

Walk in My Shoes: Developing Empathy in Middle Schoolers

by **Catherine A. Atkinson**, Ed.D

Catherine Atkinson has taught 7th grade world history for 25 years in Garden Grove Unified School District. She earned a Doctorate in Education with a specialization in Technology Integration in K16 Education from Johns Hopkins University. Catherine's research interests and publications focus on ways to integrate meaningful learning with technology in K12 and teacher education.

Twitter: [@Ms_Cabiness](https://twitter.com/Ms_Cabiness)

Website: livingthelearningcurve.com

The role of a middle school history teacher encompasses more than simply teaching academic content and skills. Aside from teaching students about events and people from a specific time period, we have always shouldered responsibility to teach students communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity skills. However, in recent years, it has become apparent that students need support in furthering the development of social and emotional skills. In fact, schools and districts have formally adopted goals that explicitly address personal skills development for students which is not a bad thing for those of us who teach in the social sciences.

Teaching middle schoolers about historical events and figures from the past provides teachers the opportunity to introduce and support the development of social and emotional skills, more specifically the development of historical empathy. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as the “process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set

and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019). Historical empathy is defined as the “ability of perceive history from the perspectives of those in the past” (Colby, 2008, p. 60). The increased proliferation of social and emotional learning programs across school districts align to recent research that suggests a marked improvement of “students’ academic performance and general school performance” when social and emotional learning needs are addressed (Hardiman, 2012, p. 50).

One only has to look at the media to find examples of the lack of empathy for people’s perspectives. The combative nature of exchanges and lack of civil discourse among adults are creating an environment in which it is becoming increasingly difficult for one to honestly express thoughts and questions (Pew Research Center, 2019). Students are not only witnesses to these types of exchanges, but in some cases may mimic this behavior among their own peer groups. As environmental factors play a role in how students view themselves and the world around

them, educators need to help students develop sense-making or metacognitive skills to better understand the world around them (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

The increased diversity in schools with students from a variety of ethnicities further substantiates the need to help students develop empathy. Banks et al., (2001) contend that “schools can make a significant difference in the lives of students, and they are key to maintaining a free and democratic society” (p. 197). However, this is dependent on developing students who are thoughtful and vested in civic life—defined as the ability to respectfully interact and participate with people who have differing personal, cultural, political, and religious beliefs (Banks, 2016). CASEL defines social awareness as the “ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others [including those] from diverse backgrounds and cultures” (Gehlbach & Hough, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, as an educator, I have made it a goal to help my students develop historical empathy. The hope is that as they learn how it feels to be in someone else’s shoes that they can transfer that knowledge to their current life.

Practicing Empathy with Emojis

One of the standards for world history includes tracing the “origins of Islam and the life and teachings of Muhammad” (California Department of Education, 1998, p. 28). Students are first given the task to read the text, watch a video, and then complete a cloze assignment (Taylor, 1953) using context clues and prior knowledge. From the cloze assignment, students are then asked to imagine Muhammad’s thoughts and feelings as the prophet of Islam. Students have to choose emojis that they believe best informs how Muhammad felt during key points in

the story of the origin of Islam. The narrative does not explicitly state emotions, so students are left to make inferences based upon what they have learned through the examination of a variety of media (e.g., print, video, images). Students also create a hashtag from Muhammad’s perspective that sums up one of the emojis used.

The purpose of having students make inferences of Muhammad’s thoughts and feelings based upon the story is to provide them an opportunity to put themselves in Muhammad’s shoes. The context of the time period was not necessarily a welcoming one for new religious ideas. An example from the cloze assignment states, “The wealthy merchants and religious leaders opposed Muhammad’s message because they feared he was trying to take away their power. They beat and tortured his followers and threatened to kill Muhammad.” Students who put themselves in Muhammad’s shoes have to interpret how they would feel if a powerful group of people threatened their safety. Some students may feel emboldened to strike back or defend themselves, while others may fear for their life. As Muhammad left no written records, the emojis students use to depict Muhammad’s thoughts and feelings are left up to interpretation (see Appendix A). But the process of placing oneself in the shoes of a historical figure allows students to develop a sense of empathy for those who experience discrimination and persecution.

During the process of this assignment, many students chose to discuss with peers appropriate emojis to convey certain thoughts and feelings. It is this type of academic discourse that is so powerful. Students have to justify to their peers why they believe a particular emoji better depicts a certain emotion. This back and forth between peers allows students to share personal connections to the story, perhaps even about a time when they may have felt bullied or pressured by

their peers. An extension activity could include having students formally reflect on a difficult situation in which empathy from others would have been appreciated.

Sensory Figures and Empathy Development

The use of sensory figures in historical analysis is another activity that can help foster the development of empathy for middle school students. The National Council for History Education's History's Habits of Mind states that students need to develop skills to "perceive past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness" (National Council for History Education, 2016). Situating students within the context of a particular historical time and place is not an easy task. Therefore, when facilitating a lesson where students have to put themselves into the shoes of a historical figure, a general rule of thumb is the more resources students have at their disposal, the better.

Sensory figures involve students perceiving the experience of a historical figure through the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Some teachers give students an outline or template of a figure that the students then have to fill in with appropriate details. Other teachers may use an application like ThingLink so that students can import a picture and use pins to add details for the five senses. An easy tool I use that allows students to collaborate on a sensory figure task is Padlet. Padlet is an online bulletin board that allows the user to customize the background, text, images, and format.

For the sensory figure project on the samurai, students were charged with the task of creat-

ing an inspiration board for a samurai that touches on all of the five senses. The images, text, and overall design needed to convey the aesthetic of a samurai living during the 14th century. Using the context of the time, students are expected to incorporate the Bushido Code and explain the impact it had the samurai way of life. Students created posts in Padlet from the perspective of a samurai preparing for battle: What would a samurai be seeing? Hearing? Smelling? Tasting? And touching? (see Appendix B).

Students are always encouraged to share their work with peers prior to submitting it for teacher feedback. A single-point rubric is used both for reflection and peer review (see Appendix C). Therefore, it is not unusual for students to engage in active discussions around why a samurai might be feeling or smelling certain things. Talking with peers gives students another opportunity to have to justify their point of view from a samurai's perspective. The use of poems, images, videos, and text provide additional information for students to make educated inferences about what a samurai would be sensing prior to battle. Stepping into the shoes of a samurai through the five senses is a unique way for students to imagine what life was like for that particular historical figure in that place and time.

Having students imagine the experiences of a person through the five senses may perhaps help students to not only become more self-aware but also more socially aware of others from different cultures. By analyzing a code of conduct that strictly dictates the life of a samurai, students may also gain a better appreciation for rules and structure as well as the moral tug-of-war between doing what's best for oneself versus the greater good. An extension activity may include having students reflect on a difficult situation using the five senses as a means to better

understand how to regulate their emotions.

Conclusion

Being able to put oneself into the shoes of a historical figure gives students the opportunity to imagine and perhaps even appreciate the difficult decisions historical persons had to make. Giving students the means to practice and develop empathy for people living in the past may

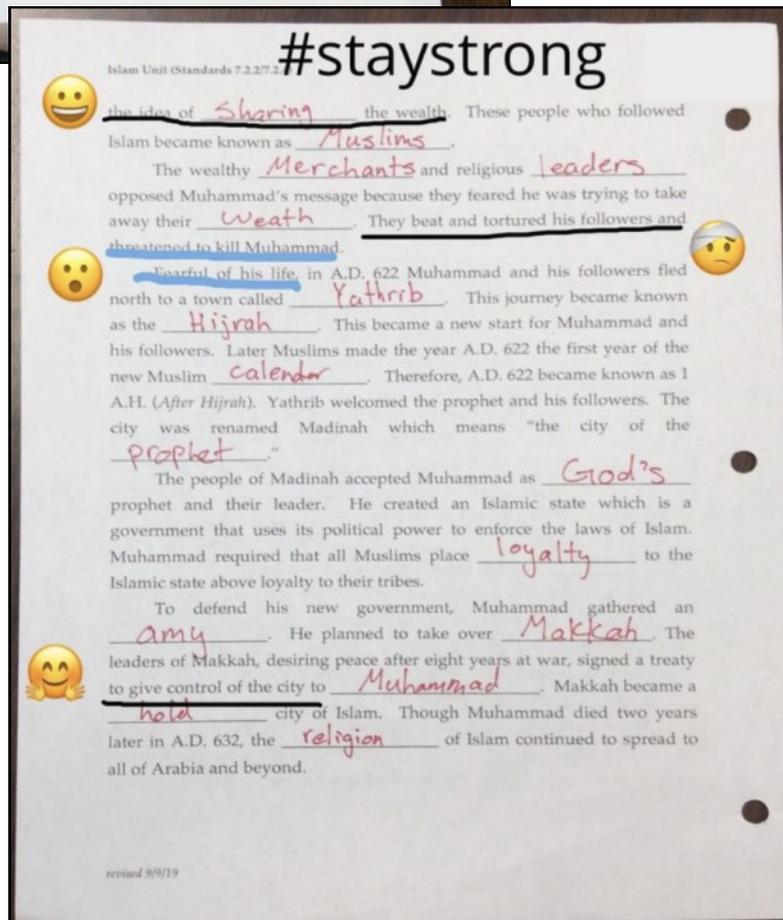
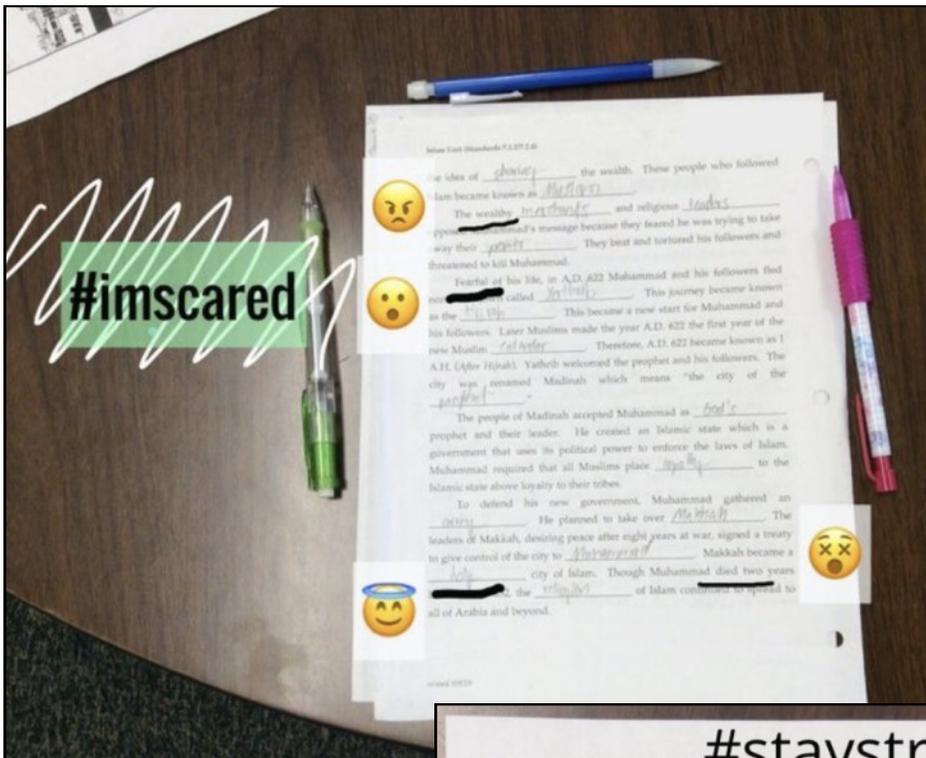
perhaps encourage them to think before they speak. It's easy to judge someone and their actions, especially through the present-day lens. However, walking in a historical figure's shoes and imagining what they may have been thinking or feeling during a particularly difficult or pivotal time may provide students valuable insight into the human psyche. Perhaps it may even prompt them to think twice before making quick judgments of the past and present.

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Appendix A

Student Examples of the Close Assignment



Islam Unit (Standards 7.2.2/7.2.4)

the idea of Sharing the wealth. These people who followed Islam became known as Muslims.

The wealthy merchants and religious leaders opposed Muhammad's message because they feared he was trying to take away their power. They beat and tortured his followers and threatened to kill Muhammad.

Fearful of his life, in A.D. 622 Muhammad and his followers fled north to a town called Yathrib. This journey became known as the Hijrah. This became a new start for Muhammad and his followers. Later Muslims made the year A.D. 622 the first year of the new Muslim calendar. Therefore, A.D. 622 became known as 1 A.H. (After Hijrah) Yathrib welcomed the prophet and his followers. The city was renamed Madinah which means "the city of the prophet."

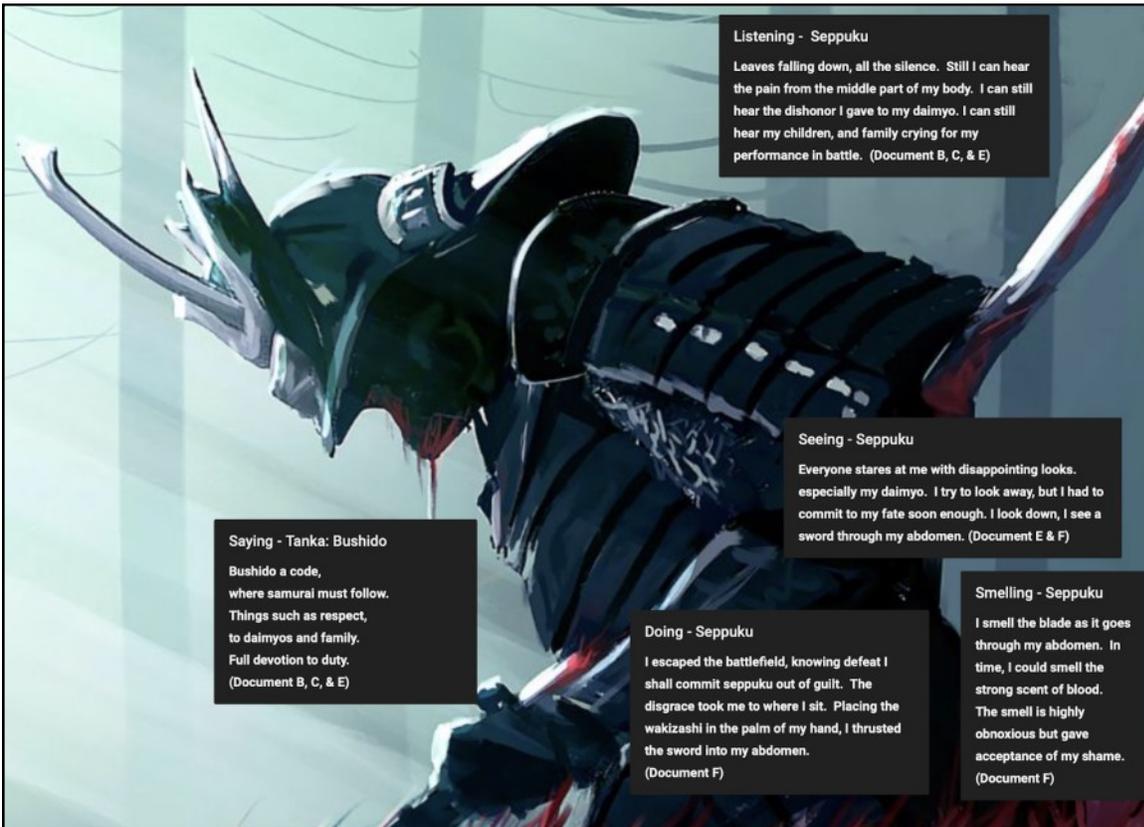
The people of Madinah accepted Muhammad as God's prophet and their leader. He created an Islamic state which is a government that uses its political power to enforce the laws of Islam. Muhammad required that all Muslims place loyalty to the Islamic state above loyalty to their tribes.

To defend his new government, Muhammad gathered an army. He planned to take over Makkah. The leaders of Makkah, desiring peace after eight years at war, signed a treaty to give control of the city to Muhammad. Makkah became a holy city of Islam. Though Muhammad died two years later in A.D. 632, the religion of Islam continued to spread to all of Arabia and beyond.

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Appendix B

Student Examples of the Samurai Sensory Figure Assignment



A Samurai Might Smell

As the battle is occurring gun shots are fired into the air, and as I am fighting off my enemy, the scent of gunpowder fills the air, the smoky, charcoal smell fills my nose and remains that way throughout battle, in the sky, "Swords, dagger, and bow and arrows. (MEMT 305) When all is done, and I walk on the battlefield and the smell of gunpowder still lingers in the air and leaves a trail of EVIDENCE of scent.

A Samurai Might See...

I, a samurai see my own death when I meditate on the topic of my ritual suicide, since death was a subject heavily emphasized on, when it came to inner depth and the morality of death acceptance, and as a CONSEQUENCE I see myself stab my own body and my own blood drip of my blade, I have accepted my death. I also see my enemies across the battlefield and, sense the ambition and pride in my coursing veins, and I will exhibit on that energy on the battle grounds and look at my enemy with lack of fear. "The Way of the Samurai is found in death" (Document G).

A Samurai Might Feel...

When I put on my suit of armor I feel it's heavy exterior and as I put it on I feel the enduring weight on my body inevitably get heavier. And as I step onto the battlefield I feel an INFLUENCE of rush and ambition, pride and I feel as if I must prove my 'discharging loyalty' (Document E), that I am an honorable man. I feel powerful and strong when I am fighting off my enemy.

A Samurai Might Hear...

As I am fighting my heart out on the battle field, I hear a big explosion in the midst of the sky, throughout the battle I could hear were gunshots being shot, bombs being thrust into the air. As if now I am filled with exhaustion as the explosions in the air repeat. During meditation, I VALUE the importance of the subject I am meditating on, and as I focus myself I hear complete silence and no noise whatsoever.

What Does a Samurai Do...

As a samurai it is my duty and SIGNIFICANCE to serve and protect my daimyo and prove utter loyalty and complete honor to the bushido code. "Samurai means to serve." (MEMT 305). I am 'devoted to my master as well as courageous, loyal, and honorable.' (MEMT 305). I train my hardest everyday and use all my effort and my energy in battle. I do whatever it takes to be a noble man and a respectable person. It fight and train extensively not to live but to earn my nobility, because 'One day you are born you die the next.' (Document F).

What Does a Samurai Say...

Haiku : As a Samurai
My actions speak louder than
my words ever could.




Appendix C

Single Point Rubric for Sensory Figure Project

Single Point Rubric ~ Sensory Figure

Describe and define the lord-vassal system (daimyo-samurai)

Owner:

Peer Reviewer:

Criteria/Standards for this Performance	Feedback (+/√/-)	Take it to the Next Level
Includes a minimum of SIX posts		
Appropriate background image		
All five senses are represented		
Correct format & theme for Haiku		
Posts clearly connect to one of the five senses		
Posts demonstrate understanding of the samurai and Bushido Code		

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