

TEACHING HISTORY, LEARNING HISTORY: A THREE-WAY DIALOGUE

TERESA VINYOLES VIDAL
UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA
SPAIN

Date of reception: 13th March, 2007

Final date of acceptance: 27th of November, 2007

ABSTRACT

This text offers some reflections on History teaching at University. In other words the training of professional historians who will create and pass on historical knowledge during the 21st century: they are going to research and teach History to future generations, as well as conserve and transfer the heritage that we have received from the past. We begin with personal experience and work carried out as Coordinator of an innovation in teaching team in the Department of Medieval History at the University of Barcelona. The text, defined as a dialogue, emerged from the author's experience of conversations with other members of the team; it goes on to think about History, and to do so in terms of teacher-student interaction, the changes that are required in our ever changing world; the importance of collaborative work and the dialogue that we have to establish with historical sources to create and pass on historical, social and human knowledge.

KEY WORDS

Teaching, University, Teaching staff, Historiography.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Doctrina, Disciplina, Vniuersitas, Professoris dignitas, Historia.

1. University teaching

I am going to write some thoughts about the teaching of History at University, particularly as part of a History degree, in other words, the training of professional historians who are going to create and pass on historical knowledge during the 21st century: they are going to research and teach History to future generations, they will conserve and transfer the heritage that has been passed down to us. The main thread of these reflections will be the dialogue. When I talk about a three-way dialogue in the title I refer to teachers, students and historical sources, all in the plural; it would be better then, to talk about a choir with three voices, each one would include different minds thinking and different mouths talking, creating a harmonious sound, but not with just one voice.

Our principal task as teachers in the University is obviously to teach, which does not simply mean giving classes, but also preparing them, attending to the students, thinking about and assessing evaluations and keeping up to date in terms of our materials. Moreover, we do research; we are assessed for our contributions within the field of historical research, our publications, and our contributions at conferences. Likewise, we participate in one way or another in the university's administrative side: fees, examining boards, meetings, reports. Also, convinced of History's social value, we see it as our duty to disseminate and pass on our knowledge to society as a whole. Contributing to a greater understanding of History in relation to the past and the present would be another facet of our mission as teachers.

We would have to carry out these disparate tasks in the most cohesive manner possible; it seems that in terms of questions of management, it is going to be impossible for them to ever achieve unison with our teaching and research tasks; but apart from that, we should link historical research with teaching, in other words, discuss not only History but also the method of researching History in the classroom: the sources of information that we deduce History from, how we interpret it, think about it, as we also theorize on the meaning of History. At the same time we will have to investigate the way in which historical knowledge and methodology is passed on to students.

Of course there are few incentives for complete pedagogical change: a university professor's competitive exams and accreditations, research and publications will be valued more or less objectively; but innovation in teaching, the creation of teaching materials, the hours dedicated to giving students attention and empathy are not valued in the same way. How do we acknowledge a job well done, efforts made to change teaching practices?

When I talk about pedagogical change I am not thinking about the use of technology in the classroom, above all I am thinking about renewing the course contents and programs, giving students a voice and the opportunity to join in, directing the learning process, leading the class, giving feedback on projects ...

In another respect, I would like to talk about teamwork. Some historians have become convinced that a large part of our research should be discussed in groups, doing it this way has been very enriching. On the other hand, in our universities,



teaching is always taken on on an individual basis; as teachers we ask ourselves pedagogical questions—if we ask ourselves these questions—we do so on a personal level, there are hardly any research teams in history teaching, not even teaching staff, who impart the same material to different groups, or related materials to the same group of students, are used to preparing the programs and materials in teams, nor have they been asked to exchange strategies and experiences.

Saying this, to write this article I have taken as a starting point a text written by the research and innovation in teaching team [*contra*] *Taedium*,¹ in which we learned that in order to make innovations in university teaching it is fitting and extremely enriching to do so in a team. So, I have drawn up an outline that starts with some passages from the aforementioned article; it goes on to reflect on History and teaching based on my readings and experiences as a teacher; I have written the text and teachers Marta Sancho and Elena Cantarell have read it, I have incorporated their greatly appreciated suggestions.

2. History: how and why?

I am going to start with a translation of the text by Professor Marta Sancho under the title, *Historia: com i per què*,² and I am going to discuss it—or better still sum it up. In this chapter, we will establish a dialogue between a summary of her text that she herself gave to me and the ideas that it gave me. Her text starts by thinking about History as a teacher, she asks herself how to pass on historical knowledge, how to teach the faculty's first year students to write history. The Professor tells us: "The first day that you walk into a first year History class, you ask yourself what all those eyes watching you are expecting from you. Most of them consider that you should provide them with knowledge on a particular part of History". In other words, they expect you to explain a topic to them, they take notes until their hands are ready to fall off, or until they get lost in the explanation and their minds wander off course; then they expect to cram at the end of the course and pass the exam. Few of them realise that what you want to teach them goes beyond this. "Knowledge, yes, but also skills, research ability, a critical eye, and the tools necessary to develop values concerning what supports their contributions as historians". These are the values that lead us to question the meaning of History, the memory that begins in the present and brings us closer to the past's humanity and our own humanity and that

1. Research team in Medieval History and Innovation in University Teaching that I coordinate. I refer to the article: "Baixem de les tarimes i connectem". *Acta historica et archaeologica Mediaevalia*, 25 (2004): 977-1003.

2. Sancho, Marta. "Baixem de les tarimes i connectem. Història: com i per què". *Acta historica et archaeologica Mediaevalia*, 25 (2004): 979-982.



should contribute to teaching future generations how to live together in relation to one another and with the environment.³

“On the other hand, you know that the program of contents is very extensive and we do not have a lot of time. We easily fall into the trap of forgetting skills and values, confining ourselves to knowledge. Some well structured lectures, some reading and corresponding reports, a final exam and ...that’s it, we’ve already finished the course”. Certainly, any other approach supposes a greater effort on the part of teachers and students; we can ask ourselves whether it is worth it, particularly whether it is worth it for the teaching staff who have already been teaching for many years and who may believe that their experience makes up for innovation. Like Dr. Marta Sancho I believe that it is definitely worth it, since “as the years roll by, this model could put an end to monotony, repetition of contents, tedium. And at a certain point you question the reasons behind the way you teach. To put an end to this situation, it is useful to listen to what the pedagogical experts tell us: it is necessary to transfer the responsibility of the learning process to the students”. It is up to them to build on their own knowledge and grow as historians, as men and women, and as fellow citizens.

We must make them understand that History is much more than knowing facts about the past, and that as long as we create historical knowledge we do it from the present, from our present, and our reality as members of a certain society: *Thinking historically goes beyond an intellectual practice, it is a way of living and understanding the world, it wakes up the mind and helps us to act coherently. It doesn't matter what historical period you are studying, what is important is how you study it, how you understand it, how you interpret it.*⁴

We start with the premise that “History is not written, we are constantly rewriting it and for this reason we need to go back to the sources, to start a dialogue with them from our present and build our historical knowledge”. This statement that we have repeated so many times in our team meetings and research, must be passed on to the students, who may be encouraged by the idea that they have something to add, and they certainly do have something to add.

Later, I am going to include a complete paragraph from the same article that refers to strategies, methods and ways of teaching: “From our teaching experience we consider setting out new strategies directed at promoting the historian’s own skills to be very useful: the research of sources, the development of analytical skills and a critical eye, and the ability to draw conclusions. For this, it has been useful to design simulated research exercises, adapted to each level, where the student is faced with bibliography searches, primary sources and planning his or her research project. In this design, the TIC offers us different platforms and formats which facilitate the task: databases, *Web Quest*, hyper-textual designs, 3D virtual reality, etc. The implementation of these teaching practices necessarily requires individualised tutoring aimed at guiding students through the learning process, preventing them from feeling alone before the challenges they are set.”

3. Vinyoles, Teresa. “Una tierra para vivir”, *Las relaciones en la historia de la Europa Medieval*. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2006: 59.

4. The author emphasised this sentence in her text.



“These tutor-led projects, autonomous and continually assessed exercises, classroom sessions, become more dynamic: the students participate more and feel they are contributing to the course running smoothly and search for clues in what the Professor says which may be of use to their research project. Those who get involved with enthusiasm and work hard on the team research project feel very satisfied by the effort they have put in and the knowledge and skills they have obtained are not forgotten so easily. For the teaching staff, the dynamics of the course turn out to be more gratifying, and ultimately the degree of general satisfaction is higher.”

I agree with my colleague’s approach and can conclude that all of this signifies more work for the teaching staff, and obviously more hours. Moreover it may appear more difficult, because it breaks with habits and teaching methods that are not that different to how we were taught in the past, when we were students perhaps in the 70s or 80s; but since then many things have changed: historical events, technology, lifestyles have caught up with us, we must not be left behind.

The increased workload that the application of these didactic strategies represents for the teachers is practically impossible to encompass if the work is not approached collaboratively. It is essential that teachers sharing a similar field of knowledge, we are not saying the same subject, but also the same group or class, share tasks and resources. Moreover, how can we teach our students the skill of managing project teams, the ability to work collaboratively, if they are not capable of putting this into practice?⁵

I must add that there is a topic that concerns us more than teaching methods. We concern ourselves and occupy ourselves with the content; in other words the renewal of programs and content promotes new interpretations of History. I believe that it is the principal objective of those who teach History at University, I will talk about this later, for now we will talk above all about the art of teaching, that is, teaching and learning methods.

Some teachers of my age, in other words close to retirement age, may be tempted to avoid making changes to form or content, I believe they are wrong. Our experience, our maturity, our knowledge seem to us to be useful in educating and training the new generation; but we must adapt to them and build bridges. My experience of working in a team with teachers of a younger generation and involving third year students in the research project, has been extremely enriching; it has allowed me to listen to their worries, accept their initiatives, be infected with their enthusiasm; at the same time they have helped me with new technologies, which I believe my generation will never master, but that we cannot reject or underestimate. This project has been fundamental and I am grateful for it.⁶ It has taken me away from historical research which is my passion, —moreover it gave me a “curriculum”—; and has been an effort; but the teachers are duty bound to fulfil the teaching task in the most satisfactory manner possible, not the easiest.

5. I am grateful to Elena Cantarell for reading my text and suggesting this sentence in order to emphasise the importance of teamwork.

6. In first place, Marta Sancho and also Elena Cantarell, Mireia Comas, Ignasi Baiges, Daniel Piñol, Carme Muntaner...



3. Thinking History⁷

History can be tackled from various angles. I am going to talk about one of the many ways in which History can be considered. It is my opinion that the choice of writing the history of everyday life is neither superfluous nor easy, it was a choice made after reflecting on how to use collective memory, in other words History, so that it becomes relevant to everyday life; a possibility of researching and explaining History to new generations.

To understand historical evolution, to understand life: to understand how to live, to teach how to live, would this not be the final objective of History, to live freely in society? It is always the history of the human race in society, or better still human-kind's relationship with society: in dialogue with the Historian that views this relationship from their own point of view, their present, their circumstances. We should investigate the history of life, the history how the human race relates to its surroundings, how men and women relate to each other, one to the other. It is going to be a history that takes as its starting point our present, my experience as a woman, as a mother, as Miss⁸, as a historian, it is going to be a history of compromise.

"They say that as historians we are neutral, they say that as historians our job is to tell History, they say that as historians we must practice these austere rules with regard to some imaginary scientific canon that tangibly distinguishes between facts and values. To this we can respond that accepting such doctrines is a violation of the basic ideas of our morality, to falsify the meaning of our past... those concerned by human affairs are compromised by the use of moral concepts and categories that normal language expresses and holds within it"⁹ We are always, whether we are aware of it, whether we acknowledge it, going to interpret the past. Because we always begin in the present, we still select the protagonists and the facts from a lineup of men, women and events from the past. And though we only want to write about events, "each event in human history reveals a hopeless landscape of actions and passions and new possibilities that together, transcend the sum of wishes and the meaning of all the sources"¹⁰. Whether we recognise it thus or not, the art of not compromising oneself is also a way of interpreting History.

Still on the subject of writing the history of life, it is possible to see life as a composite of small repetitive acts that seem monotonous, but in fact are not: the spinner does not always spin the same yarn. Every new life, "every birth inaugurates History, initiating some things and keeping or pushing aside others, as every mother knows ..."¹¹

7. This part is a re-reading and revision of: Vinyoles, Teresa. "Baixem de les tarimes i connectem. Aprenre a viure ensenyar a viure". *Acta historica et archaeologica Mediaevalia*, 25 (2004): 982-984.

8. For this word, I thank a student who always calls me "Miss".

9. Berlin, Isaiah. *Cuatro ensayos sobre la libertad*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998: 212.

10. Arent, Hannah. *¿Qué es la política?* Barcelona: Paidós, 1997: 33.

11. Rivera, Maria-Milagros. *La diferencia sexual en la historia*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2005: 159.

Life is framed by certain events that are recorded, but is shaped by daily events and also by hopes, thoughts, feelings, falling in love and falling out of love, big and small dramas, a bit of happiness. Human life always unfolds in relation to other lives; it is a relationship that goes beyond what we have come to call social history. Social relations are only part of human relations.¹²

It is not that we want to forget politics, indeed everything is political; men and women as well, are political animals. Perhaps we should set out what we understand as politics, the meaning of politics, which is not to perceive the history of those in power and which would not only look at the surface, but penetrate society's core.

Nor do we wish to forget economics, but we will start with home economics: the price of bread, the cost of a dowry, a worker's salary. We are interested in the history of culture: literature and art act as sources of history; we examine material culture and popular culture: houses, daily objects, the art of cooking, festivals, rituals." Because, as Virginia Wolf said, "Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."¹³

The study of "great events" will serve as a historical frame in which life passes by. Sometimes, life's course is interrupted, or even life itself, we are talking about wars. How do we write the histories of wars? We are talking about great victories, armament, military strategies, important Generals, the honour of the victors; or we look at death on the battle field, which is the most absurd of all deaths; the pain of the weeping mothers, the suffering of the civilian population, the repression of the vanquished, raped women, orphaned children, the horror, the pain of humanity. And what does war achieve? Moreover, I ask why we stress the importance of war in history classes and do not talk about the history of great loves and of solidarity. We must also ask ourselves who we are writing history for. So that history comes into contact with life, it appears that we do not have to restrict it to the lives of kings and queens, the sages or the saints, but we do have to broaden the range of historical figures; men and women from different social classes must be History's protagonists. If it is a question of delving into the deepest depths of history, we can recall the phrase by Unamuno: "All the history of the present historic moment is nothing but the surface of the sea...over the immense and silent human race those who make a ruckus rise up...at the bottom, the intrahistorical life, silent and constant, the substance of progress, the millions of men without histories".¹⁴

In our History, we have multiplied the subjects, the themes and the sources. The familiarity of the themes that we study and work on in class gives us the possibility of establishing a fluent dialogue with women and men from the past, it helps us to feel like members of a single human race. We do not restrict ourselves to analysing the institutions and political events, we do not waste time on the superfluous, this we leave to "Great History", we move in smaller historical circles that enable us to

12. Rivera Maria-Milagros. "Introducción", *De dos en dos. Prácticas de creación y recreación de la vida la convivencia humana*. Madrid: Cuadernos inacabados, 2000: 11.

13. Woolf, Virginia. *Un cuarto propio*. Madrid: Horas y horas, 2003: 97.

14. Unamuno, Miguel de. *En torno al casticismo*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1972: 59.



delve more deeply into social relations, human relations. The great lesson of the history of daily life could bring us closer to humankind, to both sexes, in every age and in every place.

The historical method, the dialogue with the past, is made more fluent when we ask texts, archaeological remains, or pictures of things that are known to us, facts, thoughts, feelings that are of interest to the students: What did they eat? What were their houses and streets like? How was family life? How did they work? How did children and young adults socialise? What did they do for fun? How did they love? And finally, how did they live and how did they die?

It is wise to start by setting the scene, in other words with all of the spaces and details that make up the environment, that give form, colour and heat to existence: the landscape, the house, objects. Archaeology can tell us so much about this! The relationship of humanity with its surroundings seems as important as relations between peoples, classes, countries and cultures.

We can go from the use of space to the rhythm of time: the passing of days and hours, how people earned a living, how they spent their free-time. What can we learn of the different stages of life: childhood, youth, old age? There are so many questions we could ask! Written sources are so rich in detail; we have so many documents in our archives!

I think that the history of daily life can encourage research of new themes that enable us to look at humanity from a closer, more human viewpoint. It is another way of making History, but also, through daily life, we can arrive at a historical framework in which the day to day takes place, in other words, it can help us to understand historical evolution. I don't know if it will be a utopia that we can learn to live, we can teach to live.

4. How we teach: talking about dialogue

4.1. Active participation of the students

The focus of the teaching process should be shifted from the teachers to the students. If it is a question of producing "significant learning" —in other words, that they are capable of applying their knowledge and skills obtained in a different context— it is necessary that the learning is the result of their own activity.¹⁵ We are not going to restrict ourselves to the simple transfer of knowledge, but will dedicate a large part of our time to teaching the historians according to criteria, analytic ability and skills in handling sources. Perhaps it is necessary to reiterate that the foundations supporting our teaching work are the students, they are our *raison d'être* as teachers. We are aware of this and therefore it seems crucial that the spotlight be

15. [contra] Taedium (Baiges, Ignasi J; Baró, Mònica; Piñol, Daniel; Rubió, Anna). "Les fonts a l'abast: projectes i experiències didàctiques", *Democràcia, ciutadania i arxius*. Barcelona: Institut de Ciències de l'Educació de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2006.



shifted to the group-class and each and every student, and to making them participate actively in their learning process, individually and collectively.

What mediums do we have at our disposal to do this? We live in an age in which everything is fed to us through our eyes or our ears, we create and use audiovisual products, with information technology, to bring History closer to our students who are immersed in this world of the image. We are doing no different to what they did in medieval times; informing the illiterate population by way of images, recording stories that had been passed on orally. The readers of paintings in Romanesque churches not only perceived the biblical stories and the lives of the saints, they also interpreted the symbols and must have understood the message that they tried to transmit. The current teaching staff is making the most of audiovisual media, but with literate students who can and must read books, we know that an image is worth a thousand words, but that a good book does not provide images. I am talking about supplementing the sources of information and teaching methods.

We are aware that we enjoy privileges that humankind has not enjoyed in its entire history, we have a bank of knowledge about the past, intellectual pleasures from the past, like reading a good book or contemplating a work of art, and moreover we have new technologies and can use the internet. Our students must know how to use all of the tools that they have at their fingertips, and must be aware that they live in a world where not only having the internet is a privilege but also knowing how to read, taking pleasure in reading, interpreting what they read, writing a text fluently and coherently, even knowing how to talk appropriately and respectfully, to argue and have a dialogue, these are all privileges.

We hope that through tutored projects, carried out on the basis of historical sources and the pertinent bibliographies, new generations of students are going to acquire a critical eye, analytical ability and skills in order to draw conclusions; as well as learn a little History.

4.2. The role of the teaching staff: in the classroom, tutorials and assessments

The teachers are the course leaders and course tutors, who create a favourable atmosphere for the active participation of the students. I am not saying that we must abolish lectures, I believe that some lectures are truly brilliant; but I also believe that there should not be as many as there are in the program because we are not going to prepare eight hours of class a week that we can truly guarantee will be brilliant, in other words, lessons that are remembered and make an impact, innovating the contents year after year. I have been to few classes in my life that have been truly brilliant, but these few truly brilliant lectures I remember, and I stopped being a student in 1973. At any rate even if we could prepare magnificent lectures day in day out, when would we give the floor to the students enabling them to play the leading role in their own learning?



It is an interesting experience combining theory and practice classes, lectures and tutored projects. By theory and practice classes I mean, for example, classes that enable them to follow the thematic program by way of outlines that the students see on the screen and follow with the teacher's explanation, reinforcing the explanations by commenting on documents, debates, etc., in which students participate. In referring to the lectures I am thinking about erudite, fun and innovative conferences. The tutored projects, carried out partly on an individual basis and partly in teams, prepared and directed at length by the teaching staff, must enable us to assess the consolidation of knowledge, significant learning through its application in a practical subject; at the same time as we assess how they have assimilated skills and abilities. The tutorials must be useful, this is an especially difficult job with large groups; but it is necessary to literally get down off the stage and move around the work groups to see how they organise themselves and point them in the right direction in terms of looking for information, and the method. It is also necessary to prepare individual tutorials, establish an agreed timetable for each one of them, listen to them carefully in the office, encourage them in their research, take notes on the difficulties they encounter and their achievements made.

This combination of lectures, theory and practice classes and individual and group tutorials seems adequate to meet the program's requirements in terms of acquiring knowledge as well as learning skills and judgement.

But a problem may arise, which for me, at least, is important, it is about introducing more active methods, passing on significant knowledge, giving the floor to the students, working in the classroom with historical sources, and at the same time completing the program's thematic content. Perhaps the answer is, in the words of Professor Gemma Tribó when she says: "It is necessary, and perhaps urgent, that our students learn to build their own knowledge, in this way we help them to integrate themselves into the information culture, given the name the knowledge culture, but which ultimately will be a difficult name to live up to if future citizens do not master the art of transforming information into knowledge".¹⁶ It would therefore be a question of not giving so much information in classes, not obsessing about finishing the thematic program, it is better to offer the students the tools to search for information, to learn the mechanisms, to think about the information offered in the sources, building historical knowledge. Surely it involves completely changing the programs, shifting the focus: what we have explained in class up until now is no good. We are going to exchange the transmission of information for the training of professional historians, the training of citizens.

The teachers, as well as teaching must also evaluate the students' work. Assessment is usually a problem not only for students but also for the teaching staff. We should think about important changes to the examination systems, to be exact there are two aspects that I consider important: to carry out continuous assessment and set up the exercises as part of the learning process. The students should be aware

16. Tribó, Gemma. *Enseñar a pensar históricamente. Los archivos y las fuentes documentales en la enseñanza de la historia*. Barcelona: Institut de Ciències de l'Educació de la Universitat de Barcelona-Horsori, 2005: 218.

of how they acquire knowledge and skills throughout the course, doing progressive tasks through which they can monitor their progress.

On the other hand we will set active examinations that not only serve to evaluate students but also form a part of the learning process. This process requires the time necessary to comment on the exercises proposed before the group-class, therefore we would have to make changes, I am not referring to the typology of the exercises, but the habits, the confirmed dates of exams that are taken once the course finishes, after that you don't see the group again; so the arduous task of correcting and writing notes on projects and exams are not used as a pedagogical tool. It is important to seriously think about the question of formative assessment, involving the necessary retroaction that enables the student to make the most of all and each one of the exercises carried out throughout the course, including the final exam.¹⁷

The carrying out of continuous assessment, the public presentation of course-work, a final summing up exercise before classes finish, would give the teaching staff and the students the opportunity to see each other in the classroom after each and every assessment project. The exercise notes offered as a program summary, referring to the acquisition of course content as much as skills, should be discussed in the classroom. This could well be the best lecture in the course.

4.3. *Dialogue with the sources*

For most students, History is written and you only have to study it —or perhaps cram it; they are not always aware of the relationship between the sources and the building of historical knowledge.¹⁸ If we take the idea that History is not written as a starting point, we arrive at the conclusion that we must always return to the sources, and from them formulate new historical approaches. History is an endless dialogue between the present and the past.¹⁹

We are going to establish this dialogue by way of historical sources. We are not going to restrict the concept of sources, we can attempt to interpret any remains from the past of human life on Earth. We are forever re-reading sources, looking to them for answers to new questions, and we look for new sources; we will value the “re-reading” of sources from different angles. We will endeavour to find interaction between the sources. So material remains can be a starting point for studying a historical space; normally we do not see it as the scene in which events took place, but as the place where life unfolded. We will fill the scene with human life through

17. I am grateful for the suggestions made by Elena Cantarell in this sense.

18. Baiges, Ignasi; Cantarell, Elena; Comas, Mireia; Piñol, Daniel. “La Diplomática en los estudios de Historia: Retos y propuestas desde la innovación docente”, *III Jornadas de la Sociedad Española de Ciencias y Técnicas Historiográficas* (Murcia, 20 y 21 de junio de 2005). Murcia: Dirección General de Cultura de la Consejería de Educación y Cultura de la Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia, 2006: 201-210.

19. Carr, Edward H. *¿Qué es la historia?* Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978: 40. Later the author clarifies this statement stating: “So, when I spoke at a previous conference about History as a dialogue between the past and the present, it would have been better to define it as a dialogue between the events of the past and the aims of the future that progressively emerge”.



reading documents and looking at contemporary images. As a Medieval historian, I am lucky enough to have at my disposal a whole range of sources. But the archaeological remains can also act as a starting point, after working on written documents, we can investigate the places mentioned and the objects discussed.

We present a large variety of sources so that, through the interconnection of sources that we establish, and that the students learn to establish, the dialogue is more fruitful. We are going to give them the necessary tools so that they can use them effectively. Through our teaching task we are trying to pass on the idea that sources are the basis of studying and reconstructing the past, to understand the past and the present. The dialogue will have to be established using the necessary questions, knowing how to sort through and decipher the information that they offer us.²⁰

On a practical level, realistic and varied learning strategies should be designed with different environments in mind. Obviously, we must think about bringing the documents closer to the classroom; but the students are also going to go out of the classroom in order to learn. We will design strategies enabling them to work in the library, to use the internet, so that they make the most of tutorials; perhaps we will think about museums, archaeological sites or archives, environments that they should at very least be familiar with.

The students have to be brought closer to the sources so that they learn to establish a dialogue with the past, in other words create historical, social, human knowledge and must know that not only events can be deduced from the sources; History derives from the thorough reading of texts or interpretation of archaeological remains, it goes beyond the facts and figures. Historians interpret. "Asking historians to try and imagine the experiences that others have experienced, and stop them applying their moral understanding, is inviting them to say too limited a part of what they know and take away from the human dimension of their work"²¹

Far from the Carr and Berlin's debate on history, I believe that the idea, firstly, of a dialogue, and secondly, of history being compromised, have been of service to me in my long journey as a historian and teacher of History.²² Currently the science of History is under construction, it is an open science.

5. Getting excited

Our subject's aim goes beyond the mere transmission of historical knowledge; beyond writing about certain events, meetings between important figures and memorising dates, which by the way can be found in any encyclopaedia, or history textbook, or on the internet. Essentially, I believe that we must make the tools for

20. Tribó, Gemma. *Enseñar a pensar históricamente. Los archivos y las fuentes documentales en la enseñanza de la historia*. Barcelona: Institut de Ciències de l'Educació de la Universitat de Barcelona-Horsori, 2005: 83.

21. Berlin; Isaiah. *Cuatro ensayos sobre la libertad*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998: 35.

22. Of course we have also drunk from the Annales School, from Marxism and from Feminism, but this is not the purpose of my reflection on teaching History.





finding data, interpreting it and evaluating it, accessible to the students so that they learn to write and think History.

It is necessary to design materials and prepare various class formats with the aim of stimulating creative ability, a critical eye, communication skills, written as well as oral, the opportunity to work in teams, personal values, social commitment. Because we are teaching History, above all, we, the teaching staff, must be convinced of not only the cultural but also educational, social and human value of History.

There is one aspect of teaching that cannot be learnt from textbooks: knowing how to connect with and excite the students. To do this we must have few measured and combined doses of approachability and prestige; moreover enthusiasm for History and teaching. It seems to me that in this sense we can transfer for example a fascination for sources. Read the stones, attempt to visualise spaces that are barely perceivable, touch objects that men and women from the past created and used in their daily life, discover tombs with human remains, interpret holes in a wall, it is crucial that we do this and that we teach students how to do it. It is also necessary to contemplate and interpret images; for example what fascinates me are Romanesque hands: the hands of God passing judgement, of vassals swearing oaths, of the devout making offerings and praying, of peasants holding tools; hands that gesticulate, that point; violent hands that kill, hands stretching out to help, the caressing hands of mothers.

We will bring students closer to written documents: private letters, wills, inventories, treaties, legal processes, story books... literary writings. We understand, as do the students, that the documents enable us to understand the past, to scrutinise not only the facts but also the mind sets and feelings. Through reading texts we establish an almost direct contact with those who wrote them or said them. It is important to know how to motivate the students to work with historical texts, giving them the tools to understand them; but above all to infect them with enthusiasm for the sources. When I find a new, interesting document that I love —something that often happens—, I share it in class, offering the novelty of something that is untouched and an enthusiasm for its interpretation in the correct context.

From our teaching and research experience we ask ourselves what and how we want to teach the students with the aim of training professional historians who will have to fulfil various tasks: teaching, research, cultural management, the conservation and passing on of heritage. We must go beyond this and contribute to their education as free citizens, committed and supportive. We said that it is necessary to teach them how to live, learn how to live, freely in society, in relationships.

If we do not lose our enthusiasm for History, if we continue doing research, if we can pass on something more than historical knowledge, if we see in young people today the hope of building a better future, if we believe in the educational value of History, we are on the right tracks.

