

SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION, ASSESSMENT AND ALIGNMENT IN HISTORY EDUCATION

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The past meet us in a large variety of ways. The reason for this is that there is no true image of events or processes in history. On the contrary, the history of the Middle East for example, is presented in very different ways depending on if it is done from a pro-Israeli or a pro-Palestinian perspective. Another example of history as a moving image concerns the concept of the *cold war* and its major participants. The concept itself and the countries involved have been allotted different meanings in school textbooks depending on in which decade the book was written. A third example is the concept of the Swedish welfare state, *folkhemmet*. The extreme right wing party, the Swedish democrats, used this concept in the election campaign 2010 as an image of a past and prosperous Sweden, now ruined by immigration. On the other hand the concept can be used to shed light on the exclusion and mistreatment of various minority groups in Sweden during the later part of the twentieth century. These three examples are chosen because they make it clear that there is no such thing as one true history, there is no Big picture. In order to be able to handle such competing accounts of the past all citizens have to develop there historical consciousness.

We all have a historical consciousness but in order to develop it we have to train it, because historical thinking is not a natural act.¹ Our historical consciousness changes every time we encounter and deal with historical material of some sort, be it film, magazines, family stories or political propaganda. But there is only one place where we can train it systematically, in school and history class.

Purpose and research questions

Because of history's important role in present events and its inherent character of a moving target it is of great importance to study the history syllabus in the Swedish upper secondary school. It is also interesting to study to what extent the teachers share this view of school-history. In order to reach that aim I will focus on the following research questions.

- To what extent does the history syllabus in the Swedish upper-secondary school make it possible to teach in a way that can develop the students historical consciousness?

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¹ Samuel S. Wineburg 2001.

- To what extent does the teachers' assessment align with the history syllabus?
- What explanations are there for the observed degree of alignment?

Construction of the school subject history

One important aspect of the construction of the subject of history is the nature of historical knowledge itself, and it is this aspect of the construction that is of interest here. On one hand it is possible to view the content of history text-books as the truth. This way of looking on historical knowledge is represented in the *material theory* and the *formal theory* put forward by Jensen. He claims that these two theories, from different perspectives, shares the same belief of historical knowledge, that the truth is out there. The material theory focus on the authoritative sources and what they say about the past, whilst the formal theory claims that history teaching should use historical methods in order to teach the students how to find the truth themselves. The similarity between them is the belief that there is a historical truth and that it is accessible to us.² This way of constructing the subject of history is represented in other research of history education. Ola Halldén, Stéphane Levesques and S.G Grant have observed this view among history teachers.³

Another way of looking at the subject of history is put forward by Jensen in what he calls the categorial theory. According to the categorial theory historical knowledge is the result of interpretation in two steps. First, the questions that researchers ask to the empirical sources originate in the historians subjective view of what is important to ask. Second, the historical knowledge is depending on the interpretations the researcher does as he/she encounters the material. Hayden White shares this view of the nature of historical knowledge and it is also mentioned in research of history education.⁴

The continuum

In order to clarify the different positions of viewing on historical knowledge, as it is used in the history classroom, the two opposite ways presented above will be seen as the extreme ends of a continuum. On the left side of the continuum historical knowledge is seen as true facts, a mirror of what actually happened in the past. On the right end of the continuum historical knowledge is seen as subjective interpretations of remnants of the past, no more true than any fictive novel. History teachers do not have to be positioned on any of these two extreme ends, rather are they likely to position themselves somewhere along the continuum It

² Sven Sødning Jensen 1978.

³ S. G. Grant 2003, s. 30-32. . Stéphane Lévesque 2008, s. 27. . Ola Halldén 1994, s. 30-40.

⁴ S. G. Grant 2003, s. 32-33.

is also possible that a teacher can stand on one point of the continuum in one aspect of history, ancient history for example, and on another point in some other aspect of history, such as modern history. The extreme end to the left is called the *reconstructivist* position because it can be said to view historical knowledge as an actual reconstruction of the past. The other extreme end is called the constructivist position as it sees historical knowledge as a construction of an image of the past, made primarily by the historian.

Reconstructivist

Constructivist

There is no clear consensus within research about history education as to what extent these different positions might affect students learning of history. There are several researchers that argue for a more constructivist stance in the classroom. The main argument for this is that if students do not know on what grounds the content in the text-books are established they will have difficulties not only relating to and finding meaning in the content. They will also risk being confused when meeting competing accounts of the past, as in the example of the history of the Middle East.⁵

The research made into different teaching methods gives us little knowledge about how they actually affect student learning. The youth and history project could establish any connection between a more research-based education and a more developed historical consciousness.⁶ There can be some doubts, though, as to the possibility of measuring historical consciousness with the kind of questions used in the project.

There is research that has shown that the temporal starting point of a unit of teaching in history has an impact on student motivation. Questions and assignments from a teacher and the content of the history syllabus can focus either on the present or on the past. A standard in the history syllabus for the Swedish upper secondary school that focus on the past is one that says that students should have knowledge of the basic characteristics of the historical development. This will be referred to as the genetic perspective. The perspective focusing on the present, is the genealogic, it can be exemplified with a standard that states that students should be able to discuss present issues from a historical perspective.⁷

Alignment

In an educational setting it is important that there is alignment between three parts of the teaching/learning situation. First the content of the syllabus, often referred to as the

5 Peter Lee & Jonathan Howson 2009, s. 218-221. . Sam Wineburg 1997:4, s. 259-260. Stéphane Lévesque 2008, s. 8-17.

6 Bodo von Borries 1998, s. 161.

7 Klas-Göran Karlsson 2010, s. 40-51.

curriculum Second, how it is taught in the classroom, the teaching methods, and third, how the teacher finds out what the student has learned, the assessment procedures. If there is alignment between these three parts there are greater possibilities for goal achievement among the students. If the alignment is poor there is an enhanced risk that learning is impaired.⁸ The teaching methods used by the teachers is not a part of this study which of course would have been desirable. But as I want a broader picture of teachers subject construction the choice was made only to examine the alignment between the syllabus and the assessment.

Methodological considerations

In order to establish in what ways the history syllabus makes it possible to develop the historical consciousness of students the standards will be categorised in relation to the continuum presented above and the different temporal dimensions. This will be done with a qualitative textual analyses. The next step is to measure the alignment between the standards and the written instructions for the collection of material to assess (WICMA). The WICMA contains teacher made material such as tests, instructions for home assignments, group assignments and oral presentations. This material has been collected from 23 randomly selected teachers that taught the A-level history course in the Swedish upper secondary school 2008/2009.

The reasons for using assessment material in order to get hold of the teachers subject constructions is that when producing the material there view of the subject materialises. In the assessment material they communicate to the students what that is important to know in the subject.⁹

The alignment between the standards and the assessment is measured in two ways. First the balance between the standards and assessment with regard to cognitive complexity is done by using Porters alignment index.¹⁰ The matrix used for the balance measure is the revision of Blooms taxonomy.¹¹ Second the percentage of the standards covered in each teachers WICMA is measured.

In order to complement the written material interviews are made with five of the teachers that contributed with material to the study. The teachers are chosen because of their WICMAs relation to the syllabus. Two of the teachers have a higher degree of alignment, one is located in the middle whilst two have a lower degree of alignment. The reason for this selection is that it can make it possible to identify explanations to differences in the degree of alignment.

⁸ John B. Biggs 2007, s. 335.

⁹ Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam 2009:1, s. 8.

¹⁰ Andrew C. Porter 2002:7, s. 3-6.

¹¹ Lorin W. Anderson & David R. Krathwohl 2001

These two methods, textual analyses and interviews are necessary in order to avoid the risks of relying on just one source of information. It is possible that teachers have one certain view of the subject but has a low degree of assessment competence which makes the WICMA non-representative of the teachers subject construction. It is also possible that teachers when interviewed, answers not what they think, bur what they think that the researcher wants to hear. This is a behaviour that has been observed in studies of history teaching.¹² That is why the interviews needs to be complemented by some other source that can verify the statements made. If the content of the WICMA is supported by statements in the interviews they will be treated as more likely compared to if there is contradictions between the WICMA and the interviews.

In order to explain the result of the two alignment measures two approaches are used. First, common features in the standards that are assessed to a greater extent are compared to the features of those not covered to the same extent. Second, what the teachers say about their assessment praxis and their view on the subject of history is used to shed light on the degree of alignment.

The A-level history course

The A-level history syllabus contains two different parts. On the first hand there are goals that every student should achieve (see appendix one). Secondly, there are grading criteria for the three levels pass, pass with distinction and pass with special distinction. These criteria define the knowledge that a student should have in order to get each grade. When comparing the standards of the history syllabus with the continuum of how to construct the subject of history it some important features becomes visible. There are some goals and criteria that have strong reconstructivist connotations and can therefore be placed on the left side of the continuum. The characteristics for these goals and criteria are that they are formulated in such a way that the historical knowledge that is required to meet the criteria only can be delivered in one way, there is one correct answer. One example is the gaol that states that students should know the meaning of central historical concepts. Another example is the grading criteria for pass that says that students should describe basic structures of the historical process. On the other hand there are also goals and criteria that can be located at the constructivist, right hand side of the continuum. One of these is the one that defines student knowledge as the ability to describe the historical process from varying perspectives with an insight in that historical knowledge

¹² Ronald W. Evans 1990:2, s. 124-125. Stephen J. Thornton 1988:4, s. 314-315.

changes over time. A grading criteria for pass with distinction that belongs to the constructivist end is one that says that students should be critical while using historical methods and material.

There are also differences between goals with regard to their temporal focus. A mainly genetic approach can be found in the goal that asks student to know certain traits of the historical process. A more genealogic focus can be found in the goal that asserts that students should be able to formulate themselves in historical questions. An example from the grading criteria from the genetic perspective is the one for pass with distinction that defines that students should handle phenomena and facts in the past. A more genealogic criteria for the same grade is the one that states that students should be able to define the historical background and possible future development of present phenomenon.

Apart from these clear cut goals and criteria there are some that can not be so easily defined as either reconstructivist or constructivist without putting them in a context. One example is a goal that says that students should be able to analyse historical problems. It can be argued that it is possible to analyse with a view of the subject of history placed on either end of the continuum. The difference is that on the left hand side there is one correct result of the analyses whilst there on the other side is possible for students to come to different results.

It is clear that there are goals and criteria in the history syllabus that indicates that students should be prepared to meet competing accounts and the fact that what we know about history differs over time. The goals and criteria that make this possible are the ones that are positioned on the right hand of the continuum.

The alignment between syllabus and assessment - balance

The balance between the content of the syllabus and the content of the teachers WICMA shows an unacceptably low degree of alignment. According to Webb an alignment index over 0.7 is acceptable and an index below 0.6 unacceptably low.¹³ The average index of all teachers in the study is 0.38, ranging from 0.13 to 0.6. The result shows that the teacher with the highest grade of alignment barely reaches the limit for what is considered weakly acceptable. The low degree of alignment indicates that the teachers in the study has too many items in their WICMAS that demand low levels of cognitive complexity from the students when compared to the history syllabys. The most frequent cognitive process used in the WICMAS is the process of remember, whilst more complex cognitive processes, analyse for

¹³ Norman L. Webb 2007:1, s. 15-16.

example, is rarely represented at all. The history syllabus has very few items in the process remember and the majority of items in more complex cognitive processes. This difference between the syllabus and the WICMA explains the low level of alignment. There is plenty of research that shows that this kind of assessment material, that focus on low cognitive complexity, directs student learning to surface activities and their image of the subject to an atomistic one since it presents it in small pieces taken out of context.¹⁴

The alignment between syllabus and assessment - percentage

A low alignment index does not automatically mean that teachers neglect to assess all goals and criteria in the syllabus. It is possible that teachers cover all parts of the syllabus but have a much higher proportion of items that belongs to the process of remembering. The teachers in the study assess an average of 29 percent of the goals and grading criteria. The teacher with the highest coverage reaches 45 percent and the one with the lowest reaches 15 percent. In a goal related system a coverage of 100 percent of the goals and grading criteria can be expected from the teachers, therefore the alignment measured as the percentage of the syllabus that is covered in the WICMA must be seen as unreasonably low.

In order to explain the degree of alignment it is of interest to see if there are any common traits in the goals and criteria that are assessed to a greater extent and if there are any similarities between those assessed to a lesser extent.

There are two goals out of six that are assessed to a greater extent than the others, numer one and number two. They can be characterised as being rooted on the left, reconstructivist, side of the continuum. There is one more thing that is typical for the last two goals, number five and six, in relation with the others. These two goals have a clear genealogic focus, as they states that present events shall be discussed and that the students shall formulate historical questions.

There are some striking similarities with the discussion concerning the goals when one looks at the grading criteria for pass. The two criteria assessed to the greatest extent are number one and three, and they are the concrete version of the two goals most frequently assessed. This means that they as well are placed on the reconstructivist side of the continuum. There is a temporal dimension with regard to the grading criteria for pass to. Number two and five, that

¹⁴ See for example Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam 2009:1, s. 8.

both demands that the student starts in the present and then turns back into the past for answers, has a genealogic centre of gravity.

When looking at the grading criteria for pass with distinction one can see resemblances with what has been noted above. The criterion assessed to a greater extent, number one, is on the reconstructivist side of the continuum as it is easier to handle if there is one true answer. The characteristics of those assessed to a lower extent when related to the first criterion is that they consists of many parts, such as number two. The criteria number three and five both demands more complex cognitive processes and number four has a genealogic focus.

There is one criterion out of four for pass with special distinction that is represented in the WICMA, number four. It is the one that deals with the historical method. There is one criterion for pass with distinction that mentions method as well. 13 percent of the teachers assess the criterion that mentions historical method for pass with special distinction. The other criteria on this level shares the characteristics of those assessed to a lesser extent on the other levels. They have either a genealogic focus, are located on the right, constructivist end of the continuum or demand complex cognitive processes.

To sum up it is possible to see some common characteristics in the criteria that are represented to a higher extent in the WICMA. First, they are placed on the reconstructivist end of the continuum, meaning that they ask for true answers and leave very little room for the students to arrive at differing interpretations of the past. Second, they have a genealogic focus in that their departure is in the past more than in the present. Third, they demand less complex cognitive processes in that they revolve around the process of remembering.

Interviews with teachers

As mentioned above there is a possibility that teachers WICMA do not represent their true subject construction. Therefore five of the teachers have been interviewed about their assessment practice and thoughts about the school subject history. It is possible to identify both similarities and differences between the teachers with high degree of alignment compared with those who have a lower degree.

The topics on which the teachers differ can be put into two groups, one external and one internal in relation to the subject of history. There are two external topics and on one of these the teachers with a higher degree of alignment have something in common. They both teach Swedish as their second subject and they both admit having continuous discussions at work about assessment, often in relation to the external national test in Swedish. One of these teachers also says that she had training at teacher school in assessment in the subject of

Swedish. Since only one of the five teachers had any assessment training in the subject of history it is reasonable to assume that the training and discussions in the subject of Swedish can contribute to explain the differences in alignment. The reason for this is that it is possible that the two teachers transfer a general assessment competence from one subject to another.

There are two topics internal to the subject of history on which the teachers differed. First they have different views on what kind of knowledge or skills the students are required to show in order to get a certain grade. The teachers with a higher degree of alignment demands more complex cognitive processes from their students than is the case of the teachers with a lower degree of alignment. A second topic on which teachers differs is that they start of at different positions when constructing assessment items. Teachers with a higher degree of alignment both say that they use the syllabus while the teachers with a lower degree refers to the content of lessons or text books as the main source of inspiration. It is possible that the teachers that use their lessons as inspiration have planned them according to the syllabus, but there is nothing in their WICMA that suggest that such an indirect influence from the syllabus on their assessment items.

The topics on which the teachers have similar statements can be put into one external and one internal to the subject of history. In the external group are topics about the work place organisation and all of the teachers agree on that the principal is inactive on assessment related issues. They also agree on the fact that the separation of colleagues teaching the same subject and the subsequent constructions of teams of teachers teaching different subjects have led to the removal of opportunities to discuss subject related assessment issues.

The topics internal to the subject of history shows that the five teachers have a low awareness of the content of the syllabus, that they, with one exception, have had no training in assessment in history. All teachers, except one that has a higher degree of alignment claims that the meaning of the subject of history is to learn it for its own sake, without any reference to the present. There is also agreement among the teachers with regard to the content of the A-level course. They all plan it around a specific historical content structured along a chronology of epochs. None of the teachers mentions historical methods or skills as a part of the content.

A systematic construct underrepresentation

When one locates the similarities of the goals and criteria it is clear that is not arbitrary what parts of the syllabus that is not assessed to any greater extent. Teachers consequently avoid assessing goals and criteria that are on the constructivist end of the continuum, and thereby

have a more scientific focus. They also avoid covering the goals and criteria with a departure in the present, and thus have a genealogic focus. A third common feature of goals and criteria that are not assessed is that they demand complex cognitive processes from the students. This leaves us with a history education that primarily is concerned with a big History of the past made up of facts put together to a straight story.

To explain this systematic underrepresentation one can look at the composite picture that evolves when the common traits of the WICMA is put together with the factors internal to the subject of history. This picture is an image of the teachers construction of the subject of history. While the syllabus has items on both sides of the continuum the teachers only assess the items on the reconstructivist end. Their views on the purpose of learning history and what content their A-level course have strengthens the picture of a reconstructivist construction of the school subject history. This systematic underrepresentation leads to a weak alignment between the syllabus and the assessment. The fact that the one part of the syllabus that is left out is the scientific side of the subject means that student ability to handle competing accounts of the past will not be developed. The other part of the syllabus that is left out of the assessment is the genealogic, and that means that the historical dimension that gives the subject meaning is denied to the students.

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Appendix 1. Syllabus for the A-level history course in the Swedish upper secondary school

Goals

Goals that pupils should have attained on completion of the course

Pupils should:

1. be familiar with fundamental features of historical development
2. understand the meaning of concepts specific to a period, as well as other central historical concepts
3. be able to analyse historical problems and interpret causal contexts underlying historical processes of change
4. be able to describe historical processes from different perspectives, with an appreciation of the specificity of historical knowledge
5. be able to discuss current issues from a historical perspective
6. be able to formulate their thoughts on historical issues.

Grading criteria

Criteria for Pass

1. Pupils describe the fundamental features of historical development, and show the different forces that have influenced and influence historical processes.
2. Pupils give the background for some events and phenomena of our time.
3. Pupils use concepts specific to a period and other central historical concepts.
4. Pupils formulate with assistance historical problems and issues.
5. Pupils put themselves into a historical context.

Criteria for Pass with distinction

1. Pupils compile individual phenomena and facts from the past to develop an overall understanding and give the reasons for their views.
2. Pupils demonstrate with the help of central concepts changes in historical processes in Swedish, Nordic and general history.
3. Pupils demonstrate evidence of a critical attitude in reasoning on historical problems and sources, process material as well as give reasons for their views.
4. Pupils make comparisons between different cultures, and show how phenomena and courses of events, both in the present and in the past, have a historical background and influence the future.
5. Pupils discuss the importance of the cultural heritage of different peoples and societies.

Criteria for Pass with special distinction

1. Pupils also discuss from a historical perspective current issues and analyse their own society's growth and historical identity, as well as demonstrate awareness of the consequences that different approaches may have in the future.
2. Pupils, on the basis of central historical concepts, map the conditions and driving forces of people and societies at different times and in different cultures.
3. Pupils construct different historical perspectives of what has taken place in their own world and themselves.
4. Pupils reflect, reason, and draw conclusions on the basis of their assessment of different sources and the value of historical artefacts.