THEIR BROTHERS' VOICES:

USING ARCHIVAL STORIES TO FOSTER EMPATHY IN GRADE 8 BOYS

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Abstract

In the fall of 2018, 19 boys set out on a research quest to connect with their historical Andrean brothers. They were each given an archive containing documents pertaining to one former student of St. Andrew's College from which they would not only learn, but add to. Each of the former students had a unique story, but all shared a common bond in that they had been victims of the First World War. In undertaking this work, I wondered if the boys of 2018 would forge bonds with their fallen brothers. I ultimately wanted to know whether engaging with alumni stories would help to foster empathy in Grade 8 boys. Through a process of gathering research, designing a way to share their findings, and bringing the soldiers' stories to the broader community, the boys were able to connect to the individual stories of the soldiers of the First World War on a more personal level, rather than seeing the war through the lenses of politics and technology. Data were gathered through surveys and video journaling to elicit the most detailed reflections possible from the boys. The resulting knowledge for the researcher and for History teachers is that historical empathy can be developed through engagement with personal stories and is one way of bringing a more complex perspective to our students.

Introduction

Background

In Modern History classes, two elements are converging to shape our students' understanding and experience of war. As the veterans of the First and Second World Wars disappear, their ability to relay the experiences of the battlefield first-hand is being lost to our students. For the decades since the end of WWI, these individual accounts have humanized the experience of battle and life in the trenches, adding meaningful layers of personal narrative to the political history and numbers that so often become the focus of the story within a History class. While some students

may become interested in the technology or strategy of war and study these areas out of personal curiosity, it has become more difficult to engage students in the individual stories of soldiers.

A second element that is shaping our students' understanding of war is the experience that a large percentage of them are having through war-based video games. The most popular first-person shooter games, such as *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honour,* are "the primary historical engagement with the war for a key demographic - namely, teenage and young adult males" (Allison, 2010, 191). To bring students to a more rounded understanding of the individual cost of war, this action research project attempted to provide them with relatable stories and have them design a way to share the stories to see if they developed historical empathy toward those who were lost during the First World War. In this way, despite the lack of living veterans, their stories will continue to be told.

This project took specific characteristics of boys' learning into consideration in its design. In my experience, boys generally find the subject of war interesting, but the ability to take ownership of their soldiers' stories and to be responsible for sharing their stories with others also appealed to their learning styles. Boys thrive when they are given an open-ended problem for which they must find a solution (Reichert & Hawley, 2009). This action research project put the outcome of the learning in the boys' hands to decide how best to share what they had learned. Both of these qualities are positive motivations when included in a boy's learning. As an additional quality, the project spoke directly to an area of history about which I am particularly passionate. Research suggests that boys are more excited to engage in work that their instructor is passionate about and the teacher openly shares that deep interest with them (Reichert & Hawley, 2009).

Research Question

> *How might engaging with alumni stories foster empathy in Year 8 boys towards the experiences of war?*

Action Research

I used action research as a methodology for this project because it allowed me to change the traditional instructional strategies used in my History class. Action research is an effective tool for teachers to use when identifying a need for change, designing a solution, testing the solution, and reflecting on the result to improve the practice for the future (Mertler, 2017). It also justifies using new pedagogical methods in one's teaching practice.

Literature Review

For action research to be effective, it must be informed by current research and be situated within the context of contemporary understanding. It was for these reasons that this literature review was undertaken. While there were other factors being examined, the review attempts to summarize and synthesize the current understanding of two key aspects to enrich the research process: the teaching of historical empathy and the teaching of World War I history to the video gaming generation.

Teaching Historical Empathy

According to the literature, the teaching of historical empathy is fraught with challenges. Firstly, while there have been some studies on the effects of teaching historical empathy to K-12 students in the classroom, there has been little work done to investigate the pedagogical methods on how to develop it (Cunningham, 2007). There is clearly room for more work in this area, which made the process of attempting to achieve historical empathy through my project both exciting and challenging.

A second issue facing this project was that one must clarify the term "historical empathy" as distinct from emotive empathy. It was not my intention for the students to be able to put themselves in the shoes of a World War One soldier. I felt this construct required too much context for 13-year-old boys to grasp; students would be at risk of relying too heavily on their own experiences and imaginations, rather than on historical evidence, to fill in the gaps.

In this action research project, I intended to guide my students to develop what Barton and Levstik (2004) identified as historical empathy: perspective recognition and caring. If the boys could develop these two abilities as historical skills, they would increase their self-awareness (Vansledright, 2001) and potentially their civic engagement (Barton & Levstik, 2004). I believe that both of these qualities are valuable ones to be bringing to the future inheritors of our world.

When teaching historical empathy, educators must avoid several pitfalls. It was important for activities to be framed in a way that challenged "presentism" (Wineburg, 2001, pg. 19) – the tendency to view historical events through a "present lens" and assume that past generations were simply less advanced. Students also had to overcome the tendency to focus on the differences between the past and present to effectively examine the stories of their soldiers' lives. In their study, Lee and Ashby (2001) found that this common approach to teaching History encouraged

students to assume that people of the past were intellectually deficient, which often led to an inability to empathize with historical people. If these obstacles could be overcome, it would be possible for the students involved in the action research to learn to be more deliberate when constructing their personal interpretations of past events.

Teaching War and the Video Game Generation

Part of the original inspiration for this action research question came from personal experience of teaching Grade 8 boys about the First World War. An emerging trend was a shift from students whose experience with the subject of war included having grown up with grandparents who experienced it first-hand, to the majority of boys having only connected with war through their gaming consoles. For this reason, some of the literature consulted relates to teaching war and the video game generation. Allison (2010) points out that many of the most popular and current games, such as *Call of Duty,* are "fundamentally about combat." Unlike historical films, however, the point of these games is to bring the gamer into an action where they can win or lose. Many historical details, such as waiting for days in the trenches and suffering through sickness, rarely factor in. If, as Allison points out, video games are the main way that young males learn about war, they are gaining a distorted and limited perspective. Ramsay (2015), for example, discusses the game, *Medal of Honour,* to describe the tendency for game developers to sacrifice historical details in an attempt to make a more enjoyable player experience.

This project attempted to cultivate a deeper and broader understanding of the experience of war for the students involved. Crothers (2002) suggests that one way to do this is for students to become engaged in a historical project that produces a permanent record of a community's history. He contends that by closely examining individual stories, students become better able to place a real person's experience within a wider context. In addition, the creation of projects such as the one undertaken for this action research can help bring the stories to life and make them more memorable.

In conclusion, a wide-ranging body of literature contributed to my project design, including, but not limited to, the two topics discussed in this review. I carefully considered previous work about historical empathy and about how to teach this generation of learners in a way that can be meaningful for them, despite the lack of first-person narratives and primary sources.

Research Context

St. Andrew's College is an all-boys school in Aurora, Ontario, Canada. It serves 650 boys in Grades 5 to 12, half of whom are boarding students. This project was conducted with 18 boys in a Year 8 History class. I chose this population for multiple reasons. Foremost was the opportunity for the teacher to facilitate the project. The boys have History class scheduled twice within the regular six-day cycle of the school week; therefore, they had a routine meeting time devoted to working through the elements of the project. The age of the boys was also appropriate as they fell within a demographic that has had some exposure to history, culture, and video games through everyday channels, but have not yet had the opportunity to choose whether or not they carry on with the formal study of History.

The Ontario Curriculum dictates that year 10 Canadian History is the final required course in social science. By using a sample of boys in year 8, I assumed that they had not already "self-selected" as keen history students. In addition to making the sample broad, this added to the rigor of this project as required by formal action research. Parents were sent a letter to obtain permission for their boy's participation and also to assure them that the boys' identity would remain confidential through the research and reporting of the action.

The Action

The St. Andrew's College (SAC) archives are full of personal anecdotes from the former students of SAC who fought in the First World War. I hoped that by connecting with the story from an alumnus, boys would gain a new perspective of war. We began by meeting in the archive room where the boys were given an opportunity to view all the brief biographies of the men that are hosted on our school's website in the hope that one particular individual would stand out for them. Perhaps they connected over a sporting interest, their love of music, or the town they from where they came.

Once the boys each had a soldier to focus on, the school archivist and I spent several lessons helping the boys learn how to read and digest primary source material and how to find information online using various websites and databases. We supported them as they went through the process of gathering information and reminded them to be systematic in their work. There were process checks embedded in the schedule when students would meet one-on-one with me, and we would work together to ensure they were on track and making progress.

After the five-class research phase concluded, the boys decided how they would share their findings. I coached them through several design thinking protocols, including ideation tasks as well as prototype creation. The process of ideation and prototyping spanned ten classes and included collaborative thinking tasks and the building of paper prototypes. The boys came up with several creative ideas ranging from ties to be sold in the campus shop to a Christmas tree with ornaments dedicated to each soldier. The final phase of the action involved the boys delivering the end products to their community. They specifically chose to share their work with Old Boys of the school (through a reunion event) and current students. The boys concluded the project with individual reflections through a final video journal.

Data Collection

The data collected for this project were primarily qualitative and generated through surveys, individual journaling by students, field notes from teacher observations, photos, and videos. In the initial phase of data collection, I asked students a series of open-ended questions through a survey to ascertain what their prior exposure was to the topic of war. I repeated this process at the end of the action to see if patterns of change in the language they used could be detected.

Because I was studying the student experience and whether the boys' empathy toward those who have experienced war first-hand widened or was impacted by the project activities, the boys' voices were the most important source of data. For this reason, they submitted short video journal entries at a minimum of three points throughout the project so that their thoughts were recorded for analysis. I hoped the videos would allow them to express their ideas honestly, whether they be positive or negative. As Mertler (2017) points out, "student journals provide information similar to homework to the teacher in that teachers can gain a sense of students' daily thoughts, perceptions, and experiences in the classroom" (p. 138). To continuously reflect on the project, I also kept a journal of written field notes as I observed the action. The boys completed surveys using an online tool and made digital video recordings via the OneNote notebook video recording tool. They received a selection of open-ended questions for consideration and to guide their journal entries, and also to help them reflect on the classroom activities.

To ensure the project aligned with Mertler's (2017) definition of rigor, I incorporated a degree of polyangulation with regard to data collection. In utilizing a variety of data collection methods, together with a range of participants, the results demonstrate credibility. Additionally, I scheduled plenty of in-class time for the performance of each project phase so that I could

regularly document observations. Additional time for individual interviews or opportunities for follow-up was also built into the timeline. Including video journals in the data collection methods was key to capturing student voices and ensured trustworthy research. A local research advisor was allowed full access to the research process and data collection to ensure an unbiased and critical eye was cast over the project.

Data Analysis

After the data collection phase ended, I transcribed and coded the data. It was then mined for emergent trends, including, but not limited to, changes in the boys' language, their specific understanding of the individual experiences of war, and their impressions of how their thinking had grown and developed over the course of the project. In examining changes to the boys' language, I looked for new usage and patterns employed by specific vocabulary. Ultimately, my data analysis attempted to answer the research question: *How might engaging with alumni stories foster empathy in Year 8 boys towards the experiences of war?*

Discussion of Results

Connection with War

To establish context for the data, initial survey questions asked boys about their family connections to veterans. Two boys identified grandparents who were directly involved in the war, with one of the boys noting, "My grandfather and grandmother are both Holocaust survivors." The majority of the boys surveyed responded that they did not have any family connections to veterans. This suggested that the boys had few opportunities to converse with veterans directly. Furthermore, to add to the context, every student indicated that they had watched Hollywood-produced films about war and, or, they had regularly engaged in video games, such as *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty,* that used war (both historical and fictitious) as a setting. I concluded that the boys in my classes had impressions and opinions of war that based on what they saw in the media, rather than through direct exposure to veterans' stories.

As I analyzed data collected during the project, two specific themes emerged. Firstly, the boys' conceptualization of a WWI soldier changed throughout their participation in the action and second, the boys experienced a heightened emotional connection to their soldier as the project progressed. These two aspects worked in concert to demonstrate empathetic feelings between the boys and their soldiers.

Language Usage

I coded the word frequency data according to three lenses: positive/negative/neutral, tangible/intangible, and emotive/non-emotive words. These three lenses provided some insights about how the boys' connections to their soldiers changed over the course of the project. Prior to the action, the words the boys chose as related to war could be characterized as negative and not emotionally charged. Non-emotional words included things like "horse" and "tank." Over the course of the project, the frequency of these words decreased and they were replaced by words such as "sadness" and "hope." This indicated that the boys grew a deeper emotional connection to the material they were studying. There was little change to the use of tangible versus intangible nouns, however, which may have been more closely tied to their brain development and thinking processes, rather than their level of connection.

The boys involved in the study were also asked what they thought a typical soldier of the First World War was like, both physically and emotionally. Their responses before the action indicated a reinforcement of media stereotyping, whereby students most commonly identified traits like "strong" and "athletic" in their descriptions. When asked what a typical soldier cared about, the boys' initial answers ranged from "winning" and "killing" to "justice" and "money." "Family" was also a common response in the initial survey. Once the action was completed, the students' image of a soldier seemed to have evolved. In the final survey, every respondent but one identified "family" as something that First World War soldiers cared about, whereas "winning" was only mentioned once, and "killing" had disappeared altogether. The image of what a soldier looked like became more realistic, including "young" and "tired." The stories about hardship and mud in the trenches also seemed to have become part of the imagery, with boys describing soldiers as "dirty" and "wounded."

Heightened Emotional Connection

In the video log (vlog) recordings, the boys took the opportunity to share their impressions of the project and their feelings about it. Throughout their reflections, three common themes emerged: reflection on the project components, emotional connections to the soldiers, and appreciation for the sacrifices made. The most consistent thread that ran through the vlogs created at the beginning of the project was a commentary about the project and its specific components. Boys talked about their interest levels and detailed some of their early research findings. One boy said that he was surprised by "how the faculty were able to get that much information on each of the

soldiers." As the boys compiled more research about their soldiers and got to know their stories better, their vlogs developed and began to show more connection and emotional investment. One boy directly said, "I feel like I can connect with him."

Students also identified their growth in empathy over the course of the project. One remarked, "most of them were only a couple years older than me," while another said, "I became more empathetic, and I began to understand more." In addition to the boys identifying more closely with the Fallen Andreans, their appreciation for the sacrifices their soldiers made also deepened. They reported feeling "inspired" and "grateful." One said, "I respect more how they lived before because I thought they were just good athletes that went off to war, but really they were educated and smart and still sacrificed their lives." Through such comments, most of the students showed an intensification of empathy and emotion toward the subject of their research and the experience of soldiers in World War I. Only one boy indicated that the project had not impacted his thinking at all. He said, "the way that I used to think about soldiers is the way I think about [them] now."

Conclusion

My research findings indicate that the project undertaken by the students fostered empathy and deepened the emotional connections between the boys and their soldiers. The image of the soldier became more realistic and less stereotypical. They began to associate more emotion with the experience of the soldier, which was evident in both the language they used in their reporting and in the feelings they identified in themselves. The boys also experienced a heightened sense of connection with their soldiers' stories and empathy toward what they went through. Some of the stereotypes the boys held from the information they had consumed across various media platforms shifted and became more consistent with what can be found in primary source documents. Although a first-hand connection with a veteran seems to still be the best learning opportunity, this project showed that making a connection with their Andrean brothers was a valuable experience.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The success of the project in connecting my students to the people who fought in the First World War confirmed that it was a worthwhile part of my practice. Based on the research findings, I will continue to expose my students through projects like this to the alumni stories that are held in the archives of St. Andrew's College. While there are small things that I would change in the

future, I certainly believe that the work has value, both to the students themselves in terms of developing historical empathy and a broader perspective on the past, and to the wider community as the boys develop connections to the roots of St. Andrew's. One possible extension of the project that bears some consideration would be to develop a student group of volunteers to work at strengthening, growing, and promoting our archives within the SAC community and beyond our gates.

Reflection Statement

The process of action research was an exciting one for me. While this project was developed from a basic framework that I was already running with my classes, putting it all together and examining the specific effects that the work had on my students was fascinating and fulfilling. While I might have previously thought that the result of the project was deepening empathy and growth of emotions in the boys, I now have the data to show not only how, but specifically when, it happens. To be able to chart the boys' growth through the project in their own words and feelings fully validates the time and effort it will take to run the project each year.

Throughout the process, I learned how valuable my students' voices are and how they can inform my practice so that I am providing experiences that push them to think more deeply. I now see that having students journal their thinking (especially using audio/video recordings) elicits so much more than a standard survey. This is powerful information to inform my future teaching.

The biggest hurdle that I faced was the classic issue of time. For this project, it was difficult to nail down the timing so that it did not drag on too long, but gave participants enough time to be thorough in their research and have a genuine experience. Being constrained by a timetable will always present this challenge. The only solution that I have found is to be as flexible as possible. If the boys need more time on a task, be generous. Move on quickly if it makes sense. The only other difficulty was in making sure that video journals were submitted on time and that the boys took time to be authentic and reflective.

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