



Promoting Empathy Through the Study of History by Caroline Hutchinson (Juntendo University, Tokyo)



Introduction

In recent years, the Japanese Ministry of Education has sought to promote *English as a Medium of Instruction* (EMI) in Japan. This poses the question of how to teach content in a way that is engaging, linguistically accessible, develops critical thinking skills and supports the growth of citizens able to take an informed position on the issues of the present and future. In this article, I discuss the concept of historical empathy, and its place within a modern Japanese history course that I designed and taught at a Japanese university. The course, entitled “Japan and the World: Through Travelers’ Eyes 1868-1926”, focussed on the experiences of Japanese and non-Japanese individuals travelling to and from Japan as it began to open after centuries of relative isolation.

Empathy is a term meaning different things to different people. This has given rise to the misconception that it requires students to *sympathise* with historical figures, and to identify with their motivations. Here Barton & Levstik make an important distinction: “Empathy involves imagining the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspectives, whereas sympathy involves imagining them as if those thoughts and feelings were our own” (2004: 206).

Attempting to sympathise with historical figures can tend to overlook the fact that world-views differ significantly across time, culture and individual. Empathy, on the other hand, involves understanding why people in the past acted as they did, how they saw their world, and attempting to understand their feelings on the basis of evidence.

Endacott & Brooks (2013) argue that historical empathy must involve both cognitive and affective engagement. To achieve this, they propose three key areas of skill development:

1. Historical contextualization

Students must understand the prevailing norms at the time being studied, the background of the event being studied, and other events happening at the time that affected decisions.

2. Perspective-taking

Students must be aware of the experiences and beliefs of the people being studied.

3. Affective connection

Students must consider how context and individual perspectives may have influenced the affective response of historical figures. They do this by

making a connection with their own lives, without imposing their own values on another era.

Benefits

While my discussion of empathy is based on teaching history, I believe that this dual cognitive-affective approach has a great deal to offer in any study of human actions. The cognitive elements of historical empathy must be grounded in evidence, and thus involve understanding, corroborating and comparing different sources, and gaining a sense for the context in which historical actions occur.

Although we can never confirm motivations in the past, we can learn to judge what is plausible, and how to get the most out of fragmentary sources which may be subjective or concerned to present the writer in a positive light. Sticking closely to evidence helps avoid anachronism or putting words into others’ mouths. By taking the time to understand historical figures in their own words and in the eyes of others, students can learn to recognise the logic in thinking very different from their own. Finally, it is to be hoped that students come to recognise that their own interpretations of history depend partly on their context and socialization, and thus learn to be more open to differing viewpoints (see Barton & Levstik Chapter 11 for a full discussion of this).

The above skills are integral to social studies classes, and some have argued that our emotions should have no place in understanding the past. Yet as Barton & Levstik (2004: 228-9) point out, “We cannot interest students in the study of history...if we reject their cares and concerns or if we dismiss their feeling and emotions.” They believe it is important that students care about their study in several ways:

- Students **care about** the topic of study and are affectively engaged in it
- Students **care that** injustices have happened in history
- Students **care for** the victims of injustice and wish they could help them
- Students **care to** apply what they have learned to the present

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that biased beliefs rarely change when content is taught without attention to affective dimensions (Nancy McCrary, cited in Barton & Levstik (2004). It seems that forming affective connections, based on a solid

appreciation of the available evidence, enables students to appreciate the complexity of decision-making, and the often irrational factors – pride, desperation, greed, revenge – that influence human beings at any stage of history.

Pedagogical framework

Endacott & Brooks (2013: 46) suggest 4 key stages in fostering historical empathy in schools:

Stage 1: an introductory phase designed to introduce the historical situation and/or the historical figure(s) with whom the students will engage in historical empathy

Stage 2: an investigation phase in which students study primary and secondary source material in depth to develop a deeper understanding of historical context, historical perspective and related affective considerations

Stage 3: a display phase in which students demonstrate the understanding they have developed

Stage 4: a reflection phase in which students are invited to make connections between the past and the present while considering how their personal views may have changed as a result of engaging in historical empathy.

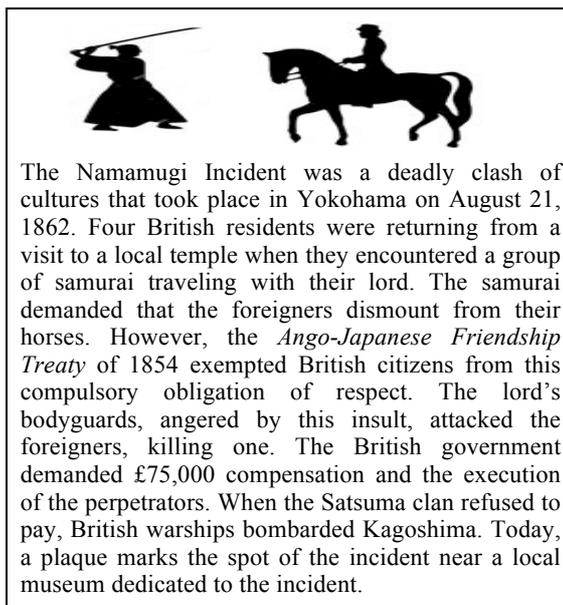
In my course, “Japan and the World”, students were asked to do Stage 1, and sometimes Stage 2, for homework. They were guided by comprehension and discussion questions. After discussing their answers in groups, and then as a class (Stage 3), I gave a lecture designed to introduce further context and present alternative perspectives. Students then wrote a reflection, including a description of what they had learned (Stage 3, a demonstration of their cognitive engagement) and an attempt to connect affectively with what they had learned (Stage 4). I wrote comments and clarifying questions on all reflections received. Students had a further chance to make connections in final reflective interviews (Stage 4).

When planning the course, I looked for topics that would shed light on the major issues of the period we were studying while also being engaging for students. I mostly avoided theoretical discussions, preferring concrete descriptions, and where texts were difficult encouraged students to do background research in their first language. I also, crucially, looked for historical figures about whom there was sufficient evidence available in English, both primary (from the time) and secondary (more modern interpretations). The evidence needed to be sufficient to support contextualization, perspective-taking and affective connections. In practice, this meant many of the historical figures I chose were published writers.

Classroom activities

As discussed above, students come to class having read some background about each historical figure and often a short primary source, and have answered both comprehension and discussion questions. These questions then form the focus of group discussion, open class discussion, classroom activities, and of my lecture. By the time students write their reflections at the end of class, they should have deepened their understanding of these questions.

1. The Namamugi Incident and historical context



The Namamugi Incident was a deadly clash of cultures that took place in Yokohama on August 21, 1862. Four British residents were returning from a visit to a local temple when they encountered a group of samurai traveling with their lord. The samurai demanded that the foreigners dismount from their horses. However, the *Ango-Japanese Friendship Treaty* of 1854 exempted British citizens from this compulsory obligation of respect. The lord’s bodyguards, angered by this insult, attacked the foreigners, killing one. The British government demanded £75,000 compensation and the execution of the perpetrators. When the Satsuma clan refused to pay, British warships bombarded Kagoshima. Today, a plaque marks the spot of the incident near a local museum dedicated to the incident.

Students read a text written by British diplomat Ernest Satow describing the Namamugi Incident and the killing of the British resident. The text describes this as a “barbarous murder”. Based on background research, and their understanding of Japanese society at the time, students re-tell the incident from the Japanese perspective.

Although all students taking the course to date have been either Japanese or had completed secondary education in Japan, this activity proved challenging. Working in groups, however, most students were able to identify reasons based on the prevailing norms at the time: commoners were expected to step out of the way of the samurai retinue; samurai carried swords and had the right to use them in defence of their lords; almost nobody had encountered non-Japanese people and were unlikely to know how to deal with them. Nevertheless, many students report being shocked by this killing, comparing it with modern perceptions of intercultural understanding.

Following this, students examine woodblock prints depicting relations between Japanese and non-Japanese in the newly-opened treaty port of Yokohama, the nearest city to Namamugi. Finding evidence of gestures used in place of a common language, or seeing how frequently Japanese people are shown serving or entertaining non-Japanese, students begin to understand the tensions that accompanied the opening of Japan. In my lecture, we then turn to look at the terms of the 1854 *Anglo-Japanese Friendship Treaty*, which exempted British nationals from Japanese law. Students are now much better placed to understand why overturning these ‘unequal treaties’ was such a priority for the new Japanese state.

2. Isabella Bird & Perspective-taking



Isabella Bird visited Japan in 1878, sixteen years on from the Namamugi Incident, part of a wave of tourists armed with guidebooks written by foreign government advisers. Unlike most tourists, she went north to Hokkaido and published her letters to her sister as “Unbeaten Tracks in Japan”.

At home, students read an excerpt focussing on one aspect of daily life in Japan, such as the new railway, the daily lives of rickshaw pullers, or busy city streets. After discussing their ideas in groups, they receive an image depicting their theme, either a tourist postcard or a woodblock print. By analysing multiple sources depicting the same aspect of life, students learn to compare and corroborate, and separate opinion from fact.

They are then regrouped, and introduce their differing themes to one another. This phase allows students to build a sense of Isabella Bird’s character and preferences, and hence her reliability as a source. While she praises some aspects of Japan’s modernisation, for example, she seems to think them out of place in Japan. Although some students are shocked by her criticism of certain aspects of Japan, others realize that they have experienced similar feelings when visiting other countries.

3. Ongoing affective connection

In my experience, once students have gained an understanding of context and the personalities involved, they have needed little encouragement to compare the experiences of the people studied to their own. Students have found it particularly easy to

empathise with Japanese people who travelled overseas, or who struggled to reconcile Japanese thinking with newly imported ideas. As Barton & Levstik (2004) found with younger students, my students often uncovered ways in which historical figures could be role models for their own lives.

Students have also reported gaining a greater understanding of historical figures and of their flaws, setbacks, and sometimes irrational decisions, coming to see them as fellow human beings facing human experiences (Endacott & Brooks 2013). It is to be hoped that this lessens the perceived distance between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘people in our textbooks’, thereby empowering students to effect change in the modern world.

Conclusion

In order for historical empathy to arise, it is important for the teacher to identify topics which have sufficient evidence to support contextualization, perspective-taking and affective connections, and to develop questions and activities that encourage these skills. Students will benefit from a pedagogical framework allowing for discussion, reflection, and multiple opportunities for feedback on their ideas. In particular, the teacher must play an active role in checking student speculation where it is not supported, or actively contradicted, by the evidence.

When historical empathy is based on both cognitive and affective skills, it offers a way of teaching content that challenges students to make reasoned, evidence-based decisions, while also giving them a chance to apply and extend their understanding of human behaviour. In my course, I have found that this has led to high levels of student engagement, prompting students to work collaboratively to understand difficult primary sources in their second language - English.

References

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- Endacott, J., & Brooks, S. (2013). An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 8, 41-58. Online: www.socstrpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/MS_06482_no3.pdf

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