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Colophon

Heritage education: Challenges in dealing with the past

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This publication presents the initial findings of a research programme on heritage education (2009–2014) undertaken by the Center for Historical Culture at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Introduction

Reflections on heritage as an educational resource

Maria Grever
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In many countries, pupils visit historical sites and museums and explore traces of the past in their surroundings. Some teachers bring heritage objects to the classroom to rouse their pupils' curiosity, illustrate a particular historical narrative, or engage pupils in historical enquiry. Such activities can be referred to by the term 'heritage education'. Although we can easily give examples of heritage education, it is not so easy to provide a clear definition. Heritage education is not a school subject in which key concepts and skills can be inferred from the academic discipline to which it is related. Heritage studies is not a distinct academic discipline, but a hybrid of several different disciplines such as history, arts, cultural anthropology and cultural geography. This hybridity can also be seen in the practice of heritage education, which not only contributes to the history curriculum but also to geography, art education, science, technology, and the development of cross-curricular skills.

To encourage children to participate in the arts and culture, the Dutch government decided in the 1990s that heritage education should become part of the broader domain of arts and cultural education encompassing the arts, media and heritage education. The government encouraged cultural institutions and schools to collaborate on developing educational resources and activities that would introduce heritage education in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Educational activities are usually initiated and designed by cultural institutions, and schools choose from this supply. Recently, heritage education was further encouraged by the decision to introduce a canon of Dutch national history in the school curriculum. Schools are obliged to use fifty items from the canon, known as 'windows', as a basis for illustrating elements of the Dutch national history curriculum. The publication of the canon in 2006 led to heritage institutions and local councils developing a large number of regional and local canons of history that frequently refer to heritage.

Whereas some scholars argue that heritage education as a cross-curricular approach centers around issues of democratic citizenship and identity, we focus on the connection between heritage education and the school subject of history. Although we use theoretical frameworks derived from history and history didactics, we do not wish to imply that heritage education cannot or should not contribute to other subjects or to generic skills.

Our research programme uses a provisional definition of heritage education: *Heritage education is an approach to teaching and learning that uses material and immaterial heritage as primary instructional resources to increase pupils'*

understanding of history and culture. This definition attempts to balance the three temporal dimensions (past, present and future) and to avoid normative elements as much as possible. There is no consensus in the literature as to the difference between heritage and history, but it is obvious that many associate 'heritage' more with building up historical identities and experiencing the past, and less with questioning and investigating. This raises two important questions concerning educational practices:

- 1 What are the opportunities and constraints associated with an imaginative engagement with the past?
- 2 How can heritage education contribute to some kind of *commonality* between all learners while at the same time acknowledge *multiperspectivity*?

Both questions will be addressed below. We will argue that heritage education should adopt a *dynamic* approach to heritage.

Historical distance: imagining the past and historical thinking

Heritage institutions, but also teacher educators and teachers often emphasise that heritage education can engage pupils in imagining and experiencing the past as vivid and nearby. The experience heritage creates can evoke a sense of direct contact with the past.

Although such imaginative engagement is an important strength of many heritage lessons, it might also generate specific problems when the aim is to learn history. Historians often complain that heritage and heritage education foster a presentist approach to the past, ignoring the historical context, which often seems strange from the present point of view. Furthermore, scholars in the field of history education emphasise that historical empathy is a complex cognitive process that implies a 'rethinking' of the specific decisions taken by actors in the past in order to explain certain actions and behaviour. It indeed requires a careful reconstruction of an historical context. Hence, historians appreciate distance when attempting to understand the complexity of the past because it provides sufficient detachment to look at that past from various perspectives.

With respect to both school history and heritage education, the challenge is to translate the meanings attributed by actors at the time to past events into *present-day* meanings *understandable* by pupils, without disregarding the historical context. An important difference between heritage education and school history, however, is that the former often has a more performative character, aimed at experiencing *direct* contact with the past through objects, exhibitions or historical sites. Because the staging of a specific past seeks to engage the public, the impression is that heritage education projects often tend to minimise historical distance. And yet, heritage education involves many different practices. There are examples of educational assignments referring to exhibitions and sites that not only stimulate an interest in history, curiosity about the past and imagination, but also try to enhance critical and historical thinking. Techniques

to bridge past and present can also be used in assignments that discuss the uniqueness of the represented past, making pupils aware of historical distance. To assess the significance of historical distance in heritage education, we are developing an analysis framework consisting of five dimensions:

Time	<i>Continuity – Change</i>
Person	<i>Identity – Difference</i>
Imagination	<i>Abstract – Concrete</i>
Place	<i>Far away – Close</i>
Engagement	<i>Passive – Active</i>

In our research, we analyse how the past is represented in heritage educational resources. How do these materials try to minimise or construct historical distance? We conduct interviews and observe pupils participating in a heritage education project in order to gain a better understanding of their learning experiences. How do pupils experience these lessons? To what extent does heritage support imagination and the construction of a vivid image of the past? Do pupils engage in historical thinking and reasoning? We interview history teachers and heritage educators to investigate how they reflect on the potential affordances and constraints of evoking ‘direct’ contact with the past and on the possibility of engaging pupils in historical thinking in lessons in which heritage is used as primary resource for teaching and learning.

We have selected three topics to help us investigate the actual practice of heritage education: Christianisation, the transatlantic slave trade, and the Second World War. Our reasons for choosing these topics are: they are part of the Dutch and English history curriculum for primary and secondary schools; they include material and immaterial heritage; the heritage associated with these topics has national, transnational and international dimensions. Moreover, we expect that heritage education related to these topics will reflect an engagement with the past that is both emotional and identity-focused.

Issues of identity: the need for commonality and multiperspectivity

Outcomes of heritage education can be framed in terms of knowledge and skills relevant for the school curriculum but also for developing personal and collective identities. Citizenship refers to the relationship of an individual with his or her environment and with the community in which he or she participates. In learning activities related to heritage, pupils can practise exploring and discussing societal issues on a local level and in the wider community. Several heritage education programmes focus on developing a sense of respect for the environment or for a particular heritage, such as an historical building. The underlying idea is that pupils will view and experience a place differently if they are better informed about its history. Furthermore, heritage learning activities can support pupils in the process of learning about themselves and in understanding others. In this way heritage education contributes to a sense of connection and belonging

that is crucial for citizenship. In particular, when heritage is related to sensitive histories such as the Holocaust, educational resources are often aimed at value development and encouraging pupils to reflect on such values as freedom and equality.

It is precisely the indissoluble alliance between heritage and identity that leads us to consider a dynamic approach to heritage as being important for heritage education. Although heritage lessons may encourage respect for other cultures, tolerance and social cohesion, they can also help strengthen community identities, with the risk of exclusion and a reinforcement of existing social boundaries. In a dynamic heritage approach, heritage has no static, essentialist meaning and is not bound to one static identity.

Hence, when heritage education focuses on developing shared cultural values and the appropriation of a shared history – if that is ever possible – there should in any case be room for the exchange of ideas and dialogue. Recently, museum experts too have argued that museums and heritage institutions should provide a platform for debate and dialogue, and invite people to participate. A dynamic approach implies encouraging critical and historical thinking. Pupils can be inspired to take historical perspectives, for instance, and to understand the ethical dimensions of historical interpretations.

A range of differing perspectives can be woven into heritage educational resources or provided by the teacher or heritage educator. These may concern the positions of historical actors connected to a certain heritage, or differing historiographical views. In the course of time, furthermore, people may come to think differently about the significance and meanings of heritage. Multiple perspectives may, however, also come to the fore when pupils are asked to discuss their ideas and understanding. Pupils are meaning-makers themselves; they actively construct knowledge in interaction with others using cultural artefacts available as tools for meaning-making. Their perspectives may differ owing to differences in identity, background knowledge, disposition, interests and values. Their understanding of heritage and history, for example, is mediated by family and collective memory. What they take away from heritage lessons will also differ. Some pupils may establish a personal connection when they link a particular heritage to their own concerns, values, interests or identity. Other pupils may not establish such a connection.

Identifying and comparing various perspectives concerning the same historical subject matter can encourage pupils to examine educational resources carefully and critically, present plausible arguments, and exchange different views. The very act of discussing and comparing perspectives engenders reflexivity. If the circumstances in a classroom allow for such a dialogue, then the use of diverse perspectives might also create an awareness of living in a pluralist yet common world. Hence, the actual use of various perspectives provides for a common ground. However, finding a common ground does not necessarily mean that people have to agree with one another and end up with the same knowledge and understanding.

Our research is intended to lead to a better understanding of how heritage educational practice addresses the issues of identity discussed above. We also want to know to what extent a dynamic approach to heritage is applied in educational resources and activities, and how. We investigate the ‘entrance narratives’ pupils bring to heritage educational projects, how pupils attribute meaning to heritage, and how they share and negotiate their knowledge, ideas and understanding.