

Zeitschrift: Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie
Herausgeber: Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich
Band: 16 (2010)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The ten commandments of good practices in history of education research
Autor: Depaepe, Marc
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901776>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.05.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Ten Commandments of Good Practices in History of Education Research

(Red.) Hermeneutik wurde im 19. Jahrhundert als Methode definiert, um den akademisch in Bedrängnis geratenen Geisteswissenschaften wissenschaftlichen Charakter zu verleihen. Später geriet die Idee des Geistes in Verdacht und wurde durch das Konzept des Diskurses ersetzt, dessen methodische Erforschung nun die Diskursanalyse war. Marc Depaepe erinnert jenseits dieser umfassenden Ansprüche daran, dass Forschung auch ein Handwerk ist, das sich besser an ein paar Regeln hält. Als Professor einer katholischen Universität formuliert er diese Regeln in Form von Geboten und stellt sie in dem virtuellen Konzil unterschiedlichster Exponenten der internationalen Bildungsgeschichte zur Diskussion.

■ Marc Depaepe

1. Thou shalt remember that the history of education is history;
2. Thou shalt write about the educational past;
3. Thou shalt not fret excessively about presentism;
4. Thou shalt not write a history of the present, nor for the present;
5. Thou shalt discourse about discourses;
6. Thou shalt demythologize former narratives and discourses about the history of education;
7. Thou shalt interpret multi-perspectively;
8. Thou shalt develop theoretical and conceptual frameworks from within the history of education;
9. Thou shalt strive for pure wisdom within the context of a cultural approach;
10. Thou shalt teach people and especially teachers in that spirit.

Explanation

At the request of the editors, I am stating here briefly what are, for me, the most important rules of thumb of good practices in the history of education research. This I am doing on the basis of my many years of research experience

as well as, on the basis of what I have published in several theoretical, methodological, and historiographical articles. I have called these guidelines, set down concisely in the form of propositions, somewhat provocatively «ten commandments» in the hope of stimulating a fruitful discussion. You can find these «commandments» as such at the beginning of the article.

Proposition #1 The history of education is history

Historical research, including research into the history of education, can be nothing other than «historical». That is by far not so obvious as it may appear. Since the history of education arose in the late 19th century in educational training institutes, its objectives were far from the purely historical. History was used primarily for practical educational purposes, such as drawing inspiration and motivation from the examples of the past, as well as theoretical purposes, for example, by providing ideas and conceptions to be used as building blocks for a contemporary theory of education. This «educationalizing» dealing with history led to a kind of «historical pedagogy» [histoire de la pédagogie], conceived as history of educational thought and ideas, and being marginalized in the institutional field with respect to cultural and social historical research. Historians, therefore, generally looked down on the history of education and left it to «pedagogues», with the exception of the history of universities, history of science, and/or history of knowledge, certainly when it concerned the history of primary and pre-school education. Over the last few decades, research in the history of education has become noticeably more «historical», but the differentiations and tensions in the field – often the result of factors external to the science, such as the striving for prestige, status, and power – have, nevertheless, continued. That several historians have been employed over the years in educational institutes has, ultimately, not changed very much. Moreover, being an historian, as such, offers no guarantee at all for the quality of the research nor would it be a *conditio sine qua non* for it. Good research is assessed not so much by the *a priori* qualifications of the researcher but rather by the results. And they are generally related to the meaningfulness of a well-nuanced statement of the question, which, by

means of its possible operationalization in complex sub-questions, is best dealt with in an interdisciplinary team.

Proposition #2
Its content is the educational past

What is «educational» in the educational historiography – a term I prefer, also in line with the name of this journal, to the old-fashioned «historical pedagogy» (which could be erroneously read as the striving for an educational theory or practice on the basis of history) – is thus not so much the research method but the content of the specialty. The material object (to express it in the already somewhat older history of science terminology) of our discipline obviously concerns the educational past (while the formal object – see proposition 1 – is precisely «historical» in nature). But since that past took place in a broader social context, the researcher may also not be blind to these wider social and cultural contexts. Education is, as a social institution, interwoven in so many ways with the ideological (by the values, norms, images of man) and intellectual (by the knowledge transmission but also by the production of knowledge and science about education), that collaboration of educators and historians often does not even suffice to chart all this adequately. In the Flemish interuniversity research team (Leuven, Ghent, and Kortrijk), which I have been allowed to lead up to now, there was, therefore, place for researchers of all sorts: historians, art historians, jurists, educational experts, philosophical pedagogues (or philosophers by training), orthopedagogues (special educationalists), anthropologists, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, philologists, cultural and even sports scientists. But even that is not a sufficient condition for good research. Above all, one must avoid shortsightedness and particularism in the starting questions. It is not good when the researcher or researchers are overly involved in the subject of the study. To my mind, a movement, an institution, a stock of ideas is difficult to map historically if the author is a participant. At the very least, a little distance is necessary to be able to look at the past critically. Ultimately, this also applies in relation to time. It does not seem sensible to me to want to take each historical study up to the present, for then contemporary educators, believers, and the proponents as well as their respective antagonists, will inevitably feel threatened.

Proposition #3
Presentism is not a methodological «sin» but rather an unavoidable condition of research in the history of education

This is not to say that «presentism» – as intended in the first wave of American revisionism of the early 1960s – is a methodological

fault. Rather, it is the inevitable condition with which the history of education researcher has had to learn to live with. Obviously, we always look back to the past from the present, that is to say, from our biologically but also our culture historically, sociologically, psychologically rooted position. But that does not alter the fact that it remains our task to avoid as much as possible the presentistic and perspectivistic pitfalls that the «viewpoint» from which we look at the past inevitably involves. As researchers into the educational past, we may not let ourselves be led or seduced by the desire to score points.

Proposition #4
History of education must avoid being a history «of» the present, let alone «for» the present

In order to be able to understand history, it must, first of all, be contextualized within its own time. And this voyage of discovery into the past assumes, just like that into a foreign culture, a willingness to dialogue with the culture of that past. Admittedly, from the present, frameworks of concepts and diverse conceptual keys have to be developed with which the past can be interpreted and understood. But that is not yet the same as wanting to write a history that interferes with the present and, as the orthodox Foucauldian model seems to prescribe, explicitly has intention of wanting to hazard our own way of being in the present. Intentionally writing in function of the present implies not only the danger of dealing «educationally» with the past – for it would ultimately again be didactic or pedagogical (see Proposition 1) – but also that of wearing blinders. The dialogical relation with the past intended here, proper to every «historiographical operation» (de Certeau) wants precisely, in my opinion, to let the past be fully the past.

Proposition #5
History of education is, like every history, a discourse about discourses

With it, injustice is not necessarily done to what Foucault has meant for history in general and for the historiography of education in particular. Quite the contrary. By drawing attention with him to the linguistic aspects of the historiographical operation (what linguistic ideas and concepts really mean, how they arise and evolve, to what the modes they are subject, what power relations they imply, and so on), it becomes clear not only that history is, above all, a narrative science but that it also possesses its own discursive power. It is, often unconsciously, the bearer of a message, the externalization of a social, political, or ideological striving. History is not, as the 19th century empiricism and historicism wanted to present it, a reconstruction of how it «really» was but the

endless construction of new, contemporary stories about the past. And as the present changes, these stories are unavoidably filled in differently. Each generation has the task, with all of the means at its disposal (sources, literature, interpretation methods and techniques, historical criticism) of producing from the contemporary position the best story about the past and that obviously implies the «deconstruction» of the existing, often worn-out stories about history. In this sense, the Sisyphean labor of the historical enterprise is always also a little relativizing, sobering, and often even humiliating.

Proposition #6

Therefore, demythologizing seems to be a never-ending task in the history of education

With the deconstruction of existing stories about history, dearly cherished myths about the past are inevitably destroyed. Historical research is, therefore, always a little disturbing because it supposes a critical dealing with what is past. Historical researchers not only pose awkward questions to the comfortable interpretations of the present but they also ultimately show that, in the framework of the behavioral sciences, there is little reason for triumphalism. In contrast to the unchallenged assumptions from contemporary disciplines, which, in their own historical reflections, generally freeze at a kind of «preface history», that is, at a history that presents the development of their won conceptual structures as continuous progress, the history of educational thought and of the educational sciences shows that the route the past has taken took very many inconsequential detours. And that not all of the roads taken have produced boundless improvements. Historical researchers are not the best speakers at jubilees or celebrations because they do not at all say what the party goers or guests of honor want to hear. It is for this reason that they are also readily seen and/or labeled as foulers of their own nests.

Proposition #7

The most important aim of the history of education remains interpretation, but interpretation from a multi-perspective point of view

As such, the educational historiography does not want to judge, let alone to condemn the past. Its primary task is and remains the interpretation of what has occurred in that past, not to call the actors from that past to account, to accuse them, or to make them look ridiculous, or whatever, but to be able to have their thinking and doing better understood. Moreover, this understanding is a necessary condition for being able to «forgive» any «errors» from the past – consider, for example, damaging ideological choices – but I leave

this aside for the moment. In order to expand the interpretation possibilities of the researchers, it is advisable for them to take up as many diverse standpoints as possible in the study of the past. Different «ways of seeing» can lead to multi-layered frameworks of interpretation. Such a change of perspective, moreover, not only yields to an epistemological necessity – our knowledge is necessarily limited by its perspectivism – but also witnesses to intellectual maturity (if, for example, we may believe the developmental psychology of Piaget). All of this ultimately seems so obvious that no learned treatises need to be written about it. The methodology of historical research is, perhaps even more than that of other approaches, pre-eminently that of commonsense. Here, too, applies the adage that the best proof of the quality of the pudding is in the eating.

Proposition #8

The interpretative qualities of the research may be improved by developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks from within the history of education

Rather than continuing to produce countless articles on the nature of research in the history of education, it seems to me to be important that the interpretative qualities of it be enhanced through a greater degree of theoretical awareness. Generally speaking, research into the history of education is still often characterized by a high degree of description of facts. Which need not surprise us, for the idiosyncratic and the special nature of certain developments inevitably attract the attention. Still, a certain striving for theory formation about the structural processes that occurred in the history of education is called for. In certain cases – as in Latin America, for example – this theoretical awareness is there more or less, but for the theoretical models used, it is all too easily plucked out of the existing history of science and cultural historical interpretations that have come about outside of the domain of education. This generally leads to very rough generalizations whereby the empirical material amassed has only to serve to «prove» the value of those coarse-grained models (such as, for example, the Foucauldian normalization paradigm). What the need requires, I would hold, is the production of more fine-grained explanatory models on the history of education from within: specific interpretative schemas that are not at all intended to serve as manuals for contemporary interventions but to introduce more structure (and thereby more insight) into the chaos of the educational past.

Proposition #9

The added value of such a history of education consists of nothing more than pure wisdom – there are no concrete lessons to be drawn from the educational past

Such a history of education does not envision wagging a finger or providing moralizing wisdom. It ignores the strict performance demands of professional educators and teachers and is, therefore, difficult to be trapped into learning objectives, final educational objectives, developmental objectives, and the like that are to be determined and operationalized beforehand. Its surplus value is situated on another, a higher, more abstract, and, *de facto* also more individual level. The history of education shows in its research not only the relativity of the often overblown rhetoric with respect to the «educational» but also provides impetus to deal with generally complex, sometimes paradoxical or ironic, and often problematic outcomes of the past. The problem is that it is difficult to strive intentionally for this advance in learning, the penalty being making history something other than history. For when history is placed in front of the cart of one or another ideological, political, or educational program, it ceases to be history.

Proposition #10

Nevertheless, such a (cultural) history of education has a place in the education of people in general and in the training of teachers in particular

The argument that counts in our neo-liberal society is one of economic profitability and utility. This makes the position of cultural historical research, and also education itself, particularly difficult. Investing in it does not yield immediately visible results, certainly not in the terms of practical utility or professional advantage. Still, the historical approach and way of thinking are far from superfluous for our society. It makes itself into a possible dam against the terror of the immediately useful. Historical research, also in the historiography of education, transcends the shortsightedness of our own time by making it clear that this prevailing drive for utility is an element of the long-term process of modernization and thereby, at the very least, holds the door open for a critical corrective that could consist of the cultivation of the culture of the non-utilitarian. Whereby history itself will demonstrate the extent to which this wish does or does not belong to the realm of illusion.

The gospel according to St Marc

• Gary McCulloch

Marc Depaepe's «ten commandments» of good practices in history of education research are, despite appearances, not tablets of stone but rather the historical gospel according to St Marc. There is much wise counsel here with which I am happy to agree, but I would be tempted to take issue and try to develop a number of points further, including the idea of «history» that he commends as well as the potential contribution of the history of education.

I support Proposition #1, that the history of education is history, but this in itself only takes us so far because there are many types of history and a large number of approaches to it. Depaepe does not clearly define what he means by history, but his preferences become evident at several stages in the argument. Some of these are fairly commonplace, but others are disputed, and when put alongside each other they form a rather curious mixture.

One of the assertions made by Depaepe about the nature of history would be criticized by many historians. For example, under Proposition #2 he notes that: «To my mind, a movement, an institution, a stock of ideas is difficult to map historically if the author is a participant. At the very least, a little distance is necessary to be able to look at the past critically. Ultimately, this also applies in relation to

time.» There are some historians who have taken such a view, but there are many others who have not and do not, and there is a great deal of important and good historical work that examines the recent and contemporary past up to the present. In Proposition #5 Depaepe insists that «History is not, as the 19th century empiricism and historicism wanted to present it, a reconstruction of how it «really» was but the endless construction of new, contemporary stories about the past.» Here, though, there is much debate among historians about the nature of historical truth and explanation, and Depaepe is posing the issue only in terms of the more extreme and opposing viewpoints. Proposition #9 asserts that «when history is placed in front of the cart of one or another ideological, political, or educational program, it ceases to be history»; again this would be disputed by many historians.

In other cases, Depaepe's notions of history are fairly conventional but do not seem to link very clearly to his argument as a whole. Proposition #4 suggests that «In order to be able to understand history, it must, first of all, be contextualized within its own time. And this voyage of discovery into the past assumes ... a willingness to dialogue with the culture of the past.» This «dialogical relation with the past» would indeed I think be widely endorsed