



LOCAL HISTORY COURSES FOR FUTURE KINDERGARTEN TUTORS: EXPERIENCES FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY

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ABSTRACT

International research in history education has highlighted the need to develop classroom teaching of history, by both encouraging students to explore the topics, as well as by training the teachers in how best to foster such skills. It is therefore necessary to formulate a supportive framework for teacher training that highlights the role of history at each age. This paper focuses on an example of an elective history course design and its evaluation at the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Thessaly, Greece. More specifically, this paper presents the results of a study of the scenarios developed by a sample of 58 students who attended the local history course during the winter semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. Content analysis of the final papers by the students, as well as the reflections of the participants, revealed a gradual shift in their pedagogical and teaching perspectives, as a result of their participation in this specially designed teaching programme. The research highlights the need to include training programmes that focus on the disciplinary approach when educating future teachers, in order that they may be better able to create new scaffolds of knowledge and perspectives in the understanding of their students through scenario design. Early pre-school intervention is crucial in instilling the groundwork of historical thinking and understanding, leading to significant benefits in the later school and post-school history education of young children.

Keywords: Local history, Disciplinary approach, Undergraduate studies, Early Childhood Education, Future kindergarten tutors

INTRODUCTION

International research in history education has highlighted the need to develop classroom teaching through a process of exploration by the students themselves, as well as through training and education of teachers in how best to encouraging these aims (Chapman, Burn and Kitson, 2018). To do this, it is necessary to develop a supportive framework for teacher training that highlights the role of history at every age (Hawkey and Snelson, 2019; Burn 2012, 2021). In particular, the teaching of history at the early and primary school ages has been the focus of much debate in the literature, as it represents a fundamental stage in the development of a connection with the past amongst young children (Cooper, 1995, 2007, 2011; Lee and Ashby, 2000; Cooper and Chapman, 2009).

This paper discusses an example of a course design and implementation for an elective module on history and its subsequent evaluation in the Department of Early Childhood Education,

University of Thessaly, Greece¹. The module focused specifically on local history and was designed to enable pre and the first grades of elementary school student teachers to make use of historical places and the local environment. The department includes in its undergraduate program history, oral and local history courses. The main aim was to provide student teachers with the skills to equip young children with an understanding of the basic concepts of historical enquiry, through the use of evidence from the past and by means of well-designed teaching interventions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The thirteen-week teaching module entitled, Historical Places and Environment, was offered during the autumn semester of the 2020–2021 academic years, organised around the following three main topics.

- (1) Theoretical framework and disciplinary approach: The module began by introducing the student teachers to basic concepts including space, place and time, and past and present and human societies in their natural, social, cultural, and historical environments. It focused in particular on how humans and the natural environment interact, through examples at the local, national, and international level, during the past and the present. The module also introduced the basic methodological principles for the teaching of historical and cultural topics to pre-school pupils. In particular, during the first six lectures the theoretical framework of the disciplinary approach was covered. This approach encourages pupils to explore historical topics through their own investigation of sources and to express their ideas about the past, to pose questions and to seek answers (Ashby, Lee and Shemilt, 2005; Lee, 2005; Ashby and Edwards, 2010; Shemilt, 2011). The student teachers were introduced to the concept that different historical questions can lead to very different narratives of the past. Moreover, they were encouraged to understand history through second order historical concepts such as evidence, cause and consequence, historical significance, change and continuity, ethical dimensions and historical perspectives (Seixas, 2010; Seixas and Morton, 2013).
- (2) Study and group presentation of similar programmes from the existing literature: In the subsequent four lectures, the students were introduced to educational scenarios that built on the history and environment of the children themselves. These included their own distinctive historical landscapes and micro-histories of place, along with everyday life issues within their immediate natural environments and local communities. They were also tasked with presenting critical analyses of similar educational programmes reported on in the literature, both in Greece and internationally, which were based on the use of the disciplinary approach during nursery education and the first grades of elementary school.
- (3) Design and presentation of individual teaching scenarios: Finally, the students were required to develop their own teaching scenarios adapted to the needs of their pupils through experiential and communicative teaching based on the multimodal semiotic influences that flood the lives of pre and primary school pupils today, using the theoretical and pedagogical framework of the disciplinary approach.

¹I was an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Thessaly, Greece, during the Academic year 2020-21.

Table 1. Week by week timetable of the module, showing content and key teaching units.

Week	Content	Teaching Units
1	Introduction to basic concepts: time, space, and place; history, past and present; environment	Theoretical framework-disciplinary approach
2	Local History: History and subject matter	
3	Contemporary views on the teaching of local history: the "disciplinary approach"; substantive and procedural knowledge(historical question, historical testimonies of the past, historical significance)	
4	Substantive and procedural knowledge(change and continuity in time; causes and consequences)	
5	Substantive and procedural knowledge (historical perspective, the ethical dimension of interpretations the past)	
6	Pedagogical framework of the disciplinary approach	
7	Educational scenarios/programmes involving the exploitation of the historical landscape and the micro-history of a place	Study and group presentation of similar programmes from the existing literature
8	Educational scenarios/programmes involving the use of everyday activities: programmes involving the use of the child's own immediate environment	
9	Educational scenarios/programmes involving the utilisation and study of local community issues	
10	Educational scenarios/programmes involving the exploitation and study of the cultural specificities of the local community.	
11	Presentation of scenarios and reflection	Design and presentation of individual projects
12	Presentation of scenarios and reflection	
13	Presentation of scenarios and reflection	

Stages of the scenarios

Assessment of the module was based on the completion of two project assignments by the students, the first counting towards 40% of their final grade and the second for 60%. The first assignment was a group undertaking in which recent Greek and foreign studies focusing on the use of local history in specific research questions were investigated. Each of the groups were required to present one of the studies to the class, followed by a discussion regarding the aims, methods and models used, the degree to which second order concepts were utilised, and its strengths and limitations. The students were also required to considered individually how they believed the knowledge and experienced gained during the assessment could be utilised in their future careers.

The second assignment required that each student design their own teaching scenario for pre and primary school pupils, based on a topic of local history and applying the principles of the disciplinary approach presented during the lectures. The scenario had to address a specific historical question and include the exploration of historical concepts, while also needing to be designed for the age group in question and the source material to be used, as well as providing

ways in which the success of the scenario could be judged. The following is an outline for the evaluation of the individual student scenarios.

Table 2. Scenario plan for the final evaluation of students.

You have been asked to produce a hypothetical teaching scenario for your pupils, based on an issue of local history and applying the knowledge you have gained during the course. Provide in around 2000 words, answers to the following series of questions. What is very important here is that the answers you provide are your own, as they will be individual to each of you and will determine the outcome of your participation on the course, so give them your full attention.

- *Which topic did you choose and why?*
- *Which of the second order concepts of historical thinking will you engage with, those of historical sources, significance, change and continuity, cause and consequence, empathy or the ethical dimension of interpretations of the past? Why did you choose to address this specific concept and what are the elements that you wish to highlight?*
- *List at least four approaches that facilitate the exploration of your chosen second order concept and provide your reasoning. Explain how these approaches facilitate your pedagogical framework, bearing in mind that each should include the following. A key question, clear learning objectives, an outline of the teaching and learning materials required, preparation methods, activities and a perceived learning outcome.*
- *Based on your experiences and knowledge gained during the course and this final assessment, add here any further thoughts or questions you may have regarding the creation of teaching scenarios?*

The project assessments were developed primarily to enhance the abilities of the students to effectively analyse and synthesise the results of their own research. The group and individual studies were presented orally and then later in written form, to incorporate the comments raised during the discussions.

Evaluation of the module

This presentation focuses on the evaluation of the course, with the main emphasis on the analysis of the content of the individual scenarios created by the students. It is these that reflect their understanding of the theoretical framework covered during the lectures and how successfully they were able to apply these to the topics they chose to prepare for their pupils.

Research Questions

The evaluation of the module was based on the following questions.

- Which topics did the students choose for their teaching scenarios?
- Which second order concepts did they choose to utilise in their teaching scenarios and how did they exploit them?
- How was their understanding of this knowledge expressed at the pedagogical level?

Sample

All 58 students who attended the module were included in the study. All were female with 45 aged between 18–25, eight between 25–30 and five aged between 30–40. Five students had also obtained a previous degree, in addition to their studies in the Department of Early

Childhood Education at the University of Thessaly, while none had attended any postgraduate courses (see Tables 3 and 4). The age of the students and their educational background is significant and may reflect latent abilities that potentially influenced the creation of their scenarios.

Table 3. Ages of the participants.

Age	Number of students (%)
18-25	45 (77.6)
25-30	8 (13.8)
30-40	5 (8.6)
Total	58

Table 4. Educational history of the participants.

Studies	Number of students (%)
Department of Early Childhood Education	53 (91.4)
Additional undergraduate degree	5 (8.6)
Total	58

Research design

The didactic use of the disciplinary approach by the students was evaluated at the end of the course in two ways.

- 1) Through a qualitative analysis of the characteristics of the scenarios produced by the students (Silverman, 2006). Each scenario formed a unit of analysis and this was assessed on three levels, content, the second order concepts employed, and the pedagogical background of the activities chosen. Content was assessed according to whether the topics the students chose to develop fell within any of the following four categories, use of landscape and local history, everyday activities, family issues, or local community issues. The use of second order concepts was assessed in terms of which were employed and how. Finally, the pedagogical choices made by the students were assessed, specifically whether their scenarios were teacher-centred or based on the active participation of the pupils.
- 2) Analysis of the responses by the students to a reflection questionnaire focusing on their understanding of conceptual knowledge and the design of the scenarios. The questions posed are listed as follows, with the students required to respond after completing their scenarios.
 - *What part of creating your scenario did you find the most difficult?*
 - *Did your way of thinking change when using the theoretical approach we followed and the scenario you designed?*

RESULTS

The students were motivated and responded creatively in their design of local history scenarios for pre and primary school pupils. Use of landscape and local history was the most frequently selected topic, accounting for half of all scenarios (see Table 5). This was followed by topics focused on everyday activities, along with topics that were not part of local history. It should be noted that in the latter, the students had failed to make use of the guidelines for the scenario

designs, since they failed to attend the lectures and therefore did not understand the key aspects of the final assignment. Local community and family issues were selected in a relatively small number of cases.

Table 5. Topics chosen by the students for their scenarios.

Use of landscape and local history	29 (50)
Everyday activities	14 (24.1)
Family issues	2 (3.5)
Local community issues	5 (8.6)
Topics not part of local history (see above)	8 (13.8)
Total	58

In terms of the use of second order concepts, most of the scenarios focused on the concept of continuity and change through time (see table 6), a result that is undoubtedly linked to the choice of the landscape and local history topic, its continuities and changes through time, as mentioned above. This was followed by the concepts of significance, historical testimonies and historical perspectives. The moral dimension of historical interpretation was utilised in only one scenario. Several scenarios focused on two or three second order concepts in their activities, while we assume that the concept of change through time was more readily understood in relation to the concepts of historical thinking. In eight scenarios, no second-order concepts were utilised.

Table 6. The use of second-order concepts in the scenarios.

Continuity and change through time	38
Historical testimonies	4
Causes and consequences	2
Significance	7
Empathy	4
The moral dimension of historical interpretation	1
No second-order concepts employed	8

Not all scenarios were successful in the application of second order concepts. At least half of the scenarios based on continuity and change through time, had gaps in their conceptual meanings. A larger problem was identified in the use of the concept of empathy, where three out of the four scenarios had utilised perspectives on an emotional, but none on acknowledgeable level. The utilization of the concepts of historical testimonies, causes and consequences, and historical significance by the students was relatively successful in terms of how they supported their scenarios through appropriate activities.

In terms of pedagogical approaches, content analysis showed that most scenarios were based on team-based activities (see Table 7). For example, many activities began and ended in the ‘corner’ of the group conversation. This format with the group arranged in a circle provides the opportunity for the development of social skills, language and communication. Many scenarios involved mixed pedagogical approaches with the participation of pupils in the educational

process, both team-oriented and teacher-centred. However, teacher-centred approaches were noted in just over a quarter of all scenarios, in which pupils follow the instructions of the teacher.

Table 7. Pedagogical approaches used in the scenarios.

Continuity and change through time	38
Historical testimonies	4
Causes and consequences	2
Significance	7
Empathy	4
The moral dimension of historical interpretation	1
No second-order concepts employed	8

As expected, those students who did not attend all the lectures were less able to produce scenarios which built on the theoretical framework followed (see Table 8). The grades awarded to most of the scenarios ranged between 7 and 9 out of 10 ($n=38$, 65.5%), while the top grade was awarded to six students who had been taught the theoretical frame work during a previous semester. It should be noted that three of the six with top grades were existing primary school teachers of between 30–40 years of age, suggesting that previous knowledge, experience and maturity had a positive effect on their performance.

Table 8. Assessment of the educational scenarios.

Assessment results, marks out of 10	No of scenarios (%)
3–5	8 (13.8)
5–6	6 (10,4)
7–8	23 (39,7)
9	15 (25,9)
10	6 (10,4)
Total	58

In terms of the question as to which part of the scenario the students found difficult, most responded that designing activities that would facilitate conceptual learning was challenging (see Table 9). It is worth noting again that the six students who had already taken another module of the same course during a previous semester, had no difficulties.

Table 9. Areas in which the students encountered difficulties, according to their post-project reflections.

Areas of scenario design	No of scenarios (%)
Preparing the scenario	4 (6.9)
Structure of the scenario	8 (13.8)
Second-order concepts	6 (10.3)
Innovative activities that facilitate conceptual learning	19 (32.8)
Age of the pupils	8 (13.8)
Learning objectives	3 (5.2)
Metacognitive activities	4 (6.9)
No difficulty encountered	6 (10.3)
Total	58

Some of the qualitative evidence regarding the most difficult part of the scenario is illuminating, leading to the conclusion that the students had begun to grasp the concept of conceptual learning (second order concepts) when designing activities focusing on local history topics. The following answer by a student is indicative of this, "*There was nothing that made it particularly difficult for me. I think that given my lack of experience, this was a good effort and as my studies progress, I will be able to improve more.*" In another case where a student had participated on a previous course, "This semester wasn't difficult for me because I was prepared from the previous one." It is well-known that developing historical thinking is key to fostering metahistorical thinking in the history classroom (Chapman, 2015).

In response to the question, *Did your way of thinking change in response to the theory we followed and the scenario you designed*, the comments by the students were also very positive. The following are two typical replies that point to changes in the perceptions and practices of the students in terms of their approach to the teaching of history.

Drawing up the scenario helped me to understand how creatively we can use local history in the classroom and it inspired me to come up with many different things I could do. Besides, the whole course was an opportunity to look at history in a different light and it helped me to move away from a view of the subject as just sterile information. It gave life and voice to events that I had previously remembered just as dates. It was a joyful experience and I am pleased that it succeeded in opening new horizons for me.

Through the scenario I realised that I should plan historical activities based on second order concepts, which I did not know before. My way of thinking has definitely changed significantly as I used to look at history as a very one-dimensional subject, whereas as an educator you can find so many inspiring ways to teach children without following the conservative curriculum.

During the metacognitive process, we discussed why the disciplinary approach should be at the centre of all activities. The answers by the students underlined that if the goal is to train critical

thinkers, then the disciplinary approach provides a key theoretical foundation with many practical applications.

DISCUSSION

From the outset, the aim of this module was to train prospective teachers in the disciplinary approach and to encourage them to consider the teaching of history as a research process. In this way they will be equipped with the skills necessary to apply these methods throughout their careers. The following are some of the findings drawn from the assessments carried out on both the group and individual exercises.

- In terms of the content of their scenarios, the students mainly selected themes focused on the exploitation of the historical landscape and the micro-history of place. In turn, this led to the use of the concept of continuity and change primarily as regards conceptual knowledge. As for their pedagogical choices, the scenarios were to a large extent focused towards the active participation of the pupils, although elements of teacher-centred approaches were also observed.

The students developed their thinking and were led to reappraise the value of didactic methods through the process of presenting their scenarios, as well as through dialogue. These processes enhanced feedback and, in general, improved their metacognitive skills. Students came to understand both traditional and contemporary approaches and also realised that history education as a research process, opens up new ways of understanding the historical environments in which people live. They also realized that early intervention in pre and primary school can lead to significant benefits in later history education (Groot-Reeueveekamp, Ros, Van Boxtel & Oort 2015).

- Several limitations were also noted and these will be considered when redesigning the module. For example, no second order concepts were invoked, with the focus of interest being continuity and change through time. For this reason, we suggest that an emphasis should be placed on presenting more examples from historic literature. It was also observed that the pedagogical aims of the students were not adequately reflected in the choice of teaching methods and the assessment of the educational plans of the students. It is therefore planned that the pedagogical approach of the module be shifted towards team-based methods with further examples, or there could be more collaboration with the corresponding course in critical pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is only under the actual implementation of the scenarios that a systematic evaluation of the conceptual understanding of the content by both the student teachers and their pupils can be realised. This would allow a systematic teaching and reflective readiness to address the problems mentioned by the students. As such, it is planned that some of the scenarios will be used in real-world kindergarten conditions next semester, and ultimately to have them re-evaluated by the next group of students who select the module. This research has highlighted the need for a training programme based on the application of the disciplinary approach as part of the curriculum of future teachers. Through scenario design, this will serve to create new scaffolds of knowledge and perspectives on the subject of history, both for teachers and their pupils.

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