

# Klaus König from Germany

According to Klaus König history is a tremendously important subject. But can you discuss every topic in a German classroom? And what do his lessons look like? König tells us more about teaching in his country.



How do teachers 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 Klaus König. I am 45 years old and I have been a teacher at a secondary school for almost 15 years now. I am teaching English, History (both, in English and German) and Religious Education.*

## Could you describe an average history lesson?

*To be honest, no – as the teaching methods differ depending on topic and age group. Right now I have a year 7 dealing with aspects of everyday life in ancient Rome quite independently. They are creating posters about one specialist topic (such as trade & transport, architecture, food & drink, the Roman family, etc.) with material and guiding questions that they have received from me and with the aim to create a poster. This poster is supposed to be so clear and easy to understand that their classmates can inform themselves*

*about the topics they have not dealt with once all the posters have been finished. At the same time I have a year-12-group which I am teaching on the topic of National Socialist foreign policy. These lessons are quite 'classic' and involve working with sources (texts, caricatures, maps) and classroom discussions. I think the thing that all the lessons have in common is that I try to avoid simply telling the students what to learn and what to think. Instead, I give them the necessary material, room and time to find out for themselves what is important and relevant when dealing with the past.*

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

*I have always been fascinated by the Cold War, probably because I am a child of the 70s and 80s. My father and I originally come from East Berlin. My second big favourite topic is the time of the Weimar Republic which in Germany tends to be seen very negatively as it was followed by National Socialism. Accordingly, when dealing with it the focus always lies on its failure and the weaknesses of its constitution.*

*This is, however, a limited view as it is actually an exciting time with its many interesting and relevant things of all areas of life.*

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

*When students start with history in years 6 and 7 they are always super motivated when it comes to ancient Egypt, Greece or Rome. Later on many students become very interested in the time of National Socialism as this, of course, is a topic which is still very much around in the media. Very often the students have already heard quite a lot about this topic, but have not necessarily got all the information or answers they are interested in. Thus, many of them are very motivated when it comes to this topic.*

## How many students does an average class have?

*This very much depends on the age group. Average class sizes for year 5-9 are at about 30, the courses in the last three school years for the 16-18 year-olds are at around 20.*



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

As German teachers are really well-paid in comparison, I'd rather not tell...

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

26 lessons.

**Which training is required to become a history teacher?**

You have to study history at a university and have to take a special final exam (which is called 'Staatsexamen') in history and in at least one other subject (which in my case is English). Afterwards you have to go through two years of teacher training at a school and do a second 'Staatsexamen'.

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

Yes, I do. As I have been teaching history in English since I became a teacher, the internet was always an important tool for lesson planning and finding suitable material. In lessons, however, this is more difficult as our school does not offer internet access in the classrooms, but only in the library where there is limited space and facilities.

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

History is a tremendously important subject of which the relevance is often underestimated. It is probably true 'people do not learn from history' directly and as a whole

and, thus, tend to make the same mistakes again and again. For the individual student, however, there is a lot to be learned. Apart from knowledge about things of the past, history ideally helps students to develop the ability to look at things from different perspectives and to come to differentiated opinions on all kinds of important issues. 'Personality goes a long way', as Jules Winnfield says in Pulp Fiction. History lessons can help you on that way, I would say.

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

The English version of a book with the complicated and boring title Wege, Irrwege, Umwege: Die Entwicklung der parlamentarischen Demokratie in Deutschland. This book is the catalogue of a permanent exhibition about German history from 1848 until the reunification in 1990 in the Deutsche Dom in Berlin. It gives a great and understandable overview and has lots of good illustrations. You can buy it really cheaply via Amazon – or in Berlin at the exhibition.

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

We do not have a national curriculum in Germany as education is in the hands of the regions ('Länder'). This has to do with Germany's federal structure. Our regional curriculum is the one of Hesse, and it gives us a large list of topics to be dealt with for each year. This is still true for the new curriculum which has made an attempt to shift the focus from content to certain skills that the students should acquire (such as being able to read maps, interpret pictures, write essays, etc.). In this new curriculum there is at least the chance to choose certain subtopics and go into depths instead of trying to cover every single aspect of one big theme.

**Do you have an idea for a nice history lesson?**

One of my favourite lessons of the moment deals with the broad variety of political attitudes in the Weimar Republic. I got the inspiration from a Dutch social studies teacher who called it the 'social stratification game'. It works well with older students and can be adapted easily to all sorts of topics. You need a piece of chalk and a school yard. You go to the yard with your students and let them draw, let's say, 10 to 12 lines on the ground. Now you let the students work in pairs and give them role cards which tell them who they are, e.g. 'A mother who has lost her two sons in WWI', 'a communist', 'President Friedrich Ebert', etc. Then you read out 10 to 12 statements on the Weimar Republic, such as 'You support democracy' or 'You think that the Treaties of Versailles are fair'. If the students in their roles agree to the statement, they have to move one step forward, if not they remain where they are. Ideally the students will be very far apart at the end of the game and the diversification of political attitudes will have become visualized.



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

I cannot think of any. As you know German history of the 20th century has the darkest spots imaginable, but they are all dealt with in history lessons, and it is only a tiny minority of people that complain that the focus is too much on National Socialism, the genocide of the Jews or the responsibility for two world wars. ■

Above: Students working on posters about German art school Bauhaus. Left: Students playing an educational game about the Middle Ages. Left page: Classroom wall covered with history posters.