Surfing the past: digital learners in the history class
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 1

Acquaintance With the Past: Which Past and Why?

Whatever its contents and aims might be, history education has always been an organised encounter of individuals and representations of events or actions that are held to have taken place in the past. The majority of scholars, theorists and thinkers who have discussed the teaching and learning of history agree that, like museums, libraries, courtrooms and monuments, history education is another channel society uses to inculcate the values, skills and knowledge deemed necessary for its members.\(^2\) Since the late 1960s, debates have been going on in the Netherlands – the country on which this research focuses – regarding the goals at which history education should be aiming.\(^3\) These debates took place within different frameworks and from different perspectives – scholarly, political, didactical and practical [involving teachers]. In this chapter, I want to introduce some of the most frequently recurring topics from the early 1990s to 2010 with regard to the goals assigned to history education, and the contents and approaches deemed suitable to achieve those goals. The early 1990s serve as point of departure because history education started undergoing unprecedented changes, both in terms of contents and learning/teaching approaches, following on the one hand the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and other related developments, and, on the other hand the birth of the World Wide Web.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) The following authors, among others, consider the preparation of individuals for valuable participation in social life as the primary goal of any educational system: Wells, 1938: 86; Cunningham, 1986: 6; Mayes & De Freitas, 2007: 19; Beetham & Sharpe, 2007: 2.

\(^3\) In 1968, the Dutch Government completed major educational reforms commonly referred to as the Mammoth Act \([\textit{Mammoetwet}]\). From that time on, history became compulsory only for the lower cycle [12–15 years] and became optional in the higher one. The time allotted to history was also reduced, and Civics was introduced as a new subject. Social studies were introduced as a new compulsory subject (Van Boxtel & Grever, in press; Wilschut, 2010: 702).

\(^4\) In his recent comparative study of history education in Germany, England, and the Netherlands, history didactics expert Arie Wilschut (2010: 711) described the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century [the two decades I am interested in] as a period of ‘Renewed interest in history teaching in politics and society’. The reason, he wrote, was, among others, the fact that the nation-state was becoming less recognisable as a consequence of: [1] the communication revolution [the Web] that made national boundaries less important for economic developments; [2] migration on a massive scale; and [3] the intensified integration of the European Union [following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union] (see also Stuurman & Grever, 2007: 2 & 7).
This chapter is, therefore, not intended as a critical review but rather as an attempt to map the ways in which scholars, education theorists and experts, politicians and other interested stakeholders perceive history education, its function and its goals. This mapping effort will provide one with a broad picture of history education during the last two decades, which is essential for any research enquiring into the uses of digital media and resources in that same history education. I will start by mapping out the discussions around the final goal of history education, which, despite its varying conceptualisations, is almost always considered to be ‘understanding of the [present] world’. I will then consider a second major discussion, \textit{i.e.}, the one about whether history education is a method – an approach – to attain understanding of the present world, or rather an end in itself, that is, \textit{the} understanding of the world. I will finally focus on contents, and how the various stakeholders have argued about their scope. While some have advocated an internationally, globally oriented approach, others have called for a more local, national orientation. Alongside the Dutch literature, I will also make reference, as and when relevant, to the writings of non-Dutch and non-history-education scholars.

1.1 Understanding the World

... history is \textit{for} human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as man ... Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is (Collingwood, [1946] 1994: 9-10).

Why is knowledge of the past considered essential if any one is to make sense of the present? This is the main question on which I want to focus on in this section, to try and discover the various explanations provided by scholars, didactics experts, and politicians. Three major answers emerge from these discussions: the present, to a great extent, makes sense in the light of some knowledge of the past; learning about the past is essential because it allows individuals to locate themselves historically, socially, and psychologically – in other terms, individual or community identity takes shape in the light of what the past is held to have been; finally, learning about the past is essential because the past is a reservoir containing values and
norms considered inspirational for present-day citizens. In this section, these three approaches are subjected to separate discussions.

In order to gather thoughts on this subject – the value and final goal of history [education] – the Dutch government-appointed History Education Advisory Commission, commonly known as the De Wit Commission, spoke in 1997-1998 with various social stakeholders who were not directly involved in the teaching of history. Regarding the aims of history education, all stakeholders ‘pointed in the same direction’:

General comments on the function or aim of history education referred to the cultivation of ‘historical awareness’ and, if possible, the stimulation of ‘interest for history’ … In addition, references were made to the importance of knowledge of the past as a required condition for a valuable citizen to be able to work in a democratic environment. It appears further that history is considered as a key discipline for the transmission of society’s values and norms (‘democratic spirit’, ‘tolerance’, ‘relativism’). Finally, the stakeholders placed a high value on the insight that history can give about the roots of national identity …

History education, as social stakeholders had expected, fulfills one major function: helping pupils, or citizens-in-making, to understand present social and political phenomena, concepts and structures. These expectations also include the various perspectives encompassed by the notion of ‘understanding of the world’: the cultivation of ‘historical awareness’, which implies, among other things, understanding present happenings in their broad historical contexts (discussed in length in Section 1.2), the training of valuable citizens and the insight into the roots of national identity.

In 1984, Alaric Dickinson and colleagues co-edited a book with the title Learning History, in which history education scholars P.J. Lee and P.J. Rogers addressed the following questions: ‘Why Learn History?’ and ‘Why Teach History?’ respectively, maintaining that learning history is essential and necessary because it provides one with a better understanding of present issues. People acquire a sound knowledge of their background and developments and can easily place them in their historical context (Lee, 1984: 13; Rogers, 1984: 21; see also Thompson, 1984: 171; Den Boer, 1998a: 99). In this

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5 Adviescommissie Geschiedenisonderwijs, Het verleden in de toekomst: Advies van de commissie geschiedenisonderwijs (The Hague, 1998). Psychologist Jean Piaget (1969: 137) criticised such an approach which ignores ‘the growing subject’ – the pupil – while paying solely attention to ‘initiating that individual’ from the adult point of view. In this respect, [history] education is conceived of as ‘a mere transmission of collective social values from generation to generation’.
perspective, contemporary gender roles and debates – for example: equal salary for equal work, women’s representation in institutions, etc. – are better understood when approached equipped with knowledge of their roles in domestic labour in the 19th and 20th centuries and the periods that followed (Barton & Levstik, 2004: 70-71). Although concerned with the past, not explicitly with the future, such knowledge ‘gives us a purchase (however slight) on the future’ like a ‘seaman [who] may know what weather is likely, without being able to explain how he knows’ (Lee, 1984: 11 & 12; see also Barton & Levstik, 2004: 80). For historian Pim den Boer (1998a: 99; see also Barton & Levstik, 2004: 71), the necessity and the importance of the knowledge of the past lay not only in its role in predicting the future, but also in what he termed ‘conscious functioning in the present’:

Only with the help of history is it possible to explain the dramatic events that took place in Yugoslavia. Only with the help of history is it possible to explain why Germany, though an economic giant, is still a political dwarf, and even to predict that the situation will not remain so for centuries.

According to former Dutch Socialist Party leader Jan Marijnissen [now retired] (2005: 3), this future-predicting/shaping role of history education is in fact inescapable, because ‘just and wise decisions about the future are unthinkable without knowledge of the developments that led to where we are now’. Addressing history teachers gathered at a congress in 2005, Marijnissen held that one can never know where one is going if one ignores the point of departure.

In addition, history education has been described as an identity-shaping framework. European history scholar Siep Stuurman (2006: 59) perceives history education as fulfilling two major tasks: the cognitive task, which refers primarily to the above-described task of enabling one to cope with the present world and to some extent predict the future, and the ideological or moralising task. The two tasks are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, ‘in history education both perspectives go mostly and smoothly hand in hand’. The cognitive part focuses on historical insight, while the ideological part is about identity-shaping. Identity, according to history theorist Ed Jonker (2006: 26), is boosted by history education through its provision of a ‘collective history that comprises elements of pride and shame’. However, history education expert Joke van der Leeuw-Rood (2001: 72) maintained that history education in Europe is inevitably ‘a selective representation of the past’ that refrains from highlighting those elements of shame. Instead, she noted, ‘[M]ost school history presents national mirrors of pride and pain, in which
pupils are made aware firstly of sufferings and secondly of credits to national pride’. In the process, ‘The damage done to others [elements of shame] and the mere fact that others can even have been victims of one’s own country are issues which hardly feature in any history curriculum or syllabus in Europe’ [text in brackets added]. Discussing the same subject in his attempt to answer the question ‘Why Study History?’, historical cognition scholar Samuel Wineburg (2001: 5-6) contended that history is a ‘basic human need’, as it entices us with the promise that we can locate our own place in the stream of time and solidify our identity in the present. By tying our own stories to those who have come before us, the past becomes a useful resource in our everyday life, an endless storehouse of raw materials to be shaped or bent to meet our present needs. Situating ourselves in time is a basic human need. Indeed, it is impossible to conceptualize life on the planet without doing so.

In this respect, then, identity and knowledge of the past are presented as non-dissociable and largely coinciding (Iggers, 1999: 49). This coincidence appears in the assignment letter, dated 26 May 2005, to the chairman of the Historical Canon Development Commission [the Canon Commission], in which Maria van der Hoeven, then Minister of Education, Culture and Science, set the goal of the Historical Canon:

The social developments in recent years once again push us to reflect upon the identity of the Netherlands and how it can be emphasised in education. The beginning of the twenty-first century seems to have speedily spoiled this identity-shaping process. Clearly a new ‘story of the Netherlands’ is needed.6

The minister was most likely referring to the rise and assassination of far-right political leader Pim Fortuyn in May 2002, followed by the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 after he had made a controversial film that criticised Islam.7 Both events provoked a shock response within Dutch society. Cultural historian Wijnand Mijnhardt (2005: 12) called these two events ‘our own September 11’ that prompted the government to redefine the norms and values of the national identity that everyone, especially immigrants, should acquire. The two murders made both

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7 The film, Submission (2004), is based on a script by Ayan Hirsi Ali, then a member of the House of Representatives.
society and politics nervous, to use the words of Dutch writer and journalist Lucas Ligtenberg (2005: 238). These events caused everyone, including the government, to wonder which approach people – especially pupils – should adopt vis-à-vis the Netherlands. The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy [WRR] observed that in recent years, efforts to ease the cultural malaise had focused on strengthening the national identity, which is regarded as a vehicle for national harmony and an example that migrants should follow and interiorise (WRR, 2007: 29-30).

Former Minister Van der Hoeven cited the problem of the Dutch identity in crisis on the one hand, and, on the other hand, proposed a solution to work on, namely establishing of a new ‘story of the Netherlands’ to be taught to children aged 6-7 and 7-14 years. This suggests that at the time when the Canon Commission was set up in 2005, a [hi]story was being taught that did not sufficiently, satisfactorily and explicitly highlight the Dutch identity. However, in one of its reports, the Canon Commission declared that it was an impossible mission to reflect a nation’s identity through a historical canon: ‘The Canon can reflect a nation’s collective memory, but never its identity’ (Commissie, 2006a: 23). For history theory and methodology scholar Maria Grever (2005: 27), the use of history education for the transmission of the ‘true Dutch identity’ is a ‘risky exploitation of history as a discipline’. She contended that the suggestion that there was a need to know one’s true identity was motivated much more by anguish [caused by ‘the social developments of recent years’] and by a neo-nationalist agenda [that originated from those developments] and would not be viable in the long run (Grever, 2006: 51).

Identity is also described as a paradoxical concept, as it is simultaneously uniting and disuniting. History education scholars Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004: 60) maintained that while national identity anchored in history is likely to be durable, it nonetheless has a dark side, since ‘[E]stablishing who we are also means establishing who we aren’t’. For Grever (2006: 34), identity is better conceived of as a multiplicity, since many frameworks exist, including the national one, in which it is manifested.

For their part, political stakeholders regard history education as the ideal framework for fostering human rights, anti-racism, collaboration, discipline, democratic spirit and tolerance (Adviescommissie, 2007: 41; Adviescommissie, 2006). A similar argument has been used with regard to historical canons. While they present the advantage of offering a workable and tangible framework for teachers (Grever, 2007: 41), they nonetheless have considerable drawbacks, namely contributing to stereotyping and ethnic categorisation. In this respect, Grever (2007: 42) argued that ‘Where there is a canonized nation, there will also be non-canonized “others”’. 

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According to Marijnissen (2005: 3), those values and norms ‘have crystallised themselves in people’s struggle for a better way of life’, and ‘we inherit them from our forefathers’. The duty of political actors and society at large, he maintained, is then ‘to actualise and maintain those norms and values, and in doing so, maintain the bridge of civilisation’. That bridge often takes the form of canonisation of those among the ‘forefathers’ whose deeds are deemed outstanding. In the political discourse, they have been referred to as being ‘important figures’ in Dutch history (Plasterk, 2007b: 1-2). Barton and Levstik (2004: 105-106) called for caution when teaching about heroic figures, arguing that since each hero has both positive and negative character qualities, the focus should be not on the person but on his or her heroic actions.

The last form in which ‘understanding of the world’ has been discussed is with regard to citizenship education. The official and political view is that history education is the main support for ‘our democratic state’ and it is there in order to foster ‘civic, democratic values’ among the Dutch. For this, and in addition to the Canon project, the government disbursed 1 million euros in June 2006 to start up a two-year project known as the Centre for History and Democracy. Explaining and advocating the use of the Historical Canon, Van der Hoeven’s successor, Ronald Plasterk (2007b: 2) contended that the Canon encourages ‘the democratic spirit and active citizenship’, as many of its windows offer ‘an overview of the basic values of our democracy’. For this reason, the Canon should be introduced into schools, precisely into history education, because, ‘knowledge of history and democracy begins at school’.

Throughout their book, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, Barton and Levstik (2004: 12) used a different concept of citizenship education. In the view of these two authors, democracy is better served in history education when the pupils are told about, and exposed to, diverse standpoints, competing perspectives among which none reigns as supreme [sacralised or canonised]. Pupils learn more about democratic values when they deliberate about those standpoints, which not only triggers reflection and mutual understanding, but also invites them to ‘[t]ake action toward a mutually satisfying future’ (*Ibid.*: 34-35). This approach to citizenship education as embedded in history education is the opposite of the ‘our democratic values/spirit’ approach, as it emphasises democratic ex-

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experience – e.g., participation, pluralism, deliberation – rather than selected narratives about democratic values.

The inclination towards ideologically tainted citizenship education has prompted scholars’ suspicion vis-à-vis politicians who claim to be enthusiastic about history education. Politicians, they maintain, want a one-sided, feel-good history, which neglects history as a cognitive subject (Stuurman & Grever, 2007: 12; see also Voss & Carretero, 1994: 6). Historian Hermann von der Dunk (2005: 215), for instance, considers that the political plea for more history in the curriculum is simply a call for a chronologised nationalism. This remark is made plausible by the repeated and emphatic use of ‘our’ and ‘own’ by the various officials: ‘their [pupils’] own culture and that of others’ (State Secretary for education Tineke Netelenbos in 1998), ‘our democratic state’ (Ministers Maria van der Hoeven and Alexander Pechtold in 2006), and ‘our democracy’ (Minister Ronald Plasterk in 2007). Many scholarly and expert voices have been raised to suggest that history education should not be subjected to that kind of citizenship education (Van Vree, 1998a: 51; Wilschut, 2005: 32).

This section has attempted to capture and map some of the major debates about history education in the Netherlands between the 1990s and 2010. I have identified an understanding of the present world as the ultimate, all-inclusive aim of history education, while pointing out the various, often conflicting ways in which that understanding is perceived. In one sense, understanding the present world means being able to decipher present phenomena and situations with the help of historical knowledge; in another sense, it means regarding one’s peculiarities as emanating from, and being rooted in, the past; in yet another sense, it means acquiring the knowledge or experience of democratic values deemed necessary if one is to function as a valuable citizen in society. The prime goal of this section was to pave the way not only for the subsequent sections in this chapter, but also for the next two chapters, where the same themes of coping with the present based on knowledge of the past, identity-shaping, and the two approaches to citizenship education [as narrative or as experience] keep coming back in different perspectives.
1.2 **Historical Knowledge and Historical Awareness**

Another ridiculous mistake is that they make them study history: they think that history is within their reach, because it is but a compilation of facts. But what does the word ‘facts’ mean? Do they think that the connections underlying historical facts are so easy to grasp, that the ideas about them effortlessly form themselves in the children’s mind? Do they think that the true knowledge of events is separable from the knowledge of their causes, of their effects, and that the historical account is less based on the principle that you can know one without the other? If you see only external and strictly physical movements in men’s actions, then what do you learn in history? Absolutely nothing … (Rousseau, [1768]1966: 136).

Unlike the first section, which focused on the aims of history education, this one concentrates on how history education fosters one’s understanding of the world [in the various meanings it bears], based on the scholarly and expert literature, as well as policy documents and politicians’ writings and views. This section aims to bring together the various main approaches to teaching history – not as practiced in history education, but rather as perceived by the various stakeholders – and group them into two broad categories. In the first place, I will deal with the approach that advocates a history education centred on identity-shaping and citizenship education in the ideologically motivated sense referred to in the previous section. This category comprises an approach to history education that consists of conveying a body of historical knowledge, deemed necessary to strengthen identity and citizenship. In the second place, I will discuss the other broad category that includes two approaches: the ‘historical awareness’ approach, which is not centred on any fixed body of knowledge but rather on history as a discipline; and the one that lies in between the ‘historical knowledge’ approach and the ‘historical awareness’ counterpart. One must suppose that this in-between approach will contain a short-list of core, must-know, historical facts and events.

The category described as ‘history as identity-shaping and citizenship education’ is best reflected in the reports of the Canon Commission, which proposed fifty windows containing a body of knowledge – people, events, and processes deemed the most significant in Dutch history and culture (*Commissie*, 2006a; *Commissie*, 2006b) –primarily designed for educational purposes. The stress is clearly on knowledge of selected people, events, and processes with a perceived ideological, political aim to foster citizenship and national identity. As shown by the assignment letter to the Canon
Commission cited in the previous section, the aim of the Canon would be to tell the ‘new story of the Netherlands’ by defining the ‘core’ historical knowledge that makes up that story. The must-know list of the new story includes William of Orange [1533-1584], the ‘rebel nobleman’ who became the ‘father of the country’ after a long battle against Spanish troops;10 and King William I [1772–1843], the first ‘king of a unified state’ who, in 1830, sent troops to Brussels to oppose Belgium’s independence, though to no avail.11 It also includes ‘The Patriots’ [1780–1795], the ‘[C]itizens who up until then had had almost no say in the administration of the towns and the country itself’, and who organised volunteer corps and rebelled against State Holder William V, whom they regarded as a dictator;12 and ‘The Dutch East India Company’ [1602–1799], whose first sailing expedition opened a trade route to the East, and which later ‘developed into a power to be feared’.13

This approach to history as aiming at achieving citizenship education and fostering identity is mostly advocated and supported by politicians. The view of former Socialist Party leader Marijnissen (2005: 3), that values and norms [constituting the Dutch identity] ‘have crystallised themselves in people’s struggle for a better way of life’, implies that pupils should be taught about those people and their struggle in order to perpetuate those values and norms. This approach emerged in the 1990s after about three decades of history education that focused on enquiry skills, to the detriment of a historical overview (Van Boxtel & Grever, in press; Wilschut 2010: 711). At that time, the national identity crisis that was already perceptible in the late 1980s following the political integration of Europe and globalisation, was reaching its paroxysm: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and that of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent acceleration of the European integration, were all perceived as threats to the national identity.

The second category could be called the ‘history education as historical awareness’ category, as it places much more stress on the way history functions as an academic discipline, rather than on the absorption of historical accounts. Within this broad category two approaches can be distinguished: one that needs no particular key

or core historical events or figures as starting point, and one that works with a few key, core historical events and figures alongside which others can be added *ad libitum* during the learning process. To be able to distinguish between these two in the paragraphs below, I will dub the first one the ‘no-must-know and historical awareness’ approach, and the second the ‘must-know and historical awareness’ approach.

The ‘no-must-know and historical awareness’ approach is best embodied by the 2001 report by the Commission for Historical and Social Education, commonly known as the De Rooy Commission. This report was a follow-up of the 1998 De Wit Commission report, upon which to some extent it continued to build. It shows that unambiguous stress was placed on historical awareness and the skills and methods that contribute to this awareness. It provided a reference framework of ten eras and left room and freedom to teachers to fill in the contents. Reacting to the criticism that some eras were given inappropriate names, Arie Wilschut, one of the architects of the De Rooy Commission’s report, argued that the naming of eras had no scientific pretention whatsoever, as the main goal was merely to find names with a such strong significance that they immediately bring to mind an image of the past. When pupils ultimately realise that the naming is just a way to help them learn history, that history cannot actually be divided into eras, they will have acquired the necessary historical awareness, including relativisation (Wilschut, 2009: 33).

In this light, then, the choices made by teachers only serve as illustrations because pupils are able, and trained, to make their own choices. One pupil might choose to consider the Reformation movement from Luther’s or Calvin’s perspective, while another might prefer to handle it from Zwingli’s or Erasmus’ perspective. Proponents of this way of making sense of historical processes want to make pupils understand that history is a multiple-perspective discipline, where ‘[T]here is no one true story about the past, but a multiplicity of complementary, competing, or clashing stories’ (Lee, 2004: 129; see also Grever, 2007: 42). For that reason, the De Rooy Commission avoided the term and concept of ‘canon’ and preferred ‘historical awareness’, in order to prevent any fixedness and arbitrariness of the curricular contents (De Rooy, 2001: 2-3).

Similar views were expressed in a book published in 2000 with the title *New Learning*, by education scholar Robert-Jan Simons and his colleagues. For them ‘[F]inding one’s way in the growing body of knowledge becomes more important than having many factual

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details in memory’ (Simons et al., 2000: 2). Aligning themselves behind this approach, history education scholars Carla van Boxtel and Jannet van Drie (2004: 8) pleaded for ‘historical reasoning’, which consists of training pupils on how to provide grounded interpretations of historical sources and facts. They consider this argument-supported interpretation of the past to be one important goal of history education.

Peter Fisher (2002: 2 & 5) and his ‘Thinking Through History’ team at the Newcastle University Department of Education also perceive history education as a framework in which ‘pupils should be challenged to think’, and in which teachers should be ‘teaching thinking’. They defined ‘teaching thinking’ as creating challenging learning experiences that call for high level thinking, including information processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking, and evaluation. Inspired by the findings at Newcastle University, since 2002, a group of Dutch didactics experts and history teachers associated with the University of Nijmegen have been exploring a similar teaching approach, the ‘Active historical thinking’ approach (Havekes et al. 2005; Havekes et al. 2009; Havekes et al. 2010). The essence of this approach is to have pupils realise that a historical reality is not self-evident and ready-made for assimilation, but rather subject to judgment from a given historical perspective (Havekes et al. 2009: 49). Pupils are therefore stimulated and motivated to think not only about their own answers but also about those of their classmates in order to ultimately come to a better argumentation regarding a particular question. For this to succeed, teachers are expected to ask relevant questions, and stimulate and guide discussions.

Harry Havekes and his colleagues have provided many learning activities and models, including, among others, the ‘Living Graph’ [Levende Grafiek] model, whereby pupils are requested to choose statements and position them in the right place in the graph and justify their choice (Havekes et al., 2005: 18-26); the ‘Mystery’ model, whereby pupils list a number of causes and consequences of one particular historical event (ibid: 27-38); and the ‘Odd One Out’ [Welk Woord Weg] model. In the latter, pupils are presented with a list of names – for instance, Stalin, Mussolini, Hirohito, Hitler – and are asked to proceed to eliminate them, with arguments, by answering the following question: ‘who should be removed from the list?’ Some would remove Hirohito arguing that he is the only Asian on the list. Others would remove Hitler as the only one who conceived and executed a genocide, yet others would remove Mussolini as the only one without a moustache, and so on (Havekes et al. 2010: 52). In this case, as in the Thinking-Through-History approach, ‘there
is no one single correct answer, and the teacher does not necessarily offer a best solution’ (Fisher, 2002: 5).

The ‘must-know and historical awareness’ approach is best embodied in the 1998 De Wit Commission report, which attempted to ensure a degree of balance in the knowledge – awareness relationship. Asked ‘specifically to give its judgment about such aspects as facts and skills, thematic approach or chronological overview, and the underlying relationships between them’ (Adviescommissie, 1998), the Commission stated that ‘people, events, and processes are only understood when placed in their historical context’ (Ibid.). This implies a balance between a certain body of knowledge [people, events, and processes] and enquiry skills [placing people, events, and processes in a historical context]. Regarding citizenship education, the Commission stressed the exceptional importance of history education in shaping ‘fully-fledged citizens’ able to function in the Dutch democracy, in perpetuating values and norms based on events of the past, and in contributing to social cohesion (Ibid.). The Commission was prudent on the facts–chronology versus skills–thematic issue and ‘abstained from opting for one approach rather than another’, as history education offers enough space for both and their combination (Ibid.).

I should mention here that I have discussed the two categories separately only to give some structure to this review. In reality – that is, in the history class – things happen differently, as the various approaches are intermingled depending upon, among other things, the subjects and teachers’ own perceptions. It appears to be a matter of emphasis rather than of clear-cut differentiating aspects. In other words, a teacher who is inclined toward citizenship education and identity shaping together with the corresponding fixed body of knowledge, will also convey some enquiry and awareness-creating skills, though as a secondary aim. The same goes for a teacher inclined toward the ‘no-must-know and historical awareness’ approach, who chooses examples while discussing a given concept and, thus, will inevitably introduce a certain body of knowledge [however small and flexible]. At his stage, it is important that I clarify this in order to avoid any misconception of the two categories as two separate and mutually exclusive blocks.

Another important element in the discussion has been the notion of the relevance of historical knowledge taught in schools. In their study of the developments in history education during the last four decades [1968-2008], Van Boxtel and Grever (in press) showed how the relevance of historical knowledge has shifted over time. For instance, from the late 19th century until the 1960s, only historical knowledge that nourished patriotism and national feelings was
deemed relevant, with a strong emphasis on the ‘great-man’-view (see also Wilschut, 2010: 700); from the late 1960s until the 1990s, contemporary history gained relevance, as the aim was ‘to provide students with more insight into contemporary society by explaining its historical development’; from the 1990s, as shown above, historical awareness gained greater prominence. History textbook author Herald Buskop and colleagues (1998: 12) added another dimension to the discussion:

The pupils live, hopefully, another half-century after their school time. Is there any list of facts that could remain relevant all their lives without needing any expansion? No one can think of such a list. In that case, who is to teach the [former] pupils how to collect new facts once they have left school? Anyway what sense does knowledge of facts make if one is not taught how to handle it?

The authors are clearly pleading for more historical awareness than for ‘any list of facts’ that would only be relevant for a given period of time and irrelevant or out of date for another. This suggests one important thing, namely that historical knowledge is one side of the coin, the other side being the indispensable skills that would enable former pupils to make sense of new historical facts deemed relevant at a later moment, or old facts that were not handled during their school time. For Buskop and colleagues, a former pupil should be able to study the subject himself, to ‘look at so-called facts with a new eye’ (Ibid.: 8).

The suggestion is that pupils, while trying to understand historical events, should acquire historical literacy (Lee, 2007: 51), simultaneously [or even in advance]. Historical literacy is the ability to understand how historical accounts of events come into being, that those accounts are not copies of the past, that they may conflict with one another, that the agents’ beliefs and intentions play a role in the shaping of those accounts,\(^{15}\) that some accounts may be simplifications of complex events, and that some may be claimed to have greater importance than others (see Perfetti et al., 1994: 258; Barton & Levstik, 2004: 84; Lee, 2004: 139; Lee, 2007: 51). In other words, pupils need to acquire contents or knowledge while learning about enquiry skills in order to be able to properly understand those contents. ‘When understanding is needed’, as claimed

\(^{15}\) In this respect, historian of war Michael Howard (1991: 2) maintained in his book – The Lessons of History – not only that historians’ agenda is set by current controversies, whether we wish it or not, but also that ‘Historians are as prone as anyone else unconsciously to formulate conclusions on the basis of temperament, prejudice and habit, and then collect evidence to justify them’ (see also De Certeau, 1974: 8-9; Lowenthal, 1985: XXII-XXIII; Howard, 1991: 11).
by Barton and Levstik (2004: 189), ‘enquiry appears to be one of the best ways to get there’. Historian of war Michael Howard (1991: 13-14) extended the metaphor used by colleague David Lowenthal (1985) – that the past is a foreign country – to conceptualise those enquiry skills as the language spoken in that country, and without which very little would be understood about that country’s beliefs and assumptions.

This section opened by drawing a distinction between two ways in which approaches to history education have been conceptualised. On the one hand, I referred to certain views as being part of the ‘history as citizenship education’ approach. These views stress the transmission of a body of knowledge reflecting the values and norms considered indispensable for citizens. On the other hand, under the ‘history as historical awareness’ category I placed those views that stress history as a discipline rather than as the mere assimilation of a given body of knowledge. I have signalled that, in practice, these approaches are not separated by some invisible wall but are often intermingled either consciously or unconsciously. The main point that emerges from this section is that history education is not merely an overview of historical facts, nor is it the provision of skills and reflexes for handling historical knowledge, but a combination of both, with more emphasis being placed on one or the other, depending on one’s own pedagogical approach (see Van Vree, 1998a: 52; Haydn, 2003: 32; Van Drie, 2005: 8). The next section takes up a closely related discussion about which contents are suitable for history education.

### 1.3 World History and Local History

In the United States to-day history is taught far too generally from the national point of view. Frequently pupils are given an unconscious impression that the world began in the American year 1776! This may be patriotic, but the narrowing influence of such teaching upon the pupil is evident. Only by learning history as world history and all subjects on the basis of the universe, can the child grow into a complete man or woman as well as a good citizen (Parkhurst, [1922] 1924: 58).

The contents of history education are meant to facilitate one’s understanding of the world [as discussed in Section 1.1] and to serve as materials with which to convey a certain body of knowledge or exercise one’s enquiry skills (Section 1.2). Discussions about contents are thus closely linked to discussion about the aims of, and approach to, history education, because contents are designed according to, and based on, the aims to be achieved and the approaches
to be implemented. This section distinguishes two trends in these discussions, namely the world history trend, which puts forward an international approach to history education, and the local, national history trend, which focuses on specific localities, regions or nations. In what follows, I will review the scholarly and expert literature, mostly Dutch but also international, as well as policy documents and politicians’ opinions. While considering the world history trend and its local counterpart, I will highlight the points at which the two intersect.

The notion of world history or the international approach to history teaching in Western Europe received unprecedented momentum after World War I, when it was realised that history teaching had contributed to war and could contribute to its prevention. In 1921, scholars from ten countries met at a conference in Geneva to discuss the teaching of history and the international spirit. One major conclusion was that ‘teachers should have in mind this idea that universal history is a reality, the sole historical reality … to which national history is contingent’ (Claparède, 1931: 15-16). Writing about the United States, where history education is dominated by national history, Barton and Levstik (2004: 37-38) advocated the teaching of world or humanistic history, arguing that it would promote ‘an expanded view of humanity’. Their main argument is that studying people, cultures, and social institutions different from those in one’s own country would enable pupils to ‘understand the multiple ways of being human’, thereby making them ‘really Competent Receiver[s] for world affairs’ (Wells, 1938, xiv). In doing so, as suggested by Howard (1991: 18), pupils learn how to ‘step out of their cultural skins and enter the minds of others’, including their own forebears but also their contemporaries with a different heritage.

Stuurman is among the pro-world history advocates in the Netherlands, as he maintained that the ‘Dutch Nation’ refers to the Dutch people rather than to the small territory at the deltas of the Rhine and the Meuse. His suggestion is, therefore, that since the Dutch were present in other parts of the world in past centuries, and since people from other parts of the world found themselves in the Netherlands [in the past], the teaching of history should place that tiny European territory in its global network and context (Stuurman, 2006: 60). Advocates of world history suggest that world history should be like an inverted pyramid, starting with the nation [or the locality, or the region], and establishing ‘global connections’ (Stuurman, 2006: 68; also see Mijnhardt, 2005: 17), because 21st century citizens are both national and global citizens (Stuurman & Grever, 2007: 3). For instance, the Batavian Revolution, which is part of local, national history, should be taught in a comparative
way, even from a ‘non-domestic perspective’, which would constitute another way of mapping the evolution of the Netherlands (Stuurman, 2006: 75-76; see also Stuurman & Grever, 2007: 8).

As it appears here, the world history approach to history education contents includes both the domestic and the international perspectives of historical events and processes. While attempting to establish a new balance between knowledge of ‘core’ events from the past and their contextualisation (see Section 1.2), the De Wit Commission attempted at the same time to introduce a similar balance between the domestic and international perspectives of historical events and processes (Adviescommissie, 1998). Its report confirmed the need for enough national history, but indicated that the local, national approach was only suitable for primary education, while the European [thus international] approach was recommended for the lower cycle of secondary education. One of the major recommendations was to establish a historical canon, a concept the Commission used in a very broad sense. That canon would be taught differently but in a complementary way in the primary school and in the lower cycle of secondary school. In primary school, subjects like pre-history, the Romans, the Middle Ages, the Republic in the 17th century, etc., would be handled with a particular focus on the Netherlands. The aim at this level would be to foster the communal awareness of all school-going children for their own past and their own culture, and cultivate a critical attitude toward them [italicisation is mine]. In the lower cycle of secondary school, the same topics would return but now they would be placed in a ‘broader European perspective’, coupled with a limited number of diachronic key concepts and skills (Ibid.).

Although this approach employs expressions such as ‘their own past and their own culture’, it could not be called purely national or local history, nor can it be fully considered as world or international history. Rather, it is an in-between approach that provides room for contents that make pupils aware of ‘their own past and their own culture’, while [at a later stage] making them aware that other perspectives and other cultures exist elsewhere. In other words, it is meant to ‘help students achieve a better appreciation of not only one’s own country but also how one’s own country is a player in the increasingly broader global perspective’ (Voss & Carretero, 1994: 6).

Advocates of local history have suggested other ways of conceptualising the contents of history education. Rural and economic historian Pim Kooij (1996: 5-6), for instance, proposed the ‘local environment as a laboratory’ model, arguing that the local small details contain aspects that could be observed globally, such as the banal
neighbourhood disputes that bore World War germs’. Kooij was implying that local history is global history in miniature. For him, the house where a pupil lives, the street where it is built, the area and the region in which it is located have morphological, demographic, social, economic, political, cultural, and religious aspects that are able to present a bigger picture than just that of the small localities whose history is being studied. In this respect, what is observable on a local level can be generalised to an extent or offer the possibility of understanding similar situations in other parts of the world. Hans van der Linde (1997: 2-3) of the Brabant Regional History Foundation [Stichting Brabantse Regionale Geschiedbeoefening], explained that the strength of this model resided in the fact that ‘one’s own local environment offers a familiar and trusted field … [with] concrete links to the past … [and] images of the past and the present side by side. Here, knowledge and emotion play an important role’.

A 1997 enquiry in 26 European countries and Israel, into the interest of young people in history, showed that this was the approach most valued by pupils. They wanted to learn about ‘family history’ and – specifically for the Netherlands – ‘the history of ordinary people’s everyday history’. Joke van der Leeuw-Rood and Marjon Kuiper (1997: 13-14), who conducted the Dutch part of the study in 21 classes in 14 different schools, with a total of 596 pupils and 21 teachers responding, noted that the Dutch demonstrated the most interest in their own national history. National history as used in this context is not necessarily opposed to world or international history, because, as the laboratory model discussed above shows, the family, ordinary local people, the nation, etc., can serve as laboratories, from which some transnational generalisations may be made.

Despite the De Wit Commission’s call for a canon, whose implementation would be Netherlands-oriented for primary school and Europe-oriented for the lower cycle of secondary school, no concrete steps were taken in that direction. The De Rooy Commission was appointed in 1999 to ‘translate the main recommendations [of the De Wit Commission] into new history education targets and examination programmes’ (Netelenbos, 1998), but did not suggest making a canon (De Rooy, 2001: 2-3). Instead, it proposed ten historical eras, which constitute a reference framework that allows teachers to start their lessons somewhere, without actually imposing restrictions as to where they should begin or end (Commissie, 2001: 20). Such a framework could accommodate both local and world history approaches.

The Netherlands-focused, national history inspired Canon – thus different from the partly Europe-oriented one proposed by the De Wit Commission – did not appear until October 2006, when
another commission – the Canon Commission – handed over its first report containing fifty windows – www.entoen.nu – which it regarded as most representative of the Dutch history and culture, and therefore intended for all Dutch citizens (Commissie, 2006a: 27). Political actors warmly welcomed the Canon, which, according to Plasterk (2007b: 1), then Minister of Education, Culture and Science, corresponded with the motto of the government then in place: ‘Living together, working together’. Plasterk made it clear that the Canon, with its selected events and figures drawn from the country’s past, fulfilled a political task by making the encounter between the Dutch – either native or naturalised – and that past easier (Ibid.: 1-2).

Five months prior to publication of the first report of the Canon Commission, Jan Marijnissen, then opposition Socialist Party leader and Maxime Verhagen, then leader of the Christian Democratic Party fraction in the House of Representatives, co-authored an article in Trouw – a Dutch daily newspaper – and confirmed this explicit unanimity of viewpoint in the matter of national history and identity. Their opinion reflects the motivations behind the national history [and culture] contents of the Canon: ‘With the Internet and globalisation, but also the individualisation of society and the arrival of more people with different cultural backgrounds, it seemed as if we had no longer had a collective identity’ (Marijnissen & Verhagen, 2006). This approach to national history could be interpreted as a limitation of the laboratory model discussed above. Local figures, events, and processes deemed significant were included in the Canon with the purpose of strengthening a threatened ‘collective identity’, rather than the one of facilitating global understanding based upon them. It is also the reverse of world history, as discussed above, which integrates non-domestic approaches to domestic historical events and processes [globalisation].

Satisfied with the ten-era framework, which, as mentioned above, imposes neither national, nor world history contents, many history education scholars and didactics experts resisted the imposition of the Canon as a compulsory component of history education in the lower cycle of secondary school.16 The Advisory Council of the

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16 According to Hubert Slings, one of the architects of the Canon, acceptance was almost total in primary schools (Author interview with Hubert Slings, director of Stichting Entoen.nu, the Canon of the Netherlands Foundation, The Hague, 16 April 2009).
admitted that the Canon is a ‘source of inspiration’, but rejected the idea of making it a ‘compulsory prescription’. For that Council, the Canon contains ‘extremely detailed’ facts, which prevents it from fitting in with the prevailing policy of ‘deregulated and globalising education’ (IVGD, 2007: 1; see also Grever, 2006: 44; Grever et al., 2006: 116-117). The use of globalising here suggests that the Council perceived the Canon as rather nationalising. The ultimate effort to oppose the Canon as a compulsory component of the key targets [kerndoelen] of history education in the lower cycle of secondary school resulted in a petition sent to the House of Representatives on 30 October 2008.\footnote{18}

A similar joint action had taken place in 2006, just after the first report of the Canon Commission, when prominent historians from Rotterdam Erasmus University and the University of Utrecht published their *Controversies Surrounding the Canon* [*Controverses rond de Canon*] (Grever et al., 2006). In these *Controversies*, they mainly criticised the Canon as a visible sign of the prevailing political anguish that had led to some forms of neo-nationalism (Grever, 2006: 51; Stuurman, 2006: 59), as lacking a global perspective (Stuurman, 2006: 68), as being too *monoculturalist* (Grever, 2006: 53), as lacking the culture-shaping aspects of religions (Jonker, 2006: 25), or simply as undermining the study of history through sacralising some parts of the past (Ribbens, 2006: 83). In the end, following a recommendation of the State Council [*Raad van State*] in 2009, the Canon was not proclaimed compulsory in the lower cycle of secondary school. Arguments of the State Council included the fact that given the depth of the details, the specificity and the [large] number of windows [50], the Canon could not fit in the Key Targets of history education, but, rather, it could serve as a source of inspiration (*Raad van State*, 2009: 2).

\footnote{17} Founded in 2003, the IVGD is a collaborative organ involving among others, the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the VU University Amsterdam, and primary school training colleges [PABO]. It mainly conducts research, offers refresher courses to history teachers and develops teaching aids.

\footnote{18} The 30 October 2008 letter addressed to Members of the House of Representatives on the subject: ‘Verplichte invoering van de “Canon van Nederland”’, was signed, among others, by its initiator Arie Wilschut of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Carla van Boxtel of the University of Amsterdam’s Graduate School of Teaching and Learning, T.F. van der Heughten of the Tilburg Fontys Institute, Harry Havekes of the Nijmegen Radboud University, Paul Holthuis of Groningen University, Stephen Klein of the University of Leiden’s Graduate School of Education. The 23 signatories, all historians or history didactics experts, warned the House that the Canon, as a compulsory component of the history education in the lower cycle, would hamper the freedom of choice that Dutch schools had long enjoyed.
The aim of this section was to briefly map the major discussions regarding the contents of history education. I have distinguished two main approaches in the ways those contents have been conceptualised. On the one hand the international approach to history education contents has been discussed as allowing the consideration of local events, phenomena, or processes not only from local, national point of views, but also from international perspectives. On the other hand, the local, national approach has been described as presenting two faces: one consisting of studying local history as a sample or case study that leads to understanding of much broader, global mechanisms; and one that avoids understanding of the local within, and in relation to, the global.

1.4 Summary

The foregoing has presented some of the ways in which scholars, history education experts, and politicians have conceptualised ‘understanding of the world’ as the main goal of history education. I have mentioned how history education has been presented as preparing pupils so they can make sense of situations, phenomena and events in the present, while enabling them to predict what the future could be like. History education has also been considered as a pipeline linking pupils to ‘their roots’ and, thereby making them aware of their identity. I have pointed out that while politicians are keen on this way of ‘understanding the world’, scholars and history didactics experts are opposed to its being part of history education. Closely related to this is an understanding of the world through the lenses of citizenship education. Education officials and politicians find it a key aim of history education, as it tells the story of ‘our democratic values’ and ‘our culture’. Opposing this view, history education scholars feel that the best way to prepare democratically-minded citizens is to let them practice democratic values during history education.

Two broad categories of approaches to history education have been distinguished. On the one hand there are politicians – the ones mostly interested in history education as an identity-fostering and citizenship education framework – who place a specific body of knowledge, with a set of ‘must-know’ figures and events, at the heart of history education. On the other hand, there are others, mostly scholars and history didactics experts, who consider the aim of history education as making pupils alert to, and aware of, how history functions as a discipline by, for instance, acknowledging the multiple perspective character of historical accounts, and questioning the taken-for-grantedness of accounts. However, one trend within this approach presents a limited body of key historical knowledge as sine
qua non. A related topic in this discussion is the relevance of any given body of knowledge at any given time. Some history education scholars propose a balance, allowing pupils to know subjects relevant to their era, while understanding how history works in order to be able to interpret for themselves historical events and processes that are relevant at later dates.

Finally, this chapter discussed the contents that the various stakeholders have presented as suitable for history education. The scholarly literature presents world history, or the international approach to history, as the most suitable form in which history education contents should be delivered. As such, though, world history does accommodate local, regional and national histories, it goes beyond local boundaries to integrate non-national perspectives and contexts. Some advocates of local history have also conceptualised local historical figures, events and processes as laboratory materials capable of making the study of history more direct whilst also leading to a much broader, transnational, understanding. On the politicians’ side, national history, protected from the influence of globalisation and the effects of immigration, and aimed at preserving and perpetuating the national identity, appears to be the most suitable form that history contents should take. Whereas this chapter has focused on the aims, approaches to, and contents of history education, the next will discuss two other major themes of this research, namely the World Wide Web, which is the medium upon which my research focuses, and the Internet Generation, who are the population at the heart of this research.