

# Historical Skills in Compulsory Education: Assessment, Inquiry Based Strategies and Students' Argumentation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper makes a reflection on the assessment of historical thinking in compulsory education. First, the article reflects on the type of knowledge that is being evaluated (memory or understanding). According to current thinking, assessment should meet the teaching aims set out by the teacher, it should be another means of monitoring and improving students' learning, of correcting mistakes made during the process and of taking relevant decisions. Secondly, there will be an analysis of the cognitive model of learning history proposed by international studies. The application of educational competences to assessment processes needs to be adjusted to the epistemological, pedagogical and cognitive fundamentals of each subject. Finally, the article will make some proposals for evaluation, firstly by using methods of inquiry, problem-based learning and related teaching strategies, in addition to the use of tools to assess more complex skills of historical thinking with students' argumentation. Historical thinking requires a variety of assessment tools that are able to capture the different capacities of the students in their interpretation of the past and their historical skills.

**KEYWORDS:** HISTORY EDUCATION, ASSESSMENT, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, TEACHING METHODS, TEACHING STRATEGIES

## 1 INTRODUCTION. ARE WE ASSESSING HISTORICAL SKILLS OR JUST MEMORISING THE PAST? THE PREDOMINANCE OF THE EXAMINATION

Assessment is one of the elements of education that has the greatest impact on students. According to current thinking, assessment should meet the teaching aims set out by the teacher, it should be another means of monitoring and improving students' learning, of correcting mistakes made during the process and of taking relevant decisions. For some decades now assessment has been treated as a separate issue in legislative reforms made in the world of education. In Spain, in the early 1990s, assessment was conceived, at least theoretically, as a

process of dialogue, understanding and improvement of the teaching-learning process. The appearance in the 21st century of a new educational concept of skills at European level meant a new challenge and boost to the concept of educational assessment.

However, despite all the changes in legislation, research into the assessment of historical contents shows that in some countries memorising conceptual knowledge is what remains most valued. Assessment of historical thought and skills relating to history is in the minority, at times inexistent. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the examination remains almost unquestionable as the supreme means of assessment.. Assessment criteria of historical contents continues to be bound up with culturalist aims, with some sought-after "objectiveness", the text book is practically the sole teaching material used, and there is a predominance of excessively conceptual knowledge which has little to do with the social reality of the students.

Indeed, the examination is the main tool for classifying, selecting and accrediting students in the subject of History. The type of format and questions designed are conditioned by the large number of examinations the teachers have to mark, and by the need to establish object criteria that are easy to defend when challenged by students and parents, which is why there is a predominance of short questions which can be answered in just a few words, along with objective tests (matching exercises, multiple choice, etc.). Such circumstances determine the type of capacities demanded in examinations. With today's world of mass teaching, use is made of memorised knowledge; it is quicker to regurgitate information than to reflect on it, which is to limit the development of intellectual skills that could foster historical thought. Several studies show that skills like analysis, reasoning, reflection and evaluation or interpretation of documents, which are fundamental to learning historical thought, barely appear in students' written examinations in compulsory education (Calatayud, 2000; Gómez & Miralles, 2013, 2015; Merchán, 2005; Miralles, Gómez, & Monteagudo, 2012; Miralles, Gómez, & Sánchez, 2014; Trepát, 2012).

Assessment focuses more on the object of knowledge than on the subject who does the knowing, thus neglecting the cognitive processes that history as a subject can favour. History is presented to the student as given knowledge (Laville, 2003), and its assessment is done as if knowledge were static, eternal and unchangeable. Assessment of facts and data out of context is the general trend. Most worryingly, teachers have given more importance to the quantity of information than to the quality of information. Despite the now classical theories on educational

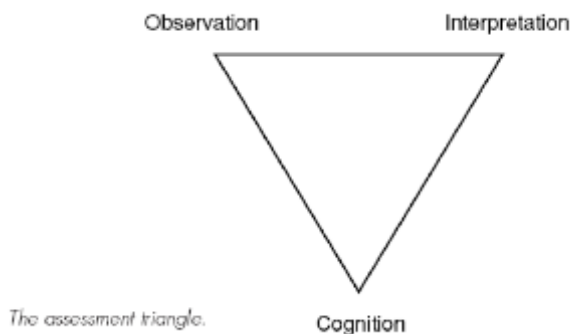
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and training assessment, there is the lingering feeling that a significant proportion of teachers confuse assessing and examining. This impression is reinforced by the negative influence of international assessments and “diagnostic tests” which, apparently, pursue the search for excellence and measure the quality of institutions and educational systems by classifying students.

## 2 TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE COGNITIVE MODEL OF LEARNING HISTORY

The application of educational competences to assessment processes needs to be adjusted to the epistemological, pedagogical and cognitive fundamentals of each subject. Pellegrino, Chudowski and Glaser (2001) emphasise that each assessment, regardless of its purpose must, perforce, be upheld by three pillars: a theoretical model of how students represent knowledge and develop skills in the subject area in which they are being assessed; the tasks or situations which allow students' performance to be observed; and a method of interpreting so that inferences can be made on the basis of the performance tests (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The assessment triangle. Pellegrino, Chudowski and Glaser, (Eds.). (2001); VanSledright (2014).

Thus, when assessing students in the subject of history, the first question to be asked is what is meant by the fact they understand, consider and reflect on historical contents. In contrast to popular belief, knowing history does not mean memorising facts, concepts and dates. Understanding history involves complex historical thought processes. History is a practice formed within a community of researchers who pose questions, who seek answers according to the evidence the past has left us, and who analyse these using proper methodology and theoretical focus. This approach that understands history as a method comes from “new history” of the mid-twentieth century. This “new history” was based on the analysis of structures, either from the Marxist conception or the eco-demographic perspective of the Annales. From the Annales School, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre rejected event history (factual knowledge) to reinvent history as a social science. Also they argued for greater analysis of the role of structural and social phenomena in determining the outcome of historical events. The beginning of this historiographical revolution can be dated to around 1945 and had its glory years in the 1960s and 1970s (Olábarri, 1995). The influence of the Annales School of historiography to change the official teaching programs in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been valued by a

multitude of authors (Miralles, 2005; Paniagua, 1997). If Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were decisive in this historiographical renewal, Fernand Braudel changed the perception and teaching of historical time with his work on the Mediterranean under Philip II. While the French School revolved around the journal “Annales”, the British Marxist School had one of their referents in the journal “Past and Present”. This journal was established very early as a forum for discussion among historians from different approaches. This is where many of the debates promoted by historians contributed to the profound renewal of Marxist historiography. The response by historians such as E.P. Thompson and Pierre Vilar against the abuses of the theory, and the great debates and discussions among professional historians revitalized this historiographical school, and gave it a more social dimension. Their main concerns focused on theoretical and methodological openness debugging; attention to human experience; and criticism and free debate. These historians include Rodney Hilton in the field of medieval history and the study of the peasantry (Hilton, 1985); Christopher Hill and his work on the English Revolution of the seventeenth century (Hill, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm by the working class and the bourgeois revolutions (Hobsbawm, 1977, 1987a, 1987b); and Edward P. Thompson and his contributions to social history (Thompson, 1984).

History is a construction and as such it must be taught in the classroom. History teachers need to have a solid theory about the formation of historical thinking and comprehension of the student body, a disciplined learning process and pursuit of indicators of cognitive progression. In order to assess historical knowledge correctly it is essential to define the cognitive history learning model. In the last 20 years many pieces of work have addressed this issue, and there has been a great deal of emphasis on the construction of historical thinking and what it means to learn skills in interpreting the past beyond mere conceptual or memoristic knowledge (Barca, 2000; Clark, 2011; Domínguez, 2015; Gómez, 2014; Gómez, Ortuño, & Molina, 2014; Lévesque, 2008, 2011; Sáiz, 2013; Vansledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). Authors like Peck and Seixas (2008) have emphasised three ways of conceiving the teaching of history to students: the first focuses on the narrative of the building of a nation; the second on analysis of contemporary problems in a historical context, which is closer to the social sciences approach; and the third focuses on understanding history as a method, as a means of investigating from this area of knowledge and, therefore, learning to think and reflect on history. The latter of these gives the discipline its own language and logic, and it uses these tools to generate new knowledge. Its challenge in history teaching is to approach the learning from both the need to understand the contents generated by the long scientific tradition and to go deeper into the procedural contents proper to the historian. This means teaching history through direct work with sources and approaching varied interpretations of certain processes and facts (Chapman, 2011).

Recent research into the teaching of history distinguishes two types of contents. On the one hand, there are substantive or first order contents, which seek to answer what, who, when and where questions. These types of content refer both to knowledge of concepts or principles (democracy, dictatorship, absolutism, Marxism...) and to specific historical dates and events (The French Revolution, The Discovery of America, The First World War...). On the other hand, these studies highlight another type of contents, usually known as strategic or second order contents.

These are defined by the possession or deployment of different strategies, capacities or competences that can respond to historical questions and help understand the past in a more complex manner. They are related to the skills of the historian, the search for and selection and treatment of historical sources, empathy or historical perspective (Lee, 2005; Barton, 2008).

The concept of historical thinking is not new; indeed it was mentioned at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States in the American Historical Association (Lévesque, 2011). However, it has grown stronger in the last two decades as an alternative position to the descriptive and acritical historical discourse. One cannot but insist that knowing history implies handling skills involving thinking, analysis and interpretation of the subject that are not innate, and therefore have to be acquired (Wineburg, 2001). In countries like Spain the curricular stubbornness of a large part of the textbooks to insist on first order contents (concepts, dates, data...) impoverishes students' history education and is closely related to the creation of social, cultural and political identities (Carretero, 2012; Gómez, Cózar, & Miralles, 2014). Articles of Rafael Valls with textbooks analysis (Valls, 2012; Valls & López-Facal, 2011) and Ramón López Facal with curriculum and student's argumentation analysis (López-Facal, 2008, 2010; Sáiz & López-Facal, 2012) have demonstrated the important role of the national narrative and the construction of identities when teaching history in the classroom.

According to Seixas and Morton (2013), historical thinking can be defined as the creative process made by historians to interpret sources from the past and generate historical narratives. There are six key concepts that need to be considered when doing this: historical relevance; sources; change and continuity; causes and consequences; historical perspective; and the ethical dimension of history. This implies possessing a series of skills that need to be developed in the classroom (Gómez, Ortuño, & Molina, 2014). First, there is the capacity to approach historical problems in their context, according to their transcendence for society. Here emphasis must be placed on the need to link the daily lives of men and women in the past to wider historical processes. Social history has without doubt an important role when establishing bonds with the past, the present and the students' interest in historical knowledge. Second, we must encourage analysis and evidence extraction from historical sources and tests, a sphere that relates historical thinking to a methodological process. Third, it is necessary to develop historical awareness in the students, i.e. the capacity to interrelate past and present phenomena. Finally, we need to foster the ability in students to construct or represent narratives from the past. These skills combine the use of sources with the transmission of historical knowledge in a complex issue: the relation between correct arguing, the capacity to put forward causes and consequences and also an understanding of changes and continuities of a historical process from a multifactorial perspective.

### **3 EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH THE TEACHING METHODS: FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT THROUGH INQUIRY BASED STRATEGIES**

From the end of the nineteenth century, the articulation of scholarly knowledge in Geography and History were mainly conceived with the aim of legitimising nation-states. School and academic tradition based history learning on a mainly theoretical basis. Laboratory and workshop activities were the domain of

the so-called scientific and experimental subjects. Unlike these areas (geography and history) whose teaching and learning were almost exclusively based on accounts, reading and memory, others (sciences and technologies) used experiments and practicals. The outcome was that only science subjects were considered for laboratories and were described as "experimental". In contrast to this conception, recent studies on history and other social sciences insist that the knowledge involved should be attained through inquiry and methods of social analysis (Foster & Padgett, 1999; Levstik & Barton, 2008), although their use is not widespread in the classroom (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

The inquiry-based approach proposes that students explore the academic content, posing questions, researching and answering them. We can define these strategies as the way of planning, organizing and carrying out actions within the teaching-learning process on the basis of the students' own activity, while following more or less precise guides given by the teachers. Research into inquiry-based methods in teaching has often centred on the sciences, but it is equally efficient for learning history and other social sciences (Warner & Myers, 2006). Indeed, inquiry is a part of the nature of historical science and the job of the historian. Although some authors hold that these strategies cannot be incorporated until the higher levels, recent research has reported positive results for early school years (Cooper, 2012; Cooper, 2013; Cooper & Chapman, 2009).

Among the inquiry-based methods most used in the History classroom are the project methods, problem-based learning or case studies (Memory, Yoder, Bolinger, & Warren, 2004). In any of these strategies the student will be using very similar procedures to interpret the past to those of the historian. The introduction to the historian's method in the classroom does not need to be different from work with procedures in other subjects, such as biology or geology. Teaching to historicize, for example, means learning to prepare hypotheses, searching for proof or sources and then classifying and submitting them to critical analysis (Lampert & Schofield, 2004). An example is the proposal by Seixas for the assessment of historical thinking through historical perspective exercises (Seixas, 2011). In these exercises students have to answer a question relating to an important historical process or event. Seixas proffers the example of the trial of the Witches of Salem. The students then adopt a historical perspective by researching various sources, and then construct a reasoned argument. Once students have learnt the methodological bases and techniques they can apply these to other past and present situations to gain an appropriate understanding of them. History teaching based exclusively on memorizing facts and concepts is not only inefficient in terms of obtaining a solid base for understanding social phenomena, but also obsolete in today's instant information internet world.

The correct historical training of students requires a change of teacher methodology in the classroom. The role of the teacher is very different from that of a teacher in the conventional classroom. Instead of giving direct instruction, teachers help students to generate their own questions regarding historical content. When teachers opt for inquiry-based methods in the classroom, they need to provide experiences that stimulate critical thinking in the students, the curiosity to learn. They need to plan processes in which their students can learn to formulate questions, they need to be able to simultaneously manage the numerous investigations of the students, and assessment should be carried out to take into account the progress of each student in their search for an answer.

The assessment of historical thinking through inquiry-based methods has to take many elements into account. The teacher needs to make continuous use of direct observation in the classroom and assessment rubrics to establish students' cognitive progress markers in their acquisition of history skills. The assessment should include both the correct use of substantive historical contents by students (data, facts and concepts) and a historian's management of procedures (the capacity to pose research questions, interpreting and ordering information by direct work with historical sources, the selection and search for information, and the correct articulation of a historical discourse). What is achieved is that the interpretation fosters the narrative, empathy and perspectives through the recounting of the facts by the students themselves. Furthermore, this interpretation of a historical fact or a problem is based precisely on the need to solve a problem and the capacity to find solutions.

The final aim is to try to ascertain the cognitive history skills of the students by employing new assessment strategies and procedures, including complex, contextualised tasks. This obliges the teacher to assess over the long term rather than just at the end (Perrenoud, 1998). Clearly, qualitative assessment tools are indispensable as a means of measuring what is a tremendously subjective situation. Besides rubrics, other tools like portfolios, co-assessment and self-assessment are useful in getting the students to participate and also to make them reflect on the historical knowledge acquired. Such techniques are essential parts of any educational approach that incorporates self-regulated learning. All of this seeks to develop the students' metacognitive capacity. Students need to be made aware of what they do and do not know about history, what they understand and what they do not. In other words, it is important that they make increasingly more correct metacognitive judgements (Gómez & Miralles, 2013, 2015).

#### **4 CAN HISTORICAL THINKING BE ASSESSED IN EXAMINATIONS?**

Historical thinking requires a variety of assessment tools that are able to capture the different capacities of the students in their interpretation of the past and their history skills (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015). However, even examinations can include questions and exercises that demand more complex cognitive skills of the students than the mere memorising of data, dates, concepts and facts. Some authors propose alternatives that use objective tests that can enhance the cognitive demands of these exercises. An example of these is weighted multiple-choice items. The answers to the exercises would be related to the interpretation of historical sources and would, therefore, measure the different skills in the use of evidence from the past and its interpretation (VanSledright, 2014).

Along with a change in design of the objective tests, another significant step would be the inclusion of tasks that would require students to give a historical interpretation and to use narrations which would allow the teacher to analyse whether the student has acquired the skills of historical thinking and

argument. Examination exercises need to demand the ability to construct or represent the narratives of the past, while casting doubts on those already constructed in textbooks and other means of dissemination. These skills should combine the use of sources with the transmission of historical knowledge (Gómez, Ortuño, & Molina, 2014). The pieces of work in the project *Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches*, which in the 1990s emphasised empathy, perspective and historical understanding, were an important reference point in developing these skills in students (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Lee, Ashby, & Dickinson, 1996). Authors like Chapman in England and Van Drie and Van Boxtel in Holland have gone deeply into the arguments of students and into the training in historical thinking through reasoning when using sources and coherent structure in discourse (Chapman, 2011; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008, 2013). In North America there is also a wealth of studies that stress thinking, reading, writing and arguing historically and historical literacy (Montesano, 2010; Wineburg, Martin, & Montesano, 2013).

Narration is beginning to be valued as a teaching approach and as a research element in the epistemology of history and the teaching of social sciences (McEwan & Egan, 1998). The idea is to move history away from a mere enumeration of events and to promote the explanatory logic of history. This is an essential part of the English curriculum, but is far less clear in the Spanish equivalent. The "National Curriculum" states that children between 5 and 14 years should learn to "discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed" while those aged 14-16 years should be able to "understand, analyse and evaluate how the past has been interpreted and represented in different ways, using a range of appropriate media". In contrast, the Spanish curriculum makes a vague allusion to historical interpretation, confining it to subjective elements. In Primary Education the indication reads "It is important that students acquire historical references that enable them to develop a personal interpretation of the world using basic knowledge of the History of Spain and of their Autonomous Community".

The use of narratives with students to assess their historical thinking enables reflection on history as a construction, because narration is not simply telling what happened; it reveals a lot more about the psychological perspective adopted by the narrator (Bruner, 1986, 1991; Rüssen, 2005). Students' historical argumentation and their narrative representation of the past are key elements in recent studies on history teaching. Narration has begun to be valued as a teaching approach (Chapman, 2014; Henríquez, 2004) and as an important research subject (McEwan & Egan, 1998). As Carretero and Van Alphen (2014) state, knowledge of history and the construction of narratives are closely related. The exclusion of narratives from history teaching impoverishes the focus and deprives social events of their singularity, without forgetting, too, that the development of narratives can be a suitable way of initiating children in understanding and explaining historical processes and concepts.

	<b>LEVEL 0</b>	<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<b>LEVEL 2</b>	<b>LEVEL 3</b>
<b>Causes-consequences</b>	The narrative does not contain any causes or consequences of the historical process.	The narrative contains a cause or a consequence of the evolution of the historical process but not well articulated.	In the narrative there are several reasons that justify the historical process, but without nesting.	In the narrative the ability to explain the historical phenomenon coming to the complex web of multiple causes and consequences of an integrated and hierarchical form is displayed.
<b>Change and continuity</b>	The narrative does not contain allusion to the changes and continuities that occurred in the historical process of society.	In the narrative there is any reference to any significant changes that initiated the historical process.	In the narrative there is several processes significant changes and refers to long-term continuities.	In the narrative proper use of timing is displayed. It has employed a flexible approach and periodization provides temporary interconnections constant changes and continuities alluded.
<b>Historical significant</b>	In the narrative there is no reference to the relevance of the historical phenomenon to understand the social, economic and political processes.	In the narrative there is any reference to the relevance of the historical process, but without determining their significance and on the scope of its relevance	In the narrative several elements of the historical phenomenon of significance are indicated in different social, economic or political, but not nesting.	In the narrative is shows the significant of the historical phenomenon to understand contemporary society and historical change. These stories show the connection of this historical process with others.
<b>Historical consciousness</b>	In the narrative there is not any value judgments on historical phenomenon.	In the narrative some implicit value judgment about the historical phenomenon but is made to explain properly.	In the narrative there is explicit value judgments on historical phenomenon, although no temporal or explanatory interconnection.	In the narrative there is explicit ethical value judgments on historical phenomenon. The narrative relate to this historical process but in turn understanding it in its proper context.
<b>Historical substantive contents</b>	Narrative with notorious historical gaps defined by absence or gross errors of information., whether or not to provide any data to present historically irrelevant.	The narrative has a mere descriptive information with a linear ordering and the mere contribution of some milestones or events sorted correctly but with certain temporal discontinuities form. It is basically a political-territorial acts.	Basic narrative of political events but combined with some socio-economic, cultural and even assessments of Muslim heritage or period information.	Narrative with better information by integrating explanations of political content with those other social, economic, and cultural, all well structured.

**Figure 2.** Score chart for cognitive skills in history in a history synthesis exercise on the Christian conquest of Moslem territory in the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages. Adapted from Sáiz & Gómez (2016).

Narrative thinking is a basic mental operation that bestows sense and enables the historical past to be organized. (Carretero & Atorresi, 2008; Ricoeur, 1995; Rüsen, 2005). If we ask students for a written synthesis, we see not only what processes the students know, but also how they represent and organize them. Barton and Levstik (2004) underline that implicit in the narrative discourse are the use of the time dimension, the establishment of causal nexuses, and some means of granting

historical importance and of connecting present and past from a moral perspective. Thus, using narratives with students allows one to reflect on history as a construction, because the narration is not simply an account of what happened but implies a lot more about the psychological perspective adopted by the narrator (Bage, 1999; Monte-Sano, 2010; Topolsky, 2004). It can be done in a variety of ways, such as discursive exercises drawing on different types of sources that enable the teacher to

assess students' skills in interpreting historical evidence. An alternative is exercises of historical synthesis in which an important historical process or fact is explained. Through these exercises the teacher can assess the discursive capacity of the students and their historical argument skills. This means we can discern the level of substantive knowledge (enumeration of certain contents regarding an event) and also the level of second order or strategic contents (what we know about the beliefs, motivations, emotions and willingness in actions occurring in the past and the correct articulation of causes, consequences, changes and continuities) (Bruner, 1986, 1991). At the same time, narration provides information about progress in the learning and the capacity to organise and understand the past, as McAdams established. The structure of the narrative, the justification, the causality and the paradoxes reflected in the narrative essay are a clear indicator of the maturity of the students' thinking (McAdams, 2006).

This assessment tool demands that the teacher creates assessment rubrics that contain a variety of skills score charts in history in order to be able to correctly interpret students' narratives. In this line, VanSledright (2014) proposes several items to be scored when working with narrative tasks that use sources. The items can be scored from 0-4, and they are as follows: Establishes/Argue Position; Citing Evidence; Corroboration; Assessing Accounts Status; Contextualization. When dealing with historical synthesis narratives, the scores for the cognitive skills need to be different and should be more related to the argument and the introduction of second order concepts (causes and consequences, change and continuity, historical importance...). Figure 2 gives an example of a historical thinking assessment/research rubric for these types of exercises.

Hence, the first step is to define the cognitive model for learning history and to therefore be in a position to design suitable techniques and instruments to assess first and second order historical contents and competences. This means combining the efforts of various social and human disciplines, such as history, literature and social psychology in order to improve students' education in history.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Teaching history must overcome the concept of learning based on memorization and reproduction of factual or conceptual content, which still prevails. The introduction of the basic educative competences in Europe does not appear to be reducing the inadequacies which stem from the school routine, which is a result of the discipline code of history as a school subject and its permanence in text books and teaching practices (Gómez, 2014; Gómez & Miralles, 2013, 2015). There are several works that have shown the educative potentiality that the teaching of abilities carries related to strategic contents and those of historical thinking in Primary and Secondary Education. The books of Cooper (2013), Levstik and Barton (2008) and Van Sledright (2011) reveal that path where the use of sources, research methods, reflection and the historical reasoning are used. However, the epistemology conception of history as a close knowledge is deeply rooted in countries such as Spain, where the teaching of this discipline is based on the lineal narration of facts of the past was previously selected by the official curriculum, the text book, the program of the institution and finally the teacher. Given this situation a cross intervention

is necessary that increases the presence of historical education (in substantive content and in historical competences, both deeply related) in the basic educative levels (Primary and Secondary) with Inquiry Based Strategies and a proposal for Students' Argumentation in assessment.

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