

Transforming Year 7's understanding of the concept of imperialism: a case study on the Roman Empire

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Those of us in the U.K. know that many of our pupils finish their entire historical education without a satisfactory grasp of basic substantive concepts as they are used in history. Do all our low-attaining or 'low ability' 14-year-olds who are pressured to drop history at 14 really emerge with an adequate understanding of a term such as Church or Parliament, democracy or imperialism? I doubt it very much. Even where the teacher has made excellent use of the limited curriculum time available, exposing pupils to a good range of stories and events, it seems unlikely that many of our pupils are surfacing with a *sufficiently* sophisticated understanding of these words to be able to debate politics, read a newspaper critically or understand a literary use of an historical reference. In many schools, the majority – perhaps the most needy majority – will just slip through the net. (Indeed, even a few of that minority of students lucky enough to continue history to 16 or of the tiny minority of very successful students who continue it to 19 may still operate with weak, narrow or inflexible definitions that do not serve them well.) This is why the work of teacher-trainers Haenen, Schrijnemakers and Stufkens deserves serious consideration. Drawing upon their knowledge of problems that many pupils similarly experience in Dutch history classrooms, they have built models for teaching pupils concepts that start with prior knowledge and that require pupils to process, elaborate, reflect upon and contest meanings, rather than simply 'receiving' them as immutable definitions to be poorly understood and swiftly forgotten. Crucially, they have carried out their work in the context of initial teacher-education courses. In this article they share their methods for helping trainee teachers to gain a deeper understanding of pupils' difficulties with historical concepts. They also illustrate ways of blending theory and practice in building the practical skill of new history teachers.

Introduction

In an earlier article¹ in *Teaching History*, we described an approach to the teaching of historical concepts in secondary education as it is currently used in our teacher education courses. In these courses, we discuss with trainee teachers both theoretical insights and practice-based research on the acquisition of historical concepts. As teacher educators, we know that trainees often think pupils' learning will automatically follow when the teacher has explained the subject matter well. The trainee teachers have distilled this idea of 'teaching by telling' from their own subjective theories and former school experiences. We challenge this through practical classroom assignments in order to make them aware of some of the problems involved in the teaching of concepts and some of the difficulties that many pupils face. We discuss with trainees the possibilities for helping pupils to achieve a deeper understanding of concepts.

Our approach is influenced by a sociocultural theory of teaching and learning. This article illustrates such an approach using a description of a history lesson on imperialism.

'Imperialism' in the classroom

In their primary education, pupils have often been acquainted with examples of imperialism and acculturation in modern history, but only rarely is the concept of imperialism explored or understood. Consequently, in secondary school pupils, prior knowledge about imperialism is still vague, partial and unstructured. In Year 7, a common assignment is to have pupils work with a map containing the various regions of the Roman Empire. These regions include the southern part of present-day Holland, that is, the area south of the River Rhine in its then course. With this map in hand, the concept imperialism is introduced as one of the key historical concepts of the secondary education curriculum. Pupils will come across it again in modern history, for example in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The content of the concept will by then have been enriched through the assimilation of different examples.

As part of our research, we have videotaped a teacher in Year 7 working with 12-year old pupils, which in the Dutch educational system means the first year of secondary education. This teacher deals with the history

of the Roman Empire – a theme taught to all Dutch pupils in Year 7.

In the lesson described in this article (see Figure 1 for the teacher's lesson plan), the teacher does something important with the concept 'imperialism' in the Roman context, something which is additional to the way it is introduced in his textbook. He joins in with a textbook sentence running: 'With imperialism, it is always important to ask yourself how the conquerors are dealing with the conquered people'.² He tells his pupils that this sentence is not easy to understand right away, and that there is a lot more to say about such an 'awkward' concept. The teacher thus puts the pupils on the track of the historical and cultural dimensions of the concept by making them think about and work with its religious, judicial and cultural aspects. Thus the pupils gradually come to realise that imperialism is not predominantly about military domination, but that it touches deeply upon every aspect of daily life. Further on in the curriculum, that insight will make it possible to touch upon the matter of negative and positive aspects of imperialism. The teacher will then be able to introduce the related concept of 'Romanizing'.

Conceptual change

From the transcription of the videotaped lesson (see Figure 2), we learn that the teacher introduces a series of tasks. These tasks are designed to stimulate a broad range of learning activities. They function as scaffolds for the pupils' understanding of the concept. Trainee teachers need to learn how to guide their pupils in sequences of such tasks. If they can create a learning environment that feels like a shared problem space, they will find it easier to invite the pupils to take part in a process of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge.

We have derived this basic tenet from the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1935), the founder of the sociocultural theory, who developed a new

framework for conceptualising these educational dialogues. Piotr Gal'perin (1902-1988) extended this framework. Gal'perin placed the pupils' conceptual change at the heart of education, emphasising the contribution to the teaching-learning process of both the teacher and the pupils' peers.³

Teaching historical concepts is often associated with fostering conceptual change. Conceptual change implies the presence of prior knowledge in pupils' minds. The induced learning experience needs to correspond with the level of that knowledge. This crucial point seems obvious, but it is often overlooked. This is not surprising, because as teacher educators and history teachers, we know from our own classroom experiences how difficult it is to pinpoint the level of the pupils' prior knowledge, and to use it as a springboard for further learning. Ausubel strongly asserts the relevance of prior knowledge as the basis for all education: 'the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly'.⁴

How prior knowledge should be made educationally profitable and how this knowledge base should be accessed is still a matter of debate, however, especially when it concerns the teaching and learning of concepts. Pupils enter secondary education with a huge number of concepts mirroring their daily experiences and representing a complex ability to think and reason.⁵ Practice-based concepts are often simple word meanings at a very basic level of generalisation. For example, to Year 7 pupils the concept 'history' is still not clearly specified. In general, they consider history as 'all that happened in the past'. In the course of secondary education, this phrasing needs to be enriched into a more sophisticated conceptualisation of history as 'the past as far as we know it from the sources we have', or even more specified as 'history is an interpretation of the past based on sources used by the author informing us about it'. Likewise, if we were to ask these pupils to describe what it is like to live in a democracy, they would call a nation a democracy simply

The pupils' prior knowledge is highly resistant to change.

Figure 1: Teacher's plan of a Year 7 lesson (50 minutes) on 'imperialism'

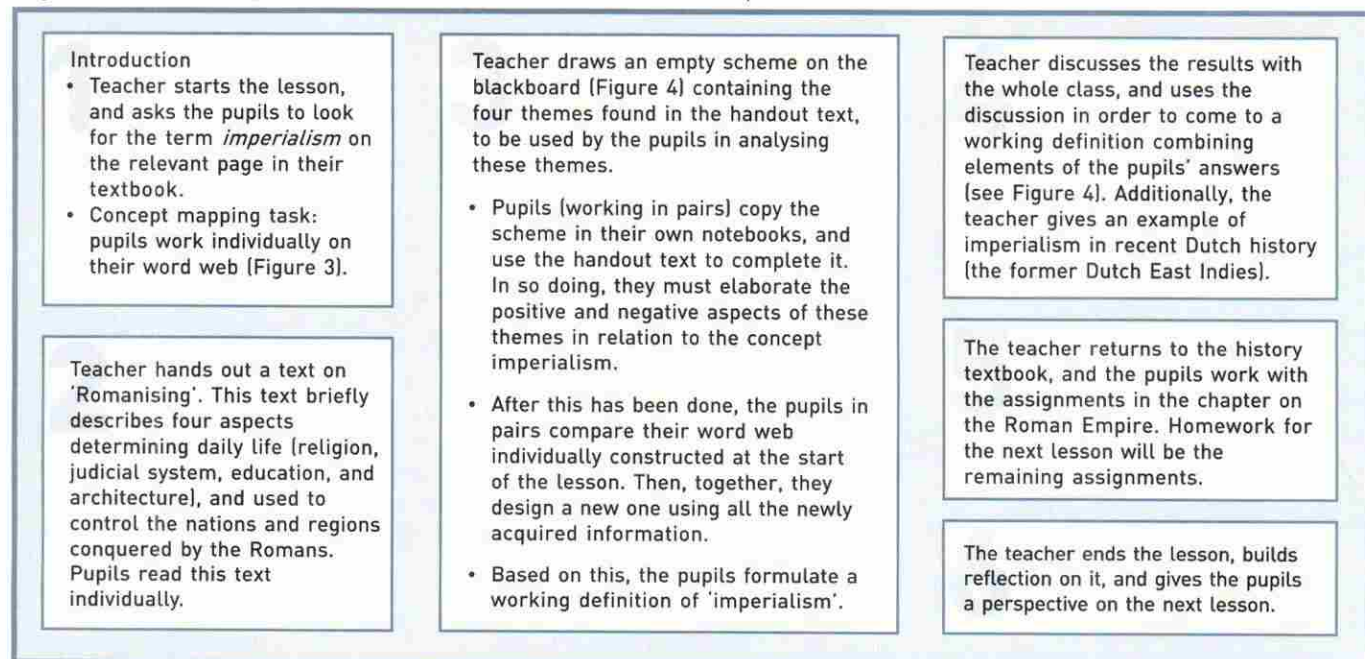


Figure 2: Transcript of a relevant part of the videotaped lesson

Teacher:

What are we going to do in this lesson? We will have many opportunities to deal with on the concept of imperialism at length. It is an awkward concept. In your textbook, something has been written on it. Who can take me to these particular sentences in your textbook and read them aloud?

[Pupil Lennart raises his hand, and is asked to read aloud a few sentences from the textbook.]

Teacher:

Thank you, Lennart, very good! You found them halfway down the page, but wouldn't you agree with me that they aren't easy to understand right away, and they don't say much about such an awkward concept? There is indeed a lot more to say and to know about it.

Now, I want you to take your notebook and, on your own, begin to make a word web. You know how to do it: put 'imperialism' in the middle, and around it write words that, according to you, are connected with it. You may find it helpful to use your textbook, but you may also first try and think of what you yourself already know about it. In other words, what is, in your opinion, relevant to the concept of imperialism? What is it all about? Start to work just by yourselves, not together yet.

[Silently, the pupils start working on the word web (see Figure 3 for an example constructed by Thijs). After a short while, the teacher asks for the pupils' attention.]

Teacher:

I want to come back to the sentences Lennart read to you. He has just said that the essence of imperialism is that one nation controls another. How can you control a nation?

Pupil 1:

By keeping the people in revolt, in order to prevent them from leaving; so, by keeping them as slaves.

[Obviously, this pupil has no clear concept of 'imperialism'. He even says something ('By keeping the people in revolt') that is actually contrary to the meaning of imperialism, because he wrongly uses the word 'revolt'. However, from his words can be concluded that he does have a vague, still unfocused idea of the concept of 'imperialism'. The teacher makes small corrections.]

Teacher:

To keep in revolt? Perhaps you have in mind: to oppress?

Pupil 1:

Yes, to oppress, to exert power over them.

Teacher:

How could someone have power over them?

Pupil 2:

By placing soldiers along the border.

[This pupil also has a vague notion about imperialism. This time, the teacher doesn't make corrections, but builds on the pupil's answer.]

Teacher:

Yes, by placing soldiers along the border.

Pupil 3:

Wage a war.

Teacher:

Wage a war. Yes, I think what you are considering is far from strange, because your first idea, of course, is something military. However, there are many other ways of controlling a nation. But, before you all start telling me what possible ways there are, I have something else for you.

[The teacher hands them a second assignment requiring the pupils to read a supporting text.]

Teacher:

I have chosen a text telling you how the Romans used to control the nations and regions conquered by them. First, read the text by yourselves, and then work in pairs in order to make a chart in which you put the examples of imperialism you found in the text. But first, have a look at the blackboard. There, I have already put the empty chart (see Figure 4). Also, you will notice the four kinds of themes you will find in the text. In the chart, I listed the themes on the left side. These are the Roman religion, judicial system, education, and architecture.

Pupil 4:

What is a judicial system?

[This question of one of the pupils gives the teacher an unplanned chance to try and elicit from the pupils any prior knowledge, however vague it might still be, on the concept 'judicial system'.]

Teacher:

Judicial system! Who can tell what 'judicial system' is all about? That, too, isn't an easy concept! Jasper?

Jasper:

That's what a judge does when starting a lawsuit. It is in order to maintain the law.

[Pupil Jasper mentions in this case his everyday concept of 'judicial system'. The teacher doesn't interrupt by reacting to the mistaken aspect of the answer, e.g., by saying something like 'That's only partly correct' or (more positively) 'That's a positive start of an answer', but he takes Jasper's answer to continue the discussion.]

Teacher:

Try to explain it by giving an example. When do we need to take someone to court?

Pupil 4:

When there is some kind of disagreement, for example, when there is a fight between two persons, who is guilty, and how the row started.

[The teacher does not aim at a complete definition of the concept judicial system. On the contrary, he feels satisfied that the pupils work with a prescientific notion of that particular concept without knowing its essence.]

Teacher:

Yes, you are right, when there is a row between two persons or two groups of persons, somehow a solution has to be found. In that case, justice has to be done. Thank you, Jasper, correctly answered.

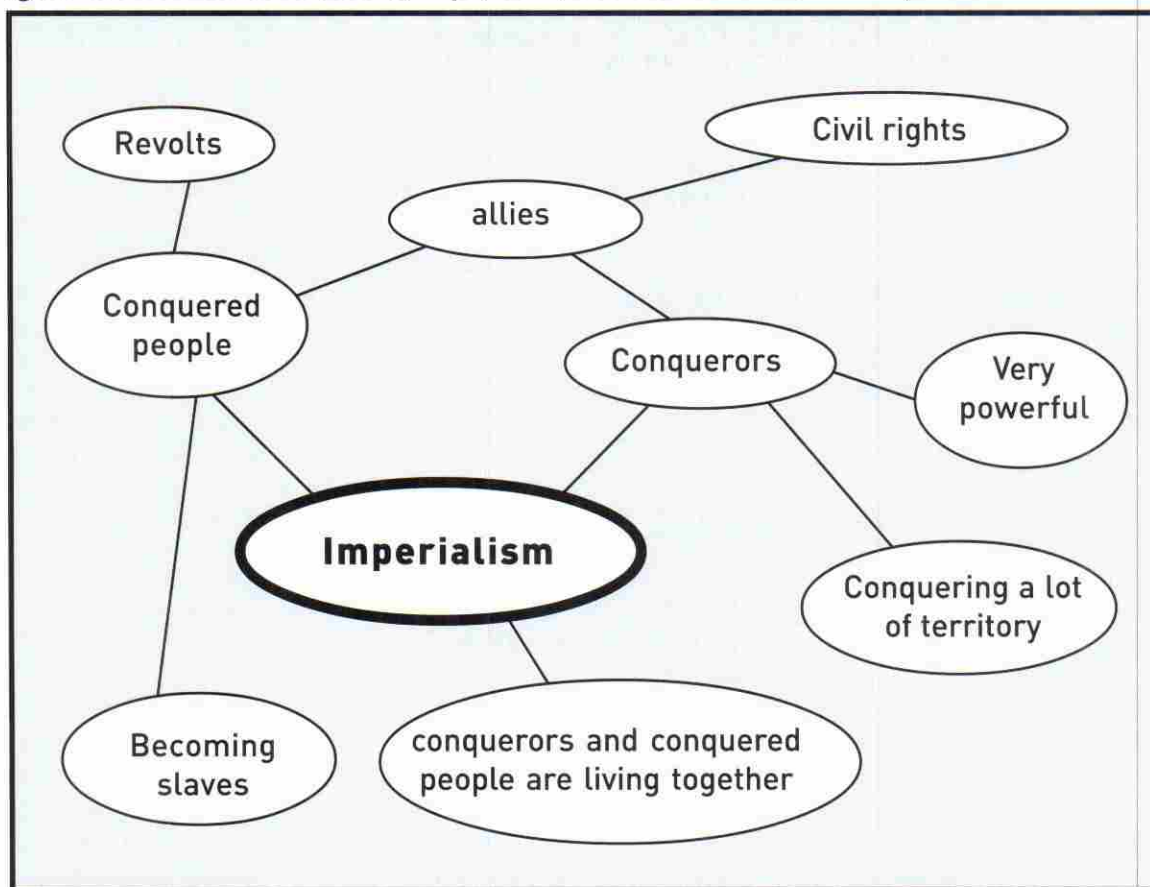
[After this clarification of the concept of a judicial system, the teacher proceeds with his enumeration of the categories of Rome's imperialist strategies to be used by the pupils to analyse the text.]

Teacher:

Besides religion and judicial system, there is also education and architecture. These are all ways in which the Romans tried to control a nation. Therefore, apart from military means, there are other means as well. That's called 'Romanising'.

Now, I will hand out the text. First, read the text in silence by yourselves. Then, in pairs, try to fill in the chart with the appropriate examples. In addition, when you have put this into your notebooks, try to imagine what the opposite of that particular example will be. Add that to the chart in your notebooks. Or, in other words, what do you consider to be *not* imperialist?

Figure 3: Word web, constructed by Thijs (Year 7) at the start of a lesson on imperialism



because it holds elections. They understand the notion that elections lead to the supremacy of the majority opinion ('the winner takes all'), because they often take votes about issues and proposals in their own classrooms. This practical notion might need to be enriched with a further basic democratic idea such as 'the majority takes care of the interests of the minorities, who never stand a chance to win elections'.

In secondary education, the level of thinking associated with such concepts as history, democracy and imperialism needs to be raised to a higher level. We achieve this by imposing on the pupils a series of activities and tasks that make them work with these concepts. This approach gives rise to the appearance of new concepts which have to be incorporated into the pupils' thinking.

This process of forming concepts usually requires the reconceptualization of an existing body of prior knowledge. Research indicates this is not an easy process, however. The pupils' prior knowledge is highly resistant to change and, without special arrangement, will remain unchanged even after deliberate teaching.⁶

Developmental teaching

One of the implications of our study is that, in secondary education, much more time needs to be spent on such basic concepts; otherwise pupils'

intuitive conceptions may remain intact. However, it takes a variety of learning activities to restructure the pupils' conceptions adequately. Teaching has to be enriched with learning activities that promote a new understanding of the pupils' own conceptions.⁷

This view accords with a sociocultural perspective on teaching and learning. By introducing a variety of activities, pupils are stimulated to become aware of an alternative way of thinking. This demands skilful teaching and discussion techniques on the part of the teachers, because they have to deal with the pupils' additional questions and answers. The teacher's role becomes more explicit and prominent in guiding the pupils' thinking processes. It could be said that this view combines a pupil-centred approach with direct teaching, at least as it has been put forward by Piotr Gal'perin.

According to Gal'perin, learning will be more effective if, from the very beginning of the teaching-learning process, the pupils are made aware of the different aspects of the learning task. In Gal'perin's view, this means presenting the new content as a meaningful whole from the very start of the teaching-learning process. He argues that this enhances the pupils' personal involvement in the learning process that follows. Presenting knowledge as a meaningful whole implies presenting it as some kind of 'tomorrow's knowledge'. First, pupils have to understand and accept the value of the to-be-acquired knowledge before the focus shifts to the actual appropriation and ability to use it. This could be seen as one of the practical consequences of

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Vygotsky's concept of 'developmental teaching', and its maxim that education 'is only useful when it moves ahead of development'.⁸

For Vygotsky, the pupil's development is structured and mediated by relationships with peers and adults. Psychological functions emerge from the pupils' social interactions with adults, peers and objects. These functions emerge in a social context and are gradually absorbed and transformed 'inwardly'. Vygotsky views social interaction as prior to individual functioning, or, as he puts it: 'It is through others that we develop into ourselves'.⁹

The 'zone of proximal development'

Vygotsky formulated this idea in his oft-quoted 'general genetic law of cultural development',¹⁰ stating that a psychological function appears twice: first on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. To put it in current terminology, psychological functions are 'socially distributed'. Traditionally, these functions (attention, memory, cognition) were treated as being properties of the individual mind. In our times, this conception has been totally changed: psychological functions are encapsulated and distributed in a community of learners. This turning away from a predominantly individualised to a contextualised and social approach to education has now entered the mainstream of educational psychology. In order to elaborate this social dimension of psychological functioning more concretely, Vygotsky developed his well-known notion of a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). He placed the interaction with adults and (more competent) peers at the very heart of this zone. It is in this very zone that teachers can lay their hands on the actual learning processes going on in the pupils' minds.

Piotr Gal'perin added to Vygotsky's new approach by exploring a new educational programme within a Vygotskian framework.¹¹ Gal'perin sees the acquisition of knowledge and skills from the point of view of the pupils' actions. He has lent momentum to Vygotsky's adage by developing a model for the first steps in instruction. Concrete pupil activities reveal the relevant and substantial aspects of the learning task, and provide the means for a systematic orientation towards it. Through such an approach, Gal'perin helps the pupils to retrieve and elaborate new information, and to experience the boundaries of currently held concepts.

For this purpose, Gal'perin developed his model of the formation of mental actions and concepts. It is a working model or blueprint outlining the teaching-learning process, and especially the interventions of the teacher in supporting and guiding students.

Helping trainee teachers to experiment with and discuss models for teaching concepts

Gal'perin's approach has provided the learning-psychological basis for our curriculum project on historical concepts. We wanted to build a practical, professional knowledge base for trainee teachers to use in their own classrooms. This knowledge base would help them to examine pupils' learning and to discuss their emerging classroom practice with each other and with other professionals. Discussing with our trainee teachers the implications of Gal'perin's sociocultural approach for their own lessons, we arrived at three innovative pillars that could be used for the teaching of historical concepts:

- the zone of proximal development
- the use of models
- cooperative learning

These three pillars integrate the basic sociocultural principles. They make the pupils familiar with an historical concept by elaborating its content at several levels. First, the concept has to be brought within the pupil's 'zone of proximal development'. Before working with the content and essence of a concept, there is the importance of orientation to it, of activating the pupil's prior knowledge concerning it. Additionally, we make extensive use of models in order to help pupils visualise the processes of thinking and reasoning. This helps to make tangible to the pupils the products of their thinking efforts. These results can be compared and discussed in cooperative learning sessions where individual learning is supported by dialogue. These ways of approaching classroom teaching have to be integrated in such a way that they form a suitable professional knowledge base for daily use within the classroom and for professional reference and discussion outside of it.

Thus, we have sought a careful interplay between the practical and theoretical components of our teacher-training course. We avoid being general and theoretical, preferring instead to present the theoretical themes through brief practical assignments in the trainee teachers' own classrooms. The results of these assignments are discussed during group meetings at the university. In reporting their practical experiences, the trainee teachers are expected to reflect on a pupil-centred approach to concept learning. We enter into discussions with trainee teachers about the teacher's role in pupil learning, and we give them guidelines as to how to teach concepts in today's classrooms. In secondary education, this involves structuring a lesson in such a way that the pupils feel themselves invited to think about and discuss the concepts to be learned. Instead of simply conveying to the pupils the definition

Figure 4: Blackboard chart constructed by the teacher during the course of a class discussion of pupils' ideas based on the handout text

Imperialism <i>examples:</i>	+	-
religion	worshipping Roman gods	worshipping their own gods
judicial system	people have to keep strictly to the Roman laws	judicial system of their own
education	pupils have to read Roman writers	passing on their own history and their own stories
architecture	Romans build their own buildings	they build their own buildings
working definition	A nation conquers the territory of another nation, and subsequently controls it using various means.	

of the concept being studied, the teacher prepares a series of assignments designed to induce the process of *thinking and working* with a concept.

The series of assignments

The lesson plan in Figure 1 gives an outline of the series of assignments. The pupils have to do the word web assignment on their own, at the start of the lesson. From the transcription of the videotaped lesson (Figure 2), we learn that this assignment is meant to give the pupil an orientation to the concept. After a short plenary discussion with the whole class, the teacher hands a text to the pupils to be used as a starting text for the next assignment: in pairs, they must think of the positive and negative aspects of several examples and themes of the concept 'imperialism'.

These assignments are aimed at stimulating a broad range of learning activities such as:

- activating prior knowledge;
- making a map of concepts (a word web or spider diagram) related to the concept being studied, and thus exploring the connection and range of concepts and their relationships (see Figure 3);
- thinking by themselves of positive and negative examples of the concept under discussion,
- putting these examples into a scheme or chart (see Figure 4); and
- exchanging and discussing the results with other pupils.

In terms of the sociocultural theory, all these assignments function as scaffolds for the pupils' understanding by mutual exchange, negotiation, and

co-construction of the concept's essence. The teacher's role is to prepare and organise the series of assignments, and to coach and guide the pupils' towards gradual grasping of the concept's content. The teacher is no longer the 'sage on the stage', but a valuable coach during the pupils' acquisition of knowledge. For example, Figure 4, produced by pupils and teacher together at the end of the video-taped lesson, shows pupils actively building and re-shaping their own meaning of the concept 'imperialism'.

The teacher's task is twofold. First, in the history lesson, the teacher stimulates the pupils to connect their existing knowledge (partly acquired outside of secondary education) with the historical concepts to be learned formally at school. Second, the teacher has to prevent an historical concept from remaining an empty shell for the pupil, something which is not experienced and understood, and can only be learned by rote. Experience shows that such undigested knowledge is of no use to pupils, and rapidly evaporates. Teachers must learn how to guide their pupils through sequences of assignments aimed at using everyday knowledge as a means really to absorb and 'own' historical concepts.

Such a pupil-centered approach is an explicit aspect of our teacher education courses. In experiencing these approaches at first hand, the trainee teachers become aware of the need to use and guide a variety of pupil activities. On the part of the trainee teachers, this demands an enquiring attitude towards their pupils. Secondary pupils are not normally accustomed, however, to such a pervasive teacher attitude requiring them to turn into productive co-constructors of historical knowledge. Moreover, these kinds of pupil activities sometimes differ from those used by history

*'It is through others that we develop into ourselves'.
Vygotsky*

The pupils feel invited to think about and discuss the concepts.

teachers in their practice schools. Therefore, during the university sessions, we discuss with them their lesson preparation schemes, focusing on facilitating pupil activities. For example, during such meetings our trainee teachers introduced for discussion the following questions, tasks or activities prepared for their forthcoming lessons:

- Could you give an example of a medieval town in Holland? How do you know it is medieval?
- Could you tell us a myth and also a legend? What distinction do you make between them?
- Please make a full sentence using the concept 'modernisation'.
- What is the opposite of an army of mercenaries? (to introduce the concept 'conscription').
- Please, tell me in your own words, what is meant by 'industrialisation'.
- Did any relatives of yours tell you about the resistance to the German occupation during the Second World War?

Trainee teachers' responsiveness

As teacher educators, we discuss with the whole group of trainee teachers what kinds of pupil response might be expected from these teaching approaches, and how to react and continue. Next, we look for additional possibilities in order to make the assignments and their formulations even more pupil-centred, for instance, by having the pupils draw up concept maps, make schemes and charts, look for patterns and work collaboratively. Because all of the trainee teachers bring in their plans, objectives and expectations for a particular lesson, we have ample material for discussion. Often, we do a simulation, playing out a lesson part: the group plays the roles of that specific year, and one of them presents his lesson.

Thus these trainee teachers become well-prepared to give that lesson *in vivo*. We ask them to report the results of the actual teaching of the lesson on the discussion pages of our electronic learning environment (we use WebCT). In reporting their practical experiences, they are expected to reflect in such a way that their colleagues can react from their own individual experiences.

In their lessons, trainee teachers often discover that their pupils have only a very limited or partial idea of the concepts they have to learn. Moreover, in acting on these concepts, pupils start from their own individual levels. This results in unexpected pupil answers and additional questions, which in turn demand a kind of not-yet-acquired responsiveness on the part of the trainee teachers. Often, this leads to a trainee teacher's expression of dissatisfaction with the teaching method and with the results of a lesson. As teacher educators, we should be very attentive to such

signals, making them educationally productive in our courses. If such feelings do not crop up after that particular lesson, they soon do so after the assessments using paper and pencil tests. It is then that it comes to light that the pupils do not understand the lesson content, and that a lot of additional teacher's work is still to be done. It is then that the trainee teacher understands that 'telling isn't teaching'. Gradually, along these lines, we teach the trainee teachers to determine the level of the concepts they want their pupils to attain in a single lesson or lesson period, and to act accordingly.

The process by which a pupil will gradually make meaning out of a concept is also affected by the sheer complexity and mutability of any concept we call 'historical'. It is a part of historical consciousness that these concepts are never definitively definable. This turns history into a 'discussion without an end'. Historians are continuously reinterpreting the past and it is that leads to the shifting content of history education. Each generation newly writes its own history, and constructs its historical images differently. As part of their historical consciousness, pupils have to become aware of this aspect of historical knowledge. It is our conviction that such an educational objective can only be achieved by a pupil-centred approach. To get at the historical concepts, history teaching has to rely largely on the pupils' own construction abilities. This means that the history teacher must create a 'construction zone' to give the pupils ample opportunities to come to grips (under the teacher's guidance) with their own historical concepts. This is more easily said than done; it asks for skilful and subtle teaching activities, and it should be practiced quite systematically. Piotr Gal'perin has given us the tools to orchestrate these kinds of classroom practices, in which the pupils' learning activities receive central place.

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