

Interview with Heinz-Elmar Tenorth

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Professor Heinz-Elmar Tenorth till 2011 was Professor for the History of Education at Humboldt-University in Berlin. Before he studied and did his PhD at the University of Würzburg. After he stayed in the same institution for some years as research assistant before becoming professor in the educational area, first in Frankfurt a. M. and then till his retirement in Berlin. As researcher he is very well known in his field and he was also the head of several large projects funded by the DfG and other foundations. Additionally, many of his publications are well known amongst researchers in the field of educational research. The topics he published about are broad and cover theoretical reflections in the field of education and especially history of education as well as research results. Of special interest has always been the idea of «Bildung» for him, for example combined with reflections about political influence, institutional structures or the ideas of «Bildsamkeit» and «Grundlegende Bildung». Also professionalism of teachers and researchers in the field of education are further topics he worked on and is still working on. Luckily he is still very active as researcher and enriches the field of education with reflexive and innovative approaches in different ways. Reading his publications is as refreshing as it is informative and in some ways, it represents a challenge in the most positive sense of the term.

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Annemarie Augschoell and Michaela Vogt (A. A. & M. V.): Could you please give us a brief insight into your academic career, your motivation for doing research within this field and the main topics you focused and focus on?

Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (H-E. T.): I started my studies in history and German in 1965 to become a teacher at a grammar school. I also took my state examination

here in 1970. Philosophy and sociology were added later because they interested me thematically and were necessary for my own work. Education was added by chance: 1968, simply because I needed money to finance my studies, and Albert Reble offered me an assistant position in Würzburg. After the state examination educational studies then became my doctoral subject, on the one hand because I immediately got an assistant position, and on the other hand because I could work historically and could combine my philosophical and historical interests in my work on the history of the formation of a discipline in educational science. Theory and history of pedagogical knowledge has therefore also become one of the central themes of my scientific work, at the professorship in Frankfurt at first with the concentration on science theory and methodology, then since 1991 in Berlin focused on the historical dimension and the identity problems of this discipline in the diversity of its forms of knowledge, finally on education and the university, already because one is confronted with Humboldt every day here in Berlin and at the Humboldt University. And why historical research? The answer is Marx, freely paraphrased. There is only one science, that is history, at least when you work on people and their practices.

A. A. & M. V.: What is the thrill of doing research in history of education? In which way is this kind of research special?

H-E. T.: To reconstruct a past in its particular historicity in such a way that its ever present significance becomes visible, based on sources from previously ignored or neglected archives and from a broad tradition of dusty papers and ambitious texts, this fascination in its peculiar practice combining drowsy consciousness, attention to the details and the compulsion to courageous generalizing while writing the results of this practice – where else can you find this? What is contrasted to this practice of a historian the pure fly-leg counting or the ever new exegesis of the same texts?

For educational science, it must be added that its own past is a practice of its own, a «monster» among the sciences, as Rudolf Lochner rightly said, whose specific practice and logic are only revealed historically.

A. A. & M. V.: Which kind of sources are of relevance for doing history of education?

H-E. T.: The entire historical tradition is potentially relevant, in its broad materiality, pictorial or textual, biographically or systemically preformed, reflexive or descriptive. One only has to make this tradition speak as a topic-related source with its own questions – but even the conceivable questions cannot be systematically limited, at best the lack of creativity of the researcher and the community of research restricts here.

A. A. & M. V.: Has the role of archives changed for researchers in the field of history of education? In which way has digitalization influenced the range of analyzable data?

H-E. T.: The archive is still indispensable, i.e. the reconstruction and presentation of tradition in its own form – everything else, e.g. the reproduction or critical discussion of the available research, is secondary and uninteresting for the historian. But of course historical educational research also constructs its own archive, does not only follow the documented tradition in public archives or libraries or material sources, but generates – e.g. in oral history methodology or in the construction of serial data and their analysis, then also quantifying – the necessary tradition itself, and by no means

only for biographies. The dynamics of institutions or forms of knowledge or networks in science can only be understood appropriately in this way. «Digitalization» can be useful as a moment of a new technique and new analytical practices at the same time. This will become apparent when one sees whether the pure and mass presentation of data and analytical material is also used for productive new questions or the examination of old assumptions that have become virtually self-evident.

A. A. & M. V.: How would you describe the relation between qualitative methodology, quantitative methodology and the methodological approaches used in the field of history of education?

H-E. T.: There are no systematic attributions of quality or opposition – the available practices of presentation and construction, evaluation and analysis of historical sources as a whole must be used, creatively related to the question and the open research problems. This applies, incidentally, to all fields of research in the humanities, not only to historical educational research. You can forget the old sham fights of the past in peace.

A. A. & M. V.: How has technology changed methodology in historical educational research over the course of your career?

H-E. T.: I was pleased when quantifying analyses became possible, e.g. for the dynamics of knowledge and theory in scientific pedagogy and its knowledge production, as we did in Frankfurt and Berlin together with staff and colleagues. That was practiced for the first time since the late 1980s in journal analyses or for educational science in National Socialism also in collective biographical analyses. In Bochum (Müller/Zymek) or Göttingen (Herrlitz/Titze) and Bielefeld (Lundgreen/Kraul) this has made today indispensable analyses of the educational system and its dynamics and momentum possible. But also the use of new sources, such as photographs, is ultimately not possible without a new technical basis. Historical methodology is no longer sufficiently described as a clever interpretation – called «verstehen» – of thematically limited or canonically spoken texts.

A. A. & M. V.: What is the current direction of the history of education as a field in Germany? What are the exciting new areas in the field?

H-E. T.: Historical educational research in Germany, not different from the international situation, has undergone a considerable change over the past 50 years towards a methodologically refined and theoretically reflected discipline. It has also taken part in all turns – critical, theoretical, linguistic, visual, praxeological, spatial, material (etc.) – of the international debate in the historical, social scientific and social philosophical disciplines, sometimes at the price of having difficulty in identifying her disciplinary identity and her significance in the educational context. I would find it exciting if this specific feature were to become a topic again alongside the routine of a broadly based and modernized discipline that has become widely accepted.

A. A. & M. V.: Is comparative history of education a rising field of interest? Are there differences between the national and international perspective in that regard?

H-E. T.: Of course, historical-comparative research is an interesting and irreplaceable perspective – already in Frankfurt we learned this from the cooperation with Jürgen Schriewer and practiced with him, in Berlin we continued this, and now Marcelo Caruso shows how this works and why it is indispensable. There is a broad international consensus on this.

A. A. & M. V.: How would you describe the interdisciplinary activities of researchers in the history of education under a national as well as international perspective? Which further steps of development are necessary in that regard?

H-E. T.: The modernization of historical educational research since the last third of the 20th century has only become possible through international cooperation. ISCHE, after its renewal, forced by the Leuven/Ghent colleagues around Maurice de Vroede, Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, has earned high marks for cooperation and discussion, also for the implementation of quality standards, across borders and is still important here today. Meanwhile this is deepened by the professional societies and the numerous relevant magazines. This needs to be stabilized and expanded, and on the whole it is on a very good path, internationally.

A. A. & M. V.: Has history of education become a global discipline? How does history of education differ between nations and what are the similarities?

H-E. T.: Of course, there are still national or cultural focal points in the topics – otherwise one could not even write appropriate stories if one would level these differences in research and only follow abstract overarching paradigms – but in the standards and practices historical educational research has become a globally communicating community. In this respect, the same and different at the same time.

A. A. & M. V.: How have the national groups collaborated to make history of education a trans-national discipline?

H-E. T.: I have already referred to ISCHE, the professional societies – from AERA, and comparable societies like EERA – to DGfE and comparable societies – have promoted this process, thematic cooperation, e.g. in the field of theory and history of education, have promoted cooperation. This will continue to work in the future.

A. A. & M. V.: Do you have thoughts about the presence of history of education in universities at the level of teaching and at the level of professorships?

H-E. T.: Historical educational research is indispensable in universities, because otherwise communication and research on culture and society and the role of educational systems, practices and processes would be incomplete and inadequate, perhaps even narrowed down to presentism and the present situation of education. Unfortunately, it has to be said that the situation is not really satisfactory at all universities, in Germany and worldwide. This has many causes, the premises and functional imperatives of the current higher education reform strategies are among them, but it also has to do with expectations of teacher education. It is insofar problematic for our subject when our own colleagues in historical educational research occasionally articulate sharply and critically the distance to the profession of education that is supposedly necessary to improve discipline, indeed the systematic disinterest of historical educational research in the expectations of the educational professions. One creates one's own obsolescence – unnecessarily, because the historical practice of education, school and teaching is the best field of experience of the pedagogical professions, for illusions and successes equally. Empirical educational research cannot keep up at all, simply because it lacks the processes of *longue durée* on the one hand and of the concrete reality of pedagogical interaction that really provide information about the possibilities of education and the fate of its ambitions.

A. A. & M. V.: How would you advise a new post-doctoral scholar coming into the history of education? What's the qualification process for the field and are there national as well as international variances?

H-E. T.: Finding one's own interests early, examining and improving one's own questions interdisciplinary, acquiring and testing the craft of historical research as quickly as possible, i.e. soon and quickly searching for the way into the archives – and then reading, reading, reading, because this immunizes against superficial interpretations, and searching for the professional public, so that one's own ideas, assumptions and illusions are put to the test of communication with experts in the field. And of course – the academic hazard (Max Weber) is also waiting, you have to learn to deal with it calmly, so you can't count initial failure on your own competence.

A. A. & M. V.: Which potential for further developments do you see in the field of history of education and which opportunities have not been taken yet? What are your personal visions for the further development of the discipline?

H-E. T.: The great thing about the future is that it is open and uncertain – I'm looking forward to surprises that my colleagues are preparing for me. For myself I would be happy if I could still bring one or the other manuscript and topic to print.

A. A. & M. V.: Do you have any other thoughts on the history of education?

H-E. T.: May her Clio remain favourably disposed!

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