To Know That or to Know How? An Attempt to Integrate Content and Skills in History Teaching

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Introduction

In the Swedish educational system, the well-known skills/content dilemma in history teaching can be said to have been brought to a settlement when the curricula for the compulsory (primary and lower secondary) and non-compulsory (upper secondary) schools were issued in 1994. Here the concept of “knowledge” was defined as:

a complex concept which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. The work of the school must therefore focus on providing scope for the expression of these different forms of knowledge as well as creating a learning process where they balance and interact with each other to form a meaningful whole for the individual pupil.¹

The forms of knowledge are well-known to all Swedish teachers as the “four F’s” or, translated to English, the “four C’s”: Content, Comprehension, Competence, and Confidence. This balanced complexity also leaves its mark on the learning outcomes given in the subject-specific syllabus. The pupil should have factual knowledge about ‘important historical figures, events and periods’ and also achieve a ‘broad and in-depth knowledge of their cultural heritage, as well as that developed by different national minority groups’. There are but a few specific topics mentioned, but when leaving compulsory school after school year 9 (age 16) all pupils are supposed to have ‘knowledge of modern history, covering progress and the striving for peace, as well as genocide, especially the Holocaust, revolutions

¹ Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the pre-school class and the leisure-time centre: Lpo 94. (Stockholm: Skolverket (Swedish National Agency of Education), 1994), http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=1070.
and war’, and pupils in school year 5 (age 12) should ‘be familiar with the
history of their home district and how this has shaped its culture’.2

In official documents everything looks fine. But as we know, history
teaching takes place in classrooms, not in documents. Is the delicate bal-
ance upheld there too? Available data suggest that there is cause for rea-
sonable doubt.

National evaluations

Skolverket (the Swedish National Agency for Education) has on two occa-
sions, 1992 and 2003, performed extensive evaluations of the compulsory
school. The evaluation of 2003 showed that between 25 and 75 percent
of the pupils (depending on the questions given) had difficulties in iden-
tifying events of importance for our time, even when the questions were
related to topics that ought to be well known. A significant pattern was
that pupils’ answers indicated a fragmented knowledge, which led the
evaluating committee to ask whether social studies education (including
history) is dominated by rote learning and collecting information, not giv-
ing pupils the opportunity to discuss and reflect over causal connections
or similarities and differences.3

The committee’s rhetorical question suggests that nothing much has
changed since the previous evaluation in 1992, when the National Agency
for Education concluded that history education is dominated by a single,
fact-based account to be learnt properly with little room to examine or
problematic. Classroom work mainly consists of a “traditional”, chrono-
logically ordered description of development handed down by the teacher,
while comparisons or source examinations are seldom present.4

History teaching and textbooks

One may safely assume that the textbook is one of the factors contributing
to the traditional and fact-based history teaching in schools. Also other

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www.skolverket.se/sbd/2098.

3 Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Huvudrapport – naturorienterande
ämnen, samhällsorienterande ämnen och problemlöning i årskurs 9. Rapport 252,
(Stockholm: Skolverket, 2004); Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Sam-
hällsorienterande ämnen. Åmnesrapport till rapport 252, (Stockholm: Skolverket,
2004).

4 Den nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 1992: Huvudrapport – samhällsorien-
learning materials chosen by the teacher can contribute to this, even if the impact of this single factor is difficult to assess. One of the significant differences between the school evaluations of 1992 and 2003 was that a majority of the teachers in 1992 stated that their work was guided by the textbook while in 2003 almost all, or 95 percent, mentioned their own ideas and interests as the most important factor. 64 percent stated that textbooks guided their work only to a relatively limited extent.

It is of course still possible that the textbook remains the most frequently used tool when teachers give their ideas and interests a concrete form in classroom work. The textbook does not seem to have lost its important role; in the 2003 evaluation 75 percent of the pupils stated that it is used every day or at least every week.\(^5\)

The syllabus does not define or prescribe the content of the history courses other than mentioning “important events” and “major social upheavals”. This is a window of opportunity and a challenge, but may also become a burden for the individual teacher. There are indications that textbooks thus create an “unofficial canon”, defining by their content the subject matters that should count as important.\(^6\)

Textbooks, however, do more than that. They also define what type of knowledge that counts as important. Studies on History textbooks used in Swedish schools during the 1980’s and 1990’s have shown that they to a fairly large extent were mediating factual information rather than facilitating student-active and problem-based learning.\(^7\) A recent analysis of textbooks from Norwegian and Swedish schools conducted by Monica Reichenberg and Dagrun Skjelbred indicates that changes during the last decades have been small. Using concepts coined by the French literature scholar Gérard Genette, Reichenberg and Skjelbred suggest that the exercises found in textbooks convey a paratextual message that shapes the students’ expectations of how the textbook ought to be read and used.\(^8\) The questions asked and the tasks given become orientation points used by the students to figure out what is seen as relevant knowledge within the subject area.

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\(^5\) Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Huvudrapport, 63; Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003: Samhällsorienterande ämnen, 55.


\(^7\) See e.g. Sture Långström, Förfärlighet och lärobokstradition: en historiedidaktisk studie. (Umeå: Umeå University, 1997); Staffan Selander, Läroboksutbildning: pedagogisk textanalys med exempel från läroböcker i historia 1841-1985. (Lund: Studenlitet, 1988)

Reichenberg’s and Skjelbred’s analysis shows that there are two common types of textbook exercises. One is found under a heading such as “Do you remember?” or “Find the answer!”, asking the student to find and reproduce pieces of factual information. The other, slightly more frequent, is labelled “Discuss!” or “Think and analyse”. Here it could be expected that the ambition of the textbook author(-s) is to get the student to reflect, to read critically, and to use independent judgement. At a closer look, however, one finds that questions starting with “Why was...” very often are “closed” questions with only one correct answer that can be read straight from the page. Questions starting with “What’s your opinion on... were rarely found in the Norwegian textbook and non-existent in the Swedish one.

The paratextual message conveyed by these books will be that learning history is done through memorizing factual information. This also means that textbooks are lacking when it comes to promote comprehension and competence (and hence also confidence). Here it must of course be remembered that textbook content in itself says nothing about what’s happening in the classroom. As John A. Zahorik has pointed out, textbooks can be used in a variety of ways depending on the individual teacher’s teaching style, e.g. as a source of facts to be learned, a source of different types of activities (textbook exercises or activities constructed by the teacher), or as a basis for interpretation and discussion.9

In order to counterbalance the “paratext effect” then textbook must be supplemented by other learning materials. A survey conducted among Nordic History teachers in 2006/2007 showed that teachers do this, and that they choose from a vast range of materials. Among Swedish teachers the textbook dominates (83 percent of Swedish teachers use it “a lot” or “quite a bit”) but more than half of the teachers answered that the textbook is often supplemented by maps, other factual texts, films and so on.10

It is, however, worth noting that the material most often used resembles the textbook, being of a kind that can be interpreted as “objective facts” about the past, something that doesn’t really need to be questioned and/or discussed. It may, of course, be used in order to show that there are alternatives to the textbook accounts, thus providing a starting point for discussions on interpretations and on how history is written. But it may also be that the paratext “knowledge about the past is knowledge about factual information” remains unchallenged.

Worth noting is also the comparatively sparse use made of literary sources (fiction) and feature films. This is a kind of material that can bring a historic context into life, visualise causal relationships, and offer objects of identification that may lead to a sense of empathy towards people of the past, something that would come close to the curriculum goal that the student should be able to view people of the past in terms of the conditions of their time.

Even more striking, however, is the rare occurrence of primary sources, artefacts, and statistical material. This kind of teaching material is indispensable if students are supposed to develop an ability to assess texts and other material which interpret and explain historical processes. More than two thirds of the Swedish teachers use such material only occasionally, and visits to museums or field trips are almost non-existent.

This is a bit surprising, considering that teachers in the same survey also stated that to 'encourage independent thinking amongst students' was the second most important function of a textbook (following closely behind "provide a historical overview"). Once again it must be remembered that even if a comparatively small number of teachers choose to work with teaching material aimed at promoting critical thinking skills we cannot draw any conclusions about what is really happening in the classroom. A picture can be used in many ways: either as a simple description ('Here you can see what it looked like when the Winter Palace was attacked') or as a starting point for creative reasoning ('What is happening in the picture? Can you explain why? What do you think happened next?'). And even if teachers stick to the tradition of frontal teaching they may do it despite their own ambitions. The number of hours assigned to the subject, the school's library and ICT resources, the expectations of headmasters, colleagues, parents and pupils are factors that can prevent the teachers from trying alternative teaching models.

Alternative ways of learning Swedish 17th century history

One excuse for not supplementing traditional learning materials that cannot be accepted is that such materials should be difficult to find. It is not. The Swedish syllabus, with no prescribed content but at the same time encouraging the use of local history, opens more than one window of opportunity. Local libraries, local and regional museums, local archives, and that peculiar Swedish phenomenon 'hembygdsrörelsen' (the Local Heritage Movement) with 1,900 local heritage societies (many of them with their own archives and/or museums) offer a lot of materials that can be adapted for classroom use as easily as factual texts or documentary films.
During the winter 2008/2009 I collaborated with Helena Lindahl, History teacher at Eketånga Montessori School in Halmstad, in planning and carrying out a module covering Swedish 17th century history in school year 5/6 (students aged 11-12). The module was originally intended as a pilot study for a larger project aiming at the development of a broad plan for History teaching for school year 7-9 (age 13-15).

In this work, one of our sources of inspiration has been the British Schools History Project, i.e. history as study of development, as in-depth study, as thematic study and as "history around us", a structure that offers great possibilities develop a historical knowledge consisting of both content and skills.

Another point of departure is Erik Lund's model for describing historical knowledge as a concept with three central aspects: substantive knowledge ("to know that"), procedural knowledge ("to know how") and conceptual knowledge, with the latter divided in two parts: first-order or substantive concepts as a tool for handling historical facts, and second-order or procedural concepts for understanding history as processes, relations, and interpretations.\textsuperscript{11}

What concepts one chooses to work with depends, of course, on a range of factors such as the time and space covered by the module, the students' age and so on – especially when dealing with substantive concepts. When choosing relevant procedural concepts it is, however, possible to draw up a generic list that can serve as a structuring scaffold for History teaching through all school stages. One such list, which in our opinion corresponds well with the learning outcomes in the Swedish History syllabus, has been suggested by Stéphane Lévesque: Historical significance, Continuity and change, Progress and decline, Evidence, and Historical empathy.\textsuperscript{12}

The first, second, and last concepts on Lévesque's list can bee seen as central for developing a historical consciousness – a key concept of the Swedish syllabus but also an ambiguous one. In this context we find it sufficient to rely on the short definition given by Peter Aronsson who has described historical consciousness as the awareness of one's own existential place in the stream of history.\textsuperscript{13} The second and third are likewise essential for developing a narrative competence, in more than one sense. Firstly, in contributing to the plotting of a narrative – when students construct


\textsuperscript{12} Stéphane Lévesque, \textit{Thinking Historically. Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century}. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 37.

\textsuperscript{13} Peter Aronsson, \textit{Historiebruk – att använda det förflutna}. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2004), 67f.

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stories about what happened in the past, i.e. writes history on a basic level, but also when they mentally construct their stories about themselves, i.e. their own individual (narrative) identities. And secondly, when studying and analysing historical writing in order to develop the insight that history is always a context-bound construction, a man-made representation of the past and not the past in itself.

The third concept, progress and decline, is of special importance for other reasons as well. It gives value judgements their place in the study of history — this may sound unusual or even controversial to the academic historian, but in History as a school subject, value issues are, and should be, part of the package. Discussing history as a process of progress and decline also opens up for a shift of perspective — what is progress for one individual or group may well be decline for another.

When selecting the subject matter — 17th century events, figures, places — the "History around us" approach, borrowed from the SHP structure, was an easy choice. It suits the Swedish school system perfectly, since the syllabus doesn't contain any detailed regulations about contents. Nor are there any national history exams forcing the teacher to cover specific content during classroom hours. The approach was also considered particularly suitable for a 17th century module in a Halmstad school. Swedish 17th century history is something of a staple commodity bound to turn up somewhere during school years 4-6, and not without reason. During this period the state in its early modern form is consolidated in Sweden, and it is also the period when Sweden emerges as a Great Power in European history. From a local perspective the century is a dramatic one: In the Knäred treaty of 1645 the province of Halland (with the city of Halmstad) was lost by the Danes and became part of the Kingdom of Sweden. Local history can give the pupils opportunities to find connections between a distant past and the life-world that surrounds them in everyday life.

The school’s surroundings provide source material by themselves, offering the students opportunities to find connections between a distant past and the life-world that surrounds them in everyday life. There are still a few 17th century buildings left in Halmstad (among them the castle and the impressive North Gate), and in the city centre the 17th century town plan is still visible which means that maps and drawings from the period can be used. Original (or copied) 17th century texts, however, are less suitable — students aged 11-12 can hardly be expected to master 17th century handwriting. Books and leaflets also provide obstacles since Swedish and Danish printers of the time used blackletter script, unfamiliar to today's young readers. The following teaching materials and resources were selected:
• The standard textbook (PULS 4-6 Historia). The book gives a fairly extensive (30 pages) account of the so-called Great Power period (1611-1721) covering administrative changes in Sweden, the regents, the Thirty Years' War, Sweden's accession of Denmark's eastern provinces, witch trials, the ethnic heterogeneity of the realm, and some views of Europe (France and Louis XIV, Russia and Peter the Great).
• Supplemental factual texts, selected by the teacher and focussing on local history
• "faction" life stories from 17th century east Denmark/south Sweden from the Terra Scaniae website.¹⁴
• "Book coffer" from the public library (selected historical novels/short stories for young readers)
• Films about Gustavus Adolphus II and the city of Halmstad
• The regional museum and the city of Halmstad itself: a museum visit and a guided city walk.

One major task for the students was to produce a newspaper—"The Great Power Post". The students were divided into groups, each group putting together an issue from feature articles, "news" articles, and "interviews" covering among other topics "Sweden as a great power", "H.M.S. Wasa goes down", "A soldier in the Swedish army", "Everyday life in Halmstad", "The Great Fire 1619", "The Estates Assembly in Halmstad 1678". The teacher acted as editor-in-chief, handing out the tasks, but the students also added items after their own preferences such as a Gossip Column or a news article built on a 17th century map used in another context.

Another task for the school year 5 students was staging a play written by the teacher using second-hand sources describing a witch trial in Halmstad in 1608 where two young women were found guilty of sorcery and sentenced— one to the stake and the other to imprisonment.

The "faction" stories were read out loud by the teacher, one each week, and the students have also been given information on the sources behind them.

Giving students the opportunity to focus on in-depth tasks has an obvious snag: they might learn a lot from a limited field but lack knowledge of a broader background. To compensate for this, a battery of questions was constructed. Some of them focussed on factual information (e.g. "How were soldiers recruited to the Swedish army") and others towards understanding and judgement (e.g. "How do you think people reacted...

¹⁴ http://www.ts.skane.se
or "What would you have done if...""). The students were given time to work independently with the questions with a follow-up through classroom discussions.

Results and discussion

From a teacher’s viewpoint, the teaching experiment described above was satisfying. The students demonstrated a good ability to construct plausible and consistent narratives using information collected from factual texts, thus getting a first experience of how historiography plots the past without disregarding the limitations set by known facts on one hand, lack of information on the other. Discussions on ideas regarding human rights and justice have sharpened the students’ awareness of continuity and change in history. By encountering information on living conditions for various categories of actors – men, women, children, immigrants, national minorities – students have also developed an awareness of how different viewpoints give different images of the past and stress the importance of source interpretation, and source criticism.

They also showed an ability to make connections from the textbook history, dealing with Sweden and Europe, to their own home town which means that they can put familiar buildings and sites in context, that the past has actually shaped the world in which they live. As one student said afterwards: “I had no idea that all this could ever had happened here in Halmstad”.

The students have thus taken a great step towards a complex historical knowledge consisting of not only substantive knowledge understood as “facts”, but also of procedural and conceptual knowledge. We can also safely say that the students have demonstrated the attainment of the learning outcomes stipulated for school year 5 in the syllabus, i.e. that students should be:

- familiar with the history of their home district and how this has shaped its culture,
- familiar with the main features of selected parts of Swedish and Nordic history, and be able to make comparisons with some other countries,
- able to relate and compare how men, women and children lived and thought in different environments and periods in Sweden and in some other places around the world.
and that a foundation has been laid for some of the learning outcomes for school year 9 when the student should be:

- able to present important events and be familiar with the personalities, ideas and changes in the historical development of Sweden, the Nordic area and Europe, as well as be able to make comparisons with other countries,
- aware of and able to give examples of historical events and conditions that can be looked at from different points of view.\textsuperscript{15}

These results may seem trivial. There shouldn't be anything remarkable about attaining the learning outcomes of the syllabus (but as mentioned above, evaluations have shown that they cannot be taken for granted). And even if the immediate outcome is satisfactory it still remains to be seen whether the students have developed generic skills that will be put to use during future lessons. We are also fully aware that the work presented here is far from unique – we know that similar projects are carried through in many Swedish classrooms, every day. But not everywhere. By sharing our experiences hitherto made and carrying out the ongoing planning for History teaching in the compulsory school we are at least able to show that there are no major obstacles preventing teachers to break with tradition and add Comprehension, Competence, and Confidence to the well-known (text book) Content. The syllabus gives free scope for the chosen approach, even encourages it. The learning material is there, ready to get and to use: on the World Wide Web, on the library shelves, in the museum. It is high time to put it to use.

\textsuperscript{15} Skolverket, History Syllabus.