

Uses of history

In theory and teaching practice

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Abstract

History is constantly used in different contexts with different purposes, and people encounter uses of history in their everyday lives. Views of history and how it is framed could be tendentious and intentionally exaggerating, or neglecting historical facts and contexts. Accordingly, it is important to teach students to analyse and reflect – to decode and interpret – the uses of history. The article explores how history is used by various individuals and groups for different purposes. It emphasises that history is not just about studying past events, but also about understanding how these events are interpreted and used in contemporary contexts. A framework for analysing uses of history, a basic model for practical teaching is presented with exercises and questions for classroom activities.

Keywords

Uses of history, history teaching, applied model, classroom activities, constructivism

1 Introduction

We cannot directly observe what happened in the past, but we can examine traces of it. Historians search for these traces in written sources, which they interpret and analyse. From these sources, reconstructions of past events can be made. However, most people do not engage with historical sources in their everyday lives. Instead, they encounter traces and representations in terms of material remains such as buildings, churches, statues, and city walls. Additionally, intangible evidence such as traditions, customs, languages, collective narratives, and widely shared cultural references often include historical elements.

There are also other traces of the past, but these are traces that do not derive only or directly from historical events. These are traces of someone intentionally using or having used history and historical references. This is the focus of our discussion, and we refer to it as *uses of history* (Black, 2005; Knutsen & Knutsen, 2019; Nordgren, 2016). This concept refers to the idea that someone utilises historical examples, in the widest meaning of the word, at a particular time, in a specific context, and for a certain purpose. Individuals, groups, institutions, politicians, and filmmakers are examples of users who apply history in various ways and for different reasons (Linde, 2009). The use of history can shape the image of an era, event, or phenomenon. As historian Howard Zinn (2003) noted, history is made, not merely received. One example is how narratives about the Swedish King Gustavus Vasa shaped the image of himself for generations

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of Swedes. The image of Gustavus Vasa as a heroic nation-builder who liberated Sweden from Danish rule in the 16th century was carefully staged by the king himself as propaganda and later reinforced by historians and history teachers through nationalistic historiography. However, the use of history does not always involve grand political propaganda. It can also appear in debates or even in commercials. For instance, a TV commercial once depicted Abraham Lincoln as a car mechanic, likely aiming to evoke trust in the car brand's reliability and service (Abraham Lincoln Commercials. *Abraham Lincoln: Toyota Repairman Commercial*. [Video]). In Denmark, the famous rock singer Kim Larsen launched a campaign in 2008 opposing a new law banning smoking in restaurants. The campaign controversially referenced the infamous Auschwitz gate slogan *Arbeit macht frei*, rephrased as *Gesundheit macht frei*—a provocative use of history.

Figure 1: Danish poster campaign against the anti-smoking law, organised by musician Kim Larsen



When history is used, cross-temporal contexts intersect, and different dimensions and interpretations of historical phenomena interact. The use takes place, it is constructed, in a certain time by someone while the historical event or the historical object existed in the past. When someone encounters this use of history, they often do so in yet another temporal context—a third layer—which can influence how the use is perceived, interpreted, understood, and used further. Moreover, perceptions of such practices can shift over time; for example, how people's actions and legacies are valued affects how the use of history is interpreted. One illustrative case is the statue raised in Bristol (UK) in 1895 to honour and commemorate the businessman and slave trader Edward Colston. The statue was torn down by protesters during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. A person and deed once celebrated (by some) was, in another time, mocked and rejected.

Figure 2: Defaced Colston statue at the M Shed museum, Bristol



At the time of writing, the Colston statue is exhibited in a museum in Bristol, an act that charges the statue with new meanings as an additional temporal dimension is added, from a use-of-history perspective.

Analysing the use of history is not primarily about determining what actually happened. Rather, it is about studying how history has been or is being used and thereby framing both the historical event and the time in which the use took place. Key questions include: Why was this particular historical reference chosen? Why this type of use? Why did someone make this specific use of history at that particular moment? What might have been the user's purpose? Who is the intended audience? To conduct such analysis, knowledge of historical periods and cultural context is essential. For instance, if someone does not know who Napoleon Bonaparte was, they will be unable to interpret how and why Napoleon is used in advertisements for cognac, cigars, or oysters (Selin, 2020). It is also important to consider that cultural context can lead to exclusion—those who do not recognise the reference may feel alienated. The use of history is always culturally framed. Studies and analyses of the uses of history are applications of historical knowledge. Factual knowledge about different periods, as well as various interpretations and perspectives, are activated when students engage in exercises on the use of history. Furthermore, analysing the use of history can serve as an entry point that sparks interest in historical periods that are used (or not used) in particular ways.

Students' active engagement with the uses of history both requires and fosters competencies in how history is constructed. Thus, we adopt a constructivist perspective on historical knowledge, meaning that we regard historical knowledge as a creative construction based on historical sources, proposed by historians to make sense of past events. Applying exercises on the uses of history in teaching is also a way to incorporate reflection on historical significance. Discussing which historical events are used, why they might have been used, and how they are interpreted in the present provides opportunities to question what has been considered significant at different times.

In this article, we present a brief overview of the theoretical frames of uses of history. To make these ideas applicable in practical teaching contexts, we illustrate and discuss a model for teaching the uses of history in the classroom (Ammert, Kakoulidou and Rosenlund, 2025). The model is basic and includes guiding instructions and questions for both students and teachers.

2 A theoretical approach

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his 1874 work 'Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben', criticised the contemporary overreliance on the past. Nietzsche argued that a meaningful understanding of history requires a dynamic interplay between past and present. Encounters with the past only gain significance when they serve a practical purpose for individuals and societies—a use of history (Nietzsche, 1998). Everyday contexts and encounters with history contribute to how people interpret both the past and the present (Kalela, 2012). The user of history always has a purpose. History can be a powerful tool used as a reference or an argument, and to stimulate reflection on alternative historical narratives (Wynant, 2025; MacMillan, 2008; Ernest, 1973).

In the Scandinavian countries, the concept of uses of history has been applied both as a theoretical framework and as a methodological and didactical tool in research and teaching. The concept was established in Sweden in the late 1990s, particularly through Klas-Göran Karlsson's book *Historia som vapen* (History as a Weapon) (1999). Karlsson demonstrated how history served political functions during various phases of Russian and Soviet, and then Russian history again. He introduced a typology that categorises different types of uses of history, the needs they address, the users involved, and the functions.

Table 1: Karlsson's typology of uses of history

Needs	Use	User	Function
Explore Reconstruct	Scientific	Historians History teachers	Verification Interpretation
Remember Forget	Existential	Everybody	Orientation Anchoring
Re-discover	Moral	Intellectuals	Rehabilitation Restoration Reconciliation
Invent Construct	Ideological	Intellectuals Political elites	Legitimizing Rationalization
Forget Erase	Non-use	Intellectuals Political elites	Legitimizing Rationalization
Illustrate Make public Debate	Political- Pedagogical	Intellectuals Political elites Pedagogues	Politicization Instrumentalization
Economic gain	Commercial	"Agents" in advertising and business	Commercialization

Translated from Karlsson (2009, p. 59) by the authors

The typology of uses of history is versatile and has become a widely adopted model among historians and researchers in history didactics. It has also been implemented by teachers in various educational contexts, particularly in upper secondary school (Thorp, 2020). However, for pedagogical purposes, the model may need to be supplemented to include the uses of history by individuals and collectives, as the original framework primarily focuses on uses by leaders and elites. It is also important to note that the different types of use are not mutually exclusive; they can interact and overlap. This allows for a more realistic and nuanced description of historical practice, which rarely fits in compartmentalised categories.

Karlsson's typology illustrates a structural perspective on the uses of history. This can be complemented by Peter Aronsson's more process-oriented approach: "Use of history is the process by which parts of historical culture are activated to form specific meaning-making and action-oriented wholes." (Aronsson, 2004). He further elaborates on the functional aspects of historical use, such as creating meaning and significance, conferring legitimacy, and managing change (Aronsson, 2004). This processual dimension is also emphasised by Kenneth Nordgren (2006), who presents a communication model to clarify the stages involved—from the sender of a historical message to its recipient. Along this communication chain, various disruptions may occur, especially when the recipient must decode and interpret the use of history in a different temporal or cultural context. Interpretation becomes more complex when the sender and receiver are separated by time or societal contexts, which is often the case in historical discourse (Nordgren, 2016).

The need to broaden the scope beyond elites and leaders is partially addressed by Danish didacticians Anders Hassing and Christian Vollmond (2017). Their categorisation outlines several functions of history:

- History as a teacher
- History as perspective and mirror
- History as an identity builder
- History as an argument
- History as entertainment
- History as a scientific expression

As described, theoretical approaches to the uses of history are often structured as typologies that help identify and interpret how different users “handle” history. Typically, these typologies focus on the user, the type of use, and the intended purpose (see also Reinecke and Löhr, 2024).

2.1 The uses of history in education

Working with uses of history exercises in history education provides students with opportunities to encounter, reflect on, and analyse expressions of history. Students can apply historical knowledge they have acquired and developed both in history classes and outside school. At their best, these exercises can offer a multi-dimensional, or multi-chronological (Ammert, 2010), understanding of the past: the time when the historical event occurred, the time when the historical use was constructed, and the time of the receiver or interpreter. In fact, most people encounter history throughout their lives primarily through various uses of history. Therefore, practicing the decoding and interpretation of such uses prepares students for future encounters with history and equips them with tools to critically analyse and evaluate these experiences.

In the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) the national curricula prescribe the uses of history as a prioritised learning outcome (Borne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research (Utdanningsdirektoratet), 2020; Skolverket, 2022). The current Swedish curriculum for compulsory education (Skolverket, 2022) states that history teaching should help students develop an understanding of how history is used in society and in everyday life. It should also offer different perspectives on how historical narratives can influence people’s identities and perceptions (Skolverket, 2022).

The typologies of uses of history presented above can support teaching by serving as theoretical models for analysing historical applications. Our contribution is to offer a more developed and concrete, question-driven and problematising approach that students, or students and teachers together, can use to directly engage with examples of how history is used.

2.2 Uses of history—Implications for classroom practices

If we aim to highlight a constructivist aspect of historical knowledge in history education, it is also reasonable to apply a constructivist perspective to both teaching and learning. This means allowing students to actively engage with the material presented in the classroom (Martell, 2022). As previously discussed, working with the uses of history involves multiple layers of interpretation. These include interpretations of historical examples in relation to different time periods, the purpose behind the use, and how the use is received. Importantly, these interpretations are not isolated—they must be understood in relation to one another.

Addressing such interpretative and constructivist dimensions of history education has proven to be challenging (Jarhall, 2020). Research shows that when students work with historical sources, they often seek a single, objectively correct answer (Nersäter, 2019), even when multiple interpretations may be equally valid. Teachers, in turn, face difficulties in helping students recognise this complexity. One challenge is the risk that concepts and scaffolds are used instrumentally (Rosenlund, 2015), leading to what has been described as *procedural objectivism*—the belief that correct use of methods, concepts, or support structures will automatically yield the correct answer (Stoel et al., 2017).

We see a similar risk when teaching about the uses of history. Since this area shares many characteristics with other interpretative aspects of the subject, teachers may be unfamiliar with how to approach it, and students may struggle with the idea that multiple answers can be reasonable. These challenges create a strong need for well-designed concepts and scaffolds that can support teachers. To avoid falling into procedural objectivism, we argue that the concepts and support structures used in teaching about the uses of history should, as far as possible, emphasise the need for student-centered and constructivist approaches. In the following, we draw on characteristics of constructivist teaching as outlined by Richardson (2003). He argues that such teaching should: (a) acknowledge students’ individual backgrounds and evolving conceptions within the subject domain; (b) include collaborative dialogue on domain-specific topics; (c) integrate formal domain knowledge and strategies through direct instruction or textual resources; and (d) enable students to question, revise, or expand their beliefs by engaging in purposefully structured assignments. By explicitly addressing these characteristics within history teaching that engages with the uses of history, the likelihood of applying the framework in a meaningful and rigorous way increases, while also enhancing the chances that interpretative perspectives are brought to the forefront.

3 Applied model for uses of history in the classroom (AMUC)

Students and teachers can use the set of questions in the model as a starting point for analysing the uses of history. The model has been developed in collaboration with teacher educators, history teacher students, and practicing teachers. It is referred to as the *applied model for uses of history in the classroom* (AMUC), and is visualised in Table 2 below. The idea behind the model is that it is generic, meaning the questions can be applied to any instance of the use of history. In the following section, we elaborate on each question and illustrate them using an example from 1972.

The Socratic questions in the model are deeply interpretative, and students' individual background knowledge and previous knowledge are factors that are likely to influence how they engage with each question. For this reason, it is important that the history teacher scaffolds discussions among students and, most importantly, actively participates in dialogic exchanges with them (Richardson, 2003).

Table 2: Applied model for uses of history in the classroom (the AMUC-model)

Question	Type of knowledge	Students' activities	Focus of the teaching unit
1. What does this image/text/film/statue/song/commercial make you think of?	Historical references, previous knowledge	Perceive, identify and reflect	Introductory
2. Identify the manifestation/event/epoch.	Previous knowledge	Historical contextualisation	Significance of the historical phenomenon
3. How does the user (sender) link the use to the historical event?	Previous knowledge, contextualisation, association	Decoding temporal relations	Temporal orientation
4. How well does the use of history correspond with what we know about the historical phenomenon? Is the use of History plausible, anachronistic, misleading, etc.	Previous knowledge, understanding of the context when the use takes place	Assess correspondence with the past	Empirical plausibility
5. Who is the user addressing?	Contextualising the present.	Identifying the audience, the receiver	Receiver
6. Why is it used/applied at the particular time and in the particular context? What is the purpose?	Meta-perspective on history as a tool	Discussing the preconditions, the needs and the aims	Purpose Significance at the time of the use
7. How is the message perceived (or how can the message be perceived) by the recipient?	Explorative competence, historical references, contextualisation	Investigating and discussing potential perceptions and interpretations	Reception
8. What function does the use of history fulfil?	Meta-perspective on history as a tool	Discuss the function and the potential outcomes	Function

The model illustrates that one of the key types of knowledge required for analysing the uses of history is students' prior knowledge on events and concepts of history, which indicates that historical knowledge forms a necessary foundation for understanding how history has been used. The concept of uses of history does not disregard traditional historical knowledge; rather, it emphasises how such knowledge is applied in various contexts. The ability to contextualise is therefore central, as it enables students to reflect on how historical conditions and situations are connected—or disconnected—from one another. In addition to contextualisation, we argue that the second-order concept of significance can further support students in analysing the uses of history. This is because it is crucial for students to understand that what is considered significant is always based on interpretation and often tied to implicit criteria.

3.1 The model in practice—an example

To elaborate on the content of the model, we use an example of how history has been used in a political context: the speech delivered by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, broadcast on Swedish radio on 23 December 1972. The speech was a response to the U.S. bombing of Hanoi during the Vietnam War, specifically the so-called "Christmas bombings" (Operation Linebacker II) in December of that year.

We should call things by their right names. What is happening in Vietnam is a form of torture. What you are doing is torturing people, torturing a nation to humiliate it, to force it to submit to the language of power.

And that is why bombing is an atrocity. And of that we have many examples in modern history. And they are generally associated with a name: Guernica, Oradour, Babij Jar, Katyń, Lidice, Sharpeville, Treblinka.

There, violence has triumphed. But the judgement of posterity has been harsh on those responsible.

Now a new name is added to the line: Hanoi, Christmas 1972

(Olof Palme, 23 December 1972).

To help students understand this use of history, teachers can apply the AMUC model as a basis for instruction. How this is implemented in practice will vary depending on the classroom context and the teacher's approach. For younger students a selection of the questions could be focused and for higher classes the entire model could be used. It is possible to work with the model for a part of a lesson, but also for a series of lessons.

1. What does this image/text/film/statue/song/commercial make you think of?

The first question is designed to acknowledge that students enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds and varying pools of contextual knowledge. It invites learners to reflect on their immediate thoughts, associations, and emotional responses to the material. This initial reaction is important, as narratives often appeal to emotions, it is essential to ask what feelings and thoughts are evoked.

—Here, the teacher can emphasise that there is no need to search for a single correct answer and instead encourage students to reflect openly on their own responses.

2. Identify the manifestation/event/epoch.

Question 2 introduces domain-specific knowledge. Students need either to acquire knowledge about the historical examples mentioned in the speech or, if they already possess this knowledge, to articulate it in relation to the historical references being used. Once they understand what happened in Guernica, Oradour, Babij Jar, Katyń, Lidice, Sharpeville, and/or Treblinka, they will have developed a historical frame of reference that is essential for progressing to the next steps in the analysis.

—For this question, there is typically a specific historical phenomenon being referenced, which means that some answers are more accurate than others. However, the way students express and label or frame the phenomenon may vary, something teachers should be aware of.

3. How does the user (sender) link the use to the historical event?

The third question addresses the type of connection established between different time periods. Is it a comparison, a form of distancing, a critique, or even a condemnation? To answer

this question, students need to decode the meaning of the speech, understand the significance of the historical examples referenced, and consider how they would have resonated with an audience in 1972. With this understanding, students may use categories from Karlsson's (2009) typology to reflect on possible purposes behind the use. A reasonable interpretation might be that Palme used the historical references to frame the bombing of Hanoi and to compare it with the terrible events.

–From a constructivist perspective, the teacher can encourage students to evaluate how the historical phenomenon is perceived as significant today and how it is framed in this particular use. This requires students to interpret both the phenomenon itself and the way it is presented. The teacher could help make these two layers of interpretation visible and clarify that there are multiple valid ways to formulate such interpretations.

4. How well does the use of history correspond with what we know about the historical phenomenon? Is the use plausible, anachronistic, misleading, etc.?

Here, students need to draw on contextual knowledge—either already at their disposal or acquired through instruction or textbooks—as they are asked to analyse and assess to what extent, and in what way, the use of history corresponds with what is known about the historical phenomenon in question. Is it reasonable, as Olof Palme suggests, to equate the bombing of Hanoi with the events referenced in the historical examples? Do those events correspond to the moral weight that Palme assigns to them in his use of history?

–As with the previous question, some answers will be more substantiated than others. The teacher could guide students toward more nuanced reasoning, helping to refine problematic responses and support those that are on the right track.

5. Who is the user addressing?

To address the fifth question, students need to understand the contemporary context in which the historical reference is made. In the case of Olof Palme's Christmas speech, this involves grasping the political and ideological climate in Sweden and internationally during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. With this background knowledge, students might conclude that Palme intended to send a message to American politicians regarding his stance on the bombing of Hanoi.

–This question can be challenging, as the intended recipient is not always explicitly known. Therefore, the discussion should remain exploratory and reflective, and the teacher should engage students in thoughtful, qualitative dialogue.

6. Why is it used/applied at that particular time and in that particular context? What is the purpose?

The sixth question is perhaps the most central, and also one of the most challenging. It concerns identifying the purpose behind the use of history: What does the user aim to achieve? Why was this particular historical reference or example chosen? What type of use can be identified? In the case of Palme's Christmas speech, an initial reflection might be that American warfare had been questioned and criticised for several years, and that there was relatively strong public and political opposition to it. The use of these highly symbolic historical examples can be understood in light of the contemporary context: there was a broad consensus that the examples represented moral failures, and criticism of the American warfare had persisted without producing tangible results. A conclusion might be that Palme's intention combined political and moral uses of history: by morally condemning the bombing of Hanoi, he aimed to politically influence the American government. Another plausible purpose could have been to shape political opinion within Sweden, also a political use.

–A teacher might draw on one of the models presented earlier. For instance, Klas-Göran Karlsson's (2009) typology can serve as a starting point for discussing the purpose and function, as a political-pedagogical and/or a moral use of history. The aim was to illustrate the American bombings as an "atrocious" by comparing them to emotionally charged historical events. Using Hassing and Vollmond's (2017) terminology, Palme's speech could be seen as an example of history being used as an argument. By placing the Hanoi bombings within a context of events with strong negative connotations, Palme shaped how they should be interpreted and understood. The comparison itself becomes the argument.

7. How is the message perceived (or how can the message be perceived) by the recipient?

Although it may be challenging, an exploratory and tentative discussion can be held about how the use of history is perceived and interpreted. The ability to imagine different interpretations and reactions is essential for developing historical understanding. In this case the public might have been aware of the magnitude of the warfare, frustrated and angry. The American administration might have understood the strong dissatisfaction in other countries.

–In situations where such reactions are unknown, students must engage in tentative reflection regarding possible perceptions. As with several of the previous questions, the teacher should guide the discussion carefully and encourage open dialogue.

8. What function does the use of history fulfil (e.g., increasing interest, arousing public opinion, anchoring national values, marketing, etc.)?

Reasoning about the potential function can build on the previous questions. Particularly relevant are the intended purpose, the target audience, the context, and the connection between the historical event and the present. In this example, students need to be aware of the American response to Palme's Christmas speech, that the United States recalled its ambassador from Stockholm and that diplomatic relations between the two countries were effectively frozen for several years.

–In Palme's case, the Christmas speech can be interpreted as an attempt to shape public opinion. One plausible conclusion is that the use of history contributed to increased moral engagement with the Vietnam War in Sweden, and possibly in other parts of the world as well.

4 Conclusion and final thoughts

Most people encounter history through narratives, memorials, statues, or films, to name a few. These representations are all created by individuals who use history with specific intentions. Analyses of the uses of history offer several tools and functions that are crucial when people engage with and attempt to interpret the past.

The analysis of how history is used is an important method in history education, enabling students to engage with and reflect on history and its various functions. However, the often abstract and theoretical typologies of different uses of history are not well-suited for practical application in the classroom. In this article, we have presented, exemplified and discussed a model for how the uses of history can be applied in teaching practice. By working with central questions, students can explore uses of history in a systematic way that help them orient themselves in relation to different time periods.

In the history classroom there are certain challenges and difficulties. Knowledge about historical contexts is essential as a frame of reference. It is not feasible to introduce exercises or analyses of the uses of history if students lack the necessary background knowledge. Nevertheless, the ambition to reflect on how history is or has been used is urgent. In our time, when facts can be questioned or ignored, and generative AI can produce false sources or fabricated evidence, students' competencies are vital for a future society where history is used, not abused.

To cite this article

Ammert N., Rosenlund D., & Kakoulidou K. (2026) Uses of history: In theory and teaching practice. *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.12685/htce.2128>

Review

This miniature has been reviewed by the editors of the HTCE journal.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgement

The article is a modified and translated chapter from the Swedish book Ammert, N., Kakoulidou, K., & Rosenlund, D. (2025). *Historiedidaktik och historieundervisning: förutsättningar, utmaningar, möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur AB.

Ethical statement

Our institution does not require ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series. AI has not been used.

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Figures

Figure 1: Danish poster campaign against the anti-smoking law, organized by Kim Larsen. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=gesundheit+macht+frei&title=Special%3AMediaSearch&type=image>

Figure 2: Defaced Colston statue at the M Shed museum, Bristol 2020. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=colston+statue+&title=Special%3AMediaSearch&type=image>

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