

HistEdu

# Positioning contested History in 21st Century classrooms

**Pilot Project | 2022/23 | Portugal**  
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**1st stage** - research (17th and 18th century economic dynamics)

**2nd stage** - debate on contemporary controversy

**Age group:** 16-17

**Class:** 11th grade (18 students)

**Course:** Languages and Humanities/  
History

**Trainee teacher:** Ana Catarina Pinto

**Head teacher:** Helena Neto



Largo Trindade Coelho,  
Lisboa, 2017.

**From the land to the bank.  
The first global commodities.**



During the **first stage** students studied the formation of european mercantile capitalism, including its linkage to large scale trafficking of enslaved peoples (17th and 18th centuries).

Each group (3-4 students) had to map the circuits of production and consumption of a given commodity during the time span referred above.

**Challenging problem:** What is the relationship between these objects (graffiti-covered statue, commodities and the globe)?

*(introductory script text)*

These natural products (sugar, cocoa, coffee, tobacco and cotton) were the main protagonists of a radical change in the functioning of the world economy and, therefore, in the lives of thousands of people in modern times and millions today. What was this change? **How can we build and tell this story? Can it be different depending on who tells it?**

You are researchers, detectives of history. Your challenge is to answer the initial question and propose a relationship between one of the products, the globe, and the image of Fr. António Vieira. To do so, you have to study a product and be able to tell its story, using space and time as aids.

Have a good trip!



Can this elements be part of the same narrative?

- + Coffee, sugar, cotton, cocoa and tobacco
- + The globe
- + Graffiting of the statue of jesuit priest António Vieira in 2020 (“Decolonize”)

The goal was to promote **problem-thinking** and to build a clear bridge between past and present events using history as a resource to inform opinions over a contested public memorial.

Students worked autonomously having a given history article or book chapter concerning the commodity they had to study as point of start.

The tasks included:

. **Synthesis text** about the commodity circuit of production and consumption articulated with the concepts of mercantile capitalism, triangular transatlantic commerce and trafficking of enslaved people.

. **Presentation** to class with the main findings.



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### **Literacy difficulties.**

None of the groups managed to complete this task.

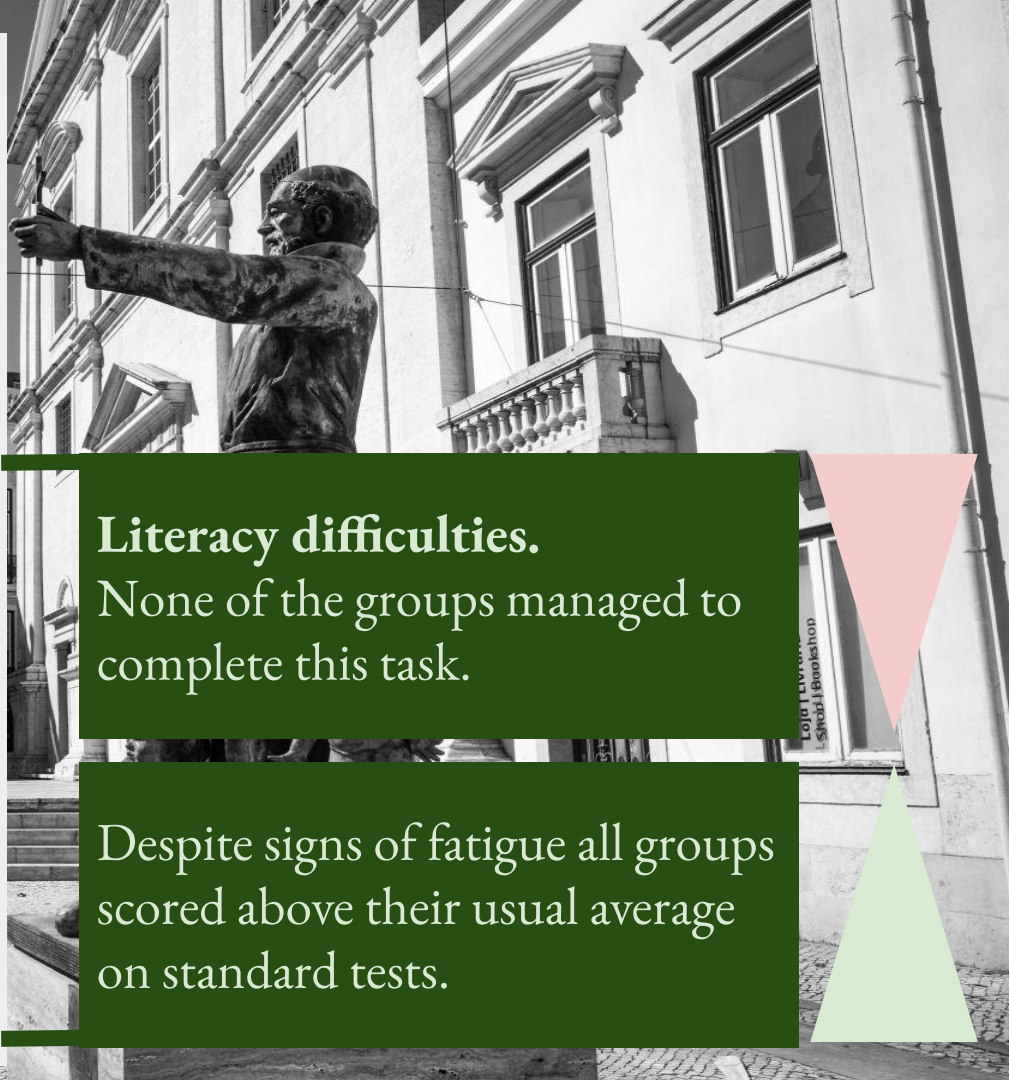
Loji i Titullit  
Shkup, Republika e Maqedonisë së Veriut

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Despite signs of fatigue all groups scored above their usual average on standard tests.



**Is History all behind us?**  
Discussing the statue of priest  
António Vieira.



Largo Trindade Coelho,  
Lisboa, 2017.

Over the **second stage** students were invited to focus on the statue and confront each others opinions over the polemic event.

It was crucial to conduct students from a superficial impression on the subject to a critical opinion.

#1 defining together (jamboard) what is an opinion, what is an informed opinion, what is critical thinking.

#2 analysing in dyads a *corpus* of documents (opinion articles, memorials and monuments, interviews, music lyrics, poetry) to inform their intervention.



Nuno Fox, 2020.

## Class debate

- ★ Tables arranged in O.
- ★ Students and teachers sat together around the O.
- ★ Trainee teacher in charge of moderation.
- ★ Each dyad made opening statement (3-5’).
- ★ Each dyad had to comment a given peer statement.
- ★ Free individual participation.





## **Class debate**

Students gave well structured and well fundamented statements.

Made clear linkage to History learnings to support arguments.

Made clear reference to documents to support opinion.

Confronted differences of opinion in a respectful way.

Were able to develop arguments when asked to.

## School debate

- ★ Two guests (Pedro Cardim, historian and Shirley Van-Dúnem, anthropologist)
- ★ Open to school population
- ★ Students in charge of moderation
- ★ Guests made opening statement (15')
- ★ Each dyad had to ask a question
- ★ Free individual participation





## **School debate**

Students were responsible for welcoming participants, presenting guests, controlling timing, registering questions.

Were able to ask meaningful questions that allowed guests to better extend their views.

## Specific challenges

General lack of literacy skills (interpretation, information processing, writing) were **an obstacle to the development of original historical narratives**. In this case, writing should be recurrent, so that students become accustomed to this type of exercise.

Nevertheless, **historical literacy can be reinforced by this model**.

When asked to form a critical position on a contemporary topic, students demonstrated great competence.

## Strengths

The model of debate around a specific topical controversy from a portfolio of diverse opinion-forming materials made evident the relationship between the study of history and the way contemporary societies relate to their shared pasts.

This practical and relevant to learners' daily lives experience, requiring the mobilization of critical skills and operations inherent to the construction of historical knowledge, also made evident **what historical narrative is** and **how it can be more or less inclusive**.

In addition to these advantages, students experienced a certain kind of power strengthened by historical knowledge and research, that of useful intervention in a public space - **having a voice**.



## Critical points

The identification of historical subjects or **stakeholders** has not been applied as envisaged in the model. A rough division could be dual and simplistic - enslaved/enslavers; colonized/colonizers - which would ignore the complexity of the various community and economic formations involved in the various geographies in question and over the broad time period studied (e.g. how does this logic articulate with that of social groups or classes or a gender divide?).

## Critical points

On the other hand, while for the study of the past this complexity should not be ignored, in the present it is evident that the long effects of empire and colonialism are felt in various manifestations of structural racism and therefore its contemporary victims are racialized people. Some students in the classrooms are children of immigrants, mostly from the global south (from regions most affected by colonialism), but many are of Portuguese African descent. These multiple identities could generate conflicting individual and collective ruptures in the classroom, not least in emotional terms for the students themselves.

## Critical points

The proposed exercise did not ignore the existence of **diverse historical subjects**, nor did it ignore the long ballast of the past, its **effects on the lives of various communities and its reflection in historical narratives**, but it did so without systematizing or simplifying these actors.

## Clues for possible extensions in public space

Edit a wikipedia entry.

Write a letter to UN, asking for a reading in the UN assembly.

Write a letter to the country's government asking for public debate, inviting government officials to visit the school.

Record a podcast and post it on the school website.

Send a class letter to a newspaper.

Share experience with other schools.

(...)

