



## Is a paradigm shift happening in history pedagogy at the moment? Is 'the Source Method' obsolete and are we now onto brave new pastures?

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### ABSTRACT

The author has been a history pedagogist for over 30 years and in this paper, she makes the claim that presently there is a new paradigm shift in the ideology behind history teaching. This paper asserts that history pedagogy is at the threshold of a new paradigm, that needs addressing by both academics and practitioners. Traditional history teaching basically looked at history as 'a finished product' the work of historians and it was the job of history teachers to pass on the facts and information. This pedagogy was seriously challenged in the 1960s and 70s in England (Burstons & Green, 1962; Price, 1969; Coltham & Fines, 1971). A new history pedagogy came into existence, what was then called 'New History' and which later became known as 'the Source Method'. The dichotomy of facts/information or skills/concepts in this approach in history teaching was in turn challenged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century mainly by Christine Counsell. Counsell refined 'the Source Method' by showing how both Substantive knowledge (facts/information) and Procedural knowledge (thinking skills/concepts) were important forms of knowledge that needed to be both addressed in the classroom (Counsell, 2004). On the whole, up to a decade ago this was basically the situation in history teaching and the paradigm shift from traditional history teaching to 'the Source method' felt complete, at least in the pedagogists' mind, how much that translated to real history classrooms can vary considerably (Euroclio, 1998; CHE report, 2013; OHTE, 2023).

However, for some time now, the author has been feeling that a new paradigm seems to be pushing 'the Source Method' out and bringing in new ideas and notions. Postmodernist ideas have long established that 'History is not the Past' (Jenkins, 1991) but now this notion seems to have been picked up by some history pedagogists as something which needs to be consistently at the forefront of teachers' thinking in the history classroom; to achieve what has been called 'Criticalist' thinking. From 2010 onwards Liliana Maggioni's work (Maggioni, 2004; 2009; 2010) becomes very significant, with many history pedagogy researchers insisting on pushing for history-specific epistemic beliefs in the classroom (see for example Voet, M. & De Wever, B., 2016; Stoel, G. et. al., 2017; Karlsson, P., 2018; Wansink, B., 2016). This paper argues that it is time for an academic debate on whether this new challenge to history teaching is the best way forward in history pedagogy.

## KEYWORDS

History Education, Criterialist Paradigm, Historical Epistemology, New History, Source Method

## CITATION

Vella, Y. (2025). Is a paradigm shift happening in history pedagogy at the moment? Is 'the Source Method' obsolete and are we now onto brave new pastures? *Historical Encounters*, 12(1), 26-35. <https://doi.org/10.52289/hej12.103>

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Published 27 December 2025

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## Introduction

Research in academia often moves along a continuum rather than steep progression, something that is continually moving and transforming slowly over time. A pattern of thinking or a model dominates the community of researchers' thinking and for a time their work operates within that model. This 'pattern of thinking' is called a paradigm and paradigms are defined as "...universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" Kuhn, (1962 p.10). The author of this paper adheres to this Kuhnian concept of how knowledge is generated and disseminated. Paradigms continue to be the dominant belief until a paradigm shift occurs and a fundamental change in the basic beliefs of the discipline occurs. Naturally, this applies to history pedagogy too. And the author, a history pedagogist for over three decades has lived through a number of history teaching paradigms and adapted her research and teacher training lectures according to the prevalent latest developments. It would now seem, that after many years the basis or consensus among history teaching academics on what constitutes good pedagogy in history may also be shifting. In the opinion of the author, history pedagogy is at the threshold of a new paradigm, that needs to be addressed academically and philosophically.

## The 'New History' (the 'Source Method') and Procedural and Substantive knowledge Paradigms

In England in the late 1960s there slowly came into existence a new type of history teaching, what was then called 'New History' (Burston & Green, 1962; Price, 1969; Coltham & Fines, 1971). By the 1980s a whole community of British researchers such as Peter Lee, Alaric Dickinson, Jon Nichol, Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Rogers amongst others, worked within this 'New History' paradigm. In the process, they arguably also turned history pedagogy as a respectable new academic branch of research (Dickinson & Lee, 1978; Dickinson, Lee & Rogers, 1984). Denis Shemilt's seminal research in the mid-80s confirmed that 'New History' was greatly enhancing children's historical thinking (Shemilt, 1987). Slowly but surely, this 'New History' pedagogy started to be picked up by the rest of the world, with Malta and Australia being some of the first countries outside the United Kingdom to attempt to implement it in their history classrooms; in all probability because both had been British colonies and had very anglophile Education departments. Europe struggled to keep up, with the European Association of History Educators *Euroclio* from the 1990s at the forefront in trying to promote 'New History' with various degrees of success and what started to be now referred to as the 'Source Method'; but in all intents and

purpose it was the same paradigm and methodology of 'New History'. Meanwhile, across the pond there were American researchers who were also becoming interested in this paradigm mainly Sam Wineburg (1994) and Keith Barton (1998).

Since the 'Source Method' had to oust traditional history teaching values, which hinged so much on facts and information, it invariably created a division between facts/information and concepts/skills in history teaching. Advocates of the 'Source Method', including the author, for a number of years pushed for the focus in history teaching to be on teaching history thinking skills and concepts rather than feeding pupils facts and information. This dichotomy was challenged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century mainly by Christine Counsell who introduced a new approach in history. Her in-depth approaches to history teaching showed how both facts/information and thinking skills/concepts were important knowledge that needed to be addressed in the classroom. Now history pedagogists became familiar with Counsell's Procedural and Substantive knowledge and how to best teach these in the history lessons. (Counsell, 2004; 2011; 2016; 2017). On the whole, up to a decade ago one could say there was a general consensus that the paradigm shift from traditional history teaching to the 'Source method' with Counsell's modification was complete, at least in the pedagogists' mind. How much that translated to real history classrooms, as reports on history teaching have displayed and continue to show, can vary considerably (Roberts, 2004; CHE report, 2013; OHTE, 2023).

In history teaching in all the methods and approaches, one can also detect an undercurrent common throughout. All history teaching paradigms include in some form or shape history for civic education. This can be found in almost all the history projects, seminars and workshops of most of the international educational bodies interested in history teaching, such as Council of Europe and Euroclio. While working within the assumed paradigm of the 'Source Method' most of their themes involve tackling controversial subjects, bringing to the front 'silenced' histories, the history of minority groups and inclusivity; basically, promoting democratic values of social justice. Here one can clearly see the influence on the British paradigm by outside ideologies on historical, moral consciousness and collective memory, predominantly the German academic, Jörn Rüsen. (Rusen, 1989; 1997; 2002; 2004; 2005).

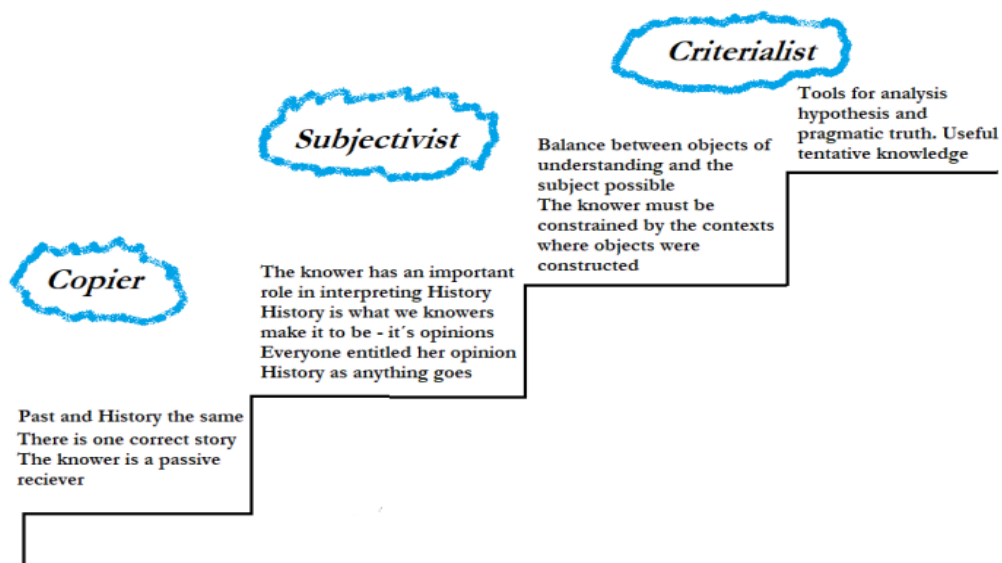
## **Problems with the 'Source Method' paradigm**

We seem to be living in exciting times regarding history pedagogy. For some time now from academic publications on history teaching as well as presentations at conferences, the author is under the impression that a new paradigm is emerging, subtly and perhaps not so subtly different from the 'Source Method'. New paradigms usually come about when the community, in this case history pedagogists, start to detect that there are faults with the current paradigm. The 'Source Method' with various degrees of success is on the whole the dominant history teaching method in many countries in Europe (OHTE, 2023) including in the author's home country, Malta. In Malta at least two-thirds of the educators often or always use the 'Source Method' pedagogy in their lessons while the remaining one third sometimes do so (Borg, 2023). Unfortunately, the work being done often tends to be of the type that is actually eliciting the 'correct' answer after source analysis! The author herself noticed this anomaly on school visits in Malta and tried to rectify it by helping teacher trainees to move away from this. She did this by having them reflect on how the exercise they had conducted in class on source analysis can be changed. From merely an exercise focused on eliciting information or to build a narrative, the teacher trainees were asked to change their exercise into one that gets the pupils to 'do history' and one of these efforts was recorded in a publication by the student teachers themselves (Vella et. al., 2023). By 'doing history' however the author and her student teachers were still working within the 'Source Method' paradigm, that is, to quote Jon Nichols "This is not to fall in with the rather twee notion of children being historians, rather we see children as acting like historians, doing their work the historian's way, following the rule book of historians and understanding that what they are doing is historical." (Fines & Nichol, 1997 p.1)

## The New Paradigm

This weakness that is, sources not being used in a challenging way in history teaching, might possibly have brought forth the new paradigm. Postmodernist ideas have long established that 'History is not the Past' (see Jenkins, K., 1991) and now if understood correctly recent academic research in history teaching is advocating that 'History is not the Past' should consistently be at the forefront of teachers' thinking in lesson planning, to achieve what has been called 'Criterialist' thinking (the author decided to call the new paradigm the 'Criterialist' paradigm and will henceforth refer to it in this way). The highest achievement in history teaching and learning in the new paradigm seems to be to get pupils to learn that there is no truth. It is very difficult to find one clear definition of what 'Criterialist' thinking is, but the diagram used in Per-Arne Karlsson's research work is helpful. It shows a trajectory (see Figure 1) from 'weak' to more more meaningful history with Criterialist thinking being the ultimate goal (Karlsson, 2018, p.4)

Figure 1



As with all new paradigms new words come into use and apart from 'Criterialist' thinking we start to come across 'nuanced' epistemological understanding and 'naïve' epistemological understanding. Interestingly, in conversations the author has had with a number of fellow pedagogists and researchers still working within the 'Source Method' paradigm, they all claim to not being familiar or even knowing the meaning of these new words in history teaching. In fact, the new paradigm's exact use of these terms when criticising or advocating history activities in the classroom can be quite complex and can differ from one researcher to the next. The author found Stoel et. al. (see Table 1, based on Kuhn et. al., 2000, Maggioni et. al., 2004, Maggioni et. al., 2009) offered a good template to understand what the new paradigm might be saying. (Stoel et. al., 2017, p.7)

From around 2010 onwards, Liliana Maggioni's work (Maggioni, 2004; 2009; 2010) becomes very significant, heavily cited in some history teaching research papers. These publications all insist on pushing for history-specific epistemic beliefs in the classroom and insist that inquiry-based learning activities should draw on historical reasoning. It is now becoming no longer enough in history classrooms to support students' learning by helping them to gain Substantive and Procedural knowledge, but learning the core of postmodernist thought on history should be the top learning objective. Academic research in history teaching in the last 15 years is clearly saying that the nature of history as a notion should be promoted in classrooms constantly. *How are we coming with our historical explanations? Why are we looking at some sources and not at others?* These aims are in the author's opinion different from the 'Source Method's analysis of sources by using different interpretations and seeing different perspectives and detecting bias

and reliability in sources. This is putting the question What is history? on a pedestal and the whole objective of history teaching becomes the historical process, the relation of the historian to the 'facts' of history which are fluid and untenable. Incidentally, the 'Criterialist' paradigm also promotes a civic element, which would be teaching students about epistemology, the nature of knowledge and knowing, and thus promoting one way of viewing how history as well as how our world works.

**Table 1**

*Levels of naïve and nuanced epistemological understanding*

Level:	Characterization of beliefs:	Examples of items:
Naïve	<b>Objectivist ideas on history</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Knowledge is fixed and singular</li> <li>– Claims are copies of the past or factual statements</li> <li>– Knowledge is embedded in the sources</li> </ul> <b>Subjectivist ideas on history</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Knowledge is uncertain and personal</li> <li>– Claims are opinions</li> <li>– Knowledge is generated by human minds</li> </ul>	8. Historians will give roughly the same explanation for an event, if they study the same sources 9. Connections between causes and an historical event are fixed 3. When two eyewitnesses make the same claim about an historical event, you know it is true 17. It is not possible to write about history when sources contradict each other 7. Historical accounts are mainly opinions 10. Because the past is gone, you cannot adequately assess the reliability of historical accounts 12. Historical accounts are largely opinions of historians
Nuanced	<b>Criterialist ideas on history</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Knowledge is generated by human minds and uncertain, but also bound by:</li> <li>– Disciplinary methods and criteria of evidence and argument</li> <li>– Claims are judgments</li> </ul>	13. New explanations for historical events will always be written 14. In history your own interpretation is very important 26. For many events, historians will continue to debate the causes 2. In history there are various methods to assess the reliability of historical accounts 6. In history education it is important that you learn to support your reasoning with evidence

**Table 2**

*Author's view on Paradigm Shifts in History Teaching in the last 6 decades.*

Traditional History teaching	The Source Method	Substantive/Procedural Approach	Criterialist Approach
Pre 1970	Post 1975	Post 2008	Post 2015
History is a finished product. The work of historians, teachers just need to pass on information.	Analysis of sources an integral part of history teaching, while also targeting history thinking skills and concepts.	Sources, history thinking skills and concepts but with historic contextual knowledge.	The nature of history, how history works become all important.
Always present in the background in some form is civic or moral education throughout in the four paradigms.  Traditional history teaching wanted pupils to learn the local and national 'given' history. The 'Source Method' and Substantive/Procedural pushes for democratic social justice values. The 'Criterialist' paradigm promotes how history (the world) works. The nature of knowledge and knowing.			

## Should 'Criterialist thinking' be the goal of history teaching and learning?

There had been much debate in the 1990s regarding post-modernism and its effect on history as an academic subject; with various explosive exchanges in academia. Richard J. Evans discusses numerous articles in the Journal of Contemporary History of 1995 between various academic heavy weights like Arthur Marwick and Hayden White (Evans, 1997a, p.270). The author remembers attending a riveting Keith Jenkins' lecture in early 1990s and buying and reading all



his publications (Jenkins, 1991;1995;1999;2002). Has Postmodernism finally reached history teaching in the form of 'Criterialist' thinking, the new paradigm? Are the Criterialists the reincarnation of the 1990s Postmodernists?

Postmodernism is very enticing and pulled a lot of us in three decades ago. "Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth declares that time is a fictional construct, and Roland Barthes announces that all the world's a text, and Frank Ankersmit swears that we can never know anything at all about the past so we might as well confine ourselves to studying other historians ..." (Evans, 1997b p. 220)

But history the academic subject, eventually revolted against these stances because while it was good that postmodernism forced historians to rethink their approaches postmodernism it is just one theory. The author feels there are lessons to be learnt from the 1990s attack of postmodernism on history that one would do well to heed before hurling completely into a postmodernist history pedagogy. If in history teaching and learning the notion that 'Knowledge is embedded in the sources' is now to be considered naïve history teaching we have a problem. For this cannot be followed by nuanced history teaching which says 'In history education it is important that you learn to support your reasoning with evidence'. The second statement does not logically follow from the previous one. This is a non sequitur. As no history can be done if postmodernists are correct then no history teaching can be done either.

For history teaching this is going to mean no timelines or time charts can be used, and the sources are not telling us anything, and what should be studied in the classroom is the history of the source of the source. Targeting thinking skills in history teaching also has to stop, for how can you analyse sources for bias and reliability if there is no truth or truth is fluid, bias can only operate when there is an objective truth. What about other thinking key history concepts and skills like cause and consequence, continuity and change? We will need to stop teaching these too. For as Jenkins says we have to see that "all historical accounts as imprisoned in time and space and thus to see their concepts not as universal heartlands but as specific, local expressions." (Jenkins,1991, p.16)

The author does not doubt that history is epistemologically fragile, there is definitely not 'one' history but many histories and these stem from the fact that the past is gone and history is just a discourse on the past and all historians can give us is a valid interpretation of the past based on the evidence. The author hopes the new paradigm is not towing the postmodernist stance, and there do seem to be instances where it is clearly not doing so. In Gerhard Stoel's table (see Table 2), subjectivist views are dismissed together with objectivist views and Criterialist thinking is defined as "knowledge is generated by human minds but bound by evidence." And the author has no quarrel with that. But the new paradigm still presents challenges. Teaching within the 'Criterialist' paradigm is definitely rarely happening in our history classrooms (see Voet, M. & De Wever, B., 2016; Namamba, A., & Congman, R., 2016; Karlsson, P., 2018; Wansink, B. et. al., 2016). No doubt teachers struggle with epistemological history thinking. Should we now make students in the classroom struggle with epistemological history thinking too? And should this become the overarching concern of history teaching? The author's position would be yes, we do need to create opportunities where pupils in the classroom can get to grips with 'the nature of history' but no to the second question. History teaching should not be rendered only as a philosophical theoretical exercise on what is history.

### **How can we create opportunities where pupils in the classroom can get to grips with 'the nature of history'?**

There should be opportunities in schools where 'the nature of history' is one of the teaching objectives while carefully not allowing it to become an overarching learning objective. The aim of this paper is to instigate a discussion among academics regarding this new paradigm in history teaching, while acknowledging the fact that naturally this new paradigm might never touch ground, and actually never really trickle down in any form in real classrooms. Bridging the theory and practice divide can be very difficult, indeed to this day almost 60 years later, a few teachers

in schools have ignored all subsequent paradigms and never moved out of the traditional one! But paradigms can work and they are adopted by teachers and on an international level too, as the success of the 'Source Method' has shown. It might well be beneficial that Criterialist thinking starts to form part of history teaching in schools.

However, there are several challenges:

1. No time or space in curriculum. It is true that lack of time is often cited as a difficulty by those hesitant to adopt new pedagogy but teaching within a Criterialist paradigm is really time consuming. In October 2022 the author together with her student teachers changed one exercise in a year 8 (12-year-olds) history class on Medieval Malta, from an analysis of a medieval document by Godfrey Malaterra to learn about what happened in a Christian invasion of Arab Malta in 1091 to one which focused on who was Godfrey Malaterra. The focus in the lesson was no longer the invasion per se but the writer of the source Malaterra himself, his account and why was this document chosen by the textbook writers, and furthermore how different historians interpreted this document and what was their agenda. The discussion during the history lesson was very fruitful and at the end of it 12-year olds were debating how truthful a depiction the source gave on what really happened in 1091 (Vella, et. al., 2023, p. 15). But all this was done at the expense of forfeiting two other history themes which were very meaningful as learning experiences about multiculturalism in Malta in medieval times. Few if any other history educators would be willing to do this within the context of the history Maltese curriculum. And if all lessons were to be conducted in this way, that is, discussing in depth the writer of each history source, all history lessons not just in Malta but everywhere else, would soon grind to a halt and syllabi would really never be covered.
2. Another challenge is the fact that it is very difficult to define epistemology and maybe even harder to assess it. Measuring epistemological beliefs in history is like "nailing jelly to the wall" (Novick, 1988 quoted in Stoel et. al., 2018 p.130). One criticism of the arguments put forward by the author in this paper, by followers of the 'Criterialist' paradigm, might be that the author has not understood what Criterialist thinking is really all about. But if that is the case, that in itself is very concerning and does not augur well for its implementation in real history classrooms. If a fellow history pedagogist and a teacher trainer is finding Criterialist thinking difficult to pin down, let. al. one how difficult teachers and in turn, the pupils in the classroom will find it.
3. Research (Karlsson et. al., 2018) shows the usefulness of history student teacher training when it comes to bringing change in history pedagogy. However, it is not as straight forward as one might think. For many years now, the author has taught a historiography study unit to her student teachers but not once has there been a lesson observation session where a student teacher adapted the lectures of this study unit to some form of activity on the nature of history in a history lesson in school. Therefore, while historiography study units should be retained they are definitely not the solution on their own. Knowing about the epistemology of history by a teacher does not necessarily mean that the teacher will use it in their history teaching. One possible solution which the author plans to try out in the future, is to actually insert 'how history works' specifically as one of the learning objectives in the model lesson plans in pedagogy study units of my Faculty. Therefore, the author's student teachers will start to use and to create lessons with this objective in mind. That way a student teacher and potential future history teacher must give 'how history works' attention.

## **Conclusion**

Paradigm shifts occur but one often notices that in each new paradigm there are remnants of the other and so it is in the case of history teaching. A popular term often used is 'wobbling', that is, the community of researchers as well as practitioners can be going back and forth between

paradigms not fully abandoning one and not fully adopting the other. One could argue that in truth the 'Criterialist' paradigm is not really any different from Procedural Knowledge or indeed the 1970s objective 'to work like a historian'. On the other hand, in the author's opinion there are distinct notions that the new community of researchers have extracted and deployed as rules in their new paradigm and these should not be ignored. Why teach history? has long been debated. Traditional history's answer was to learn about the past, 'the Source Method' focussed on thinking skills, while Substantive and Procedural approach asked for contextual in-depth thinking. What do the advocates of the new 'Criterialist' paradigm in history pedagogy want out of their learners? The author of this paper believes more discussion is needed to answer this very important question before deciding that the answer might indeed be worth going for or not.

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