

German History Didactics: From Historical Consciousness to Historical Competencies – and Beyond?

ANDREAS KÖRBER

Competency-orientated history teaching

In Germany, the results of the PISA-program as well as of a number of other studies before and afterwards (TIMSS, IGLU etc.) have triggered a growing interest in the (measurable) “outcomes” of school teaching. “Educational standards” emerged as the keyword and magic term of the new education debate. Even though there has been no official political program (on the federation-level) to formulate any such standards for *history* (in contrast to subjects such as mathematics and German) the concept and its underlying principles have influenced the discussion on historical teaching and learning, too. As in some other subjects (e.g. geography, religious education of both Christian confessions), sporadic initiatives either of school administrations of federal states, teachers or academic didacts have worked on “educational standards” for history.¹

Standards in history should – if developed and agreed upon – take the form of “performance standards”, not “content standards” (Körber 2007). This demand conforms to the initial concept of general educational standards (depending on the official political process on the federation level) as outlined in the quite renowned “Klieme-Expertise”, named after Eckard Klieme, who presided a committee devising general principles of how to formulate “educational standards”. Following their

1 See e.g. Baden-Württemberg 2004 and Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands 2006.

line of argumentation, educational standards need to be “domain-specific”, i.e. the concept of *general* “competencies” to be applied to *different* subject matters has been rejected in favor of a concept of specialized sets of abilities which are used in different fields of knowledge and cognitive activity (“domains”) (Klieme et al. 2003).² “History” and historical thinking then is one such “domain”, besides e.g. geography (orientation in space), languages, sciences etc. and deserves a differentiation of the competencies needed to achieve orientation.

All in all, the concept of “performance standards” based on “competencies” is a useful innovation for history didactics, because it allows for, or rather requires more structural definitions of what earlier had been coined “historical consciousness”. By employing the definition of “competencies” by Franz Emanuel Weinert, which is mainly used in the standards debate (including the Klieme-Expertise), it seems possible to differentiate *procedural* vs. *static* aspects of historical consciousness as well as *cognitive* vs. more *affective* ones.

Weinert defines “competencies” as complexes of (cap)abilities, skills (proficiencies) and dispositions which enable a person to solve (new) problems in a specified domain.³

Two of the central characteristics of competencies, following this definition, are that

- they *contain knowledge*, but that knowledge is not sufficient to speak of a “competence”, and
- whatever form of knowledge is part of a “competence” cannot refer to some *specific* past event, structure etc., because a competence is the mental capability to solve *new and different* “problems” (of orientation).

Let me give a rough example for the latter: following this concept, it is perfectly possible to attest a high level of historical competence to someone lacking even the most basic information, say, on the medieval German “Old Empire”, as long as she/he shows the capability to master a process of coming to terms with this complex through historical thinking. Thus, a professor of history from, say, Japan, in applying himself to

2 The term “knowledge” falls somewhat short here. “Domains of orientation” would be better.

3 Originally, the definition reads: “die bei Individuen verfügbaren oder durch sie erlernbaren kognitiven Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten, um bestimmte Probleme zu lösen, sowie die damit verbundenen motivationalen, volitionalen und sozialen Bereitschaften und Fähigkeiten, um die Problemlösungen in variablen Situationen erfolgreich und verantwortungsvoll nutzen zu können“. (Weinert 2001, cited in Klieme et al. 2003: 21).

the subject matter of medieval Germany, will show a high level in these competencies, even though he will (initially) lack *case knowledge*.

The form of knowledge contained in historical competencies therefore is structural knowledge, i.e. knowledge on categories and concepts, procedures etc., which needs to be applicable to different historical subjects. Examples of this are systems of periodization, e.g. the well-known differentiation of Antiquity, Middle Ages, Early Modern Times and Modernity vs. the chronology Anno Domini, the differentiation of style-based epochs of history of art, Jewish chronology, but also other differentiations used in smaller groups, e.g. the reference to “the war” in old people’s talk, to the “interwar period”, “the postwar era”, up to references like “back in the old house” in a family’s narrative.

Similarly, second order concepts such as “change” and “evidence” etc. are part of the historical knowledge integrated in the “Sachkompetenz” (“subject matter competence”) dimension. This specific competence indicates not only whether a person understands that historical accounts and stories can be “true” or “wrong”, but of the concepts used to a) differentiate between these two states and b) to differentiate themselves, too. By which concepts, for instance, does a person express or negate the reliability of a story heard or justify a story to be told?

By drawing on the concept of historical thinking as an *individual* process of orientation in time, triggered by needs for orientation encountered in “everyday life”, I am very skeptical as to the possibility of deriving “educational standards” for the competencies relevant to our domain, i.e. standards as could be operationalized by means of closed items following probabilistic IRT-models. The core argument against standards operationalized like this is that most IRT-models and especially the unidimensional Rasch-model used in almost all large-scale-assessment-programs (TIMSS, PISA etc.) requires items (tasks) which can be coded as either “solved” or “not solved”, or at least (with partial credit-technique) as “partly solved”, (Rost 2004: 662-678), but that there is no room in this model for *differing* solutions, which are necessary if historical thinking is to be taken seriously as problem solving from a certain (one’s own) perspective (Körber 2008). Therefore, at the moment, work on competencies does not aim at formulating educational standards, but has to appreciate the (underlying) concept of “competence models” as an analytical tool to better define and achieve the goals of historical learning appropriate for post-traditional, pluralistic societies.

At school, learners (pupils and students) must acquire general abilities as well as precise skills and (structural) knowledge, which enable them to take part in the historical and memorial culture of their (pluralist) society. More precisely, they must learn to

- (correctly) *apply* concepts and categories, procedures (methods and techniques) commonly used in their society in *their own* historical thinking,

and to

- *have at their command/control* these concepts, categories, procedures and methods, i.e. to gain the intellectual and affective distance necessary and the cognitive power to *reflect* on their benefits and limits, the assumptions inherent in them, their adequacy for a specific problem etc.

A structural competence model

If historical teaching and learning is neither about teaching “the past” nor about passing on a conventional picture of the past to young members of society (aiming at their integration or assimilation), but about enabling them to individually and critically take part in a society’s handling of history, then some more concrete concepts are needed of what this capability can be said to consist of. A *model of competence* is needed, in order to define

- different *fields of historical competence*, i.e. dimensions in which the abilities of historical thinking can differ between people, or in which these abilities can differ between different stages of a learning-process,
- different *levels* of these competencies, by which any of these differences (between people or between stages of learning) can be “measured”.

In Germany, different *competence models* have been suggested in the last 5 years,⁴ but the model suggested by the FUER group is the only one

- to be based on a specific theory of historical thinking (see below), and
- to introduce both a differentiation of dimensions of historical competence *and* a concept for distinguishing *levels*.

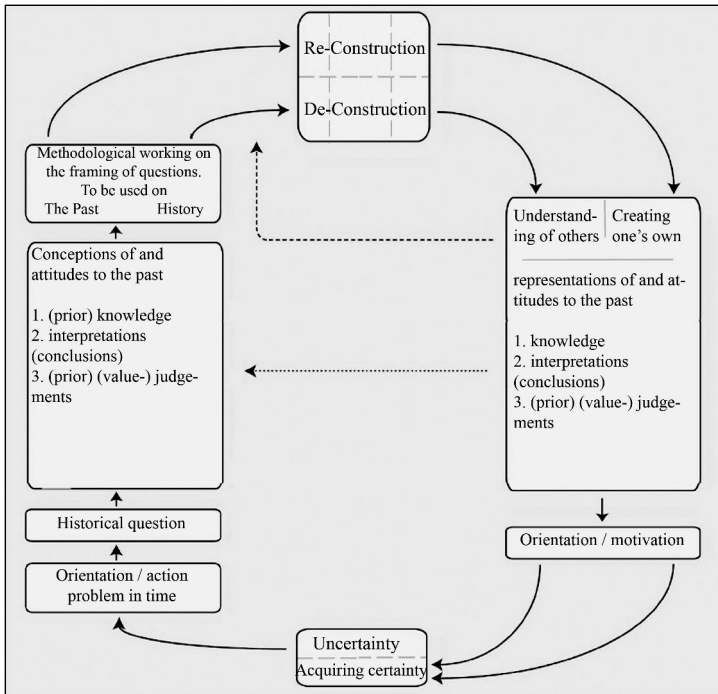
4 For a discussion of several models cf. Körber 2007 and Körber 2008.

Dimensions of historical competence

The competence-model of FUER⁵ is based on the notion of historical thinking as a process of orientation in time. It distinguishes four basic *dimensions of competence*, three of which are *procedural* and one is *basic* (and rather *declarative/static*). The three procedural competence-dimensions are derived from the circular process of historical thinking, developed on the basis of Rüsen's theory by Hasberg and Körber (2003). From this, the following dimensions of competences can be derived:

- Anyone in need of historical orientation needs the capability to transform her or his perceived uncertainty into some processable form of historical *question* in order either to reconstruct a historic narrative or to analyze given historical narratives of other people for their historical questions, and to understand them. This first dimension of historical competence (“inquiring competence”) spans from the perception of any uncertainty referring to time via the activation of earlier insights, concepts and categories up to the start of a methodically controlled process of re- and de-construction. In fact, it also includes the ability to decide whether (or rather, when) to turn to narrative accounts or to original sources.
- The second dimension of competence (“methodical competence”) combines all knowledge and proficiency pertaining to finding and analyzing historical material and to re- and deconstruct historical accounts on their basis. This includes heuristic skills as well as the ability to place pieces of information along a timeline, to draw comparisons between events and structures within an epoch and between historical times and to integrate all this information into a narrative structure, but also to identify the “particles of the past” and the narrative structures in given narratives.

5 A short version (Schreiber et al. 2006); a longer publication includes extensive discussions (Körber et al. 2007).

Illustration 1: The process model of historical thinking by*Hasberg/Körber 2003: 187*

- The third procedural dimension of competence combines all those often neglected competencies needed for actually *using* the historical information (previously gathered in processes of re- and de-construction) for personal or collective orientation in the present and the future. Core competencies in this dimension are
 - the ability to revise one's concept of history and the concepts and categories used in historical thinking and one's "historical consciousness",
 - the ability (and disposition) to (re-)shape and revise one's own concrete notion(s) of the past and the present world, i.e. one's pictures of other people and/or other times;
 - the ability to (re-)shape the concept of one's self in relation to the outside world and the past, i.e. to revise one's historical identity, e.g. by coming to (new) terms with one's own personal relationship to the deeds (merits and sins) of one's ancestors, etc.
 - the ability to (re-)shape the own conceptions of what can be done, achieved, hoped for in the present and the future – in the light of

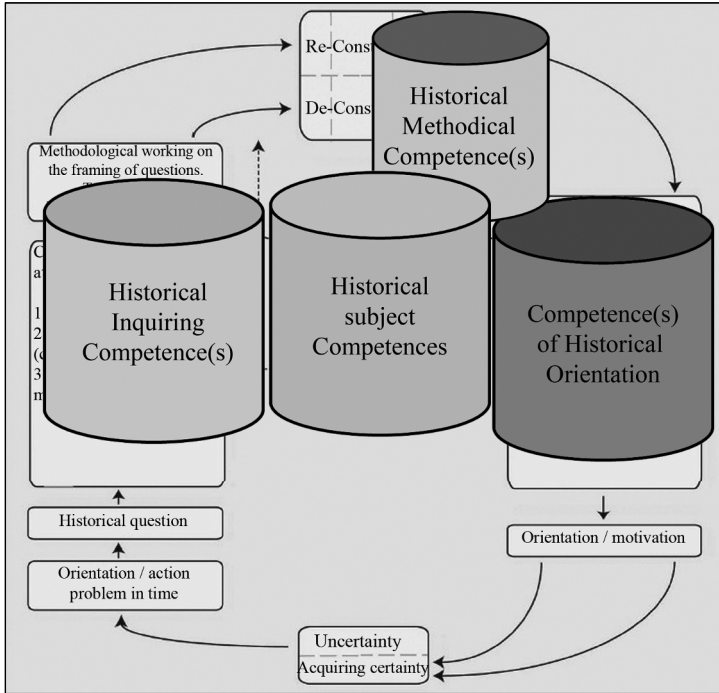
the insights and the knowledge derived from analyzing material about the past.

These “procedural competencies” are all linked to a fourth basic (static/declarative) dimension of competence, which is not only needed when executing the process of historical orientation, but also – on the meta-level – in all instances of theoretical reflection and of communication *about* historical thinking, its assumptions, principles or its results. This fourth dimension of competence has been named “Sachkompetenz” (“subject matter competence”) in German, a term otherwise often (but erroneously in our view) used for relating to *case knowledge*, i.e. knowledge about individual “facts”, “dates”, “names”, but also specific insights etc.

As argued above, such case-knowledge cannot be part of a competence model, because competencies need to be applicable to *different* situations and contexts. In the FUER model, the term “Sachkompetenz” is used nonetheless, on the grounds that the “subject matter” of historical teaching and learning is not the past, but rather “thinking about the past”. Therefore, in our model, this “subject matter competence” stands for the command over/ability to use and apply rather abstract first and second order concepts, categories, knowledge of procedures ad methods etc.

In graph 2 these dimensions of competence are shown as based on the above given theoretical process model of historical thinking.

Graph 2: The dimensions of competence in the competence model
 “Historical Thinking” of the FUER-group



Translated from Schreiber/Körber et al 2003: 56. Translated by the author.

Levels of historical competencies

As for the differentiation of *levels*,⁶ our model remotely draws on the widely known concept of Lawrence Kohlberg, referring to the conventional character of moral standards, and distinguishing levels by the relation of moral thinking to these conventions – but with an important difference: we do not (yet) define *stages* within a process, but *levels* to begin with. This means that it is *not* part of our model to postulate some unidirectional development from one level to the next higher one, but that it can also be used to track down and register leaps, “regressions” etc. Thus, in a two-dimensional Cartesian coordinate-system, our levels would constitute the axis of ordinates (y-axis) only with (yet) no claim whatsoever as to a progression with increasing age (or other factors).

6 Within the FUER model, the term “level” is used in order to distinguish from connotations of gradually advancing “stages” or “steps”.

Even though in reality there will be an infinite number of small differentiations of levels, the FUER model only differentiates three, respectively five main levels. The core concept for the differentiation of these levels is the mode and degree of command a person has over *conventional forms* of applying the operations subsumed under a given dimension of competence:

- On the basic level, a person applies and performs all operations necessary for elementary historical thinking, but without any command over conventional forms, terms, concepts and procedures whatsoever. The person's historical thinking therefore will take on a highly individual and situational form and therefore will not or only hardly be readily understandable to other people, just as the person cannot (or only hardly) use other people's help for her/his own thinking. A (non-historical) example of such a level would be children playing with LEGO-bricks but giving both the building blocks and the assembled constructions new names, so that without some translation or learning they would not be able to order missing bricks in a LEGO-store or to tell anyone what their constructions are meant to represent. An example from the domain of history would be people not familiar with the common concepts of historical periodization, and therefore always referring to "back then" instead of some generally recognized historical time. This basic level, in the FUER-terminology, was labeled "a-conventional". Historical consciousness on this level of competence is solitary in nature.
- The intermediate level, accordingly, is labeled "conventional" because it describes the (above mentioned) ability to apply standard terms and concepts, procedures etc. in order to perform one's own historical thinking. This allows for access to all the material and information categorized using these concepts in libraries and archives, enables the person to consult experts and witnesses, but also to communicate the findings and results etc. It is important to note that this intermediate "conventional" level does *not* require the person to hold conventional beliefs, interpretations and values. It also (or even more so) applies to persons doing *their own* historical thinking and even disagreeing with their society's consensus, as long as they are capable of using the society's (or other relevant group's) concepts and terminology. Historical consciousness on this level of competence is connective in nature.
- The third level of historical competence then is defined by the ability not only to *apply* the conventional and standard concepts, terminology, procedures etc., but to *reflect upon* them, to evaluate them, criticize their shortcomings and (if necessary) to deviate from them, sug-

gesting new concepts, new terms etc. This level represents an “ideal type” in that it cannot be characterized conclusively: people will never stop learning. As with the “Richter-scale” of seismology, it is open-ended, too. The ideal level has been termed “elaborate” and “trans-conventional” because it requires command over conventions but also the ability to *transgress* them. Persons on this level could, for instance, be students who have learned that there were times generally referred to as “The Middle Ages” in past reality, but that this concept has been coined retrospectively and has some advantages, but also poses some dangers,⁷ and who are then able to *decide autonomously* on where and whether to use this concept, and when to resort to/suggest other/better ones. Historical consciousness on this level of competence is reflective in nature.

Let us again refer to the examples used above for the dimension of “Sachkompetenz”: A basic level of command over concepts of periodization would be shown if common references to time were not understood. She or he would then have to spontaneously invent new terms, which the others don’t know about, and which in most cases would not hold up for other instances. To know these conventional differentiations and to be able to use them when referring to a certain time, also to be able to translate between them in a limited way, would mark an intermediate level. Of course, the ability to translate and recalculate would be higher than mere knowledge, but as long as these differentiations can only be used, but not queried, examined as to their assets and limits, the level would still only be intermediate. Elaborated level then is indicated by insight into the logic by which these periodizations are constructed, by their dependence from cultural viewpoints, and by the ability to reflect upon their appropriateness for a specific task of historical thinking.

As for the second example of concepts to differentiate the reliability of stories, a basic level would e.g. be indicated if a person could just indicate that a story was “doubtful” or “wrong”, but would have no idea how to express and justify this judgment using terms others understand. To have in one’s arsenal of “Sachkompetenz” concepts like “lying” vs. “telling the ‘truth’”, “error” and “misconception”, would indicate a (somewhat lower) intermediate level. To be able to refer to concepts of “(multi-)perspectivity”, of (different) “interest” and their influence on historical accounts (both in secondary and in primary material), would mark a fully developed intermediate level. An elaborated level could be diagnosed if the person could *discuss* what “(multi-)perspectivity”

7 See Moos 1999 and Borries 2008.

means, what the epistemological grounds and implications are, if she or he was able to differentiate between “testimony” and “evidence” and to reflect on further differentiation and new concepts.

In conclusion, Historical Competencies (as formulated in the FUER-model) offer a more structured version of important aspects of what previously was discussed under the heading of Historical Consciousness. Our model does not abolish or re-invent the entire complex of consciousness concepts, but yields some new opportunities to formulate educational goals (and, less possibly, also standards). It offers the chance to operationalize competencies of historical thinking for empirical research and evaluation, even though only a small part of these competencies will be assessable via quantitative analyses and large-scale analyses as in PISA, and the major part will require qualitative approaches (Körber 2008).

A new concept of historical literacy

Even though *competence-based* historical learning and teaching is in no way “knitting without wool” and therefore always will require dealing with concrete aspects of the past, promoting propositional “knowledge about the past” as well as abilities of interpretation and orientation, it is true that the concept reinforces a formal concept of learning. The concern expressed by some teachers and didacts that, as a consequence, the subject matter and historical topics might disappear, must, however, be taken seriously. Still, the solution cannot lie in a model in which the teaching of competencies is accompanied (or even compensated for) by another approach to history-teaching, in which statements about the past are presented as unquestionable truths, as has been suggested by the German History Teachers’ Association under the heading of “educational standards”. In this Association’s own competence model, acquiring competencies of a designated “first dimension of competencies” comes down to memorizing statements of propositional knowledge and judgments the students are only required to “name” and “explain”, but not to “consider”, “check” or “assess”, and the standards listed in the other two dimensions (“competency to interpret and reflect” and “media/method competency”), though focusing on real abilities, are limited to school use (Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands 2006).⁸ Categorically speaking, such a solution represents a fundamentally conservative strat-

8 See also the discussion between Karl-Heinrich Pohl and Martin Stupperich (the *spiritus rector* of these standards) in Pohl 2008 and Stupperich 2008.

egy to the challenges of education, namely the attempt to introduce the young generation to an “existing world of solutions”, binding them to their scope (Girmes 1997), instead of enabling them to perform new attempts to find other solutions, better ones, ones more adequate for their times, or even new solutions to new problems.

Renate Girmes, professor in general didactics in Magdeburg, has developed a new concept of literacy (“Bildung”), which, in overcoming the traditional orientation inherent in the classical notion of the term, is more likely to be adequate for post-traditional societies and which is based on Hannah Arendt’s anthropological elaboration of the activities (from which Girmes derives “tasks”) of human beings existing under certain (given and self-made) conditions. Besides the activities of *labour* and *work*, it is a central characteristic of the third main activity, *action*, that it needs to reflect (and take into account) the plurality of mankind. This state of plurality is not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative characteristic: humans perceive and judge both their historically given conditions and the resulting (individual as well as common) tasks differently, which leads to a multitude of different interests and actions. One of the necessities resulting from this condition is, that people must communicate about their perceptions, beliefs, judgments and actions – especially if the society they form is a heterogeneous and post-traditional one – to be democratic. The capacity to tolerate and accept uncertainty and to (actively!) handle it, then, is one of the main tasks of social communication.

However, this kind of uncertainty (resulting from plurality) needs to be distinguished from the concept of contingency in Rüsens’s theory of historical thinking. Thus, on the whole, history can be said to be affected by contingency of at least three types (Girmes 1997: 42):⁹

1. The first is contingency that results from *temporal experiences* of humans when earlier expectations and plans are compared to the eventual, actual (historical) development. “Contingency” here means the mental construct which enables us to conceive the real development not as totally accidental (which would make any effort to construct sense and to orientate oneself futile in the first place) but not as totally determined either (which would deprive us of any possibility to decide about the consequences to be derived from historical insight and therefore of any possibility to *act*). This form of temporal contingency is the *movens* of processes of historical thinking / con-

9 For an in-depth analysis of philosophical elaborations and differentiations of chance and contingency and their role in (social) historiography as well as in theory of history see Hoffmann 2005.

structing meaning. Also, contingency here is part of the *explanandum*.

2. Another role of contingency in historical thinking is its use as *explanans*, i.e. the possibility to refer to “chance” in order to construct (reasonable) historical meaning. Strictly speaking, if this were the only strategy, it would prevent the emergence of historical sense in the first place – for referring to chance in historical explanations means not to explain at all. However, it may occasionally be necessary to integrate limited amounts of “chance” into a historical account in order to be able to construct an orientating, meaningful narrative. In such cases, “contingency” means to accept “blind spots” in history which are resistant to explanatory efforts and to which to resort to does not (or only rarely) constitute a surrender. Often, contingency is used in this way not so much to refer to coincidence in history, but as a means of either masking a thread of inquiry not further pursued by the narrative’s author or marking a change of perspective. This is e.g. the case when references are made to events which “by chance” foil a strand of action, events, which could neither have been influenced nor foreseen by the actors in the resulting history, but could be clarified by further inquiry on another scale.¹⁰
3. The third version of contingency, which is central here, is to be found on the side of the results of historical thinking: due to their multi-dimensional plurality, humans exhibit different needs for temporal orientation. Because of the different times, societies, social groups, cultures etc. they live in, they will quite naturally be using different concepts, operations, patterns of explanation and of narrating which in turn will result in different narratives. These narratives / constructions of meaning will not be incomparable, but also not simply translatable into one another. In that sense, it is historical orientation itself which is contingent – contingent not only in its temporal, but in cultural, spatial and social dimensions. And as for people *living and acting* within the plurality of today’s societies, it becomes vitally important to (be able to) handle this contingency of narrative orientations.

10 An example would e.g. be a narrative portraying the success story of a company suddenly destroyed by a terrorist attack which “by chance” took place at the very moment of the signing of an important contract. Although both actions, the signing of the contract and the terrorist attack, are by no means accidental in themselves, their actors and motives are totally unconnected unless a connection is discerned or established by focusing another level (e.g. the terrorists’ view of the economic system and the company’s role within this system).

What is more, each of the latter contingent orientations (3) is not only a narrative, but constitutes a world, a perception of (temporal) reality guiding the actions of its bearers. Thus, alternative narratives among individuals and cultural groups ultimately represent different “solutions” to the task of temporal orientation.

In this sense, in the plural societies of a globalized world, it becomes increasingly important not only to participate in the construction of historical sense and of political rooms in which to communicate, but to gain insight into the perceptions of (the task as well as) the results of other people’s thinking.

It is here that we find the basis of a new concept of historical literacy. From this point of view, literacy is neither to be defined as some high-class knowledge about important events and actions in the past nor as a set of general insights into the historicity of mankind, even though this latter aspect can still be part of the concept, as the Swiss philosopher Peter Bieri recently pointed out in a lecture entitled “What would it be to be literate?”. As to the religious dimension, he formulates: “Only he who knows about and acknowledges the historical contingency of his cultural and moral identity really has grown up.” (Bieri 2005: 4)¹¹ In this quotation, the classical notion and concept of German literacy lingers on in a familiar way. But the sentence is framed by statements which add another relevant aspect, more reminiscent of what has been said about the importance of contingency so far:

“The knowledge of alternatives only seemingly deprives it [here: religion] of its value: the value can even be experienced as higher, because we now no longer deal with an intangible fate, but with free choice. [...] One has not completely taken over the responsibility for one’s own life, as long as one accepts an external authority prescribing how to think about love and death, morality and happiness.” (Bieri 2005: 4)

Similarly, Girmes proposes as a quality for being able to deal with uncertainty in post-traditional societies, not to look for certainty, but to (learn to) think in concrete constellations. Education aiming at literacy therefore should neither aim at providing the learners with fixed solutions (here: fixed narratives) nor with tasks and tools to find such solutions only, but also with the *variety and plurality* of different real and possible solutions as a prerequisite for thinking and living in a new and self-determined way (Girmes 1997: 44).

The multitude of different narrative orientations therefore is not only to be used as an exchangeable substrate for developing formal com-

11 All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

petencies (especially that of de-constructing other people's orientations and narratives), but gains a value in itself: these narratives (which still need to be de-constructed and analyzed as well as critically reflected as to their plausibility) are both the repository of concepts, patterns of interpretation and explanation, values etc. for later use, and they also represent the variety and plurality of life-guiding orientation of a person's fellow citizens. "Historical literacy" therefore is rooted in knowing *about* this multitude and variety, in being familiar with great parts of these orientations, in accepting and assessing their orientational function and strength and in recognizing the necessity and the value of this multitude of orientations in itself.

Consequences for didactics of history

It is not easy to derive clear-cut consequences from principles and models which are still under debate. The following therefore is more or less to be understood as suggestions and impulses for the current discussion. For history didactics as a discipline, the orientation towards competencies calls for a more consequent definition of its own theoretical basis and its self-concept. Neither the work of academic historical research nor mere political and/or pedagogical aims can be at the heart of its reflections, but original theoretical reflections on what history is and what it is for. History didactics in this sense is a meta-discipline which embraces the work of academic research as one, if particularly important, instance of the many forms and institutions of historical thinking, but its aim is not to steer this academic work or to externally set standards for it, but rather to reflect its position and relevance for society.

As for future research, first of all, the empirical validity of the FUER-competence model needs to be tested (Are the distinguished dimensions discernible in data? Can different levels, as postulated, be found as a matter of fact?), and, as a second step, research needs to be conducted as to the identification of developmental processes. It might be that learning historical thinking comes down to a mere (steady) increase in the levels in all dimensions and competencies, but it is also possible, that differences in pace of development, phases and ties between levels among/within different competencies or even regressions can occur.

Furthermore, the theoretical premise that historical thinking occurs on all levels and that the intermediate level is marked by command over conventional concepts, whereas the elaborate level is marked by the ability to reflect, criticize and change conventional categories, calls for

empirical analyses into specific conventional concepts, procedures etc. of specific groups of society and for comparisons of their standards of historical orientation. For a type of history teaching which does not aim at transmitting specific interpretations into the students' heads, but at enabling students to handle different perspectives, questions and concepts, this would prove essential.

Last but not least, models, strategies and instruments are needed for determining levels of historical competence(s) underlying actual forms of historical performance. These are needed for large-scale assessment and evaluation purposes, but even more for individual diagnostics and subsequent educational measures in school. A lot of work remains to be done in this respect, especially since the instruments used e.g. in PISA can (in my view) hardly be applied to the domain of historical thinking (Körber 2008).

Consequences for history teaching

Consequences for history teaching in general

The first and most obvious consequence of the sketched understanding of historical learning is that history teaching at school must be about promoting students' historical competencies. In the broad sense of the term "competence", this, at first, does not seem to amount to something fundamentally new. Teaching only specific knowledge and authoritative interpretations of the past seems to be a bygone concept anyway. But a closer look at current suggestions for curricula (some actually in force by now) shows that even under the heading of "orientation towards competencies", in some federal states and by some actors in the debate, exactly this is promoted, when, for instance, in the German History Teachers Association's concept, students' abilities are narrowed down to "naming" specific aspects, to "explaining" events, structures, actions in specific pre-determined ways and students are even required to come to specific conclusions, such as presenting the crusades as a "conflict, but also as a chance for (cultural) encounters between the Christian and the Muslim world."¹² Other crucial abilities (more likely to deserve the term "competencies") are also included but are only illustrated by examples of minor controversies and, revealingly, never by examples questioning the Eurocentric grand narrative presented (as factual) in the first place.

12 The example is taken from the German History Teachers' Association's (suggestion for) "educational standards" (Verband 2006). For a critique see e.g. Körber 2007.

Furthermore, these abilities, too (analyzing material, considering multiple perspectives etc.) more closely resemble techniques rather than methods of independent historical thinking.

As is becoming clear, the consequence to focus history teaching on developing competencies and dispositions needed for independent participation in a society's historical culture and debate is not so self-evident as it would seem.

Moreover, our model of historical competencies calls for paying attention not only to techniques and methods as well as concepts, terminology etc. (competence-dimensions "methodical competence" and "subject matter competence"), but also explicitly for developing the abilities to ask historical questions ("inquiring competence") and to (individually and collectively) reflect upon possible consequences of specific stories (which have been derived from re- and/or de-constructive processes) for the present, the future and for further thinking. Together with the de-constructive component of "methodical competence" this also demands the use of historical narrations not only (or even mainly) as media of bits and pieces of information, but as material to be analyzed in depth. Students and pupils must learn to dissect the narrative structure of historical accounts in order to be able to consciously and critically handle them.

Last, but not least, as follows from much of what has been said earlier, the conventional concepts a society uses for grasping and structuring the domain of history and historical knowledge should be presented not as factual, but have to be addressed explicitly and in a reflective way. Thus, for instance, the common concepts of periodization (Antiquity, Middle Ages, Modernity) need to be taught as contingent models with specific benefits and limits, which need to be compared to others (e.g. of history of art, of ecclesiastical history and of course to the ones used in other cultures as in Islam and such used in everyday life).¹³ The same holds true for (other) conventions of historical methodology such as procedures of analyzing material, of story telling etc.

13 See. v. Borries 2008.

Teaching in a controversial memorial culture

As for the subject of this book, the competence orientation and competence model holds some further consequences for history teaching. Most notably, competence orientation calls for an integration of the large field of commemoration and memory culture into history teaching at school. The old dichotomy of “history vs. memory” which has been stressed by Halbwachs and still by the earlier Jan Assmann should not lead to excluding the “family album” and “public memorial culture” – type of addressing the past (and orientation) from the curricula, which would result in the denial of their power, logic and relevance by pointing to the academic dignity of scientific knowledge. Quite contrarily, these specific functions, their conditions and the immanent logic of communicative, social and cultural memories (A. Assmann) need to be explicitly addressed and recognized. On the other hand, it would also be wrong to treat these as sacrosanct and as not revisable in the light of other, most importantly, academic knowledge. For prospective members of a pluralist society, it is of utmost importance to be able to reflect upon the respective status and benefits, but also the limits of specific forms of (historical) construction of meaning.

This then, among other things, means that students must learn to reflect upon the epistemological status of original sources as well as upon that of contemporary witnesses, that they must become acquainted with the concepts of “authenticity”, “originality” and “truth”, as well as with those used in memory debates like “victim” and “sacrifice”, the differentiation between different types of memorials (hero-, victim- and so on), the political concepts which draw on historical interpretations (like “hierarchy of victims” vs. “equalization of victims”) and so on.

History teaching needs to address the plurality and multiplicity of handlings of the past and of orientations drawn from history, it must enable students to recognize the interests of specific groups in history, their questions, their political agenda, but it must enable them to arrive at conclusions and judgments individually and independently, too. History teaching in this sense is not about forming a society by creating uniformity, but about forming social coherence¹⁴ by enabling people to handle multiplicity and diversity through responsible reasoning.

14 I here relate to a distinction within a new concept of “interculturality” by Klaus-Peter Hansen. See Rathje 2006.

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