
Are Historical Thinking Skills Important To History Teachers? Some Findings From A Qualitative Interview Study In Austria

Roland Bernhard, Salzburg University of Education, Akademiestraße 23,
5020 Salzburg, Austria

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Keywords:

Austria, Historical consciousness, Historical thinking competencies, History education, History teachers, History Textbooks, Quantitative and Qualitative research, Qualitative expert interviews, Research design

ARE HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS IMPORTANT TO HISTORY TEACHERS? SOME FINDINGS FROM A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY IN AUSTRIA

Roland Bernhard, Salzburg University of Education, Akademiestraße 23, 5020 Salzburg, Austria

Abstract

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Introduction

Despite some popular ‘history wars’ about the purpose, content and form of history education in recent years (see Peterson, 2016; Taylor & Guyver, 2012; Evans, 2010), the development of historical thinking competencies ‘has emerged as a primary goal of history education’ (Levisohn, 2015, p. 1, see also Wineburg, 2001; Andrews & Burke, 2007; Seixas & Morton, 2013). More than just overcoming rote learning, the orientation on historical thinking has meant a real paradigm shift in history education. History learning is now understood as the development of students’ abilities to think historically, a concept that challenges the conventional idea of using history to introduce the next generation into accepted national master narratives (see Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015, p. 89). Historical thinking skills also have dominated the discussion about history education in Germany (see Barricelli & Gautschi, 2012; Körber, Schreiber & Schöner, 2007 among many others) and Austria (e.g. Kühberger, 2009) in the last decade. Generally speaking, it can be stated that at least in history education research, historical learning is nowadays primarily seen as the introduction of pupils into a ‘style of thinking’ concerning the ‘flexible (lively and fluid) application’ (Borries, 2006, p. 43) of knowledge, rather than mainly being about the accumulation of positivist encyclopaedia contents. This can definitely be said for the area of history education research. In this context, some empirical research in Austria already exists (Kühberger, 2014a, 2014b, Pichler, 2016a, 2016b), although until now there is hardly any empirical evidence about what teachers think about this. Do they consider the teaching of historical thinking in schools as important? Above all, it depends upon the teachers and their attitudes towards historical thinking, namely whether it is really developed in classrooms. Therefore, this question needs to be addressed.

In this article, some findings will be presented that were gained within a qualitative interview study with 42 teachers in Austria in the framework of the Competence and Academic Orientation in History Textbooks (CAOHT) project,¹ which investigates historical thinking and textbook use in history lessons in Austria using a sequential qualitative-quantitative triangulation design. History lessons are investigated with participant observation, quantitative surveys for teachers and pupils and qualitative interviews with teachers. This article only refers to the interview study and will provide some answers to the question of how important historical thinking/historical competencies are in the minds of Austrian teachers.

Theoretical framework – the model of historical thinking competencies FUER Geschichtsbewusstsein

The scientific background of the curriculum for “History, Social Studies and Civic Education”² in Austria is an elaborated concept of historical thinking by the international researcher group FUER Geschichtsbewusstsein. The history education researcher Christoph Kühberger played a major role in the introduction of this model into the Austrian context. His widely read and cited book *Kompetenzorientiertes historisches und politisches Lernen* (Kühberger, 2009) provides the theoretical background for the historical thinking competencies that teachers are supposed to develop in their history lessons in Austria according to the curriculum since 2008. The FUER model traces back to the theoretical work of Danto (1968), Rösen (1983), as well as other authors who influenced the concept of ‘historical consciousness’ (see Körber & Meyer-Hamme 2015, p. 89). Historical consciousness is seen as ‘a complex interaction of interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations towards the future’ (Bracke, Flaving, Köster, & Zulsdorf-Kersting, 2014, p. 23). One central element is the connection of the past with the present and future, namely the critical reflection about the fact that history always means personal orientation in the present and enables future actions. In the first decade of the 21st century, the FUER group operationalised historical consciousness and created a competence model with four dimensions. The underlying concept of these dimensions is a procedural understanding of historical thinking developed by Hasberg and Körber (2003) (see also Kölbl & Konrad, 2015; Körber, 2011).

The first dimension ‘competence in questioning’ reflects the ability to devise historical questions as well as detecting and assessing the questions that lie behind historical narratives with which one is dealing. The second dimension is called ‘methodological competence’, which comprises being able to synthetically construct historical narratives or historical statements from given information such as historical sources or historical representations (‘re-construction-competence’). Moreover, it is also about the skill to analytically reflect and assess given historical statements and work out what ‘lies behind them’, or how, why and with what intention they were constructed (‘de-construction-competence’). The third dimension is called ‘orientation competence’ and is connected to the present and future in the above-mentioned sense, reflecting the ability to relate history, insights and judgements about the past to one’s own life in the present (see Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015, p. 93). Peter Seixas labels this focus on uses of the past for orientation in the present as the ‘strength’ of the Austrian-German model (Seixas 2015, p. 4). The fourth dimension of historical competence is called ‘Sachkompetenz’ and is difficult to translate into English. One could say that it is – among other things – the “competence of notions and

1 The project “Competence and Academic Orientation in History Textbooks” (P 27859-G22) is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF)..

2 Since the subject is called ‘History’ by teachers and pupils, in what follows we will use the term ‘history’.

structures” insofar that it contains all concepts and categories that are used to structure the historical universe (knowledge about patterns of periodisation or epochs, of sectors – political, economic, cultural, micro-and macro history, etc.). However, this dimension contains much more than that; rather, it encompasses all of what is called ‘second-order concepts’ in the English-speaking discourse, e.g. the ‘six big historical thinking concepts’ of Seixas and Morton (2013) belong to this area (see Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015, p. 93-94). Moreover, skills of gaining access to achieve, the analysis and interpretation of documents and ordering information chronologically belong to the dimension of ‘Sachkompetenz’ (Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015, p. 94). In this context, Austrian contributions about historical knowledge and concepts include Kühberger (2012) and Kühberger (2016).

Thus, there exists a well-elaborated and in part highly complex theory about historical thinking in history education research in the Austrian-German context. However, the question that arises in this matter is whether these theories really inspire the practice of history lessons in our schools. There has been strong criticism about educational sciences, claiming – among other things – that the findings were often too theoretical and irrelevant to schools (Whitty, 2006, p. 161). Building history education research more strongly on an empirical basis would allow establishing better connections between research and the practice. As Kaestle (1993) puts it:

For the discipline of history education research, it is important to truly understand the practice and know what teachers think about history education and historical thinking. Based on this knowledge, it will be possible to think about what needs to be done to greater inspire school practice and how to inform Initial Teacher Education and Education policies. Especially in a time where a paradigm shift was proceeding in theory, it seems important to know whether this has already arrived in the classrooms.

Researching historical thinking in the history classroom – the CAOHT Project

The question of what history education is really like in Austrian schools and what role historical thinking plays in day-to-day history lessons is currently being investigated with qualitative and quantitative empirical methods in a project called Competence and Academic Orientation in History Textbooks (CAOHT). Within the framework of the CAOHT project, a sequential qualitative/quantitative triangulation design is used to gather rich data about history education in Austria, with a special focus on textbook use and historical thinking.

There are two approaches, namely a qualitative and quantitative one. The qualitative study has two strands that seek to provide two complementary and meaningful perspectives on the object of study. On the one hand, ethnographic participant observations took place in 50 history lessons from different teachers from lower-secondary schools in Vienna. On the other hand, following the participant observations, the teachers are interviewed in qualitative expert interviews, in accordance with Bogner et al. (2009 & 2014). The findings of the two strands of the qualitative study provided the foundation for those hypotheses to be tested by the subsequent quantitative survey with pupils (n=1000) and teachers (n=250) (see fig. 1). This study is currently (fall 2016) being carried out in Austrian schools. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Between-Method-Triangulation – about Triangulation, see recently Flick 2016) will allow for a more comprehensive record, description and evidence-based explanation of history education and will provide a ‘detailed and balanced picture’ (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2008, 147) concerning history lessons in Austria.

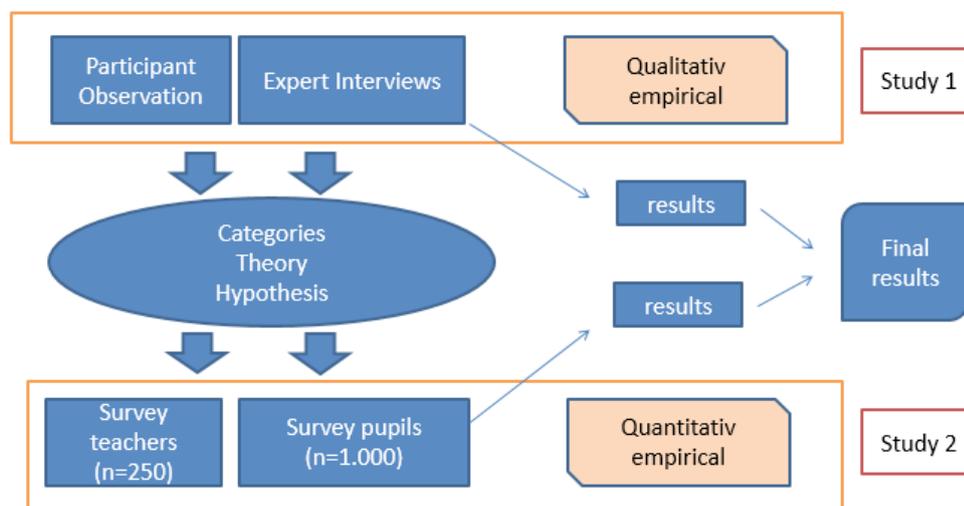


Fig. 1. Expert interviews in the framework of a triangulation design in the CAOHT project

Within the qualitative empirical study 1 (fig.1), to date 42 interviews have been conducted with teachers in Vienna regarding their approaches to history lessons, historical thinking and their use of teaching and learning materials. Furthermore, participant observations in history lessons of 35 teachers have been conducted thus far. Since we are working with elements of the Grounded Theory, the interpretation of interview data and the research in the field alternate. Accordingly, it is necessary to return back into the field when new questions arise in the process of interpretation of the qualitative data.³ In the process of interpreting interview data to date, some findings could already be made, which will be presented in this article.

The expert interviews with teachers

30 interviews with female and 12 with male teachers were conducted in February-June 2016 in Vienna. All interviewees are teaching in lower-secondary schools (pupil generally from age ten to 14). The participants were recruited using two approaches. (1) With the permission of the school authorities, an email was written to principals of schools with a request for the participation of history teachers in the project. Advance communication clarified the purpose of the study, which is essentially to know how history teaching is conducted in practice. Therefore, we communicated that we wanted to interview history teachers and make observations in their lessons, whereby it is our intention to learn from the practice. Principles passed on the email to their history teachers, some of whom volunteered to participate in the study. Some principals also directly asked teachers who they believed to represent the school in a good way to participate. Most of the interviewees were recruited in this first way. (2) Some participants were found through the help of gatekeepers, mostly through persons who work in initial teacher education and who passed on our request to teachers who they knew. Care was taken to include young teachers with little experience as well as experienced teachers. All interviews were semi-structured face-to-face interviews in the school

³ We are guided here by the principle of openness in qualitative research. At the time when this article was submitted (Nov. 2016), we had already conducted a certain number of interviews, although since there were a few more questions that arose during the interpretation of the data, some further interviews and observations in the field were already planned.

or institution in which the teachers worked. The interviews were generally conducted in a quiet room in the school after the participant observation in a lesson that the interviewee gave. The interviews were up to 70 minutes in duration and they were recorded and fully transcribed. They yielded rich texture data on teachers' experiences and beliefs with respect to history education and were analysed with MaxQDA.

Nearly all teachers were asked the following question at the beginning of the interview⁴: 'What is important for you concerning history education in schools?' For this article, only the answers to this starting question will be taken into consideration. When teachers are asked this question, they will tell you the things that first come to their minds and it is likely that these are the things that are really important to them. Accordingly, in order to ascertain how important historical thinking competencies are for teachers, the analysis of this data seemed promising to us.

Some results from qualitative interview data

Generally speaking, in the discussion about history education a dichotomy of two concepts can be found: a focus on either content (content orientation) or thinking or skills (competence orientation). In the words of Chapman (2015) – who is talking about an English context here, although this can be generalised – recent discussions of history curriculum and education research sometimes:

[...] have tended to be structured through overdrawn dichotomies - between 'content' and 'skills', between 'traditional' and 'progressive' and between 'child-centred' and 'subject-centred' pedagogies. (p. 31)

Interview data supports Chapman's idea that these are 'overdrawn dichotomies' since it is not possible to make clear distinctions between content- and skill-oriented teachers. Chapman highlighted the 'emptiness of these oppositions', arguing that:

[...] these oppositions present us with fallacious choices that restrict options to 'either / or' where, in reality, more complex choices, including 'both / and', are possible and desirable and, very probably, inevitable. (Chapman, 2015, p. 31).

The analysis of the interview data shows that for almost all teachers 'both /and' plays a role. Generally speaking, at least theoretically teachers are against rote learning of dates and facts. Interviewees position their history teaching in opposition to an earlier time when – according to them – dates and facts were the heart of history teaching in schools. As teachers said in the interviews:

Yes, somehow teaching [in earlier times] was designed in a way that either you fall asleep, or then, yes you just learned for the exam, and for the exam you had to learn as much as possible by heart in order to be able to pass the exam.⁵

4 Most of the time, this was the first question that we asked. Only when teachers began to talk about relevant topics concerning History education when they were asked to introduce themselves was the line of thought of the interviewee followed to avoid disturbing the flow of speech.

5 In the new curriculum for History, Social Studies and Civic Education of 2016, the term 'historical thinking' is found at the very beginning of the document, whereas in the 2008 curriculum the term cannot be found, despite already being a competence-oriented curriculum.

What shall they [pupils] learn? Let's start with what they shall not learn. They shall not learn, in my opinion, this dead knowledge about history, because that is not useful in any way.

Teachers often expressed their dislike of 'dead knowledge'. Nevertheless, many teachers explicitly stress the importance of teaching some content:

I think it is good, when they have some, I always say something like a skeleton. So, yes, they need to know a few things [...] I never ask for year dates, because this is relatively unimportant for me, I must say sincerely.

I think, completely without dates and facts it won't work. This is a basis. We cannot discuss them away, I think, this wouldn't correspond to the subject. But this is far from being all. And it is also not the only thing that matters.

Many teachers said in the interviews that content is not the most important thing in their history teaching, even though it holds some relevance. Thus, the question is what do teachers want pupils to know and be able to do? Interestingly, no teacher used the term 'historical thinking' in response to the question about what is important to him/her in history education. This is an interesting finding because from this we can deviate that the term 'historical thinking' plays almost no role in the minds of teachers in Austria, even though in German-speaking history education research historical thinking and historical thinking competencies have been very important topics in recent years (e.g. Mebus & Schreiber, 2005; Schreiber, 2006; Körber, Schreiber & Schöner 2007; Borries, 2008; Kühberger, 2013).

Despite this, data shows that the term 'historical thinking' has not really reached Austrian teachers until now.⁶ Historical thinking in the FUER model means – as we saw above – the development of historical competencies. Since 2008, according to the history curriculum the main focus of history education must lie on the development of these competencies. Accordingly, it can be asked whether perhaps teachers said that historical competencies are important to them and by saying so they would implicitly mean historical thinking. However, interestingly, no teacher answered in response to the first interview question about what is important in history education that these are historical competencies. Since the term 'historical competencies' is very common in Austria at present, the fact that teachers generally did not mention it is a remarkable result.

Can this be interpreted in a way to suggest that historical thinking processes do not play a role for these teachers? A deeper analysis of the data will prove that this is not the case. We argue that the cause for the aforementioned phenomena is as follows: a competence orientation was also introduced in other subjects. There was a real paradigm shift that affected many areas with which teachers deal, relating to the so-called 'Pisa-shock' in 2001, [PISA Programme of International Student Assessment] which caused profound uncertainty about the effectiveness of the education system in the German-speaking regions. During this time, teachers in Austria were often criticised in the media and political discourse because compared to pupils in other countries German and Austrian students scored below the international average. This fact led to demands to focus not so much on content compared with domain-specific competencies, and competence models for different subjects – including for history – were elaborated (see Kölbl & Konrad 2015, p. 24). Many teachers now have a problem with competence orientation in general because

⁶ It is supposed that the interviewee meant 'world' here, since in the classes of this teacher there are pupils from all over the world and those from Europe are a minority.

among other reasons they have the impression that it was 'prescribed from people from above' after the teachers failed the PISA test.

In the interviews, when we asked teachers what they thought about competence orientation in history education, many teachers offered answers showing their antipathy towards the concept, and we argue here that this is mainly due to the general antipathy towards the concept that derives from the aforementioned situation. Thus, from the perspective of history education research, it is a challenge that historical thinking and the term 'competence orientation' (in history) means the same in the Austrian context and that accordingly historical thinking suffers from the negative reputation that competence orientation currently has, generally speaking.

The interview data shows that three educational objectives are – apart from learning content in the aforementioned way – important to teachers:

- 1) Fostering critical thinking;
- 2) Enabling an understanding of the present by dealing with the past;
- 2) Enabling participation in the political discourse.

(1) The paradox is that all of these objectives are very close to some objectives of the competence oriented curriculum. Critical thinking and the participation in the historical culture strongly relates to the competence of questioning and methodological competencies (de-construction and re-construction competencies). Understanding the present by dealing with the past relates to orientation competencies. This means that the discourse about competence orientation is obviously not adopted or often even opposed by teachers, while the same teachers consider the thinking processes required in competence-based history teaching as important.

Yes, for me actually the thing with the critical, independent thinking is important. That young people come out who have an opinion on their own and as a first reaction, when they hear something, they always say firstly 'one moment'. I mean in the sense of being a bit mistrustful.

Yes, I wish that they become human beings able to think critically and that they don't swallow everything that is presented to them.

These two teachers are describing an attitude that is needed for de-construction competence of historical thinking, even though the two of them did not know that they were talking about historical thinking. Furthermore, the interviewee of the second quotation does not know at all what historical competencies are, as the interview data shows.

(2) Historical thinking is also – as we have seen – about orientation in the present by dealing with the past. This aspect generally plays an important role in the interviews. Teachers generally see that history must hold relevance for the present in a form whereby pupils understand the present by dealing with the past and that from this basis onwards they orientate their actions in the future:

For me it is important that they understand connections, yes, I mean, that they recognize and understand connections, namely from things that once were to how it is now and how it can be in the future. Or how it will be. Yes, this is how I would summarise it, that is the most important thing for me.

[...] that they are able to link the past with the present. This is very important for me, this reference to the present. [...] This means that we look, how did the ancient Egyptians or Greeks do it, for example democracy. And how is this nowadays in Austria?

I want that children – they come from the different parts of Europe – that they understand, why they, perhaps, why their parents tell them, that these are bad, these different ethnic groups and that this always has historical roots that this is born from wars.

(3) Moreover, the importance of the ability to participate in the political discourse was often highlighted in interviews. In a time of increasing radicalism in Austria, these topics seem to play a major role with respect to history teaching. On the one hand, history teaching shall help pupils to participate in the social discourse and integrate into the democratic society being able to judge on their own. On the other hand, history education should help to critically scrutinise developments in society and politics. The aspect of civic education is also sometimes seen as the justification of the subject history in general:

Civic education is a very, very important part for me. And I think History should always have such a focus. [...] Which justification do I have to stand before them and say: Now we will have a look at how it was in the past, whenever. Because there must be a reason for me to do so. Just to say: You have to know it because curricula demands it, because we want it ...

Yes, that they for example, that history education enables children to develop a political competence [...] That is very important that the children can integrate themselves in our democratic system in Austria and that they can judge things.

All this nationalism must for me – when you look at history – be identified as silliness and when children grasp [...] that Egyptians influenced the Greek then we don't need to talk about nationalism. [...] When I see the other as something positive [...] then I think we can also arrange our living together here a little better.

As we saw, generally speaking, the interviewed history teachers think that learning content is to a certain degree an important factor in history education in schools as a basis to go further. Although historical thinking and historical competencies were not mentioned in the answers to the question regarding what teachers find important in history education, many teachers saw elements that belong to historical thinking as important aspects of history education, namely fostering critical thinking, understanding the present by dealing with the past and participation in political discourse and historical culture. Data showed that the dichotomy of content and skills is a theoretical one. Thus, this chapter will conclude with Chapman (2015):

'Either/or' is, then, an unhelpful way of framing pedagogic debate: simplistic binaries are incapable of capturing the knowing and thinking involved in learning. The opposition between 'knowledge' and 'skills' is also clearly inadequate (p. 32).

Limitations of the study

This study draws upon qualitative interviews with a small sample of teachers. Teachers who offer participation in such a study are normally self-confident because otherwise they would not let somebody from a university observe their teaching. Accordingly, it can be supposed that the teachers we talked to may be more reflected in what they are doing and pedagogically more able than others who did not want to participate. Furthermore, it is not possible to deduce from the interview data what teachers are really doing in their history lessons. Nevertheless, when this study is put into the context of the data derived from participant observation of history lessons, it may help to understand in a deeper way what is happening in the field and why.

Discussion and conclusion

As we have seen, there is no such a thing as an ideal “content-oriented” or “competence-oriented” teacher. Generally speaking, teachers believe that both content and competencies are important in history education in schools. Rote learning of dates and facts is generally seen as useless. Contents are seen as an important framework and are especially important in the eyes of teachers when they help to understand developments in the present.

Interestingly, the term ‘historical thinking’ does not play a role at all for Austrian teachers and many of them do not know what historical competence orientation represents. Nevertheless, many teachers have negative attitudes towards what they believe it to be. On the other hand, generally speaking, some of the thinking processes in the classroom that historical competence orientation requires are seen by them as very important. In response to the question ‘Are historical thinking skills important to history teachers in Austria?’, it can be said: yes, in part they are important, although many teachers often do not know that what they consider important is part of historical thinking or historical competencies. It is obvious that many aspects of the rich and deep competence model of historical thinking are not considered at all by teachers and many opportunities in this respect are not used.

Thus, it can be said that the paradigm shift has just partly arrived in the minds of teachers. We argue that this may be a reaction to the reaction of the so-called PISA shock that comprised decreeing competence orientation as the solution to improve teaching in Austria. The introduction of competence orientation in general was seen as severe criticism of teachers’ performance. Thus, the question should be raised within the German-speaking history education research community concerning how to avoid that negative reputation of the term ‘competencies’ having negative effects on the reputation of these thinking processes that are called historical thinking. Moreover, we have to ask the question of how to better introduce teachers into historical thinking and how to better convince them of the benefits of the historical thinking approach.

Correspondence

Roland Bernard
Roland.Bernhard@gmail.com

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