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My Life in the 90s - A young person's text faces the authority

Nanny Hartsmar

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During the summer holidays in 1995 we went on an Inter-rail card. We visited many beautiful countries and we met a lot of fantastic people. On this trip we all matured and started to see life from another angle. It really was a memorable experience.

But not only good things happened in the 90s. A lot of evil things had begun to grow. The war in Bosnia started in the beginning of the 90s. It was terrible. On the TV news I had to watch my own country being destroyed. All the time everyone was discussing what was happening. There were often conflicts and those who didn't even come from Yugoslavia were meddling with the conflicts. For a long time I felt anger in me towards the politicians. War is a terrible thing, my dear friend.

During the summer and winter holidays I was in Serbia in a small village named Vesac. I loved being there and when it was time to go back home tears always came into my eyes. In my opinion Vesac is still the most beautiful village there is. I will always love it with all my heart.

But, when war broke out Vesac changed, not the village itself but the people in it. Suddenly money became the only goal in life and everyone entered into competition with each other about who had the most money. Since people were poor because of the war there was only one way to get rich, it was to join the Mafia. In the 90s the Mafia controlled Vesac.

During the summer of '95 I met a guy whose father was a member of the Mafia. He was the most loathsome and stupid guy I've ever met. He thought money gave a person higher status. But I want you to know, my dear friend, that money can never make you happy. It can only help make things more comfortable. When I was a teenager I never had lots of money but nevertheless I was always happy and content...

Racism grew in the 90s when I was a teenager. I often saw skinheads and, to be honest, they scared me...

I've never understood racists. To me all people are equal no matter what the colour of one's skin or race. I had friends from all kinds of countries.

I also want you to remember that the colour of skin is only a thin layer, while the inside is much thicker.

(D.M., 1995. Translated from the Swedish by Hartsmar.)

The standardised achievement test

The writer above is a fifteen-year-old girl. It is autumn term 1995, and the class is writing what was then called 'the standardised achievement test', given to grade nine all over the

country. Her thoughts and her ability to express them in writing will not be judged for any other purpose than to give her a mark in Swedish language. The criteria for different marks are described: that the writer demonstrates a good way of thinking, puts her thoughts into words and shows her language proficiency. Someone has decided the criteria and, by these, influences both what she should concentrate her thinking on and what she should write about. When the essay is completed, it is subjected to specific speaking and reading scrutiny, for which contextual factors such as time, history and culture are of great significance. From this process, the mark signals a final interpretation.

Reading and writing are social acts which ought to be interpreted from a historical and socio-cultural perspective. Who is the author and what does she want to tell us? We are listening here to a voice, which by its 'my dear friend', 'my friend' and 'I also want you to remember', is inviting us into a dialogue.

At the same time she is describing and reacting to a fragment of our contemporary history. She sees, and is reflecting on, her own change from being a child to becoming a young adult. She has, as she tells us, matured and is able to see things from another angle.

In a dialogue with others

In Bahktin's dialogic theory the dialogue itself is seen as the fundamental element of life. Throughout life we are involved in a dialogic interaction with others by questions, answers, statements, agreements or counter-arguments. Through the dialogue it is possible for us to have a relation to 'others' and be aware of what 'I' is.

The young writer's text can be seen as a contemporary answer to both what has already happened and to what is to come on some future day. Her personal experiences from the visit to Bosnia and her standpoint on racism are, at the same time, something unique, something of her own, and an echo of the thoughts of others both inside and outside her historical and socio-cultural sphere. To be able to understand and make sense of what she sees and hears via the mass media and her visit in Vesač, she reacts to the messages she takes part in. She gives her response to the authoritative word, which in the shape of a monologue, is mediated by the comments of politicians and newscasters.

On the TV news I had to watch my own country being destroyed. All the time everyone was discussing what was happening. There were often conflicts and those who didn't even come from Yugoslavia were meddling with the conflicts. For a long time I felt anger in me towards the politicians.

Bahktin emphasises that the authoritative word does not acquire its status as authoritative until it has met 'the other' in a dialogue. 'Authoritative' implicitly means that it is unquestioned.

That is why words are binding, independent of their ability to convince us – they do not insist on a free reflection but an 'unconditional adherence'. (Bahktin 1981, p.343. From Swedish by Hartsmar.)

What happens with the author's invitation to a dialogue in her use of 'my dear friend' and 'my friend'? In the typical school situation in which she is put to write her essay, the dialogue becomes an illusion. Through her choice of topic she has the opportunity to make her voice heard, but no one is actually interested in what she has to say. No field of

application for her thoughts is offered. The school is only interested in, and only gives a response to, how she has solved the task from the perspective of the formal criteria.

...outside the tyranny of the present there is a possible addressee who will understand them. This version of the significant other, this 'super-addressee', is conceived in different ways at different times and by different persons: as God, as the future triumph of my version of the state, as a future reader. Holquist (1990, p 38.)

Pupil's conception of time related to their understanding of history - the nine-year school

The girl who, on an autumn day in 1995, wrote an essay to get her mark in Swedish is one of the informants in my thesis. The aim of the thesis is to analyse and interpret pupils' (age 8, 11 and 15) conception of time related to their understanding of history. Formation of concepts such as 'time', 'past-present-future' and 'consciousness of history' are essential in the teaching of history.

The empirical data consist of three parts:

1. associations to 'time', 'past' and 'future' (pupils)
2. semi-structured interviews (pupils and teachers)
3. essays from the standardised achievement test for Swedish

Concept development

The standardised achievement test offered six headings to choose from. All focused on 'time'. The writing of the essays was the culmination of the whole test battery, which in its other parts contained text reading, control of text understanding and listening to a tape and discussions. In all tests the concept of 'time' and the time dimensions past-present-future are in focus.

The latest Swedish curricula, Lgr 80 and Lpo 94, contain strong formulations and attach great importance to concept development in general. The concept of 'time' is said to be an overall concept within the teaching of history. One must be able to understand and use the concepts past-present-future to be able to understand historic development. Nothing is, however, said about the changing of meaning of a concept, a change due to the change of the historical, socio-cultural context. Nor is anything said about the individual experience of time. In the curricula, concepts seem to be ready-made, simple to define and accordingly easy to 'learn'. The goal set for the pedagogical process is (according to the descriptions of aims) to transform every-day concepts into scientific ones. But, says Säljö (1995, p.11):

Piaget strongly emphasised that knowledge is the result of activity and interaction between subject and object in concrete situations (1983), but concept research in general doesn't study concept development in that way. ... Consequently it is not concepts 'in action' but concepts 'on display' that are analysed.

In the essay above the author has chosen a content which reflects the time of her adolescence. While writing her text she has to imagine an adult future where she has become a grandmother who is now talking to a grandchild about what it was like when

she was a young girl. In that way three dimensions of time are interwoven in a way that forces her to picture a fictitious future as she is looking back on a past which in reality is part of her present days.

In the interview part of my study, we are discussing why a specific content has been taught. The question *how* the content is chosen gets the unanimous answer 'it was the next chapter in the book'. The question *why* causes confusion. None of the pupils is used to discussing *why* they are studying, for example, the Swedish king Gustav Vasa or the second world war. It is something that has to be done, because everyone who preceded them had done it.

Regarding the three time dimensions, past-present-future, the interviews show that history is a traditional business bearing towards a deposition in the memory bank. The future is dealt with as no more than something from science fiction. Nor has anyone any experience with dealing with the time concept in various contexts. In school one *learns how it is*.

In the standardised achievement test it is the shortcomings mentioned above which are subjected to testing. An anonymous authority wants to know something about the pupils' present adolescence but it is to be described as past time. Not because it is interesting to take part of *what* and *how* young adults think about it. The main interest lies in finding out whether they can separate the concepts past-present-future from one another or not, and describe them adequately. The time concept itself seems to be ready made and simple to define.

Marking

The young writer received a mark of 4 (which is the second best from the top) for her essay, but no comment on why she was marked as a '4'. The markings in the text were all about linguistic errors.

The girl gets no response on her invitation to a dialogue. 'Those who didn't come from Yugoslavia', the newscasters and the politicians, are all absent, not listening to her voice, not reading her text. The teacher, as a representative of the authority, appears to take no risks by concentrating the pen on what is easy to *mark*. The original focus on concept development is long since forgotten.

The essay begins with:

Granny, granny! Can you tell me, what it was like in the 90s?
Oh, do you really want to know? Are you sure? It is going to take quite a while to tell.

Authority, what did you really want to know, and *why*?

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