

Johanna Bonäs from Finland

Because of the short national curriculum, history teachers in Finland have much freedom in teaching their subject. Johanna Bonäs is of the opinion, that her native country offers the fewest hours of history lessons compared to other European countries. As a result of this, she must plan her lessons efficiently in order to cover a topic thoroughly within a limited time. How do her lessons look like?



How do they teach history in other countries? Editor of Kleio **Lisa Oskamp** tries to figure that out and interviews colleagues from all over the world.

Name, age, teaching experience?

My name is Johanna Bonäs and I am 40 years old. I have been working as a teacher in History and Social Science at Vasa övningsskola (a school with 800 students aged 6-19) since 2003. I teach students aged 16-19 at upper secondary school (a grammar school, academic-based). Vasa övningsskola is also the University of Åbo Akademi, a teachers' training school, i.e. university students who study to become teachers do their supervised vocational training here. I also tutor aspiring History and Social Science teachers.

Which subject is your favourite subject to explain in a lesson? Why?

I guess that every history teacher has got a favorite subject. I have several favorites and one of them is the French Revolution. I think 1789 is one of the most important turning points in Europe's history. It was in 1789 that the people of Europe started their struggle for freedom, justice and equality, a struggle that still goes on today both in Europe and outside Europe. It is hard to understand today's society without knowing anything about the French Revolution. Unfortunately, the national parliament of Finland

does not agree with my view on the French Revolution as it has been removed from our national curriculum (2016). As a result of this, students at the upper secondary school do not have to read about the French Revolution anymore. I believe that Finnish students at the upper secondary school in general read less about history than in other European countries. I am not surprised at all, because Finland is probably the country in Europe that offers the fewest number of hours of history lessons. Students at vocational schools do not read history at all. Students at academic-based upper secondary school are given three history courses. For example, one course takes about 18 lessons of 75 minutes at our school. One course is about Europe's history before 1914, another about Europe's history after 1914. One course is Finland's history, but Finland's history does not start until 1917 when Finland became independent. This is according to our parliament who has approved the new curriculum resulting in a reduced history course by one third. If there are other countries where students have less history classes than Finland, please let me know.

Could you describe an average history lesson?

I try to vary my lessons as much as possible, because of the different ways of learning my students have. Sometimes we read and analyze different kinds of texts, sometimes the students do their own research and write essays. We pay visits to historical places (museums, battlefields etc.) in our own neighbourhood and abroad as much as possible. Sometimes I guide my students and sometimes they guide me during these "outside classroom" lessons.

I also invite guests to our classroom. If we, for example, are talking about the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, I try to find someone who has experienced that war and invite him or her to the classroom to tell us about his/her experiences. In this way my students hear a lot of exciting and breathtaking stories told by persons who have actually experienced history themselves. I also encourage my students to read historical novels and watch historical films in their leisure time. When they do, I will reward them with extra credits at tests. This is my way of trying to bring empathy into my history lessons.

My favorite way of teaching though, is to tell about and explain history myself. I believe that a good history teacher must be a good storyteller, because storytelling is one of the most important ingredients of a good history lesson. Children love listening to stories and if you are a good storyteller, they will also remember your stories and perhaps notice that history is one of the most exciting and fascinating things in the world!



Which subject is the favourite subject to a lot of students?

When my students notice that I like a subject (and I like most of them), they like it too.

**Do you use ICT-applications?
In what way?**

Almost every lesson. Every class-room has a computer and a video projector and every student has a laptop at our school. I use the video projector to illustrate my stories with pictures, show films, listen to music, show maps and so on. All tests are also made by computer. The only standardized test in Finland is the matriculation which you take at the age of 18-19 at the end of upper secondary school. That does not mean that we don't test students at all. My students are given homework after every lesson and small tests are given to check whether they have done their homework or not. These tests are provided digitally and the students answer them with their smartphones. I use socrative.com when I make these mini tests. After every module my students will do a bigger digital test based on the whole course. The matriculation is also written by computer.

I also use Skype during my lessons. Through Skype I can invite guests to my classroom. In this way we have been talking to diplomats, journalists abroad and members of both the European and national parliament. It is also very good that every student has his own computer and can use it to do research during a lesson. But I want to emphasise that although every student has got a laptop, I don't allow them to write down notes on their laptops. If I want them to take notes (and that happens quite often) I encourage them to do that old-school i.e. with a pen and paper. According to scientific research, one remembers things better if one writes by hand, and I am willing to believe that too.

Give your own opinion on the importance of teaching history?

History as well as religion, geography and philosophy plays an important role in our culture as it is an indispensable carrier of our cultural heritage. Sometimes it is hard to try to explain to people

why it is important because of its cultural related subjects at school in a world where profit and productivity are seemingly the only things that matter.

It is, however, important that we know who we are and where we come from. That will also help us to know what we are heading for. Rootless people without a history are dangerous. History itself is full of examples of them. Rootless people who do not know their own and other people's history easily fall victim to political manipulation by leaders and parties with obscure goals. Unfortunately that seems to be happening in Europe right now. Also in my own country. That is why I am shocked that the parliament in Finland has recently decided to cut the number of classes in history, religion and geography at upper secondary schools.

What is the average salary of a forty-year-old teacher who works full-time?

I don't know. We have personal salaries based on our personal and individual negotiations with our employer. Our salary differs very much depending on our personal skills, our education and which aged students you teach. I am satisfied with my salary though. It is high compared to teachers' salaries in other European countries. According to statistics the average wage in Finland is € 3,786 a month.

How many hours do you teach when you work full-time?

Depending on what subject you teach, you have to teach a different amount of hours. A history teacher must work for 21 hours a week to gain full salary, while a mother tongue teacher only has to teach 16 hours, for example.

Which training is required to become a history teacher?

You must have a master's degree in history from a university and a separate teacher training education (one year). I have a doctor's degree in history and a master's degree in Political Science.

Is there a subject which is considered controversial to teach in your country?

I would not say that there are any controversial subjects in Finland's history anymore. The civil war in 1918 used to be controversial, but it is hasn't anymore since all those who had participated in that war, are dead. But there are, unfortunately, subjects that the government and parliament find unnecessary and therefore have decided to remove them completely from mandatory courses in history. For example, Finland's history before 1917 and especially Finland's history as a part of Sweden before 1809. I think that excluding history is both stupid and dangerous. It leaves the field wide open to all those who might want to manipulate history.

How many students does an average class have?

I have 25-30 student per class and I guess that is quite common at upper secondary schools.

Do you have an idea for a nice history lesson?

Be happy and try to create a positive atmosphere in your classroom. And tell your students a good story. If you burn for history your students will too!



If we want to learn something about the history of your country, which book would you recommend?

A history of Finland by Henrik Meinander.

Do you have a national curriculum?

Yes, we have a national curriculum, but it is very general and gives us a free hand to form our lessons as we want to. We have a national curriculum, but it mainly consists of a list what must be taught. That list is very short and opens up for many different interpretations and give teachers much freedom to use different kinds of teaching methods. The national government or any other authority does not monitor teachers in Finland. ■