A curriculum of frame-of-reference historical knowledge
The idea and the practical problems

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Final examination

What do you know about the English cotton industry in 1850?

Nothing.

In that case I cannot vouch for your future!

Examen final

Que sais-tu de l’industrie cottonière anglaise en 1850?

Rien.

Dans ce cas je ne peux pas garantir ton avenir!

Cartoon appearing on front page of Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in 2004.
What explains the publishing of this cartoon?

History examinations are front page news.

There is discontent about the subject matter that has to be studied for the final examinations.

The contents of the programme are apparently regarded as pointless.

Causes:
- Seemingly arbitrarily selected topics have to be studied in relative detail.
- Reproduction of detailed knowledge of these topics plays an important role.
Backgrounds about Dutch education

Freedom of education is a constitutional right in the Netherlands.

Therefore the government’s influence on the curriculum is limited.

Influence is mainly being exerted through directives for the final examinations.

These directives are very determinative for teachers’ behavior.

*Therefore we shall concentrate on the developments around the final examinations.*
Examination practice 1995 - 2014

The examination programme:

Part 1: Historical information skills (evidence, facts, accounts), historical reasoning skills (continuity & change, causation, perspective taking, imagination, interpretation), skills for presentation of historical information.

Part 2: Eleven broadly described domains of content knowledge
- Livelihood and social networks
- Households and upbringing
- Political system and political culture in the Netherlands
- Totalitarian systems and states
- State and nation building
- International relations and warfare
- 'Non-Western' societies
- Contacts between 'non-Western' and Western societies
- Ancient cultures and Western society
- Folk culture: the design of daily life
- Religion and philosophies of life
Examination practice 1995 - 2014

The examination practice:

Part 1 barely played a role in the tasks and questions that students have to answer. Cause: lack of expertise among teachers as well as the authors of examinations.

Part 2 was examined by selecting two out of the eleven domains and prescribing a certain specified detailed topic, including facts and details to be remembered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Totalitarian systems and states</td>
<td>A system under tension: The Soviet Union of Stalin and of Brezhnev 1928-1941; 1964-1982</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Political system and political culture in the Netherlands</td>
<td>The Dutch and their authorities 1950-1990: pillarization, polarization and regained consensus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Livelihood and social networks</td>
<td>The magnifying glass on Lancashire: cotton and society 1750-1850.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>International relations and warfare</td>
<td>Decolonization and Cold War in Vietnam.</td>
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</table>
The rise of criticism: nineteen nineties

The examination practice suggested
- that students did not acquire survey knowledge of any general significance
- that a haphazard choice of alternating topics dominated the examination programme
- that history education therefore did not serve the needs of society

Politicians intervened
- almost unanimously (no party distinctions)
- stressing the need for more generally ‘usable survey knowledge’
- ‘students should know that Napoleon came earlier than Hitler’
The first governmental answer to criticism (1998)

1998 The secretary of state for education appointed a ‘Committee for History Education’.

Members were professors of history and some stakeholders at a distance from the world of history education (specialists in history education were believed to ‘defend their own position’).

Task: find out what society expects from history education at school.

Report: *The past in the future*

‘Virtually all interviewees turned out to attach most value to the transfer of historical facts and insights into a chronological framework; learning skills, while useful, was considered secondary. On this point, the Committee has found a certain estrangement between what is considered to be desirable in a broad social circle, and the current practice in history teaching’ (p. 35).
The first governmental answer to criticism (1998)

Report: The past in the future

- a ‘new balance between knowledge, insight and skills’.
- an identical minimum package of historical overview knowledge and skills (‘canon’) for all students in primary education and junior secondary education.
- limit the subject matter for senior secondary education to the period from the pre-industrial Europe to the present.
- delineating the substance within that period to a limited number of diachronic thematic domains (p. 36).

More general survey knowledge, less skills, no more arbitrarily selected topics.

The word ‘canon’ was used, but no mention of a ‘national canon’.
The second step (2000)

2000 The secretary of state for education appointed a follow up committee: ‘Committee for History and Social Sciences’ (CHSS).

Presided by an Amsterdam professor of history, historians and history educators were members.

Task: describe a concrete curriculum based on the advice of the previous committee.

*General expectation in media: this committee will describe a ‘canon of factual knowledge’, consisting of concrete historical facts, dates, persons, etcetera.*

For example: an inquiry among the readers of the history teacher’s journal into which historical facts and persons they thought would have to be listed.
The second step (2000)

Discussion among members of CHSS:

*What is the function of the intended survey historical knowledge?*

Answers:
Enhance *historical consciousness* among students.
Help them to *orientate in time*.

What is historical consciousness?

Jeismann’s (1979) definition: ‘More than mere knowledge of or pure interest in history, historical consciousness embraces the connection between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and future perspectives’ (p. 42, my translation).
Some backgrounds on orientation in time

(William Friedman, 1990; 1993; 2005)
Some backgrounds on orientation in time

‘islands of time’

‘The sense of an absolute chronology in our lives is an illusion, a thin veneer on the more basic substance of coincidence, locations in recurrent patterns, and independent sequences of meaningfully related events’ (1993, p. 61-62).

It is a ‘chronological illusion’ to think that people imagine time naturally like ‘an abstract, uniform, measurable dimension that stretches indefinitely into the past and the future’ (1990, p. 103).
A pattern of eras each symbolically represented with a picture and a name.
The frame of reference proposed by the CHSS

- Associative names.
- Pictograms.
- No dates, events, national heroes.
- Every era only characterized with some generally formulated features.
- A framework meant as an instrument, not as an aim in itself.
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<td>48 The 'sixties'</td>
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<td>49 Pluriform societies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Confirmed by research (2006)

Percentages of students mentioning correct associations, persons or events, when confronted with the names of eras.

(Van Straaten, 2006)
Confirmed by research (2012)

*Images of time* (Wilschut, 2012):

Students orientate in time using associative eras rather than using dates and numbered centuries.

*That’s in the Time of the Romans!* (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2012):

Outcomes support the idea that a rich associative network of historical knowledge organized around key historical concepts and knowledge of landmarks helps students anchor and calibrate timelines for effective contextualization (p. 113).
Key Concepts

- Spread of Christianity
- Rise of Islam
- Feudalism
- Manors and Serfs

Landmarks

- 496: Baptism of Clovis
- 622: Muhammad conquers Medina
- 911: Rollo the Viking pledges fealty to Charles III
- 771: Charlemagne publishes *Capitulare de Villis*

Associative Network

‘Monks and Knights’
Advice on final examinations

Abolish prescribed annually changing topics with detailed knowledge to be memorized.

Instead: test students on their competence *in doing history*:
- Skills and modes of thought in historical reasoning.
- The use of an orientational framework of outline knowledge.

Shape of the final examination:
- One or two ‘issues in history’ (not previously studied), documented with background texts and source material.
- The assignment to students to write an essay in which they take a position based on historically sound ways of thinking.

Example issues:
1 Should the ‘Elgin Marbles’ in the British Museum be sent to Athens to be near their place of origin? (Antiquity, Ottoman Empire, Enlightenment, Modern nationalism).
2 Should the statue of Dutch colonizer Jan Pieterszoon Coen, founder of the city of Jakarta, be removed? (Colonial exploitation, Entrepreneurship, Nationalism, etc.)
The second step (2000)


Widely misunderstood as ‘the canon of names and dates’.

Idea of essay-testing on relevant historical ‘issues’ immediately rejected by national assessment institute CITO.


Era curriculum introduced in senior secondary education in 2007, but final examinations postponed until after an experimental test period.
Political developments in the meantime


2005 Advice of Education Council (The State of the Educational Netherlands)

'Respect for others may be enhanced if we know who we are and what history we have. Knowledge about one's own identity strengthens the understanding for others. In addition to imparting knowledge about their own past ('the story of the Netherlands'), education can help young people to come up with a modern interpretation of the concept of 'citizenship'. A canon for education makes an important contribution to this’ (page 13).

A comparatively swift political reaction: a Committee for the National Canon of the Netherlands.
Political developments in the meantime

Committee composed of few historians, presided by a professor of Dutch medieval literature, no specialists in history education, no members of the previous CHSS.

‘The canon’ was produced with a surprising speed.

2006: Fifty items ‘that every Dutch person should know’, exclusively from national history. Names, events, phenomena to be memorized.

No correspondence whatsoever to the ten eras and their characteristic features.

The canon was generally applauded in politics and society. This was an idea that everyone could understand, especially those who lacked any form of expertise in history education.

For example:
10 out of 50 items for era 6 (the Dutch Golden Age);
11 out of 50 for era 10 (the Netherlands since World War II).
Political developments in the meantime

Politicians had probably forgotten that there were rules for the curriculum based on ten eras that did not correspond (neither principally no practically) to the idea of a national canon.

The result in the law was a typical Dutch compromise: The items of the canon of the Netherlands serve as a source of inspiration for the treatment of the eras (Law of April 29th, 2009).

Only applicable in primary and junior secondary education.

No consequences for the final examinations.

Continued discussion about a ‘museum of the national past’. Also resulting in a compromise: One ‘Canon Room’ in the existing Open Air Museum (folk culture of the Netherlands) in Arnhem. Opened September 2017.

Surprisingly enough based on the ten eras!
Back to the final examinations

Experiments with new style examinations in the period 2006-2010.

No essay assignments (banned by CITO), but examination questions appearing as much as possible like the existing ones.

The only difference:

*No two topics to be memorized in detail, but outline knowledge and historical skills to be applied to examples given at the examination.*
Experiments with new style final examinations

Example of a new style question:

In 1792 the Marquis De Condorcet wrote: ‘We must assume that the progress of reason will keep pace with the progress of arts and sciences. That, for instance, the progress of medicine will eventually result into the annihilation of all contagious and transferable diseases and also of diseases which are the consequence of climate, nutrition and the burdens of daily labour. Is it therefore strange to suppose that the improvability of the fate of man knows no limits?’

The views of the Marquis De Condorcet are an example of a new way of thinking in the eighteenth century.

Name a characteristic of this new way of thinking and explain how this is manifest in the views of the Marquis.
(CITO, experimental examination, intermediate level, 2006, question 16).
Experiments with new style final examinations

Evaluations of experiments by quantitative and qualitative methods.

Some examples of quantitative data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Exp. group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This examination allowed me to show my historical knowledge</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This examination allowed me to show my historical understanding</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This examination allowed me to show my historical skills</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will probably forget soon what I have studied for this examination</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have acquired a good survey of historical knowledge</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can contextualize events and phenomena in the correct historical context</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learnt things that are applicable elsewhere (outside history)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learnt things that are useful for further study</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learnt things that everybody should know</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Averages on scales from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Ca 700 participants in each group.
Experiments with new style final examinations

Evaluations of experiments by quantitative and qualitative methods.

Some examples of qualitative data.

A teacher’s remark:

‘I would deplore a return to the annual themes. Because with this program, one is really dealing with history. Otherwise one only has two topics which are just singled out from history and which have no relationship between them whatsoever.’
Experiments with new style final examinations

Evaluations of experiments by quantitative and qualitative methods.

Some examples of qualitative data.

Students’ remarks:

‘With this examination, one really had to think. For instance there was one question about the Enlightenment and those articles from America. The question was to name the Enlightenment ideas and relate them to the texts. One had to think really deeply for that.’

‘By this method I have acquired a clear image of history, and if for instance you have only studied the Cold War or the Netherlands East Indies, then you are really missing something. Sometimes, when I am watching the news, I think: hey, this is like something that happened in that time too. So you can explain things historically’.
Experiments with new style final examinations

In spite of the generally positive results of the experiments:

*Fierce resistance to the new examination from*

(a) CITO (the national assessment institute).
(b) The Dutch Organization of History teachers.

(a:) Fear of not being able to produce enough valid questions with one undisputable ‘correct’ answer without further specification of subject matter.

(b:) Insecurity of ‘what to teach’ if there were no further specifications of subject matter to be memorized. The overwhelming tradition (in spite of all discussions about ‘new style history teaching’ since the 1970s) is still:

*Testing students on their ability to reproduce certain specified historical factual knowledge which is memorized.*
The examinations since 2015

Framework knowledge of ten eras still applicable.

Most of the examination however devoted to ‘historical contexts’ with detailed knowledge to be memorized (in theory: ‘the concrete context to which the features of eras are applied’).

Contexts 2015-2021
- The Dutch Republic 1515-1648.
- Enlightenment and Revolutions 1650-1848.
- Germany 1871-1945.

Contexts as of 2022
- Cities and citizens in the Low Countries 1050-1700.
- China from Empire to Capitalism 1842-2001

Instead of topics changing every two years, we now have topics changing every five years. The topics are a bit less ‘exotic’ and usually cover longer periods of time.

But memorizing facts to be reproduced is still core business!
Examination practice

Example of a question from the final examination of 2018:

Source 2
Jan Huygen van Linschoten is a Dutch navigator who sailed in Portuguese service. Through his Portuguese contacts, he collected information about the sea route to China and Japan. In 1596 he publishes a book about this that attracts a great deal of interest and is reprinted many times in the Dutch Republic. He writes about Korea:

‘Immediately above Japan, around the 34th and 35th latitude and not far from the Chinese coast, there is another a large island, namely the peninsula of Korea. We do not yet have reliable reports regarding its size and its people, nor about the products that can be found there.’

Use source 2
This source is suitable as an illustration for two characteristic aspects of early modern times. Please explain this by:
- mentioning the characteristic aspect of the sixteenth century where this source fits, and
- explaining which characteristic aspect of the seventeenth century is recognizable in the source.
Examination practice

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Use source 2

This source is suitable as an illustration for two characteristic aspects of early modern times. Please explain this by:
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- explaining which characteristic aspect of the seventeenth century is recognizable in the source.

Which characteristics of the sixteenth century do I remember?
1 Renaissance
2 Revival of Antiquity
3 Discoveries overseas
4 Reformation
5 Dutch Revolt
(Reproduction of knowledge)

Which characteristics of the seventeenth century do I remember?
1 Absolutism
2 The Dutch Golden Age
3 Worldwide trade and early capitalism
4 Scientific revolution
(Reproduction of knowledge)
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Please explain this by:
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Would it not have been more efficient to simply ask this:

1 What were the characteristic features of the sixteenth century?
2 What were the characteristic features of the seventeenth century?
3 Which of these could be related to a trip to Asia of a Dutch navigator in those periods?

But what is the meaning of such knowledge? What can you do with it?
Recent developments: ‘relevant history education’

History as a subject concentrating on reproduction of arbitrarily selected knowledge
- is not appreciated by students.
- Is not recognized as a subject serving important societal needs.

Plans for curriculum renewal threaten the existence of a separate subject ‘history’ and target at introducing integrated social studies.

Scholars in history education strive for ‘relevant history teaching’ connecting past, present and future.
Strategies for relevant history teaching

I Historical analogies

- The Roman Empire and the European Union:

*Did the Roman Empire collapse because of the pressure of immigrants, or did the Empire flourish through the influx of new people? Or both?*

- Roman policy of granting citizenship.
- Roman use of ‘allies’ (socii) for border defense.
- Greek influence affecting Roman ‘identity’.

How does this knowledge affect your views on the European Union today? What are important differences? What are parallels?
Strategies for relevant history teaching

II Connect past, present and future

- Energy transitions:

During the Industrial Revolution, the world switched from renewable energy sources (wind, sun, human and animal muscular power) to non-renewable fuels. In the next energy transition, we have to turn back.

What did the world look like before the energy transition?
What influenced the origins of the energy transition in the past?
What were the consequences of the transition?

Will it be possible ‘to turn back’? Or is it turning back at all? How does this knowledge of the past affect your thoughts about the future?
CONCLUSIONS

The idea of defining the school subject of history as *a competence*, based on applicable historical skills and an applicable framework of orientational knowledge, shatters again and again on a tough tradition of interpreting history as ‘remembering what happened in the past’.

Political pressure to introduce *a national canon of knowledge* is popular outside education, but has only a marginal influence in education itself (though it is detrimental to the successful application of the ten era didactics).

The continued interpretation of history as knowledge about the past to be remembered is *a danger to its continuation as a school subject* in the future, as it is seen as largely irrelevant by students as well as outsiders.

Attempts to introduce *relevant history education* by means of connections between past, present and future may be a way out, but there is still a long way to go.
References


Thank you for your attention.

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