

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

# EMPATHY AND LEADERSHIP



CANADIAN CENTRE FOR THE GREAT WAR  
CENTRE CANADIEN POUR LA GRANDE GUERRE



## INTRODUCTION

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This resource guide was developed by educator and scholar, Sara Karn. It explores how historical empathy may be used to support teaching and learning about the First World War. It highlights the importance of empathizing with, or seeking to understand, other people and ourselves to become effective and caring leaders in our communities. In addition, it showcases Vimy Foundation programs that apply historical empathy in varying ways, including experiential learning. The accompanying project, carried out over the course of a semester or year, aims to engage participants in translating empathy into action—youth engage in advocacy and change-making on an issue impacting their community. Youth can submit their project to the Vimy Foundation to further develop their leadership skills and earn funding to help bring their transformative community project to life.



## WHAT IS HISTORICAL EMPATHY

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When we think about the past, we may often wonder about the people: their stories, their innermost thoughts, their hopes and dreams, their decisions and actions. In many cases, our own identities and backgrounds can shape our interests in particular historical actors and may even contribute to feeling a sense of connection with them. As a result, history can seem more meaningful to us in the present, as we seek to better understand people in the past.

*While learning about the First World War, we may ask questions such as:*

- What thoughts and feelings did soldiers experience in the lead up to the Battle of Vimy Ridge?
- What motivated Anishinaabe soldier Francis Pegahmagabow to enlist in the First World War?
- What were the lived experiences of children in wartime Canada?

In attempting to answer these questions, and others like them, we may consider the wider contexts of the time, seek out sources that provide insight into diverse perspectives and experiences, and imagine possibilities for how historical actors may have thought and felt to fill in gaps in the evidence. This process is sometimes referred to as “**historical empathy**.”

## **Defining Historical Empathy**

**Historical empathy** may be defined as a process of attempting to understand the thoughts, world views, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people in the past, within their specific historical contexts. It is important to highlight that **historical empathy** places particular emphasis on understanding everyday people, including those who have been marginalized, not just well-known historical figures.

Another term that is sometimes used to describe our attempts to understand historical actors is “historical perspectives.” However, **historical empathy** is different because there is a focus on the affective dimensions—or the feelings, emotions, and connections that arise in the process of learning about the past. Historical empathy anticipates and engages these feelings and emotions, both within historical actors and the learner themselves. *For example*, when teaching and learning about the topic of war and considering historical actors’ feelings (which might not be explicitly stated within the sources we are examining), it can be a highly emotional topic for those learning about war in the present, too. While there are sometimes concerns about feelings and emotions “getting in the way” of being able to look at history rationally and objectively, feelings and emotions are going to arise. Rather than trying to avoid them or pretending they do not exist, we should find ways to effectively engage them.

**Historical empathy** can also help us better understand people in the present. This involves encountering the stories of other people, being attentive and having an open mind, and being willing to reconsider our own values and assumptions in light of these encounters. Another part of this process involves developing a better understanding of oneself, through reflection and consideration for how our identities and worldviews shape how we think about and respond to learning about the past.

*When teaching about historical empathy, there are some things to keep in mind:*

1. It is important to be explicit about empathy with youth—facilitate conversations about what empathy is, how it is developed, and why it is central to our relationships with others.

2. Empathy is a process that is built over time. There is no single lesson or activity that holds the key to unlocking empathy.

By engaging youth in a variety of learning experiences over time the conditions for developing empathy may be nurtured.



### ***Note about historical empathy and teaching about the First World War:***

War and conflict, in general, are often difficult topics to address and understand. Students who have personal or family connections, which can sometimes include trauma or intergenerational trauma from war, may experience conflicting and difficult emotions resulting from war education in the classroom. Educators need to be aware of different student experiences and foster safe learning environments where students can freely express their points of view or emotions through respectful dialogue.



## **ELEMENTS OF HISTORICAL EMPATHY**

There are different elements of historical empathy, each of which encompasses cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) aspects: evidence and contextualization, informed historical imagination, historical perspectives, ethical judgments, and caring (Karn, 2023). Below, each element is described in more detail and some activities and prompts are suggested to support teaching and learning.

### **Evidence and contextualization**

Empathizing with people in the past requires two closely related tasks: analyzing evidence and considering historical contexts. This involves gathering sufficient background information about historical events, people, and concepts, and considering a range of primary and secondary sources that highlight various historical perspectives.

*Some activities focused on evidence and contextualization include:*

1. Viewing wartime photographs for evidence of how people in the past experienced and felt about various events and circumstances. Consider their facial expressions, body

language, and interactions with other people and what we can assume about their experiences, as a result.

- [Canadian soldiers in the trenches](#)
  - [Canadians on the home front participating in armistice celebrations](#)
2. Listening to oral histories for firsthand accounts of how people thought, felt, and experienced war. Seek out diverse perspectives and experiences, whenever possible. Consider having a conversation with a relative or neighbour who heard stories from someone who lived through the First World War.
- [First World War soldier testimonials: Canadian Military Oral Histories](#)
  - [The Memory Project Archive](#)
  - Soldier memoir: *And We Go On*, Will R. Bird

## **Informed historical imagination**

Applying an “informed historical imagination” can help improve our understandings of and engagement with history, especially when we don’t have explicit traces of historical actors’ views and feelings. This involves inferring details using available information when evidence is lacking or contradictory. We can consider a range of possibilities that could account for the thoughts, feelings, values, actions, or decisions of historical figures within a given historical context.

*Some activities focused on informed historical imagination include:*

1. Learning about the experiences and decision-making of First World War fighter pilots. It may seem difficult to empathize with them, as many of us do not have experience flying planes, but we can use a combination of evidence and imagination to gain insight into their experiences
  - *One in a Thousand: The Life and Death of Eddie McKay*, Graham Broad
  - Watch one of many First World War flight simulator videos on YouTube
2. Reading historical fiction for examples of using an informed historical imagination. Discuss details in the story that are grounded in evidence and take into account the historical context, and which details demonstrate the author’s creative license or imagination.
  - Dear Canada series *Brothers Far from Home*, Jean Little
  - *The Stone Carvers*, Jane Urquhart

## Historical perspectives

Understanding historical perspectives is another key part of historical empathy, as it involves inferring historical actors' thoughts and feelings to better understand the past. Considering diverse and multiple perspectives can help us understand just how many factors and emotions can influence the process of forming ideas, making decisions, and acting upon them. For more on historical perspectives, see the [Historical Thinking Concepts](#).

*Some activities focused on **historical perspectives** include:*

1. Constructing a profile of a real or imagined person who lived during the First World War (consider their gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, town/city, religion, political orientation, occupation, economic status, military rank, etc.). Return to this profile throughout the unit of study and consider how this historical actor may have experienced and/or viewed different events and circumstances.
2. Viewing propaganda posters and listening to music created during the First World War. The messages represented can provide a window into the values, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those who created the posters/music and those of their intended audiences.
  - [Collection of propaganda posters](#)
  - [Song recording: "Good Luck to the Boys of the Allies," Morris Manley](#)

## Ethical judgments

Historical empathy also involves making ethical judgments about what transpired in the past. We can uncover the values and norms of a particular period to make informed judgments about historical actors' values, decisions, and actions based on past and contemporary worldviews. At the same time, we can critically assess how our values, beliefs and assumptions in the present contribute to the judgments we make about the past.

*Some activities focused on **ethical judgments** include:*

1. Making informed judgments about the internment of "enemy aliens" in Canada during the war. Consider the ethical dimensions of these decisions and the lived experiences of internees in the camps.
  - [View maps and photos, and read historical newspaper articles about internment camps](#)

2. Reflecting on how our own identity, background, experiences, and values in the present shape our understandings of and emotional responses to people, events, places, and circumstances in history—and, therefore, the judgments we make about the past. Consider journalling and/or discussing with others.

## Caring

Caring can inspire us to learn about the past and to apply our learning both within and beyond the history classroom. There are four varieties of caring: *caring about* people and events in the past; *caring that* particular events took place and developing ethical responses; *caring for* people in history who have suffered injustices or oppression and seeking retrospective justice; and *caring to* change our beliefs and behaviours in the present in light of studying the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

*Some activities focused on caring include:*

1. Setting aside time for reflection and writing in response to the prompt: When learning about the First World War, whose stories do you care about? Whose experiences would you like to learn more about among those voices or histories that you have not yet heard about? How do your own experiences and identities shape the ways you care for historical actors? Consider and reflect on why.
2. Researching and sharing about instances of warfare and atrocity in the present. Learners may draw connections between the past, present, and future of war and conflict, and translate their sense of care towards historical actors into caring about other peoples' lived experiences in the present. They may also find ways to advocate for and alongside those experiencing war, oppression, injustice, and trauma.



### **Note:**

Some learners may have been directly impacted by or experienced war or conflict. If completing this activity, steps must be taken to prevent heightening trauma or harm, particularly for these youth. Teachers can preview the work or give prompts to students such as trigger warnings to decrease student anxiety.



## **HISTORICAL EMPATHY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH THE VIMY FOUNDATION**

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Experiential learning offers opportunities to engage with both the cognitive and affective dimensions of history (Karn, 2024b). When learning about the First World War, facilitators may engage youth in visiting local historic sites, virtual reality opportunities, learning personal accounts through audio recordings and testimonials, or even overseas battlefield study tours. Each offers possibilities for examining evidence, imagining historical experiences, understanding diverse perspectives, forming judgments on ethical issues, and developing a sense of care.

*Many of the Vimy Foundation's [educational programs](#) and projects can support these learning experiences:*

### [Vimy: A Living Memorial](#)

- Bring Vimy closer to home by having youth access this digital experience using a mobile app. Participants visit Vimy virtually and navigate over the landscape to learn more about the soldiers, nurses, and artists who experienced the First World War. Emotions are evoked through the use of stories, photographs, and sound that foster a deeper connection with historical actors. The app may also be used by visitors to Vimy to assist with contextualizing the site and imagining the impacts of war on humans and the environment.

### [The Digital Pilgrimage](#)

- This virtual space of remembrance fosters understanding towards other people in the past and present, with the presentation of testimonies from the First World War to the war in Afghanistan. Through storytelling, there is an emphasis on building relations and human connection to understand how we are all implicated in war and conflict in different ways. Participants may be encouraged by facilitators to share their own story and consider how they might work towards a more just and peaceful future.

### *The [Vimy Pilgrimage Award](#) and [Beaverbrook Vimy Prize](#)*

- These programs bring youth to the battlefields in Belgium and France to study

Canada's First World War and Second World War contributions. Through their engagement at historic sites, cemeteries, and museums participants gain a better understanding of the consequences of war while drawing meaningful connections between the past and present. The opportunity to interact with each other, local community members or history professionals, and battlefield landscapes often elicits emotional responses in participants, which fosters the development of empathy.



## CONNECTING EMPATHY AND LEADERSHIP

# CLASSROOM PROJECT

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During the First World War, leadership took many forms: an officer leading soldiers into battle, a student organizing a fundraiser for the war effort, a politician making decisions about wartime production, a nurse volunteering to give medical aid overseas, a musician composing a song to inspire enlistment. There were leaders of all backgrounds and identities who exercised their agency to make a difference, whether in their local community or on a global scale.

While acts of leadership take many shapes, being a leader requires certain knowledge and skills, as well as character traits and values. To be an effective leader, one requires empathy. Leaders must consider what other people need, understand their mindsets and values, and continuously reflect on their own approaches and accomplishments as a leader. They should demonstrate care, compassion, and a desire to help others or solve a problem. Leaders must also consider and balance the benefits for a collective group over individual needs and desires.

We can learn lessons about what it means to be a leader today by learning about diverse leaders and forms of leadership in the past. Through a process of attempting to empathize with leaders in the past (their experiences, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and actions), we can gain the skills and competencies required to empathize with others in our own roles as leaders in the present.

The Vimy Foundation's [Vimy Inspires Tomorrow](#) program is a history-based leadership program that encourages youth to apply lessons from First World War history to develop their leadership skills and make positive contributions to their communities. Free, bilingual modules encourage participants to learn how Canadians of different ages, backgrounds, and military ranks took on leadership roles, and the impact of their decisions, actions, and



contributions during and after the war. Eligible youth or groups who complete the project below are encouraged to submit their community project idea to Vimy Inspires Tomorrow for a chance to earn a grant to help bring their idea to life.



## PROJECT

Turning Empathy into Action

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### Overview

This project invites participants to identify an issue in their community and develop a plan for addressing it, in consultation with the impacted group or community. The goal is to turn empathy (understanding others) into action (acting in solidarity with others, based on those understandings).

*By the end of this project, participants should be able to:*

- Identify a present-day issue in their community and develop a plan for addressing it.
- Demonstrate empathy and care in consulting with the impacted group or community.
- Develop relationships with community members and organizations to take steps towards addressing the issue.
- Reflect critically on their own motivations for helping with this issue and their approaches to being a leader.

### Time required:

A semester or year



#### *Note for facilitators:*

It is recommended that participants complete [Modules 2, 4, and 5](#) of the [Vimy Inspires Tomorrow](#) program, to learn more about leadership in the context of the First World War, before engaging in this project. Facilitators can encourage participants to submit their project ideas to the Vimy Inspires Tomorrow program when applications are open, for a chance to receive funding to bring their project to life.

### Facilitator's Plan:

- As a group, participants **identify an issue** that requires leadership and action in their community. It may be desirable to select an issue related to the facilitator's or students' pre-existing relationships and connections within the community, if any.
- **Develop a plan** to address the issue. Facilitators should encourage ongoing discussion and reflection among participants.
- **Reach out** to local groups and organizations currently working to address the issue. Facilitators should conduct research on these groups or organizations in advance, screening for any ethical concerns.
- **Consult** with members of the impacted group or community in respectful, sensitive ways. Facilitators are encouraged to reach out to these individuals or groups first to establish a relationship before participants become involved.
- **Take action** in solidarity with local groups and organizations, as well as the impacted group or community. Discuss as a group how each participant, and the facilitator, will continue their involvement in addressing this issue beyond the semester or year.

### Activity:

Participants will identify an issue in their community and develop a plan for addressing it. They will collaborate with other participants, community organizations, and those directly impacted by the issue. This is an ongoing activity that requires nurturing relationships with others over time and practicing empathy. Participants will experience leadership as they take action on a local issue.

### Guiding Questions:

The following questions are intended to facilitate ongoing discussion and reflection among participants at all stages of this community-based project.

#### *Selecting a **community issue***

- What are the historical roots of this issue?
- Who is experiencing this issue most profoundly?
- How are we personally implicated in this issue?
- Why is this issue relevant for our community? Why is it relevant for us?
- What are our motivations for wanting to help address this issue?

### ***Connecting with local organizations***

- Which local organizations are dedicated to addressing the issue?
- What efforts are they taking to address the issue?
- What are the motivations of the organization for addressing the issue?
- What values and commitments does the organization have? Do these align with our values and commitments?
- Is this organization working closely with the impacted group or community?

### ***Consulting with members of the impacted group or community***

- What approaches might we take to connecting with the impacted group or community?
- How can we develop relationships of trust and reciprocity with the impacted group or community?
- How can we show that we are listening to the impacted group or community?
- How might our own privileges prevent us from understanding the needs of the impacted group or community?
- What will we do if the group or community does not want our help, or feels that we are not the right people to help?

### ***Taking action***

- What actions can we take to address the issue?
- How will we ensure that the perspectives shared by the impacted group or community are informing our actions?
- How can we raise awareness within our community about this issue?
- How will we know if our efforts are making a difference for the impacted community?
- What have we learned from taking action on this issue? How has this experience changed our perspectives and assumptions about the issue?

### ***Providing ongoing support***

- How will we continue to support the impacted group or community?
- What next steps are needed?
- How might we involve other people and organizations in supporting this issue?
- Are there related issues in our community that we might support?
- What knowledge, skills, and dispositions did we develop through this leadership opportunity that may be helpful for informing future change-making?

THANK YOU TO  
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## Resources

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