

A panel session at the conference “Meaning, learning and teaching history”

Methodologies for investigating the construction of historical interpretations

This panel aims at strengthening the theoretical and methodological groundings of investigations on constructing interpretations in the domain of history. The topic touches on many scholarly areas, including the philosophy and theory of history, educational psychology, history education, and the learning sciences. However, despite sharing many common overall goals, scholars in these fields employ diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks, which have seldom been aligned. We believe that more thorough exchanges of ideas among all these areas would be fruitful for the further development of research on history education.

Organizers:

Arja Virta, Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland

Marjaana Puurtinen, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies & Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland

Presentation 1:

How to approach adolescents' conceptual understanding in history

Arja Virta, Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland

A basic requirement for the development of historical thinking skills is coping with the language of historical presentation, and understanding the meaning of historical concepts as basic components of texts. In this paper I present preliminary findings of a research dealing with adolescents' understanding on the meaning of historical concepts and textbook contents. For this study, I developed an instrument combining think-aloud and interview techniques. The students read excerpts of their current textbooks, they were asked questions about concepts, and finally they retold the contents of each piece of text in their own words. Total of 44 students from grades 5 through 7 were selected. Roughly half of them had Finnish as a second language. One source of difficulties were abstract concepts, or concepts combining abstract and practical meanings. Some historical expressions also caused false associations. All difficulties with the “historical” language were not related to words including historical contents, but can be explained by general problems of understanding texts.

Arja Virta (PhD, history; PhD, education) is a Professor of History and Social Science Education in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Turku. Her research interests include teaching and learning in history and social studies, historical literacy, multicultural education, and teacher education. Virta has extensive experience in educating history and social studies teachers.

Presentation 2:

Historians' epistemic aims: An interview study of experts

Mikko Kainulainen (Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku)

Marjaana Puurtinen (Turku Institute for Advanced Studies & Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku)

Clark Chinn (Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University)

Despite the large amount of research on philosophy and theory of history, and the growing interest in training students to work with historical sources and historiography as historians do, there is still relatively little empirical evidence about historians' epistemic practice. While previous research provides crucial insights about how eminent historians reflect on their general practices, these reports have been unable to systematically access the *situative* epistemology of "doing history" by a significant sample of working historians. It is therefore crucial to approach historians' work not only through their general beliefs about the nature of historical research, but also through more detailed reflections on their everyday work. To approach this issue, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 Finnish academic historians about their practices, understanding of historical research, and the epistemic and non-epistemic aims of their ongoing projects. Preliminary content analysis allowed the identification of considerable between-respondent variety in four different respects: type of end products, agency, source, and structure of epistemic aims. Positioned at the intersection of historical theory, expertise research, and research on epistemic cognition, this study adds to current understanding of expertise in this domain and provides findings relevant for the justification and further development of instructional practices.

The presenting author, Mikko Kainulainen (MA, education), is a PhD candidate at the University of Turku. His research focuses on history education, mathematics education, epistemic cognition and conceptual change. He is currently working on a doctoral thesis about the development of history experts in higher education.

Presentation 3:

How to study the interpreting of historical images? Pros and cons of the eye-tracking approach

Marjaana Puurtinen, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies & Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland

Anna-Kaisa Ylitalo, Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Markus Nivala, Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Arja Virta, Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland

This presentation will discuss the potential benefits and challenges of applying the eye-tracking method in examining the interpreting of historical images. We ground our work mainly on prior eye-movement research on the development of domain-specific visual expertise. History offers an intriguing new area for such explorations, as the skills for identifying information relevant for a particular analytical perspective can be seen as an essential part of expertise in history: however, research methods suitable for this domain still need to be developed. In our pilot study 23 university history students named themes for two briefly presented series of historical images. Both series

were presented twice on a computer screen, and eye movements during picture viewing as well as verbal responses after the first and second viewing were recorded. Preliminary statistical analyses indicate that changes in the given topic between first and second viewing of a series were related to changes in particular eye-movement patterns. Although our procedure thus allowed us to, for example, locate pictures during which reinterpretations of a series theme may have occurred, careful reflections on how to best approach this research topic are still necessary. We argue that it is these kind of reflections that will prove fruitful in developing teaching methods on working with historical (non-textual) sources.

The presenting author, Marjaana Puurtinen (PhD, education; MA, history), is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies and working in the Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku. Her research focuses on the characteristics of expert-like performances in the domains of music and history. She has specialized in the application of the eye-tracking method in educational research.

Presentation 4:

History in a social media: theoretical aspects of the #sota39 project

Ilkka Lähteenmäki, Department of History of Science and Ideas, University of Oulu, Finland

In my presentation I explore the theoretical aspects of the #sota39 project by the Finnish National Broadcasting Company YLE. The research explores a radically different form of historical representation, which puts the emphasis on encountering rather than learning history, even though the project was used in a high school as teaching tool. The project is a chronological representation of the Finnish Winter War produced for the social media platform Twitter. The project remixes authored material with content produced by the project's consumers to provide a multivocal representation of a seminal historical era which seems to excel in invoking experience to its readers. How can historical characters be transfigured to relive 105 days of national crisis, after 70 years of its passing, through a strict chronology and on a social media platform, in a manner that connects with contemporary media consumers and still maintains its relevance as a historical project? The social media form is radical for historians, yet well suited for presenting chronologically proceeding events. My attention is not in the content of #sota39 but in its experimental format, use of historical sources and the historiographical consequences.

Ilkka Lähteenmäki (M.Soc.Sc., contemporary history) is a PhD candidate at University of Oulu. His research focuses on possibilities and limitations of different forms of historical (re)presentation, including games, social media feed, museum exhibitions, and the traditional narrative historical text. He is currently working on a thesis discussing the theoretical usefulness of conceptualizing different kinds of historical representations as historical worlds instead of informative texts or explanations.