

“MAKING HISTORY FAMILIAR”: THE PAST IN SERVICE OF SELF-AWARENESS AND CRITICAL CITIZENSHIP

Jared McDonald

Department of Historical Studies

University of Johannesburg

jmcDonald@uj.ac.za

Jenni Underhill

Academic Development Centre

University of Johannesburg

jenniu@uj.ac.za

Abstract

This paper explores the process of self-reflection undertaken by a History lecturer with a view to promoting the same type of critical awareness among a group of third- year History students at a South African university. The study draws on student experiences of and responses to a critical pedagogy that offered a deconstruction of past identities and enabled an emerging discourse of agency with contemporary relevance. By means of a qualitative methodological approach, open-ended, reflective questionnaires were used amongst a focus group to gauge student perspectives. The paper concludes that via creative and innovative pedagogy, History can become a vehicle for promoting self-awareness and in turn critical citizenship in South Africa's current social context.

Keywords: Self-awareness; Critical citizenship; Pedagogy; Identity; Social history; Reflective practice; Subjectivity; Social justice.

Introduction

The study reported on in this paper explores the experiences that occurred amongst a group of third-year History students at a South African university as they were engaging with a module entitled *Themes in the history of the Cape Colony*.¹ The core aim of the module was to illuminate identities and their constructed nature in a particular historical context, namely the nineteenth century Cape Colony, or Cape of Good Hope. The aims of this module reflect a broader trend in the ways in which History is taught and researched at tertiary level in the post-apartheid era. Since the dismantling of apartheid, social historians have taken up new themes which illustrate that “issues of identity and subjectivity loom large in public discourse as South Africans

¹ When the term History appears capitalised in the text, it is referring to the academic discipline. Where the term appears in lower case, as history, it is referring to historical events and processes.

grapple with the challenges of reimagining themselves and breaking free of the institutions and inherited structures that defined apartheid identities”.²

This could be viewed as a descent from the “ivory towers” of the academe in response to the various ways in which historical knowledge is used in the broader society of which it is a part.³ It is widely recognised that the main reason for studying the past is because of its connectedness to an understanding of the present.⁴ In this vein some historians see their subject as the pursuit of objective truths and as instrumental in forging national or other types of identities and coherence, whereas others seek to deconstruct such histories and to reveal the mythical or invented character of different social, cultural and political collectives.⁵

Current historical research on South Africa has come to focus on how people in the past perceived themselves and those around them. The concept of identity has seemingly come to replace other categories of distinction, in particular class and race.⁶ In other words, because research on identities has been integrated into historical curricula, an opportunity has emerged to teach History as a means to develop self-awareness and, in turn, agency. These constructions have played into similar present day constructions which allow students to deconstruct, in their own ways, society today. This functions both as a historical theme and as an attempt to address the concern that History remains relevant and of contemporary significance for those who teach and study it.⁷ Accordingly, our guiding question in this study was, “Does viewing examples of how subjectivity and agency functioned in the past enable students to think about their own subjectivity and agency in their present context?”

In addition, the teaching of the past has been influenced by debates over how to instill and transmit values of responsible citizenship through higher education.⁸ For History, this begins with teaching and imparting an awareness

2 C Hamilton, B Mbenga, & R Ross, “The production of preindustrial South African history”, C Hamilton, B Mbenga, & R Ross, (eds.), *Cambridge History of South Africa*, 1, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 56.

3 S Amirell, “Descent from the ivory tower: A group assignment for studying the role of History in society”, *The History Teacher*, 42 (4), 2009, p. 444.

4 TE Rodgers, “History, self-awareness, and the core curriculum”, *The Journal of General Education*, 54(1), 2005, pp. 41-57.

5 J Tosh, *The pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (London, Longman, 2002), pp. 5-12.

6 N Worden, “After race and class: Recent trends in the historiography of early colonial society”, *South African Historical Journal*, 62(3), 2010, p. 593.

7 R Phillips, “Contesting the past, constructing the future: History, identity and politics in schools”, *Journal of Educational Studies*, 46(1), 1998, pp. 40-53 & PG Dagbovie, “Strategies for teaching African American history: Musings from the past, ruminations for the future”, *The Journal of Negro Education*, 75 (4), 2006, pp. 635-636.

8 Y Waghid, “Education for responsible citizenship”, *Perspectives in Education*, 27(1), 2009, pp. 85-90.

of the subjectivity and complexity of human experience and identity.⁹ The starting point in this process is self-interrogation and reflection by the historian as lecturer.¹⁰ The motivation for this is amplified by the reality that both internationally and in South Africa, the diverse and evolving student profile at institutions of higher learning requires an ongoing review of teaching and learning strategies framed by critical citizenship.¹¹ Scott suggests that extending the benefits of higher education in South Africa requires willing engagement and creativity from lecturers themselves; in this case historians.¹² Lecturers need to set about designing courses and teaching in innovative ways that suit the social realities of students.

South Africa's social, political and economic context after 1994 continues to raise challenges of how to promote History education for democracy and critical citizenship.¹³ Citizenship is understood as the "exercise of being oneself in the context of the state".¹⁴ As such, citizenship is inextricably linked to identity. So, for instance, the course *Themes in the history of the Cape Colony* addresses the current social realities of students by placing emphasis on the lived experiences and myriad identities of the Cape's underclasses or subalterns, in particular the Khoisan¹⁵ and slaves. Studies of underclasses are intended to provide an alternative perspective on past events and processes by uncovering the actions, agencies and experiences of those forgotten or excluded by traditional histories, of the political or nationalist variety. While the subaltern experience at the Cape was not monolithic, this focus afforded the lecturer and students opportunities to explore "themes of victimisation and perseverance, acknowledging agency and subtle forms of resistance without trivialising tragedies".¹⁶ By "emphasising the importance of women and men as agents of history", questions about active citizenship necessarily came to the fore in class discussions.¹⁷

9 For example, BC Cruz & JA Duplass, "Making sense of "race" in the history classroom: A literary approach", *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 2009, pp. 429-430.

10 J Carruthers, "The changing shape and scope of southern African historical studies", *South African Historical Journal*, 62(2), 2010, p. 391.

11 M Goldschmidt, "Identifying labels among university students in the new South Africa: A retrospective study", *Journal of Black Studies*, 34 (2), 2003, pp. 205-206.

12 I Scott, N Yeld & J Hendry, "A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education", *Higher Education Monitor*, 6, 2007, p. 6.

13 J Nieuwenhuis, *Growing human rights and values in education* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 2007), p. 34.

14 C Soudien, P Kallaway & M Breier (eds.), *Education, equity and transformation* (London, Kluwer Academic, 1999), p. 583.

15 Khoisan is a combination of Khoikhoi (herders/pastoralists) and San (hunter-gatherers).

16 PG Dagbovie, "Strategies for teaching African American history...", *The Journal of Negro Education*, 75(4), 2006, p. 636.

17 C Soudien, P Kallaway & M Breier (eds.), *Education, equity and transformation...*, p. 583.

A priority of the course was to facilitate regular opportunities for interaction among the students. In a series of discussion classes the students were able to share ideas and interpret the content of the course's readings.¹⁸ As a third-year cohort with a fair degree of knowledge about the Cape Colony already in place, the discussion classes were well suited to questioning the "history" presented in the readings. By guiding the discussions, the lecturer was able to highlight the argumentative tone of the prescribed texts and question the students about whether or not they found the arguments persuasive or convincing.¹⁹ A critical thinking approach is fundamentally about questioning and challenging conventions, suppositions, taken-for-granted meanings and orthodoxy. This lends itself well to motivating critical citizenship among students who are required to think critically and develop an alternative perspective of the past in the lecture hall.

Furthermore, as Pingel has asserted, the critical questioning of others' interpretations "involves being critical of oneself."²⁰ A critical thinking approach develops a student's "sense of subjectivity or the 'self'", thus stimulating self-awareness.²¹ The promotion of self-awareness can be supported by focusing on histories of individuals, thus personalising history.²² Macmillan has suggested that detailed examples of lived experiences in the past help "when it comes to thinking about the present world."²³ Fortunately the Cape historian has at his or her disposal a rich variety of primary and secondary sources that capture subaltern lives in vivid detail, even as these sources are necessarily problematic by virtue of belonging to a colonial archive. Nonetheless, this raises the prospect for discussions around representation, which again links to self-awareness and critical citizenship. We maintain that counter-discursive storytelling allows students to use such stories as frameworks for re-constituting new selves and possibilities in the present.²⁴

18 B Bunt, "The nurturing of creativity in the history classroom through teaching methods – The views of teachers and learners", *Yesterday & Today*, 4, October 2009, p. 119.

19 N Jackson, "Creativity in history teaching and learning", *Subject perspectives on creativity in higher education*, 2005, p. 3.

20 F Pingel, "Can truth be negotiated? History textbook revision as a means to reconciliation", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617, 2008, p. 189.

21 J Seroto, "Citizenship education for Africans in South Africa (1948-1994): A critical discourse", *Yesterday & Today*, 7, July 2012, p. 66.

22 LJ Rice, *What was it like?: Teaching history and culture through young adult literature* (New York, Teachers College Press, 2006), p. 20.

23 M Macmillan, *The uses and abuses of history* (London, Profile Books, 2009), p. 167.

24 R Simon, *Teaching against the grain: Texts for pedagogy of possibility* (New York, Bergen & Garvey, 1992), p. 22.

Teaching History as an academic discipline

History, as an academic discipline, is essentially the “study of questions”.²⁵ As lecturers, historians attempt to impart both knowledge and skills in order to equip students with the ability to question. Though this academic exercise is motivated by the desire to establish a more comprehensive, sophisticated understanding of the past, the types of questions that will be asked, and warrant being asked, are shaped by current contextual influences.

In the context of the module presented, the political and economic developments of the period provided important insight into the Cape colonial setting. As noted, emphasis was placed on the lived experiences of the Colony’s underclasses: the indigenous inhabitants, or Khoisan, and slaves. Historiographically, emphasis on underclasses emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Revisionist historians sought to reform historical theory and methodology by focusing on class struggle and an appreciation for historical inquiry from the bottom up – shifting attention away from the ruling classes and towards the lives of the “masses”. The lower classes were increasingly seen as being active participants in the unfolding of historical events.

From an early emphasis on class, class struggles, and labour movements, a wider range of themes has since become associated with “History from below”, including questions about the environment, gender, ethnicity, religion, mentalities and identity – all inspired by the growing popularity of social history in the second half of the previous century.²⁶ This trend has made significant conceptual and theoretical contributions to our understanding of colonial histories. Indeed, it is in the challenge to colonial hegemony that the socially marginalised have found resonance in colonial histories through their refusal to assimilate, as well as through their acts of resistance. As a result, the human subject is rescued from the obscurity of master narratives and represented as an active agent/participant in historical processes.²⁷

Over the last twenty years or so, social historians have been influenced by a “cultural turn”. They have become increasingly interested in themes relating to the history of dress, consumption, living spaces, material belongings,

25 P Rael, “What happened and why? Helping students read and write like historians”, *The History Teacher*, 39(1), 2005, p. 23.

26 J Sharpe, “History from below”, P Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991), pp. 24–41.

27 R O’Hanlon, “Recovering the subject: Subaltern studies and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 22(1), 1988, pp. 189–224.

language and leisure, as well as past expressions of status, respectability and honour as markers of identity and social performance.²⁸ This approach does not negate the more conventional issues of race, class, gender and power. Indeed, these structural determinants of identity influence what is possible and what is not for those engaged in identity self-fashioning, even as they are open to being challenged.²⁹

In colonial histories, post-colonial and postmodern ideas have led to the search for how identities were moulded, expressed and defended in colonial settings, on the part of both the colonised and the colonisers. This historiographical trend points towards the extent to which historians are influenced by their contemporary context. Contests over identity have become typical in South Africa's post-1994 public discourse. Citizens of all classes and races are engaged in re-imagining themselves as apartheid-inspired identities are being interrogated and re-invented.³⁰ However, despite this trend of socially conscious citizenship in both public and academic domains, it does not always translate from historians to their students through pedagogy. We argue that the "cultural turn" in social history lends itself well to inspiring self-awareness and critical citizenship among History students.

Nevertheless, in higher education institutions, History courses tend to be concerned with introducing students to the subject as an academic discipline, while at the same time anchoring this higher-order intellectual process in a descriptive narrative of major events, processes and characters.³¹ This balance has to be consciously understood by the historian in the lecture hall. In order to achieve this, a factual foundation has to be established and critical reading and thinking skills must also be developed simultaneously. It is only with the added dimension of more sophisticated analysis and interrogation of past events and peoples that students can access the discourse of the academic discipline of History.³² Moreover, this approach can be further extended to encompass an emancipatory discourse, in keeping with an activist historical

28 N Ulrich, "Time, space and the political economy of merchant colonialism in the Cape of Good Hope and VOC world", *South African Historical Journal*, 62(3), 2010, pp. 578-579.

29 K Wilson, *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London & New York, Routledge, 2003), pp. 2-3.

30 J Jansen, *We need to talk* (Johannesburg, Bookstorm & Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-27; NS Ndebele, *Fine lines from the box: Further thoughts about our country* (Johannesburg, Umuzi, 2007), pp. 153-160.

31 TA Nuttall & K Luckett, "Teaching and learning history as an academic discourse: Showing first-year university students how to read and write like historians", *South African Historical Journal*, 33, 1995, pp. 83-100.

32 B Leibowitz & L Witz, "Becoming a writer of History: The expressive tradition and academic historical discourse at the University of the Western Cape", *South African Historical Journal*, 33, 1995, pp. 101-118 & JG Ferreira, "Transition from school to university", *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 9(1), 1995, pp. 154-158.

paradigm. These terms are discussed in more detail later on.

Traditionally historians introduce their discipline to students implicitly, as they understand and structure it via the content and requirements of the course. The challenge to achieving this is, as Rodgers posits, “History professors are scholars, not teachers, and the structure of History courses is derived more from the nature of the discipline itself than from abstract theories of educational methodology.”³³

Our understanding of this is that an ideal approach to teaching History is one that is dialogical and interpersonal, as opposed to monological. This is fitting for third-year study in particular, where students have developed beyond memorising and simple analysis to a deeper application of knowledge that involves a creative evaluation of their environments and themselves.³⁴ As academic and discipline-specific discourses have been relatively established at this level, History can begin to serve as a vehicle for exploring meaning construction. We argue that one way to achieve this is by representing historical characters through a critical, multi-perspectival lens so that students may come to identify the social constructions of the past. Viewing the past in such a way allows for multiple, competing voices to be heard. In this way, the historian undertakes a critical inquiry of the history and attempts to understand how the past is formed and reformed by exploring the discipline’s practices of communication, production and social organisation and the acts that constitute them. This is construed as reflective practice with an emancipatory agenda on behalf of the historian.

One of the key features of working in an emancipatory paradigm is that the lecturer and the students enter into a dialogic exchange. Such exchange enables the lecturer to view the students as active agents instead of objectifying them and reifying them in their social contexts. Dialogic exchange allows meaning to be constructed through negotiation with historical material rather than meaning being imposed by a dominant researcher. Lather proposes that the goal of an emancipatory paradigm is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding.³⁵ By resonating with students’ lived concerns, fears and aspirations, an emancipatory perspective can serve an energising, catalytic role. It does this in the module by focusing on the contextual dynamics of the

33 TE Rodgers, “History, self-awareness, and the core curriculum”, *The Journal of General Education*, 54(1), 2005, p. 45.

34 C Anderson & K Day, “Purposive environments: Engaging students in the values and practices of history”, *Higher Education*, 49(3), 2005, p. 321.

35 P Lather, *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 119.

nineteenth century Cape Colony with a view to linking larger issues with the particulars of everyday life, both past and present. This is only made possible when the History lecturer takes on the role of reflective practitioner.

Theoretical framing: The reflective practitioner

Reflective practice involves consciously engaging with teaching methodology.³⁶ There is no one form of action that can be termed reflective practice, however, there are many different ways of regarding it.³⁷ In sum, it cannot be considered as an exact science, but there are several distinct features of reflective practice. The first of these includes the notion that the subject matter of reflection is likely to be one's own practice, which comprises of the everyday events of the practice and/or the conditions that shape that practice. Reflection can also be ongoing, or it can be a reaction to a certain event or problem. In addition, reflection can be in response to an externally posed question or arise from personal considerations.

Another common feature of reflection is that it may not allow for the resolution of an issue, but rather for a better understanding of it. Reflection frequently involves a process of thinking and this may be aided by a process of articulation in written or oral form. Generally, the aims of reflection are self-development or professional development or the potential empowerment of an educationalist in an institution. The most typical kind of reflection that lecturers may engage in is personal. This usually involves an internal reflection on the cognitive (the content), the action or doing (the how) and the process, as well as the affective (how I felt) aspects of teaching.

In the case of the module, *Themes in the history of the Cape Colony*, the initial, design phase involved thinking about practice-related issues and how these could be addressed by the practitioner in the lecture theatre. While many historians would concur that the most important reason for critically examining the past "lies in its relevance for understanding the present", how this is achieved in the lecture setting is subject to the personal, intellectual inclinations of the historians involved.³⁸ As Amirell notes, some historians may attempt to deliver a comprehensive, linear narrative of past events in order to demonstrate how the world came to be the way it is. Other historians

36 M Coventry, P Felten, D Jaffee, C O'Leary, T Weis & S McGowan, "Ways of seeing: Evidence and learning in the history classroom", *The Journal of American History*, 92(4), 2006, pp. 1371-1372.

37 J Moon, *Reflection in learning and professional development: Theory and practice* (London, Kogan Page, 1999), p. 23.

38 S Amirell, "Descent from the ivory tower...", *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 2009, pp. 441-442.

may be more concerned with stressing the constructed nature of history and bringing into sharp focus the teleological biases of some histories, especially those of a nationalist bent. Still others may see History as a means to highlight the invented character of identities and seek to deconstruct the historical-mythical basis on which various cultural, social and political collectives are founded. Activist historians adopt an emancipatory paradigm in their approach to their research and teaching; they “aim to scrutinize critically the prevailing political ideologies and expose unequal relations of social, cultural, economic and political power, often for the purpose of ‘emancipating’ underprivileged groups such as workers, women, or ethnic minorities.”³⁹

In keeping with an activist, emancipatory paradigm, the lecturer designed the module guided by the notion that History ought to resonate with the students in their present lives. This means that what they learn in History modules has social and political relevance to what they currently witness.⁴⁰ However, this has to be constructed by the way in which the module is presented and taught. In this case, the themes which were selected for the course were informed by issues of transformation underpinning South Africa’s recent transition to a democratic dispensation. This approach was shaped by the will of the lecturer to attempt to determine whether History can do more than provide factual knowledge of the past by instilling intellectual skills at the same time.

Adopting this approach presents an alternative way of History teaching in the academic setting. We argue that History courses can promote self-awareness in students if they are presented as being more than simply a study of the past. Names, dates and other facts are stepping stones to be used by the historian to enter into the beliefs, values and attitudes that constituted past cultures. By showing students how these are constructed they are made aware of their own constructions in their contemporary context. The thematic inferences linking the past and present are clear and tangible, but subtle.

Our view is that self-awareness is inextricably linked to subjectivity. Subjectivity can be understood to mean that interactions or events mean different things to different people depending on the ways in which they interpret the world and the discourses available to them at that moment in time. The traditional understanding of subjectivity is that we are in control of the meaning of our lives and are able to perceive experience as individualised.

39 S Amirell, “Descent from the ivory tower...”, *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 2009, p. 453.

40 Y Waghid, “Knowledge production and higher education transformation in South Africa: Towards reflexivity in university teaching, research and community service”, *Higher Education*, 43(4), 2002, pp. 457-458.

Moreover, we are open to all forms of subjectivity. In addition, biology and society are factors of varying importance in the acquisition of subjectivity and language is taken to be the medium through which subjective identity is acquired in social interaction.⁴¹

A post-structuralist view of subjectivity is that individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and forms of power at work in a particular society. Subjectivity is formed by gender, race, class, age and cultural background. The forms of subjectivity open to us will variously privilege rationality, science, common sense, religious belief, intuition and emotion. Thus, different discourses provide for a range of modes of subjectivity. Individuals identify their “own” interests in discourse by becoming the subject of a particular discourse. Lather explains that while we are not authors of the way we understand our lives, as? we are subjected to regimes of meaning, we are also involved in discursive self-production where we attempt to produce coherency and continuity.⁴² Knowledge of several discourses and recognition of plural meanings allows for more measure of choice on the side of the individual and even where choice is not available at least resistance is still possible.⁴³

Reflection in practice

The self-reflection of the lecturer began with him asking how he might contribute to furthering his own subjective worldview with the aim of instilling self-awareness in the students enrolled in the course. In addition, he attempted to work with a consciousness of who the students were instead of assuming a generalised version of them. In so doing he aimed to provide the students with the opportunity to influence the conditions of their own academic and, indeed, personal lives and critically engage with the discipline. In order to achieve this, student reflection was consistently built into the module. An emancipatory approach to History teaching may enable students to shift perspectives by encouraging self-reflection and deeper understanding of their own particular subjectivities. This understanding may include cognisance of contextual structures, interpersonal constraints and recognition of relations of dominance and control.⁴⁴

41 C Weedon, *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1987), p. 121.

42 P Lather, *Getting smart...*, p. 119.

43 C Weedon, *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*, p. 121.

44 P Lather, *Getting smart...*, p. 120.

For instance, the course broadly presented a number of sensitive themes, including race, the construction of the “other”, gender and colonial oppression and disempowerment. Within these, the lecturer opted to present the historical narrative through the subjective lenses of Cape subaltern characters with an aim of exposing both vertical and horizontal avenues of oppression and resistance. A central focus of the course was the resistance of these characters to the colonial meta-narrative and the lecturer’s choice to present their stories as emancipatory counter-narratives that still resonate today. This includes an interrogation of agency on personal and political levels among those who were contextually deemed to be marginalised and “voiceless”. It was the lecturer’s own understanding of agency that allowed for the course to be taught as it was. Themes relating to agency encompassed claims to social status and the performance of respectability that transcended racial, class and legal boundaries within the Cape colonial context.

Critics of an emancipatory approach to teaching History could argue that in its attempt to transform, it becomes too prescriptive. Furthermore, in its examining of ethics, values, morals and politics, it becomes as controlling as the agendas it seeks to expose. We recognize these challenges as limitations of this study. However, we argue that reflective practice exposes issues and that once concerns have been raised, one can start to understand and counter them if so desired. But, until issues are brought into consciousness, one does not know what they are. In brief? (used sum earlier), the awareness of multiple discourses and myriad meanings allows for a measure of choice on the part of the individual. Moreover, even when choice is not available, the possibility for resistance still exists. The point is that an emancipatory approach enables a project of possibility.⁴⁵ Simon writes, “... educational practice should participate in social transformation that is aimed at securing fundamental human dignity and radically reducing the limits on expression”.⁴⁶

Within this approach the space was created for students to make sense of a world of contradictory, incongruent information. In higher education it has been the expectation that as students progress through their studies they will develop personal understanding and it is posited that their conception of learning may develop concurrently. This means that students will evolve from acquiring a discrete package of information to one that constitutes a change in themselves and the way they perceive the world around them.

⁴⁵ R Simon, *Teaching against the grain...*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ R Simon, *Teaching against the grain...*, p. 17.

Methodology and data analysis

This study takes the form of qualitative research because it is concerned with understanding a particular world at a particular time. It is concerned with the ways that people construct, interpret and give meaning to experiences. Qualitative research offers “a way to confront the messy facts of social life” with a view to making meaning and perhaps generating new ways of making sense of social arrangements.⁴⁷ It allows a research approach that is interactive, humanly compelling and contextualised.

In this study, reflective questionnaires were addressed to the students in a bid to gauge the extent to which they were engaging with the critical dimensions of the module. Twelve voluntary participants constituted the sample of this research in response to an open invitation to the whole group (which amounted to 55 students) by the lecturer. Though these participants are not necessarily representative and their responses may not be generalisable, the primary concern was to acquire valuable and in-depth responses from those who were prepared to give them. We argue that the fact these twelve students opted to take up the offer of providing reflective feedback on their personal experiences of the module was in itself an act of agency. Furthermore, the responses can be understood on a continuum of self-awareness, ranging from minimal engagement with the module’s material to a deep and profound connection between the module and contemporary society. Coghlan and Brannick describe reflection as the process of stepping back from an experience to process what the experience means.⁴⁸ In addition, it is the critical link between the concrete experience, the interpretation and taking new action. Thus, using student reflections from the questionnaires enabled us to link our original intention of promoting self-awareness and critical citizenship among the students via the content of the course to the results.

We attempted to create semi-structured questionnaires with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions can be motivating for the respondents as they require more free-ranging and unpredictable responses. Open-ended questions allow for the expression of opinion enabling the respondents to see that their responses do not need to fit “a straightjacket of prescribed answers”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, open questions indicate what one wants to know,

47 K Gerson & R Horowitz, “Observation and interviewing: Option and choices in qualitative research”, *Qualitative research in action* (London, Sage, 2002), p. 215.

48 D Coghlan & T Brannick, *Doing action research in your own organisation* (London, Sage, 2005), p. 35.

49 B Gillham, *Developing a questionnaire* (London, Continuum, 2000), p. 34.

but they do not provide a predetermined choice of answers.⁵⁰ As we wanted to engage the students in productive reflection, we created questions which had personal relevance for them, for example: “Do you think the lecturer has been sensitive to issues of race and language in his presentation of the course material?” “Have the ‘characters’ in the course and their experiences been fairly represented?” “Which theme/s covered in the course have stood out for you and why?” “Has the course in any way made you think about and relate to current affairs in South Africa?” “Do you think that having a greater knowledge of Cape colonial history has enabled you to think about modern South Africa in new ways?” The respondents were asked to explain their answers in depth and provide examples where possible.

These questions were also designed to reveal the complexities of largescale social change by examining the intricacies of individual lives. To this end, the students’ responses became a lens through which to view their understanding of social contexts and arrangements. Therefore, individual student interpretations were analysed in order to reveal how, and to what extent, they understood their own positioning, perspectives and subjectivities within larger social and cultural contexts.

Data was analysed by putting together issues arising across individual responses. This included a search for themes, shared responses, patterns of reasons, agreement and disagreement. The aim of this was that individual responses could be compared against each other. We were looking for an overall patterning in the questionnaires, with the idea that patterns connect. In essence this means it is in the connections that the data takes on thematic meaning, not in the single entities or units of meaning as such.⁵¹ The connections between the data tell the story in the data. This approach allowed us to think creatively of the data as a network of connected ideas. While our key concern as researchers was to identify the patterns or themes in the data, we were cautious not to impose our own particular views on the data.

Analysis of responses to Themes in the history of the Cape Colony

We argue that the course was experienced on a personal level in some instances by the participants because it offered an alternative way of representing history. The way in which the course was taught allowed for students to embrace

50 TE Rodgers, “History, self-awareness, and the core curriculum”, *The Journal of General Education*, 54(1), 2005, p. 54.

51 U Flick, *An introduction to qualitative research* (London, Sage, 2006), p. 221.

different historical viewpoints that could be readily linked to the socio-political present. The course allowed the willing participants to construct lessons of value by investing in critical analysis and questioning. Thus, the course provided an option to question and modify historical perspectives, encouraging self-awareness via self-reflection, first by the lecturer and in turn the students. Self-awareness can occur when individual versions of stories are told, but it mostly occurs when we can identify and change those procedures or terms through which our stories become “true”.⁵²

From the data it was evident that an alternative perspective of Cape colonial history was emerging among some of the students. Moreover, the data revealed that not every student adopted this explicitly. More commonly though, student responses were open and embracing of the possibilities for self-awareness framed by the self-reflection that the course offered. We acknowledge that a limitation of this study is that while the intention was for the students to make the links between past and present socio-political contexts for themselves, this did not occur with every student in every instance. This was because the links were not a formal part of the curricula, but rather inferred. In addition, it is difficult to assess the degree of achievement with regards to such a broad self-awareness intent. Yet several of the students’ responses demonstrated insight in relation to the course’s themes and the links to current identities and events, as illustrated by the examples below.⁵³ The analysis of the data revealed two broad emergent themes in relation to self-awareness and critical citizenship. The first was the emerging discourse of agency and the second the contemporary relevance of the course to present-day South Africa.

In response to the question of whether the lecturer had been sufficiently sensitive to issues of race and language in the presentation of the course themes, one of the participants made this observation:

Yes, I feel the lecturer has been sensitive to issues of race and language. For example ... he made sure we understood that the content may be controversial and asked that we not be offended.

Another student added:

I did not have an extensive knowledge of the characters prior to taking the course but I felt that the lecturer dealt with the characters and events with respect and sensitivity.

52 R Simon, *Teaching against the grain...*, p. 30.

53 S Amirell, “Descent from the ivory tower...”, *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 2009, p. 452.

These responses refer to issues that are very sensitive to teach such as racism, dispossession, the brutality of slavery and forced labour regimes and how these are represented in language. The content was taught in such a way so as to illustrate that while the historical characters being discussed were disempowered and co-opted by their context, they were not without agency. This approach potentially allowed students to consider current realms of oppression and their responses to them. Yet another respondent noted in relation to the lecturer's approach to teaching:

... that he is sensitive to issues of race and language because when he is lecturing he does not think of other races as inferior and in case of language he can even say the Khoi words with clicks.

This response is telling, as it suggests that the student has not encountered a deliberate effort to bridge language divides in other classrooms. As language, race and identity are inextricably linked, the student has interpreted the lecturer's sensitivity towards language as a means of dispelling racial tension. This is of contemporary significance, as current South African identities continue to be shaped by issues of language and race. History in this sense is used as a vehicle to acknowledge both past "and" present tensions with a view to encouraging agency-driven responses and reconciliation.

In this response: "... he has highlighted that issues regarding race and language are subject to the time period and not necessarily true for everyone involved", the student has recognised that although there was a prevailing colonial meta-narrative of race and language in the Cape Colony, serving to categorise the Colony's inhabitants, this did not inhibit individual responses to such classification. In this sense, the student has identified agency on the part of the Cape's eclectic mix of historical characters and their relative hierarchical positioning in society.

Furthermore, with regards to the social positioning of slaves, for example, the following student response shows that although systemically deemed "voiceless", slaves were presented in the course as able to draw upon cultural resources to shape life outcomes, even if only in limited ways. This implied a sense of empowerment in a seemingly disempowered environment and discourse. We argue that it is possible to suggest this in such a way without detracting from the harsh and brutal realities of slavery.

The theme about Cape slavery stood out for me because it is where I had learned about the Hottentots having/being equal before the law and also about the origin of slavery. I liked this theme because slaves could use laws to seek legal redress.

In response to the question concerning which themes had stood out for them and why, a student wrote:

The gendered analysis because I felt that the rest of the course was sort of what we always hear about slavery but having a new perspective definitely helped with insight [into] many of the issues of the time.

Hence, agency was further represented in the lecturer's presentation of the link between power and gender. This was illustrated in one of the prescribed readings which appears to have resonated with the students. This particular reading dealt with a slave rebellion which took place in the Cape Colony in 1825.⁵⁴ The rebellion involved the slave and Khoisan men on a rural farm taking up arms and attacking their white male owners and overseers. The female slaves and servants on the farm did not actively participate in the revolt. The significance of the absence of female involvement and "voice" in the rebellion was highlighted to the students to show how women were positioned in the Cape colonial context. This was taught as an indicator of how women were not only vertically oppressed by their masters, but also horizontally by men of their own culture, sharing their class and race position as slaves and servants. A gendered analysis was forwarded as a means for understanding why the male slaves and servants initiated the revolt. Close attention was paid to the leader of the rebellion, whose life was revealed in detail by the court proceedings following the event.

Despite the fact that the leader of the rebellion was a slave, his story was taught through an individualised lens, which afforded him a "voice". This made an impression on the students, as they did not expect that a slave's perspective could be incorporated into the Colony's narrative. For instance, a student noted that this theme:

... provided a sense of "personalness", basically it made you feel like you knew the people involved and hence made it better to grasp different ideas...

In the above examples taken from the student data there are several indications of an emerging discourse relating to the activist paradigm from which this course has been taught. We argue that some of the students began to embrace this discourse, which is an indication that they have responded positively to the innovative approach offered by the lecturer. Our understanding of the choice of words used by the students is that it points towards a shift in student thinking that is both new and analytical. This point is reiterated in the following student responses. One student reflected on why the theme of

⁵⁴ P van der Spuy, "Making himself master: Galant's rebellion revisited", *South African Historical Journal*, 34, May 1996, pp. 1-28.

evangelical-humanitarianism and the missionary movement in Cape colonial society resonated. S/he noted:

The reason being that the [missionaries] influenced the way the Khoisan viewed the world and it also brought about the “civilizing” of the Khoisan.

In this example, the student uses the phrase “Khoisan viewed the world” as well as “civilizing”, which has been qualified in inverted commas. We argue that from this it is evident that critical thinking is emerging via a mimicked discourse, as indicated specifically in the phrase “Khoisan viewed the world”. Within this mimicked discourse is the student expression that subjectivity forms part of both past and present identity awareness and self-fashioning. By recognising the subjectivity of the historical characters explored in the course, students have taken up the opportunity to link past subjectivities to present identities and contexts.

Several answers showed that the students responded subjectively to the course’s relevance to present-day South Africa. The lecturer’s approach, as a project of possibility, did engender self-awareness in some students as indicated in their reflections. In other words, the students were making links between the historical, social and political contexts discussed in the course and what they currently observe and experience in South Africa. Importantly, these links were not made explicit by the lecturer, but were rather left to student discretion. The themes of oppression “then” have been related to the themes of oppression “now”, which indicates the students’ ability to express an agencydriven and critical approach to understanding as well as internalising this course. This is important as it was the lecturer’s intention to simulate students to express themselves as others in the past have, no matter what their positioning was.

Integral to the process of internalisation potentially experienced by the students is the notion of acknowledging and then responding to meta-narratives. The meta-narratives of the past such as power, entitlement and hierarchy have been recognised in the present. For instance this student reflects on abuse of power and independently draws a thematic parallel with current politics:

Yes the course has related to current affairs, for example if you have power you can get away with anything although there are laws that are passed by the government. People who have wealth get away with wrongdoing that they have done, because they have power, like politicians they are similar to masters.

In the same vein, the following student response points towards socio-political scepticism regarding values of justice and the transparency of the law in current South Africa.

The new ways about modern South Africa is the abuse of others by others indirectly. Slavery is gone but the way our protection and security treat people seems as the way masters treated the slaves, they know the law but ignore it.

Within this project of possibility, this next quote does not show a dramatic shift in the student's personal perspective, but rather reflects a reinforcement of critical citizenship that is already in place. Importantly, we argue that because this student entered the course with a critical discourse, it served to offer historical examples upon which his/her insights could be made clear and reinforced. The student noted:

Personally my perspective of modern South Africa has not changed, but I do see things with a better understanding ... this course has made history seem so familiar.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the first priority of the majority of academics is to keep up with the developments in their disciplines and to contribute to them through research. As a result teaching expertise usually takes second place. This study has shown the importance of merging research and teaching practice and how History can be taught in ways that are socially and currently relevant. To this end, most educators of History will concur with Van Eeden that all History educators ought to engage in reflection and in so doing share their knowledge and experience of teaching History for the benefit of their students.⁵⁵ Part of this reflection is that it creates the opportunity for intra-disciplinary conversation in History education.

In our experience, the self-transformation of the lecturer led to the emergence of a social justice focused and critical educator, as well as a revitalisation of the subject. In addition, this approach inspired students to engage in critical thinking by reflecting on questions about their own subjectivities and linking to the familiar. It is this familiarity that is important in current South Africa in order to enable critical citizenship and to promote agency so that social transformation and justice never cease.

55 ES Van Eeden, "The youth and school history – Learning from some of the thinking of yesterday in South Africa", *Yesterday&Today*, 8, December 2012, p. 45. ES van Eeden, "History as silent formative force in all careers with specific reference to history training and its career receptiveness", *New Contree*, 41, May 1997; ES van Eeden, "Beroepsmoontlikhede in, en die bemarking van Geskiedenis - 'n herwaardering van die Geskiedenisonderwyser/dosent se rol", *Gister en Vandag*, Mei 1995.