate in a certain section [See Artifact 5: Trial of Socrates Observation Notes]. If the priorities of a simulation do not focus on public speaking skills, it is appropriate to provide an opt-out for some students as long as they contribute to overall group work.

Ultimately, however, individual written role-pay assignments provided the highest levels of safety for the students in my teaching context. I observed high levels of creativity and commitment to role-adoption in the letter writing assignments. In contrast to the Mock Trial of Socrates, students did not ‘break character’ or reveal embarrassment. For example, Bea, a student often concerned with her image and actions when completing group work, wrote an extremely poetic and committed WWI Letter [See Artifact 9: WWI Letter, Reflection].

**Morality in the Social Studies Classroom**

If varying levels of ‘safe’ assignments were not available to the students, Bea may have not had the chance to explore historical empathy with that same emotional commitment [See Artifact 9: WWI Letter, Reflection]. Reading the work of students’ that flourished in the ‘safer’ writing assignments contributed to my own evolving understanding and definition of ‘historical empathy’. In addition to the theoretical definition of the academic concept, I also considered the traditional associations and meanings of the word empathy beyond the criteria by Downy. Particularly towards the end of my student teaching, I was unable to define or articulate the connection between respect and historical empathy within my established method of analysis.

In my Aquinas Analysis, I compared two students, one who I believed connected with the task in a meaningful way and one who may have only partially committed to the task. Mitchell received neutral ratings on empathy because it was difficult for me to determine whether he really considered Aquinas’s perspective and his outlook. Adopting someone else’s outlook requires a certain level of respect for the role and the circumstances. I did not see it in his work. He correctly filled in the gaps, which required some level of understanding of Aquinas’s perspective, but he did not show any kind of true connection to the task. This is difficult concept for me to articulate. However, analyzing Mitchell’s answers has highlighted an issue for me; should I expect my students to adopt these roles and maintain a certain level of respect for the historical actors? I have difficulty defining what this concept of respect means in historical empathy and imagination. Although, I can at least recognize that I do not see it in Mitchell’s answers. [See Artifact 7: Aquinas Class Work, Student Sample Analysis]

In contrast, Ariel’s work did reflect some level of commitment to empathy and respect for the historical actor. This greater understanding of empathy requires some level of emotional commitment. As I mentioned earlier, Foster’s recognition of this feeling was important to my own understanding, “finally, historical empathy requires a respect for, an appreciation of, and sensitivity toward, the complexity of human action and achievement” (Foster, 2009, p.g 19)

But Foster restrains himself; he argues that students are asked to only comprehend, not to sympathize with the plight of a historical actor such as Neville Chamberlain (Foster, 2009). Unlike many scholars, I would argue that students should attempt to understand what it ‘felt’ like to be in the role of this historical actor, and others that seem equally alien. Human action is complex, I do not know if we can truly separate understanding and feeling. Understanding Chamberlain requires some level of ‘feeling what he felt’, knowing his prejudices and fears. If a student can feel the historical actor’s perspective, that are, in a small way, sympathizing.

To some, it is bold to suggest that students should attempt to feel what others felt. But asking students to empathize, or even sympathize, with a historical actor is not asking them to justify that historical actor’s choices or actions. Instead it is asking them to participate in a civic and moral action.

There is clear scholarship that argues for morality in the social studies classroom. The conflict with morality education is choosing whose morals. But I agree with Walsh’s advocacy of morality in a ‘pluralist society’.

In pluralist societies history writing will be better for taking account of the pluralism of contemporary values, laying special emphasis on the values that are shared, being explicit about the relevant more ‘personal’ values, and so forth – in other words, for adopting the manners of procedures of everyday ethical discourse in this kind of society. (as cited in Peterson, 2011)

For me, one of the greater shared values of a pluralist society is tolerance and empathy. We need to practice the ability to both understand our own perspective and respect others’ viewpoints, especially those who seem so unlike ourselves. Understanding historical actors living in vastly different contexts can help contribute to this larger goal of pluralist morality education.

**Further Inquiry**

My inquiry has in many ways validated the importance of historical empathy and imagination in my growing pedagogy as well as the significant role of simulation and role-play activities in my practical methods choices. Yet despite dedicating my student teaching experience to this analysis, I have yet to explore all of my queries into the subject. There are still aspects of the theoretical concepts of imagination and empathy that I have yet to explore. I also intend to expand my examination of simulation and role-play activities beyond the imagination and empathy concepts.

Before I expand my inquiry, however, I first need to explore a specific aspect of the concepts that I did not have a chance to address in my portfolio. As mentioned previously, I never concentrated my practice on examining one specific criteria of historical empathy, the ability to “distinguish between past perspectives and to shift from one another from a relatively detached point of view” [See Method of Analysis]. In the future, I would like to provide space in my classroom for students to be able to demonstrate this skill. Throughout my analyses, I establish concern for my inability to determine if a student’s adopted perspective blends too much with their own perspective. A meta-cognitive approach should be able to address this issue. In future role-play work, students should have the time evaluate their own role-adoption abilities and reflect on the distinction between perspectives.

For me, the clearest absence in my portfolio is the lack of exploration into gender, race and class in simulation and role-play. This omission is partially due to the ‘marathon-like’ nature of the world history curriculum. With so much to cover, my simulation and role-play activities largely focused on the themes of two units, philosophy and war. Regardless, I should have made a larger effort to include the concepts of race, gender and class in my methods. For example, it would have been useful to explore the concept of adopting the perspectives of different genders. My role-play activities required my female students to adopt male roles. I would have liked to see if there would be a backlash to the opposite scenario. If so, a class could benefit from discussing what that backlash indicates about gender roles in our larger society. The Zinn Education Project has provided me with multiple resources for the future so I can explore this avenue of inquiry further in my teaching next year.

Ultimately, my inquiry has led me to the conclusion that simulation and role-play activities should have a prominent role in the classroom. While I focused on historical imagination and empathy, I consistently found myself distracted from my initial inquiry to explore other possible benefits of such methods, including their ability to address multiple intelligences and their potential to encourage students to improve their basic reading and writing skills. Although it is not included in this portfolio, I also started to inquire into the use of simulation and role-play activities in my 12th grade government classes to determine if they have an impact on civic engagement.

In the end, however, teaching students to empathize and understand one another is a priority in my pedagogy. While historical empathy and imagination are theoretical concepts confined to the academic study of history, they could have a far larger impact on students who learn how to practice and master them. The greater possible implications of students applying empathetic and imaginative skills to the larger world outside the classroom drive my continued inquiry into this topic.

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