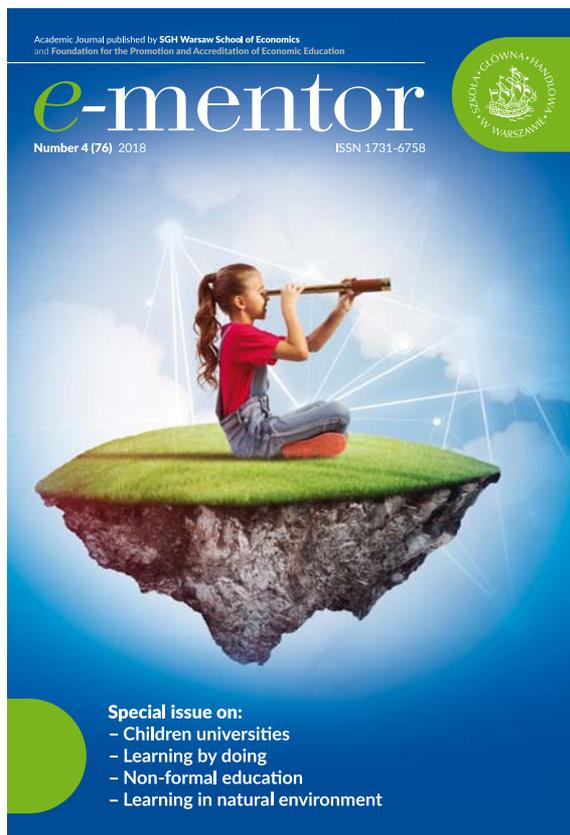


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Children's University of Interesting History – learning the history of Poland and the history of the world

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University is a place where people can pursue their passions for research. It is university where one can meet people, who are keen on observing phenomena and analyzing facts closely. People, that are curious about the world around them and have desire to explore it. At the same time, the university could be associated with tedious work, making new discoveries and also – the workplace for adults.

Although the Children's University sounds like an oxymoron, this is a deeply thought off and sensible idea. Children can develop their interests there and get acquainted with the academic atmosphere and space. They can discover that apart from the knowledge 'delivered' at school, many other interesting subjects and issues worth exploring exist. There are places in which extraordinary secrets may be hidden, waiting to be discovered by those who know where to look for them.

Humanist with a capital H

The Children's University of Interesting History (DUCH¹) is one of such places. On selected Saturdays during the school year, several hundreds of young enthusiasts of science participate in the classes organized by DUCH, listen to the lectures and get involved in the discussions. What distinguishes this initiative from others, is its subject – history and related disciplines. At first glance, it may be surprising. Thinking about academic research, we usually have in mind scientific experiments in the area of, for instance, natural sciences. Humanities do not seem to be very attractive and, what is more, difficult to present in a spectacular, eye-catching way.

Nonetheless, the humanities, although slightly marginalized by modern societies, are crucial to understanding contemporary processes and changes. They are essential for a solid and thorough education. The lecturers of DUCH for a couple of years are trying to prove that they can fascinatingly talk about history. Acting in a multisensory way to awake children's

interest in humanities is the basic concept behind classes organized by DUCH. The classes to be engaging should attract children's attention in many ways: through listening to the stories, watching, touching props and even smelling things (e.g., spices). It is also important to combine lectures with workshop activities that involve movement activity, performing tasks, teamwork, and discussion.

The experience of DUCH shows that the moments of seeming relaxation and unscheduled actions strongly influence the final success. First and foremost, adequately chosen activities should be entertaining for children as well as give them a break in intellectual work. On the other hand, they should illustrate and enrich the subject content. They should be chosen carefully concerning many factors. First of all, they should be adjusted to the age of children, their knowledge and skills. For example, a six-year-old grade 0 student at school can read quite well at the end of a school year, but the same student from a kindergarten not necessarily. The topic of the class and the group size are other factors that also affect the choice of activities. The younger the children, the more elements of play and fun should be included in the program of activities. For example, breaking codes can be entertaining for teenagers but may be boring for the first-graders.

Where wisdom resides, or in other words, about Greeks, Socrates and more – a case study

In the following case study, one of the numerous topics discussed during the Children's University of Interesting History classes will be described: Where wisdom resides, in other words, about Greeks, Socrates and more. The issue was the subject of discussion in every DUCH group, namely with the Observers,

* Children's University of Interesting History

¹ This acronym is in Polish a word game – DUCH stands from the Polish name *Dziecięcy Uniwersytet Ciekawej Historii* the exact translation of which is Children's University of Interesting History, but DUCH is also a noun which means a ghost in English. (Ed.)

Explorers, Discoverers, Travelers, and Creators. In the subsequent sections, the author will explain the approach taken adequately to the age of participants. But first, it is worth to outline the issues common for all the groups mentioned above.

Socrates is definitely one of the most prominent historical figures in the European civilization². It is impossible to imagine our way of thinking, and even more, our culture, without that citizen of Athenian polis from the 5th century before Christ. The bibliography concerning Socrates could fill at least two large trucks, and this amount is growing systematically (e.g., Jaspers, 1999; Guthrie, 2000; Krokiewicz, 2000). Therefore, it is worth to stress on the very beginning that the primary task of the Children's University of Interesting History is to help children to 'make friends' with the leading figures of the common European imagination. That may be called some co-parenting as well. In other words, the most important heroes of history are invited to play with children on a playground. They are encouraged to play, and that way, to live and experience together. There is probably no need to explain that the ability to remember something increases when proper and deep emotions accompany the learning process. At the same time, it is worth to mention, that boredom, so frequent and sometimes even accepted in many school classes, puts the traditional educational system at a disadvantage.

In the teaching process, it is assumed that the teacher has broader knowledge than a student. Moreover, the teacher knows the goals and leads the student to achieve them. They can be both cognitive (building knowledge) and formative (referring to emotions and attitudes). However, the tendency – dominating in pedagogical theories – to split one holistic experience into two different areas seems to be wrong. Such an approach to teaching is present both in humanities and social sciences. And it is too often forgotten that learning, like any other experience, should be viewed holistically in the context of one's individual experience and personality. This concept is not at all new. It is enough to mention the motto of Ignacy Krasicki, Prince-Bishop of Warmia – 'play to learn.' In this context, the popular phrase about history 'at one's fingertips,' that also guides activities of the Children's University of Interesting History, is not just a cliché. If something is within our reach, we can discover it, look for and watch it closely. Moreover, we can interact with it and thanks to that create a common world we live in.

For that reason, children become familiar with Socrates during one of the first DUCH classes. He was the citizen of Athens, born around 470 BC (died in 399 BC). According to Karl Jaspers, he is one of

the four authorities of contemporary civilization, next to Buddha, Confucius and Jesus (Jaspers, 1999, pp. 5–36). However, during the first classes not the significance of Socrates philosophy was discussed but a few biographical and historical facts concerning his life. So, children learned about Socrates' conversation with a friend on the Athenian market. Socrates told his friend about the strange answer Pythia gave him to the question 'Who is the wisest man in the world?' Students also learned about Socrates searching for someone wiser than himself. Older groups discussed the parts of the Euthyphro dialogue, in which the author had tried to find the real meaning of piety. It is worth to mention that Socrates's questions were always thoroughly thought off, he paid a lot of attention to ask the proper person at the appropriate time. He asked the people who, with their behavior, social role or personality, gave at least hope if not a guarantee that they knew the answer. Euthyphro was heading to the temple when Socrates asked him about piety.

The judgment of Socrates, his defense and death were the next topics discussed by students from older groups. They read the parts of the *Criton* dialogue referring to the possibility, which was offered to Socrates to help him avoid the death penalty. The essential concept of the teaching program of the Children's University of Interesting History is stimulating active learning. In that case, children had to decide on their own what would they do if they were Socrates or his fellow citizens. Thanks to this experiment, they became personally involved in the events. However, one should not forget that even the observation can be active and creative. Because of that, the overview of the topic *Where wisdom resides, in other words, about Greeks, Socrates and more* should start with classes for the youngest groups – the Observers and the Explorers.

A strange man with a beard – Socrates arrives

Apparently, Socrates was ugly, very ugly. Initially, his appearance on the agora should have surprised his fellow citizens. However, Aristotle (a student of Plato, in some kind an 'intellectual grandson' of Socrates) noticed that surprise was the beginning of knowledge. And that is the reason why the word 'interesting' appears in the name of the Children's University of Interesting History. But, the 'interesting history' is not only the set of examples and curiosities. As Stagirite³ rightly put it, curiosity is, after all, only the beginning of knowledge, not the end. Therefore, the teaching program of the Children's University of Interesting History focuses on stimulating children's interest in

² The staff of the Children's University of Interesting History appreciates the value of the Greco-Roman tradition. Its aspects, so clearly visible in Anglo-Saxon culture, unfortunately in Polish schools are not so much emphasized. The award-winning program *Łacina wśród nas* is an example of the University's creative work in this area.

³ Stagirite is a nickname of Aristotle, derived from the name of the city Stagira, where he was born. (Ed.)

history. However, the actions are not limited to raising the interest, as can be seen on the example of the oldest group – the Creators.

In the light of above, it is understandable that the classes with youngest groups of Observers and Explorers focus on ‘watching’ and ‘spotting.’ The lecturer wears an Athenian outfit from the fifth century BC. Unusual clothes like chiton and sandals intrigue students. The lecturer may use their interest to explain why he/she has chosen such a costume. Children in the youngest groups have an amazing sense of observation, and simultaneously they are not so much tempted to think, as adults do, schematically. Therefore, they accept otherness quite easily. It makes them more curious than hostile. For them, Socrates quickly becomes a real person and partner for conversation.

Homework is a crucial element of the classes. Despite the name, it has nothing to do with traditional school homework. Therefore, the DUCH educators while designing the tasks refer to students’ everyday experience. In this case, children should try to answer the question: *Who, in your opinion, is the wisest person in the world?* They can discuss this question with their parents, other family members or peers.

Such task should stimulate the child’s independent thinking. It is an invitation to discussion. The teachers at the Children’s University of Interesting History ask questions that require consideration – they cannot allow for just repeating what was memorized. In other words, it is more about making student to ‘understand’ rather than ‘know’ and thanks to that ‘wonder,’ ‘ask’ and ‘look for answers.’

Another aspect of teaching used during the Observers’ and Explorers’ classes regards their everyday language experience. There is no more accessible material for observation than commonly used words. Concerning Socrates, the very word ‘philosophy’ clearly consists of two Greek words ‘Philo’ and ‘sophy.’ It gives the teacher an opportunity to ask children if they know any Sophy. Usually, they know. It could be the name of a grandmother, sister or friend. So suddenly, the familiar name Sophy, used by children every day, becomes foreign and full of strange meanings. Students can observe how history, even the ancient one – Greek, affects their every-day life. The similar situation concerns words that are created in Polish by suffix ‘fil’ such as ‘polonofil,’ ‘rusofil,’ ‘bibliofil’ etc. Once again, one may say that the history is within reach, and in this case ‘the reach of the tongue.’

By using the elements of drama, students learn the story of Socrates’ life in a way which is adequate to their age and capabilities (Guzy-Steinke, Wilk, 2009).

What did you do to Athens, Socrates or why has history gone that way?

Children from grades 4 to 6 are Researchers and Travelers. Their classes at the Children’s University of Interesting History go beyond the observation

as it was the case with younger students. Their historical knowledge is built and extended using other teaching methods, not the elements of drama or the costumes. They learn about Socrates and his story in a broader context. While it is true that context was important for younger groups as well, it is also true that it referred mainly to some aspects of everyday life (costumes, language). Researchers and Travelers receive more information from teachers than their younger colleagues. It is worth to observe, that the case of Socrates, although unique, was firmly settled in historical events. One may say, that the Athenian democracy, created by a particular society sanctioned the death penalty for the philosopher. The lives of individuals must always be seen in the broader perspective of historical context (Hansen, 1999, *passim*). A period of long-lasting war between Athens and Sparta, as well as the rule of tyrants, preceded the year 399 BC. The tragedy of Socrates may indicate the collapse of Athenian democracy. In those times, Socrates was not the only victim sentenced by law murder. For these reasons, the groups of Researchers and Travelers analyze the process of Socrates, as well as the ostracism and its political significance more broadly. Students have to face the questions – how the Athenian democracy operated and if there were stronger arguments that might have been used in Socrates’ defense (so criticized later by Plato). As part of classes, Researchers and Travelers vote for Socrates being guilty or not guilty. Thanks to that, they can feel responsible for their decisions, as it is also the case in younger groups. That leads them to reflect on the causes and consequences of specific historical behavior. And this is the main aim of these classes.

Children also discuss some parts of *Criton dialogue*. Criton was Socrates’ friend who offered him help to escape from prison. Socrates rejected the offer with disdain and gave a speech about the duties of a good citizen. Prior to learning about philosopher’s attitude, students must decide by themselves how to respond to the offer of Criton. If their decisions are different than the decision of Socrates, they have to consider in a group what was the reason for that. The questions students have to answer are following: *Is it possible that the differences depend on something else than just natural differences of human character? What did ‘being a citizen’ mean to the ancient Athenian?*

Travelers come back to the past, but not to stay there, but to return and confront the collected data and experience gained with the contemporary world. Would it be possible to repeat the statement of Socrates? Could anyone like Plato be found in the Stalinist labor camp? Would it be possible in totalitarian systems for a person sentenced to death to give a lecture? As the experience of the groups of Researchers and Travelers indicates, the story of Socrates brings more questions than answers. However, the culmination of the whole teaching program is to come only on the next level of analyzing the history, which involves Creators.

Many faces of Socrates – the task for a group of Creators

Leszek Kołakowski said that the significant characteristic of the European culture is the ability of self-questioning. It is worth to notice that this element of our identity comes from Socrates. In his speech to the Athenians, he compared his role in the society to the task of a horsefly. The insect annoying a pasturing horse does not allow it to become lazy and stupid. The older group of the University students – Creators, learn how to question our current knowledge on Socrates. According to Jaspers *Anyone who studies written works about Socrates creates an individual picture of him. From all possibilities, we choose our image of Socrates. We think about him as a real person, despite being aware that our creation is uncertain* (Jaspers, 2000, p. 30).

In the European culture, Plato's interpretation of Socrates story is commonly recognized as the right version of the events. Socrates himself did not write a single sentence. To be more precise, none written piece of philosopher's work has 'survived' to our times. Everything we know about him comes from the stories told by other people. For many years in our culture, Socrates used to be compared to Jesus. To not extend this thread, one may only spot, that they both did not write anything by themselves. More precisely, no words written by them have left. So, who were the real Socrates? We have versions of Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes (in his comedy *Clouds*). Diogenes Laertius mentioned Socrates in his biographies of ancient philosophers as well.

Also, in Aristotle's works, some pieces of information related to Socrates appear. Moreover, we have a rich tradition and many historical and archeological research regarding life in ancient Athens. How can we recognize the truth within a massive load of information? Socrates is a perfect example that can be used for learning the students of the oldest group about two crucial principles of history studies. Our knowledge always depends on the sources available⁴. However, the historical references are never unbiased. They reflect the authors' opinion, as well as the goals they wanted to achieve by their works. For example, Aristophanes who described Socrates in the comedy had an entirely different goal than Plato who depicted him as a philosopher in his dialogues. The first one intended to entertain (and the ancient joke was not so sophisticated), while the other wanted to teach and provide knowledge. Aristophanes addressed his comedy to the wide audience, whereas Plato's dialogues aim at educated people. Perhaps knowing these circumstances, one could reconcile the contradiction of those portrayals. However, such reconciliation may

be neither possible nor convincing. History is about learning to select, make choices and constantly question the obtained results. And, last but not least, to live with the consequences of the way we think. History understood that way is the foundation of the European culture. For that reason, we can summarize the Creators' adventure with Socrates by quoting his famous saying *I know that I know nothing*. However, despite such a conclusion, one may also state that students from the Observers and the Creators groups of DUCH have learned about their limitations. Therefore, their efforts were not in vain.

Conclusions

The story of Socrates' life was chosen as a subject for this case study after thorough consideration. Socrates is a person who connects both historians and philosophers. Analyzing his biography, one may learn about many historical facts such as everyday life of Athens, great politics of the Peloponnesian War, ambiguity and contradiction of historical sources, etc. The story of Socrates' life also illustrates how important is wisdom in teaching history. And that was another reason for including his story in the program of the Children's University of Interesting History.

To summarize these considerations, one may quote the words of Leszek Kołakowski from his essay *Wielkie i małe kompleksy humanistów* (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 262). These words, although written in the mid-sixties of the 20th century, are still valid. Kołakowski presents a humanistic approach to teaching as an example of a translation project. The author compares the competences of humanists, including historians, to the translators of English, Chinese or any other language. Those latter are for him not the humanists but technicians. In Kołakowski's opinion, although they will always be needed, their role remains strictly utilitarian. A true humanist, according to Kołakowski, is a translator of cultures. Perhaps expanding a bit this metaphor, one may say that (s)he is a translator of his/her own culture into his/her contemporary language. The primary mission of the humanist is the task of maintaining social bonds that could protect societies against the technocratic threats, the tasks that allow creating values, not tools (Kołakowski, 2000, p. 262).

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⁴ Krystyna Kersten, a distinguished historian of the modern times, recalls the anecdote about Stefan Kieniewicz. It is said that when asked why in one of his books the weather descriptions end unexpectedly, he said that he did not have any more source information about the weather (Kersten, 1991). Such a level of historical accuracy (with regard both to the historian and to the ordinary users of sources) is also the goal of the Children's University of Interesting History.

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Abstract

The article presents educational activities of the Children’s University of Interesting History. The various methods that allow effective teaching of the history are analyzed. The Children’s University of Interesting History has been a part of Warsaw educational market for six years. The case study included in the paper illustrates the university’s unique methods and attitude towards students. The author analyzes different teaching methods and educational goals concerning every university group, from the youngest students – Observers and Explorers, by Travelers and Researchers up to the oldest – Creators. Such a diversified approach allows building the coherent vision of history. Teaching this vision is the basic concept of the Children’s University of Interesting History, which is also visible in practice. Referring to what Leszek Kołąkowski says, one may call such approach a translation project.

Key words: education; history; extracurricular education; teaching methods; children’s university

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KinderUni am Heidengraben

Heidengraben („pagans’ moat”) is the name given to the remains of a large Celtic fortified settlement (oppidum) dating to the Iron Age, located on the plateau of the Swabian Jura (Schwäbische Alb) in the districts of Reutlingen and Esslingen in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. The settlement was in use from about the late 2nd century BC to the early 1st century BC. By surface area, Heidengraben is the largest oppidum in all of mainland Europe.
 Source: Wikipedia.



This unusual children’s university – located in a place where history is ‘alive’ – offers the lectures on archaeology and ancient history for children aged 8 to 12.

<http://www.kinderuni-am-heidengraben.de>