

# History and its educational relevance for overcoming tensions in current times

## Editorial

Paul Zanzanian\* <sup>a</sup>, Martin Nitsche\* <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>McGill University, Montreal, <sup>b</sup>FHNW School of Education, Aarau

## Keywords

history education, teaching disciplinary history, historical consciousness, teaching history for current times, history in times of crisis

Research detailing history's workings from non-disciplinary perspectives are gaining momentum. Work in memory studies, historical culture, and non-Western approaches to sense creation offer important insights. For example, in the study of historical consciousness, scholars have examined history's wider cultural, ethical, and temporal implications, seeking to better capture a greater diversity of experiences and epistemologies (Simon, 2004; Karlsson, 2011; Grevier & Adriaansen, 2019; Nordgren, 2016; Ruin, 2019; Chinnery, 2019; Zanzanian, 2019, 2025). Such contributions seek novel approaches to understanding how to better operationalize the way we make historical sense of time's flow. Even in the wider field of history education, scholars are searching for ways to broaden our understanding and uses of historical thinking, hoping to disrupt its strict associations with disciplinary history. Scholars seek more existential, cultural, and epistemologically diverse conceptions of how to think historically, to make it more attuned to the realities and needs of the history classroom and beyond (Thorp & Persson, 2020; Alvé, 2024; Parkes, 2024; Wassermann & Angier, 2024; Godsell, 2024; Zanzanian, 2019, 2025). Despite these different interests and important contributions, modernist views of what history is and how it functions still seem to dominate in the field of education. Because of its application of the historical method as a scientific and rational way of constructing knowledge, history from a disciplinary angle is seen as the form of knowledge creation regarding the past that can best explain "how things actually were". In educational contexts, such an understanding of history is often perceived as foundational for allowing people to engage and orient themselves in life, giving them the necessary agency to tackle the many social and political problems that they may face. Adopting the historical method as a form of knowledge creation is seen as specifically permitting learners to act in an informed and self-conscious manner, enabling them to interpret emerging present-day realities as plausibly as possible and to correct misinterpretations of the past that are deceptive and non-conducive to positive change, especially as they arise in the public sphere through (social) media, expositions in museums, or political debates (e.g., Rüsen, 2017; Carretero & Perez-Manjarrez, 2022; Lévesque & Clark, 2018).

With the predominance of the *ideal-type historian* as inspiration for guiding our ideas of what history is and how it should be taught (Zanzanian, 2024), the present issue offers insights into whether such a focus on disciplinary history is still relevant for overcoming tensions in the world. In our contested times, with such life challenges as climate change, increasing frictions

---

\* **Contact:** Paul Zanzanian ✉ [paul.zanzanian@mcgill.ca](mailto:paul.zanzanian@mcgill.ca) McGill University, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, Montreal, Canada; Martin Nitsche, ✉ [martin.nitsche@fhnw.ch](mailto:martin.nitsche@fhnw.ch), FHNW School of Education, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Aarau, Switzerland.

between contrasting knowledge systems and ideologies, faster technological transformations, and the ever-present need of making better room for marginalized peoples in our imperfect societal structures, the question to ask is whether history, understood primarily as a scientific, modernist, and methodological approach to knowledge creation, is still a relevant model for addressing the contemporary needs of our complex world. When seeking to examine both past and present-day problems in formal and non-formal educational settings, the following questions arise and constitute the basis of the current issue: How can we — as researchers, scholars, educators, teachers, etc. — conceptualize our use of history as a form of sense creation for addressing present-day realities and consequently ensuring positive change through its transmission? Is it possible to adapt history's standard "disciplinary" approach to knowledge creation to better address emerging challenges in the world, at different levels of schooling? If so, how? Should other approaches, such as democratic citizenship, use-of-history competencies, oral histories, testimony, and or understandings of historical culture, form the basis for developing new "standards" of history education? Do untapped opportunities remain that can enable the creation of new meanings for new futures?

This second issue of *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education* sought both theoretical and empirical approaches to addressing these questions. The call of this issue was open to scholarly work from local, national, and transcultural contexts. It also welcomed interdisciplinary perspectives and differing research methodologies as practiced in various cultural settings. The following research papers and miniatures are the result of our call. As can be seen, they represent an interesting array of approaches to addressing history's educational relevance for overcoming current tensions in the world. Of interest, they include similarities in the types of crises our authors bring to their reflections, the type of texts they offer, i.e., research reports or position pieces, and the types of methodologies, research-wise and or teaching-wise, they use in their work. Key orientations also emerge regarding the authors' views of history and how it should be taught, notably their configurations of time and its workings. Authors also mainly seem to connect history to narrative, either as a form of expression or as an entry point for gaining insights into people's thinking. Ideas on how to make change through the teaching of history moreover come to light.

All contributions to this second issue look at current day crises. The research papers examine what to do with history as it relates to either broader disruptive situations or contexts, such as environmental or related crises due to our engagements in the Anthropocene (McGregor & Karn and Breser & Heuer), historical experiences of violence (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg), colonialism (Godsell & Maluleka), and difficult histories (Honold & Eiland) or to specific types of disruptive events, such as genocide (Holmberg) and terrorism (Bammens et al.). One of the miniatures focuses on fake news and misinformation (Nally), while the other two provide interesting reflections on our state of being as historical actors (Scriba and Wansink). Which, in light, of these crises, can offer key insights into how to view the history teacher and learner as engaged and ready to commit to making change.

Four out of the seven research papers comprise research reports that share important findings (Holmberg; Bammens et al.; Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg; Honold & Eiland). The remaining three articles are position pieces (McGregor & Karn; Godsell & Maluleka; Breser & Heuer). One miniature provides an overview of a German-speaking monograph on how individuals resonate with history. Another considers how hope can be supported through history education, and the last explains how to counter fake news by promoting historical consciousness. In terms of methodologies used, two out of the seven focus on either a mixed methods approach to sharing data (Bammens et al.) or an examination of surveys and student essays (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg). Four other ones focus on teaching methods, using an inquiry design model (Holmberg), an analysis of a teaching unit (McGregor & Karn), critical historical inquiry and activity theory (Honold & Eiland), and an analysis of political and history education (Breser & Heuer). The seventh article uses ethnography as inspiration for both a research and teaching methodology (Godsell & Maluleka).

Key ideas emerge from these contributions that demonstrate how the issue's authors view history, its workings, and its relevance for the history classroom. Four of the research papers view history as comprising time's temporal flow, moving from the past to the present into the future, with an interest in wanting students to understand the historical process to better prepare them for changing the future (Holmberg; Bammens et al.; McGregor & Karn; Breser & Heuer). For Holmberg, grasping the historical process means harmonizing notions of historical significance and historical relevance, where understanding the present through the past or understanding the past on its own terms is aligned with developing perspectives onto the future for action.

For Bammens et al., what matters is the notion of historicizing, where gaining facts, contextual knowledge, and information on actions already taken, can help learners understand that historical phenomena are in constant evolution. This comprehension, in turn, can enable them to reflect on how they position themselves, to then come to appreciate that they have agency in how they decide to make sense of phenomena, which can also evolve. For McGregor and Karn, history works to highlight the interconnectedness of emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual learning, and can thus make visible and uphold human responsibilities for caring for our ecosystems and fellow species who share our planet. Bringing eco-emotional literacy together with experiential learning, storytelling, and inquiry practices can show how past-present-future are connected and can thus counter complacency in our treatment of the environment. For Breser and Heuer, engaging with history, in our times of crises, means “doing” responsibility and recognizing our ability to act. By being self-reflexive about how we think and how we do things, we can consequently open horizons for engaging with the future. In the face of unprecedented changes, emerging from life in the Anthropocene, it is up to us to be responsible and to change if we want to survive. All these articles look at students’ engagements with the historical process through the lens of their interactions with events or phenomena that are external to them. Through grasping and engaging with the historical process, the aim is to equip learners to make change, either to their societies or worlds of belonging (Holmberg) or to themselves, where the authors believe through transforming the self, learners can change the outside world for the better in the future (Bammens et al. McGregor & Karn; Breser & Heuer).

Two of the remaining three research papers still connect history to its temporal flow, but either mainly emphasize the connection between past and present (Honold & Eiland) or mainly connect history to the future (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg). Both these articles, however, focus on potential obstacles or tensions that block student learning through engaging with the historical process. At play here are either teachers’ own challenges in reasoning about how to proceed in their teaching, particularly in teaching sensitive topics (Honold & Eiland), or the challenges brought on by prevailing political cultures that impede learners from criticizing authority, which in turn, impacts students’ historical consciousness and its role in changing attitudes and mindsets (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg). Regarding teachers’ challenges, what arises is the need of engaging with non-disciplinary input sources of information. When dealing with local, difficult histories, the skills and benefits of disciplinary history are not enough. Emotional knowledge, racial knowledge, political and ideological clarity, and deeper content knowledge beyond official narratives for critiquing and helping develop counter-narratives, are needed. Pedagogical reasoning is situated, and teachers cannot simply rely on disciplinary history for doing history (Honold & Eiland). In turn, concerning the impact of prevailing political cultures, knowledge of the fates of victims of violence and the emotions that this information can generate does not directly lead to the rejection of violence. Focusing on victims’ experiences of violence is not enough. Since learning history involves learning through examples, examining the subjectivity of the perpetrators of violence is also necessary to gain a better sense of what it means to separate good from bad. Only concentrating on victims’ narratives can lead to political fictions and ideological manipulations (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg). The seventh research paper does not necessarily connect history to time’s flow but does discuss creating new pathways forward by helping the marginalized regain their voice (Godsell & Maluleka). As the authors mention, “voice contains knowledge, agency, vision, and history”.

Six out of the seven research papers engage with the ideas they propose through the lens of narrative (Holmberg; McGregor & Karn; Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg; Honold & Eiland; Godsell & Maluleka; Breser & Heuer). Narrative’s uses vary. Narratives are at times a source of knowledge and the way this information is presented to us (McGregor & Karn; Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg; Honold & Eil). Here narratives, in the form of stories, are external to us and are brought to learners in the teaching context. Narratives are also seen as the medium through which we can gather information on learners (Holmberg) or the means through which we express history (Godsell & Maluleka; Breser & Heuer). Only one contribution does not make room for the idea of narrative but rather for the knowledge and skills we gain (Bammens et al.).

When it comes to making change through the teaching of history, the contributions to this issue offer several approaches. Change through the teaching of history can happen in many ways; in ways that are different from having learners to think like the *ideal-type historian*. To engage in preventing genocide, for example, learners need to get a sense of their agency through better understanding the historical process. Gaining agency can take place by understanding how history works as well as grasping how learners can get involved to gain new outlooks onto the future. Getting learners to recognize significant events as a process with different steps can enable them to see the relevance of what they are seeking and what steps need to be taken. As such,

history is something learners can intervene in, especially when there is an alignment between using key procedures and concepts for understanding historical phenomena and fully employing them for interpreting the present and creating perspectives for the future (Holmberg). Some authors offer design principles. To reduce learners' fear of the threats of terrorism, history can help make change by offering facts, context, and a sense of control by demonstrating actions that individuals and law enforcement agencies have already taken for combatting terrorism. This input can help learners to better understand and demystify any perceived helplessness in the face of the threat of terrorism and can lead to hence decrease the fear of it (Bammens et al.). To combat anthropocentrism's negative impacts on the environment, change can be made by having learners realize that things can get better. The key is to grasp different ways of thinking about time and one's place within it. Mindsets can evolve by having learners come to recognize that the past is very different from the present and that the future need not consequently be the same as the present. Change and continuities over time, input from experts (including traditional knowledge keepers), and examinations of how different cultures present history, can help foster this process of change (McGregor & Karn). In contexts that seek to decolonize pedagogy, change can be made by using history to give voice to those who have been marginalized and to open new trajectories for questioning and problematizing the official knowledge learners are presented with. To make change, this pedagogy of providing a voice needs to be done regularly, to support and develop students' voice and trust in their own thoughts and knowledge (Godsell & Maluleka). Again, in dealing with the negative effects of the Anthropocene, the idea of having learners gain critical-reflexive distance from their thinking and social conditions to open new possibilities and horizons is also suggested. The idea, for the authors, is to thus learn to engage in practices of historical-political education and doing responsibility (Breser & Heuer).

The two remaining research papers mainly emphasize key obstructions or challenges to history's change-making process. When faced with teaching the history of policing and activism in Detroit, teachers seem to be faced with a tension, where they need to navigate and figure out where they stand regarding how to teach such a sensitive topic (a racialized history), while also having learners come to position themselves and manage their affective responses (Honold & Eiland). Ultimately, teachers need to harmonize their disciplinary goals for teaching history and their sense of responsibility regarding learners' affective well-being. The impact of learners' prevailing political culture is also an obstacle, especially when it limits learners' abilities for freely and independently questioning the powers that be (Schor-Tschudnowskaja & Auersperg). When thinking of how to teach history, deep analysis of the political culture in place in society needs to happen. Learners should ultimately be given opportunities to question the power dynamics involved during times of historical violence.

The second issue's miniatures also provide interesting insights into how we should or can rethink history to better deal with tensions in current times. Scriba offers his imagined persona of *Historicus* to describe the workings of history, which he does by analyzing personal perceptions and experiences of history. He looks at such key concepts as resonance, understanding, and encounter. Wansink offers his deep reflections on the notion of hope in education. Not only is the concept of hope complex, but it is also in crisis given the many tensions we currently face in the world. Wansink particularly suggests that teachers balance their personal hopes with their professional ethics and the state curricula they are responsible for transmitting. Necessary moral dilemmas and frictions will arise that teachers will need to navigate. Wansink calls for research to better understand these processes. Concerned with fake news and misinformation, Nally offers key insights into how to integrate the concept of historical consciousness, which has been added to the new history curriculum in New South Wales in Australia, into the teaching process so that core historical contents and skills become meaningful for learners outside the history classroom. In our era of post-truth, one key aim, he argues, is for learners to specifically be able to detect forms of misinformation and to analyze them in more nuanced ways.

When looking at the second issue's contributions, it appears that in assessing history's relevance for education in our current times of tension that most of our authors seem to move away from disciplinary history as best as they can, without outright rejecting it. They inadvertently turn to a general understanding of how we navigate time's flow with history, albeit one that mainly connects past-present-future in a linear and segmented manner, for making sense of how we can move beyond disciplinary history. The question that arises is whether what is available when theorizing about what history is and how it functions in the field serves as defaults for visualizing history and its potentials or are there other ways of proceeding. When it comes to history and its teaching, does moving from one paradigm of history and its workings mean moving to another one, which seems to be seemingly gaining ground. What does this say about history and its teaching?

We hope our readers find this issue stimulating and would like to thank the authors for their dedicated engagement with questions about how history can address current tensions. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback and the production assistants, Lorenz Meier, Dominik Rieger (both FHNW School of Education, Switzerland), and Sina Springer (University of Cologne), for their support in the publication process.

## To cite this article

Zanazanian, P., & Nitsche, M. (2025). History and its educational relevance for overcoming tensions in current times. Editorial: *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education*, 2(1), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.12685/htce.2129>

## ORCID iD

Paul Zanazanian  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5044-162X>

Martin Nitsche  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4261-5583>

## References

- Alvén, F. (2024). Controversial issues in history teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 56(5), 537–553. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2024.2322502>
- Carretero, M., & Perez-Manjarrez, E. (2022). Learning history. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Science* (3rd ed., pp. 523–542). Cambridge University Press.
- Chinnery, A. (2019). The bearing of historical consciousness. *Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical Consciousness, Historical Cultures, and History Education*, 6(1), 96–109.
- Godsell, S. (2024). ‘Both sides of the story’: The epistemic nature of historical knowledge as understood by pre-service history teachers in a South African university. In Åstrom Elmersjö, H. & Zanazanian, P. (Eds.), *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* (pp. 77–93). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7_5)
- Grever, M., & Adriaansen, R. -J. (2019). Historical consciousness: The enigma of different paradigms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(6), 814–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1652937>
- Karlsson, K. -G. (2011). Processing time: On the manifestations and activations of historical consciousness. In H. Bjerg, C. Lenz & E. Thorstensen (Eds.), *Historicizing the uses of the past: Scandinavian perspectives on history culture, historical consciousness and didactics of history related to World War II* (pp. 129–143). Transaction Publishers.
- Lévesque, S., & Clark, P. (2018). Historical thinking: Definitions and educational applications. In S. A. Metzger & L. M. Harris (Eds.), *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning* (pp. 117–148). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119100812.ch5>
- Nordgren, K. (2016). How to do things with history: Use of history as a link between historical consciousness and historical culture. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 44(4), 479–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1211046>
- Parkes, R. (2024). Epistemic fluency and the pedagogical challenge of fake news, historical denial, and rival histories. In Åstrom Elmersjö, H. & Zanazanian, P. (Eds.), *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* (pp. 21–41). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7_2)
- Ruin, H. (2019). The claim of the past – historical consciousness as memory, haunting, and responsibility in Nietzsche and beyond. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. 51(6), 798–813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1652936>
- Rüsen, J. (2017). *Evidence and meaning: A theory of historical studies*. Berghahn Books.
- Simon, R. I. (2004). The pedagogical insistence of public memory. In P. Seixas (Ed.), *Theorizing historical consciousness* (pp. 183–201). University of Toronto Press.

- Thorp, R. & Persson, A. (2020). On historical thinking and the history educational challenge. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. 52(8), 891–901. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1712550>
- Wassermann, J. & Angier, (2024). The epistemic considerations of post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) – history students: A South African case study. In Åstrom Elmersjö, H. & Zanzanian, P. (Eds.), *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* (pp. 61–76). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7_4)
- Zanzanian, P. (2019). Examining historical consciousness through history-as-interpretive-filter templates: Implications for research and education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(6), 850–868. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1652935>
- Zanzanian, P. (2024). From the *ideal-type* historian and its associated conceptions of teaching history to a more embodied and practical life approach. In Åstrom Elmersjö, H. & Zanzanian, P. (Eds.), *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* (pp. 353–367). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58056-7_19)
- Zanzanian, P. (2025). *Historical consciousness and practical life: A theory and methodology*. University of Toronto Press.