

Meeting and Raising Standards in Initial Training of History Teachers at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana – Slovenia (Student’s Portfolio)

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Introduction

History Didactics is a course designed for the fourth year History students of pedagogical orientation at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. It is one of the most important pedagogical courses, which educates and prepares students to become teachers in lower and upper secondary schools in Slovenia (Trskan 2002b, Trskan 2003b, Trskan 2004c).

Within the course, students learn about basic didactic and methodological features of pedagogical work and the teaching of history in lower and upper secondary schools as well as modern history didactics. They combine theoretical knowledge with teaching practice in schools and are trained in monitoring and researching the teaching process. The course also raises their awareness of the importance of permanent education and versatile pedagogical work.

The basic standards of knowledge are that the students are required to know the aims of modern history teaching, the didactic and methodological structure of curricula, the student’s and teacher’s books as well as the external examination; to be able to make yearly and daily lesson plans, organise, carry out and evaluate lessons and out-of-school activities, emphasizing the active role of the learners; to use ICT; to be able to observe, monitor, evaluate and self-assess the teaching process; and finally, to show satisfaction, responsibility and positive attitudes towards pedagogical work.

A special feature of the History Didactics Course is a portfolio which enables the students to become actively involved in the study programme and to succeed in meeting all study requirements of the course. The portfolio offers one of the possibilities to meet and raise the standards in initial training of history teachers.

The role of the portfolio

The portfolio is connected with the standards of knowledge

or the competences of future history teachers. Standards of knowledge are a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitude towards learning and work. All these components are interconnected and therefore demand the organisation of a complex learning process in which learners learn actively and observe their own learning (Sentocnik 2004, 75). The process of learning and its results are presented in the portfolio.

“Setting of the standards is based on the principle that the basic role of those who educate future teachers is to train students so that they can become competent teachers. Hence it ensues that teachers of future teachers should /.../ base their work on specific practical problems and questions that experienced teachers as well as students, the future teachers, have to cope with.” (Cvetek 2004, 156)

The portfolio presents “authentic” learning. Therefore the study requirements of the History didactics are linked with real situations a teacher might find himself in, so that the students can feel the challenge and rationale. Compiling the portfolio encourages students to study history didactics actively – they have to carry out, collect, present, describe, evaluate and assess certain tasks throughout the year. Moreover, the portfolio also presents authentic testing and assessment because it includes continuous assessment (descriptive assessment, peer- and self-assessment, teacher’s grades) and final assessment (descriptive assessment, self assessment, assessment of the subject and work throughout the year).

The portfolio is an excellent feedback for students. Thus they can make continuous improvements and meet the standards more easily. Alternative assessment puts the process of learning first and evaluates student’s progress during certain periods of learning, while feedback is used for correction and improvement (Sentocnik 2004, 73). The portfolio influences students’ thinking and actions, boosts their self-confidence, their belief in their own abilities, and motivates them to continue to learn even after the end of formal education.

Reflection, as the main component of the portfolio, encourages students to trust their own talents, develops a positive self-image, a positive attitude towards learning as well as the subject and trains them for permanent education and citizenship (Sentocnik 2004, 74).

The contents of the portfolio

The History Didactics portfolio consists of six thematic units (Trskan 2002a, Trskan 2003a, Trskan 2004b).

The first unit contains introductory information, where students write their study orientation, present their best teacher, describe their best learning and teaching experience and describe what they expect from the History Didactics Course.

In the second unit, there are self-assessment forms for group assignment (students evaluate work and behaviour in a group); a written part of the seminar paper in the form of a pedagogical article (students assess clarity, organisation, depth and breadth of the contents, suitability of the examples and interpretations, use of sources, quotation, abstract and form); oral part – the presentation of the article (students assess clarity, comprehensibility, and mode of presentation, interpretations, examples and the use of teaching aids); observation lessons reports; preparation for individually taught formally assessed lessons in lower and upper secondary schools (students write what they have already managed to prepare and what remains to be done); formally assessed individually lessons in primary and secondary schools (students assess their own teaching and describe the didactic and methodological elements that were carried out more or less successfully); preparation for oral exam (students write the number of hours spent, sources and articles they have read; they describe their problems, write about didactic and methodological elements they already know and those they do not yet understand; they also write the expected grade); oral exam (students enumerate the questions they had problems with as well as those they answered very precisely).

Peer-assessment forms can be found in the third unit and are used by the students to assess presentations of seminars and individually taught lessons of their fellow students.

The fourth unit is made up of assessment forms for study requirements that are filled in by the university teacher. The forms relate to: group assignment, a pedagogical article or a seminar paper, reports of observation lessons, a formally assessed lesson in upper secondary school, a formally assessed lesson in lower secondary school, teaching practice diary, oral exam and portfolio.

Unit number five includes students' work: a pedagogical article, lesson plans for formally assessed lessons in lower and upper secondary schools and teaching practice diary. Besides the obligatory work, students can enclose additional notes, revision exercises from lectures, personal writing etc.

The sixth unit ends with an action plan in which students plan improvement, reading of sources and articles, as well as writing the most important knowledge and useful tips they have gained during the course. At the end they write a conclusion, a plan for future professional growth and a statement verifying their authorship of the portfolio.

An important part of the last unit is the evaluation of the subject where students explain which of their expectations were met and which were not. In addition, they can suggest how to improve the practical part of the course. This part influences each year's additions and slight modifications of the study programme within the frames of the History Didactics Course. The main findings are that the requirements have to be very diverse in order to meet the needs and interests of all

students. What students want most is more practical work and longer periods of teaching practice.

The conclusions of the students' portfolios are very positive and indicate that the standards of knowledge have been met. For example, one of the students wrote: "My view of pedagogic work has changed very much. I have always found it very demanding and I still do. However, I have learned some important strategies that lead to successful pedagogic work. I think I have got rid of superfluous fear and discovered that pedagogic work can present an interesting challenge. In the classroom a teacher just has to be true to himself and set a good example for the learners." Another student: "I found out that a successful teacher is the one who likes pupils, feels a special vocation and constantly makes effort to grow professionally; only this way can he/she stay in touch with the learners and their changing expectations. A teacher should keep track of social changes and try to understand the aspirations of each individual." Yet another student writes: "Above all, I gained a lot of ideas I will be able to use in practice. One of these is also a portfolio. It is something new and interesting that I would like to use in the classroom where it can be of a great help to the teacher as well as pupils, clearly showing the success and personal progress. It also encourages reflection which is otherwise often neglected."

Evaluation of the portfolio

The last self-assessment form filled in by the students in the second unit also relates to the portfolio. Students evaluate the organisation of their portfolio, the quality of their work throughout the year and the effort that they put into it. They choose their best work, their favourite study requirement and describe their experience in self-assessment.

Between 2003 and 2005, self-assessment forms were filled in by one hundred students. In the process they used the following academic grades: excellent (10), very good (9), very good (8), good (7) and satisfactory (6).

Sixty-four students assessed the organisation of their portfolio with 10, twenty-four students with 9, ten students with 8 and two students with 7. The main reasons for higher grades were: organisation (67 students), perfection (9 students), continuous work (14 students), effort (9 students) and materials collected in the portfolio. They used lower grades because they did not work throughout the year and did not fill in their portfolios carefully/precisely.

Forty-four students assessed the quality of their work in the fourth year with 10, forty students with 9, fifteen students with 8 and one student graded it 6. Their arguments for a higher grade were: invested effort (30 students), continuous work and work to the deadlines (37 students), quality of work, creativity and progress. Lower grades were suggested due to delays (4 students), absence from the lectures (5 students) and the fact that students did not work throughout the year or put in as much effort.

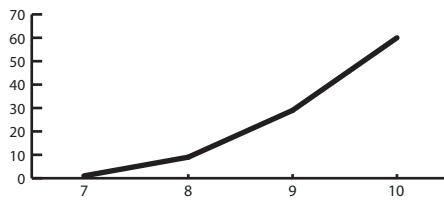
Sixty students assessed their effort with 10, twenty-nine students with 9, nine students with 8, while two students thought they deserved 7.

The graph shows the curve for the assessment of effort which students put in throughout the year.

Since the process of learning presented above always starts with a certain level of knowledge, skills and behaviour which grow, extend, deepen or broaden during the course, the curve has a shape of a J. A similar curve can be observed with the final grade in History Didactics.

According to the students, their best works were: teaching practice diary (50 students), a formally assessed lesson in

lower or upper secondary school (17 students), reports on observation lessons (9 students), lesson plans (9 students), a seminar paper in the form of a pedagogical article (5 students), a worksheet used during the teaching practice (2 students).



The rest of the students individually chose two (i.e. diary and reports, diary and lesson plans, diary and article, lesson plans and reports on observation lessons) or only one thing (i.e. peer assessment, portfolio). The main criteria for the best work were the amount of time and effort that had been put in (44 students), while some of the students chose a particular task because it was the most extensive, allowed them to gain experiences and to show their creativity.

Students were also asked to decide which study requirement of the course they most liked. Fifty-five students chose the teaching practice, seven students selected individually taught lessons, eight students the article while six students decided upon the observation lessons. The rest of the students chose other requirements.

Students chose the teaching practice for the following reasons: practical work (20 students), acquired experiences (21 students), independence and creativity (14 students), extensive knowledge (9 students), enthusiasm, cooperation, invested effort etc. For example: "During my lower secondary school teaching practice /.../ I felt great. I liked working with pupils. For the first time since I had started my studies, I felt this was the job I had always wanted to do. The teaching practice filled me with enthusiasm for teaching. In a way the practice was also exhausting since there were a lot of things to be done before we entered the classroom ..."

Students answered that self-assessment and the filling in of the portfolio forms taught them to evaluate their effort and work more adequately (23 students) and helped them to develop self-criticism (23 students). They noted that they were very self-critical at the beginning (14 students), that they found self-assessment very difficult at the beginning (16 students), that self-reflection helped them to overcome mistakes (9 students) and that self-assessment was a positive and interesting experience. Students also mentioned a more objective attitude towards others, responsibility in assessment, greater self-confidence, more positive feedback on their own work and the importance of self-assessment for success. Only two students wrote that they had still not become used to self-assessment, while one thought he would have been successful even without self-assessment.

Some descriptions of experiences in self-assessment and self-evaluation are presented below. They show that students are aware of the positive effects of filling in the portfolio.

"It is difficult to be self-critical and impartial at the same time. It is not easy to give a negative assessment of your work when you know how much effort you have put into it. It is, however, a wonderful experience of self-reflection, during which you can learn about your own mistakes and later try to remedy them."

"At the end of the academic year I can find that I assessed my work accurately and overcame the uncertainty that I felt while assessing the good parts of my work. Filling in the entire portfolio helped to boost my self-confidence. At the same time I have realized that self-assessment is one of the keys for successful continuation of professional growth."

"At the beginning I found it very hard to talk about which

grade I deserved or how I would assess my knowledge. However, I have realised that in the process of assessing my work, I started to think about my learning and progress, I started to evaluate my work critically. Thus, I was developing the skill of critical evaluation. Modern society, in which we are 'bombarded' with information, will certainly make it a welcome skill."

On the basis of portfolio evaluation, the following conclusions can be drawn. Even though students found it difficult to write a descriptive or numeric self-assessment, the process of filling in the forms (for self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher's assessment) helped them to realise that self-reflection can help to improve results considerably, even in a short period of time. Besides, students stop being over self-critical and are able to commend their own work. The answers show that the portfolio as a whole offers possibilities for quality and gradually attaining as well as raising the standards in the History Didactics Course.

The new role of a university teacher

"In the modern society of knowledge, teachers are also required to acquire some new roles. The most important are: re-orientation from teaching to learning, the use of modern ICT, the skill of working with different learners, the necessity of co-operation with other teachers, experts and parents, the ability of self-reflection, research and evaluation of one's own work. In order to perform these new roles successfully, a teacher must be open to change and motivated for life-long learning and permanent professional growth." (Razdevsek Pucko 2004, 71)

A modern teacher ought to gain and keep knowledge and skills pertaining to his subject; create and maintain a stimulating learning environment for students; develop and use continuous assessment; give feedback on student's progress and help to develop skills needed in the pedagogic profession; encourage the students to think about their experiences, performed tasks and self-assessment; empathise with those he/she teaches and works with, monitor their work, allow them a certain amount of freedom and know their needs; know how to reflect on his/her pedagogic work; carry out, coordinate, monitor and improve the programme of teacher training in view of the specific demands of students-users, also with suitable school offers (Cvetek 2004, 156-157).

A modern university teacher is a reflective practitioner who monitors his own pedagogic work and considers possible improvements and modernisation. "Reflective teaching is often based on the teacher's initiative and guidance, since it involves self-observation, collecting data on one's own work and role in the classroom and the use of the data for self-evaluation, changes and professional self-development." (Cencic 2001, 77-78)

Therefore, a university teacher who prepares future teachers should influence the students as a role model and create a stimulating learning environment. He/she should radiate optimism, care, perseverance and a love of the pedagogic profession.

Conclusion

To sum up, a portfolio is a sort of aid, helping students to get to know themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, working habits, demands and targets, responsibility towards their work. On the other hand, it also helps the teacher, indirectly, to plan activities throughout the academic year and to write and give instructions for different tasks. In addition, it especially helps to monitor the individual student's progress continuously.

Conclusions drawn from the portfolio self-assessment forms and answers in the teaching practice questionnaire show that in the future, more attention will have to be devoted to the organisation and realisation of the teaching practice and quality cooperation with teachers ie mentors in schools (Trskan 2001, Trskan 2002c, Trskan 2005).

Different study requirements/assignments (individual, pair or group work, written, oral, "authentic" ...) offer possibilities for experiencing and learning about one's own work (especially portfolio) and progress, which is an integral part of experience as a whole. This experience can be transferred to other jobs and spheres of activity. Reflection, thinking and planning are necessary for successful work and personal satisfaction. "Due to the changed social demands in connection with active and lifelong learning, an individual is presumed to be able to plan the process of learning, change and direct himself in the process of learning as well as evaluate his own learning process, which later has a return influence on further planning." (Pecjak 2004, 39)

In the process of compiling the portfolio, students change their self-perspective. They begin to believe in themselves, develop self-acceptance, become more responsible, caring, compassionate, creative, hardworking and active. They acquire self-discipline, skill and self-initiative. "Estimation of progress and results of learning is based on different forms of testing and is no longer limited to the teacher's domain; on the contrary, it is also becoming the student's responsibility and plays an important role in diagnosing the problems and raising the quality of the learning process and its results." (Sentocnik 2004, 71)

Initial training cannot function as a closed system. We should try to make up the deficiencies and change it in accordance with the needs and interests of students and the environment. Among others, a university teacher also is responsible for that to happen. "Self-research is supposed to increase teacher's autonomy and professionalism. It can train teachers in systematic and critical thinking about one's work. It can help them to understand the reasons for their actions and improve their teaching. Class research is, thus, supposed to have a positive effect on teacher training as well as atmosphere in the classroom. In this way, teachers would have more control over their work, develop professionalism, emancipation and autonomy. The entire research should be guided by the wish to improve individual practice." (Cencic 1991, 21)

However, history students and future history teachers ought to be aware of the fact that pedagogic work is a part of a lifelong process and that their teacher training will never come to an end. They only become prepared for this challenge during their undergraduate studies.

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