



Concept Note | v. 17 October 2022

Unpacking the past

If you were to set out on a (digital) tour of the bulletins and social media accounts of History Teachers' Associations around the world¹ of the last few years, this would show a series of common themes:

- the political (ab)uses and misrepresentations of history
- commemorations, monuments, and controversies surrounding them
- an active effort to showcase the diverse perspectives of national minority narratives
- the role of history education in raising a future generation of active and responsible citizens, able to understand the complexity of the past and present

To summarise it in one word, all our discussions deal with COMPLEXITY.

They highlight that history is complex because it is composed of multiple narratives and perspectives which are then interwoven together to create diverse and pluralistic² societies composed of people with multilayered individual identities. Not only this: how we help develop the “necessary attitudes, dispositions, and ways of thinking in students to allow them to meaningfully engage with diverse perspectives from and about the past is (also) highly complex”³.

¹ With the help of an automatic translator, we have done for our members (<https://euroclio.eu/association/members/>)

² For a definition of pluralism, please see <https://www.pluralism.ca/who-we-are/#what-is-pluralism>

³ Bridget Martin, [Integrating Multiperspectivity in the History Classroom](#), published on the Council of Europe website on 5 August 2022.

While multiperspectivity and the complexity of the past are not a new subject⁴, historiography and pedagogy have evolved in the last few years, growing to encompass new methodologies and teaching strategies that can help us and our students meaningfully navigate this complexity.

In Vilnius, we will take stock of these new approaches and reflect on key questions such as:

- How is the complexity of history tackled around Europe and the world?
- How can we best identify complex histories and help our students understand them?

Our methodology focuses:

This year, we have decided to identify three methodological approaches to spotlight throughout the conference. The past can be unpacked in a variety of ways, all suited for different classrooms, contexts, and historical events. During the Annual Conference, you will be able to attend workshops and sessions that use the following methodological approaches:

- Dialogue, debate, and discussion in the classroom
- Tackling controversial topics
- Questioning

Dialogue, debate, and discussion in the classroom

History is not the past. It is an academic discipline that seeks to understand the past. History is always contested, with discussion and debate at its heart. While there may be agreement about certain established facts; there is rarely consensus about what these facts mean. At times, however, history as taught in school can appear to be a fixed body of knowledge. Classrooms where there is discussion, debate and dialogue are those where students learn that there are many valid and evidence-based opinions, giving them the opportunity to participate in such weighing of ideas. Ultimately, this allows students to learn how to develop their own views and that their own voice also counts.⁵

Tackling controversial topics

In a time of growing division, where intolerance creates an “us-versus-them” attitude among social groups, it is essential for students to learn how to deal with controversial subjects, and how to cope with a variety of viewpoints and disagreements. By dealing with controversies in a safe learning environment (the classroom), pupils can develop important skills that they will then carry with themselves for the rest of their lives, ultimately understanding and fostering democracy and democratic processes.

⁴ The [EuroClio Manifesto](#) in its 2015 revision focuses on multiperspectivity, as do most of our current and past projects, for example.

⁵ See the [Learning to Disagree Teachers' Guide](#) for more details

Questioning

By asking questions, and choosing to ask particular types of questions, teachers are modelling the discipline of history to their learners. They are, in essence, teaching them to ask the sorts of questions that historians ask. Historians ask questions all the time. They use the fragments that remain of the past as evidence to answer historical questions. The types of questions that are asked result in different answers from the past, often referred to as different interpretations of the past. Sometimes, the same question can yield different answers, perhaps because different fragments of the past are used to create an evidence-based answer, and/or because one historian has different perspectives and concerns from another. This also implies that historical narratives change over time: questions which seem pertinent at one time might not be relevant in new or different contexts. Asking questions is fundamental to 'doing history' and to do history we need to learn how to ask effective questions.⁶

What will you learn?

In this conference and international training course, you will learn more about how to help your students to meaningfully unpack the past. You will be challenged to think about what topics are controversial in your local context, how to disagree respectfully in a classroom environment, and how to model good questions to help your pupils become inquisitive learners. Through lectures, panels, workshops, interactive sessions and on-site learning you will get more insights in the topic "the Complexity of History" in general and specifically in the current context of the Baltic region. You will be trained in ready-to-use strategies, methods and materials you can apply in your own teaching.

The Conference will result in:

- A collection of strategies and approaches to help our pupils unpack the past, using the three methodologies spotlighted across the conference
- A public conference report
- A series of recorded sessions, shared on EuroClio's YouTube channel
- Increased knowledge, skills, and competences of conference participants
- Strengthening of cross-border cooperation among teachers and teachers' associations

⁶ For more information, keep your eyes peeled for our upcoming Teachers' Guide on The Art of Questioning!