

# AN ANALYSIS OF GRADE 10 HISTORY ASSESSMENT TASKS

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the nature and scope of the assessment tasks that three Grade 10 history classes were required to complete in 2005. Data were collected from three different secondary schools located in different socio-economic areas in KwaZulu Natal. Three tests from each school are analysed using Bloom's revised taxonomy in terms of knowledge dimension and cognitive process. The findings show that the assessment tasks across the schools differ substantially in both the level and the range of cognitive demand required of learners. While the study cannot make strong claims about causal explanations for the differences, the data do support an explanation of curriculum continuity in the historically advantaged sector in that previously white and Indian schools have been using evidence and source-based teaching and assessment for a number of years.*

## Introduction

This paper reports on a small part of a larger PhD study which aims to trace the recontextualising of the history curriculum through the levels of the pedagogic device (Bernstein, 1996). The wider context is that of a new curriculum being introduced in 2006 in Grade 10 of the Further Education and Training (FET) band. I have collected data from the various levels of the pedagogic device, such as interviews with the writers of the FET history curriculum, an analysis of the history curriculum document, interviews with Grade 10 textbook writers, participant observation of the four-day KZN provincial training workshop for teachers, observation of history lessons in three case study schools, interviews with the three history teachers in these schools, group interviews with learners and the collection of learners' assessment tasks. School-based data were collected in 2005 and in 2006.

The focus of this paper is an analysis of the learners' assessment tasks. The paper first describes the present curriculum and assessment policy position in the subject of history, outlines the use of the Revised Bloom's taxonomy as a tool of analysis and then presents the findings of this analysis.

### **Assessing history in South Africa**

The overwhelming focus of the teaching and learning of history in South Africa has traditionally been on understanding history as a body of information to be learned. Since the early-1980s, there has been a shift in some education departments (notably the Natal Education Department and Department of Education and Culture: House of Delegates) to understanding history rather as a process of finding out about the past (Sieborger, Kallaway, Bottaro, & Hiscock, 1993; van den Berg & Buckland, 1983). This notable shift was informed by the Schools Council History Project in England which pioneered this 'new' approach to history learning in the mid-1970s. It was argued that students need to be able to study the past as historians did, using primary and secondary sources, examining evidence, being able to empathise with people from past times and attempting their own explanations (Schools Council History 13 -16 Project, 1976). The focus is on understanding history as interpretation, as a construction, rather than simply as indisputable facts.

This approach to history learning is clearly reflected in the new National Curriculum Statement for History (Grade10 -12), (Department of Education, 2003).

Learners who study history use the insights and skills of historians. They analyse sources and evidence and study different interpretations, divergent opinions and voices. By doing so they are taught to think in a rigorous and critical manner about society  
and

The first three Learning Outcomes reflect the process by which historians (and learners) investigate the past. They develop historical enquiry, conceptual understanding and knowledge con-

struction.

While the NCS for FET history strongly advocates the ‘history as enquiry’ approach, this approach is also mentioned in the Interim Core Syllabus (1996) which is the current (2006) syllabus for Grade 11 and 12. Under the Aims, the syllabus reads

Thus History, in addition to its content, is also a mode of enquiry, a way of investigating the past which requires the acquisition and use of skills. (my italics)

This approach to learning history requires that assessment must change so that students are not only tested on the factual information that they can remember. They also need to be assessed on whether they can read source material critically, how they use evidence that is presented to them and whether they understand historical procedures and concepts (Sieborger et al., 1993). Since 2003, the Senior Certificate examination has been ‘more attuned to the new interpretive syllabus goals’ and has ‘made a move towards more skills-based questions in the source-based section of the paper’ (Umalusi, 2004). This is significant as assessment is the key indicator of whether curriculum change is actually taking place.

## **The study**

The key question for this study is “what are the nature and the cognitive demand of assessment tasks completed by Grade 10 history learners?” Data were collected in three secondary schools in the third term of 2005. The schools represent a purposive sample of three co-educational high schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The purpose was to select three schools that represented a range of schools in terms of their previous administration and the socio-economic status of the learners, using school fees as a proxy measurement of this. Each school represents a case study, and although may be typical of other similar schools, essentially can only represent themselves. Five consecutive Grade 10 history lessons in each school were observed, the teachers interviewed, some learners interviewed, and all the assessment tasks collected that learners had completed up to that point in the year.

Grade 10 was chosen as this is the grade in which the new curriculum was to be implemented in 2006. This study focuses only on the assessment tasks that were collected. These assessment tasks were collected in 2005, the year before the new FET curriculum was implemented. Thus they cannot be evaluated using the criteria established by the new curriculum, but do give us some insight into how these teachers might make the transition to the demands of the new curriculum.

### **Schools and their history teachers**

Enthabeni High School was previously administered by the Department of Education and Training. The school is located in a rural area, about 20kms from the nearest town. The staff and learners are all black African. The fees are R150 per annum. There are 821 learners registered in 2005. No teachers are funded by the School Governing Body. The only person employed by the SGB is the security guard. The matric pass rate was 86% in 2003 and 88% in 2004. The majority of learners lives in the area and walk to school. According to the principal, only 10% of the parents are working. He estimates that more than half of the learners stay with their grandmothers.

Mr Mkhize worked as a private, unqualified teacher for three years before he went to university. He studied for a BA, taking sociology and history as a minor subject. On completing his BA, he did a Higher Diploma in Education. He trained to teach Tourism, Geography and Zulu. He also has an Honours degree in Human Resource Management and is considering furthering his qualifications in education. Before starting at Enthabeni, he had taught at rural schools in Northern Zululand for 4 years, teaching History and Life Orientation. He started teaching at Enthabeni at the beginning of 2005, thus has been there only 10 months at the time of my observation.

Lincoln High was previously administered by House of Assembly and is located in a middle class, mostly white suburb. The staff is still mostly white, although the student body is racially diverse. The school is highly sought after by parents. The matric pass rate has been 100% for a number of years. The fees are R 7000 per annum. The school has 1200 learners with a total staff complement of 48 teachers. Of these, 12 are paid

by the School Governing Body.

Mrs Lawrence has been teaching at Lincoln for 18 years, first as an English teacher and then as a History teacher. She has a BA and an HDE, but trained to be an English teacher rather than a history teacher. She did one year of History in her BA. For many years she had an equal load of English and History, but now only teaches History to Grade 9, 10 and 12. She is the History HoD, and the head of Grade 12.

North Hill High was previously administered by the House of Delegates. The majority of the staff is Indian, but the learner body is now approximately 80% black African and 20% Indian. The matric pass rate has been between 98% and 100% over the past three years.

The fees are R 700 per annum. The school has 1125 learners and a total of 39 teachers, of whom seven have salaries paid by the School Governing Body. According to the principal, amongst parents there are few professionals (except most of the Eastern Cape children have parents who are teachers), many are unemployed and most would be working in shoe factories, as supermarket workers etc.

Mrs Naidoo has been teaching at North Hill for four years and previously taught at a senior primary school for 4 years. She trained to be a senior primary school teacher through a distance education institution. She also did a Further Education Diploma in Management and is currently studying for a B.Ed. Hons part time. She did not study history in her diploma, nor did she take it as a matric subject. She started by teaching Human and Social Sciences at North Hill and then moved onto to teach Grade 10 history, which she has taught for three years.

### **Analysing the assessment tasks**

The assessment tasks are firstly described in terms of their scope, and then three tests from each school are analysed using the categories generated by the revised Bloom's taxonomy. In South Africa there is somewhat of a revival of using Bloom, spearheaded by the quality assurance body, Umalusi. The revised version of Bloom's original (1956) taxonomy, developed by Anderson et al. (2001) provides a useful analytical tool to-

identify the forms of knowledge and cognitive demand of the assessment tasks which learners have been required to complete. The major change from Bloom's original taxonomy has been to separate the knowledge dimension from the cognitive process dimension. The knowledge dimension consists of four levels: factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge and metacognitive knowledge. Likewise the cognitive process dimension also consists of several levels, each level representing more demanding and complex cognitive processes. These two dimensions intersect to form a grid for categorizing learner assessment tasks (see Table below):

**Table 1: Scope of the Grade 10 History assessment tasks**

| School                                     | Essays                              | Tests                                                   | Source-based tasks | Investigative reports | Empathy | TOTAL |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|
| <b>Enthabeni</b><br>(Jan to Oct<br>(2005)) | 5 (but only one on a history topic) | 3 (short answers, True/false)                           | 0                  | 0                     | 0       | 8     |
| <b>North Hill</b><br>(Jan to Sept 2005)    | 3                                   | 5 (short answers, source-based, definitions, empathy)   | 3                  | 0                     | 0       | 11    |
| <b>Lincoln</b><br>(Jan – Aug 2005)         | 3                                   | 5 (multiple choice, source-based questions and empathy) | 1                  | 1                     | 3       | 13    |

Like the original taxonomy, the revised taxonomy is assumed to have a hierarchical nature, in that a more advanced level subsumes the levels below. For example, it can be assumed that a person operating at the application level has mastered the cognitive demands required for working at the knowledge and comprehension level.

The main levels in the knowledge dimension are:

- Factual knowledge – The basic elements, terminology and details that students must know to be acquainted with a discipline or solve problems in it.

- Conceptual knowledge – Knowing the interrelationships among the basic elements within a larger structure that enable them to function together. Knowledge of classifications and categories, principles and generalizations and theories, models and structures.
- Procedural knowledge – How to do something, methods of enquiry, and criteria for using skills, algorithms, techniques, and methods.
- Metacognitive knowledge – Knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one’s own cognition (Anderson, 2005)

The main levels in the cognitive process dimension are:

- Remember – Retrieving relevant knowledge from long-term memory. Sub-levels include recognizing and recalling.
- Understand – Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written and graphic communication. Sub-levels include interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing and explaining.
- Apply – Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation. Executing and implementing are sub-levels.
- Analyze – Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose. Sub-levels are differentiating, organizing and attributing.
- Evaluate – making judgements based on criteria and standards. Sub-levels are checking and critiquing.
- Create – Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or making an original product. Sub-levels are generating, planning and producing.

### **The scope of the assessment tasks**

Learners’ tasks were collected from Lincoln in August 2005, from North Hill in September 2005 and Enthabeni in October 2005. North Hill and Lincoln learners had written more assessment tasks than the learners at Enthabeni, despite the fact that the assessment tasks were collected from Enthabeni a month or two later than from the other schools.

The type of assessment and the number of assessment tasks that the

learners had done was very different in the three schools. At Enthabeni, the learners had written 3 tests, 2 short homework tasks and written 5 essays. However, only one of these essays was on the history syllabus (the French Revolution). The other four were on general current affairs issues, for example “Discuss how South Africa’s holding of the Soccer World Cup in 2010 will benefit South Africa” or “Briefly discuss the clash/dispute among ANC members based on the dismissal of Jacob Zuma, fair or unfair.” The learners had not been exposed to any empathy or source-based questions.

At North Hill, learners had written 5 tests and these did include source-based questions and empathy-type questions. They had written 3 essays and 4 short homework tasks. These were either definitions of terms or source-based questions.

Lincoln learners had been assessed through the widest range of tasks. They had written a 10 page investigative report entitled “Who killed Jack the Ripper?”, 3 essays, 5 tests (which included source-based questions and empathy questions) and 3 short homework tasks which required writing in a different kind of genre (for example, write a letter as soldier who has deserted Napoleon’s Russian Campaign, or write a newspaper article about the death of Louis XVI).

### **Analysis of the assessment tasks**

Three tests from each of the three schools were analysed using Bloom’s Revised taxonomy to establish the cognitive demand and the knowledge level of each of the questions in the test. The tests comprised on average 10 questions and were out of 25 to 50 marks. Each question was coded using the taxonomy grid (see Table 2 below).



**Table 2: Comparison of tests written at Enthabeni, Lincoln and North Hill, 2005**

**The cognitive process dimension**

| <b>The Knowledge Dimension</b> | 1. Remember                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 2. Understand.                                                                                                                                      | 3. Apply | 4. Analyse                  | 5. Evaluate       | 6. Create                                                                        |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A. Factual knowledge           | (E) French Revolution 100%<br><br>(E) Treaty of Aliwal North 100%<br><br>(E) Industrial Revolution 100%<br><br>(L) Jack the Ripper (28%)<br><br>(L) French Revolution (26%)<br><br>(L) Napoleon (20%)<br><br>(N) Apartheid (66%)<br><br>(N) Congress of Vienna (100%)<br><br>(N) French Revolution (83%) | (L) Jack the Ripper (24%)<br><br>(L) French Revolution (10%)<br><br>(L) Napoleon (34%)<br><br>(N) Apartheid (16%)<br><br>(N) French Revolution (7%) |          | (L) Napoleon (2%)           | (L) Napoleon (4%) |                                                                                  |
| B. Conceptual knowledge        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | (L) French Revolution (14%)<br><br>(L) Napoleon (10%)<br><br>(N) French Revolution (10%)                                                            |          | (L) French Revolution (12%) |                   | (L) French Revolution (20%)<br><br>(L) Napoleon (30%)<br><br>(N) Apartheid (10%) |

|                                 |  |                         |  |                                                                          |                                                                         |  |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| C. Pro-<br>cedural<br>knowledge |  | (N) Apart-<br>heid (8%) |  | (L) Jack<br>the Ripper<br>(28%)<br><br>(L) French<br>Revolution<br>(18%) | (L) French<br>Revolution<br>(8%)<br><br>(L) Jack<br>the Ripper<br>(20%) |  |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

The percentages in the table show the percentage of marks in a test that fell into a particular category. For example, for the French Revolution test at Enthabeni, 100% of the marks fell into the *Remember Factual Knowledge* category, whereas as Lincoln, 28% of the marks of the French Revolution test fell into that category.

### Examples of coding

Questions that required learners to give definitions and multiple choice questions were coded as *Remember Factual Knowledge*.

Examples of how other questions were coded are given below.

#### *Example 1*

Learners were given a cartoon of dark-skinned child on a 'Europeans Only' beach pulling down his costume to show a policeman that he is in fact a white child. The question is:

*Explain the message being sent out by the baby in Source B. (4)*  
(North Hill test on Apartheid)

This question was coded as *Understand Factual Knowledge*, since it seemed that learners were required to use their knowledge about Separate Amenities legislation (factual knowledge) and explain or make sense of the cartoon in the light of that knowledge.

#### *Example 2*

Learners are given an extract from a contemporary newspaper account of the Storming of the Bastille. The question is *Is the source biased in favour of or against the Revolution? Quote from the source to substantiate your answer. (4)* (Lincoln test on The French Revolution).

This question was coded as *Evaluate Procedural Knowledge*, since it seemed that learners were required to make a judgment about the source, and to do so need to draw on their knowledge of the procedure of evaluating historical sources.

### **Example 3**

*Imagine you were living in the Apartheid Days. Write a diary entry on how you feel about the natives Resettlement Act of 1954. (5)*  
(North Hill test on Apartheid)

## **Cognitive demand of the assessment tasks**

It can be seen in Table 2 that at Enthabeni all the questions (100% of the marks) in each test focus on remembering factual knowledge. The tests at North Hill have a slightly greater spread across the cognitive processes. However, in two of the tests (Congress of Vienna and French Revolution), at least 90% of the marks were allocated to questions that required that learners remember factual knowledge.

Lincoln had the greatest spread of marks across both the cognitive process and the knowledge dimension. This was the only school where procedural knowledge was tested, in questions that required learners to analyse or evaluate the source material.

## **Use of source based questions**

The new FET curriculum requires that learners learn to think like historians and analyse source material in critical ways. The Interim Core Syllabus (which was in use in Grade 10 in 2005) also suggests that history is a mode of enquiry. Enthabeni learners were not exposed to any source work at all. Although the North Hill teacher did make use of a number of sources, the questions that were asked on the sources were generally comprehension-type questions, or were questions that did not in fact refer to the source at all. The source appeared to be there simply as a prompt, or simply because it *is* a source. So on the surface, it takes on the *form* of 'progressive' history teaching, however the *substance* is not there. Siebörger et al (1993) make a similar point in their analysis of

National Senior Certificate exam papers in 1989, where a poorly constructed source-question consists of a graph which seems to serve a decorative, rather than information-giving purpose. Saxe et al (1999) refer to a similar finding in examining mathematics teachers' assessment practices in the context of educational reform. Some teachers were able to grasp the new *form* that was required, not the *function*. So here too, the assessment task takes on the *form* of a source-based question, but in fact is merely a prompt for recall-type, or comprehension questions. An example at North Hill is a picture of the leaders meeting at the Congress of Vienna, which is labeled Source A. However, none of the questions which follow actually require the learners to engage with the source at all.

All of the questions simply require learners to recall factual information. The picture appears to serve a decorative purpose only. The questions are:

- Why did the great powers meet in Vienna?
- Name the great powers and the countries from which they came.
- List three principles followed by the Congress.

In a second example from a North Hill test, learners are given a picture of a 'dompas' and are asked to name any five pieces of information that was contained in it. In this example, learners are in fact engaging with the source, but at a very low cognitive level. They are simply reading off information such as "name and surname", 'race', 'language' etc. Learners are not required to engage in any kind of analysis of the source. So although the question has the appearance of being source-based, it requires learners to simply retrieve information.

The source-based questions at Lincoln were different in that some of the questions required learners to actually engage with the source as an *historical document*. For example, learners are given the evidence of a woman which was given at the inquest of Annie Chapman, a victim of "Jack the Ripper" and have to answer the following question "*How reliable do you find this source as evidence in identifying the main suspect?*"

Questions that required learners to write an empathy response were coded as *Create Conceptual Knowledge* (B6). Learners are required to create a letter or newspaper article or diary entry that draws on their

knowledge of the links and relationships between their historical knowledge.

*Explain your response in a paragraph 4- 5 lines long.*" In another test, learners are given an extract from a contemporary newspaper article about the storming of the Bastille. One of the questions asks them to establish whether the source is biased in favour or against the Revolution. Lincoln is the only school where source-based material is used in way that requires learners to analyse and evaluate source evidence. North Hill shows the appearance but not the substance of the 'history as enquiry' approach and Enthabeni is still firmly located in the 'history as fact' approach.

## **Discussion**

As already mentioned, these tasks were collected in 2005, before the assessment demands for the new FET curriculum were in place. Thus I will not evaluate them using criteria established by the new curriculum. What the analysis does show is which of these schools will find it easiest to meet the challenges of the new curriculum. Lincoln is essentially already meeting, and probably surpassing, the assessment requirements of the new curriculum. The assessment tasks at North Hill show the appearance, but less of the substance of the evidence-based learning that characterizes the new curriculum. And Enthabeni is simply nowhere close. Even setting aside the fact that Enthabeni learners had not been exposed to any source-based material or empathy questions, the questions that they were required to answer were all simply recall questions based on factual knowledge.

The obvious question is: why are there such stark differences in these three History classrooms? Is it the school context, the resources, the learners or is it the qualifications, experience and competence of the individual teachers? The data do not allow this kind of causal analysis. However, it is easy to understand these differences in terms of the legacy of inequality in South African schools. Much has been written about the continuing inequalities in the broader school system regarding issues like integration (Soudien, 2004) and school fees (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). There are also recent studies which show how these inequalities

are reinforced through pedagogy and knowledge at the micro-level in the classroom (Green & Naidoo, 2006; Hoadley, 2005).

In terms of history in particular, it is interesting that it was noted already in 1993 by Siebörger et al., that in the Natal Education Senior Certificate examination paper of 1988 about “a quarter of the marks is allocated to assessing historical skills related to the use of the sources, and there is a pleasing sense of debate in some of the questions” (1993: 218). This is almost 20 years before the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement. The Joint Matriculation Board, the NED and the House of Delegates are singled out as examiners who are assessing the new approach to history successfully both by Siebörger et al. (Sieborger et al., 1993) and the Umalusi report a decade later (Umalusi, 2004). Thus, both North Hill and Lincoln have a history and a ‘head start’ in understanding and implementing the ‘new’ approach.

Harley and Wedekind (2004) suggest that the new curriculum represents curriculum continuity in the historically advantaged sector. They show that the new curriculum looks remarkably like the curriculum advocated by the Natal Education Department in the 1980s. The data presented in this study show the same trend and point to these historical continuities. In his evaluation of OBE implementation in Grade 1 classrooms, Jansen (1999) alludes to the fact that the implementation (and non-implementation) strategies employed by teachers reflect back the inequalities across the post-apartheid education system.

Another question raised by the study is to what extent the nature of the learners impacts on the cognitive level of engagement. Do the North Hill and Enthabeni teachers simply not ask higher level questions because they know that their learners would struggle to answer these kinds of questions? The Lincoln learners are middle-class, bringing with them a particular kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that is valued by the curriculum, and the majority have English as their mother tongue. At Enthabeni particularly, learning history in English is a major stumbling block, with learners reporting that a good history teacher is one that can explain concepts to them in Zulu so they can understand the concepts. These kinds of questions require further investigation and exploration.

## Conclusion

This paper has described how the assessment tasks in three different secondary schools differ both in terms of their scope and the cognitive demand. While it is not possible to answer causal questions about exactly why these differences are present, the explanation of curriculum continuity seems plausible. Unless there is some type of intervention in the schools where current practice is far away from the ideals of the new curriculum, the current patterns of advantage and disadvantage will unfortunately simply continue. An analysis of assessment tasks set in 2006 will reveal to what extent these three schools are adjusting their assessment requirements to reflect the requirements of the new FET curriculum.

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