

Sinéad Fitzsimons

from Northern Ireland

According to Sinéad Fitzsimons, history education is very important to develop informed, contributing and engaged citizens. How does she handle her lessons? And how does she cope with a controversial subject like The Troubles in Northern Ireland?



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 Sinéad Fitzsimons. I am 31 years old and I have been teaching secondary history since the age of 21. I began my teaching career in Belgium, where I taught for five years at an international school in Brussels. This experience allowed me to learn a great deal about how to use a multiple perspective approach to history education, as I aspired to link the international history content to various nationalities, cultures and language backgrounds represented in the class. After my time in Brussels, I returned to Northern Ireland and taught history in Belfast. I have taught in two different schools in Belfast, both in the maintained sector.¹

Could you describe an average history lesson?

In my experience, there is no average history lesson! Lessons may involve pair work, group work or individual study. In addition, lessons may involve a mixture of primary and secondary sources, video or audio sources, internet activities and/or manipulatives that are provided with students to work with in class. One common aspect of all classes, however, is to begin by clearly

stating the lesson objectives and to conclude with a revision activity to formatively assess the students' level of understand.

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

Addressing social history as well as addressing more controversial issues are my two favourite types of history to explore in class. I find both really engage the students and show them the power they have in interpreting and positioning history. I think it also highlights the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives, openness and historical thinking, which they realize can be applied to their everyday life.

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

A lot of the students in my school are very interested in the Holocaust. I think partially because it is so shocking to them, and also because they hear so many references to it outside of school that they are eager to develop a strong understanding of it through history class.

Do you use ICT applications? In what way?

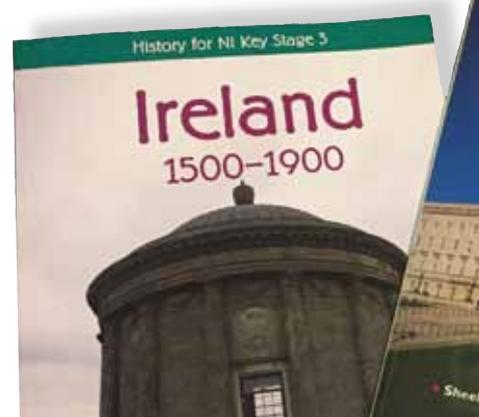
I use a few ICT applications in my classroom. I use Google Classroom with all of my year groups (year 7 to year 13). On Google Classroom, I provide them with additional resources, extra support for homework, and clear instructions about assignments. We also use it to have class reflections on a particular

topic using the Posting and Blogging feature. It's a great tool. I also use Streetmuseum which is an app offered by the Museum of London. It allows users to select any spot in London and see how it has changed through time. We use it mainly when studying Ancient Rome, as well as the Industrial Revolution for students to see how the city has evolved, but also what originated during these significant historical periods. We also use Tiki-Toki and Capzles to create timelines with our students. We do this mainly at our GCSE and A-level when students bring their own devices for class. It's a great way for them to organize all the information they receive, and it's a great way to review all the information before their final assessments.

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

If history is taught well, I believe that it is the most important course in the curriculum because of the lessons that are taught through it. These lessons are not just academic, but also social, moral, political, ethical, spiritual and so on. In short, history education is playing a

¹ Explanation of the schoolsystem, see www.theschoolrun.com/what-are-maintained-schools.



central role in developing informed, contributing and engaged citizens. In addition, history education blends with all other subject areas, and without historical understanding, the other subjects lack context and lose some of their value. To truly understand anything, you need to understand some of its history.

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

About £37,000 a year (about 42,300 euros), although that will increase if the individual is involved in leadership.

How many students does an average class have?

Usually between 25 and 30 pupils for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (ages 11 and 16). For Key Stage 5 (A-Level), class sizes decrease since students select fewer subjects. Depending on the subject and the practical elements involved, class sizes can range from 10 to 25 students.

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

32.4 hours per week.

Which training is required to become a history teacher?

To become a history teacher, teachers need to complete a relevant university undergraduate degree, followed by a one year Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), specializing in History education or a related subject such as Social Sciences.

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

Modern Ireland 1600-1972, by R. F. Foster.

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

We do have a national history curriculum in our country. For Key Stage 3 (12 to 15 year olds), it is a one page document with themes that must be addressed (for example, medical advancement, civil conflict, shifts in political ideology, etc.). Teachers are free to cover these themes in any number of ways. There are several topics, however, that must be covered during Key Stage 3, such as the 1916 Easter Rising and the Holocaust. But, for the most part it is quite flexible. Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 (15 years to 18 years) is more specific, with final exams being externally set and assessed. This obviously means there is less flexibility of what is covered in class, since students must be prepared to write on several topics that may be included in the standardized assessment.

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

The partition of Ireland and The Troubles in Northern Ireland always has potential to bring challenges in Northern Ireland. This is because of the many differing perspectives

Do you have an idea for a nice history lesson?

I think it's difficult to explain a nice history lesson without having a group of students in mind. A nice history lesson is one that is tailored to the interests, needs and identities of the class. For example, I always have the students fill out a survey at the beginning of the year that asks them for their interests, their hobbies, their cultural affiliations, etc. I then try to incorporate these themes into the curriculum. For example, we just completed a unit on the evolution of public health in the United Kingdom. However, we incorporated activities that had students consider how public health evolved in other parts of the world as well; areas that they felt personally connected to. Not only did it give them a deeper understanding of context, but it also made their own identities and interests feel more valued which increases their engagement and confidence in their learning.

and accounts of the issues. Then, there is the added complexity that the social implications of these two events/periods in history can still be felt in Northern Ireland society. For some time, teachers would (unintentionally or intentionally) only provide one side of the events. Or, in hopes of avoiding issues, only briefly touch on the topics and the move on. This has changed now, with schools covering various perspectives, factors, and addressing the longitudinal impact. A lot of work is being done to support teachers with this. I believe this goes hand in hand with society in general being more open to discuss these critical issues, and a wish of many to move forward constructively. What takes place in history classrooms has a major impact on that. ■

Some of the history books used in Northern Ireland.

