

Introduction

“History is probably the most important and significant academic discipline for media studies students and researchers.” (Ferguson, 103)

Why is history important for us as media educators? Where could we find a useful entry to link the school subject ‘history’ with our mission of Media Literacy? Ferguson notes, that “writing history is analogous in many ways to the construction of a media message” (104). Historic data in this sense is constructed – it is collected, selected, structured and presented in a specific form and has been put together with a certain reason and motivation. It is also expressed via different formats and media such as text, still and moving images and combinations of sound.

Examining the construction and the mediation of history will be the central focus of our new theme.

History, the facts and the individual

The school's approach towards the subject 'history' has been transformed by the discussion of the last decades. The importance of the 'facts' of history has been strongly questioned by Carr's 'What is history' (1961), at least in the Anglo-American world. A glance at the newly published history curriculum for Berlin primary schools reveals this development and postulates a need to understand history in an investigative way avoiding a straight forward knowledge acquisition of given historical texts. Children should be encouraged to “.. approach historical circumstances through their own questions and should examine historical facts from different perspectives”. (18)

According to the new curriculum history should concentrate on the individual as part of society and the reasons why he/she might act in a certain way because of meanings which have been presented to him/her by the environment, for example how a child experienced having an aunt and uncle on the other side of the Berlin wall. Relating this experience back to the pupil's own understanding of their own values, standards and environment should help them assess historical content.

These two emphases – the investigative method and the larger focus on the individual - lead us to the issue of historiography. Historiography is concerned with the study and the development of historical methods, and in that respect deals not only with history itself but as well with the portrayal of history.

How is history mediated?

How can we approach a critical evaluation of the mediation of history? Short analytical exercises can help in becoming aware of the selectiveness and subjectivity of mediated history. Here are a few starting points:

- *Books:* Compare one theme from a school history textbook with the presentation of the same them in a different kind of book, such as a history fiction book. What information is included, what is missing? What narrative is used to bring the content across? How is the reader encouraged to reflect on the content?
- *Television:* Explore where history features in television – in either specific programmes or parts of programmes (such as news). How is information presented in documentaries about historical events? What is the difference between a historic event which is acted out or one which is portrayed with still images a voice-over?
- *Feature films:* What historical themes are chosen for the plots? What themes are not chosen? Where can you detect the need to ‘entertain’ the audience? What means are used for that? How much action is included in the plot? What myths and clichés are used?

Possible starting points for practical work

Helpful practical video assignments can deepen a reflective discussion. One first idea could be producing a fictional story based on a chosen historical theme. A documentary style video clip might go further (see our task 'My school was ..') and enable all pupils involved to become historians themselves. Different perspectives of how the past is perceived by the individual pupil can open up the discussion about the subjectivity of personal historical narratives.

“The increasing importance of media evidence in history teaching should ensure our understanding that historical ‘truth’ is not unitary or one-dimensional, and that we must settle for, at best, honest representations which will need to be interpreted in relation to the interests of their sources”. (Masterman, 257)



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