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# Content, methods and orientation of history education

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David Rosenlund, *History education as content, methods or orientation? A study of curriculum prescriptions, teacher-made tasks and student strategies* (New York: Peter Lang 2016). 205 pp.

## *Introduction*

Next to considerable innovations, e.g. addressing changes in society (e.g. immigration), media (computers, internet) as well as other developments, the field of history education is stamped by a series of long lasting strands of research and discussion, among which the intertwined complex on the nature of history and the purposes and appropriate "orientations" of (especially state mandated) history teaching may be the most prominent. It is this classic debate, which David Rosenlund takes up in his doctoral dissertation, addressing it in an innovative combination of empirical approaches and theoretical reflections underpinning these.

## *Theoretical Framework*

In his elaboration of a theoretical framework, Rosenlund can show that the three "approaches", referred to in the title of the work, namely history education as the transfer of content, as "teaching of disciplinary tools" and "including the present", do not form self-contained and legitimized alternatives in themselves, but are evaluated differently when viewed from two distinct "philosophies" of history education theory and research, namely a mostly British and North-American "empirical" one, focusing on students' abilities to think historically in terms of disciplinary concepts, on the one hand and a "continental" one focusing on students' orientation in their lifeworld on the other – for which Rosenlund refers to Peter Seixas and Sven Sødning

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Jensen as advocates respectively.<sup>1</sup> This theoretical chapter has its merits in highlighting different conceptions of history education prevalent in the Anglophone and continental discussion and calling for a merger or combination of both, which he ventures to for the sake of his study applying the German FUER-model of historical competencies.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, bought for the price of a somewhat simplistic presentation of the two philosophies, missing out, e.g., the fact that the development of a specific epistemology and methodology of the discipline of history comparing itself with the sciences, which Rosenlund acknowledges as the basis of the Anglo-disciplinary approach is also to be found in the German process of "scientification" of historiography, so that in one of the "orienting" philosophies' main advocates' (Jörn Rüsen's) works, disciplinary concepts and approaches are also central, so that part of the combination of the two "philosophies" has already been prepared.

### *Research Focus*

Rosenlund's interest is in empirically finding out what approach(es) to (and philosophy of) history education govern actual teaching. For this, he does not focus on the immediate classroom processes, the research of which with any ability to generalize would transgress the possibilities of a doctoral thesis, but rather takes a kind of triangulated approach by analysing: 1) the state syllabi of 1994 and (because of a change during his research) 2011, 2) a quite big sample of teacher made exam tasks, and 3) strategies of students when working on two kinds of tasks which focus different aspects of teaching. While the relation of the three focuses are mainly addressed via argumentative comparison of results emerging from qualitative approaches, two of the three foci are additionally interconnected using a quantitative approach widely applied in the US-American culture of large-scale assessments for determining the "alignment" of curricula and standardized tests ("Enacted Curriculum"-Research; see below).

In this general design, bringing together data of different kind in a framework of historical education focusing not mainly on ("factual") knowledge but on a wider spectrum of teaching purposes and logics, the study is indeed innovative. The results are, however, largely disappointing if not alarming, suggesting a narrowing from the prescribed curriculum to enacted expecta-

1. Peter C. Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or, does Postmodern History have a Place in the Schools?," in Peter N. Stearns, Peter C. Seixas & Sam Wineburg (ed.), *Knowing, teaching, and learning history: National and international perspectives* (New York 2000) p. 19–37; Sven Södring Jensen, *Historieundervisningsteori* (Köpenhamn 1978).

2. Andreas Körber, Waltraud Schreiber & Alexander Schöner (ed.), *Kompetenzen historischen Denkens: Ein Strukturmodell als Beitrag zur Kompetenzorientierung in der Geschichtsdidaktik* (Neuried 2007); Andreas Körber, *Historical consciousness, historical competencies – and beyond? Some conceptual development within German history didactics* (2015).

tions to mainly "content", but not detrimental in the sense that this would hinder students to learn a broader range of operations. To be judged from this research, however, some of them are not systematically evaluated.

But Rosenlund's innovative venture does in some respect also raise concerns as to the significance, if not validity, of his results, which should lead to both a debate in the discipline about research strategies and to further research into some aspects brought up in this book. In some aspects, methodological reflections would have been welcome in the dissertations, itself, in others, the results highlight possible implications of research strategies and conceptualizations used here, which should be discussed in the discipline. Before these methodological aspects are addressed, some main results should be sketched.

### *Results*

There are a lot of individual findings and reflections which are worthwhile considering within the three approaches as well as in the concluding chapters where they are brought together. In the following, some of the more general results will be sketched. Further comments as to methodological and strategical questions (see below) do, however, affect their interpretation.

As for the syllabus analyses (two of them), Rosenlund can show for 1994 (p. 70–77), that there is a difference in distribution of "goals" on the one hand and "grading criteria" on the other hand across the five "curriculum emphases", with "historical content" and "transferable concepts" being well-equipped and "historical questions" being equally little addressed in both dimensions, whereas "temporal orientation" is almost non-existent among the goals but strongly addressed in the grading criteria, and "Historical methods" not figuring among the goals at all, but being addressed in two grading criteria. Furthermore, among the criteria for higher grades (PD, PSD), orientation seems to get specific attention. With regard to the epistemic stances, the goals and the criteria concentrate on the two extremes of the spectrum ("copier" and "criterialist") with earlier goals and criteria for lower grades on the former, and goals resp. criteria for higher grades on the latter. This suggests a "hidden" standard of teaching students criterialist and orienting thinking about history, even though this finds only scarcely support in the goals of the syllabus.

The 2011 syllabus shows a somewhat different distribution with the orientation-dimension weakened in comparison to 1994 (p. 173), which holds only true as long as the grading criteria (missing in 2011 and only partly "replaced" as items by "core-content") are counted. Among the goals, "content" is still strong, "methods" and "temporal orientation" strengthened, and "transfer-

able concepts" weakened, while in the now prescribed "core content", "content" (meaning: "knowledge about the past") and "methods" prevail. On the "stances"-dimension, both goals and core content are stronger the higher the stance is (p. 122–126). In his comparison, though, Rosenlund concludes that the orientation-dimension is weakened.

Very prominently, Rosenlund's work suggests to some quite strong degree, that these provisions for teaching not only facts and insights but also reflective stances, theoretical understanding of history as a subject, and disciplinary concepts and procedures are largely lost at teachers, if not in their own personal syllabi and teaching itself (which Rosenlund did not observe), then within the framework of their exam tasks. Even though some teachers in the rather small group Rosenlund interviewed additionally state that they start their task-constructing process from the syllabus (while others don't), the vast majority of the "syllabus items" Rosenlunds categorizes refer to "content knowledge" only.

This finding might have teachers, administrators and researchers agreeing with one of the wider philosophies of history education sketched at the outset or even a combination of them, worry on whether either these efforts are futile in the first place or totally different measures need to be taken – especially since there may be some validity to the argument that the actual exams and teachers references to them do convey stronger ideas to students than printed syllabi do. From that perspective, the structure of the actual tasks may be the more effective syllabus.

The effort to quantitatively calculate the alignment between syllabus prescriptions and teacher-made-tasks, yields, in general, a similarly poor picture. Calculated over all (ca 940) tasks, the alignment coefficient is 16 percent only, whereas some individual teachers reach values up to 60 percent.

The worries may, however, be premature, given the results of Rosenlund's analyses of students' strategies when working on tasks.

In his qualitative categorisation of students' responses and their quantitative correlation, the author can show that the spectrum of considerations students take is much broader, and they seem, e.g., to be specifically stronger in the "orienting" approach – combining references to the past, their present and the future in their reasoning – than the relative monoconceptual picture he draws of the exam tasks leads to fear.

In a quite complex approach, the author can show considerable correlations between students' abilities in applying disciplinary methods and orienting reasoning, indicating both to the necessity to reconcile the theoretical philosophies and approaches focusing these aspects, and to possible innovations in further curricula and teacher education. It might be the case that either students do learn more than is conveyed to them as the required

standards via actual examining, or that the reality of both teaching and testing is wider than formally required indeed.

### *Methodological questions*

Rosenlund's application of research methods merits and requires commentary, both for evaluating his own empirical findings and for further research in the field. In a number of cases, Rosenlund applies methods and procedures of research following examples of recent research works in other disciplines. For combining the different purposes and logics of history education discussed in his theoretical chapter into a manageable number of categories, and to detach his own categorising work from the immediate philosophies and approaches, he borrows the concepts of "curriculum emphases" from science education research, arriving at five complex orientations which can be identified in different proportions, combinations or figurations in the material.

Similarly, he makes use of the American approach to Enacted Curriculum after the example given by Gunilla Näsström's (non-history-related) examples<sup>3</sup> rather than following the original or revised procedures given by the developer of the used index, Andrew Porter,<sup>4</sup> and therefore does not categorize the "cognitive demand" on a single scale and tabulates each task by this value and its topic, as Porter does, but rather by two cognitive dimensions taken from Bloom's revised taxonomy,<sup>5</sup> that is "types of knowledge" v. "cognitive processes" (p. 101ff).

A specific justification and reflection of the decision for Näsström's version is, unfortunately, missing. Especially since there are both advantages over Porter's procedure and limitations or even weaknesses to be reflected. The original concept of alignment as used in Porter's Surveys of Enacted Curriculum (SEC) is indeed problematic for the field of history (which has only been addressed as topic-dimension of social studies in the Oregon SEC and as a sector of social science in the Wisconsin K12 Social Studies Content Areas study). While Porter's logic measures the degree to which tests address the topics in the curriculum at the cognitive demand level which they are referred to there, the approach of Näsström and Rosenlund abstracts from the topic coverage as measures whether the different kinds of knowledge are

3. Gunilla Näsström, *Measurement of alignment between standards and assessment* (Umeå 2008).

4. Andrew C. Porter, "Measuring the Content of Instruction: Uses in Research and Practice", in *Educational Researcher* 31:7 (2002) p. 3-14; Andrew Porter & John L. Smithson, *Alignment of Assessments: Standards and Instruction using Curriculum Indicator Data* (New Orleans 2002).

5. Lorin W. Anderson & David R. Krathwohl (ed.), *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York 2001).

addressed using similar cognitive processes in both syllabus and testing. For history teaching which aims at enabling student not only to think within the box of a given topic but to apply the disciplinary toolset to new problems, this abstraction from the specific topic-coverage may be a reasonable decision. On the other hand the application of the domain unspecific taxonomies of Bloom may lead to inaccurate categorisation especially where domain-specific types of knowledge need to be added to Blooms types of "factual", "conceptual", "procedural" and "meta-cognitive knowledge". Rosenlund's categorization of a task on Leif Erikson on p. 104 is a good example.

The task reads: "'Leif Erikson discovered America'. Analyse and discuss this statement. What speaks for and what speaks against this claim? Weigh arguments for and against and draw your own conclusions." For Rosenlund, the cognitive process can be classified as "evaluate" resp. "analyse",<sup>6</sup> and the knowledge dimension as "conceptual" (subtype "categorizations and categories"). While the restraint of using only the most complex process in the former dimension is a general restraint, there are disciplinary questions to be raised as to the usage of Bloom's typology of knowledge. To analyse and discuss the statement at hand does not only require conceptual and categorial knowledge, because the mastery of defining characteristic of "discoveries" does not suffice here – the students must also have *narrative* knowledge not only about a) earlier immigration to America, b) the episodal nature of the visit, and c) the lack of regular knowledge about it in Europe even after Leif Erickson, in order to question it. Without at least complementing Bloom's knowledge-typology with narrative forms (maybe in a separate dimension), its usage in such research may lead to the omission of the discipline's specificities.

Similar reflections on the implications of methodological decisions would have been welcome in several instances, e.g. in relation to the usage of Maggioni's (et al.). Epistemic stances,<sup>7</sup> which Rosenlund applies as belonging to a continuum (very much in line with the original proposal), but which – especially in the light of the empirical results – might also be used as a nominal typology. And furthermore, the reader not very familiar with the different strands in international history education research will cherish the research overview (p. 45ff), but also regret that the coverage is rather general, putting the triangulated approach into the different contexts, but neither discussing the implications of the colleagues' approaches and methods for the intersect-

6. With regard to the other dimension, the cognitive process, Rosenlund announced an amendment to the categorization in his disputation. It is to read "Evaluate", not "Analyse".

7. Liliana Maggioni, Bruce VanSledright & Patricia A. Alexander, "Walking on the Borders: A Measure of Epistemic Cognition in History", *The Journal of Experimental Education* 77:3 (2009) p. 187–214.

ing task at hand nor highlighting the innovativeness of the approach.

A strong part of the dissertation is the theoretical conceptualization Rosenlund uses for framing the students' strategies' analysis. In their original integration of concepts into a model, the opportunities it opens for further research in analysing historical reasoning, but also in the further debate both possible and necessary around this model and approach. He here integrates theoretical and methodical aspects out of different traditions (mainly British/North-American) but in doing so transgresses the limitation of a mere disciplinary into modelling orienting aspects, also, especially in using Alix Green's "time streams".<sup>8</sup> This would, however, have been a context where the FUER-model, referenced before, with its six-field-matrix and its focus on orientation, could have been integrated also.

All in all, the study provides for a lot of structural insights into important dimensions of the "enacted" regulations of history teaching in Sweden today, in the light of recent concepts of history education taken from not only one traditional strand. Both because of the triangulative design and approach – yielding a wealth of individual findings but introducing the task of interrelating them – and the theoretical and strategic questions raised by Rosenlund's methodical approaches, his individual results and interpretations might as such be of no long duration, but their impact on history teaching research and debate will hopefully be longer lasting. It is especially desirable for the discipline to take up the methodological and conceptual questions raised in this study.

8. Alix R. Green, *Using history in public policy development* (Hatfield 2013).