

What is historically significant? Historical thinking through the narratives of college students¹

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the historical relevance given by Basic Education students to historical events and in what ways they do it. For that, standards of historical thinking held by those future teachers are analyzed. Focus is on the so called historical significance. Through short account, we analyzed the abilities of the future teacher in relation to this basic concept of the historical thinking, which brings interesting signs about how students understand history and the underlying assumptions to narrate it. For that purpose, we processed 107 short narratives written by 520 individuals, all of them college students of Basic Education working in groups. The texts were collected during three academic courses and were analyzed with qualitative methodology based on the categorization of their contents. The results show that these future teachers have minimum historical knowledge, most of it limited to events that are the landmarks of changes in a historical period. These events of transition between historical periods are, for them, the most significant in the history of humankind to the detriment of others. Some of the implications for their future work as teachers include a great limitation of the contents to be taught or an excessive dependence on the textbook. This leads to the development of a teaching based on memorization and the lack of reflection of the historical narration itself to the detriment of the analysis of the importance of some historical events.

Keywords

History – History teaching – Basic education – Teacher training.

1 - Research made under the Project “La evaluación de las competencias y el desarrollo de capacidades cognitivas sobre History en Educación Secundaria Obligatoria” (EDU2015-65621-C3-2-R), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness / FEDER funds and the Program *Jiménez de la Espada* de Movilidad, Cooperación e Internacionalización de la Fundación Séneca, within the Region of Murcia plan for Science, Technology and Innovation.

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Introduction

Research into students' knowledge of history, especially research into how students can and should understand history, is one of the most pursued lines of research in the English-speaking world (HENRÍQUEZ; PAGÈS, 2004; LEVSTIK, 2011). Recent years have witnessed an insistence on the need to teach students to think historically (SEIXAS, 1996; WINEBURG, 2001; SEIXAS; PECK, 2004; WINEBURG, 2007; LÉVESQUE, 2008; VANSLEDRIGHT, 2011, 2014; SEIXAS; MORTON, 2013; GÓMEZ; ORTUÑO; MOLINA, 2014; DOMÍNGUEZ, 2015). It is a mantra that is repeated *ad nauseam* in the specialist history teaching literature, but which nevertheless has failed to catch on in the classrooms. Perhaps the gap between research and the classroom could or should be spanned through appropriate training of future teachers. But, do our future teachers possess the necessary bases for building thinking historically? How does this knowledge of history relate to some of the metaconcept categories of thinking historically? After an initial inquiry into what history our future Primary school teachers remember (ARIAS; EGEA, 2015), the aim here was to focus the analysis on one of the competencies compromising thinking historically - historical significance - since it is considered to be one of the key categories for ascertaining the perception future teachers have of history. In the final analysis understanding this perception is key to our understanding the variable nature that the subject entails. Hence, a historical fact is significant depending on the aim pursued, the geographical framework in which one moves, etc. Students need to know the substantive contents of History if they are to move on to understanding the metaconcepts. The problem is that these more conceptual contents are learnt (or sometimes recited) with no real reflection about their presence or why they were selected in the history narrative.

For all the above reasons, we believe that a diagnostic analysis will be key in establishing a starting point to promote strategies that will encourage a change in our way of teaching and learning history, and that these new ways should begin by reflecting on the suitability and choice of teaching contents.

Historical Significance

First order substantive concepts or conceptual contents are one of the key components of thinking historically. We are dealing here with dates, facts, historical figures, concepts, etc., which are the basis for the later construction of the various strategic skills needed to give the knowledge meaning. These are understood as structural elements, second-order concepts or organizing concepts), and are specified in competencies to respond to and give meaning to historical questions and to understand the past as it is understood in history research (SEIXAS, 1996; CERCADILLO, 2000; WINEBURG, 2001; LÉVESQUE, 2008; VANSLEDRIGHT, 2011, 2014).

Several researchers have considered historical significance as a basic skill in these structural concepts (SEIXAS, 1994, 1996; CERCADILLO, 2000, 2006; SEIXAS; PECK, 2004; LÉVESQUE, 2005, 2008; SEIXAS; MORTON, 2013). Historical significance or, if one prefers, what is historically determining, consists in our students' knowing how to

determine and understand which historical events have been significant and why. They will then be in a position to respond to the timeless question about the usefulness of studying the past in their training. So, what does this imply?

Clearly, it is impossible to study everything, so we have to choose from among the pieces that make up the corpus of the past those which are really worth studying and those which are not (SEIXAS, 1994). Many teachers at times find themselves in the position of having to choose between periods or events to teach their students. So, it is necessary to reflect on what makes an event significant or not and the need to transmit its importance to our students. Partington (1980, cited by PHILLIPS, 2002, p. 19) had already established a series of factors in this respect. Some of these factors are the importance of the event for the people of the time, how deeply it affected people's lives, the number of people affected, the duration of its consequences and, finally, its significance, i.e., the degree to which a specific event contributes to understanding the present. For Lomas (1990) it was also fundamental to underline that some events were more important than others, that their importance could change over time, that different people could have different ideas about what had been more historically determining, that apparently insignificant events could be highly symbolic or that an event could become more significant as it acquired more connections with other events.

Nevertheless, as the results will bear out, what students initially consider as being of historical significance is, unfortunately, far removed from all these considerations. Following on from Seixas (1997), although every year our teachers and textbooks select (whether or not they follow these criteria) what is historically significant for the students, in the end there is a screening within the students' minds based on what they remember, forget, enhance, modify, etc. There have already been some approaches to this issue in other areas of education that attempt to determine what events are most significant for students. In Canada, there is information available about High School students (SEIXAS, 1994; LÉVESQUE, 2005), EEUU (BARTON; LEVSTIK, 1998) and there are even comparative studies between Spain and the United Kingdom (CERCADILLO, 2000 and 2006). The novelty of this paper is that it presents the findings of research carried out in Spain and specifically looks at those who in a few years' time will be teaching in our Primary Schools.

Methodological Framework

AIMS

The research question addressed in this paper is encompassed in the title: What is historically significant for future teachers in Primary Education? This question serves to focus the next aim:

- to analyze which historical events are future Primary Education teachers consider to be important and in what terms.

This type of analysis is clearly fundamental in determining how tomorrow's Primary Education teachers conceive History today since, without doubt, this conception will determine how their future teaching will develop.

Context and participants

Over three academic years (2012-2015) an activity was carried out with second year students of Primary Education at the University of (EGEA; ARIAS, 2015), with 520 students participating, whose ages ranged from 19 to 35 years, of whom almost 75% were 19 or 20. We therefore had a non probabilistic convenience sample with the students chosen came from the classes being taught.

Students were instructed to work in small groups and to compose short rap-style verses about historical periods. This led to 107 compositions¹. Note that History of Spain was a core subject for these students in their final years at school, so almost all of them would have had their most recent academic contact with the subject just two years earlier.

Procedure

The texts collected (n=107) were coded correlationally [T001-T107]. Group compositions were analyzed by a qualitative research method. Each group pooled their memories to compose the verses, so the texts produced were the fruit of joint efforts. The texts were processed using the software for qualitative data, Atlas.ti (v.7), and a series of units, categories and subcategories were established (STRAUSS; CORBIN, 1998). The units alluded to how the students had undertaken the History narrative task, and were differentiated by listing (mere sequences of unrelated events), description (choice of an event and a description of it) and recounting (where students devised a plot or included themselves as participants in the action). The second unit corresponded to the period the composition referred to, so texts were classified according to their historical period or sub-period, and thence according to their main category or subcategory. Within the categories a distinction was made between episodes and events, the leading actors and themes. Themes were in turn classified under politics, society, economics, religion or art and culture. In the specific analysis there was an emphasis on the categories of events and actors, and the characteristics of these provided the key indicators to ascertain the degree of significance that students gave to the subject of the narrative. For other subject matters and aspects of the narrations, please see (EGEA; ARIAS, 2015).

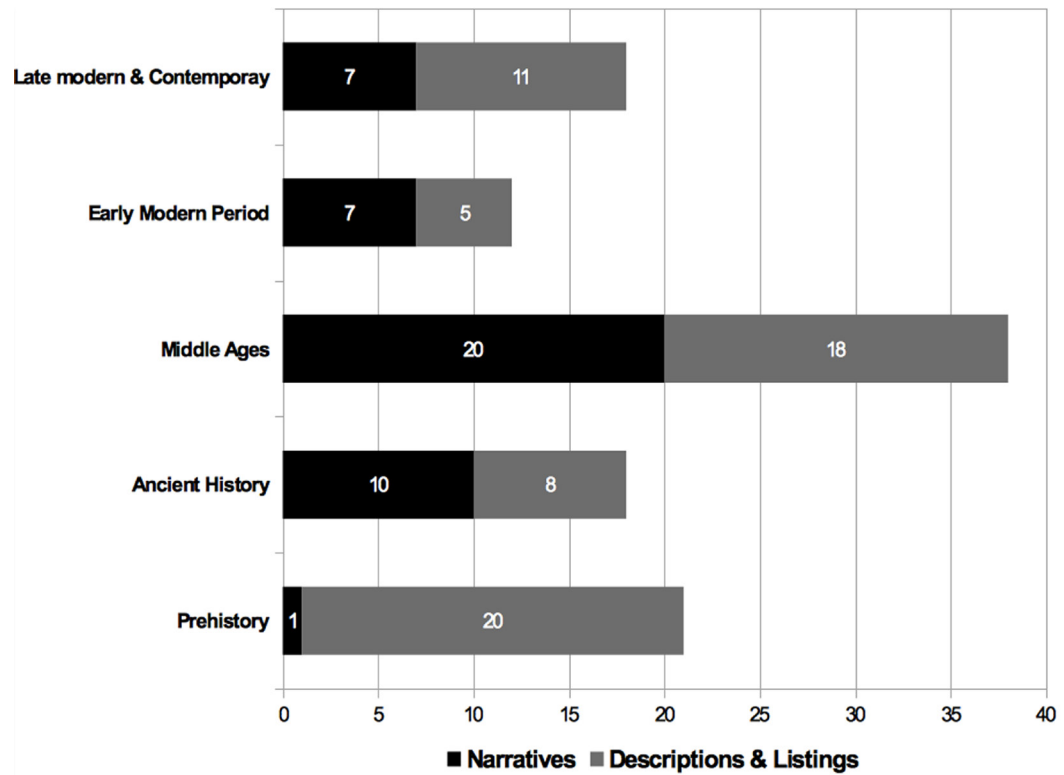
This tool was chosen for the research on account of the importance of narratives when reconstructing History and for the understanding of History that their reading bestows (WERTSCH, 1998, 2002; RÜSEN, 2005).

Results: what our students remember

On the basis of the narratives created by the students (n=107) it is interesting to observe that 43% (n=46) limited themselves to merely listing unconnected historical facts in which they use proper names and isolated events in an attempt to describe the period they are working on. This type of narrative lacks *per se* any category associated with historical significance, and understands History as a series of events with no causal relations among them. It as if the events are important for the students but that they do not always know why and, hence, the difference between these compositions which

merely list facts and those which seek to describe some extra element. The free choice of some elements rather than others seems to indicate that these are more present in the students' memories and that they therefore bestow greater significance to some historical events than to others. Expectedly, students do not have the same conception of all periods (Graphic 1).

Graphic 1- Distribution of the texts prepared showing the difference between narratives and mere listings.



Source: own.

It is interesting to note that when describing Prehistory, the absence of figures of reference or specific events leads students, in general, to attempt to get closer to the periods by being more explanatory. In these cases, the History of Prehistory gets narrated in terms of the progression from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, establishing a comparison between the two periods mainly in terms of economy, technology and society (ways of life and alimentation).

[T106] Conocieron el suelo ¡Agricultura su consuelo!³ (Man got to know the earth and with it came farming's birth!)

3- From here on there appears a selection of texts [T] produced by the second-year students in Primary Education at the University of Murcia. The material was collected between 2012 and 2015.

[T014] El hombre cambió de nómada a recolector y la agricultura y ganadería apareció. (Rather than wander, man opted to collect. Crops and livestock followed next.)

[T014] Con nuevas armas e ingeniería fue cambiando nuestra vida. (When weapons and engineering came to stay, life was lived in a whole new way.)

[T073] Creando herramientas el cultivo desarrollaron y los nómadas del mundo finalmente se asentaron. (With the creation of tools came the farming of the land, and that spelt the end of the nomad man.)

The discourse shifts when metals appear. These are seen as having had a key role in the new make-up of society. The emphasis is now on the value of metals for improving weapons, and how this in turn leads to the advent of war.

[T048] Cobre, bronce, hierro, metales que forjan nuevas armas, nuevas guerras, pueblos que enfrentar. (Copper, bronze, iron: metals forging better weapons. Better weapons make better wars and set us one against the other).

Ancient, Medieval and Modern Times are conceived of mainly in terms of a string of random facts. There are few reflections on their transcendence in the compositions, and what there is always in terms of their legacy in today's world.

Regarding the Ancient World, the allusions are mainly to the influence of writing, democracy, the buildings where spectacles were held as a result of the Roman expansion and Roman law.

[T048] La escritura, grandes cambios, nueva etapa a comenzar. (Writing spelt big changes, and a new time got under way.)

[T045] Un sistema político se creó, llegó a ser tan famoso que a todo el mundo alumbró. (A political system suddenly arrives; it becomes so famous it lights up our lives.)

[T078] El imperio de Roma con su organización formó la cuna de nuestra civilización. (The Roman Empire, with its organization, formed the cradle of our civilization).

[T091] Dejándonos un gran legado, teatros, circos y anfiteatros. (...bequeathing us a great legacy: theaters, circuses and amphitheaters).

[T084] No nos olvidamos de aquellos ciudadanos que nos aportaron el derecho romano. (Always have a thought to spare for those who brought us Roman law.)

The Middle Ages is understood as a kind of historical hiatus. Scant historical significance is attributed to the events included in their verses which focus on portraying a period that seems to be characterized either by darkness and oppression (with the church and the nobility exercising control), or by conflict (religious and political) or, in contrast as a mythical Middle Age. There was just one allusion to the legacy that the various cultures that occupied the Iberian Peninsula left for the future.

[T009] Mezcla de culturas en terreno limitador, aportaciones diversas que nuestra historia ha condicionado. (A mix of cultures in a limited space, all sorts of contributions that our History makes.)

It is curious how at times the context of certain events is denied, with parts of their explanation being reduced to mere randomness.

[T067] Un nuevo camino hacia las Indias, por error encuentra nuevas tierras. Un continente que nace de una coincidencia. (A new way to India stumbled on new lands. A whole new continent appeared by chance.)

With regard to the Middle Ages we have only two references to any possible consequences deriving from the domestic and foreign policies of western European countries.

[T104] Un imperio donde no se ponía el sol. Y durante dos siglos el mundo español habló. (An empire where the sun never set; for two whole centuries the world spoke Spanish)

[T080] Es una triste época de represión, en América esclavos, en España Inquisición. (A time of sad repression; slavery in America and in Spain the Inquisition.)

On one occasion we have a mention of a change in thinking in a period serving as the driving force behind big change, and the French Revolution appears as the turning point.

[T071] Nace un nuevo pensamiento. El hombre es importante en el Renacimiento. Igualdad, libertad, fraternidad, esto son los ingredientes de la nueva sociedad. (A new idea was born. Renaissance gives man importance. Liberty, fraternity equality conform the new society.)

[T093] La gente empezó a pensar, ya nada iba a ser igual. Tras la revolución francesa los derechos debían cambiar. (The people began to think, nothing would ever be the same. After the French revolution, rights just had to change.)

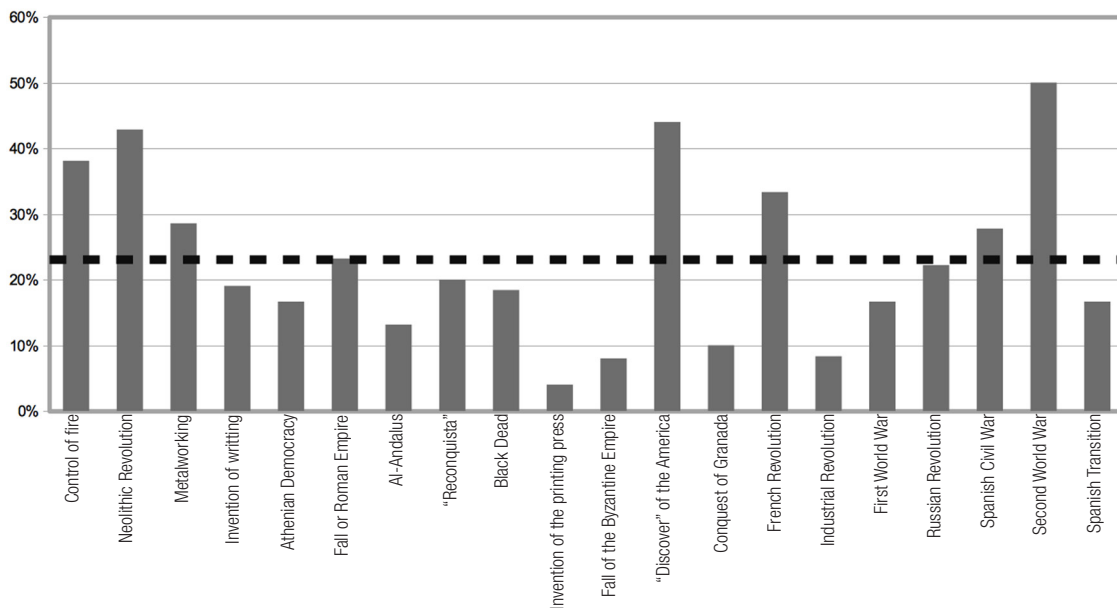
[T016] El pueblo francés buscaba libertad. Acabaron con los reyes para conseguir su igualdad (...) Fin del Antiguo Régimen, viva la Revolución. (The French sought freedom. An end to kings made them all the same. End of the Ancient Regime. Long live the Revolution.)

A similar reflection arises when a group of students chose the end of the Franco dictatorship, now in contemporary times, as their central theme. They establish a relation between the movements that inundated Spain in the 1980s, among them the well known the “Movida madrileña”(The Madrid Scene).

[T007] La Movida comenzó tras una dura represión, la gente salió a las calles para gritar “¡Liberación!”. (The “Movida” began after years of harsh repression; the people took to the streets and shouted “Liberation!”)

So far, we have only pointed out those reflections on historical significance which the students expressly mentioned. However, there are other aspects which are reiterated in the students' narratives which gives them a certain representative value (although it might not be significant) for our students (Graphic 2). While unaware of the terms of their significance, these occupy a preeminent place in their knowledge of universal History.

Graphic 2- Most frequent historical episodes over the different stages of history. The broken line represents the mean value.



Source: own

To calculate representativeness we analyzed how many of the narratives talked about each episode in relation to its corresponding period of history, and then compared the frequencies of each element with respect to its stage. However, for events that appear in both stages the calculation was made with respect to the total number of texts in both stages. For example, the Black Death appears in 7 of the 38 texts on the Middle Ages (18,4%) and the Fall of the Byzantine Empire in 4 of the 50 texts about the Middle Ages and the Modern Age (8%). In view of this, by historical stages it is found that for the students the Neolithic revolution, be it with regard to the appearance of farming, livestock, domestication or settling, is one of the most recurring elements (42.9%) from Prehistory.

With respect to Ancient Times, the arrival of writing (19%) or Athenian democracy (16.7%) are frequently cited, although rather less than the Fall of the Roman Empire (23.2%). It should be noted here that historical landmarks that serve as a transition from one period to another are usually the most frequent, appearing in narratives relating to both the stages.

For the Middle Ages, the Catholic "Reconquest" of the Iberian Peninsula (20%) is one of the events most referred to, followed at some distance by the influence of Al-Andalus (13.2%). However, without doubt, the Europeans' arrival in the Americas is one of the most frequently chosen events (44%) for all of History, and is, in proportion, only exceeded by the Second World War in the Contemporary age (50%). Allusions to other elements of huge historical significance, all be they difficult for the students to detect, (e.g., the printing press) are left on the fringes (4%).

There is little information about the Modern Age, with students' knowledge of the period being seemingly scant. The star event is the French Revolution (33.3%) – again an episode of transition. There was just a single reference to the Industrial Revolution (8.3%).

Finally, for Contemporary Times, there are, as we mentioned, numerous references to the Second World War, some relating to leading figures (Hitler, Stalin), some to its consequences (The Holocaust, the atom bomb) or to the countries at war (Britain, Germany). Episodes like the First World War (16.7%) or the Russian Revolution (22.2%) complete the view our students have of the twentieth century. It is worth noting that in the case of Spanish History almost the only events of significance since 1492 are the Spanish Civil War (27.8%) and the Democratic Transition (16.7%). The Spain of the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries seems to have left little mark on our students' view of History.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on other texts which, given the students' positioning, can be understood as having high historical significance for them. We are in total agreement with Levstik (2000, p. 287) when he states that from the standpoint of the subject (in his case the interviewees, and in ours the writers of the narratives) “historical events took on significance when they ‘formed us’, ‘changed us’, or ‘made us a nation’”. The position adopted by students to History enables us to see how they understood those events. While the texts which limit themselves to reeling off events do not provide us with many clues to understand the perspective of the students participating in the study, we do find a series of compositions, which we term “stories” (n=28, or 27% of the total), in which the students include themselves in the narrative as participants in the action by using the first person (singular or plural) and hence showing a specific positioning and attitude with regard to certain historical episodes, and an emphasis on certain subjects rather than others.

In this sense, when narrating Prehistory they include themselves as hunters (5) or farmers (3), and, in one case as builders of megaliths. It is from the viewpoint of the subject that they describe the tools, way of life and characteristics of the time.

[T014] Con nuevas armas e ingeniería fue cambiando nuestra vida. Ya podíamos labrar, cosechar y al perro domesticar. (New weapons and engineering came and changed our lives. Now we plough and harvest and have domesticated dogs.)

In Ancient Times, the identification with the subject varies from being Romans (3) assuming the role of gladiators, warriors or conquerors, to settlers in the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Romans' arrival (1).

[T006] Arrasaremos Germania sin dejar un solo bárbaro. (We will lay low Germany; not one barbarian will survive.)

[T045] Los romanos nos invadieron. (The Romans invaded us.)

When dealing with the Middle Ages, we find a larger number of subjects identified with Europe or with Christian Europe. So we get the nobles (2), knights (3) and soldiers (2) whose main deeds are centered in the Crusades or in the “Reconquest” of Spain. In general, when the students adopt a position, it has to do with war.

[T036] En la Península estábamos de Reconquista, los hispanos recuperando su vida. (In the Iberian Peninsula we were reconquering, Hispanics were taking back their lives).

[T020] A un soldado nazarí maté durante la Reconquista. Y con Alfonso X el Sabio entramos en Sevilla. (During the Reconquest a Nazari I killed. And with Alphonso X, the wise, we entered Seville)

[T009] Quisiera ser un noble, vivir en un castillo, poseer tierras, tener la ley en el bolsillo, tener en las catedrales mi lugar de exilio, defender a mi rey, luchar contra enemigos. (I'd like to be a noble, living in a castle, the law in my pocket, cathedrals my exile, defend my king and fight our foes.)

Columbus' voyage to America offers another marvelous opportunity for students to embark on their own voyages of exploration.

[T005] Encontrarme entre mares, dejándome llevar, en 1492 América encontrar de la mano de Colón y con Santa María regresar a ver la Alhambra que a nuestras manos acababa de llegar. (Lost at sea and at the mercy of the wind, in 1492, Columbus claims America for Spain. In the Santa Maria he returns to find the Alhambra, back in Spain.)

[T069] En busca de las Indias, a tierra firme llegué, navegando navegando con América me encontré. (I went in search of India till I came upon dry ground; after sailing, sailing, sailing, America I found.)

Lastly, there was just one group that broached the reform movement of the Catholic Church, or that avoided the Franco dictatorship.

[T021] Me gustaría recorrer Europa con Erasmo. Ponerme en contra de la Iglesia. No seguir nunca más sus dictados y sentir como nace en mí el espíritu de protesta. (I would like to travel through Europe with Erasmus; I break free from the church. I throw off its dictates and feel how my spirit of protest grows).

[T090] En conciertos de los Beatles me recreo mientras en mi país una dictadura nos censura. (In Beatles' concerts I get my pleasures, while in my country the dictatorship censors.)

Discussion: what is significant for our students

Our students' narratives reveal certain references and reflections on some events or episodes in the history of humankind in our country that have been more noteworthy for them.

Prehistorically, one of the most determining facts was the development of the stone industry and the invention of farming, which are presented as elements that culminated in settlements [T014, T073]. The Metal Age, for example, presents clear consequences, the invention of arms and, subsequently, the beginning of wars [T042, T048]. One of the few events deemed worthy of remembering in the Ancient World is the appearance of democracy in Athens [T045] and its current influence on our world. The French Revolution is another example of a significant moment, not only because

of the number of mentions it gets, but also because, on occasions, [T093] there are reflections in its role in history as a turning point in social rights.

Frequently, however, a high number of mentions is accompanied by a complete absence of reflection. In the Ancient World, and in particular Ancient Egypt, we find no element related to causality or historical significance, but just a list of proper names. Another clear case is that referred to as the “discovery” of America, which is recalled like an adventure story which at times borders on the naïve.

According to the data obtained, in principle when our students establish that something is historically determining, they do so in the following terms: (1) because it affected many people, (2) because it lasted a long time, (3) because it somehow affects them today, or (4) because the event supposed a turning point in the timeline of the history of humanity.

Despite these distinctions, the scarce appearance of important elements (and the scarce significance attributed to them) makes us wonder if the students are really unable to understand the scope of many of the historical events they remember. The reasons for this may be found in Cercadillo, who showed that in Spain, as in most European countries with the exception of the United Kingdom, the curricula, “emphasize the pursuit of facts and details over questions of historical significance, evidence and interpretation” (2006, p. 8).

In broad terms, it has been shown that the time scheme of these future teachers is founded minimal historical pillars or episodes, most of which are limited exclusively to episodes that marked a change of historical stage. We are contemplating an almost empty skeleton; there are no muscles, no tendons, practically nothing.

Equally surprising is the scarcity of certain episodes that are clearly of historical significance for southern Europeans. Examples are Romanization, the expansion of Islam and the ensuing influence of Al-Andalus, to cite just a few highly significant cases. Levstik (2000, p. 297) writes that “silences in the history curriculum are reflections of silences in the larger culture”. The Spanish, along with the curricular materials and textbooks used in the classrooms, does include these elements, but it has been demonstrated that they are not given the necessary time or that they are mainly absent from the master narratives that have so much influence when transmitting and conceiving History (LÓPEZ, 2015).

It cannot be overlooked that, despite all our efforts as teachers, there are external factors like the mass media, the social context, the group, the family, even the relation between teachers and students, etc., that will frequently determine what is remembered from History and what is considered to be most important (EPSTEIN, 1997; WINEBURG, MOSBORG; PORAT, 2001). It is also worth considering as the cause of some of these omissions or shortfalls the dichotomy put forward by Wertsch (1998, 2002) when equating historical narratives as an example of cultural tools that serve to take mediated actions. The fact that our students may have mastered some contents, some narratives, in order to get through an academic course, does not mean that they have appropriated them.

Conclusions and implications for education and research

It has become clear that for the students analyzed there are certain events of greater historical significance than others. Nevertheless, we have also detected a worrying shortfall in reasons for choosing some events over others. These students memorized, but they did not reflect, they did not think historically. Seixas stated that it was crucial not only to teach History but to submit to criticism the strategies employed to transmit historical significance to students (SEIXAS, 1994), since it is one of those “epistemological minefields through which there is no one simple, well-beaten path”, but which, starting from this difficulty, the work of the researchers in to the teaching of History should be to clear the way so that neither teachers nor students fall and hurt themselves in their journey (SEIXAS, 1996, p. 778). Seeing the shortcomings of our future teachers in the se aspects, it is becoming urgent, to take the Canadian researcher’s metaphor further, that all the gunners should get to their stations. And for that, we need some in-depth studies of the issue.

The reality is, as Seixas and Morton (2013) state, that significance in History varies over time and from group to group and, still further, it will depend on the age and the history education received (SEIXAS, 1994). This research does not allow us, as other studies do, to reflect on the degree of understanding or explanation of significance in History of the participants, since the narratives jumble up what is historically determining with the curious, the strange and the anecdotic. We can, however, outline the reflections and considerations our students today possess about this category and the future of the History of Humanity or of Spain. Seixas (1997) distinguished between basic objectivist, basic subjectivist, advanced objectivist, advanced subjectivist and narrativist stances. Elsewhere, Cercadillo (2000) distinguishes between contemporary, causal, pattern, symbolic, revealing or presentist explanations. Later, narratively more extensive, studies could give more precise information about the different levels of understanding of historical significance. In our case, the brevity of the texts means that we can only state that a fair number of students considered that certain events were worth recalling and others were not, milestones in their opinion and therefore historically determining. The conclusion is that this research has revealed which historical events are held to be of certain significance by the future Spanish Primary school teachers. Thanks to this knowledge, we should be able to establish guidelines in the future to improve the history teaching and understanding process.

The advantages of incorporating into the classroom strategies and activities that work with what is historically significant and aid in their understanding will, in the long term, be highly beneficial. Hunt (2000) claims that if this aspect of teaching History is emphasized, then there will be a substantial in the attitude of students as they understand the value of their studies. There already exist some very interesting classroom experiences in this area (HAMMOND, 2001; COUNSELL, 2002; CONWAY, 2006; these and many more have been collected in WRENN, 2011), and some even report that their incorporation led to enhanced motivation, to students asking more thoughtful and meaningful questions,

to shifts in perception of some of the apparently less interesting subjects and to stronger links between the local, the national and the international (PHILLIPS, 2002).

Manuals replete with pre-selected, prepared data, evaluation processes that draw heavily on the conceptual, clearly improvable working conditions for teachers (ratio, diversity, classrooms, timetables) are some of the obstacles to a new way of teaching and learning History in the classrooms in Spain. All of this is, in our opinion, caused by an unmanageable curriculum that makes it impossible for teachers to adopt a suitable approach, a situation which in Spain has been made even worse by the latest education reform (LÓPEZ-FACAL, 2014).

All these factors undoubtedly hinder the History classes where the reason for each topic taught is abundantly clear to students and teachers alike. Even so, it is necessary to focus on each of the periods on the basis of certain questions that will lead, in the long run, to an understanding of History in a more global and more critical way, while at the same time clarifying what is historically significant so as to increase hugely the motivation and enjoyment to be had from this subject among our students.

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Received on August 31, 2016.

Approved on november 23, 2016

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