

From avoiding uncertainty to accepting it: Semiotic modelling of history education at the limits of knowledge

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Abstract: This article explicates how different approaches to teaching history can enforce diverse strategies for dealing with uncertainty. Descriptions of three types of historical pedagogy are analysed as three kinds of modelling systems derived from Juri Lotman's theory of semiotics of culture: myth-type modelling, scientific modelling, and play-type modelling. The paper argues that the connection between pedagogical approaches and uncertainty, as an experience that occurs at the limits of knowledge, can be modelled as the relation between a semiotic system and its boundary. The nature of this relation can differ depending on how the division between the internal and external space of the semiotic entity is perceived. Different types of modelling systems establish distinct patterns in order to deal with the indeterminacy of the borderland area. In the process of learning, these patterns can be viewed as semiotic strategies that various pedagogical approaches enforce when arriving at the limits of knowledge and facing the situation of indeterminacy that can cause students to experience uncertainty. Three different strategies are discussed in the context of history education: avoiding uncertainty in the case of the collective memory approach, addressing uncertainty in the case of the disciplinary approach, and accepting uncertainty in the case of the post-modern approach to teaching history.

Keywords: uncertainty; Juri Lotman; history education; boundary; modelling systems; semiotic theory of learning

1. Introduction

The accelerating speed of change, the rising level of complexity and fragmentation, the inability to predict the course of future events (see Rosa 2013) – all these aspects of our contemporary world instigate uncertainty on various levels of culture, from individuals to whole societies. In the times of “liquid modernity”,

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