

Public Histories of Education: Perceptions, Memories and Constructions.

Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Historians of education have spent decades working collaboratively with diverse audiences and publics. Their determination to maintain public engagement with the past and construct history in a participatory way is neither new nor recent. If over recent decades we have witnessed the expansion of “public history” – given our interest in history, memory, didactics and heritage – it is only recently that we have incorporated the term “public history of education” to denote how “history of education” has not only been constructed “for” but also “by” and “with” non-specialised individuals and non-members of the academic community. In this special issue, we try to provide reflections, historiographical analyses and studies of specific products and experiences for critical analysis of what is currently understood as “public history of education” from different academic traditions and geographical contexts.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Public History; School; Education; Memory; Historiography.

The evolution of history and its development in universities throughout the 20th century generated a distinction between academic history – focused on national history – and history as a prerogative of scholars, archivists and amateurs. The latter approach was relegated to a local perspective and mere nostalgia until the 1970s when, thanks to mass media, the general public's consumption of history increased exponentially. In turn, the academy began an

attempt to recover its social facet. For example, the British History Workshop movement identified a solution to the expanding distance between society and academia in “popular history” (or “pop history”) understood as a way of constructing history from the perspective of local communities which emphasised narrative and vivid details over scholarly analysis. In Italy, the need to bridge this gap helped in the development of microhistory which, without focusing on the local, worked within this space to reclaim everyday lives and practices.

At the same time, the severe employment crisis at universities in the United States meant many unemployed historians sought alternative resources outside academe. It was here that historians and their use of the historical method outside the academy came to be known as “public history”. This approach to constructing history aimed to communicate history to a non-academic public, encourage public participation and apply historical methodology to current issues. This idea connected with the British History Workshop movement’s approach of constructing history outside universities and democratising the history-making process. The British and American traditions merged towards a history for, by and about the public themselves. Discourses and practices that could be considered public history also emerged in other European countries, although not always consciously nor using the term itself.

We can affirm that a “collaborative history” had already been developing both in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Continental Europe – before the term “public history” spread – amongst non-academic stakeholders, aimed at a non-specialist public. This approach to history-making (which today we generally call “public history”) has been linked to oral history, digital history, social memory, museology, heritage interpretation and local history, using new sources in addition to traditional methods in historiography.

In recent decades, the term “public history” has become widespread, experiencing a remarkable global expansion and connecting with the different historiographical trends in constructing participatory history for non-academic audiences. It is not surprising that different interpretations of what can be considered public history have emerged from contexts with distinct traditions in historical research. In any event, it is clear that history is increasingly interested in re-establishing public engagement with the past. Thus, collaborative practices between historians and society progressively encourage more active, inclusive and democratic participation in the construction of historical knowledge, marking a significant shift in the relationship between those who make history and those who consume it.

Historians of education have also spent decades working collaboratively with diverse audiences and publics. Our determination to maintain public engagement with the past and construct history in a participatory approach is neither new nor recent. While we have witnessed the expansion of public history and its recent “participatory turn” – given our interest in history, memory,

didactics and heritage – it is only recently that we have incorporated the term “public history of education” to denote how “history of education” is not only “for” but also “by” and “with” non-specialised individuals and non-members of the academic community.

The main goal of the research project involving the authors in this special issue is to analyse the historical background to this way of constructing history of education, its influence on social memory and the construction of collective imaginaries, and its potential for future projects. The project is entitled *Public History of Education in Spain (1970-2020). Social Perceptions, Memories and Construction of Imaginaries about Teachers and Their Practices* (PID2020-113677GB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033). We are a group of Spanish scholars from the University of the Balearic Islands and the University of Alcalá, together with an international team of experts from Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. We come from different historiographical traditions now converging in the use of the term “public history” to define the approach to history of education from the perspective of public engagement, with and for local or national communities. This scenario has sparked international debate which we have supported through two meetings held in Palma (Majorca) in July 2022 and May 2023, the symposium organised by our group within the framework of the 44th ISCHE in Budapest¹, the constitution of the ISCHE Standing Working Group on *Public Histories of Education*² in July 2023 and the workshop *Public Histories of Education: Manifestos... and More*, organised by our group under the auspices of the 3rd SIPSE National Congress³. All these scientific activities had a triple purpose: (a) discussing the current and potential place of public history of education within and/or in relation to public history, (b) examining the historical evolution of public history of education practices in different European contexts over recent decades, and (c) sharing our current experiences and interventions in the field.

This collaboration and ongoing dialogue have led to this special issue entitled *Public Histories of Education: Perceptions, Memories and Constructions*⁴. The title reflects our intention to critically address what is currently understood

¹ Symposium: *Educational Reform and Public History: New Challenges for Historians of Educations* (Budapest, July 20, 2023), chaired by Francisca Comas Rubí.

² The ISCHE Standing Working Group *Public Histories of Education* (2023-2028) was formed by the following convenors: Gianfranco Bandini (Italy), Sjaak Braster (The Netherlands), Francisca Comas Rubí (Spain), Karin Priem (Luxembourg) and Siân Roberts (United Kingdom).

³ 3rd SIPSE National Congress: *The Historical-Educational Heritage as a Source for the Public History of Education: Between Good Practices and New Perspectives* (Milan, 14th-15th December 2023).

⁴ This special issue has been coordinated within the framework of the project PID2020-113677GB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033. The authors are members of the ISCHE Standing Working Group *Public Histories of Education* [<https://www.ische.org/about-ische/standing-working-groups/>].

as public history (including the public history of education) in different geographical contexts and different academic traditions, and study the ways in which historical-educational knowledge has been presented and disseminated over the last few decades outside the academy, all in an effort to reach a wider public.

The first articles in this special issue offer different and complementary reflections on what we mean by “public history”, its background and its place in the history of education.

Karin Priem from the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History of the University of Luxembourg offers an interesting history of historiography, museology, museography and public history in her article. She argues that the growth of public history should be attributed to technological-epistemological transformation, deeming that the gradual changes in media technologies, historiography, museology and museography well into the 1970s can be seen as the pre-history of public history. She contends that the rise of memory and related historiographical changes in the last third of the 20th century went hand in hand with an increased influence of analogue and digital media, impacting communication, documentation and preservation. Consequently, the transformation of historiographical approaches, the focus on memory and the rise of participatory historical research emerged after evolutions in ICT.

The article by Ian Grosvenor and Siân Roberts, both from the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, also offers an interesting genealogy of public engagement with the past. Taking British case studies concerning educational contexts, they explore the emergence of the “participatory turn” in UK public history and the growing cooperation between academics and communities to develop a “history engaged with the public”. They argue, however, that this “participatory turn” is not so new and dates back to the History Workshops in the 1980s and earlier, and ask why this collaboration had been overlooked in the past and what implications it may have for the future.

Juri Meda, a member of the HoE research group at the University of Macerata, reflects on what exactly we mean when we use the term “public history”. He raises dilemmas arising from practical reality, where high quality scientific communication to non-specialist audiences has to deal with the ever more present dissemination of pseudo-scientific knowledge on social networks that creates misconceptions and stereotypical content heightening the general public’s mistrust towards science. His article invites us to assess the difficulties, risks and challenges of making a true public history of education, necessarily in line with the current participatory trend but reinterpreting it in light of the global responsibility of historians as “public intellectuals”, and avoiding falling into the traps generated by the popularisation of historical knowledge.

Giordana Merlo, a member of the HoE research group at the University of Padova, provides a reflection on what public history of education means. Her

article stresses that in order to define it, we need to link two interconnected conceptual planes: public history as an approach and a way of constructing history, and the current appreciation of historical-educational heritage. For this reason, she highlights school museums as privileged spaces for rethinking the history of schooling from the perspective of public history, fostering an encounter with the past and making shared authority a reality.

The second part of this special issue comprises four articles that analyse different products aimed at communicating the results of historical research in education to the general public, with a view to analysing them in the context of public history of education and the public uses made of it.

María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, from the University of Alcalá, Sjaak Braster, from Erasmus University, and Francisca Comas Rubí, a member of the GEDHE research group at the University of the Balearic Islands, present the initial results of a research project aimed at the systematic study of documentaries on the history of education produced in Spain between 1976 and 2023. After providing a conceptual review of the meaning of historical documentary, the article offers a descriptive catalogue of 73 documentaries on the history of education, drawing some initial conclusions about the role played by documentaries in the public history of education in Spain, and outlining future lines of research based on the analysis of this cultural product.

Wikipedia – an open-content online encyclopaedia – has been one of the most widely used resources by students to date. In this special issue, Avelina Miquel Lara, Sara González Gómez and Bernat Sureda Garcia, members of the GEDHE research group, critically analyse this resource in the context of public history and the public uses of history. The article highlights Wikipedia's strengths and limitations in history of education teaching, examines the didactic experiences of historians or amateur historians in using the resource, and presents a case study from the University of the Balearic Islands in the context of academic courses on history of education.

Sergi Moll Bagur, Pere Fullana Puigserver and Joan Josep Matas Pastor, members of the GEDHE research group, present a study on private schools' commemorative books as historical-educational products linked both to the fields of public history and corporate history. Specifically, over thirty books from Catholic schools in the Balearic Islands are analysed to determine the degree of involvement and participation of the educational community (students, former students, teachers, families ecc.) in their creation. The production of these books can be viewed as a way of constructing public history, although we must not overlook how their public use has more corporate than historiographical goals.

Connecting with the perspective on public uses made of the history of education, Xavier Motilla Salas and Llorenç Gelabert Gual, members of the GEDHE research group, close this special issue with an article focused on the Francoist appropriation of Andrés Manjón's pedagogy through the paradigmatic film *Forja de Almas* (1943). The authors reflect on how this

cultural product was used to promote educational models and practices in line with the Francoist regime, and how its public broadcasting resulted in the construction of collective imaginaries about specific educational role models.

Finally, this special issue aims to provide reflections, historiographical analyses and studies on specific products and experiences, with a critical analysis from different academic traditions and geographical contexts of what is currently understood as “public history of education”.