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The Nervous State: using cross-curricular learning to develop students' emotional literacy and subject knowledge

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Introduction & Context

This case study summarises a collaboration between historians, educators and a dramatist to develop cross-curricular, creative methods to embed emotional literacy (Steiner, 1997; Goleman, 1996) in the school curricula.

History in English schools is traditionally conceptualised through an analytical, evidence-based disciplinary lens (Sexias and Morton, 2013). However, history is fundamentally about humans; connecting to and understanding the emotions of historical actors is central to understanding history. A rounded history education therefore should encompass both cognitive and affective domains (Krakwohl et al., 1964; Cunningham, 2009). Furthermore, making those affective connections can support young people to reflect on and contextualise their own emotional responses and develop emotional literacy, defined as: "the ability to understand your emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathise with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions productively." (Steiner, 1997:11)

Such connections can be strengthened when combined with a focus on creativity and imagination. There are several examples of educators using art, drama, music and literature to make emotional connections to history: bringing history to life whilst supporting students to interpret the creativity of others and to create their own work. (Godsell & Mathebula, 2025; Clarke, 2025; Endecott et al. 2024; Cottingham, 2005)

Building on these conceptualisations, the Nervous State Project at XP School combined the disciplines of history and English to enable Year 9 (age 13-14) students to: develop knowledge and

understanding of the ‘war of nerves’ in Europe in 1938; deepen their sense of historical perspective taking or historical empathy (Lee & Shemilt, 2011; Rantala et al., 2016; Bartelds et al., 2020); strengthen their skills of textual and filmic analysis; and create their own reflective journals. Throughout, students had opportunities to reflect on the emotions of people living in 1938 and to use this understanding to identify, describe and articulate how they feel about life today. This empathetic and potentially therapeutic process is described by Stadler (2024) as ‘mentalisation’ and is central to building healthy relationships and a tolerant, open-minded attitude towards others. This is particularly pertinent given the post-pandemic increase in mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression which have led to Generation Z being labelled ‘The Anxious Generation’ (Haidt, 2024)

The Nervous State Project in the History Curriculum

Playwright, academic and political commentator F.L Lucas (1894-1967) was commissioned to write a journal documenting his personal response to world events as they unfolded across 1938. The resulting publication, *Journal Under the Terror, 1938* (Cassell, 1939) documents the mental strain and anxiety Lucas and his wife Prudence experienced, not only in response to the political events that subsequently led to war, but in their equally tumultuous personal lives.

Gottlieb ‘rediscovered’ Lucas's journal during research into the emotional impact of the so-called ‘war of nerves’ of 1938, and she immediately recognised the journal as a powerful example of ‘history from within’ (Gottlieb, 2025) - exploring history from the personal viewpoints of those affected, foregrounding the emotional and psychological impact of historical events on those that lived through them. Looking for a creative way to share and enhance her research, Gottlieb collaborated with dramatist Nicola Baldwin to produce a play and a film that dramatize Lucas’ journal (The University of Sheffield, 2025).

Gottlieb and Baldwin were interested in how engagement with emotional history might unlock a connection for young people to both the past and their feelings about the present. In this context, they engaged with several history departments, including King Edward VII School in Sheffield through a Year 9 History scheme of work making use of original source material and the *Nervous State* film as outlined by curriculum leader Sarah Davis:

> putting people at the heart of our enquiries is essential in making history meaningful for young people. Shining a light on individuals and historians transformed our students' procedural knowledge and enthusiasm for our discipline. (Davis, 2024: 34)

Furthermore, Davis notes, her students made profound and nuanced connections with their own feelings about current affairs through the study of "emotion history" (Davis 2024: 33).

The Nervous State as a cross curricular 'expedition' at XP School

As a creative, cross-disciplinary project there is obvious potential in broadening the project beyond history lessons, particularly given the evidence of the potential academic and emotional impact of combining history, creativity and imagination noted above.

However, one of the barriers to developing this work beyond history lessons is the siloed nature of the English school curriculum. The separation of learning into subject specific periods and schemes of work can limit the potential for students to see connections between subjects. Furthermore, secondary school (11-18 years) teachers are trained and employed in subject specific departments with limited opportunity to share expertise across disciplines.

XP Trust were therefore approached to participate in the development of this project because of the cross-curricular design of the school's curriculum. XP Trust schools teach through 'expeditions' which cross curricular boundaries to address real questions with tangible outcomes. XP Trust explain that their curriculum is designed for:

> learners to grow their character, create beautiful work and achieve academically so that they are ready for both present and future opportunities and challenges in their lives, and are able to contribute positively to the communities they live in. (XP Trust, 2025: 25)

Even in this promising context there was initial concern that the historical content of the project did not align closely enough with GCSE specifications or Key Stage 3 (11-14) curriculum. This was overcome due to the willingness of leaders and teachers at XP to see the potential to strengthen students' broader understanding of history, to develop their skills of analysis in both history and English disciplines and to improve students' emotional literacy and well-being.

Lessons were designed as an 'immersion' experience with Y9 (13–14-year-old) participating in an 'expert session' led by Julie Gottlieb, Kevin Harris and Mark Cottingham from The University of Sheffield in which students' prior knowledge of the Munich Agreement and of appeasement was reinforced in preparation for engagement with the film.

Students then watched the 19-minute film '*The Nervous State*', which dramatizes F. L. Lucas's Journal, and recorded their 'notices and wonders'. They shared these thoughtful and incisive reflections with the group in a facilitated discussion.

Following this period of learning and reflection, students were invited to emulate F.L. Lucas by writing their own journals, envisioning these as a message in a bottle from 2025 to a reader in the future. Whilst the task was deliberately open, many students reflected on the similarities between 1938 and 2025, for example:

> It was fascinating to look into and imagine the emotions that must have filled people all over the world at that time and also find similarities to current events all over the world (XP Trust, 2025: 11)

and

> Watching the film reminded me about the wars and conflicts that are currently happening in Gaza and Ukraine (XP Trust, 2025: 12)

Subsequently, students examined more evidence about 1938, including the thoughts of ordinary British people captured by the Mass Observation Archive (https://massobs.org.uk/) before returning to further develop their journal entries.

This combination of historical analysis, reflection and writing, stimulated by the imaginative recreation of Lucas' diary through Baldwin's film, enabled students to make profound connections to the situation of people in 1938, to the events of 2025 and to their own emotional responses. For example:

> We had the chance to write our own journals like Peter Lucas did which feels like we can connect to him. (XP Trust, 2026: 13)

and

> It's really engaging because it shows how individuals acted during those times, how they felt and how people like Peter Lucas conducted themselves when Hitler and Chamberlain signed that contract (XP Trust, 2025: 21)

Conclusion

This project demonstrates the potential for immersive, cross-curricular approaches to the teaching of history and English to not only be mutually supportive of those disciplines but to support students to connect academic study to their own lives and to develop their emotional literacy.

Through this project, the students at XP School became better historians. They built a deeper understanding of the events leading to World War Two and of the process of studying and creating history. They made connections with people in the past and began to understand the complex nature of historical perspective taking or historical empathy. This was made possible through the cross-disciplinary stimulus of a dramatic film and the creative technique of journaling, which resulted in the publication of a booklet of their work (XP Trust, 2025).

Similarly, students developed their ability to interpret a work of art, considered the imaginative process of turning a historical artefact into a drama and honed their writing skills; the historical context and journal framework providing purpose and meaning to the written exercise.

Beyond the disciplines of history and English, students were able to consider their emotions, their responses to current events and to contextualise these feelings in comparison to people in the past, realising that they share many of the same emotions. Such a realisation could help young people to better manage their emotions, understand the feelings and actions of others, and thereby have a positive impact on their overall well-being.

The impact of this project provides a challenge for teachers of history, English and PSHCE and for curriculum designers to explore the potential for cross-curricular collaboration that deepens students' understanding of the subject disciplines and develops emotional literacy.

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