

## INTRODUCTION

# In Schools, and in All Educational Situations, Public History Is exactly What We Need

This volume has an unusual structure that traces my experience as a lecturer and researcher chronologically: my first encounters with public history, mainly made up of North American literature, the first paper on these topics presented at an international conference of educational history scholars, the attempts to outline a theoretical and practical profile for public history in education, and, in tandem with all this, my own trials as a public historian, mainly within master's and postgraduate university courses.

As you can see, it is a biographical journey, a kind of *ego-histoire*, which I did not want to rework in an abstract way by removing the thread of memory, the various passages that have made the role that public history can play in education increasingly clear to me. I believed it was very useful to retain this chronological, sequential, personal and biographical order of my progressive awareness as my experiences and contacts with other interested colleagues (inside and outside the university) became more frequent. If others also recognise themselves in this path, or in some of its components, we can more easily collaborate, exchange ideas and comments, criticism and proposals for improvement. So rather than hiding it, make it open, in the typical style of public history.

Our personal equation, abounding in both studies but also in many experiences and encounters, is in fact an integral part of the historian's work, stretched between his irrepressible subjectivity and the need for the rational and as much as possible argued and objective sharing of the result of the analysis and interpretation of sources.

Gianfranco Bandini, University of Florence, Italy, gianfranco.bandini@unifi.it, 0000-0003-0477-7944

Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup\_referee\_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Gianfranco Bandini, *Public History of Education. A Brief Introduction*, © 2023 Author(s), CC BY 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0294-7, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0294-7

Following such a path makes it easier to understand how important it is to be aware of the meanings and implications of public history. However interesting a study can be made of its antecedents, it is not accurate to equate the experiences of the last century with those of today, whether we are talking about the Italian or the North American context, which began using this approach as early as the 1970s, responding in an original way to the crisis of history. Even then, some very interesting earlier experiences could be found, all sharing the role played by certain institutions, first and foremost the museums, and the communicative intentions, of connecting with society. The same procedure can also be carried out in the Italian context, recalling in particular the experiences of oral historians and anthropologists. All this is entirely justified from a historiographical point of view and allows us to better understand many aspects of the relationship of history with memory, of the relationship between research and territory. However, here I would like to emphasise the crucial role played by the awareness of the public history approach and its effects when a stable and structured relationship is created between people, groups, associations, territorial institutions, organisations, in essence between all those who want to make history in a participatory and meaningful way to meet today's existential and cognitive challenges.

Therefore, while evaluating with great interest and pleasure what has been done in the past (with intentions that generally partly coincide with public history as we understand it today), we must not forget the potential and originality that comes from belonging to a movement that has national and international roots. Membership of the *Italian Public History Association*, from this point of view, represents a very important step, not only on an individual level, but also for the professional and cultural associations and scientific societies that promoted its birth and those that subsequently joined it.

For these reasons, the following pages show the intersection of personal experience and theoretical questions, the moment that saw the need arise in me to find new ways to make history in education and, above all, to do so without forgetting the pressing demands of the present, which always pose new and sometimes unexpected questions to research.

It can be rightly said that this link between academic research and society, in particular between the university and the world of education, has always been a characteristic feature of all pedagogical research, not only of a historical nature. This is already clearly visible in the first generation of post-Second World War Italian scholars, from Lamberto Borghi to Raffaele Laporta, in their constant commitment to building a democratic society, starting with the school, understood as an educating community in dialogue with the surrounding world.

In addition, and this is of particular interest, the area of studies and research dealing with educational issues has always been a crossroads of different disciplinary approaches, which from time to time have generated hybridisations or conflicts, specialisations and new research paradigms.

Building on this established tradition, in the context of the great and epoch-making changes of the new century, a new perception arose in many historians

of education of the need to renew themes and methodological approaches, and more generally the very identity of the profession and its social image.

The first requirement is that educational historians (and historians in general, tout court) should make a new and original contribution to the training of teachers (initial and in-service), offering a tangible option to the declining presence of the historical approach in education. More generally, the basic idea is that history should be considered as an intellectual tool to address current issues in the educational professions (the school headteacher, the educator, the support teacher, etc.) and not just to provide a static representation of a distant past, useful only for passing a competition or a qualification. From this point of view, the specific contribution of history is the enhancement of the reflective and critical character of education. In the whole area of the helping professions (crossing over with the Medical Humanities) it is therefore possible to establish new links and projects that do not neglect history, making individuals aware of the factors that over time have contributed to the current situation, the forces that still act potently on us today, both as individuals and as a community.

The idea of involving public history more profoundly in educational matters has to do with the perception of its great potential, partially but not fully explored. The concept of *public history of education* was coined to delimit a specific field of activity, recognising that the education sector has certain characteristics that require a detailed and in-depth study, and also a specific adaptation to educational needs: a process that, according to a characteristic approach of public history, continues over time and is nurtured by improvements due to the continuous interrelations between a series of actors, between institutions and communities, between theoretical conceptualisations and experiences in the field. As a result, in 2018 I proposed a *Public History of Education Manifesto* to start a collective research experience, together with many other people and institutions. The *Manifesto* presents itself as a specification and application of the *Manifesto of Italian Public History*, to relaunch a new image of historical knowledge as a fundamental and indispensable tool for education.

These pages therefore describe a process of awareness that has grown over time and has profited from relationships with other colleagues, academic and otherwise, who have contributed enormously to reinforce my convictions not only on the potential of doing public history in education, but on the absolute necessity of embarking on this new path. I stress new, because it is not a matter of pouring old wine into new barrels, as too many people still think.

In this cultural itinerary, if participation in the Italian association was certainly an important moment, the same must be said for the relationship with the schools that took up the invitation to do public history. With their passion and commitment far beyond their hourly and curricular obligations, the teachers and students demonstrated that there is a need for history and that public history can respond to it. It allows for better and more meaningful teaching of the discipline of history, expanding the possibilities of didactics, but above all it allows for its specific contribution in transversal education, such as education for citizenship or intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It allows us to leave

the four walls of the classroom, initiating an exploration of the participatory and workshop dimension of history, knowledge and appreciation of cultural heritage, in relation to the territory and its main cultural institutions: museums, libraries, archives, archaeological sites, monumental complexes.

Public history, enthusiastically and passionately embraced by schools, shows us the way forward in other educational settings as well, in the direction of meaningful and transformative learning, under the auspices of participation, building shared authority, and the territorial and community dimension.

Florence, 3 October 2023