Surfing the past: digital learners in the history class

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Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 0

INTRODUCTION

-Canon clip' narrator [showing William V in his office, reading a book and then walking around]: Two hundred years ago, the Netherlands was a Republic. A country without a king. Instead, it had a State Holder [Governor]. He is the forefather of our Queen, thus a member of the Orange House. He was not, however, a king. Together with other important citizens he governed the Republic. William V was such a State Holder. He lived in a beautiful palace and acted as if he were a king. Actually he himself had the feeling that he was a king. Such was the extent of his power.

The Netherlands was not at peace under William V: it was at war with England. English warships were always lurking on the coast, which meant that Dutch commercial ships could not sail …

[Showing 3 men walking hastily] Many people started to complain. They blamed William V for all their problems. They thought that he was not governing the Republic well and that the power was in the hands of the same families. Moreover, the State Holder was acting as if he were a king …

-Braham [13 years], to himself: Guillotine!

-Canon clip goes on: It was time for a change. The unsatisfied citizens of the Netherlands wanted to take part in decision-making. Why couldn’t they govern their own cities? These people were called ‘the Patriots’. They were unsatisfied and they made it known …

-Canon clip narrator[Reading an excerpt from one Patriot’s petition] ‘… The State Holder controls the army, that is why the citizens have no power. They cannot undertake anything against William V. He can do what he wants’.

-Braham, to himself: Echt niet! [No way!] Pff! [His mouth mimicked a gun-shot with a fictive pistol – his hand – aimed at his temple].

-Canon clip goes on: …

0.1 History Education as Communication

The vignette above is a real-life scene from a history class. Braham, 13 years old, was in the second year of secondary education at the *Baarnse Lyceum* in the central Dutch city of Baarn. Together with his classmates, he was watching a Web-based clip from the Historical Canon of the Netherlands, as part of the history class. There are many ways and perspectives from which to analyse and understand the situation presented in this scene. One could look at it from the point of view of content and assert that the clip contributes to historical knowledge, as the narrative provides a number of details and a context for a historical event. With more focus on the motivation that led to selecting that particular event, on the pro-Patriots approach, one could maintain that the children were in fact involved in education relating to citizenship or Civics – the functioning of institutions at that time – via history. From another perspective, one could argue that the instantaneous interactions with digital media is a sign that history is better taught to the digitally-minded young generation with the use of digital media. Finally, a cognitive or adolescent psychological perspective could focus more on the verbal and gestural reactions as translating internal thinking processes.

The research presented in this book enquires into these and other similar and not-always-taken-for-granted interactions of young learners with digital media in history education. The history class is viewed as a communication process, involving a message, its representation in a medium or mediation, as well as its transmission, reception, internalisation or mental processing, and eventually the externalisation of that mental processing, in the form of verbal or gestural reactions. By stressing that the history education is first and foremost a communication process, I want to highlight the fact that each of the elements and actors in the process has a role to play, a role that can potentially have some impact on the other stages or elements of the process. To return to the vignette, it is clear that the message is the story of the Patriots; that the Historical Canon of the Netherlands [that is, the Commission that established it], via the teacher [who selected and played the clip, thereby conferring upon it some authority], is the sender of the message; that Braham and his classmates are the receivers; and that the Web and the video, or the Web-based video, are the channels through which the message is transmitted. It is worth wondering whether the reception would have been the same if, for instance, the audio narration had been replaced by subtitles, or if the audio had not been combined with images, or if the story had been read from a textbook, or if the story had emanated from an anonymous source.
There is no simple ‘yes or no’ answer to this, because one would need to observe all these scenarios before one could formulate a grounded answer. Hence the need to understand how the communication process is taking place, in particular how the World Wide Web is influencing that process. The central question in this research is thus: How does the Internet Generation use the Web and digital resources to learn about the past? I have explored this question theoretically on the one hand, through literature reviews, and empirically on the other hand, using qualitative and process-oriented approaches. The ultimate aim is to gain some understanding of what goes on in a history class where the Web is used. The starting point is that history education is much more than just the transmission of contents. It necessarily involves, among other things, the aims intended by the creator and the sender of the message, or by the system in which the communication process takes place, by the content selected or made available to achieve those aims, by the technologies used, and even by the aims of the audience for whom that communication is intended.

0.2 Why This Subject Now?

When I started this research in 2008, the Netherlands – and Western countries in general – had gone through almost two decades of identity crisis and cultural anxiety. An increasingly perceptible sense of cultural [and national] loss and disorientation prevailed in Western Europe during the late 1980s following globalisation and the political unification of Europe. That sense was subsequently exacerbated by some major events that served as catalysts, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and, ten years later, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. In the Netherlands, other catalysts left their marks on the crisis, namely the assassination of far-right political leader Pim Fortuyn in May 2002, and the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in November 2004.

History education was increasingly perceived as one efficient channel that could help re-boost the ‘threatened’ national identity and the declining spirit of citizenship. At the same time, a particular generation, the Internet Generation, had just completed its maturation and had become the prime target of the entertainment industry, which, through the Web, exposed them increasingly to a global culture and drove them to global citizenship. It appeared then, that the same channel could be profitably used to infuse the contents of [history] education to boost the shaping of a national-identity and national-citizenship (Van der Ploeg, 2002b: 30 & 31; Commissie, 2006a: 27 & 40). Related to the latter, in some ways, the third, par-
allel development was the digitisation of cultural heritage collections on a very large scale, and the transformation of part of them into multimedia educational modules (WTR, 1998; Raad voor Cultuur, [2003] 2004: 13; De Haan et al., 2006: 13).

Given the complexity, simultaneity and reciprocal influences of these developments, it would be interesting to try to understand how they function and intermingle in history education. For the first time in history, the pupils are described as more technology-literate than their teachers (Onderwijsraad, 2003: 37), and as multitasking, multiple-choice learners who have access to sources of historical information outside the classroom. In other words, alongside and in addition to the textbooks and the school’s library, the pupils could potentially have access to sources located anywhere in the world, official or unofficial, conventional or unconventional. After about fifteen years of the existence of all sorts of Web contents and about ten years of cultural heritage digitisation, it is important to understand the interaction of digitally-minded young people with all these kinds of sources both in terms of digital sources as opposed to their analogue counterparts and, more importantly, in terms of conventional sources as opposed to, or complemented with, unconventional ones. This evaluation is needed both from the classroom perspective, that is, from the practices within the four walls of the classroom, and from the perspective of pupils, namely, through their independent choices of sources.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the Internet Generation is conceptualised as presenting new learning styles that largely integrate digital media. However, as far as I could find, no research has yet concretely mapped these styles with regard to history education. Assumptions do exist that digital media turn the history class into a livelier environment, foster pupils’ historical thinking skills, and offer a greater variety of sources. The time is ripe to explore some of the how questions of those assumptions. In the chapters that follow, I intend to shed some light on the real-life history class, focusing on how the developments described above intersect, which, in the final analysis, will help detect the gaps, if any, between assumptions and practice, while raising new questions for further consideration and research. This will require a specific approach integrating both a theoretical part and an empirical one.

0.3 The Research Approach

The most suitable approach to this research would appear to be to first highlight the major issues and topics discussed in the last two decades with regard to history education, the Web and the digitisation of cultural heritage collections, and then to zoom in on case
studies. The first aspect of this approach includes, thus, an extensive literature review including scholarly, expert and professional literature, as well as official and policy documents. While the former offer an insight into theoretical and practical aspects, the latter reflect official responses and strategies for addressing major issues discussed in this research. It also appears useful to use newspaper articles, which have documented and commented upon the developments that form the nucleus of this research. These articles are particularly interesting because on the one hand they captured and confronted the views of scholars, experts and professionals with those of officials and politicians, while on the other hand, they depicted the prevailing mood in society *vis-à-vis* those developments. The review part is also enriched and complemented by incorporating interviews with scholars, experts and professionals in the various areas at the heart of this research.

Some of the assumptions that emerge from the reviews are explored in an empirical, process-oriented way. At this stage, I must confess that when I started putting ideas together for this project, my approach was opposite to the one I finally adopted. I had initially intended to explore the uses of Web-based cultural heritage resources in history education based on existing digitisation projects with an avowed educational orientation. At the time, I wanted to identify classes that were using materials from: *het Geheugen van Nederland* [the Memory of the Netherlands], a large-scale digitisation project by the National Library; *Teleblik*, another digitisation project of public radio and TV channels’ archives at the *Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid* [Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision]; and the Historical Canon of the Netherlands. My reasoning was as follows: with the Memory of the Netherlands, I would have a perfect case of government-sponsored memory and heritage materials coming into the classroom via the Web; with *Teleblik*, I would have a perfect case of mainstream-media memory serving as pedagogical aids; finally, with the Canon of the Netherlands, I would have an excellent case of the officially and carefully crafted narrative of the history of the Netherlands, reaching pupils via the Web.

This approach proved both difficult and, retrospectively, inefficient. It was extremely difficult to identify teachers who were regularly using materials from these individual projects. Individual contacts with teachers even revealed that some of these projects were still unknown to many teachers. Instead of selecting case studies based on digitisation projects, the new approach consisted of selecting them from among end-users, regardless of the sources they used to teach or learn history. In other words the focus was not on the content-creation side, but rather on the side of content-consum-
tion or users. The idea behind this case study-based approach is that pupils’ interactions with media, online sources, new-media-driven behaviours and attitudes could be observed, recorded and interpreted as they unfolded. Subsequently, the eventual impact of the ways the contents are created and organised on the end-users’ interaction with those contents could be analysed.

Later, after completing my two case studies, I realised that the initial approach would have been less productive, because the reality in the two classes I observed was that pupils used much more than one online source. The kinds of websites teachers and pupils would use were unknown to me. This seemed to me to be an exciting approach because it allowed me to observe matters unfolding without knowing in advance what they would be, or in which direction they were heading. Some of the projects on which I had initially intended to focus appeared either during the lessons or subsequently, in pupils’ written assignments. The new approach became, thus: observing the use of online resources, whatever their source, and mapping them, together with the different attitudes they apparently provoked.

0.4 The Structure of the Book

The two approaches discussed in the previous section correspond to the two parts of this book: the theoretical, historical part, which also includes the institutional and official perspectives on various subjects, and the process-oriented, empirical part. The first part aims to map the major themes discussed in the last two decades with regard to history education, the Web, the Internet Generation [that received such momentum from the Web] and the digitisation of cultural heritage collections. In Chapter 1, I start by identifying the aims of history education as they were conceptualised, various suggestions regarding teaching approaches and methods as well as the orientation that history education should take between the national and global study of history.

While understanding the present world has been presented as the main aim of history education, diverging views appear as to whether that understanding should be reached first and foremost by imparting a specific package of knowledge or by opening learners’ eyes and minds to the functioning of history as a discipline. While neither excludes the other, this chapter shows that the difference between the two lies in the stress put either on historical knowledge or on an awareness of the process leading to that historical knowledge. Questions also arise about whether the Netherlands should be the focus or whether it should be studied as part of larger structures – Europe or the world. This chapter also shows that mostly politicians advocate teaching ‘our history’, reflecting ‘our values’ and ‘our
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Chapter 2 takes up the second important theme of this research – the World Wide Web – its gradual but steady spread into the wider society, its late appearance in [history] education, its decisive fostering of the Internet Generation, and the early embrace it received from pioneering history teachers. Despite the fact that, from the late 1990s, the government started investing heavily in Information and Communications Technologies [ICT] in general, and in the Web in particular, some history teachers had been experimenting with the Web as early as the mid-1990s. While most other sectors were enthusiastically and excitedly embracing the new medium, the educational sector lagged behind. Despite this lateness, the school-going generation was already showing it had a special appetite for digital media. The Internet Generation – the cohort of people who were born around or after 1980 and who grew up with digital technologies (Van Steensel, 2000; Huysmans & De Haan, 2003: 177-178; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008: 239) – seemed to be attracted by the media that offered more choices, increased interactivity and freedom. They also appeared to be much more inclined towards images, either moving or still. At the time when the Web was becoming a more or less stable and reliable medium, the Internet Generation was also emerging as an inescapable population to be reckoned with. Hence the huge amounts of money pumped into education in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in order to get all schools connected to the Internet (Van Egmond et al., 2005).

At the same time, as Chapter 3 will show, digital contents are needed alongside the infrastructure. Though education is not the sole reason behind the digitisation of cultural heritage collections, it does occupy an important place in digitisation plans. The selection policies of most digitisation projects include the need to rescue fragile and decaying objects, starting with those deemed unique and of educative or historical value [preservation], and to make them accessible to the widest audience possible. Many of these projects pay special attention to the educative value of these new, digital collections and develop modules intended for teachers and pupils. I must also stress that many cultural heritage institutions have misunderstood digitisation as consisting of, and being restricted to, the conversion of analogue objects into digital objects. I will show that pedagogic-value-enhancing functionalities like hyperlinking – which is meant to connect related objects and thus create a context for those objects, and to increase the visibility of objects on the Web – have been largely neglected either for reasons related to corporate identity and other interests, to the still prevailing vision that heritage
professionals are not concerned with content organisation, and to
government-imposed restrictions regarding subsidised projects. As
time passes, however, more and more institutions are gradually em-
bracing social networking platforms, and encouraging teachers and
other education professionals to create collection-based educative
modules and share them online.

Some assumptions emerge from Chapters 2 and 3, which, as I
explained earlier, need to be explored in real-life classes. Chapter 4
opens the second part of this book and sketches briefly the meth-
odological approach I used to collect data while conducting my field
research. In addition to defining the research question and the three
assumptions I explore – all relating to the attractiveness of the Web,
its fostering of historical thinking and the fact that it offers a vari-
ety of sources – it also explains the ethnographic techniques I used
for two case studies, namely participant observation, interviews and
content analysis, as well as the recording techniques. In Chapters 5
and 6, I present the findings of the first and the second case studies,
respectively, in which each of the three assumptions is descriptively
discussed. The two case studies are about history classes at the more
or less traditional Baarnsch Lyceum and at the more or less digital-
media-dominated Helen Parkhurst Dalton School in Almere. Pupils
in both classes were aged 13-14 at the time of the field research
[2010].

While Chapters 5 and 6 present findings in a descriptive way,
Chapter 7 discusses them more analytically, establishing patterns,
and attempts to position these patterns in current debates. Based on
the findings of the two case studies, the attractiveness of the Web,
its fostering of historical thinking, and the variety of sources it of-
fers are presented not in isolation, but in a way that highlights their
interconnections. In addition, the convergence that results from the
mixture of conventional and unconventional sources is presented
as a new phenomenon brought about and encouraged by the Web.
This phenomenon is discussed not only with regard to pupils’ class
assignments but also with regard to heritage institutions, a few of
which have attempted to join that trend. This analytical chapter
ends with a discussion of some of the issues currently being debated,
especially, the digital divide in education and the concepts of ‘New
Learning’ and ‘New Heritage’, and the ways in which the two inter-
sect in history education.

Concluding this book and drawing from the research findings,
Chapter 8 makes some observations about what digitally-minded
young history learners appear to be doing with the Web, that is, the
ways in which, and the extent to which, they interact with Web-
based contents and digital media in general; about their perception
and uses of digitised cultural heritage contents; and about some of the ways in which the Web-driven learning styles discussed in this research appear to contribute to the key targets of history education in the lower cycle of secondary school. Some recommendations are formulated and perspectives for further research proposed.