

Súsanna Margrét Gestsdóttir from Iceland

Historical knowledge and skills link it all together according to Súsanna Margrét Gestsdóttir. Those skills are also very important in the national curriculum of Iceland. What 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?

Súsanna Margrét Gestsdóttir, 50 years old, 24 years on all levels, from primary to university.

Could you describe an average history lesson?

Having observed several dozens of history lessons through the years, I hesitate to attempt to describe an average one. As to my own teaching, I strive not to have one. I teach in a school where the students are of all possible backgrounds, also when it comes to age and ability, and I believe that variety in teaching approaches is crucial.

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

Why?

This differs from one year to another. My favourite tends to be something I am hugely interested in at the moment, often due to recent travelling or meeting people from different places. An example could be my infatuation with Central America a few years back. It gave me great pleasure to share my experiences with students and to have them discover many aspects of it, from pre-Columbian times to the present. It is always inspiring to be able to mix everything from archeology to current politics in one course.



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

Again, this varies. According to the regular surveys done at school, the interest and enthusiasm of the teacher has a determining impact on students' interest. However, I have yet to come across a student that does not enjoy working on Greek mythology (NB closely linked to Greek history of course!).



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

Yes, of course – this has transformed my approach to teaching and history lessons have benefited a great deal. Having said that, I firmly believe that the teacher has to be in command during class and give a lot of guidance to students when it comes to ICT. Me and several colleagues have written about some of the apps that we and our students like at Historiana Labs (labs.historiana.eu).

What is your own opinion on the importance of the course history?

Where to start? In brief, historical knowledge and skills link it all together.

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

It would be somewhere around 5,000 euros per month.

How many students does an average class have?

25 (if lucky, less – if not, up to 32).



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

Contact hours are supposed to be 24 x 40-minutes lessons (in fact, the length of lessons varies from one school to another). Then there are all the complicated calculations of working hours related to these contact hours.

Which training is required to become a history teacher?

On lower secondary level: 5 years B.Ed. On upper secondary level: BA in history plus two years of teacher training courses or MA in history plus one year of teacher training.

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

Gunnar Karlsson, Iceland's 1100 Years: The History of a Marginal Society (Hurst, London 2001).

What is the content of the history curriculum in your country?

The national curriculum is very open and skills-based. There is a general understanding that two basic courses are supposed to cover both Icelandic and world history from pre-historic times to the present but after that, schools are free to create courses according to the interest and ability of the teaching population. E.g. in my school we teach eight different history courses (and text books are available for half of them).

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

This is a question that has often been asked and I have to admit that there is none. Issues that used to be controversial at the time, such as the American military base in Iceland until 2006, don't ruffle anybody's feathers anymore. But this is bound to change, if only for the fact that the country is not as homogenous as it once was. This will bring new challenges to the teaching of history.



Do you have an idea for a nice history lesson?

Recently, my students were watching a North-Korean movie (O Youth! from 1994, available on YouTube). During those 90 minutes they were supposed to jot down issues they would like to explore further or questions that came to mind and give them to me at the end of the lesson. The next time we met, I divided those issues/questions between small groups of students and they worked on them for a while before sharing their findings with the rest of class. I liked this lesson because it was very, very lively, spectacularly simple and, best of all, the tasks were created by the students themselves. I have done the same when a guest lecturer has visited and on other occasions. ■

