About Creativity in History Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

A high-performing academic education system supports the development of skills such as curiosity and creativity in students' activities and learning experiences. However, the academic curriculum gives quite a lot of importance to the accumulation of knowledge and the learning of specific skills, which can encourage an education that is less oriented towards the development of creativity and curiosity, especially in the discipline of History. Our study has as target group the 3rd year students of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, whom we monitored during two academic years. The purpose of the research is to analyze the effect of the didactic strategy on students' creative thinking and to show that creativity is a fundamental element for the development of their historical thinking as students and future practitioners. In our approach, we started from the following premises and hypotheses: 1) creativity is present in all learning contexts, although it is not always specified as such; 2) students need to be creative in a constantly changing world that requires us to permanently adapt; 3) outside of those disciplines that explicitly emphasize creativity (fine arts, music etc.) creativity is rarely present in the discussions regarding teaching and learning; 4) if at History we apply a series of strategies to stimulate creative thinking that includes interactive methods, diverse teaching aids and mixed organizational forms which involve cooperation, then students' creativity, curiosity and interest in this subject will be stimulated. Therefore, we proposed the following objectives: (O1) The implementation of didactic strategies that stimulate students' creativity; (O2) The analysis of the results - how does the didactic strategy affect creative thinking in the history discipline? (O3) The analysis and evaluation of the effect that the didactic strategy may have on creativity at History. The expected results are, in the case of students, an increase in creativity through the application of certain didactic strategies, motivation for learning and positive attitudes towards history, with the belief that when they become teachers they will apply similar strategies in the classroom.

Keywords: students; history; creativity; didactic strategies; academic performance.

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Introduction

If we conduct a simple opinion poll, we immediately find out what the students' perception about studying History is: History class is a place where you have to repeat what the professor or the textbook said and you have to follow the right steps in the right order to get the answers correct; History is the subject where you hear names and data that you try to memorize and reproduce in tests and other evaluation forms. If you learn the lesson "by heart" academic success is guaranteed.

How come we discover such an opinion, even at such an academic level? As a consequence of excessively using short term memorizing during their school years, students have come to the conclusion that History is a difficult and unpleasant discipline (Krathwohl, D.R., 2002). A large part of learning is done undisciplined, associative, inert. Exposure and its forms, massive content coverage and illogical research, combined with student passivity, perpetuate the inferior thinking and learning that students have come to associate with school. Students are not used to actively reaching conclusions, nor they debate ideas with other peers or professors; they don’t confront with a variety of points of view; they don’t analyze concepts, theories or explanations from their own perspective, nor compare what they learn with experience, or examine assumptions, or gather evidence, they don't think critically and, least of all, they aren't creative in History classes (Paul, 1990, p.1).

Academic education encourages professors to consider the role of creativity in students’ teaching-learning process. Many considerations underlie this approach: the need to be creative is found in all learning contexts, although we do not use the term creativity often enough to describe such situations; we all need to be creative in a constantly changing world that demands systematic adaptation (Borgonovi, 2022). Basically, professors value the creativity, originality, intuition and imagination of students, hallmarks of excellence in higher education learning and performance (Anghel, 2017). These are essential features of training future teachers who need to achieve the best performance in schools. At the academic level, they make a major leap toward that creative and critical thinking that will serve them in the classroom and for the rest of their lives.
The development of creative thinking skills is essential in the formation of individuals who are capable of critical thinking, who generate innovative ideas and approach challenges with an original perspective. Within the discipline of History, stimulating creative thinking plays an important role in cultivating deep interest and understanding of historical events and processes.

Research methodology

Our aim is to show that creativity is an important part of historical thinking and that stimulating creativity can be a determining factor in increasing students' motivation to learn. The fundamental objective of this research is to highlight the effects of the didactic strategy combined with extracurricular activities for stimulation creativity in the discipline of History, training and development of skills through the use of methods, means and forms of organization that stimulate creativity and cooperation among students. Our specific objectives were to implement didactic strategies that stimulate students' creativity in the History discipline and to evaluate their effect upon students' creativity in the discipline of History.

The target group were the students from Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, the 3rd year of study, which I have monitored for the last 2 years, around 70 students per year, during the face-to-face classes, after the Pandemic Covid-19. As we encouraged the use of teaching-learning methods and activities that stimulated creativity, an increasing number of questions arose. How could creativity be described in the History discipline? What strategies enable students to be creative in History? What are the main obstacles that professor and students alike encounter in this process? Do we also assess a student's creativity? If so, how can we measure creativity? Can we evaluate it objectively?

With these questions in mind, we outlined several working premises and hypotheses: creativity is present in all learning contexts, although it is not always specified as such; students need to be creative in a constantly changing world that requires us to permanently adapt; outside of those disciplines that explicitly emphasize it (fine arts, music, etc.), creativity is rarely put in the discussions regarding teaching and learning; if we apply a strategy to stimulate creative thinking that includes interactive methods, diverse
teaching aids and mixed forms of organization that predominately involve cooperation, debate, freedom of imagination, then students' creativity, curiosity will be stimulated and thus their interest in History (Jackson, 2005, pp. 1-2). The independent variable refers to the introduction of a strategy based on interactive methods to the History discipline, to the design of activities that stimulate creative thinking. The dependent variable refers to creative thinking (fluidity, fluency, originality, elaboration, synthesis, solution), behaviors, skills and attitudes acquired by students.

The research involved conducting a pedagogical experiment completed with a focus group interview, a qualitative method that focuses on in-depth understanding of phenomena and processes, with an emphasis on the subjective interpretation of the participants and a detailed exploration of their experiences and perspectives. In our case - the implementation of a strategy that stimulates students' creative thinking in History classes, aiming to observe and evaluate its impact on them. These interviews facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas between participants, which allowed me to obtain rich and varied information about their experiences and to identify common patterns of strategies aimed at creativity. As research methods and tools we used observation, the experiment and discussions with the focus group.

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

There are significant differences in students' creativity at the beginning of the semester (as a result of the analysis of their seminar products and involvement in the teaching-learning activity) and at the end of the semester, after didactic strategies and activities that stimulate creative thinking have been applied. At History, creative thinking could be evaluated through various aspects and indicators, such as: fluency of ideas - the students’ ability to generate a large number of ideas, interpretations or solutions in relation to the historical topics addressed; flexibility of thinking - evaluation of the ability to adapt to various perspectives and to think in new and unexpected ways in the interpretation of historical events and characters; originality - evaluation of the degree of novelty and
uniqueness of the ideas or solutions proposed by the students in what concerns the interpretation or resolution of historical problems; elaboration - assessing the students' ability to develop and explore in detail their ideas and arguments in relation to the historical events, processes or themes addressed; synthesis - assessment of students' ability to integrate and combine different information and perspectives to obtain a comprehensive understanding and coherent view of historical topics; creative problem solving - assessing the students' ability to identify and propose creative solutions to problems or challenges related to historical topics, thereby providing innovative perspectives and approaches (Kaufman, 2019). These indicators emphasize the importance of key features of creativity in the study of History, such as generating multiple and original ideas, flexibility in thinking, elaboration and synthesis of information and innovative approach to historical problems and challenges. By evaluating these aspects, students' creativity in the study of history can be highlighted and appreciated and their development can be stimulated in this direction. In the initial stage, we collected and capitalized on the data provided by current observations carried out during curricular and extracurricular activities, in the first class hours and in the manner in which they presented their first seminar topics. I found that at the beginning the students are reluctant to take the initiative in debates, to express their opinions, to carry out the seminar projects in a personal way, even if they have a consistent baggage of general historical culture. For these first meetings, we established certain observable indicators: fluency - evaluation of the number of generated ideas; flexibility - assessment of the ability to connect, modify, restructure and find various solutions to solve proposed problems; originality - assessment of the ability to issue new ideas and ingenious solutions in the answers provided; elaboration - evaluation of the level of development and completion of the ideas presented, as well as the degree of construction and accomplishment of the seminar works; synthesis - assessing the ability to combine different elements to create a coherent whole, the overall appearance of the answer; the solution - evaluating to what extent the answers we obtained address the problematic situations, understanding their usefulness and value (Kaufman, J., Sternberg, R., 2019).
During the following hours in class, we proceeded to apply some interactive, active-participative methods, varying the work techniques, while the final product obtained by the students was designed to be useful in the learning process. The students worked both individually and in groups or teams, the tasks allowed different ways of approach, without imposing a specific model. The use of various didactic materials, including technology, models, maps was encouraged. I also used the role-play method, where students were encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of historical characters and find creative solutions to the problems or challenges these characters faced. In the teaching activity, I systematically used brainstorming, problematizing and debate, thus stimulating students to formulate and express their own ideas. We also had classes in the extracurricular space, namely going with each of the two student series to the Princely Court National Museum Complex in Târgoviște. Every time I have found that holding classes in this historical setting has positive effects on their perception of the History discipline, it stimulates them to be more open to discussions, more curious, more imaginative.

The assessment of students' creativity in the subject History requires a holistic and flexible approach. In addition to evaluating knowledge and understanding, I paid special attention to the display of creative thinking. During lessons and practical activities, I encouraged students to express their personal ideas and perspectives, generate innovative solutions and develop their argumentation skills. To assess creativity, I used criteria such as originality, novelty of ideas, innovative connections between concepts and imaginative use of available resources and stress a special attention to finding creative solutions to historical problems.

I have discovered that students become more interested and motivated to participate in lessons because creative activities challenge and stimulate them to think in an innovative way. This leads to a development of their critical and analytical skills as they are encouraged to examine historical topics in depth and explore different perspectives. Participating in creative activities also helps them develop their communication and expression skills as they are encouraged to present and argue their ideas in front of their peers. Students reacted very enthusiastically and engaged to the activities to stimulate creative thinking in the lessons of history. I noticed that
these activities succeeded in awakening their curiosity and interest in the subjects addressed, and their active participation was evident. Students were eager to share their ideas and own perspective, and collaboration and dialogue within the classroom was improved. The scores at the final exams have improved considerably, the fail to pass the examination at this discipline heading to almost zero.

In the discussions I had during and following these activities, the students stated that creative thinking contributes greatly to the process of learning and understanding history. Over 75% of the students believe that creative thinking stimulates the innovative exploration of historical topics, asking questions and generating new ideas, and that creative thinking brings more interest and engagement in the process of learning history, stimulating curiosity and imagination, therefore the process of learning and understanding. However, I noticed that the level of creativity did not change for all students, some of them finding it difficult to always search for solutions to problems in the field of history, but the courage to speak up for their opinion has seen, nonetheless, an improvement. So did their final scores.

**Conclusions**

Our research does not attempt to minimize the importance of memorization and expository methods in the History teaching and learning. Memorization remains the foundation of the taxonomy of learning for any discipline of study (Krathwohl, D.R., 2002). The general perception is that creativity is undervalued in history, and although much can theoretically be done to encourage it, there is a degree of anxiety that prevents teachers from taking action, especially because History is seen as an quite conservative discipline (Jackson, 1990). However, it is important that learning, at History, does not stop at this level, but tends towards those stages of a higher order learning, evaluation, self-evaluation and creativity. If we manage to develop these thinking skills among students, we can be confident that they will become teachers who, in turn, will instruct their students in the same way.
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References


