Hands-on Articles

Assessment in the teaching of Holocaust history and Theories of Race

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Abstract

The focus of this article is Holocaust education as well as the teaching and learning of race theories, as set out in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) for Grade 9 Social Sciences (History), and Grade 11 History. The article makes general statements about aspects of this history, and possible methodological approaches, especially in areas which present a challenge: victimhood, resistance, historiography and interpretation, the phrasing of assessment questions, impartiality and neutrality, unpacking concepts and assumptions, conflation and fudging, race, role play, and independent learner research. There is specific focus on four of the textbooks used in the teaching of Grade 11 History; questions from these books are cited and discussed. The questions selected illustrate the difficulties commonly encountered in the teaching and learning of the Grade 11 "Theories of Race" component. The article draws on the contributions of various individuals and bodies to the teaching of difficult histories, and attempts to provide suggestions for an approach guided by rigorous analysis in the context of the human rights History classroom.

Keywords: Assessment; Holocaust; Theories of "Race"; Learning and Teaching; Grade 11; Textbooks; Genocide; Methodology.

Introduction

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is part of the work programme for Grade 9 (Term 1) and Grade 11 (Term 2). This content provides teachers with opportunities to encourage in their learners qualities such as compassion, critical thinking, ubuntu, and personal integrity. Alexander Karn (2012:221-240) argues persuasively for an approach that takes into account historical context and imperatives, as well as ethical considerations. Whilst teaching this kind of content cannot be merely an academic exercise, at the same time teachers should be cautious to avoid making their classroom a platform for

their own political and ideological convictions.

The teaching of trauma history in any context requires an analytical and sensitive approach, which includes assessment methods and content. This article seeks to explore the teaching, learning and assessment of Holocaust history, and pseudo-scientific theories of race in the Grade 11 programme in particular.

In this article all sample questions are taken from Grade 11 textbooks which have been used in South African History classrooms, and which in some instances are still being used, especially where budgetary restraints continue to be a factor in the purchase of updated and new textbooks. I have chosen only examples that highlight the concerns raised here. The term "assessment methods" is used in its broadest sense, to include any of the following activities:

- Essay writing
- Source-based activities
- Pair and group discussion
- Stop-and-consider/ brainstorm/ mind map
- Formulating positions and stances
- Role play
- Research tasks

The reason for the inclusion of all types of assessment being included in the description "assessment methods", is that any assessment task, whether formative or summative, is intended to probe the extent of learners' grasp of content and concepts, and to reinforce and develop the learning of skills. This article thus engages with a variety of assessment types.

One of the stated aims of teaching History, according to the Grade 9 (Social Sciences) History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document, is "promoting human rights and peace by challenging prejudices involving race, class, gender, ethnicity and xenophobia…" (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2011a:9).The History CAPS document for Grades 10 - 12 speaks of "…promoting human rights and peace by challenging prejudices that involve race, class, gender, ethnicity and xenophobia…." (DBE, 2011b:8). Learning and teaching about race-based oppression, persecution and murder is understood to be in the service of these stated aims. Grade 9 learners cover various aspects of the Nazi racial state and Grade 11 learners investigate the pseudo-scientific ideas which helped to lay the basis for the persecution, marginalisation and mass murder of six million Jews and

five million other victims of Nazi ideology. All such history calls for clarity of purpose in our teaching, sensitive dealing in the classroom, and wise choices in our methodologies. These are children – impressionable, growing minds. We need a clear compass in the way we conduct our practice so that when we guide our learners through the content and skills and ensure they learn the history, we remain true to the principles of integrity, honesty and fairness meant to characterise human rights education. This must necessarily reflect in our assessments.

Not just victims, but people

Learners should always be encouraged to remember that the victims of the Holocaust were people, not statistics or numbers as the perpetrators tried to reduce them to. Using individual stories and first-hand accounts as sources in assessments brings this message home. It is easy for high school learners to be side-tracked, especially by Holocaust denialists' haggles over the numbers of dead instead of focusing on human beings, unique individuals. The History, Grades 10 – 12 CAPS document addresses itself to this: "…reflecting the perspectives of a broad social spectrum so that race, class, gender and the voices of ordinary people are represented" (DBE, 2011b:8). In our choice of sources for assessments it is useful to select some first-hand or eye-witness accounts of events. In this regard, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum advice is as follows:

> *Encourage your students not to categorize groups of people only on the basis of their experiences during the Holocaust; contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2015).

Resistance

In interrogating a third person account, one aspect we could address in our lessons, is the way in which the author represents the victims. Important here is that they were not mere victims. It is necessary to give them agency. Resistance always takes many forms and the teaching and learning of the Nazi Holocaust was no exception. Often the Jews are portrayed as a characteristically passive and submissive people for whom resistance was culturally foreign (a common racial stereotype) while by contrast, their rescuers were proactive risk-takers.

When we teach resistance against Nazism, a key point is that resistance does

not necessarily mean armed and violent resistance or public protest. Another is that Jews were in fact engaged in armed resistance not only in the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, but also in ghettos in Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine, and in the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz. As in every other struggle there were many ways in which Jewish and other groups asserted their humanity in the face of unthinkable odds. Our assessments should not skew the history even if we do not go into great detail.

Historiography and interpretation

Issues around historiography and interpretation are especially problematic in the assessment of History tasks. The following questions as they appear in two Grade 11 learners' textbooks demonstrate the point:

Question A

Research genocide in one of the following countries: a) Cambodia (1975); b) Guatemala (1982); c) Bosnia (1995); or d) Sudan (1983-2005). Write an essay on your findings, arguing for or against links between racism and genocide (Defteros, Dugmore, Geldenhuys, Ramoroka, Snail, Stoltz, Titus & Van Reenen, 2010:195).

Question B

Discuss with a fellow learner whether the Eugenics Movement was morally and ethically acceptable (Govender, Mnyaka & Pillay, 2006:176).

We teach our learners that an interpretation carries a bias and that narratives compete for currency. This is true. We teach them that in order to evaluate the reliability of an interpretation it is necessary to examine the evidence. But the context within which this teaching happens is the human rights classroom. We teach the Holocaust and other genocides because we do not want to repeat the mistakes of history, because we believe these to have been crimes against humanity. Our assessments must reflect this framework and this basic assumption.

Question A asks the learner to produce an argument "against links between racism and genocide". The most superficial enquiry into all the named genocides reveals that no such argument can be made because racism was indeed key in all of these. The question, though, suggests that such an

argument can be made and by default suggests that all this is merely a matter of opinion, of "different interpretations". This is dangerously close to moral relativism. There is not merely an instruction to research these genocides – which would obviously be a sound learning activity.

In the same way, Question B suggests that perhaps there could be a defence of Eugenics if learners really put their minds to the exercise, when the very point of teaching about the Eugenics Movement is that it was and still is morally indefensible for somebody to make decisions about who has the right to live and reproduce, and who does not. A laissez-faire approach to historiography invites learners to view lunatic fringe interpretations such as Holocaust denial, and conspiracy theories, as holding equal currency and being equally valid with every other interpretation, depending on one's "point of view." They may then arbitrarily choose which evidence to accept and which to ignore, irrespective of how reliable or unreliable the evidence is generally deemed to be. The crucial fact that evidence has to have a basis in reality is then irrelevant. The process of examining each source and testing the nature and reliability of its evidence then falls away – learners are presented with sources and left to draw their own conclusions and to imagine that this is fine, since in any case all cases are valid and that history was and is whatever the individual makes of it. The fact is that, just as the interpretation of a poem is governed by context and linguistic features such as syntax and punctuation, the interpretation of a historical event is governed by evidence.

Margaret Conway (2004) in *Educate*, a journal that brings together doctoral research in education, points out in her paper that, myths, in all their colourful glory, can be more powerful and attractive to learners than reality:

> *…it is not so much how the narratives are composed that matters, but rather if they have, as a distorted form of reality that perpetuates myths about the past, become more potent than reasoned facts* (Conway, 2004:67).

Given the fact that learners can sometimes so readily attach to "interesting angle – great story" myths, it falls to teachers to emphasise the obligation of looking for and weighing up evidence, and drawing on the body of reputable scholarship. In this regard, it is crucial that we do all we can to develop as researchers and scholars so we can lead the way. The authors of the *Activities for the Development and Consolidation of Democratic Stability (ADACS) 1999* report, in writing about critical awareness in History teaching, tell us that learners should be taught:

> *"…to discriminate between different kinds of argument, and recognise relevant and irrelevant arguments…"* (ADACS, 1999:13).

In this way we can encourage our young historians to frame relevant and reasoned arguments in their essays, and discourage other tendencies less useful to the acquisition of discernment and critical thinking.

The phrasing of assessment questions

Teachers should be conscious of the assumptions underlying how assessment questions are phrased. For example:

- Constant reference to what Hitler did, to "his" army, "his" invasions, "his" initiatives, etc. is likely to skew learners' understanding of the fact that, despite Hitler's position as a dictator, the proponents of Nazi ideology in Germany and German-occupied regions were many and varied. This tendency is often the result of the "famous/ notorious men" view of history, which relegates to the margins the agency of ordinary men and women, and of classes and groups of people.
- Contrasting Germans and Jews ignores the fact that the Jews of Germany were German, the Jews of Poland were Polish, and so on. The very distinction that the Nazis made is not challenged when we inadvertently suggest that because someone was a Jew living in Hungary, this means they were not Hungarian first and Jewish second.
- The false notion of racial purity ought not to be embedded in our assessments. Speaking to learners about racial purity as though this could be a real entity is likely to encourage a belief in the myth.

False dichotomies

Sometimes a test or exam question will set up a false opposition, as in the following question on the causes of World War Two:

Question C

Write an essay which argues that Nazism and the [sic] World War II were results of economic depression, rather than racism. Or write an essay which argues that it was racism rather than other economic factors that gave rise to Nazism and the World War II (Defteros *et al.*, 2010:192).

On reading this history it is clear that economic factors were among the causes of the Second World War. Also, that Germany was transformed into a racial state by Nazi ideology. Question C conflates causes of the war with the character of the Nazi racial state, and then puts them in opposition to each other as primary reasons for the outbreak of WWII. This is confusing for the learner and a misleading presentation of the topic under discussion – causes of WWII.

Question D (below) on the 1936 Berlin Olympics poses another such dichotomy but goes further:

Question D

The Berlin Olympics [1936] could be commemorated [sic] by focusing on its positives: the organisation, the media coverage, the excellent facilities, the celebration of human achievement, and its links with ancient Greece. Or it could be displayed as a betrayal of the ideals of the Olympics: the condoning of racist ideas, the emphasis on victory rather than participation, and the promotion of nationalist propaganda.

a. Is it possible to create a balanced or neutral portrayal of these Olympics? Explain your answer.

b. Is it desirable to create a balanced and neutral portrayal? Is bias acceptable? Explain your answer (Bottaro, Visser & Worden, 2007:153).

There is no doubt that the host nation, Germany, made use of the opportunity to put its racial Nazi state on display in the international arena – not in dispute in any telling of this history. But also, by the very nature of the event the organisation, facilities and media coverage were on the scale traditionally appropriate to Olympic Games. The link between the Olympics and ancient Greece is assumed; it is a default setting. This does not detract from the fact that these particular Games were intended by Nazi Germany to celebrate "Aryan" achievement and no other, and that Nazi propaganda was promoted. Why then are these aspects of the 1936 Olympics presented as an opposition? Question D goes on to speak of "balanced or neutral" portrayals and asks whether or not bias is acceptable. The point is that bias is present in any source or interpretation, in what it says, how it speaks, and in its absences and emphases. This does not necessarily mean that the bias of a source disables understanding. It does help, however, to bear in mind that in most sources there is a statement regarding a view of the world and its history. The Stanford

Encyclopedia of Philosophy has this to say:

> *"Historians normally make truth claims, and they ask us to accept those claims based on the reasoning they present. So a major aspect of the study of historiography has to do with defining the ideas of evidence, rigor, and standards of reasoning for historical inquiry"* (Stanford, 2016).

What is at issue is whether a source, an interpretation is faithful to the event, to the history, based on the evidence available to us. If we say that the Berlin Olympics followed tradition and that they also put the Nazi racial state on display, are we to understand that this is not a "neutral" statement because it mentions what actually happened in 1936? I may be misreading this assessment, but it seems to me that what Question D is implying is that "neutrality" means "judgement-free balance" and that the historian is therefore required to be neutral. What would be the reason for wanting to be unbiased and neutral about an international celebration of racism in the Olympic arena? Historical opinion presented with an absence of emotional content does not imply neutrality.

Impartiality as an ideal?

The study of history benefits from our capacity to appreciate and understand differing perspectives, and to base judgement regarding historical imperatives solely on the basis of reliable evidence. However, this is often confused with defending at all costs a no-man's-land of historiographical neutrality, which is "impartial" and untouchable.

In his book *Race and Reality* Guy P Harrison avers:

> *It is clear that the majority of the world's people have not received the memo, but many scientists have been saying for decades now that biological races are not real. They do not exist. They do not occur naturally. We made them up* (Harrison, 2010:21).

Given the history of South Africa, and given that race is a cultural and social construct, and more especially, given the monumental damage that racism has done in the world, why would we seek to be "impartial" on the question of race? And yet Question E tells our learners that this is what we should aim to do.

Question E

Why is it important to be impartial while talking about "race"? (Grové, Manenzhe, Proctor, Tobin & Weldon, 2012:118).

Surely we dare not be impartial on this question. We need to be very clear that race is not genetic or biological even though every person has the right to his or her own identity, and to affirm themselves as part of a group or groups. This is implied in documents such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, beginning with the recognition of diversity (Constitution of South Africa, 1996: Preamble). It is also one of the driving forces of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Preamble of which mentions the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family", and the "fundamental human rights" and "dignity and worth of the human person" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948: Preamble). It seems then problematic that a question like this concludes that a firm and definite point of view based on evidence and investigation is not desirable when it comes to the question of race.

The question set for learners in the following exercise is: Can the principle of Eugenics ever be justified? The simple answer is no, or else, why are we even bothering to teach our learners that it is pseudo-science, that it was used to justify inequalities, human rights violations and mass murder? So what, then, is the point of the proposed debate in the following example?

Question F

Can the principle of eugenics ever be justified? [Formal debate]

Divide the class into two large groups (teams) and decide which group will support the motion and which one will oppose it. Nominate a chairperson and a timekeeper (your teacher will be the adjudicator) (Grové *et al.*, 2012:114).

[This instruction is then followed by guidelines for conducting a debate.]

First of all, Question F places arguments for and against Eugenics on the table as equal but opposite quantities, by implication equally valid until the skills of the debaters decide the outcome. And of course this means that the pro-Eugenics team may win the debate, depending on how well they prepare for the exercise. The ethics of asking learners to research the pseudo-science in order to argue for it – and all of its implications – works against the ethos within which the history is being taught. Secondly, the teacher, we are told, "will be the adjudicator." The authors of the *Teaching Emotive and Controversial History Report (TEACH Report)* (2007) caution against the

ostensible impartiality of the teacher in this situation – with specific reference to the teaching of Holocaust history. The comment could apply to Eugenics history as well:

> *…debate and discussion need to be handled with care and skill… research into methods investigated by Short and Reed (2004) suggest that, in the case of the Holocaust, it is unacceptable for a teacher to adopt the role of the neutral chair. It may indicate that the teacher is indifferent to the event being discussed or could result in revisionist, anti-Semitic Holocaust denial being given an equal platform alongside mainstream historical debate"* (TEACH, 2007:33).

Unpack and rephrase

Classroom exercises are introduced within the context of a larger work programme, and are generally preceded by some sort of preparation in the form of lesson content or reading. If, in a question, we are going to set a hypothetical challenge to a broadly accepted thesis (e.g. There are no inferior or superior groups of people in the family of humankind), then the challenge needs to be unpacked and its hypothetical status clarified.

Question G

"…Eugenics co-operates with the workings of nature by ensuring that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races." What is your opinion (Grové *et al.*, 2012:118)*?*

Asking the learners to formulate an opinion here without first interrogating the use of and understanding of the term "fittest races", is ill-advised. An acceptance of Social Darwinism is embedded in the statement above. If we paraphrase the question, it might go something like this:

> *We take as a given that there are fit and unfit races. Now, based on this given, what is your opinion of the claim of Eugenics, i.e. that humanity should be represented by the fittest races? Do you agree with the Eugenicists, that humankind should advance only the fittest among us?*

We have effectively told the learner, in the wording of our assessment, that there is merit in Social Darwinism's and Eugenics' claims that humanity can be divided into desirables and undesirables, when this is probably not our intention at all. Clearly, the terms of the statement need to be unpacked and questioned before we invite the learner, (who is even less equipped than we are to uncover assumptions and interrogate terminology) to express an opinion.

In fact, opinion questions are best avoided unless they occur in specific, clearly drawn contexts. Asking learners to form opinions about monumental topics such as Eugenics, the Nazi ideal of the "master race" and other such issues, off the tops of their heads, without requiring prior research seems a little aimless. It is, however, given some weight when it is framed as an exercise that marks the end of one section of work or introduces another. Moreover, it could lead to uninformed waffling, encouraging learners to reach conclusions without bothering to educate themselves about the provenance and history of assertions, notions and theories. In relation to these kinds of questions, David Walbert suggests the following:

> *Instead of asking what students think about an issue – let alone how they feel about it – ask them how different types of people might respond to that issue. Ask why the people you're studying said or did certain things, and what other people might have said or done in response, and why. Every issue has multiple perspectives, and this strategy requires students to consider them* (Walbert, 2015). [Author's emphasis]

Fudging and off-focus

Assessments which are not carefully pondered are likely to lack focus and even be illogical. Consider the following example:

> **Question H**
>
> These issues [Eugenics] are still relevant for us today. In groups, discuss the following issues before you continue with this unit. In each case, suggest specific examples to support your position. Should human life be protected at all times and in all cases? Are there cases where killing is justified?
>
> • *Should states or governments have the right to kill people? If not, why not and if so, when?*
> • *Should national or community needs take precedence over individual rights?*
> • *Should animals be used in medical experiments?*
> • *Should people ever be sterilised? Who should decide this?*
>
> *Keep the ideas you discussed in mind as you work through this unit* (Bottaro *et al.*, 2007:142).

Eugenics programmes argued for denying the right to life based on the belief that, for the human gene pool to be improved, groups and individuals considered undesirable should be killed or sterilised, while desirables should

be encouraged to "breed" with other desirables. Parts of Question H steer learners away from this core concept. Consider the first topic: Should states… have the right to kill people? This would almost certainly become a general discussion about, among other things, capital punishment and war. This is problematic for all kinds of reasons, not least of which is that such a discussion would not necessarily distinguish between convicted criminals and perceived enemies in conflict, and the targets of Eugenics programmes, or between the different scenarios. The second topic is: Should national or community needs take precedence over individual rights? This could be taken to imply that Eugenics may well be seen as serving public interests (even though it is not in the interests of individuals who are at the receiving end of atrocities). In fact, if this is not meant to be how we read the topic, then why is it part of this discussion at all? And the third topic, about animals, is irrelevant in a discussion of Eugenics, the study and practice of which applies solely to the human race.

Racism and the Holocaust

In their televised discussion, *Antisemitism, Islamophobia and the Future of Religious Racism*, Arsalan Aftekhar (international human rights lawyer) and Leon Wieseltier (professor at Brookings University, USA) (2015) make the point that if you want to understand a prejudice then those who hold the prejudice ought to be the subject of your study, and not those against whom the prejudice is practised. They go on to explain that in this context, a focus on the perceived culture, origins and religion of the persecuted is likely to entrench the prejudice rather than cast light on it. This is because a spotlight on the hated assumes that there must be something in their cultural and social (and sometimes religious) makeup and history that can help to explain why they are oppressed, marginalised, dispossessed and murdered (Aftekhar & Wieseltier, 2015). In this regard, consider the following assessment:

Question I

Using the information from this chapter and your own knowledge, do a group assignment on the origins of the Jewish religion and its diaspora (scattering across the globe). Present your findings to the class (Govender *et al.*, 2006:178).

In the textbook, this exercise is situated right after the section on Social Darwinism and Eugenics, and just before the section on Nazi race ideology. The textbook does go on to explain that Jews were regarded as racially inferior (although it does not say that they were considered to be *gegenrasse* – a "counter race", not human at all). The learners' exploration of Judaism in this context would hardly help learners understand why Jews were not treated like human beings, but the suggestion will have been made to them: if you take a close look at the religion this will help you to understand the Holocaust. In 1990 Lucy Dawidowicz wrote, in criticising the stated aims of the California Social Science Framework, which sought "to engage learners in thinking about why one of the world's most civilised nations participated in the systematic murder of millions of innocent people, mainly because of their religious identity":

> *One would have thought that by now educators would know the Nazis determined who was a Jew not by religion, but by the spurious criterion of 'race'* (Dawidowicz, 1990:27).

Role play

There is danger in using role play to teach and assess history such as this. Much has been written about the ethics of the methodology and though some argue in favour of the practice, there is more to make us doubt and to exercise extreme caution. The authors of *Teaching Tolerance* (2008) argue that even though some proponents of classroom simulations in History teaching are vocal in their support for this method, the contrary case is persuasive:

> *Educators who oppose the use of simulations for emotionally vulnerable subjects generally point to three main concerns: the effects of simulations on children's psychological development, the ability of simulations to oversimplify history and oppression, and the fact that few teachers possess the appropriate training to facilitate simulations successfully* (Teaching Tolerance, 2008).

Participating in the enactment of atrocities can traumatise young learners. How are they to role-play the following scenarios (in Questions J and K, below) without becoming distressed, having their perspectives warped or their capacity to empathise compromised? Another possibility is that the extreme brutality of the scenes – difficult to grasp let alone enact – makes it unlikely that the learners will take the exercise seriously. You may even have in your History class those who relish the opportunity to act the role of perpetrators in a genocide owing to the preconceptions and prejudices they bring with them. Cristina del Moral Ituarte refers to the "disparities between what is taught in

schools and what students learn from their families or communities" (Del Moral Ituarte, 2013).

Question J

Role-play the events as outlined in [this source]

Juliana Mukankwaya wore a vacant look as she explained why she, herself a mother of six, along with a number of other women from her village, rounded up two children of her Tutsi neighbour and bludgeoned them to death. Juliana thought she was doing the little boy and girl, whom she had known since their birth, a favour, since they were sure to face a much harder life under the civil war that was raging all around them; their father had been hacked to pieces in front of their eyes, and their mother was dragged away to be raped and then killed. "The children did not cry, because they knew us," the stoic woman added. "They just made big eyes. We killed too many to count" (Defteros *et al.*, 2010:197).

Question K

Group drama. Write and enact a sketch involving a planned KKK racist attack (Govender *et al.*, 2006:188).

And even if you were able to derive, in part, a positive result from dramatising traumatic history, this might well be limited by the fact that in the end it is not possible for your learners to experience or simulate even an iota of the suffering and pain that victims of genocides endured. Despite the best intentions, what learners may be left with is the impression that this was just another "fun" drama experience, a welcome departure from read-and-write humdrum classroom life. This would make a mockery of the history we are trying to teach. Samuel Totten (University of Arkansas) concludes that dramatising the Holocaust is inappropriate and that other methods should be used instead:

> *Instead…teachers and students should focus on examining the primary documents, the first-person accounts, the accurate and well-written histories, and the best films on the subject* (Totten, 2000).

Independent student research and presentation

While it is desirable to encourage learners to conduct their own research and to present to an audience, this process requires monitoring and guidance. They should be discouraged from crowding their presentations with content designed to shock their audience, especially images of violence and suffering. Learners should have clear guidelines and be coached through the preparation for their presentations, and be fully briefed on how to filter what they find:

> *Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the internet* (USHMM, 2015).

Conclusion

Assessment in the History class has to be a careful and considered business. Every item should have a clear didactic purpose, use terms and descriptions unambiguously, and avoid misrepresentations and inaccuracies. The same principled stance we apply in our approach to the subject has to be reflected in the assessments we choose for our learners – the tests, exams, research projects and presentations have to support the learning process. And always, we have to remember that history is as much about individual human beings as it is about broad sweeps and tides, and that we are teaching individual human beings with personal histories and feelings.

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