



## Using stories of the past to teach students about its complexity

Abb. 2

Figure 2

The most important dimensions of the missile

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Helen's strategy – *Using stories of the past to teach students about its complexity* – engages with real people's memories. It asks students to compare similarities and differences in narratives and draw conclusions about the causes of disparity or similarity. Students are encouraged to contrast history in their textbooks with the remembered past and consider what makes for historical significance.

This lesson plan is part of a five-part teaching strategy series designed and tested by teachers for teachers. The overall aim of Sharing European Histories is to help young people understand the complexity, multiplicity, and transnational character of European history and recognise how history can engage everyone in understanding Europe. For more information, go to [sharingeuropeanhistories.eu](http://sharingeuropeanhistories.eu).



**Evens Foundation**



# **Using stories of the past to teach students about its complexity**

HELEN SNELSON

**'Stories of the past'** uses the memories of people across the continent to get students to see that people experienced the same time period or event in different ways.

## OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGY

The strategy is based on the collection of multiple life stories of individuals from different parts of the continent (if possible) or one country and different parts of society (age, gender/sex, nationality, ethnicity) about the same time period or event. This collection of life stories could introduce students to an unfamiliar period and encourage them to gain their own sense of period behind the version portrayed in their textbooks.

Comparing descriptions of “big events” in the textbook with the reflection of them in human lives and the analysis of differences and similarities of perception of historical events and periods by people with different backgrounds could help students grasp that life was (is) always more complex and less straightforward than simple cause and effect exercises may seem to make it in hindsight.

The proposed strategy supposes not only the concrete example of work with selected and prepared stories but the method of collecting life stories as historical sources for teaching/learning activity with other events/periods.



## WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE STRATEGY?

The strategy is primarily aimed at teaching diversity. It will show how despite living different histories across the continent, there are a vast amount of experiences that we still share.

The strategy provides nuance and a platform for voices from the time that have not been heard before and, therefore, makes it harder to be ‘black and white’ about complex issues.

The strategy will also help students see the difference between history and memory and understand the constructed character of history.



A black and white photograph of a group of children sitting on the grass outdoors. There are about six children visible, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. They are wearing various clothing, including a blue shirt, a patterned dress, and a dark jacket.

**What do you  
need to do  
to use this  
strategy  
in your  
classroom?**

## **STEP 1: PREPARE THE MATERIALS**

To carry out this activity, you first need to gather a collection of ‘stories from the past’ on the topic you wish to teach. These topics should be transnationally focused for this to work. There are two options:

### **Option 1 – Use a ready-made collection**

Use a ready-made collection of ‘stories from the past’. On historiana.eu, there are collections covering the period 1945-1949 and 1989-1990. Here is [another example](#) of a collection that is based within the experience of one country – the former Czechoslovakia – but which has a range of perspectives on key 20th-century topics relevant to that country.

### **Option 2 – Make your own collection**

To put together an effective collection of ‘life stories’ you need to think about the following:

#### **1. Make a diverse collection**

Here is a checklist to help you construct a diverse collection of memories. You should strive to collect memories that reflect:

- The range of areas, regions, and countries relevant to the topic;
- Memories of people in varied economic positions;
- People of different ages at the time of the memories;
- A gender balance;
- Differences in education and social status; and
- Ethnic and other minority voices.

What diversity means exactly will vary depending on the time period and topic chosen. For example, the topic of ‘experiences of Spain leaving behind the age of Franco’ would draw voices from a different range of perspectives than the topic ‘Europe 2001-2008’ and different, again, from a topic such as ‘Our town in the 1960s’. ‘Stories of the past’ do not seek to be representative (they could not be) and should not be presented as the voice of a people or a country.

#### **2. Ask the same questions**

About 5-6 main questions should be asked of people contributing life stories. This enables students to make comparisons in class. It also opens up the possibility of reducing the quantity of text for students who may find a whole story too much reading at one time. Students could be given a story response by response in smaller sections. Please see the specific example given for examples of questions.

#### **3. Access stories**

There are well-established networks of history educators who will be able to understand this context and will be able to help you to access stories. One such example is the EuroClio Facebook group. A clear brief with parameters and requirements is highly likely to result in help from colleagues. They will, of course, need a bit of time to access the stories for you.

#### **4. Construct the stories**

Read through the material collected and think about how it could help students gain a sense of period and place. You may need to research/add information on other issues and themes present in society to better contextualise the story. Simplify the language, explain concepts, and exemplify comments as necessary so that someone who does not know this person and their local area can still understand the story. Be prepared to heavily edit long responses. Please see exemplars for examples of tone and style.

## **STEP 2: USE THE MATERIALS IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **Activity 1: In advance of the excursion**

*This activity gets students comfortable with one story in depth before beginning comparisons.*

Pairs of students are given a story from the past. You can approach this in one of three ways: every pair has a different story, some pairs have the same story, or give out stories question by question. Their first task is to read the story to understand and locate their person's story on a map displayed on PPT at the front of the class.

### Activity 2

*This activity gets students to move to comparisons but only with one other story to make it more accessible.*

Pairs then join with other pairs who have a different story and they compare notes to find similarities and differences. Students often benefit from prompt questions. For examples of these please see the exemplar activity.



### Discussion 1

*This discussion gets students to share their ideas across the class to reach generalisations about the stories as a set.*

Class discussion then follows about similarities and differences. What has been found? What ideas do we have about why there might be these differences? (For examples of questions for teachers, please see the exemplar activity). The aim of the discussion is to enable students to learn that people have diverse experiences of the same period. People do not necessarily regard the same events/changes as most significant.



### Discussion 2

*This discussion is designed to get students to critically engage with the process of history and our use of evidence.*

Teacher questioning will promote discussion about the nature of the evidence to draw out how: we can only draw tentative conclusions; these sources are not representative of groups; there are problems with memory; as a set of sources it raises more questions; and we could test the validity. (For examples of questions for teachers, please see the exemplar activity).

### Activity 3

*This activity gets the students to compare what they have found to the narratives in their textbook so they can critically question the narrative they have been provided. This will help them realise that history is constructed.*

Pairs then refer to the years of the topic in their textbook or a timeline of the period prepared from textbook-style material. What is the difference between what the textbook and what the person who gave their story from the past remembers and focuses on? What is in the textbook and what is not? Would these people see their memories and/or what is most important to them reflected in the textbook?



### Discussion 3

*This discussion concludes the strategy.*

Teacher questioning to draw out answers and further observations about:

- What answers have we found to our questions?
- How have the stories further enriched our knowledge of the period?
- Does it matter that there are differences between the textbook's history and what people who lived through the time remember as most important and impactful to them?

## WHAT OBSTACLES COULD A TEACHER WITH THIS STRATEGY FACE?

### **Reading ability**

Students need to be reasonably confident readers to do the work as exemplified here. Alternatively, less confident readers could be paired with more confident peers and/or stories could be translated, reduced in length, read as a class, or turned into sound recordings.

### **Conceptual understanding**

Teachers will need to review stories bearing in mind the prior knowledge of their students. There may well be terms and concepts that need explaining or simplifying to make stories accessible to all.

### **Question prompting**

Some students will be able to think about the stories without prompt questions. Others will need prompt questions. Examples of these are given in the exemplar material. They are topic specific, but will give teachers ideas about the detail required and can be adapted for other topics.

## HOW COULD YOU MAKE THIS STRATEGY MORE INCLUSIVE?

### **Supporting lower attaining students**

Some students might struggle with the amount of reading involved in this strategy. To tackle this you could use fewer stories, or use a condensed story, i.e., remove some of the text to leave only the most important parts. Equally, pairing a lower attaining student with a higher attaining student could support them with the reading requirements.

### **Challenging higher attaining students**

For your higher attaining students, you could easily skip Activity 1 and, instead, give them a larger pack of stories immediately and get them to find similarities and differences. This will require them to skim for information and think more critically.

# **Example of the strategy in action**

A black and white photograph of a missile launching from a silo. The missile is angled upwards, leaving a trail of smoke. The background is a cloudy sky. The entire image is framed by a red border.

**AFTER THE COLD WAR: HOW DO DIFFERENT PEOPLE  
REMEMBER THE YEARS 1989-2000?**



This example uses a collection of ‘stories about the past’ from the period 1989-2000. These are available from the historiana.eu website.

**Indicative time: 2 to 3 hours**

**Approximate age: 11 to 16 year olds**

### **Activity 1**

- Display a map of the countries of Europe on a PPT at the front of the class. Give pairs of students one of the stories from the past.
- Ask students to read their story for understanding and to locate their person’s story on the map.
- As students work, answer any questions about the meaning of the life stories and the locations of events in the stories.

### **Activity 2**

Pairs of students then join with another pair who have a different story and compare notes to find similarities and differences. Here are some prompt questions that can be given to students:

- How similar and different are the people you have read about in terms of: age, gender, their level of education, the place they were born, the place they lived in during the years 1989-2000?
- How would you summarise your person’s story?
- Overall, does your story give a sense of easy or difficult times in these years? Share examples from your stories.
- How much did life for your person change during the period? How does that compare to the other person’s experience?
- How much were the people you have read about concerned by events very personal to them? How much were they concerned by wider events and changes in society?

### **Discussion 1**

Class discussion then follows about the similarities and differences. Teachers should draw out similarities and differences through questioning:

- How does where a person lived seem to be important?
- How do personal factors, such as age and gender, seem to affect a person?
- What else seems to shape what someone regarded as most significant to remember about this time of their life?
- What does all this suggest to us about life in the period 1989-2000?

Students should be encouraged to notice that people have diverse experiences of the same period. People do not necessarily regard the same things from the time period as having been most significant. They should be encouraged to put together hypotheses as to why these differences in perspective exist.



### **Discussion 2**

These life stories are not representative. They are few in number and are highly personal views from particular people using hindsight at a particular moment in time. However, though anecdotal, they are valid on their own terms. As evidence, they can be used to illustrate the diversity of remembered experiences of the period. To help students to think more deeply about the nature of evidence in relation to this source material, you could ask students:

- What may be the problem of relying on memory for finding out about this topic?
- What do the memories reveal about this period that is useful to a historian?
- What else do we need to know to make sense of this whole period and to understand where this person’s memory fits into a wider context?
- What questions would we like to ask the person if we could ask them more about their memories?

### **Activity 3**

Working in pairs, ask the students to read about the period 1989-2000 in their school textbook or use the standard timeline of the period that has been prepared from textbook sources (see student materials section). They could use these prompt questions:

- What is the difference between what the textbook/timeline describes of the period and what the person who gave their story from the past remembers?
- How much would your person see their memories/what they have said was most important to them reflected in the textbook?



### **Discussion 3**

Teacher questioning to draw out answers and further observations about:

- How have the stories enriched our knowledge of the period further than the textbook/timeline? (Students should be able to comment that they add diversity, nuance, variety, colour, and complexity.)
- Does it matter that there are differences between the textbook's history and what people who lived through the time remember as most important and impactful to them? (This is another opportunity to focus on the idea that what we regard as historically significant varies.)
- How do these life stories help us to answer the question: 'How do different people remember the years 1989-2000?'





# Examples of two stories

## EXAMPLE 1

### 1989-2000+ MEMORIES FROM A MAN BORN IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

#### What you think of first when you look back to the period of your life between 1989-2000?

These were my late teenage years. I finished secondary education in 1989 and so I had big dreams and hopes. Exciting times! I was the first generation who could go to university. Where I lived there was not much industry; Ireland never had an industrial revolution, but suddenly there was potential, walls coming down, opportunity, and I was the right age to benefit.

#### The key events of your life in the years 1989-2000+

In 1989, I was about to move to university and there was ‘freedom in the air’ that I had not experienced in my younger years. As a young teenager in the early 1980s, there was a sense that the Cold War was very dangerous. That said, I loved my teenage years. I was optimistic, despite my father being unemployed and Ireland being a rubbish place to live in the early 1980s. Things changed and Ireland became a great country to live in in the 1990s. I left university in 1992. I had a huge passion for History and English and Ireland had just begun to link to the European Credit Transfer System (an early form of Erasmus). My professor suggested I join. I had never been out of Ireland, so I grabbed the chance and went to Denmark to study a master’s in History. I went to Roskilde, as one could work in a group. I loved it. In 1993, I returned to Ireland to train to be a teacher. From 1994, I was teaching at a disadvantaged school in Dublin West. I taught there until 2000. In 1999, I got married.

#### What we need to know about your life before 1989 in order to better understand the period?

I was born in 1972. When I was a child, Ireland had very high unemployment and not very many people went to university, especially

not those from disadvantaged backgrounds like mine. Ireland was a hard country to live in. The Irish Constitution was reviewed by the Roman Catholic Church before the Cabinet in the 1940s and laws were strict and illiberal. Even in the 1980s the Church had a dominant place in society. Coming out as gay was still a problem then and so was having kids when unmarried. I was OK as my parents were liberal-minded and my dad put up with no nonsense from the Church. Primary school was often run by nuns. They were awful, vicious, and aggressive. Corporal punishment at school was legal until 1982, but nuns still used it until the 1990s. By the time I reached the senior end of secondary level, there were no more nuns and priests in school. They’d all gone.

#### Where you lived 1989-2000 and your home?

Dublin, when not in Denmark. I grew up on a council estate – housing owned by the local government for poorer people. There was a great sense of community even though we were disadvantaged.

#### Your hopes and aims at the time

Ah, I think I’ve covered that. I wanted to go to university, travel, and then become a teacher. I hoped life was going to get better – and it did. I loved those times. Even though we had enormous challenges, even though we had very little money or prospects, there was a sense of the new, the different, and the possible.

#### Things that limited your life and prevented you from doing what you wanted

I was lucky. In the early ‘90s, things were opening up and problems were reducing. Ireland had been a place where you only got on in life if you knew the right people. Your postal address mattered and I grew up on the wrong estate. My dad felt that de Valera – the first leader of fully independent Ireland – had a lot to answer for and, in the later 1980s, we started learning about the corruption and scheming of men such as Charlie Haughey – a de Valera protégé. However, though that legacy was around, things were changing fast and I did not have a problem. It was scary being the first in the family to go to university, but I loved it.

### **What you did with your time then?**

Again, I've mostly said this. I can add that I had great friends – great times!

### **What you remember was on the news back then?**

I remember the news about the bombings on the English mainland by the IRA. We didn't go to the north of Ireland on our own. The Troubles there felt a long way away, but we were aware of the tensions from the news. There was no optimism for peace in Northern Ireland. It was economically-depressed, too. Peace coming in 1997 was surprising and very welcome.

### **How you think events in the news shaped your life?**

The 1989 opening of the Berlin Wall had an impact on me. My friend's mum had emigrated from Poland to England and married an Irishman. As soon as the Wall opened, they made a family visit to Berlin. He came back so excited and it made me excited, too. The people's power, the social activism, the resistance...it all added to a feeling of chance. We weren't putting up with the old Ireland anymore.

### **How you remember the mood and atmosphere of these years?**

There was a mood of growing optimism. In 1986, there was a concert in Dublin with U2 called 'Make it Work'. It was a public statement and protest about how difficult things were in Ireland. It was to raise political awareness of poverty and hardship. In 1987, U2 released the 'Joshua Tree.' And then 1989 was just great – transition, something different...

### **What you think has changed most between then and now?**

Everything! For me, the most important thing is the reduced role of Church as a control on society. The stranglehold of the Church, represented by the Roman Catholic priest coming round to your house on a Sunday afternoon, has lifted. Ireland is liberal. We had referenda to get abortion rights, same sex marriage, etc. and huge crowds turned out to Dublin

Castle for the announcement of the results. We do politics better. There's more transparency, more accountability, more trust, and less scheming. The Rhein report of 2008 was begun in 1998 to uncover the abuses of the Church and we are still needing a national discussion about what it means for us.

## **EXAMPLE 2**

**1989-2000+**

**MEMORIES FROM A WOMAN WHO WAS BORN IN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA, AT THE TIME WHEN IT WAS PART OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

### **What you think of first when you look back to the period of your life between 1989-2000?**

My main memory is of the Bosnian War – the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1992-95. But, it might surprise you, I also remember having a great time in high school despite the war. I was 15 in 1992 and we had the best parties ever. This was because our parents couldn't expect us to be back the same night as there were night-time police hours (a curfew). We couldn't be in the streets coming home. Even school was unbelievably fun. We had all the excuses in the world not to go, but it was friendly and we studied really hard. People around us were dying every day. People were moving and others arriving, due to ethnic cleansing<sup>1</sup>. We knew life was unique and should not be taken for granted.

### **The key events of your life in the years 1989-2000+**

I was 13 in 1989 and I was at high school during the Bosnian War. In 1996, I went to university in Banja Luka. I could travel home every weekend as it was not too far from our home in the Republika Srpska part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Then, I became a teacher and got married in 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Ethnic cleansing – the forced removal of one group of people from an area to empty it of those sort of people.

### **What we need to know about your life before 1989 in order to understand?**

My family are a mixture of nationalities (Croatian and Serbian) and when I was small it was never an issue. I was not aware that we were a mixed family before 1991. Then, the first nationalistic political parties took over. I remember looking at the posters and slogans pasted on street corners and trees and asking my dad, "what is this?" He said, "this is a Bosnian Muslim national party, this is a Croatian national party, this is a Serbian national party, and so on." This was strange, as most of us were raised in the Yugoslavian spirit. We knew there were different nationalities, but we were raised as Yugoslavs. My grandmother was religious and we had to go for Christmas and Easter to visit her, but it was just a tradition. I did not connect it to a national background.

### **Where you lived 1989-2000 and your home?**

Our family home was in Doboj, a town in the former Yugoslavian republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We lived in a small flat of 50m<sup>2</sup> in a building with 17 floors. That was a standard home for about 80% of Yugoslavian families living in big towns and cities. First we were on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor and then on the 5<sup>th</sup>. My grandparents had a house in the same town with a yard and a dog. I lived at both addresses. We also had a small house for the weekends in the mountains 15km away.

### **Your hopes and aims at the time**

I kind of knew that I wanted to stay in Bosnia. My sister 100% wanted to leave the country. I wanted to make my own money so my parents did not have to support me. For two years, in high school, I worked in a grocery store so that they did not have to give me pocket money. I was in school in the morning and then worked 8 hours in the store with my books. I read big books. One day a soldier came in and said I had a worse time than him having to read all those books – that was his perspective! I knew I wanted to finish school and go to university.

### **Things that limited your life and prevented you from doing what you wanted**

The war was not the only problem. Getting a visa to travel was horrible and humiliating. You queued through the night, then reached the front in the daytime and met a clerk who took your life apart with a 1000 questions. It was so humiliating. You had to talk about everything and even provide proof that you could pay your electricity bill. All that just to get out of the country and go on a summer holiday. Things got better for me when I got another passport – a Croatian one through my mother's family – in addition to my Bosnian.

### **What you did with your time then?**

In my last year of university, I started teaching history. My old school could not find a teacher and asked me. From 2001-2005, I travelled from Doboj to Banja Luka. It was hard as it is 100km on a train and it took nearly 3 hours. I was terrified of being unemployed, but eventually I quit and went back to live with my parents. I did my master's degree and then it was okay.

### **What you remember was on the news back then?**

I remember the Berlin Wall opening. I remember the dissolution of Yugoslavia. I remember 1995 when the war was finally over and in November there was the Dayton Peace conference. I remember the period around making the European Union bigger and that happy atmosphere.

### **How you think events in the news shaped your life?**

Hugely! The early 1990s were a totally new world for us in Yugoslavia. For the first time, we got media from many sources instead of just from the government controlled news agencies. Most people watched TV and it was shocking for my parents to see more than one 19:30 evening news programme with more than one viewpoint. Who should we trust? What should we think right now? I remember that period as a total mess. As a society, we were not ready for this. It was difficult. There

was an extremely popular TV show in Sarajevo called ‘Top lista nadrealista’ made by a movement called ‘New Primitivism’. At first it was a radio show, then a TV show, then a rock band. They made fun of our lives and, looking back now, they predicted everything that happened and it shocks me.

**How you remember the mood and atmosphere of these years?**

At first, there was a ‘national awakening’, but not in a positive sense; we moved centuries backwards and from peace to war. After 1995, there was hope and ‘great expectations’. Then, hope turned to disappointment.

**What you think has changed most between then and now?**

It’s hard to answer. At that time there was still the socialist idea of life. Here, in what was Yugoslavia, everyone who wanted to work had a job, social security was secured, everyone had health protection, schools were for free, we could travel, and most people had a place to live for free. Many people hoped that after 1995 it would stay the same. It did not. We don’t have socialism and we don’t have developed capitalism either. We have had a devastating transition period that has ravaged our economy. Massive factories don’t exist anymore and privatisation took place in a very bad way. People with corrupt money took over. That’s why there’s such huge disappointment.

## EXAMPLES OF WORKSHEET

Read the story of the past that you have been given and make notes on this worksheet ready to discuss what you have read.

PERSONAL DETAILS	
Place of birth:	Approximate age:
Level of education:	Gender:
WHERE THE PERSON LIVED IN THE YEARS BETWEEN 1989-2000	
HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARISE YOUR PERSON'S STORY? (THE KEY EVENTS, THEIR MAIN FEELINGS, THE WAY THEY REMEMBER...)	

OVERALL DID THE PERSON HAVE AN EASY OR DIFFICULT TIME?  
NOTE AN EXAMPLE.

WERE CHANGES THAT THEY EXPERIENCED POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE? WHY?

GIVE EXAMPLES WHERE THE PERSON WAS CONCERNED BY EVENTS VERY PERSONAL TO THEM.

GIVE EXAMPLES WHERE THE PERSON MENTIONS, OR IS AFFECTED BY, WIDER EVENTS AND CHANGES IN SOCIETY.

## **ADDITIONAL SUITABLE TOPICS FOR THIS STRATEGY**

As this strategy relies on oral history it can only focus on the recent past. However, we believe the following topics would work really well with this strategy:

- The creation of the European Union
- Life after the Second World War
- 1968: The revolutionary year
- The oil crisis of 1973
- Chernobyl
- Color Revolutions
- Atlantic Slave Trade
- Teaching Nazi Germany
- Waves of immigration
- Brexit+
- Reflections on a particular decade



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history blinds.  
Set in motion,  
it opens minds.**

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