

The AVATAR-method in a Maltese Secondary School

Context

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Abstract

The AVATAR-method is an activity which allows students to develop their "historical empathy" skills in a manner that is nuanced and interesting (Tak, 2018). This dissertation explained what the AVATAR-method entails as well as its benefits. Thus, providing secondary school history teachers in Malta with knowledge pertaining to a new activity they can use in their classrooms. Included in this work was a chapter dedicated towards placing this method within a Maltese secondary school context. A variety of challenges that might arise through the use of this activity were delved into and solutions for these challenges were provided for teacher use. The research method used in this dissertation was that of a bibliographic search. Online and physical sources of information were used in both a theoretical and applied manner.

This dissertation provides detailed information on the AVATAR-method and the benefits of its use. It includes three ready-made fictional characters, created following the procedures for character creation in the AVATAR-method, who are respectively related to three important Maltese historical events, these being; the Great Siege, World War I in Malta and the Sette Giugno conflict. The challenges that were delved into included the utilisation of Artificial Intelligence (regarding the AVATAR-method) by students and how to make sure that students are developing skills in historical empathy properly. Any secondary school history teacher in Malta is able to use the information and practical suggestions provided in this work and implement the AVATAR-method into their classrooms in order to foster historical empathy.

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References

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Introduction

The skill of empathy in history has a contentious past with many discussions and debates on what the meaning of empathy with relation to history teaching is, as well as how best to go about making use of this skill (Lee & Shemilt, 2011). Problems that have arisen with regards to the skill of empathy in history are related to two main issues; that of the difficulty in preventing a degree of disregard from historical realities when learners practice this skill as well as the mistaken belief that historical empathy is purely "affective" (Lee & Shemilt, 2011, p. 40). This belief led to a distinction between those activities that are based on "dealing with sources of evidence, change and development, cause and consequence" and empathy activities that are reliant on imagination (Lee & Shemilt, 2011, p. 40).

Thus, in order to deal with the trouble that comes with the skill of empathy in history teaching this dissertation sought to illuminate Maltese teachers on an activity that can allow them to implement the skill of empathy within a secondary school history classroom environment, in a way that is based on evidence and practical suggestions and solutions. Consequently, this created a solution to the two main issues described above. The activity in question that seeks to solve these two issues is called the AVATAR-method. This activity is composed of two main steps (Tak, 2018). The first step is the creation of an avatar. This step is a guided one, where students have to contextualise their avatar on different levels. These levels start from the more "personal" and move on to a wider sphere, ending with a brief description of the "historical context" in which the character is situated (Tak, 2018). The second step is when the students are tasked with writing a piece of text in which they have to write

in their avatars point of view (Tak, 2018). In order to be done correctly those taking part in the activity have to understand the historical time period well in order to be as historically accurate as possible. This means that the activity is one in which students have to make use of a wide range of sources, thus not falling into the trap of implementing the skill of historical empathy incorrectly and relying only on imagination.

This dissertation sought to answer three research questions. These were: What are the benefits of the AVATAR-method with regards to history teaching?, How to deal with the challenges that this method creates? And How can a teacher apply the AVATAR-method to Maltese history lessons? This first research question, pertaining to the benefits of the AVATAR-method, was targeted in the literature review component of this dissertation. The literature review was made up of chapter one and chapter two. Chapter one went into detail on how the AVATAR-method was created, its features and the benefits of this activity. While chapter two focused on historical empathy and discussed how the AVATAR-method aids history teaching.

The final chapter of this dissertation discussed a variety of solutions to the challenges that could potentially arise when implementing this activity. The chapter dealt with topics such as Artificial Intelligence, Dyslexia as well as history-related challenges. Chapter four was the most practical as it gives teachers a wide variety of ideas on how to implement the AVATAR-method into their classrooms. This chapter also provided secondary school history teachers in Malta with information and three ready-made original fictional characters, respectively belonging to three different historical events in Malta. These events being; the Great Siege, World War I in Malta

and the Sette Giugno conflict. These topics were specifically chosen to be in line with the history syllabi, with this link explicitly explained in chapter four in order to ensure that the practical suggestions provided in this dissertation can be of use to secondary school history teachers in Malta.

In order to answer these questions the research method used was that of the bibliographic search. The literature review (chapter one and chapter two) as well as chapter five, were the main sections of this dissertation that relied heavily on the information found within the selection of databases available from HyDi as well as other information sources. Whereas, chapter four relied more on practical suggestions that were included in order to guide secondary school history teachers in Malta on how they can make use of the AVATAR-method in both General and history Option classes.

The focus of this dissertation with regards to secondary school history teachers in Malta added to its value. Due to the fact that the literature surrounding the AVATAR-method deals with contexts that differ from this setting. The creator of this activity, Edith Sheffer, made use of it in a Stanford history class with students that are older than those that this dissertation targeted and discussed a topic that is not within the Maltese context (Sheffer, 2009). Other papers on this activity show more commonality with Sheffer's context when using the AVATAR-method rather than the one targeted in this dissertation (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013) (Volk, 2013). Thus, this dissertation showcased the AVATAR-method in a new geographical and cultural context as well as targeting an altogether different age range.

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Chapter 1: The AVATAR-method

1.1 Background on the AVATAR-method

The AVATAR-method is an educational activity created by Edith Sheffer during her time lecturing at Stanford. Her motivation for creating this activity was due to finding herself in a situation where her class was composed of a few students who were not motivated to learn and were not showing interest in the history topic being taught (Sheffer, 2009b). She wished to devise a more engaging way of learning history for the students, where what is being taught to them is related to their own lives and not merely a past event with no impact on the modern world. She was able to come up with the framework for this project through the use of Sakai as well as taking inspiration from the concept of Facebook (Sheffer, 2009b). Sakai as referred to by Sheffer (2009) is a "wiki". A wiki is defined as a technological resource that allows for collaboration between people through the uploading and sharing of information that can be engaged with by others (Hanna, 2023).

She decided to set a weekly writing task that had to be personally meaningful to the student and that would make the content she was teaching in class have more of an impact. She decided that every student would have a wiki page in which they would write, in a diary format, the events happening to a fictional character living in Germany in the 1900's (Sheffer, 2009b). One student said (Sheffer, 2009a):

The weekly identities assignments were somewhat like the weekly problem sets in math or science classes. In a math or physics class, it is not enough to

just listen to the lecture and read the textbook; the student actually has to practise solving real problems. The Identities Project [...] (*this ellipsis was found in the original quote*) forced me to consider how real people actually make decisions in historical events; I felt that I was in essence 'solving' the problem of 'how and why do ordinary people act in history' by 'practicing' on my historical avatar every week. (p. 7)

It is important to note that the students taking part in Sheffer's activity were of university age, however, the AVATAR-method can be tailored for secondary school students as exemplified in this dissertation.

Her first trial of this activity was a success as one can see from the student testimonies above. Her methodology for this first trial will now be explained in order to get a clearer view of what this activity entails. When the students arrived for the first lesson of the course, they were each asked to draw, at random, a historical identity (Sheffer, 2009b). The identity included the birthplace of the character as well as their socioeconomic status. The characters were all born in the year 1900. The characters had vastly different origins, one character belonged to a Jewish family who worked in banking in Munich, another character was the son of a prostitute who lived in Berlin. What was noted was that guidance was not needed as much since the students took the project in their stride and researched life at that time in Germany to such an extent that they were able to create a very fleshed out fictional life for their character. The only parameters set were that death or a long coma was not allowed, no emigration was allowed except during the war and with the stipulation that the

character had to return to Germany and no major history changing events were to be done by the characters (Sheffer, 2009b).

A wiki, as explained previously, was used for the entries of this project (Sheffer, 2009b). The wiki's community guidelines made the students more responsible for their work. Prompts were given by Sheffer on the wiki. The first prompt being to create a childhood for their character. They had to speak about the day to day life of their character as a child and activities being done, such as reading. A picture of their character's house also needed to be given. Week after week the students had to have their characters make choices in their lives based on what was discussed in that week's lecture (Sheffer, 2009b). The students also had to write a short analysis on why their character made the decisions written in the journal entry (Sheffer, n.d.). An example of these types of choices would be if their characters voted to elect Hitler as well as the reasoning behind this choice. The events that were described in the journals ranged from World War I, Hyperinflation, World War II, the Cold War and the re-unification of Germany (Sheffer, 2009b). This project allowed for these important events in German history to be ingrained into the memories of the students (Sheffer, 2009b).

Every week the students were given a specific date in which they would have to write about what their characters had done on that particular day. They had to see what Germans at the time thought about the events happening on that day as well as the ordinary day to day live events happening to the character (Sheffer, 2009b).

The activity was a massive success since it allowed students to discuss some of their personal interests, such as colonialism when discussing German South-West Africa as their character was inserted into that specific environment during wartime (Sheffer, 2009b). There was also a page where the students copied links to the research they made use of when writing about their characters. Sheffer noted that she did not have to do much work since the students were heavily motivated to do this project (Sheffer, 2009b). Students also wrote on average about 1120 words each journal entry over the course of nine weeks. The students were highly motivated and exceeded what was expected due to this motivation. A lot of care and attention was taken by the students when it came to historical accuracy and every detail was researched thoroughly. Students also were able to input what was happening in their own lives into the project, such as can be seen, in one student's work, that was inspired by the ban on gay marriage that was being discussed in California and their disagreement with the intended ban, the student made their character gay in Nazi era Germany. The student was able to use her interest in gay rights in her normal life and research how gay people were mistreated by the Nazis as well as the lives of gay people in both East and West Germany (Sheffer, 2009b).

Another reason for the success of this project was that the students were able to become fond of their characters. So much so, that having to write the entries was not seen as work and they even talked about the characters with loved ones. Some students even based their character's lives on the lives of their own family members (Sheffer, 2009b).

Another case study is linked to the AVATAR-method which was also a resounding success. The case study took place in 2012 at Stanford University (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). The class was learning about 20th Century European history and as a part of this class took part in the project titled "Creating Lives" (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). The main aim of this endeavour was to give students practise in changing their perspectives (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013).

The students were asked to generate two imaginary people. The first person had to be an 18-year-old in the year 1900 and had to live till 1940 at the minimum. The second character would be an 18-year-old in 1940 and had to live till the present day. The students had total freedom in designing their characters but were told that the characters could not die before the times stated above as well as not being able to drastically change history (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). The students were able to creatively come up with characters whose backgrounds were very different. Such as a soldier from France taking part in trench warfare as well as a Jewish character during the Nazi period (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013).

The students were given two tasks. They had to write one weekly essay, mostly in a diary format, that had to be in their character's point of view. As well as an explanation and analysis on why they wrote what they did in their essay. This was done so that the students would keep their writing as historically accurate as possible (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). In this paragraph they would be able to refer to where they gathered their information such as the actual lecture and also independent readings. The general length of the entries was between 400 to 600 words which were posted on a blog that had been specifically created for this project. The students could also

use the blog collaboratively as they have access to other student's writing (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013).

During this study, the lecturer gave their students the task of writing down a conversation they would have with their character. The purpose of this discussion was to allow students to reflect on how their way of life influenced their perspectives and how these factor into their character's way of life (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013) .

The outcomes of this study showed that the AVATAR-method allowed for students to become attached to their characters. 75% of students researched even further to create their accounts and 50% of students discussed their characters with relatives and friends (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). A lot of students also said that they paid more attention in lectures as well as doing the assigned reading and made an effort to fit what they read into their stories. Some students also wrote their accounts on controversial aspects of history in order to understand the moral difficulties present during the event (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). In order to counteract the student taking the voice of those who committed atrocities, the analytical paragraph was used so that the students could set apart their own opinions from their character's opinions. This also allowed for a discussion to take place on whether it was even useful to try and understand this specific perspective (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013).

This study also allowed for student feedback which can help improve the AVATAR-method. From this feedback it was gathered that in future projects the skills that were to be developed by the students needed to be clearly outlined as well as how these skills would be beneficial to them in their day-to-day lives (Ciancia &

Sheffer, 2013). There also needed to be an emphasis on history not being primarily about rote memorization (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013).

Certain students fell back on their beliefs about the historical period and did not verify these with research. There were also some students who made their characters act in a way that was grounded in Americanised outlooks (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). In order to rectify that, a teacher can use different sources in order to give students a way of understanding the outlook of people in that context(Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013) .

1.2 Features of the AVATAR-method

Below is the step-by-step process of how to perform the AVATAR-method in a class based on what is described by Pascal Tak (2018).

The first step to this method is to choose whether one creates their own character or uses a real historical person (Tak, 2018). It is important to take into consideration that if a real historical character is picked students have to be careful to keep as close as they can to the real personality traits and family information of the person in order to avoid historical inaccuracies (Tak, 2018).

In the case where a student decides to create their own historical avatar, they would need fill out a "character profile" that consists of three categories (Tak, 2018). First "the personal tier", then "the social context" category and lastly "the historical context" category (Tak, 2018) Students can choose to create as much information as they want about their avatar. This information is split into the three categories above.

The first category includes information regarding the avatar such as "name, age, gender, a certain socio-economic background, religion and a place of residence." (Tak, 2018). Those taking part in the activity are allowed to write in depth about their avatars and can include other information such as the avatar's 'strengths, weaknesses, allergies" (Tak, 2018).

The "social context" category broadens the avatars world (Tak, 2018). Information that is relevant to this category includes "family relations (father, mother, brothers, sisters etcetera), family size (only child, second son in a family with eight children etcetera), co-workers and opponents or enemies." (Tak, 2018). In this section students should research certain aspects of life during that period in order to create a social scenario that is as historically accurate as possible. Such research should focus on information, such as how many people would typically be found in a family at that time (Tak, 2018).

In the final category, the "historical context" is focused on (Tak, 2018). Information that is important to include in this section include "the time, place and society (including the norms, values, social layers, type of government etcetera) in which the avatar 'lives' and operates." (Tak, 2018). It is imperative that a lot of work goes into finding relevant history sources that can allow the students to gain an understanding of the period their avatar is placed in (Tak, 2018).

Once the "character profile" has been created, then students can move forward and manoeuvre their avatar through as large or small a period of time as they choose or

depending on what is set for them (Tak, 2018). Their character must witness or take an active part in important historical episode/s or changes. These can be either very specific, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, or a less specified event, such as a Sunday visit to church (Tak, 2018).

The teacher must also set specific boundaries with the student in order to get as much out of the activity as possible. Death is not a viable option for the avatar as it would mean stopping the activity, the avatar must behave realistically and cannot do actions that change the course of history and for some settings the avatar is not allowed to get out of their country due to the major shift in context that might happen (Tak, 2018).

After these boundaries are set the students are given the opportunity to write the ways in which their avatar would respond to the events happening around them that are described to them by the teacher (Tak, 2018) The students have to make sure that their character behaves in a way that is in line with their character' personality and circumstances. The students also have to justify the behaviour of their specific avatar (Tak, 2018).

The students are given the freedom to structure their writing in a way that feels comfortable to them, be it a diary entry, epistolary etc. (Tak, 2018). The students have to use both primary and secondary sources in order to make sure that their work is as historically accurate as possible (Tak, 2018).

1.3 Benefits of the AVATAR-method

One of the AVATAR-method's main benefits is that it makes history more engaging and relevant to those studying it. This has been achieved in Edith Sheffer's first trial of this method as one can note in one student's testimony (Sheffer, 2009a):

It allowed us to fuse the course material with our own creativity and take away so much more than a typical survey of history would foster. [...] (*this ellipsis was found in the original quote*) The project forced us to see the situation as much from within as a student can, several years later and thousands of miles away. Oskar, to whom I grew attached, had a past, a family, thoughts, ideas. There were justifications for his actions that were intricately tied in with all of these, ones that I would never have considered without a specific persona in mind.
(p. 18)

Another of its main purposes is to facilitate students' understanding of different perspectives other than their own. It tries to open their eyes to other ways of thinking and feeling that might oppose their own way of life (Tak, 2018). Thus, the students are better able to understand the differences of thought that are present in their lives. It helps them also mature as they are able to see that there is not only one right opinion with the other being all wrong, but many different opinions that can be equally as valid as each other (Tak, 2018).

This method also allows for a more nuanced understanding of historical actors instead of relying on stereotypes that have been strengthened through the passing of

time. People born in the past are able to be seen through the view that they are the same as us in the present and not lacking in intelligence or possessing wildly different characters and ideals (Tak, 2018). This type of understanding is linked to the procedural skill of empathy that was further discussed in chapter two.

This type of activity benefits a student's historical understanding as it shows how impacting day-to-day actions can be as well as training student's ability to shift their perspective into a person from a vastly contrasting background (Sheffer, n.d.). It is more academically intensive than normal essay writing as the student has to analyse a lot of intricate and interwoven factors before they can write the choices that their characters take. Due to this students are more likely to attend lessons and follow them seriously (Sheffer, n.d.).

The AVATAR-method can be used in collaboration with other subjects, such as English, in which both history and the other subject's teacher/s focus on different aspects of the student's writing, such as historical content and grammar (Tak, 2018). The AVATAR-method is versatile as it can be used with more than one age range. However, the level of work and research will differ from one age range to another (Tak, 2018).

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Chapter 2: Historical Empathy through Imagination

2.1 History Teaching

The 'Schools History Project' (started in 1972) was created in order to assuage the agitation over the importance of the subject of history in school that arose during the '60s (Dawson, 1989, p. 221). Mary Price's article explains this agitation in detail. She points out that as a subject history can often be found in a situation where its place as a timetabled school subject is continuously questioned and threatened. Price notes that this is not a new phenomenon as a similar sentiment was shared by James Bryce in 1907 (Price, 1968). Student perceptions of history as a subject were also not favourable as showcased in a 1966 survey that asked 9677 adolescents to rate the uselessness or usefulness of different school subjects in which history did not perform favourably in the youth's ratings (Price, 1968). When the students were asked why a subject can be seen as monotonous the students offered some insights. They stated that they found it dull to hear a teacher continuously talking and repeating themselves as well as only being allowed to occupy themselves within the lesson through the jotting down of notes (Price, 1968).

Armed with this knowledge the "Schools History Project" (Dawson, 1989, p. 221) aimed to better the way history was being taught in schools as well as moving away from the over-reliance on memorisation instead of true comprehension (Dawson, 1989). This project focused on concepts that were seen as key in history, such as, "causation, evidence, change and continuity, empathy" (Dawson, 1989, p.232). It also aimed to inspire classroom activities that diverged from the traditional note-taking

lessons. These new activities would aim to increase student involvement (Dawson, 1989). Thus this project worked on improving the points that were brought up by students as seen in Price's article.

Out of the efforts of this project, the then-called "New History" method of teaching spawned. In the '70s R. Ben Jones succinctly explained this groundbreaking pedagogical approach as one which "lays less emphasis on content and more on the process of learning" (Cassar & Vella, 2011, p. 97). From its inception in Britain, this new approach spread to Malta and was established on the island in 1974 through the efforts of Michael A. Sant. The aim of this way of history teaching was for students to develop methods of thinking that allow them to independently come to conclusions on different historical phenomena based on evidence (Cassar & Vella, 2011). The notion that the words history and past cannot be used synonymously is a key influence over this way of teaching and learning history. A quote by Keith Jenkins, as cited by Cassar & Vella (2011), summarises this school of thought in a clear manner:

History as discourse is thus in a different category to that which it discourses about, that is, the past and history are different things. Additionally, the past and history are not stitched into each other such that only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary. The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. (p. 98)

Through proper utilisation of this method of history teaching one is able to firmly entrench this outlook on their students' view of history and the works of historians vis-a-vis the past. The aim of good history pedagogy is not relegated to the blind

memorisation of historical facts but it should encourage students to question what is present around them and not blindly accept what is presented as correct. The paramount feature of this pedagogical approach is the analysis of sources which echoes the way historians work (Cassar & Vella, 2011). However, this type of teaching is challenging, especially when it comes to teachers teaching Maltese history due to the dearth in resources which they can use in class, this dearth stemming from market limitations. In this case, if a teacher wants to give effective history lessons following this approach they would have to expend a great amount of time and effort to create resources from scratch or tailor existing resources to suit their needs (Cassar & Vella, 2011). This is why creating works, such as dissertations that focus on activity ideas and resources, can help lighten these teachers' workload and allow them to create pedagogically sound lessons that benefit their students.

2.2 The Skill of Empathy

Broadly, empathy is defined "as the feeling of another person's feeling" (Lieber, 1995, p. 23). It is regarded as a majorly important skill as is attested by the very fact of its continued inclusion in all manner of fields, such as 'social and behavioural sciences, ethics, arts and humanities, multicultural studies, education, medicine and law' (Lieber, 1995, p. 23). With relation to the subject of history, the phrase coined in reference to empathy was "Historical empathy" (Wilschut & Schiphorst, 2019, p. 74). This more specific phrase alludes to how historians try to hypothesise the different schools of thought and views on life which those in the past had (Wilschut & Schiphorst, 2019). This diverges from putting ourselves into the shoes of another, as

the saying goes, since it takes into account the temporal differences separating past actors and historians in the present.

Much more has been written around the subject of historical empathy. Two pioneers on this subject are Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt. One of their works discusses how empathy tends to be problematic as a skill. They pointed out that when students are given work that focuses on empathy they had a hard time not including anachronisms in their work (Lee & Shemilt, 2011). Another issue regarding empathy is the mistaken belief that historical empathy is synonymous with sympathy. This leads empathy to be seen as an exercise in which students try to see the past through their own ideals and schools of thought instead of taking into account the, sometimes vast, variation between those ideals and schools of thought and those belonging to people in the past. This type of belief regarding empathy limits a person's ability to perform historical empathy as they would find it difficult and also upsetting to try and empathise with historical figures that are morally reprehensible. This empathising scenario is a part of historical empathy, as in order to empathise one does not need to believe that the choices done by a person are morally correct and what they would have done in their shoes (Lee & Shemilt, 2011).

The problematic nature of historical empathy has led to a variety of disputes by figures who do not have a true grasp of what this skill actually entails. This can be seen in Margaret Thatcher's statement (as quoted in Briffa, 1998, p. 13) that, "No amount of imaginative sympathy for historical characters or situations can substitute for the initially tedious but ultimately rewarding business of memorising what actually happened"

This statement related to the debates on a heavily contested issue at the time, that of the implementation of "New History" as a history pedagogy (Briffa, 1998). Thatcher's point, as seen above, belies the difficulty that many people find in separating sympathy from empathy as well as the influence of a person's political inclination when it comes to the preference of either the long-established way of history pedagogy or "New History" which was seen as more left wing politically (Briffa, 1998). "New History" has been studied and the findings of these studies correlate to better historical analysis proficiency in students that are taught with this method than those who are taught more traditionally. Implementation of this skill within lessons also helps students in their lives due to this skill's ability to train students to think more critically about nuanced matters that affect them in their personal lives (Briffa, 1998).

The concept of empathy has generated disconcert due to the lack of agreement on its meaning and how one should go about performing historical empathy (Perikleous, 2022). This lack of agreement is found even within academic circles. Some academics have themselves argued against the concept of historical empathy as they saw this concept as a breeding ground for historical analysis approaches that were not sound. This is stemming from the assumption that students would have to place themselves as they are within the past. This type of thinking, heavily prevalent in the 1970s and '80s, was denounced by Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt (as cited in Perikleous, 2022, p. 30) who noted that historical empathy had been "wrongly associated with imagination, sympathy and identification". Lee and Shemilt (as cited by Perikleous, 2022) argued that in order to rectify this what was needed was a clarification of what historical empathy truly encompassed.

Lee and Shemilt (2011, p. 42) came up with a categorising system regarding the historical empathy levels exhibited by students. Level by level the proficiency of students with regards to historical empathy increases. The levels described by Lee and Shemilt (2011, p. 42) are as follows: Firstly "Explanation by description", secondly "Explanation by assimilation to the known present or by identification of deficits in the past", thirdly "Explanation by stereotype", fourthly "Explanation by means of everyday empathy", then "Explanation by means of historical empathy" and finally "Explanation with reference to 'forms of life'"

Levels one, two and three exemplify a lack of true in-depth empathy with past people. The information given by students is succinct, reliant on modern understanding, with past ideas and actions understood to be stemming from a lack of intelligence on the part of past actors and the reliance on stereotypes as a method of describing behaviours and practices of past actors (Lee & Shemilt, 2011). From level four onwards students start to perform historical empathy at a higher level of proficiency. Those students in level four are able to empathise with past people, however, they do not manage to acknowledge the differences in the schools of thought of historical people and contemporary thought. In level five this deficiency is corrected. The highest level of historical empathy is level six in which students understand the historical reasons why people in the past believed in matters in the way they did due to a combination of influences present in that time period (Lee & Shemilt, 2011).

Stephen Briffa's dissertation put Lee and Shemilt's work to the test with its analysis of the empathy levels of year ten pupils. Students were asked questions related to

empathy and the answers that students gave were analysed and categorised into the different empathy levels. The resulting conclusion regarding the students ability to perform historical empathy was that students were able to understand that people in the past partook in a lifestyle that differed from that of the student's and that historical people also did not have the same perspectives as those typical in people in the present. Yet, students did not mention any circumstances present during the period that would have influenced the people they were discussing (Briffa, 1998). Briffa did also note a concern, after evaluating the students' answers, that a section of the students answers were not clearly linked to only one of the empathy levels but had elements from different levels. Therefore, Briffa concluded that this system is best used by teachers in order to devise ways of creating educational activities with the aim of developing empathy within students and not to be used in terms of student assessment (Briffa, 1998).

This level system is not the only hypothesis focusing on the defining historical empathy and what it entails. Suggestions have been made to change the term into that of "*Perspective taking*" (Perikleous, 2022, p. 30). This change has been argued for as it was seen to be moving away from a supposedly feelings based approach into one that is based on logic and facts. Perikleous (2022) is not in agreement with these suggestions as he notes that there is not such a distinction between the logical and the emotional in psychology, where this term is put to use. This change in terminology would also not solve the problem of the disagreement on what empathy entails since the problem would still remain as some historians use this suggested term and that of empathy as one and the same. There is also the case that this term gives the illusion that these perspectives are already present within the world and not

ones that need to be created after being informed by evidence (Perikleous, 2022). The confusion that comes through the use of the term empathy has been commented on by many academics as one can see from Peter Lee's exclamation "for God's sake, don't use that word [empathy]" as well as his addition that "any word we could have used would have brought misunderstandings, so in the end I'm not too worried about the fact that it was empathy that got used because anything else would almost certainly have been equally bad" (Perikleous, 2022, p. 31)

Perikleous' study, in the same vein as Briffa's dissertation, analysed the responses of students when given questions aimed to elicit student replies based on historical empathy. Before delving into their study, Perikleous (2022) first defined their working definition of historical empathy as "distinguished from a free exercise of imagination, identification, sympathy and sharing feelings, since these are notions which refer to mental acts that are either impossible and/or incompatible with the discipline of history." (p. 32) On the subject of imagination and historical empathy, Perikleous does point out that imagination does come into contact with historical empathy however this contact must not contaminate the truth of the matter (Perikleous, 2022).

Perikleous also outlines that "Historical empathy is also not a metaphysical ability to transfer ourselves into the mind of people in the past and identify with them" (Perikleous, 2022, p. 32). Historical empathy is a way of understanding why people in the past behaved in a certain way. One cannot become exactly the same as a person in the past since those in the past are "Other" to us (Perikleous, 2022, p. 32). This means that one has to seek methods of elucidation on the Other's behaviour. Being the same as the "Other" would mean that the "Other" disappears since it would not

be the "Other" after this process of *sameness* has taken place (Perikleous, 2022, p. 32). There is also the fact that historians are different from those present in historical events due to their own present understanding of life as well as the fact that historians have hindsight to aid their understanding of an event (Perikleous, 2022).

Other key facets of historical empathy come out in Perikleous' definition of historical empathy. They point out that empathy, especially historical empathy, should not be so wholly associated with emotions as it is presently understood as. An argument against this connection is presented succinctly by Perikleous (2022):

"It would be unreasonable to try to share the feelings of people in the past since we do not share their beliefs, views and ideas and we live in a radically different world. We cannot share their hopes or fears since we already know whether they came true or not. (p. 32)

Empathy also does not mean that the person who is performing empathy is also feeling the same as the "Other" they are empathising with (Perikleous, 2022, p. 32). Max Scheler (as mentioned by Perikleous, 2022) further develops this argument by stating that one can still understand the feelings and reasons behind the feelings of the "Other" without being intimately acquainted with the feelings of the "Other" (Perikleous, 2022, p. 33). Sympathy, while helpful in certain cases of historical empathy, can also be a hindrance to the process when it comes to understanding the actions of the "perpetrators" of history (Perikleous, 2022, p. 33).

In short, in Perikleous' study historical empathy was defined as being "about understanding past behaviour based on the knowledge of ideas, beliefs, intentions and feelings of people in the past and also the historical context in which they lived" (Yeager & Foster, 2001; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Perikleous, 2014 as cited by Perikleous, 2022) This definition recognises that those in the past are separate from us due to matters of time and culture. This means that one cannot simply use today's belief systems or modern body of knowledge when in contact with the past. Notwithstanding that one must also identify that their own attempts at empathy are informed by the belief system of the culture and time they are in and not to be confused with pure fact (Perikleous, 2022).

In spite of the disconnect between past and present stated above, there are two main ways in which a person is linked to those in the past. These being that both those in the past and those in the present are a part of humanity as well as both sets of people belong to societies that are connected to each other due to the modern society developing out of the past society (Perikleous, 2022). "If we "treat people in the past as less than fully human and do not respond to those people's hopes and fears, ...[we]... have hardly began [*sic*] to understand what is history [*sic*] about". (Lee as cited by Perikleous, 2022, p. 35). This goes for both the victims in history and those victimising people.

With regards to Perikleos' study, it was noted that it is imperative to understand the preconceptions that students hold in order to guide the students into developing accurate historical knowledge (Perikleous, 2022). Studies in this area, underline a variety of findings related to historical empathy. These being that the level of

education of a particular student contributes to that student's understanding of how much importance they give to past people's agency when it comes to their actions, many students are not able to correctly identify what information originated from a past person or from a historian when learning about a historical event as well as the older a learner is the more deeply entrenched their preconceptions on past people are (Perikleous, 2022).

During this study, there came to light several categories of answers by the students that show their ability to empathise with those in the past. These categories are very similar to those illustrated by Lee and Shemilt (2011). Some of these explanations included: stating that those in the past were not as rational as we are and that their religious beliefs were incorrect as seen in level 2 of Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt's empathy levels: "Explanation by assimilation to the known present or by identification of deficits in the past" (Lee & Semilt, 2011, p. 42). From this study it was gathered that many students explained past healing practices as arising from a lack of intelligence present in people of the past. This past is also viewed by the students as a location which has the same culture as that of today (Perikleous, 2022). This as stated by Wineburg (as cited in Perikleous, 2022) is a school of thought that needs little intellectual effort. This type of thinking is termed as "presentism" which has been seen in multiple studies when it comes to how students understand historical empathy (Perikleous, 2022, p. 40).

What is important to note from this study is that students in the same class rarely hold the same preconceptions about the past. This means that it is of utmost importance that students are given the chance to make known their preconceptions

about the past in a way that is not intimidating to the students. This can be done by implementing methods in which students discuss any misconceptions with both the teacher and each other (Perikleous, 2022). There is also the fact that the issue of "presentism" must also be addressed within the classroom (Perikleous, 2022, p. 42). As such, allowing the students to work on tasks centred around empathy will allow them to realise how the past and present differ. The idea that those in the past are not as intelligent as those in the present should also be tackled and it must be explained to students that the people in the past behaved in the way that is recorded "because of what they knew and had and not because of what they did not know and did not have compared to the present" (Perikleous, 2022, p. 43).

2.3 Multiperspectivity

Multiperspectivity might be considered as an offshoot of empathy which might also be discussed. Multiperspectivity rose to prominence with the inception of the "New History" method of history teaching (Stradling, 2003, p. 9). It also was impacted by the realisation that the history being focused on was largely depicting one culture type and not focused on inclusion. This led to an increased effort being made by those overseeing curriculums to incorporate different cultures within the curriculum (Stradling, 2003).

Multiperspectivity is defined by K. Peter Fritzsche (as referenced by Stradling, 2003, p. 13) as "*a strategy of understanding*". This type of perspective can only be effectively done when one recognizes that our perspective has been shaped by the culture we were born into as well as being informed by our own preconceptions and

ideas. In order to truly engage in multiperspectivity one has to be ready to acknowledge the validity of other perspectives on life different than our own as well as earnestly try to empathise with another person (Stradling, 2003). Multiperspectivity can help with "the issue of young people not identifying with the history" they are taught (Smart, 2016, p. 20). This is on account of multiperspectivity allowing for the fostering of diverseness which "means paying heed to the different experiences of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups, and of different genders, different classes, and in different regions through time" (Smart, 2016, p. 15)

By dissecting the components of the term multiperspectivity one can understand it even better. The term perspective, making up the latter half of the word multiperspectivity, is one that denotes a limitation. This is due to a perspective referring to the outlook of a singular person. In history, this singular perspective is found in both those in the past who provide contemporary people with sources of information as well as the historians who analyse and interpret this singular perspective information (Stradling, 2011).

Due to this, it is important to include a variety of perspectives when discussing historical topics. This variety of perspectives also allows for the inclusion of different "vantage points" (Stradling, 2011, p. 67). This refers to the physical location of the person passing on the information at the time that this information was acquired. This affects the reliability of a source. Questions must be asked on who the creator of the source was and how they were able to access the information they used to create the source. This allows one to get an understanding of the source creator's perspective (Stradling, 2011). Sources also carry another problem in relation to perspectives as

there might be a disconnect between the creator of the source's perspective and the perspectives of those being represented in the source (Stradling, 2011).

Through the notion of multiperspectivity one is able to detect situations in which there are different perspectives, including those perspectives that are not regarded as relevant by the majority, and see how these perspectives influenced each other. Thus, this allows a historian to come to an understanding that is even more comprehensive and closer to the truth of the events being studied (Stradling, 2011). Multiperspectivity also influences historians personally. Those studying history will have their interpretations focused only on the sources which they can obtain. These sources will also be used in a different way based on the perspectives of those historians using the source, who will focus on different strains of information within the source (Stradling, 2011)

2.4 Role-Plays

Role-plays as well as simulations have been noted to be activities that are given importance in the classrooms of those teachers that are "significantly more likely to value critical thinking over content acquisition" (Wright-Maley, 2015b, as cited in Worthington, 2018, p. 137). What follows is Wright-Maley's (as cited in Worthington, 2018, p. 137) description of the meaning of simulations. These are "pedagogically mediated activities used to reflect the dynamism of real life events, processes, or phenomena, in which students participate as active agents whose actions are consequential to the outcome of the activity."

The use of simulations together with role-plays gives pupils the opportunity to participate in learning that is presented in a way that is more true to life with challenges that they need to overcome just like a person from the past would have had to (Worthington, 2018). The benefits of this type of learning are not only academic but also allow the student to develop in their personal life. Students are able to become better problem-solvers as well as improving their ability to think critically (Worthington, 2018).

With regards to history learning, this type of activity allows students to develop their awareness of what history entails. As they begin to see how history is shaped by the perspectives of those in the past as well as those presently working in historical studies, they are able to note that history is made up of selected pieces of information that can be highly non-inclusive with regards to different past lived experiences (Worthington, 2018).

The AVATAR-method is an activity that hinges on student role-playing in a simulated circumstance. As such, it is a highly beneficial activity that will develop both personal character as well as their knowledge on both historical concepts as well as what history truly entails.

2.5 The AVATAR-method in History Teaching

With the rise of the "New History" teaching pedagogy there is more of a focus on promoting student involvement in interpreting history rather than relying on previously agreed upon interpretations (Spiteri, 2020, p. 3). There is also an increased

emphasis on the importance of giving students opportunities in which they can learn independently. This can be seen prioritised in the AVATAR-method. This type of activity is also helpful in illustrating different cultures and perspectives that are now being continuously emphasised in history teaching in Malta in order "to reflect recent changes in Europe and Malta' demographic and cultural composition" (Spiteri, 2020, p. 3).

Further emphasising the aptness of the AVATAR-method, one can note studies which have been conducted to support the idea of using imagination as well as the skill of empathy within lessons in order to further a student's understanding of history (Brill, 2004). As Helen Snelson argues, students "need to connect with specific individuals, places and events in order to engage with the past" (Snelson, 2022, p. 66). She further emphasises this point by including a quote by Willingham; "The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories. So much so that psychologists sometimes refer to stories as 'psychologically privileged,' meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material" (Snelson, 2022, p. 66)

Snelson suggests that having students read stories relating to different historical events can raise student interest as well improve student's skill in "Historical thinking" (Snelson, 2022, p. 67). It has also been found that "Young people who read historical fiction gain a sense that real people were involved in history and that times and issues in history were complex" (Levstik, 1989 as cited in Stripling, 2011, p. 97). One suggestion she makes is having students read an excerpt of a British military personnel stationed in Malta during World War II. This she expounds will ignite the

student's curiosity and encourage them to seek more information on local life during World War II (Snelson, 2022). This type of activity is deeply ingrained within the AVATAR-method as the students would have to create their own character as well as stories connected to their character after reading the stories of people who lived during that time, adding to the benefits espoused by Snelson.

This type of learning through stories is a tried and true method as seen by the fact that "The Greeks learnt of their origins through an oral tradition of story-telling handed down from generation to generation" (Mills, 1995, p. 7). Through the creation of fictional stories set in the past students are given the opportunity to do independent research and practise the steps of story creation. Hester Burton (as quoted in Mills, 1995) describes these steps as follows:

First I must acquaint myself as thoroughly as I possibly can with the historical period and the events I am describing... I should be able to see clearly in my mind's eye the houses in which my characters live, the clothes they wear, and the carts, carriages and ships in which they travel. (p.7)

This type of preparation allows students to truly understand that in connection with all the information in which they learn in history, real human lives are front and center (Mills, 1995). This will also help them avoid falling into the trap of viewing history as a subject that is reliant on memorisation. Referred to by Luckhardt as "memory history" (as cited by Letizia, 2016, p. 219). Susan Benedict (as quoted in Mills, 1995) explains the benefit of this type of awareness very aptly when she stated that:

It is not through factual accounts of history that students learn to love and appreciate history, but rather through stories. In bringing the past to life so that students can judge the effects of historical events on their lives today, we must not lose sight of the fact that history is a story, a long series of never ending stories. (p.8)

Benedict implemented this type of mentality into her classroom through a historical fiction writing exercise she gave her students. She guided them through the process of researching for their assignment and even gave them opportunities to see their subject matter first hand through the use of outings. When the students' writings were given in, it was evident that her students had a very sophisticated level of understanding of the era being studied and written about (Mills, 1995).

By giving students the opportunity to create their own character one can allow them to explore historical avenues that are not commonly explored within the curricula done in schools. Tupper (as cited by Snelson, 2022) states that:

The official versions of history that students encounter in schools must be interrupted as a means of restoring that which has been lost, so that all students, male and female, white and nonwhite have an opportunity to see their lives and experiences reflected in historical narratives. (p. 69)

Students as Barksdale notes are better able to learn when they are actively involved in their learning, which story creation allows for. Just like historians they are able to

actively question the past and find information that helps them gain a clearer picture of events as Barton notes (as mentioned in Barksdale, 2013).

The issue of students not being able to grasp the fact that real lives were involved in historical events, which has been repeatedly brought up in this section, has led to educators seeking activities that address this issue and rectify it. Volk was one of those educators. Volk (2013) described their concern as such:

I worry that my students read history as they would view a film: not only do they see it as a constructed and edited narrative (a valid approach), but they think of history's citizens as actors, playing roles rather than living lives. Unable to experience it, my students' view of history remains conceptual. (p. 193)

Volk addressed this issue after being inspired by Sheffer's course on German history and her use of the AVATAR-method. Volk created a course titled "Dirty Wars and Democracy" (Volk, 2013, p. 294) The political environment of "Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay" around the mid-to-late 20th century were tackled throughout the course (Volk, 2013, p. 294). It discusses how these countries became ruled by their military and were the base of countless human rights violations. This course has proven to be quite a challenge for students as they have to grasp the way in which the power struggles evolved within each of the countries as well as how the governments of the countries were able to sanction the various acts of violent behaviour performed by ordinary people on those deemed undesirable by the government (Volk, 2013).

Volk started this foray into the AVATAR-method in 2010 (Volk, 2013). He gave each of his students the opportunity to rummage in a hat and pick a paper from it which included information that they would then use to create their own Avatar. The information presented in the papers included 'sex, birth year (sometime between 1930 and 1965), birth place, parents' birth location if different, and parents' occupation." (Volk, 2013, p. 196). The rules that governed this assignment were similar to Sheffer's own rules with the one divergence being that the characters could relocate away from their assigned country as long as they remained within a community of people who also relocated. If they wished to see their characters return to their country they would have to follow the same procedures as were followed in real life. Students could trade their chosen paper with one another. However, they had to quickly come up with a name for their character in line with the naming conventions of the country assigned to them. After this the students would have a weekly assignment which was organised chronologically. Those students who had child characters in the beginning of the course had the chance to let their character's caretakers speak for them during the first assignment (which was an entry where the characters had to describe themselves and their lives). The dates were chosen by Volk purposefully, so that they would coincide with important historical events (Volk, 2013).

With regards to word count the students had to submit an entry that was around 600 words. What was noted was that while the beginning entries were short, the next entries went well above the estimation given to them by Volk. The longest entry came to 15,000 words (Volk, 2013). Volk made use of a blog system which allowed

students to post their writings on a collated page for their character which would be housed with the other student's work on a single blog made for this course assignment. The work of other students could be accessed by the students themselves, however, Volk was the only one who would know which student wrote which post. Students would also be able to comment on each other's works in addition to the lecturer's weekly feedback (Volk, 2013).

One of the aims of this course was to understand how a regular person could become a person who participates in the human rights violations happening at that time. In order to create an environment where students feel more at ease with exploring this question, Volk made the blog posts anonymous (Volk, 2013). The students did include characteristics in the characters that were inspired by their own goals and characteristics. However, interestingly the students were able to engage with the characters they created and learn from them. The course discussed a topic which is fraught with emotion and it was imperative that students accounted for and worked with the emotions conjured by this part of history in order to have a more in-depth learning experience (Volk, 2013).

History for the students became something real. History was seen as events in which real people took part in, whose outcomes were of prime importance as it could change the course of lives for better or for worse. One student noted that "It served as a reminder that behind every history lesson, behind every news story I read about, there are humans" (Volk, 2013, p. 205) . Due to this aspect of the course the students put in substantially more effort when it came to the research they had to undertake in order to create their entries (Volk, 2013). Articles such as Volk's and others

mentioned in chapter one (The AVATAR-method) show how the AVATAR-method is a beneficial resource for history teachers. It allows for empathy to be taught in a way that supports the tenets of the Source method and that is engaging for the students.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Aims of this Dissertation

This dissertation aimed to discuss the application of the AVATAR-method within Maltese secondary school classrooms. The AVATAR-method targets the skill of historical empathy by having students develop an avatar. This avatar can be based on a real figure in history or a fictional character which they must create. In order to create an avatar, students must fill in a "personal profile" made up of three different categories (Tak, 2018). These are; "the personal tier", "the social context" and the "historical context" (Tak, 2018). The first category revolves around the individual characteristics of the avatar such as "name, age, gender, a certain socio-economic background, religion and a place of residence" as well as going into detail on their avatar's personality (Tak, 2018). The second category should include information on the avatar's family and their social sphere, making sure to keep in mind the historical era their avatar belongs to (Tak, 2018). The last category goes into detail on the time period and important events which will influence their work and their character's life (Tak, 2018). After the avatar has been created the teacher can task students with writing in any form, such as "a diary, a (web)log or vlog, a range of letters to friends or family members abroad" etc... (Tak, 2018). It is important to keep in mind that what is written by the students should be done as though their avatar is the one writing and not them, making sure to keep in line with both the personality and circumstances of their avatar as well as the broader historical context (Tak, 2018).

Edith Sheffer created the AVATAR-method in order to increase her students' interest in the topics being discussed by her at Stanford (Sheffer, 2009). Another trial of this activity was again done at Stanford in 2012 (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). With the activity being tested out by Volk (2013) around this time in another American university. What these all have in common is the fact that the AVATAR-method was presented and engaged in by university students and in an American context. In turn, this dissertation took inspiration from the work done by these educators and applied it to the Maltese context as well as an age range that is younger.

In order to do this in an organised manner, three research questions were drawn up. The first question that was answered was: What are the benefits of the AVATAR-method with regards to history teaching? This part of the dissertation was the most theoretical and relied heavily on a variety of sources of information in order to convey the great positive impact which the AVATAR-method has on students. Certain benefits relating to this activity that were discussed were the fact that this activity allows students to immerse themselves into the study of history since they use their created character to interact with the historical eras being discussed in class (Tak, 2018). Further supporting this is Susan Benedict (as cited in Mills, 1995) who sees the use of stories in history teaching as an activity that allows students to increase their enthusiasm on the subject of history. Benedict also mentions that students who engaged with history-related story writing activities were able to learn with a high degree of aptitude due to the amount of research they had to do in order to carry out the activity (Mills, 1995).

The second research question that was delved into was: How can a teacher apply the AVATAR-method to Maltese history lessons? Chapter four was devoted to answering this question. The chapter was split into three parts respectively devoted to a specific Maltese historical event, present in both the history General syllabi as well as the history Option syllabi. These three parts were then further split up into three subcategories. The first of these subcategories delved into the background of these events. The events that were discussed were the Great Siege, World War I in Malta and the Sette Giugno conflict. The second subcategory was composed of a ready-made fictional character example created in the way outlined by Tak (2018) which was described in the literature review. This original fictional character can serve as a template for both teachers and students. The final subcategory revolved around explaining in depth the link between both the General and Option history syllabi and the specific topic being discussed and applying the AVATAR-method into a fictional classroom. This means that this subcategory gives teachers who would like to use the AVATAR-method with their history classes ideas on how to implement the activity in a variety of ways. This section was split into ideas for how to use the AVATAR-method with the General history class as well as how to tailor it to history Option students.

The last research question to be focused on in this dissertation was: How to deal with the challenges this method creates?. This research question was tackled in chapter five and a variety of challenges were discussed. Certain challenges stem from the fact that the AVATAR-method is an activity that heavily relies on writing. An example of a challenge that is caused by this fact is related to Artificial Intelligence. Using Artificial Intelligence in a writing assignment can be problematic due to the very real

struggle to parse out whether the piece of writing was written in full by the student or if instead they used AI to write it for them (Yeo, 2023). This is especially problematic in this activity as it hinders the students from fully benefiting from the effects of the AVATAR-method when it comes to developing the ability to empathise historically. After the challenges that come with Artificial Intelligence were described, solutions were then presented which teachers can implement both in relation to the AVATAR-method as well as being applicable in general.

Ways of making the AVATAR-method more inclusive were also developed, especially in the case of students with dyslexia. The rest of the chapter was devoted towards identifying and ameliorating certain challenges that are more linked towards the subject of history especially when it comes to ensuring that the AVATAR-method is used in a way that facilitates and encourages the students in their development of their historical empathy skills.

3.2 The Bibliographic Search

This dissertation made use of a bibliographic search as its main research method. An important resource which is critical to this research method is that of "Online bibliographic databases" (Rumsey, 2008, p. 31). A system that is linked to multiple databases is that of HyDi which gives University of Malta students access to different resources due to the student currently being a member of the university (Rumsey, 2008).

HyDi has features that aid one in finding specific information. In order to make use of these features it was important to first clearly outline the dissertation's specific research questions that it aimed to answer (ESSEC Business School, 2017). Knowing what specific topics were covered throughout the whole dissertation and making note of them was the next step taken when the bibliographic search was started (ESSEC Business School, 2017).

Once the specific topics that were delved into were chosen then this dissertation's author moved onto making use of HyDi, in order to find resources surrounding these topics. There are two different methods of searching on a resource such as HyDi. These are named "Quick search" or "advanced search"(Rumsey, 2008, p.35). Using the quick search function is helpful when one wants to see what information is available or in the case that the information being searched for is something that is more niche and thus is not likely to have a lot of resources available pertaining to it on HyDi (Rumsey, 2008). Whereas advanced search aids a researcher in sieving out the more superfluous results and focus on the resources that are more linked to their specific needs (Rumsey, 2008).

However, resources like HyDi are not without their limitations since it relies on the search terms inputted by the researcher and in some cases what is being searched for might not be found on the system thus ending in a total lack of finds or resulting in options which are not necessary for the specific purposes of the researcher (Rumsey, 2008).

While resources like HyDi were very helpful when it came to accessing pertinent academic information it was not the only way that information was acquired (Rumsey, 2008). The internet was another helpful resource that contains websites that might bring new types of ideas to the notice of researchers. This is the case for this dissertation, where the crucial activity being discussed and tailored to the Maltese setting was first brought to this author's attention after reading an article describing the AVATAR-method on Euroclio's website. After this article was found it was also enlightening to find the website created by Edith Sheffer that included even more detailed information on the AVATAR-method. Thus, reputable websites were used throughout this dissertation in the case where information was found through them that was not accessible through HyDi. These online resources were very convenient and easy to access, however, libraries and physical book collections also aided in the acquisition of information that was used in this dissertation. The information found from all these avenues were used in both a theoretical and applied way, as suits the aims of this dissertation.

3.3 How is this dissertation useful?

The activity at the centre of this dissertation has been shown to increase student engagement and interest in learning history. As well as targeting a difficult history skill, that of empathy (Tak, 2018). The difficulty present within the notion of historical empathy stems from how demanding of a skill it is on students who need to; try to understand why people behave in the way they do, why past societies engaged in activities which 'seem irrational and unreasonable today" and also coming up with a

valid "empathetic explanation" of past events and action of historical figures (Lee & Shemilt, 2011, p. 40).

Another way in which this dissertation added something new to academia revolves around the inclusion of the Maltese context as a consideration for this activity. The literature surrounding this activity shows it as an activity that is suitable for university aged students in a non-Maltese context. This dissertation took note of how these educators structured this activity in their practice and modified it to fit into the Maltese history curriculum by taking primary inspiration from Tak's (2018) work, such as how to structure character creation.

The applied parts of this dissertation (which consist of the historical background on the Great Siege, World War I in Malta and the Sette Giugno conflict, the three ready-made original fictional characters and the last chapter that focused on the challenges and their solutions relating to the AVATAR-method) makes this dissertation useful for Maltese educators who would like to teach their students on different Maltese historical events as well as improving their student's historical empathy skills. In short, this dissertation provides Maltese teachers with another resource, including ready made templates, which can be used in class.

The last chapter addressed certain challenges that while linked directly to the AVATAR-method can also be used by teachers in a variety of diverse scenarios. Artificial intelligence, which has increasingly become a matter of importance, especially in the education sector were discussed including its implications with relation to education and the challenges that arise from student use of this tool in

their writing (Yeo, 2023). Practical solutions were then described which teachers can apply when implementing the AVATAR-method as well as more generally. Another important topic discussed was how to make the AVATAR-method more inclusive, especially for students with dyslexia. Practical adjustments as well as examples of how to implement Universal Design for Learning were also described.

3.4 Limitations

The main limitations of this dissertation stem from the fact that the activity was not applied in a real life Maltese classroom. Therefore, it is not possible to predict the results of how an actual Maltese classroom would fare, especially when it comes to showing whether this activity increases the historical empathy skills of Maltese students or not. Having this activity done in a real life classroom would also produce insights into how teachers view the AVATAR-method i.e. whether it was helpful for them or not as well as what adjustments they put into place in order to better tailor this activity to their and their student's specific needs. It would also allow for a very pertinent insight into identifying what unexpected challenges, which might not be mentioned in chapter five of this dissertation, happen when using this activity in a real classroom and how these challenges could be handled.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As Tak (2018) points out there are historical events which are "controversial" and implementing the AVATAR-method in connection with these events adds a layer of complexity to the activity, which while potentially beneficial, should be done with

students that are able to reap these potential benefits. There is also a need to emphasise that when attempting to empathise with past people one does not need to go through the process of either "identifying or sympathising" with the outlooks of those past people (Karn, 2023, p. 92). It would be better to avoid urging pupils from seeing themselves as similar to people in the past as this could create a precarious situation where pupils "sympathize with or condone the behaviours of those in the past" (Karn, 2023, p. 92). Chapter five of this dissertation went into more detail with regards to the challenges that come with teaching historical events that are of a more sensitive nature and how to handle these situations.

3.6 Conclusion

This dissertation sought to answer three research questions. The first two chapters, which both form part of the literature review, focused on answering: What are the benefits of the AVATAR-method with regards to history teaching? These two chapters described and discussed the AVATAR-method, outlining how other educators used this activity, as well as discussing the notion of historical empathy and going into detail on how the AVATAR-method is beneficial for history teaching. Chapter four took a more applied approach as a background on three important Maltese historical events was given and ready-made original fictional characters were created. The exact link between the historical event that was described and the Maltese history syllabi (both for General history students and Option history students) was outlined and ways of applying this activity in a fictional classroom were brought up. This answered the research question: How can a teacher apply the AVATAR-method to Maltese history lessons? The last research question: How to deal with the challenges

this method creates? was answered in chapter five. This chapter focused on solutions to the challenges stemming from the AVATAR-method. Topics such as Artificial Intelligence, Dyslexia and controversial historical events were delved into. The research method used to answer the research questions in this dissertation was that of a bibliographic search, with HyDi being a main resource where information was found. In spite of the limitations of this dissertation, stemming from this activity not being trialed in a real life classroom, it is a valuable resource for teachers in Malta who wish to increase their repertoire of tools which can be used to teach historical empathy. This dissertation can also inspire other academic work that aims at testing this activity in real life Maltese classrooms

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Chapter 4: The AVATAR-method applied in Maltese History

4.1 The Great Siege

4.1.1 Historical Background: The Great Siege

Before the Great Siege

In the decades preceding the Great Siege, the Mediterranean was a tense environment as the Christian and Ottoman naval powers battled each other for dominance within the region (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005). The Ottomans were clearly in the lead, with the Christian powers, who were mainly affiliated to Spain, only being able to try and protect themselves rather than initiating attacks. Other Christian territories, such as Venice and France, struck alliances with the Ottoman Empire which gave the Ottomans an advantage in their military endeavours and left the Christian sections of the Mediterranean in an increasingly untenable situation. Malta, being in Christian hands, was thus a target of the Ottoman Empire. As such, de Valette sought to defend Malta from an Ottoman attack (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005).

1551 was a year characterised by Ottoman military engagements with the Christian Mediterranean territories. Malta was one such territory (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005). The Ottomans were able to breach the territory through the use of the Marsamxett harbour with Ottoman soldiers landing on the island. An attempted siege was then undertaken by the Ottomans, with Birgu being targeted, however this attempt was not a long-lasting one (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005). Birgu as a fortress had been

ameliorated from its pre-Knights' period composition, however, the Knights had been unprepared for this attack and it was fortunate that the Ottoman-attempted siege was just that, an attempt, which was subsequently given up on rather early on (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005). Instead of Malta suffering the effects of an Ottoman military success, Gozo was ransacked and its population captured and initiated into a life of slavery. With its success the Ottoman army hastened to capture another Christian territory, Tripoli, which in turn fell into Ottoman hands (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005).

Due to these bitter losses, the Order set out on an expedited process of building two new fortifications; Fort St Elmo and Fort St Michael. De Valette continued to prepare for the next Ottoman encounter on the island and his preparations turned more and more harried as it became even more certain that the Ottomans would once more attempt to overtake Malta (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005).

During the Great Siege

The Ottoman fleet was first spotted making its way to Malta on the 18th of May 1565, making landfall in Marsaxlokk the day after (Galea, 2018). St Elmo was the first to be attacked, starting on the 27th of May. Almost a month later St Elmo was captured by the Ottomans. However, this was not a total success for the Ottomans as they lost Dragut in their effort to overtake the fort. With the taking of St Elmo, the Ottomans could now take shelter in Marsamxett harbour. The next focus of the Ottoman military was Senglea, which they started their assault on in July in a two-fold attack both maritime and land-based (Galea, 2018). This assault however was hindered due to an Ottoman deserter who had instructed de Valette on this Ottoman strategy thus

allowing de Valette the chance to hone his strategies and make them as effective as they could possibly be. Another event that proved detrimental to the Ottoman military cause was when Turkish naval vessels were placed within the line of fire of Order canons and subsequently the vast majority of these vessels were sunk which also led to a large amount of Ottoman affiliated lives being lost (Galea, 2018).

The Ottomans still proceeded to focus their military might on Birgu and its accompanying fort throughout July and August with one close call for the Maltese on the 7th of August (Galea, 2018). Birgu had almost been captured and the ensuing outcome looked bleak for the Maltese when the Ottomans suddenly went on the retreat. This was due to the actions of Captain Vincenzo Anastagi and the cavalry forces under his command with relation to a Turkish encampment. As they had found this encampment to be vulnerable Anastagi and his men decided to attack and kill those they found inside. The ensuing alarming message brought to the Turkish military commanders made the Ottoman command decide to retreat as they had made the mistaken supposition that support had arrived from Sicily to aid the Maltese (Galea, 2018).

A string of unsuccessful military endeavours for the Ottomans followed till September. As the weather started to shift, the Ottomans whose fighting force had had a third of it diminished were beginning to lose hope (Galea, 2018). They tried to settle into Mdina however this plan was foiled as they had assumed that the city had more military might than it actually did since those in Mdina decided to unleash cannon-fire on the Ottomans. The Turks had begun their plans to move out of the island when the "*Grande Soccorso*" arrived on Malta and unleashed an attack on the

Ottomans (Galea, 2018, p. 10). The 8th of September heralded the victory of the Order over the Ottomans (Galea, 2018).

The Aftermath of the Great Siege

This Siege left many Maltese men dead with their families left to pick up the pieces and carry on as best as they could. Among the survivors, a large number suffered from injuries gained from battle (Spiteri, 2015). The island was also in an abysmal state with its countryside having been desecrated (Mallia Milanés & Mäkipere, 2016). The Birgu fortifications and the structures found had been heavily damaged in the Siege. With the end of the Great Siege, the Order immediately started to build the long awaited city atop Mount Sceberras (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005). The end of the Great Siege solidified the Order's presence in Malta which in turn benefitted the island both socially and economically (Mallia Milanés & Mäkipere, 2016).

The Great Siege was a watershed moment with regards to Christian-Ottoman relations in the Mediterranean region. While the Ottomans remained a force to contend with till 1580, without possessing Malta their goals of acquiring dominance within the Mediterranean were doomed (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005).

4.1.2 Avatar Creation:

"Tier 1" (Tak, 2018):

"Personal Aspects" (Tak, 2018):

Vittorio Farrugia, 20 years old, Male, Roman Catholic, does not know how to read or write, lives in Siggiewi. Works in his family's fields harvesting cotton. Vittorio has matured a lot due to his recent marriage in 1564. He is a family man and puts his family above all else. He works hard under pressure. He is determined to protect his family from the coming Ottoman onslaught.

"Tier 2" (Tak, 2018):

"Social Context" (Tak, 2018):

Vittorio is married to his wife, Gioia and they have recently welcomed their new baby, a girl, and baptised her in the parish of Siggiewi on the "12th of February 1565" (Cutajar & Cassar, 2005, p. 18). Vittorio spends his day training with the other men that are a part of "the Siggiewi group" of Maltese soldiers, under the tutelage of a middle-aged Knight (Cassar, 2005, p.3). When not in training Vittorio helps in the strengthening of the fortifications. When the Great Siege had begun Vittorio made sure to take his wife and baby to Mdina in order to protect them.

"Tier 3" (Tak, 2018):

"Historical Context" (Tak, 2018):

1565, Malta, the Great Siege. Tension was in the air due to the frenzied preparations for the Great Siege. The Ottomans posed a large threat to Malta and the Maltese people knew that if the Ottomans managed to capture the island both them and their

families, including their children would be taken away from Malta to live the rest of their lives as slaves. With this knowledge in mind, the Maltese fought hard to protect the island from the Ottoman invaders in spite of the dangers inherent in warfare. The Great Siege ended in a victory for the Order and the Maltese although much damage had been done both in terms of human life as well as to the countryside and fortifications.

4.1.3 Application in a Fictional Classroom Setting

Link to History Syllabus

With regards to the General history syllabus the Great Siege is a part of "Subject Focus 12" - "Malta and Europe (1565 - 1813) specifically "Learning Outcome 12" - "I can describe and discuss significant events and developments in European history that impacted on Maltese history from 1565 to 1813" (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 14). In "Learning Outcome 12" the following topics can be addressed through the use of the AVATAR-method (DLAP, 2023, p. 14): "12.1a": "Identify the causes and the preparations undertaken for the Great Siege." (DLAP, 2023, p. 14), "12.2a": "Explain the causes and the preparations for the Great Siege." (DLAP, 2023, p. 14), "12:3a": "Discuss the causes and the preparations for the Great Siege." (DLAP, 2023, p. 14) and "12.1b": "Identify the immediate effects of the Great Siege." (DLAP, 2023, p. 15)

In the case of the Optional history group syllabus the Great Siege is featured in the "Subject Focus" titled "Malta under the rule of the Order of St John" as a part of

"Learning Outcome 5" - "I can describe and evaluate some major projects and achievements of the Order of St John in Malta after 1565 and Analyse some of the problems for the Order in the eighteenth century with the help of various primary and secondary sources" (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 31). With regards to topics that can be addressed through the AVATAR-method one can focus on the three sections included in "Learning Outcome 5" (DLAP, 2023, p. 31): "5.1a": "Identify consequences of the Victory of 1565 on the Order and/or the Maltese." (DLAP, 2023, p. 31), "5.2a": "Explain the consequences of the Victory of 1565 on the Order and/or the Maltese population." (DLAP, 2023, p. 31) and "5.3a": "Discuss the short and long-term consequences on the victory of 1565 for the Order and/or the Maltese." (DLAP, 2023, p. 31)

Ideas for how to present the AVATAR-method in class

General History Students

It would be best to affiliate this activity with the lessons dedicated to either the preparatory work done by the Order before the Great Siege or the consequences that resulted directly after the Great Siege or depending on the class both of these topics. The activity should be introduced after the students have completed a substantive part of these topics.

A teacher can put this activity into practice by providing the students with a pre-made character like the one done above. This would be beneficial as it is a difficult topic to

get enough information on the day-to-day lives of Maltese people during the 16th century. However, if the teacher is of the opinion that the students would be able to create their own character for this activity then allowing the students to create their own character would also be a viable activity option. The students can be shown by the teacher the steps that must be taken to create the character. This can be done using the template above to facilitate the teacher's explanation of proper research skills to pupils that will help them in this activity. Artificial Intelligence can be utilised for this explanation in order for the teacher to show their pupils how one can use this resource in the way the teacher wants them to.

After the method of character creation is explained to the pupils, the teacher can give out a worksheet that includes the diary entry prompt which they need to address in this activity. The worksheet could also include helpful guidelines on what the teacher expects from the students, such as reminding the students to include references to the character's emotions and the minimum word count. A writing frame can also be included to further guide the students. However, if a writing frame is given, it must be made clear to the students that they are allowed to deviate from what is written in the writing frame. This clarification is made in order to prevent any hindrance to their creativity. With regards to the word count it would be good to specify a minimum number of words that the student must write but to leave out any mention of a maximum number of words that can be written. This would allow the students agency on the amount of research that they would like to do and help them get more into the activity.

One example of the diary entry prompts that can be given in the worksheets is: Write a diary entry in which your character describes their day. The date of this entry must be the 30th of April 1565. This would allow the students to target the preparations for the Great Siege. Another example is to instruct them to: Write a diary entry in which your character describes their day. The date of this entry must be the 8th of October 1565. This targets the immediate consequences of the Great Siege.

Students should also be given the following materials in order to help them make sure that their diary entries are as historically accurate as possible; a list of helpful books/websites or other resources, the character template used in the explanation and a summarised background on the Great Siege (as seen in the first section).

Option Group History Students

In the case of History Option students one can modify this activity so that it requires more independent effort on the student's part. An introduction can be done on the Great Siege and the teacher can then present the character template written above and describe the steps one must take to create this character, following the procedures of the AVATAR-method. The students will then be tasked with the creation of their own character and given from a few days to a week to create them. The teacher can facilitate this activity by giving the students a list of helpful resources they can use to source detailed information about the Great Siege. After the week has passed the teacher has to make sure that their character's background is correct. Then the diary entry assignment/s can begin. The prompts can be presented on a worksheet which includes the same resources which the General students

received in their worksheet, as specified in the previous section. For the Option group multiple assignments can be given to them with the aim of tackling different topics related to the Great Siege, such as the causes, preparations, main events and the consequences. These assignments should be given to the students throughout the lessons on the Great Siege in order for the maximum benefit to be derived by the students.

4.2 World War I in Malta

4.2.1 Historical Background: World War I in Malta

The Start of World War I

Stemming from a complex web of power relationships between diverse countries this war started in 1914 and ended in 1918. Germany, then recently unified, wanted to improve Germany's status to that of a "World Power", as they saw themselves as being above other powers on the basis of their culture as well as their industry which was rapidly developing due to their reliance on "chemicals and electricity" (Howard, 2007, p. 6). In order to achieve their desired status Germany would have to compete with the British. To inculcate this competitive mentality into its people, Germany, through the use of propaganda, showed the British as the enemies of the Germans who must be defeated (Howard, 2007). Germany started to invest more into their navy as this sector was found lacking when compared to the British. Seeing this, the British invested even more into their navy and also fostered diplomatic alliances with

France, Russia and Japan as well as creating positive ties with the United States (Howard, 2007).

With all these preparations in the background, the situation in the Balkans was the spark which induced World War I. Austria and Serbia had a tense relationship, with the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina further fueling this tension due to the start of the "liberation movement" started by Serbia (Howard, 2007, p. 9). Serbia's victories in the Balkan Wars increased tensions as Austria felt powerless against Serbian might. Within this context, on the 29th of July 1914, when Gavril Princip shot Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand World War I started in earnest (Howard, 2007).

World War I in Malta

In the summer of 1914, "martial law" was implemented in Malta and a couple Battalions from the "King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia" were deployed (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 21). This was ordered in "*Proclamations XIV and VII*" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 21). A number of Maltese people enlisted into the army although there was some conflict that happened as the "Army Council" did not see the importance of these people when it came to including them in the war as they were not trained (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 22). The Maltese, however, still managed to be a part of the war effort in Mudros and Cyprus. Approximately 24,000 people from Malta were a part of the British war effort (Zarb-Dimech, 2004).

The Maltese Medical Sector throughout World War I

One important sector of the war effort that women could take part in was nursing. Nursing pre-1883 was still mainly a male-dominated sector. These men were untrained and hired as needed. Female nurses had been given a chance to enter service before 1883, however, this initiative was largely a failure (Zarb-Dimech, 2004). During 1884, "Regulations for the Staff of Nursing sisters in the Royal Navy" was created and disseminated with these nurses originating in "Haslar (Portsmouth) and Plymouth" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 149). The start of the female nursing service in Malta was in 1897.

During World War I, foreign nurses also came to Malta to serve in the War effort, such as nurses from the "Australian Army Nursing Corps" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 149). Women wishing to serve in the British War effort were allowed to join the "*Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) later Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps*", the "*Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)*", the "*Women's Royal Air Force*" and the "*Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service*" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 150). These services were made up of British women. Those women in the "*Women's Royal Naval Service*" were given foreign posts including serving in Malta (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 150).

Maltese women apart from becoming nurses were able to help the war effort by organising entertainment for those men in the hospitals as well as providing them with supplies such as "tobacco, matches, stationery, etc.," and were there to meet all incoming hospital ships regardless of weather conditions (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 151).

Malta's efforts in terms of medical aid was an unforeseen development stemming from the dire situation of the soldiers taking part in the Gallipoli campaign. The plan for Malta's hospitals was to briefly house the wounded that could be treated and taken back to the front when they healed. However, the Gallipoli campaign was a disease stricken battlefield with diseases like dysentery ravaging the troops. In order to deal with the influx of patients on the island, hospitals were created from converted "barracks, schools and even two Governor's palaces" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 156). Nurses had to work hard in these hospitals, on one occasion one nurse was in charge of over a hundred patients, many who had broken their backs. This nurse would use her free time to catch up on sleep or write letters on behalf of patients who could not. When a death happened, this nurse would send a letter to the patient's mother in order to describe how the patient had been faring before his death. Nurses were able to hear first-hand accounts on the conditions of the battlefield from their patients as well as seeing the impact of these conditions on their patients. Nurses would also be in charge of keeping the holiday spirit alive during Christmas time where they would decorate hospital wards as well as arrange presents for the soldiers (Zarb-Dimech, 2004).

Maltese people were very enthusiastic about learning First Aid during World War I going as far as teaching it to school-aged children. Established in Malta in 1909 was the 'St John's Ambulance Brigade' that aimed to equip men and women with training in First Aid as well as nursing (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 88). Members of this group went abroad in order to aid in the war effort. Those that stayed tended to the large number of patients being brought in.

Many hospitals were available in Malta, these hospitals would cater to different needs. One of the responsibilities of "Valletta Military Hospital" was to house those who were too ill to move (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 91). The "Cottonera Hospital" served as the primary Maltese hospital. It worked to treat those who suffered from diseases and shell-shock coming back from "the Gallipoli and Salonika campaigns" (Zarb-Dimech, 2004, p. 94). Maltese women were allowed to join the "Queen Alexandra Royal Nursing Service" and work as nurses (Micallef Eynaud, 2010, p. 76). Examples of such women are "Mary Muscat and Violet Briffa" (Micallef Eynaud, 2010, p. 76). Mary Muscat worked in the Mtarfa hospital and Violet Briffa worked in the Cottonera hospital.

Malta's efforts when it comes to tending to the sick and wounded was lauded by many. This care included the setting up of entertainment, such as concerts for those still healing on the island. One such commendation was made by Lord Methuen when he made the comment (Micallef Eynaud, 2010):

The people of Malta, ladies and gentlemen, came to my aid in a manner I shall never forget... (this ellipsis was found in the original quote) nor must I omit to mention the excellent concerts organised by Chevalier Lancellotti with local talent, assisted by singers from the Opera who gave their service gratuitously... (this ellipsis was found in the original quote) the work done by Mrs Radcliffe and her Ladies Committee was beyond all praise. (p. 77).

4.2.2 Avatar Creation

"Tier 1" (Tak, 2018):

"Personal Aspects" (Tak, 2018):

Name and Surname: Marija Zammit, 21 years old, Female, Roman Catholic, knows how to read and write, working class, lives in Birgu. Joined the newly formed St John's Ambulance Brigade in 1910 at the age of 16. Started training to be an auxiliary Nurse. Continued on to join the Queen Alexandra Royal Nursing Service. At this time (1915) she is working in the Cottonera Hospital where she tends to patients suffering from shell-shock and wounds. Neat and organised, she makes sure that the patients she tends to are in a clean and organised environment. She reads to her patients in order to comfort them and is always ready with a soothing word to help those soldiers in despair. She feels helpless when faced with the harrowing effects of the Gallipoli campaign on the soldiers and tries to alleviate this by going above and beyond in her service in the hospital.

"Tier 2" (Tak, 2018):

'Social Context' (Tak, 2018): The youngest daughter in a family of five children (two brothers and two sisters), Marija's birth took place in her home with a midwife being there to help her mother. Her father is a baker with her mother also working in the bakery. All the children attended a school and learnt how to read and write. The eldest son is learning the family trade in order to take over the Bakery. The second eldest son joined the Royal Navy Reserve during the War. The eldest daughter is learning how to sew by working for free for their neighbour and the other daughter

also joined The St John Ambulance brigade with Marija and during the war is teaching first aid to children in schools.

"Tier 3" (Tak,2018):

"Historical Context" (Tak, 2018): 1915, World War I in Malta during the time of the Gallipoli Campaign. Cottonera was the main hospital for the military in Malta. It was up to date in its equipment. The amount of beds available in this hospital were 167 which made up the bulk of beds for the militarily wounded and sick in Malta. Around 67,000 people were taken to Malta to be tended to in the military hospitals found around the island. Such was the need for hospitals in Malta that in June of this year, some schools were requisitioned to tend to soldiers in need of treatment.

4.2.3 Application in a Fictional Classroom setting

Link to History Syllabus

In the General history syllabus World War I in Malta forms part of 'Subject Focus 12' - "Malta and Europe (1914 - 1945)" which includes "Learning Outcome 12" - "I can describe and discuss significant events and developments in European history that impacted on Maltese history from 1900 to 1945" (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 20). This division includes three sections relevant to the topic of World War I in Malta: "12.1f": "Identify Malta's role during the First World War." (DLAP, 2023, p. 20), "12.2f": "Describe Malta's role during the First World War." (DLAP, 2023, p. 20) and "12.3f": "Discuss the socio-economic effects of the First World War on Malta." (DLAP, 2023, p. 20)

The History Option syllabus discusses World War I from two angles. These being a more in depth analysis of World War One in the "European History Section" of the Syllabus as well as in the 'Subject Focus: Malta during the Two World Wars' (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 47). For this discussion, the focus will be on World War I in relation to Malta rather than with regards to the European perspective on World War I.

A Maltese perspective about World War I is described in "Learning Outcome 9" - "I can describe and evaluate the main local and foreign events and developments about Malta during the Two World Wars with the help of various primary and secondary sources" (DLAP, 2023, p. 47) The topics that can be addressed with the AVATAR-method are: "9.1I": "Differentiate between facts about Malta during the First and the Second World War." (DLAP, 2023, p. 47), "9.2I": "Discuss the contribution of Malta to the Allied victory in the First and/or Second World War." (DLAP, 2023, p. 47) and "9.3I": "Compare and contrast Malta' role and contribution to the Allied victory in the First and Second World War." (DLAP, 2023, p. 47)

Ideas for how to present the AVATAR-method in class

General History Students

After the lesson dedicated to Malta's situation at the time of World War I is given to the students the teacher can explain how the students are to create their character. The students can then be randomly assigned the name of a fictitious person as well

as the age of this fictitious person (this age referring to how old their character would be in 1915). This random assignment can be done by having students pick a slip of paper from a covered box, with the box during one round throughout the class (Volk, 2013). The students will then have the assignment explained to them. After the explanation is done the students are free to trade amongst themselves with regards to the character they choose out of the box (Volk, 2013).

The activity can focus on the act of remembrance. The students will have to write a biographical account of that fictitious person's experience during the war after ten years have passed from the termination of World War I. The student should also create the character background in the same format as the template given to them. In order to guide the students on how to write a biographical account of a world war the teacher can provide the students with both a writing frame as well as an example of a biographical account of World War I written by a person who was present during the war. Students should be given background information on World War I in Malta and also a short amount of information on how people viewed the war during the interwar period. A list of helpful resources would also be very beneficial for the students.

Option Group History Students

The same focus on remembrance can be used during the History Option classes which can be dedicated to describing both World War I and World War II in relation to Malta. After the students have completed the lessons dedicated to these two topics they can be taught how to create their own character following the AVATAR-method

through the use of a template (the one given above can be used). The students will then be given the following instructions:

Create your own character and write three different entries. The first entry must be written sometime during World War I and in the form of a diary entry describing what they did on that specific day. The second entry must be written sometime during World War II (specifically between 1940 - 1942) in the form of a diary entry describing their daily life. The third entry should take place two decades after World War II in which your character describes the different experiences they went through in the two wars, making sure to include both comparisons and contrasts between these wartime experiences. The character created must be old enough to have clear memories of World War I and must survive the following four decades.

The students should make sure to provide the history teacher with information related to the three categories that make up their character's background and the three entries assigned to them. The minimum word count should not be too high due to the fact that the students have to complete multiple entries. A chance to submit a draft of their work should be given to the students in order to aid them in their story creation. The teacher should make sure that the students have the necessary resources available to them as well as being given ideas on how to acquire even more resources, such as referring them to public libraries or archives.

4.3 Sette Giugno

4.3.1 Historical Background: The Sette Giugno conflict

Why did the Sette Giugno conflict happen?

In order to begin to understand why the events taking place during the Sette Giugno conflict happened it is imperative to understand the economic implications of World War I on the Maltese. Malta during this time, due to its status as a colony of Britain, had its dockyard used as a maintenance and repairing station for allied warships. Due to the turbulence during this period the dockyard and its workers had to attend to a vast number of warships. As such, the number of dockyard workers had to increase and in 1918 there were around 13,000 people employed and earning their livelihood in the dockyard (Cassar, 2019). Malta during the war also had another source of increased employment, that of hospital personnel in the various medical facilities dotted around the island (Cassar, 2019).

In spite of the increasing employment opportunities for the Maltese, economic turmoil was still present among the population (Cassar, 2019). Due to wartime conditions making it difficult to get access to common necessities, most of the Maltese had a hard time attending to their basic needs since their wages were not keeping up with the cost of these necessities, such as food. The first signs of discontent with the British government in Malta were being felt (Cassar, 2019).

The end of the war meant that the employment opportunities which had been present throughout the war in Malta were now defunct. Many Maltese were becoming unemployed which caused great strife to the Maltese and set off alarm bells for the British "colonial administration"(Cassar, 2019, p. 13). Politically, things were also in shambles. With the institution of the 1903 constitution Maltese politicians were in the minority against the official members. Resignations and abstentions were par for the course in the government at that time. The Maltese affiliated with politics wanted an improved constitution that addressed their wish for more independence in local matters (Cassar, 2019).

Adding even more pressure into this tense situation was the matter of how costly bread was (Cassar, 2019). Bread was a staple food in the diet of the Maltese, especially of the poorest in society. Due to the lack of common necessities, as stated previously, bread increased in price which created a desperate situation for many on the island. Regardless, grains that were imported into Malta were still being taxed; these products were even being tampered with due to the inclusion of badly rinsed rice which resulted in sickness. As such, this situation made it possible for the breeding of resentment between the Maltese and those who they saw as profiting off their suffering; "millers and the importers of wheat"(Cassar, 2019, p. 16).

What Happened during the Sette Giugno Conflict?

The previous section has shown how a highly volatile situation had settled into Malta by 1919. Keeping this in mind, one is able to understand why the events of the 7th of June happened in the way that they did.

Due to the disappointing British response to the plea of the National Assembly for a greater share in the running of Malta after their first meeting on the 25th of February 1919, the National Assembly had scheduled a second meeting in Valletta to take place on the 7th of June 1919. Newspapers such as "*Il Hmar*", filled with impassioned support for a government in the hands of the Maltese, urged people to make their way to Valletta on that day (Cassar, 2019, p. 30).

These pleas worked and many Maltese people made their way to Valletta in order to support the National Assembly. However, this meeting was interrupted after ninety minutes when witnesses arrived describing the violent pandemonium happening outside. The crowd outside had been set off by British flags which were present above certain buildings in Valletta as they brought up all the simmering anger and resentment towards the British (Cassar, 2019). A rampage ensued in Valletta, British flags were dismantled and members of the Police were beaten. Next, the crowd attacked and lit on fire the building of "*The Daily Malta Chronicle*" a British leaning newspaper (Cassar, 2019, p. 36). After splitting up the crowd made their way to the homes of Cassar Torreggiani, a "wheat importer", and Francesco Azzopardi, a disliked politician, and proceeded to damage both properties (Cassar, 2019, p. 36).

Soldiers were sent into Valletta to control the raging crowds. Firing ensued near the home of Cassar Torreggiani and the property of *The Daily Malta Chronicle*. Manwel Attard and Giuseppe Bajada were killed instantly with Lorenzo Dyer dying shortly after sustaining grievous injuries (Cassar, 2019).

After interventions by select members of the National Assembly, both the soldiers and the crowd of Maltese people began to leave leading to the end of the first day of the conflict. The following days were characterised by mourning for the deceased as well as further violent actions. The fourth life was also claimed, this being of Carmelo Abela who had been bayoneted by Marine soldiers (Cassar, 2019).

The Consequences of the Sette Giugno Conflict

In the conflict's aftermath, press censorship was set into place on the 9th of June. Reports on what happened during the entirety of the conflict were limited to what was said during meetings by "the inquiry commission"(Cassar, 2019, p. 47). Thirty-two people were also taken to be judged by the court with twenty-four of them being taken to prison having to spend at least nine months in prison and at most twenty years. A commission was set to look into what happened during the conflict and what instigated the crowd (Cassar, 2019).

On the 10th of June, Lord Plumer became the new Governor and set out to remedy the dire situation. He made sure to regulate the amount of money being charged on bread, and tackled the unemployment situation through the increase in "public works" initiatives and ensuring the fullest possible amount of Maltese people were being employed in the military sector (Cassar, 2019, p. 54) .

With its culmination this conflict inspired widely felt political change on the island. The National Assembly submitted their draft for a new constitution which described how the governing of Malta would be split between two different governments. The

government run by the Maltese would have control over local issues whereas the "Maltese Imperial Government" were in control of "Reserved Matters" (Cassar, 2019, p. 58) . In 1921 a new constitution was granted which allowed Malta to take a vital political step forward and gained a level of autonomy from the British (Mangion, 2019).

4.3.2 Avatar Creation

"Tier 1" (Tak, 2018):

"Personal Aspects" (Tak, 2018):

Ninu Grech, 25 years old, Male, Roman Catholic, does not know how to read or write, lives in Bormla. Belongs to the working class and had a job in the Dockyard, which he started in 1915 at the age of 21, but due to the large amount of layoffs in the Dockyard in the aftermath of World War I, he is currently unemployed (1919). Ninu felt useful during the war due to the increased amount of work present in the dockyard. At heart he is a hard worker who takes pride in any type of work he does. With his current unemployed status Ninu is going through a hard time. Resentment and bitterness have started to affect his daily life.

"Tier 2" (Tak, 2018):

'Social Context' (Tak, 2018):

The second son of a poor family of nine children (3 brothers and 5 sisters). His Family used to live in the countryside and followed a customary village existence. When Ninu was around fifteen the family moved near the harbour area in order to get jobs at the Dockyard. His father and elder brother both started working in the

Dockyard. His dad and brother kept their jobs at the Dockyard after the end of the war. While Ninu had been in the Dockyard he was exposed to the teachings of Manwel Dimech. After he was laid off, Ninu further aligned himself with the position of the Dimechians who were spreading the ideologies of Dimech after he had been exiled. Ninu's bitterness towards certain people was also increasing at this time due to the families struggle to get enough bread for them to eat. This caused Ninu to resent the Cassar Torreggiani family.

"Tier 3" (Tak, 2018):

"Historical Context" (Tak, 2018):

1919, Malta, Sette Giugno. This event was caused by the dire economic situation of many of the Maltese population as well as their inability to afford bread which meant that a substantial part of their diet was restricted. The atmosphere in Malta was tense due to the abovementioned economic turmoil as well as the political agitation that was present at this time. The violent events led to property damage and multiple deaths. Consequently, the conflict pushed the colonial administration to create new opportunities for employment, monitor how expensive bread was as well as making way for a new political milestone to be reached in Malta.

4.3.3 Application in a Fictional Classroom Setting

Link to History Syllabus

The Sette Giugno conflict is tackled in both the General history syllabus as well as the Option group history syllabus. In the case of the General history syllabus it forms

a part of 'Subject Focus 9' detailing "Politics in Malta (1813-1945)" specifically "Learning Outcome 9" - "I have knowledge of Malta' historic political milestones achieved since the nineteenth century" (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 15). The below mentioned topics can be tackled by using the AVATAR-method: "9.1i": "Mention causes for the outbreak of the *Sette Giugno* riots of 1919." (DLAP, 2023, p.15), "9.2i": "Explain causes for the Outbreak of the *Sette Giugno* riots of 1919." (DLAP, 2023, p.15), "9.3i": "Discuss the causes of the 1919 *Sette Giugno* riots. (DLAP, 2023, p.15), "9.1j": "Mention the main events taking place during the *Sette Giugno* riots of 1919." (DLAP, 2023, p.16), "9.2j": "Describe the events of the *Sette Giugno* riots of 1919" (DLAP, 2023, p.16) and "9.3j": "Discuss the consequences of the *Sette Giugno* riots on Maltese political and constitutional development." (DLAP, 2023, p.16)

Pertaining to the Optional History students syllabus the topic of the *Sette Giugno* is included in the 'Subject Focus' titled "Malta during the Two World Wars". It is relegated as "Learning Outcome 9" - "I can describe the main local and foreign events and developments about Malta during the Two World Wars with the help of various primary and secondary sources" (Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes History Department [DLAP], 2023, p. 48). The AVATAR-method can be used to solidify the knowledge gained in these three topics related to the *Sette Giugno*: "9.1m": "List causes and consequences of the *Sette Giugno* riots." (DLAP, 2023, p. 48), "9.2m": "Explain the causes and/or consequences of the *Sette Giugno* riots." (DLAP, 2023, p. 48) and "9.3m": "Discuss the causes and/or consequences of the *Sette Giugno* riots." (DLAP, 2023, p. 48)

Ideas for how to present the AVATAR-method in class

General History Students

The AVATAR-method when it comes to tackling the topic of the Sette Giugno can be done in collaboration with the English and Maltese subject teachers in order to increase the working time allocated to this activity since as a topic it does not occupy a lot of lessons in the schemes of work of history teachers (Tak, 2018). In the case of the English syllabus the AVATAR-method can be used in order to attain the part on the syllabus labelled "Process Writing" in particular "Learning Outcome 3: I can plan, draft and revise my own writing" (Learning Outcomes Framework: A Supporting Document for Year 10 (ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE) 2024-2025 [LOF], n.d., p.20). This "Learning Outcome" targets; "Rewording/Rephrasing", "Plan", "Draft" and "Revise" (LOF, n.d., p.20). These divisions can be tackled between both the History and the English teacher in the following manner:

In the case of "Rewording/Rephrasing" the students will be able to practice their paraphrasing skills throughout the AVATAR-method as they need to take the knowledge found in history books, websites etc.. and relay the information in their own words in order to both create their character and answer the writing prompt. (LOF, n.d., p. 20). A "Plan" needs to be given to both the History and English teachers in order to assess different matters (LOF, n.d., p. 20). The history teacher

will focus on assessing the historical accuracy as well as the types of sources and resources used by the students. While the English teacher will focus on if the student's plan follows a logical sequence and answers the prompt correctly (LOF, n.d., p. 20).

Next, a "Draft" can be shown to the history teacher in order to make sure that the facts mentioned as well as the perspective taken is historically accurate. (LOF, n.d., p. 20) To target "Revise" the English teacher can be given the revised version of the assignment in order to assess it based on the language being used. (LOF, n.d., p. 20)

In the case of those students who write in Maltese, the Maltese writing syllabus includes mention of planning an essay through the use of a concept map which can be used in the planning stage of this assignment (Gatt, n.d.).

Lesson Sequence for General History Students

The first lesson dedicated to this topic can focus on why the event happened in order to introduce the students to the topic. In the second half of the lesson the teacher would introduce the AVATAR-method by showing the students how they can create their own character through the use of a template. The students would then have a week to create their own character and give the teacher their character's information split into the three categories in order to have the teacher check that it is correct. The lesson would focus on the main events that happened during the conflict as well as the consequences of this event.

In the next lesson, the teacher would assign a worksheet with a prompt relating to the Sette Giugno conflict. An example of such a prompt would be: Write a firsthand account where your character describes what they think caused the conflict as well as what happened during the 7th of June in Valletta.

The students should also be given the character template, a list of useful resources as well as a summary on the topic in order to aid them in their writing. A minimum word count must also be outlined for the students without the inclusion of a maximum word count.

By the end of this activity each student should be able to give in the information on their character split up into the three categories, a plan of how they will write their first hand account as well as a draft version of their writing that will be checked for accuracy by the history teacher. The English teacher will receive all of these combined with the finished piece of writing.

Lesson Sequence for Option group History Students

For the History Option group of students this assignment regarding the Sette Giugno can be designed in another way. In the first lesson dedicated to the Sette Giugno the teacher can begin by assigning the students a character name as well as the type of work their character does. This assigning of characters can be done in an arbitrary and interactive way, such as through the use of a spinning wheel shown on the interactive whiteboard which the students can take turns spinning around and have their character be chosen based on which panel is selected by the spinning wheel.

The lesson should then focus on giving students information on why the Sette Giugno conflict happened, making sure to focus on different types of social backgrounds such as Dockyard workers or University pupils that feature in the reasons for the start of the conflict. Towards the end of the lesson the teacher should give a brief explanation of how to create a character in the AVATAR-method and assign the students homework where they have to create their own character. The teacher should assign the deadline they find most applicable for their select group of students.

After the students have given in the categorised background of their character and had this corrected by the teacher, the students should be given three prompts following the same character before, during and after the events of the Sette Giugno. It is imperative that the students are given an adequate amount of detailed sources, both primary and secondary for them to sustain their writings.

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Chapter 5: Challenges when Implementing the AVATAR-method

5.1 Artificial Intelligence and student writing

5.1.1 Problems that stem from Artificial Intelligence being utilised by secondary school students

ChatGPT has become a popular resource with students. This resource uses "artificial intelligence (AI)" to create responses gathered from information found on various websites and other information repositories and collated into a "human-like" summarised answer (Yeo, 2023, pp. 1-2) . Not only that, ChatGPT also creates entire articles of writing tailored to the needs of the asker with only a few simple actions needing to be done by the aforementioned asker, such as prompting ChatGPT with the title (Yeo, 2023). Despite the ease by which ChatGPT generates information after being queried by the user, this information is not guaranteed to be true; this puts those students who source their information from ChatGPT at a disadvantage (Lo, 2023).

The popularity and ease of access of these AI applications create certain challenges when it comes to academic activities. The main challenge would be parsing out who or what wrote the piece of writing being assessed (Yeo, 2023). Another drawback is that the use of AI by students can hinder the students from developing their skills when it comes to "cognitive, linguistic and socioemotional competencies" (Yeo, 2023, p. 2). With regards to the AVATAR-method a negative consequence that is related to

the student's using AI is that it makes it more difficult for the student to feel as though the piece of writing created is truly something they feel a sense of "ownership" towards (Yeo, 2023, p.2). In turn hindering them from truly practicing the historical skill of empathy which is the whole aim of the AVATAR-method.

Another problem that arises when students utilise AI when doing work that mainly relies on writing (such as the AVATAR-method) relates to the issue of "fairness" when it comes to assessing student work especially when a teacher decides to summatively assess a student's progress through the use of written work (Yeo, 2023, p. 6). This is because in this type of written work students may take the opportunity to have AI write either their whole assignment or a part of it, while there will be some students who do not make use of AI at all and produce work that is entirely composed and edited by them. This dichotomy can be unfair on the students who did not use any form of AI input in their work who are judged to the same standard as those who made use of AI (Yeo, 2023).

5.1.2 Solutions to the problems posed

A research paper found that those in academia who were not informed on AI tools such as "GPTs" found themselves struggling when it came to figuring out whether written content was generated by AI or by a real-life person (Elaal et al. 2022 as cited in Yeo, 2023, p. 6) . However, if educators are given the opportunity to attend at least "one training session" on the subject of AI, they were able to improve their accuracy with regards to recognising AI written work (Yeo, 2023, p. 6). Thus, in order to decrease the possibilities of unfairness to those students who do not use AI in their

work it would be beneficial for educators to be given or seek out training and information on the different types of AI tools available to students (Yeo, 2023).

Students should be taught about the disadvantages of ChatGPT, such as the possibility of this AI tool relating knowledge that is not supported by any evidence or actively going against evidence at times, in order to prevent them from taking all the information given by this AI tool as being truthful (Lo, 2023). By bringing this negative aspect to the student's attention, teachers are able to teach them methods by which to remedy this defect in order to not be negatively affected by it. One simple method would be for the students to check with other more established and reliable fonts of information (such as published books) whether the facts being espoused by ChatPT are sources supported by substantiated evidence (Lo, 2023). The fact that AI tools are known to at times include information that is not based on fact can be used to detect potential AI use within a student's writing (Cotton et al., 2024). To get further proof whether AI has been used by a student, the teacher can ask the student to describe what they wrote to classmates (Cotton et al., 2024). This allows the teacher to check whether the student confidently knows what they wrote and can back up the reasons behind the choices they made throughout their writing process.

A way of preventing students from plagiarising by using ChatGPT would be to discuss the topic of plagiarism with students in class (Cotton et al., 2024). Through this discussion the teacher should help students understand what plagiarism entails and why it should be avoided. This allows the students to take on the responsibility of avoiding plagiarism in their written work since they would know in detail what exactly plagiarism refers to (Cotton et al., 2024). Adding on to this, teachers should create a

list of regulations which describe the ways in which AI can be utilised in students' work (Cotton et al., 2024). Teachers may also find it necessary to put into place stipulations on how students should flag when and how they utilised AI (Tang et al., 2024). This allows for the teacher correcting the work to be able to pay attention to whether the information included within the piece of writing is historically accurate since AI is known to come up with information that has no basis in truth or is imprecise (Tang et al., 2024).

5.1.3 Benefits and suggestions for AI use in Education

In spite of the drawbacks present within the interaction between education and AI tools, AI's presence within the educational system is one that can benefit student performance. These benefits include AI's ability to assist students when it comes to conforming to "grammatical, spelling and notational standards, in addition to structural and organizational norms" (Kim et al., 2025, p.1268). AI aids students in these matters by proofreading the written work of students and is further advantageous to students as the use of AI tools comes without the caveats that are associated with having an actual person proofreading your work, such as: lack of availability (Kim et al., 2025). Another benefit that comes with utilising AI for this corrective purpose would be that students feel more at ease showing their possibly defect-laden work to AI than they would if they showed it to real-life people (Kim et al., 2025). Pupils can also utilise AI to develop academically by having AI go through their writing and asking the programme for constructive criticism on their work, this allows students to improve their writing ability. However, there are still some issues with using AI rather than a person to check one's written academic work as AI tools

are not able to identify "nuance or a writer's intent" regardless of its proficiency in highlighting language faults (Kim et al., 2025, p. 1268). Therefore, the human element present when a teacher reviews a student's writing is still needed for the student to be able to get more thorough feedback on the work provided. AI can be helpful in this regard by correcting student writing which in turn produces writing of a higher standard as well as allowing students to seek aid from what they view as a 'supportive and non-judgmental partner" (Kim et al., 2025, p.1275).

5.1.4 Suggestions for the use of AI with regards to the AVATAR-method

It is imperative that educators recognise that AI will be used by their students especially with the rapid developments that are being done in this area. As such, it is of vital importance that the work created by educators to be assigned to their students must take into account the presence of AI (Yeo, 2023). The benefits of the use of AI highlighted in the previous section are applicable to the AVATAR-method, with AI being used by the students to further improve their writing ability. Another idea with relation to the AVATAR-method and how AI can be used as a beneficial tool would be to give students the opportunity to reflect and comment on pieces of writing that have been created by GPTs by taking into account the teacher created rubrics. The students would then have to create a new piece of writing derived from the AI generated essay that is informed by their previous critiques (Yeo, 2023).

There are other types of AI tools which perform differing functions from ChatGPT and can provide a better quality of assistance with regards to student needs. An example of this type of AI tool is "Wordtune" (Yeo, 2023, p. 3). "Wordtune" allows for students

to have the opportunity to use AI to edit their writing in order to better their work but the tool still needs the students to write their own ideas down thus allowing students to have agency and control over their ideas which allow them to benefit from AI usage while also developing the historical skill of empathy catered for through the AVATAR-method (Yeo, 2023, p. 3). This is because due to the student's ability to control the ideas inputted into this AI tool they will still be able to undergo the empathic thought processes needed to successfully complete the AVATAR-method.

5.2 Dyslexia, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the AVATAR-method

5.2.1 The characteristics of Dyslexia

People with dyslexia face challenges when it comes to a variety of "language skills", these include "word recognition and reading fluency, spelling and writing" (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2017, p. 3). With regards to writing, people with dyslexia can find themselves having difficulty in handwriting (Raabia & Seemab, 2016). Their handwriting can be difficult to read due to a lack of clarity (Cambridge English, 2024). The written work of students with dyslexia also may contain incorrect spelling of words as well as not being well-organised and lacking a good structure when it comes to ideas included (Cambridge English, 2024). Reading is also another challenge for students with dyslexia since some find it difficult to understand the definitions of words and they tend "to misread or mix up common words" (Cambridge English, 2024, p. 6). Due to these challenges, those with dyslexia may find it difficult to do well in mainstream academic institutions (IDA, 2017).

It is therefore of utmost importance that teachers develop adequate "teaching methods" in order to mitigate the specific challenges that those students with dyslexia face in order to allow these students to reach their full potential (IDA, 2017, p. 3). In addition to this, teachers who address the needs of students with dyslexia will also positively influence a student's self-esteem. This is because those students with dyslexia are at a risk of viewing their level of intellect in a negative light due to the challenges they face in their academic journey. These negative emotions and the agitation that is brought with them also decreases the student's will to proceed further with their education (IDA, 2017).

Dyslexia should not just be viewed as a condition which only inculcates difficulties into a student's academic life. There are positive implications that come with dyslexia which have been described by multiple people. These include being good at recognising "patterns" as well as collating "information from a variety of sources" and they are able "to perceive possibilities from different perspectives" (Silverman, 2010 as cited in Wallbank, 2018, slide 5). These positive traits among many others make the input of students with dyslexia very valuable when it comes to academic assignments and thus must be encouraged and supported (Wallbank, 2018).

5.2.2 How to tailor the AVATAR-method to the needs of students with Dyslexia.

A teacher must first take into consideration the specific needs as well as other related knowledge on the student they wish to aid. This includes finding out about the student's; "learning style, intellectual potential, strengths, weaknesses, and past educational history" (Morgan, 1983, p. 252). This makes it so that the teacher is able

to understand which types of tools are able to help the students in the best way possible. The tools can rely on "visual input, others auditory, some tactile, others a combination of all three" (Morgan, 1983, p. 252). It is also important that the teacher continuously reflects on their practice with relation to their aimed for helpful interventions as to whether it has had the desired effect or not (Morgan, 1983).

There are many different adaptations that can be applied to the different stages of the AVATAR-method in order to make it more accessible to students with dyslexia, depending on their specific needs. The different stages of the AVATAR-method process include the information gathering stage (this stage is not one that stops at the beginning of the activity but carries on throughout the other stages of the activity), the character creation stage, the story writing stage and the presentation and feedback stage (this stage, like the information gathering stage, is best to be done continuously throughout the duration of the activity) (Tak, 2018).

In the information gathering stage, if students are given a topic to write about using the AVATAR-method that focuses heavily on a battle, such as the Great Siege, a map that explains the different events that took place during the siege can be of use to students with dyslexia as it will further consolidate the information learnt both in class and through their readings on the subject (Morgan, 1983). A list of key terms and their definitions relating to the particular history topic being targeted is also a helpful aid (Long et al., 2007). Another helpful strategy for students with dyslexia to help them when it comes to reading would be to give the students the option to hear information rather than only relying on reading it (Bratsis, 2016). This can be done by providing the students with links to websites that can have the text being read

inputted into them and which then can be read aloud by a computer generated voice. It would be imperative that the information that needs to be inputted into this software would be available on their personal devices rather than be given to them as physical copies, so that they could use the copy-paste function to transfer the information to the recommended websites.

One strategy that might aid students with dyslexia during the character creation portion of the activity would be to have them submit their work on this part of the activity in the form of a recording (Cambridge English, 2024). This will still allow the teacher to make sure that the character created and information presented is historically accurate. The act of giving the students a template on how to create their characters as seen in the previous chapter is also of help to students with dyslexia as well as the process of going through how the character in the template was created and what the teacher specifically requires of the students (Long et al., 2007).

With regards to the story writing stage, students can be given the opportunity to portray their character and the ensuing story visually. This can be done by providing students with the option of drawing the story they wish to tell through the form of a "comic strip" (Morgan, 1983, p. 253). The students can also be allowed to verbally present their drawings to either their peers or to the teacher and have them go into more detail such as further illuminating their "characters' actions, motives and the outcome" (Morgan, 1983, p. 253). Students could also be allowed to present their work in a typed format (Long et al., 2007).

In the case of the presentation stage, the teacher must be aware of the necessity, in some cases, to give students with dyslexia a longer time frame by which to complete their work (Bratsis, 2016). During the feedback stage, teachers can go through the process of marking a student's work in the presence of said student in order to create an environment where learning history is a continuous process (Long et al., 2007). Another way of assessing and providing feedback to students would be to record the feedback to be given to students rather than just write the feedback down (Cambridge English, 2024).

5.2.3 What does Universal Design for Learning (UDL) entail?

Universal Design for Learning focuses on using methods both in planning and in class that are informed by scientific research related to neuroscience. Its primary aim is that of noting what each individual student needs and accommodating these needs (Cast, 2025a). Multiple instructions have been curated for this purpose, these instructions referred to as "UDL Guidelines" (Cast, 2025a). There are three main branches included in these "Guidelines", namely, "Engagement", "Representation" and "Action & Expression" (Cast, 2025a). These branches focus on three aspects pertaining to education respectively, these being, "the why of learning", "the what of learning" and "the how of learning" (Cast, 2025a).

5.2.4 How to design the AVATAR-method activity with UDL in mind

One is able to apply the different branches present within the above recommendations to the AVATAR-method to inculcate an accessible and inclusive

educational environment that caters to the diverse group of students the activity is implemented on. The following are a few recommendations based on "UDL Guidelines" that aim for the previously mentioned objective (Cast, 2025a).

The first of the main branches to be discussed is that of "Engagement" (Cast, 2025b). This branch deals with how lessons and activities can be designed to motivate students in different and sometimes diverging ways (Cast, 2025b). The first subsection of this branch is that of "Welcoming Interests & Identities" and ideas stemming from this subsection would include giving students the choice when it comes to finding the resources that work the best for them in the case of finding information as well as allowing them to choose the best way in which to present their stories and categorised character background (Cast, 2025c). The second subsection is 'Sustaining Effort & Persistence' which would include constantly reminding the students on what the aims of the activity are, this being historical empathy and guiding students on how they can break down the activity into a number of more manageable actions (Cast, 2025d). The final subsection is "Emotional Capacity" (Cast, 2025e). A way in which to aid students in this would be to give relatable examples to students on how to manage the emotions (some that are negative) that come with an academic task (Cast, 2025e).

The second of the main branches is "Representation" (Cast, 2025f). The section focuses on how students do not all have the same method of understanding and accessing information (Cast, 2025f). The first subsection deals with "Perception" ideas related to this subsection include the presentation of information relating to the AVATAR-method digitally in order for students to be able change the formatting of

these materials to what works best for them (such as enlarging, among other modifications) (Cast, 2025g). Another improvement would be to provide students with information that includes different types of individuals that were present historically such as women, those from poorer backgrounds and coming from different countries as well as information that was written by different types of people (Cast, 2025h). In the second subsection, "Language & Symbols", the AVATAR-method can be modified by having the information as well as the student's work presented through different mediums rather than just relying on text (ideas relevant to this have been described in the previous section on dyslexia) (Cast, 2025i) . The last subsection focuses on "Building Knowledge" (Cast, 2025j). A way of doing this in the AVATAR-method would be to show students how to analyse a large chunk of information while keeping in mind which of the information is relevant or not to their work and sorting the information into these two sections in a variety of ways, an example of this being highlighting. (Cast, 2025j).

The final branch is that of "Action & Expression" (Cast, 2025k). This branch focuses on the differing ways that students progress through their academic lives as well as how they show their achievements (Cast, 2025k). The first subsection focuses on "Interaction" and an idea to enhance this in the AVATAR-method would be to allow students to hand in work that can be typed (as suggested in the previous section on dyslexia) (Cast, 2025l). The following subsection is "Expression & Communication", in the AVATAR-method this can be supported by allowing students to avail themselves of the various technological supports available to them such as 'spell checkers, grammar checkers" and "word-prediction software" (Cast, 2025m). The use of writing frames are helpful too (Cast, 2025m). The last subsection to be

discussed is 'Strategic Development' (Cast, 2025n). This can be addressed through the use of "reflection prompts" that allow students to notice what problems they are facing during this activity and come up with solutions to these problems (Cast, 2025n).

5.3 Challenges stemming from the History aspect of the AVATAR-method

5.3.1 How to facilitate student acquisition of historical empathy skills through the AVATAR-method

The successful implementation of historical empathy by students is an endeavour that proves to be challenging to put into practice. This is because it requires students to make note of the contrasts between the lived experience of the here and now and those experiences belonging to past historical periods (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Not only that, the students must also come to understand that facets of the past hold frames of belief that may also "hold some validity" (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 42). Rather than looking at historic people and relevant events from only a purely logical perspective and thus placing modern day people as far above those belonging to the past, students have to take into account other factors that affect the human experience, these include; "pride, fear, love, hate, desperation, or greed" (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p 43).

Despite the difficulties that come with trying to teach pupils the skill of historical empathy, there are encouraging findings that point to this being possible as well as work done by "Foster and Yeager" to devise a framework on how to teach this skill

(as mentioned in Brooks, 2008, p. 131). This framework can be used as a guideline for the teacher interested in implementing the AVATAR-method in order to make sure that they are doing all that can be done to help their students acquire an increased skill in performing historical empathy. The topic that is chosen ought to be one that lends itself to "the analysis of human action" (Brooks, 2008, p. 131). Pupils must then be taught and also put in effort into learning about the topic in a holistic way, which would include delving into the "chronology and context" of the specified topic (Brooks, 2008, p. 131). Learners must also be exposed to a diverse selection of sources connected with the topic being dealt with and these sources should be scrutinised with the following notions in mind "utility, audience, language, perspective, and bias" (Yeager et al, 1998, p. 20 as cited in Brooks, 2008, p. 131). It is only then that pupils can engage with the topic in the AVATAR-method with reference to their findings based on the sources available to them (Brooks, 2008).

5.3.2 Presumptions in History and how it influences the AVATAR-method

History teachers meet with various challenges whilst trying to teach students. One of these challenges are presumptions regarding historical events. Phillips (2009) highlights important notions related to presumptions and their impact on history teaching. Taking the example of one soldier's life before, during and after World War I, he notes how a common way of teaching this war inculcates "a stereotypical view of the war on the Western Front" (Phillips, 2009, p. 53). Further developing his argument, he uses the previously mentioned example to show how only teaching students about the war in the typical way leaves out the variety of lifestyles and circumstances as well as the different types of perspectives that made up the lives of

different people during that period (Phillips, 2009). The AVATAR-method does focus on different types of individuals' perspectives and the motivations and outside factors that shape their lives which allows for students to move away from common presumptions present in history. However, it is important for teachers to note whether the student undertaking this activity truly justifies their avatar's individual perspectives in their work rather than focusing on a view of the event reliant on common presumptions relating to it.

5.3.3 Controversial History

The subject of history has one problematic element within it, this being the reality that certain moments in history deal with matters that exemplify human cruelty. Certain figures that are deemed as being exemplary in one culture, can be seen as the total opposite in another (Lansen, 2006). In Lansen's work he describes four types of histories that are linked to controversies, these are; "Unspeakable History", "Exclusionist History", "Diametrical History" and "Absent History" (Lansen, 2006, pp 61 - 63). "Unspeakable History" refers to events in history that are related to cruel actions as well as the inclusion of subjects that are seen as "taboo" nowadays, or issues that are still ongoing (Lansen, 2006, p. 61). "Exclusionist History" is a phenomenon in which in order to discuss a topic, such as "feminism", one has to belong to the particular group being discussed (Lansen, 2006, p. 62). "Diametrical History" is when there is a discussion in class that centres around a topic that goes against the beliefs and ideals of any individual in class (Lansen, 2006, p. 62). "Absent History" is the difficulty that comes with explaining to students certain historic

moments which are vastly different from their daily lives, in turn these topics not being seen as important by students (Lansen, 2006, p. 63).

There are some ways an educator can deal with these controversial instances in class. One key point to remember is that an educator is there "to serve as a facilitator, not opinionator" (Lansen, 2006, p. 64). This is vital and must be kept in mind at all times in order to create a learning environment that is free from bias as well as allowing for firm boundaries to be set in place by the educator. In order to target "Unspeakable History" teachers can make pupils aware of the specific topic being discussed and provide them with resources that are from the perspective of a child that has been through the event (Lansen, 2006, p. 64). A child's perspective is beneficial as "Children are (presumed) innocent, honest, and non-political" (Lansen, 2006, p. 64). This same technique can be used to teach "Absent History" since students would be able to relate to those in the same/similar age bracket as them (Lansen, 2006, p. 64). This can be applied to the AVATAR-method by endeavouring to find primary sources that are from a child's point of view which can aid students when creating their character and writing the subsequent piece of text in their created character's perspective.

Another method that addresses both "Absent History" and "Exclusionist History" is by making use of "Historical Analogy" (Lansen, 2006, pp. 66 - 67). This is done by taking a historical moment and comparing it with a situation that is relevant to the students' lives. This allows pupils to understand the implications of actions done in the past as they can draw on knowledge from their day-to-day lives as well as not having to belong to the specific group being discussed to participate in the discussion

surrounding the subject (Lansen, 2006). Thus, using analogies when preparing students for certain topics can be a great way of getting students to understand and discuss these topics in their stories. A method that can be used to tackle all the varieties of controversial histories is that of "Dual or Crossroads History" (Lansen, 2006, p. 66). This is done by providing pupils with a view into the multiple perspectives found within the specific topic. This increases pupil understanding and facilitates their ability to empathise with multiple points of view with regards to the same topic (Lansen, 2006). The information, on the topic being dealt with through the use of the AVATAR-method, which is given to the students should include a range of perspectives that were/are present with regards to the historical issue.

5.4 The Choice between Writing in the First or Third Person

One consideration that a teacher must take into account would be whether to have their students write the main writing task in the AVATAR-method in the first person, the third person, a mixture of both or allowing them to choose what the students feel to be the most appropriate. The nature of writing in the first person is reliant on the views expressed in the content being written in a way that is shaped "by that character's opinions, mood" and "past experiences" (Merriam-Webster, 2025). This allows for students to benefit more in the case of historical empathy in spite of its divergence from historical accuracy.

One reason why a teacher would choose to have their students write in the third person would be so that their work is more true to reality in the case where the character created by the student is described as being unable to read and write.

However, the choice to write their work in the third person would not lend itself to allowing the student to take on the specific mindframe of their character in the written work as it is not as smooth as the first person in conveying the personal experience of a character which in turn allows for the development of the skill of historical empathy.

There are three variations of the third person that have varying degrees of usefulness with regards to the AVATAR-method (Merriam-Webster, 2025). In the case of the "third-person objective" what is written is not influenced by the views and experiences of the character, as such, writing in this form should be avoided in the AVATAR-method (Merriam-Webster, 2025). The "Third Person Omniscient" is a text that is not written by the avatar but by a writer that knows all the inner lives of those mentioned in the text (Merriam-Webster, 2025). This would not be helpful in the AVATAR-method for the aim of improving historical empathy skills as hinders the student from focusing on their avatar's perspective since the student would have the further need to know the inner workings of other figures in the work, which their avatar would not have known about, thus distancing the student from their avatar. In the "third person limited", while the person reporting the event is not the avatar there is still reference to the inside views of the avatar (Merriam-Webster, 2025). This is the most usable way to write in the third person as it leaves the inner lives of other characters as unknown, the same as would be the case for the avatar, whilst also providing a look into the avatar's inner world.

5.5 Other Recommendations

Teachers attempting to use the AVATAR-method within their classroom should account for some other practical challenges that come with implementing this activity. In the case of what topic to select for this exercise it would be best to avoid topics from events that have a lack of resources and sources pertaining to them or if these resources and sources are difficult for students to get a hold of. More recent history would be easier to find the types of resources and sources needed for this activity both for the teacher and the student (Tak, 2018). The final recommendation is that it is better not to give the Option group and the General group of history students the same time period done in roughly the same time during the scholastic year in the case of the AVATAR-method activity. This prevents confusion as well as added work on those students taking history Option.

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<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/emotional-capacity/awareness/>

Cast. (2025f). *Design Multiple Means of Representation.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/>

Cast. (2025g). *Support opportunities to customize the display of information.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/perception/customize-display/>

Cast. (2025h). *Represent a diversity of perspectives and identities in authentic ways.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/perception/perspectives-identities/>

Cast. (2025i). *Illustrate through multiple media.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/language-symbols/multiple-media/>

Cast. (2025j). *Highlight and explore patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/building-knowledge/patterns-features/>

Cast. (2025k). *Design Multiple Means of Action & Expression.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/action-expression/>

Cast. (2025l). *Vary and honor the methods for response, navigation and movement.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/action-expression/interaction/response-navigation-movement/>

Cast. (2025m). *Use multiple tools for construction, composition, and creativity.*

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/action-expression/expression-communication/construction-composition-creativity/>

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Conclusion

This dissertation was reliant on the use of the bibliographic search as the research method. HyDi proved to be very useful when it came to acquiring information for free that would not have been available to me to use without payment (Rumsey, 2008). The information found within this system allowed for the description and discussion in more depth of the nuances of the AVATAR-method as well as the skill of historical empathy. This resource, however, was not the only one relied on as the internet was also made use of to find sources of information, such as the history syllabi, that allowed for the tailoring of the AVATAR-method to the Maltese context as well as providing more information on the AVATAR-method and other topics mentioned in the dissertation. Physical books from public libraries and personally owned books were also important for the research process, especially when it came to creating one of the characters found in chapter four. The information found from all these differing sources allowed for confident creation of ideas that can be used by teachers to implement this activity in class.

The research questions were thoroughly answered throughout the different chapters of this dissertation. For the first research question, What are the benefits of the AVATAR-method with regards to history teaching?, it was found that the AVATAR-method can make history more engaging and relevant for students (Sheffer, 2009). As well as allowing students to develop a better understanding of historical actors and creating opportunities for collaboration with teachers or other subjects, such as English and Maltese (Tak, 2018). This activity places emphasis on different perspectives which reflects "recent changes in Europe and Malta's demographic and

cultural composition" (Spiteri, 2020, p. 3). Related to this, it is important that students have the opportunity to participate in activity like the AVATAR-method as it allows students to become aware of different sides of history that are not usually explored in the school curriculum in turn giving students the opportunity to see themselves in specific people from the past which they can relate to (Tupper as cited by Snelson, 2022). Helen Snelson argues that pupils "need to connect with specific individuals, places and events in order to engage with the past" (Snelson, 2022, p. 66) solidifying that history is not just made up of information but consists of human lives at the centre which the AVATAR-method thoroughly supports (Mills, 1995). The AVATAR-method being both a simulation and role-playing activity allows for pupils to learn in a way that factors in real life challenges which they have to figure out how to overcome in the same manner as someone from the past would have.

For the second research question, How to deal with the challenges that this method creates?, the first challenge discussed was that of student misuse of Artificial intelligence which in turn hinders their ability to practice the skill of historical empathy. Some solutions proposed for this problem would be for teachers to learn more about Artificial Intelligence so that they can recognise AI produced works more effectively as well as having teachers instruct students on plagiarism and why it is to be avoided (Yeo, 2023) (Cotton et al., 2024) Tailoring the AVATAR-method for students with dyslexia was also discussed due to the nature of the AVATAR-method (i.e. this activity relies heavily on writing). Some of the adaptations described included using maps to depict events that are related to battles, such as the Great Siege, giving students the option to hear information in addition to reading the information and allowing students to present their work in the form of a recording (Morgan, 1983)

(Cambridge English, 2024). In order to make this activity even more inclusive Universal Design for Learning was explained as well as different methods aligned with this framework were delved into. With relation to challenges that are more related to the history aspect of the AVATAR-method the topics discussed were how to facilitate the students historical empathy skills, as well as dealing with presumptions and controversial events in history.

The answer to the third research question, How can a teacher apply the AVATAR-method to Maltese history lessons?, was delved into during chapter four which formatted the AVATAR-method in a way that helps secondary school history teachers in Malta structure this activity in their practice. Thus, viewing the activity in a different context and tailoring it to a different age range than the other literature surrounding this activity does. Suggestions present in this chapter include collaborating with language educators (Tak, 2018), assigning students character names and occupations through the use of a spinning wheel on the interactive whiteboard and focusing on a theme, such as remembrance, while carrying out the activity.

The main limitation of my dissertation hinges on the fact that it has not been tested in a real life secondary school classroom in Malta. This means that the ideas and solutions suggested in this dissertation have not been trialed and thus their effectiveness is not certain as well as any modifications needed are not included. However, this limitation opens up the avenue for further research into the AVATAR-method. This is because in another research piece this activity can be

tested out in a real life classroom. The products of this activity can be analysed in order to show if students did manage to hone their historical empathy skills.

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