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The Future of Public History – What Shall We Teach Prospectively? Remarks and Considerations

The heterogeneous field of public history is gaining importance for history school education. This raises the question to what extent public history should be firmly integrated in nowadays school education. The term public history covers various expressions of history in the public field. These products influence pupil's individual and collective perception of the past, determining also their historical consciousness obtained in history lessons. Bringing public history in school offers the opportunity that pupils can come to appreciate history as an ongoing conversation that yields not final truths, but an endless succession of discoveries and interpretations that change our understanding not only of the past, but ourselves and of the times in which we live. Therefore, public history at school helps bridging the gap between history and the currently reality of the pupil's surrounding world. But pupils need to have the necessary tools to take part in the ongoing and various discussions of the meanings of the past. Public history in school can encourage pupils in consuming history as well as in participating actively in doing public history. In curricula, public history has not yet reached a structural part. In some curricula, it appears only one time as a single approach, in Germany often combined with National Socialism and memory culture. Although some curricula and history textbooks offer some topics, they seem to be rather casual, without any systematic categories. A central challenge is to conceptualize and systematize public history theory as central future issues. To enable teachers to teach public history in the future, methodological and theoretical-based concepts of approaches, contents and examples are necessary. What could such categories be?

Some reflections along this wide-spread field for the future of teaching public history will be introduced in short here, regarding both, content and theory.

1. Teaching public history at school on the one side offers the opportunity of doing public history. In this regard, public history can be conceptualized as an engagement in society and as a social participation in cultural communication about history and memory. Doing public history together with pupils in project-based learning-settings brings back the opportunity of participation in history as a cultural practice in society. Schools can evolve into powerful public history agents, identifying partnerships between schools and museums, archives and local political authorities as a new market for public history. The current museological concepts to open museums as places and

- spaces of interaction with the past in the present and especially the new participatory museums allow mutual enrichment. In addition to museums, also archives have been changing their relation to school education as well as to the public. They have altered from closed institutions of preservation to transparent and publicly accessible spaces. This new conceptions offer new possibilities of cooperation and may help to entangle the discourse between museums, archives and public history at school. With a decentralist view on history, doing public history means here carrying history in the public realm by working on the past with local communities, agencies and institutions of public history as well as exploring family conscience as individual approaches to the past. Using oral interviews, remembering individual and collective memories, collecting and preserving sources enhances students to produce history on an epistemologically valid basis in various forms of representations and therefore contributing to the collective memory. To cite a few examples, possible projects of doing public history could be: engaging in history competitions, planning and designing exhibitions, producing audio-guides or audio walks for peers for exhibitions or historical sites in cooperation with public broadcasting stations or initiating a format of public commemoration and remembrance (for Germany f. ex. *Stumbling Blocks*)
2. On the other side, teaching public history does not only mean doing public history with the pupils, but also teaching students to deconstruct public history narratives, i.e. the representations of others. This approach includes analyzing how and why the public perceives and deals with history and how the demands for history presentations f.ex. in mass media such as films and on TV can be described analyzed and interpreted. The German-speaking conceptual developments of history didactics had adopted an approach of public history in connection with the question of the formative factors of non-formal off-campus learning scenarios, f.ex. in museums, and its interrelation between historical learning in the classroom. However, it has to be noted, that historical learning in off-campus learning scenarios is not automatically identical with an approach to public history. To visit museums and exhibitions in order to teach public history means, that students should recognize these presentations as offers of historical interpretation and critically evaluate the constructions of the past presented to them. This aspect is of crucial importance, following relevant theories of history didactics, to convey to students that historical narratives are always subjective and constructed.
 3. Teaching public history in the future, we need categorizations of the various media-specific ways, with which historical narratives are presented to point out the difference between the scientific logic and the presentation logic.

When the medium changes, when the delivery system changes, public history itself changes – the latest example is the new “digital historical culture”. Therefore, we need more systematization and categorization for the analysis and interpretation of public history products. A helpful tool could be to differentiate between those representations, which are closer to the forms of scientific logics and are strongly linked to historical science and research, and those, which have only weaker or especially selective links to historical science or are completely different to the scientific logics (f. ex. historical narratives as performative practice and aesthetic forms of expression). People can (and do) engage with the past within the realms of aesthetics and sensibilities, not only within the domains of knowledge, analysis and empirical observations that are the common currency of historians. Artists, film directors, computer games developer, poets, comic-book authors and others besides have their own ways of working with the materials and sources left by the past: They don’t want to be academic historians. They have alternative mnemonic practices and therefore, judging other historical practices by the standards of academic history does not touch the substance of the matter. Instead, there is a need to acknowledge that each form of historical representation has its own methodology, its own forms, codes and conventions, and its own cultural value. However, this acknowledgement reaches its limits in the case of ideologically driven and abusive efforts at remaking the past, so that public history at school has also to empower students how to assess critically those narratives.

4. By analyzing and deconstructing how today’s public perceives and deals with history there is to take in consideration, that “public” is an umbrella phrase, often used to create an idea of unification and homogeneity of identity by often hiding or homogenizing the numerous publics that can and do exist simultaneously. For that reason, it makes sense to identify the various actor groups as target groups (recipients) as well because public history projects adapt to their specific contexts. A distinction concerning different approaches could be drawn between bottom-up-projects (grassroot-movement), which are run by individuals, local societies or community groups, all mostly non-professional historians, and top-down-projects, carried out of public institutions such as museums, archives or universities. This distinction does not mark strict boundaries, for example, grass-roots movements can initiate projects which are taken up by public institutions. Both social and public approaches to history have something important in common: both are not only representations of individual or collective memories, but can be described as discourses of power in order to establish specific interpretations of history.

5. There is to think about the relation between public and popular history. Popular accounts of history, audio-visual offers in the field of TV, film as well as in computer games and via web 2.0 have reached a new worldwide peak in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Given the currency of historical themes in mass culture, however, and the democratization of expertise promised by new digital frontiers, discerning public history from popular history has grown increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, one distinction can be made: Popular accounts of history address a non-expert but very interested audience under the pressure of commercial success, at least in societies with a market economy, and the orientation on interest of specific target groups. Popular media of historical representation offer a different style of engagement with the past. The intention to successfully sell historical topics as a commercial mass product often therefore tends to result in making “good stories”, so that scientifically proven statements about history in many cases are of no relevance. Also in the field of popular history culture, we find products, which are closer to the forms of scientific logics, f.ex. forms that are to be contextualized in the vast field of popularization of scientific or academic knowledge, and those which are completely different to the scientific logics (f. ex. history as entertainment). Pupils meet and use a great variety of popular history products outside of the classroom. The accounts of history often seriously differ from the postulates about basic standards of history education. It is not a question devaluing popular forms of history and ban them from the history classroom. Popular history products can be important learning objects as well by connecting school classes with historical culture outside of school. Teaching popular public history has to provide the students with the competences needed to critically deal with and to develop standards for critically evaluating the presented concepts of popular history.
6. Teaching public history at school is not only a topic for advanced learners in higher classes or high schools. Younger pupils are able to participate in doing public history as well and they can reflect on user-centered history by examples of their local cultural environment (f. ex. why a jubilee of the city foundation is celebrated, which agencies are involved and which narratives are intended and why).
7. Teaching public history at school should also include approaches of historizing public history, reflecting f.ex. on institutions of public history on the meta level (museums, archives) as well as on public history projects in former times in order to focus on the historical context and the dynamic of public history. This includes also the question of historical forms and media of the popularization of (academic) historical knowledge to a broad, non-expert but nonetheless interested audience.

8. There is no doubt, that there remains a strong need for empirical research for teaching public history in the classroom. Some research issues could be:
 - the question to what extent and how students deal with public/popular history in their leisure time;
 - what kind of importance they attach to these accounts on history;
 - how they assess the relationship to historical learning at school
 - on the use of public/popular history products as learning objects in history education

Public history at school opens a new way, thinking about history in the classroom, because it focusses on the different ways in which people – individually and collectively – relate to the past, so that history at school gains relevance for the young peoples' present and the future. The understanding of non-academic forms of historical engagement and contemporary culture's ongoing fascination with the past has to be addressed at school. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that students have the right and the need for scientifically orientated history lessons as well so that the prevailing dichotomy between public and academic history is not to be transferred in the classroom. On the contrary: Deconstructing public (or popular) history narratives needs the knowledge of the logic and the methods of academic history in order to be able to recognize and critically evaluate the various forms of historical representation that do not adhere to the rules of evidence and standards of academic rigour. In a complementary access to both, students can understand, how the 'historical' is conceptualised by the scientific logic and by cultural imagination and reflect on different historical needs in society.