

The integration of history teaching practice and practitioners into history education journals

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which German-language academic journals of history education serve not only as publication platforms for researchers but are also relevant to the wider community – particularly to practitioners such as teachers. It notes that there is a striking lack of reader surveys that would reveal the actual function these journals fulfil. The presentation of journals as communication platforms and their significance for academic communities is followed by a discussion of discursive power differences between editorial teams, authors, academics and practitioners within the community. Finally, the central questions regarding the relationship between academic discourse and professional reflection, and the significance of professional experiential knowledge in academic debates, are discussed.

Keywords

History education; academic journals; knowledge production; discursive power; integration of practice and practitioners

1 The integration of history teaching practice and practitioners into history education journals

The editorial teams of German-language academic history education journals need hardly worry about whether they have a future. Researchers in history education need platforms in which to publish, and as there are only a few such journals, they are sought after as publication opportunities and thus as venues for disciplinary discourse. However, this does not answer the question of the extent to which these academic journals are also of interest to their potential readers. After all, the circle of those interested in history education is far larger than the group of history education researchers who report on their academic work.

However, there is hardly any reflection on the profile of an academic journal by members of the history education community or members of the respective editorial board in published studies. Furthermore, the few contributions on the content design and/or the social composition of the authors of history education journals pursue other research questions (Fodor & Tóth, 2023; Bernhardt, 2014; Demantowsky, 2010; Rohlfes, 2000; for an overview of these studies, see Ziegler, 2026).

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One way of assessing a journal's appeal to its readers would be to survey a journal's readership regarding the appeal and relevance of the journal's profile and the articles published therein. The complete absence of reports on readers' surveys of history education journals is therefore striking. It raises the question of what function(s) academic history education journals serve for the disciplinary community and what this reveals about the disciplinary knowledge structure and the supposed all-round participation in the production and negotiation of disciplinary knowledge.

1.1 German-language journals of history education and their readership

Journals of history education, like other journals of didactics or subject-specific didactics, represent a specific format of academic journals. This is because, at least in theory, they generally target a readership with a wider range of professional backgrounds than journals positioned as specialist academic publications. Whilst the latter are generally geared towards communication amongst those active in academia, journals of didactics claim to function as a communication platform between those working theoretically, empirically and practically in this field. In German-speaking countries, communities of subject-specific didactics have long been understood, much like the academic disciplines themselves, as communities of researchers engaged in theoretical and, in rare cases, empirical research. For some years now, however, practitioners with an interest in subject-specific didactics – primarily teachers at various school levels – have been regarded as members of subject-specific didactical communities and addressed as such, even though subject-specific didactical content plays a different role in their profession than it does for researchers. Practitioners are now included in the community primarily because the members are often not confined to a single professional role in subject-specific didactics; for example, they combine the roles of research assistants with those of teachers at the relevant educational levels (Bammé, 2015, pp. 176–204). While this can be observed throughout the German-speaking world, it is particularly pronounced in German-speaking Switzerland due to the small number of posts available in subject-specific didactics (Gautschi & Ziegler, 2023, pp. 29–30).

In the following, using the example of (German-language) history education journals, it will be discussed whether and how subject-specific didactics journals are adapting to this changed view of the composition of their community and thus their readership. It is argued that the needs and interests of readers engaged in subject-specific practice (particularly teaching) are merely imagined or derived from subject-specific didactics research. Conversely, readers' and especially practitioners' perspectives on theoretical frameworks and empirical findings are scarcely discussed in a way that challenges the research itself. The expansion of the professional activities of didacticians with an academic background raises the question of whether designing these journals exclusively as a communication platform for those engaged in academic research is sufficient to meet the needs of the readership. Furthermore, it leads to the question of whether the field of history education is thereby missing an opportunity to incorporate the experiences and assessments of academic research by those with academic training but working in practice into the academic discourse.

First, we will briefly examine the discussion within media and communication studies regarding academic journals. We will then discuss their function for the (German-speaking) history education community, based on a sociological framework of knowledge. Subsequently, we will outline the structure of knowledge and knowledge communication that can be described regarding the various members of the community, and the position occupied by the editors of history education journals within the community. Finally, we will discuss the challenges arising from the participatory integration of practice and practitioners into academic discourse, which must be achieved for history education journals to become a shared space for disciplinary knowledge acquisition through theory, empirical research and practice.

1.2 Academic journals

For decades, media and communication studies have criticised the failure to provide a coherent definition of journals within the context of mapping a media system (for a detailed discussion, see Oehmer et al., 2020, p. 369; Holmes, 2012, pp. 1–6; Vogel, 2002, pp. 13–18). In analytical attempts, they were initially described as something “different” in contrast to newspapers. Subsequent efforts to define the nature of this “difference” yielded varying results, none of which, however, have gained widespread acceptance.

Researchers who have conducted an empirical review of previous studies on individual journals to arrive at a definition have once again noted the extraordinary heterogeneity of their research subject. They note that analyses of individual journals by researchers from different disciplines, often from a specific thematic perspective, are not helpful for a generalised examination or even a theorisation of journals (see, for example, Jarren et al., 2019, pp. 47–48). The heterogeneity of the research field of journals or magazines and the underlying definitions is impressively documented by the contributions to the *Handbuch Zeitschriftenforschung* (Scheiding & Fazli, 2023, tr. *Handbook of Journal Research*, BZ).

Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining the research subject *journal* and the reservations regarding such an approach, Tim Holmes (2012) identified, on the basis of a meta-analysis of studies of individual journals or, as he calls them, magazines, the elements that constitute them, and referred to these again in the *Handbuch Zeitschriftenforschung* (Holmes, 2023, p.592):

1. magazines always target a precisely defined group of readers;
2. magazines base their content on the expressed and perceived needs, desires, hopes and fears of that defined group;
3. magazines develop a bond of trust with their readerships;
4. magazines foster community-like interactions between themselves and their readers, and among readers;
5. magazines can respond quickly and flexibly to changes in the readership and changes in the wider society... (Holmes, 2012, p. 7).

Following a systematic review of the literature, the research team led by Otfried Jarren identified the defining characteristics of journals in more restrained terms (Oehmer et al., 2020):

Journals are publications that appear regularly (though not daily and at least twice a year) over a prolonged period and are printed for economic or social reasons, with a thematic focus or specific target audience. They feature typical forms of presentation (text types such as reportage and background reporting) as well as modes of presentation, such as visualisation or text structure (...). In principle, they are accessible to everyone. (pp. 369–370, tr. BZ)

Scheiding and Fazli (2023, pp. 12–14) also emphasise in the introduction to the *Handbuch Zeitschriftenforschung* that, alongside attempts to theorise the quality of journals and thus to determine their place within a media system, there has recently been a shift in research towards cultural studies approaches that also focus on the complex interrelationships between society and journals. This approach also characterises the major historical study on the journals *Philosophical Transactions* and *Proceedings* of the Royal Society (Fyfe et al., 2022), which demonstrates how significantly the character of a specialist journal has changed over time and under the influence of a wide variety of factors, whereby even here – according to the authors – it remains unclear to what extent the specific findings can be applied to research on other journals.

1.3 The function(s) of an academic journal

Jarren's team based their research project on the question of what contributions journals make to society (within a multi-level media system), which is why their work is particularly relevant to the focus of this article. These researchers define the function of journals as follows: "They serve primarily to provide and facilitate the exchange of information on topics of specific interest and thus fulfil the social function of self-organisation among actors in differentiated, pluralistic (knowledge) societies." (Oehmer et al., 2020, p. 377, tr. BZ) Using a cluster analysis based on a list of Swiss journals between 1975 and 2016, they identified groups of journals organised according to their function, in the hope of thereby having "created a basis for systematic, synchronic and diachronic comparative journal research [...]: 1. Specialised journals on professional development and networking; 2. Specialised journals for member communication; 3. Commercial subject-specific journals; 4. Subject-specific journals on social networking" (Oehmer et al., 2020, p. 377, tr. BZ).

According to Jarren et al. (2019, pp. 57–58) journals of science and education constitute a subgroup of thematic journals. The sociologist of science Rudolf Stichweh (2013, p. 17, tr. BZ) subsumes them under the "sufficiently homogeneous communicative context", which he regards as essential for a scientific community alongside the body of scientific knowledge, "problematic questions", an ensemble of research methods and a specific career structure or institutionalised socialisation process. In doing so, he attributes to them, as part of the publishing process, the significance that they help to determine, on the one hand, shared knowledge and, on the other,

the individual position of researchers in knowledge production or within the community (Stichweh, 2013, pp. 51–64). Whilst Jarren's research team (Oehmer et al., 2020, p. 377, tr. BZ) defines journals as a medium for the "self-organisation of actors" in "(knowledge) societies", Stichweh (2013, pp. 64–69) specifies the function of the academic journal as a site for the circulation of knowledge within a community, whilst simultaneously serving as a link to research-driven knowledge production.

However, this says nothing about the internal structure of a community, or about whether and how the internal academic discourse that takes place in the medium of the academic journal is shaped by the varying levels of discursive power held by those involved. This will be discussed below under the heading of the philosophy of history education journals, with a particular focus on history education practitioners, who are now (or should be) understood as part of the (academic) community.

1.4 The philosophy of history education journals

Christopher Shoop-Worrall (2023, p. 265) identifies two views of the role of journals, or rather two self-conceptions held by their editorial teams, in the literature on the history of media: In one tradition of thought, media, including journals, are "understood as the fourth power, which educates and enlightens its audience; in the other, the media are seen as a mirror of society". He (Shoop-Worrall, 2023, p. 266, tr. BZ) emphasises that journals generally cannot be classified as belonging entirely to one school of thought or the other. Through education and enlightenment, Shoop continues, "the fourth power [projected] the world onto its readers", whilst "the opposing tradition [regarded] the media as a mirror: not as something that imposes desires and interests on its audience, but as something that attempts to reflect the thoughts already present in readers' minds".

Academic journals represent knowledge significant to the respective academic community. According to Stichweh (2013, p. 57), publication enables individual authors to stake out their position in relation to that knowledge, whilst simultaneously situating both the authors and the findings presented within the broader context of disciplinary discourse. As knowledge within a scientific community is nowadays very broad, only a few participants – though at least these few – can engage in a discussion on a well-founded basis. This implies that the notion that the process of truth-negotiation – that is, the argumentative discussion regarding knowledge and critical questions – takes place only to a limited number of participants: namely, those working within the same specialised field. For most readers, the reports serve as informative, enlightening lessons, although among them are researchers who, whilst unable to judge the specific content, can at least form an opinion by examining the process of acquisition of knowledge and results as presented. Practitioners who draw on the knowledge offered acquire it mainly as a resource.

The complex structure of knowledge negotiation and scientific truth-seeking in academic journals is further complicated by characteristics specific to the disciplines of subject-specific didactics and pedagogy. Until the so-called empirical turn in the 1990s and the accompanying and subsequent professionalisation of the practice-oriented professionals, the discussion within the German-speaking community was conducted in accordance with subject-specific academic mechanisms with a view to standardising knowledge. On the one hand, a process began in which the theoretical discussion within didactics sought to emancipate itself from that of educational science. The aim was to construct an independent, discipline-specific body of knowledge (Criblez, 2009, p. 33; Ziegler, 2019, pp. 20–23). This process proceeded initially through a theoretical discussion in which practitioners were not expected to contribute to the academic debate. History education practice itself remained an imagined field and practitioners kept being addressed mostly by colleagues in journals designed for practical application – for example, in the case of history teaching, in *Praxis Geschichte* or *Geschichte lernen*.

On the other hand, it became clear that the presumed effects of theoretically derived didactic concepts and models could hardly be found in practice – even though they ultimately have to be proven in practice. The often significant discrepancy between theoretically derived claims regarding the effects of didactic action in the practical field consequently was a key reason for the shift towards empirical research. It led to a need within educational science and subject-specific didactics to test theoretical frameworks and debates through empirical studies in the practical field. Consequently, the practical field acquired an independent value, and history education theory was challenged by empirical studies into verifiable practice. Practitioners, however, with their individual experiences and reflections on practice and theory, remained in the status of objects in the negotiation of truth in journals, that is, in academia.

This caused even less concern within the academic communities, given that for a very long time the prevailing view of teaching and learning was that learners – whether trainee teachers or pupils at the final stages of their education – should be instructed through the transfer of knowledge, and thus introduced to that knowledge. The self-image commonly associated with academic journals is deeply rooted in these disciplines: The communication of knowledge has long been understood almost exclusively as instruction, even as teaching methods began to diversify. This is countered, at least in potential, by the shift towards competence-building, which has led to intense and protracted debates in subject-specific didactics such as history education (Schreiber, Ziegler, Kühberger (Eds.), 2019b). This was accompanied by the practice of setting out the theory and methodology of studies in a transparent manner, thereby enabling them to be subjected to informed discussion.

This may have met with particular resistance, as its parent discipline, history – in which a large proportion of history educators were trained (in the Swiss context, see Ziegler & Nitsche, 2023, pp. 16–17) – still does not primarily aim at an argumentative and reasoned presentation, but rather at a coherent narrative that is, however, not infrequently opaque regarding its preconceptions, sources and perspectives, and whose merit for discussion can scarcely be recognised by non-specialists. In this sense, historical scholarship continues to frequently practise a discourse of instruction which, in many places, persists in history lessons at various levels as a canon rather than as a socially negotiated construction made transparent (on developments in Switzerland, see Ritzer & Hediger, 2023).

Anyhow, competence-oriented theory has transformed research and, ultimately, the presentation of knowledge in journals, thereby empowering a far wider readership to engage in the discussion. It has sharpened the focus on the need for a reasoned and explanatory presentation of requirements or recommendations addressed to practitioners (Schreiber, Ziegler, Kühberger, 2019a, pp. 333–335). As the relationship between academia and practice has thus evolved, practitioners are recognised as professional actors and understood as subjects within their field, in which they apply and reflect upon didactic knowledge in their practical work. If, as postulated, they are therefore understood as members of the history education community, the questions, doubts and criticisms they raise in discussions regarding the theoretical and empirical frameworks for their practice must now be considered by researchers and theoretical conceptualisation (Schreiber, Ziegler, Kühberger, 2019a, p. 336).

1.5 The discursive power of editorial boards

As already noted, academic journals play a vital role within their respective communities by providing researchers with the opportunity to publicise their projects and findings, and to position themselves as authors of statements relevant to the discipline, as Stichweh emphasises (Stichweh, 2013, pp. 58–60). This significance grants editorial boards a special position within the community. Whilst editorial boards serve the publishing community and its communication through their editorial work, they simultaneously steer its discourse through the setting of themes and decisions about authorship. This is because they determine the processes through which contributions must pass to be accepted into the journal, and through the selection of potential reviewers, they further shape the journal's direction. They frequently set themes for at least some of the issues, thereby steering the research focus of potential authors to a certain extent. These decision-making powers create a certain degree of hierarchy within the academic community, and this becomes all the more pronounced the fewer people are involved in journal programming – whether because there are very few journals in a discipline, or because, for example, the executive boards of the disciplinary community are responsible for journals as well as their conferences.

Both potential authors and readers exert a certain corrective influence on the actions of editorial teams. Potential authors have a degree of choice in that they can submit articles to certain journals and not to others. Readers have less influence. If they wish to stay informed about research in their discipline, they have no choice but to take note of the journals' content. This is particularly true when – as is generally the case in subject-specific didactics – there are only a small number of such publications. Practitioners among them have, overall, little discursive power. Moreover, their influence in journals is all the more limited because the editorial boards are generally made up of researchers and university professors. Despite being addressed more and more as part of the community; their influence is poor partly because they are generally not considered as authors, and partly because subject didactics such as history education remain unable to determine the significance and function of practice for the production of scientific truth.

1.6 Practice in the field of history education, practitioners in history education journals

Professional practice is grounded in academic research and thus has an intersubjective basis. Nevertheless, it operates on an individual basis and must proceed situationally in its assessments and actions. Professional reflection on this practice is academically trained but tied to perceived past and present experiences (Schön, 1983; Terhart, 2011; Wyss, 2013; Arendt et al., 2025). Accordingly, professional reflection on history education differs in part from academic reflection. Those engaged in history education in practice consequently take their own view of theoretical frameworks and evaluate academic texts according to categories of interest that are partly different from those of academics. This presents challenges for the editorial teams of history education journals – and indeed for the history education community as a whole, which here stands as representative of subject-specific didactics – in integrating practice and practitioners into the disciplinary establishment of truth. For the editorial teams of specialist journals, it could (or should) be a particular priority to find ways of stimulating discussion within the journals themselves about the scientific significance of practical experience and insights from professional practice, and to promote the theorisation of the relationship between generalised research and individual practice through collaborative work between researchers and practitioners. It must be emphasised once again that this is by no means an end in itself: history education, like other didactics, are disciplines that must always relate to practice and are therefore required to test and verify their findings in and through practice, and to explain and reduce any discrepancies between research-based findings and their practical application.

It is therefore argued here that the field of history teaching faces challenges that must be addressed through a combined approach involving theory, empirical research and practice:

- It is necessary to clarify what relationship can be established between academic discourse and professional reflection, and what role professional reflection can play in the academic discourse establishing disciplinary truth.
- It must be determined what significance (professional) experiential knowledge can have in the academic debate on history education, provided it is not dismissed from the outset as arbitrary, subjectively limited and therefore unsuitable for an intersubjective engagement with history education.

If journals of history education wish to position themselves as forums for theory-based and practice-oriented debate on the teaching and learning of history, they must prioritise fostering discussion of these still unresolved issues. This requires not only the greater integration of observable practice into theoretical discussion and empirical analysis, but also the comparison and clarification of theoretical and professional commentary. If practitioners are to be engaged in this discussion, their reflections on practice must find their way into the journals and thus into the academic discourse. In order to identify topics in history education where, on the one hand, researchers can demonstrate the practical relevance of their findings and, on the other hand, practitioners have a strong interest in clarification and discussion, journals cannot rely on the topics they set and the texts provided by researchers being sufficient. All groups, including practitioners, must be regularly consulted regarding their interests and needs. In this way, journals of history education can develop to a far greater extent into forums for communication between all members of the community. Addressing these questions is closely linked to the extent to which the aim of engaging with and understanding practitioners as members of the history education community can be realised.

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