

# A New Way of Teaching Ancient History: The Case of the Bachelor's of Education at the University of Seville\*

## Introduction

Over the last decade, the University of Seville has funded five successive research projects on teaching innovation in history. Members of the Department of Ancient History at the University of Seville designed and carried out these projects. This is, therefore, a cumulative, collective effort to improve history teaching in the university classroom. The projects are as follows:

- *Fundamentos de Historia. Historia de España* (2011). Main goal: Research on the previous knowledge of history of undergraduates in the Bachelor's of Education
- *Innovación y mejora docente en Historia Antigua: elaboración de nuevos materiales* (2016). Main goal: The design and writing of new class material.
- *Nuevas formas de docencia en Historia antigua: el uso de nuevos software lúdico-educativos* (2017). Main goal: The use of apps and software to improve the teaching and learning processes.
- *De la teoría a la práctica: gamificación y juego de rol en las clases de historia* (2018). Main goal: The use of role-playing and gamification in class.
- *La práctica mejorada y aumentada: manual 3.0, gamificación y juego de rol en las clases de historia* (2019). Main goal: The promotion of autonomous learning using mainly role-play activities.

Even though each project had its own main goals, the primary purpose of all of them was to promote learning and improve the performance and intellectual possibilities of undergraduates in education who took history, and Ancient History in particular, as part of their curriculum. The cornerstone was boosting a largely autonomous, although directed, type of learning to maximise the efficiency of the efforts of both the students

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and the teachers themselves.<sup>1</sup> The underlying goal was to promote critical thinking and to help to foster better schoolteachers, since the main participants were students of the Bachelor's of Education in Seville.

Ancient History professors contributed the raw data, the bibliography, the sources, and the theoretical constructions. They strove to present history in all its complexity, without simple explanations, so that they might arouse interest in the students for an ever-changing discipline while also improving the students' general knowledge of the subject.

Our paper briefly explains all five projects, which are really, as stated before, part of a single teaching effort. For the sake of clarity, the article is organised following the steps and chronological order that we took during the last decade. Therefore, the text is divided into three parts:

- The presentation of *Fundamentos de Historia Antigua y Medieval de España*, a new type of handbook for the study of history. This handbook was soon partnered with specific teaching tools that used it as a starting point and learning reference. In particular we developed several exercises using the programs *Kahoot* and *Jumble*.<sup>2</sup>
- Autonomous learning through historical role-play.
- The use of timeline in the university classroom for learning history.

### ***Fundamentos de Historia Antigua y Medieval de España: a new type of handbook for the study of history***

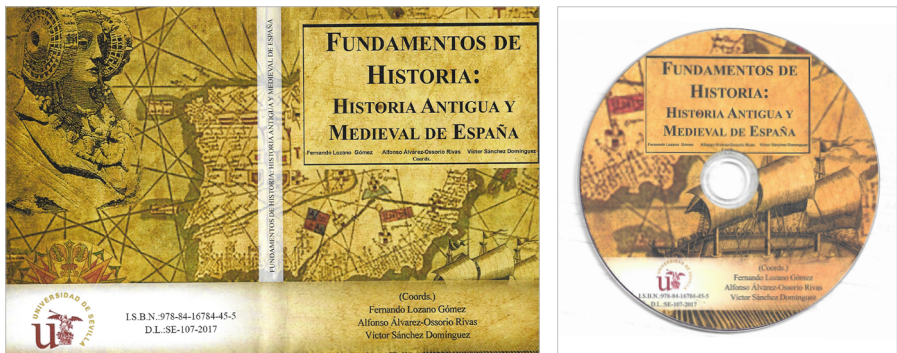
When we began teaching in the Bachelor's of Education program, we realised that most of our students lacked a good history background. So we decided to do research on the previous knowledge of these undergraduates. We devoted an entire year to doing so. The results were interesting. First, we came to understand that the shortcomings of their education in history were significant. Additionally, the students generally found history to be a boring subject, and they especially complained about the lack of good, new, affordable material from which to learn.<sup>3</sup> And there was another issue: since the main goal of these students was to teach at schools, and to teach children from 6 to 12 years of age, they also stressed the gap between the information, materials, and general education that they were receiving in the university and the type of material, information, and activities that they were supposed to teach to their students in the near future.

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1 Prieto 2008; Benito, Cruz 2010; Sánchez Domínguez, Álvarez-Ossorio, Lozano 2019.

2 Sánchez Domínguez et al. 2018; Álvarez Melero et al. 2018.

3 Sánchez Domínguez et al. 2018; Sánchez Domínguez et al. 2019.



**Fig. 1:** Cover and DVD label of the book.

As a result of this analysis, we decided to create a new type of manual and class materials that fit better with the needs of the students of education and their mission after graduating. This is why we devoted a couple of years to devising and writing a book that is open access (Fig. 1) – it can be downloaded from the library of the University of Seville and it can also be checked online in a blog.<sup>4</sup> In this book we adapted the contents and the materials to the needs of the students.<sup>5</sup> To date, the blog has been visited some 5,500 times (last checked 19/8/2020).

The book is divided into six chapters. Each has the same structure. They start with two double-paged presentations. These presentations combine key images, with a brief summary, a timeline, and a number of maps (Figs. 2a and 2b). This is intended to give the students the essential information at a glance. The text of each chapter is crowded with images and explanatory material, as well as sections aimed at providing undergraduates with ideas for their future classes as teachers. These sections are separated from the rest of the text and they are shaded in green (Fig. 3). The book closes with 12 examples of practical classes. These practical classes were actually taught by the students in class, acting as teachers for the rest of their classmates. We also wanted these examples to serve as models for their own practical classes (Fig. 4). Lastly, the book includes an updated bibliography.

The use of the book in class has proven to be a great success. It is clear to us, after these initial years, that it has shortcomings and that there is room for improvement – something that we intend to do shortly with a revised version – but it served its purpose, since the number of successful students in this class increased dramatically, as did the overall perception of this subject and of history in general for students of the Bachelor's of Education at the University of Seville.

<sup>4</sup> <https://fthantiguaymedieval.blogspot.com> (last accessed March 30, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Lozano Gómez, Álvarez-Ossorio, Sánchez Domínguez 2017.

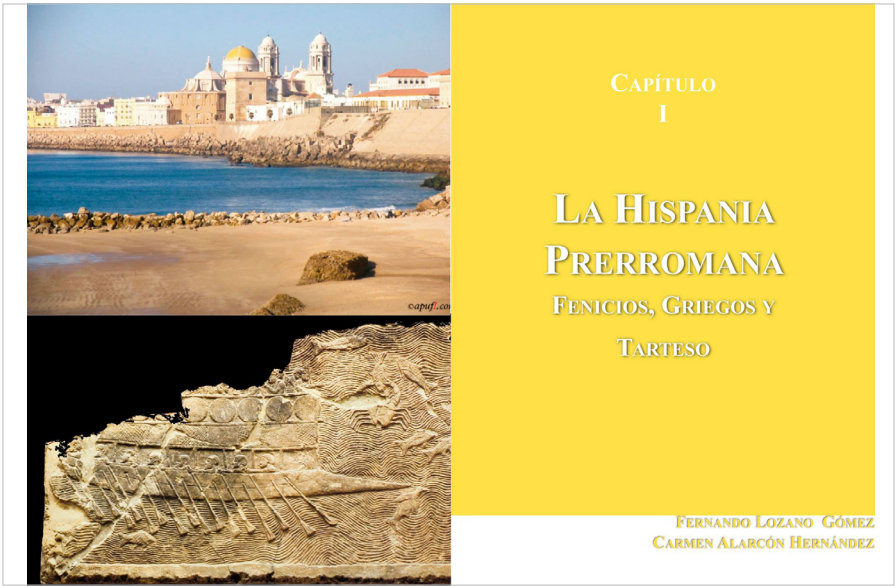


Fig. 2a: Introductory presentation to chapter one.

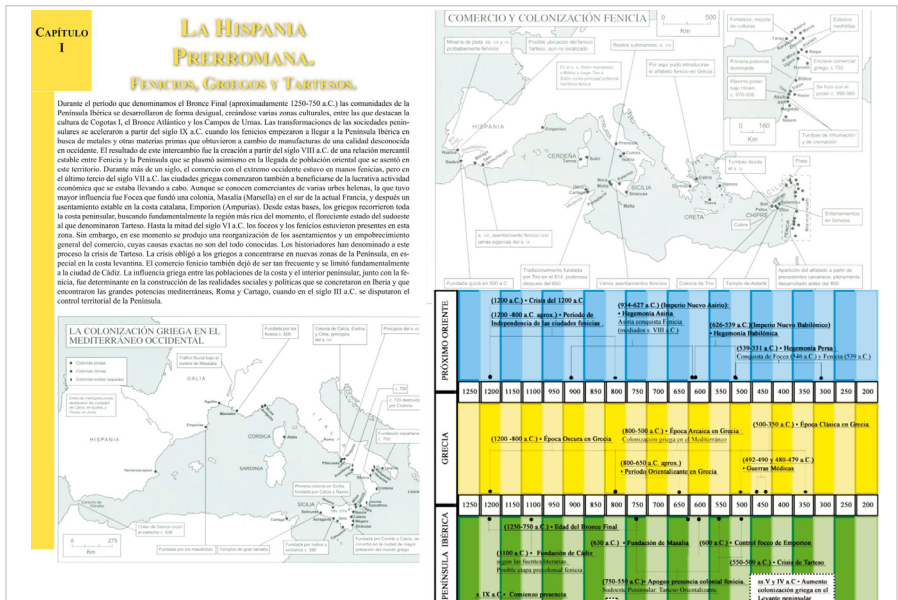


Fig. 2b: Introductory presentation to chapter one.





After completing the new teaching material, we also wanted to improve the manner in which we were evaluating our students. This is why we began to learn about new ways to evaluate and study history in higher education. We ended up developing new materials using *Kahoot* and *Jumble*. We have used both programs as a ludic support during class as well as learning material for students at home with the use of the ‘challenge’ mode, especially with *Kahoot*. In order to help students improve their knowledge of Ancient History, we created a number of questions for each chapter of the book that could be used as study support and as a tool for us to give extra credit and to encourage students to prepare better.<sup>6</sup> We also created a YouTube channel onto which we uploaded 20 questions for each of the first four chapters, as well as several exercises created with *Jumble*.<sup>7</sup> The students were given the correct answer as well as the pages of the book in which they could read about the question.

It took some time for the students to adapt to the system, but once the use of the book, together with the learning materials provided via *Kahoot* and *Jumble*, became routine, we were able to see improvement in the general education of the students and therefore in the number of successful students in our subject. As a result of the use of the new material, the number of students who took the final exam rose from 60% to 85% of the total number of enrolled students. The average qualifications of those that passed the exam rose from 6 to 7.5 (out of 10). The number of visits to the YouTube channel is also a testament to the widespread use of this tool by our students. (our YouTube channel was created in 2017, and to date it has been visited 23,603 times– last checked 19/8/2020).

## **Autonomous learning and live action role-play (Larp)**

The next methodological element that was incorporated during the teaching-innovation projects was the use of live action role-play (hereafter: LARP). This strategy would be encompassed within a game-based-learning teaching methodology and within the context of Serious Games, understanding that LARP is not common role-play, but is associated with a set of rules that allows interaction in real life with fictional characters based on the interpretation of the participants of this activity.

Within the dynamics of improving motivation and learning how best to teach our subject, we understood that the incorporation of this teaching methodology in different areas such as psychology and political science would be especially useful. It must not be forgotten that, from this perspective, role-play, one of the previous variants of LARP, has been useful as an element of personal, psychological, and pedagogical development.

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6 Álvarez Melero et al. 2018.

7 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1c4kHIKTb-PMbvQYezellw> (last accessed March 30, 2021).

Thus, the conception of this strategy as being of a ludic nature, along with its connection with the concept of play being so fundamental in education for authors such as Vigotsky (1982), Dewey (1963, 1997), or Huizinga (2000), is connected to action and active participation that promote concepts such as meaningful learning and set the groundwork for a clear social constructivism, one in which the participants acquire some previous ideas of the interpreted reality that are deepened through interaction and stimulation created by other individuals.

This globalizing approach to LARP derives from its own origin as an evolution from board games or role-playing games on paper, as different authors have already attested.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it could be said that LARP has sought to invigorate and amplify the experiences obtained in these games, which had limitations in terms of the number of participants, to create a new game system in which the dependence on narrative elements personalised by the game director was reduced to its minimum expression by strengthening the system of rules and giving participants more interpretive autonomy.

The use of traditional role-playing games (hereafter: RPGs) as learning strategies had already been implemented by colleagues such as Juan Carbó at the Murcia Catholic University,<sup>9</sup> and our team is studying the link between these games and gamification and game-based learning methodologies.<sup>10</sup> However, the limitations of traditional RPG board games and even digital RPGs clearly pushed us to address the possibility of implementing LARP for the didactics of our history course.

The students, as has already been explained, are unmotivated in the study of a subject that, first, is distant from their training due to the curricular separation of the different educational stages in which our contents are addressed; second, due to the little application that they find in the subject, since they still do not know the depth of professional knowledge that the teaching of history may require in the primary stage; and third, because the ratio of students per class is high, small groups having a constant of around 25–30 students.

Therefore, we wanted an immersion methodology that fostered meaningful learning in different areas and that could be used with large groups, for which we understood that an LARP adapted to our content with a dynamic system of rules that promoted participation was the most suitable.

The main challenge posed by the design of an LARP derives from the rules system itself, which must be simple enough for it to be memorized by the participants, but at the same time must cover the different possibilities that arise from their interaction. In addition, participants inLARPs usually have previous experience with similar RPG systems; they are accustomed to the interpretation and imagination of fictitious contexts, fundamental elements of this type of experience.

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8 On LARP, see Tychsen et al. 2006; Kot 2012; Mochocki 2013; Bowman 2014; Sánchez Domínguez et al. 2019.

9 Carbó, Pérez 2010, and Carbó 2019.

10 Sánchez Domínguez 2019.

We contacted a professional LARP-type activity design company (Alter Ego) that designs LARPified dinners in which they mix the concept of LARP, games, and gastronomy for variable groups of between 10 to 50 people. Specifically, at the beginning of the project, participants were in the process of testing company dinners for a large number of diners.

The participation of its director and main designer, Marcos López, opened up a new range of possibilities. Understanding the particularities of the students as well as our didactic objectives, we implemented a system in which, in addition to regulating the interpretative interactions of the participants a game of resource management and interpersonal actions was incorporated, one that enhanced the gameplay while introducing economic, social, and political concepts that were difficult to interpret without previous concepts, but that could be learned with the new system in a simple and dynamic way.

Working groups were created among the teachers to design the materials with historical content, as well as characters of a historical or pseudo-historical nature, with a high degree of credibility and a historical background that was linked to the agenda that we proposed to gamify – for this project, specifically the arrival of Rome to the peninsula. We proposed the creation of three great scenes or acts that would address both the indigenous reality, the Punic and Hellenistic element, and the Roman one. In this way, three massive events were created, linked to three class sessions: a meeting between ambassadors from different towns to discuss the Ebro treaty of 226 BC, an assembly of Iberian peoples to debate whether or not to help Sagunto besieged by Haníbal Barca in 219 BC, and an indigenous assembly prior to the 197 BC revolt.

Different factions were created for the players – Romans, Carthaginians, Greeks, Iberians, Turdetans, Celtiberians, and Celts – with their own characteristics and objectives. Within them we designed a total of 10 characters per faction, with their stories and personal relationships between members of the same faction as well as with those of others, in order to address groups of between 21 and 70 players in which everyone could relate.

## **Playing and learning with chronologies: the use of *Timeline* in the university classroom**

We are now going to assess our final innovation devoted to gamification and game-based learning. As is clear from the previous text, the use of games is very important in our innovation projects. In fact, we use the game-based learning (GBL) described as “an environment where game content and game play enhance knowledge and skills acquisition, and where game activities involve problem solving spaces and challenges that provide players/learners with a sense of achievement”.<sup>11</sup> We have also implemented

<sup>11</sup> Qian, Clark 2016, 51.



gamification within our lessons, defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts”.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to this educational strategy, we have solved several problems linked with motivation and participation. Now we are working in order to improve the academic results of our students, helping them to deal with some of the more problematic subjects of Ancient History. We are sure that almost all our colleagues who teach Ancient History, especially within the first terms of the different degrees, have had problems in getting their pupils to use chronologies correctly. We can find a good example of this in the paper of Eugenio and Pietro Garibaldi, devoted to discovering whether Italian students are able to make a chronological axis and to locate where and how they make mistakes.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, timeline failures of decades or even centuries used to be common. In fact, the further we go back in time, the more significant the chronological mistakes become. And the mistakes of the students of the Bachelor’s of Education tend to be even worse<sup>14</sup> than those of our Ancient History or classics students. The former are supposed to become schoolteachers, and they are only studying an introduction to ancient and medieval history of Spain with us<sup>15</sup>. In this situation, mistakes increase and can be even worse. This is because it is difficult for these students to understand the diachronic historical process, as well as to place historical events in the right chronological order.

As we were aware of these issues, we decided to include a timeline in the first page of each chapter of our handbook (Fig. 2). All these efforts were useful, but were not enough, as we still had about 30% of students who could not use chronology properly. Therefore, four years ago, we started trying to find solutions that could resolve this problem. Then, at the beginning of 2017, we learned about the game *Timeline* and how to play it. It involves playing with cards to make timelines (Fig. 5).<sup>16</sup>

Right away we understood that we could use *Timeline* in our classes, but we soon realised we could go even further than that. We decided to use the game with our students in both departments, Education and History, but we wanted more than simply to play with dates; we thought that the game could be used to review the main historical facts and events, including a short explanation, as well as dates. So we introduced short summaries for each event, with an obvious increase in the size of the cards (Fig. 6).

We realized it was possible to use the game to make an ordered chronological summary, one that could give our students a brief explanation of the entire content of the subject and its most important aspects.

12 Deterding et al. 2011, 10. For more information about GBL see Pivec 2007; Garris et al. 2002. For gamification, see Kapp 2012; Marczewski 2015; Werbach, Hunter 2015, and the review of literature of Kasurinen, Knutas 2018; Ardila-Muñoz 2019; Silva et al. 2019.

13 Garibaldi, Garibaldi 2017.

14 About the problems that teachers have among education students about time conception and how to teach it and the use of chronologies see Santiesteban 2007 and Pages, Santiesteban 2010.

15 We have already discussed the study level of our students in a more specific way in other works: Sánchez Domínguez et al. 2019. See as well Pages 2019; Pages, Santiesteban 2010; Santiesteban 2007.

16 You can find a detailed explanation of how to play *Timeline* here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02Gzxq2cQhQ> (last accessed March 30, 2021).



**Fig. 5:** *Timeline game.*

We began a three-phase project. In the first phase, last year, we selected the shortest theme of our handbook, though in fact one of the more complicated, number four, devoted to Late Antiquity in the Iberian Peninsula. It has two well-differentiated parts: the Late Roman Empire and the Visigothic Kingdom. Indeed, we often used to about the latter on our exams, but we had never done so with the former, because we thought that it was too complicated.

We designed 36 cards for our chapter four timeline. Each card had its title and a representative picture on the front, while on the back we included the title, the date, the explanation, and another illustration (Fig. 6). We played the game with our students, getting very positive results.

As we finished our semester and before the final exam, we gave our students a digital copy of the game, allowing them to use the cards as study materials. Of course, on the exam, for the very first time, we asked about the Late Roman Empire in Hispania. All the students that answered this question correctly got at least a B on the exam.

As we saw that the system worked, we decide to go to phase 2, which has been developed during this course. We have created cards for all six themes of the handbook, with 160 in total. The game can be played theme by theme or by overall subject. This last version has two difficulty levels: pro, with all the cards, and easy, with a selected 60-cards game.



**Fig. 6:** Some examples of the timeline cards created for phases 1 and 2 of the project.



**Fig. 7:** The Beta version of the cards created in phase 3 of the project.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented us from playing the game with all groups in the subject (we have played with about 200 students out of 700), but in those groups who have been able to participate, the results have been as encouraging as those of the previous year. Of course, we have provided a digital copy of all the cards to our students, who have used them to prepare for the final exam.

We are already working on phase 3 of our project. Once we have tested the idea, and have checked its accuracy, we are going to try to expand it, creating a new tool meant to be commercialized. To do this, we have reduced the size of the cards, simplified the explanations somewhat, created a corporate image, and designed a new game regulation that goes far beyond what *Timeline* does (Fig. 7).

The new game can be played in an easy manner, as we have done in our lessons until this year, including, of course, the historical explanations on each card. It can also be played in groups, with levels of difficulty linked to different themes or cultures, or even more (we are developing the game system right now, in order to have it ready for 2021).

We believe that the advantages of this blended learning system based on the insertion of gamification and learning by games in the classroom are evident. Last year's results leave no room for doubt: in addition to the evident success of the game in class, the academic achievements of the students were noticeable in a very short time.

Finally, we want to highlight that, although we have created a game to learn chronologies and the historical process of ancient and medieval Spain, the system is adaptable to any historical period and geographic or cultural context. We are already considering English and French versions.

## Conclusion

The group of scholars working on these research projects is devoted to – we could even say ‘mad’ about – teaching, and is keen on improving the manner of teaching Ancient History. Right now the data shows that there is improvement in the results at a quantitative level. Also, through direct observation during classes, an increase in motivation and participation can be verified. We could therefore conclude that the project is meeting its objectives. However, we hope to continue to consolidate the results obtained and expand our resources. The lines of improvement that we want to explore in the future include, first of all, a revision of the materials created to correct errors. We will also try to improve the content to overcome limitations (as we have improved our timeline). We have proposed, secondly, to extend the use of LARP to other subjects. In particular, we will analyse the degree of acceptance and the impact that these new methods have on the Bachelor’s of History. Along the lines of gamification, the doctoral research of one of our members is oriented toward two aspects: the analysis of students’ perceptions regarding these methodologies focused on ludic strategies, and the design and use of gamification in historical subjects (specifically Ancient History) to assess the potential of this teaching methodology. The conclusions of his work will surely help us to continue to learn about and improve the way we teach Ancient History in the university classroom.

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