


We must teach both sets of skills

Challenges for history teaching in the digital area

Carmen Gloria Zúñiga González* 

Interviewed by Sebastian Barsch

About Carmen Gloria Zúñiga González

Carmen Gloria Zúñiga González is History, Geography, and Social Sciences teacher from the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso and Doctor of Education from the University of Western Australia. She is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. She researches projects related to the study of pedagogical practices of outstanding history teachers, feedback practices in initial teacher training, and citizenship practices within the school system. Her main lines of research are the teaching and learning of History and Social Sciences, Citizenship and Human Rights Education and classroom assessment.



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Interview

Sebastian Barsch: Let's talk about the challenges of transcultural dialogue, about the value of historical thinking and learning. Have the conditions for these changed recently in your national context?

Carmen Gloria Zúñiga González: Indeed, significant changes have occurred in the Chilean educational context. Over the past decade, there have been numerous discussions in parliament regarding the curriculum. The Ministry of Education decided to eliminate history as a mandatory subject in the final two years of compulsory education. This decision was controversial, as history was replaced with a new subject called "citizenship education," which aims to integrate history, geography, and other disciplines. In Chile, there has been a shift towards a more integrated approach to teaching history, akin to the American educational system's model of social studies. This new subject encompasses history, geography, and social sciences. However, in the final two years of compulsory education, it focuses solely on citizenship education.

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Reflecting on history education, it has indeed transformed over the past decade, with significant changes starting around 2020. Consequently, research practices among academics like myself, who specialize in history education, have also shifted towards citizenship education and an integrated approach that includes sociology, history, geography, economics, and civics. The primary goal at the academic level is to critically engage these disciplines together in response to both national and international contexts, thereby enabling students to analyze sources and evidence to address complex problems. Additionally, we aim to cultivate students' sense of agency, empowering them not only to answer challenging questions but also to propose actionable solutions.

You were already talking about the political implications on history teaching. What do you think about academia? How can we promote a transcultural academic dialogue on concepts of history education that are embedded in different educational contexts and, of course, linked, as you said, to state policies, social values and norms?

I believe this question encompasses multiple levels. What we are engaging in here is already a transcultural and transnational dialogue. Academic collaboration through international conferences and co-authoring books is one approach, and I am pleased to see this happening. However, this occurs primarily at an international level.

Nationally, the Ministry of Education has been actively working on curriculum reform. Following a decision in 2020, both the Ministry and we are now revising and reviewing the curriculum, a process that began in 2014 with an agreement for a ten-year review. Currently, various stakeholders are being invited to provide input on the curriculum's content. This process includes history and social sciences education as well as all other school subjects. In the academic sphere, we had the opportunity to contribute during four meetings, each lasting three hours, where we suggested ideas, objectives, and specific strategies. Similar consultations were held with school principals and teachers. Although stakeholder engagement has happened before, this time it was a comprehensive national consultation with structured meetings. It has been a thorough process of soliciting input from relevant parties on what school history should encompass over the next decade, which I believe is an excellent approach. However, there are some concerns. It is uncertain whether all types of stakeholders, including ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and those concerned with intersectionality issues, will be adequately represented. This proposal primarily targeted schools and other stakeholders, but did not specifically focus on ethnic or gender minorities, which are currently very sensitive and important topics.

You already talked about agency. When we switch that to a global level, how can we ensure that the academic discussion on history education is not only dominated by those with economic or social power and how can we bring to the fore relevant perspectives that are often overlooked?

I believe this is why we, Chileans, often find ourselves under the Global South label. The Global South remains underrepresented, and even Australia, as a British colony, does not wield the same influence as the UK, Europe, or the United States. This issue is particularly relevant for us, academic non-English speakers from the south, who have limited budgets for conducting research. At our Faculty of Education and our university, we strive to adhere to the Global North standards of publications and research, which is quite challenging.

Opportunities like this interview in journals that are not tied to indexation, ranking, and metrics provide us with a chance to innovate and pursue our research goals. To be candid, publishing in an American journal often requires referencing American academics. Reviewers may critique the absence of certain frameworks, which are typically grounded in research conducted outside the Global South. This challenge extends to Spanish journals as well. Unfortunately, Latin America lacks strong journals in terms of metrics, and those that exist are highly competitive due to the high demand from Latin American researchers.

In the Chilean academic community, particularly in history teaching, we are striving to support one another through collaboration and knowledge sharing. Our goal is to achieve both: disseminating knowledge to teachers, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of our work, while also meeting international standards and metrics. This dual challenge is not unique to Chile but is a broader issue faced by academia globally.

We talked a lot about transcultural issues – when taking transcultural dialogue into account: what do you think about the crossing of professional borders as you faced in your curricula? What is the importance of domain specific knowledge in history or history education?

I believe both perspectives are highly relevant. I fully endorse the transdisciplinary approach. Currently, I am transitioning from history teaching to citizenship education, recognizing that, historically, these fields have been interconnected in Chile. Citizenship education, especially within a human rights framework, is more inclusive than history education alone and extends beyond it. Citizenship education can be promoted across all disciplines, which is why my research is now focusing on this area. I aim to understand how citizenship education is and has been taught across various school subjects, moving beyond just history teaching.

I strongly believe that interdisciplinarity is essential. However, one cannot construct knowledge without a specific domain and a solid methodology for building scientific knowledge. Both aspects are necessary, and I experience this challenge firsthand. As a history education instructor for primary school teachers, I notice that these teachers often have a strong foundation in pedagogical content but lack depth in the historical discipline. In my course, “Teaching and Learning History”, I must address both: providing disciplinary knowledge and teaching how to analyze sources and understand context. Context is crucial in all social science disciplines.

Therefore, my response to your question is that both approaches are necessary. We must maintain deep disciplinary knowledge while also adopting an integrated approach to understand the broader purpose of teaching history and social sciences. For me, this purpose is to educate young students to become informed adults capable of making decisions and living peacefully with others. This knowledge is particularly relevant in our current contested world, with conflicts in Gaza, Syria, and Ukraine, as well as issues like narco-violence in Latin America. We must foster a culture of peace in these diverse geographical contexts, which cannot be achieved solely through history teaching. It requires an integrated approach that includes geography, understanding territorial dynamics, and sociology, understanding human behavior.

The last two questions head a bit in a different direction. How do you see the role of the digital age and networked communications in the teaching of history and historical thinking?

Digital communication has fundamentally changed the way we teach history. The skills required to analyze written documents differ significantly from those needed to assess online information, especially in terms of reliability, authorship, and the purpose or intention behind online or social media sources. This presents a challenge for history educators, as we must teach both sets of skills: those for analyzing traditional paper-based documents and those for navigating online information. Our students, having been born in the internet era, require instruction on handling online information first. In parallel, we then teach them how to manage written information. This complex topic also presents numerous benefits. For example, digital storytelling, which involves using reflective tools displayed in videos, requires comprehension, reflection, planning, and leverages students’ native technology skills.

Sam Wineburg proposed using Wikipedia to explore parallel thinking, not as an endpoint but as a starting point for information-seeking. Despite the challenges, there are also significant benefits. I would like to address the impact of social media on the Chilean context. In 2019, we experienced a social outburst that disrupted our lives with nationwide strikes and demonstrations. Although not a civil war, the country essentially came to a standstill. This was followed by the pandemic. The social unrest revealed that the political division stemming from Pinochet’s dictatorship had not been overcome; in fact, polarization is now more pronounced, as evidenced by the 2021 presidential election, where the final candidates represented the far right and far left. The far-left candidate won, not because of widespread support, but because voters opposed the far-right candidate.

History education is crucial in this context, especially regarding social media. Algorithms and the information consumed online by both young and adult people influence our society profoundly. Our role is to teach not only young students but also adults how to navigate the web responsibly. One significant benefit of the digital age is access to lifelong education, which history education must promote. The influence of the internet on voting behavior, as seen in Chile and Argentina, where Javier Milei’s campaign targeted young voters on Instagram and TikTok, underscores the need for history educators to engage with present and future societal challenges. Politicians’ use of online information has had problematic effects on society, making our role as history educators critical in teaching about the past, present, and future.

The last question: How do you think we can integrate today's challenges such as pandemics, wars, the consequences of climate change into history education? Do these phenomena reinforce the need for transcultural dialogue or exchange in academia and practice?

I want to emphasize that the interdisciplinary approach is grounded in the idea that we teach history and social sciences to enable students to learn from the past and build a better, peaceful, and sustainable future and present. One effective way to achieve this is by addressing controversial topics – referred to as “difficult knowledge” by some academics – such as climate change, wars, and ethnic conflicts. These issues are more effectively taught in a contextualized manner, as history alone is insufficient for students to fully grasp current events.

For example, when teaching about the Spanish conquest in Chile, we now link it to contemporary issues involving indigenous people and current conflicts, moving back and forth to make history meaningful for our students. Similarly, geography, climate change, and human rights are interconnected. In the Chilean academic community, we are considering: “Why separate them?” Instead, we advocate for teaching historical thinking in conjunction with geographical and sociological thinking. This integrated approach helps students understand the current world while appreciating the past.

Carmen Gloria, thank you very much!

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