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Scientific instruments and the neglect of teaching in the history of physics

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While historians of science are mainly interested in the history of research, many if not most of the objects in physical cabinets and other historical scientific instrument collections emerged from a teaching context. I argue that we need to relocate education from the periphery of the history of science and technology to its centre. I claim that it is essential to study science education in its entirety and complexity if we want to understand the generation, reproduction, circulation and transformation of scientific and technological knowledge, practices, practitioners and objects inside and outside of scientific institutions and communities. Deborah Warner has suggested that the most common use of philosophical apparatus in the eighteenth century was in pedagogy. Since then, the relationship between research and teaching, and research and teaching instruments have changed considerably. For the last decades, the historical study of scientific instruments and collections has received a boost in Europe through the efforts of many of those involved to preserve the material heritage of universities, which had become endangered by institutional restructuring. Changes in research and teaching practices made these objects obsolete for current scientific activities and transformed them into historical objects. The material cultures and teaching practices related to these instruments, and their relation to research and other scientific practices, need to be studied.

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