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Essay Review

Understanding history teaching

Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson, Anna Pendry, *Understanding History Teaching. Teaching and Learning about the Past in Secondary Schools*, Maidenhead and Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2003 173p.

1. Introduction

Teaching history may well be one of the toughest professions in the game. History is the subject that deals with change over time. Academic historians who research the past, investigate moments or periods in time that are lost forever, describe people whom they never met, and recover information from sources one would not imagine worth studying. In a process that may take years, a professional historian reconstructs the past in a way that perhaps makes sense to many people, but the interpretation is always the product of his or her mind. There are many sorts of “historians”. Some are more and some are less faithful to the current methods and values of the profession. Some reconstruct the past for scientific purposes, others out of political interests, and still others merely to entertain an audience. Many of these representations of the past coexist and—if one happens to be living in a liberal democratic society—are allowed to coexist and to be debated. This exchange of theoretical and concrete notions of the past shows great variety in scope and content. Historical visions of the past reflect long-term changes or sudden upheavals, and are mediated through academic writings or shocking audiovisual images, through indifferent comment or passionate appeal. Cinema, TV, and the Internet compete with older mediators of historical

knowledge and collective memory such as museums, memorials, and monuments. This is the complexity of “the past” as it presents itself to citizens in western societies today. How do teachers approach this state of affairs when teaching history at secondary school?

2. History teaching in England

This question is raised in *Understanding History Teaching* by Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson, and Anna Pendry. In the first part of this book, the authors provide an overview of the development of history as a school subject and its underlying assumptions in England during the last 30 yr. These assumptions pertain to both content and pedagogy. The authors distinguish two competing traditions in the teaching of history and point to the shift in emphasis from one to the other. Until the 1970s, the so-called “great tradition” was dominant. In terms of content, school history was mainly concerned with British political and imperial history, aiming to imbue pupils with a shared heritage or collective memory. In terms of pedagogy, history lessons were one-way processes, with teachers as active transmitters of historical knowledge and pupils in the role of passive recipients. The other—more recent—tradition is known as “critical history” and involves a different pedagogical approach and a different purpose of history as a school subject. Here, we see pupils in the role of active constructors of historical knowledge, through a combination of teacher instruction and various ways of working in the classroom. Historical knowledge is not simply passed on through memorization, but actively developed by pupils themselves through researching primary sources and questioning

interpretations made by others. History teaching in the critical tradition aims at contributing to pupils' historical identity and to their sense of history as an interpretative discipline.

3. Research method

The first National History Curriculum, published in 1990, showed the clash between the traditions on a macro level. The authors characterize this Curriculum as "a policy compromise which appeared to hold the two traditions in creative tension" (p. 13). What actually went on in the classroom after its publication and subsequent revisions remains unclear. What choices did teachers from various backgrounds make and how did these choices affect their pupils' learning of history? In *Understanding History Teaching*, the authors aimed to uncover the knowledge base from which history teachers work today. By using "teacher knowledge" as a concept that encompasses "knowledge", "beliefs" and "intuitions" (Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001), the authors focused on the mindset of the teacher and its relation to classroom practice and pedagogical behavior. Part of teacher knowledge is the concept of pedagogical content knowledge, developed by Shulman (Shulman, 1986), but the authors explicitly abstained from using PCK because this concept often results in "deficit models of teachers' expertise" (p. 69).

The research that this book is based on, took place in eight secondary schools, which were selected on the basis of variables of intake, age range, and location. Within these schools, the history departments differed in composition, stability, and development. Although the research was varied in scope, the authors do not pretend to have selected a representative sample of schools. Furthermore, it is unclear on what criteria the teachers were selected. They differed in experience, but all were already familiar to the researchers before actual data collection took place. The methods used by the researchers were non-participant observation of one full day of lessons of one of the teachers in every school, followed up by two semi-structured interviews. The first inter-

view took place soon after the observation and focused on the aims and objectives of the lesson; the second was conducted some days later and dealt with several topics such as the nature of history as a school subject and present and future goals. Departmental handbooks and other sources of information about the department and the school were also consulted. The authors make clear that their main concern during the collection of data was to maintain an open and constructive approach. An account of their methods of analyzing the data can be found in an appendix.

4. Teacher knowledge of the history teacher

What can we learn from this book about what history teachers do, what they know, and how they use their knowledge in a classroom context? These are the central questions in the second part of the book. Although they use the concept of teacher knowledge in a broad sense, the authors did not work with the subtle distinctions other researchers have made in this field. Working inductively, the authors constructed a simple model in which the shared components of teacher knowledge of the history teacher were categorized. They discerned:

1. knowledge of subject
2. knowledge of pupils
3. knowledge of resources and activities

Before we discuss these categories, a short remark should be made. As *the* history teacher is non-existent, the authors start the second part of the book by describing three individual teachers and their classroom practices. The contexts in which their lessons take place are different as are the major goals of their lessons. One teacher concentrates on the affective dimension of teaching in a school with low average results, another on getting the content across in a class preparing for examination, while the third teacher focuses on developing historical understanding in a class with pupils performing above average. From these descriptions and the generalizations that follow, it seems that, for the authors, the key to understanding history teaching is understanding experi-

enced history teachers. The authors make clear that the knowledge of the experienced history teacher differs in some fundamental ways from the knowledge of the novice teacher. It is unclear, however, whether experience, according to the authors, is simply the result of time invested in accumulating PCK and other aspects of “teacher knowledge”, and therefore, attainable for many, or professional development based upon specific personal character traits and, therefore, attainable only for a few. In other words, is there a difference between the experienced and the expert (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Torff, 2003)? Is the authors’ contention that, the more experienced history teachers are, the more their personal base of teacher knowledge contains the following two compartments.

First, the teacher knowledge of the history teachers observed consisted of elements of a general pedagogical nature in combination with content knowledge. Although no specific questions were asked, subject content proved for all teachers to be a major factor in preparing and giving lessons aimed at developing historical understanding. Most of the teachers observed were able to question pupils more closely and react to their answers more effectively because of their detailed content knowledge. Also, most teachers observed succeeded in relating their planned learning activities to a level that fitted intellectually and socially with the pupils in the classroom. Especially the experienced teachers drew on a broad reservoir of possible activities and sources in order to engage their pupils in a learning process aimed at incremental learning. Because of their broad content knowledge, their general knowledge about pupils’ learning, and their tested repertoire of teaching activities, these teachers succeeded many times in motivating pupils to work actively on their ability to understand the past.

Second, the authors concluded that there is another compartment of teacher knowledge that—related to the one mentioned above—forms the heart of history teaching today. Most teachers held explicit beliefs about the nature of history as an interpretative discipline. They were aware of the status of the discipline in the postmodern era and of the procedural concepts of the critical tradition.

These concepts include *evidence*, *causation*, *significance*, *change*, and *empathy*. In their teaching, all experienced teachers worked upon these central concepts and tried to develop historical understanding of a critical nature in their pupils. Sometimes, pupils were encouraged to question whether historical information was reliable or not after considering the sources that provided it. Other activities were aimed at reconstructing a historical moment in time, in order to understand better what options people in the past believed they had and how this affected their behavior. Experienced teachers were more aware of the nature of their profession and more accurate in thinking through its consequences for classroom practice, as was demonstrated by their choices of goals, activities and tests. In the words of the authors, “a broad conception of what history is seemed to underpin a more detailed understanding of both substance and procedures of history, both part of a unified whole” and “these conceptions and understandings were intimately linked to what they actually did with their pupils in the classroom” (p.72). The authors subscribe to the views of Cooper and McIntyre (1996), who have emphasized the complexity of the diverse types of knowledge with which expert teachers operate.

The authors do not claim to be sophisticated in their reconstruction of teacher knowledge and admit that many more characteristics could be found. Nevertheless, they mention specifically one area of teacher knowledge of the history teacher that they were unable to untwine sufficiently; one that seems crucial for the development of historical understanding by pupils. Although almost all teachers held theoretical notions of learning by children in secondary schools, none of them stated explicitly how exactly pupils arrive at the knowledge and notions of the past that they hold at a certain age. This may be caused—we learn—by inefficient research methods or by the fact that this type of knowledge is closely linked to theoretical notions of learning and to subject knowledge. This type of knowledge is, therefore, seldom articulated separately and the authors emphasize the need for discussing it more frequently in history departments. The problem here is that the development of historical knowledge by children is not limited

to classroom activities. In societies where pupils are overloaded with historical notions and narratives from everywhere in the globalizing world, it is hard to determine how they developed the beliefs about the past they currently hold. Teachers sometimes use a great variety of activities in the classroom without knowing exactly how these activities work upon pupils' existing frameworks of incomplete knowledge and understanding of history. Discussing the issue might help, but it will not change the fact that pupils encounter most historical impressions outside the influence of professional teachers and their critical methods (Wineburg, 2000). I will address this in more detail below.

5. History teachers in the critical tradition

In the third part of *Understanding History Teaching*, the authors demonstrate that implementing a national curriculum from the perspective of teacher knowledge is a highly complex process, influenced by several internal and external factors. The teachers who were questioned on their decisions and outcomes concerning curriculum implementation showed high awareness of this complexity and were able to build up logically consistent sequences of lessons. It is their professionalism, according to the authors, that transforms a "standardized and theoretical curriculum" into a "local and actual curriculum" that fits into a particular learning context (p.109). The so-called critical tradition has gained ground as most history teachers stressed the importance of content and skills to be developed without sensing a contradiction. That content still matters to these teachers is obvious from what they said, but it is far less clear to them which areas of content are to be regarded as obligatory. Simply there is less consensus on what to teach. Teaching national histories and cultural heritage—a major aim in the "great tradition"—has become a more uncertain way of dealing with identity. Some feel the moral dimension of history teaching more strongly than others, but all agree that no history teaching can do without moral judgement. In some cases, the moral position is obvious, for example, in dealing

with the holocaust. But in many areas, teachers in the critical tradition treat morality as something that is tied to context and personal values rather than something that is unquestionable. The overall aim for history teachers in England today is, help pupils to develop into critical citizens; all uncertainty lies in the nature of the society in which these citizens will have to participate and in complex ways historical representations are mediated today. This last aspect is not covered by the book, but it needs to be mentioned, where understanding of history teaching is concerned. After all, pupils of today were born in what some call "the media age" and the book invites us to think further about our discipline.

6. Understanding history teaching in the media age

In the introduction, I referred to the complexity of the exchange of historical representations in western societies today. From *Understanding History Teaching*, we learn that, in England, experienced history teachers increasingly teach their pupils to develop historical knowledge in a critical way. Instead of memorizing facts and figures, pupils actively construct knowledge through learning activities that invite them to use historical concepts which derive from the professional discipline. An important question is, however, whether these concepts can be applied by teachers (and their pupils) to those sources of historical knowledge that seem most influential today. Although the authors claim that their teachers had a deep and sophisticated knowledge of content, sources, and activities, they do not specifically distinguish between written and audiovisual sources or moving images. It may be true that history teachers use documentary and film in their lessons in a critical way, i.e., by asking questions that stimulate viewing moving images as representations rather than as manifestations of historical reality, but we know little about what teachers know in this area; how they operate in the classroom, and what effect their teaching has. As academics, history teachers are usually very well trained in analyzing written texts, less well trained in analyzing pictures and paintings, and hardly or

not at all trained in analyzing moving images. There is ample reason, however, to take the difference between the written and the unwritten very seriously. From American research, we know that citizens derive their historical consciousness—to use this more general term—to a large extent from audiovisual materials, in particular those broadcast on television (Wineburg, 2001). These include such “suspect” sources as biographies, documentaries, and historical film, whether drama, action, romance, or even satire. Why “suspect”? Researchers of history teaching are divided on many things, but certainly on the issue of how to define historical understanding (Wilson & Suzan, 2001). And audiovisual sources prompt fundamental questions about the nature of historical knowledge and thus pose dilemmas when these sources are used in educational environments.

Let us consider some of those dilemmas. Many films and documentaries share characteristics that make these products accessible to larger audiences. For example, they have a narrative structure that directs the viewer toward a certain closed end, and thus provide easy answers. But the story, although set in a historical context, does not enlighten that context in its most complete and often contradictory way. It singles out and oversimplifies elements of present concern; which concern is up to the maker or director of the moving images and his or her commercial, political, or artistic background. Shaping the past into storylines for mass consumption is, of course, no different from what a professional historian does when writing for a popular audience. There is, however, a substantial difference in the techniques used. Explaining a historical process in writing often involves a breaking up of the process into separate dimensions that can be described in nuance and detail. Popular history books can be entertaining for the reader and they can reach dimensions of history that are difficult to transform into narratives of moving images. The written text, however, does not capture our emotions the way moving images do. These can make deep impressions by reducing a complicated historical process to relationships between a few antagonists to whom we can connect. Our emotions are influenced by a combination of various filmshots, cutting techni-

ques, and added sound, as well as mise-en-scene. The visuals can be close to historical accuracy and what one sees is history as an integrated picture (O'Connor, 1990; Rosenstone, 1995; Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Stradling, 2001). So, compared to written history, moving images are highly problematic and provide many opportunities when it comes to learning.

Pupils see quite a lot of popular visual history and many teachers use this kind of material in class. Why they do that seems obvious. The past has already been structured in a way that is more accessible to modern viewers, although not necessarily to young modern viewers. But the visualized past does capture the attention easily and gives emotion to a subject, in a way teachers find difficult to match when telling a story (exceptions noted). The need to motivate pupils is ample reason for using audiovisual sources. Nevertheless, some fundamental questions have to be asked. How do moving images contribute to historical understanding? Which genres or products provoke what kind of understanding in which pupils? And to what extent do we wish emotion to become a historical category (Rosenstone, 1995, p.59)? The last question is a familiar one for those working in the critical tradition, since *empathy* is listed among the historical concepts teachers work with. As a tool for pupils to develop historical understanding, this concept has provoked much debate (Husbands, 1996). Do we mean by empathy, simply the rational capacity of pupils to reconstruct the historical situation of a person in the past in order to better understand his actions, or does empathy involve some affective bridging from present to past (Husbands & Pendry, 2001)? In either way, can moving images be of help here or do they form obstacles to historical understanding? Closed, moving narratives tend to project modern emotions on people separated from us by centuries and seldom allow much room for understanding the strange and unexpected ways that people in the past differed from us (Seixas, 2000). But they can powerfully present cognitive information about historical contexts that is essential for the act of imagination in learning history.

Are these notions about the problematic relationship between moving images and the past part

of teacher knowledge? Do teachers know how to cope with the difficulties of learning history using these often very complex sources? We hope they do, because there would be little sense in teaching history if adult citizens were to end up having reservoirs of historical information filled almost completely with notions derived from various inaccurate and biased products of our mass media. In *Understanding History Teaching* we learn that the critical tradition has influenced the teaching practice of teachers today. It would be interesting to know whether (and if so, how) this critical approach is also applied to the audiovisual sources which, as many suggest, are deeply influential in creating the historical understanding of the media-generations.

7. Conclusion

In *Understanding History Teaching*, Husbands, Kitson, and Pendry succeed in giving a clear insight into the complexity of what constitutes the teacher knowledge of the history teacher, even if some aspects could not be untwined. Viewing teachers as responsible actors in their craft, the authors claim that it is teacher knowledge that should be the starting point of future innovations in the curriculum rather than educational blue-prints constructed in government offices (p.144). The political message the authors deliver here is sound and important, although familiar. The study is somewhat jubilant about the teaching qualities of most of those observed, but the results do not make clear whether, in general, anything meaningful can be said about differences in teacher knowledge between the expert and the experienced non-expert. This seems especially relevant to learning in the media age, in which audiovisual sources challenge teachers' knowledge and skills in many ways and will continue to do so in the future.

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