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Displaying Historical Empathy: What Impact Can a Writing Assignment Have?

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This study explored the development of historical empathy in the social studies classroom by addressing the following question: Does the manner in which students are asked to express their historical conclusions impact their ability to exhibit empathy? The results of two different types of writing assignments were examined in order to determine whether one is more likely to encourage the display of historical empathy: text written in the first person from the perspective of a historical agent or text written in the third person about the perspectives of historical agents. Data, in the form of student writing samples and interviews, was collected over a two-week period in an eighth-grade social studies classroom. The findings suggest that the way in which students are asked to articulate their historical conclusions can indeed encourage or inhibit their ability to exhibit empathetic regard.

Introduction

Historical inquiry provides, for the novice and the expert alike, the opportunity to expand one's capacity to entertain perspectives different from one's own (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Foster & Yeager, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2001). The ability to display empathy is commonly recognized as an essential element of effective participation in society; consequently, it has attracted significant attention in the research on the teaching and learning of history (Barton & Levstik, 2004; VanSledright, 2001). Empathy has been defined as a process of understanding people in the past by contextualizing their actions (Barton & Levstik, 2004). An alternate conceptualization, put forward by Lee and Ashby (2001), identifies historical empathy as "where we get to when we know what past agents thought, what goals they may have been seeking, and how they saw their situation, and can connect all this with what they did" (p. 24). In an attempt at further clarification, Foster (1999) writes that historical empathy should be carefully distinguished from identification, imagination, or sympathy.

Whether historical empathy is classified as an achievement or a process, there is little debate over its importance. In a study of ninth and tenth grade social studies students, Gehlbach (2004) was able to demonstrate a positive correlation between the ability (and inclination) to accurately take another perspective and social studies achievement and conflict resolution skills. Barton and Levstik (2004) argue strongly for the development of historical empathy in the classroom as a means of preparing students to be effective citizens of a pluralist democracy. Democratic deliberation depends on the ability to recognize that other people's values, attitudes, beliefs, and intentions may be different from one's own and that these perspectives have potential merit. Furthermore, they write that "if students are going to take part in meaningful public discussion, they need to understand that differing perspectives are a normal part of social interaction, not an aberration to be suppressed or overcome" (p. 216). Finally, students' recognition of the historical context of their own perspectives is crucial to meaningful communication with others.

Empathy, perhaps more than any other aspect of historical understanding, is a particularly difficult achievement, because it runs counter to many natural, common sense ways of thinking. Barton and Levstik (2004) found in their work with fourth and fifth graders that students have a tendency to believe that historical agents' attitudes, beliefs, and prac-

tices were a result of their lack of intelligence. Lee and Ashby (2001) report that another significant hindrance to students' ability to empathize historically is their need to explain by providing justifications, even those that are simply made up. By generating reasons to explain the past that are not grounded in evidence, students are in danger of what Wineburg (2001) labels "presentism" — the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present. He explains that this act is not simply a bad habit that some fall into, but a "psychological condition at rest, a way of thinking that comes quite naturally" (p. 19).

Some researchers claim that historical empathy is essentially impossible to fully achieve. VanSledright (2001) points out that every student of history is influenced by historical "positionality" which he describes as "the current, socioculturally permeated deportment or stance any historical thinker brings to the task of making sense of the past" (p. 57). This "positionality" impinges on, invades, and configures the information processed. Riley (1998) makes a similar point in saying that "the individual researcher-student brings to the task at hand a set of unique experiences," which assist in the construction of knowledge but also make it impossible to access history on its own terms (p. 32).

Despite the existence of serious obstacles to students' development of historical empathy, a number of studies have produced encouraging findings about young people's ability and propensity to engage in this cognitive process. Davis (2001) observed fifth and twelfth graders participating in empathy-developing activities and concluded that, while the two groups functioned with different levels of sophistication, both were able to gain additional knowledge and make progress in their appreciation of different perspectives. Downey (1994) evaluated fifth grade students' ability to take on the perspectives of American Indians and Spanish colonists and found that they were only somewhat successful at capturing a historic outlook. Their marginal success, he suggests, was most likely a result of the preceding instruction, which focused primarily on the details of what people *did* and not on *how* they did it or how they *thought about* doing it. Downey advises that "instruction that has historical thinking as a goal should place greater emphasis on the underlying structures and processes of everyday life" (p. 23).

Foster and Yeager (1998) have outlined four interrelated phases that they propose should be included in any exercise of empathy. First, students should be introduced to a historical event that necessitates the analysis of human action. Second, students must acquire background knowledge of the event through research into both chronology and context. Third, students should analyze a variety of historical evidence related to the event under study. In order to successfully engage in this stage, students must be able to "consider issues such as utility, audience, language, perspective, and bias when examining evidence" (Yeager et al., 1998, p. 20). Finally, students should use the evidence they have to draw historical conclusions and construct a perspective of the past. Riley (1998) extends this framework by stressing that an exercise in historical empathy should also include an examination of "the actions and words of ordinary individuals related to the historic moment in question" (p. 33).

Multiple studies have evaluated how the availability and use of different types of historical sources influences students' ability to empathize historically. In an investigation conducted by Yeager and her co-researchers (1998), two groups of students were given different sources to study Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb: one a textbook, the other a variety of historical documents such as first-hand accounts, mem-

oirs, etc. The resulting student work indicated that those who had many sources at their disposal were able to construct insightful, accurate narratives that also incorporated their own perspectives on the bombing. Building on this exploratory study, Doppen (2000) found that providing investigative questions along with varied primary and secondary sources encouraged students to focus on the evidence, rather than being swayed by emotions.

Through classroom observations of two high school social studies teachers' units on the Civil Rights movement in the United States and interviews with students in each class, Grant (2001) explored the relationship between teachers' practices and students' understandings of history. His findings indicate that students taught almost exclusively through lecture do not have an understanding of the multiple perspectives that existed at a given time. Conversely, students who participate in a variety of educational exercises, including simulations, are given access to different viewpoints, and most importantly recognize the value of understanding multiple perspectives.

Recent literature makes a strong case for the promotion of historical empathy in the social studies classroom and creates a need for more empirical work on the subject. While a number of studies have examined the impact that access to varied historical sources and different types of instruction can have on students' historical thinking, less attention has been paid to the significance of the format in which students are required to communicate their ideas about the past. The question remains: Does the manner in which students are asked to express their historical conclusions influence their ability to display empathy? While students of history are often invited to convey their historical interpretations in a host of ways (performing skits, creating documentaries, or constructing exhibits — to name just a few), perhaps the most commonly assigned exercise is a written one. As the most visible product of historical reasoning, writing is fundamental to the study of history. Monte-Sano (2006) asserts that "in constructing historical arguments, writing is often inextricable from thinking and working with evidence" (p. 2). The connection between claim and evidence, frequently elusive in other modes of presentation, is most clearly demonstrated through writing.

It is not surprising then that essays, as well as first-person narratives which invite students to write from the perspective of a past historical agent, are ubiquitous in the social studies classroom. Downey (1994) claims that the latter form of writing assignments provide "an easy entrée for the more systematic introduction of historical thinking into the school curriculum, as teachers are familiar with the genre and students seem to like doing it" (p. 4). This observation certainly resonated with my own experience as an eighth grade social studies teacher; however, it left me wondering what influence, if any, the particular design of a writing task might have on students' historical thinking. This curiosity led to the formation of the following research question: Which type of writing assignment is more likely to encourage the display of historical empathy — text written in the first person from the perspective of a historical agent or text written in the third person about the perspectives of historical agents?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by a synthesis of theory that has resulted from previous research on students' development of historical empathy and, more generally, on students' historical thinking. Students bring to the study of history a set of assumptions and ways of making sense of the world — some of which hinder their

ability to understand the past (Lee & Ashby, 2001; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). The nature of the instruction that students encounter in the classroom can impact their ability to think historically. Factors such as the depth and breadth of study, the format and structure of learning, and the nature of resources made available are all significant to students' development of historical thinking (Doppen, 2000; Downey, 1994; Grant, 2001; Yeager et al., 1998). Instruction that manages each of these variables effectively has the potential to move students along the continuum from less to more contextualized thought. Students' work, as well as their comments about their own work, can provide evidence of their understanding and skills (Monte-Sano, 2006).

Research Methods

My investigation included each of the activities which are considered typical of action research: design of a research question, formation of an action plan, and collection, analysis, and interpretation of multiple data sources (Johnston, 2006; Mills, 2003). I employed qualitative research methods in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation — middle school students' display of historical empathy. The design of this inquiry reflects the assumption that this phenomenon can be most effectively examined in the context in which it most commonly occurs: the classroom. Furthermore, insight into this phenomenon was sought from the perspectives of the students themselves, as expressed in their own words. The steps of data collection and analysis described below were guided by a desire to preserve this emic perspective.

Context

This study was conducted at a middle school that accommodates approximately 650 students in grades five through eight. The school is located in a rural community near a major university; many of the students that attend have a parent(s) in academia, while others' families are in private industry, social services, and other occupations. The participants in this study were students from four separate sections of an eighth grade American history course that I taught. Each of these four classes ranged in size from 17-22 students. A total of 80 students — 39 females and 41 males — participated in the study. These students, aged 12-14, came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Latino (n=1), Persian (n=2), Black (n=4), Asian (n=12), and White (n=61). They were grouped heterogeneously in the classroom and therefore ranged academically from gifted to severely disabled. The classes met three times a week for two 90-minute blocks and one 45-minute block.

At the time of this study, the eighth grade American History curriculum was organized into eight topical units: (a) American Revolution, (b) American Government, (c) Westward Expansion, (d) Industrial Revolution, (e) Reform Movements, (f) Civil War, (g) Immigration, and (h) Decades of the Twentieth Century. The fourth unit, the Industrial Revolution, was chosen as the backdrop for this study for two reasons. First, the topic is one that invites analysis of human action. Second, because the unit was situated in the middle of the year, students had significant previous experience with primary source work. They were fairly comfortable considering such issues as utility, audience, language, perspective, and bias when examining various forms of historical evidence.

Data Collection

Over a period of two weeks, data were gathered in two main forms: student writing samplings and student interviews. In an effort to "strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings," each form of data was collected on two separate occasions (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29). What follows is a detailed description of the instruction students received in connection with this study and the process by which data were collected from them.

To begin, all of the students received a brief introduction to the topic of the American Industrial Revolution by reading an assigned chapter in their textbook, *The American Nation*. They also viewed a short film which addressed the development of interchangeable parts, the establishment of the factory system in Lowell, Massachusetts, and some of the broader changes brought about by these industrial developments (i.e., the mass production of goods, urbanization, and the development of new methods of transportation). Students were then asked to analyze a variety of primary sources while considering the question, "Why did young women choose to leave farm life to find work in the mills?" During one class period, students read several pages from two separate diaries — one written by a young man and the other by a young women — in order to gain insight into the experiences of a young person living on a New England farm in the early 1800s. In the next session, students worked together in small groups to study a collection of six documents (see Table 1). These sources were accompanied by an analysis guide, which provided questions specific to each document. For example, after reading a description of Lowell, Massachusetts, written in the *New England Gazetteer* in 1839, students were asked to identify the purpose of the document and to consider which aspects of the description might have been attractive to a young woman at the time. All of the primary source activities required students to work in pairs or in groups of four to five participants so that they might have the opportunity to think about the sources in different ways through discussion.

Following these activities, students from two of the four classes involved in this study were asked to consider the perspective of a fifteen-year-old girl, living in the first half of the 19th century, who had just recently decided to leave her family's New England farm and travel to Lowell, Massachusetts, to work in the mills. They were instructed to write a one- to two-page letter that such a girl might have written to her cousin explaining why she has made this decision. Students from the other two classes were asked to write a one- to two-page essay explaining why many young women, in the first half of the 19th century, chose to leave farm life to find work in the mills. Rubrics, very similar in format, were provided to the students for each assignment.

After these assignments had been collected, twelve students were interviewed about their work. Five of the students who were interviewed had completed the first-person letter assignment and the other seven students had written the third-person essay. The average overall social studies grades of the students interviewed ranged from A to C. During the interviews, students were asked a series of questions concerning their writing process and the appeal of the assignment. Students' responses were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Having completed one of the two initial writing assignments, students in all four sections were asked to examine another set of documents (seven in total) in an attempt to understand the experience of those who worked in the mills and lived in the company boarding house (see Table 1). As in the previ-

ous lesson, the sources were accompanied by an analysis guide with specific questions for each document, and students worked in groups to make sense of the material. The final lesson of this unit addressed early labor reform efforts that began in Lowell, Massachusetts. After reviewing a time line of key events, students examined a petition addressed to the Massachusetts Legislature requesting a 10-hour workday and a series of testimonies given to the Massachusetts Legislative Committee on Manufactures regarding conditions in the Lowell Mills. Students were asked to list any arguments, for and against the ten-hour movement that they could infer from these documents.

Table 1. ***Primary Sources Analyzed by Students***

Topic	Documents Used
Farm life	▪ excerpted diary of Catherine Cabot Hall (1830) ▪ excerpted diary of Noah Blake (1805)
Appeal of the city	▪ article from the *Plattsburg Republican* ▪ letter from the Superintendent of the Merrimack Manufacturing Co. to Jesse Huse Esq. (1847) ▪ advertisement for Merrimack Co. Power Loom Jeans (c. 1830) ▪ description of Lowell, MA, from the *New England Gazetteer* (1839) ▪ drawing of the Lowell Shopping District (1856) ▪ cloth label—Hamilton Mills (c. 1860)
Factory and boarding-house life	▪ "Letters from Susan-Letter First" from the *Lowell Offering* (1844) ▪ Boardinghouse Regulations, Middlesex Co. (c. 1846) ▪ letter from Barilla Taylor to her parents (1844) ▪ Regulations for the Hamilton Manufacturing Co. (1848) ▪ "Time Table of the Lowell Mills" (1851) ▪ Hamilton Manufacturing Co. Records (1843-1846) ▪ Bill of Mortality for the City of Lowell, MA (1846)
Early labor reform	▪ Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature (1845) ▪ excerpted testimonies given to Massachusetts Legislative Committee on Manufactures (1845)

Following these inquiry lessons, students from the two sections who had previously completed the letter writing assignment were asked to write a one- to two-page essay explaining why many Massachusetts mill workers supported the Ten-Hour Movement in the mid 1800s. Students in the other two sections, who had previously written an essay, were asked to consider the perspective of a teenage mill worker in Lowell in the year 1845. They were instructed to write a one- to two-page letter — such as a teenager living in that time period might have written explaining why he or she supports the ten-hour movement — to the editor of the *Lowell Courier*. As with the initial writing assignment, rubrics were provided to convey clear expectations for both tasks.

A different set of twelve students was selected to be interviewed about their work on the second writing assignment. This time, six of the students who were interviewed had

written a third-person essay, and the other six students had completed the first-person letter assignment. Fifty percent of all the students interviewed in both rounds were male, and fifty percent were female. The same interview questions were used in this second round of interviews as was used in the first.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis concentrated initially on the 153 student writing samples collected. A set of codes was designed and used to identify evidence of historical empathy, or the absence of it, in each piece of student work (see Table 2). Next, the student interviews were carefully reviewed several times, before a code was created for each new and distinct response. Similar and reoccurring responses were assigned the same code. Interview questions two and three focus on students' writing process. One set of codes was constructed to identify the manner in which students decided upon which points to make in their writing. Another set of codes was created to categorize the ways in which students used historical evidence in their writing (see Table 3). Interview questions one and four address a similar subject, that of the appeal to students of first-person and third-person writing assignments (see Table 4). Therefore, another set of codes was created in order to organize the students' expressed reasons for liking or disliking the different writing tasks.

Findings

The findings of this study offer some evidence to suggest that the manner in which students are asked to express their historical conclusions can significantly encourage or inhibit their display of empathy. First-person writing samples were found to be more likely to include inferential thinking. The ability to draw conclusions based on inference has the potential to contribute to empathetic regard but only to the degree to which it takes the available historical evidence into account. The first-person narratives also proved more likely to invite decontextualized thinking about the past. On the other hand, the process of writing an essay appeared to focus students' attention on the accuracy of information, even as it detracted from their propensity to make inferences.

Inferential Thinking: Promise and Peril

The findings provided by Table 2 reveal that in many ways the first-person and the third-person writing assignments yielded very similar outcomes. The two different assignments were almost entirely successful at prompting students to provide explanations for the actions of historical agents. Similarly, both assignments were equally successful at inducing students to form historical arguments grounded in the evidence available. Furthermore, students who completed the first-person writing assignment were only slightly more likely to support their arguments with factually accurate details drawn from the evidence than those who completed the third-person writing assignment. The similar results of these two different writing assignments are not surprising, because all students were given access to the same variety of sources and participated in the same guided-inquiry activities prior to writing. The design of these activities was based upon the findings of previous research on student development of historical empathy. For example, the student inquiry included the four interrelated phases described by Foster and Yeager (1998); based on Riley's (1998) recommendation, the student work focused on the actions and words of ordinary individuals in the past. The results of this study, then, confirm these previous findings on the best

instructional practices for encouraging the development of historical empathy (Doppen, 2000; Downey, 1994; Foster & Yeager, 1998; Riley, 1998).

Table 2. ***Results of Writing Samples Analysis***

Code	1st person		3rd person	
Provides explanation for past actions	100%		98%	
Main points of explanation are drawn from the evidence	all	some	all	some
	75%	24%	74%	24%
Specific information / supporting details are drawn from the evidence	all	some	all	some
	51%	45%	43%	45%
Includes references to / descriptions of specific sources used in class	30%		43%	
Includes inferences that can be supported by the evidence	96%		81%	
Includes inferences that cannot be supported by the evidence	76%		62%	
Includes statements that require hindsight (1st-person only)	12%			
Includes references to student's and/or reader's thoughts / preferences (3rd-person only)			20%	
Includes use of the present tense (3rd-person only)			38%	

Although comparison of the first- and third-person writing samples reveals many similarities, there are some noteworthy differences, which can shed light on the ways in which these assignments impact the development of historical empathy. In order to cultivate historical empathy, students must go beyond the collection and organization of factual data from the sources. It is critical that students make connections between the fragmented pieces of evidence available and begin to draw conclusions in an effort to reconstruct the mindset of those people whom they are studying. The data in Table 2 indicates that students who completed a first-person writing assignment were more likely to make inferences (some of which were rooted in the evidence and some which were not) and include these in their work. This information is helpful, but what is difficult to quantify are the differences in the types of deductions students make in the different assignments. In order to highlight how the inferences made in the first person are unlike those made in the third person, it is necessary to look at actual examples of student work. The following excerpts are taken from writing samples in which students attempted to identify young women's motivations for leaving farm life for the mills.

Third-person narrative

These recruiters told the women about how much they would be paid, what kind of work was being offered, how long it is, where they will stay, and

what is expected of the employees. These professional recruiters were hard to refuse when the girls had never left the farm. They played a big role in why the women wanted to go to the mills, and without the recruiters, not as many women would be in the cities working in the factories. (Neha)

First-person narrative

I was visited by one of the nicest men I have ever met. His name was Jesse Huse Esq., and he ... told us that he could loan me money to get to the mills. I don't have the money to get to the mills, and he said that I could pay the loan back when it is the best time for me. I have never been able to travel, mainly because I didn't have enough money, and now that he has given me a loan, I can go to Lowell, which is a new place to me. The mill owners must be very kind to give loans to future workers, which probably means that the work there will be easy and the boarding houses will be very high quality. If the mill owners are so kind, he would let us skip work if we are tired, sick or just want to go, which makes life a lot easier. (Beth)

The two students responsible for these two excerpts have drawn essentially the same conclusion. Based on the evidence made available to them, they have concluded that the work of mill recruiters was a key factor in many young women's decisions to leave their homes for the mills. Both of the excerpts describe the type of information that a recruiter would provide, but the first-person excerpt goes further in that it makes inferences about the impressions a recruiter's words or demeanor might have given a young women concerning her future experience at the mills. The following are two more excerpts taken from writing samples in which students sought to identify factory workers' reasons for supporting the Ten-Hour Movement.

Third-person narrative

Almost all of those that testified at the 1845 hearings complained that they did not have time to exercise their bodies, minds, or religion. At the time of the complaints there were schools open at night to educate those at the mills, but many people worked so late they did not have the free hours to attend. (Shanirah)

First-person narrative

When the recruiter came to visit my town he said we would work for awhile then have time for our own activities. What could I do after I work a thirteen hour shift I would be too tired to have any fun at all. They had advertised shopping and socializing and other activities. I'm stuck in a building all day long either sitting or standing and doing nothing with my mind ....There is no mental freedom time for any of us. I believed them for what they told just to find out there was a consequence. (Nick)

Once again, these two excerpts, although taken from two different types of assignments, make a similar assertion. They present the argument that many mill workers participated in the Ten-Hour Movement in response to their lack of time to engage in educational and recreational activities outside of the mills. Both offer examples of the types of pastimes young women might have participated in with a shortened workday, yet the latter excerpt makes some inferences that the former does

not. The first-person passage conveys a sentiment of frustration that cannot be detected in the third-person passage. The first-person excerpt also goes so far as to assume that some of the young women's frustrations might have stemmed from a feeling of being lied to by mill recruiters. Both examples suggest that the first-person writing assignment provides students with an opportunity to explore the thinking of historical agents in a way that an essay assignment might not.

These passages also reveal that this exploration can be detrimental to students' development of historical empathy. Both of the first-person excerpts contain assertions that cannot be clearly supported by the historical sources provided to the students. For example, there is no evidence to support the contention made in Beth's writing that young women, contemplating a move to Lowell, expected their future employers to be kind and lenient. There is also no documentation to support the claim made in Nick's writing that mill recruiters made promises or guarantees about the recreational activities available to young women in the city. Unsupported claims such as these are certainly present in the third-person writing samples but to a lesser extent.

Inviting Decontextualized Thinking

It is worthwhile to consider what about the first-person assignment might tempt students to go beyond the evidence in their assertions. Perhaps the best way to approach this question is to examine the other major source of data collected in this study —students' answers to interview questions. Students who were interviewed about their work were asked to describe how they decided on the main points they would make in their writing.

Table 3. ***Student Responses Regarding Their Writing Process***

Interview Question	Statements about 1st-Person Writing Assignment	Statements about 3rd-Person Writing Assignment
How did you decide what main points to include in your writing?	27% considered which points were personally the most interesting or appealing 27% could not articulate why they chose the points they included 9% considered which points he/she knew the most about 9% considered which points came up the most in the primary sources 9% considered which points were the most important historically 9% considered which points were easiest/most fun to write about/support 9% considered which were the main points, the most important	31% considered which were the main points, the most important 31% considered which points were easiest/ most fun to write about / support 15% considered which points were personally the most interesting or appealing 15% considered which points came up the most in the primary sources 8% could not articulate why they chose the points they included

How did you use the sources we have analyzed in class in your writing?	27% referenced/described specific sources in the writing 27% to obtain specific information about the topic to put into my writing 27% to generate main points/general ideas/ primary reasons 9% to develop an understanding of past historical agents 9% to consider my own personal reaction to them 9% to gain general knowledge about the topic	40% to obtain specific information about the topic to put into my writing 40% to gain general knowledge about the topic 20% to generate main points/general ideas/ primary reasons 20% referenced/described specific sources in the writing

Table 3 reveals that 27% of the students who completed a first-person assignment could not articulate why they made the points they made. Another 27% of the students explained that they chose to write about those points, which were personally interesting and/or appealing. Several student responses to this effect are provided below.

Mike: *I chose some of the three major ones that made a big difference, like the sicknesses and injuries.*

Interviewer: *Did you pick the ones that you thought were most serious or the ones that you thought people in the past thought were most serious?*

Mike: *The ones that I thought were the most significant.*

Olivia: *I just picked out the most important things that I would think if I was a girl. The important things to me would be the pay and everything.*

Erin: *From the different articles and what we did, I chose — because I'm about the same age — things that would interest me, like the shops or the church — I don't go to church — but it would be something familiar to me and it would comfort me, and the money and how they offer room and board for you and food. Also it's more independent, which I wouldn't really want now necessarily, but I can understand if you have been working on the farm your whole life and taking care of your siblings and helping all the time and not really going to school, why you would want to be more independent.*

These responses indicate that students who completed a first-person writing assignment were inclined to make sense of the sources in terms of their own feelings, preferences, etc. When questioned directly about it, Mike is quick to admit that his own opinions were foremost in his mind as he organized his writing. Mike and Olivia appear to take it for granted that all girls of a similar age think and

are motivated in the same way, regardless of their place in history. Erin bases her historical conclusions exclusively on what she can visualize herself doing. It does not occur to these students that the past peoples they are studying might think entirely differently from themselves, even if they are the same age and gender. Instead, the students (perhaps without even being aware of it) do what is most comfortable for them in that they analyze and explain past actions through their own eyes or from their own perspective.

Table 4. ***Student Responses Regarding the Appeal of the Writing Assignments***

Interview Question	Statements about 1st-Person Writing Assignment	Statements about 3rd-Person Writing Assignment
Did you like completing this assignment? Why or why not?	100% like	61% like
	45% allows for consideration and expression of personal feelings 27% opportunity to learn or think more about the topic 18% enjoyable way to learn 9% could not articulate reason	38% an opportunity to learn or think more about the topic 7% good way to demonstrate or synthesize knowledge 7% possessed the content knowledge needed to complete it 7% allows for consideration and expression of personal feelings 7% enjoyable way to learn
	0% dislike	39% dislike
		15% uncomfortable or struggle with format 7% lacking the content knowledge needed to complete it 7% find the topic boring 7% just stating facts
If given a choice between a 1st- or 3rd-person writing assignment, which would you choose? Why?	58% like	42% like
	54% allows for consideration and expression of personal feelings 4% comfortable with the format	13% possessed the content knowledge necessary to complete it 13% just stating the facts 8% comfortable with the format 8% can include various opinions, more information

This observation is further supported by students' comments in response to interview questions related to the appeal of either assignment (see Table 4). All of the students who completed a first-person writing task stated that they liked the assignment. When asked to provide a reason for their approval, 45% responded that it afforded an opportunity to consider and express their personal thoughts and feelings. Several of their responses are provided below.

Olivia:	*I liked it because instead of just studying from a textbook, like facts and everything, you actually got to pretend like you were a girl that age set in that time and everything.*
Sarah:	*Yeah I actually thought it was kind of cool, just so we could put ourselves in the place of a teenager working at the mills.*
Dillon:	*I thought it was ok, because it was interesting.*
Interviewer:	*What was interesting?*
Dillon:	*You could come up with your own reasons why you would support the ten-hour movement.*

When asked to choose between a first-person and a third-person assignment, 58% of the students questioned selected the former. All but one of these students explained their preference in terms of a desire to consider and express their own thoughts and opinions in their writing.

Erin:	*I think the first one, because...you could kind of put your own opinion in it, and I think it is easier if you are able to have a bias or more of your own opinion on it. It's just easier for me to do it that way.*
Dillon:	*I think I would choose the first one because the way you could write it is like what you would do at the time...*
Seth:	*The letter. In an essay you have three reasons and an introduction. In a letter you just tell what you feel about what's going on.*
Interviewer:	*Is it what you feel or is it what someone else felt?*
Seth:	*What I felt.*

All of these comments suggest that many students who wrote about the past in the first person felt quite comfortable contemplating what their own reaction might have been had they lived in the time period of which they were writing. It is as if they thought the assignment required them to "pretend" they were living in the past, to put themselves in the place of another, or to "come up with their own reasons" to explain past actions. In fact, the instructions asked them to do nothing more than "consider the perspective" of an individual from another time. The students describe the process of writing a first-person history as "interesting," "cool," and "easier" than writing in an essay format. It is quite possible that they found the first-person writing task preferable and simpler, because they understood it to require less careful analysis of the sources.

Getting the Facts Right

Can it be concluded, then, that the third-person writing assignment encouraged students to rely more heavily on the evidence in the formation of their historical conclusions? The data in Table 2 provides some evidence to support this assertion. While there are fewer inferences made overall in the third-person writing samples, the inferences which are present are more likely to be drawn from the evidence. Table 2 also documents students who completed a third-person assignment directly referenced specific documents studied in class more frequently in their work. This inclination to describe or cite certain primary documents could be an indication of a key element of historical empathy — students' reliance on the available sources to generate their explanations of the past.

Additional information about students' perceptions of, and approaches to, the writing process comes from the interviews (see Table 3). Students were asked to describe how they decided which points to make in their third-person writing, and several of their responses are as follows:

Jared:	*I just took a look at the notes from the class before — the t-chart — and kind of took some off of there.*
Interviewer:	*Were there more than three?*
Jared:	*Yeah, but I just picked three for the essay.*
Interviewer:	*How did you pick those three?*
Jared:	*Basically the ones that seemed the most important — like how the working conditions were poor, the hours were tough, and the wages were low.*
Mitchell:	*I just chose the three biggest, more important reasons — the overall topic of health, not just bad sleeping habits.*
Interviewer:	*How did you decide what was the most important?*
Mitchell:	*Really just the easiest.*
Julia:	*I looked at the chart that we made and compared farm life and city life and chose the ones I thought I could back up the best.*
Josh:	*I picked the ones that were easiest to describe.*

The majority of the students responded with one of two basic answers. Some, like Jared, simply explained that they included in their writing the points that were the most important. It is difficult to determine whether they are referring to those points that *they* personally think are most significant or to those points that they believe were historically most significant. Other students — like Mitchell, Julia, and Josh — claim that they considered which points were the easiest to write about or support with evidence. These responses indicate that the students who completed third-person writing assignments were primarily focused on getting it right. In other words, they were not nearly as interested in making creative inferences and expressing their own personal thoughts as they were in making those points, which might be considered most important or are easiest to write about in a thorough manner.

This can also be seen in students' remarks on the appeal of the third-person writing assignment (see Table 4). Forty-two percent of those who were interviewed claimed to prefer writing about the past in the third person over the alternative. As the examples below demonstrate, their explanations for this preference focus on their possession of adequate content knowledge to complete the task and the opportunity afforded by an essay assignment to concentrate on presenting factual data.

Jared: *Probably the second one, because it isn't so much emotion. It's more just facts in there.*

Mike: *I think the second one, because for me it's harder to put myself inside the position of others, but I can just give you the facts and everything.*

Some students seem to think that when completing a third-person writing task, they are relieved of some of the responsibilities inherent in a first-person assignment. In their comments on essay writing, there is almost no mention of forming opinions, drawing conclusions, etc. Rather there is a heavy emphasis in students' remarks (both positive and negative) on presenting factual information properly. This understanding of the assignment can have some positive outcomes in terms of students' development of historical empathy in that it can encourage a close review of the sources. Also, there appears to be less temptation to be distracted from the evidence by an exploration of personal feelings and opinions. At the same time, it is quite possible that third-person writing assignments can detract from the development of historical empathy in that they invite the misunderstanding that historical inquiry requires nothing more than the compilation of factual information. In order to develop historical empathy, it is critical that students are encouraged to explore the thoughts, beliefs, and motivation of past people's lives.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that the final assignment students complete, as part of a larger exercise in historical inquiry, is just one of many important variables contributing to their development of historical empathy. Students' abilities to display empathy in any type of historical writing task are directly linked to the type of instruction they receive prior to the assignment. Students must be allowed to explore historical events that invite analysis of human action. They should have the opportunity to examine a wide range of historical evidence related to the event under study and be guided through careful scrutiny of these sources. And yet, even with these elements in place, it should not be overlooked that the manner in which students are asked to express their historical conclusions can significantly encourage or inhibit their display of empathy.

The evidence produced by this investigation supports the assertion that a first-person writing assignment can both contribute to, and detract from, the development of historical empathy. According to Barton and Levstik (2004), historical empathy involves "using the perspectives of people in the past to explain their actions" (p. 208). A first-person writing task does invite students to consider the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of past agents in order to contextualize their actions. It can empower students to speculate and make inferences in order to explain the events of the past. At the same time, the explanations offered in their work are not always the result of the careful examination of evidence that empathy requires. In composing their first-person histories, students frequently appear to rely on their own imaginations in order to make inferences. When completing this type of assignment, students can easily fall prey to "presentism" by viewing the past through the lens of the present (Wineburg, 2001, p. 19). They fail to recognize that "historical empathy demands an intuitive sense of a bygone era and

an implicit recognition that the past is different from the present" (Foster, 1999, p. 19). A "sense of otherness" — perhaps the most fundamental aspect of empathy — is too often missing from their first-person histories (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 210).

In contrast, when writing a history in the third person, students appear to avoid some of the pitfalls presented by the first-person writing assignment. For example, they seem to have a lesser tendency toward personal identification with the mindsets of past agents. Rarely do these students express their needs, or inclinations, to share the motivations and feelings of the people they write about. In general, those who write in the third person seem more disposed to the "cautious inquiry and close examination of available evidence" that empathy requires (Foster 1999, p. 19). Students reference the sources often in their writing and in their comments about the writing process. At the same time, their use of the evidence concentrates on the collection of factually accurate information. Empathy "involves some ability to infer from given knowledge an explanation of certain actions" (Foster & Yeager, 1998, p. 2). In so far as it discourages this sort of adductive and inferential thinking, a third-person writing assignment has the potential to inhibit a student's development of historical empathy.

The findings of this study provide valuable information for educators who desire to foster the development of empathy in their social studies classrooms. It is useful for teachers to be aware of the possibilities and perils presented by different types of commonly used writing assignments and to plan their curriculum and instruction accordingly. Perhaps it is productive for instructors to design exercises in historical empathy as a two-part process. Initially, students need a safe environment to make inferences and draw their own conclusions. Some students have been so trained by their previous educational experiences to "find the right answer," that they struggle with the task of stepping into the territory of speculation. These students need to be rewarded for their attempts to draw their own conclusions and should not be penalized for making assertions that further study might reveal to be false. For this purpose, it would seem that a first-person writing assignment is the most appropriate tool.

Of course, if empathy is the objective, it is critical that students are educated in the importance of rooting historical conclusions in the evidence. Students should be given the opportunity to revisit the inferences they have made in order to evaluate their validity in terms of the historical sources. Modeling and explicit instruction are a must if students are to become adept at supporting their claims with evidence. For this purpose, the third-person writing assignment might be most suitable. No matter what type of writing assignment is assigned, it is useful for teachers to be candid with their students about the pitfalls the task might present. This is likely to assist students in achieving the ultimate goal: a balance between careful analysis of historical evidence and creative, inferential thinking, both of which are necessary to understand and explain the past on its own terms.

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