

# Reimagining and Transforming Cold War Education: Virtual Field Trips and the Berlin Wall Experience

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## Abstract

*Virtual Field Trips (VFTs) are increasingly recognized as effective tools for engaging students with challenging and complex historical content. This exploratory case study demonstrates how a VFT focused on the Berlin Wall was implemented in a Singapore upper secondary history classroom. Drawing on studies in experiential learning, student motivation, and distributed cognition, this paper demonstrates how VFTs can promote deeper historical thinking, inquiry, and authentic engagement, particularly in teaching Cold War content, such as the Berlin Wall.*

## Introduction

Field trips offer students the opportunity to draw connections between abstract historical narratives and tangible sites and experiences. An everyday staple in Singapore, physical field trips are typically employed and carried out as part of the lower secondary history curriculum; however, their use in upper secondary classes focused on modern world history—such as the Cold War—is rare due to logistical constraints. It is seemingly impossible, barring overseas trips, for students to come into close contact with the spaces they read about in Europe and other parts of the world. This paper examines how virtual field trips (VFTs) can fill that

gap and perhaps bring the world to the doorsteps of our classrooms.

VFTs enable students to engage meaningfully with historical sites and content without leaving the classroom, utilising multimedia resources such as 360° virtual tours, museum archives, artifacts, and digital storytelling. With the Ministry of Education's emphasis on e-pedagogy and blended learning (MOE, 2023), VFTs are timely tools for expanding pedagogical moves and strategies. COVID-19 restrictions between 2020 and 2021 further reinforced the need to bring the world closer to each student, where teachers can facilitate learning journeys without the need to bring students out.

## Designing VFTs for the History Classroom

Effective VFTs are grounded in three pedagogical principles: experiential learning, student motivation, and distributed cognition.

- **Experiential learning** involves students engaging in authentic, reflective tasks that mirror real-world experiences (Kolb, 1984). Lessons involving experiential learning require teachers to design authentic tasks and experiences that stimulate higher-order thinking skills within real-world

contexts focused on historical concepts. Experiential learning approaches enable students to find meaning and relevance in their learning through the development of new knowledge and/or the correction of prior misconceptions about the nature of history. In the long run, the desired goal is for students to be able to apply these approaches across various contexts of historical learning.

- **Student motivation** is enhanced through multisensory and personally relevant tasks (Lepper, 1988). As a pedagogical tool, Virtual Field Trips can significantly improve motivation in a few ways. Firstly, it enhances autonomy and choice by allowing students to explore different topics or places at their own pace. This is also timely given the implementation of home-based learning and student-initiated learning. VFTs can serve to provide students with learning experiences and autonomy as part of these curriculum initiatives. It can also foster curiosity and relevance by closing the distance and space. Students can reach far-flung places within the confines of their device and help spark curiosity. VFTs can be used in pairs or groups, prompting peer discussions, inquiry, and joint discovery, fostering relatedness.

- **Distributed cognition** recognises that cognitive processes are not located solely in an individual's mind, but are also being distributed across people, objects, and the environment that people engage and interact with (Paul, 2021). It emphasizes social learning, where knowledge is co-constructed

among students and mediated by tools, artifacts, and environments (Hutchins, 2000). It is through interactions involving thought, experience, the senses, and discussions that knowledge is acquired. Distributed cognition is important and connected to VFT-based lessons due to its emphasis on the role of external resources and social interactions in cognitive processes. Enhanced access to online resources in the form of virtual environments, multimedia materials, and online databases is used to support student learning. Inherent in distributed cognition is the importance of social interactions. Social interactions in distributed cognition involve designing learning experiences for students to collaborate with peers, share perspectives, and collectively make sense of the VFT-based lesson. As such cognitive load is distributed as students use discussion-based pedagogies, joint negotiation of meaning, and construction of shared understanding as ways to engage in higher-order thinking skills.

Beyond the three key principles outlined above, the VFT examined in this article is also based on five design principles for the Singapore history classroom that were developed as part of the 2022 Outstanding Educator in Consultation (OEIC) program, organised by the Academy of Singapore Teachers. As part of the OEIC program, Stoddard worked with two local teachers to shape these principles. Furthermore, the VFT is also designed with reference to the elements of authentic field trips that were outlined by Stoddard (2009), as outlined in Figure 1 below: 1654-1762.

**Figure 1. VFT Design Framework (adapted from Stoddard, 2009)**



This includes virtual maps, physical classroom redesigns, curated museum resources, and dialogic teaching. Inquiry questions fronted the lessons. Example inquiry questions such as "Where is the Berlin Wall?" and "What is its significance today?" helped structure each lesson.

The following sections will explore a VFT designed with these principles in mind and examine some of the student responses and outcomes from such a lesson.

### Methodology

In the context of the VFT presented in this article, it was implemented in a

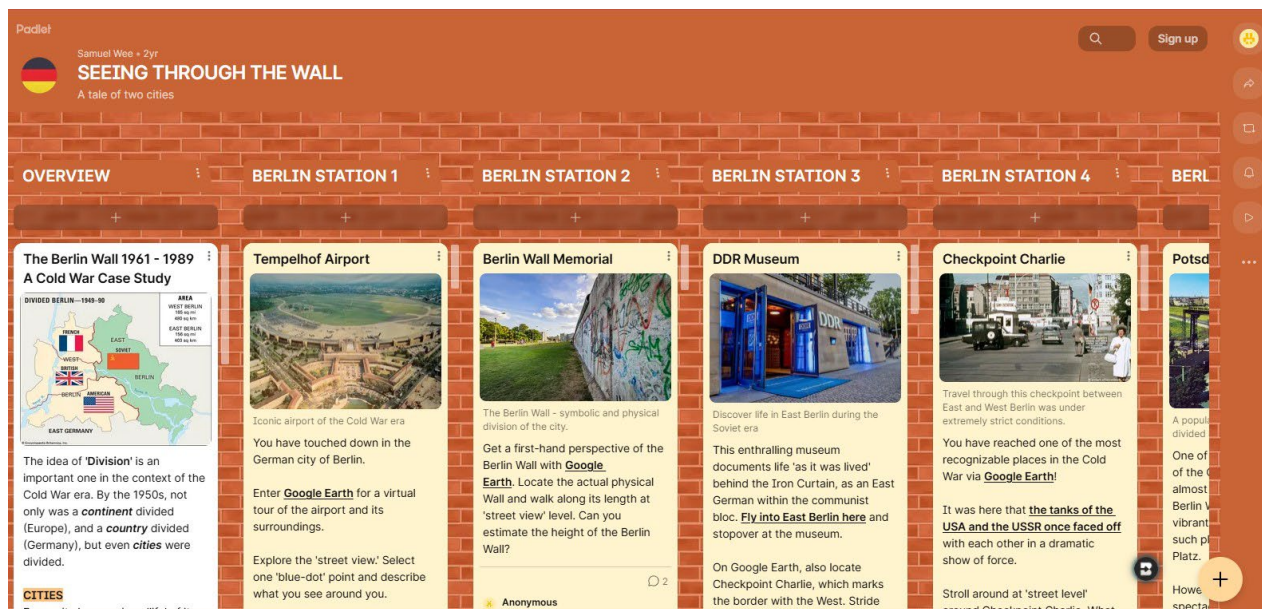
classroom of four upper secondary students by one teacher. The process of implementation was then documented through the following means:

- a. **Classroom Observations:** As per the table above, three classroom observations were carried out to examine teaching methods, student engagement, and classroom dynamics. Each session lasted 90 minutes and was video recorded for later analysis. Observations focused on instructional techniques, teacher-student interactions, and the overall learning environment. Detailed field notes were taken to capture significant moments and interactions.

**b. Student Responses and Artifacts:**

Student-generated responses and artifacts were collected via a Padlet wall, offering insights into their learning processes. These materials

served as valuable evidence, complementing the observational data and deepening the understanding of student learning outcomes.



**c. Teacher Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with teachers to explore their instructional approaches, pedagogical beliefs, and classroom experiences. These interviews provided space for teachers to reflect on their decision-making, share perspectives, and discuss both the challenges and successes encountered during virtual field trip (VFT)-based lessons.

### A Virtual Field Trip to the Berlin Wall

By applying the principles discussed in the previous sections, a VFT to the Berlin Wall was designed. The table below summarises the key lesson decisions that were taken:

**Table 1. Summary of key VFT design decisions and objectives**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Seeing through the Wall: A tale of two cities: How the "West" and the "East" viewed each other</b>
<b>Inquiry question</b>	Where is the Berlin Wall?
<b>Topic</b>	The Berlin Wall in the context of the Cold War (Unit 3/Article 1)
<b>Precis</b>	Situated in an authentic historically imagined environment, students will learn how citizens of East and West Berlin perceived Berlin as a divided city during the Cold War.
<b>Big idea(s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cities often have a culture of their own that emerges from their history. There are aspects of a city that people enjoy and regard as valuable and important.</li> <li>2. This life is seen in the city's structure, architecture/walls, and museums.</li> <li>3. People living in the cities have agency, choice, options, actions, thoughts.</li> <li>4. During the Cold War, Berlin became a divided city between 1948 and 1989.</li> <li>5. People are resilient. The people of East and West Berlin found ways to “cope” and deal with living in a “divided city” (i.e., choices, options, actions, thoughts). This was on both sides of the Wall. How can this be seen?</li> <li>6. How were the city cultures different between 1948 and 1989?</li> <li>7. How do Germans remember Berlin today?</li> </ol>

This VFT was intended to be a set of three lessons that would provide students with

enough room and time to explore and grapple with the big ideas outlined above.

**Table 2: Classroom activities and observations in research case study**

	<b>Lesson 1</b>	<b>Lesson 2</b>	<b>Lesson 3</b>
<b>Duration</b>	1.5 hours	1.5 hours	1.5 hours
<b>Place of VFT visit/topic</b>	<b>Berlin:</b> Tempelhof Airport and Berlin Wall Memorial	<b>Berlin:</b> DDR Museum and Checkpoint Charlie	<b>Berlin:</b> Potsdamer Platz and interview with a Berliner through online conferencing  Reflection on learning

### Site Selection: Inquiry-Based Learning in Contested Spaces

While there are many sites within Berlin that are relevant or meaningful towards understanding the Berlin Wall and its role during the Cold War, the VFT narrows down on the notion of contested or “contentious spaces” to deepen students’ historical imagination (Ahonen, 2011). The Berlin Wall, as an icon of ideological conflict, was explored through both official narratives and alternative perspectives. The sites that were selected as part of this VFT were intended to further encourage students to grapple with the idea of “contentious spaces” as part of the Cold War. Here is the list of key virtual locations included in the VFT:

- Tempelhof Airport

- Berlin Wall Memorial
- DDR Museum
- Checkpoint Charlie
- Potsdamer Platz
- Brandenburg Gate

The range of sites that can be included in a VFT further provides opportunities for differentiation and gives students greater autonomy over the sites they may choose to visit and how they may interact with these virtual sites. Each of these sites offers unique opportunities for various activities and can provide a distinct perspective on life in Berlin during the Cold War. The table below summarises the activities that accompany each site.

**Table 3. Learning activities at each VFT site**

Location	Activity Description	Objective
Tempelhof Airport	Virtual arrival with greetings in German (students can learn short phrases in German)	Build situational interest
DDR Museum	Analyze East vs. West artifacts and music	Explore differing ideologies and lifestyles, while considering the objectives of the DDR Museum.
Berlin Wall Memorial	Interpret graffiti and wall structures via the use of colours and materials	Examine symbolic significance
Checkpoint Charlie	Translate signs and explore checkpoint photos using Google Translate	Understand Cold War tensions

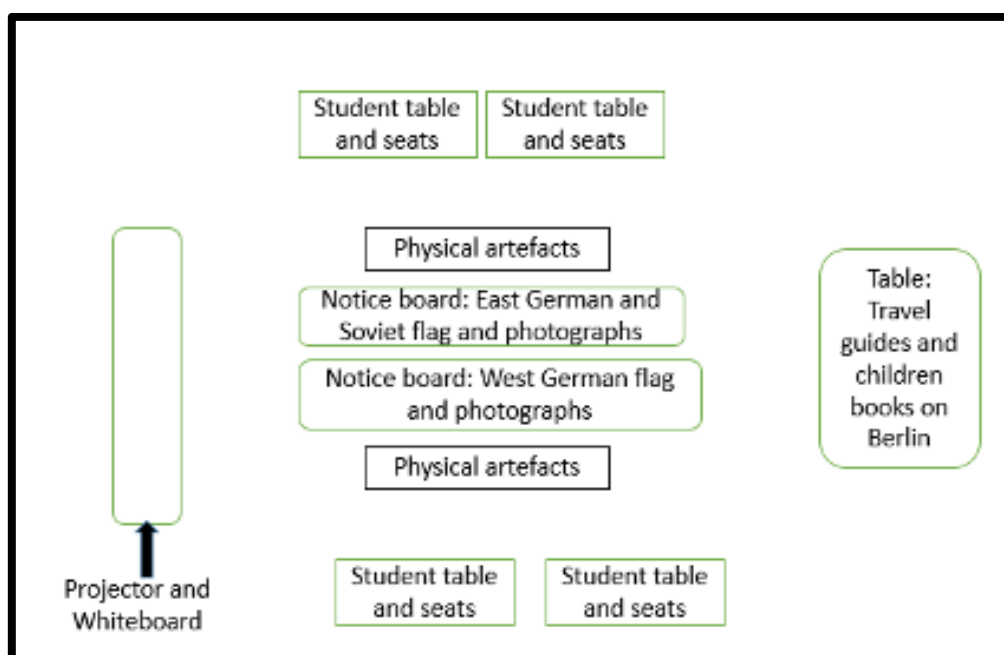
### Creating Multisensory and Authentic Experiences

The classroom was rearranged to simulate how Berlin was divided at the time. Students were allowed to engage with various objects, including replica artifacts

and music from both East and West Germany, and they completed a guided reflection. They also assumed historical personas, such as West German tour guides in 1961. These aimed to enhance students' understanding and retention while making the entire learning experience enjoyable.



**Figure 2. Classroom arrangement**



**Figure 3: Student Learning Station Layout**



This immersive and authentic experience helped students understand the psychological and physical impact of the Wall. One student wrote: "We West Berliners were shell-shocked when we woke up to this new reality", a strong example of historical empathy at play.

### **Dialogic Talk and Historical Thinking**

As part of this VFT, assessment for learning (AfL) ideas were promoted through dialogic teaching, moving beyond the initiate-response-evaluate (IRE) sequence to co-construct understanding.

Dialogic exchange can encourage historical empathy and complex reasoning (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Building on the virtual field experience that students underwent, the teacher facilitated discussions that revealed nuanced

reasoning from the students. Teachers can consider asking questions that encourage dialogue, open conversations, and provide students with opportunities to engage with historical thinking and reasoning. Some examples of such questions are:

**Table 4: Typology of Questions Posed to Students During VFT**

Theme	Example Questions
Life in Divided Germany	What was it like living in Berlin at the time?
Reunification	How did people feel when Germany reunited?
Education and Propaganda	What did they teach you in East Germany?

The following conversation between the teacher and two students demonstrates some of the questions and dialogue moves

that the teacher made to encourage students to think about the Berlin Wall and the past in a disciplinary manner.

**Table 5. Transcript of dialogue between the teacher and Students A and B**

Transcript	Commentary
<b>Teacher:</b> Read the portion on Corporal Hans Konrad Schumann. I hope it answers the question that we asked at the start of the lesson: How does the division of a city affect a country, a city, families, and even an individual? [silence]	Shared discussable topic/object of learning
<b>Teacher:</b> When did Schumann jump the wire? What is the date? <b>Student A:</b> August 15 <b>Teacher:</b> How many days after the building of the Berlin Wall was this? <b>Student A:</b> Two days after the Berlin Wall was set up.	Use of place, chronology, and character
<b>Teacher:</b> Did he make it? <b>Student B:</b> Yes. He went on to live in West Germany. <b>Teacher:</b> Read on. Did he live happily ever after?	Opening up spaces for discussion and cross-boundary learning Creating “gaps” for discussion



<p><b>Student B:</b> He left his family behind in the East and started a new family.</p>	<p>between what a teacher wants students to be talking about and what is of vital interest to students (i.e., the fate of Schumann)</p>
<p><b>Teacher:</b> And how did it end?</p> <p><b>Student C:</b> Oh no! He becomes an alcoholic and dies by taking his own life. It says, “he never escaped living his life in fear, fear of the <i>stasi</i>, the secret police.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> From his one act, he is seen in the West as a ...?</p> <p><b>Student A:</b> Hero</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> In the East, he is seen as a ...?</p> <p><b>Student B:</b> Traitor</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> So, what is he? Hero or traitor?</p> <p><b>Student A:</b> He is just a human. He made the choice to be free, and he couldn’t live with the fact that he abandoned his family. He could have been happy with his choice; he had his own family, but he left his mother and sister behind. He had mixed emotions and couldn’t live with his choice.</p>	<p>In order to give students space for new thinking, the third evaluative turn was opened up by using the following approaches: (a) recognizing and supporting students’ attempts to deepen their reasoning on historical perspective, and (b) encouraging the class to think together to consolidate and negotiate a joint voiced meaning to the new perspective.</p>
<p><b>Teacher:</b> So, can the division of a city affect a country, a city, families, and even an individual? What happened to him? This is the deep impact of the Berlin Wall. Was it worth the jump? Would you make the leap over the wire if you were him?</p> <p>[There is a chorus of responses]</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> Sometimes an instinctive decision that you make can change your whole life for the better or for the worse. That’s the impact of the Cold War and the Berlin Wall.</p>	<p>Using another evaluative turn to encourage the class to think together, to ask more questions, and to consolidate and negotiate a joint voiced meaning to the new perspective</p> <p>Students cross the boundaries of their own original thinking and use their own voiced positions to gain a deeper understanding of historical perspectives.</p>

In this other conversation between two teachers and two students, a dialogic approach encourages students not only to make knowledge claims about the past (such as stating that the Berlin Wall was built to prevent border crossing between East and West Berlin), but also to interrogate the disciplinary basis of those

claims and to co-construct interpretations behind the reasons and purpose for the construction of the Berlin Wall. This process of knowledge construction further adds an authentic dimension to the VFT as students constantly engage with history as discipline.

**Table 6. Transcript of Interview 2 between two teachers and Students A, B, and C**

Transcript	Commentary
<b>Student A:</b> The primary and essential purpose of the Berlin Wall was to prevent people from crossing the border from the West to influence the East.	Student A makes an initial knowledge claim about the past.
<b>Teacher A:</b> How do you know?	Question posed to encourage students to consider the evidential basis of the knowledge claim they are making about the past (the purpose of the Berlin Wall).
<b>Student B:</b> This is because you can see from the picture that the East was scared to be influenced into the democratic way of living. One feature is that there are barbed wires on top of the wall to prevent people from climbing over.	Student B made his/her own thinking visible by explicitly pointing to historical sources and explains his/her interpretation of that source. The process of interrogating the source encourages students to consider issues of historical evidence.
<b>Student C:</b> It says here that from 1945 to 1961, 40 percent of the East German population fled to the West.	Participation of Student B and C in the conversation provides further opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge between peers.
<b>Teacher A:</b> And who was the Soviet leader?	Question posed to encourage students to contextualize the source that has been cited and make connections with prior knowledge (e.g. Khrushchev and his policies).

<p><b>Student A:</b> Oh. It's Khrushchev. He was the Soviet leader who gave the East German government permission to close its borders with the West.</p>	<p>Through contextualisation, Student A was able to consider the motivations behind the construction of the Berlin Wall beyond the immediate East-West German relationship and to factor in the broader Cold War context.</p> <p>By accounting for the broader context, Student A is also engaging in causal reasoning.</p>
<p><b>Teacher B:</b> And so what?</p>	<p>Question posed to encourage students to further consider the implications of Khrushchev's decision (and the construction of the Berlin Wall) on the broader geopolitical conflict that was ongoing.</p>
<p><b>Student A:</b> This resulted in Berlin being physically divided into two sections led by different countries with two different ideologies: West Germany with US democratic influence and East Germany with Soviet Communist influence. (historical significance)</p>	<p>Student A was able to relate to a localised event, such as the construction of the Berlin Wall, to the wider first-order construct that is being studied (e.g the Cold War).</p>

### Student Outcomes and Reflections

Student responses to the use of Virtual Field Trips (VFTs) in history lessons demonstrated significant growth in historical thinking, particularly in understanding how museums present and interpret historical narratives. Through guided exploration of the DDR Museum's online resources, students developed deeper insights into life in East Germany during the Cold War. Their reflections revealed a shift from commonly held assumptions to a

more balanced understanding that life in East Germany was not necessarily as dark as often portrayed in texts and media. This engagement showed students applying both factual recall and interpretative skills to reassess historical perspectives.

Using the four-phase model of interest development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), students showed progression from situational to individual interest. Reflections from students also indicated emerging historical interpretation:

**Student C:** The DDR Museum shows that East Germans had a life too. The West might have exaggerated how bad it was."

**Student A:** The East Germans were not as opposed as we think them to have been."

In another example:

**Teacher:** So what is [Hans Schumann] – hero or traitor?

**Student A:** He is just human. He made the choice to be free, but he left his family behind. He couldn't live with that.

This recognition of multiple perspectives is foundational to historical understanding (Seixas, 1994).

Additionally, the opportunity to interact with a Berliner via Zoom added an authentic, human element to the learning experience. Students actively participated, posing a range of thoughtful and open-ended questions—some historically focused, others more personal and cultural. This interaction sparked curiosity and increased engagement, helping students connect past and present while fostering cross-cultural awareness. The teacher emphasized that such authentic, informal learning experiences are rare but vital for making history feel alive and relevant. Overall, the students' responses suggest that VFTs can meaningfully enhance historical understanding, curiosity, and confidence in engaging with complex narratives.

### **Implications for Teaching and Learning**

This case study highlights the promising potential of VFTs in enhancing student engagement and fostering deep historical thinking in upper secondary history classrooms. While designing VFT-based

lessons presents certain challenges, the outcomes suggest that meaningful and impactful learning can occur when lessons are carefully structured around sound pedagogical principles. Three key learning theories—experiential learning, student motivation, and distributed cognition—emerged as foundational to the design and implementation of these lessons.

Focusing on the Cold War, the concept of divided spaces, such as the Berlin Wall or the Korean Demilitarized Zone, offers a powerful thematic anchor for VFTs. These locations serve not only as historically rich content areas but also as avenues for exploring historical thinking concepts such as perspective-taking and the significance of events and places. Teachers are encouraged to select sites that are both symbolic and historically significant. These may include transport hubs, border checkpoints, memorials, and museums as focal points for VFTs. These help to provide space and an avenue for students to explore and think.

One of the most impactful design choices is treating VFT-based lessons as informal and authentic learning environments, just as you would if you were to organise actual field trips or museum visits. To simulate and recreate the experiences, teachers can modify classroom layouts, incorporate physical artifacts and documents, and even employ interactive digital resources, tapping into the myriad tech tools available. These adjustments help teachers bridge the gap between the formal structure of traditional classrooms and the immersive nature of field-based learning. In doing so, VFTs can even offer students a more engaging and realistic learning experience.

Inquiry-based learning proves to be a particularly effective approach for VFTs. By framing lessons around compelling

historical questions and linking these to specific locations, students are prompted to actively explore and make sense of the past. This method is especially powerful when used to examine how physical spaces are tied to public memory, historical narratives, and contemporary relevance. The integration of "mini-inquiries" across various sites ensures that curiosity is sustained throughout, while facilitating a discursive environment, all the while ensuring that important knowledge and know-how are acquired.

Another key learning point is that we need to maximize the learning potential of VFTs; therefore, lesson sequences should be deliberately structured to spark and sustain student interest. For instance, beginning a lesson at a significant transportation hub (such as Tempelhof Airport or Checkpoint Charlie) can generate immediate intrigue. This entry point can then be followed by visits to other curated locations, such as the DDR Museum or the Brandenburg Gate, each paired with targeted learning activities. These may include historical role-play, visual analysis, and reflection prompts designed to promote deeper engagement with historical thinking.

### **World Building to complement VFTs**

There are numerous other avenues and affordances that teachers can leverage to further enrich Virtual Field Trips (VFTs). Multisensory engagement has shown promising results thus far. Visual input, being the most immediate and accessible, enables students to observe historically accurate environments. However, educators can also consider incorporating other senses. For instance, haptic feedback in simulators, ambient soundscapes featuring authentic historical audio, the simulation of smells, and even the use of temperature and wind controls can all

contribute to enhancing the realism of VFTs. One emerging area of interest is sensory history, which is defined as an attempt to understand the past not only as something seen or read about, but also as something felt, heard, smelled, and tasted (Smith, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

The Berlin Wall VFT showcased how digital and ICT affordances can change the way the Cold War can be taught. While VFTs are currently underutilized in classrooms, they present a compelling opportunity to reimagine the teaching of history. When we stay rooted in strong learning frameworks while carefully planning instructions and activities, such approaches can only serve to better the teaching and learning environment, facilitate greater student agency, and deepen understanding of the topic at hand. With growing teacher familiarity and intentional design, VFTs may become a transformative tool in the history classroom, helping students connect with the past in dynamic and meaningful ways.

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