



Boring History, Bored Pupils: The Role of History Teachers

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Teaching history should be delight, for all human life is there, triumphs and disasters, love and hate, folly and wisdom. History is the universal soap opera that allows us to 'look through the keyhole' at people in the past, from kings to queens to the poorest slave and peasant. The key to successful history teaching is to bring the past to life in the minds of the children, so that they can imagine themselves there, hear people speak and join in their debates, controversies and adventures, either as voyeur or participant. All this we and our children can do, with one essential rider. Whatever we teach must be honest, in the sense that it must be true to the surviving record of the past, our historical sources.*

Unfortunately, this is not the picture of our classrooms. The three workshops I attended (Budapest, Istanbul, Ljubljana) presented quite a different image: history teaching in most countries of this region is still a rather painful process of acquiring a large amount of unnecessary facts and the role of history teacher is too often perceived as some kind of a patriot on duty. Especially national history is overburdened with political and military history and includes too many images of our own heroic past and 'us' being victims of the 'others'. At the same time, multi-dimensional approach and the realistic and sober perspective of

* Jon Nichol and Jacqui Dean, *History 7-11: Developing primary teaching skills*, Routledge 1997.

the others is missing in many textbooks; there are too many examples how they, even when describing the neighbouring peoples, include quite a number of negative stereotypes and often no knowledge. There is a serious lack of, as one participant of our workshops put it, “optimism and sense of humour”. In other words, school history is boring and it is no wonder that, in comparison with other strong influences, especially those from media and family tradition, it has a little or no effect on our pupils.

In that matter, history textbooks play important role because, along with the historical knowledge, they transfer social, cultural and political norms of one society. Unfortunately, they are much too often subjected to influences from politics and public opinion and too often brought into the position to follow current political trends and spread ideologies. Many of them still include only one-dimensional interpretation of historical problems and do not help pupils to develop critical thinking and to judge events and sources. (I still remember being taught during my teacher’s training at university that textbooks may include only one interpretation of events because different opinions can only confuse pupils!) Nevertheless, there are lately some positive developments in textbook production. The emergence of alternative and parallel textbooks in most countries in the region and competition among publishers helped to improve the quality of design and appearance of textbooks. However, when curricula and content of textbooks are concerned, changes are much slower and more time-consuming.

Our discussions in workshops and experiences from our school systems also show that it is sometimes more easy to change curricula and textbooks than the way teachers are used to teach (the Slovenian case). There is always a considerable resistance among those teachers who are used to the

traditional way of teaching history to accept new ideas and new methods. If teachers are not prepared and eager to change their teaching, then the best curricula and the best textbooks will prove useless.

However, teachers do need help. I attended many seminars for history teachers in Croatia and it is my experience that many of them feel demoralised and lost. After years of ideologisation of history as a school subject and neglecting of history didactics, teachers do need seminars and workshops which will help them to update their historical knowledge, to learn new teaching methods and to learn how to deal with certain sensitive and controversial topics which are never lacking in the history of this region.

Let me describe in a few words the Croatian case. After the collapse of the socialist system in 1990, the Marxist approach was left out from the curricula and textbooks and Croatian history was singled out from the earlier Yugoslav frame. However, because of the political pressure, one ideology was replaced by the another, based upon the ethnocentric presentation of history and elements of national exclusiveness. Relations with neighbouring peoples were presented primarily through conflicts and the Croatian resistance to aggression and attempts of destroying Croatian national identity.

After the parliamentary elections at the beginning of the year 2000, there were again more talks about the need for urgent changes in history teaching. The Ministry of Education appointed a Commission, which evaluated the existing history curricula and textbooks and recommended the development of the new ones. It also recommended the organisation of seminars for curricula and textbooks authors, with participation of foreign experts, and also to provide them with possibilities of attending courses and studies abroad.

But, after much talks and widespread demands for changes, so far nothing happened. There is still no systematic and permanent in-service training of history teachers and teaching practice remained quite traditional. The same negatively evaluated curricula still exist and all new textbooks have to be written according to them. Didactically and methodologically speaking, most of them are still old-fashioned, burdened with too many facts and written in a language which is not suitable for children's age, which made the subject of history one of the most unpopular subjects at school.

Therefore, teacher training is essential and could make a difference. In this respect, our workshops for teachers could be a one step forward towards different history teaching, although it will be a long and slow process. It would also do teachers good to meet and share experiences because personal contacts can also help to overcome prejudices and fears from each other. At the same time, such workshops could also introduce new teaching methods and develop alternative teaching materials. It would be also important to achieve some co-operation with Ministries of Education; this could provide opportunity for teachers participating in those workshops to present the results and materials at the seminars for teachers in their own countries. It is also of great importance that university professors and teachers co-operate because, as far as history teaching is concerned, scientific knowledge of subject and teaching experience should receive the same attention.

When I started to teach history, most of all I wanted to transfer my enthusiasm and interest for the past to my pupils. I like to imagine that I succeeded to present at least some topics in interesting and amusing way. However, my pupils still ask from time to time, especially after some really boring lessons, why do they have to learn history, some-

thing that is long gone and forgotten and not at all fun. I do hope that, in times to come, there will be more lessons like first ones and less and less those like second ones. And I do hope that, when bell rings at the end of the class, it would be possible to hear more often from my pupils the word "Already?" instead of "Thank God, it's over!".