‘Man, people in the past were indeed stupid.’

Using a three-stage framework to promote historical contextualisation

In this article, which is based on Huijgen’s PhD dissertation *Balancing between the past and the present*, Tim Huijgen and Paul Holthuis present the results of an experimental method of teaching 14–16-year-old students to contextualise their historical studies in a different way. In the four lessons described, students’ initial reactions to aspects of the 1950s Cold War were challenged by explicitly teaching them to build historical context, and then to revisit their initial impressions of what, for example, it might have been like to have been an American schoolchild being asked to ‘duck and cover’. The article also provides a wider argument for the importance of historical context both as something for students to be taught to create and as a potential barrier in historical learning. This is part of a wider project, and resources are provided to show how this might be done with a larger range of topics.

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‘I do agree with Sophie. It is just stupid when you lose your job when you got married. And females should do all the labour in the household, right? Men are grown-ups, right? Let them do the cooking and cleaning. Women could also have jobs and are smart, not only men are able to have jobs. Man, people in the past were indeed stupid.’ This was said by Lisa, a 14-year-old student, in response to the test item displayed in Figure 1 before we started an intervention focusing on promoting students’ ability to perform historical contextualisation. Historical contextualisation is the ability to situate phenomena and agents’ actions in the context of time, historical location, long-term developments and particular events, in order to be able to give meaning to these phenomena and acts.[1]

Lisa did not use knowledge of the historical context to answer the question. Instead, she viewed and judged the past from her present-oriented perspective. Sam Wineburg argued that, similarly to Lisa, many students might not explain or interpret historical phenomena successfully because they tend to view the past with their current beliefs, values, and knowledge. Historical thinking is therefore an ‘unnatural act’ that needs be taught explicitly to students in history education.[2] However, research illustrates that teachers might struggle to engage students in historical contextualisation processes in history classrooms.[3] Students might therefore miss opportunities to practise the skill of historical contextualisation in the classroom. To help teachers and students, in this article we present a three-stage framework that promotes students’ ability to perform historical contextualisation.

What is historical contextualisation?

Historical contextualisation is the students’ ability to create an historical context and use this historical context to successfully interpret and explain historical phenomena and people’s actions. An historical context comprises a chronological and a spatial dimension as well as socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Questions such as:

- ‘When did an historical event occur?’ and
- ‘In what chronological sequence did historical events occur?’

can contribute to insights into the chronological dimension. The spatial dimension focuses on the geographical location and scale (e.g., regional, national or global) of an historical event. The social dimensions concern the use of political, economic, and cultural knowledge of a specific historical period to explain or interpret an historical phenomenon.

In history education, students have to become aware of their possible present-oriented perspectives and need to learn how to create an historical context when interpreting phenomena or agents’ actions. As such, we consider historical contextualisation a skill in which knowledge of the historical context plays an important role. Historical contextualisation is seen by many scholars as a competency essential to thinking and reasoning historically.[4] Moreover, the ability to perform historical contextualisation is important in other domains. For example, when discussing artwork, historical contextualisation is needed to examine a seventeenth-century painting: without considering the historical context of the painting, it cannot successfully be interpreted. Another example is that historical contextualisation is needed when students discuss literature. Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn* and Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* cannot be understood without it.

To promote historical contextualisation is not to promote the condoning of what we now consider unacceptable historical events and agents’ actions. Students are not wrong when they consider, for example, slavery or child labour as awful. However, to explain and interpret

Figure 1: Item from the historical contextualisation test

> Sophie reads in her history textbook: 'Until the late 1950s, women in the Netherlands often lost their jobs when they got married. For female governmental officials, this was incorporated in the legislation.' After reading this text, Sophie reacts with: 'People living in the 1950s were stupid.'
>
> Do you agree with Sophie?
> I *agree* / *do not agree* with Sophie because…

such historical phenomena successfully, students need to become aware that people in the past held beliefs, values, and knowledge different from their own. For example, we know the outcome of the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in the early 1930s, but people living in that period might (perhaps surprisingly) have voted for Hitler because they wanted better life circumstances and did not know that millions of people would be murdered.[5]

The role of historical contextualisation in causation

As pointed out by Carla van Boxtel and Jannet van Drie, historical reasoning competencies are needed to reach justifiable conclusions about the causes and consequences of historical phenomena.[6] The ability to perform historical contextualisation is essential for reaching such conclusions because it is not possible to interpret or determine causality when historical events or actions of people are not placed in a broader historical context. For example, the consequences of the shot fired by Gavrilo Princip in 1914 can only be understood when his action is placed in the context of rising nationalism, alliances, and imperialism of European countries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lincoln's views on black-white relations and slavery need to be placed in the political, economic, and social context of the USA in the nineteenth century to be fully understood and explained. Rosa Parks's actions should also be placed in the context of segregation and a politically mobilised African-American community to explain the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955.[7]

The three-stage historical contextualisation framework

Despite the important role of historical contextualisation in successful work with causation and other historical reasoning competencies, explorative research illustrates that Dutch history teachers might not train students much in the skill of historical contextualisation.[8] When observing eight history teachers twice with a domain-specific observation instrument called the *Framework for Analysing the Teaching of Historical Contextualisation* (FAT-HC), the results indicated that the observed teachers paid little attention to historical contextualisation in their classrooms.

Figure 2: The three-stage historical contextualisation framework (see Page 11)

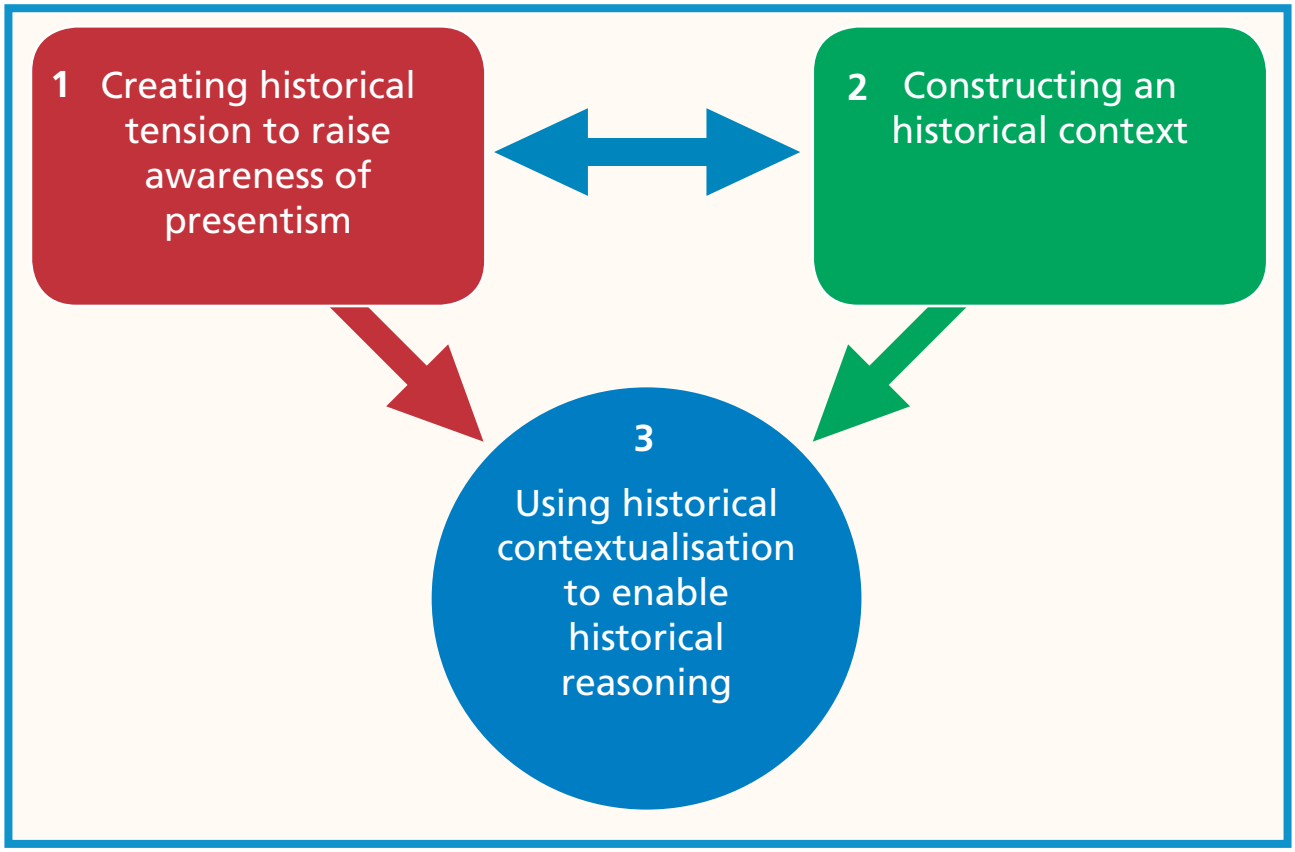


Figure 3: Historical cases that can be used to promote historical tension

Case #1: Bloodletting

Look at the ancient Greek painting on a vase. The physician is bleeding a patient. Bloodletting is the withdrawal of blood from a person to prevent or cure illness and disease. How could you cure people with these methods?
Link: tinyurl.com/ycfx887l

Case #2: Medieval marriages

If you were a young female living in Europe in the Middle Ages, it was very normal that the parents arranged your marriage. It was all about gaining economic profit. You did not have any choice. When you reached the age of 12 your marriage could be arranged.
Link: tinyurl.com/y9gwrchm

Case #3: Drinking a beer

Nowadays you have to be 18 years old to drink a beer in the Netherlands. However, in the Middle Ages even very young Dutch children drank beer regularly, even at breakfast. Moreover, the average consumption of beer was around 300 litres of beer a year. Did these people not know any better?
Link: tinyurl.com/ya6y3b62

Case #4: The Dutch trio

Read the descriptions of the lives of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Joannes van Heutsz, and Michiel de Ruyter. Coen and Van Heutsz murdered many people in the Dutch East Indies and De Ruyter recaptured Fort Elmina in Africa to continue the Dutch slave trade. Do these people deserve statues in the Netherlands?
Link: tinyurl.com/y965eujk

Case #5: Bib Hill no.1

Look at the picture taken in the beginning of the twentieth century. The two children are very young and working barefoot on the spinning machine. These children often had to work all day long and could easily get hurt. Should the owner of the factory not be arrested for putting such young children to work?
Link: tinyurl.com/yaz6ln6j

Case #6: The swimwear police

View the picture. The beach patrol was measuring bathing suit length in 1922 in the USA. If the bathing suit was too short, a woman was asked to leave the beach. Is that not ridiculous? Should women not decide for themselves what to wear?
Link: tinyurl.com/y9k6um97

Case #7: Warner Bros cartoons

View the cartoon (7.09 min) made by Warner Bros in the 1930s. Is this not very racist? Why would somebody make such videos? Should these videos not be banned?
Link: tinyurl.com/ybkerghu

Case #8: Gas

This picture was taken at the Empire Pool in London on August 21, 1938. You can see a father, mother, and two children wearing bathing suits but also a gas mask. Are these people crazy? Why would you go swimming wearing a gas mask?
Link: tinyurl.com/y7vjq2tl

Case #9: The guillotine

Study the picture. You can see the last public execution by the guillotine in 1939 in the French Republic. Do you see the large crowd watching this execution? Can you imagine yourself as one of them?
Link: tinyurl.com/y82zahxg

Case #10: The Tendeloo Resolution

Dutch law stated until 1956 that females working for the government lost their jobs when they got married. Moreover, all women had to ask their husbands for permission to travel and to buy new clothes. As a Dutch magazine noted in 1949: 'For a husband it is very difficult to stay home all day to pay the milkman and baker. He has something better to do.' Were these people stupid?
Link: tinyurl.com/ybh6wjc6

Case #11: The comic book ban

Read the different strips. This is racism, is it not? The black people are depicted as stupid and European people as civilised. Should these comic books not be banned? Is it normal that you can buy these books in shops? What will young readers think when they read these comic books?
Link: tinyurl.com/yat4gjeb

To help teachers who want to train their students more in historical contextualisation, we developed a three-stage historical contextualisation framework. This framework consists of three interrelated components:

(1) raising awareness of the present-oriented perspectives by creating historical tension;
(2) constructing an historical context by providing guiding questions; and
(3) creating opportunities to practise historical contextualisation to explain historical phenomena or agents' actions.

These three components are based on previous research in which we formulated different design principles of historical contextualisation.[9] Figure 2 (see Page 9) presents the three-stage historical contextualisation framework.

Stage 1: creating historical tension

The first component of the framework is including 'historical tension' in history lessons to make students aware of their possible present-oriented perspectives. Historical tension is created when students are not able to explain an historical event or an historical agent's action because of their present-oriented perspectives. Creating historical tension provides opportunities for teachers to discuss with students the consequences and limitations of viewing the past from present-oriented perspectives. To inspire teachers, we developed 11 'cases' regarding different historical topics that might promote historical tension among students: these cases are presented in Figure 3. Teachers can have their students react to the questions accompanying the cases in, for example, a classroom discussion, and discuss the limitations of viewing the past from a present-oriented perspective when examining historical phenomena.

Stage 2: constructing an historical context

The second component is constructing an historical context of the topic of the case. Students need explicit guidelines. In the framework, we use a chronological, spatial, political, economic, and cultural frame of reference as guidelines for students to construct an historical context. These guidelines also function as a checklist since students can use them to review what they know and what they do not know about an historical event. For example, when students are asked to construct an historical context of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, students might forget the geographical context. However, the geographical context (Cuba's location next to the United States) is essential to understand and explain the crisis. Considering all frames of reference reduces the chance for students to miss important elements. The guidelines for constructing an historical context can be found in Figure 4.

Stage 3: using historical contextualisation to enable historical reasoning

Historical contextualisation becomes meaningful when it is used to explain, compare, interpret, and evaluate historical phenomena and sources. Students becoming aware of present-oriented perspectives and knowing how to construct an historical context is not enough. The third component of the framework therefore aims at creating opportunities for students to perform historical contextualisation to enable historical reasoning. For example, in this stage, students can review their initial answers to the case presented in the first stage using their acquired historical context knowledge. Teachers can also instruct their students to use their awareness of present-oriented perspectives and their knowledge about constructing an historical context (the guidelines) to examine a new question or problem.

Using the framework: an example

To illustrate how the framework can be used to design lesson units and classroom materials, we present a lesson unit (four lessons) on Cold War events for students aged 14 to 16. Figure 5 presents the outline of the lesson unit. In previous research, we used a repetitive lesson structure for eight lessons.[10] However, students and teachers were not motivated to do each lesson the same way. Therefore, for this study, we used a lesson unit structure that moved from basic historical contextualisation processes (i.e. the teacher demonstrates historical contextualisation) to more complex historical contextualisation processes (i.e. the students perform historical contextualisation). In the first two lessons, the framework was used more to train students in historical contextualisation, while in the final two lessons, the framework was used to design an historical contextualisation activity that students had to complete.

The first lesson concerns the start of the Cold War and the development and fear of the atomic bomb. The short movie *Duck and Cover* is shown at the start of the lesson to create historical tension and to trigger possible present-oriented perspectives among students: what would it be like to receive such atomic warfare training?[11] Next, students use the guidelines in Figure 4 to construct an historical context for the start of the Cold War, in both geographical and chronological terms, using the events in Figure 6. At the end of the lesson, the teacher asks the students to use their acquired historical context knowledge to review their initial answer from the first lesson activity. Are the students more successful in explaining why American school students received atomic warfare training at that time?

The second lesson focuses on the American fear of communism. Students are provided with an historical source about the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 to create historical tension. With a partner and with the whole class, students discuss how they might explain the execution of the Rosenbergs. Next, the teacher uses the different frames of reference to construct an historical context of the start of the Cold War consisting of a chronological (timeline) and spatial context (geographical map) and of the historical events that are displayed in Figure 7. At the end of the lesson, similarly to the first lesson, the teacher asks the students to review their answer from the first lesson activity. Are they more successful in explaining the execution of the Rosenbergs?

The third and fourth lessons focus on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The teacher provides students with two

Figure 4: Guidelines for constructing an historical context

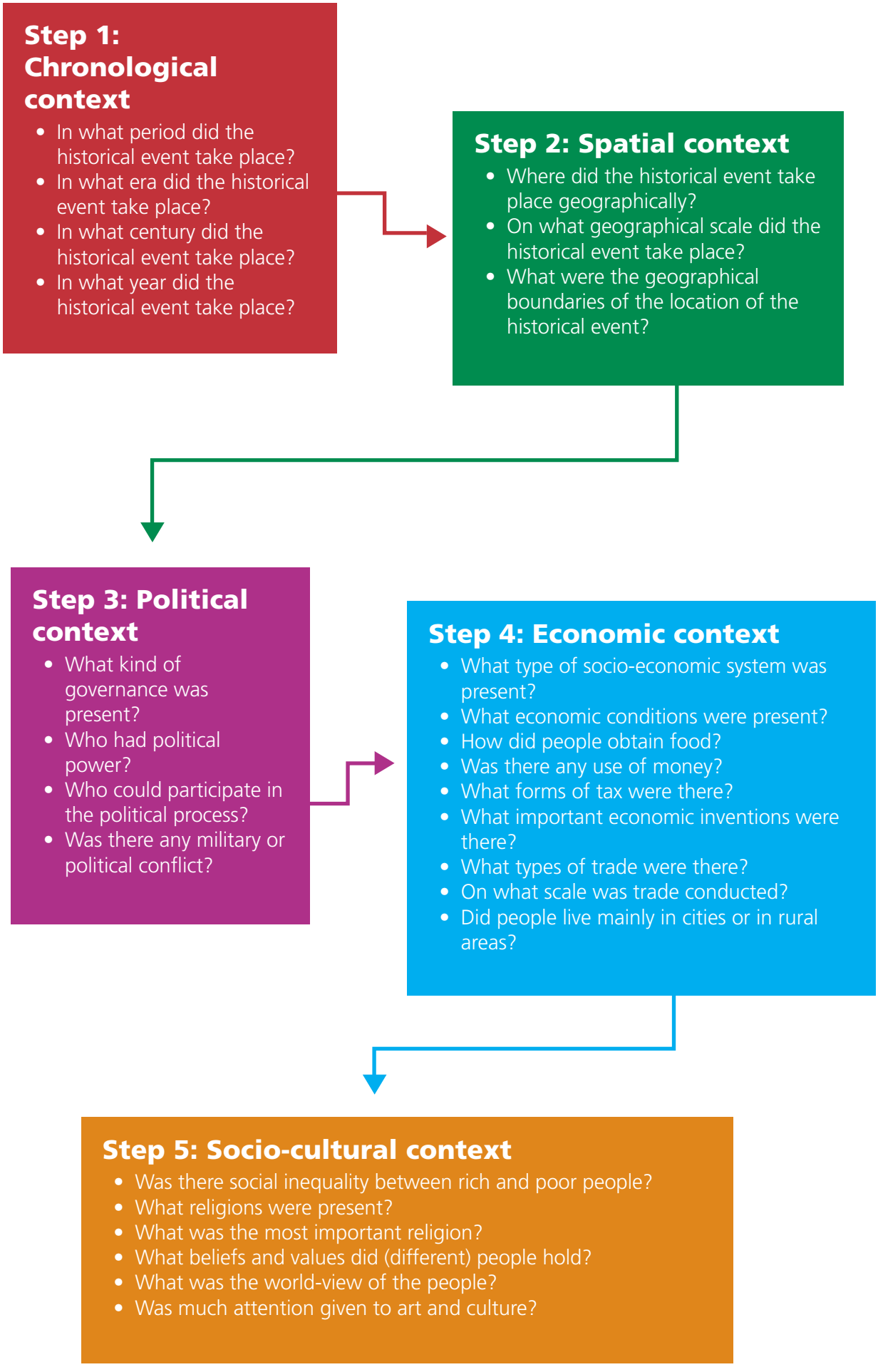


Figure 5: Outline of the lesson unit

Lesson 1:
Duck and Cover

Case to enhance awareness of present-oriented perspectives: The teacher provides pairs with a handout with questions and shows the *Duck and Cover* movie. Central task for the pairs is to reason if they could imagine receiving such atomic warfare training. In a classroom discussion, the pairs' answers are discussed. In this discussion, the teacher uses the students' present-oriented answers to explain the consequences of viewing the past from a present-oriented perspective (i.e. not able to explain the case).

Explanation of historical contextualisation: Teacher provides the handout with the guiding questions (Figure 4) and explains the importance of historical contextualisation.

Reconstructing the historical context: The teacher explains the historical phenomena outlined in Figure 6.

Evaluating the case: The teacher asks the pairs to revisit their first task, but now to explicitly use the newly acquired historical context knowledge. In this classroom discussion, the teacher explains the importance of historical contextualisation by stressing the differences between the students' present-oriented answers (from the first lesson activity) and the contextualized answers.

Lesson 2:
Rosenbergs

Case to enhance awareness of present-oriented perspectives: The teacher provides pairs with a handout with questions on the execution of the Rosenbergs. Central task for the pairs is to explain why Ethel Rosenberg was executed despite the marginal evidence of espionage. In a classroom discussion, the pairs' answers are discussed.

Reconstructing the historical context: The teacher explains the historical phenomena outlined in Figure 7.

Evaluating the case: The teacher asks the pairs to revisit their first task, but now to explicitly use the newly acquired historical context knowledge.

Lessons 3 and 4:
Hungarian Revolution

Case to enhance awareness of present-oriented perspectives: Students in groups of four are provided with two historical sources displaying a street name change in Amsterdam. The groups have to answer if they could explain why this street name change happened.

Reconstructing the historical context: In groups of four, the students are provided with five historical sources describing different perspectives on the Hungarian Revolt of 1956. Students are instructed to create an historical context based on the historical sources provided and to answer the central question (explaining the street name change in Amsterdam).

Evaluating the case: The student groups have to present to the other students their answers from the assignment. What did they find? Furthermore, they have to discuss whether their answer has changed over the course of these two lessons.

historical sources at the start of the third lesson and asks them to discuss how they might explain why the Amsterdam street *Stalin Lane* was renamed *4 November Lane* in 1956. Next, students are divided into groups of four and provided with five different historical sources about the Hungarian Revolution, as follows:

- a source with general information about the Hungarian Revolution;
- a source addressing the demands of Hungarian students to the Hungarian government;
- a source addressing the Soviet invasion from the perspective of a Hungarian journalist;
- a source presenting the perspective of a British journalist; and
- a source presenting the perspective of a Russian tourist in Budapest.

The central task is to use the historical sources to construct an historical context to explain why the name of the Amsterdam street was changed. At the end of the fourth lesson, students present their answers to other students and receive feedback from the teacher. When presenting their answers, students also explain whether the task helped them to explain the street name change.

How successful was the framework?

To test the effect of the lesson unit on students' ability to perform historical contextualisation, two conditions were created. The first was the experimental condition in which the described lesson unit was taught. The second was a control condition in which students received more traditional history education (e.g., teacher storytelling, students completing tasks from a history textbook).

The experimental condition was taught by four history teachers to 96 students, while the control condition was taught by three different history teachers to 73 students. All students were from the two highest Dutch educational tracks (general higher secondary education and pre-university education) and ranged in age from 14 to 16. Students' answers on a pre- and post-historical contextualisation test were analysed for the use of present-oriented perspectives and the display of historical contextualisation (e.g., understanding the differences between the past and present and using historical context knowledge). The test comprised six open-ended questions based on the History Assessments of Historical Thinking.[12] Two example questions can be found in Figure 8.[13]

The analyses of the pre- and post-test answers showed that students who participated in the experimental condition used less present-oriented perspectives and more historical contextualisation in their post-test answers compared with students in the control condition. In particular, the framework seemed to teach students to set aside their own perspectives and to explicitly consider the differences in beliefs, values, and knowledge between the past and the present. These results offer a positive indication that the historical contextualisation framework can be

Figure 6: Historical events of the first lesson

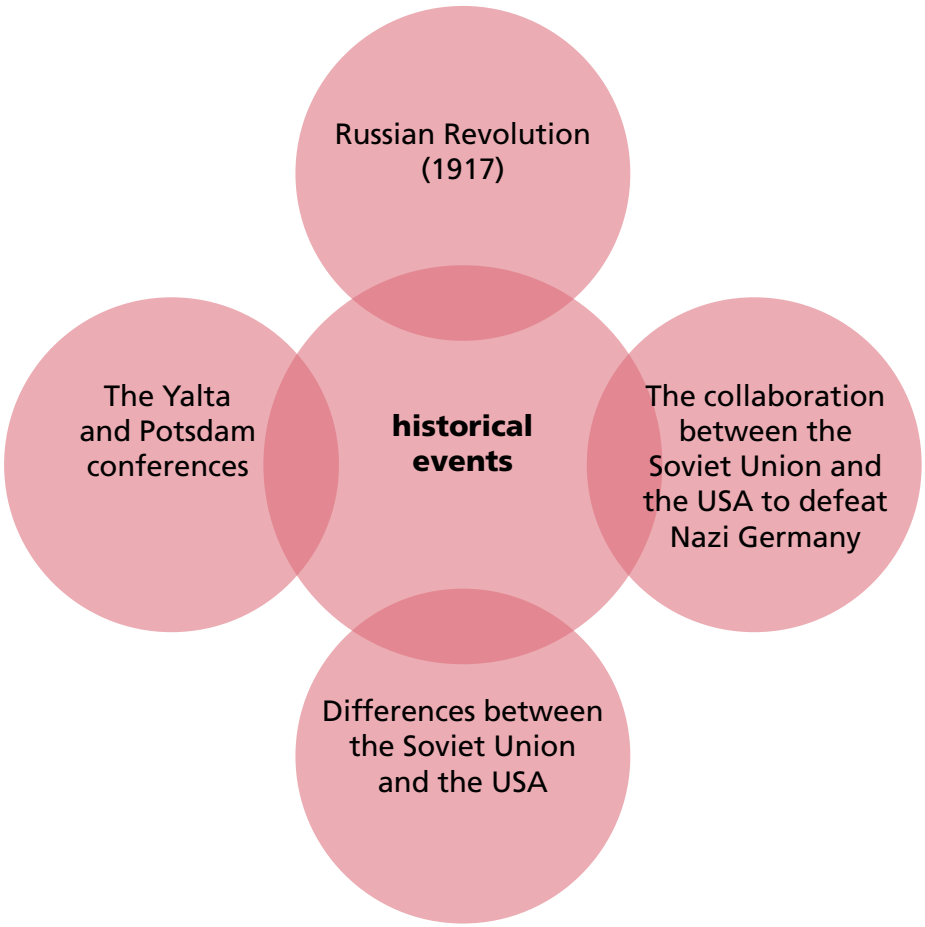
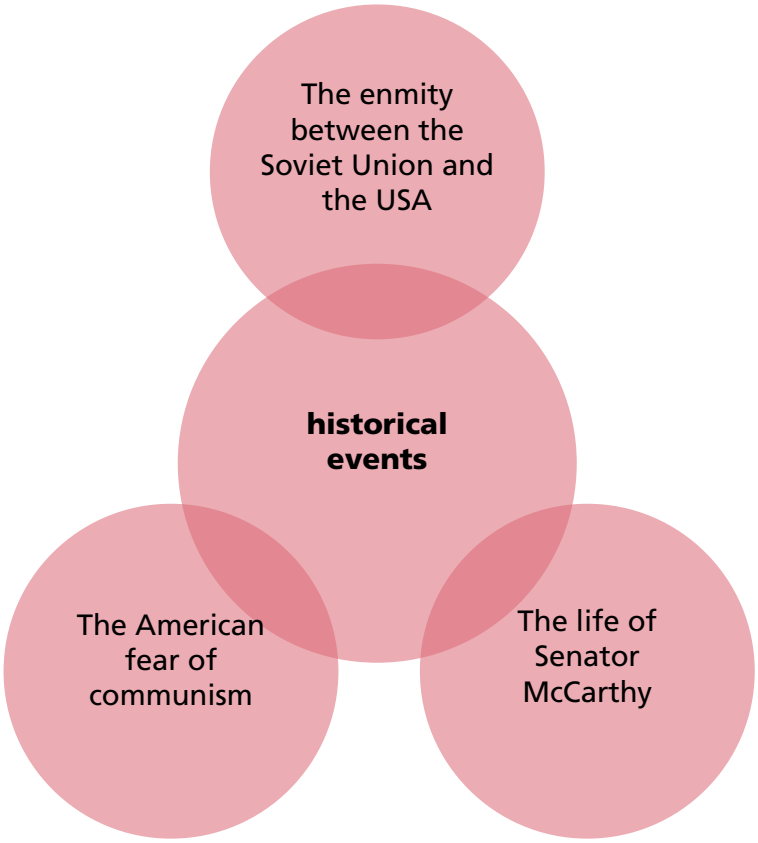


Figure 7: Historical events of the second lesson



used to promote students' ability to perform historical contextualisation. Maybe the success of the intervention is best illustrated by Lisa, the 14-year-old girl who displayed a present-oriented perspective on the firing of Dutch women when they got married in the 1950s. She answered the same question in the post-test: 'I can explain why it happened. I do not agree with it, but I know that in the 1950s there were different beliefs and values compared with our contemporary society.'

A critical reflection

Despite the positive indicators for using the framework to promote historical contextualisation, we need more information about how it works exactly. Do students understand and use the different guidelines to construct an historical context? What are the effects of the individual components of the framework on students' ability to perform historical contextualisation? Interesting questions that also need to be examined are: How to challenge students who are already more capable in historical contextualisation. How can we address students' differences and meet their specific needs within the framework? Moreover, we only tested the framework on one historical topic: the Cold War. Is the framework also effective for promoting historical contextualisation among students when studying other historical topics?

On the positive side, the participating teachers and students found it challenging and motivating to work with the framework, especially with the Hungarian Revolution task. We hope that other history teachers are inspired to use the different stages of the framework to develop lesson units, lessons, and classroom materials. The 11 developed cases that are outlined in Figure 3 might therefore be considered a good starting point.

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[10] *ibid.*

[11] The film *Duck and Cover* was published by the U.S. Federal Civil Defense Administration in 1951: https://archive.org/details/DuckandC1951

[12] For further information see the Beyond the Bubble project: https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-assessments

[13] For all six questions see: Huijgen, T., Holthuis, P., van Boxtel, van de Grift, W. and Suhre, C. (2018) *Promoting students' ability to perform historical contextualization: examining the use of a three-stage framework*. Manuscript resubmitted for publication.

Figure 8: Example test questions to examine students' ability to perform historical contextualisation

Example question 1

Harry Knox, a journalist working for the respected American newspaper Austin Press, interviewed the 70-year-old Ben Simpson in 1891. The enslaved Simpson worked for more than 20 years at an American plantation in Texas and told Knox the following story about his life:

> 'The plantation owner was in charge of a large plantation. When he pulled me and the others off the boat, he chained us around our necks. The chains were fixed to the horses. With the chains we – my mother, my sister Emma, I and the other slaves – had to walk all the way to his plantation in Texas. We had to sleep in the snow on the ground. The plantation owner had a long whip made of leather. If one of us fell behind, then he would hit him with it. When the night came, he fixed our chains to a tree. The ground was our bed. At the border of Texas, my mother couldn't go any further. Her feet were broken and bleeding, and her legs were swollen. The master took his gun and shot her. He didn't bury her. He left her lying where he had shot her.'

Two statements accompanying the text are as follows:

I. The plantation owner committed a crime. He should have been arrested by the police and brought to trial.

II. Slaveholders saw slaves as products. They thought that if a product breaks, you just buy a new product.

Which statement best suits the events described by Simpson?

I choose statement number:
because

I do not choose statement number:
because

Example question 2

Düsseldorf, Germany in 1930. Hannes (20 years old) is the son of a man who owns a small factory that makes handmade shoes. One day Hannes meets with his friend Gerd. They talk about the situation in Germany and the upcoming elections. Hannes says, 'My father's company might close down. Since the war ended, everything is getting worse and worse. After the economic crisis of 1923, we began to feel some hope again. But now, it is worse than ever. I don't know how this is going to end. Right now, I still have a job in my father's business. But when he closes down, I have no idea where to get a job. We have always been wealthy people – and look at us now!' Gerd replies, 'You are right. What has happened to our country? Look at what is going on today. No one has work.' Hannes replies, 'My father always says that we were better off during the time of the German Empire. What can we do if our country is suffering from a crisis and the winners of the war are hurting us wherever they can? Our politicians are not decisive and do us no good. It's time that Germany is ruled by someone who knows what he is doing and who really takes the lead.'

Read the text about Hannes. The Nazi Party (NSDAP) is Hitler's political party.

Two statements are as follows:

I. Hannes will not vote for the NSDAP. No one can approve of what this party has done to the world.

II. Hannes will vote for the NSDAP. In his eyes, Hitler is a strong leader.

Try to take Hannes' perspective and choose the statement that suits his situation best.

I choose statement number:
because ...

I do not choose statement number:
because ...