

Elective Scheme for History Teachers in Training.

E.S.H.T.T.

Section 1: Reasons for the Proposal.

The basic premise put forward here is that the training of history teachers ought to include opportunities for students to experience perspectives on history teaching other than that of their own national system. Increasingly pupils are taught to look at history from a range of perspectives, but it is not yet generally accepted that we need to broaden the perspectives of history teachers at all levels. It is widely accepted that the training of students in foreign languages and, surprisingly, in medicine is enhanced if they can spend a part of their training abroad. This ought to become a general practice for the training of history teachers too.

The general purpose of this article is to raise the issues for discussion within the International Society for History Didactics. It may be useful to compare views and practices in different countries and to see whether there is anything further which the Society might be able to do in this direction.

There are many reasons for suggesting that the 1990s may be a good moment to establish a greater international element in the training of history teachers. The forces of 'history' have become evident in many parts of the world. The collapse of communism and the versions of history it established in schools raise immediate and acute problems for teachers in those countries. In the West pressure groups, relativism and versions of post-modernism raise issues about 'whose' history is to be taught in school and on what authority and for whose benefit selections are made for curricula, texts and examinations. Nationalism and fundamentalism likewise raise pressures in many countries which may be particularly acute in school history.

History became a part of the basic school curriculum in most countries at a time when the content of the subject centred on conveying an outline of national history, and the method of teaching was through books, particularly an authoritative textbook. Times have changed: the content of the school curriculum now encompasses local, national, regional and aspects of world history. Making meaningful selections for school and balancing all of these perspectives poses new problems. Methods of teaching and learning have also changed: whilst books remain important pupils also learn history from a variety of sources, from oral history and the environment, and increasingly use computers to obtain and interrogate data.

Within Europe discussion of 'European' history, what it is and how it should be taught, is increasingly raised. Ideas about comparative and regional routes into shared

historical experiences such as the Reformation or Industrialisation change national perspectives. Many publications of the Council of Europe emphasise the need to develop an awareness both of the diversity of the European cultural heritage and of wider global perspectives. However, a recent Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community, (Commission of the European Communities to the Council, 5th. November 1991) noted that study abroad schemes as part of teacher education were not well covered by existing programmes such as the Erasmus and Tempus schemes. Indeed it proposed that special measures covering the initial and continuing education of teachers are necessary, and that: 'Opportunities for joint action and for sharing knowledge and expertise in the definition and development of curriculum, in the production of curricula materials and in the evolution of new approaches to learning, involving both schools and teacher education institutions, should be encouraged....'

At the moment there are schemes for the exchange of practising teachers and for students studying for history degrees, but none specifically for the training of history teachers. Yet the claim that an international perspective is both an enrichment and a protection could be made strongly for the training of history teachers. Students in general are very keen to do such exchanges, but short training courses leave very few opportunities for visits. It is a moment in life when such visits may make their greatest impact. Later on as practising teachers with families and careers it may be difficult to make such a visit. In England it is more often students training as primary teachers, a four year course, who get opportunities for study visits where their College has an established exchange scheme with other similar institutions.. The training of primary teachers is more general, across the curriculum, and there may not be in such schemes any particular focus on history and the way it is approached in different school systems.

The International Society for History Didactics provides an important forum for discussing all of these possibilities specifically in relation to the teaching of history, where a strong case can be made for the value of fostering a broader than national perspective in future teachers. I am suggesting that the initial training of history teachers may be a good point at which to start. The purpose would be for students to learn something of how other countries tackle history in school and thereby to gain a new perspective on their own system as well as to consider alternatives.

Section 2. The Practical Proposal.

Attempting to develop practical proposals is one way of beginning to establish the general idea that trans-national visits ought to be an accepted part of the training of history teachers. For specialist teachers of

history the courses of training are often short and undertaken after completing a university degree. This means that lengthy visits may not be possible, but quite short visits of two weeks can be very productive. It may be too complicated to insist that visiting students must always undertake some teaching in schools. There are language problems and such teaching is difficult to arrange. It would be better for visits to be left as wide and flexible as possible, and for this reason visits may be more useful than exchanges.

Essentially what is required is to establish a network of participating institutions. Each institution would agree to accept a number of students from abroad who would be attached to a group of their own students and participate in all academic activities, and for whom accomodation could be made available. The times of the year when such visits would be possible, the length of visits, the numbers of visitors who could be taken and the general conditions of accepting foreign students would be decided by each institution. Students who wished to visit would apply, with support from their tutors, and the terms and conditions would then be stated. This is the pattern of elective attachments by medical students worldwide. Institutions might develop reciprocal exchanges, but these are not essential. Both institutions can benefit even from a one-way visit .

The crucial problems are firstly those of money to provide for some secretarial time to arrange visits and for the accomodation of students. Many students may be able to find their own sources of funding to cover the cost of travel. Once the idea is established, institutions may themselves find some of these relatively small sums. It may also be worth inquiring into how schemes for language or medical students are already funded, to see if some history students can be added into an existing scheme. Alternatively it may be necessary to seek outside or special funds.

Secondly it is essential to gain institutional and academic support for such visits as a recognised part of the training of history teachers. Clearly this is a matter for institutions and countries to establish within their own educational system. Nonetheless, international support might help individual recognition. The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion within the Society for History Didactics on whether it is possible or desirable for us to initiate the kind of network required and gain the support to establish it. It is a common practice for students of languages and medicine, are there others who think it should be an aspect of training history teachers too and how can we make it happen ?

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