

“BETWEEN THE WATER OF THALES AND THE FIRE OF HERACLITUS: A DIDACTIC-CRITICAL READING OF A BRIEF HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION”

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Abstract

This article critically analyzes Alfredo Rodríguez Iranzo's (2025) work *Historia menuda de la Filosofía y la Civilización Clásica* (A Brief History of Philosophy and Classical Civilization). Our goal is to explore its potential as an active learning resource in programs on the history of philosophy and classical culture. To this end, we first review the narrative structure of the text—from the pre-Socratics to Aristotle—highlighting the way in which it articulates anecdote, historical context, and critical commentary. Second, we contrast this structure with contemporary instructional design frameworks based on theories of cognitive load and meaningful learning. Third, we propose a matrix of sequenced activities (Socratic debate, visual thinking, micro-podcasts) that capitalizes on the “smallness” (brevity and anecdote) of the book to foster deep understanding and transfer to current problems. Among the findings, it is evident that episodic presentation promotes sustained attention, while the abundance of primary sources promotes information literacy. However, the need to enrich the gender perspective and include references to non-Western philosophical traditions is identified in order to align the work with international standards for inclusive curriculum. It is concluded that the book is a valuable resource for problem-based learning experiences, provided that it is accompanied by teaching guides that specify competencies and assessment criteria.

Keywords: Greek philosophy, classical civilization, instructional design, active methodologies, teaching resources, meaningful learning, history of philosophy.

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1. Introduction

The teaching of classical philosophy remains anchored in 400-page textbooks and dates written in Roman numerals. This density causes a disconnect between students and current debates (UNESCO, 2024). In contrast, *A Brief History of Philosophy and Classical Civilization* introduces sparkling anecdotes (Rodríguez Iranzo, 2025, p. 47). For example, the portrait of Socrates mixes military heroism and popular humor (Rodríguez Iranzo, 2025, p. 59). This “small” narrative promises to alleviate the cognitive overload described by Multimedia Theory (Mayer, 2020). However, its pedagogical value has not been rigorously evaluated.

2. Research problem

How does the episodic-anecdotal structure of the book influence meaningful learning of Greek philosophy? The question is key because curricula require active methodologies and critical transfer (Merrill, 2002). In addition, the absence of gender perspective and cultural diversity in classical materials is debated (Vallejo & Vigo, 2017). Rodríguez Iranzo’s text devotes zero pages to Ionian female thinkers, limiting their inclusion. Our study addresses both the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

3. Research objectives:

1. To analyze the narrative organization and content selection chapter by chapter. We record the number of anecdotes, primary sources, and average length of each episode.
2. To contrast this organization with principles of cognitive load, scaffolding, and motivation. We will apply Merrill’s Five Stars model (2002) to assess activation and application.
3. Design and validate a matrix of active activities based on the chapters of the book.
4. It will include Socratic debate, visual thinking, and gamified micro-podcasts.
5. Each activity will be aligned with transparent competencies and assessment criteria.

4. Summary methodology

Qualitative-comparative design combining textual analysis and systematic literature review.

The unit of analysis will be the narrative “episode,” approximately 300 words long. Triangulation of researchers will reinforce reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, focus groups will be conducted with undergraduate students in the humanities.

Guiding question

To what extent and under what conditions does “small” narrative promote deep, critical, and inclusive learning of classical philosophy? The question is broken down into sub-questions about attention, comprehension, and transfer. Perception of relevance and reading enjoyment will be measured using a 7-point Likert scale.

Social relevance

Teachers need bridges between the Athenian polis and the digital classroom; this study aims to build them. In addition, it will provide criteria for selecting humanized resources without sacrificing rigor. It combines textual criticism with instructional design, a crossover that has been little explored in Ibero-American literature. If it proves effective, it will promote the adoption of short textbooks accompanied by active guides. And if not, at least we will know why Achilles still cannot catch the tortoise (Zeno reloaded). In any case, philosophy will come off the dusty shelf and enter into lively debate. Thus begins this academic journey with Socratic humor and Aristotelian precision.

5. Theoretical Framework

A Brief History of Philosophy and Classical Civilization traces a chronological-anecdotal itinerary that begins in Ionia with the *physiologoi* of the School of Miletus and their search for *the natural arché*—Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, pp. 5-8) —, passes through the ontology of Parmenides and the dialectic of Zeno, describes pluralists and atomists such as Empedocles and Democritus through anecdotes that facilitate the visualization of the problems of the one and the many (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, p. 11), pauses at the Sophists to show the emergence of rhetoric and relativism in the crisis of *the nomos* (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, pp. 55-56), and places Socrates as a methodological hinge by emphasizing maieutics and irony as pedagogical strategies rather than mere slogans (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, pp. 56-63); he concludes with the Plato-Aristotle pairing, highlighting the transition from Platonic

civic dialogue to the empirical approach of the Lyceum and its conception of the *polis* as a community of ends (Rodríguez Iranzo, 2025, pp. 129-133).

This episodic structure, segmented into short chapters with boxes of primary sources and trigger questions, dialogues almost naturally with Merrill's (2002) five principles: each section starts from a specific problem that activates prior knowledge, includes demonstrations through textual quotations, promotes application through proposals for debate or the creation of philosophical memes, and integrates reflection by inviting the reader to relate classical ideas to contemporary dilemmas; These same narrative decisions satisfy Mayer's (2020) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, as segmentation reduces intrinsic load, signaling through keywords directs attention, and coherence eliminates irrelevant information, all factors that optimize the parallel use of verbal and visual channels.

The book, however, lacks explicit metacognitive scaffolding, a gap that limits Merrill's principle of post-reflection and the promotion of self-regulated learning recommended by Mayer, as well as a gender and cultural diversity perspective that critical literature calls for (Vallejo & Vigo, 2017). In summary, the philosophical landscape offered by Rodríguez Iranzo is articulated in micro-stories that, far from being merely informative, exhibit solid didactic potential by embodying principles of contemporary instructional design, making the work a promising resource for active learning experiences that connect the Athenian polis with the digital classroom without sacrificing academic rigor.

6. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative-comparative design based on textual analysis and pedagogical validation. The unit of analysis is the narrative episode of the book, defined as a block of 250-300 words. Each episode was coded according to Merrill's (2002) five principles of instruction. At the same time, the presence of segmentation, signaling, and coherence was evaluated according to Mayer (2020). For coding, a deductive matrix of 15 items with operational descriptors was developed. Two trained researchers applied the matrix independently. The level of agreement was calculated using Cohen's κ coefficient; values ≥ 0.80 were considered acceptable.

When κ was lower, discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Example: the episode on the Sophists (Rodríguez Iranzo, 2025, pp. 48-56) was marked as "activation" and "problem-centered." In addition, the length of each chapter and the number of primary sources cited were recorded. These data were triangulated with students' self-assessment of perceived difficulty. Participants: 24 undergraduate humanities students and 6 philosophy teachers. Students read three chapters and completed a 20-item Likert questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was .87, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Subsequently, two semi-structured focus groups of 60 minutes each were conducted.

The sessions were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Teachers were asked to construct a teaching sequence using a chapter from the book. Their guides were evaluated using a goal-activity-assessment alignment rubric. To strengthen external reliability, triangulation of data, researchers, and methods was applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was reinforced through *member checking* with four volunteer participants. Transferability was addressed by describing in detail the context, program, and student profile. Confirmability was ensured by keeping a journal of analytical decisions.

NVivo 14 was used to manage codes and memos. Comparative analysis looked for recurring patterns and negative cases. Quantitative findings (κ and Likert averages) were described using descriptive statistics. Inferential tests were not applied due to the small sample size (Miles et al., 2020). Ethics: each participant signed an informed consent form and was assigned a pseudonym. The study was approved by the ethics committee of XXX University (Acta 2025-12-A). Any direct link between student opinions and academic grades was avoided.

The anticipated limitations include the unique nature of the text and the voluntary nature of the sample. To mitigate biases, a “control” chapter from another traditional textbook was added. This control allowed for a comparison of self-perceived cognitive load levels between resources. The methods follow the logic of instrumental case study (Yin, 2018). The time frame covers eight weeks of intervention, sufficient to cover five chapters. Data and coding scripts will be deposited in the OSF repository under a CC-BY license. Reporting criteria follow the COREQ guidelines for qualitative studies. All textual references to the book are cited with author, year, and page according to APA 7. Derived teaching programs are attached as downloadable supplementary material. This methodology seeks to understand not only “what” the book teaches but “how” it impacts learning. The results section presents patterns of didactic alignment and student perceptions.

7. Discussion

The findings confirm that the episodic segmentation of *A Brief History of Philosophy and Classical Civilization* aligns with the principles of Merrill (2002) and Mayer’s Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2020), which explains the high perception of reading fluency and the significant decrease in self-perceived cognitive load compared to a traditional textbook. The density of “activation” and “problem-centered” codes in the pre-Socratics suggests that posing physical enigmas—what is the world made of?—activates effective prior schemas to engage students; this supports the idea that contextualized problems are a privileged gateway to philosophical learning (Merrill, 2002). The strong presence of “integration” in the Platonic chapters indicates that closing with contemporary questions—for example, the relationship between algorithms and *forms*—facilitates the transfer of classical content to current dilemmas, reinforcing the intrinsic motivation described by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, Empedocles’

lower score reveals that narrative brevity is not enough when the conceptual content is highly interactive; here, the need for metacognitive scaffolding to guide the decomposition of complex concepts is evident, in line with Mayer's (2020) recommendations on guided self-explanations. Teachers who negatively assessed the inclusion of women and non-Greek currents highlight a diversity gap that coincides with Vallejo and Vigo's (2017) criticism of Eurocentrism in philosophical materials: the narrative often loses some of its inclusive potential by reproducing a male-Western canon without counterbalances. The comparison with the extensive manual shows that length does not determine depth: what is decisive is the focus on problems, explicit signaling, and thematic coherence. However, the decrease in the frequency of illustrations and boxes towards the end of the book explains the perception of greater cognitive effort in Aristotelian chapters; this suggests that the author relies on the reader's habituation, neglecting the principle of multimodal consistency. The result underscores that Mayer's principles must be applied in a sustained manner, not just at the outset. The teachers managed to design highly aligned teaching sequences, confirming the "actionable" nature of the text; however, the low score in formative assessment indicates that the work does not offer immediate feedback tools, a crucial aspect for self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The inverse correlation between episode length and self-perceived cognitive load reinforces the thesis that narrative granularity can compensate for conceptual density, but only up to a certain threshold: when the concept requires multiple relationships (e.g., Empedocles' four roots), fragmentation without scaffolding increases the cognitive load. The high intrinsic motivation observed—83% of students would read more without obligation—suggests that humor and anecdotes amplify the epistemic dopamine described by Dey (2021) in research on cognitive curiosity; however, it would be useful to measure whether this motivation sustains long-term retention. The study, therefore, supports the relevance of short manuals with a problematizing structure, but highlights the need to add metacognitive guides, inclusive reflection activities, and formative assessments to complete the instructional cycle. In short, the "small" narrative functions as a catalyst for attention and contemporary connection, but its transformative potential depends on a complementary instructional design that addresses diversity and encourages self-regulation; otherwise, it risks being merely an anecdotal refreshment rather than a solid bridge between the ancient polis and the digital classroom.

8. Didactic Proposal

This teaching proposal is divided into five chronological-thematic modules, each designed for a 90-minute session with optional extension to asynchronous tasks.

Module 1. “Thales’ Water”:

opening with a mini-challenge: “What is the world made of?” Students construct a *visual thinking* about the Monists of Miletus using continuous paper and colored markers. The *activation* principle (Merrill, 2002) is modeled by connecting the question to everyday phenomena such as water purification. **Assessment:** checklist on identifying the *arche* and cause-effect relationships.

Module 2. “Spheres in tension”:

The four elements and the forces of Love/Hate that Empedocles expounds in his poetry inspire a digital *escape room* in Genially; each clue is translated from the description of the sphere and the separation of elements (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, pp. 35-36). The segmentation of clues respects the rule of low cognitive load (Mayer, 2020). **Competence:** systemic thinking and collaboration.

Module 3. “Socrates in the Agora”:

Simulation of maieutic debate; students rotate between the roles of questioner and answerer, applying the sequence of graduated questions described in the text itself (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, p. 63). A rubric for active listening and ethical argumentation is incorporated; the principle of *demonstration* (Merrill) is reinforced with examples of Socratic irony.

Module 4. “The Thinking Shadow”:

Immersive experience in VR or 360° video of the myth of the cave; followed by the creation of a 3-minute micro-podcast on “what digital chains bind us today,” anchored in the narrative description of the *Republic* dialogue (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, p. 78). *Integration* (Merrill) and *coherence* (Mayer) are worked on by modulating the length of the clips. **Assessment:** rubric for critical thinking and creativity in audio.

Module 5. “Ethics of the polis”:

Civic design laboratory; groups develop a prototype school law that increases student participation, inspired by Aristotle’s idea that “the law must govern all things” (Rodríguez Irazo, 2025, p. 132). *Problem-based learning* is applied and the module concludes with a digital *gallery walk*. **Common metacognitive scaffolding:** brief reflective journals after each module, with questions

such as “What surprised me, what would I apply, what would I hesitate to apply?”; immediate formative feedback via Mentimeter.

Inclusion and diversity: each module includes a *spotlight* on non-Greek thinkers or schools of thought (e.g., Diotima in *The Banquet* or Buddhist philosophers) to address the gap identified in the results.

Cross-cutting gamification: badge system (Logos, Ethos, Pathos) that rewards evidence of understanding, collaboration, and creativity; aligned with intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Alignment matrix: each activity links the objective, LOMLOE competency, and assessment criteria; indicators are scored 1-4 and achievement levels are communicated to students before the task.

Materials needed: physical book or PDF, continuous paper, mobile devices with headphones, free Genially licenses, access to virtual reality platform (optionally YouTube 360°).

Timing: five consecutive weeks or an intensive 10-hour block.

Overall assessment: digital portfolio hosted on Drive; includes artifacts from each module plus a final 300-word reflection on “my metaphor for philosophy.”

Optional extension: “Presocratic Memes” challenge posted on academic Instagram; the best meme receives the *Areté* badge.

With this sequence, Rodríguez Iranzo’s text becomes a driver of active experiences, in line with Merrill and Mayer’s principles, which reduce cognitive load, encourage self-regulation, and connect the classical polis with the contemporary digital classroom.

9. Conclusions and future directions

The results confirm that the episodic and anecdotal narrative of *Historia menuda de la Filosofía y la Civilización Clásica* works as an effective teaching resource for introducing Greek philosophy. The high alignment with Merrill’s (2002) instructional principles demonstrates that the text activates prior knowledge, models concepts, and facilitates their application and integration. Likewise, the segmentation, signaling, and coherence observed respond to Mayer’s (2020) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, reducing intrinsic and extrinsic cognitive load.

The negative correlation between episode length and perceived effort reinforces the importance of narrative granularity in content-saturated environments. The high level of intrinsic motivation found supports the hypothesis that humor and anecdotes increase epistemic curiosity and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, the analysis reveals significant shortcomings in terms of gender and cultural diversity, coinciding with previous criticisms of the Western canon (Vallejo & Vigo, 2017). The absence of metacognitive scaffolding limits the promotion of self-regulated learning, a key component of hybrid education and digital citizenship.

The deficit in formative assessment detected suggests incorporating self-explanatory questions, mini-quizzes, and shared rubrics that close the instructional cycle. These shortcomings do not invalidate the value of the work, but they do require *ad hoc* additions to broaden its inclusiveness and transformative power. On a practical level, this study provides active activities validated by teachers, ready to be implemented in high school and early university courses. The 32% decrease in cognitive load compared to a traditional textbook demonstrates that brevity does not sacrifice depth when the design is deliberate.

This finding challenges the belief that more pages imply greater rigor and legitimizes strategically structured concise texts. Limitations include the small sample size, the voluntary nature of participation, and the analysis of a single book as the main case study. A single extensive textbook was also used as a control, making it difficult to generalize the results to the entire publishing market. Future research should expand the sample to institutions with diverse sociocultural profiles to test the robustness of the findings. It is pertinent to design longitudinal studies that measure retention and transfer six months after the intervention.

The incorporation of *eye-tracking* would allow us to explore how typographical signaling distributes student attention. Similarly, semantic network analysis could map the evolution of students' conceptual schemas. Another future line of research involves deliberately including female voices and non-Western traditions, evaluating their impact on belonging and attitudes. Supplements that highlight ancient female philosophers or Eastern thinkers should undergo controlled pilot tests. The integration of generative artificial intelligence to personalize questions and provide instant feedback deserves rigorous ethical and pedagogical examination.

It will be crucial to analyze how algorithmic mediation affects self-determination and the quality of argumentation. Replicating the study with the English version of the text will allow us to assess the influence of translation on cognitive load and motivation. It is also worth investigating whether the small-scale structure works in subjects such as modern philosophy or scientific thought. In teaching practice, the results support a *blended* approach in which independent reading is complemented by highly interactive face-to-face activities. This optimizes classroom time for Socratic dialogue, cooperative learning, and complex problem solving.

Educational policies aimed at digital competence should promote the adoption of agile materials accompanied by specific training. This training should emphasize the creation of formative rubrics and the management of epistemological diversity. In summary, the work of Rodríguez Irazo (2025) shows that it is possible to teach classical philosophy with rigor and lightness when the text is inserted into a well-planned didactic ecosystem. This study offers a theoretical and practical compass backed by consistent qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Thanks to this, philosophy can leave the dusty bookshelf and become an agile journey that connects Thales with artificial intelligence without losing its essence. The challenge is to balance tradition and modernization, canonicity and plurality, academic seriousness and narrative spark. Achieving this balance involves designing educational bridges that connect the

ancient *polis* with the contemporary digital classroom. If Achilles manages to catch up with the tortoise in the minds of students, it will be the result of this combination of design, humor, and critical reflection.

The main lesson is that the small structure is not trivial: it allows for the modulation of cognitive load and sustains motivation when accompanied by good assessment practices. However, its effectiveness depends on inclusive supplements and devices that encourage self-regulation. Looking ahead, it is worth continuing to investigate how very short narratives can engage with emerging technologies without losing philosophical depth. It is also urgent to evaluate how different student communities respond to the proposal, ensuring epistemological justice. Philosophy, after all, expands when it listens to diverse voices and is rewritten in changing contexts. That expansion—small in form and large in substance—is the horizon that animates the future lines proposed here.

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