

Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis

**Improving the quality of teaching:
How to make History an interesting subject¹**

Introduction

Many students of all ages and at all levels don't like history, because they don't like to memorize kings, different parties of war and dates², but mainly because, sometimes, the way of the teaching history is related to the lack of enthusiasm.

It is worth mentioning what the famous historian Eric Hobsbawm said to his lecture held in July 2002, in conjunction with the Institute of Historical Research in London to celebrate *Past and Present's*³ fiftieth anniversary:

“... My first contacts with a professional historian as a school-boy were unpromising. He was a small, round man who dashed round the classroom of a Berlin Gymnasium pointing a ruler as he asked pupils for the dates of the German emperors. I learned them by heart but have naturally forgotten all of them since. The joke was that this exercise must have bored our teacher as much as us, for, as I now know, he was by far the most distin-

1. This paper is based in my lecture delivered at the international conference titled “Combating Skills. Mismatch in Education: Exchanging Paradigms and enhancing skills transferability for combating students’ skills mismatch in education”, 3-5 May 2023, University of Crete, Greece.

2. R. TALLAVAARA - M. RAUTIAINEN (2020), “What is important in history teaching? Student class teachers’ conceptions”, *History Education Research Journal* 17 (2), 229-242. Online. <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.17.2.07> (Accessed in 5.11.2024).

3. *Past & Present* is the most famous historical journal in the English-speaking world.

512 *Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis*

guished scholar in the school, author of a monograph on the mystery cults of Eleusis and Samothrace, a recognized classical archaeologist and papyrus expert and a contributor to [publishers of *Real Encyclopädie*] Pauly-Wissowa [...] [However] it almost turned me off history for good...⁴

Hobsbawm's narration is a representative example of how teaching method could affect the perspective of a student about a lesson. From the above it is obvious that an effective teaching has less to do with teacher's knowledge. Of course a good knowledge of a discipline is important, but it's not the most important step for a successful teaching, a teaching which could lead to good student outcomes. A good teacher respects students, builds up confidence and inspires them with passion for education. Students don't learn from people they don't like. Therefore, the question is, how to make history an interesting subject, but, first of all, students have to understand why History is important for them.

What is History?

History is not just a collection of names or stories. It's not only battles or historical monuments. It explains how the modern world was shaped by the events of the past. Moreover, History is the story of changes in the human societies. There were series of changes that determined our contemporary epoch⁵.

First and foremost, there are different ways to teach and learn History and depend on the age of the students. To be more specific, there is a difference between the history taught in a primary school, the history taught in the secondary education and the history taught in the higher education. For example, in the Greek education system teachers of all levels teach the same historical periods but in a different way: in primary education teachers teach mainly

4. E.J. HOBBSAWM, "A Life in History", *Past and Present, a Journal of historical studies*, Oxford University Press, no. 177 (2002), 3-16 (and especially p. 3).

5. See: https://www.historyskills.com/historical-knowledge/change-and-continuity/?srsltid=AfmBOopujKN-OK7TobtzYrOphzGg1A-h_YU3H6OSlx-daGmMfH01kfVn_ (Accessed in 5.11.2024).

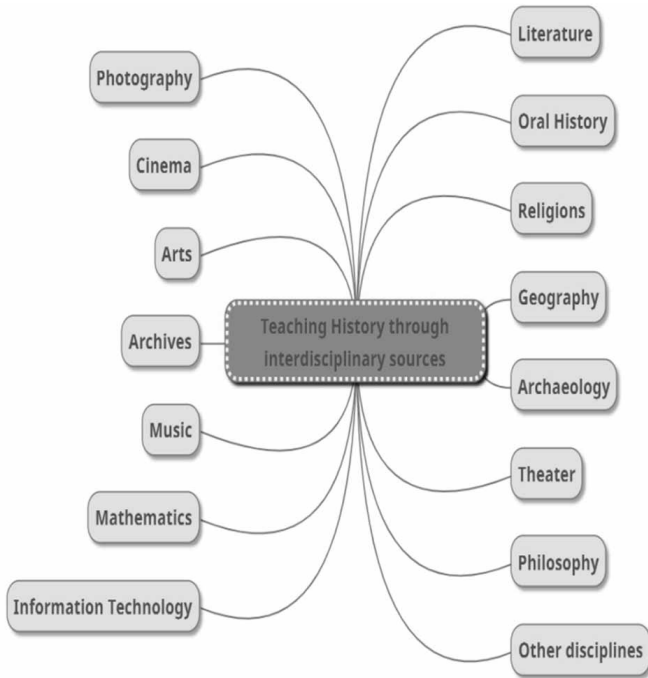
Improving the quality of teaching 513

the basic concepts of how history is developed, in the secondary education a school teacher teaches the same historical periods with more depth, more examples and additional information. In the higher education History taught (in Schools of Education or Philosophy Schools) is related or has to be related with pedagogical freedom, high level of autonomy, historical literacy and more critical thinking.

Interesting Ways to teach History

There are some suggestions in teaching and studying history. Nowadays teaching or studying History should not be confined to political events as it was by old historians, but, rather, should be open to other complex issues which require careful investigation and collaboration between History and other disciplines. Interdisciplinarity in history is a process of answering questions or examining a variety of different topics. Furthermore, teaching history through interdisciplinary sources, such as Literature, Oral History, Photography, Cinema (films, documentaries, series), Religions, Arts, Geography, Archives, Archaeology, Music, Theater, Mathematics, Philosophy, or other disciplines, combined with visiting a museum, a cinema, a gallery, an archive or a historical site, or looking at maps or mindmaps or watching historical films and documentaries or working on diverse history projects makes history more accessible and more fun. Moreover it improves the students' critical thinking skills and makes teaching History a fun, not a typical, rather boring, process. Moreover, the study of History through interdisciplinary sources, as mentioned above, could create an overall and representative picture of the past. It helps to clear the otherwise unknown past, by shedding light on all the diverse aspects of human History. In conclusion, Interdisciplinarity can make History be seen under a new, more attractive and fresher perspective, and change the way that traditionally has been researched and taught. Hopefully, the interdisciplinary approach will become an essential tool for all the historians of the future⁶.

6. EMMANOUIL CHALKIADAKIS [EMMANOYHA XAAKIADAKHS], *History: interdisciplinary dimensions and approaches (exemplary paradigms in research and teach*



Teaching History through interdisciplinary sources
(Mind Map)

According to the anniversary edition of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, History could, among other things, be approached in an interdisciplinary way through climate, words, numbers, inscriptions, environment, demography, art, economics, and by extension economic and social history. After all, if we take into account the general perception that historical science refers to all aspects of human activity, then this approach confirms the view that everything could be considered to be history⁷.

ing practice) [Διεπιστημονικές διαστάσεις και προσεγγίσεις της Ιστορίας. Ενδεικτικά παραδείγματα στη διδακτική πράξη και στην έρευνα], εκδόσεις Ηρόδοτος, Αθήνα, 2022.

7. The Editors, "Introduction: Fifty Years of Interdisciplinary History 1970-2020", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 50, Issue 1 (Summer 2019), 1-2.

Improving the quality of teaching 515

Another interesting way to teach History is to examine the impact of the past in our daily life; because what we do today is the history of tomorrow. History is connected to our everyday life. Monuments, everyday scenes, toponyms (identifying names given to streets), names of squares or other places, attitudes, advertisements, anything we meet in our daily lives could have a historical background, which we perceive consciously or subconsciously. For example, everyone, if they're a little bit observant, can see a lot of toponyms or squares having names of historical personalities or historical events. Even words or phrases that we use in our everyday reality may have a historical background⁸.

Let us see the word Ok. There are many theories about how Ok (Okay) developed. I will refer only two: the most popular theory here in Greece is that is coming from the Greek phrase "ola kala" meaning "everything is well" suggesting it was used by Greek teachers to mark papers, or by Greek sailors to mark cargos. A lot of Greeks immigrated to USA between 1900-1924 and between 1965 and 1980 and many of them became sailors in ships which traveled to US. Another explanation is that "okay" is an Anglicization of the word for "good" in kwa⁹ a group of languages in West Africa. These West African languages were spoken by many of the slaves brought to the Southern USA, such as North Carolina¹⁰. It does not matter which of the above interpretations are valid. What matters is that through these possible interpretations you can talk to students about the immigration of Greeks to America or the abhorrent regime of slavery that existed in the United States from its founding (in 1776) until 1865 and also about the American Civil War (1861-1865).

8. EMMANOUIL CHALKIADAKIS [ΕΜΜΑΝΟΥΗΛ ΧΑΛΚΙΑΔΑΚΗΣ], *Διεπιστημονικές διαστάσεις και προσεγγίσεις της Ιστορίας. Ενδεικτικά παραδείγματα στη διδακτική πράξη και στην έρευνα* [Χαλκιάδακης], *History: interdisciplinary dimensions and approaches (exemplary paradigms in research and teaching practice)* [Διεπιστημονικές διαστάσεις και προσεγγίσεις της Ιστορίας. Ενδεικτικά παραδείγματα στη διδακτική πράξη και στην έρευνα], *op. cit.*, 393-400.

9. A group of languages, now generally regarded as a branch of the Niger-Congo family, spoken in an area of West Africa extending from Côte d'Ivoire to E Nigeria and including Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, and Ibo.

10. <https://greekreporter.com/2025/01/19/ok-meaning-greek-language/> (access in 15.3.2023).

516 *Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis*

Moreover, the method of splitting history into small stories during the process of the teaching, could make history lesson more fun and interesting. If we divide the history lesson into shorter stories, or better, if we refer to shorter stories during the lesson, we can make it more interesting. For example, in 480 BC, the Persian king Xerxes ordered the construction of a pontoon bridge across strait. But before his army were able to cross, a storm blew in and destroyed the bridge. Xerxes became angry and ordered his soldiers to punish the sea by whipping it with chains 300 times. This act symbolized the sea's submission to his authority. Imagine the soldiers of King Xerxes to whip the sea... Was he crazy? Undoubtedly, this is a funny scene¹¹.

It is worth mentioning the significant role of humor in teaching which capture students attention and helps them to remember¹². Moreover, kids and adults are amused by games and Information Technology. Quizzes, games and match ups through Wordwall¹³ and other applications help teachers to create their own teaching resources and gain interest, entertainment and also information¹⁴.



World War I Map (Wordwall)

11. See <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-westerncivilization/chapter/splitting-history/> (access in 10.4.2023).

12. See MANDEEP KAUR, "Using Humor for Effective Teaching-Learning Process", *Kala Sarovar* [research journal], vol. 24, no. 4, 2021, 412-416.

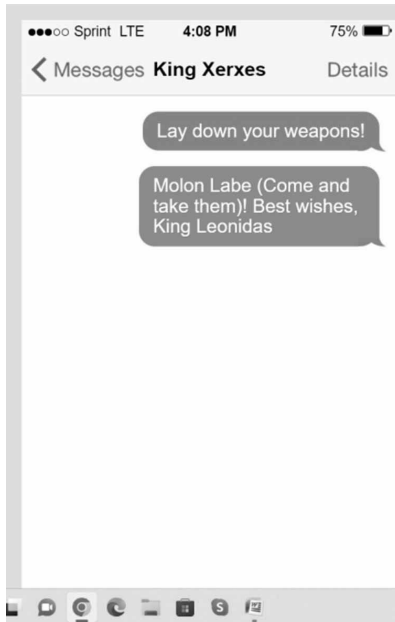
13. <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/word-wall> (access: 1.4.2023).

14. See MICHAEL BEGG, DAVID DEWHURST & HAMISH MACLEOD, "Game-informed learning: Applying computer game processes to higher education", *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 1, 6 (2005), 1-7.

Improving the quality of teaching 517

Here is an example of an application which could combine humor, with a game and Information technology. With an IT application we can create fake messages and write historical texts in a modern more accessible and familiar way to students. <https://ifaketextmessage.com/>

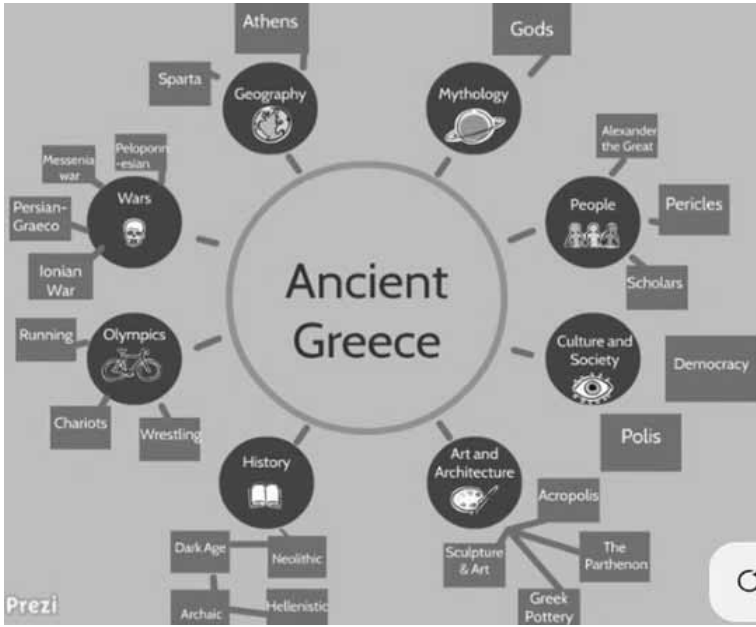
This is King Leonidas' well-known response to King Xerxes' request to surrender during the battle of Thermopylae (in 480 BC).



History through Humor
See <https://ifaketextmessage.com/>

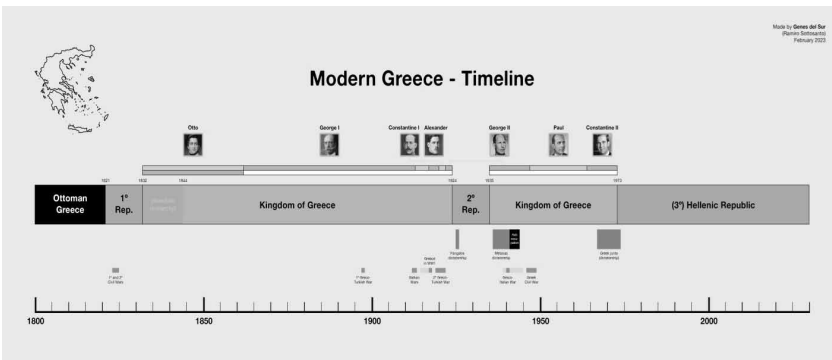
Very useful for History teaching could be mind maps which are used as a tool to structure and organize thoughts, ideas and historical concepts. Moreover there are interesting timelines in History which could also organize and connect people and places with significant historical events.

518 *Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis*



Mind Map of Ancient Greece

Source: <https://gr.pinterest.com/pin/ancient-greece-mind-map--540713498987368530/> (access 1.3.2023)



History of Modern Greece Timeline

Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/UsefulCharts/comments/1lgo5ra/history_of_modern_greece_timeline/?rdt=53101 (access: 2.2.2023)

Mésogeios 40 (2024)

Improving the quality of teaching 519

Last but not least, we must teach students to think like historians, providing primary source access to all of them. For example, in Brazilian history textbooks there is a separate section entitled “think like a historian”. This exercise learns students how to think critically¹⁵. According to Robin Katz, “all students become new students, learning a new skill outside of their comfort zones”. This means that the observations of all beginning researchers have equal merit and value, which also encourages the exchange of — and exposure to — diverse perspectives¹⁶.

For example, is it possible for students to understand the inclusivity that Alexander the Great applied in his politics? Specifically, Alexander the Great, instead of destroying Persian civilization, chose to embrace it. He married a Persian and incorporated Persian officials into his government. In the section “Think like a historian” students could be given as an exercise and discussion for reflection and discussion the following question: “If the Persians had prevailed over the Greeks, would they have implemented the same policies as Alexander?”.



A Brazilian History textbook (Think like a historian)

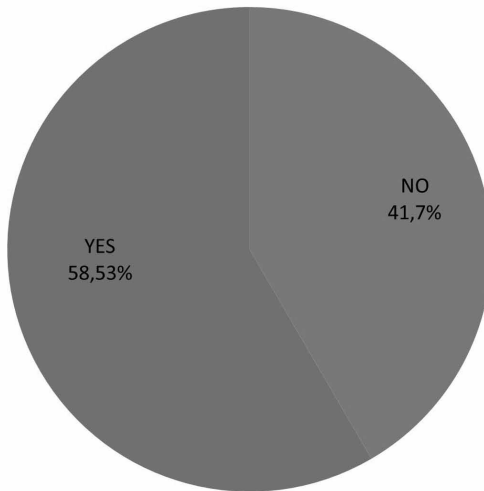
15. “What Brazilian textbooks say about Greece”, in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBSFeRHX9P8> (Access: 2.3.2023).

16. COURTNEY SUCIU, “Why Teach Students to Think Like Historians?”, in <https://about.proquest.com/en/blog/2019/why-teach-students-to-think-like-historians/> (Access: 2.3.2023).

520 *Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis*

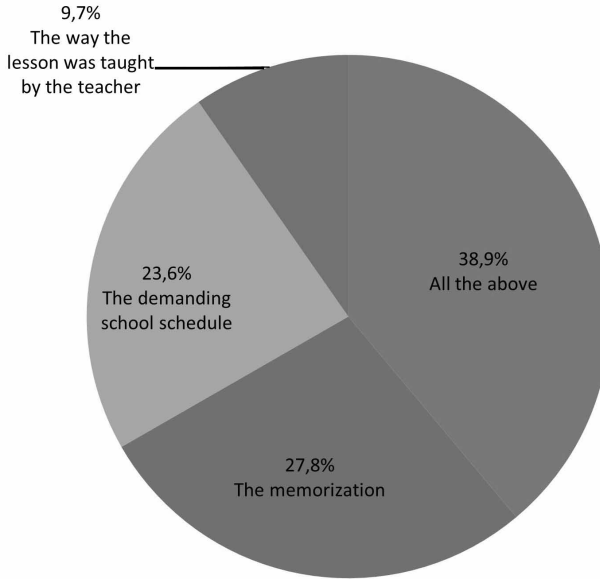
At this point it is worth referring to the questionnaires voluntarily answered by 72 of my students who have taken History courses in my department. According to these, 4 tenths of my students did not like the history course at school because of the way it was taught by the teacher, the pressing schedule of the school and the memorization process by which it was tested. On the contrary, they liked the teaching of history in higher education more, because of the academic freedom, the absence of mere memorization, the discussions held in the class, the interdisciplinary approach to the course, the use of Information Technology, the connection of history with everyday life and the educational excursions.

Did you enjoy history lessons when you attended school (primary, secondary education)?

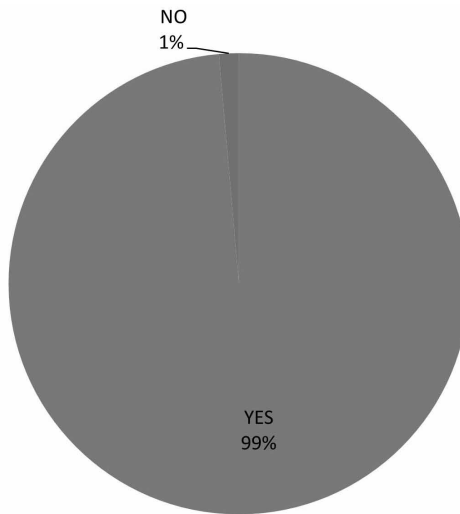


Improving the quality of teaching 521

What didn't you like in the history lesson (if there was anything you didn't like)?

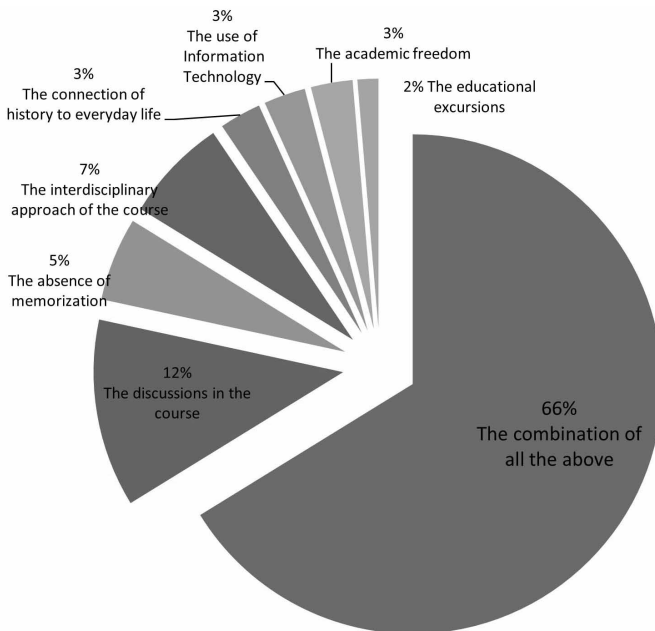


Do you like the way history is taught at the University (based on your experience)?



522 *Emmanouil G. Chalkiadakis*

What did you like most in your history course at university?



Source: Anonymous Research on 72 students of the Department of the Primary Education of the University of Crete who attended my history course in the academic period 2021-2022.

Conclusions

The Athenian statesman and constitutional lawmaker Solon said “γηράσκω ἀεὶ διδασκόμενος”, which means as we go older we learn. To sum up, we must never stop learning and trying out new teaching methods through our self-evaluation and continuous learning. As far as the History lesson is concerned, teachers do not need to focus only on providing information, but on how to make their students understand in an interesting and attractive way the importance of History in the development of the human society and the responsibility of man in shaping History.

Mésogeios 40 (2024)

Improving the quality of teaching 523

Abstract. — History is about stories. But even though we like stories, we do not always like history. Despite the obvious etymological connection of the two terms, there is a major difference between them. The main difference is that usually history refers to what really happened, but stories are more fictitious. When a past incident combines fact with fiction, such as the genre of biography, it then becomes more interesting. Some people don't like history, because they don't like to memorize facts, dates or names and also because, sometimes, the way of the teaching of history is related to the lack of enthusiasm and to the absence of enjoyment. Therefore, the question is, how to make history an interesting subject?

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