A Comparative Suggestion for Supporting History Class with Customized E-Tools

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide some empirical evidence on the assumption that History didactics as far as secondary education History class is concerned can be enhanced via the assistance of certain customized digital tools. If our objective is to shape students' historical consciousness and enable them to perceive and interpret historical facts through reason and critical thinking, then we need the best use of primary sources and evidence, both textual and visual. This is where ICT comes in: We do firmly believe that school History is by nature amongst the most entitled and suitable areas for the implementation of ICT integration in class, since all kind of historical evidential material can be presented in the most pedagogically effective way with the use of modern digital tools. We will therefore present two otherwise almost identical History lessons, except that the second one was enriched with the use of certain digital material developed ad hoc for teaching purposes. In both cases the classes in reference were 3d grade of senior high school (17-18 years) and the outcome was reported in certain questionnaires handed to the students at the end of the process. As it turned out, the "blended" lesson, i.e. the one in which traditional teaching was supported with digital tools was eventually more successful and productive in all aspects regarding any major pedagogical and gnostic dimension.

Keywords: history, didactics, ICT, integration, pedagogics

1. Introduction

Although ICT integration in almost all fields of secondary education has long been taken for granted, there is always need for effective and easy to implement ideas, since many educators still feel skeptic about the true pedagogical value of the countless digital tools available both on and off line. After all, as far as History didactics is concerned, what is important is finding ways to build the historical thinking; and that goal can at the end of the day be reached only by evidence, empathy, comprehension, explanation, significance and other meta-historical concepts[1]. We do believe that the use of ICT can in a certain frame help the educator direct his/her teaching towards this objective.

Our suggestion focuses mainly in senior high school level (students' age 15-18) but can of course easily be expanded and adjusted for younger ages. After assessing his/her classes' specific needs in any certain area of History curriculum, the educator can make use of digital presentation tools other than the typical power point, in order to pursuit any predefined didactic goals. Software like Articulate Engage, Presenter and Storyline could, amongst others, provide a variety of potentials in the direction of presenting educational material, engaging students in interacting with it and enriching the teaching process in a pedagogically resourceful way. Hence, we will within this frame try to deliver some concrete didactical suggestions, which derive mainly from our "on the job" experience concerning History teaching to 15-18-year-old students. We conducted two versions of the same lesson, one without and the other with the support of specific digital tools. The pedagogical outcome was assessed via questionnaires handed to the students right after the completion of the process.

1.1 About History didactics

Before we proceed with the description of the teaching activities, we regard that it would be useful to remind some basic principles concerning merging ICT with History didactics. Apart from the development of historical thinking skills, one of the major pedagogical roles of ICT in terms of History teaching is to develop students' information management and information literacy, to make them more discerning about what they read, listen or watch. Thus, historical education in the twenty first century should mainly focus on the development of students' understanding for the reliability of information from various media sources, the "refinement" of their visual "literacy" via the use of digital maps, images and other visual/audial material, as well as their familiarization with the comparative advantages and disadvantages of using different and, not seldom, interdisciplinary interpreting perspectives. In order to exploit digital educational material for teaching purposes, it is of critical importance to initially stimulate students' interest and curiosity through an energetic and – why not – unexpected approach. ICT tools in History class can functionally serve this

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[1] Alves, R. 2015

purpose, as they have the potential to facilitate students, so that the latter could construct mental representations connected to certain teaching objectives. Moreover, the interactive nature of modern ICT learning material, especially when ICT based activities are implemented in a team or/and interdisciplinary oriented context, permits the active engagement of more students, and limits the number of the so called "neutral" or indifferent ones.

2. Scope – Activities

Bearing all the above in mind, we should now turn to our main scope, i.e. to provide evidence of the belief that History teaching can be more resourceful and, eventually, successful, when assisted by certain digital tools customized by the educator to fulfill specific pedagogical objectives. The teaching scenarios we are about to present were implemented at 3d graders of Senior High School level (17-18 years old). Both scenarios were designed for a 2-hour teaching session and the implementation itself took place in two different (but rather homogeneous as regards students' profile) classes of the 3d (and last) grade, during two different days within the same week. In both cases the topic no different but the first scenario confined itself to more or less traditional teaching (no ICT required)[2]. On the other hand, the second one, though pretty much similar at its scope and pedagogical philosophy, was adjusted accordingly to integrate some ICT features. Both teaching efforts were at the end evaluated a) gnostic-wise, by the educator via a brief quiz handed to the students b) pedagogically-wise, by the students themselves, who were asked to fill a short questionnaire (see below).

Class A: Conventional Process
Class B: ICT integration
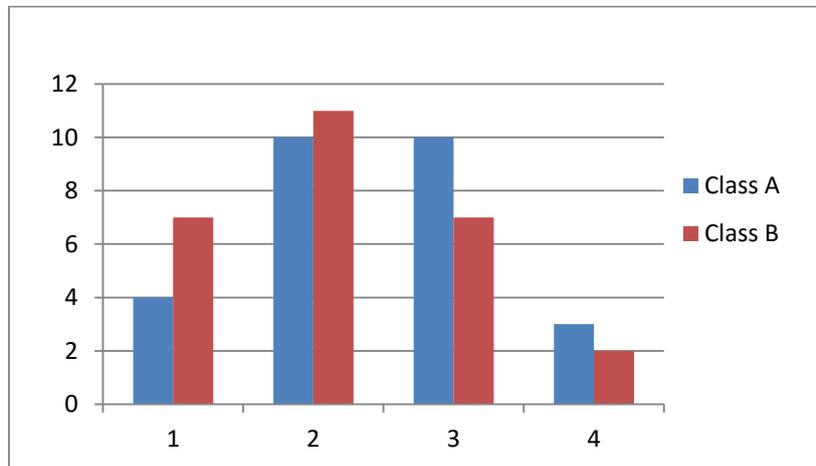
Quiz
Score at knowledge quiz:
Class A (27 students)
Perfect: 4   High: 10   Medium: 10   Low: 3

Class B (27 students)
Perfect: 7   High: 11   Medium: 7   Low: 2

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[2] Although an internet connection was available in class, so that some things could be looked up in the web.
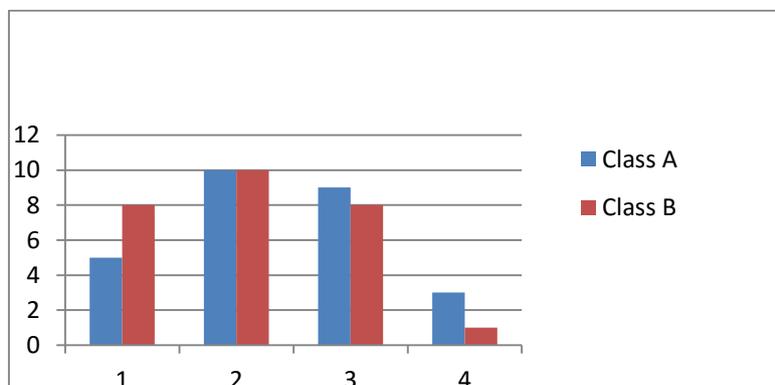
Figure 1

B) Questionnaire

1. Did you enjoy the class?

    Class A: Very much: 5   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 9   No: 3
    Class B: Very much: 8   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 8   No: 1

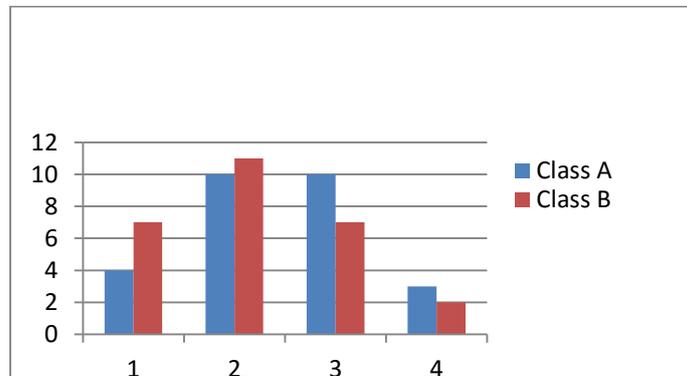*Figure 2*

2. Do you feel you learned something new?

    Class A: Very much: 5   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 9   No: 3
    Class B: Very much: 8   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 8   No: 1
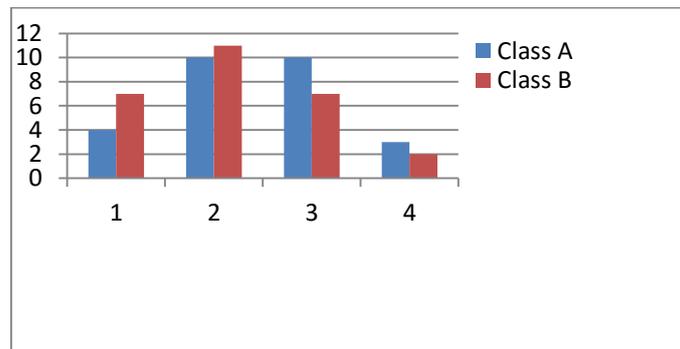
Figure 3

3. Would you do some extra reading on the topic?
    Class A: Very much: 5   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 9   No: 3
    Class B: Very much: 8   Much: 10   Moderate feelings: 8   No: 1

Figure 4

The data provided by both the quiz and the questionnaire leave no doubt that the ICT integrated class can be overall characterized as more successful in all aspects. The positive results (perfect and high score, absolutely and yes) were increased at Class B, which cannot be irrelevant to the implemented teaching method, bearing in mind that both student groups were of a very similar profile.

2.1 The activity *per se*

Both scenarios were implemented in Model Lyceum of Anavryta during the academic year 2018-19. The subject was modern History and, specifically, Napoleon's Europe until 1815. In both classes, students were introduced to the subject by the educator and were asked to link the historical period with the major facts which preceded the period under examination. They were then handed out selected primary and secondary sources – on

photocopies - concerning European political status of the time, the French revolution and the place of Bonaparte's personality in this historical context. Students were asked to work in small teams and answer certain questions in order to construct some basic aspects of the particular historical subject. Each team was assigned to a different set of questions. Both classes initially worked in almost identical manner, but in the process class B was asked to work in teams at the PCs and search the answers by firstly using a couple of specially designed for the specific subject digital objects. Those were two rather simple "learning objects" designed and developed in advance ad hoc with Adobe's Articulate Storyline[3] and Engage[4] respectively. The first was a multimedia presentation which included textual and visual sources about Bonaparte's life, rise and fall, as well as presentations of his major victories (Wagram, Austerlitz etc.). The second was a timeline depicting the phases of the battle of Waterloo (see a specimen below):

Figure 5

Both learning objects were customized according to the official curriculum and enriched with hyperlinks to certain websites for further reading and documenting the embedded narrative and multimedia information. It should be here pointed out that there is a repository (http://lyk-peir-anavr.att.sch.gr/Lessons/LessonsFrames.htm) of such digital material in our school's website, which is regularly enriched and is open for everyone to download or use on line.

To return to the activity, students were at this point asked to activate the tools and, then, guided to go through the digital material. They were furthermore instructed to use the links and search the web, in order to try to answer the given questions based on the retrieved from all kind of digital sources information. This engagement demanded the active involvement of all team members, who were encouraged by the educator-facilitator to

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[3] In our class we used Storyline 3, which carries an in-built player and allows the educator to create interactive content able to dynamically adapt to any screen size.

[4] We used the available to us Engage 2009, which, though a rather old version, is more than suitable for creating media-rich interactions both for off and online courses.

organize their teams towards some kind of inner role distribution (go through the tools, search the web, spot the information, keep notes etc.) and undertake certain tasks, in order to complete their work in due time. This process occupied approximately 20 minutes of the whole two-hour lesson.

Our primary objective was to compare the two classes' performance, along with the behavior of students. As has already been mentioned, the procedure was almost identical and both groups were homogeneous, sharing pretty much the same gnostic level. The procedure for both classes included forming teams, reading and comprehending the given questions, going through the sources, contemplating on the outcome and writing down the answers. What differed was eventually only the 20-minute integration of ICT at the second class. Since the second class was not provided with extra time, the educator held in addition the responsibility to make sure that the students would go through all the above steps a bit quicker, in order to save time for dealing with the digital material. So, with the exception again of the 20-minute ICT integration at class B and the obligation to handle time accordingly, the educator's role was in both cases not much different, as in the course of the lesson this role transformed gradually from "running the show" to facilitating and giving discrete guidance to the working teams.

What came out was a feeling that the involvement of students was at the second case obviously more active, as more or less all members of each team contributed to the whole process, according to each individual's special interests and skills. This feeling of ours' was confirmed and made evident by the answers given to the questionnaire (see above p. 3,4).

3. Conclusion

The implementation of e-tools in History class constitutes an energetic teaching approach, which enables History teachers to become more effective and provide their students with challenging and attractive learning potentials. Let us bear in mind that the learning process of the historical or any substantive concepts, related to the contents that are taught, is of great value in the development of historical consciousness[5] and it seems that certain ICT tools can be helpful in this effort.

There is no doubt that designing and developing e-tools suitable for the special needs of each class, group of students or curriculum is a prerequisite for organizing History classes which can exploit the several pros that such tools provide. Although getting familiarized with these products' digital environment is not significantly difficult[6], neither does it require any special knowledge of informatics, it is true that it demands a certain investment of time and zeal on behalf of the educator. We are therefore firm supporters of the view that History

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[5] Schmidt, M. A.; Urban, A. C, 2016
[6] One can find several tutorials on line (e.g. https://community.articulate.com/series/storyline-3). These tools do not require any special informatics background, only rather some general familiarization with ICT integration in class.

teachers should be encouraged and motivated by the educational administration, in any pragmatic way available, to design and develop learning objects of this kind in order to enrich and improve their History lessons.

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[11]   https://www.euroclio.eu/