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HISTOLAB

EUROPEAN INNOVATION DAYS IN HISTORY EDUCATION

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STRASBOURG & ONLINE

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EVENT REPORT

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HISTOLAB WHERE HISTORY EDUCATION MEETS ITS FUTURE

Introduction

History education has the unique potential to develop students' nuanced understanding of the past. By connecting past and present, it can inspire learners to build a peaceful world. But for history education to fulfil this potential, it needs to be approached using innovative methods, based on multiperspectivity, dialogue and critical reasoning.

Following a successful inaugural event in Brussels in 2023, the second edition of the European Innovation Days in History Education took place from 3-5 April 2024, at the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg. The projects and speakers during the conference were mostly recruited from an open call, for which 108 applications were received for the main programme, and 440 submissions for the HISTOLAB Award for Innovative School Projects in History Education. In 2024, the award was presented to nine schools from member states of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe:

- Private Sanko Secondary School from Gaziantep, Türkiye.
- Corpus Christi Primary School from Moyross, Limerick, Ireland.
- IES Las Norias from Monforte del Cid, Spain.
- Muratpaşa Türk Telekom Anadolu Lisesi from Antalya, Türkiye.
- Lycée Charles Péguy from Eysines, France.
- Belediye Fen Lisesi from Fethiye, Muğla, Türkiye.
- "Footprints for Freedom" - Collaboration between schools in France, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine.
- XIV Beogradska Gimnazija from Belgrade, Serbia.
- Toki Güneşparkevleri Kaihl, Küçükçekmece, Istanbul, Türkiye

As students are one of the key stakeholders of the joint project, the HISTOLAB Award is an important initiative to highlight their perspectives on the future of their history classes, and to allow them the space to develop unique and original history projects. In the second edition of the Award, the students were given the exact same themes on which to base their projects as the rest of the conference participants. This proves that students are engaged enough with modern human rights issues, the importance of local history and museums, and the impact of technology of their lives, to use them as a framework for their own individual research and work. Those selected for the Award showcased not only a deep understanding of historical information and creativity in their schoolwork, but also a willingness to participate in these important discussions on innovation and inclusion.

For the rest of the programme, the conference participants possessed a diverse range of professional experience related to the field of history education: teachers, academic historians, academic researchers with a specific focus on history education, policymakers, professionals working in non-formal education environments such as museums, and of course, the students themselves. The work of the HISTOLAB joint project is supported by its Advisory Board of core partners consisting of EuroClio, the FEDEration for European Education, the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute, the House of European History, and the International Society for History Didactics (ISHD). European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS)

was also a special contributor to the event, during which it presented the results and conclusions from the Sound in the Silence project on history through art.

The purpose of the Innovation Days is to facilitate a tolerant, inclusive, and open dialogue between the different stakeholders from across the world. The themes of the conference illustrated core values of inclusion, empathy, and a drive for change. As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949, marking the first moments European countries decided to work towards building a more peaceful and sustainable future, the current level of democratic backsliding and the rise in right-wing sentiments globally showcase how delicate these ideals and values have become. Therefore, opening spaces for dialogue without prejudice is highly important in fostering mutual understanding between different communities with varied perspectives. As was noted by Susanne Popp, honorary president of the ISHD,

> "[It] makes this programme and all the work of HISTOLAB and the Observatory more valuable than ever before, because it is one of the places or spaces where we have to make very clear not only the basic ideas and values of this liberal history understanding, but also to bring the people together who create good practices in this field."

The Innovation Days initiates discussions about potential new ways to teach history, including new technologies and advancements, in addition to the needs of learners and stakeholders in the field. Examining where more research or co-operation is necessary ensures history education is always progressing, contributing to our goal of evolving our practices of learning about the past, and applying a critical lens to current and emerging crises and challenges.

How can history education amplify underrepresented or marginalised stories?

In a classroom environment in which teaching is highly influenced by a prescribed and often overloaded curriculum, exam preparation and time restrictions, is it feasible for teachers to incorporate multiple perspectives into historical narratives, especially if the support materials are often limited to more nationalised versions of specific events? In the discussion panel on *Amplifying Marginalised Voices in History Education*, moderator Judith Perera opened the session by simply asking *why* and *how* underrepresented stories should be a part of teaching history. Both questions were analysed throughout the panel, with Judith igniting the discussion:

> "In my own work I have often wondered about the "how" – where should the amplification begin? Should we go back all the way to the beginning of the very definition of history that characterised non-writing people as prehistoric, or are we too constrained by the pressures of curriculum and time that the amplification must begin later?"

In politics, academia, and in particular philosophy, *why* is usually a far more complicated and intriguing question than *how*. The mechanics behind achieving a goal are usually far simpler to ascertain than determining the abstract reason on why the goal even exists. However, in history education, understanding why diverse topics should be taught is comparatively more straightforward than how to actually go about teaching them.

Firstly, teachers should include the experiences of minority communities simply because an accurate account of the past is impossible without them. Inclusion is not about creating a narrative to satisfy modern expectations or quotas, but to prevent erasure of the very real histories of our countries, as Raul Cârstocea noted:

> "Societies were not monolithic; they were not homogenous. The very concept of minorities is a modern concept, having to do with the establishment of the nation-state, and for most of history, people wouldn't know what we mean when we say minority."

Consequently, the concept of multiperspectivity only exists as a reaction to nationalism and the modern nation-state. The Roma community very rarely appear in prescribed history books, yet they have been a part of European society for centuries. As Clarence Lusane mentioned, the history of the black community in America was taught to black children during segregation, but when this apartheid system ended in 1954 following the landmark decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, black students were tasked with learning the history of the white majority, while the reverse was not expected or enforced. Yet without these stories, and especially the experiences of those who suffered because they were targeted or neglected by the nation-state, one only has part of the picture of European or global history. Claire Holliss posed the important questions:

> "Are we giving our students an idea of what the world of the past was really like? If we exclude certain voices, are we potentially in danger of giving students a false impression?"

Therefore, one answer to the question "*Why amplify marginalised voices in history education?*" is that this so-called amplification is only just starting to put the perspectives of minorities, both

ethnic and social (such as the LGBTQI+ community), back on equal footing with those of the majority. Without the full tapestry of human experiences, the good, the bad and sometimes the truly horrifying, the next generation is denied a full and accurate picture of the past.

Determining *how* to teach about underrepresented communities or experiences in history class is a more confusing task. As noted above, teachers do not always have the time or resources beyond the set curriculum or prescribed textbooks. Many of the panellists highlighted the additional pressure of ensuring that students are adequately prepared for exams. Where do teachers begin to innovate their teaching practices? The Innovation Days showcased many ways to introduce diverse topics, from engaging learning materials to empathetic, conscientious discussions. **Jolan Remcsak**, a history teacher from the French overseas department of Mayotte, stressed the importance of connection and communication with students who are not at the centre of historical narratives, and not to underestimate the impact this can have on their engagement with school subjects:

> "For me, amplifying the marginalised or underrepresented in general is just talking to them, because I have a majority who are marginalised in front of me every day."

A workshop on **Women in Soviet Armenia** by the **Paradigma Educational Foundation** illustrated how to introduce multiple perspectives on women's lives in Armenia, using a graphic novel along with various historical sources. **Stefania Gargioni** showcased how object-based learning and museums can help students to **deconstruct the impact of Belgian colonisation in Congo**. The team from **LETHE: (e-)Learning the Invisible History of Europe** used digital resources to teach about the excluded histories of women, children, people with disabilities, migrants, and indigenous groups, to give just a few examples. In **Race Today, Judith Perera** provided insight and text-based examples on how to help students understand the social construct of race, and how racialised ideas impact communities in the world today.

Finally, if the greatest limitations preventing innovation outside of the history curriculum are time and resources, policymakers must be made aware that structural changes are needed to ensure teachers are given the opportunity to include multiple perspectives in their classes. As we see, discussions and awareness on *why* marginalised histories should be taught are evolving and are more widely accepted than ever before, especially in the face of threats to democratic values. It is also possible to see *how* teachers can amplify the histories of marginalised communities through some more creative and empathic teaching practices as listed above. Perhaps the most pertinent question to ask now is: *When* will teachers get the chance to include multiple perspectives, without a progressive and inclusive history curriculum?

How can local history be connected to wider historical events on a European or global level?

In the process of establishing both the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe as well as the HISTOLAB joint project, a recurring discussion focused on finding ways to increase students' engagement with the subject of history at school. Often perceived as outdated, boring, or irrelevant, it is clear that there is a disconnect between learning history and how events of the past impact the lives of students today. As history is so vast and complex, students can easily "check out" of topics that appear too removed from their own lives, for example, students from Ireland learning about the fall of the Roman Empire, or students from Serbia sitting through a lesson on Christopher Columbus' voyage to the "New World".

A Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, ATRIUM: Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Europe's Urban Memory, takes the approach of using local architecture of particular cities, mostly from fascist periods in Europe, for example, in Italy from 1922-1943. Fascist leader Benito Mussolini transformed the town of Forlí into the "*prototype fascist town*" as an homage to himself. These architectural modifications are still visible today, rendering Forlí an open-air museum for the fascist regime it was adapted to memorialise. According to Patrick Leech:

> "It's a route that deals with difficult history, it works on a difficult and dissonant aspect of the past. It focuses on a neglected or repressed part of the fascist history of Forlí."

Architecture is therefore used to explain and make connections with a very difficult part of Italy's history and showcase the tangible relics of this time. The immediacy of the architectural sources is a direct route to connection with students' learning experiences, as they can imagine the history through the buildings and urban planning. What Mussolini once thought would be a showcase of his supremacy is now a commemoration of the fallacies of Italian society in the early twentieth century.

By linking the history of a students' locality to the wider historical narratives taught across the world, teachers make these lessons more tangible, and even start to increase the students' comprehension of historical empathy. While discussing the project the Backpack of Memory, Miško Stanišić from the NGO Terraforming explained that the subject of the story on which the graphic novel was based was not the most important feature of the learning material – instead, it was the feeling the story elicited. A Jewish boy living in Belgrade, Serbia during the Second World War is told by his mother what to do if she does not come home one day, for example, where he must go and the backpack he must take with him. Miško explained:

> "It is not about being able to understand Nazism or racism, it's about being able to understand being alone and being put in a situation that you don't deserve, that you cannot control. This is a horror that you can understand on some level, especially as a child."

The Backpack of Memory is a prime example of connecting wider historical events (World War II and the Holocaust) to a specific location familiar to the students (Belgrade) and to use universal

feelings of uncertainty and loneliness to help them understand the experiences of someone from history. While Serbian students can imagine the story through their familiarity with the city of Belgrade, others from across the world can connect with the themes of the narrative, and the emotions of the child protagonist.

To expand upon this concept of historical empathy, a key takeaway from the Innovation Days is that placing students at the centre of lessons is a useful method for increasing their engagement with history as a school subject. Allowing them to imagine their own possible role or experience in the historical events in their classes is an important first step, but perhaps a more significant approach is to place oneself in another's shoes, especially those from different communities, or the opposing side of cultural wars. For a course of his at Howard University, Clarence Lusane explained one of his approaches to teaching complex, racial history:

> "I often ask my black and white students to write an essay on 'Why do you deserve reparations', which forces them to think about history… They think about 'How did I end up in this space where there has to be some kind of repair?' Again, there are no wrong or right answers, it's really about trying to get yourself into somebody else's experiences."

The learning outcome of this method of teaching is in the experience itself, namely allowing students the time and space to think critically, which sometimes involves negative criticism. While history might seem removed from our modern perspectives or day-to-day lives, understanding the mindsets of those in the past bridges this gap with empathy and understanding. Reorienting oneself into the past, whether through local settings, architecture, personal stories, or historical empathy, brings about a connection with the past through widening perspectives and centring our own emotions in the history lessons that once seemed worlds away from the here and now.

Creativity in History Classes

During the first Innovation Days in 2023, a recurring discussion and suggested innovative teaching method was the integration of history with other school subjects, especially civic education. In the 2024 edition of the event, many of the workshops and projects focused less on creating multidisciplinary approaches to teaching history by merging it with other subjects, but rather on using more creative and artistic methods in history classes themselves. Ranging from sport and games to art, music, and dance, the event featured a myriad of new ways to teach history by engaging the creative interests of students.

One of the main projects that uses artistic expression to help students understand and learn about history is the ENRS transnational project, the Sound in the Silence. The project brings students to historically sensitive and difficult memorial sites, often Holocaust memorial sites, in different countries. Various iterations of the project have taken place in Neuengamme, Germany (2011) and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland (2016), to give a few examples. In 2022, students visited the Kaunas 9th Fort Museum, Lithuania, and the Gusen and Mauthausen Memorial Sites in Austria. They worked with artists and educators to process the extremely difficult and distressing history they encountered at each of the memorial sites, to then express these complex emotions through performance art.

Dan Wolff, a creator of the project, spoke about one of the main difficulties which arises from the fact that students come from different countries which had different experiences during World War II. The aim is not to minimise the experiences or learning comprehension of the students, but to use art to transcend these complicated conversations and arrive at a place of mutual understanding. For many people, what they see at the memorial sites is not in the distant past, but is closely connected with the traumatic experiences of their relatives and communities — it exists in their world today. This presents a challenge that is opposite to the disconnected and removed histories spoken about in the previous section. The students witness these histories up closely and then must navigate their emotions. According to Terezina Barac, who works in the Education Department of the Mauthausen Memorial:

> "History is not just something that you learn, but something you have in your family, and you can connect with that, and I think it's great to express this through art."

Consequently, the title of Sound in the Silence aptly describes the purpose of the work: to create sound and expression about moments in time that are often surrounded by a fearful silence, as people struggle to find the words to describe the historical atrocities that took place at the memorial sites.

As well as being a tool to analyse and deconstruct very difficult and dissonant moments in history, creativity can also play a role simply in piquing students' interest in a topic by attaching an activity they value to a history lesson. Three workshops covered distinctive approaches to innovate teaching methods using more creative activities.

History Brick by Brick by Anne Lea Christensen used Lego to teach about the history of democracy and government structures throughout time and across countries. Lego allows for students to conceptualise abstract concepts and emotions through the medium of play.

A transnational project supported by EuroClio, Football Makes History utilises the biographies of footballers in the twentieth century to teach about the connections between local and global history, encouraging multiperspective analysis and the educational merits of teaching history through sport.

Exploring the History of a Cuban Guitar: Teaching 19th Century History through Music by Isidora Sáez Rosenkranz employs a combination of approaches, including historical research, a mystery to be solved and analysis of musical changes over time, to teach about the histories of ordinary people and the connections between different parts of the world.

Each of the workshops gave teachers practical ways to innovate their history classes using popular activities and social topics, often deconstructing wider, more complex historical events using familiar hobbies.

Finally, the students themselves fully showcased their creative processes during the HISTOLAB Award for Innovative School Projects in History Education. With the Award driven by the research and ideas of the students themselves, their approaches towards innovating history classes included a podcast and essay on multiperspectivity; films, websites, and an application capturing local historical sites and events; and an art project on the histories of migrants and refugees. The students illustrated their original and open-minded ideas on how they want to learn about history and demonstrated their in-depth comprehension of their chosen historical topics.

How can museums and places of remembrance enrich the learning of history?

Teaching history using museums, places of remembrance and memorial sites a is a theme closely linked with using local history to teach about wider historical events. As one of the core discussion points for the Innovation Days, many project presentations, workshops and one discussion panel focused on the variations of teaching history using places.

One discussion panel consisted of representatives from the memorial sites that participated in the aforementioned 2022 edition of the Sound in the Silence project, as well as from participants offering an NGO (**Centre for Dealing with the Past, Zagreb, Croatia**) and institutional (**Council of Europe**) perspective. This report has already alluded to the emotional complexities students deal with when visiting sites of such historical significance. The learning outcomes of the educational programmes created by the memorial sites themselves focus on the many complicated perspectives connected with history. **Bernhard Mühleder** of the **Mauthausen Memorial** in Austria explained the work of the education department:

> "It deals with the victims, perpetrators, and the social environment from the Mauthausen concentration camp from multiple perspectives. The pedagogical principles include autonomous and participatory learning."

While these memorial sites are a prerequisite for implementing the Sound in the Silence project, not every history class will be able to visit the memorial sites such as Gusen and Mauthausen. However, the issue of access should not pose a problem for applying this teaching approach more widely. **Jean-Philippe Restoueix** of the **Council of Europe** highlighted the prevalence of memorial sites all throughout Europe, noting that one need only look for them:

> "Just take a tour in your city or your village and try to find the trace of what was the place of Jewish people, the Jewish community, the Roma community, the places where LGBT people met and perhaps were arrested."

The projects presented at the conference featuring museums and place-based learning showcased the sheer level of this accessibility, and demonstrated how the students benefit from stepping outside the classroom to expand their historical knowledge. The **Little Guides** project created by the **Junior High School of Hortiatis**, Greece, takes a fully student-centred approach to learning about sites of remembrance by having the students themselves conduct the tours. This allows them to fully understand the importance of conserving and promoting local heritage and gives them a chance to explain history in their own words, mentored by their teachers. **Olena Valchuk** also discussed her transnational project, **Building the future: learning about peace and conflict in Europe**, which gives students from Ukraine, Germany and Poland the opportunity to visit historically significant sites in each of these countries, encouraging them to use history to develop analytical skills in the area of peaceful conflict resolution.

The workshop on **Who were the Victims of the National Socialists?**, created by educators from Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Slovakia, and Spain in collaboration with EuroClio, presented a toolkit that uses place-based learning to teach about the diverse groups of victims of

fascist and anti-democratic regimes. The toolkit empowers students to innovate in their history classes by giving them and their teachers the resources needed to approach these topics.

Therefore, some of the most pertinent questions on how to teach using museums and sites of remembrance relate again to time and access. If teachers are afforded the time to branch out of the prescribed curriculum and use place-based learning methods, history field trips do not need to try to accomplish the impossible. Reiterating the contribution by Jean-Philippe Restoueix, history is everywhere in Europe, and many memorials can be found directly in the school's locality.

The everchanging digital landscape - Fake news, distortion, and manipulation

One of the main issues facing both history educators and society in its entirety is learning how to navigate a world with abundant amounts of easily accessible information, the sources of which are not always clear or verifiable. The **HISTOLAB Toolkit for History Classes: Debunking Fake News and Fostering Critical Thinking** is an effort to respond to the rise of the manipulation and distortion of history, both online and offline. The dangers caused by the spread of fake news have been linked to many events in recent history. Donald Trump's presidency of the USA was characterised by his penchant for using his platform to say whatever he felt like, without verifying sources or information. The anti-migrant rhetoric that was widespread during the Brexit campaign of 2016, both on social media and mainstream media outlets, is the subject of one of the activities of the HISTOLAB Toolkit. The Director General for Democracy and Human Dignity of the Council of Europe, **Marja Ruotanen**, highlighted this real damage fake news has caused to modern democratic processes, including the exacerbation of social inequalities and racism:

> "We live in an age where disinformation and misinformation not only confuse and mislead society, but derail entire election cycles and propagate hateful campaigns targeting minorities."

The effects of the misuse of history are evident in the smaller details of our day-to-day lives, as our approaches to education have had to adapt to the rapid advancement of technology. Students are usually more accustomed to this adaptation and have been quick to make use of support tools such as artificial intelligence in their studies, but perhaps without enough guidance on how to properly deconstruct it. As was noted **Aurora Ailincai**, the head of the History Education Division, during the dedicated session on tackling the manipulation of history:

> "Never before have young people been inundated with as much news and content as they are right now. Governments, institutions like ours and the European Union, and especially schools, have all had to grapple with the consequences of the surge of fake news online."

The HISTOLAB toolkit is a resource that teachers can use to help their students build their awareness of fake news, hate speech and distorted narratives related to historical information, especially when found online. It showcases how manipulating facts has always been present in society and used to warp the public's judgments to justify war, the targeting of minorities (specifically the Roma community, refugees, and migrants), or the denial of the Holocaust.

The research group from the **University of Murcia** presented results from the piloting of the HISTOLAB toolkit and found that students' awareness or understanding of manipulation of history does not improve naturally with age, therefore necessitating a real educational intervention to assist them in cultivating these skills. **Digital (hi)story telling with social media**, a transnational project by the **Zurich University of Teacher Education** (Switzerland) and the **Ionian University** (Greece), found that students often post about history in a performative yet uninformed way, using social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok. One of the main questions of the project was "*How can students be taught to create critical digital historical narratives through these media?*" Again, the main aim is to increase students' critical awareness of their analytical skills,

empowering them to use social media in a mindful and responsible way. While technological progression has happened rapidly – with global society more connected that ever before and vast amounts of information a click of a button away – human beings have been slower to adapt to these changes. The pitfall of this connectivity is widespread disinformation; therefore students need to understand that they should not believe whatever they read, and that they have a role to play by not spreading damaging fake news further through their own use of social media.

Another real-world example of the impact of disinformation campaigns based on historical distortions is Russia's war against Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's misuse of Ukraine's own history to justify his invasion of the country was evident long before the war began, but **Steven Stegers**, Executive Director of **EuroClio**, stated the importance of teaching credible and quality history education to counteract such violence and propaganda:

> "One issue you can only address through history education is the misuse of history… This is at the heart of the war of Russia against Ukraine That is already a great way to answer the question, 'Well, why do you have to learn about history?' – well, history can lead to war."

Quality history education is an invaluable asset to fight the modern phenomenon of disinformation and fake news. While manipulation of history has always existed, the contemporary problem we now face is the ease with which information spreads and the amount of it available at all times. Students must be equipped to analyse what they find online and be given the skills to think critically and independently. History education can specifically show students the importance of fact-checking sources to ensure their credibility, which is one of the aims of the HISTOLAB toolkit and a core goal of the joint project overall.

Conclusion

After two years of implementing the HISTOLAB joint project and two different editions of the Innovation Days, one of the most important conclusions one can draw is that innovation in history education is not an anomaly. The ideas and enthusiasm to engage with the subject and allow for more creativity and original thinking are there from both students and teachers. We can now apply the questions of Judith Perera to the aim of the conference: how and why innovate in history education?

Again, as mentioned earlier in this report, the *why* appears to be a less complicated question to answer than the *how*. Innovating in history education creates opportunities for more contributions by all stakeholders, from teachers and students to policymakers as well as those from varied backgrounds and communities. Continuing to teach a monolithic and whitewashed version of history – and only from a textbook day in day out – deprives everyone of a true understanding of the past and the world we live in today. As we strive to ensure our democracies become more and more inclusive, and to encourage everyone to claim space in participatory systems, history can act as a guide to show us the lessons and (many) mistakes of the past.

As for how to innovate in history education, the Innovation Days itself seeks to answer this question. From presentations on teaching initiatives to student projects and discussion panels, the aim of the conference is to draw on diverse and valuable insights to understand the needs of those working in the field as well as of the beneficiaries, students. Another important output of the joint project is the HISTOLAB Fellowship, an initiative that invests in research exploring innovative potential for history education to inform policymaking, teacher training, and ultimately, teachers' educational practice. The first four fellowship articles were presented at the conference, and cover the following subjects:

- More than Accessibility: Including People with (Intellectual) Disabilities in Public History, by Jan-Christian Wilkening.
- Digital Transition of Museum Theatre as an Enrichment Tool for Virtual Museum Education, by Foteini Venieri.
- Strengthening the European Dimension Through Curriculum Reform in Serbia. Successes, obstacles, and implications, by Ana Radaković.
- Exploring the potential of emerging digital technologies for history education, by Miljenko Hajdarović.

Along with the HISTOLAB Toolkit for History Classes: Debunking Fake News and Fostering Critical Thinking, the final publication of all the fellowship articles will be available in the latter half of 2024: yet another example of how much work is going on behind the scenes in developing research and practices to constantly progress the discipline of history teaching.

One final and very significant takeaway will not come as a surprise to anyone, but an integral responsibility for innovating history education lies in the hands of policymakers. They must consider the challenges encountered by teachers who wish to ensure their students master the prescribed material, especially to succeed in their exams. Without a wider, more flexible curriculum that allows for innovation, the gap between the state of the art in academic history and the actual way history is being taught will continue to grow.

The European Innovation Days in History Education is an event that showcases many possibilities for reinvigorating the subject of history, which must then be seriously considered by those creating the history curricula and resources. It is however only with adequate time, resources, and an openness to new ideas that the outcomes of the conference can truly be implemented to their full potential.