

Teaching history in a changing world – draft report

Bad Wildbad – 10-14 October 2011

Team – Richard Harris, Roger Sawda, Catherine Thompson, Béchir Yazidi

This workshop was a new venture for the Council of Europe in its cooperation with ALECSO. The theme of ‘Teaching history in a changing world’ was very pertinent given recent events in the world. The workshop provided an excellent opportunity for history teachers and others involved in history education to come together and share experiences and ideas from a rich range of social and cultural backgrounds.

The workshop was attended by seven delegates from across the Arab world, many of whom worked within their respective education ministries, ten teachers from Germany, and a further ten teachers and others involved in history education from other parts of Europe. This combination provided a strong mix of experiences and perspectives which led to an enriching series of discussions and activities.

The main aims of the seminar were to:

- Deepen participants’ understanding of each other’s contexts in which we work;
- Identify the issues facing us in our work;
- Develop a shared understanding about the nature and purpose of history;
- Share ideas and approaches to teaching history.

To facilitate this, the workshop focused on four central questions:

- What is the nature of history?
- What is the purpose of teaching history to young people?
- What history should be taught (to meet these purposes)?
- How should history be taught (to meet these purposes)?

To meet the aims of the seminar participants were given numerous opportunities for group discussion, which were focused around the key questions and were also used for a series of activities to deepen participants’ insights into the issues being discussed and provide models for classroom practice. The groups were structured to enable participants to work with others from the different regions were represented.

The central questions formed the focus of different sessions. The first day was used to orientate the participants and to provide a context for the seminar, drawing on two of the facilitators’ personal

experiences of living in societies that have experienced significant change in the recent past. Following this, participants were able to share their own understanding of the nature of history, using a 'placemat' activity, before having a free discussion about the different contexts in which they work and different expectations regarding history education. There was a strong consensus about the nature of history, being a construct and open to reinterpretation, with history representing an on-going dialogue between the past, the present and the future. By allowing students to see that history is not fixed, and that it is both a construct and a process, students should learn to better understand the history with which they are presented. This was explored further using an exercise to examine Western interpretations of the Crusades to illustrate how, through time, views have changed and an analysis of the reasons for these changing views.

The following day focused on the questions about purpose and what content ought to be taught. Using a 'moving' debate with a series of statements to stimulate thinking, participants were then challenged to deepen their understanding of the purposes of history teaching in a group discussion exercise, using a 'diamond 9 ranking' activity. Although there were different emphases in importance, there was a general feeling that history helped to promote acceptance of difference and democratic values, historical consciousness, a sense of identity, and lessons that should be drawn upon for the future. After this participants explored what content ought to be taught in schools. They were initially asked to identify key things they thought students should know about and shared these in groups, before being challenged to think about relating their understanding of purposes to content. This was developed further through an exercise about teaching World War One and how different approaches would facilitate different purposes. As part of the final plenary session, a 'silent conversation' was modelled and used to illustrate one approach to develop students' active listening and critical thinking skills. The evening was given over to a guided tour of the spa town and an international evening of food, drink and song from the participants.

A varied, interesting and powerful range of practical activities were demonstrated on the next day, and used to illustrate key points about the nature and purpose of history, and the appropriateness of content selection, and how these ideas could be explicitly addressed with students. Thus to illustrate the concept of multiperspectivity, the story of Little Red Riding Hood was examined from the perspective of the wolf, before a similar exercise drawing in an historical event in the Lebanon was examined. Ways to use evidence to promote multiperspectivity were also explored, whilst practical ways to teach the concept of significance, both in terms of what makes something significant and the criteria that can be employed, and how as process this changes through time and context. Finally, some excellent activities on helping students to explore their personal and multiple identities were demonstrated.

The final day saw participants discussing key questions that had arisen during the previous days, before identifying key issues and ideas that they would take back and implement within their own practice.

The overwhelming reaction of participants was extraordinarily positive. The opportunities to learn about history education in a range of contexts was highly valued, as was the chance to engage in numerous group discussions and to experience a 'hands on' approach to a number of challenging and thought-provoking activities. The seminar presented other challenges particularly a linguistic one; all participants were keen to work with people from other backgrounds and cultures, which

meant the translators worked very hard and everyone showed great patience in working together. The feedback from the participants following the meeting has been extraordinarily strong, with members of the seminar using the web platform to continue discussions after the meeting to share ideas and resources.