5. Task Analysis

Having surveyed some of the current practices in undergraduate history teaching at three universities, I will turn to my own tertiary history teaching. I firstly outline the courses currently offered, and then place these and the local history task in the context of relevant learning theory. The task analysis is carried out as an instance of ‘situation definition’ (Wertsch, 1991) in a move to help students redefine their conception of the nature of history; and also to go beyond this to redefine their own identities within the practice of history.

The History Programme at the College of Education at Wits

I will begin by placing the task in the context of the two years of academic history currently constituting the programme in my department. As stated in the introductory chapter, I recognize that the History I and II courses fall into a tradition of specialized or discipline-based academic teaching. Course content is chosen for a number of purposes: to interest students, engage them in learning about key concepts and periods in the past, and to equip them to some extent to teach history should they choose to do so. It is also intended to provide a context for challenging stereotypes and for investigating values, as well as for developing some understanding of the society in which they live. The first year course is a general history course with modules on the ancient world (Egypt and Rome); industrialization in Britain; the rise of Communist China; the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1947; and aspects of north American history. The 2nd year course surveys a wide range of South African history, from the origins of human society to the dawning of democratic elections in 1994.

Students are provided with regular opportunities to enter historical debate through tutorial exercises and the writing of quarterly formal academic essays. The essays are text-based and generally require a critical engagement with a particular interpretation of a past event or period, or of the role of an historical figure. This activity falls into the tradition of the adjudicative tasks described earlier in this research report. My emphasis is always on guiding students to construct their own interpretations of history, within the structures of the discipline.
As I turn to the theorists to illuminate and refine my practice, it is evident to me that I have engaged in a constructivist approach to learning; recognizing that students make something their own by acting upon it. This is not achieved by leaving students to their own devices. I see learning in essence as a social activity. I have employed Bruner’s notion of scaffolded learning – the support of the more knowledgeable gradually being withdrawn as learners become more independent agents (Moll, 1990). Structured assignment outlines, preparatory tutorials and discussions lead up to the writing of formal essays. It is thus evident that I have acted as a mediator of learning within the Vygotskian zone of proximal development; acted as the more knowledgeable adult, providing the tools for working with ‘culture’ by mediating learning through instruction, discussion and providing opportunities for self-exploration (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991).

The courses and tasks afford students the opportunity to learn about history, historical debate, and what historians do; in this they are very much like the courses delivered at UCT, UWC and in the main History Department at Wits. They do not require students to act as historians. This is why I have introduced the local history task as a major assignment running concurrently with the usual teaching programme for the first half of History II.

The local history task  

(Figure 1, p.5)

It has been a matter of concern to me that my students might become history teachers without ever having discovered for themselves what historians actually do. I vividly remember the first time when, as a History Honours student, I sat in the domed building of the Cape Archives, and was brought a box of handwritten missionary letters by a wizened clerk in a white dustcoat and homburg! The sense that this was ‘the real thing’ is an experience that both Nigel Worden and Clive Glaser echo in my interviews with them:

I think that all of us felt that the reasons we became historians was because we got excited when we started doing our own research …(Worden,2004:14)

…[T]he idea of trawling through the sort of dusty archive and seeing the real, yellowing, crumpled papers … I can imagine that actually exciting students (Glaser, 2005:16).
My original intention in designing the local history task was, and still is, essentially to provide students with an opportunity to construct history after the fashion of a historian. (That this has generated rich and frequently enthusiastic responses adds to my commitment to continue with it, as well as to investigate what the students are learning by engaging in it.)

They are asked to undertake their own research into an area with which they are familiar. The choice of local history is intentional because, although resources for local historical research vary enormously, identification with an area provides motivation to investigate it. Connection with the area means that students are likely to have access to sources of information through local networks. Very importantly, however disadvantaged the area being studied might appear, the task should demonstrate that each student is able to put together a history of his or her own geographical area. It has a history. The task is thus intended to reinforce a democratic assumption that ordinary people and places have a history.

I recognize, now, that the task has been used to mediate learning by moving students into processes entailed in locating historical sources and constructing an historical account. An application of Shay and Moore’s analysis suggests that the assignment engages students in the interpretative task of the historian which involves ‘an apprenticeship in the theoretical frames of reference informing the application of historical methods’ (Shay & Moore, 2002:313). It also entails application of historical methods. The local history task is one in which the lecturer as historian is to some extent playing the role of ‘master’ to the student ‘apprentice’. The structuring of the assignment is informed by my knowledge of the concepts and practices of history, and my availability as guide but not instructor.

I am asking the students to do what a historian would do, and produce a first-voice account. I recognize that I have been engaging them as apprentice historians, and as such they have to organize the whole process of research, directed by a particular question. In the case of this study, they are being asked to investigate what has happened to the suburb of their choice – how its function has changed over time. In this, the concept of periodization needs to be applied.
Their task is to locate primary and secondary sources of various types – documentary, visual, oral. They need to synthesise, interpret and evaluate a wide range of sources, and manage the gaps and contradictions in these sources. Constructing a narrative or explanation requires the students to position themselves and use their evidence to support their explanation. In some instances it requires countering another interpretation. The concept of ‘balance of evidence’ thus becomes real as they weigh up what they have put together. Their interpretations need to be framed and reshaped in reference to previous scholarship – the second voice.

Hedegaard (1990) applies Vygotsky’s conception of mediating the development of ‘scientific’ or theoretical concepts in her work with children, and her explanation is pertinent to what is achieved with the local history assignment as artifice:

Through working with the central conceptual relations and procedures that characterize the subject area, the children acquire the scientific concepts of the subject. The children acquire the concepts as active concepts … when they are able to relate themselves to their own learning activity as well as the sphere of application of the concepts, allowing children to orient themselves theoretically to the surrounding world (in Moll,1990:181).

In the process of constructing the historical account the history students utilize, and thereby appropriate more effectively, other core concepts, for example: cause (why has their area changed?), consequence (how are people affected by changes?), continuity (what functions of the area remain the same?) and situation (what is particular about this place at a particular time?). They need to demonstrate the ability to contextualize the explanation. They need to demonstrate an ability to decentre – to see the past from its own perspective, as well as relate the account to the present.

In asking the students to make connections between their local study and wider issues in South African history, they are being required to reflect on the particular and the general in the way that historians constantly do. Finally they are given the opportunity to reflect on their experience in a way which is intended to make them think about their own thinking and knowledge – to engage in epistemic cognition.

Very importantly, as well as scaffolding history students’ engagement with the interpretative tasks of the historian, the assignment appears to offer an opportunity for them to achieve recognition as historians-in-the-making. Lave and Wenger (1991; Lave, 1993; 1996) emphasise the social nature of learning, in which agent and social
context are mutually defining and totally interdependent. They move beyond Vygotsky’s ‘small “aura” of socialness’ to examine the learning of practices rather than isolated tasks, and learning as involving ‘the whole person acting in the world’ rather than as individual internalization (Lave & Wenger, 1991:48-49).

To the extent that being human is a relational matter, generated in social living, historically, in social formations whose participants engage with each other as a condition and precondition for their existence, theories that conceive of learning as a special universal mental process impoverish and misrecognize it (Lave, 1996:149).

Lave and Martin Packer characterise a learning theory as consisting of:

three kinds of stipulations: a **telos** for the changes implied in notions of learning; the basic relation assumed to exist between subject and social world; and mechanisms by which the learning is supposed to take place (Lave, 1996:156)

Lave and Wenger have provided a very generative application of social practice theory in which they take ‘learning to be an aspect of participation in socially situated practices’ (Lave, 1996:150). Thus in the practices of tailoring or legal learning, the **telos** would be the identity of a respected practitioner rather than possessor of a particular set of atomized skills or decontextualised knowledge. The identity is forged in the engagement between the individual and his/her world. The mechanism for learning is that which offers the opportunity for participation in the practice; of moving from newcomer to old-timer by operating as a ‘legitimate peripheral participant’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 29-30). ‘Crafting identities is a social process, and becoming more knowledgeably skilled is an aspect of participation in social practice’ (Lave, 1996: 157)

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), in applying Lave and Wenger’s theories to classroom learning, argue that learning activities need to be ‘authentic’, enabling students to approximate the standpoint of practitioners. The local history assignment can be seen as an authentic task, bridging history students into a fuller experience of being historians. This is offered through opportunities to participate in the interpretative practices of the historian; to learn as a peripheral participant something of the totality of doing, being, valuing as an historian. It is contextualized learning rather than the decontextualized learning which seems to be on offer.

It needs to be assessed whether, in putting together their assignments, students are engaging in ‘situated learning’. To what extent is their learning something with flows
out of the ‘experienced, lived-in-world’ – a world that is itself ‘socially constituted’ (Lave, 1993: 64 & 64)? Is there the development of what Jean Lave terms ‘knowledgeable skills’ – skills which are not isolated or possessed by the individual alone? Both Lave (1993) and Brown et al (1989) point out that knowledge and skills are situated, and progressively developed in the process of being used. The process of learning is thus not deterministic or tidy, as the learners always influence the direction it takes.

Although the local history assignment is not undertaken within an extensive community of practising historians, it seems to me that the task enhances learning by placing the student in a familiar and meaningful social context while at the same time asking them to stand back and analyse it. If they are able to position themselves in the world they are investigating, the question is whether they are able to find their voices in a way that is not possible when they are working with reified texts.

So while the structure of the assignment frames their investigation, students should be able to make a wide range of choices as to how to implement it. The task is situated in the reality of their everyday locations and the social relations these places embody. The familiarity of the environment may provide them with resources for the task, but the task would seem to be particularly challenging, because it requires the application of a wide range of problem-solving skills, both social and cognitive.