Freiburger Geschichtsdidaktisches Kolloquium (SoSe 2026)

Vortrag:

"From the site to the classroom. A PhD on Neander-thal's archaeology in formal Education in Spain"

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Over the past 20 or 30 years, the image of Neanderthals in academia has changed completely. Both the new research methods that transformed how archaeology is conducted and the new approaches to the study of Palaeolithic societies have led to discoveries that allow us to understand Neanderthals as a highly complex species, not only in technological and economic terms, but also in social, behavioural, and cognitive ones. A species so similar to us that we even share DNA.

Picture 1[1]

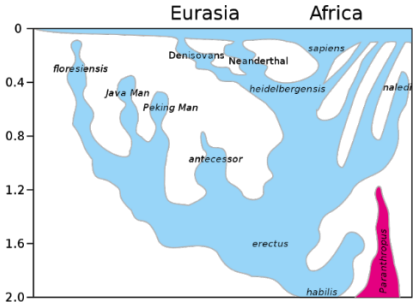
Picture 2[2]

Why undertake a PhD, a four year project, on the relationship between archaeology and education? We are not sure that this new knowledge is reaching society or contributing to the development of its social value. We need to study what information is being transmitted and how it is being used.

[1] Picture **Fehler! Nur Hauptdokument** František Kupka, 1909, based on Marcellin Boule's concept of Neanderthal brutality.

[2] Picture 2. Tom Bjørklund, 2020, from the cathatolgue of the Moesgaards museum. Bjarnø, C. and Kellberg Nielsen, T. 2020. Neanderthal. In the Land of the Mammoth hlunters, Moesgaards museum p. 39.

Picture 3[3]



Picture 4[4]

One example is the line of human evolution that we usually see in textbooks: the traditional linear sequence beginning with apes, then Australopithecus, and so on, ending with us, Homo sapiens. However, we know that this is not how evolution is currently understood. The evolutionary tree is much more complex than that.

How can we make such information understandable and useful for society? How can we make this knowledge relevant? The answer, as I understand it, is not just to simplify the information, but rather to simplify the language. If we simplify the data itself, we end up with simplistic evolutionary narratives that are not scientifically accurate and that fail to realise the full educational potential of our knowledge.

We first need to understand how information is being transmitted and used in order to develop educational objectives. We begin in 1990 because this is when the Spanish educational system changed, and also because someone who attended primary school from that date onwards is now around 40–50 years old. These are the people making political decisions, producing textbooks, and raising children to whom they transmit the image of the past that they acquired at school. Understanding what they were expected to learn allows us to understand the image of the past that exists in our society today and also enables us to trace how this information was introduced into schools.

There have been four educational laws with five different curricula (LOGSE 1990 and 2001; LOE 2006; LOMCE 2013; and LOMLOE 2020). We first identified the number of subjects containing prehistoric content, and what we found is that the gap between subjects dealing with prehistory and the total number of subjects is increasing. This means that the relative presence of prehistory, calculated as a percentage, is decreasing.

We then examined subjects and topics related to symbolism, human evolution, genetics, technology, and social behaviour. We wanted to understand how these contents are used, and for this purpose we analysed evaluation criteria, since these

[3] Human evolution line from a textbook, Social Science, Primary 4th grade, Anaya 2023.
[4] Scientific human evolution tree. Filogenia y taxonomía del género Homo.

are the only elements shared across all laws and curricula. We selected all the action verbs from the criteria and classified them according to Bloom's taxonomy.

Working at PH Freiburg allowed me to study Historical Thinking frameworks. Although these frameworks were not designed specifically to analyse evaluation criteria, they proved useful for understanding how knowledge is being used. Historical Thinking competences aim to foster a deeper understanding of the past, rather than the simple memorisation of facts. Studying both the contents and the criteria allows me to assess whether they encourage the development of critical thinking, help future citizens think more effectively and make informed decisions, and improve their understanding of the world around them.

I therefore analysed all the criteria using different frameworks, and although descriptive statistics cannot be applied because these are categorical variables, I used modes to identify which categories are most frequently employed and to assess which analytical frameworks work best for analysing the criteria. The Historical Thinking competences proposed by Schreiber, and by Seixas and Morton, proved to be the most useful in an initial approach. I can say that we observe a significant difference between the current law from 2020 and the others. In the actual law there is a stronger emphasis on social responsibility, less focus on factual memorisation, and greater attention to heritage value as an element of identity and social engagement.

We then moved on to the analysis of textbooks. We included three publishing houses which together account for more than 50% of textbook sales in Spain, and we are analysing several subjects. In primary education: social and natural sciences; in secondary education: history and biology; and in upper secondary education: philosophy and art history.

We created a specific database for textbook analysis in which we can include general information about the books, images, texts, activities, archaeological sites, chronologies, and other relevant issues. We will also incorporate Historical Thinking framework analysis into the activities.

Some preliminary results from primary school textbooks show that, among books aimed at children aged 8 to 11, 41.8% of the prehistoric content concerns the Palaeolithic, but only 0.65% specifically concerns Neanderthals. Among the Palaeolithic topics, only 1.55% relate to Neanderthals, and among human evolution topics, only 8% concern Neanderthals. When Neanderthals do appear, it is usually through very brief information, general Palaeolithic images, or activities loosely linked to them and often mixed together with activities relating to Homo sapiens. The analysis of textbook activities is still a work in progress.

We argue that prehistory and the Palaeolithic are valuable for educational purposes, and that their value can be summarised in five main points:

1. their capacity to connect with other subjects and foster interdisciplinary perspectives;
2. their usefulness for working with primary sources, something quite exceptional in history education;
3. their contribution to the development of scientific and historical thinking and reasoning;
4. their role in raising awareness about the importance and protection of archaeological and historical heritage as a means of fostering social engagement and identity; and
5. their usefulness as tools for combating xenophobia and racism, while defending diversity.

So far, we have established the starting point for research into the relationship between archaeology and education by identifying a gap between archaeological knowledge and educational practice.

As a conclusion, I presented an example of work that we have already carried out in schools. At the archaeological site of Cova Simanya, a Middle Palaeolithic site, the local community directly asked us to share our results as something useful and important for children's development, not only for learning specific information, but also for fostering ideas of community identity and understanding how society and landscapes change over time.