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Teaching sensitive topics: Training history teachers in collaboration with the museum

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ABSTRACT

Discussing sensitive topics, such as slavery, political extremism or religion, in the history classroom presents an interesting challenge for history teachers and museum educators. The goal of this small-scale case study was to evaluate a domain-specific professional-development course for Dutch history teachers that was developed in cooperation with museum educators. This course trains teachers to explore the dynamics of and multiple perspectives on a heritage object by asking historical questions, starting from an overarching main question. We investigated: 1) to what extent trainee and experienced history teachers felt competent in teaching sensitive topics before and after the training; and 2) how three experienced history teachers discussed multiple perspectives in a follow-up lesson after the training. Results showed that teachers reported higher self-efficacy in teaching sensitive topics and that the course offered them practical ideas about how to discuss these kinds of topics in their classrooms. Lesson observations showed that the teachers applied some parts of the design principles demonstrated in the course. This article discusses how using tangible heritage objects could support history educators in negotiating sensitive issues.

KEYWORDS

Sensitive topics, History education, Teacher professional development, Museum education

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Introduction

Teacher education and professionalisation should prepare teachers to teach sensitive topics. However, little research has been done on how and the degree to which teachers are prepared for this (Pace, 2019). Teaching sensitive topics offers opportunities to make students aware of different perspectives in and on the past, which is an important skill to acquire in democratic societies. But it also demands pedagogical flexibility with students (or communities) who respond emotionally, causing teachers to fear and avoid sensitivity. From a pedagogical and interpersonal perspective, teachers often know how to handle classroom discussions and how to respond to disruptive behaviour. In addition, there are many tools and training courses that support teachers to develop de-escalating skills (Hess, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In our view, these approaches could be supplemented with more domain-specific approaches that develop teachers' pedagogical content knowledge regarding sensitive topics.

From the perspective of history education, teaching methodology theories provide insights into historical thinking and dealing with multiple perspectives that can offer teachers starting points and guidance to discuss sensitive topics with their students (Savenije, Wansink & Logtenberg, 2022). Because the sensitivity of historical issues currently often manifests itself in discussions involving concrete cultural heritage (such as statues, paintings, and objects) it could be useful to step outside the history classroom and work together with museums (Marcus, Levine & Grenier, 2012; Rose, 2016; Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017). Based on this idea, we developed a domain-specific training in which we show teachers the possibilities of teaching sensitive topics using concrete (museum) objects and multiple perspectives through time. In this article we explain the design principles of our approach. We also explored the contribution of this training to teacher self-efficacy in teaching sensitive topics and the extent to which teachers succeed in discussing sensitive topics with their students from multiple perspectives through time.

Reasons for sensitivity

Sensitive topics can be characterized by the fact that the focus lies on a traumatic past, which is told through the perspective of victims with whom students may feel a strong connection (Sheppard, 2010). For example, history lessons on the transatlantic slave trade could strongly emphasize the point of view of enslaved Africans, stimulating students to emotionally empathize with this perspective. Furthermore, topics may become sensitive when students or teachers perceive them as a threat to the image of the group they identify with (Goldberg, 2017). In the Dutch context, 'Black Pete' is an example of a sensitive tradition, where one group, that regards this figure as a symbol of a festive children's event, feels their identity threatened by another (growing) group, that sees this tradition as a painful remembrance and continuation of feelings of oppression and racism. Based on their own social identifications in the present, students relate to particular historical groups (i.e. slave traders and enslaved persons). This example also demonstrates another factor of sensitivity; through students' social identifications diverse and conflicting moral perspectives may become apparent. Teachers often refer to the social or religious background of students when explaining the reasons for sensitivity (Savenije et al., 2022;

Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). Taken together, trauma, social identity and moral values can give rise to emotional responses in the classroom.

Research findings on teachers' experiences in dealing with sensitive topics provide a rather mixed picture. A Dutch study involving 1,117 teachers (Sijbers, 2015) reports that teachers feel competent to deal with tensions in their classrooms, but when teaching in the lower levels of secondary education, they do have trouble with topics such as anti-Semitism, Islam, and fundamentalism. In a study involving 82 Dutch history teachers, it was found that teachers are especially challenged by emotional responses and over-simplified opinions in the classroom on topics such as Islam, the Holocaust and slavery (Savenije et al., 2022; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). Two exploratory studies (De Graaff et al., 2016; Kleijwegt, 2016) report that student teachers and teachers in pre-vocational secondary education do not feel competent to teach sensitive topics because they have not fully developed their role as moral educator. In general, teachers experience a gap between their personal worldview and the worldview of their students. This gap is widened due to teachers apparently having little insight into the sources of information that students use while developing their opinions. Furthermore, teachers require support in facilitating content-specific classroom discussions and disciplinary interaction (Reisman et al, 2018).

International research paints a similar picture regarding the reasons why teaching sensitive topics is difficult for teachers (Nystrand et al. 2003; Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013; Wooley, 2017). Besides fear of emotional responses in the classroom (Goldberg, Wagner & Petrović, 2019), teachers sometimes experience pressure from parents, school boards or the local community (Misco, 2017; Girard et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers tend to avoid sensitive topics because of their own values or opinions (Kello, 2017). Zembylas (2017) argues that teachers can develop resistance towards other perspectives because of the affective dimensions of sensitive topics. Carefully creating 'affective disruption' and opportunities for teachers to start questioning their beliefs and emotions with less sensitive issues could support them in engaging with sensitive histories (Zembylas, 2017).

Characteristics of a domain-specific approach

In the Netherlands, professional development courses on teaching sensitive topics often relate to goals of citizenship education. They focus mainly on general conversation techniques and learning to see different perspectives (e.g., SLO & Diversion, 2016; Hess, 2009). Research has shown that it is essential to introduce students to the fact that individuals can have different perspectives on a particular topic due to religious beliefs, cultural background, and moral views (Oulton et al, 2004). Domain-specific research in history education offers further directions for history teachers to discuss multiple perspectives in the classroom. By analysing motives, values, identities, and viewpoints of people within a specific historical context, students can learn to understand a perspective that is different from their own (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Barton & McCully, 2012; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Goldberg, 2014).

Research into informal museum education and heritage can offer teachers valuable insights and tools to discuss sensitive topics with their students (McCully, Weiglhofer & Bates, 2021). Tangible objects can help students with developing historical thinking skills, such as historical perspective-taking (Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017; Savenije, van Boxtel, & Grever, 2014), analysing sources (Marcus & Levine, 2011) and understanding the nature of disciplinary thinking (Seixas & Clark, 2004). Objects, and the stories behind these objects, can evoke different emotions, which is an important part of triggering these kinds of skills. McCully et al. (2021) investigated museum visits of Protestant and Catholic student groups in Northern Ireland and discovered that an affective impact of museum material, such as objects and personal testimonies, coincided with deeper questioning. They concluded that affective disruption (Zembylas, 2017) provoked by museum objects can stimulate critical thinking. Museum objects can render the relationship between the past, present, and future more tangible. In addition, they can show that people (now and in the past) can have different opinions on the meaning of the object. This understanding can

be developed further by offering students (and visitors in general) information about why an object is exhibited and encouraging them to evaluate these reasons (Gosselin, 2011). In this way students are offered an accessible, inclusive, and safe opportunity to discover their own perspectives and emotions (Gómez-Hurtado, Cuenca-López, & Borghi, 2020) and those of other people now and in the past. Concrete heritage objects within the walls of a museum could provide a relatively risk-free opportunity to evoke different emotional responses. Therefore, they are a valuable addition to the abstract and textual information that is often discussed in history lessons.

In order to be able to discuss multiple points of view on a museum object in a structured manner, we suggest using a layered approach which distinguishes between different perspectives on the object in the historical time (when the object was made/used), the present time, and the historiographical time (the period, between the historical and present time, in which people have written about the historical time of the object; e.g. the time the object was placed in a museum) (Wansink, 2018). For example, a statue of the famous 17th century Dutch East India governor-general Jan Pieters zoon Coen raised different feelings and reactions in the 19th century (when the statue was made) than it does in present-day society. Showing students these differences and similarities of perspectives through time may help them deal with current issues and understand certain emotions. It allows them to gain some distance from their own opinions and stimulates historical thinking.

Finally, in a domain-specific approach it is essential to consider the questions that could be asked by teachers and students. Questions can be formulated from a disciplinary perspective, based on the big ideas or concepts of the historical discipline, such as time, evidence, continuity and change, causality, historical significance and ethical perspectives. Such questions not only can stimulate students to examine the object from multiple perspectives and engage different historical thinking skills, but can also reveal their own way of looking at and thinking about the past. (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Logtenberg, 2012; Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017; Wansink, Logtenberg, Savenije et al., 2020). Focusing on learning to ask questions could also help in maintaining a constructive dialogue regarding sensitive issues, which focuses less on judgements and polarized answers. Questioning from different perspectives could contribute to 'cooling down' hot issues, for example by looking from a historiographical perspective in the case of a contemporary issue. This could also provide support in de-escalating a heated discussion (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). In addition, questions can also 'warm-up' issues that are not sensitive at first glance, for example by exploring them from a moral perspective. Both 'warming-up' and 'cooling-down' can be helpful because these questioning activities show the heterogeneity of perspectives and stimulate students to empathize with other perspectives (Kello, 2016).

The present study and research questions

The insights outlined above were incorporated into a professional development course for teachers that was developed in collaboration with researchers, history teacher trainers and a museum educator. The training takes place in a museum and starts from a concrete museum object that can evoke different emotions and opinions (in this case the unwrapped mummified body of a young boy from Ancient Egypt at the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities). The educator discusses perspectives on the object from different times (historical, historiographical, present) and poses historical questions in order to show that sensitivity changes over time.

The training is set up in such a way that teachers first experience the teaching material as participants and reflect on the underlying design principles. After this introduction, teachers are challenged to practice with these principles with other museum objects. Finally, they are asked to translate them into a history lesson that they deliver in their own classroom. Research into the professional development of teachers has shown that activating participants by walking them through an example lesson appears to be more effective than simply offering teaching materials (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The underlying idea with this training is that teachers, having experienced an example themselves, can use this approach when an expected or unexpected issue emerges during teaching.

The following research question was investigated to evaluate the outcomes of this training: to what extent do history teachers after the training:

- Feel competent in teaching potentially sensitive topics?
- Discuss different perspectives from different times on a sensitive topic, using a concrete object in their lessons?

Methods & data sources

In the following section we describe the participants, design of the training and the data collection with questionnaires and an observation instrument. An overview is in Table 1

Table 1

Training and data collection

	Process	Instrument
Training with 3 experienced teachers	Collected data on experience with and self-efficacy in teaching sensitive topics before and after the training.	Questionnaire
Training with 29 trainee teachers		
Lessons of 3 experienced teachers	Video-recorded and observed lesson based on the training	Observation instrument

Participants

Participants were 29 in-service student teachers and three experienced history teachers. The experienced teachers were (to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used): Ewald (33, 10 years' experience, small town context), Nicole (41, 18 years' experience, urban context) and Roland (29, 8 years' experience, urban context). All participants were teaching in the lower levels of Dutch secondary education (vocational education, students between 12 and 15 years old). We purposefully recruited participants teaching at this educational level because not much research has been done with these groups (even though approximately 60 percent of Dutch students are enrolled at this level) and teaching sensitive issues seems more challenging than with older students in higher levels of education. The training was the same for both teacher groups but was given at separate meetings.

The training

The training was developed within the context of a museum. To enable transfer to other contexts and museums, the design principles that formed the core of the training were made explicit:

- start from an overarching main question around a concrete heritage object;
- explore, by asking historical questions:
 - multiple perspectives on the object over time (historical time, historiographical time, present time) and
 - the dynamics of the object's sensitivity over time.

By focusing on one object and starting from a central question, the sensitivity of the subject becomes immediately visible and tangible, so that possible tensions do not arise unexpectedly. The second principle aims to create or maintain some distance from the sensitive subject by historicizing it. At the same time, explicit focus on multi-perspectivity ensures that the different perspectives that people can have on a subject are not avoided (Wansink et al., 2020). Working with concrete heritage objects is easier to achieve in a museum. In a classroom it will often be necessary to work with images or with indirect representations of material culture that cannot

always be physically present. In this research we decided to give the training in a museum and allow teachers to experience the added value of working with concrete objects and a museum educator. This museum context provided tangible insights into the dilemmas and complexity of conserving and presenting cultural heritage.

The training, given by a teacher trainer and a museum educator, started with a case about the choice not to exhibit the unwrapped mummified body of a young boy from Ancient Egypt in the museum. This case touches on an ethical issue about the handling of human remains in three different times (Ancient Egyptian times, the nineteenth century and the present). The overarching question was: 'how do we deal with human remains?' The educators discussed different perspectives on this issue through time, based on the questions why and how the boy was mummified in the ancient Egyptian past (historical time), why the mummy was purchased by a Dutch museum in the 19th century (historiographical time) and why the museum has recently decided not to display the unwrapped mummy (current time).

During the training, the design principles were explained and discussed using this case as an example. Next, teachers were given the opportunity to practice with the principles by applying them to a different object in the museum. Finally, teachers were instructed to design a lesson on a sensitive topic based on the design principles.

The training was given for the first time to the three experienced teachers and was subsequently repeated with the 29 trainee teachers. Only the three experienced teachers were asked to design and give a lesson at their own schools.

Instruments and analysis

Before the training took place, data on teachers' and student teachers' experiences with teaching sensitive topics were collected through a questionnaire used in international research that aims to explore which topics are considered as sensitive, the reasons for sensitivity and the teaching approaches that are applied to deal with these sensitivities (Goldberg et al., 2019).

A self-efficacy questionnaire on teaching sensitive topics (adapted from Zee et al., 2016) was administered before and after the training. Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's perceived ability to influence the environment despite external factors (Bandura, 1997). In this study, it was defined as confidence in teaching sensitive topics. Compared to what teachers say they do in their lessons, confidence in their own abilities offers a more reliable picture of their actual approach in the lesson. For example, if a teacher is confident in his/her own ability to get students to listen to each other in a class discussion, this is a relatively reliable indication of whether the teacher manages to accomplish this in his/her own practice (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998). Participants were asked to rate their performance through a series of questions, such as: how well do you manage to limit disruptive behaviour in the classroom? These questions were supplemented with items from a questionnaire specifically aimed at measuring the extent to which teachers consider themselves to be able to involve students from different backgrounds (Siwatu, 2007). This questionnaire consisted of 20 items ($\alpha = 0.86$) on a 7-point scale. An example question is: to what extent are you able to create a learning community when the class consists of students from different backgrounds?

After the training, teachers' and student teachers' experiences were collected through the same questionnaire, which now included a series of open prompts (e.g., the training has/has not offered me support in dealing with sensitive topics, because....). The answers to these questions were analysed based on the design principles of the training.

The three experienced teachers were instructed to design and teach a lesson on a sensitive topic, using the design principles of the training. The teachers were given free choice in choosing a sensitive subject and teaching context. All three teachers prepared a lesson for a lower secondary vocational class. The three lessons were video-recorded and observed by two researchers who were present during the lessons. An observation instrument for analysing history lessons (Gestdóttir, 2018) was used during the lesson observation (see Appendix). It was adjusted for this study based on the model of multi-perspectivity (Wansink, 2018) and a study on

the use of cultural heritage for historical reasoning (Baron, 2010). The analysis focused on the following criteria:

- 1) the lesson is built around a concrete object or phenomenon
- 2) an explicit central question is asked
- 3) multiple perspectives in the past, present, and historiographical time are discussed
- 4) historical sources are used
- 5) the lesson includes interaction between teacher and students and between students.

While the observations focused on the actions of the teacher, the analysis also provided us with some information on interaction between the teacher and students and the questions students asked.

After the lesson, the teacher briefly evaluated the lesson with the observing researchers. Subsequently, the lessons were reviewed in a meeting with all researchers, teachers, and the museum educator. Data were analysed by two researchers: data from the questionnaires was calculated and categorized, while the lesson observations were used to provide a systematic description of the lessons given by the three experienced teachers. In the presentation of the results, we provide a detailed description of the cases, so that they can also serve as concrete practical examples of working with the design principles set out above.

Results

Perceptions of sensitivity before the training

The 29 student teachers indicated that they experienced the following topics as sensitive: slavery/colonialism, Holocaust /WWII, terrorism, Islam, and immigration/refugees. The reasons for sensitivity mainly lay in the controversial nature of these topics in the public debate. They also reported feeling worried about hurting students' feelings and dealing with students' emotions in general. Furthermore, teachers indicated that they sometimes experience a knowledge deficit when it comes to discussing current issues in the public debate. In response to the open question about who might be sensitive to these issues, most student teachers referred to the cultural or religious background of students (migrant, Dutch, Surinamese, Moroccan, Muslim, Christian). However, several teachers also indicated that some subjects could be sensitive for everyone.

The three experienced teachers also reported their experiences with sensitive issues. Teacher Ewald, who teaches in a small-town context, mainly referred to religious subjects, because many of the enrolled students had parents with a Christian background, and migration, because of the political preferences of the students. He indicated that he was always trying to point out the 'beauty of these differences' to students and to create a safe atmosphere in the classroom but he did not always succeed. Ewald testified to the fact that he has sometimes avoided teaching human evolution theory, because of the discomfort he felt about conflicting with parental opinion and because he was unsure whether he would be able to remain neutral himself.

Roland, teaching in an urban area, explained that emotions in the classroom, which in his view obstruct deeper learning, pose a challenge to him. He tries to ask many questions, whilst avoiding passing judgement. At the same time, he indicated that he did not evade any subject. Nicole, who teaches in a metropolitan context, pointed out that the Palestinian conflict, slavery, and the phenomenon of the multicultural society are sensitive topics among her students. They may become angry and get caught up in their own emotions. When this happens, she is used to de-escalating before she goes back investigating the matter through dialogue.

Self-efficacy to teach sensitive topics

After the training, 29 student teachers showed a slight increase on the self-efficacy-scale of teaching sensitive topics. Two of the experienced teachers showed an increase, while Nicole showed a slight, but negligible, decrease (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mean scores on the self-efficacy scale before and after the training (Likert-scale 1-7)

	Before	After
Student teachers (n=29)	4.98	5.25
Ewald	4.25	4.60
Nicole	6.35	6.15
Roland	4.85	5.15

This increase is partly explained by clearly higher ratings on items related to dealing with cultural diversity in the classroom. Although it remains unclear to what extent the training contributed to this rise, its focus on exploring multiple perspectives on a concrete object did offer tools for dealing with cultural diversity.

Lesson observations

Teacher Ewald used 'Mussert's Wall' as a heritage object in his lesson for a group of first-year pre-vocational secondary school students (12 years old). This wall, together with the meeting place in front of it, is the only remnant of a complex used by the Dutch National Socialist Movement (NSB) and their leader Anton Mussert for large party rallies during the 1930s in the Netherlands. When a local heritage association submitted a request in 2015 to include the wall on the list of national monuments, a fierce debate arose about whether this remnant of a difficult history should be preserved or not. The sensitivity here arises from the fact that this site was built and used by national socialists and, hence, represents a perpetrator perspective. In addition, there was concern that such a historical object could provide a platform or become a 'pilgrimage site' for far-right sympathizers, potentially fueling antidemocratic and antisemitic ideas.

The central question in the lesson was whether Mussert's Wall should be demolished (criterion 1 and 2). Using a worksheet and classroom instruction, students were offered several different perspectives on this question, acknowledging the three different time layers (criterion 3). The period of historical time comprised the construction of the wall and its use for political meetings between 1936 and 1940 (During WWII, the German occupier prohibited political meetings). Further lesson material dealt with how the wall was used for other activities after the war and how, in fact, it had been 'forgotten' for a long time (historiographical time). Most of the lesson focused on the present-day discussion about whether the wall should be demolished or listed as a historic monument. The sources used were mainly contemporary and provided conflicting views about the wall (criterion 4). Students completed assignments on a worksheet and there was some interaction between individual students and the teacher, but little interaction between students themselves (criterion 5).

None of the students seemed to experience the subject as sensitive at the start of the lesson. Students mainly thought the wall could be removed for pragmatic reasons: its removal would provide space for the camp site that was built on the site after the war. By the end of the lesson, some students had become more aware of the sensitivity of the issue. The teacher had clearly applied the design principles of the training and introduced his students to different perspectives on a sensitive topic. The question remains whether the relatively indifferent reaction of the students was a consequence of this approach, and thus increased the negotiability of the subject,

or was a result of the students not having any strong opinions on this subject at all. After the lesson, the teacher acknowledged that interaction between students had been largely absent, but that it had worked well to structure the lesson around one object.

Teacher Roland gave a lesson about the 'Black Pete' debate in a second-year pre-vocational secondary education class (13-14 years old students). This debate featured prominently in the news at that time and concerned the controversial black-faced companion of St. Nicholas, an annual children's feast that is celebrated in December. This topic is sensitive on a national level and can be regarded as a 'hot topic' (mainly at certain times in the year). An increasingly larger group of people regards this tradition as a painful memory of colonial history and a continuation of feelings of oppression and racism, while another group sees this figure as a harmless symbol of a festive children's event, experiencing criticism of this tradition as a threat to their identity. From a students' perspective, however, the sensitivity regarding Black Pete could be regarded as 'hot' and national compared to, for example, the more 'cooled down' and 'local' debate about Mussert's Wall.

The lesson started with a discussion on the current debate about Black Pete, with most students taking the position that the Black Pete tradition is not racist. The lesson did not include an explicit central question or concrete object (criteria 1 and 2). After the discussion, students were instructed to study sources (pictures of Black Pete) from different periods of time between 1880 and the present (criterion 3 and 4). The purpose of this exercise was to nuance their views. The sources were deliberated in a final round of discussion. The lesson included a lot of interaction between students, with the teacher passing on questions and answers and asking open questions (criterion 5).

After the lesson, teacher Roland indicated that he had not expected most students to appear to be in favour of keeping the Black Pete tradition. Compared to the lesson on Mussert's Wall, in which students at first glance did not understand why the topic could be seen as sensitive, this lesson seemed to contain little sensitivity because of all the students indicating that they had the same point of view. However, sensitivity did arise later in the lesson, when a student of Polish descent reacted emotionally after reading a comment made by someone on the Internet that stated that Black Petes should be replaced by Polish people. Afterwards, the teacher indicated that this needed a follow-up discussion.

In this lesson, the teacher only applied the design principles of the training to a limited extent. He clearly addressed interpretations of the Black Pete tradition that have changed over time, using different sources, but he did not use a concrete object or a central question. Nor did the teacher fully apply the principle of addressing multiple perspectives in three time-layers. It is possible that applying these principles would have brought sensitivities on the subject to the forefront earlier. While evaluating the lesson afterwards, Roland explained that he had started the lesson with a current and actual discussion and not with events in the past because he first wanted to know exactly what was going on in the minds of his students.

In her second-year classroom (13-14 years old students) teacher Nicole also chose the topic of Black Pete, partly at the request of some of her students. She started the lesson by making an inventory of the reactions to a photo of a Black Pete in the present; students were asked to put into words their associations with and questions about the photo. Thus, Nicole used a central object, namely a photo (criterion 1), but no central question to start off the lesson (criterion 2). In the discussion that followed, the teacher gave the floor to all students. Then students started working on the question of whether Black Pete is appropriate for the present day or not (criterion 2). To answer that question, they were given a text describing the probable origin of Black Pete. They could also look up information themselves on the Internet. This meant that attention was paid to one perspective from the past based on a historical source (partly covering criteria 3 and 4). In a closing debate, students were divided into groups tasked with arguing for or against using Black Pete in St. Nicholas festivities. The teacher ensured that students articulated their arguments (criterion 5). The students did not always adhere to their roles as supporters or opponents but tried their best to articulate their arguments and respond to each other.

In this lesson the teacher applied various design principles of the training, but did not incorporate a discussion of different perspectives from the past and present and in historiography. As a result, it was mainly the present-day debate that defined the lesson. However, the use of a historical source ensured that students also brought arguments into the discussion that revealed some insight into the dynamics of perspectives over time. In addition, the fact that proponents and opponents in the discussion did not always adhere to their assigned roles showed that there were more views on the subject in the classroom than the first inventory of associations suggested. If the teacher had addressed different perspectives in the three time-layers more strongly, these views might have been explicated earlier, so that they could have been discussed. Afterwards, the teacher indicated that she was very satisfied with the input from the students, precisely because she had allowed a lot of room for it at the beginning.

Experiences with the training

In the follow-up meeting with all three teachers, the fact that the students generally did not regard the topics discussed as sensitive was noted as a striking feature of the lessons. The teachers indicated that students do not always appear to see the sensitivity of a certain subject and noted that they sometimes stick to their own view, although they do develop a greater understanding of other perspectives. Partly for this reason, Roland expressed his intention to pay more attention to the feelings and experiences of his students in the future, while also devoting less time to present-day contexts. Nicole specifically related this to the use of an object, which she highlighted as a useful insight from the training. She thought it would be valuable to initially ask students what feeling this object evokes in them.

The teachers were interested in the historiographical approach of the museum working with sources about the time when an object was placed in the museum. However, teachers also indicated that they had difficulty in applying the concept of historiographical time to their specific topic. This had to do with difficulties in determining what time between the historical time and the present would be most interesting as a historiographical context. In addition, the teachers indicated that they were afraid that including multiple perspectives from all time-layers would make the lesson too complex for students. Ewald specifically mentioned the difficulty of not offering students too many sources while also wanting to do justice to as many perspectives as possible.

Overall, the three experienced teachers were positive about the tools offered by the training. This can be illustrated by their statements: 'Especially the apparent simplicity of the examples provided, to see what you can do with something so small' (Ewald). 'Practical tips that can be used at all levels. It also provides you with enough scope to interpret it in a way that suits the group' (Nicole). 'By experiencing a lesson on the 'developed' mummy myself, I have gained more self-insight. The PowerPoint slides provide a framework for lesson design and types of questions that can stimulate depth in the lesson' (Roland).

The student teachers reported that they regarded the principle of discussing multiple perspectives over time as a useful insight that they could apply in their lessons. Some indicated that they had become more aware of the sensitivities surrounding a subject and that the training had contributed to expanding their didactic repertoire. The idea of providing more space for students' opinions by discussing them in a safe and respectful way, the use of a concrete heritage object, and setting meaningful questions was seen as useful and led to intentions to introduce multiple perspectives in their lessons.

To sum up, our results indicate that the training contributed to a sense of self-efficacy in teaching sensitive topics. In the observed lessons, teachers applied various design principles that were offered in the training. They used (heritage) objects and partly succeeded in exploring multiple perspectives through time. Moreover, teachers appreciated the tools offered during the training and indicated that they gained more insight into discussing sensitive issues from multiple perspectives.

Conclusion and discussion

Research has shown that teaching about sensitive topics and acknowledging multiple perspectives is and remains challenging. Various training courses and interventions exist, but little is known about how they work in the classroom and whether a domain-specific approach could help history teachers to deal with sensitive issues proactively. In collaboration with museums and teachers, this study attempted to develop guiding principles for open discussion of sensitive issues, which were then tested in a teacher trainer course. The training focused on exploring multiple perspectives (of students and over time) related to a heritage object that reveals different and changing points of view in a tangible way. We evaluated this training in a small-scale monitoring study, to find out whether teachers and student teachers experienced self-efficacy when teaching about potentially sensitive topics. We also observed whether teachers applied the design principles of the training in their lessons.

Confidence to teach sensitive topics

Teachers indicated that the training provided them with insights and practical tools for discussing sensitive topics and they reported becoming more confident in teaching sensitive subjects. They mainly pointed to the design principles of showing multiple perspectives over time and using a concrete object as powerful tools to achieve this. Furthermore, the approach of allowing participants to first experience the design principles themselves appeared to generate greater awareness of the sensitivities surrounding historical topics.

Teaching practice

Some use of the principles demonstrated in the training was observed in the lessons of the three experienced teachers. Notably, only one teacher used a concrete object, while the other two teachers used different images. The lessons also differed in the use of a central question. All three teachers addressed different time periods in the lesson (by using sources), but multiple perspectives within these time layers were less represented. In particular, perspectives from historiographical time remained undiscussed. Probably because there was a lot of room for input from and interaction between students, the emphasis was mainly on the present time: how people in the present deal with the past.

The focus of this study was primarily on the experience and professional development of teachers. However, the ultimate goal is that through this process, students become more adept at taking a historical perspective, for which no data were collected in this study. What is notable, is that the precise nature and sensitivity of the topic discussed makes teaching historical perspective-taking challenging in various ways. From the approaches of the teachers we observed, it is evident that a subject like 'Black Pete' demands a more student-driven approach, where perspectives in the present, due to the contentious nature of the topic, require more time and attention, and the transition to the past is somewhat more challenging. In the case of a topic like national socialism, which seemed less sensitive to students, we observe a somewhat more teacher-driven approach and more room for historical contextualization.

The observations also suggest that allowing room for students' input could result in less diversity in perspectives in the lesson. Regarding 'hot' and somewhat abstract issues, students may be less inclined to ventilate an alternative opinion, resulting in less diversity of voices. This demands culturally responsive teaching, by teachers who know what emotions and stereotypes exist below the surface of a classroom (Siwatu, 2007; Tribukait, 2021). We assumed that focusing the discussion on a specific concrete object, in accordance with the design principles of the training, would have helped to facilitate the expression of more diverse perspectives, but further research with more teachers using concrete objects is needed. Additionally, future studies would need to include students' perspectives, and their learning outcomes regarding historical perspective-taking, as the handling of sensitive issues is to a large degree defined by the interaction between teacher and students.

Although historiographical points of view are difficult to teach, they are seen as valuable and domain-specific perspectives because they can ‘take the sting’ out of dichotomies that often characterize discussions (past/present; sensitive/not sensitive) by showing how the sensitivity of a topic changes over time. Teachers indicated that they wanted to practice more and give more lessons based on these principles to become more familiar with them. Adding more concrete, worked-out examples to the training could also help teachers to get a better idea of what is meant by perspectives from the historiographical period. Finally, teacher knowledge plays a major role, and it requires research skills to determine what objects could form an interesting starting point for discussion of a specific sensitive topic and what period would be interesting as historiographical time. The expertise of museum staff is of great value in this regard, because they often are more familiar with the story behind specific objects.

Opportunities and obstacles

The results of this small-scale case study appear to support previous research findings. Teachers sometimes have little confidence in their own knowledge when discussing sensitive topics, although they do not always avoid teaching them (Kleijwegt, 2016; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). In addition, this study provides a direction for further research into the implementation of didactic approaches in practice.

Collaboration between museum educators, teaching methodology experts and history teachers seems promising, especially when it comes to sensitive topics and the use of concrete objects. History teachers and museum educators could make much more use of tangible heritage objects when discussing abstract and difficult themes. Concrete objects can evoke a response in every student and make differences between the perspectives of individual students visible and open for discussion (Savenije et al., 2014). If a teacher makes substantive and concrete choices, there is also more scope for students to reason historically and reveal their perspectives. In this study, a relatively short and simple domain-specific training appeared to offer teachers a handhold and to encourage them to teach lessons based on multiple perspectives in lower secondary vocational education.

Because of the small scale of the study, we should be cautious about drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the training. It is uncertain to what extent this training would have substantial effects on teaching, especially when a teacher is taken by surprise by unexpected emotions and sensitivity in the classroom. Further research could investigate whether this approach (in which the teacher takes the initiative to raise a potentially sensitive issue) also offers tools for moments in lessons when teachers/students are confronted with sensitive issues.

The design principles of the training could be expanded into a powerful hybrid approach that could be used in different educational contexts: in museums, on location and in the classroom. Museums are not neutral participants in engaging with the past, which makes them excellent venues for showing students that multiple perspectives can converge and clash, even within these institutions. Other contexts could also be found through collaboration with other school subjects. Tangible and less tangible objects related to sensitive issues can, for example, be viewed from multiple domain-specific perspectives (Janssen, Hulshof & Van Veen, 2018). Themes such as dealing with death and homosexuality could, for example, be approached cross-curricular from a biological and historical perspective, while ideas about the role of women could be discussed from the perspectives of classical languages, social studies, and history. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate with students how the same information or facts are sometimes used as arguments for completely opposing perspectives. This broad approach could help students to become proficient in understanding the sensitivity of topics and in making an informed contribution to discussions themselves.

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APPENDIX 1: Observation Scheme

KEY QUESTION: THE TEACHER BUILDS THE LESSON AROUND A KEY QUESTION			
The lesson is built around a main question that is central to the lesson, namely:			
This question has been made explicit:	By the teacher		
	By the student(s)		
MULTIPERSPECTIVITY: THE TEACHER MAKES CLEAR THAT THERE ARE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS			
on the event / on the actor / on the phenomenon:	Perspectives of different historical actors (past)		
	Different historical interpretations over time (historiography)		
	Different interpretations in the present		
	One perspective from the past, through time and in the present		
	A single perspective or interpretation		
Shows that interpretations change over time			
Makes clear that the perspective presented is only one of many			
Asks historical questions to clarify the mutability of perspectives over time, namely:			
USES SOURCES TO CLARIFY PERSPECTIVES			
Uses 1 source at a time > what time(s)?			
Uses the same source over time			
Uses the source to illustrate a perspective			
Uses the source to substantiate a perspective			
Contextualizes the source			
Evaluates the usability/reliability of the source in relation to a specific question			
Compares different perspectives on the source over time			
Problematizes the current use of the source in a museum			
Asks historical questions regarding the source, namely:			
Interaction: THE TEACHER ENCOURAGES THE STUDENT TO REASON THROUGH INTERACTION AND BY ASKING QUESTIONS			
Encourages interaction:	Between students in class		
	Between teacher and student (Contributions from more than one)		
	By asking open questions		
	Geared to getting the students to put their own arguments into words		
Gives assignments that demand historical thinking and reasoning activities	Name/compare perspectives or interpretations		
	Analyse/evaluate historical sources		
	Ask historical questions		
	The students do not work on assignments		

Method: Tick each item that you observe and use the space on the right to add comments