

Best practice – a tutor’s perspective

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In this short presentation I will try to describe two things. First, I how tried to organise my teaching with the aim to prepare my students for participation in the history competition. Second, give a description of the main focus when tutoring the students while they worked on their entries. Finally, I will try to reflect on some aspects why I think participation in history competitions is important.

The Norwegian history competition – Basic Facts

Organiser:
Den norske historiske forening – HIFO

First organised in 2000.

2007

Topic: *My Family in Light of History*

Participants: 199

Entries: 155

Goals: To change the history teaching in Norway in direction of more use of project work, historical sources, multi-perspectivity and student’s own reflections on history.

How did I organise the history teaching?

First of all I have to make clear that my class had to participate in the competition, i.e. they had to write an essay on the topic of the competition and hand it in to me for assessment. This part was compulsory, but the students were of course free to hand in the essay to the competition. I did this because I saw a clear connection between my teaching and the goals of the competition. The main goal of the Norwegian history competition is to change the history teaching in Norway, which

we in general consider to be based on a strong tradition of learning from textbooks and lectures by the teacher. It was also an opportunity for the students to make an assignment which was in line with the principles of my history teaching and the goals in the national curriculum.

I taught the class history for two years in the second and last year of the gymnasium. From the very beginning I put emphasis on developing different historical skills. Much of the work was centred on working with a variety of historical evidences. Written sources as well as pictures and objects were “read” and interpreted. We looked for inconsistencies between different sources and analysed them trying to find possible biased statements etc.

In short, the national curriculum puts emphasis on developing historical skills, and I tried to do so in my teaching. In this way I believe the students, if they paid attention to the class room activity, were given the opportunity to be well prepared for participation in the competition. At least they were familiar with the way of thinking about historical

evidences and how to ask questions. Making a possible entry to the competition was so to speak the final test on how they had developed their historical skills.

For many of my students this was the first time working with a larger project. To make sure that all of them made the final deadline and not ending up with writing the whole essay the last week, I thought it necessary to structure the progress for them. I made a clear progress plan with defined milestones. The students had to deliver their first thoughts, problem questions, ideas for a topic at a fixed date. They got an approval by me with some short comments. Then they had to work on a possible disposition which was also handed in for comments. After some weeks looking for sources, making interviews and doing research and writing, they had to deliver their first draft, which I again commented. After delivering their first draft they were left on their own, and had to decide on taking my comments into consideration or not and in general finishing the essay/entry.

The new challenges or “what kind of problems did the students face”?

I discovered six main difficulties or obstacles:

1. Finding an interesting research topic

Many students came up to me and said: “There is nothing interesting about my family! No one has ever done something spectacular and important”. In such cases I think it is important to make the students understand that most of us are just ordinary people and that the purpose of the competition is not to write about any famous person. It is also important to try to make them feel that the history of an ordinary person is interesting and fascinating. It is maybe possible to give them the task of being the family historian, because famous persons will have their history written, but who will write the history of the not so famous? This might be the task of the student.

In other cases I discovered that some students, for different reasons, do not want to write about their family. In this case I think it is important to give them the opportunity to write about another family or write even write about a famous person.

The last and probably most difficult case is if the student wants to write about something highly sensitive and emotionally and that this might expose the family in a not so flattering way. I think it is necessary to make it clear that the students need an approval by the family in such cases. The winners of the 2007 competition chose to write about their grandfather who volunteered for the *Waffen SS* in Russia. In Norway this is still a very sensitive question. Making sure that they had talked it over with their families and they had approved it, I had no problems letting them continue with the project. I even encouraged them because I knew that very little research has been done this topic, so in many respects the student's work would turn out as a kind of pioneer work.

2. Finding interesting questions to ask and helping the students develop questions which are fruitful and possible to answer.

Many students find it difficult to ask good questions. Some seem to ask questions that are too narrow, i.e. the questions can be answered in one or two sentences or they are related to details. One might call it a sickness of the history profession when the questions are linked to just some minor details. Although details are important, the purpose of the competition is also to make the students see connections, relations between the "small" and "large" history. The tutor's role will have to be to help them open up the questions or make them ask additional questions.

Some students also have a tendency to ask the really "great" questions; questions close to asking for the meaning of life. These questions are of course impossible to answer considering the amount of time and space the students have. We therefore have to make the students see that the questions must be more focused and narrowed down.

In both cases I think it is important to let the students work for a moment with their original question, hoping that they themselves will see that they have to do something with their question formulation.

3. Have a clear focus – red line or *Leitmotiv*

This point is related to the second point above. In my comments to the students I often had to emphasise the importance of rather writing a shorter essay than bringing in new aspects and topics.

4. Ability to focus away from "the hero"-story of my family and see it in a broader perspective

This seemed to be the hardest for many of the students. It is difficult to lift your eyes when you are absorbed in the most interesting topic in the world – my family. Still, having this ability is probably what distinguishes the excellent work from the just good ones. For this reason, I think that the students should not be given too much help on this point. They should be able to see connections between the specific family and the general context. They should be able to see where my family history goes in line with the general trend and where it differs.

5. Developing theses/hypothesis

Early in the process I asked the students to write down what they expected to be the conclusion of their project. Immediately they said that it was impossible to do it because they had not found anything yet. Still I "forced" them to ask themselves the question: What do I expect to find?

My idea was that this would help them writing the conclusion. It would make the conclusion clearer and more structured. The second reason was a thought that it would help them think about what they actually found and if it was expected to find it or not. And if they found something unexpected, they should feel an "obligation" to reflect on why it was unexpected and what might be an explanation of the unexpected. In this way they should be able to have some reflections on the learning process they had been through.

6. Finding useful sources

This is always a major problem for the students, especially if it is primary sources they are looking for. They are not necessarily familiar with what can be useful sources for historical knowledge. Lack of written sources seems to be a problem for most of the students, and if they find grandmother's diary, it is often written in a handwriting that is time consuming to decipher. When they finally manage to read the diary, they find out that not much is useful to them.

Interviews with grandfather and grandmother or other family members are therefore probably the best and easiest way primary sources. Making an interview is not always easy. First of all they need to be well prepared and know what kind of information they are looking for. Secondly, they have to be critical to the information the source give them, since it is often a long time since it actually happened. This is of course an excellent opportunity for the student to show their skills in being critical to the source. On the other hand, it is not easy to more or less say that grandmother is "lying". Some students do not have any person to interview because they have passed away or do not remember too well. In any case, this is where a good tutor shows herself using her knowledge and creativity. Good tutors have knows the variety of sources and how to utilize them!

These six points became my main focus as a tutor. And they became not only important because the students needed help with them, but also because it was related to what I consider important historical skills to develop. In that sense I got another confirmation on the importance of students participating in the competition – it helps to promote critical thinking. It promotes developing historical skills. Finally, the students seem to how fun with history and that is probably the most important effect and mission of the competition after all.

Looking back, I have tried to find the point where I felt most satisfied with "forcing" my students to participate in the competition. Of course I felt proud when two of them won the competition. But it was another experience that was become just as important, and

which shows that history can mean a difference and has the ability to touch something essential.

After some weeks working with the project, one of the students came up to me. Well, he did not walk, he ran with a book under his arm. It was a recently published book on the history of India and Pakistan, and I knew from the reviews that it was not a blockbuster, rather a highly scholarly work. But the student had read it because he was interested! This was big surprise because the student had never before shown any interest in reading books, least of all history books. He did not brag about having read it, he rather wanted to tell me something he felt important. What he said, in a most ecstatic way, was: "I have just talked to my father! And do you know what? I'm not from Pakistan, but from India!" For one of the first times, an interest, although small, for history had occurred, he had probably had a normal and serious conversation with his father and he had learned something new about his family. This little episode justified spending many weeks on the project, and if we rewrite the slogan for the pastilles *Läkerol*, we could say: "History competition makes people talk!"

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