

# Why Bother with History?

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People live in the present and prepare for the future, so why will they bother to study the past? Why would they care to study history if historical information is available at a click of a thumb? We, at the Lebanese Association for History, are often challenged by these questions thrown at us when people learn about our mission to develop History Education. We believe that history is a powerful science that allows us to enter into the laboratory of human experiences to better understand the present. Learning history has significant impact on who we are and who we will become. It is a vehicle to peace building.

The importance of History Education has shifted in the last half century. Traditionally, history was seen as a discipline making individuals more 'cultured'. It allowed them to quote important figures from the past, recall events, and sound as if they know everything that took place in the past. This vision required retention of names, dates, and events. However, with the internet providing us with a wealth of historical information at our fingertips, the purpose of teaching history has shifted. The current trends consider history a discipline with its own concepts and tools that contributes to higher order thinking. History Education has significant impact on our individual, civic, political, and moral identities.

The main reason why nations choose to include history in their national curricula remains building citizenship. Although governments frequently exploit it for political aims, history can contribute to building responsible citizens. It empowers individuals to approach events from many perspectives, looking into causes and effects, understanding

change, evaluating significance and analyzing conflicting interpretations.

History helps us understand better the present. If we want our young learners to understand why politicians behave as they do, how society functions and how our world came to be, they need to study the past. It is the past that sheds light on the complexity of today's societies. In the process, they consider divergent narratives and how we can reconcile with their divergence. Students' ability to examine evidence, consider interpretations, draw their own conclusions and engage calmly in focused conversations about any topic are essential for responsible citizenship, as well as for preparing future political leaders, business people, and professionals.

History also engages pupils in moral contemplation. Students reflect on who they are by examining how others behaved in the past. Hence the importance of teaching about ordinary people, families, neighborhoods not only about leaders and extraordinary men and women. History also develops thinking and

communication skills essential for individuals to interact positively within society and environment.

## How to teach history

For the past five years, we at LAH have been working on developing a classroom model for students in Lebanon. We focus on building historical thinking. What does this mean in reality? Students learn to think like historians. To understand the past, they start by asking big questions such as «why did a war start in Lebanon in 1975?», they use many sources that provide different perspectives, they analyze them, compare them, draw their conclusions and develop their own interpretations. Thus, students are trained to think critically, consider perspectives, make decisions, and contribute to a wider conversation about the past.

This classroom model also entails teaching strategies that develop skills and dispositions needed in our current, and future, societies. In history classrooms, students ought to learn how to find and use evidence; how to talk and write clearly and purposefully; how to communicate ideas in person or electronically; they learn how to engage in dialogue; how to interact in a democratic society; how to take individual and collective responsibility; and how we can reconcile with the past, and thus with the present. Indeed, history education becomes a critical vehicle to the development of the individual and the safeguarding of societies, a vital component of Education.

With the protraction of the curricular deadlock in Lebanon, it is time that we reconsider how we think about history, its aims, and strategies. We cannot continue to marginalize the teaching of history leading to generations of young people ignorant of their own past and how the past has led to the present. And, while we acknowledge the role of politics in issuing curricula, it seems that it is time to rest the task of designing the history curriculum in the hands of academics and specialists away from political wrestling.

