

THE THIRD NORDIC CONFERENCE ON HISTORY DIDACTICS
Bergen, May 9 - 15, 1987

The third Nordic conference on history didactics was held in Havtun, near Bergen, Norway, between May 9 - 15, 1987. The number of the participants coming from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden was over 30. The programme was divided into two main Themes: using narratives in school history instruction, and the legitimation of history in school and society. The syllabuses of history and their developments in the different Nordic countries were examined in relation to these themes. The programme was designed so that the main themes were first introduced in the plenary lecture, then discussed in small groups and finally summed up in plenary discussions. In this way the participants had to assume an active role, as everybody was expected to prepare and present a brief talk in the groups. The discussions in the small groups were more lively than in the plenaries. The large number of participant presentations brought up varying perspectives into the themes.

The plenary lecture of the first main theme - using narratives in instruction - was given by Dr. John Fines. He stressed the importance of using narratives particularly for introducing classroom work, for bringing an imaginative element in instruction, and for making summaries. In an extreme form of the method, the teacher says nothing but has short sentences on an overhead transparency, and the pupils dramatize the situations!

The use of narratives in history instruction is coming (and has already come) back to classroom due to the emphasis of cognitive psychology and philosophy of history on the learning process and the peculiar character of the discipline. It will be remembered that narratives used to be criticized on the grounds that they do not place sufficient intellectual demands on the learner. Some presentations also referred to Collingwood, who has emphasized more "how" than "why" questions in the explanation of history. Erik Lund also presented computer application of Collingwood's mystery of John Doe.

Narratives seem to have two opposing aims in history instruction. On the one hand, the purpose seems to be to give the learner a coherent (though limited and one-sided) picture of some historical event, adapted to his level of comprehension. On the other hand, the purpose of the narrative can be to give a broad (but incoherent and overgeneralized), orienting view of the topic. The use of narratives will have to find a suitable balance between these two opposing aims.

The plenary lecture of the second main theme - legitimation of history in school and society - was given by Dr. Jörn Rüsen, who discussed the notion of consciousness of history, learning history and a **critical** examination of history, suggesting final grounds for legitimizing history. The legitimation is essentially based on opening learners' mind to historic experiences and understanding differences in ways of experiencing time. The teacher's own knowledge of the general rules of historical processes has a central role in the learning process. It is important for the learners to realize that they are part of history, and find their own identity in the ~~flow~~ of time.

In group presentations it was generally noted that history has lost ground in school to some extent during the past few decades. This is seen in the reduction of the instructional time allocated to history in the curricula and in the pupils' assessments of utility of the different school subjects. It was pointed out that this is also a question of the didactics of history. It is likely that learner interest will increase as a result of instruction that appeals to problem-solving, and the development of such skills is also useful preparation for everyday life in society. This view emphasizes, then, that history requires thinking and is a relatively difficult subject.

The examination of the curricula showed that history is an obligatory subject in all the Nordic countries. If I remember correctly, the only exception was one senior secondary school line in Norway. Syllabuses have been revised in all stages of school during the past ten years. Norway has probably gone furthest in integrating history with geography and social science by way emphasizing geography in the first grade of the senior secondary school, history in the second grade, and

social science in the third grade. The traditional chronological sequencing is still followed in the revised syllabuses. The empirical research of history didactics was not prominent in the presentations and discussions. It seems that didactic classroom work is very practically oriented, with current emphasis on computer applications, peculiar characteristics of history, and learning processes.

Conference organizers had also arranged opportunities to visit the surroundings of Bergen, without forgetting the important fishing. Brief visits are always **refreshing** in the middle of discussion-oriented conferences and give opportunities to gain first-hand experiences of the historically interesting characteristics of the district. For the successful arrangements our best thanks are due to the Norwegian hosts, particularly to Magnus Angvik! The next conference will be arranged in three years' time in Sweden.

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