How Textbook Research Was Given a New Future in Braunschweig Following the Death of Georg Eckert

Eckhardt Fuchs and Steffen Sammler

THE BEGINNINGS
Following the sudden death of Georg Eckert in January 1974, the state of Lower Saxony resolved to ensure that the work of the International Textbook Institute that Eckert had founded would be continued. On 26 June 1975, the delegates of the Lower Saxony State Parliament (Landtag) thus passed the resolution – by unanimous vote – to establish the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI) as an institution of public law. In doing so, they secured not only the continued work of the International Institute for Textbook Improvement founded by Eckert in the spring of 1951 (known as the International Textbook Institute as of 1953), but also provided it with a new and stable foundation in both a legal and financial sense. Lower Saxony invited all other federal states to participate in rendering the GEI the textbook institute of all Federal States of West Germany. In the period that followed, this invitation was accepted by all West German states with the exceptions of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. The Board of Trustees, at the time under the leadership of Alfred Kubel, further secured the support of the Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the German UNESCO Commission and of the Lower Saxony Teachers Training College.

The founding of the GEI brought in its wake the constitution of a Board of Trustees and an Academic Advisory Board, and thus led to a continuous extension of the research library and of textbook research itself. Since 1981, the renovation of the Villa von Bülow by the State of Lower Saxony has given the Institute a prestigious home, enabling its employees to continue the textbook work initiated by Georg Eckert and to successfully respond to new challenges within the fields of textbook revision and research in the decades that followed.
THE LEGACY OF GEORG ECKERT

This monumental resolution by the state of Lower Saxony had been preceded by an intensive discussion with representatives from the sectors of politics and research initiated by Federal State Ministerpräsident Alfred Kubel shortly after the death of Georg Eckert. This discussion had confirmed from an early stage that the Institute would be able to rely on a large number of supporters who were willing to see the Institute’s work continued and reformed, even after the death of Eckert himself. These included sociologist Siegfried Bachmann, political scientist Walter Mertineit, historians Wolfgang Marienfeld and Rudolf von Thadden, and geographer Wilhelm Wähle, who as members of the academic advisory committee not only continued the bi- and multilateral textbook talks begun under Eckert’s leadership with Poland, Romania and the Vatican, but also undertook crucial preparations for the beginning or resumption of textbook talks under the directorate of Karl-Ernst Jeismann with the USA (1980), the Soviet Union (1983) and Israel (1981). They were also able to assure the international partners within the Council of Europe and UNESCO of the continued cooperation of the GEI, which had served as a textbook centre of the Council of Europe since 1965. The international Council of Europe conference on “Co-operation in Europe since 1945”, which was organised by the Georg Eckert Institute in December 1979, bore witness to this lasting partnership and was followed by a series of joint events, such as methodological discussions of textbook research, depictions of Europe in textbooks, and the new concept for history teaching after the events of 1989. A conference together with UNESCO in 1988 on the portrayal of global issues for humankind in the classroom formed the basis for the UNESCO Guidelines for Curriculum and Textbook Development in International Education and the establishment of the UNESCO International Textbook Research Network, maintained by the GEI in close cooperation with UNESCO.

The changes in the year 1975, however, led to an intense discussion on textbook revision and research. The founding of the Institute took place amidst heated debate – both specialist and methodological – which had surrounded the future of the subject of history in the light of multiple perspectives since the 1960s. This debate, which had been shaped by – amongst others – Karl-Ernst Jeismann (appointed Director of the GEI in 1978) would define the work of the Institute for decades to come.

In the light of these events, textbook revision could no longer be conceived as merely a “pragmatic” process of negotiation on a historical narrative that was to be collaboratively defined and liberated from enemy images, stereotypes and factual errors. Rather, textbook revision itself needed to become the object of a critical analysis that considered the political climate, methods and results of textbook projects.

The Institute thus now found itself faced with the challenge of shaping textbook research into an interdisciplinary field that could develop new methods and lines of inquiry moving beyond a descriptive content analysis. This approach to theories and methods of textbook research paved the way for a more praxis-orientated approach to teaching and learning in the classroom in studies of the following years on the production of knowledge in textbooks.
THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLICATIONS
At this time of intensive scholarly debate and a clearly visible medial shift, the Institute also now faced the challenge of swiftly transferring the results of international textbook projects into the spheres of politics and research. Georg Eckert had been able to set up cooperative partnerships with publisher Hans Eckensberger, who produced the Institute’s book series and the Internationales Jahrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht (International Yearbook for History Teaching), edited together with the Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Lehrerverbände (German Teachers Union) in the Limbach publishing house. From 1979, textbook and academic publishing houses such as Westermann, Diesterweg or Hahnsche Buchhandlung published the new journal of the Institute, Internationale Schulbuchforschung (International Textbook Research), and the book series, Studien zur Internationalen Schulbuchforschung (Studies on International Textbook Research). Today, the GEI edits a book series and Expertise series on current sociological lines of inquiry, both published by Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht and, with Berghahn Journals New York, the Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society (JEMMS).

TEAM AND SCHOLARSHIPS
The International Textbook Institute owed much of its success since its establishment to the curiosity and international competence and perspectives of its researchers. From 1975 in particular, it was these qualities that formed the basis for the Institute’s work, which in the previous few years had become more visible thanks to the increasing international makeup of its staff. With a constantly expanding number of employees it became possible to extend the library collection beyond the boundaries of Europe and to organise collaborative research projects with partners from Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. A key aspect of these successful measures and also the excellent reputation of the Institute at the international level, however, was the rich network of international cooperation partners and a generous scholarship programme. The Institute was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education in the year 1985, which prize money allowed for the further development of the scholarship programme, together with the generosity of historian Robert-Hermann Tenbrock, former Mayor of Braunschweig Otto Benemann, and the Association of Friends of the GEI (Verein der Freunde und Förderer). In 2013 the Institute founded the Georg Arnhold Programm on Education for Sustainable Peace, rendered possible by its benefactor Henry H. Arnhold.

The establishment of the Georg Eckert Institute of International Textbook Research on 26 June 1975 constituted a historic moment along the path from the International Institute for Textbook Improvement (1951) to the Institute’s successful application for membership of the Leibniz Association in 2011. This moment exemplifies Karl-Ernst Jeismann’s conviction that there can be no eternally valid truth in textbooks, as each generation must reformulate its own questions of history, geography, politics or religion based on its own need for specific knowledge. In order to address these questions in our research, we must repeatedly develop and put to the test new research methods and new formats with which to secure and disseminate results. As Theodor Heuss, former President of Germany, once put it so succinctly with regard to the Franco-German textbook talks in the 1950s, our success has depended and continues to depend on, amongst other things, the willingness and ability of “professors, well-established teachers, and journalists” to “learn once again themselves as teachers”; indeed, on the ability and willingness of all of us to continue learning.

On 7 December 2015 the GEI will celebrate its 40th anniversary. The Institute not only looks back on a long tradition and successful path of development, but is today a unique interdisciplinary centre of competence in international textbook research and textbook projects. With its profile that combines cultural studies with historical scholarship, the GEI brings together research, research infrastructure and knowledge transfer, enjoying an excellent reputation within the local region, Germany and abroad.