

Harry Truman and the Atomic Bomb: A High School Classroom Study in Historical Empathy



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he perspectival nature of historical inquiry necessarily highlights the role of empathy as a powerful tool for understanding history. Empathy merits specific attention because historians must bring it to their inquiry in order to analyze the events, actions, and words of key

figures in the historical record. As Berlin (1966) explained, good history offers a window on human character, motivation, and principles. In the construction of historical meaning, empathy for history's participants is central.

We argue here that historical empathy is not based simply upon exercises in fanciful, "let's pretend" imagination (e.g., "Imagine you are an Apache warrior"), affective overidentification (e.g., asking students to identify with Adolph Hitler), or mere sympathy (e.g., encouraging students to sympathize with victims of slavery). Rather, we attempt to show that the development of historical empathy in students is a considered and active process, embedded in the historical method, that involves four interrelated phases:

- the introduction of an historical event necessitating the analysis of human action
- the understanding of historical context and chronology
- the analysis of a variety of historical evidence and interpretations
- the construction of a narrative framework through which historical conclusions are reached.

If the task of the historian is to make sense of a past of which only partial knowledge exists, then the use of empathy may be crucial to the process of understanding. Having established context as best they can, historians may then draw on the knowledge gleaned from hindsight - a precious tool in that it enables them to see the consequences of a particular set of actions. Historical empathy helps the historian bridge the gaps of what is not known from the available evidence; that is to say, it must involve some ability to infer, from given knowledge, an explanation of certain actions. To engage in historical perspective taking, Downey (1995) argues, is to try to understand an historical character's frame of reference without trying to identify or sympathize with his or her feelings. Downey em-

phasizes that historical perspectives are not waiting to be discovered, like photographs; rather, they are constructed on the basis of facts and evidence.

The Study: Truman's Decision to Use Atomic Weapons

This study focused on the subject matter of World War Two because of its centrality to the high school history curriculum and because of its breadth of moral and political dilemmas. In addition, the topic of World War Two has generated ample primary and secondary source material that is relatively easy for teachers and students to access and use in the classroom. An eleventh-grade U. S. history teacher selected eight students from his four U. S. history classes. The teacher divided the students into two groups. Group One read about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and about the general context of World War Two from Bailey and Kennedy's The American Pageant (1979). The Group Two students read a variety of excerpts from multiple sources (see Appendix). After their reading, students wrote responses to the following:

Based on the evidence you have at hand, construct a reasonable explanation of why you think Truman ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What forces affected his decision? What were his options? What were the short- and long-term effects of his decision?

The curator of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., must put together an exhibit on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What should this exhibit include? Who and what must the curator take into account when deciding how to portray this event?

Our study offers insights into students' understandings of historical empathy. More importantly, it demonstrates the difference that the available evidence and contextual/chronological information made in the two groups' understandings and empathic responses. We do not mean to suggest that good teaching plays a peripheral role in how students develop empa-

thy. The intent of our study was to describe some preliminary findings about the development of students' historical empathy, given their use of particular sources and questions upon which teachers can build in their own classrooms. Especially, we wanted to find out whether the students who used only a single school history textbook in this empathy exercise yielded substantially different empathic responses from the students who read from the large array of primary and secondary sources that were assembled in order to provide multiple perspectives and insights on the decision to bomb Japan.

Results

Generally speaking, the Group Two students viewed the issue of Truman's decision to bomb Japan in more complex terms than Group One did. They identified multiple perspectives, possibilities, and lessons to be learned from the event. They found more room for ambiguity and possible errors in judgment among the historical actors involved; they also appeared to find room for infusing their own perspectives into the questions they answered. Essentially, the students in Group One saw the bomb as an either/or proposition, a simple choice between American and Japanese lives, and they tended to praise Truman for making a tough but necessary decision. The Group Two students, although they did not oversimplify Truman's decision in hindsight, seemed to conclude that, given the circumstances at the time, Truman's choice probably seemed obvious to him. For these students, the decision was not something to be cheered or condemned in its historical context. However, Karen, a student in Group Two, was the only one who seemed to remain dispassionate and to refrain from condemning the decision in hindsight, viewing Truman's decision mostly in strategic terms. The other three, even though they explored multiple perspectives, options, explanations, and lines of reasoning in their responses to the first question, implied in their responses to the second question that the bombing was morally offensive to them and that, although they did not totally condemn Truman himself or the historical context in which he had to make his decision, they wanted a current Smithsonian exhibit to depict the full horror of nuclear destruction so that

wers would see “an accurate account” of the “real effects” of bombings.

In addition, the Group One students wanted to avoid giving offense to viewers of the Smithsonian exhibit, alluding vaguely to showing “all sides” without knowing what “all sides” were and without realizing the tension between being inoffensive and showing all sides.” In Group Two, Karen seemed to believe that “many views of the incident” could be shown while still portraying the U. S. in a positive light. The other three students in Group Two, although they wanted to include factual historical information about all of the factors and perspectives that influenced Truman’s decision, tended to favor graphic depiction of the horrors of war and did not consider the potential offensiveness of this kind of exhibit to many Americans. None of the students mentioned specific groups (American Legion, Japanese-Americans) that might exert pressure on the museum to mount the exhibit in a particular way and did not specifically address the highly politicized nature of this type of museum exhibit. Perhaps if the students had been given information about other controversial museum issues, they might have been able to make explicit the political connection to history.

Thus, the Group Two students all exhibited characteristics of rational “hindsight” in their responses to the first question, especially in their ability to explore multiple perspectives and explanations of the various historical actors involved. The second question, however, evoked three strong, opinionated responses advocating an exhibit that would serve as a moral lesson on the evils of war; the fourth wanted to ensure that the U. S. would be favorably depicted regardless of the role it played in the destruction.

Conclusions on Historical Empathy: Can It Be Attempted?

The teaching of historical thinking can emphasize the necessary awareness for the development of historical empathy. However, contextual and chronological information must remain the central focus of exercises in historical empathy. The students in Group Two, on the basis of the wide range of evi-

dence at their disposal, were able to go beyond imagination, sympathy, and overidentification in order to construct insightful, accurate narratives. Furthermore, the information they had at hand, like the historian's, gave them the valuable perspective of hindsight - a perspective that textbooks tend to adopt only superficially. In other words, Group Two students had richer information about what happened after the bombing and were able to make more robust interpretations of the short- and long-term effects of this crucial historical event.

We advance the following suggestions for establishing some pre-requisites for the implementation of exercises in historical empathy:

1. **The success of the exercise depends on the context.** In order to empathize in a meaningful way, students must have some valuable context (what Rogers [1990] refers to as "enabling knowledge"). This context may be achieved in a variety of ways, but central to the process must be a significant role for the use of authentic historical sources and evidence.

2. **Students must have some appreciation for the sources of evidence with which they are working.** They must consider issues such as utility, audience, language, perspective, and bias when examining evidence. In this study, making the sources available was a good start; again, however, knowledgeable teachers can direct students' exploration of the components of historical inquiry. As Cooper (1995) argues, teachers need to "select a small number of key sources of different types, which reflect significant aspects of a period, and to show children...the kinds of questions to ask, the kinds of probabilistic inferences to make about them, and how to support their ideas with reasons" (p. 56). Through making such inferences, students can begin to consider "what sources may have meant to the people who made and used them, and the feelings, ideas, and behavior the sources reflect, which may be different from their own" (p. 56).

Obviously, in classrooms as well as in historians' practice, every piece of historical evidence will not be used; moreover,

the context must be made appropriate to the ages and abilities of the students. However, this study showed that the participants in Group Two were able to assimilate a wide variety of materials. One can only speculate how much more their thinking could have developed with an engaging, informed teacher's guidance and with opportunities to go beyond the bounds that were established with the materials that were selected for the study. Ideally, students can be encouraged to search for their own contextual knowledge and not confined only to their teacher's interpretations and selection of materials.

3. The student, like practicing historians, must have reasonable knowledge of outcomes. Specifically, they should utilize the benefit of hindsight in understanding actions. Interestingly, both this point and the previous point fly in the face of the criticism that empathy exercises are irresponsibly superficial and spurious (i.e., telling students on the basis of minimal knowledge to "imagine you are an Apache warrior"). The participants in this study showed that historical empathy derives from detailed knowledge and understanding of an historical event.

4. Students must be encouraged to examine material critically and, when they do make empathic inferences, to defend their positions intelligently. Thus, the skills of historical problem-solving and critical inquiry can be combined with classroom discussion and debate.

5. Students must be aware that historical conclusions are tentative at best. Essentially, the goal is to interpret the past through the eyes of the present using the best available knowledge. Students can learn to try and resolve historical questions in reasonable ways.

Downey (1995) also has several recommendations for evaluating evidence of successful historical perspective taking. First, students must indicate that they realize the past is different from the present and that some historical outcomes are specific to time and place. Second, perspective taking must be

- Downey, M. T. (1995). Perspective taking and historical thinking: Doing history in a fifth-grade classroom. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.
- Rogers, P. J. (1990). History: Why, what and how? Teaching of History Series, Number 60. London: Historical Association.

Appendix

List of Primary and Secondary Source Excerpts Read by Students in Group Two

1. From *The Awesome Power: Harry S. Truman as Commander in Chief* (1973), by Richard Haynes
2. From *Hiroshima* (1946), by Jon Hersey
3. From *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician August 6-September 30, 1945*, (1955), by Michihiko Hachiya, translated and edited by Warner Wells
4. From *Children of Hiroshima* (1980), edited by Yoichi Fukushima
5. From *City of Silence: Listening to Hiroshima* (1995), by Rachelle Linner
6. Poem by Toge Sankichi from *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses* (1990), edited and translated by Richard H. Minear
7. From *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After* (1984), by Peter Wyden
8. From *Widows of Hiroshima: The Life Stories of 19 Peasant Wives* (1982), edited by Mikion Kanda, translated by Taeko Midorikawa

9. Photograph of Hiroshima after the bombing (1945)
10. Excerpts from Japanese army manual issued during World War Two
11. *From The Era of the Second World War* (1993), by Nigel Kelly and Martyn Whittock
12. From *No High Ground* (1961), by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey
13. From "The Atomic Bombing Reconsidered," in January/February 1995 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, by Barton J. Bernstein
14. From *The Memoirs of Harry S. Truman* (1955), by Harry S. Truman
15. British newspaper cartoon published in 1945 after bombing
16. From *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965), by Gar Alperovitz
17. From *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (1980), by Harold F. Gosnell
18. From *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (1975), by Merle Miller
19. From *Triumph and Tragedy: The Second World War* (1953), by Winston Churchill
20. Extract from U. S. News and World Report article on the 50th anniversary of the bombing, July 31, 1995
21. From *The Rising Sun* (1977), by Arthur Zich
22. From *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-1945* (1994), edited by Saki Dockerill
23. Excerpts from Congressional testimony by Robert Oppenheimer and other research scientists on the Manhattan Project, former American POWS, and Truman's chief of staff Admiral D. Leahy

24. Excerpts from media interviews with the Secretary to the Japanese War Minister in 1963, with Henry Stimson (U. S. Secretary of War during WW2) in 1947, and with James Byrnes (American Secretary of State during WW2) in 1965
25. Excerpt from speech given by Japanese prime minister Suzuki in 1945



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