

HOW RELEVANT IS THE HISTORY TEACHER IN THE 21ST CENTURY ???

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Sometimes one wonders whether or not the history teacher is a dying species. Is the history teacher about to go the same way as the dodo – or more worryingly, the same way as the Latin teacher of some 30 years ago.

Well, here are some worrying signs that might indicate that this is the case!

- Are the history lessons given by this teacher difficult to understand?
- Are the notes handed out by the teacher of any use? Are they obscure and problematic? Are they from some old book studied by the teacher?
- What is the relevance of the topic to the students? Is the teacher making it relevant?
- Is punishment involved for not following what is happening?

In other words.....is the lesson that is being given irrelevant and boring to the learner or is it a meaningful and stimulating experience? To what extent is the teacher connecting with the learner?

We must remember that we are dealing with learners who are living in a world of modern technology. Ipods, DVDs, surroundsound and colour are the norm. Even if the student comes from a disadvantaged background and does not own the latest technology, it is still all around us in commercial malls and public places. Yet how many of our notes incorporate colour? How many of our textbooks incorporate colour? How many of us use sound during our lessons?

Part of the inaugural speech made by Nelson Mandela looks impressive, but to listen to it being said by him (available on various sound recordings), is even more impressive.

“We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world.

Let there be justice for all.

Let there be peace for all.

Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.

Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves.

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.

Let freedom reign.

The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement!

God bless Africa!”

Teachers must relate to this world in their teaching. Too often, teachers are hostile to it!

But how do history teachers relate to it? Through a bland textbook? Through many roneoed notes?

This disparity between the world of the history teacher, the pupil and the outside world can lead to misunderstanding and conflict, leading both sides to hostility. A good example is that of reading. Many teachers grew up with a love of books as places from which much information can be obtained. Young people these days do tend to have a problem with reading :either they won't do it or perhaps they can't do it. A recent report in Britain indicated how the reading level is dropping and how young people are enjoying reading less.

The history teachers, if they are to be relevant must be able to relate to all this. Are history teachers not supposed to be the worst of all?? Stuck in the past!! But we are not -

or, at least, we should not be...

Another matter is that sometimes we may sell ourselves short as teachers. We say, or perhaps we just think that we are “only a teacher”. If we undervalue ourselves, we are simply making ourselves not relevant and we may as well go to the scrapheap.

What is the value of a headmaster? If one examines the pay packet of a headmaster at a local school compared to that of a general manager of a local supermarket – which do you think would be the greater? Nearly everyone I have spoken to, believes (rightly so) that it is the supermarket manager who wins. Is this not where our priorities are wrong? Surely the value of the headmaster is much more important? Of course, perhaps our priorities are wrong if we consider the pay packet of a national soccer coach!

There is no doubt, however, that the role of the teacher is changing.

He or she must become :

- An expert in their field of knowledge! (Otherwise, what is the point? Get the knowledge from the internet!)

Of course, the Internet also has its problems. It needs to be managed –by the relevant teacher! To quote once again from the previous article, very few people have had proper instruction on how to use the internet and how to pick out what is true and what is false.

- A good manager of the classroom situation – the teacher is the one in control!

Punch magazine once gave a very sobering view of the modern classroom, referring to the less advantaged schools in Great Britain.

“The modern classroom is a hive of activity with 40% of the class engaged in sex and 40% of the class engaged in violence and 20% engaged in both ... controlled by a teacher hanging from a light cord.”

- A good and efficient administrator!

The good teacher can deal with paperwork, can organise, can construct notes, question papers, memoranda, rubrics, assessments, visits etc. etc.

There is some confusion as to what certain people think a good teacher should be.

A teacher is NOT...

- A bus driver.
- A sports coach!
- A general dogsbody!!

Many headmasters would like to see them be all three of these, but the teachers cannot do everything – they cannot produce quality work and have loads of extra duties, or undertake part-time work.

So, I would like to start a new fund / or campaign...the save-the teacher fund, especially the history teacher!

- Don't overload the history classes – make them manageable for instruction and discussion – not just lecturing!
- Don't over-bureaucratise!! The bureaucrats have taken over!! There are minutes / meetings/ admin of meetings/ roadshows/ paper-paper-paper (etc and etc)
- Give the teacher TIME to do their work – time to prepare, to assess, to read and to unload (during the holidays). There is a sound educational reason why pupils and teachers have these holidays!

However...the history teachers must also save themselves!! They must be those with:

good knowledge...in fact.....expert knowledge! They must know what is going on.

They must be up to date with current events and technology – not stuck in the last century! Otherwise, their credibility has gone!!

And then, they will save themselves!

Of course...good teachers are essential! The bad or incompetent ones... must become extinct. They must strive to be good managers and administrators – go on courses to learn the latest knowledge and techniques!

The really good teachers must be able to :

- Kickstart the lessons.
- Manage and administer and
- Assess effectively.

Let us not get too carried away by assessment. It is an important tool in history, but it is not the only one. The lessons must be enjoyable.

Another matter, moving towards the more human component is that teachers bring the human element to schools - they're much more cosy than calculators or computers.

Of course, this is looking at the ideal situation in the classroom where the focus is on teaching and learning and not on problems, crime and violence. But...if we do not look at the ideal...what do we have to aim at??If we can only all do a little bit ourselves, imagine how wonderful the classrooms and schools could be!

So the final answer to the question on how relevant the history teacher is in the 21st century is ... Would it be obvious to work out the conclusion as it is a history conference attended by many history educators? The answer is YES! The history teacher IS relevant to the 21st century BUT...only if they want to be...we want knowledge and contribution not sheltered employment!!! And then they will move from becoming history teachers to becoming history.