

# History Education: Values, Process Objectives and Experiences

by Leonard Grech (President: History Teachers' Association of Malta)

## Introduction

There are many variables that determine what goes on during the history lesson. The specific targets planned beforehand by the history teacher are of paramount significance. Effective teaching will transform itself into learning more easily, if teachers are not only aware but also clear about what they want to achieve during lessons. I believe that chances of success will increase if students themselves agree with, and support the attainment of specific targets.

Knowledge and insight, skills and attitudes as well as preparation for citizenship are among the most popular aims and objectives of history education. The debate whether values should form part of our agenda is still going on and is not likely to be put aside.

## Values

History teaching and learning have to be discussed within the framework of the aims and objectives of education in general. Hence the importance of values which, in a certain sense, form an integral part of the socialisation process. Such a process is not meant to turn our students into YES people, persons who are always conforming as if they don't have a mind of their own. On the contrary, it is within the spirit of the National Curriculum to help our students develop their individuality. Having a critical mind will ensure that our students will not be manipulated all that easily. Values will hopefully help them to develop in themselves these objectives of education.

I very much agree with Carmel Gallagher (1996) that *"In the multi-cultural context of European society, schools have an important role to play in helping young people to become informed, active and responsible citizens of a culturally plural Europe and a global village. The growth of democracy, tolerance and social change in the 'New Europe' will require both understanding of the past and sensitivity to ways of handling conflict in the future. History teaching has a potential contribution to make to the development of citizens who are open-minded, aware of diversity, willing to accept difference and to respect peoples of other cultures, religions and languages. This type of teaching implies an appreciation of a shared civilisation, the interdependence of nations and the contribution made by various civilisations and cultures within the global village"*.

Gallagher is obviously in favour of teaching values during the history lesson. There are those, however, who strongly disagree with this idea. They say that imparting values could create a dangerous situation. Teachers may manipulate students and indoctrinate them with 'malicious' propaganda in favour of Neo-Nazism, the White Power Culture and other beliefs or ideologies which may be unacceptable and harmful to society.

This could be a real problem. But abstaining from promoting values for fear of abuse is like suppressing the use of a signifi-

cant tool for fear of it being used in an unprofessional way.

In Nazi Germany school children were indoctrinated in the hatred and suppression of the Jews. These 'teachings' were the direct result of an ideology that was founded on lies, prejudice, injustice and inequality. So what are the values that should be promoted?

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention of Human Rights, the Constitution of Malta, the laws and the culture of our country, the National Curriculum and Malta's international commitments could form the basis for the choice of such values. These would include:

*Freedom*  
*Democracy*  
*Tolerance*  
*Understanding*  
*Equality*  
*The rule of law*  
*The dignity of the individual*  
*Respect for Human Rights*  
*Concern for others.*

I am in favour of the learning and teaching of values because I believe that first we are educators and then, teachers of history. The media, particularly the Internet, exposes our students to all sorts of ideas, cultures and ideologies. It is our duty to guide them in the 'right' direction, but I feel that we cannot impose. This is a very delicate situation. We ourselves can easily fall into the trap of indoctrinating our students in particular values which we hold to be sacred and indisputable. But sometimes what is good for the goose may not be good for the gander.

Let us challenge our students with thought provoking and imaginative questions:

*What sort of beliefs do I value?*

*How do I want my children to be in twenty years time?*

This sort of education will very probably involve lots of discussions on moral issues. Teaching First Year students about the Romans and their laws, for example, will lead to a discussion on slavery, the treatment of handicapped babies, religious persecution and the inequality of the sexes. Prehistory will give us the chance to discuss the amount of freedom enjoyed by prehistoric man, for example religious freedom vis-à-vis the homogeneity of the community.

These questions could lead to fruitful considerations. Students could become so much involved that they start examining their own personal values.

*Am I tolerant enough towards those who have different religious beliefs? Do I believe in diversity?*

In this context I can quote again Carmel Gallagher who is an expert in history education. I agree with the author that there are differing views on the role of history teaching. Personally I include myself with *"those who see the potential of education,*

and history teaching in particular, as a vehicle for values education and the development of critical thinking, moral reasoning and inter-cultural education. This type of teaching involves the conscious development of skills in historical analysis as valuable and relevant, not just in terms of an academic or leisure interest, but as the potential basis for forming personal attitude and values; for making reasoned judgements in relation to controversial issues; for considering the ethical and moral dimensions of actions which affect the dignity and rights of others; and, thereby, for promoting tolerance and democratic values”.

The methodology of the history lesson itself could help us achieve an important objective. It could help us develop in our students mediating skills, similar to those required for non-violent conflict resolution. This will lead to another very important value, namely, peace and harmony.

### **Process Objectives**

Methodology is of utmost importance and closely connected to what Pratt (1994) refers to as Process Objectives.

These objectives are not specific and cannot be thought of in advance. They are generally connected with an activity, for example, photo language. The teacher (and the students themselves) provides interesting and challenging pictures about a historical topic, such as Roman life and civilisation or Byzantine culture. The pictures are scattered on the table and the students are invited to choose an illustration. They are advised to work in groups and discuss, for example, the evidence that can be elicited from the picture. Perhaps the students want to observe the clothes or the colours adopted by the artist. It is not advisable for the teacher to put forward questions to the students during this activity. It is important to let them imagine, explore, experiment and discover.

As indicated above, this approach is activity oriented. You start with an activity without being sure what the outcome is going to be. We may call it the Columbus style of teaching and learning. When Columbus left Spain on his discovery journey, he was definitely not sure what he was going to encounter. The same happens with this approach. You ask the students to write a play about the Maltese under Arabic rule, and you are not sure what the outcome will be. It may be that the students will come up with things that the educator has never even considered.

### **Experiences**

The history lesson should therefore serve as an interesting experience for the students. I believe that experiences are in themselves an important objective and should not be considered as a means to achieve other aims or objectives of history education. Experiences have the effect of fulfilling the students. Such experiences do not focus on the past or the future of the student, but on the present moment. They will bring about fun, happiness, and a sense of satisfaction. Play, fantasy and imagination are sometimes involved. Back in 1959, Abraham Maslow referred to “peak experiences” which he regarded as a form of “self-actualisation”. This is one of the reasons why we have to regard them as self-justified and an end in themselves.

These experiences will be vividly remembered by the students. They do not come about by accident but are the result of deliberate planning by the teacher.

I agree with Pratt that these peak experiences can alter a person’s view of himself or herself, of others, and of the world.

They may result in an increased sense of the value of living. It is experiences more than anything else that are the foundation of attitudes. Pratt maintains that “*experiences of success are particularly important for students - whether children, adolescents, or adults - both because they are significant in themselves, and because they contribute to the development of a healthy self-concept.*”

Peak experiences can vary and take different forms. Can you imagine the expression on the students’ faces when an oil-lamp dating from the early Christian era is brought into the classroom and lit for the first time in 2000 years!! Or perhaps a Copper or Bronze age necklace is brought to the classroom and worn by a lucky eleven year old!! This can become a reality with the co-operation of the Museum of Archaeology. Obviously, such peak experiences are not an everyday occurrence. More common are what we can describe as ordinary experiences. Occasionally these take the form of educational visits. Teachers prepare worksheets and, back at school, they organise some activity connected with the visit. This is important and necessary for this type of experience. But it should be different with regards to the peak experiences described above. Pratt has something very interesting to say about this matter:

*“It is important for two reasons not to fall into the “follow-up” trap - requiring the students on their return to answer a quiz or write an essay.... The first reason is that students’ knowledge that there is to be some kind of assessment will interfere with the quality of their experience. The second is that if your purpose in organizing the trip is to have students learn more about [a subject or a topic], it is not an experiential objective, but simply a learning strategy: a means to an end, not an end in itself. What would be valid would be some attempt to assess the quality of the students’ experience: a class discussion, review of students’ journals, and attention to remarks they make about the experience.”*

I think it would be very fruitful to reflect and debate such a statement.

### **Conclusion**

It is high time that we seriously consider dramatic changes in the teaching and learning of history. We cannot glue ourselves to old time aims and objectives of history education and to traditional teaching methods that are no longer proving effective. We have to be proactive. We have to envision the future of history teaching and learning, and of education in general. We have to learn how to risk venturing outside our usual assumptions.