

'Why am I accused of being a heretic?'

A pedagogical framework for stimulating historical contextualisation

One of the challenges facing students who want to make sense of a source or an interpretation of the past is the need to place it in its context. Various research studies have shown that students tend instead to approach sources and interpretations with a form of 'presentism' resulting in a number of misconceptions and misunderstandings. Huijgen and Holthuis share in this article the results from a research project conducted into how students might be helped to overcome presentism through an emphasis on historical contextualisation. In particular, they outline a three-stage pedagogical model that was used to help pupils reconstruct the context of a source, and they set out their findings from their evaluation of this strategy.

In the very popular Dutch novel for young adults *Crusade in Jeans*, written by Thea Beckman, the teenager Rudolf Wega is accidentally transported back in time to the thirteenth century in Germany.¹ At that moment, the German children's crusade of 1212 is occurring, and Rudolf decides to join this crusade. With his twentieth-century mindset, he is wondering about many things along the way, such as the treatment of diseases, people's clothing and being accusing of being a heretic. Although Rudolf has made many close friends among the participants in the children's crusade, he succeeds in travelling back to his own time at the end of the book. For history education, it is unfortunate that time-travelling, such as that described in *Crusade in Jeans*, will remain the exclusive domain of writers and Hollywood because of limitations of time and space. As many students experience the past as an open book, it would be very effective for a teacher to have the opportunity to travel with a group of students back to medieval Britain when teaching about the medieval state and society, or to travel to Verdun in France when teaching about the First World War.² Such an opportunity would be especially useful for history teachers because, in contrast to teachers of school subjects such as math and languages, they often cannot refer to an existing and familiar world for students.

Many students view the past from a present-oriented perspective and tend to see history subconsciously (rather than consciously) through their own ethical, moral and cultural perspectives formed based on their personal experiences.³ Research in social psychology discusses 'the curse of knowledge'. This cognitive bias makes it difficult for people who have more knowledge to think from the perspective of less-well-informed people.⁴ This form of *presentism* can generate a difficult problem for students because in contemporary history education, they are asked to consider that the past differs from the present.⁵ Students' present-oriented perspectives can obstruct their understanding of historical phenomena and historical decision-making and can easily lead to drawing the wrong conclusions about what actually happened.⁶ For example, students without historical contextual knowledge find it difficult to explain why a person in Germany in the 1930s voted for Hitler or why women who were accused of witchery were burned to death in the Middle Ages.

In order to overcome their present-orientated perspective, students need to be able to understand the past in its own context. Historical contextualisation involves interpreting and understanding historical phenomena by creating in one's mind a specific historical context based on the characteristics of the time and place of the phenomena.⁷ Having such a context in one's mind is a necessary condition of numerous other historical tasks, such as using sources, developing a line of argument and dealing with chronology. For this reason, the ability to perform historical contextualisation is incorporated into the history curricula of many countries, including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In the United Kingdom, for example, the purpose of the history curriculum is for students to 'gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales'.⁸

In this article, we present a pedagogical framework consisting of three consecutive stages that can help teachers and students contextualise the past. The framework was

**Tim Huijgen
and Paul Holthuis**
Tim Huijgen and Paul
Holthuis teach at the
Department of Teacher
Education of the University
of Groningen, Netherlands.

Figure 1: Poster for the English film *Crusade: march through Time* (2006), directed by Ben Sombogaart.



developed and tested among 82 pre-university secondary-school students in a two-year research project led by the Department of Teacher Education of the University of Groningen. We first present some background information on the research project. Next, we present the different stages of the framework and present our findings from testing the framework, and, finally, we discuss the practical implications of the framework.

The research project

The framework for stimulating historical contextualisation was developed within the Dutch research project *VEKOB0*.⁹ This research project was a collaboration of the Department of Teacher Education of the NHL University of Applied Sciences and the Department of Teacher Education of the University of Groningen and was financed by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. Three history teacher educators from the NHL University of Applied Sciences and two history teacher educators from the University of Groningen were involved in the research project. Furthermore, two expert elementary school teachers and three expert secondary-school history teachers completed the research team.

The project's aim was threefold: 1) to examine which practical problems history teachers encounter during their lessons, 2) to design and evaluate practical tools for helping students and history teachers with these problems, and

Figure 2: Students' score for historical contextualisation and present-oriented-perspective (n=1,270)

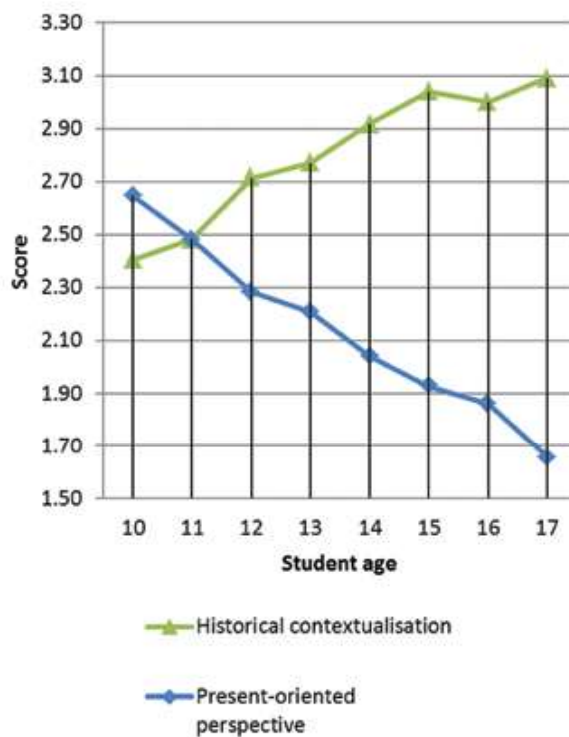
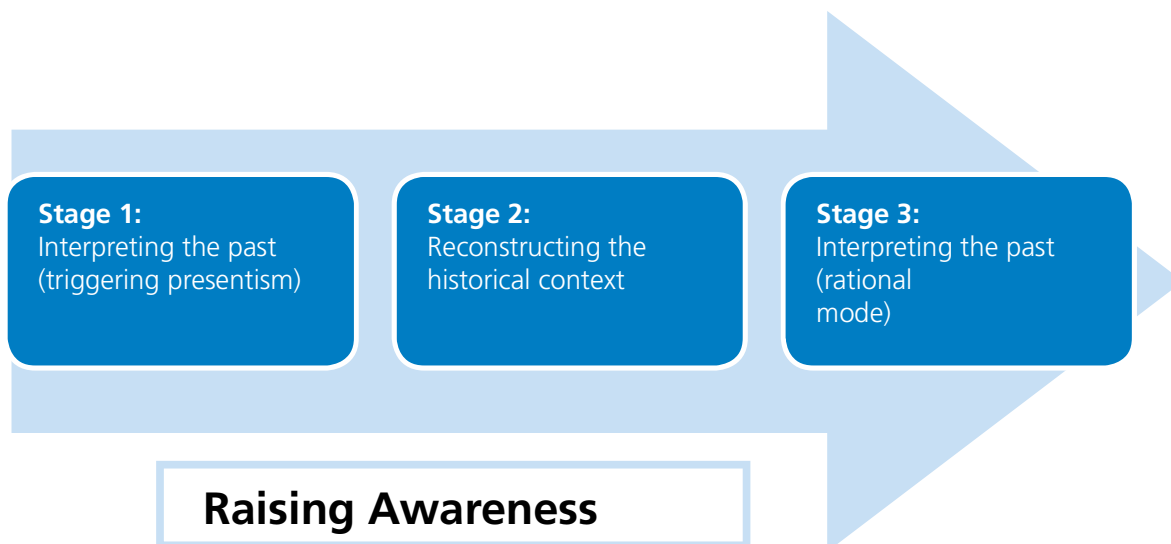


Figure 3: Pedagogical framework for stimulating historical contextualisation



3) to increase the expertise and academic skills of the teachers and teachers' educators who participated in the research project. The research methodology of the project was action-based research, and reliance on continuous feedback from the work field and a widespread dissemination of the project results were two important principles of the project.

Developing the framework

In research conducted earlier, we tested 1,270 upper elementary and secondary-school students aged from 10 to 17 years old using a validated instrument to measure their ability to perform historical contextualisation and their present-oriented perspective taking.¹⁰ The results are displayed in Figure 2. The scores for present-oriented perspective and historical contextualisation are shown on a four-point scale. A high score for historical contextualisation reflects strong student ability regarding historical contextualisation. A high score for present-oriented perspective reflects a high score for students' present-oriented thinking. The older students performed better in historical contextualisation compared with the younger students. Having said that, even students between 11 and 17 years old obtained no higher than 3.10 out of a maximum score of 4.0 for historical contextualisation.

Based on these results and their own classroom experience, the participants in the project chose to examine the problem of historical contextualisation and developed a pedagogical framework that could stimulate historical contextualisation among students. This framework consists of three consecutive stages, as we present in Figure 3. The framework is based on the theory of *constructive controversy*. This instructional procedure is designed to create intellectual conflict among students, and this theory has proved to be very effective for student learning.¹¹ Be that as it may, research shows that many teachers do not stimulate intellectual conflicts in classrooms because they lack knowledge about operational procedures to guide them.¹² With the development of the framework, we hope to provide guidance for history teachers on how to stimulate constructive controversy to achieve

historical contextualisation. In the next section, we provide a description and explanation of each stage of the framework.

Stage 1: Interpreting the past (triggering presentism)

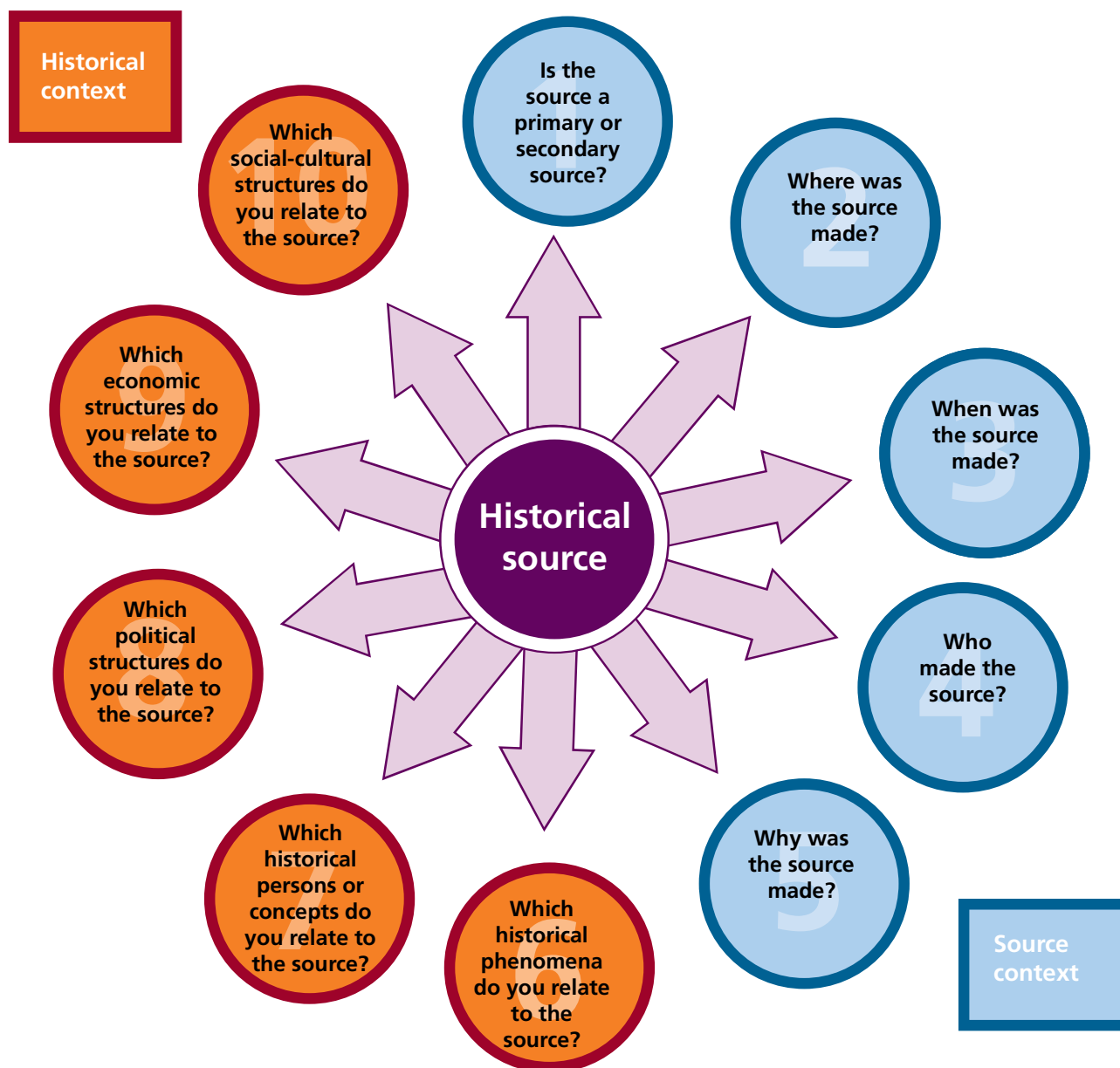
When interpreting the past, students should be taught to be aware of the biased nature of their assumptions and of the moral values that they already possess. More often than not, the foundations on which interpretations are built are constructed by a present-oriented perspective.¹³ Therefore, the first stage of our teaching is aimed at triggering and visualising the present-oriented perspectives (presentism) of students and making them aware of their biased position. This stage also gives teachers the opportunity to examine the extent to which presentism plays a role among their students. There are many ways for teachers to trigger and visualise present-oriented perspectives among students. For example, teachers can confront their students with provocative historical sources or statements and have them react to them. Teachers can also ask their students to explain historical phenomena that students may find controversial, such as the persecution of Christians or slavery.

Stage 2: Reconstructing the Historical Context

Whereas stage one focuses on triggering presentism, stage two asks students to reconstruct in their minds a historical context for historical phenomena. To help do so, we developed the historical contextualisation tool shown in Figure 4. The first five steps of the tool consist of questions related to the context of a source, such as 'When was the source constructed?' (question three) and 'Who made the source?' (question four). These questions are crucial because students too often tend to examine only the content of historical sources and not the source itself (the context of the source), although considering the source is viewed as a crucial part of achieving historical contextualisation.¹⁴

Questions six to ten consist of more associative questions aimed at structurally reconstructing the historical context using different frames of references. In other research that we

Figure 4: Tool for reconstructing the historical context



conducted focusing on the strategies and knowledge students use to perform historical contextualisation, we found that many students often use one-dimensional knowledge. For example, they use only knowledge about social-economic circumstances to reconstruct the historical context. They do not consider other dimensions, such as social-political or social-cultural knowledge, in their reasoning. Students who do use and combine more distinct frames of reference achieved higher scores for historical contextualisation.¹⁵

By allowing students to answer these questions regarding the source context and the historical context to reconstruct the historical context, we expect that a constructive controversy may arise in the form of intellectual conflict for students who exhibited a present-oriented perspective. Students will begin to distance themselves from their possible intuitive (and present-oriented) judgements made in stage one, moving towards interpreting historical phenomena from a more rational perspective in stage two.

Stage 3: Interpreting the past (rational mode)

In the last stage of our framework, students again interpret the past, but in contrast to stage one, students should become more conscious of the importance of being critical of their own intuitive beliefs when interpreting the past. In this stage, students should be aware that the past differs from the present in many aspects; for example, people in the past had different moral beliefs and norms. Teachers could test and check the progress of their students, for example, by asking them whether and why their explanations and statements about historical phenomena have changed relative to their explanations and statements in stage one. Are students now more aware of their possible present-oriented perspectives? Did students reconstruct the historical context, and does this lead to students' improved abilities in argumentation, reasoning and explanation of the historical phenomena? Do students in the third stage explain and evaluate the past more from a rational mode than from the perspective of presentism?

The aim of the entire framework is to make students aware that present-oriented perspectives can hinder the ability to explain historical phenomena and that reconstructing a historical context can assist in explaining and interpreting historical phenomena. Wineburg argued that historical thinking is not a natural process: on the contrary, historical thinking contrasts with how people naturally think.¹⁶ Teachers who use the different stages of the framework as an instructional procedure could therefore help students in doubting their first intuitive reactions and stimulate critical historical thinking.

Testing the pedagogical framework

We tested this pedagogical framework among 82 Dutch pre-university secondary school students from two different schools in two age categories: the first category consisted of 51 students aged 14-16. The second category consisted of 31 students aged 16-18. In Figure 5, we display the source that we centralised in the different stages of the framework: a 1932 election poster of Hitler's political party: the Nazi Party.

Testing the first stage: interpreting the past (triggering presentism)

The source was presented on a separate hand-out and students first had the opportunity to examine the source. The hand-out also contained specific questions aimed at triggering present-oriented perspectives, which students had to answer on the hand-out. One of the questions, for example, was whether students could have voted for Hitler. After the students answered the questions, their answers were discussed in a full classroom discussion.

Students in the age category of 14-16 years old displayed far more present-oriented perspectives: 12 of the 51 students displayed in their reasoning a present-oriented perspective compared with three of the 31 students in the age category of 16-18 years old. As an example of a present-oriented perspective, one student in the 14-16 age category noted 'I would never vote for Hitler, because he was responsible for the death of millions of people'. The poster, however, is dated 1932, before the outbreak of the Second World War. This student used the knowledge that we now have but forgot that Germans in 1932 did not possess the same knowledge. In the 16-18 age group, most students realised that an answer to this question would now be different compared with the situation in 1932. One student noted that 'many Germans were being manipulated during those times. Hitler was being glorified, and many people did not see any evil in the man. Today, nobody would ever be able to vote for Hitler because we now know what he has done'.

Testing the second stage: reconstructing the historical context

Next, students in both age categories used the contextualisation tool to reconstruct the historical context for the election poster of the Nazi Party of 1932. First, the students received a short instruction and explanation of the historical contextualisation tool. Because our goal was to stimulate historical contextualisation rather than to test historical content knowledge, the students could use their textbooks if they needed to find information to answer questions

Figure 5: 'Our last hope: Hitler'.
Election poster of the Nazi Party of 1932.



while using the tool. The students could write down their answers on a separate hand-out, and their answers were subsequently discussed in a full classroom discussion.

The source context questions (Figure 4, Questions 1-5) often resulted in the same answers for students in both age categories, though students in the 12-14 age category were less explicit in their formulations compared with students in the 16-18 age category. Furthermore, the students aged 14 to 16 struggled more with Q5 (Why was the source made?) than the older students did. All students in both age categories succeeded in answering the historical context questions (Figure 4, Questions 6-10), but the students aged 16 presented more sophisticated and extensive answers compared with the students in the 14-16 age category.

Testing the third stage: interpreting the past (rational mode)

After discussing the answers to these questions, the students progressed to the third stage and were asked to react to the question of whether the contextualisation tool had changed their answer to the question of whether they might have voted for Hitler. In the first age category (ages 14-16), 40 out of 51 students (78%) claimed that their answer had not changed compared with 11 students (22%) who answered that it had changed. In the first stage of the framework, there were 12 students who displayed presentism. Only one student could still not understand why somebody could vote for Hitler ('I still cannot imagine that somebody in the 1930s could not see the evil of Hitler. This is just obvious, is it not?'). For the older students (ages 16-18), out of a total of 31 students, 28 (nearly 90%) did not change their initial answer, whereas three students (10%) did change their answer. These three students had exhibited a present-oriented perspective in stage one.

Younger students from the first age category explained their changed answers using arguments such as 'now you

know more about the political chaos from which Hitler benefited' or 'I did not know that there was an economic crisis in Germany back then, and, therefore, I changed my interpretation of the source.' Interestingly, some students aged 16-18 in stage one correctly outlined why a person in the 1930s could have voted for Hitler but noted that the historical contextualisation tool used in stage two helped to shape their argumentation, as the following explanation demonstrates: 'I used to know only a few consequences of Hitler's approach. When I arrived at stage two, I was forced to think a bit longer on the issue, and I concluded that I missed some other things, such as the Germans having almost no experience with the concept of democracy'.

What did the students think of using the framework?

After completing all three stages of the framework, we used a questionnaire for all students and augmented this with semi-structured interviews with four students (two from each age category) to analyse whether the students regarded the framework as a useful tool. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions with a five-point response scale. In general, younger students appreciated the framework more than older students did. Almost 70% of the younger students claimed that the framework helped them to understand historical phenomena. The historical contextualisation tool used in stage two was considered particularly useful: nearly 80% of the students thought that it could be a helpful tool in solving assignments that included using and interpreting historical sources. The students from the older age category found the tool less helpful: only 65% considered the tool to be useful. One student from the 16-18-year-old category noted in the interview that the tool did not change his answers to the questions in stage one but that the tool changed his perspective on the source material. 'It forced me to spend more time thinking about the historical situation, and it made me see that there were even more factors that played a role'.

Practical implications of the framework

This article presents a pedagogical framework for stimulating historical contextualisation based on the theory of *constructive controversy*. The framework consists of three consecutive stages and focuses on triggering present-oriented perspectives, reconstructing the historical context and making students aware of their present-oriented thinking when interpreting the past. We tested our framework among 82 pre-university students divided into two different age categories, and our findings regarding the use of the framework are positive. We assume that younger students profit more from the framework than older students do because younger students appear to suffer more from present-oriented thinking. Having said that, for students who did not suffer from presentism, the framework still strengthened their argumentation when interpreting the past because the framework demands reconstructing a context as completely as possible. History teachers could therefore use the framework not only for discouraging present-oriented thinking and stimulating historical contextualisation but also for evaluating historical sources and providing guidance for argumentation when interpreting the past.

Because many teachers struggle with shaping instruction to create constructive controversy in the classroom, we hope that our framework can contribute to stimulating constructive controversy – in a structured manner – in history classrooms. In the words of Seixas and Peck, 'History education should be about teaching students to critically study the past – to prevent them from being overwhelmed by it [...] Students' ability to use testimonies for this reconstruction does not, however, evolve automatically: it demands a development of structured education'.¹⁷

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