
Reimagining history education through the arts: an exploratory study on active and experiential learning

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Abstract

History education is often text-based and tends to fall short in connecting students with emotional and reflective experiences of the past. This study aims to explore various forms of art, such as novels, films, paintings, and songs, as media for history education that can foster active engagement and experiential learning among students. Through an interdisciplinary approach that maps the potential and functions of artistic works within the context of history education, this study highlights how art can serve as a powerful narrative medium to enrich critical understanding, empathy, and personal reflection on historical events in Indonesia. The research findings indicate that works of art have the capacity to serve as humanistic historical material, challenge dominant narratives, and foster a deeper connection between students and the past. This exploratory mapping provides a conceptual foundation for the development of innovative, student-centered history learning strategies that are more emotionally engaging, culturally relevant, and intellectually stimulating.

Keywords

History education,
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Introduction

A historical account of past events is an important part of modern-day life. As per Kuntowijoyo, history education is a kind of extrinsic form of liberal education that begins from schools up to universities (Kuntowijoyo, 2018). History education is necessary in building historical awareness and national identity (Chairu et al., 2023). Despite the necessity, several challenges have been pointed out in relation to the history learning process, including insufficient resources (Debby Rofi'ah & Dita Hendriani, 2025), conventional instruction method (Tresa et al., 2024), as well as problems faced by students (Saidillah, 2018). The result is that students fail to connect their personal experience and the emotional context of the historical events learned, leading to unproductiveness in learning history (Piani & Mauludea, 2023; Sari & Firmansyah, n.d.).

Firstly, as indicated earlier, history education is politically inclined and centralistic in nature, which is formed by the history curriculum of the nation and the standardization of history discourse in the official interpretation of the government through history books (Suparjan, 2020; Utami, 2014). The politics of history education renders the material being taught to be more political than academic (Darmawan, 2018; Mahardika, 2020; Zulkarnain, 2018). Therefore, historical events that do not align with the goals of history education in the official context are generally ignored, such as human rights, gender, and community issues.

Some solutions that have been proposed include applying problem-based learning techniques (Sanjaya, 2021) using museum collections (Fajar Wulandari et al., n.d.; Ningrum et al., 2023; Ningrum & Faisol, 2023) as well as digital media in the form of local history podcasts (Asmi, 2019), novels (Hazmi & Ramadani, 2021), visual materials (Bohari & Wajnah, 2018) and historical movies (Husmiati, 2010). Even so, the aforementioned solutions remain incapable of overcoming the current problems in history education. A detailed examination of those challenges shows that the current problems in history education relate to learning strategies that do not inspire students to learn actively and critically.

Thus, the need for creative pedagogy that bridges the past and the present is necessary. Apart from that, history learning media should be diversified with alternative interpretations to broaden students' perspectives on historical events in Indonesia. In the modern educational context, experiential learning could be a solution that will make history learning participative, creative, and humanistic. Direct experience, according to Kolb (1984), constitutes the primary foundation for any learning activity. Learning in the experiential framework is a constant transformation process where learners gain new experience, reflect on the experience, conceptualize the experience, and test the experience in practical situations, which results in knowledge formation.

The incorporation of art in the teaching and learning process could enhance the experience of the learner and stimulate emotional engagement (Eisner, 2003). Art, as argued by Marcus & Hall (2022a), is one of the learning media that can help connect facts, students' emotions, and creativity in the process of learning from historical events. In an experimental three-year study carried out at the university level, they noted that the use of audiovisuals can aid students' understanding of the historical event while simultaneously stimulating their emotional engagement.

Historical empathy, which can be fostered through artistic works, has also been examined in relation to history education for pre-service teachers. Art was found to facilitate historical empathy and bring the learner closer to the historical person's experience (Endacott et al., 2024). Moreover, according to Simbolon et al. (2024), visual media such as illustrations, maps, videos, and infographics, among others, help simplify complicated ideas and visualize events, thereby helping students understand the chronology of events and their relationships. These kinds of media also capture the learner's attention, making the process interactive.

In general, all of the above findings show that artworks can be used as instructional media to help students get a more comprehensive grasp of historical events. Nonetheless, most of the discussion in literature revolves around the specific forms of art, with most of them done from a Western context. The use of the experiential learning approach in the teaching of history is rare and incomplete due to a lack of incorporation into the history curriculum (Sheng, 2023). Very few researchers have looked into the application of different art forms (e.g. novels, films, paintings, songs) as history learning media in Indonesia. Such research is crucial for inventorying art forms and understanding their potential in history learning.

Based on this background, this paper proposes a mapping of artworks (novels, films, pictures, songs, and paintings) as instructional media in order to promote participative, creative, and humanistic history learning with the use of the experiential learning approach. Specifically, the objective of this research is to explore the potential art forms that can be used in facilitating participative, creative, and humanistic history learning through the experiential learning approach. Therefore, this research intends to provide a conceptual basis for developing art-based history learning strategies that are participative, creative, and humanistic in approach.

From the academic perspective, this research may enrich the literature on art-based pedagogy in history education. From the pedagogical perspective, the results from this research could be used to inspire history lecturers/teachers in organizing more creative history learning activities. From the curricular perspective, the research may open doors to more creative design in history learning activities that are not only informational but also transformative. Last but not least, from the social and cultural perspectives, this research could be an alternative for recovering lost narratives and building identity consciousness through history-making through art.

Methodology

In order to explore and map the possibilities of artworks as a tool for active learning and experience, the qualitative exploratory research design will be employed in this study. The research approach will help the scholar to reveal and investigate different art forms and their potential to promote historical consciousness, imagination, and reflection among students. As argued by Stebbins (2012), exploring new phenomena with the purpose of discovering directions for developing new theories characterizes exploratory research. The use of an interdisciplinary approach in this study is grounded in the idea that art makes a unique contribution to education, according to Eisner (2003).

There are two categories of data sources utilized in the current study. Firstly, there are various works of art, including novels, films, paintings, and songs, containing the themes related to history. Secondly, academic literature (such as scholarly articles, journals, books, and reports) that discusses arts-based learning, experiential learning, and history education will be used. Academic sources can provide conceptual guidance for interpreting the findings of this study. For collecting data, the researcher will employ two methods. First, a review of academic literature will be conducted to find theoretical foundations and justify the use of artworks as a teaching and learning tool in history classes. Second, document analysis will be used to examine the works of art chosen based on the criteria provided above. Document analysis, as noted by Bowen (2009), is useful in a qualitative study since this method enables triangulation and helps the scholar gain a deeper insight into the subject matter.

Data collected through two abovementioned techniques will be analyzed based on thematic analysis. Three actions will be performed at this stage: first, the identification of specific artistic elements of each work under investigation (narrative, visuals, symbols, and emotions); second, the classification of works of art based on the type (novels, films, paintings, and songs) and potential to promote certain goals (such as enhancing historical imagination or encouraging reflection). Third, it will be required to interpret data and draw connections between the works of art and concepts related to active learning and experience. In order to achieve data validity, the researcher will implement source triangulation to compare findings obtained from different types of artworks with information gathered from academic sources.

Results and Discussion

Mapping forms of art as media for history learning

Mapping the different types of art is a crucial initial activity that will help us identify the possibilities and potentials of art as a learning medium for history education. The various art forms including novels, movies, paintings, photography, songs, and poems have the inherent capability of representing the historical event vividly and emotionally in ways that are more reflective than those seen in textbooks. Consequently, mapping the different categories of artistic creations is necessary to explore their possibilities as a learning medium, thereby forming a base for the development of history learning activities.

The novel is a literary genre that has the inherent narrative strength of narrating the story of past events from the perspectives of both individual and collective experience. In its capacity as a learning medium, the novel provides knowledge on historical events in addition to other aspects such as emotional and psychological components which may not be included in traditional histories. It is worth noting that historical and literary narration are related based on the assertion of White (1990) who argued that they are both constructions through narrative processes.

Figure 1. Screening film of "Laut Bercerita" with the writer, Leila S. Chudori, 2025
Sources: privat collection



In Pramoedyana Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*, students get an insight into life in the era of colonialism through the perspective of Minke. He serves as a representation of the educated Indonesian people who face discrimination and social stratification, and develop nationalist ideas as a consequence. In such a way, besides the information about the political regime of colonialism, the reader experiences injustice personally. On the contrary, *Laut Bercerita*, written by Leila S. Chudori tells about the suffering and experiences of the victims of the political repression under the regime of the New Order. The book provides a chance to recall violations of human rights and revive memories that have been marginalized, raising awareness about the importance of democracy and humanistic values. Moreover, *Laut Bercerita* was adapted into the movie under the same name, directed by Pritagita Arianegara. Young viewers welcomed it eagerly as a chance to learn more about the events of the past through innovative media sources. Finally, *Dari Dalam Kubur* by Soe Tjen Marching is an interesting combination of fiction based on testimonies of 1965 victims who suffered from violence and loss, leaving serious social scars on Indonesian politics.

Therefore, these books show the great value of literature as a source of historical knowledge, as well as raise questions related to morals and sensitivities (K. H. Marcus & Hall, 2022b). As a result, reading books and discussing their content helps to cultivate both historical and emotional empathy, as well as encourages engagement in analysis and interpretation of events of the past (K. H. Marcus & Hall, 2022a). Hence, literature becomes an important tool for changing history education from mechanical memorization into participatory learning.

Figure 2. Biopic films poster in Indonesia



Sources: (Bramantyo, 2010, 2013, 2017; G. Nugroho, 2015)

The strength of films as a learning medium in history is the ability of this medium to immerse the viewer into the event. While textual learning provides only limited perspectives on the subject, film learning makes students become witnesses of historical events happening right before their very eyes. Film serves both as a source of enjoyment and a learning medium capable of developing historical imagination, promoting memory, and increasing empathy towards the depicted characters and events (Marcus et al., 2018; Rosenstone, 1995).

Some biographical films such as Sang Pencerah (2010), Kartini (2017), Soekarno (2013), and Tjokroaminoto Guru Bangsa (2015) provide a chance to see history as an embodiment of individual personalities. Sang Pencerah shows K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah (Bramantyo, 2010). Kartini describes women's struggle for their rights during the colonial period (Bramantyo, 2013). Soekarno focuses on the ideology of independence while Tjokroaminoto explains the history and the reasons behind nationalism and relations between the first founders of this idea and their followers who carry on their work (Nugroho, 2015).

Figure 3. Poster of You and I



Sources: (Fanny Chotimah, 2020; filmindonesia.or.id, n.d.)

Next to biopic movies, documentaries like You and I (2020) by Fanny Chotimah show another side of history by focusing on the lives of marginalized people or groups regarding social and human rights issues. Documentaries help to interpret history not only in terms of great stories but also through small voices, which usually remain silent and ignored by other kinds of movies. A relationship built on love between Kusdalini and Kaminah makes them able to withstand the fragility and vulnerability of their life affected by the tragedy of 1965 (Rachmatika, 2023).

On the other hand, animated films like *Battle of Surabaya* (2015) and *Rainha Boki Raja* exemplify ways in which history can be taught to young audiences using creativity and technology available nowadays. In particular, *Battle of Surabaya* (2015) shows the history of the revolution of Surabaya, whereas *Rainha Boki Raja*, based on Toeti Heraty's poetic narrative about a female warrior from Ternate fighting against Portuguese colonization, provides an opportunity to learn about the colonial era (Jasmine, 2024).

Figure 4. Screening film of *Rainha Boki Raja* in Artjog 2025



Source: (ArtJog, 2025)

As a visual medium, paintings play a vital role in the portrayal of events, people, and the atmosphere that existed in that period of time. In the context of education, one can consider the use of paintings as a means through which to convey knowledge about historical periods in ways other than through conventional methods, thereby allowing students to analyze the symbols, aesthetics, and stories that lie behind the paintings.

Colonial era painters, like those who created Mooi Indie paintings, portrayed their view of romanticized landscapes and the lives of the people living in Dutch East Indies. Despite being accused of colonial biasness, these paintings can be taught in the classroom and can allow the discussion of colonialism and representation in visual culture. These paintings are able to arouse the students' imagination. An example of such a painting is *Bazaar van Bantam* (1596), which portrays a market scene of a diverse group of people in Banten, along with the roles of women in the economy of the region in that era. On the other hand, the works of Indonesian painters, like the paintings done by Dullah's students in the revolutionary era, can be considered patriotic and portray their views of life during war.

Figure 5. *Bazaar van Bantam*, 1596



Sources: (*Bazaar van Bantam*, 1596, n.d.)

In today's world, for instance, exhibitions like *Sastra Rupa Gambar Babad Diponegoro 1* (2019) and *2* (2024) provide a platform for discussing visual representations of the history of Prince Diponegoro in terms of paintings that tell a story of his life. Here, a combination of historical facts and contemporary artistic renditions provides a forum to discuss and examine issues related to collective memory and representations as symbols of anti-colonialism.

Notably, such exhibitions serve to deconstruct the colonial image of Diponegoro by offering a different interpretation of the prince in terms of an artistic portrayal that emphasizes his spiritual identity as a santri (S. P. Nugroho & Hamzah, 2023). Likewise, an exhibition devoted to Ratu Kalinyamat, who is considered to be a maritime warrior of the archipelago, enables students to see women as key figures in the history of Java, thus overcoming gender bias in historiography.

Figure 1. Art Exhibition of Pameran Sastra Rupa 1 (left) and 2 (right) Gambar Babad Diponegoro



Sources: (Pameran Sastra Rupa #2: Gambar Babad Diponegoro (16 Oktober -3 November 2014), 2024; Sastra Rupa Gambar Babad Diponegoro, 1 – 24 Februari 2019, n.d.)

Other than paintings, photographs are also visual memories of experiences that link the past and present through observations and reflections. Moreover, photographs are important in teaching history as visual memories that relate memories, experiences, and interpretations. In doing so, students have the opportunity to interact with history, make observations, pose questions on various perspectives, and conduct analysis on socio-political situations. Contrary to texts, photographs also show emotions and mundane aspects of people, providing the human element of the past. Not only does this enhance the development of visual literacy and historical empathy among students (K. H. Marcus & Hall, 2022a), but it is also important for aesthetic and emotional engagement in learning, according to Eisner (Priyambodo, 2021; Rondonuwu, 2017).

Figure 7. *Anna Warrow & Marie Thomas, women students of STOVLA (left), Proclamation of Independence (Center), childcare center on the first general election in Indonesia.*



Source: (Harian Umum, 1955; Priyambodo, 2021; Rondonuwu, 2017)

The photographs "Proclamation of Independence (1945)" taken by Frans and Alex Mendur reveal the emotion of unity and hope surrounding Indonesia's birth, something that goes beyond a mere story. On the other hand, the portraits of Marie Thomas and Anna Warouw as Indonesia's first female doctors portray how education and gender changed through Indonesia's history. An example is a photograph taken during the 1955 election, when some women are voting while a daycare facility is operating nearby. These are some of the examples that show the importance of using images as learning materials in teaching the history of the nation since they allow students to study history through emotions, social context, and images (Priyambodo, 2021; Rondonuwu, 2017).

Music is one of the tools used in documenting and depicting the political, social, and cultural conditions of a period. According to Purnawan Basundoro, according to the opinion of the literary scholars, the music depicts a factual condition that is going on at the time, making song lyrics another resource to use in the study of history (Basundoro & Afdholy, 2023). It means that besides being entertainment, music also functions as cultural documentation of historical narratives, politics, and collective memory.

For instance, during the Revolution, the song "Halo-halo Bandung" made by Ismail Marzuki is a remembrance of the "Bandung Lautan Api" event, which occurred on March 24, 1946. The songs depicted the spirit of nationalism and helped in creating unity in defending the country against any attack. In the case of the Sukarno era, Asmono Martodipoero composed the song "Viva GANEFO" in preparation for the Games of the Emerging New Forces (GANEFO), which happened in 1963. This song depicted the political ideology of President Sukarno against imperialism and colonialism.

"Towards the last days of the New Order era, "Krismon" by Tonny Hawaii and sung by Cindy Cenora depicted the social-economic problem of the 1997-1998 monetary crisis in the country," said Purnawan Basundoro. The song helped to convey the socioeconomic issue to the public in the form of entertainment. During the reform era, the song "Di Udara" by Efek Rumah Kaca depicted human rights issues by commemorating the courage of Munir in fighting for his rights (Tim PRMN 12, 2022).

“[...] Ku bisa tenggelam di lautan ([...] I could drown in the ocean).
Aku bisa diracun di udara (I could be poisoned in the air).
Aku bisa terbunuh di trotoar jalan (I could be killed on the sidewalk).
Tapi aku tak pernah mati (But I never die).
Tak akan berhenti.[...] (I won't stop [...]). (Efek Rumah Kaca, 2007)”

To conclude, when comparing all kinds of art in their application to the field of history education, one can notice certain advantages of each of them. Novels provide a story of an individual, promoting empathy and critical thinking, whereas movies enable the immersion into an event through visuals, thus, becoming more accessible to students than written texts. Moreover, paintings allow conveying symbolic images that give way to discussions of the ideologies behind and create room for memories shared by people who lived in a particular time. Songs show the context of their creation and enhance collective identities. Through their implementation, history education can transcend its traditional approach of just providing facts to students, making the process more interactive and humane. Thus, this study helps in developing 21st century history learning strategies based on active participation and interaction with art pieces.

The pedagogical function of artworks in strengthening historical understanding

The use of art forms for historical education is also determined by the characteristics of the media and the modes in which it is used for conveying a message or a lesson about particular periods in history. Reading novels allows for entering the world of historical experience through characters' activities, conflicts, and relationships. For instance, *Bumi Manusia*, *Laut Bercerita*, or *Dari Dalam Kubur* provide students not only with information on colonialism, political oppression under the New Order regime, or the tragedy of 1965 but also with insights into the suffering, hopes, and struggles of those people whose lives were affected by these events (K. H. Marcus & Hall, 2022b). This practice enables the development of historical empathy, as well as the critical evaluation of the historical discourse established by political elites.

The pedagogical value of film comes from its power to immerse one in the world created by images and sounds. Biographical films like *Kartini* and *Soekarno* help to see some sides of leadership and national ideology; documentary *You and I* makes students explore real situations faced by disadvantaged social layers, while animated *Battle of Surabaya* and *Rainha Boki Raja* introduce young learners to historical events. Thus, film is a medium that links the past and present, allowing the formation of historical imagination (Rosenstone, 1995).

The role of paintings in historical education consists in using their symbolic meanings, aesthetics, and political and cultural relevance for gaining certain insights into the history of the nation. For example, paintings by Mooi Indie show the colonial bias of the time; works of Dullah illustrate revolutionary passion, whereas the *Babad Diponegoro* exhibition and visuals representing Queen Kalinyamat provide grounds for exploring topics of identity, resistance, and gender. The analysis of historical painting contributes to the development of visual literacy among students.

Photographs also have a significant pedagogical effect as a medium used for teaching the historical experiences of previous generations. Transforming visual observation into interpretation and understanding of people's feelings, this mode of communication helps students understand what happened in the past and how. Being archival material that captures human expressions, body languages, emotions, and social interaction, historical photographs

help to comprehend some aspects of the past not revealed in written records. Using the Proclamation of Independence photograph taken by Frans and Alex Mendur, Marie Thomas and Anna Warouw portraits as the first women doctors in Indonesia, as well as a 1955 election photograph, which demonstrates voting women next to a nursery school, students may analyze themes of nationalism, gender, and democracy (Marcus & Hall, 2022a). Thus, by means of photographs, one may feel the human side of history associated with different emotions and experiences. As suggested by Eisner (2003), visual arts (in particular, photographs) contribute to developing the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of learning, whereas Marcus and Hall (2022b) focus on its capability to foster historical empathy and critical interpretations.

As far as songs are concerned, this art form uses lyrics and melodies in order to evoke social memory and collective emotions of a certain epoch. Songs like Halo-halo Bandung promote revolutionary spirit, while Viva Ganefo is related to Sukarno's foreign policy ideology. Krismon expresses social anxiety during the time of the New Order, whereas Di Udara, created by Efek Rumah Kaca, touches upon problems related to human rights in the post-Reform era. Through listening to these songs, one can gain an understanding of history as the experience connected to human life and daily concerns, interpreting historical events from the position of people of the times (Basundoro & Afdholi, 2023). In conclusion, the above-listed pedagogical functions of art include such aspects as historical empathy, imagination, critical thinking, and awareness of morality.

Implications of the mapping for the development of history learning strategies

A map illustrating artworks, including novels, films, paintings, and songs, shows that art can contribute substantially to developing history learning strategies based on the principles of activity and participation. For example, in its current format, teaching history relies primarily on chronological storytelling of facts. Student-centered learning is another perspective to be considered when developing more effective history learning strategies. In particular, students should engage in the processes of interpreting and critically evaluating historical phenomena (Barron & Chen, 2008).

Firstly, it is possible to use novels to teach empathy towards individuals experiencing various challenges during different historical periods. Films can be used in the development of visual imagination and analytical skills in the context of historical dynamics. Painting helps improve visual literacy and the ability to analyze and discuss symbolism, aesthetics, and ideologies.

At the same time, photographs offer a great potential to develop learners' research skills using an inquiry-based approach. In particular, photographs, as visual archives, allow capturing human emotions, gestures, and relations, and thus enable connecting abstract historical events with human experiences. The development of visual literacy and critical thinking skills takes place as a result of visual decoding, comparative analysis, and creating digital exhibitions. By analyzing the photograph entitled 'Proclamation of Independence (1945)', the painting 'Indonesia's First Female Doctors', and a photograph capturing women casting ballots at the election in 1955 in Indonesia alongside childcare centers, learners can practice their abilities to interpret history through the lenses of empathy, memories, and visual literacy. As noted by

Eisner (2003) and Marcus & Hall (K. H. Marcus & Hall, 2022a), the role of photos in promoting aesthetic and affective literacy is significant.

In addition, one can suggest using songs as an instructional resource to promote reflection upon socio-political issues related to particular historical periods. In general, integrating art contributes to expanding the number of instructional strategies. Reflective discussions, creative document analysis, and production of new artistic works as experiential learning activities can be used successfully (Kolb, 1984).

It is necessary to mention that mapping artworks allows drawing attention to additional educational functions of art beyond the pedagogical ones. More specifically, art tends to represent an alternative perspective neglected by mainstream historical narratives. For example, the voices of victims, survivors, or minorities can be represented in artworks. When integrating such artworks into the classroom, teachers not only enrich the variety of learning materials used but also contribute to raising students' awareness of the importance of diverse perspectives. It relates to the mission of education in the 21st century, which is the cultivation of socially responsible, empathic, and critical citizens concerned about human rights issues (Banks, 2006).

To conclude, one can consider the mapping of artworks as a conceptual basis for developing history learning strategies focused on active learning. The main principle of such strategies consists of full student engagement during learning processes.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper proves that using all kinds of art, including novels, films, paintings, photographs, and songs, can make numerous pedagogical contributions to the process of history teaching and learning. It is necessary to note that each kind of art possesses certain qualities that turn learning history into an interpretative, reflective, and humanistic process, enriching one with empathic skills and moral understanding of what happened years ago. In addition, each type of art makes learning history more effective since novels help develop empathy and morality; films inspire imagination; pictures develop visual literacy and connection between emotions, contexts, and symbolism; whereas songs help students perceive their role in society and their place in the process of development.

The obtained results show that modern history learning strategies have to be shifted to include active involvement and engagement on the part of students, with special attention paid to interpretation of the material, creation of images and reflections, and empathic perception. Future studies in this field may consider implementing classroom strategies based on art in which students would perform certain tasks with artistic materials. This may refer to projects on studying artworks, organizing online exhibitions, reproducing pictures, paintings, etc. Further research will also include exploring cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives on developing empathy, inclusiveness, and critical thinking in 21st-century learners.

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