6. ‘BECOMING HISTORIANS’ – STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE LOCAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

‘For the first time in my life, I felt like a proper historian’\textsuperscript{12}, writes Nicholas as his opening comment on what he has learnt about constructing an historical account through engaging in the local history assignment. But ‘it takes a lot to be a budding young historian’ he adds. Jane’s concluding remark in response to the same question is:

\begin{quote}
If I was rich and did not have to work it would be fun to take a few years off and write a book on the History of the Suburbs. As it would be like having a full time job.
\end{quote}

This from a student who describes herself as initially being ‘naïve’ in thinking that she ‘could walk into the Johannesburg Library…look in a few books and get everything I needed’ for her study of Northcliff.

While acknowledging that the products of these student explorations fall very short of what would be expected of the historian who has mastered the craft, I think that they and their fellow students have had significant experiences of what the interpretative practices of history entail. They see themselves as realistically participating in a community of historians. My intention in setting the assignment had been to expose them to what historians do, hence my first research question for this research report asks: \textit{How does participation in a local history assignment advance the development of second year history students’ capacities to engage in and reflect on the practices of the historian?} I think that it succeeds in ways more profound than I ever anticipated.

If, as chapter four has emphasised, the usual focus of undergraduate history programmes is an initiation into the adjudicative practices of the historian, how could this be enlarged to include a meaningful introduction to the interpretative practices of the historian? What are the benefits of enlarging their historical apprenticeship in this way?

From both written and oral responses, it is clear that the respondents are not engaged in an insulated, text-based historical exploration. Their everyday world looms large in

\textsuperscript{12} Unless identified as an oral comment, which was obtained in the group interview, the quotations from students’ work are from the written responses to \textit{Figure 1, Q. 6: Comment on what you have learnt about the construction of an historical account through doing the local history task.}
their analyses – as would be expected because of the nature of the task. Unique opportunities for learning are provided that would not be possible in the lecture room or library alone.

Jenny focuses her study of changing function on one street, 7th Avenue, Florida. The contextualized nature of her investigation has spatial and social dimensions: 7th Avenue is ‘within walking distance of my place of work’, and the investigation involves walking past local businesses, a church, and the primary school which her partner had attended. Sivuyile’s study is wider: the East Rand ‘township’ of Katlehong. His study takes him into local public places: the post office, police station and library, and on local forms of transport – minibus taxis. It also takes him into places he regards as ‘challenging’. From the context this refers more to meeting the ‘City Engineer, Superintendent, Surgeons and Nurses’ than the ‘squatter camps’ he also visits. The study is also explicitly located in the political context of an impending general election (February-June1999), which affects his ability to gain information in the informal settlements.

Not only are the students familiar with the area they are investigating, but they are also shaped by it to some extent. Dominique has grown up in Yeoville (though lives there no longer), and been headgirl of her high school. Jane’s therapist is, like her, a resident of Northcliff, and Alex’s Standerton is where his grandfather and brother still live, and some of his friends are in jail.

As these students describe their own experiences of constructing an historical account, the reader is taken on a narrative journey, the telos or trajectory of which powerfully illustrates Lave’s analysis of situated learning as being participative. The knowing is a relationship, not information acquired. What they describe is very familiar to the professional engaging in historical research and an aspect of the practice of history that no book enables them to learn.
Learning to find sources

Doing a local History is hard, time consuming and very confusing at times. (Jane)

The students are initiating a process of investigation which is constantly adjusted and redirected because of the lack of access to intended informants or sources of information. The whole experience is in turn shaped by the diverse and disorderly society in which they are located. A repeated refrain in many student accounts is that they find constructing a historical account unexpectedly difficult. In the words of Matthew, who worked on Edenvale:

I have learnt that it can be very difficult to construct an historical account. The first difficulty…was finding evidence. There were often not many sources …They also might not be in one place

Their experience includes frustration, struggle, perplexity and disappointment.

Jenny writes:

I began by writing letters appealing to residents and business for any information…but received no response. I faxed a letter to the Roodepoort Recorder, but they did not respond… I was told I could visit the old gaol, but it was closed both times I tried…Most residents did not open the door for me to speak to them.

Sivuyile says:

As I started before the general election (02/1999) some people were skeptical of my questions. In the squatter camps they thought I wanted to trace which political organization they were in. As a result they refused to talk about anything concerning the squatter camps.

In other public places like the post office, police station and library I was referred to the seniors who were nowhere to be found…

Dominique expects libraries to provide her with sources but:

One of the librarians at the Johannesburg library said that Yeoville’s library had a lot of information and articles concerning its history. However when I went there I was told that it had been stolen sometime last year. I wanted to cry! People have no respect for history… Much of what was is now forgotten because history is not cared for. People forget and don’t store things properly. History gets lost … and that makes it very difficult to find.

Rose finds that:

What I learnt is that to make a research about places like White City Jabavu [Soweto] is not an easy task because there are so many sad stories about the inhabitants of the area because some of the people thought that I wanted to take away their houses especially when I asked them about the permits or title deeds.

The students are trying very hard to be active agents in their own learning – and are learning, but it is often not what they hope for. While the fortunate few soon access collections of sources that meet their needs, more often it is their powerlessness to
unlock sources of information that emerges in their accounts. They have many
‘reflective moments organized around the trajectory of their participation’ (Lave &
Wenger, 1991:54). Their experience of the process of research constantly calls for
equilibration and the construction of a new narrative structure to accommodate the
missing links and the unexpected form and content of historical knowledge.

But the journeys take a turn. Sources are eventually located, and the narratives include
references to being touched and interested (Sivuyile), fascinated (Matthew), excited
and inspired (Nick), and interested and challenged (Donnan). Jenny finds the
experience enjoyable and providing for unimagined historical discovery.

A feature of moving away from a solely text based exploration, is the students’
engagement with the visual and spatial dimension of their study. A number of
students recognize the value of, and really relish undertaking, their own observations
of the physical environment. This is directed to some extent by the task instruction
that they photograph the place they are studying. They are looking and noticing
aspects of the human environment in new ways.

Jane comments that:

When I look photos, it was the first time I actually noticed things in the area like the …
water tower. I’d never actually looked at it …It gives you ideas because you think, ‘Actually
this water tower’s pretty interesting. I wonder if I can find out information on it?’ (oral source)

Glenn writes that:

I found the photographing of the city [Roodepoort] the most rewarding by far. To see how
things have changed over time is really amazing. To know that what I was photographing was
being photographed a century ago is truly fantastic.

Matthew’s exploration finds him, like Glenn, yo-yoing between the past and present
through the visual and physical images of the same place at different times. There’s
an almost existential realization that the past is present and that history is here, as he
says in the group interview:

I just find the whole thing so fascinating that I find myself at times just forgetting... what I’m actually supposed to be doing... At one stage I had all the old photos lying out on my bed, I called my dad and whole family and I said, ‘Check van Riebeeck Avenue. Can you believe it? Check that!’ ... I had a photo of the first school and it had the address of it, so I went off in my car with the camera to go take a photo. And you get out of your car and you look where it is and then you see, ah there, and it’s like a bottle store …[I go] this side of the robot and I take a photo, then I walk to the other side and I take a photo there. And I found … I got caught up in the actual history of the … place… Like I’ve lived in Edenvale my whole life and to find out the history of things you never knew… I’ve often seen the river at the bottom flood and then to read that the first little stall was located down there and the little stall used to get flooded because they didn’t know the river flooded - that kind of thing fascinates me.

(oral source)

Alex feels that the assignment:

also taught me to study the physical layout of an area [Standerton] as having information communicating a political aspect of it.

What comes to his notice is as varied as ‘cheaper houses for a black community’, a mosque and the offices of the Freedom Front. The street names make an impression, too. Sivuyile reflects, in a striking metanarrative on sources and evidence, that:

The infrastructure tells more than what one can get from the books… it is interesting to see how the buildings and other structures can tell of the past and the present that we do not normally notice.

For Jenny the evidence of the physical environment is ‘not enough’ to meet the needs of her exploration, however. Instead she finds that she can talk to two ‘hawkers’ about the area when the doors of suburbia are shut to her. Her richest sources are finally found in a more predictable place, the library of the Roodepoort Museum. So, unlike the township experience of Sivuyile, middle class Roodepoort provides a repository of written sources about Florida – ‘files full of information’. The museum curator is also knowledgeable and informative.

Theoretically Jenny and the other students can learn from lectures at university about primary sources and their preservation in libraries and archives. What they learn for themselves is to locate the repositories and, that done, the perseverance to complete the complex processes involved in finding sufficient relevant information for the task at hand. Between them the students in the study visit and use, with varying levels of satisfaction, a number of local libraries (Katlehong, Klerksdorp, Yeoville, Sandton and Roodepoort for example) as well as the Johannesburg Public Library (JPL). The more specialized services of the William Cullen (Africana) Library at Wits University, Museum Afrika and the African Museum at the JPL are accessed. The
library of a major Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, is visited as are various municipal offices, including Johannesburg’s Civic Centre in Braamfontein. The more localized archives of churches and Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia also provide documentation used by students.

**Negotiating access to the sources**

The students have expectations of professional service from the curators, librarians and officials whom they encounter, and discover that creating a worthwhile historical account is enhanced or inhibited by these people. Matthew’s ability to research Edenvale is enhanced by a cordial relationship with a local reference librarian who herself feels validated by his need for the sources:

I ..enjoyed speaking to the librarian, getting information, and … my librarian loved it because she had set up a whole section on Edenvale and no one really had ever come in to get it, so she really enjoyed that… [oral source]

Further on in our discussion of the role of librarians he remarks that:

it is almost like librarians and historians, you know libraries and history go together.. [oral source]

Less fortunate are the students who find their librarians unhelpful, unknowledgeable or new to the job and therefore unable to assist. While this in turn may be partially the result of the personal qualities of the individual, it is also very often reflects the impact of contemporary socio-political conditions on the capacity of library and museum services to fulfil their roles. Patchy collection and poor preservation and cataloguing of sources are mentioned a number of times. Jenny notes that the files in the Roodepoort library are ‘full of information, which has not been fully catalogued or up-dated’. The curator is expected to keep ‘all the records for the entire Roodepoort area’. I do not doubt that this is related to cost cutting and changing priorities for municipal authorities since 1994.

Sometimes the libraries and librarians are perceived to be of very little help at all. In past years, students who have studied sections of Soweto have commented on the dearth of municipal records and library resources but understood that this was the legacy of political violence and apartheid funding. Sivuyile’s frustration at the lack of written records about Katlehong’s past is marked. The lack of anything except school
textbooks in the Katlehong Library he likewise puts down to underfunding, but Germiston City Library and Wits’ Africana Library also fail to provide more than a couple of articles and a newsletter.

Truly speaking I cannot understand why there are no historical accounts written about this township by either people who rule it or grew up in it.\textsuperscript{13}

He finds that oral sources turn out to be the richest: a clinic nurse in the squatter camp, ‘the Superintendent KHG Municipality Council’[sic] and two Katlehong residents.

There was nothing more touching and interesting that to listen to old people’s reminiscences.

Tota similarly finds his interviews rewarding, if somewhat challenging:

I learnt that people who are around you have stories to tell, especially in terms of history…All the people who were involved in oral evidence responded positively and the interview ended up been [sic] tense , as most of the people were talking strong about what Yeoville used to be.

Although recognizing the need for oral sources, some students express the concern that oral evidence is less reliable than written. Taryn is not sure that all the evidence she obtained of ‘by word of mouth’ was ‘real evidence to support the findings’. Nonetheless, in their use of oral sources the students are moving into the domain of the professional researcher of contemporary social history. Oral testimony and life history have become increasingly important in tracking the history of those not represented in the dominant narratives (Lekgoathi, 2003). Sivuyile makes the very perceptive comment, born out of his own investigation into his own area:

It seems that most people’s experiences went unnoticed as only the big events were recorded and published. Indeed our history is incomplete.

\textbf{Learning about interpretation of sources}

At this stage a number of aspects of student learning are emerging very clearly. As the students are faced with the task of putting together an historical account from a range of primary and secondary sources, they are engaging with what Karen Strohm Kitchener (1983) refers to as an ‘ill-structured problem’. In other words it will never be ‘solved correctly’ but invites skilful analysis and evaluation of the data based on certain theoretical assumptions and resulting at best in a ‘reasonable solution’ – one which is always open to challenge. She suggests that engaging in such problem

\textsuperscript{13} His local history study was undertaken before the publication of Bonner, P. & N. Nieftogodien. (2000). \textit{Kathorus – a history}. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
solving invokes processes of self-monitoring. These include but also go beyond the usual understanding of metacognition as ‘self-monitoring on simple cognitive tasks’ (1983:223). She employs the concept of epistemic cognition to identify an individual’s ability to reflect on the limits of knowing altogether.

At a metacognitive level, students are able to articulate certain skills – knowledgeable skills - that they have developed during the research process. Some relate to strategic functioning such as wielding a camera and tape recorder, preparing questions before an interview and harnessing IT skills. They include being polite with the people you work with, always being ready to listen and, says Rose, knowing that you ‘don’t trespass into the private properties’. They learn to negotiate with security guards, municipal authorities and librarians. Samantha learns that, ‘to do an historical account can be quite costly’ in terms of petrol for travelling to different places, and for paying for copies of pictures, maps and plans as well as photographs. She also discovers that being prepared (by having a camera at hand) and luck are invaluable aids to historical research: three former Rivonia trialists happen to be at Liliesleaf Farm, Rivonia, on the day she visits and happily consent to being photographed for her assignment.

Other skills relate to students’ own thinking. It is clear from many comments that undertaking this investigation into local history confronts them with core issues of interpretation and knowledge construction. In this they again face the issues that historians are working with all the time. They are made to think about the incompleteness of sources both in coverage of events over time and in terms of representing only some of the people who would have lived in an area.

Alex remarks on the partial coverage of Standerton’s history in newspaper records of the past:

[T]he news was starting from 1895 up until like 1903 when it was the end of the Boer War, and then from 1903 all the way up to 1936 there is no history documented and after that we started with the World War… World War II is documented and then after that there is no history up until the 1970s, that’s when we started having history. [oral source]

Many students understand that good historical research involves tapping into a range of perspectives, although they tend to see this in racial rather than, for example, gender or class terms. They find it difficult to do in practice.
Donnan says:

Like any other good researcher I did collect information [on Klerksdorp] from the different groups of people. But what was disappointing was that only one group of people had all the written evidence …from the side of the blacks and Indians is just the oral version.

Matthew echoes this experience:

The same kind of people write and document and photograph the evidence. Most evidence I worked with was written by white people. So you have more difficulties here because you are getting your evidence from one kind of people. You have to ask yourself if the evidence is in any way biased.

Owen is able to obtain a white woman doctor’s views on changes in Coronationville, as well as a Christian and Muslim coloured perspective. ‘However, I didn’t get a Black or Indian perspective’.

There is also the problem of contradictory evidence. Different sources provide different dates for the same events. Dominique is piqued because her sources do not agree on who started Yeoville, but shows herself capable of negotiating an explanation in the style of a true historian:

In the History Dictionary of Greater Johannesburg it says that the area was probably laid out by G.A.Troy, but by 1902 it was owned by Sherwell (?). In the Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa it says that the area was laid out by Sherwell (?) and …I’m more inclined to believe that Sherwell (?) was the one who laid out Yeoville and proclaimed it as I have found a picture of the first house built in Yeoville in 1894 by Sherwell himself – and I have no information regarding G.A.Troy or anything that suggests he laid out the area. [oral source]

Owen is challenged by contradictory accounts as to whose coronation Coronationville is named after. He has three different written sources and the views of local residents to go by – finally deciding to ‘take the “authorized” version printed in the brochure on Coronationville Hospital’ i.e. that both King George VI (1937) and Queen Elizabeth II (1953) are commemorated.

The students are also able to reflect on their experiences of organizing their accounts once the sources have been located. Donnan remarks:

After collecting all the different information and photos it was difficult for me to select what I was going to use.
Taryn, who is confronted with a ‘whole room’ full of documents on Halfway House and finds it ‘hard putting it all together’, asks herself:

What goes where? Is this correct?... [I]s the information accurate? All these kinds of kinds of questions are going through your mind [and you are] wondering if you are on the right idea or are you just babbling?

She also wonders whether she is simply writing her own subjective account, or is ‘trusting the facts’. Jane asserts more confidently that, ‘it will eventually come together’. She then consciously chronicles some of the capacities which I have written about as features of constructing history. She says that she has learnt to periodize her account, sequence information according to date, and contextualize the articles she has found.

**Thinking about the nature of historical knowledge**

The shift of students into processes of epistemic cognition is evident as they ponder the interpretative role of the historian. In thinking about their research, a number of the students begin to make connections to wider historical issues. It is interesting to see them reaching back into their classroom experiences of historical debate and making the kind of connections that Biggs & Collis (1982) refer to as a feature of extended abstract thinking. Owen, for example, says that the debate over the origins of Coronationville reminds him of the classroom debate ‘on whether to call the Anglo-Boer War a South African War…’ They also reflect on the nature of history as involving people like themselves. Somehow their earlier experiences of studying history has largely left people, places and events ‘out there’, to use Jane’s words. Exploring the history of Northcliff, with its Iron Age and Mfecane connections has transformed her understanding of these events.

Matthew similarly understands trekboers (voortrekkers?) in a different light since he went back and found that his suburb had been bought by a trekker. Donnan’s research into the history of Klerksdorp has changed his perception of history as being about, mostly horrific, world conflicts; instead, ‘I see history as something which is to do with everyday life…’
Donnan continues:

One thing I’ve realized it’s not about a set of facts like we used to hear … you had to know about van Riebeeck 1652 - it’s about people and the development in the lives of the people including myself… I mean talking about migrant labour and the lives that my grandmother (?) lived. If my father works as a migrant labourer in the mine to a certain extent I will see myself into a picture of doing a history about people who went to the towns to look for a job. To a certain extent it’s about the searching of one’s own identity. I found more of myself to do with … I could relate to certain things  

[oral source]

It is a profound insight on Donnan’s part that history is as much about himself as people in the past and the issue of identity is one to which I will return.

A point that they find hard to internalize is that there is unlikely to be a ‘true’ history of anything. The dichotomies in their written responses are between biased and unbiased sources, rather than investigating particular perspectives in all cases. This is something that I deliberately raise in the discussion groups – with mixed results.

Matthew: What do you mean by ‘true’ history?
Jane: Is it actual fact? Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape – that’s fact.
Matthew: Oh …ok.
Jane: I think history is not objective.
HL: It’s not objective?
Jane: …There’s no way of proving that what so-and-so said was the truth. I mean because you also get people who are quite opinionated (?), they might have been actually right there on the day and seeing the event completely different to what was actually happening and just basically giving you their interpretation which is half truth and then half a bit of opinion and bias …

Donnan: To add to what Jane has just said about there is no actual truth when it comes to the Historical research, I’ve realized something. I took pictures …and on my pictures Ms Ludlow saw something about the Moslem Cemetery and Hebrew what. I only wrote what I wanted to write and I give one version of that particular area and she brought to my attention some of the things which were on my pictures which I didn’t even comment about …We also write from our own perspective and from our own experience… I’ve realized that there were so many things that I omitted in writing my essay which were important and later on I realized that those things were so important… So what if it was a book, a history book? Definitely learners who were going to use my book were going to look at things the way I put them.  

[oral source]

Identity as constructors of history

Donnan at times struggles to communicate coherently, but the way he narrates the trajectory he is taking ‘through discourse space’ (Gee, 2001: 111) is fascinating. James Gee (2001) distinguishes between an institutionally imposed identity and an institutionally sponsored identity when a community of practice is established in the
classroom. There is a difference between being ascribed a role, and constructing it for oneself.

Discourse can give us one way to define a person’s ‘core identity’ … Discourses are social and historical, but the person’s trajectory and narrativization are individual (although an individuality that is fully socially formed and informed) (Gee, 2001:111).

Donnan has found himself in the history, and he is reflecting on the consequences for learners of his particular historical construction. He further reflects on his realization that you need to be knowledgeable in the first place to be able to ‘see’ the significance of some of the evidence. It had been later in the history course that he studied the 2nd South African War and realizes that he has missed its presence in Klerksdorp, the site of his local history research.

I’ve realized that when I was doing the history of Klerksdorp there were things about the cemetery, boer cemetery … I did not know the importance of that thing for the whole thing … What I did was I took what I think was good for me to use … I only realized later on that I could have put something about this, realizing the importance of those cemeteries in the lives of the Afrikaners. That’s what makes me see that one needs to know the background of a place and do more … research on the place before you can do any editing. [oral source]

The engagement with local history has begun to influence students’ sense of identity. In what the students write and say about themselves as agents of historical enquiry, I find an emergent sense of agency and authority. Alex, Glenn and Jane speak with some awe of how they find themselves being listened to by friends and relatives as they begin to talk about the history of their locality. In the interview Glenn and Jane interact as follows:

Glenn: [O]ne night all our friends went out for supper – there were about thirty of us and I was telling my friend a little bit of history and like by the end of that the whole table was just listening … going, ‘Ah, that’s amazing.’ It was cool. It makes you feel important.

Jane: I actually did the same thing. I took a whole lot of photos to my boyfriend’s house and I was looking at them and I never thought he thought anything of it but when his friend came over it was … ‘Did you see what Jane found? Look at this, this used to be Northcliff hill, this is this, this is this.’ I was actually, ‘wow’. I actually laughed. You’re right it made me feel important because … I actually found that stuff and the other people are actually finding it interesting.

[oral source]

Nick, with whose comments on feeling like a historian I open the chapter, likes the fact that the task had not been too prescriptive; that he has been able to choose his area of study, how to go about the study, what to photograph and so on.
Jenny recognizes that the task has ‘much more depth’ still to be explored and that ‘it was really valuable to have some kind of practical experience of how history is constructed.’ Her journey has taken her from a position of disempowerment (see page 50) to one of possessing the knowledge of a rich store of material. She has also acquired an ally who will welcome her participation in the community of museum-users. Jenny’s exploration has acquainted her with the museum curator’s frustration that she has resources no longer wanted or appreciated in the ‘new South Africa’.

Jenny states explicitly, ‘I see the potential for researching and recording history with learners’. She could thus engage them in the contextualized learning that Lave, Hedegaard and others advocate. As both an apprentice historian and apprentice teacher, she has learnt about processes and relationships of learning that could be built into her future role as a teacher.

Rose feels that:

I know the real story of my location and I have paved the way for other students from any any institution who might look for an information like me on White City Jabavu.

‘Ja’, says Alex, ‘I think I was able to write the history of Standerton how I see it’.

Sivuyile concludes, however:

Above all, this assignment showed me how broad history is and how far and how much I still have to learn in terms of collecting the evidence and using it to compile a report.

I do not believe that this comment contains any false modesty. He has worked with very limited resources, guided by the task and lecturer. In the end Sivuyile has constructed a comprehensive and subtle analysis of the changing function of Katlehong. I do believe that he has begun to acquire what Alasdair MacIntyre refers to as the ‘goods internal’ to a practice which:

are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity (1981:175).

For MacIntyre there are virtues which accrue from learning humbly from those who are more skilled. I would add that these virtues also accrue from listening humbly to those in their own communities who have tales to tell. Kitchener equates epistemic
cognition with wisdom, citing Meacham’s definition of wisdom as a:

balance between increases in the amount one knows and simultaneous increases in the
recognition that there is much that one does not know (1983:21 in 1983:230).

This humility and wisdom is apparent in Sivuyile, as are empathy, compassion and adventuring in many of the students whose work I have analysed. They also voice a new understanding of how hard it is to be an historian, how fragile the evidence is with which the historian works, and the need for themselves and the public generally to care for the vestiges of the past – or ‘history gets lost’ (Dominique).

In reading the local history assignments more widely, it strikes me how the boundaries of history as a subject, an imaginary subject in the classroom, and history as dealing with life itself really have become blurred. The situated nature of the engagement is very evident. Social issues, issues of citizenship and politics, of financial management and negotiation, are all raised by the students. Alex’s Standerton, for example, seems to have many of the elements of dissatisfaction with local government that have recently stirred up violent protest in Harrismith and the Western Cape. A core issue, it seems, is that while most students feel that ‘democracy is good’, their local history study confronts them with problems they find troubling. Who do you ‘blame’ for neglect of former heritage sites, urban decay, crime and homelessness?

That many students struggle with managing these contradictions becomes evident as I read their written responses. It re-emerges in striking fashion during my second group interview. I press the students to comment on their perceptions of themselves as constructing history. I will quote the discussion at length because I see in this exchange evidence of the community of practice at work.

HL: … I keep coming back to you telling me how you found it difficult to find sources, or interesting … [H]ow … do you see yourselves as constructors of history? Do you see yourselves as historians in doing this – more than you do when you are writing an essay from textbooks? Did you feel you had power … that you were investigating, constructing?

[Initial responses ignore the question, so I try again]

HL: …do you understand what I’m saying … I’m trying to put you in a position where you are a writer of history rather than just a re-interpreter of someone else’s history?
Dominique: But as a historian you have the power to put across your own opinion.
HL: That’s what I’m trying to say. And did you find that good or was that problematic for you? Did you like putting across your interpretation? …
Dom: Well I don’t know, I think for us, because of you, we will try and be as fair and objective as possible and that’s difficult, considering the sources that I found. It was difficult for me to see Yeoville in the other light in comparison to what I do see it as, as a deteriorating suburb.

HL: Which is quite interesting because you’re saying that you are writing for an audience, and your audience was me – who was going to judge what you were going to say and …

Dom: Trying to see the good and not only the bad.

HL: But what I read was a fairly painful account of Yeoville which I understand – I do understand that.

Dom: Because that’s all I found.

Richard: But you can only write according to the sources that are available, now if the sources are not there how can we write? I can’t write from my head…

HL: And yet Dominique writes one history of Yeoville and Tota writes another history of Yeoville … and what I found really interesting was reading two accounts of the same place…

[oral source]

I am somewhat disconcerted (though should not be) to find myself influencing in this way Dominique’s engagement with producing her text. At a crude level it seems that obtaining good marks might be about writing the text the lecturer wants to read. Yet Dominique stays true to her sources and her heart, while reflecting on the possibility of other sides to the story – because the historian/teacher with whom she is engaging has in past months alerted her to ‘other sides’ of South African history. Just as historians write their accounts aware of the academy figuratively peering over their shoulder, Dominique’s historical construction has been tempered by being part of a community of practice. (And should she engage with Tota’s immigrant interviewees in Yeoville, she might still discover that for many of them, Yeoville is a place of hope rather than a slum!)

The very fact that students are troubled by some of their findings provides an opportunity for further interaction back in the classroom and for learning which is much more meaningful because it has come out of their own engagement in the practices of the historian.

A final word from Jean Lave:

The object of learning surely becomes full, strongly valued participation and deeply transformed forms of understanding (1993:81).

I do believe that the history students who engaged in the local history assignment have to a significant extent participated in the practices of the historian. They have discovered something of what it means to be a historian. And they have experienced a transformed understanding of the nature of history.