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How Swiss primary students interpret a national monument

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Abstract

Since historical monuments are often difficult to interpret, this study commences with the questions, how do students understand historical monuments and in what ways are they able to describe and interpret them? The focus of our paper is a monument showing Arnold Winkelried, a leading Swiss national figure that nine Swiss students of Grades 5 and 6 studied. Winkelried is a legendary Swiss hero who sacrificed himself to bring about Swiss victory over the Austrian Habsburgs in the Battle of Sempach in 1386. As an iconic, symbolic source of Swiss national cultural heritage, he is representative of the establishment of the young Swiss Federation's history culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. The study's mainly oral research data was collected by means of focus groups (Bohnsack, 2010). The discussions with the students were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a documentary method (Straub, 1999), that is, we reconstructed typical patterns of description. The findings first indicated that students find it difficult to observe and describe such monuments appropriately. Indeed, the students tended to begin the process by guessing what they were observing. Second, the findings show that through the interviewer's prompts – accurate observations and descriptions – during the focus group sessions, students can activate prior knowledge and thus engage with the historical topic.

Keywords: culture of remembrance; history culture; public history; monuments; primary students; Swiss history; national identity; public space; Switzerland

Introduction

Public historical monuments often defy easy interpretation, so this study starts by asking whether students understand such monuments and, if so, in what ways they are able to describe and interpret them.

The focus is the monument to Arnold Winkelried, the Swiss hero of the Battle of Sempach in 1386. This is a source of Swiss national culture of remembrance, representative of the establishment of the young Swiss Federation in the second half of the nineteenth century (Mathis, 2008). The Winkelried monument is perfect, even exemplary, for involving students with history in the 'public space', that is, where students have to acquire the skills to self-initiate, observe, discern and reflect upon the phenomenon of such public iconic monuments ('street furniture') and autonomously appreciate them (Messmer, 2013: 223).

Monuments are regarded as complex sources of cultural remembrance. According to Cornelißen (2012), the term 'culture of remembrance' (*Erinnerungskultur*) acts as an umbrella term for all forms of conscious remembrance of historical events, personages and processes, whether they are aesthetic, political, personal, social, cultural

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affective or cognitive in nature. In this sense, the concept of culture of remembrance is synonymous with the concept of history culture, but it puts more emphasis on the functional use of the past for the formation of a historically based identity. Politics of remembrance, politics of memory or politics of history are subsumable concepts, which make this emphasis very obvious (ibid.).

Moreover, Kreis (2008) understands monuments as *Zeitzeichen* (signs of a particular time): only if the observer has knowledge of a monument's cultural and historical context and associations can its meanings be understood or interpreted. However, considering the interaction of past and present represented in the monument, the emphasis must be on multiple contexts for its interpretation. Schmid (2009: 52) refers to monuments as 'focal points of collective memory'. Therefore, the specific monument must be understood as a 'set of symbols' that include the meaning generally attributed to the monument during its inauguration (ibid.: 59). For Assmann (1999), monuments function as media of memory, that is, the reception and communication of collective memory at a specific moment in time. Furthermore, monuments as media of memory have a double meaning: first, they act as media for an agreement about a society's substantial and firm values, and second, they act as media of cultural memory, whereby the collective self-concept of a society is expressed. Therefore, monuments are usually interesting to the public.

The Winkelried monument in Stans, Switzerland

The sculpture, carved from a block of Carrara marble by Ferdinand Schlöth (1818–91), dominates the Stans village square and is an integral part of the townscape (see Figure 1).

Credit: Alessandro Miele

Figure 1: The Winkelried monument

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stans_Winkelrieddenkmal.jpg

The monument was inaugurated in 1865 and is considered to be the first national monument of the young Swiss Confederation, founded in 1848. It is an important historical, cultural source of the Swiss reconciliation of its diverse cultural communities as a major factor in an emerging national Swiss identity. The history of the Winkelried monument is complex, and the entwinements of its historical strands are numerous. In order to recognize and distinguish these entwinements, it is essential to understand the history of the Winkelried myth.

The Winkelried myth

The myth surrounding the hero Arnold Winkelried in the 1386 Battle of Sempach arose about a hundred years after the historical event. In response to the battle, the Habsburgs made a hero of Duke Leopold III, who had fallen in the battle. True to his name, Leopold had fought like a lion and was killed in action – on his own, killed by his subjects in the fight for his inheritance (Marchal, 2007). This interpretation is the basis of Habsburg historical understanding of Leopold as a national Austrian hero.

Seventy years later, Winkelried emerges in a folk song for the first time as an alternative, Swiss, hero of the Battle of Sempach. Using the story of Winkelried, who had thrown himself on the Austrian pikes, marking the turning point to victory, the Swiss confederates compared the Habsburg interpretation with their own version of events. With hindsight, Winkelried's mythical deed not only secured victory for the Swiss confederates at Sempach; his sacrifice for the community became a symbol of Swiss virtue (ibid.). Over time, the dying words 'I will open a passage into the line; protect my wife and children' were attributed to him, becoming a testament to national sacrifice. Caring for others was thus added to the virtues of self-sacrifice and courage (Suter, 1977; Marchal, 1986, 2007; Stettler, 2002). The underlying narrative forms the basic Swiss Confederal story of emerging national identity.

Description of the Winkelried monument

The Winkelried monument consists of a group of three men:

- At the bottom is a dead warrior, the oldest of the three:
  - in front of him lies a halberd, a typical weapon of the Swiss confederates.
- Propped up on top of him lies a younger man, Winkelried, who seems to be in his prime:
  - his stature seems strong under his tunic and chain mail
  - in his chest, there are broken pike splinters coming from the left
  - also on his left side is an empty sword sheath
  - he has a beard, a distinctive moustache, thick back-combed hair and a deep furrow in his forehead
  - his gaze is directed top right to the youngest of the three men.
- This young man, a Swiss fighter, with his right leg pulled up, is about to charge over the two men below him:
  - he holds a mace in both hands, raised above his head, with which he prepares for a forehand stroke
  - his gaze is directed to the left in the distance
  - there is no eye contact with the other two men
  - he has neither a beard nor armour; his wild hair, the hooded shirt and the webbing wrapped around his waist, flow backward in the headwind.

Interpretation of the monument's three dimensions

The monument to Winkelried has a triangular shape in neoclassical style**.** According to the theory of classical art, it points to a key moment or a 'gestus' – the hero is shown at the last tolerable moment (Winckelmann, 1756). Hence, the moment in its complexity bears condensed messages that can be interpreted in three dimensions:

(1) The horizontal axis shows the spatial dimension of the battle. The hostile armies stand left and right of the group of figures. The artist omits this element of the battlefield image. If viewers know about the myth, they will easily be able to envisage it using their imagination, which is also supported by the depicted broken pikes in the chest, coming from the left, which point to the Habsburg army.
(2) The vertical axis shows the temporal dimension of the myth. At the bottom lies the dead warrior, killed by the long spears. Propped up on top of him is Winkelried, the hero of the battle at the moment of his death. The statue indicates a turning point in the battle in favour of the Federal army; at its apex the young warrior charges on to victory.
(3) Likewise, in the vertical dimension, a third symbolic ideal can be detected, blanketed by the temporal dimension. The oldest warrior at the bottom symbolizes the past, as previously the Swiss used to recognize sacrificial death as the foundation of the Federation. The centre represents the present through Arnold Winkelried, where observers, descendants of their martyred ancestors, mentally sacrifice themselves from a contemporary perspective. The future perspective is symbolized by the lively youth at the top. The sacrifice and achievements of previous generations inspire the patriotism of both the youth and succeeding generations. Commitment to the patriotic virtues of self-sacrifice is an enduring meme, as reflected in the sculpture.

Research methodology

Research questions and theoretical background of the empirical study

The research study concerns the question of how children comprehend and acquire knowledge concerning monuments. Thus, the following research questions are addressed:

- How, and in what ways, do students describe the monument? What kind of interpretations are there? What historical knowledge do they draw on to construct their narratives?
- Which typical patterns of explanation can be reconstructed? In researching the students' presentations, we will be able to find out which concepts, strategies and mental models children have regarding the Winkelried monument and its historical context.

In accordance with a constructivist historical learning theory (Günther-Arndt, 2014), students' prior knowledge is crucial for their historical learning (Mathis, 2015: 16–27). Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand students' conceptions and knowledge – that is, their disposition – so as to design teaching and learning about the monument in better accordance with learners' prior knowledge.

As a first step, the level of perception should be determined. Here, we refer to Bernhardt (2011: 48–9), who describes four levels of image perception, which he sees as a graduation of perceptual competency (cf. Gautschi, 2011). These four levels are as follows:

(1) Students cite only a few details of the picture.
(2) Students perceive and cite many or all details of the picture, try to interpret its meaning, which is strongly influenced by everyday ideals, and recognize facial expressions and gestures as a medium of expression.
(3) Students cite selected details of the picture, come up with hypotheses in regard to its overall interpretation, have a sense that the picture is a sign, recognize relations, and are conscious about the historical dimension of the picture.
(4) Students change between description and interpretation of the picture, revise their old views by integrating irritating details in their new interpretation, use correct concepts and connect them with their prior knowledge, and are able to recognize and interpret metaphors, symbols, gesture, facial expression and relations.

Perceptual competency aims first of all at 'perceiving' something as 'the past', without having to already recognize a 'meaning' in it (Bernhardt, 2011: 50).

Bernhardt (ibid.) related the grading to the visual work. A monument cannot and must not be reduced to an image as a medium of collective memory and symbolism. In addition to form and symbolism, the location, the inscription(s), materiality and social practice play a central role in the construction of meaning (Scholz, 2015: 25–31). Nevertheless, monuments appear, so to say, as phenomena to the onlooker. Their perception, observation and interpretation are also visual acts, which require a visual competence. The Winkelried monument consists of a sculpture – a three-dimensional, physical object of the fine arts. Analogous to the image interpretation as defined by Pandel (2011), a sense of phenomenon, significance, documentation and timing can be established. In this context, it is necessary to separate description and interpretation (Pandel, 2011; Grafe *et al.*, 2014: 110).

Sample and methods

The survey (N = 27) of the entire study is composed of nine groups of three children, comprising three groups from each of Grades 1/2 and Grades 5/6 from primary level, as well as Grade 8/9 students from secondary level in Stans, Switzerland. The students are taught in mixed-grade classes. The evaluated data, from which the results presented here were derived, is from three groups of three students from a Grade 5/6 class (N = 9). The students were aged between 11 and 13. Swiss primary schools are not divided according to students' literacy levels, so the sample includes children of every level of performance. The students were chosen because their school lies very close to the monument, so they pass by it at least four times a day. However, their previous experience of handling historical evidence was rudimentary, that is, they had not yet been introduced to handling historical sources or accounts systematically.

The data was collected by means of focus groups; one took place in front of the monument, the other two took place in school in front of a projected picture of the monument, after having visited the monument. With the help of an open guideline, the interviewer gave fresh impetus: he paraphrased, gave hints, and then progressively steered the children's attention and asked questions to reflect and define. This moderately guided procedure should help the children justify their statements (Mathis, 2015: 88–95). Verbal methods make it possible to access the structures of how children think, which are often unconscious or not reflected upon. In particular, group assessments, such as group discussion, offer the possibility of collecting socially divided opinions, attitudes and orientations, as well as patterns of thought and interpretations (see Bohnsack, 2003: 21; Mathis, 2007). Like Bernhardt (2011: 41), we asked the children a question, which was as simple as possible: 'Take a look at this please and tell me

everything that comes to mind. Everything you see, or think is of interest. You can't say anything wrong.'

The children's group discussions usually lasted about forty minutes. The discussions with the students were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a documentary method (Straub, 1999; Bohnsack, 2010). A typical pattern of description and interpretation has thereby been reconstructed in a multi-step process, during which different horizons of comparison have been systematically addressed. Note that a slash (/) in the transcription indicates an interruption or re-start.

Findings

Principally, it is clear that students already experience difficulties when verbally naming the visual elements of the monument, which Pandel (2011: 74) terms 'appearance subtlety', and which in his opinion does not require any particular prior knowledge. As one of the students, Nicole, says, they are 'not accustomed to looking so closely'. They are therefore more likely to guess about the monument. Our results are in line with the results taken from the study by Bernhardt (2011: 41). He also notes that children and adolescents do not follow a recognizable system in observing images, but have a more erratic approach and are strongly guided by subjective everyday experiences. In his model, discussed above, the results of the group discussions can be classified as Level 2: the children cite a few details of the monument and try to interpret its meaning, which is strongly influenced by everyday ideals. However, attention to detail and precise description, which the interviewer calls for in the course of the group discussions, leads the students to interlink their interpretations with prior knowledge and explicit perceptions of history.

The fact that most of the children of Grades 5 and 6 assume that a historical narrative is depicted in the monument is striking. For example, it is clear to Micha that all a 'good' story needs is an enemy and a hero who collide head-on:

> Micha: Well, I think it's important that he's [at the top] from Habsburg; To see [laughs] that they / he's [the middle one] Winkelried, otherwise you could think, he's [at the top] Winkelried. Well, it could be. It takes all three. You need an enemy, you need the hero and you need /
>
> Anna-Maria: Allies.

Nevertheless, it is hardly possible for the children to see which individuals are represented in the group of figures. The children often ask the interviewer what the person in the middle is actually doing. If the interviewing person poses this question first, the children typically respond, like Anna-Maria, by describing what they see: 'It's actually quite simple ... he's standing and he's lying and he's, hmm, uh / and him too / ugh [laughs].'

It is, however, clear to the students that each of these people can be assigned to a specific historical figure. The monument as a storyteller has quasi-authority. For the children, it is not a sign, but an effigy. In this mimetic understanding of the monument, the constructiveness of the sculpture is masked out. Lange (2011: 266) was also able to observe that 'pupils generally view images as an effigy of the historical past, historical reality'. Due to ignorance of historical facts as well as the myth, the correlation between these historical figures becomes a guessing game for the students:

> Interviewer: ... look, who ... do we recognize in the picture. ...
>
> Micha: The Habsburgs.

Interviewer: Three / all three men?

Micha: One from Habsburg, Winkelried … [counts with fingers]

Julia: Mhh [thinks] [3 seconds]

Micha: Or from Lucerne?

The students of Grades 5 and 6 agree that the man at the bottom must be from the Habsburgs because he wears armour and a helmet, and the children's idea about the Swiss confederates in the Middle Ages was that they were all poor peasants. This notion is also found in Stöckle (2011: 185–98, 262–3) and in Mathis (2015: 149–51). Because farmers do not wear armour, the figure at the bottom must therefore be a Habsburg fighter:

Interviewer: Which side is he [the one at the bottom] fighting for?

Micha: On the side of the Habsburgs?

Julia: Yes, with the others. With those ones [left].

Interviewer: Could he also be on the side of the federals? …

Micha: No, because he has, because he has a helmet and /

Anna-Maria: And armour and everything.

Moreover, the children have the idea that heroes are victorious. This concept causes great difficulty for the students to determine the hero within the group of figures. They typically identify Winkelried either as the man at the top or, more rarely, as the dead man at the bottom. It is quite unusual that the middle figure is recognized as being Winkelried. For example, the group replies to the questions as follows:

Anna-Maria: Well, this one [the one in the middle] is definitely not the hero.

Julia: I would have rather thought that he's [points with her finger] the hero, because [3 seconds] /

Interviewer: The one at the top?

Julia: Yes, because he's still fighting.

Regarding the three dimensions of the monument discussed above, it can be noted that the students first begin to describe the group of figures along the vertical axis. The lively youth at the top typically triggers the children to switch to the horizontal axis – there would have to be 'one more present':

Julia: Yeah, exactly. He seems to me at first glance to batter the others. But on closer inspection / still running, theoretically / someone else should be present, who helps make it a little bit easier to imagine.

Anna-Maria: He [the one at top] must be a bit further behind.

Micha: Yeah, you can see that very well. Because if his spear is still in the stomach / and then just simply lift and – it can be seen clearly – he doesn't look down at Winkelried but looks straight ahead and Winkelried looks up and almost has his mouth open, as if he would somehow say, yes: 'run'!

...

> Interviewer: Where is he [the one at the top] looking, then?
>
> Micha: At the next enemy.
>
> Interviewer: Yes, if he / one has to imagine.

Once in the horizontal axis, the students try to reconstruct the battle, as well as the parties. The students typically answer the question about facts and fiction concerning the hero, as follows:

> Micha: So / so I think / he did exist, but simply exaggerated. Perhaps there weren't all these spear things, but he just ran and then, uhmm, well / I think it happened in a less exaggerated way than it's been told.
>
> ...
>
> Micha: But I can really imagine that he did exist. This is, for instance, something different, compared to, hmm, what do I know, [thinks] if dinosaurs existed [laughs, embarrassed].
>
> ...
>
> Micha: Yes. I think that / there was a man called Winkelried / is very / very probable / well is almost more than likely.
>
> ...
>
> Anna-Maria: Yes, it could be, but ... not so far-fetched, like with all the spears in the stomach. Then he must have really been on a death wish [falls silent and smirks].
>
> ...
>
> Julia: ... well, I think he did exist but not as it's told. He took part in the war and [2 seconds] with heavy artillery and the like. Yeah, as well, but [2 seconds] uhmm / he wasn't exactly the hero.

Principally, they do not rule out the fact that there was a historical Arnold Winkelried. However, they do not, or hardly, believe in sacrificial death. The fact that someone can sacrifice himself for a community cause appears very alien to them.

Conclusion

Foremost, it can be shown that initially students have difficulties in observing and describing the monument appropriately (cf. Lange, 2011; Bernhardt, 2011). Students tend to start the process by guessing what they see. 'Zapping' and association become more apparent when viewing the monument – an unstructured picking out of arbitrary things – rather than a systematic description and interpretation (cf. Bernhardt, 2011: 39). Targeted impulses are needed here to help focus the viewers' gaze and stimulate lingering concentration on a point on the monument. According to Bernhardt (ibid.: 51), action-oriented methods are suitable for this because 'by establishing a stronger emotional bond, they increase the motivation to busy themselves longer with picture'.

Children also lack the contextual historical knowledge to interpret the monument. They can recognize the Habsburgs, those from Lucerne, knights and peasants but they are unable to cast these figures into a plausible narrative. The Winkelried myth is not known, or is hardly known, to most children. As revealed in the Lange (2011) study, which shows how students deal with image sources, the ideas the children have about the

monument are much the same: that the 'real' story is depicted in the monument. The constructiveness of the sculpture is not recognized due to 'visual evidence' (ibid.: 267).

Furthermore, an accurate observation and description guided by the interviewer during their interaction leads to the activation of the students' prior knowledge and the interconnection of their historical conceptions. Hence, systematically introduced and regularly applied sequences of guided discovery learning are necessary, along with cognitive modelling phases by the teacher. Continuous and systematic student involvement with history in the 'public space' is essential, where teachers act as experts and models for the accurate description, understanding and interpretation of monuments.

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