

## Engaging World History Through the Self: Building Student Empathy With Reflection

The best practices for teaching world history, global history, or world civilization surveys have been the subject of urgent quests by high school and university teachers for decades, even as historians have struggled to move away from lecture-based formats to student-centered learning. *World History Connected* routinely publishes articles to help teachers improve their craft, sometimes joined by both the *World History Bulletin* and the *Journal of World History*.<sup>1</sup> There is no single answer, of course, but rather a combination of techniques adapted to the circumstances of each classroom and each student body. This article offers one useful technique employed in the one-semester world history survey course offered at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in Colorado, a four-year undergraduate-only university with a mission “to educate, train and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the US Air Force and US Space Force in service to our Nation.”<sup>2</sup> Our course aims to help these future leaders grow their capability to understand the world around them by using self-knowledge to understand the perspectives of others. Recent research has made clear that such empathic growth is critical to the development of leaders committed to strong relationships, caring work environments, and positive mental health for people at all echelons of an organization.<sup>3</sup> We all hope to work around people with these skills, making this empathy-building approach useful for virtually any learning environment.

In our world history survey, we have chosen to focus on the development of empathy through reflective exercises, an approach that has gained increasing support in pedagogical research in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Employing a technique generally referred to as “evocative autoethnography,” the students analyze and engage their own reactions to historical materials, experiences, and activities in an effort to connect with and comprehend societal activity in terms familiar to them.<sup>5</sup> Scaffolding the world history survey around such experiences and engagements familiarizes the difficult while asking students to frame events in a way that makes sense to them but through the perspectives

of others. Such an approach thus carries the potential of enlivening the course for learners of all types and backgrounds and could thus serve as a “signature pedagogy” when combined with classroom activities and experiences that encourage even greater reflection.<sup>6</sup> While the post-graduation outcomes at USAFA are hardly universal, the learning environment does carry potential for applicability elsewhere, whether in a high school or university setting. Understanding our university context, however, is crucial to determining that wider applicability.

### **Building Empathy in the World History Survey**

Due in large part to the specificity of the university’s mission, students at USAFA follow a large core or general education curriculum centered on nine institutional outcomes. The world history survey, or History 300, serves as a mandatory intermediate course in the Human Condition, Cultures, and Societies outcome. Of the six proficiencies described as crucial to competence in this outcome, the world history course particularly aids students to “describe key elements of their own identity as human beings, citizens of a republic, and officer-statesmen” while also encouraging them to “explain historical, cultural, social, and political developments that have shaped another’s identity and worldview.”<sup>7</sup> Making all of this happen in a single-semester offering is a daunting challenge and our department has gone back and forth over many years in delivering a single-semester course that meets the university requirements but also includes the latest in world history teaching techniques.

After a recent multi-year review ending in 2021, we settled on a course that begins in roughly the year 1000 CE and runs into the early twenty-first century. After much discussion, we built the course using John R. McNeill’s *Webs of Humankind: A World History* focusing almost entirely on the second volume.<sup>8</sup> The course is carefully scaffolded to build the institutional proficiencies, using McNeill’s text for foundational context, first assessed through reading quizzes. The students build on that baseline understanding in the second level of skill development, a series of primary source skills evaluations that ask students to analyze written and visual sources in context. Next, students engage those sources through and in comparison with their own experiences and reactions in a series of reflective writing assignments. Finally, the students generate a more extended written analysis of selected primary sources, first on one specific source representing the period 1200 to 1600 CE that they select from a curated list and then again across two sources representative of critical movements of the twentieth century. Ultimately, all these assignments ask the students to embrace and incorporate their own perspectives into analyses of global trends. Most important and most tailored to their needs as reflective learners, though, are the written reflection exercises.

These assessments are low-stakes and generally graded for honesty of effort rather than analytical quality or completeness, meaning that most students receive full credit for on-time submissions. Each asks the students, in roughly 400 words, to react

and respond to historically situated sources. Early in the semester, the students reflect on what has become known as the *Catalan Atlas*, the revealing representation of the known world created by the Majorcan cartographer Abraham Cresques in 1375 CE.<sup>9</sup> The assignment asks the students to review Panel VI and “explain how you felt after reviewing the above illustrations and captions and why you think you felt that way, employing specific examples from the atlas.” Building on some generalized prompts we provide, students most frequently choose to consider why Cresques might have depicted people in this way and how they would feel if they were depicted in those terms, in some cases even extending their analysis to a rumination of what such an atlas might look like if depicting their own contemporary world. Even early in the semester, students generate superb responses that demonstrate their very real willingness to think about themselves in an international frame.

To encourage deeper engagement as the semester continues, just a few weeks after the midpoint of the term we ask the students to generate another written reflection with the same general requirements on length. In this case, we present the students with three representative depictions of African colonial soldiers included here as Figures 1-3.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1: Poster by Charles Foqueray Artist. *Journée de l'armée d'Afrique et des troupes coloniales.*, 1917. [Paris: Lapina] Lithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99613621/>. Public domain.

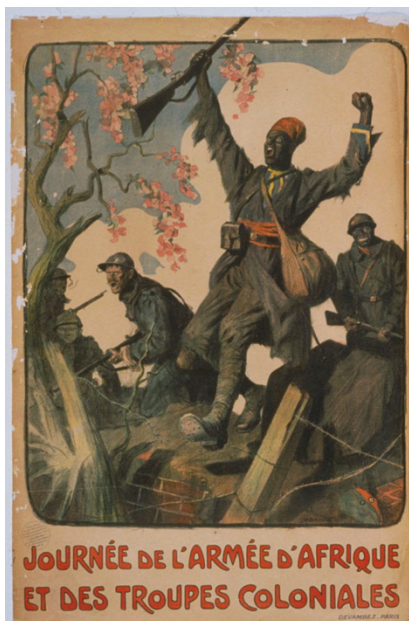


Figure 2: Poster by Lucien Jonas, Artist. *Journée de l'armée d'Afrique et des troupes coloniales.*, 1917. [Paris: Devambez] Lithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99613600/>. Public domain.



Figure 3: Advertisement by Giacomo de Andreis, Artist. *Affiche publicitaire de la marque Banania.*, 1915. [Paris: Affiches Camis] Lithograph. Public domain.

The students then respond to a prompt identical to that of the first reflection asking them to relate why they reacted as they did to the posters but pushing them further with more detailed analytical suggestions. Moving beyond the obviously distant depictions in the Cresques Atlas, this second iteration requires a deeper engagement with colonial control and representation, demanding a higher level of empathetic reflection from students coming to terms with the nature of military service in the exploitative, intellectually contested environment of the early part of the century. These two written reflections set the stage for the final, and most impactful reflective event of the semester as students consider the contested international environment of the Cold War and the decolonization of Europe and Asia.

### **Exercising Empathy in the World History Survey**

At USAFA we are fortunate to work only in small classes that rarely exceed 20 total students. These small groups give us more pedagogical flexibility and, in this case, allow us to place students into country teams in what we term the ‘Non-Aligned Exercise.’ The exercise follows on the heels of classroom discussions on ‘The Third World’s Cold War’ and ‘Decolonization and remaking the Global South,’ giving the students context for the role play to come. However, we augment that with a significant number of primary sources, many of them gathered from the remarkable online collections of the Wilson Center and the United Nations and augmented by the published and unpublished writings of leading thinkers of the time such as U Thant, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah, and Jawaharlal Nehru, among others.<sup>11</sup> Ideally, students have small amounts of time in previous class meetings to discuss these materials in their teams prior to engaging in the exercise itself, which plays out across two or three days, depending on the space and time available in the course syllabus. If three days are available, there is less need for student preparation prior to classroom events.

The exercise-opening prompt encourages the students to imagine themselves as leaders of delegations working to carve out space in the international environment after decolonization:

It is now 1965 and the Non-Aligned Movement is losing steam. It is time to reinvigorate the group. Your job, as national delegations and as a combined group of non-aligned state actors, is to chart a revised course to counter the continued power and strength of the United States and the other European powers such as the USSR, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and West Germany. To that end, you will have today and next lesson to generate positions, both as individual states and as a combined delegation, for communication to the rest of the world. Your negotiations today, as well as your detailed reading of the supporting

materials assigned to you as preparation, will enable you to answer four basic questions when you present your final platform or communique.

WHAT do we want as a non-aligned national delegation?

WHY do we want those things?

HOW will we achieve those objectives?

WHO (what other delegations) will help us get what we want?

Thus, the first day of the two-day exercise involves students negotiating as country teams with one another on priorities they have discerned from engagement with the primary sources. Regardless of class size, we ensure there are always teams representing the People's Republic of China (PRC), India, and Indonesia. If the course is sufficiently populated to allow for teams consisting of between two and four students, we also add Ghana, Algeria, and North Vietnam. While it is important that the students work through challenges as part of the exercise as another way to build empathy, instructors must be prepared to intervene lightly when students become unprofessional, do not engage productively, or employ gross historical inaccuracies as part of their work. To that end, we provide a simple instructor guide as preparation.

In most instances of the exercise, the PRC emerges as the central player given their size, recent demonstrations of military strength, long history, and broad access to resources. Perhaps because of their upbringing amidst American capitalism, most teams will immediately jump to economic problems and solutions, though they will quickly realize the need to work through political, military, and social issues on the road to economic prosperity. In most instances, India and Indonesia will attempt to act as neutral arbiters attempting to avoid an arms race and denuclearize as Ghana, Algeria, and North Vietnam struggle to wring concessions from the larger powers. Such struggles mirror the imbalances that appeared and ultimately helped to fragment the original 1955 Non-Aligned Movement of Bandung. During these interactions the instructor may need to intervene lightly on occasion to encourage the smaller state teams to work together while learning the levers of the international environment.<sup>12</sup>

The exercise concludes on the second day, which typically begins with an opportunity for teams to do one last, quick round of negotiation and refining of their platforms and declarations. Format is not important for those declarations unless assigning a grade or course points, but it is important that each delegation deliver responses to the four questions listed above. Following those deliveries, the instructor has an opportunity to lead an immediate class discussion of learning from the exercise, asking the students to do a preliminary reflection on the meaning of what they accomplished in terms of historical context, team and leadership dynamics, the nature of negotiation, and as citizens of the world. This discussion sets the stage for the course's final written reflection exercise, which again uses the same basic prompt and then asks

students to consider their own experiences in the exercise. As before, we prod deeper reflection by asking them to think about the perspectives of the African and Asian delegations they represented and how their future interactions with private citizens or even national representatives from those places and those societies might play out. In some cases, students are willing to go so far as to think about how they would want those delegations to describe their negotiating tactics and approaches. Through the creation of contextual experience, the exercise permits students to build on their previous reflections in an environment that seems more familiar and thus relevant.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Indeed, the greatest challenge of general education history surveys is helping students to understand relevance. Reflection exercises permit students to connect what appear at first glance to be disconnected and distant historical events with their own lives, fears, hopes, and concerns. In the last year of implementation of this technique at scale across the entire course of more than 800 students, we have found even greater engagement and legitimate reflection through these written assignments than we had ever hoped. Students almost universally laud the value of those assignments for their simplicity and ease of completion and many report that they have adopted increased reflection in their daily lives, certainly a hopeful sign for them as future leaders in government and beyond.

For assessment purposes, we also calculate and record changes to student empathic capabilities. Measuring empathy is notoriously fraught and runs the risk of reifying emotional phenomena, but some recent research has delivered a rubric that is useful in measuring empathic expression in writing, a form that lends itself to easier recording than speech.<sup>13</sup> At the conclusion of the course, we collected examples of the first and third written reflections from each instructor to allow for an analysis of the change in empathy according to the rubric, weighing expressions as “superficial,” “proficient,” or “advanced.” In the fall, student empathic expressions increased by approximately 0.236 instances per student while the spring more than doubled to an increase of 0.5 instances per student. These results were small-scale, random, and somewhat anecdotal but they do indicate at least a correlation between these exercises and changes to student empathy.

The incorporation of reflection thus stands as a potent avenue to build strong student thinkers ready to engage the world around them with compassion. Combining contextualized personal reflection with active and engaging exercises helps to cement that learning across the classroom and would certainly work across one – and two – semester versions of world history surveys. The greatest problem, particularly at the university level, would be adaptability to larger offerings with many students. In such a case, execution of the exercise laid out here would have to occur in smaller discussion sections, though the reflection exercises would remain possible at all levels of the

course. Reflection remains a powerful tool available in history education and a vital means to generate empathy from educational environments of all sorts.

**Author's note:** *The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force Academy, the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

---

**Douglas W. Leonard** is an Associate Professor of History at the US Air Force Academy, where he teaches courses in African, intellectual, race, gender, colonial, and world history. His research focuses on the intellectual history of North and West Africa, including his most recent book, *Anthropology, Colonial Policy, and the Decline of French Empire in Africa* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and publishing widely in journals dedicated to anthropology, history, and pedagogy. His next book-length project is tentatively entitled, *Seas of Time: Reimagining the Social and Political Worlds of West Africa After Colonialism*, an examination of the implications of a non-linear understanding of chronological flow held by prominent West African intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century on social and political futures. He can be reached at [douglas.leonard@afacademy.af.edu](mailto:douglas.leonard@afacademy.af.edu).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> For a foundational discussion on the move away from the history lecture, see Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92, 4 (2006): 1358-1370.

<sup>2</sup> For further detail see [www.usafa.edu/about/mission/](http://www.usafa.edu/about/mission/).

<sup>3</sup> John E. Barbuto and Marilyn J. Bugenhagen, “The emotional intelligence of leaders as antecedent to leader-member exchanges: A field study,” *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8, 2 (2009): 135–146.; J.B. Gregory and P.E. Levy, “It’s not me, it’s you: A multilevel examination of variables that impact employee coaching relationships,” *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 63,2 (2011): 67–88.; Karianne Kalshoven, Deanne N. Den Hartog, and Annel H.B. De Hoogh, “Ethical leadership and follower helping and courtesy: Moral awareness and empathic concern as moderators,” *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 62, 2 (2013): 211–235; Asli Asciglu Onal and Ilhan Yalcin, “Forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness: The predictive role of cognitive distortions, empathy, and rumination,” *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 68 (2017): 97–120; M. Wei, C.-I. Li, C. Wang, and S.Y. Ko, “Finding benefits from acculturative stress among Asian Americans: Self-reflection moderating the effects of ethnocultural empathy on positive outcomes,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63, 6 (2016): 633–644.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas W. Leonard, “Researching the Self: Autoethnography and Empathy in the University Classroom,” *Transformative Dialogues* 16, 1 (Fall 2023): 54-71; Laura Vogelsang and Tania Bergen, “Enhancing interprofessional competencies using reflective writing in clinical nursing education,” *Journal of Nursing Education* 57, 12 (2018), 768; Victoria A. Shaffer, Jennifer Bohanek, Elizabeth S. Focella, Haley Horstman, and Lise Saffran, “Encouraging perspective taking: Using narrative writing to induce empathy for others engaging in negative health behaviors,” *PLoS ONE* 14, 10, online.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, 1 (2011): Article 10; Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Viramontes, “Autoethnographic reflections: Autoethnography as a signature pedagogy of speech communication,” *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal* 6, 1 (2012): 1–10.

<sup>7</sup> See the institutional outcome descriptions at [www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/](http://www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/).

<sup>8</sup> John R. McNeill, *The Webs of Humankind: A World History*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2024).

<sup>9</sup> See the translated atlas available at <https://www.cresquesproject.net/>.



<sup>10</sup> Figure 1: Charles Fouqueray, Artist. *Journée de l'armée d'Afrique et des troupes coloniales.*, 1917. [Paris: Lapina] Lithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99613621/>; Figure 2: Lucien Jonas, Artist. *Journée de l'armée d'Afrique et des troupes coloniales.*, 1917. [Paris: Devambez] Lithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99613600/>; Figure 3: Giacomo de Andreis, Artist. Affiche publicitaire de la marque Banania., 1915. [Paris: Affiches Camis] Lithograph. All images are in the public domain.

<sup>11</sup> See the Wilson center collection at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org>, and the United Nations documents at <https://archives.un.org>, all last accessed June 6, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> On Bandung see Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Leonard, “Researching the Self,” 62-63 for more detail on the rubric. For more on writing and empathy, see Eric Leake, “Writing pedagogies of empathy: As rhetoric and disposition,” *Composition Forum* 34 (2016), accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1113428.pdf>, 9 June 2021.