

## How to teach history in an interesting way? Methods and inspirations

History is a story. By listening to the events that shaped our culture, we learn to understand it, reflect on it and create the reality we live in from it. As technology develops, the way we tell stories about the world is changing. There are new opportunities to create narratives that build engagement. We can tell a story no longer only orally, but also using graphic or audiovisual tools.

In the Digital Historytelling project, relying on new technologies, we looked for interesting and engaging forms of storytelling about the past. Based on collaboration with practitioners, using innovative methods and listening to the voice of female teachers, we created materials that support the teaching of history and other humanities subjects. In developing the materials, we were inspired by effective learning methods, combining them with what technology has to offer.

### Needs and challenges

Our research (focus groups, surveys, pilot of materials) in Poland, Spain and Belgium shows that male and female teachers see the advantages of using new technologies in teaching. However, some need support in using digital tools. At the same time, those teaching in all countries stressed that it is important that male and female students are not just passive recipients of the content being conveyed, but actively research the story and learn from it.

We wanted the materials that we created to take into account the needs of learners, but also to be flexible, easy to use and adapted to the digital skills of different audiences. The new tools should be easy for teachers to use, engaging for young people and tailored to the content needs, i.e. taking into account the content of the curriculum.

An important contribution to our work on educational tools was provided by the pilot, during which we tested our proposals and examined what teachers needed to create educational materials and design attractive lessons themselves. Here are the key findings from the pilot:

1. The curriculum look different in each of the three countries and the teaching styles are also different. Therefore, the testers wanted the methodological aids to be flexible. Some teachers did not stick to the scenarios we proposed, but creatively adapted them to their audience groups. The flexibility concerned both the content (adding new historical events or characters, supplementing the materials we had prepared with other visual or audiovisual suggestions) and the form (changing the order of the exercises, combining different parts of Kolb's cycle, lengthening or shortening the individual parts).

2. We noted how important it was for teachers to make the materials as engaging as possible for students. Those testing said that the games helped build engagement. We decided to reinforce this component, which appealed to the majority of those testing the materials.
3. Teachers most often do not have unlimited time resources to prepare for lessons. During the testing, there were some voices that helped us to see that simplicity and short time for lesson preparation were just as important as the attractiveness of the materials.
4. A focus group study we additionally conducted among Polish teachers showed that it is important to change the way we think about experiential learning. Active methods, which allow pupils to explore a topic freely, are perceived by some people as mere enrichment of the lesson. We want to show that they are not so much an interesting add-on as an essential, even immanent part of the educational process. In encouraging teachers to use active methods, we base our methodological aids on the philosophy of experiential learning.
5. The overwhelming majority of teachers do not teach remotely or hybrid lessons. In schools in all countries, desktop learning has taken a back seat for good. Although during the COVID-19 pandemic teachers became familiar with digital tools, most are not experts in new technologies. Therefore, the proposed digital tools must not be complicated and difficult to use. For many people, working with paper is more comfortable, especially in a stationary setting. Knowing this, we decided to create the material in the form of a PDF document, which gives freedom – allowing to both work interactively with the course and print it out.

Testing the materials created therefore showed us that the most useful material would be one that would give the teachers clear and simple guidelines, would not be time-consuming, and at the same time would allow them to come up with creative solutions adapted to different groups and different cultural and social contexts. We decided to base our material on the philosophy of the Experiential Learning Model using digital storytelling tools and educational games. At the same time, knowing that these methods are new to many teachers, we decided to create a DigHist course that would take them step-by-step through the process of constructing their own material, using a tool borrowed from the business model canva.

The materials tested in the pilot relate to three historical topics that we have chosen based on previous [research](#). We want the DigHist course to help teachers create similar scenarios on any topic. Therefore, we think of it not as a one-off course, but as a process that can be gone through many times, using canva to create different lessons.

Most online courses rely on assimilating knowledge using visuals or short texts and then testing it. In order to remain in line with the experiential learning model, we decided that our course would not become a mere collection of interesting practices or methods. Rather, we want it to immerse you in the process of such learning and provoke you to find your own new learning solutions using the methods we propose.

## Ready-to-use materials – our methodology

Based on a survey of male and female teachers in three countries, we have created a list of values that are important when creating materials:

- **Flexibility** – materials can be quickly adapted to a specific context, such as the curriculum in different countries.
- **Simplicity and accessibility** – the methods we propose are inspired by technology, which does not mean that they require complex technical knowledge. When designing them, you can start simply with a piece of paper and a pen. We have tried to ensure that the lessons take as little time as possible to prepare and that the methods can also be used by teachers with minimal technological knowledge, so we explain everything in detail and show simple tools.
- **Engagement** – we propose a way of creating lessons and presenting educational content that is engaging for young people and relates to the technologies they use every day.
- **Innovation** – we have been inspired by the latest trends in education when choosing methods, while relying on proven effectiveness through experience and research. The materials will help you develop your own innovative lessons on a specific topic and support your creativity.

The materials created in this way allow teachers to incorporate elements of gamification into education, put emphasis on reflection and emotional engagement, enable effective knowledge transfer and provoke important questions about understanding not only history, but also the present, which is actively created by pupils.

The materials are based on the educational philosophy of Alice and David Kolb. We have adapted their method, originally created for adult education, to the needs and conditions of school education. [The DigHist course](#) allows teacher to prepare a lesson that incorporates all four elements of Kolb's cycle: from experience, reflection and drawing theoretical conclusions, to talking about the possible use and processing of the knowledge gained.

Designing immersive learning experiences seems to be key in engaging young people in learning about history. Here we have opted for the tried and tested gamification and image interpretation, the medium that young people are more likely to use. The lessons created through our course are designed to put the students in charge and place the teacher in the role of asking questions, deepening reflection and supporting independent learning.

From the research carried out in the pilot, we found out that in all the countries, teachers often use expository methods in imparting historical knowledge. In order to support them in interesting teaching, we used digital storytelling tools. They can be used flexibly, e.g. to create illustrations for the story being told or materials for flipped lesson. At the same time, such tools, by embedding historical knowledge in a digital environment, are a great support for remote or hybrid learning. They can also be used by pupils and students to acquire knowledge independently or to repeat it.

## What inspired us?

The School with Class Foundation is a Polish non-governmental organisation with extensive experience in supporting teachers. It focus on effective teaching methods and have been providing schools with interesting and tailored educational materials for years. In the Digital History project, it has joined forces with the Belgian museum BELvue, which is an expert in history education, and the Spanish organisation Smileundo, specialising in creating innovative digital tools and educational games. Thanks to our experiences and the voices of teachers from the three European countries (also on remote and hybrid education), we have prepared a package of materials that helps teach history and other humanities subjects in an innovative way.

Here is a description of the tools and methods that inspired us:

### A. Digital Digital storytelling – telling stories in a new way

Digital storytelling is a method that serves to tell stories using digital tools. It combines the power of storytelling, a traditional way of telling stories that has been present in business for years and is increasingly popular in education, with the effectiveness of digital narrative tools that easily attract audiences. Storytelling is one of the more effective educational methods, as it allows the audience to be emotionally involved and the message to be reinforced. In doing so, using one of the digital tools makes it even more effective in capturing the attention of students, for whom the world of technology is a natural environment. A story can be told not only with words, but also with images, videos, animations, maps or a visual representation of data or facts.

The most popular tools used in digital storytelling are:

- Timeline – a visual representation of historical events in chronological order that helps to understand the sequence and timing of these events. Timelines can exist in either a simple – linear – form or in a more complex form.
- Infographic – an illustration combining text, images and data. Its purpose is to present information in a clear and engaging way. Typically, infographics are presented as a single image or poster.
- Animation – dynamic visuals that bring characters, events and concepts to life through movement and storytelling. Animation allows to add an engaging and interactive element to historical narratives, but can require more time and effort to prepare compared to the other forms we offer.
- Narrative map – shows the connection between specific places and historical events. This allows pupils not only to know the geographical context of history, but also to better understand the dynamics of change over time and space. Narrative maps can vary in level of complexity: from simple diagrams showing key locations, to interactive maps with multimedia elements (requiring more advanced technical skills).
- Quiz – an interactive way of testing knowledge that engages pupils. It encourages active participation and consolidation of acquired knowledge. It can be designed to test understanding of key historical processes and give immediate feedback. It is also a tool for assessing learning outcomes.

## **B. Games – a way to build engagement**

Children and young people are keen to engage in online games. For many of them, a lesson that consists of reading a textbook is not very engaging, and the expository methods of conveying knowledge does not seem interesting. Gamification itself, or elements of it, are eagerly used in education to make the message more attractive and to build young people's involvement in the learning process. Playing games meets many of the needs of pupils: it promotes group work and a sense of belonging to a team, allows results to be seen quickly, enhances motivation, gives a sense of development and releases emotions, which are inherent in effective learning. With games, education turns into a dynamic process.

## **C. The flipped lesson method – empowering students**

It is based on scientifically validated theories about anticipatory learning and on contemporary knowledge about how people learn. Flipped learning requires the teacher to relinquish position as an all-knowing expert, who is entirely responsible for guiding the process and its outcome, in favour of a guiding role that helps, explains and supports learners. The teacher ceases to be the young person's only, or even primary, source of information. They prepare a starting point in the form of a package of materials and information and guidance for further independent knowledge acquisition.

This method, originally called flipped teaching, flipped lesson or flipped classroom, is increasingly being used worldwide. This lesson model is also becoming popular, as it involves young people in the process of acquiring knowledge and prepares them for self-education.

The flipped lesson is not about swapping teacher-student roles. It is a change in the pattern of the lesson: pupils master the topic independently at home before the lesson, and practically consolidate and practise it in class under the guidance of the teacher. The lesson is also an opportunity to develop and revise the knowledge that pupils have previously acquired independently. Before the young people start their individual or group research, the teacher usually briefly introduces the topic of the lesson and, together with them, defines the scope of the information they are looking for, possibly also indicating sources to be used. To work effectively with the flipped lesson method, teachers divide their activities into the following stages:

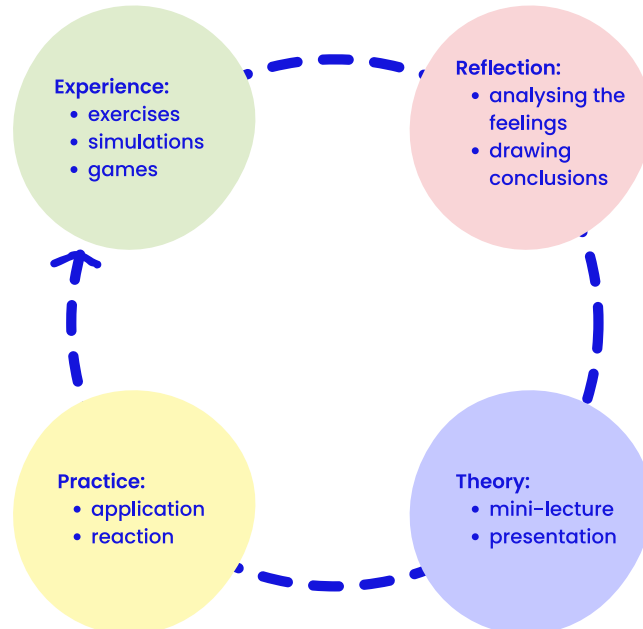
1. Planning the lesson and the process of preparing for it (teacher's work at home).
2. Preparation of materials for self-study and materials for exercises during lessons (teacher's work at home).
3. Introduce students to the topic, the problem question and the purpose of the activity (pre-lesson).
4. Giving students work to take home and pointing to sources or providing materials for self-study (lesson before).
5. Pupils' independent acquisition of knowledge on a given topic (pupils' work at home).

6. Organizing students' knowledge, verifying the information they have acquired and using it in practical, engaging tasks (lesson).
7. Discussing and summarising the topic and the process of acquiring knowledge and skills (lesson).

#### D. Experiential Learning Model – how to learn through experience

The Experiential Learning Model has been recognised as one of the most effective teaching methods for several decades. It was created by David and Alice Kolb, a theorists of teaching methods from the USA. It is mainly used in business and non-formal education, but it is also increasingly appearing in schools, helping teachers to create engaging lesson plans. It is a method that makes it possible to deliver engaging lessons because it emphasises the acquisition of knowledge through experience, reflection and practice. The Experiential Learning Model involves going through four successive phases:

1. **experience** – exercises, simulations, games, watching videos, visuals together, creating something, e.g. a poster, a song, etc;
2. **reflection** – analysing the feelings and drawing conclusions from the exercise;
3. **theory** – mini-lecture, presentation, reading or viewing and analysis of research, articles and scientific publications;
4. **practice (application)** – working out how the knowledge gained can be applied, how to relate it to events that may occur, how to find solutions and how to respond to situations that arise.



#### How to create materials for history lessons yourself? Important tips

1. **The purpose of a lesson** – seems like an obvious matter, but during our research we noticed that teachers more often focus on... the implementation of lesson topics than on the purpose. However, the objective and the topic are two separate issues. When formulating an objective, it is worth starting

with the question "What do I want to teach my students by implementing this topic, and why might it be important to them?".

2. **Narrative matters** – the way a story is told not only has an impact on student engagement, but more importantly, it helps them to better remember events and facts and shape the attitudes we care about. When preparing for a lesson, start by thinking about what the story you want to tell will be about. What values, attitudes or people does it tell about?
3. **Engaging young people is key.** Use tools that will allow them to 'get into' the story. These can be games, quizzes, infographics or online tools to help students learn more.
4. **Human stories are the most interesting** – understanding human motivations and needs allows us to build a connection with the people who created our culture, better understand abstract historical processes and develop empathy skills. When teaching about historical processes, stay close to human stories and the details that accompany them. Try to build in students an understanding of the motivations and needs that individuals pursued with such actions.
5. **Observe pupils** – check how they learn and what works for them. Strike a balance between storytelling (with expository methods) and empowering young people. Maybe you can discover a cool historical YouTube channel together? Maybe they can prepare their lesson and deliver it to another group?
6. **Experiment with technology to learn new and interesting ways to tell stories** in the digital world. You can start your adventure with digital storytelling by making a timeline related to a historical event of your choice. Play around with the tools. Before you move on to moments from history, you can ask students to create a digital timeline of selected events from their lives (e.g. the last school year). Use the tool we suggested for this and the tutorial we prepared for it (TimelineJS).
7. **Connect historical events to the everyday lives of pupils.** Showing the connection between the knowledge you are gaining and everyday life has a significant impact on motivation to learn. Think about how the historical processes you are discussing can interest young people and help them find their way in the modern world. Why should they know and understand the events discussed? How will this help them?

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