

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN HISTORY

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History in South African schools has reached the crossroads.

Students, pupils, the general public, educationalists and historians themselves have been questioning the value and purpose of history in the South African schools for some time. There have even been suggestions that history should only be offered in the secondary and tertiary institutions while a course of social sciences should replace history in primary establishments.

MYTHS AND FICTIONS

Much of this dissatisfaction with history is confined not only to South Africa, but seems to be a world-wide phenomenon. Several empirical studies have been undertaken to establish the reason for the discontent and the collective findings centres around external conditions - the materialism of our age, the emphasis on the physical sciences, the technological needs of our times - while internal aspects include factors such as the nature of history, the teaching strategies and methods employed as well as the specific format of the examining of history. However in the South African situation it is especially the history curriculum, as illustrated in the core syllabus and effected by the various education departments, which has been emphasized as the dominant problem area. Although the dimensions of the present curriculum are obviously unacceptable, it is especially the content which is under attack.¹

Jeismann indicated in his research that dissatisfaction with the school history curriculum in actual fact forms part of a universal problem, as all governments use the "authorised" or "official" version of their school history to justify their present political situation. In this "official" version the emphasis rests on

the dominant group and its positive image, while those opposing the dominant group will be depicted in a negative way.²

Therefore it is obvious that no school history anywhere would ever satisfy an entire community - the more heterogeneous or divided a country's population, the more controversial its history teaching is likely to be. In a country as fragmented and deeply divided as South Africa, a fundamental questioning of the legitimacy of the "official" version of the past is thus to be expected.

But in the South African situation the issue extends even further, in the sense that the "official" version has never even provided any "national" orientation of the past. Chernis found in his research on school history syllabuses and textbooks from 1839 to 1990 in South Africa, the historical thought reflected to be so narrow and sectionally orientated that school history had been reduced to a White-centred, Eurocentric, largely Afrikaner-focused view of an idealised past, in which the white man occupies almost the entire historical stage.³ Matthews clearly illustrates how this version of the white man's history had to be accepted by all other groups, and although totally foreign to their respective group images, had to be studied in order to qualify. In order to cope with this situation, alternative views of history are presented in many classrooms, alongside the "official" version which has to be memorised for examination purposes. This results in the school subject history being reduced to the level of at best conflicting mythologies and at worst alternative fictions.⁴ Another dimension to this debate is added when the school subject history is compared with the academic subject history: none of the insights, knowledge and perspectives gained through historical research over the past few decades, are reflected in the current school history curriculum!

This situation therefore clearly demonstrates the uniqueness of the South African predicament: an unusually large gap has developed between the "official" version of the school history curriculum and the practical situation in the history classroom. Where the "official" version is still propping up an outdated political and social dispensation, the practical classroom situation can no longer justify or accept this obsolete version. Obviously this situation has had a profound effect on history teaching: It has caused a national identity crisis with an absence of an historical orientation. Assuming that a national identity rests to a large extent on a nation's historical consciousness, and therefore a prevalent historical culture - which rests on a mutual acceptable version of the past - a broad South African identity has yet to emerge.⁵

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

Several historians have provided guidelines in order to rectify this situation, but it is especially the views of Prof Jörn Rüsen which deserves careful deliberation in this regard. Among other suggestions he proposes the incorporation of the strategies of historical studies into the school subject history. In historical studies a diversity of standpoints is accepted and prevalent. *In South Africa various schools of historical thought exist, each with its own right of existence.* These differences in standpoint pose no threat to history, but rather constitute a great advantage because they bring about a multitude of insights by a multitude and diversity of perspectives. Perspectives allow the past the meaning, significance and importance of being history; they also furnish the past with a fundamental relationship to the present time. It is thus in this multitude and diversity that the many-faceted character of the South African society is met and realised: "Didactically seen, the acknowledgement of this multitude and diversity gives history back to the people. It relates the people's need for a historical orientation of their lives to historical studies, thus acknowledging their standpoints as necessary conditions for perspectives."⁶

If this character of diversity which exists in historical studies can be incorporated into the teaching of history and thereby form the basis for the school subject history, then a multi-perspective approach can be accomplished wherein the different cultural entities are

reconciled through the mediation of their diverse aspects. The *mediative character of this multi-perspective approach* must be accentuated because hereby the emphasis of the school subject history will rest on the ongoing process of continuous mediation and no longer on the teaching of the static product of the curriculum.

If historical studies' skills and principles are incorporated and reflected in history didactics, history is accentuated as a process which allows for the development of a historical consciousness through historical learning. "The starting point of the historical learning is the historical memory of the students. There are already culturally effective traditions, ideals, fragments of knowledge, attitudes to the past, patterns of significance, issues of historical identity ... they have to be picked up in the process of learning They have to be reflected, they must become the discourse of the classroom. The value systems which are fundamental for the historical identity of the learning people must be voiced, must become a matter of reflection and argumentation. If this is done, there is a chance to teach history in such a way that the students gain an historical identity."⁷

PUPIL PARTICIPATION

A "new" approach to content must automatically be followed by a "new" methodology. If a character of diversity is accepted, it demands that teachers move away from teacher-centred methods, which often tend to be authoritarian, to the active participation by pupils in their own learning. Remembered facts need no longer be the principal evidence to years of studying history - it could now be the ability to do things, in other words a way of thinking is now emphasised. A greater emphasis on skills and conceptual understanding also means gains in depth and in intellectual demands at the expense of breadth.⁸

Prof Rüsen sees the following change of emphasis in the South African situation: The role of the pupil changes from that of a receiver of messages and information from the teacher to that of an involved actor working with the teacher. The role of the teacher also changes that of teaching knowledge of the past and the present interpretation, to that of the producer of knowledge and interpretations together with the

pupils. He should present his pupils with source materials and interpret these materials together with his pupils, asking for interpretations, empirical evidence, alternatives, etc. The task of the teacher will now be to develop the possibilities which lie in the minds of the pupils and indirectly result in the formation of a positive historical identity. This implies that the teacher will have to have a sound knowledge of what is going on in the pupil's mind. The main procedure of this learning will now be the gaining of competence by dealing with the past, interpreting the past as a coherent historical development which leads to the present time, using this knowledge to understand the present situation and to disclose a future perspective of one's own life.⁹

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

While virtually all subjects have their controversies and unresolved questions, in history controversial topics dominate, because history forms the expression of the value system of each culture. Therefore controversial issues will always form an integral part of the teaching of history. Strandling defines controversial issues as those problems and disputes which divide society and for which significant groups in society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values. The more contemporary the issue, the greater the problem that the issue may also be politically sensitive to the group involved and the society as a whole.¹⁰ Insofar as South African history is highly controversial in terms of different interpretations, it offers an extraordinarily fertile field for teaching and learning about history as a process whereby historical skills may be acquired: where two or more groups experience a common event or a series of events, their versions are likely to differ and all these versions should be offered to enable the pupil to reach his own conclusions.¹¹

However in the areas of the curriculum where controversial issues predominate, the history teacher is in a different position from, for example, the mathematics teacher: Because history is a subject concerned with human behaviour, no pupil is wholly ignorant or inexperienced. He is not initiated into a body of knowledge with which he is totally unfamiliar, but the history teacher is in reality participating in a learning process which is already underway before the pupils do any

history. Pupils bring with them into the classroom their own experiences, knowledge, commitments and prejudices and research has indicated that this body of extra-mural learning is acquired from peers, relatives and the mass media.¹²

At present history teachers, in the teaching of controversial issues, tend to ignore this body of extra-mural learning, or endeavour to offer the pupil a "correct" explanation to supplement the "official" version which remains in the text and is memorised for examinations purposes. In both these strategies, a controversial issue is taught as a product, an end in itself. Controversial issues thus receive a sort of intellectual treatment, differing from the treatment allotted to non-controversial topics.¹³

The methodology based on a multi-perspective approach seeks that the teacher should recognise what the pupil already knows, listen to him, encourage his independent learning, welcome unexpected questions and interpretations, and work from the subjectivity of the pupil into the compilation of a multi-cultural combination of viewpoints. The starting point must thus be the pupils' historical consciousness - education must start with the subjectivity of the pupil and work from this biased, one-sided position to a versatile, multi-perspective understanding of the issue.¹⁴

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

The Humanities Curriculum Project addressed in the United Kingdom did devise some appropriate methods and techniques for dealing with controversial issues in the classroom and these have contained among others the two key-elements of discussion and evidence. Through classroom discussion, pupils are able to arrive at their own understanding of the issues. However the discussion must always be disciplined by evidence which must be provided in breadth and depth for the evaluation of the group.¹⁵ This also implies the end of the teacher as the monopolist of knowledge and experience. Lynch states that in the school situation, a teacher can also be an unprejudiced discriminator by not opposing or challenging bias, especially racism.¹⁶ Pupils must be helped to overcome their own prejudices by remedying biased ignorance with factual information and perspectives of other interpreters. Thinking pupils, interpreting events themselves, are no

longer as powerless as they were and their individuality is now less likely to be submerged in the common learning of the whole class.¹⁷

The strategy of emphasizing the pupil's activity includes a specific selection of materials which should contain sources as well as interpretations. It is also useful to present to the pupils controversies and different perspectives already as part of the sources materials. Teachers can even bring about an awareness of categorical patterns of historical interpretation in the minds of the pupils, by using everyday material which articulate these patterns in a way that every pupil can understand them. In this fashion every teacher can deal with highly abstract theoretical matters of historical consciousness, even with beginners at school.¹⁸ Sensitive issues can be raised in non-threatening contexts, which enables pupils to distance themselves from the contemporary situation whilst making it possible to put existing emotions, values and experiences into perspective. This can be done by choosing examples both chronologically and geographically distant from the present situation. Once multi-perspective interpretations have been established, the distant situation can be related to the present situation and interpretations based on a similar fashion can follow.¹⁹ The emphasis of this strategy is on providing the pupil with some kind of conceptual framework, skills in discussion and a critical analytical approach to a topic, in order that he can transfer these on to issues and situations which he will encounter later in his adult life.

Richardson emphasizes greater participation and equality in the classroom as being necessary in dealing with controversial issues because pupils learn experientially from the form of the lessons as well as from the lesson content: "this style of teaching involves providing pupils with the space and the security which they need if they are to face uncomfortable and painful challenges, specifically the challenge of unlearning - that is, realizing that much of their current knowledge is not knowledge at all, but misinformation and prejudice."²⁰ The information to be considered, the different viewpoints to be discussed and the variety of materials and activities require open responses. The teacher has to be highly responsive to the reaction of the pupils, both to the content of the lesson as well as to the teaching methods employed. He has to take into account the age

and ability of the pupils, as well as their knowledge, values and experiences, which they bring with them into the classroom and which will obviously dominate the classroom climate. The teaching of controversial topics must not be seen as an issue where pupils will have "answers" or "conclusions" but rather one where views may develop and more information be assimilated over a period of time. The fact that the issue is controversial outside the classroom increases the likelihood of radically differing views inside the classroom - pupils can therefore not be thought of as a homogeneous group committed to a single consensus view. Similarly teachers will have widely differing views on these issues and many teachers will also be called upon to express these views in the course of classroom discussion, in order to effect further discussion or even criticism. Far from transmitting conscious bias, this helps pupils perceive bias, enabling them to make judgements in the light of it.²¹

EMPATHY

How to view another culture without offending the cultural values of that society is not easy - learning to judge others not by "our" own standards but by the standards established and upheld by the society being studied is of course a high-level empathetic skill, therefore the material and the course content both need careful consideration before adoption. Empathy can be defined as an affective sensitivity or ability to discover and describe the feelings of others. Empathy as a skill can be taught and materials of the topic should include information of the time period, as well as information of the modes of thought prevailing during the time period.²² Through the practice of understanding a historical character or event against its own background, problems, modes of thought, values and beliefs, the pupil gets valuable training in the understanding and interpretation of present problems and cultures from its own perspectives and values.

The main problem with this multi-perspective process-based approach is that it is rather difficult for the teacher to gauge its success. It is easier to assess the knowledge gained from teaching about a specific issue than it is to assess the pupil's capacity to transfer the skills and understanding acquired from studying one issue on to another issue. However in education as well as history, marking schemes

have been developed to assist the evaluation of skills including the skill of empathy. But if we want to abandon a process-based approach because its skills, such as empathy, are hard to realise and evaluate, then we might as well abandon history, failing as it does to achieve its general intention of explaining what, how and why things happened in the past.²³

History is not value-free, its interpretations are not objective, but it is surely not a value-system as currently expressed in the "official" version within the South African school context. The words of Prof Slater in defence of the "new" history in the United Kingdom seem remarkably apt in the South African situation as well: "It (history) does not seek to sustain or devalue tradition, heritage or culture. It does not assume that there are shared values waiting to be defined and demanding to be supported. It does not require us to believe that a society's values are always valuable. If history seeks to guarantee any of these, it ceases to be history and becomes indoctrination. The new history offers very barren and unfertile ground to the indoctrinators."

CONCLUSION

If history does not guarantee attitudes or aspirations, it is a necessary, if not a sufficient condition, which might enable the making of informed choices. It not only helps us to understand the identities of our communities, cultures, nations, by knowing something of their past, but also enables our loyalties to them to be moderated by informed and responsible scepticism. But we must not expect too much. It cannot guarantee tolerance, though it can give it some intellectual weapons. It cannot keep open closed minds, although it may, sometimes, leave a nagging grain of doubt in them. Historical thinking is primarily mind-opening, not socializing. But in a country where the virtue of competing goods in open market places is more zealously proclaimed than those of competing ideas in classrooms and where, more contemptibly, deference and conformity seem more valued than independent thought and debate, *thinking historically is a strand in the fabric of national thought which must be jealously- and urgently - defended.*²⁴

Time is running out for history in South African schools. At this stage we should very urgently consider the call of Prof Kapp already expressed

almost a decade ago: "Die leerplanne en onderrigmetodes sal beter voorsiening moet maak vir geskiedenis as denkinhoud, eerder as 'n proses wat inhoudsbemeestering vereis. Vergelyking, bronne-ontleding, begripstoetse ... is almal werkswyses waardeur hierdie kognitiewe vermoëns ontwikkel kan word. Uit die aard van die saak vereis dit van die leerlinge baie goeie agtergrond kennis van die stuk geskiedenis wat op die spel is. Dit skep egter soveel didaktiese moontlikhede en leerpsigologiese betrokkenheid by die leerlinge, dat dit vir die onderrig van die vak net ten goede kan kom ... die benadering stel egter hoë eise aan die onderwyser en sy vakdidaktiese opleiding ... leerplanne sal ingrypend hersien moet word en veral inhoudelik aansienlik ingekort moet word. Die oormatige beklemtoning van eksamens sal plek moet maak vir deurlopende evaluering ... Vakinspekteurs en departementshoofde se rol sal veel sterker op vakdidaktiese en inhoudelike leiding eerder as kontrole en inspeksie toegespits moet word. Onderwysers sal meer ruimte vir eie inisiatief gelaat moet word."²⁵

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See articles of R.E. Chernis and of O. van den Berg and P. Buckland quoted in this article, as well as those of authors such as A.M. Grundlingh, B.C. Mohamed, M. Broodryk and F.A. van Jaarsveld.
- 2 R.E. Chernis, "The Past in Service of the Present: A Study of South African School History Syllabuses and Textbooks 1839 - 1990" in *Yesterday and Today*, April 1991, No 21, p. 13.
- 3 Chernis, p. 20.
- 4 W.R.L. Gebhardt, "Does History Teaching Ask and Answer Relevant Questions in a Multi-Cultural Society?" in *Yesterday and Today*, Sept 1991, No 22, pp. 20 - 21.
- 5 Chernis, p. 21. and see also F.A. van Jaarsveld, "Omstrede Afrikaanse Verlede".
- 6 J. Rüsen, "Historical Education in a Multicultural Society" in *Yesterday and Today*, April 1991, No 21, p. 4.

- 7 Rüsen, pp. 5 - 6.
- 8 J. Slater, *The Politics of History Teaching : A Humanity Dehumanized*, London, University of London, 1989, pp. 2-4.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 R. Stradling, M. Noctor and B. Baines, *Teaching Controversial Issues*, London, Edward Arnold, 1984, p. 2.
- 11 Chernis, p. 23.
- 12 Slater, p. 14.
- 13 O. van den Berg and P. Buckland, "Why History?" in *Yesterday and Today*, April 1982, No 3, p. 21.
- 14 Rüsen, p. 5.
- 15 P. Goalen, "Multiculturalism and the Lower School History Syllabus : Towards a Practical Approach" in *Teaching History*, Oct 1988, p. 14.
- 16 Ibid., p. 10.
- 17 Slater, p. 14.
- 18 Rüsen, p. 5.
- 19 Goalen, p. 12.
- 20 Stradling, p. 94.
- 21 Ibid. pp. 94 - 95.
- 22 N.S. Kekana, "The Evaluation of Empathy" in *Yesterday and Today*, Sept 1990, No 20, p. 3.
- 23 K. Jenkins and P. Brinkley, "Reflections on the Empathy Debate" in *Teaching History*, April 1989, p. 22.
- 24 Slater, pp. 15 - 16.
- 25 P.H. Kapp, "Die Waarde van Geskiedenis as Skoolvak" in *Yesterday and Today*, April 1984, No 7, p. 6.

RELEVANSIE

Relevansie in die onderrig van Geskiedenis is nie 'n teoretiese saak nie. Dit hang van die kreatiwiteit van die onderwyser af. 'n Onderwyser wat die Uitlandersituasie van 1892 met sy leerlinge behandel en nie 'n vergelyking tref tussen die Uitlanderpetisie en die politieke petisies van 1992 nie, het nie die vermoë om die relevansie vir sy leerlinge te ontsluit nie.

'n Geskiedenisonderwyser wat die Diamantveldkwessie behandel en nie sy leerlinge oor die huidige probleme van die De Beers maatskappy en die diamantmark inlig nie, doen sy leerlinge 'n onreg aan.

Dr Pierre Edwards, Hoof van die Afrikaanse Hoër Seunsskool Pretoria, in sy referaat op die FAK se Geskiedenisimposium, 21 Augustus 1992.
