



# Conflict, Art and Remembrance

## HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

### Week 4: Conflict and memory: the individual experience

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Focussing on the experiences of individuals in the past can help pupils to find a deeper connection with the history they are studying. Exploring the relationship between individual stories and more general narratives can broaden their historical understanding. This week, our focus was on the individual experience of conflict and the ways in which this can be used as a focus for learning. We asked participants to consider some different approaches to using individual experiences in the history classroom and to engage with some powerful testimony about the ways in which experiences of war impact of succeeding generations. As usual, they wrote some very thoughtful pieces.

Many teachers acknowledged power of individual stories in helping pupils to find a connection with the history they are studying:

- “the diversity of recorded Individual experiences whether it be in diaries, letters, recorded interviews or shared by others offer a fascinating and extraordinary engaging source of evidence for bringing personal narratives into the classroom”
- “We know how engaging a life-story is. It offers rich insights, can localise, personalise, create context and emotional heft in the middle of studies that can often be about forces, ideas, movements, and deep structures. Human stories can help students relate to actors in the past as human actors with agency and perspective. Life-histories like Reg Wilkes or Robert Henry Roper can show how history is embodied, experienced, negotiated and constructed”

This is certainly the case when the individual question is a relative of one of the pupils in the class:

- “I have found it very interesting to explore the resources this week, especially in the context of my student appearing at my classroom door just before half term with two folders full of letters, maps, medals etc which were written by her great uncle between his enlistment in 1916 and his death in 1918. The excitement and awe that

I felt in reading, touching, smelling (weird I know but they did smell good!) these documents demonstrated really effectively the power of engaging with personal experiences of historical events. This same feeling was clearly echoed in the students who were incredibly excited to see and read the letters and other materials. As expressed in the Reg Wilkes article, 'Suddenly they were not looking at just another source about how muddy the trenches were, but at a letter that was actually written in those muddy trenches.' The inspirational impact of engaging with personal artefacts is clear."

However, the use of individual narratives is not straightforward. Some members of the group cautioned against an uncritical use of personal testimony and suggested that developing evidential understanding should form part of learning about the individual experience:

- "For me, most of the challenge here is in avoiding the uncritical use of testimony, story and memory in the classroom.....Narrative tropes seem to have been used widely to shape and structure reminiscences and anecdotes by veterans ... we need to be aware of these issues of selectivity, emplotment, narrative, when we are using testimony in the classroom....We cannot, as Todman explains, succumb to the magic of veteran testimony - it has often been shaped and changed by social, cultural, emotional and historical forces into narrative forms that fit the need at the time. And we need to be careful that we don't unwittingly perpetuate myths or encourage our students to act beyond the methodological confines of our discipline by uncritically accepting testimony as truth"

Others emphasised the need to contextualise the individual experience:

- "Without broader knowledge to contextualise the individual stories they are simply a nice narrative to engage students, and not an enriching teaching tool that they can be."
- "we must ensure we give a voice to ...different participants and agents of the war lest we fall into that same trench-heavy trap that we discussed in the previous week's forum. I really like the (Paul Barrett) article for that reason; individual stories woven throughout the scheme of learning complimenting the lessons and giving a voice to a huge number of different people. They are also there to support the history and not to replace it – I think this is essential. I think individual stories work best when students already have some prior knowledge of the events that they use to contextualise the individual's story

One teacher offered a useful way forward based on her reading:

- These benefits of using a personal approach to engage and excite students and also to help them to understand complex material can be seen in the 'Please Send Socks' materials and also in the creative responses of students to the 'Meeting in No Man's Land' documentary and archive materials. More problematic though is the potentially narrow focus of history based on personal memory. The student response videos to the Meeting in No Man's Land project all seemed to reflect the Western Front centric, tragedy of war view as espoused by Owen and Sassoon. As discussed previously,

this is one valid view of the war, but should certainly not be the only one that students engage with. I thought the Historiana activity offered an interesting and effective way to engage with different individual histories and memories. The wide range of life stories covered and the activity in which the stories were compared to the factual narrative [similar to the enquiry questions about Reg Wilkes] seems to me a highly effective way of broadening the lens through which we view the war, engaging students with personal experiences and still ensuring historical rigour. I think it would be extremely interesting to try to create a similar resource based around the First World War.

Overall, this week's reading has reinforced the power of using individual narratives in engaging pupils with real experiences of people living through times of conflict. It has also raised some important issues about the use of personal testimony in the history classroom and had suggested some useful ways forward.

## References

- [Sally Evans, Chris Grier, Jemma Phillips and Sarah Colton, 'Please send socks.' How much can Reg Wilkes tell us about the Great War? \*Teaching History\*, 114, 2004](#)
- [Lynda Abbott and Richard s Grayson, 'Community engagement in local history: a report on the Hemel at War project, \*Teaching History\*, 145, 2004](#)
- [Paul Barrett, "My grandfather slammed the door in Winston Churchill's face': using family history to promote rigorous enquiry', \*Teaching History\*, 145, 2011](#)
- Life in Europe, 1945-1949, Historiana <https://historiana.eu/#/learning-activity/life-in-europe-1945-1949>
- 'Meeting in No Man's Land', Age Exchange, 2016 <http://www.eyesociation.org/MiNML/>