The aim of a History course – any History course – is of course to promote students’ learning of History, i.e. to promote their knowledge of History. What, then, is knowledge of History? For me, it was a somewhat strange experience when I suddenly realised that during my seven years of History studies – from the first undergraduate course to the PhD exam – no one had ever raised the issue of what it is to know History. Oh, we learned a lot about how to achieve historical knowledge, e.g. through the meticulous and critical study of historical sources, but what that knowledge really consisted of was never discussed.

This, however, has not stopped us from regularly using expressions such as ‘...she is indeed a brilliant historian...’ or ‘...his contributions to the field are invaluable...’ Such expressions undoubtedly indicate that the person in question has a profound knowledge of History. But is it also possible to define the scholarly qualities behind the words ‘brilliant’ or ‘invaluable’? My own tentative answer would be that a good historian

a) knows her facts
b) knows how to find and evaluate new facts
c) knows how to find patterns, resemblances, and differences that convey meaning to these facts.

It is thus obvious that the good historian stands with one foot in each of the two camps of the ‘content vs. skills’ battle. ‘Content vs. skills’ is a most unhappy dichotomy (as many dichotomies tend to be). As Stéphane Lévesque has pointed out (Lévesque 2009), it is all about content but content of two different kinds: *substantive* and *procedural* content. Lévesque links the distinction to Peter Lee’s and Denis Shemilt’s distinction between first-order and second-order concepts (Lee & Shemilt 2003) where the former deals with History as substance, the latter with History as procedure.

Another attempt at dissecting historical knowledge has been made by Erik Lund (Lund 2009), who suggests that historical knowledge can be viewed as a concept with three central aspects: *substantive* knowledge (“to know that”), *procedural* knowledge (“to know how”) and *conceptual* knowledge, with the latter divided in two parts: first-order or substantive concepts as tools for handling historical facts, and second-order or procedural concepts for understanding History as processes, relations, and interpretations. The possible advantage of Lund’s model is that its
definition of procedural knowledge is slightly wider and that conceptual knowledge can be seen as a (necessary) link that connects substance and procedure, thus underlining that the three aspects of knowledge are inseparable and irreducible parts of a whole, parts which presuppose and interact with each other.

To an extent it is possible to ‘do history’ – interpret the past and draw up a coherent narrative – without the use of concepts. But as soon as we wish to transgress an idiographic approach and link an event to others through comparison or a chain of causation we have to generalise, which is where concepts come into the picture.

Which concepts one chooses to work with and the degree of complexity used in defining them depends, of course, on a range of factors such as the time and space covered by the course, the course level, and so on – especially when we deal with substantive concepts. When choosing relevant procedural concepts it is, however, possible to draw up a generic list that can serve as a structuring scaffold for History teaching through all educational stages, from primary school level to post-graduate studies. One such list has been suggested by Stéphane Lévesque (Lévesque 2009):

- Historical significance,
- Continuity and change,
- Progress and decline,
- Evidence,
- Historical empathy.

To these may be added:

- Causation and motivation,
- Chronology and narrative,
- Similarity and difference
- Historical consciousness, and even
- Time.

Take the concept evidence, for instance. Reading a handbook on how to deal with historical sources can give a preliminary understanding of the difference between narrative sources and remnants, but it is through meeting the sources and grappling with them that one really begins to understand the difference, as well as the fact that the same source can be both (or either) a narrative and a remnant, depending on the context and the questions we ask. Or the concept cause. The all-to-familiar exam question “Name the three major causes of the French Revolution” suggests that causes in history is as simple and clear-cut as in Newtonian physics. Causes in history are, however, of a much more evasive character and we are given a choice (or many choices) of directing our attention towards different categories of causes, once again depending on the question we put to the past.

Concepts serve as links between the substantive and the procedural. Substantive concepts stand, obviously, closer to the substantive knowledge and can therefore, to an extent, be mastered through reading. Procedural concepts, however, can only be fully understood through participating in the procedure itself: constructing a chain of causation, writing a chronological time line or a narrative, comparing in terms of similarities and differences. This
does not imply that conceptual knowledge is a kind of tacit knowledge, uncodifiable and out of reach of epistemology, or that Michael Oakeshott was right in suggesting that “the preoccupation of the historian in his attempt to apprehend facts prohibits him from reflecting upon his process of thought” (Oakeshott 2004). It might well be that the historian does not reflect over processes of thought during the writing process itself, but historians do have the ability to consciously reflect over their thinking, and this ability is an important part of historical knowledge.

If thinking, and thinking reflectively, is part of historical knowledge, it seems reasonable to suggest that teaching to think historically should be an integrated part in History courses. If one looks at School History this has been argued, and to an extent implemented, during the last three decades or so, with the UK Schools History Project as the perhaps most well-known example. At the universities, however, it may still happen that students spend their first semester or academic year reading thousands of pages, pouring the content out at the exams – and at the next level they are supposed to produce independent essays without ever being given the opportunity to train the necessary thinking skills. The result is often meagre, much to the chagrin of the supervisors: “Why can’t they use their sources properly, there’s an excellent handbook on the list of course literature?” There might be, but one do not master sources through reading handbooks, just as one do not master the flute through reading books about how it should be played.

Jerome Bruner’s famous dictum (Bruner 1977), that intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontier of knowledge or in a third-grade classroom, has often been invoked as an argument against rote-learning in primary and secondary schools, shifting focus towards student-centered learning activities. But it can just as well be used as a reminder to university lecturers that inspiration can be sought from models and examples developed for younger students.

The snags with student-centered activities aimed at promoting thinking skills are obvious. First: they are time-consuming. For a lecturer to present ‘the three major causes of the French Revolution’, 15 minutes are sufficient: a neatly wrapped up story, just to store in memory, no need for questioning. Another 15 minutes, and one can point out the main links between the American and French revolutions as well. If, on the other hand, the students are supposed to find the major causes on their own they will need at least 45 minutes to discuss the significance of different causes, different categories of causes (economic, social, ideological), and whether causes should be seen as necessary, sufficient, or contributional. And time is scarce – 30 years ago students got 40 hours of lectures and seminars during a five week module on early modern history. With the constant cuts in university funding this has been reduced to 30 or even 20 hours. It is understandable if lecturers desperately try to pass on the same amount of information, but the inevitable result is lectures cluttered with a plethora of data effectively clogging up the students’ minds. The curriculum has, after all, never covered more than a tiny portion of all the events that have occurred in the past. Reducing it further is not necessarily a catastrophe, but it must be carefully considered which topics can be left out and which are so significant that they cannot be left out without jeopardising the understanding of a bigger picture.
If, on the other hand, courses are based on thematic study of discretely taught in-depth topics, there is a great risk that students never develop the capability of synthesising. Denis Shemilt (Shemilt 2009) has advocated the use of large scale overviews, not as a list of events but as a story showing change and development, taught quickly at the beginning of the course and frequently revisited, revised, and extended.

The traditional Swedish first semester of History studies, the overview from ancient Egypt to the post-war era and experienced by generations of students as riding a motorbike through a museum, has gradually been replaced by thematic courses with a more or less evident main thread. The balance between reading and thinking might, however, need to be reconsidered. And the ‘big picture’, the scaffold or synoptic framework, might need to be introduced as well.

*This very provisional paper should be read as a short first draft of a more substantial text on historical knowledge for the 27th Nordic History Conference, Tromsø, August 2011.*

**References:**


