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Four Reflections for the Didactics of History

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Abstract

This paper offers four reflections on the state of history didactics. First, effective didactic research requires genuine teaching experience: without immersion in school life, didacticians risk producing knowledge detached from classroom realities. Second, solid disciplinary training is essential; history educators must master both historical content and the methods by which historical knowledge is produced, so they can foster students' capacity to think historically. Third, the profession must resist pedagogical fashions and prescriptive curricula imposed by educational administrations, which often undermine teachers' autonomy and hinder meaningful innovation. Finally, historical teaching must incorporate contemporary cultural and technological transformations, using inquiry-based approaches that turn the classroom into a space for collective investigation rather than passive reception. These reflections aim to reorient history education toward practical relevance, disciplinary rigor, professional autonomy, and innovation grounded in the realities of today's learners and society.

Keywords: History Didactics; Teacher Professional Experience; Historical Thinking; Educational Innovation; Curricular Autonomy

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I present a series of reflections which, although they may appear self-evident or grounded in common sense, remain essential to me despite their limited popularity within certain academic environments. Immersed in the perverse logic of producing didactics for didacticians alone—and disseminating our work primarily through journals, preferably high-impact ones, that only didactics specialists read—we seem to have forgotten who the true beneficiaries of our research should be and what its genuine impact ought to look like.

In recent years, a particular type of university academic has become increasingly prevalent in the field of education: scholars who inhabit a bubble largely disconnected from the everyday reality of school classrooms. As Ibáñez Fanés (2018) observes in El reverso de la historia: Apuntes sobre las humanidades en tiempos de crisis, the themes that dominate our academic conversations today—once devoted to far richer topics—now revolve around evaluation and promotion systems that embitter the professional lives of senior academics and constrain the intellectual and personal development of younger colleagues.

In the Spanish context especially, these systems predetermine which conferences must be attended, what types of articles must be written and where they must be published, how many administrative positions should be held, and ultimately nearly everything except criteria of genuine scholarly interest, scientific quality, originality, or the actual substance of what is evaluated. We are not merely facing measures imposed from above; we are confronting a system in which we are simultaneously victims and accomplices.

For this reason, I wish to articulate several ideas that attempt to move beyond the university logic imposed on us by the hard sciences and by the self-appointed guardians of so-called scientific quality.

I structure this contribution around four reflections for scholars of history education:

1. Professional teaching experience in the relevant educational stages is indispensable.
2. Strong disciplinary knowledge is essential for teaching history.
3. Didactics must avoid educational fashions and administrative prescriptions.
4. Innovation is necessary, especially in light of contemporary cultural and

informational transformations.

A fifth reflection could be added regarding how to measure the impact of social sciences such as ours—although this would require a separate and more extensive discussion.

FIRST REFLECTION: ONE CANNOT TEACH WELL WHAT ONE HAS NEVER PRACTICED

No one would imagine a professor of surgery without experience in the operating room. How could such a person teach others to operate? Certain academic fields can reach high levels of theoretical sophistication while remaining distant from practical application: theoretical physics, logic, biochemistry, or the history of economic doctrines are essential to their respective scientific communities precisely because they operate in largely abstract domains.

However, when the goal is to intervene directly in reality—whether by analyzing or transforming it—we must speak of applied disciplines. This is why universities have departments of applied economics, applied linguistics, applied physics and, as in the case of the University of Barcelona, applied didactics, which includes social science education.

An applied perspective requires deep knowledge of the contexts in which one intends to intervene. Such knowledge can come from sociological, psychological, and cultural studies, or from theoretical work preparing the conceptual foundations of didactics—as I discussed years ago when outlining the five fields of research in social science education. Following this approach, many new researchers in didactics have been trained in our university groups.

Yet in my view, the knowledge derived from study and direct research, while valuable, remains insufficient for shaping a good didactician in the social sciences. Professional teaching experience—at the level in which one intends to work (primary or secondary education)—is fundamental. Occasional school visits or moments dedicated to administering tests do not suffice. As a secondary-school colleague once told me, "the smell of the classroom," the continuous incidents, the moments in which relationships with students are forged are all essential to understanding the work of teaching.

To these more intangible elements—what we might call immersion in the world where we intend to act—we must add the experience of trialing didactic materials and

implementing projects. I would have learned very little about teaching had I not led, applied, revised, and executed innovative materials generated by groups such as Germanía 75, Garbí, Historia 13/16, or Eidos, of which I was an active member.

These groups lacked extensive theoretical foundations; however, applying materials in classrooms, debating them with colleagues in seminars and professional development courses, proved fundamental to my formation as a didactician. This professional experience has remained a constant reference in both my research and my university teaching.

To summarize this first reflection: anyone aspiring to teach others how to teach history—or any subject—should integrate professional teaching experience into their academic development. Combined with the theoretical and research-based training obtained in university settings, such experience forms the best foundation for becoming an effective university professor in our field. As Antoni Gaudí noted, an architect advances only if he walks with two legs—one theoretical and one practical; without both moving in harmony, one limps.

For this reason, I have long argued that professional teaching experience should be considered a significant merit—if not a requirement—in selection processes for university positions in social science education.

SECOND REFLECTION: TEACHING WHAT WE KNOW IS DIFFICULT; TEACHING WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW IS IMPOSSIBLE

This second reflection concerns the indispensable knowledge required for teaching—especially for teaching history. To begin with, a competent didactician must master the technical dimensions traditionally associated with pedagogical expertise: curriculum design, the structuring of didactic units, assessment methods, educational psychology, personality theories, school sociology, and a wide range of professional competencies that today are essential for effective teaching practice.

From my perspective, however, the cornerstone of teacher preparation must be the disciplinary knowledge of the subject to be taught. In the case of history, a robust formation requires a diachronic and comprehensive understanding of the past, with clarity about the fundamental characteristics of each historical period and the major cultural and civilizational units. This is why we have consistently recommended to faculties of history that they offer degree programs structured around general history or the humanities—because historical knowledge cannot meaningfully be separated

from related fields such as literature, the arts, and philosophy. Naturally, such a curriculum must also include substantial coursework in geography.

Unfortunately, many faculties of geography and history have preferred to foster increasing specialization—not only within specific historical periods (such as focusing exclusively on contemporary history) but even within narrowly defined thematic subfields. The Bologna Process, within the European Higher Education Area, was intended to counteract this excessive specialization by introducing common foundational courses in the humanities and core subjects that would provide essential general training. Yet many faculties, at least in Spain, lacking a clear sense of the social function of their graduates, have diluted or bypassed that goal.

Even a broad-based humanistic education is not enough. It is essential to understand how historical knowledge is produced: which methodologies are most appropriate for different types of sources and topics, how interpretations emerge from empirical investigation, and how to engage critically with historiographical traditions. In short, future history teachers—and even more so those who train them—must learn to conduct historical research and situate themselves within contemporary historiographical debates. Research experience, therefore, should be an integral part of undergraduate training.

The rationale is simple. If a didactic approach seeks to position students as active protagonists in their own learning—through discovery-based methods or inquiry-driven pedagogy—and if it aims to present history as a social science rather than a finished narrative, then classroom activities must simulate the work of the historian. This can only occur if the teacher understands what historians actually do.

For these reasons, history teachers and history educators must possess both substantive historical knowledge and an understanding of how such knowledge is constructed. Lacking this, the teacher risks becoming merely a transmitter of fixed, pre-packaged truths rather than an educator capable of fostering historical thinking.

THIRD REFLECTION: AVOIDING FASHIONS AND ADMINISTRATIVE PRESCRIPTIONS

Throughout our professional careers, we have witnessed the rise and fall of pedagogical fashions and the increasingly intrusive role of educational administrations in defining and controlling curricular direction. Since the implementation of the LOGSE—the Spanish law that reorganized pre-university education—administrations,

guided by self-proclaimed academic "experts," have attempted to replace the professional autonomy of teachers. In doing so, they have contributed to a decline in the culture of innovation that, during the 1970s and 1980s, had generated a powerful movement for didactic renewal, rooted in the initiative and creativity of teachers themselves. Though this movement may have been numerically minoritarian, it held hegemonic influence over the educational discourse of the teaching profession and offered a promising foundation for improving classroom practice—largely because in-service teacher training drew heavily on the authority of peers who had developed innovative proposals.

A particularly problematic shift occurred in the 1990s, when the functioning of the educational system—especially curricular design—became linked to specific psychopedagogical theories. This development was unusual compared with curricular models in most Western nations. Secondary school teachers were repeatedly admonished: administrations urged them to adapt and retrain; many psychologists and pedagogues, often with no secondary teaching experience, questioned their pedagogical preparation; and "propagandists" fluent in the new technical vocabulary argued that educational renewal required embracing their bookish, prescriptive approaches. Institutional professional development disseminated an almost scholastic technique of content organization and application, accompanied by a profound disregard for what a scientific discipline like history truly is and what it contributes educationally. As occurs so often with the humanities—frequently viewed as infinitely malleable—educational reforms shaped by conservative neoliberal agendas, global economic organizations, and international policy frameworks have imposed restrictive, often reductive curricular visions.

Since then, we have endured a long procession of pedagogical fashions and administrative mandates. The "operational objectives" of the late 1970s were discarded, only to be replaced by a proliferation of new terms—levels of specification, attitudinal and procedural contents, evaluation criteria, competencies, standards, and more. Most of these terms were detached from the professional culture of effective teachers. Meanwhile, the fiction persists that the more the official curriculum demands, the more thoroughly teachers will comply. In practice, teachers teach as best as they can and know how, while losing more and more professional autonomy. The result is a pedantic scaffolding of paperwork and bureaucratic routines that has stifled genuine didactic renewal based on teachers' professional expertise.

Fortunately, signs of positive change are emerging. Schools and teacher groups

are again seeking locally grounded and contextually appropriate pedagogical approaches. Their initiatives offer a promising horizon, despite efforts by the most conservative elements of the educational establishment—often disguised as innovators—to regain discursive control.

For these reasons, it is advisable to distance oneself from the pedagogical prescriptions of administrative "shamans," and above all, to disregard entirely the history curricula imposed by central authorities, many of which are impossibly vast. The encyclopedic nature of official programs renders high-quality didactics unattainable. As textbook analysis clearly shows, it is practically impossible to adopt anything other than traditional expository teaching, regardless of supplementary images, videos, or activities that merely serve to reinforce pre-packaged truths. As a wise secondary school teacher once told me: "If I truly tried to cover the official syllabus, I would have barely a week per topic."

This returns us to where we started: still burdened with encyclopedic curricula based on rote memorization, as if nothing had changed. It is worth recalling what Gardner (1999) has argued: if students studied even a single topic in depth, their learning would be far more effective than attempting to cover fifty superficially. What matters most, according to Gardner, is that students—at any educational stage—study a limited number of topics deeply enough to learn methods of analysis.

FOURTH REFLECTION: TEACHING EFFECTIVELY REQUIRES AN INNOVATIVE SPIRIT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The History Library at the University of Cambridge is named after John Robert Seeley, a distinguished essayist and academic who, like other historians of his time, offered reflections on how history should be taught. In 1890, Seeley argued:

> "In the teaching of history, everything should be aimed at turning narration into problems. As long as you think of history as mere chronological storytelling, you remain trapped in the old literary labyrinth, which leads to no valuable knowledge but only to pompous, conventional tales… Break the somnolent chatter of narration, pose questions, and engage with problems: your attitude will change, and you will become an investigator. You will cease to be solemn and begin to be serious" (Seeley, 1890, p. XX).

Seeley's insight remains profoundly relevant. Effective history teaching cannot

reproduce methods that have repeatedly failed: the traditional approach, in which knowledge is presented as finished and packaged, designed merely for memorization. Simply adding exercises, films, visits, or source materials does not resolve the problem if the underlying methodological approach remains unchanged. Teaching that obscures how historical knowledge is constructed risks presenting students with a corpus of myths or erudition devoid of practical relevance for learning to think historically.

As I have argued in my manuals on history didactics, the history classroom should function primarily as a laboratory simulating historical research. This principle is valid from primary school through the end of secondary education. Jerome Bruner (1996) similarly emphasizes that:

> "History never simply happens: it is constructed by historians. The claim that children cannot engage in historical construction is unconvincing. I have witnessed students at the Learning and Development Research Center in Pittsburgh developing interpretative historical perspectives—they were learning to act as historians rather than merely consuming prepackaged stories or supporting partisan interpretations" (p. XX).

Based on this principle, a multitude of innovative pedagogical paths exist. Today, it is the responsibility of didacticians, in collaboration with school teachers, to identify and renew effective methods for historical inquiry. A common denominator in these approaches is the transformation of the classroom into a collective space for investigation, where teachers design prototypes, guide students' exploration, and create opportunities to contextualize and formalize acquired knowledge.

While these ideas are not new—they were already defended in the 19th century—the contemporary social, cultural, and technological context is radically different. Teaching today must respond to new conceptions of culture, the role of social knowledge in a rapidly changing world (Giddens, 1991), and emerging channels for communication and information exchange.

Classroom resources have evolved far beyond textbooks, notebooks, blackboards, maps, transparencies, and slides. Modern tools include computers, websites, multimedia materials, interactive virtual reality, electronic databases, hypertexts, next-generation mobile technology, and interactive television. Effective teaching must integrate these resources into a technological society heavily oriented toward virtual engagement. The challenge lies not only in incorporating technology but also in adapting pedagogy to the social realities shaping leisure, family life, communication spaces, and contemporary culture.

Innovation in history didactics must therefore aim to achieve three overarching goals:

1. Perspective – a rational understanding of the evolution and dynamics of human societies, providing a solid foundation for interpreting the present.
2. Knowledge – accurate comprehension of historical events, figures, institutions, concepts, periods, and processes of continuity and change.
3. Competence – the ability to use the basic tools of the historian's trade, thereby learning to "think historically" (Vilar, 1970).

Historical thinking requires developing the capacity for critical rationalism, analytical equanimity, and the aspiration for objective, evidence-based interpretation of social phenomena (Vilar, 1970). These competencies transform students from passive recipients of information into active practitioners of historical inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS

The reflections presented in this essay highlight the multifaceted nature of teaching history and, more broadly, the social sciences. Effective didactics cannot be reduced to technical skills, compliance with administrative mandates, or adherence to academic prestige. It is, instead, the careful integration of deep disciplinary knowledge, practical classroom experience, pedagogical autonomy, and the capacity to innovate in line with contemporary culture that allows education to fulfill its transformative potential. These elements, though often undervalued in academic discourse, constitute the very foundation of meaningful historical education.

Professional Experience as Pedagogical Foundation

First and foremost, practical teaching experience remains indispensable. While theoretical research contributes significantly to the intellectual development of future educators, it cannot substitute immersion in real classroom environments. Classroom experience allows the teacher to develop sensitivity to the rhythm of school life, the social and emotional dynamics among students, and the practical challenges of implementing innovative materials. Exposure to such realities enables educators to move beyond abstraction and connect theory with practice. As the author has previously demonstrated in his work with groups such as Germanía 75, Garbí, Historia 13/16, and Eidos, the iterative process of applying, reflecting, and revising didactic

materials in real educational contexts is critical for cultivating pedagogical expertise.

Mastery of Subject Matter and Research Literacy

Second, mastery of the subject matter is essential. A history teacher who lacks a thorough understanding of historiography, research methods, and disciplinary knowledge risks reducing education to rote memorization and the passive reception of prepackaged facts. Historical education must engage students in inquiry and critical thinking, modeling the work of professional historians. This involves not only teaching content but also fostering methodological competence, guiding students to interrogate sources, construct interpretations, and appreciate the complexities and ambiguities inherent in historical study. Research experience, even at the undergraduate or graduate level, is thus not an optional supplement but a core component of teacher preparation.

Autonomy and Resistance to Prescriptive Curricula

Third, effective didactics requires pedagogical autonomy and critical resistance to bureaucratic or prescriptive educational mandates. Administratively imposed curricula, often encyclopedic and disconnected from classroom realities, risk stifling creativity and innovation. Excessive attention to standards, competencies, or bureaucratic procedures can undermine the professional judgment of teachers. Instead, educators must be encouraged to design learning experiences grounded in students' needs and contextual realities. The teacher's role is to navigate between the constraints of official curricula and the potential for meaningful, student-centered learning experiences. This autonomy is not merely professional preference; it is a prerequisite for maintaining the integrity and relevance of historical education.

Innovation in the Context of Contemporary Culture

Fourth, the innovation of historical pedagogy must be conceived in the context of contemporary culture and technological transformation. The proliferation of digital tools, multimedia resources, interactive simulations, and online databases presents both opportunities and challenges. Innovative didactics entails the thoughtful integration of these resources to enhance inquiry, analysis, and interpretation rather than superficial

engagement. In this sense, technological competence becomes inseparable from pedagogical competence. Moreover, educators must consider the broader social and cultural dimensions shaping students' experiences, including media consumption, civic engagement, and participation in digital spaces. Teaching history today demands not only the mastery of disciplinary knowledge but also an awareness of how knowledge circulates in society and how students engage with it in multiple forms.

The Social Responsibility of the History Didactician

Beyond individual classrooms, history didacticians bear a broader social responsibility. They contribute to the cultivation of civic literacy, critical thinking, and historical consciousness. A society that understands its past with nuance, depth, and analytical rigor is better equipped to engage with contemporary challenges. By fostering historical literacy, teachers empower students to navigate misinformation, appreciate diversity, and participate meaningfully in democratic life. Thus, the work of the history teacher transcends the classroom, shaping the intellectual and ethical framework of future citizens.

Integration of Theory, Practice, and Innovation

Ultimately, the preparation of history didacticians must integrate three dimensions: theory, practice, and innovation. Classroom experience and applied experimentation provide a reality check for theoretical models. Disciplinary expertise and research literacy allow educators to frame instruction within robust epistemological and methodological frameworks. Innovation, informed by contemporary culture and technological developments, ensures that historical learning remains relevant and engaging. Only through the conscious integration of these elements can the teacher guide students from passive recipients of knowledge to active, critical participants in the construction of historical understanding.

Towards a Transformative Historical Pedagogy

In conclusion, historical didactics is a dynamic, complex, and socially significant endeavor. It requires the cultivation of professional expertise, deep disciplinary knowledge, critical independence, and innovative pedagogical strategies. Teaching

history effectively is not merely the transmission of facts; it is the cultivation of historical thinking, inquiry, and analytical reasoning. By fostering these competencies, history educators contribute to the formation of engaged, thoughtful, and critically literate citizens. The classroom becomes a laboratory where knowledge is not static but actively constructed, interrogated, and applied. This vision aligns with the insights of Seeley (1890), Bruner (1996), and Gardner (1999), emphasizing that education is an active, participatory, and reflective process rather than the simple delivery of finished knowledge.

In this light, the modern history didactician is both a scholar and a practitioner, a facilitator of inquiry, and a guide in the ethical and intellectual formation of students. The challenge and opportunity of contemporary historical education lie in balancing tradition with innovation, theory with practice, and disciplinary rigor with cultural relevance. Only by embracing this holistic vision can history teaching fulfill its profound educational, social, and civic mission.

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