

Trends and tendencies in Nordic schools

Perhaps the most succinct explanation of the crucial role that history plays in the life of us humans is the Ingsoc slogan from [George Orwell](#)'s novel *1984*:

Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.

We cannot, of course, control the past in itself – at least not as long as we presume that ‘the past’ has some kind of objective existence. What can be controlled, however, is how we construct and reconstruct our interpretations of the past. Which, when all is said and done, is what history is about.

The core content of Orwell’s wordings is reflected in the concept ‘Historical Consciousness’, which for the last 30 years or so has played a central part in the Scandinavian debate on history teaching and learning. Within that debate, the multi-faceted definition proposed by Karl-Ernst Jeismann in his article ‘Geschichtsbewußtsein’ (1979) has served as an obvious point of reference.

Jeismann’s definition starts with a quote from [Theodor Schieder](#), which in itself is a definition of the concept ‘historical consciousness’ as an ever-present insight that every human being, and every form of social life, is embedded in time, i.e. has a past and a future that is neither stable nor unchanging or without conditions. He then goes on by stating what can be seen as one of the fundamental, perhaps the most fundamental, element of the concept:

More than being just knowing or taking an interest in history, historical consciousness comprises the relations between interpretations of the past, understanding of the present, and perspectives on the future (ibid. p. 42).

Linking together the past, the present and the future opens up for a corollary, namely, that history is not a mirror image of the past, but our (present) reconstruction of it. Historical consciousness, writes Jeismann, is thus a mode through which the past, as imagination and experience, is made part of our own time. This also means that the past as reconstruction is

dependent on and formed by our present questions, needs, and interests. Jeismann here quotes the French philosopher [Raymond Aron](#):

History is the reconstruction of the lives of the dead, by and for the living. The interests of times present are what make man - thinking, suffering, acting man - explore the past (Aron 1961 p.17).

If history is a reconstruction of the past that springs from the needs and interests of our time and our place - our lifeworld - it also follows that the form, the content, and the reflective depth of our historical consciousness will differ from person to person, from group to group. Historical consciousness can have the character of a cliché or watchword, or it can be reflected, thought-out, and open to new encounters and experiences. Implied is (a) that everyone has and makes use of (some kind of) historical consciousness, and (b) that one's historical consciousness, situated in a social context, is constantly changing, added to, and passed on to others.

Jeismann finally stresses the importance of historical consciousness as shared, collective experiences - or as shared and collective stories of experiences. When elements that unite dominate over elements that divide, it will contribute to defining as a group those who share the stories. Historical consciousness as collective experiences can therefore be seen as 'a necessary element for the creation and the upholding of human societies' (Jeismann 1979 p. 43).

This aspect, which highlights the connection between, on the one hand, historical consciousness as an individual, personal relation to past, present, and future, and on the other hand as a collective relation, is what gives history its political and ideological charge and also explains why history has had its given place in the curriculum of the compulsory school, from the 19th century onwards. The education policy of the nation-state is one where the narrative of the 'imagined community' is honed, polished, and above all transferred to

generation after generation of school children as part of 'the skills and sensibilities which make them acceptable to their fellows, which fit them to assume places in society, and which "make them what they are"' (Gellner 1983 p. 37). Through its monopoly of legitimate education the nation-state, controlling the present, has strived to control the past in order to control the future.

Intense battles over school history textbook content have recently been fought in Greece and Japan (Repoussi 2011; Ogawa & Field 2006). As late as 2013 the UK Department for Education published a proposal for a new history curriculum, aiming at ensuring that all pupils would know and understand 'how the British people shaped this nation and how Britain influenced the world' (Department for Education 2013a p. 3). After heavy criticism from teachers' associations and academic bodies the curriculum was rewritten and now aims at ensuring a knowledge and understanding of 'how people's lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world' (Department for Education 2013b). Remaining from the first proposal, however, is the idea that British history can be told as 'a coherent, chronological narrative' (ibid.), which, apparently, is supposed to be shared by all as 'our history'.

The dream, so dear to education policy makers, that school history ought to assimilate young people into a unifying master narrative has, however, become more and more imaginary. As pointed out by Andreas Körber (2011), history is, inevitably, affected by contingency:

...due to their multi-dimensional plurality, humans exhibit different needs for temporal orientation. Because of the different times, societies, social groups, cultures etc. they live in, they will quite naturally be using different concepts, operations, patterns of explanation and of narrating which in turn will result in different narratives [...] And as for people living and acting within the plurality of today's societies, it becomes vitally important to (be able to) handle this contingency of narrative orientations (ibid. p. 157).

Teaching history as an assimilation project, built on a single, unifying master narrative, is no longer possible, nor is it desirable. A multi-culturalist approach – to each his or her own

history, not to be questioned or criticised – may at first seem to be an attractive alternative but runs the risk of developing into what Thomas Hylland Eriksen somewhat drastically has labelled ‘apartheid with a friendly face’ (Eriksen 2005), or at least into societal fragmentation rather than cohesion. Does this also mean that we must renounce Jeismann’s idea that some kind of collective historical experience is necessary for upholding a sustainable society?

One viable alternative might be to promote a common understanding, not of what history says but what it does. Or, in other words, a collective experience of history as form rather than as content. Or, yet again, to promote a cognitive awareness of one’s own as well as other’s historical consciousness, understood both as a state (something that we have) and as a process (something we use in everyday life).

In order to achieve this, the scholars involved in the research project *FUER Geschichtsbewußtsein*, launched in the year 2000, have suggested that four core competencies or fields of competence are crucial for the development of a reflexive historical consciousness, namely the competencies of inquiry, methods, orientation, and subject matter (Schreiber et al. 2006; Körber 2011). The first three can be seen as related to the procedural dimension of historical thinking, the fourth to the substantive dimension of historical ‘facts’.

Starting out from the understanding that historical consciousness as a process starts with an uncertainty, a need for orientation, and a question, the first dimension of competency is the *Inquiry Competence* (‘Fragekompetenz’). This is described as ‘the capability to transform [a] perceived uncertainty into some processable form of historical *question* in order either to reconstruct a historic narrative or to analyze given historical narratives of other people for their historical questions, and to understand them’ (Körber 2011 p. 149).

The second procedural dimension, *Methods Competence* (‘Methodenkompetenz’) comprises the subject-specific, i.e. historical, methods used for gaining and processing knowledge:

to categorise, to put bits and pieces in their chronological order, to integrate information into a narrative structure but also to identify and de-code the structure of existing narratives. Central to this field of competence is the capability to both re-construct and de-construct

historical narratives.

The third and last of the procedural dimensions, *Orientation Competence* ('Orientierungskompetenz') contains the skills and abilities needed for using the knowledge gained from the re- and de-construction of historical narratives. Here four core competencies are discernible, and they all relate to the aim of the FUER project: developing a reflexive, and also a self-reflexive, historical consciousness. They are also of utmost relevance when considering the role of history and historical narratives in a pluralist society:

the ability to revise one's own concept of history as a field of knowledge, including concepts and categories used in historical thinking;

the ability to revise one's concepts of the past and the present world, i.e. one's picture of other people and/or other times;

the ability to revise one's own relation to the past and the present, i.e. to revise one's own identity, including one's relation to the actions (commendable or deplorable) of one's ancestors or members of one's own group/culture/nation;

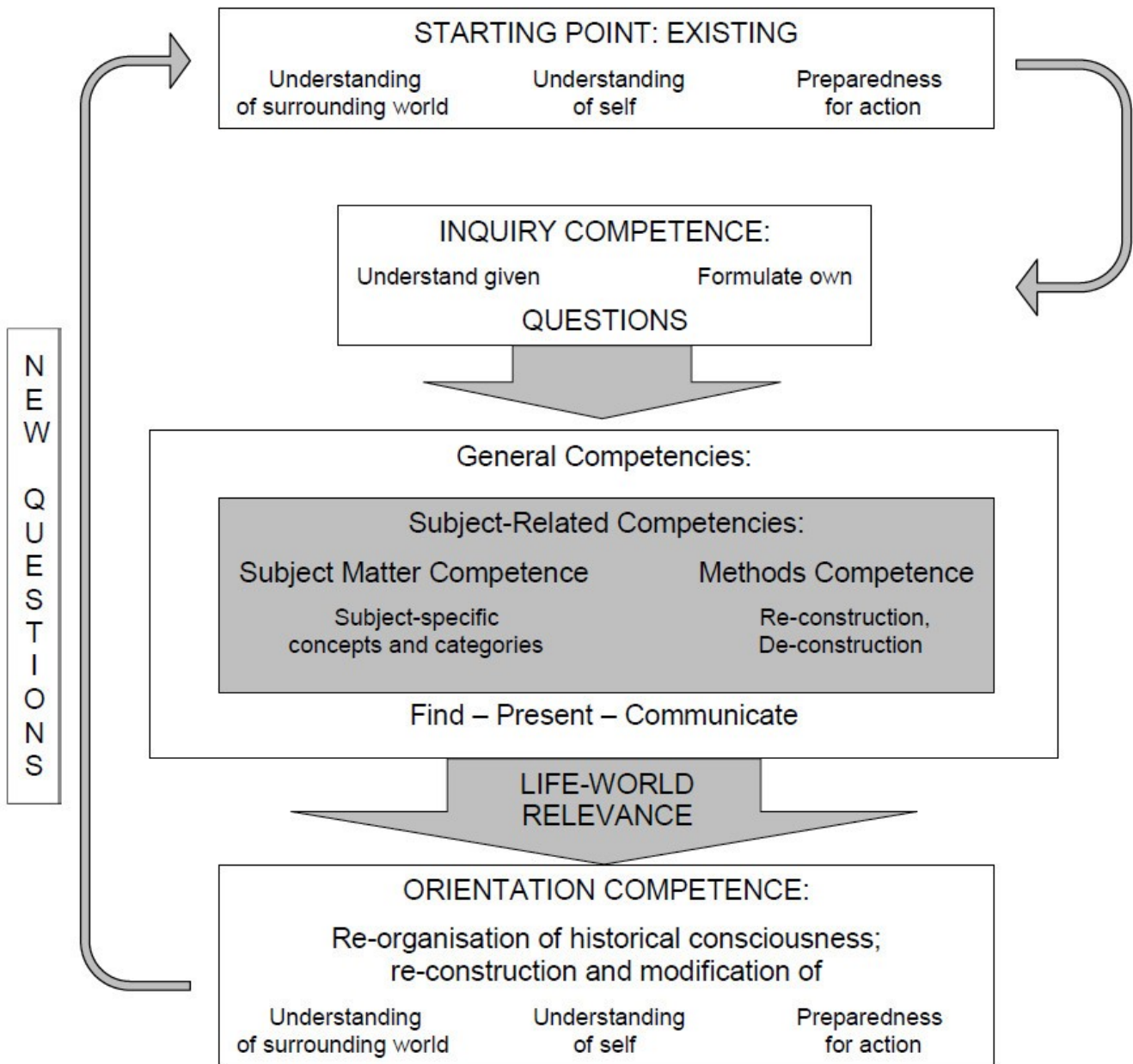
the ability to revise one's own ideas of what can be done in the present and hoped for in the future (Körber 2011 p. 150).

The three procedural dimensions are all linked to a fourth, somewhat improperly named *Subject Matter Competence* ('Sachkompetenz'). Contrary to what may first come to one's mind this dimension has nothing to do with the memorising of names, dates, or particular events. The FUER project nevertheless used the label:

...on the grounds that the 'subject matter' of historical teaching and learning is not the past, but rather 'thinking about the past'. Therefore, in our model, this 'subject matter competence' stands for the command over/ability to use and apply rather abstract first and second order concepts, categories, knowledge of procedures and methods etc (Körber 2011 p. 151).

Waltraud Schreiber and Sylvia Mebus have sketched a graphic representation of how the four fields of competence are present in the process of historical thinking:

Figure 1: Historical thinking competencies



after Schreiber & Mebus 2006 p. 13.

Being in possession of these competencies means being able to scrutinise and challenge established 'master narratives' handed down by authoritative (or authoritarian) institutions, among them the school. It also means being able to scrutinise and challenge narratives prevalent in one's family or peer group, and, ultimately, to scrutinise and revise one's own

ontological narrative. Being in possession of these competencies therefore means being able to exercise a certain amount of control over how history is presently written.

That history can, and should be viewed as a process rather than a well-defined body of knowledge, and that this process is present not only as a cognitive activity in the classroom or the scholar's study but also in our everyday life, is an approach that is reflected in the history curriculum in all Nordic countries, most markedly in Denmark and Sweden where the concept 'historical consciousness' was introduced in the 1990's. In the Danish curriculum, history's crucial role in human life is described thus:

People make decisions out of their experience and knowledge of the past, their ideas about the present, and their expectations for the future. That is to say that a time frame - history - is a prerequisite for being able to understand oneself and the world as an entirety, as well as to reflect on possible actions.

History is furthermore used to establish and strengthen the consistency of real and imagined communities.

History is thus an integrated aspect of our lives. It is a basic condition of human existence that we are shaped by, as well as co-creators of, history (Undervisningsministeriet 2014 p. 3).

The resemblance with the Swedish curriculum is obvious:

Man's understanding of the past is interwoven with beliefs about the present and perspectives of the future. In this way, the past affects both our lives today and our choices for the future. Women and men throughout the ages have created historical narratives to interpret reality and shape their surroundings. A historical perspective provides us with a set of tools to understand and shape the present we live in.

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Teaching should contribute to pupils developing their understanding of how historical narratives are used in society and in everyday life. By this means, pupils should develop different perspectives of their own identities, values and beliefs, and those of others (Skolverket 2011 p. 163).

To what extent have the curriculum aims been achieved? Has school history abandoned the long-standing tradition of transferring a canonical master narrative of the nation's past? Thanks to recent studies from Denmark and Sweden, presented at the 28th Congress of Nordic Historians in 2014, we have at least a provisional answer: history education is undoubtedly heading towards its aims – but progress is slow and there is still a long way to go.

Nanna Bøndergaard Butters (2014) has performed a study built on observations of history lessons in three classes (4th, 8th and 9th grade) in an urban Danish *folkeskole* (compulsory school) with 60 % plurilingual students (42 different languages were represented among the students), followed up by teacher interviews. A central part of the study was to investigate whether teachers planned for discussions around concepts such as 'culture' and 'identity'. All teachers declared that they had not introduced these concepts. One teacher mentioned lack of time and the demand to reach the curriculum's learning outcomes. Another confessed that she never had thought about these concepts as related to the history subject. A third 'solved' the challenge of pluralism by simply denying it:

If their histories are given room in the course, you mean? But they too are part of this history... Actually, I've stopped thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them'. For me, it's important that no one is left behind, I am aware that they come from different places and different cultures, but a Danish home can be just as different as the home of a bilingual. I simply do not see veils, or 'here's a Somalian girl' (ibid.).

More common was an approach where society's heterogeneity and plurality were acknowledged in principle, but where a traditionally taught history of Denmark kept its role as a unifying narrative.

Butters' results have been confirmed by Claus Haas' findings from a nation-wide survey among History teachers in the Danish *folkeskole*, followed up by qualitative interviews with 20 teachers (Haas 2014a, b). Again, the interviewees at the same time acknowledged diversity and saw Danish culture and history as the obvious unifying factor:

In my opinion, education should prepare them for the multicultural society which they are about to enter as citizens. But I still believe that... what I like about the curriculum's canon after all... is that somewhere... a tiny bit of common thread through something... that we all can feel that right here in our multi-cultural, heterogeneous society, there still is something that bind us together somehow. I think that is a very good idea (Haas 2014a.).

Borrowing a concept from Gregory Ashworth, Haas characterises the typical Danish approach towards pluralism as 'Core +'. In Ashworth's definition, this concept slightly resembles the classic 'melting pot' metaphor, but with the difference that a substantial core of history and heritage is preserved. To this core can be added 'such other social groups as are seen to be unthreatening to the existence of the core and even contributing a useful addition

to its variety' (Ashworth 2007, p.20). However, Haas stresses that this approach is not the outcome of a deliberate choice - when present in the interview answers, it is conceptually vague and marked by a lack of critical reflection.

A certain vagueness and lack of rigour is also present in the preliminary results from a Swedish survey carried out as part of a research project on interculturalism and history education conducted by the historians and educationalists Per Eliasson, Maria Johansson, and Kenneth Nordgren (Eliasson 2014). The survey results indicate that history teachers are interested and eager to promote 'orientation competence' of the kind proposed by the German FUER project. They clearly see the relevance of and the possibilities inherent in their subject, but it is uncertain whether they actually contribute with narratives challenging or adding to the textbooks' 'master narratives'. It is also uncertain whether they, tied up in the straight-jacket of a detailed curriculum, can find the time for classroom work focussing on multi-perspectivity and different interpretations and explanations in history.

According to a deceptively simple but extremely fruitful explanatory model, outlined by the Swedish political scientist Lennart Lundquist (1992), Successful implementation of a reform or programme requires that those who are supposed to carry it out on the shop floor

have the understanding, the ability, and the will to implement the programme.

When it comes to the implementation of history education that is meaningful and sustainable in a society marked by a multi-dimensional plurality, we can therefore ask whether Lundquist's three requisites are met. Interview answers suggest that they lack the ability due to a shortage of appropriate learning material and best-practice examples and also of time needed – curricula do not stress procedural knowledge only, there is a huge portion of factual knowledge that must be given time if the learning outcomes are to be fulfilled. They also lack a profound understanding, firmly grounded in theory and established practice. There is, consequently, much to be done in teacher education institutions as well as in the field of continuous professional development, e.g. developing and defining conceptual frameworks for inter-cultural teaching and learning (both generic and subject-specific) as well as integrating inter-cultural perspectives on teaching and learning in subject-related courses in teacher education programmes.

The good thing is that the perhaps most important factor, a willingness to teach for a pluralistic, multi-cultural society, is present.

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