

A B O U T F U T U R E H I S T O R Y T E A C H E R S

I gave my first teacher training course to history students in the academic year 1961/1962 and the last one in 1982/1983. Since 1961 several hundreds of students have passed through my hands. Hardly anything is now as it was in 1961, and I intend to give an account of the often very profound changes that have occurred in these 22 years. But one thing remained the same in all these years, the legal frame wherein the courses took place. But even this frame, dating from 1954, will be completely transformed in the immediate future. Because I am speaking about the past I shall leave the new plans aside. (History) students have to pass two examinations in the course of their studies, the first one is called >>the candidates exam<< (in history it takes ca. 3½ years to reach it) and the >>doctoral exam<< (another two years). After the doctoral examination one has not become a >>doctor<< (to get that degree one has to write a thesis or dissertation), but a >>doctorandus<< (a >>drs<<). A doctorandus is considered as having completed his academic studies, but if he wants to teach in secondary teaching he has to qualify first by taking the teacher training course (normally before the doctoral), which approximately between 80 and 90 % of the students do. The students who are going to qualify have passed their candidates exam and are about 22, 23 years old, sometimes older, a few much older. Only a few have some experience in teaching, but most of them none at all. An important thing is that Dutch university students normally take only one discipline and nothing else besides.

Although the legal frame remained the same, the separate parts of it (theory of education, pupil psychology, history didactics and the practice period) have been integrated into one course of four months. It is now no longer possible that a student goes to school for his practice period a year or more after the university course. And here we meet the first great change in student attitude to teacher training. In 1961 they seemed to say : if you do not bother us we shall not bother you. If you succeed in making your subject attractive, we shall even pay attention to what you say. But in our opinion that does not imply that it is necessary to

take this course, we see it more as an interruption of our normal studies. So do not expect more from us than our presence and at the best our attention.-What we **expect today** of our students is incomparably more than a quarter of a century ago. Then they dropped in for an hour of history didactics during one academic year, and another hour of educational theory (given by another teacher, without any co-ordination); now they stay for four whole months on end for an integrated course (all the subjects in one hand, no longer a few hours, but 25 whole days), the university course being interspersed with the practice periods. They get papers to read, subjects to study, demonstration lessons and discussions to prepare, their practice reports to write, a lot of home work that is, and the practice period too is much longer and exacting. But for the students this is not enough!

"The course is too short", they complain, they want to be trained more intensively. They do their home work gladly, without any protest at all. Formerly during the course the students relaxed a little from their >>real<< studies, now they often confess that they have never worked so hard! During the practice period they have to get up early (normally not a part of the student's way of life) to reach their often distant schools in time (some of them begin at 8.15). "I saw the sun rise", an amazed student once told me. Now there has occurred a very important difference between the situations of 1960 and 1980. Then nothing could be easier than obtaining a job in teaching, now the labour market is in a deplorable state. But I think there is more to the new industry of students than the wish to qualify as **well** as possible in order to get one of the few jobs there are. Better than their academic teachers they have understood that academic study also embraces the question what you mean to do with it. A short time a student told me that the teacher training course had been his very first opportunity to see that you can do useful and meaningful things with history. I shall return to this point later. Normally, I do not talk about possible exceptions, their academic teachers do not pay regard to questions like these. This is a thing which remained unchanged in all these years : academic teachers still live in an ivory tower. Not long ago one of them wrote that academic historians are not qualified to prepare students for their future jobs, and of course he saw this as a good thing,

for now the historians can devote themselves to pure science. The more practical training you give to students, the more scientific quality you lose. 1883 or 1983, there is absolutely no difference! Except one : the students are no longer of the same opinion.

My 1961 course consisted exclusively of lectures, my 1982/1983 course was completely built on student activities, a lesson on pupil motivation excepted, which had been expressly asked for (and even that lesson was preceded by reports from students about their experiences in this special field). In 1961 I lectured as all professors do, that is to say I told them orally what they had to do in the classroom. I do not think I was very theoretical then, much less than others I suppose, but there was no practice, in my course I mean - for practice they had to turn to their mentors in school -, I told them how to be practical. And was amazed when the students talked about >>too much theory<<. Nevertheless, I was still in tune then with the usual ways of academic teaching, and at first the complaints of the students were very casual and vague. Looking back I find my own manner of teacher training in the first years very astonishing, because in my own school practice as a teacher I had gone very far already in pupil activity (about which exploits I used to tell my students). But the university ambience must have awed me a little, and it is quite true that the students did not like then to be put to work. So one did not feel inspired by the situation.

But in the course of the years I succeeded in getting on. Parts of the course were put on paper so that they needed not to be expounded orally any longer. Later, when I had shifted from Amsterdam University of Utrecht University, I became blessed with inspired and inspiring colleagues, with many fruitful ideas which helped me a lot. And so in the last year the course consisted nearly completely of practical exercises, demonstrations by students, group discussions, subjects prepared and introduced by students, reports from school practice and so on. Once I said to them that it is a very weak spot in secondary education that in the case of the teacher being absent there can be no lessons : the pupils are not able to go for a time by themselves. And, so I concluded, this may not

happen in this course which has to be a model in this respect also. A very short time afterwards I had a small accident with my car on my way to Utrecht and arrived more than an hour late. The students had begun at the appointed hour of their own accord and were busy, they hardly noticed my entry. A demonstration lesson was going on and the group evaluated the doings of one or two of their colleagues. I sat quietly at the back, ruminating the thought that the real aim of teaching is to make the teacher superfluous! This indicates not only a big change in my own mode of teaching, it also corresponds with a very profound alteration in student attitude : they are no longer content with listening respectfully to what their elders and betters tell them, they want to do things themselves, to discover their own possibilities.

In the beginning the school practice period was not popular with the students. It cost them a lot of time, and I must admit, it was often very ineffectual. Teachers were chosen at random, all too often their own old history teachers. Not a few students tried to skip part or even the whole of the period, I heard a lot of special pleading in those days! It has happened that a student remarked to me : what I have learned is how not to do it. The first good thing I did in 1961 was to forbid the students to apply to their own old school for practical training and to choose their own mentors. In Amsterdam I succeeded in building up a group of reasonably **reliable** mentors, and a growing number of students became reasonably content with their school practice.

When I came to Utrecht in 1970 however, I met a much more favourable situation. Our whole institute, the PDI, collaborated to develop an idea coming from our biological department. That idea was, and it became reality too, to train teachers specially for their task of tutoring practising students, and to send the students in groups of three to them. The education <sup>ministry</sup> gave an invaluable help by deducting from the weekly task of a teacher who took part in the scheme, two hours for one group in the course of a year **or** four hours for two groups. In 1982/1983 our history department had a number of thirteen **reliable**, professionally trained, committed and experienced history teachers, enough to receive 57 students in one year. Of course this made the practice period much more intensive, the more so because the students got much feedback from their fellow-students in the group and because there existed now very

close and direct relations between the work in the institute and that in school. There is real integration now. The result is that the students, quite **differently from** the situation in 1961, see the school practice period as very important, even as crucial. It is hard work for them, for they have to prepare a lot for their lessons, they have also to fulfill tasks and assignments emanating from the course in the institute, and they have to report in writing on their experiences in the classroom.

All this is very satisfying of course and constitutes a real progress. But there remains a very weak spot. In their contacts with their mentors, in their intercourse with the school and in their own teaching in the classroom the students meet with a certain rigidity. Their mentors often tell them they may have a free hand - >>you may do what you like<< -, but nevertheless things seem a little bit >>prestabilised<<. Their mentors do not contradict the institute, they certainly do not obstruct the training course of the institute, they are quite willing to co-operate, they are open for innovation themselves. But after the first few weeks of honeymoon things seem to take a predestined course. Mentors fall back on their old established ways, their tried manners, their beloved subjects, and the students follow them. Soon they begin to see the school practice as more important than the course in the institute, you might say, they are taken over mentally by the school. Not that they decry the course in the institute, by no means, but for them the >>real thing<< seems to happen more and more in the school. "The beautiful things you teach us cannot be realised in school", they sometimes tell us ruefully, leaving the question unanswered whether this is our fault or theirs or that of <sup>the</sup> school system. In the second half of the practice period the student has found his own manner of teaching and he sticks to it. Now they have become a >>teacher<<, a teacher who resembles very closely all the other teachers there are already and have been there for the last four hundred years.

Add hereto what I wrote in a former article in this journal and shall therefore not repeat extensively, that history students are very wary of theory. Theory is everything which is not applicable immediately. What they want is tools

and means that can be used in tomorrow's lessons. This attitude narrows their possibilities of innovation still further. Of course they say that they learn and will continue to learn from their own experience and from that of others. But they forget that this experience is a very limited one, because it started from very restricted premises which have never been extended.

Now the students are quite right to see the practice as crucial. It is in the classroom and not in the lecture room that they can test their possibilities and abilities in a direct and practical way. And there exists quite certainly some discrepancy between the didactical lessons and their practical application. But having been a history teacher for so long and having been a didactician and teacher trainer for so long and having looked therefore a thing from both sides, I must declare categorically that in this respect the fault lies with the school which is much too **predetermined, and with the students** who are much too quick in giving the school the upperhand over the institute. For it is the institute and not the school which commands a wide view and is orientated towards the future. What this amounts to is that the innovation of history teaching will be a very slow affair. The impulses which the students get from the institute and which they appreciate and find valuable and important, are very soon extinguished in the act of teaching, when not already during the practice period, then during the first one or two years of independent teaching.

One may well wonder why students who consider themselves as progressive and who are very critical with regard to the school system and the conventional ways of history teaching, nevertheless tune in so soon and so completely to the classical modes of instruction and stick to the age-old choices of subject matter. But the explanation is not so difficult. First they have the secret but very strong wish to survive in the classroom, their bogey is not an outlived choice of subject matter, but a disorderly class. Most of them succeed during their practice periods in finding ways and means of stabilising the situation. That lifts a very heavy burden from their souls, but it does not make them more disposed to take extra-risks with experiments. Secondly, as I stated above, they give

>>practice<< precedence over >>theory<<. School is practice, the institute theory. Practice means safety, theory means experiments and danger. The institute offers innovation, the school offers routine. Routine may be dull, but does not involve risks. Very quickly they discover that routine makes things (seem) much easier.

This brings me to another point which bothers me very much. Talking once with a group of students at the end of their training course about their experiences and mine, I accused them of being prone to >>acedia<< or >>accidies<<. They did not know what that means, and I explained to them that is one of <sup>the</sup>medieval cardinal sins, the vice of despondency. How often do I not hear from the students, when I propose an original method : "all very well, but that does not work in a school". They mean, it does not fit into the preexisting educational patterns that they have already made theirs. And most of them do not clearly intend to try fitting it. They hoist the white ensign before the enemy is in sight. They are also very sceptical about the attitude of the pupils. From their viewpoint pupils must needs be totally uninterested in history, and when they see how their mentors succeed in captivating and motivating classes and putting them to work, they can hardly believe their eyes. Many of them do not believe it justified to teach history, they sometimes call it >>thrusting history upon pupils<<, and at the first sign of lack of interest they conclude they have been right. I am inclined to believe that this opinion (or rather prejudice) about the degree of concern they expect from pupils, is in reality a reflection of their own attitude to history.

The way they are being taught in the historical institutes does not make things easier for them. None of their professors and teachers ever put the question of the use or the uses of history. As in the hey-day of historism history is still completely self-evident. It does not alarm the pundits that history has lost a lot of ground in the schools already. I regret to say it, but in my opinion the historical institutes are extremely a-social, in the first place with regard to their own students who are left in the lurch as to their own future. Uneasily they, the students presume they have not become equipped as historians, I will not yet say for a special profession, but for social life, for living as a scientifically trained histo-

rian in modern society. A student, a very intelligent and open-minded young man of 24, wrote to me : "After all those dull sessions in the historical institute it has been a relief to take part in a motivated group .....During the teacher training course I have learned an immense lot of >>history<<, but in a totally different way than during the >>real study<<, not specialistically or based on political and sociological theories, but from a cultural perspective. Not : what will science pick out this time, <sup>but</sup> what is its use for people (in our case pupils), what can we offer them? I found this way of handling history very stimulating and have sorely missed it in the other parts of my study." Very gratifying for the teacher trainer of course, but it underlines what I said. But a few months of teacher training cannot make good the social and personal deficit of years of scientific education.

All this is bad enough, but still worse is that the scientific study does not benefit our students very much either, at least not with respect to teaching. Simply and shortly said : they do not know enough of history. Very, very often I have sat at the back of the classroom and listening to a teaching student asked myself : "For heaven's sake, what have they done all those years in the institute?" Not infrequently they are not acquainted even with the main lines or the most important facts. I have heard students corrected by pupils who looked up the right thing in their textbooks (I remember a student who simply did not know that the Netherlands had been, from 1810 to 1813, an integral part of the French Empire). I have seen them unable to answer questions and looking bewildered at their mentors ("perhaps you know that?"), I have heard them stammering : "yes, sorry, you see, this is not my usual subject".

And this is where it hurts. They have only >>subjects<< and >>special themes<<, but they lack an overall view. This situation can be explained easily. After the candidates exam the great majority of them take modern, contemporary or social-economic history as their main subject. That leaves the Middle Ages a blank, Antiquity has not even existed. But even in their main subject their knowledge of everything not political or social-economic, for instance cultural or religious history is extremely thin. This is partly the fault of the institutes which tend too much and too soon to specialization,



but partly of the students too who do not read enough. Once I talked with a girl student and reproached her her lack of the most elementary knowledge. She replied that she had never read anything else than the prescribed books. Of course this is an extreme case, but many students are not so far from this absolute zero.

My last point is a consequence of the former. Apart from a few exceptions the history students possess only a very meagre general erudition. One of these days a young didactician told me that in the historical institute he had frequented you could call hardly one of the perhaps thousand students an >>erudite<<. And the young man I have quoted already added than in his opinion you could give this predicate to only very few of the scientific historians who were his teachers. Most of the history students can only read English, they cannot read French or even German, let alone speak it. Not many of them read literature. Even the greatest trends of cultural history remain a closed book to them. I once asked a group of 45 students of 23, 24 years old who of them knew what >>gnosis<< or >>gnostic<< is. There was only one who **had** a vague idea of this religious ideology which dominated the centuries before and after the birth of Christ. Students of Utrecht University that has within its walls one of the greatest, if not the greatest specialist on gnosticism, **Prof. Quispel!**

It may seem now that I am denying implicitly what I suggested in the beginning, that I have always considered it a pleasure to work with students. This opinion would not be right. I liked them, but my love did not make me blind. I have always been aware of their shortcomings and have in the course of the years become still more acutely aware of them. For many of their ills I put the blame on the university. Nevertheless these passages are not meant as an indictment. Teacher training is everywhere in an experimental phase, in many countries even in an embryonic stage. We are fighting uphill, against very heavy odds, against inveterated traditions and established interests. Therefore it is a good thing to take stock of the situation. We still have to conquer big difficulties, but in some respects we have made considerable headway already. There is reason for some realistic optimism.