

The Benefits of Studying History: How to Uncover the Historical Truth?

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Keywords

history, information, sources, political indoctrination, show trials, fact-check

Introduction for the teacher

The lesson script is intended for students aged between 14 and 18. The subject matter discussed allows for its use in interdisciplinary classes in history, culture, media education and social sciences.

The material has been divided into three parts: the lesson scenario, a set of source materials and a worksheet of exercises to be done during the class, in a group or individually.

Instructions

The script contains five pieces of source material and a worksheet with exercises to be implemented during two lessons (45 mins each). The lesson structure can be modified by the teacher to achieve specific objectives. The source materials and worksheet can also be adapted and used only in part according to the class requirements. The lesson will benefit from using the Internet (computer, multimedia projector and an interactive white board), including devices connected to the Internet (smartphones, tablets, etc).

Operational goals

The student is able to:

- understand the importance of verifying historical information,
- acquire knowledge about historical methods,
- explain the meaning of the terms 'show trial' and 'fact-check',
- use historical methods to verify the information presented as truths on the Internet and social media,

- develop an independent argument regarding the role of history in human society and contribute to the collective debate.

Teaching methods

- teacher-led discussion,
- group work,
- brainstorming,
- analysis of source material, texts and illustrations,
- metaplan,¹
- independent work with a set of exercises.

Teaching aids

- boards/flipcharts, felt pens/chalk,
- large paper sheets/Bristol board sheets, post-its,
- a computer with internet access and a multimedia projector and an interactive white board.

Before the lesson

Ask the students to read the essays titled '[How historians verify information](#)' by A. Pok and [article by Ł. Kamiński](#).

¹ One of the activation methods used during class; it involves poster making by the discussion/debate participants. The poster represents a graphic summary of the debate (based on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaplan> [accessed 14 December 2020]).

Lesson Scenario

Introduction

1. Begin your lesson by asking the students what they know about the recent past. Do they have knowledge about the lives of their parents and grandparents during the communist regime? Discuss how they discovered the information: by reading history books, through oral history and memories recounted by their relatives? Ask whether it is important for them to know how living in a different society was and if they use the information to compare how life was then and now. Ask them if, during their research, they noticed discrepancies between the different sources of information regarding the same event. And if they did, how they managed it? Use the discussion to create a link with the topic of the text regarding the verifying of historical information.
2. Introduce the topic: how to verify information using historical tools. Distribute the worksheets and sets of source materials among the students. Tell the students that during the lesson, they will work both individually and in groups.

Development

1. Direct the students attention towards **Source A** and engage them in **Exercise 1**. Write the following question on the board: why is it important to study history? Ask the students to write a reason on a post-it. Each student will put the post-it with the answer on the board. The similar answers will be grouped within the same category. That will provide a broad image of how students see history and why is it relevant to them.
2. To continue, ask the students what they value in the society they are living in. Is it the abundance of things, the way of life, or the freedom to access any information, regardless of the source? Present a few elements of living in a communist society: state control of public and individual life, control of movement, information and books, and the lack of free expression. Discuss how authoritarian regimes used history as a tool of political indoctrination and how historical research and publishing were subject to state control.
3. Direct the students' attention towards **Source B** and ask them to work individually on **Exercise 2**. Once that is done, a student will read the answers while the rest will correct or approve.

4. To better understand the place of history in an authoritarian society, work with your students on **Exercise 3** to create a metaplan centred on the following claim: **In authoritarian regimes history is subject to political control.** Demonstrate by providing answers to the following questions: **How is it done?** and **What is the purpose?** Build an alternative approach to history by answering these questions: **How should it be done?** and **What is to be done?**
5. During the communist regime, mainly under Stalin, changes in Eastern Europe leadership were orchestrated from Moscow. In some cases, purges that occurred in Moscow reverberated to Eastern Europe and affected the national communist leadership who were accused of severe crimes, such as espionage, being too open to the West or supporting the enemies of Moscow. These were not fair trials, and their role was more punitive than corrective. Such were the show trials of László Rajk (Hungary), Władysław Gomułka (Poland), Traicho Kostov (Bulgaria) and Rudolf Slánský (Czechoslovakia) at the end of 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. In this context, point the students towards **Sources C** and **D** and ask them to complete **Exercise 4.**
6. Moving towards the present, ask the students how many times they questioned the accuracy of a post or information they have found on the Internet. Was the post shared by friends, and did they share too? Did they try to verify the information? And how did they do that? Discuss various methods of verifying the information, such as searching for more and different sources and inquiring about the originator of the information and possible motivation.
Direct the students to **Source E** and ask them to work on **Exercise 5.** The goal is to notice how the methodology used in history applies to verifying present information.

Conclusion

To conclude, write down and reflect with your students ideas related to the importance of verifying information; how many tools can be used for fact-checking and how important is that for minimising the spread of false information.



Homework

Choose a piece of information you have found on the Internet. Maybe it was shared by a friend. Before sharing it, try to verify it to see if it is accurate. Write a short essay describing the steps you are taking and what the result is.

Worksheet

Exercise 1

Using **Source A** give one reason why it is important and useful to learn history.

Exercise 2

Use **Source B** to evaluate whether the statements in the table below are true (T) or false (F).

Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes control historical research and publishing.	
A political regime cannot control the teaching of history in schools.	
In authoritarian regimes, historical writing is subject to censorship.	
History is less vulnerable to ideological pressures than other branches of science.	
In totalitarian regimes, history has an increased political relevance.	
History cannot become tool of political indoctrination.	

Exercise 3

Use **Sources A** and **B** to create a metaplan following the model below by answering the questions in the table.

How is it done?		How should it be done?
	PROBLEM In authoritarian regimes history is subjected to political control.	
Why is it the way it is?		What can be done?

Exercise 4

Using **Sources C** and **D** as starting point, identify other sources of the Slánský show trial.

Your answer:

Exercise 5

Using **Source E** debate how methods used in the study of history can verify information spread on the Internet.

Your answer:

Answers

Exercise 1

Possible answers:

It teaches us about the past and that is important in understanding the present.

Helps us understand how humanity has evolved.

History provides us with a real grasp on how the world works.

Exercise 2

Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes control historical research and publishing.	T
A political regime cannot control the teaching of history in schools.	F
In authoritarian regimes, historical writing is subject to censorship.	T
History is less vulnerable to ideological pressures than other branches of science.	F
In totalitarian regimes, history has an increased political relevance.	T
History cannot become tool of political indoctrination.	F

Exercise 3

Possible answers:

How is it done? – Through censorship, controlling the school curricula, research and historical publishing.

How should it be done? – Historical narratives should present the past as it was and without concealing or changing facts to comply with a political agenda. Why is it the way it is? – Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes use history for purposes of political indoctrination.

What is to be done? – The goal of historical truth may be achieved in a democratic society, where history is freer from ideological pressures.

Exercise 4

Possible answer:

<https://www.private-prague-guide.com/article/rudolf-slansky-and-the-slansky-trial/>

Exercise 5

Possible answer:

To verify present or historical information, you could search multiple sources, including the Internet, to check an event or a statement. It would also be useful to research who originated the information and the motivation behind it, and who was the intended audience. An analysis of the style and content of the information may provide useful elements in assessing the accuracy of the information.