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Connecting past, present and future

The enhancement of the relevance of history for students

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Students' views on the usefulness of history

Secondary school students usually have vague ideas about the purposes and benefits of studying the past and a low esteem of the usefulness of school history (e.g. Biddulph & Adey, 2003; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Harris & Reynolds, 2014; VanSledright, 1997). Typical in this regard are comments made by 11- to 14-year-old English students in a survey conducted by Haydn and Harris (2010). When asked about the usefulness of school history, most comments could be typified as 'tautological' assertions about the need to study the past (e.g. 'I think it is in the curriculum because people need to learn about it'). Another common pattern of response referred to ideas of employment in terms of history being important for pursuing a career as a history teacher or archeologist. Quite a few comments indicated that students felt lost with the question ('I can't explain', 'they don't let you know'), found history not useful ('it's just storing information that has already happened and won't help me in my future life') or gave 'trivial pursuit' reasons for studying the past ('it helps you on quiz shows and pub quizzes') (pp. 249-250). A small number of responses reflected the aims and purposes of history education as defined in curriculum standards, such as mastering historical skills or understanding present-day society. There were large variations between schools in this respect, which led Haydn and Harris to conclude that teachers should explicitly address the purposes of school history as it appeared to be a factor which explained why students were or were not able to phrase the usefulness of the subject.

Studies conducted in the Netherlands give no reason to assume that Dutch secondary school students' views on the usefulness of history deviate from those discussed above. Research carried out in the 1980s showed that 12- to 13-year-olds deemed history considerably less useful than mathematics and Dutch language (Otten & Boekaerts, 1990). A large-scale European survey in the 1990s revealed that Dutch students in the age of 14-16 agreed to a much greater extent than their European peers with the statement that history is 'dead and has nothing to do with my current life' (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997, B26). In a more recent survey, both grade 7 and grade 10 students found history significantly less useful than English language and mathematics (Wilschut, 2013).

Thus, in the past decades Dutch students' views on the usefulness of history seem to have remained unaltered. It should be noted, however, that the number of studies is limited and the available data mainly concern views of junior secondary school students. Presumably, senior students are better able to explain what history is good for, given the fact that reflective skills and epistemic beliefs about history tend to mature as students age and schooling progresses (King & Kitchener, 2002; Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009). Revealing in this respect is a letter to the editors of a Dutch newspaper written by a grade 12 pre-university (VWO) student (NRC-Handelsblad, 2016). Dutch history education, according to this student, is only concerned with 'trivial' historical events instead of dealing with historical backgrounds of urgent contemporary issues. He wrote:

We stop at the fall of the Berlin Wall, due to the examination program. We do not look back to the past with the most recent current affairs as points of departure . . . We need to do something. We need to make more use of historical arguments in current discussions, so that we can better understand the world of today by analyzing the world of yesterday. Let history be more than a trivia festival that you only use in the TV quiz One Against Hundred.

This student is well aware of the social relevance of history and the role school history should play, but the curriculum seems to be defective in fulfilling this role. This underlines once again that it may be important to explicitly teach the purposes and benefits of school history, as Haydn and Harris (2010) already concluded from their research.

1.2 Purposes of school history in the Netherlands

Since history became a compulsory part of the school curriculum, questioning its purposes and benefits has always been an object of debate. In the Netherlands, as in other Western countries, history education in the 19th century and much of the 20th century aimed at fostering patriotism and educating loyal and responsible citizens who were able to make a useful contribution to state affairs (Wilschut, 2010). From the 1960s onwards, the focus in educational goals shifted from the nation-building perspective to the teaching and learning of methods of historical research and historical interpretation, which was a

response to the emergence of social sciences with their focus on explaining human society, putting history on the defensive and forcing historians and educators to reconsider the goals and principles of the subject. The nation-building perspective never completely disappeared, however, and even made a comeback from the 1990s onwards as a result of an alleged loss of national identity due to globalization, immigration, European unification and revolutionary developments in the field of communication (Grever, 2007; Wilschut, 2010). A strongly politically motivated debate arose about the place and function of history in society, with advocates of more national history insisting on establishing a canon with ‘important’ persons and events from Dutch history and opponents of more national history stating that the use of history for national identity building is completely contradictory to the essence of historical scholarship. A canon consisting of 50 historical items eventually became compulsory in primary and junior-secondary education in 2010. In the meantime, a more profound transformation in history education had taken place in 2006 through the introduction of a chronological framework of ten eras with clear-cut, easy to remember names (e.g. the ‘era of hunters and farmers’, the ‘era of the world wars’). This framework was designed to help students to orient in time, i.e., to enable them to contextualize (new) historical subject matter and to grasp long-term political, socio-economic and cultural developments (CHMV, 2001). Intended as a time orienting tool, the framework program only defines general characteristics of the ten eras without further elaborations in terms of specific historical content all students should know (Wilschut, 2015). This evoked the criticism that students and teachers could not rely on a fixed knowledge base in preparing for the national examinations. In 2012, therefore, specifically described topics (so-called historical contexts), covering several eras and their characteristics, were added to the curriculum, containing a relatively large quantity of historical content to be memorized in a traditional manner.

All these developments in Dutch history education have resulted in a hybrid package of partly contradictory attainment targets. On the one hand, there are goals which aim to promote historical thinking and historical consciousness originating from the axioms of scholarly history. On the other hand, students have to learn a certain amount of historical subject matter, knowledge that serves either national identity building (canon) or an understanding of the past as an end in itself (the so-called historical contexts).

1.3 Past, present and future: the concept of historical consciousness

The chronological framework of ten eras and their characteristics intends to enhance historical thinking and historical consciousness (Wilschut, 2015). The concept of historical consciousness was elaborated in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s from the point of departure that there exists an interdependence between past, present and future in human thinking (Jeismann, 1988). Related to the human aptitude to think back and forth in time, historical consciousness can be characterized as the complex relationship between interpretation of the past on the one hand and the perception of reality in the present and expectations for the future on the other. Without a future perspective, studying the past is rather pointless, and without relying on past experiences, conceiving a future becomes very difficult. Historical consciousness is the cognizance that human culture exists in time: it originates, develops and faces a future. It implies the awareness that the course of human existence is not predetermined or eternally immutable. It means getting a sense of the variable and contingent nature of developments in human culture and seeing the present as an intermediate between the past and the future, realizing that human existence is an ongoing process. This sense of temporality, alterability and contingency constitutes an important distinction between history and the social sciences (Jonker, 2001). It may stimulate taking a reflective, distanced position towards things as they are, providing occasion for thinking about alternatives, which are important assets in a democratic society (Wilschut, 2012).

The work of the German philosopher of history Jörn Rüsen has been influential in the theorizing about the concept of historical consciousness. Rüsen (2017) considers historical consciousness as ‘the basic category of history didactics’ (8.1), by which he means that learning the mental operations involved in (developing) historical consciousness is essential to the teaching of history. According to Rüsen, these mental operations are not confined to the academic skills needed for the acquisition of historical knowledge. Essential is the question of historical meaning: to what end should one acquire knowledge of the past? He emphasizes the ‘orientational function’ of historical knowledge, which holds the ability to interpret experiences from the past in narratives that illuminate realities in the present and contours of the future. Historical competence, therefore, is ‘narrative competence’ (2017, 8.1). Rüsen (2017): ‘History is an event-

based, temporal coherence between the past and the present (with an eye on the future) that creates meaning and the orientation needed in daily life through narrative.’ (2.2).

1.4 Making connections between past, present and future as an educational challenge

In order to conceive what it means to pursue the development of temporal orientation in secondary education, it is enlightening to distinguish between uneducated and educated historical consciousness. Human beings are by nature temporally oriented because they are endowed with a memory storing experiences on which they ground their decisions and plans for the future (Becker, 1931; Kahneman, 2011; Karlsson, 2011). This ‘unschooled’ historical awareness is usually confined to personal memories that do not go far back in time and pertain to personal social environments. Educated historical consciousness, on the other hand, entails a deliberate historical study of the development of the human kind worldwide over very long spans of time. This study can be very demanding and requires much more effort and sophistication than the spontaneous, ‘existential’ historical awareness which comes naturally (Lee, 2005; Lowenthal, 2000; Oakeshott, 1983). Rösen (2004) speaks of ‘genetic’ historical consciousness as the most sophisticated way of dealing with the past. Genetic historical consciousness implies the ability to ‘historicize’ the present, i.e. to imagine, for example, that contemporary political, ethical or moral principles are subject to change because they exist in time. This allows an understanding of fundamentally different forms of human life in the past on their own terms. Teaching genetic historical consciousness is likely to be a complex endeavor.

With regard to the teaching and learning of history, all of this implies that students should be made familiar with ways in which knowledge of the ‘historical’ past (as opposed to their ‘personal’ past) can be employed to orientate on the present and the future. This is exactly what standards for history teaching in many western countries pursue as a means to prepare students for their future role as citizens in society (DFE, 2013; NCHS, 1996; Seixas & Morton, 2013; VGD, 2006; Wilschut, 2015). However, standards usually lack further elaborations of the kinds of connections between past, present and future that may be helpful in achieving this goal. Content descriptions in curriculum documents focus on understanding the past and learning historical thinking

skills as aims in themselves. The compilers of these documents apparently assume that learning about the past yields insights into the present and future as a matter of course, taking knowledge transfer beyond subject-specific contexts for granted without any explicit learning activities directed at achieving this aim. Research indicates, however, that in a school history context, students are not inclined to use knowledge of the past to orientate on the present and future of their own accord (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008; Mosborg, 2002; Rosenzweig, 2000; Shreiner, 2014). Therefore, the teaching of historical consciousness can be seen as an educational challenge.

1.5 Aims of this thesis

From a pedagogical point of view, two issues in the teaching of historical consciousness need to be addressed. On the one hand, there is the issue *what* to teach: what kinds of objectives can be pursued while connecting the past, the present and the future in history class? On the other hand, there is the issue of *how* to teach it: which methods can be employed for making connections between the past, the present and the future? This thesis examines both questions. It wants to provide a theoretically and empirically grounded framework which can be used for designing curricula aiming at the making of connections between the past, the present and future which are meaningful for students.

In addressing the aims and methods that align with teaching about the interdependence between the past, the present and the future, this thesis will introduce and use the concept of ‘relevant history teaching’. Relevant history teaching allows students to recognize and experience what history has to do with themselves, with today's society and their general understanding of human existence. Research in the field of cognitivist learning theory, student motivation and history education (e.g. Barton, 2008; Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Novak, 2002; Pintrich, 2003), provides reasons to believe that relevant history teaching stimulates meaning making as students actively use knowledge of the past and relate it to their own lives. The second aim of this thesis is, therefore, to examine whether implementation of the aims and methods of relevant history teaching indeed affects students’ views on the usefulness of history. This is an important issue, because value awareness of school subjects is an impetus for student engagement and motivation (Brophy, 1999; Eccles, 2004; Martin, 2003; Pintrich, 2003).

1.6 Research question and outline of the thesis

The central question of this thesis is:

What are the aims and methods of relevant history teaching, explicitly focusing on connections between the past, the present and the future, and how does this type of teaching affect students' appraisals of the relevance of history?

Examination of this question has yielded one theoretical and four empirical studies, the results of which are presented in chapters 2 to 6 (see also Fig. 1.1). Each of the studies addresses its own aims and questions, which are paraphrased in the following synoptic descriptions of the individual chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 2 presents a theoretical framework of relevant history teaching, encompassing aims and methods practitioners and researchers can use to design curricula that are meaningful to students. The aims were derived from three types of theoretical sources: educational philosophy on meaningful education; constructivist educational theory on meaningful learning; and historical philosophy on historical consciousness in relation to the temporal dimension of human existence. The methods were derived from various curriculum proposals and pedagogical approaches that have been described in history education literature. The framework of relevant history teaching described in this chapter is the theoretical foundation of the thesis and the point of departure for its empirical studies.

Chapter 3 reports the development and psychometric qualities of the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS), a questionnaire for measuring students' appraisals of the relevance of history. The RHMS was specifically designed for the purpose of this research in the absence of a suitable measure for gauging effects of lesson interventions in the context of relevant history teaching. Factor and reliability analyses were conducted to determine the extent to which the items of the RHMS corresponded to the relevance aims defined in chapter 2, using data collected from a sample of 1459 Dutch secondary school students aged 12 to 18. Data from this sample was also used to learn more about students' views on the relevance of history over the years and to see whether junior students hold opinions different than those held by their senior peers. The development

of the RHMS created an instrument enabling the assessment of effects of the intervention studies in this thesis. Therefore chapter 3 is one of the conditional chapters leading up to the main study described in chapter 5.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of three explorative case studies on the implementation of the methods of relevant history teaching within the boundaries of existing curricula. The purpose of these case studies was to see whether embedding these methods in regular programs is feasible without major curriculum revisions. Three indicators were used to examine this feasibility issue: the extent to which students used historical subject matter in their orientation on current affairs; teachers' experiences with the integration of the methods in their daily teaching practice; the effects of the methods on students' appraisals of the relevance of history. The case studies were conducted in two Dutch secondary schools with grade 8 to 10 students ($N = 135$) and their teachers ($N = 4$) as participants. Data were collected by means of questionnaires (including the RHMS) conducted in a pre-/post-test design, interviews and writing tasks. The explorations described in this chapter paved the way for a more profound research presented in chapter 5. Therefore, chapter 4 can also be seen as conditional to the main study described in chapter 5. The case studies made it more clear that drawing analogies between past and present would offer the best opportunities for relevant history teaching. Thus the results of the explorations described in chapter 4 guided the decisions taken in shaping the experiment described in chapter 5.

Chapter 5 draws together what has been prepared in the previous three chapters. Based on the theoretical foundation of chapter 2, employing the measurement instrument developed in chapter 3 and utilizing the lessons learnt of chapter 4, a large-scale intervention study was designed which could assess the effects of relevant history teaching. Chapter 5 reports on the effects of an intervention focusing on the teaching of analogous cases of an enduring human issue (a combination of two methods of relevant history teaching: 'historical analogies' and 'enduring human issues'). There were two experimental conditions: one in which students were actively encouraged to compare cases and to draw analogies with the present (case-comparison condition) and one in which students studied cases without making comparisons or drawing analogies with the present (separate-case condition). These conditions were created in order to elucidate whether studying similar parallel cases in the past would by itself influence students'

appraisals of the relevance of history, or whether explicit comparing activities, supported by a conceptual framework and emphatically referring to the present, would be essential to the success of this kind of history teaching. The effects in both conditions on students' appraisals of the relevance of history were measured in a quasi-experimental pre-/post-test design using the RHMS and set against the results of a non-treatment group of students who followed the usual history curriculum. Participants were grade 10 to 12 students ($N = 1022$) from 24 secondary schools.

Chapter 6 reports the experiences and views of students ($N = 444$) and teachers ($N = 15$) who participated in the case-comparison condition of the intervention mentioned in chapter 5. As comparing past and present cases of an enduring human issue is an innovative approach in Dutch history education, the aim was to find out whether students and teachers thought this approach is practically feasible and desirable. Besides, the qualitative data collected among students could provide more insight into the effects of the intervention next to the quantitative evaluations presented in chapter 5. Measures to collect data were interviews and closed-format questionnaires.

Chapter 7 summarizes and discusses the main outcomes of the five studies. In addition, directions for further research and practical implications of the thesis are presented.

Chapters 2 to 6 have been written as articles for peer-reviewed educational research journals, which means that they stand alone and can be read independently. Inevitably, the chapters contain some duplications, especially with regard to their introductions and theoretical frameworks, which are all about the central theme of this thesis: the aims and methods of relevant history education. The studies in chapters 2, 3 and 4 have been published in peer-reviewed journals, while the studies in chapters 5 and 6 have been submitted for publication and are under review.

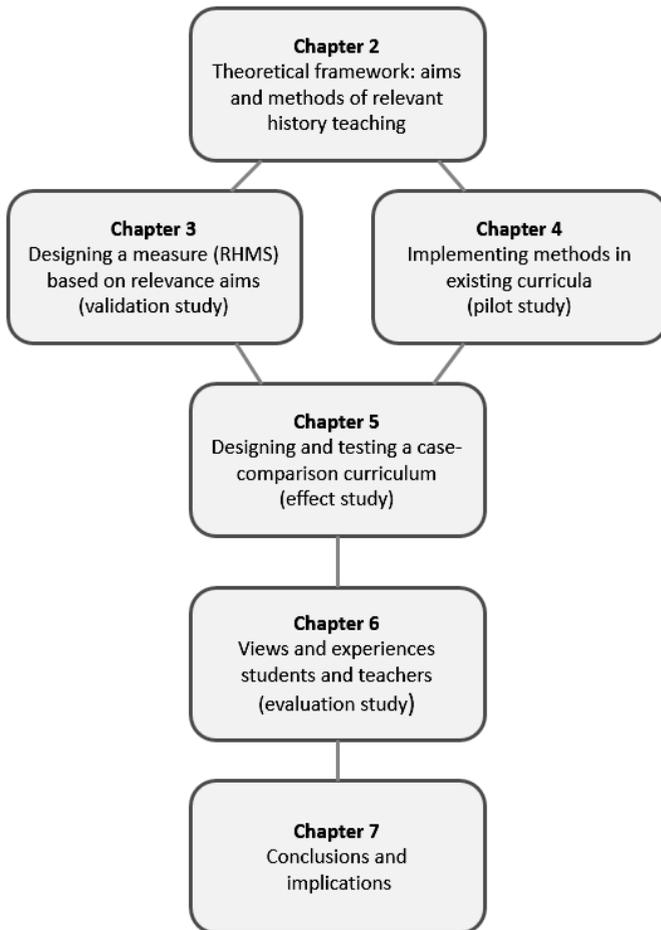


Figure 1.1 Design and content of the thesis.