



Revisiting history and its epistemology: Teachers and learners

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Editorial

The idea for this special issue arose from a symposium, titled *History Teachers' Epistemic Considerations*, that the first two editors co-organized on October 13th and 14th in 2022, at Umeå University, in Sweden. Generously funded by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2018-03787), the symposium sought to explore scholars' various approaches to conceptualizing and investigating key problems that they believe exist regarding history teachers' epistemic beliefs about history and its transmission to students. Particular attention was given to finding ways to reflect and overcome perceived challenges to how teachers believe historical knowledge is constructed, to grasp the way these understandings influence their teaching, and to moreover capture the extent to which teachers' emerging beliefs relate to and result from their interaction and use of the history programs they are mandated to teach. Given the high response to our call, our initial idea of simply co-editing a single volume on this topic turned into both a book and this special issue. The co-edited volume, *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* was published in the

summer of 2024, by Palgrave Macmillan. From a variety of perspectives, the book's contributing authors investigate the underlying processes in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of history teachers' epistemic beliefs and how these understandings intersect with the complex realities of their classroom practice. Through this exploration, some authors tend to problematize the overall way scholars in the field currently approach and examine history's epistemic beliefs, while others seek to refine the potentials of what is already in place and to improve how teachers and learners alike understand history and its construction of knowledge. Since a recent set of insightful articles already existed prior to our symposium in a special issue in *Historical Encounters*, titled *Epistemic Cognition in History Education*, co-edited by Martin Nitsche, Christian Mathis, and D. Kevin O'Neill (2022), we decided to return to the same journal with Martin Nitsche from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, to create the present follow-up issue.

Brought together, both Elmersjö's (Umeå University) introduction and Zanazanian's (McGill University) commentary to the co-edited book, along with the editors' note and introduction to Nitsche and his colleagues' special issue, provide a clear overview of the field as well as some of its main emerging tensions. On the one hand, there is this fascination to better assess why teachers and learners are ultimately not able to always think consistently in a preferred manner when teaching and learning history and how we can perhaps better prepare them to do so. On the other hand, there is a form of critical resistance to this perceived obsession with capturing, measuring, and correcting how teachers and learners think about history in epistemological terms, pointing to a growing disillusionment with what is being done and fundamentally taken for granted as "the right thing to do". Through their analysis, Nitsche and his colleagues problematize the field's lack of clarity and indistinct formulation of history's epistemic processes and manifestations among teachers and students, and highlight the disunity in addressing the developmental, multi-dimensional, and contextual features that underlie people's thinking when constructing historical knowledge. The question of fully or adequately accounting for the complexity and fluidity of the procedures underlying history's epistemic cognition consequently arises. In his delineation of the main studies that have been conducted on teachers' epistemic beliefs and consequent questions that remain to be answered, Elmersjö highlights the challenges involved in unravelling the reasons for emerging inconsistencies in teachers' epistemic understandings of history's workings, particularly pointing to problems in capturing when, how, and why teachers – consciously or unconsciously – tend to oscillate between different beliefs. Zanazanian (McGill University), in turn, in his commentary for the same co-edited volume, titled *From the ideal-type historian and its associated conceptions of teaching history to a more embodied and practical life approach*, identifies and questions what he perceives to be the strong overreliance on history-as-discipline for viewing what history as knowledge is and what it can do, as well as the consequent assumption of the existence of a direct influence between epistemic beliefs of (disciplinary) history and its teaching in schools. Instead of wondering why and how we can get teachers and learners to think in a criterialist manner – where they ultimately are expected to be able to adjudicate and select the better argument or perspective regarding a historical issue based on the evidence that is provided or available –, Zanazanian calls for scholars to self-reflexively problematize and account for their (unintentional) preferences and normative assumptions when conducting research; or in other words to better account for their differing positionalities when doing work on teachers' and learners' epistemic beliefs. The aim of this questioning would be to take critical distance from the perceived overreliance on history-as-discipline and to embrace other (non-disciplinary) epistemologies, along with newer thoughts and practices in the teaching and learning of history.

With these main reflections in mind, a clear tension seems to appear between what is currently being done in the field and a desire to branch off into a new direction. Perhaps there will be a middle ground where the status quo will be refined and adapted to changing times. Perhaps two different areas of study will emerge instead. Underlying this tension, as can be seen with the present special issue, and in the preceding work mentioned above, is the great interest in the processes of how historical knowledge is constructed and how this information should be taught. This attention, especially in the field of history education, should not come as a surprise given the

generalized belief of the necessity of promoting students' intellectual development through an understanding of history's disciplinary practice, which, at the very least, is central to many secondary school history curricula in western societies. Because reality is complex and because students need to make sense of this complexity to be able to navigate differing life situations (with a critical mind), the basic idea is that this focus is indeed necessary, especially if one is to readily accept that history's disciplinary features can best help students capture that complexity in the most methodical and rigorous manner. This focus on history-as-discipline, at least in the opinion of Zanazanian, has become so generalized that it is seen as constituting what "real" or "true" history ultimately is, despite the field's democratization and the genuine openness among scholars and teachers to embrace epistemologies of history other than the latter modernist- and Eurocentric-leaning one. This criticism, however, as all three editors agree, does not necessarily preclude history-as-discipline's resilience in overcoming challenges to its own structure and purpose, nor does it deny its flexibility and ability to adapt to changing times. Perhaps in the near future, non-western and non-disciplinary aspects of the construction of historical knowledge will be included in our common mindset and will come to direct both research and educational processes in schools and beyond.

Five main themes thus emerge and speak to this tension across the various papers presented in the present special issue. Of interest, these themes tackle similar questions and pressures on teachers, student teachers, and learners when it comes to the construction and transmission of historical knowledge. Sometimes these themes problematize the whole history teaching project and its reliance on people's penetrating understandings of history as discipline and its criterialist manner for constructing knowledge. Sometimes these themes seek to better understand what is going on to then find ways to improve how things are understood or done.

The first theme refers to better understanding the demands and limits on teachers and their ability to teach history (usually) in its disciplinary format. Given the pressures from the field and the school cultures teachers belong to, an examination of their practical wisdom or approach to these requirements is called for, with suggestions of looking at the bigger picture in which teachers and learners function. Reliance on understandings of how historical knowledge works to then focus on the transmission of what results is not enough. The second theme looks at different ways in which teacher educators can help teachers in the field and student teachers to better understand history's disciplinary workings to then enable them to better implement the knowledge they gain into their own teaching practice. The aim here is to *improve* the epistemological knowledge teachers already possess and to, through these teachers' newly gained insights and consequent interventions, get their own students to develop sophisticated epistemic understandings of history, namely the ability to think in a criterialist manner. The third theme relates to the resources that are generally available to teachers, such as curricular documents and textbooks, that offer normative guides for assisting teachers to better grasp and transmit a certain valued type of historical knowledge to their students. This theme offers input into the challenges that users of these documents and textbooks face in their attempts to engage with these materials – in their promotion of history in its disciplinary form –, and the extent to which it influences their practice. The fourth theme examines history teachers' knowledge of history's epistemological workings; or more specifically how history teachers in their everyday conversations with others discuss their perceptions of history as a subject matter to be taught in schools. This theme looks at such exchanges on social media, mainly Facebook, through which understandings of their knowledge or beliefs about history as epistemology emerge. Far from what is expected, teachers do not necessarily demonstrate disciplinary and criterialist knowledge of history's workings. The fifth theme looks at key measurement tools that are widely employed in the field, such as both the *Beliefs about learning and teaching history* and the *Beliefs about history* questionnaires. It investigates different ways in which we can improve our ability to capture and assess teachers' and learners' ability to think in a criterialist manner. The purpose is to better understand what is going on in teachers' and learners' minds.

As these themes speak to the specific conversations that our contributing authors' respective articles generate, their key outputs nonetheless directly relate to the tension mentioned above. Some of these authors explicitly or even implicitly question the whole history teaching project, while others seek to build on what we have gained as collective knowledge, hoping to take these results further. It is the hope of the editors that these five themes' emergence in this special issue and the discussions they produce can conceivably contribute to opening the work conducted on history's epistemic beliefs in education in multiple directions. The challenges to overcoming the main tension listed above, along with the more distinct conversations that each of the articles contribute to, are healthy ones to have and hold the promise of promoting a better understanding of how our field might move forward in our changing times.

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Paul Zanzanian is an Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. His research examines historical consciousness' workings in everyday actors' means of knowing and doing when constructing social reality for purposes of living life. Theoretically and methodologically, he explores historical consciousness' role in the development of individual and we-group identities and their consequent potentials for agency. He pays attention to these manifestations in both formal and informal educational settings. He is co-editor, with Henrik Åström Elmersjö of *Teachers and the Epistemology of History* (2024), published by Palgrave Macmillan. His new forthcoming book, *Historical Consciousness and Practical Life: A Theory and Methodology*, where he outlines his conception of historical consciousness, will be published by University of Toronto Press in February 2025.

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