The relevance of History to students: How to improve it?

Arie Wilschut

1. Introduction.

In documents describing standards for history teaching in Western countries, connecting the past to the present and the future is frequently being regarded as a means to prepare students for their future role as citizens in society (ACARA 2015; DFE 2013; NCHS 1996; SLO 2016; Seixas & Morton 2013; VGD 2006). As a rule, history’s contributions to citizenship are expressed in terms of general goals of history teaching expounded in the preambles of these curriculum documents. In most of the more specific content descriptions, however, systematic elaborations of meaningful links between the past, the present and the future are largely absent. Content standards focus almost entirely on understanding the past and learning historical thinking skills as aims in themselves. This is reinforced by high-stakes tests emphasizing the acquisition of factual knowledge described in the standards (Saye & SSIRC 2013; Stern 2010). There is, therefore, a discrepancy between general goals explicating the value of history beyond school and specific learning objectives focusing on “value-within-content”, i.e., the value of certain content knowledge in view of mastering more content knowledge (Francis 2014). Apparently, developers of history curricula assume that studying the past yields insights into the present and the future as a matter of course, and they take knowledge transfer beyond school for granted without any explicit learning activities directed at achieving this aim.

* The first two sections of this article are quoted from: van Straaten et al. 2018: 102-111. Table 1 was added from Wilschut 2013.
Research suggests that such expectations may not be justified. According to Haeberli (2005), students may develop either an “intimate” or an “external” relationship with history. Students of the “intimate” type enjoy history and consider it useful in view of their understanding of the world and of their own lives, while students of the “external” type have a much more negative attitude and hardly see the benefits of studying the past. The latter type is probably much more numerous among secondary school students than the first, as indeed appeared to be the case in Haeberli’s (2005) study. Research has shown that 14-year-old students in countries like Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands tend to think that history is «dead and gone and has nothing to do with my present life» (Angvik & von Borries 1997, B26). Dutch secondary students find history significantly less useful than English language, economics and mathematics (Wilschut 2013; see Table 1). Several studies indicate that students in England and North America have limited views on the purposes and benefits of history and struggle to explain the point of studying the past (Barton & Levstik 2011; Biddulph & Adey 2003; Foster, Ashby & Lee 2008; Harris & Reynolds 2014; Haydn & Harris 2010; VanSledright 1997; Zhao & Hoge 2005). All of this implies that there are ample reasons for an active attitude among teachers to promote the relevance of history by means of linking the past to the present and the future.

Table 1. Comparative research into the perception of school subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Not difficult</th>
<th>Interesting</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research among more than 500 7th and 10th grade students of ten secondary schools in the Netherlands. Mean values on five point scales, implying that 3.0 is the break-even point. Each subscale tested by 8 items, a total of 32 items, out of which 16 negatively and 16 positively formulated. Source: Wilschut 2013, 39.
2. **Relevance of history.**

We define relevance of history as «allowing students to recognize and experience what history has to do with themselves, with today’s society and their general understanding of human existence» (Wilschut, van Straaten & van Riessen 2013, 36). This description stems from three types of theoretical sources: (1) educational philosophy on meaningful education, (2) constructivist educational theory on meaningful learning, and (3) historical philosophy on historical consciousness and historical thinking in relation to the temporal dimension of human existence.

2.1. Educational philosophy.

The first category of literature yields overall goals for meaningful education, including history education (e.g., Biesta 2010; Pring 2005; Winch 2006). Three main functions of education are commonly distinguished: qualification, socialization and subjectification.

**Qualification** entails that education should prepare students to accomplish something later on in their lives, e.g. exercising a profession or participating in political life. History can play a role in qualifying students, because it may enhance their political literacy, for example by means of studying the origins of political ideas or by means of acquiring the requisite vocabulary for understanding political phenomena and processes; mastering historical thinking skills may also enhance students’ ability to develop and substantiate opinions with fact-based arguments and qualify them to participate in political and social discourses (Barton & Levstik 2004; Davis 2009; Jordanova 2006).

**Socialization** implies that students are initiated into societal structures whose traditions, rules, values and norms they have to become familiar with in order to function as citizens. History obviously has an eminently socializing effect. It provides narratives for nation-building and collective-memories approaches which can be powerful tools for cultural acclimation of young people, in particular the younger generations of newcomers (VanSledright 2008; Wertsch 2002). It teaches students where institutions, traditions and dominant ways of thinking originate from and why it may be
worthwhile to uphold or rather to contest them. Students learn how society has developed historically, how to grasp processes of change and continuity in past and present societies, how society operates and what is needed for successful civic participation and action (Gies 2004; Stearns 2000; Stricker 1992). History sheds light on the origins and development of human culture over long spans of time. Historiography implies reproducing “culture” which is thus transferred to future generations. The activities of critically analyzing primary sources and shaping plausible images of the past also socialize students into the rules and standards that apply in the academic world (Wineburg 1991).

Subjectification means that students develop their own identities based on values, ideals and beliefs which make them unique persons vis-à-vis the communities to which they belong (family, ethnic group, religious community, etc.). Learning about the history of these and other communities enables students to reflect on the traditions, customs and beliefs that have shaped their personality, or to which they might wish to oppose. Students also have personal experiences, which are usually remembered as an ongoing story shaping a person into an individual. Temporal continuity “identifies” a person: without a past, without memorized experiences, developing a personal identity is inconceivable (Ishige 2005). Finally, through the study of history students encounter all sorts of people with whom they have to “communicate” in order to make sense of the past; studying the lives of others may result in a better understanding of oneself (Southgate 2013; Wineburg 2010).

2.2. Constructivist learning theory.

Constructivist learning theory dissuades rote learning and focuses on active construction of knowledge and knowledge transfer to extracurricular contexts (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih & Moss 2013). Meaningful learning is nurtured if students are emotionally engaged and relate new information to prior knowledge, personal needs, interests and goals (Novak 2002). Linking subject matter to students’ needs increases its relevance and may also positively influence students’ motivation (Frymier & Shulman 1995; Muddiman & Frymier 2009; Pintrich 2003). “Authentic pedagogy” propagates in-
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Inquiry-based instruction on disciplinary ideas and emphasizes learning outcomes beyond successful performing in school (Newmann 1996; Saye & SSIRC 2013). Inquiry-based instruction may also meet one of the “basic needs in education” related to motivation, viz. the need for autonomy to decide on learning objectives and learning activities (Ryan & Deci 2000).

These constructivist learning principles are consistent with empirical research in the field of history education. For example, organizing the history curriculum around inquiry into enduring societal issues promotes student engagement and creates more opportunities for meaning making than a curriculum mainly focusing on learning facts and dates (Barton & Levstik 2011; Saye & SSIRC 2013). History becomes meaningful to students if the past is connected to the present and if students feel emotionally involved, for instance by examples of inhumane or heroic behavior of people in the past (Barton 2008). Real life issues may lead to effective construction of new knowledge if incidents and events in history are interpreted in the context of general conceptual frameworks, which facilitate relating new to already existing knowledge (Jadallah 2000).

2.3. Historical philosophy.

Historical philosophy on historical consciousness and historical thinking in relation to the temporal dimension of human existence emphasizes that history is about mankind in other times: very different from today, but also similar because people have always shared fundamental aspects of being human. Collingwood’s (1973) philosophy of history is principally based on the idea that time gaps can be overcome by “re-thinking” thoughts of historical agents, which is only possible because people in past and present share the essences of being human.

Dressel (1996) distinguishes eleven basic human experiences: space and time, religion, family, food, dealing with nature, the human body, sexuality, labor, conflicts, gender and encounters with strangers. The tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar in issues such as these defines one of the essential functions of the study of history; «[...] the strangeness of the past offers the possibility of surprise and amazement, of encountering people, places, and times
that spur us to reconsider how we see ourselves as human beings» (Wineburg 2010, 83).

Another fundamental aspect of history is the awareness of existing in time: people need to relate to a past and a future, because, endowed with memories and expectations, they cannot think otherwise than in terms of past, present and future (Friedman 2005; Kahneman 2011; Karlsson 2011; Rüsen 2004). The past permeates the present in the form of various narratives to which people must learn to relate. According to Rüsen (2005), relationships with these narratives exist in different modes, such as taking the past as an example to follow literally or dealing with the past critically by seeing the present in contrast with the past. The most developed of Rüsen’s (2005) modes is, what he calls, «genetic historical consciousness», implying that one is fully aware of the fact that the past is always viewed from a contemporary perspective and that processes of change are inherent in human existence, including one’s own variability over time.

2.4. Three objectives of relevant history teaching.

The three theoretical sources offer various angles to approaching the concept of relevance of history. What they have in common is the importance of constructing and using narratives that may create meaning in societal and educational contexts. Historical philosophy shows how people construct narratives that can give meaning to human existence, educational philosophy shows how these narratives are to be connected to the development of personal and societal identities, and constructivist learning theory shows how meaningful knowledge can originate from personal experiences, real life issues and focusing on generic concepts rather than specific facts and dates. Based on these insights, we distinguish three objectives of relevant history teaching (van Straaten, Wilschut & Oostdam 2016):

- Building a personal identity: seeing oneself as an individual with a personal past and developing one’s own values, opinions and ideals vis-à-vis those of the historically shaped communities to which one belongs (subjectification).
- Becoming a citizen: understanding the origins of social institutions, traditions, values and norms and enhancing political
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literacy in order to function as a citizen in society (qualification and socialization).

- Understanding the human condition: becoming aware of one’s own historicity and supplementing one’s experiences with past approaches to human issues.

3. **Putting relevant history teaching into practice.**

The three objectives mentioned above may be put into practice in history teaching along the following lines. From the point of view of educational philosophy relevant history teaching focuses on teaching

- to qualify as professionals and *as citizens of democratic societies*;
- to *become members of society*, by means of knowing its culture, its traditions and its values;
- to know and *develop themselves as unique individuals*.

From the point of view of constructivist learning theory, relevant history teaching should enable students to

- apply and use previously acquired knowledge; this implies *teaching general concepts* instead of specific facts and *teaching how to make comparisons* between different situations in the past and in the present;
- use their own experiences: connect history to *the world outside school*, the world today.

From the point of view of historical theory relevant history teaching concentrates on the use of history to help creating conscious narratives about past, present and future *that give meaning to human existence*.

In order to put all of this into practice, three pedagogical strategies may be employed. The first is drawing historical analogies, which implies comparing analogical situations in the past with each other in order to trace similarities and differences. In this way, learning history focuses on learning objectives beyond the facts and searches
for meaningful insights that may be derived from knowledge about the past. The second is trying to connect the past to the present and the future, for example by challenging students to make predictions about what might happen next, based on their knowledge of what happened before. This makes students reflect on the use of historical knowledge to understand the world of today and tomorrow and to think about processes of change that influence these worlds. The third is focusing on «enduring human issues» or «essential questions» (McTighe & Wiggins 2013). These are questions that are relevant to any human being, such as: how can we cope with international conflicts (war and peace), how do we deal with inequality and poverty, or how have humans in time provided food, shelter and energy?

3.1. Historical analogies.

Comparing two or more situations in the past is intellectually challenging for students, because it makes them think beyond the facts. In order to make meaningful comparisons, they must be able to discern categories or criteria for comparison. This implies that they must be able to deal with abstract concepts and analyze situations with the help of conceptual frameworks. For example: if students compare a number of situations of refugees in the past, they should be able to analyze these using concepts like “cultural differences”, “economic push and pull factors”, “religious (in)tolerance”, “political oppression”, “persecution”, and the like. In this way they can not only discern differences and commonalities, but also think more deeply about the phenomenon of refugees which might lead to more distanced and critical attitudes towards all too easily expressed opinions about this matter.

An example of this strategy might be challenging students to compare two situations in which there has been a certain degree of unity within Europe, viz. the time of the Roman Empire and the time of the European Union. The Empire and the Union might be compared from several points of view, e.g. the political and military situation, the economic situation, or cultural aspects like cities and languages. One aspect the Empire and the Union share is the pressure from immigrants from outside. In this context, the question might be asked: *Did the Roman Empire collapse because of the pressure of immigrants, or did the Empire flourish through the influx of new people? Or both? And what does this imply...*
for the situation of the European Union today? In this context, students could study the Roman situation regarding the aspects of

- granting citizenship;
- the use of “allies” (socii) for border defense;
- the Greek influence affecting Roman identity.

In view of the first aspect, they might conclude that granting citizenship was to a certain extent necessary, because the number of citizens of Rome was simply too small to control an empire; they might study examples of successful integration, such as emperors like Hadrian whose family originated from Spain. They might also conclude that the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of Caracalla (212 AD) did not *per se* result in an ideal situation, because it also marked the beginning of a troubled third century. With respect to the role of allies on the border, there are successful and less successful examples, and the case might be made that the strong position of a number of Germanic tribes (like the Franks) in the later Roman Empire also created a basis for their taking control of the western Empire in the fifth century. The study of the famous quote by Horace that «captive Greece captured her rude conqueror» and complaints by several Romans about the excessive Greek influence in Roman culture and society, as well as study of the numerous philhellenes among the Romans, may lead to reflections about cultural influence and cultural domination. As a conclusion of a project like this, students might be confronted with questions like: How does this knowledge affect your views on the European Union today? What are important differences? What are parallels? In this way, studying Roman history might appear surprisingly relevant to students who do not by themselves see the point of concentrating on the lives and culture of people from two thousand years ago.

Another example of studying analogies is comparing the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 with the possible outbreak of a Third World War in 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis put the world into a situation of anxious suspense for a period of two weeks. For reasons of space, we shall not describe this example as extensively as the one about the Roman Empire. Aspects which might be drawn into the comparison of 1914 and 1962 are: the roles of political leaders (emperors like Wilhelm II and Nicholas II versus Kennedy and Khrushchev), the roles of alliances (Triple Entente and Quadruple Alliance versus NATO.
and Warsaw Pact), the roles of mentalities (thoughts about war and peace and ideas about the realities of war in 1914 and in 1962), and the role of international peace initiatives (The Hague Conferences and the UN Security Council). All of this could result in discussing questions like: Could the result in 1914 or 1962 have been different? Was a third world war imaginable and what would have been the consequence? Is a third world war still imaginable? This treatment of the subject matter may produce useful insights and reflections about international politics in general, also in view of the present global political situation.

3.2. Past, present and future scenario’s.

By ending the last example in the previous section with the question whether a future third world war would still be imaginable, we already turned our attention to future scenario’s. Acknowledging the fact that history cannot really be used to predict the future, it is also true that experience from the past is the only source humans can employ to have some idea about what the world might be heading for. This in itself is an insight worth pursuing, because many students naively think would rather deal with the future than with the past, not realizing that there is no other way to deal with the future than studying the past.

An example of inducing students to think about future scenario’s might be confronting them with the question: Given the history of the Soviet Union and the communist countries in eastern Europe, what will be the future of North Korea, China and Cuba? Students may be given the assignment to write a scenario about, e.g., the China’s future and devote their essay to the question: what will China look like ten years from now? They would then have to think about parallels and differences: what happened to the Soviet Union in 1990, and what kind of explanations are there for this course of events? Is it likely that something like that would repeat itself in China? Given the fact that many people in China nowadays have a better life than some decades ago, how likely is it that they would want to change their system? What do people want most: freedom and democracy, or economic prosperity? A comparison with the situation in North Korea would also be interesting in this respect, in view of the economic circumstances North Koreans have to cope with.
Another topic which might be interesting for looking at the future in view of the past, is energy transitions. The world faces an important energy transition at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but not for the first time. During the Industrial Revolution, the world switched from renewable energy sources (wind, sun, human and animal muscular power) to non-renewable fuels. The interesting point about this, is that the next transition will have to take the opposite direction: from non-renewable to renewable. This gives rise to questions like: What did the world look like before the energy transition? What influenced the origins of energy transitions in the past? What have been the consequences of the transition of the Industrial Revolution? Will it be possible “to turn back”? Or is it turning back at all? In this way, studying the Industrial Revolution acquires an unexpected relevance for current problems, and students may be challenged to think about the question: How does knowledge of the past energy transition affect my thoughts about the future?

3.3. Enduring human issues.

The strategy of enduring human issues focuses on experiences shared by all humans in all periods and circumstances, thus giving rise to «essential questions» (McTighe & Wiggins 2013). What exactly McTighe and Wiggins mean by this type of question is not easily caught in a short definition. They talk about «questions that are not answerable with finality in a brief sentence; questions whose aim it is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions – including thoughtful student questions – not just pat answers». They provide the following characteristics for essential questions which

- are open-ended; that is, they typically will not have a single, final, and correct answer;
- are thought-provoking and intellectually engaging, often sparking discussion and debate;
- call for higher-order thinking, such as analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction; they cannot be effectively answered by recall alone;
- point toward important, transferable ideas within (and sometimes across) disciplines;
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- raise additional questions and spark further inquiry;
- require support and justification, not just an answer;
- recur over time; that is, the questions can and should be revisited again and again.

Typical essential questions for history are questions like “Why are there so many wars if almost everyone prefers peace to war?”, or “Should governments provide for all necessities of life of their citizens or should their powers and responsibilities be limited (to securing the safety of the country and upholding public order)?”.

An example of an enduring human issue that can be studied in history lessons is the issue of paying taxes. In all developed human societies, taxes have always been levied by kings, nobles and governments, giving rise to a lot of debate and turmoil. This phenomenon can be studied from the point of view of the essential questions: Why do people pay taxes? Which factors influence the imposition of taxes and the willingness to pay them? What is a just taxing system? These questions could be studied in a number of different historical contexts, such as:

- Roman ladies, led by Hortensia, refusing to pay taxes for wars conducted by men (42 BC). Hortensia’s speech, as it was reported by the historian Appian, speaks volumes: «You have already deprived us of our fathers, our sons, our husbands, and our brothers, whom you accused of having wronged you; if you take away our property also, you reduce us to a condition unbecoming our birth, our manners, our sex […]. Why should we pay taxes when we have no part in the honours, the commands, the state-craft, for which you contend against each other with such harmful results? “Because this is a time of war”, do you say? When have there not been wars, and when have taxes ever been imposed on women, who are exempted by their sex among all mankind?» (Appian, The Civil Wars, IV, 32-33).
- English barons only permit their king to levy taxes on strict conditions, as outlined in the Magna Carta of 1215 AD, which in due time gave rise to the development of the English Parliament.
- American colonists demand their part in government in exchange for their paying taxes, and refuse to pay them without
proper representation ("no taxation without representation"), thus inducing what was to become the American War of Independence (1775 AD).

- Nineteenth century European governments, after the liberal revolutions of 1830 and 1848, introduce voting rights for representative bodies in their states, but limit these rights almost everywhere by means of a census: the one that pays (more) taxes, will have the right to vote.

- Twentieth century governments after the Second World War increasingly apply "progressive tax tariffs", which means that the higher incomes not only pay more, but also pay a greater share of their income compared to lower incomes, in order to level down all too large differences in income: taxes as a means of enhancing social justice.

Studying these examples can only be done from the point of view of a number of essential questions, like:

- Is there a connection between the amount of taxes one pays and the amount of political power and influence one is entitled to (the one who pays, decides)?
- Can taxes be used to oppress and bully people?
- Do people have the right to refuse to pay taxes if they are not satisfied with the purposes for which the money is being spent?
- Does paying taxes imply a form of solidarity between the richer and poorer citizens?
- To what extent do authorities have the right to interfere with a citizen’s right to private property?
- Should the levying of taxes be a means to promote social justice?
- Should governments use the levying of taxes to conduct an economic policy?

Like in the examples of the other strategies to promote relevant history teaching, the strategy of enduring human issues requires a conceptual, comparative approach of history teaching. Rather than studying the precise details of each historical situation, students
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should try to reach beyond the facts towards the underlying level of the issues that are really at stake, on the basis of which one situation can be compared with the other and with the present. This will give them the opportunity to see why studying history is important. In the case of the levying of taxes, for example, it will make them think about the principles behind tax policies today and ask questions around present realities which seem to be self-evident, but, on second thoughts, could also be very different from what they actually are.

4. How successful have these strategies proven to be?

In a number of experiments, the strategies described above have been tested among Dutch secondary students. One example is the application of “past, present and future scenario” after studying the Cold War in regular history lessons. Participants were 51 ninth grade students from one secondary school. They were given the assignment to write a future scenario for communist China based on their knowledge of the Cold War and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union in 1990. The participants filled out the so-called Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS), a questionnaire designed to assess the extent to which students deem history relevant from the point of view of their own identity, their role as citizens and for their insight into the human condition, as described in section 2 of this article (van Straaten, Wilschut & Oostdam 2018). They were interviewed in dyads about their experiences with the assignment. Some of their remarks in the interviews were: «When I see that assignment I cannot think: “well, I will write that down in a minute”. You have to dive into the subject». «I do think that you learn from it, because you have to think more than with a normal history question. With a question you copy the answer from the book, but for writing a future scenario you really have to study».

In general, they were more positive about the uses of the past than can usually be expected from ninth grade students: «The past teaches the present lessons». «History helps us to make correct decisions». «History shows what the future may be like».
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These impressions from the interviews were confirmed by the results of the RHMS (see Table 2). An increase in the relevance appraisals was detected for all three categories, the largest increase occurring in the category of “humanity” and the smallest in the category of “identity”, which is in line with the general feeling of students that, if history influences society and humankind, the influence on themselves as persons cannot be that great. In all three categories, the appraisal of the relevance of history after the intervention exceeded the break-even point of 2.5.

Table 2. Pre- and post-test results of the RHMS among 51 ninth grade students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-scale</th>
<th>Pre-test (SD) N=51</th>
<th>Post-test (SD) N=51</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>2.37 (.64)</td>
<td>2.62 (.47)</td>
<td>+ 0.186</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>2.43 (.49)</td>
<td>2.67 (.53)</td>
<td>+ 0.249</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>2.57 (.53)</td>
<td>2.84 (.50)</td>
<td>+ 0.272</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores on 4-points scales, implying that 2.5 is the break-even point.

** Significant difference, p < 0.005.

A second experiment was conducted on a large scale among tenth to twelfth grade students of 24 Dutch secondary schools: 460 in an experiment group and 289 in a control group. The experiment groups used the strategy of historical analogies combined with the strategy of “enduring human issues”. They studied five examples of refugees in the past, compared with the present refugee problem in the European Union. The five examples were taken from quite diverse episodes in history, like Jewish refugees fleeing towards the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, or Belgian
fugitives at the outbreak of the First World War moving towards the neutral Netherlands, or Cubans on the move towards the United States after the Castro revolution. Also, in this case, the RHMS was used as a pre- and post-test, and interviews were conducted with twenty participants in dyads. An extra measuring instrument was a questionnaire with 19 opinion-statements about the present refugee problem in Europe and the Netherlands, also used as a pre- and post-test to see whether studying history would influence students’ opinions about a current problem in the present. The experiment group used a standard framework of conceptual questions to compare the situations of refugees in the past and the present (see Table 3).

The interview results suggested that some students found the comparison between a number of historical situations useful in view of the current problems, for example:

Student 1 (female, 17-year-old): «I found it interesting that there were so many refugees in proportion to the population».

Interviewer: Which example do you think of?

Student 1: «Almost all I think. For example, there were many southern Dutch and Belgians».

Student 2 (male, 18-year-old): «If you look at the 14 million Germans driven out of eastern Europe after the Second World War, there were so many. More than 60 million people lived in Germany, it seems very few, but 14 million is still a lot».

Student 1: «Now there are very few actually, and we make quite a fuss about it».

Others would stress the differences between then and now, like:

Student 1 (female, 17-year-old): «But today it is all very different, also with regard to language, it’s just totally different. Take the Jews in the Netherlands, you could still understand them and you did not see a real difference. But now it’s just all different. Larger and more spread throughout Europe. It is of course a very big difference, the Belgians and the people of Syria. Culturally and economically. I think that’s going to cause more damage».

Student 2 (male, 16-year-old): «Belgium is our neighbor, but Syrians come from very far. They have very different habits, speak
a different language, have different values. They also have a different religion. I think that if the refugees would have had the same culture, everyone here would have been more hospitable».

Table 3. Conceptual framework of questions used in the refugee experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>general</th>
<th>political</th>
<th>economical</th>
<th>sociocultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are the numbers of refugees large in relation to the population size of the host country?</td>
<td>Do people flee because of political circumstances?</td>
<td>Do people flee because of economic circumstances?</td>
<td>Are relationships between refugees and natives affected by religious differences or similarities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the refugees intend to settle permanently?</td>
<td>Do human rights and humanity play a role in receiving refugees?</td>
<td>Are refugees profitable for the host country? Do natives feel economically disadvantaged?</td>
<td>Do differences in behaviors, habits and customs play a role?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asked about the use of the conceptual framework of questions, students replied:

Student 1 (female, 16-year-old): «I think that comparing the past to the present is good, because I find it more interesting when it is about the present. The ordinary lessons are only about the past and now you make comparisons with the present, which I think is better». 

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Student 2 (female, 16-year-old): «If I compare things from the past with the present I remember it better, so if I would not have used the conceptual framework, I would know almost nothing».

Student 1: «Yes, that framework helped a lot. Because you can keep the economic, political and social issues apart. It helps, you remember it better, because you go deeper into it, because you look at the political and economic side».

The results of the opinion statements questionnaire showed that the experiment group had changed its opinions to a certain degree on ten out of the nineteen statements, while the comparison group that had not studied the refugees in past and present in the same period of time only changed its opinions on two out of the nineteen statements.

The results of the RHMS showed a slight increase in the appraisals of the relevance of history. The smallness of the increase can be explained partly by the fact that these students, as opposed to the group of 51 reported above, belonged to a higher age category which usually better sees the point of studying history to begin with. This implies that there was less room for improvement in this case. Nonetheless we detected small, but significant improvements in the appraisals of history of the experiment group in two instances: relevance with respect to the identity and relevance with respect to the insight in the human condition. In the control group that filled out the RHMS at the same moments as the experiment group without having studied the refugee problem, there was no significant change in the appraisals of the relevance of history.

We conclude that applying our pedagogical approaches to a more relevant history education can be realized in practice and positively influence students’ appraisals of the relevance of history.
Table 4. Results of the RHMS-measurements in the refugee experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre-test (SD)</th>
<th>Post-test (SD)</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 460 / N = 289</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>3.16 (.86)</td>
<td>3.31 (.90)</td>
<td>+ 0.15</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.16 (.89)</td>
<td>3.16 (.91)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>3.84 (.88)</td>
<td>3.88 (.89)</td>
<td>+ 0.04</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.69 (.84)</td>
<td>3.63 (.85)</td>
<td>- 0.06</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>.243</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>4.01 (.76)</td>
<td>4.07 (.79)</td>
<td>+ 0.06</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>.029*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.87 (.85)</td>
<td>3.85 (.80)</td>
<td>- 0.02</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>.806</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores on 6-points scales, implying that 3.5 is the break-even point.

** Significant difference, p<0.005. * Significant difference, p<0.05.
References


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