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### Connecting past, present and future

*The enhancement of the relevance of history for students*

van Straaten, D.

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## Chapter 2

### MAKING HISTORY RELEVANT TO STUDENTS BY CONNECTING PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: A FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

History teaching usually focuses on understanding the past as an aim in itself. Research shows that many students don't see the point of this and perceive history as not very useful. Yet history plays a major role in the orientation on the present and the future. If students fail to see this, the question arises whether this is due to a lack of explicit attention in history classes on the application of knowledge about the past to the present and the future. This article explores two questions: 1) If history is to be more relevant to students, what kind of objectives should play a central role in history teaching? 2) What kinds of pedagogical approaches align with these objectives in history teaching? The first question is answered by means of historical and educational theory. The second is answered by exploring a number of pedagogical approaches that have been described in the literature, as well as a small scale experiment conducted by the authors. This article aims at providing a basis for developing meaningful history curricula as well as for research into educational strategies which can be deployed to teach students how to make connections between past, present and future.

#### 2.1 Introduction

When in the spring of 2014 Russian troops took possession of the Crimea, it became apparent how important history's role in society can be. Protesters in Kiev held up signs portraying president Putin as Hitler and comparing the 'legitimate interests' in the Crimea claimed by Russia with those claimed by Nazi Germany in the Sudetenland in 1938. Political commentators referred to Prague in 1968 and Srebrenica in 1995 and other instances in which Western leaders had been fooled by dictators who supposedly only understood the language of force. Historians lectured that Ukraine may be seen as the cradle of the Russian Empire and explained that the Ukrainian people had always been the plaything of forces from East and West. History was thus called in to assess and explain the military invasion of the Russians in the Crimea and to predict that 'dictator' Putin would not give in unless the West would condemn his actions and stop him.

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Assessing, explaining, and predicting: three ways in which history can be socially relevant. Several descriptions of standards for history teaching seem to pay attention to these activities. The National History Standards in the United States (NCHS, 1996) for example describes the significance of history for the informed citizen and contains a section on ‘historical issues’ which requires students to analyse issues in the past with the purpose of understanding the present and take decisions for the future. The National Curriculum for England (DFE, 2013) refers to students’ understanding their own identity and the challenges of their time, while the German standards developed by the National Association of History Teachers (VGD, 2011) explicitly states that students should ‘orient on the present and future by reflection on history’ (p. 4, our translation). We find similar considerations in documents from the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada (Seixas & Morton, 2013; SLO, n.d.; VMOV, n.d.). In the detailed description of educational targets in all these documents, however, attention seems to be almost exclusively directed to knowledge and understanding of the past and to historical thinking as aims in themselves. The compilers of these documents seem to assume that studying the past will straightforwardly produce insights in the present and the future or skills to apply historical knowledge.

Whether that is true, is questionable. Research shows that many students consider history largely irrelevant, or if they think history is important, they struggle to explain why. An international comparative study in 1994 revealed that 14-year-old students in countries like Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands believed, to a greater extent than their European peers, that history ‘is dead and gone and has nothing to do with my present life’ (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997, p. B26). A recent study points out that Dutch high school students find history significantly less useful than English language, economics and mathematics (Wilschut, 2013), while several studies indicate that students in England and North America can hardly explain what history is good for (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Cutrara, 2012; Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Haydn & Harris, 2010; Morgan, 2010). When Lee (2004) asked students in Britain whether history would help in choosing a political party or deciding how to deal with race relations, less than a third thought that it would. In a survey by Haydn and Harris (2010), a very small number of students (3%) connected the usefulness of history to explanation of the present.

Apparently, there is a discrepancy between educational aims and students' perceptions about the usefulness of history. Haydn and Harris (2010) also showed that in schools where teachers paid attention to the purpose of history, students were better able to describe its relevance than students in schools where teachers left the purpose of history implicit. That would argue for education that systematically teaches the relevance of the past for the present. However, history curricula are usually designed to study past events by themselves and do not often explicitly aim at considering their contemporary relevance. In addition, teachers who wish to make history relevant to students cannot rely on much available pedagogical know-how. Since the introduction of history as a school subject in the nineteenth century, much has been said about the functions of history, but empirical research into methods to create meaningful relationships between past, present and future is scarce (Morgan, 2010). This may be due to the lack of consensus among educational researchers about the purposes of history education, in particular ways in which history can be socially relevant (Harris, Burn, & Wooley, 2014). During the last hundred years, many claims have been made about the benefits of history to create (either patriotic or critical-democratic) citizens, morally responsible human beings or individuals who are aware of their own ancestry and identity (Wilschut, 2010). In spite of this, the history curriculum still largely consists of chronologically ordered factual descriptions of past realities which are hardly meaningful to students. Quite a few historians, and history teachers in their wake, state that history cannot and should not be made useful or applicable and can never be used to say something about the future.

In this article we explore two questions: (1) If history is to be more relevant to students, what kind of objectives should play a central role in history teaching? (2) What kinds of pedagogical approaches align with these objectives in history teaching? Answering the first question does not have the intention of repeating the objectives already present in documents about standards for history teaching we discussed above, but to analyse the nature of the objectives for a type of history teaching which explicitly aims at making history relevant to students. For this purpose, historical and educational theory and philosophy will be used. The second question deals with an exploration of pedagogical approaches designed by experts to achieve these objectives.

The purpose of this endeavour is to create a base for more concrete attainment targets in this field, connected to concrete pedagogical approaches which may serve to make

history teaching more relevant. Once these targets and approaches are specified, empirical research can be conducted in order to measure the feasibility and effects of relevant history teaching and to weigh consequences for curriculum development. Before starting with the main questions, some clarity has to be created about what is meant by ‘relevance’ in history teaching.

## **2.2 Relevance in history teaching**

### **2.2.1 Significance and relevance**

In the literature on historical thinking one of the key concepts is ‘significance’. For example, it is one of the ‘big six’ Canadian historical thinking concepts (Seixas & Morton, 2013) and it appears in the general aims for history in the English National Curriculum (DFE, 2013), into which it was introduced in 1995 (Wrenn, 2011). The meaning of ‘significance’ has been described in different ways. For example, Phillips (2002), following Partington, measures the significance of historical events by the extent to which they affected lives of people in the past or the extent to which they can explain situations in the present. Counsell (2004) mentions five criteria: remarkable, remembered, resulting in change, resonant and revealing; something may be seen as remarkable by contemporaries or later generations, has at any time been part of collective memory, has had an impact on the long term, has been used as an analogy to something similar, or throws an explanatory light on some other aspect of the past.

These descriptions imply that significance may refer to two aspects: importance for developments and people in the past, or importance for the present. The importance of some historical phenomenon for people in the past or for historical developments refers to understanding the past as an aim in itself. Importance for the present, however, refers to the relevance of historical knowledge for today’s world. If this distinction is not clearly made, students may confuse different aspects of significance (Seixas, 1994). For example, when Canadian students were asked to name the three most important events of the last five hundred years, fifty percent referred to historical events that in their view determined the course of world history, such as the Second World War or the demise of communism. Others interpreted the task more personally, like the student who wondered why he had brown hair and where his ancestors came from. Another mentioned the ice

hockey final between Canada and the Soviet Union in 1972, which was won by Canada. 'I put that down because I love hockey. That's the most important thing that ever happened in hockey' (p. 296). The different interpretations of significance presented by students induced Seixas (1994) to conclude that further research would benefit from a clear conceptual delineation of the concept.

In his most recent publication, Seixas specifies four 'guideposts' for teaching significance (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Out of these four, there are three which clearly refer to the meaning of history for the present: 'revealing about issues in contemporary life', 'constructed through narrative', and 'varying over time and from group to group'. The aspect of importance for the historical development as such is also still present in a fourth guidepost: resulting in change for many people over a long period of time. An example of this could be the Black Death in Europe, which resulted in big changes for many people over a long period of time. This story however, though contemporary as a matter of course, is not necessarily meaningful to students today, unless it is studied from the perspective of what it reveals about human issues like sickness and health, religion and superstition or prejudices and discrimination. This perspective, however, would not meet the criterion of 'resulting in change', but the criterion 'revealing'.

For this reason, the concept of significance will not be used in this article. We prefer to use relevance, which exclusively refers to history's relations to the present and to the lives of students. We define relevance in the field of history education 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, p. 36).

### **2.2.2 Historical theory: past, present and future**

When asked whether history would be helpful in choosing a political party, one of the students interviewed by Lee (2004) gave a peculiar answer:

I would need to know how they had governed in the past and what rules they laid down when they were in power, and if they actually made use of them . . .  
(Interviewer: Would history help?) No. Because with time, parties have different MPs and over a 15 year period the whole party could have changed (p. 26).

What we see happening here, is that a student almost naturally uses the past to substantiate his answer, but when asked explicitly about history, he denies that it could be important. Human beings by nature have memories and expectations; without a historical consciousness of some kind, there would be no humanity (Karlsson, 2011). This does not necessarily imply that history as a discipline is also seen as meaningful. Oakeshott (1983) distinguishes a ‘practical present-past’ and Carr (1986) writes about a ‘pre-thematic historical awareness’ to describe the average daily relationship which people naturally have with the past, which is to be discerned from serious and deliberate historical study. According to Oakeshott (1983) deliberate historical study implies the ‘most sophisticated’ attitude one can adopt, ‘difficult to achieve’, and ‘difficult to sustain’, and also highly susceptible to relapse ‘into some other kind of engagement’ (p. 28). If this is true, that would imply that students need to be supported to optimise their attempts to make connections between past, present and future.

The relationship between past, present and future has been further elaborated by Rüsen (2004, 2005), whose theory of history may be utilised to understand what kind of support students would need. Rüsen (2005) describes how in the context of historical consciousness the practice of daily life (*Lebenspraxis*) interconnects with the discipline of history, which is to be understood as the creation of meaningful narratives about the past. Orienting on these narratives may occur – according to Rüsen (2004, 2005) – in four types or modes: traditional, exemplary, critical or genetic. Summarised broadly, the traditional mode is one that accepts the authority of narratives about the past without further questions and takes them as guidelines to be followed in the form they have been handed down; the exemplary mode derives general principles from narratives about the past without trying to follow them up in a too literal sense; the critical mode distances itself from what has been passed down and tries to assert that times have changed and therefore narratives about the past have little to say about the present and the future; the genetic mode takes historical development into account in such a way that justice is done to the intricate interplay between narratives about the past (including their moral dimensions) and the realities of the present. It implies the insight that things have grown over time, developed and changed, yet the notions about their former existence, which is partly comparable to and partly different from what is now, have a role to play in the way one understands human reality. These notions take the form of narratives by means

of which humans try to make sense of their past and thus create a perspective on their present and their future. As such these narratives represent multiple and diverse interpretations, substantiated by means of historical evidence.

The utterances of the student cited at the beginning of this paragraph may be interpreted as examples of traditional, or perhaps exemplary historical consciousness in the first sentence, and then critical consciousness in the next. We can assume that this student might be well served by guidance towards a more genetic type of historical consciousness. As we will see in one of the next paragraphs, this kind of consciousness fits well to the aim of understanding the 'human condition'.

### **2.2.3 Educational theory: functions of education and effective teaching**

Assuming that the school subject of history should contribute to general social functions of education, we employ the description of such functions by the educational philosopher Biesta (2010), who, like others, distinguishes three of these functions: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification entails that students need to be prepared to accomplish something later on in their lives, like exercising a profession or participating actively in political life. Socialisation implies that students need to become part of social, cultural and political 'orders'; they must be made familiar with social values and norms and be initiated into existing social structures. Subjectification means that students need to discover their ideals and values and develop as individuals with a unique position in society. If history is to contribute to these functions, knowledge about the past should be explicitly linked to the lives of students and the society of which they are part. We define these purposes of history teaching as *building a personal identity* and *becoming a citizen*.

Apart from educational philosophy we may utilise cognitive theory in order to explore objectives of relevant history teaching. Cognitivism, among other things, deals with the question of meaningful learning as distinguished from rote learning (Novak, 2002). In rote learning, knowledge is memorised and reproduced without making much sense to the student, but in meaningful learning knowledge is actively constructed. Steps in this process are linking new knowledge to existing knowledge and using knowledge in different contexts, which may be school situations, but also extracurricular contexts outside school. Meaningful and motivating learning should be connected to experiences



outside school and real life issues (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih, & Moss, 2013). Experiences and real life issues may lead to the effective construction of new knowledge if incidents, facts and events in history are interpreted in the context of general conceptual frameworks, thus relating new knowledge to already existing knowledge which also enables generalisations (Jadallah, 2000). Instead of concentrating on knowledge of facts as an aim in itself, a constructivist approach to the history curriculum could therefore lead to a resuscitation of Lord Acton's maxim as endorsed by Collingwood (1973): 'Study problems, not periods' (p. 281).

This constructivist approach is supported by empirical evidence showing that history does seem to become more meaningful and motivating when historical knowledge is related to today's life and directed towards studying generic problems (Anderson, 2011; Haerberli, 2005; Muddiman & Frymier, 2009). Morgan (2010) designed activities in which students had to compare life today with life in earlier times. Through this then-and-now-approach students found the lessons more interesting and performed better because they saw that how history was connected to their own time. One student put it this way:

Like in math class, if I never see it in the real world, I do not really care and I do not try hard. But if it is something I am going to use in the real world, I try harder (Morgan, 2010, p. 316).

### **2.3 Three objectives for relevant history education (RQ 1)**

From theory of history we derive the notion that relevant history teaching has to take the relations between past, present and future as its point of departure. On the one hand such relations are self-evident for any human being, but on the other hand deliberate study of the past to grasp the real nature of these relations may be a demanding endeavour. Moving from a 'practical present-past' or 'pre-thematic historical awareness' towards a 'genetic historical consciousness' is the perspective that encompasses the objectives for relevant history teaching.

We derived more clarity about such objectives from educational philosophy and insights from cognitive learning theory which suggest that history may become relevant if historical knowledge is applied to contemporary social and personal contexts and directed towards generic concepts and problems instead of specific facts or events.

Beyond these two contexts, a third one can be discerned relating to the philosophical question of what it means to be human. The Latin phrase *conditio humana* (the condition of human existence) refers to what is innate and inherent to all human beings. From theory of history we derive the notion that one of the most evident aspects of the human condition is that humans are aware of the temporality of their existence. As such they differ from all other creatures. Humans have memories and expectations and are aware of the fact that they were once born and will once die. This is the reason why they create stories about their lives by means of which they try to make sense of their existence. Genetic historical consciousness, as defined by Rüsen, is the most advanced mode of dealing with such narratives. Therefore, developing this type of consciousness and the process of understanding the human condition are intrinsically linked with each other.

In sum, relevant history education addresses three objectives: *building a personal identity*, *becoming a citizen* and *understanding the human condition*. In Fig. 2.1 we show the way in which these three were derived from three theoretical sources. Historical philosophy shows how humans construct narratives that can give meaning to human (temporal) existence, educational philosophy shows how these narratives are connected to the development of personal and societal identities, and constructivist learning theory shows how meaningful knowledge is constructed by connecting personal experiences, facts and events to broader conceptual frameworks. For example: a meaningful historical narrative about secularisation in western societies since the eighteenth century can be used in the context of personal questions about one's own (ir)religious identity and of understanding societal developments showing a resurgence of religious beliefs and religious fundamentalism in present western societies and elsewhere, in the process of which conceptual knowledge (such as secularism, religion and fundamentalism) is essential. This shows how the contribution from three theoretical sources produces a synergy adding up to more than the sum of the parts. The three objectives of relevant history education can therefore not be strictly separated from each other. As the above example demonstrates, what students learn about current society also affects their personal development. What they learn about themselves and society in turn contributes to deeper insights into the human condition. Therefore, *understanding the human condition* is the most comprehensive category. In the next sections, the three objectives will be specified in more detail.

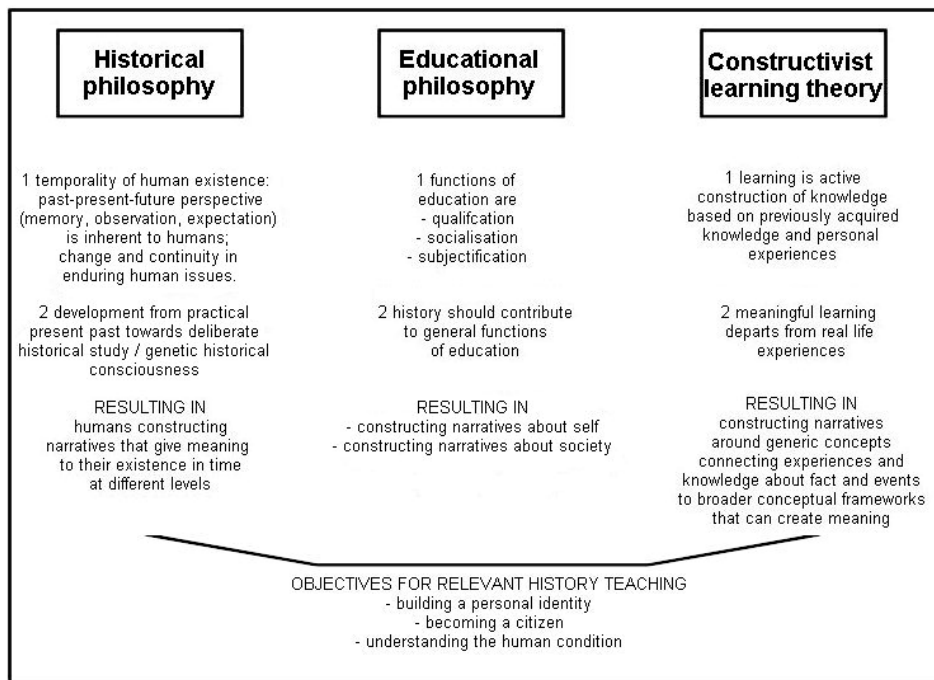


Figure 2.1 Three sources of relevant history education and their yields.

### 2.3.1 Building a personal identity

In citizenship education, the development of personal identity is often regarded as a prerequisite for active participation in society. Students can only become full citizens and bear social responsibility if they know who they are, where they come from and what they stand for. Education should provide students with opportunities to develop their ideals, values and norms and to act in accordance with them (Arthur & Cremin, 2012; Bron, Veugelers, & Van Vliet, 2009; Onderwijsraad, 2012). From this aim we derive two aspects of building a personal identity:

- Seeing oneself as an individual with a *personal past* which is shaped by the environment in which one has grown up and by the communities of which one is a part.
- Developing one's *own values, opinions and ideals*, which can serve as a base for an independent, 'unique' position vis-à-vis one's environment and communities of which one is a part.

By learning about the history of social communities to which students belong (family, ethnic group, religious community, etc.) they may become more aware of the traditions, customs and beliefs that have shaped their personality. Apart from the group's experiences there are personal experiences, which are usually remembered as an ongoing story shaping a person into an individual. Even experiences not linked directly to each other or distanced from each other in time are interconnected to form a continuous history, or personal historical narrative. In other words, temporal continuity 'identifies' a person. Without a past, without memorised experiences, formation of a personal identity is not possible (Ishige, 2005; Rösen, 2017).

The second aspect of building a personal identity, however, means that one breaks loose from the environment by which one has been formed. By studying the past, students can develop new insights that may give them a certain autonomy with respect to their environment. For example, Skrade (2004) had students investigate how realistic the American Dream has been from the 'critical pedagogical' perspectives of race, gender and class. She asked students what this subject had meant to them personally. One student connected it to an incident he had experienced on the golf course. When one of his sports friends made a racist joke, he tried to shut him up, while before he had never bothered about such things. Through the lessons about the 'myth' of the American Dream he became aware of the racism of his friends and started daring to counter them. The history lessons had caused him to start distinguishing himself from his environment. The turnaround in his thinking can hardly be seen separately from the moralistic message that critical pedagogical education wants to convey to students, but that is the paradox of building a personal identity in an eminently socialising environment like school.

Historians often object to moralism, because they find the past should not be used to draw moral lessons for the present. Oakeshott (1983) defends this point of view by arguing that the past itself has never preached a message and has never had a meaning. But as a matter of fact, the past itself does not exist. We only have images of the past that do have a certain purpose which did not exist in the past to which the images refer. A position such as Oakeshott's has little to offer for teachers who want to make history relevant to students. History pre-eminently lends itself for building identities, of which moral sense is an important aspect. Lévesque (2008) points out that the moral dimension of education has become increasingly important. Seixas (2005) wonders whether the

study of history without a moral dimension makes sense at all: ‘Historical knowledge that does not lead to moral orientation and moral judgments is useless history: why would we undertake the history project at all, if not to orient ourselves morally?’ (p. 144).

All of this does not imply that heritage teaching should take the place of history teaching. As Lowenthal (1998) describes, heritage is the story about the past ‘owned’ by certain groups of people, not aiming at a plausible account, but at ‘credulous allegiance’ and a ‘declaration of faith’ in the past, whereas history is ‘universally accessible’ and aims at ‘testable truths’ (pp. 120-121). The moral dimension of history teaching should not imply that the content of history lessons is degraded to heritage in this way.

### **2.3.2 Becoming a citizen**

Relevant history education contributes to the performance of students as citizens in society. Citizenship has many dimensions, but we focus here on the political and social aspects of citizenship to demonstrate what knowledge of history can yield. History may *qualify* and *socialise* students as citizens: qualify through the transfer of knowledge and ways of thinking that promote political literacy and a democratic disposition; socialise by creating insight into the origin and meaning of social institutions, traditions, values and norms.

For example, in history lessons students learn how after much political struggle modern democracy has developed and how political freedoms have become anchored in constitutions. In the context of ancient Athens they learn how citizens proudly distinguished themselves from powerless subjects in other states. History shows that democratic citizenship in its current form and worldwide diffusion is a relatively new phenomenon and that despite the democratisation process there have been regular backlashes in which citizens were relegated to subjects without rights. The realisation that democracy does not necessarily exist forever and has to be reinvented over and over again can cause students to develop a responsibility for the state of democracy. As the pedagogue De Winter (2011) puts it: ‘One who does not know the historical perspective, does not know what democracy is the alternative for and will probably view the current situation as self-evident’ (p. 25, our translation). Last but not least, historical narratives contain concepts like power, government and policy without which the past cannot be well understood. History classes confront students with these concepts in ever-changing

contexts which will enable them to increase their level in the 'language of citizenship' (Wilschut, 2013).

Democratic dispositions may also be promoted by ways of thinking that are specific to history. The gap between past and present can only be bridged if one is willing to take seriously the points of view of those who think in strikingly different ways and if one is aware of one's own position which is as much time-bound and defined by certain values as those of others. Images of the past must be supported by evidence in ways similar to the way in which opinions in a political debate must be substantiated. Dealing critically with information like historians is a skill that contributes to the soundness of debates. Historical thinking also teaches students that positions are not fixed forever but can change as new circumstances arise. Taking into account contingency in historical developments, the role of chance and the vicissitudes of fate, may teach students to deal critically with predetermined visions of the future (Van Straaten, Claassen, Groot, Raven, & Wilschut, 2012; Wilschut, 2012).

History can have an eminently socialising effect. It explains the origin and development of human culture over thousands of years. Historiography reproduces 'culture' which is thus passed on to new generations. Students learn where traditions come from and why it may make sense to maintain traditions or rather to get rid of them. They learn to realize that historically they are part of different communities like their nation, their ethnic group or their religious group. Historical research also socialises them into the rules and standards that apply in the world of knowledge and science.

There are also reasons to be cautious when it comes to history and citizenship (Harris, 2011). The aim of socializing students into an existing culture may reinforce a tendency to see history as a closed narrative which ends up in the present as its logical outcome. Employing history to throw light on current issues may result in a presentist attitude which leaves out historical content which is irrelevant for today. Citizenship education often aims at creating 'active' citizens, while history has no such direct activist purpose. If these caveats are taken into account, however, history and citizenship may go well together. Whether history education should pursue this aim, is object of much debate (e.g. Elgström & Hellstenius, 2011), but the premise that education must have social relevance allows no other conclusion but that it should.

### 2.3.3 Understanding the human condition

The third and most fundamental aim of relevant history education is understanding the human condition by taking into account the temporality of human existence. Endowed with a memory, human beings by nature orient in time by translating past experiences into an understanding of the present and expectations regarding the future (Friedman, 2005; Kahneman, 2014; Rösen, 2004). Narratives about the past are the form in which this process of translation takes shape. Genetic historical consciousness, as defined by Rösen, is the most advanced mode of dealing with such narratives.

From an educational point of view, genetic historical consciousness accommodates two dimensions which may enhance students' understanding of the human condition. First, since change and development are at the heart of narratives that both connect and divide the past, present and future, seeing oneself as a temporal being subjected to change provides important existential insights. Second, as contemporary images of past life, narratives provide the opportunity to distinguish certain aspects which are common to all human beings, irrespective of time and circumstances; studying these aspects can be a powerful means to learn about the human condition.

With regard to the first dimension, becoming aware of their own *historicity* may be a first step for students to understand the human condition. This may be accomplished by connecting their personal pasts to the 'temporal whole' (i.e. the much larger field of the past of mankind). Though different from the personal past, it is yet connected with it. By taking cognizance of the past of mankind individuals widen their perspectives on their own past, present and future, thus acquiring a deeper insight into their own existence. Dealing with history is therefore not a matter of wanting to know, but of needing to know (Gies, 2004).

By connecting their personal pasts to the much broader history of mankind, students will realise that they are part of a larger story that started somewhere and has constantly been subject to change and different interpretations. Historicity implies in this context that history derives its meaning from patterns of change which separate past and present from each other, but also historicize them both, which is 'place them in time'. Through changes man starts relating to time and realising that also his own existence is constantly in motion and that his perspective on past, present and future shifts over time.

Seixas (2012) advocates education in which students learn to appreciate and understand their own historicity. In his view, ‘narrative arcs’, bridges between past, present and future, should be the instruments to this end (p. 871). According to Shemilt (2009), awareness of the temporality of life can be helpful in creating more adequate perspectives on the future. Historical events were neither determined nor inevitable, but it is also not true that everything in the past took place totally at random and without any reasons. Likewise, while events in the future are not predetermined, not all possible scenarios are equally plausible. History sheds light on the plausibility of different future scenarios. In the words of Shemilt (2009): ‘The disposition to investigate and analyse the past from the perspective of possible futures is a key development in historical consciousness and one that transcends the all too common perspective that “the past is dead and gone”’ (p.197).

A second dimension of genetic historical consciousness in the context of understanding the human condition is that narratives about the past may reveal aspects of human life which are not specifically time-bound and therefore characteristic for the human condition. We propose to call these aspects *enduring human issues*. Sociology and anthropology can be helpful in tracking these issues down.

Sociologists enumerate six elements which are essential to human survival: food, shelter, protection, affection, knowledge and guidance (De Swaan, 2005). As societies in the course of time have become more complex through specialisation and division of labour, people have become increasingly interdependent in fulfilling the necessities of life (Elias, 2000). The historical dimension thus offers an explanation for the existence of human interdependency.

Historical anthropologist Dressel (1996) has coined the concept of ‘elementary human experiences’ (*menschliche Elementarerfahrungen*), among which he counts space and time, religion, family, food, dealing with nature, body, sexuality, labour, conflict, gender, and encounters with strangers. He chooses the word ‘experiences’ to refer to historically and culturally determined changes in these essential elements of human existence. On the one hand, every human being shares experiences with something like food, on the other hand, these experiences differ over time. As such, experiences may also teach lessons. Dressel (1996) points to comparisons and contrasts between different examples of the same ‘elementary human experience’, the ‘dialogue



with the unknown', and the enhancement of critical attitudes towards stereotypes which may be the result of such – essentially historical – operations.

History is an integrative approach of all aspects of human existence and does not choose for one particular dimension, such as the economic, political or legal (Kocka, 1977). It is a study of all life forms and life opportunities humanity has known during thousands of years, thus expanding the repertoire of 'human possibilities' beyond one's own experience. More than other studies history shows man in all his abilities and limitations. It is the story of extremes: courage and cowardice, love and jealousy, compassion and bloodlust, pride and shame, survival and self-destruction. The past offers numerous examples of daring and successful entrepreneurship, but also situations in which human beings are at the mercy of forces totally beyond their control. History reveals the limited room for manoeuvre within which people try to realise their ideals and what it is like to have to operate in conditions over which one has no hold. It offers examples of discrepancy between wanting and being able, between planning and realisation of plans, between intended and unintended consequences.

Exactly because we can look back and see what the outcomes of human efforts and expectations have been, we are confronted with the role of *contingency*: the course of events is not predetermined and greatly depends on coincidences. According to Butterfield (1931/1973), history shows:

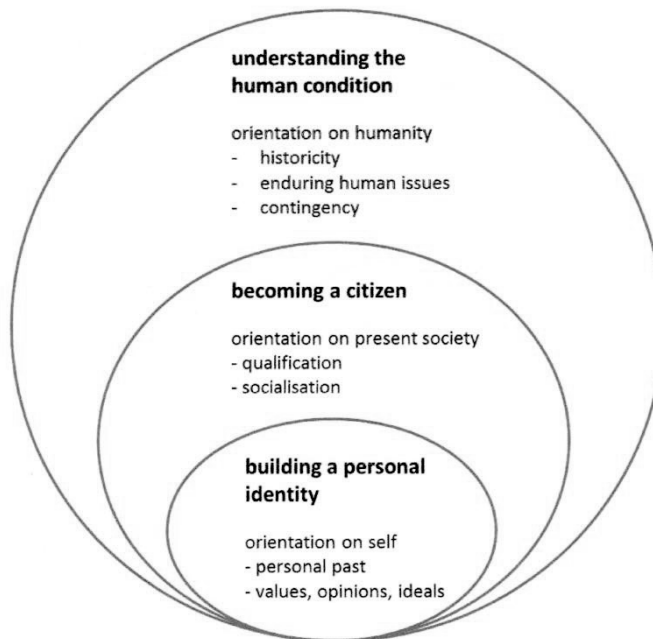
how crooked and perverse the ways of progress are, with what wilfulness and waste it twists and turns, and takes anything but the straight track to its goal, and how often it seems to go astray, and to be deflected by any conjuncture, to return to us - if it does return - by a back-door (p. 24-25).

By learning about the role of contingency in history, students learn that predetermined and monocausal visions of the future should be treated with scepticism. Society appears to be liable to social engineering only to a limited extent.

Understanding the human condition is an intended outcome of all the social sciences, not just history. In this paragraph we have described the specific contributions that history can make because of its temporal dimensions. By relating their personal past to a general historical past, students become aware of their own historicity which fosters their understanding of the temporal aspect of the human condition. Narratives about the

past reveal examples of past approaches to enduring human issues which can enable students to extend their experiences and knowledge to cope with such issues, while taking into account the role of contingency.

In Fig. 2.2 we show the three objectives of relevant history teaching in concentric circles, suggesting that the scope of the three objectives varies between the small scale of the self, the intermediate scale of one's society and the large scale of mankind.



**Figure 2.2** Objectives for relevance in history teaching.

#### **2.4 Pedagogical approaches for making connections between past, present and future (RQ 2)**

Research suggests that students are not inclined to make connections between past, present and future of their own accord. In England the project Usable Historical Pasts (UHP) investigated whether 14- to 16-year-olds made an appeal to historical knowledge when discussing contemporary and future issues. For example, students were asked whether the United States would always remain the most powerful country in the world. Only 8% of the answers contained explicit connections between past, present and future.

The vast majority of students viewed the issue only from a contemporary perspective (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008).

Lack of readily available historical knowledge could be a plausible explanation for the fact that students struggle to make connections between past, present and future. Another explanation may be found in the way students understand the past. There is a large quantity of research indicating that students show a strong tendency to only take a contemporary perspective into consideration and that they perceive the past as something that does not exist anymore and therefore has no value and does not affect the present (e.g. Barton, 2008; Blow, 2009; Lee, 2005; O'Malley, 2013; Savenije, 2014; Seixas, Peck, & Poyntz, 2011; Shemilt, 2009; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Von Borries, 2011). Students' historical thinking is hallmarked by events following each other in a causal chain without alternatives, not by the interplay of change and continuity or the chances of contingency. In a study by Anderson (2011) for example, a student claimed that without the Greek theatre there would have been no film or television; another stressed the importance of the taming of wild animals by farmers in the Stone Age because now she knew how to train her dog. Students interpret the past in a personal, everyday manner: they look for historical explanations in the concrete actions of people, not in conditions, developments or changes.

Teaching students to make connections between past, present and future therefore confronts us with a challenge, to which we do not pretend to have found final answers. What is discussed here, is what we have gleaned from the literature: some untested proposals and some experiments, which we have broadly categorised in four groups:

- teaching with longitudinal lines;
- teaching with enduring human issues;
- teaching with historical analogies;
- teaching with a focus on decision-making and scenario thinking.

Discussing these four categories, we shall analyse them in the light of the theoretical framework that has been worked out in the previous sections of this article. In particular, we shall examine to what extent the pedagogical approaches can be used to achieve the three objectives of relevant history teaching. In Table 2.1, we have indicated how the objectives and approaches relate to each other and for which objectives each approach

seems to be the most appropriate. In theory, these relationships unfold in a logical manner, but more empirical research is needed to substantiate the interaction between objectives and approaches of relevant history education.

**Table 2.1** Possible connections between the objectives of relevant history teaching and four pedagogical approaches.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES		OBJECTIVES OF RELEVANT HISTORY TEACHING		
	Key pedagogical transactions	Building a personal identity	Becoming a citizen	Understanding the human condition
Longitudinal lines	Describing long-term political, socio-economical or cultural developments (e.g. the emergence of national states).		X	X
Enduring human issues	Study and evaluate issues common to all humans by means of various historical examples from different periods (e.g. about paying taxes, crime and punishment, resolving conflicts).	X	X	X
Historical analogies	Comparing historical situations or developments from different periods or the present to study differences and similarities.		X	X
Decision-making and scenario thinking	Use historical knowledge to assess the probability of developments in the future to be able to anticipate on them.	X	X	X

### 2.4.1 Teaching with longitudinal lines

If students are to become aware of their own historicity in order to understand the human condition, they should, among other things, be able to position themselves as historical beings in the context of narratives that extend beyond the story of their own lives. It seems a sensible idea, therefore, to confront them with narratives articulating long lines of development. This diachronic approach to history teaching is not entirely new, though our impression is that most history teaching usually departs from chronologically organised curricula. Studying a specific aspect of human existence (like ‘food’, ‘labour’

or ‘religion’) along longitudinal lines seems something more novel in the context of relevant history teaching. Longitudinal lines should not be confused with historical overview knowledge without any explicit organizing principle or specific question to the past. Overview knowledge without an explicit narrative structure probably does not serve the purpose of making connections between past, present and future.

Shemilt (2009) proposes synoptically described lines of change under themes such as modes of production, or political and social organization. Lee and Howson (2009) also argue for diachronic narratives about certain themes or topics. In this way, students will not only be able to extrapolate long lines into the future, but also reflect upon their own future role as (e.g.) an office employee compared to a stone age hunter, a medieval farmer, a sixteenth century craftsman or a nineteenth century factory worker. Comparison and contrast, as well as dialogue with the unknown, based on one of the ‘elementary human experiences’ such as pointed out by Dressel (1996) (in this case ‘labour’) can be applied in this context.

Shemilt (2009) and Lee and Howson (2009) stress the importance of teaching disciplinary knowledge related to longitudinal lines; students who know that history is an image of the past and not the past itself, will realise that changes and developments have been reconstructed from a hindsight perspective. This enables students to better discern developments by themselves and extrapolate these into present and future. Research suggests that such an effect of disciplinary knowledge may occur (Cutrara, 2012; Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008; Mosborg, 2002).

Shemilt’s and Lee and Howson’s proposals have not been empirically tested. We found only one small experiment that could be seen as an example of working with long lines. Nuttall (2013) presented a comprehensive chart of twentieth century history to 14- and 15-year-old students, structured by six periods on one axis (e.g. 1919-1938, 1946-1989) and three main questions on the other axis: What is the big story of the twentieth century? What is the story of the empires? Who is the most powerful? In the resulting cross table students could compare the six periods from three guiding points of view, thus creating longer lines in twentieth century history. Students proved to be better able to switch from past to present and started spontaneous conversations on topical issues such as the rapid growth of the Chinese economy or the civil wars in Africa. Because the students saw the ‘whole picture’ and perceived different lines connecting past and

present, they realised that the present can be seen as a random outcome of developments in the past and could have looked different if things had turned out differently.

Teaching with longitudinal lines seem an appropriate strategy to learn students how to utilize historical knowledge in contemporary social contexts. Out of the three objectives of relevant history education, it fits best to 'becoming a citizen'. By means of longer lines connecting past to present students can learn how today's society has grown and how it will possibly develop in the future. Long lines can also contribute to the awareness of historicity and as such may serve the purpose of understanding the human condition, because they may induce students to reflect upon their own position in relation to the presented narrative and about the interconnectedness of past and present.

#### **2.4.2 Teaching with enduring human issues**

A second pedagogical approach departs from notions of historical anthropology as described by Dressel (1996). The observation that certain issues are common to all human beings, but that the way in which people have dealt with them differs from time to time, may lead to the design of curricula organized around these common and enduring human issues. For example, in the German state of North Rhineland Westphalia a curriculum was designed by Klafki (*as cited in* Gies, 2004) around concepts like peace, environment, social inequality and interpersonal relationships.

Hunt (2000) proposes to organise the curriculum around 'ageless social, moral and cultural issues' (p. 39) to be studied on the basis of key concepts, key questions and historical content. In the context of civic education students need to learn how to form a well-informed judgment about questions such as: Are there limits to the degree of freedom we can create? Why do we obey laws? Why do people live in societies or groups?

Barton and Levstik (2011) suggest that history education may become meaningful if students are confronted with 'enduring themes and questions' (p. 3) such as the interaction between man and his environment, or the development of cultures and societies. Misco and Patterson (2009) take current issues as a starting point and from there go back in time. Obenchain, Orr and Davis (2011) developed teaching about 'essential questions' in cooperation with teachers – for example: the question of the grounds on which freedom may be curtailed – which they translated into 'historical

questions', for example: the question whether the American president Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) was in his right when he restricted the entrepreneurial freedom of large corporations in his fight against trusts. In similar projects teachers and researchers have designed curricula around 'big ideas' (Grant & Gradwell, 2010) or 'persistent issues' (Brush & Saye, 2014).

What all these examples have in common is that historical knowledge is used in order to formulate judgments about enduring societal, political or human issues. Because enduring human issues are often morally oriented, this kind of teaching is also potentially a strong tool for developing students' values, opinions and ideals; therefore it seems appropriate to build a personal identity. Because many of the enduring human issues are societal in nature, becoming a citizen is also an aim which can be targeted by this approach. The most outstanding aim in this context is understanding the human condition, because enduring issues touch on commonalities shared by all humans in different times and circumstances.

The examples and suggestions from Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom that we mentioned above show that the idea of organizing the curriculum around enduring themes or essential questions is not entirely new. In the daily practice of history teaching, however, it is a phenomenon that still needs further development, especially in the context of the objectives of relevant history education as described above.

### **2.4.3 Teaching with historical analogies**

A third approach is teaching with analogies: parallels between historical and contemporary phenomena. The parallel in this case is not necessarily derived from a longitudinal line or an enduring issue, but from developments or phenomena which show correspondences in their development or structure. Analogical reasoning is an effective and motivating way of learning, but there has not been much research into the use of analogies in teaching history (Myson, 2006). From what is known from classroom experiments, it seems to be a promising strategy.

If analogies are drawn between something comparatively known and something comparatively unknown, the first is called 'base' and the second 'target'. Three types of analogies are usually applied in history classes:

- Something mundane from the present as base and a historical phenomenon as target, for example a marriage of interests and the Concordat between Mussolini and the Pope (Laffin & Wilson, 2005).
- Historical events that show similarities, such as the failed attempts of Charles XII, Napoleon and Hitler to conquer Russia (Mugleston, 2000).
- Something from the past as base and something from the present as target, for example Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II and the terrorists who committed the attack on New York in 2001 (Robbins, 2004).

The limited number of studies available suggests that teachers prefer using the first two of these (Ata, 2009; McCarthy Young & Leinhardt, 2000). However, using something commonly known from the present in order to explain something from the past is not an example of relevant history teaching if the purpose of such an exercise is explaining the past as an aim in itself and not to create meaningful relations between past and present. Using the example of a marriage of interests to explain the Lateran Concordat mainly seems to serve the interest of explaining the latter, unless generic human behaviour such as disregarding ideological or moral principles because both parties profit, is focused upon.

Comparisons between two or more phenomena or developments in the past, on the other hand, may be seen as a strategy for relevant history teaching if they reveal generic human aspects. For example, Boix-Mansilla (2000) made students compare the history of the Holocaust with the history of the genocide in Rwanda. Such a comparison may induce students to think about human nature and the circumstances in which atrocities like these can occur.

Using analogies between past and present in order to shed light on the present seems to be less common than the other two types, maybe because it is more complicated. Yet this pedagogical approach is the most suitable for relevant history teaching. An example is to analyse the present situation of taxpayers in the light of historical issues around paying taxes, like the Magna Charta (taxes as a favour granted by the taxpayers and a means to put pressure on the king), the issue of taxation and representation in the American Revolution, and the nineteenth century census: How is the duty to pay taxes



connected to the right to have political influence? The comparison with historical situations makes the present situation less self-evident and ‘given’.

An important aspect of analogies is the fact that not only the similarities may be illuminating, but also the differences. Evidence suggests that students have to be trained to take the differences into account. For example, in the case of the Holocaust and the Rwanda genocide students were inclined to disregard the differences between the two genocides in their zeal to find an explanation for the genocide in Rwanda. However, differences are important to prevent students from generalizing. The fact that something in the past is not the same as it is now, may induce students to see the present less as a natural given and open their minds for the possibility of alternatives.

Comparing the past to the present is something common in many history lessons, usually targeted at making the past more understandable to students. The opposite aim is probably much less frequently pursued. Comparing two or more historical situations, like in the example of the Holocaust and Rwanda, may be a rarity. Using comparisons with the explicit aim to illustrate the relevance of the past for the present by stressing conceptual understanding of human experiences common to all periods, is not often practised in history teaching as it stands.

Analogies may be used for the objectives of becoming a citizen and understanding the human condition. Because analogies not only explain the present, but also shed a different light on present issues which leads to questioning the self-evidence of contemporary realities, they may enhance critical thinking. As far as generic human issues are concerned, analogies may lead to reflection upon the human condition.

#### **2.4.4 Teaching with a focus on decision-making and scenario thinking**

Although it is impossible to predict the future, historical knowledge may serve the purpose of thinking about plausible future scenarios. Policy makers in the field of politics and economics have good reasons to base their scenarios for possible future developments on historical studies (MacKay & McKiernan, 2006; Neustadt & May, 1988). Sometimes mathematical formulas are applied to historical facts to determine by means of extrapolation which future scenario is the most plausible one (Dortmans & Eiffel, 2004). By putting students in the position of scenario thinkers, the possibility

arises that they will use historical knowledge in a meaningful way and will see links between past, present and future.

Instone (2013) conducted a study in which students had to indicate what China's position in the world would be a hundred years from now. One student drew a parallel with the global dominance of the United States in the twentieth century and expressed his doubts about whether China would ever achieve that status, because the country faced much more poverty and social problems than the United States had ever seen. Over all, students were cautious in their predictions. A factor may have been that they did not know enough about China.

Culpin (2005) also gave students an assignment to make predictions, but he embedded this in a series of lessons, so students would have enough knowledge to be able to speculate about the future with more guidance. In the context of a theme on terrorism for example, students were asked whether the American War on Terror had any chance of success. From the complexity of the reasoning with which the students underpinned their speculations it was apparent how well they had mastered the subject. Projects like these aim at students' understanding that history is about the past as well as the present and that people can shape their future: 'explain the past . . . shape the future' (Graseck, 2008, p. 371).

In 2013, we conducted a pilot study among 28 grade 9 students in which the potential of scenario thinking was explored. After studying the Cold War, students were presented with the (fictitious) problem that Iran was trying to produce nuclear weapons, contrary to all international agreements. Students were instructed to write an advice to the President of the United States about the decisions he was to make. They were explicitly asked to use their knowledge of the Cold War. Nevertheless, some students did not use any historical knowledge at all; their advice to the president relied solely on everyday hopes for peace and aversion to war.

Students who referred to the Cold War did so in different ways. Some stressed the importance of continued talks with Iran to prevent misunderstandings and incomprehension such as had arisen between Truman and Stalin. Others rather advised the president to start an arms race because this had meant the financial collapse of the Soviet Union. Some students remained very close to the subject matter they studied, for example by advising to offer a Marshall Plan to the people of Iran, or to blockade

seaways to Iran, a tactic that had after all been successful during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Some students produced sophisticated lines of thought. One of them urged the president to put forward penalties in the negotiations with Iran in case that country would not honour the agreements. According to this student the Americans and British had failed to do this in their agreements with Stalin, after which the Soviet leader could simply take his course in Eastern Europe.

After completing the task, ten students were interviewed in pairs. In general, they found the task more difficult than the ones they had to do normally. According to one student the reason for this was that they had to think of ‘what went well and what went wrong during the Cold War and that is harder than just writing down what happened.’ Students were asked if they understood the world around them better by doing a task like this. All of them indicated that this was the case. One student explained it in this way:

One often hears something on the news about nuclear weapons and now we understand that better. Normally one just hears it and does not give it a second thought. Now one hears it and thinks about why that country has a nuclear weapon and why others are opposed to that. If you look at the Cold War, you see that ultimately no war has broken out. So then you can see if war can also be prevented now. But the Cold War lasted a long time so you can see if you can learn something from that to solve something faster. It is difficult because it involves other countries and there are other problems, but often you can make comparisons.

The results of this pilot study suggest that the extent to which and the manner in which students use knowledge about the past for writing future scenarios vary significantly. Some students operate in Rösen’s traditional mode (taking the past as an example to be followed literally), others in a more critical mode. Students who do not use historical knowledge seem to argue from a contemporary and personal perspective more than other students. Also, students tend to look at what was right and what went wrong in the past and base their decisions on that. By working with future scenarios students seem inclined to compare past and present and view current affairs from a different perspective.

We are not aware of the presence of working with future scenarios in the usual history curriculum, so this approach may be the most novel of the four that we present in this article as options for relevant history teaching.

Decision-making and scenario thinking seems particularly suitable for the aim of becoming a citizen. Citizens need to orient on the present and the future from an historical background in order to create informed views about what is possible, probable and feasible. Because of this orientation in time, this pedagogical approach could contribute to the objective of understanding the human condition, particularly to the awareness of one's own historicity. There may also be a connection with building a personal identity, depending on the kind of assignment. Some assignments may refer more explicitly to students' expectations about their own life in the future. But also if their assessment of probable societal scenarios is concerned, thinking about the future involves the student's personal ideals and values.

We have presented four pedagogical approaches as four separate categories, but we realize they have some overlap because all four focus on the deployment of historical knowledge in contemporary contexts and all embody some element of comparison. Yet there are good reasons to keep them apart. For example, teaching with longitudinal lines concentrates on processes of change and development which are extrapolated into present and future, and, as such, enable students to orient in time. Teaching with enduring human issues and historical analogies focuses more on similarities and differences between past and present phenomena and less on patterns of change and development. Forming moral opinions on timeless human issues and the understanding of contemporary phenomena is more prominent in these strategies than orientation in time.

The four pedagogical approaches also differ in their impacts on the existing curriculum. Teaching with longitudinal lines or enduring human issues probably requires a much larger amount of adaptation than the use of historical analogies or working with future scenarios, which can be easily added to historical topics as they occur in traditional curricula.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

We have explored how history may be made relevant to students. We have tried to create clarity in the concept of relevant history teaching. Based on historical theory about the connections between past, present and future and on educational insights about the general functions of education, we have expressed the importance of knowledge about the past for the present in terms of three objectives. Relevant history education pursues these objectives. This implies that in the classroom relationships should be established between past, present and future. Four pedagogical approaches may provide feasible options to achieve this, because they help students to assess and explain developments in the present and create pictures of the future that might make sense. Assessing, explaining and predicting: these functions of history emerged from the responses to the Russian occupation of the Crimea in 2014 with which we started this article.

The effectiveness of the four proposed approaches has yet to be determined. To what extent do they encourage students to apply historical knowledge in contemporary contexts? To what extent do students learn to better understand what the past has to do with themselves, with today's society and with their understanding of the human condition? We believe that if this is the case, students will better understand the usefulness of history. It is obvious that this is of great importance to students' motivation and the position of history as a school subject.

The validity of the framework outlined here for relevant history education should be empirically substantiated. Research is needed to determine to what extent the proposed objectives and pedagogical approaches are feasible. Such research may imply conducting experiments with each of the four approaches described in this article, to determine to what extent the expected effects on the sense of relevance of history among students (and their motivation for the subject) are achieved. An important question is also whether the approaches can be smoothly incorporated into the existing curriculum, or if not, which major changes are needed. Perhaps it may appear necessary to escape from the straight-jacket of existing schoolbooks and curricula which focus predominantly on the study of the past as an aim in itself.