

Exploring identity and citizenship through an academic exchange

History Educators' International Research Network Conference
University of Marmara, Istanbul
10 – 12 September 2007

Gordon Roberts
Department of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education
University of Oulu, Finland

Rob Siebörger
School of Education
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

The authors met briefly when Rob Siebörger was invited to spend a week in Oulu, Finland, at the start of a North-South academic exchange agreement between their universities. This visit resulted in Gordon Roberts being invited to Cape Town and attending Heirnet 2006 during his stay. Rob subsequently returned to spend two weeks at Oulu in March 2007.

The paper is an initial attempt to evaluate the benefits of such an exchange between two history educators by means of personal reflection. Issues of identity and citizenship play an important part in the work of both authors and they each routinely use reflection as a means of stimulating professional growth amongst their students.

The differences in the context and nature of their work are, however, as great as the similarities. The paper aims to highlight both, and to suggest what the “lessons learned” for the educators and for history education might be.

Introduction

Issues of identity and citizenship loom large in the teaching of history in most contexts. They are usually considered from the position of the pupils or students being taught. We wish to reflect on them from the point of view of the academic history educator and to ask how an academic exchange contributes to an enhanced understanding of them in our thinking and teaching. The paper is written as a dialogue between us.

We begin by personal reflections on the nature and value of the exchange, written independently of each other

Rob:

I was a little suspicious of the manner in which I first introduced to Gordon. The University of Cape Town (UCT) had recently signed an agreement to become one of four Southern African institutions in a North-South academic exchange with the University of Oulu, and the Oulu leader of the initiative was in Cape Town on a “look and see” visit to our School of Education. She very emphatically said after a few days, “Gordon Roberts must come here. He will fit in well.” So the match was arranged.

I then went on a return visit to Oulu in April 2005, where I met Gordon briefly and sat in on one of his classes. Though it was an English class, I could immediately see what had motivated the

matchmaker. There were clear similarities in context and teaching interests. The classes of prospective primary teachers were much the same size, with similar social backgrounds and similar interests in teaching. Both of us were using essentially British approaches and materials (it seemed to me) in contexts that weren't British, and we shared common attitudes towards children's literature and what we thought student teachers should experience on their courses. Both of us, too, did not have colleagues in our home departments with the same history education interests.

Gordon's visit to Cape Town was timed, on my part to coincide with the 2006 Heirnet [History Educators' International Research Network] conference, which I convened at our university. I had thought it would add interest to his visit, and it seemed a good time for me to host him in Cape Town, as it would provide opportunities for taking part in activities and visiting places that might not otherwise be possible. It meant, however, that my early interaction with Gordon was as a conference attendee, rather than an academic visitor. The time after the conference, however, provided many opportunities for informal discussions, and it became clear that we shared pedagogical ideas and interests. This was confirmed during joint visits to local schools to supervise my students in teaching practice. The foundation was laid for a professional friendship.

The friendship was cemented during my return visit to Oulu in March this year. It began with four days in northern Lapland with Gordon and his family on a ski holiday, during which Gordon attempted to teach me cross country skiing – something which led to endless, sometimes painful on my part, discursions on teaching and learning new skills. Thus, the opportunity to develop our collegiality over the following two weeks of the formal part of the exchange.

Gordon invited me to teach his history ed. class during my visit. Part of the brief he gave me follows:

The students with whom I work are mainly Finnish, though a number of them have usually lived abroad, perhaps have even been educated abroad. There are always some non-Finns in the group too. The group size is 20-25. All have gone through a selection process which is quite competitive, and have been selected on to a programme that offers a five year Master of Education in primary teaching. The special emphasis of the programme is international education. During the second year of study, the students do a number of short courses on the methodology of all the subjects taught in the primary curriculum; this includes ten 90min sessions on history teaching.

The response of his students to my teaching was a little reserved at the beginning, and I could empathise with what I think is a fairly universal scepticism on the part of busy students when having to make up their minds about whether a lecture by a visiting lecturer is something that needs to be engaged with seriously. But that didn't last long, and they became curious, then interested in how they could adapt my ideas about a rationale for history teaching, using pictures, and developing and playing games and simulations. Gordon and I had discussed these sessions beforehand and made sure that they complimented his course content.

I'd often been envious of UCT colleagues who taught courses as visiting lecturers and this was the first time for me. The teaching sessions confirmed that the methods and ideas I used with my students could be transported successfully to as contrasting a location as Oulu. The students (I think) had the opposite experience, that someone from the other side of the world could teach them something about teaching a subject as locally and nationally bound as history very often is in the primary school. I'd chosen South Africa and Cape Town as content focus of the sessions and I felt good that I'd had the opportunity to explain some of the city's past, and had given the students the

opportunity to ask questions about and interact with aspects of it that they would not have known well – the early settlement, indigenous South Africans and slave emigrants, and frontier land issues. We didn't set out to research this (as it wasn't the purpose), so the students' responses weren't formally tested. But it did appear to me that it was far better for the students to learn about South African issues from a South African, and to experience issues of identity and citizenship from contexts that were both fully familiar to the presenter (thus providing a firm knowledge base), and sufficiently different from those they were accustomed to discussing to enable a fresh consideration for them. The students confirmed this in their end of course evaluation.

Gordon:

When Rauni, the North-South Programme co-ordinator, returned from Cape Town and told me that I, rather than she, should go there next time, I took it with a pinch of salt. What could I achieve or offer by flying in and out of Cape Town and talking about something/ anything that I might imagine I had some expertise on? She then mentioned Rob Siebörger, who was coming to Oulu, as someone with whom she was sure I could develop a working relationship. When Rob did come to visit the department, there was no suggestion that I would host him, nor that I would 'use' him in my courses. At the time of Rob's first visit, there was a lot going on both at work and at home, so I did not even have time to be sociable. However, a day came when I arrived in one of my literature seminars to find Rob sitting there. In our department, to have a complete stranger sitting in a seminar room joining a group that is mid-course is nothing special, but I always am slightly concerned about what they will make of my relationship with the students, and how they will make sense of where I have been with the course, and where I am going. The lasting impression that I got from this first encounter with Rob was a pleasant surprise. He was able to tune into the situation rapidly, both in terms of the social dimension and the substance of the seminar. He seemed to understand exactly what I was doing. Maybe we were on the same wavelength, maybe Rauni had got it right.

Going to UCT was a much easier step to take, because I knew that Rob would understand that I felt uncomfortable about the whole concept of me, the expert, going to UCT to pass on my wisdom to the natives before flying out again. The Heirnet conference in Cape Town was a well timed opportunity for me to tune in to Rob and his work. But since I stayed on, I was able to see more – the schools, Rob's students on teaching practice, the way he handled the students, his working circumstances etc. I came away from Cape Town with a deeper understanding of UCT, South Africa, and Rob's agenda. I also felt as though I was now a stakeholder in the North-South Programme. I wanted to be involved in choosing the Oulu student who would go to Cape Town, I knew what the experience could bring to my History Ed, course, and I knew that Rob really had something to offer. I also knew that Rob was modest enough to perhaps need encouragement and convincing of this.

The North-South Programme had by now made it possible for me to design my history teaching methods course to include an 8 hour (4 x 2) slot from Rob, and allowed me an opportunity to broaden my own horizons on history teaching through the experience and discussions that I had in South Africa.

At this stage, none of the students have opted to study history as a minor (they all have Education as their Major and can opt to do two minors later); they are all doing it because it is compulsory. In other words, they have made an active choice to be primary teachers, and are usually very talented and intelligent, but history is a must for them. It should be added that I convene a course on European history with the same students; the theme is nations and states, and we look closely at the history of stateless nations and nation- states that have recently acquire that status.

Usually the history methodology course begins with a ‘truth session’, in which we examine attitudes to history as a school subject, and try to establish the reasons for the attitudes.

The students are ‘good students’ – they have done well at school, done well in exams, they have been well behaved, have not challenged the system and are ‘good Finns’. They are very conscious of the Finnish identity, but have not reflected on how this identity has been built. Finland won its independence 90 years ago, and, in connection with the Second World War, had a severe struggle to preserve that independence. Other Baltic and Central and Eastern European states were ‘less fortunate’. Most of the students have grandparents who were involved in the struggle, and they have been taught both in the home and at school to show respect and gratitude to those who gave up so much to preserve the independence of the nation that now offers them so much opportunity. Finnish independence is revered and respected, and certainly not taken for granted. Independence Day is a restrained, in many ways a solemn occasion. This background gives plenty of food for thought every time that I begin to get the students to reflect on what history is, why it is taught, what is taught, how it is used and how it is abused.

Reflection on the above issues is followed by an examination of the school curricula, and what the national education board recommends. Since the students are on a programme with special emphasis on international education, it is especially interesting to look at what is happening with curricula in other countries, what the roles of national boards are, what the contents of the curriculum are.

The North-South Programme has offered an added context and dimension to the considerations on the history teaching scenario, culture, identity, citizenship, curriculum content etc. Comparative education has become a ‘hands-on’ affair for Rob, myself and the students, rather than a passive descriptive exercise. Knowing that I would be sharing the History Teaching Methodology course with a South African counterpart, new possibilities in my own classroom opened up. When the course began, I was able to inform the students that Rob would be coming to work with them too, and they were made aware of where he works. Because of work that the students did with me in their first-year studies, they did in fact know quite a lot about South Africa, so it was not unreasonable of me to ask the students to indulge in a certain amount of speculation about how conversations about history and history teaching led by Rob in South Africa might differ or be similar to our own discussions. Having spent time with Rob in Cape Town meant that I was able to comment on the speculation of the students. The fact that Rob was coming to their classroom gave added relevance to the speculation. Dealing with these subjects in a South African context certainly helped the students to come to terms with some of the revelations about what history teaching has achieved in terms of their own identity building, and made it easier for them to see that history is selectively used and can be abused.

Although we spent time usefully reflecting, beyond the national, on why we learn about history, and on what or whose history we learn, a methodology course must be about how we learn history. Most Finnish students seem to view the school subject of history as being about acts and facts (this accounts for most of the negative attitudes towards history as a school subject), so much of my work focuses on developing the students awareness of those learning skills that can be developed in the history class, and on exploring approaches to history. This seems to be a pre-occupation that I share with Rob, and this must reflect a tendency in both countries for history teaching to have been acts and facts oriented. We are both trying to redress the balance. If we use an analogy of a cook book, it would seem that the cooking methods that Rob is using in South Africa, and I am using in Finland are the same; we simply use different ingredients. Nowadays, however, it is easier to import and export the ingredients. When we are thinking of international education, to be able to use imported ingredients in a history teaching methodology course is rather exciting, but it does not

need to be something exclusive to international education, and can be part of citizenship education. One approach to history teaching is the story-telling approach. But Rob being able to show the students a video of a South African story-teller functioning in the true African oral tradition gives a new inspiring slant on storytelling in the history classroom. Similarly, the use of pictures to stimulate thought and discussion in the history classroom is common, but Rob's use of 'imported' pictures proved to be particularly stimulating for the teacher education students here in Finland. Much of what is taught in the history lesson in Finland is inevitably from a rather Eurocentric perspective, so imported ingredients can be very useful in helping the learner to view things differently. Certainly the student teachers clearly enjoyed being obliged to see things from a non-European point of view, and the inevitability of the Eurocentric presentation was thrown into question.

The history teaching course that Rob and I facilitated together included sessions where the students taught each other using different approaches and picking on different topics mentioned in the Finnish national recommendations for a history teaching curriculum. The feedback that Rob gave would have been given by me if I had been able to speak first. Had Rob seen his own students fall into similar traps? Did the Finnish students prove to be more innovative than the South African students or less so?

Responses to selected issues raised by the other

We develop our reflection here by each commenting on aspects of the other's account.

Rob on Gordon's teaching a European history course to the same students taking his history education course:

I began my career as an history educator teaching in a college of education in the late 1970s and early 80s. For the first few years I conformed to the college's timetable, namely that I had about two hours a week for teach the students primary school history "content" and three-quarters of hour for "method". By the time I left the college I'd abandoned this pattern completely and integrated all my content and method teaching and assessment. To me this made complete sense. Students studied the past, but in studying it they were always kept alert to the application of it in the classroom. But for the last twenty years at UCT I've seldom had the opportunity to teach any thing else than history education (method).

Talking to Gordon and seeing his interaction with his students brought this all back to me, and made me realise how sterile some of my history education teaching had become. It is so easy to concentrate on activities to introduce students to, which drawn from a wide variety of historical contents, chosen usually because I knew there was an activity that 'worked' with this content. I typically cover issues of identity and human rights through class discussions, group activities and written work, but it's not done within the context of any particular historical content [beyond the Holocaust, as the Cape Town Holocaust Centre always has a part in their course]. What I saw at Oulu was that Gordon and his students constantly referred to their nations and states course when looking for illustrations in history education discussions. Their relationship was different, too. Students respected him for his ability to interpret European history, not only because he was good with classroom recipes. Gordon's history method students were also in a much stronger position to engage with identity than mine because of the reading that they had done in the other course. I clearly need to think about how I can incorporate opportunities for studying history in my course to feed into the 'method' I currently teach.

Gordon on Rob's observation about being alone in our home departments:

It really is important to bounce ideas off colleagues. Because our students in Oulu are being educated to function as teachers in an international context, and the theme throughout the whole degree programme is a pluralistic approach, it really is logical to look beyond national and European borders when seeking a colleague to bounce ideas off, and even share courses with.

No longer alone, it became easier to demonstrate to our students of teacher education that history have an inclusive approach to all disciplines in the school, so the focus of the 'facts' in history teaching has to go beyond the nation level. I was happy that the students were put into a situation whereby they were able to reflect on values and skills related to history teaching, and also notice that a pluralistic content is possible. An international answer (as opposed to a national answer) to the 'being alone' problem was a useful answer for the students.

Gordon on Rob's concern about student attitudes to visiting lecturers:

I think this is well founded concern. The students that Rob met have a large part of their studies in English. This means that as a group they seem almost seem to have a several functions, one function being they are used as a 'rent-a-crowd', whenever a visiting lecturer comes. EU exchange programmes have got to a point that lecturers invite themselves to the department, and we have to imagine who might be their audience. Too often the group that Rob met are at the receiving end of visitors, and they do wonder just why they are being subjected to this visitor.

I really made an effort to minimize on the wonderment, and this can be seen from the way I describe the structure of the course above. I consciously fitted Rob into the big picture, and tried to make the students aware of the big picture. The initial feeling that the students were 'a little reserved' was indeed a natural short term reserve, and the briefing that both Rob and the students were given is an essential part of a meaningful teacher exchange. We did have real exchange on the student-teacher level – there was two-way give and take.

Rob on Gordon's students' responses to the need to value Finnish independence, and its influence on their identity:

Gordon's reflection on this aspect (which I'd become aware of largely through visits to museums and historical sites in Finland) strikes an immediate chord. Here is something that our students potentially share in common – a re-construction of national identity. What's abundantly apparent to an outsider in Finland is the rich "independence dividend" that has been enjoyed by all. The country has developed economically so rapidly since World War 2, that it must be difficult for his students to comprehend what it must have been like for their grandparents. This is not the case for the majority of South Africans, many of whom have little to show for thirteen years of democracy, and certainly no economic reason to commemorate it. It raises a question for me about the differences between teaching about identity and citizenship in a wealthy context and a poor one.

My students are mainly privileged, but they also teach in deprived contexts. In research conducted in the schools they taught in 2004, which I presented to the first Heirnet conference (Siebörger 2005), I argued that there was a strong identification of Grade 9 pupils with South Africa. What that research did not attempt to establish was what factors influenced their identity as South Africans. Unquestionably they would be far more complex than those of Gordon's students, comprising a mix ethnicity, language, religion, class/economic status and sport. My students are typically not secure in their own identity in relation to South Africa, and find it difficult, if not impossible, to respond to the wide variety of identities presented to them in school classrooms.

The future of the exchange relationship

This conference presented us with a further opportunity to develop our collaboration. Writing these reflections and preparing for the presentation of them at the conference has been useful to us. We trust they will also be informative to the North-South programme as a whole.

National identities and European identity are high on the both the history and citizenship curriculum agendas. The national identity agenda is served by myths related to ethnocentricity and homogeneity, usually promoted by the text books. Euro-centricity is also a danger. The visit by Rob to Oulu obliged the students to see 'doing' history from a different perspective: it was not an 'us' and 'them' approach, but an 'us' and 'us' approach, a shared humanity approach; this is essential in international education. Attention was paid to multi-ethnicity and heterogeneity, which may well lend itself to multi-level citizenship construction.

Apart from preserving what has been achieved, the next step in the development of the exchange has to be related to research; research in which we carry out comparative studies with a focus on curricula and issues of citizenship, in history education and teacher education. The associated North-South student exchange could be on the Master's level, with joint supervision from Oulu and UCT.

Siebörger, Rob (2005) 'What Do They Make of Ten Years of Democracy?' Researching the Identity and Skills of Grade 9 History Pupils in Cape Town Schools.' *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*. Vol. 5, no 1, 54-61.