University of Groningen

'There is nothing more practical than good history'

Peters, Richard

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Peters, R. (2015). *'There is nothing more practical than good history': learning histories in the Netherlands.*

'There is nothing more practical than good history': learning histories in the Netherlands.

Rik Peters, Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Groningen.

Every year, the title's paraphrase of Kurt Lewin's famous dictum, fills the first slide of the masters' course 'Learning Histories and Organizations' at the Department of History at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. The motto always comes as a surprise to the students. Being trained as historians, they usually do not realize how historical method can be used to address contemporary problems. Even greater is the surprise when they hear that they will be sent to all kind of organizations to write learning histories for them: 'is it really possible to learn from history?', they ask, often in astonishment. Since 2004, and after 60 traing learning histories, 12 master theses and several large research projects in f.e. Philips Inc., the Dutch Employment Service and the Dutch Tax Administration, we think we have found and answer to that question. In finding it, we have combined our expertise in the theory of history with the practice of practice of writing learning histories in a process that constituted a learning history it itself.

The course Learning Histories and Organizations began in 2004, when the department of history decided to train history students for employment outside the fields of research and education. In this context, Frank Ankersmit and I joined forces to design a course to teach history students how to deal with contemporary social problems. Frank Ankersmit was then Professor in Intellectual History and Theory of History, and I had just been employed as a researcher in a research project in the theory of history. Before I came to Groningen I had been working as a consultant in all kind of profit and non-profit organizations. Using Socratic dialogues both in meetings and in coaching sessions, I had got interested in the theory of learning organizations. In this context, I read Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* and discovered how dialogues can be used to create shared visions in organizations. It was in *The Dance of Change* that I saw the term 'learning histories' for the first time. Being trained as a historian with a PhD in philosophy, the term 'learning history' immediately intrigued me, and I began to read more about it, discovering the books by George Roth and Art Kleiner. On this basis, I began to transform the dialogues into learning histories: using the output of an dialogue as input for the next, I creating a sequence, the results of which I also used in individual coaching sessions.

In the first course Frank Ankersmit and I set up for the new programme, we began by exploring the methods of national investigation reports, parliamentary inquiries, and other political documents, until one of the students asked whether he could do such a research himself in the administration of a small Dutch town. We immediately agreed, and advised him to write a learning history. To our pleasure, the learning history was well received by the town's administration, so we decided to focus on learning histories only. In the 2005 course we used Senge's books as well as *Oilco* and *Car Launch* by Art Kleiner and George Roth, and we began to teach about the five disciplines, double loop learning, and of course the learning histories method. From the beginning, however, we also gave our own accents to the method. First of all, along the lines of Hayden White's and Frank Ankersmit's narrativism, we stressed that a learning

history should comprise a good story, with a clear plot based on a strong root metaphor. We also taught our students that if organizations intend to learn from the past, they should begin to compare original intentions with final outcomes, both intended and unintended. Finally, from the beginning we realized that learning histories require highly developed hermeneutical techniques to scrutinize both written sources and the interviewees. In this context, we taught our students both Collingwood's and Gadamer's hermeneutic of question and answer and Ginzburg's notion of 'clues' which he had developed in his cultural history. The hermeneutics of question and answer is based on the principle that meaning of artefacts and words can best be understood as an answer to a question. If we want to understand the speech of a CEO, or the formal structure of an organization, or the division of offices in an organization we must try to understand them as answers to questions, or as solutions to problems. Viceversa, if we want to get useful answers from our interviewees, we will have to invent and organize good questions in the first place. In addition to this, Ginzburg's notion of 'clues' helps to interpret the results of the research into a broader cultural context; just like Ginzburg in his *The Cheese and the Worms* had used the Menocchio's answers to reconstruct the organizational culture of the Inquisition at the end of the 16th Century, so modern learning historians can use the same method to understand the culture of a modern organization.

With this luggage we sent the students to all kinds of organizations. For most of them this was quite a shock. History students normally get a thorough methodological training, but of course, they are not trained to apply use their skills in real life modern organizations. To our pleasure, however, the students adapted very quickly and every semester they produced learning histories for schools, political parties, ministries, a bank, a software company. Also, from the beginning many learning histories were presented to and used by the organizations.

Though most learning histories were well received by most organizations, they also confronted us with a huge theoretical problem. Historians are well equipped to write good stories, but in learning histories the point is to write a story from which organizations can learn. In the course we claimed that organizations can learn from history, but the very idea that it is possible to learn from the past is highly contested, in particular among historians. Unlike the first learning historians at M.I.T. who had admirably shown how learning from the past is possible, we had to focus on the question why it is possible, if only to convince our colleague historians.

In our search, we started from Argyris and Schön's theory of single loop and double loop learning and Hilary Bradbury's ideas on learning histories as an action research practice and combined this theory of unintended consequences, which is one of the classic topics in the philosophy of history. This combination of theories showed us how reflection on the past is necessarily involved in learning, but it does not explain why that reflection leads to learning. While thinking about this question, we gradually discovered that the question was not 'how can we learn from the *past?* but: 'how can we *learn* from the past?' Contrary to our professional identity as historians, we thus realized that our most important problem was not the notion of history, but the notion of learning!

For some years, Frank Ankersmit and I struggled with the problem, but the beginning of solution came when our colleague Jaap den Hollander joined us. As an expert in systems theory, he brought the ideas of Umberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, and Niklas Luhmann to the course. On this basis we defined organizations as autopoietical systems, which organize themselves in relation to their environment by describing their own past. From this perspective, historians can be seen as a specialised second order observer, because they have been educated to observe observations made in distant times. Finally, we combined the theory of learning with sysems theory, arguing that unintended consequences can best be explained in terms of 'blind spots'. On this basis we were finally able to answer our original question: to learn from the past means to discover the blind spots of organizations. From this perspective, we defined learning historians as 'eye-openers': they make the blind see again.

On this basis, we train students in a one semester's course. After a thorough introduction of seven weeks in the theory of learning histories and an intensive interview training, they are sent to the organizations in teams. They first explore what the organizations actually 'see' by studying their documents, and by collecting the stories from the CEO and employees to the customers in interviews. In this context, they employ hermeneutics as a method to understand the organizations as a whole; by analysing the documents and the stories of employees they map the mental models by which people in the organization observe reality. The next step is to find out what they do not see, and most importantly, why not. The final step is to write a learning histories which, by asking critical questions in the margin as in the original M.I.T. format, confronts the organization with its blind spots. As a rule, we present the learning histories in the organizations, often discussing the results in Socratic dialogues. Many learning histories have been expanded into full masters' theses some of which have served as a basis for articles.

In order to illustrate the method I will give two examples.

The first master thesis written on the basis of these principles dealt with the struggles of civil servants when in 1998 their town was appointed a location for a refugee camp. The building of the camp led to vehement protests among the citizens which immediately reported in the media. The learning history pointed out how the civil servants' mental model to serve the town clashed with their personal ethics. This clash came dramatically to the fore, when, during a dialogue on the results of the learning history, I asked them: 'why, in view of all the trouble in the town, did you decide to continue the building of the camp'? The answer was: 'we could not leave the refugees outside in the rain'! In Collingwood's terms, this was their 'absolute presupposition', that is, the belief upon which they had taken action, despite all resistance. By discovering it, the civil servants learned what they had stood by all the time.

In the years 2006-2009 we carried out a learning histories project in the Dutch Employment Service. With 35.000 employees this is one of the largest organizations in Holland. It has a long tradition and is one of the key organizations in Dutch society; from the First World War the Dutch Employment Service has mediated between demand and supply on the labour market. In 2000 the Service began a large ICT project, which had enormous consequences for all the people

working in the organization, and for its clients. In 2006, the organization asked us to write a learning history about the implementation process in order to learn from it. Together with the students we gathered all the relevant documents from the archives and conducted interviews with about 50 employees in all parts of the organization. One of the most significant outcomes of this research was that the central organization in Amsterdam had not sufficiently realized how the new ICT would change the lives and work of the employees working in the department in the country. Symbolic for the organization's blind spot was a moment during the presentation of the learning history, when one of the employees told the director of the human resource department: 'if I have to choose between filling in the correct computer files and helping the carpenter and his family through the Winter, I choose the latter. After the presentation, the learning history was summarized and distributed among all the employees of the organization.

Along the same lines we have conducted research in many other organizations like Philips and the Dutch Tax Administration. Last year, we began a large in the city of Groningen, our home town, focussing on social integration policies. Next year, we will continue that project, and expand it to other cities, broadening the scope to the increasingly urgent issue of immigrant acculturation.