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Apprenticing undergraduate history students into interpretative practice through local history

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1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction in recent years of a local history assignment into a second year academic history course has been the stimulus to this research. Each time I have marked students' responses and talked with them about their projects, I have been struck by the high level of initiative and engagement shown by the students, and their apparent increasing appreciation of history as a practice. I have been intrigued to understand in what ways the assignment promotes their understanding of history as an academic practice.

The central question in this research report is thus:

> *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?*

As such the object of the research is the development of students' knowledgeability and identities as historians.

A secondary aim is to explore possible implications of such an approach for curriculum development. Thus two subsidiary questions are:

- *What understandings of history as an academic discipline have informed the teaching of history at undergraduate years of study in some South African universities?*
- *Could a history task such as the one under investigation offer a new dimension to undergraduate apprenticeship into history as a practice?*

Personal motivation for research

For over twenty years I have taught history as an academic major to students who are studying to be teachers at the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE), from 2001 the College of Education at Wits. The roots of this study are deeply embedded in the challenge I faced to introduce the rigours of history as a discipline to students of a

wide range of abilities and very different backgrounds. JCE was initially separate from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and the majority of our students were registered for a Higher Diploma in Education. In addition, the College had an agreement with Wits to deliver most courses, including history, to students registered for the Bachelor of Primary Education degree at the university. Entrance requirements based on students' performance in their matriculation examinations were less stringent for diploma than for degree students, although financial considerations meant that some potential university candidates enrolled for the diploma and received a provincial education department bursary. [1]

Up to and including 2002, diploma and degree students were taught separately for History I. The groups were then combined for History II, where the subjects of this study are located. Regardless of whether they were diploma or degree students, credits in the History I and II courses were recognised as equivalent to those gained at any South African university and portable to any degree-awarding South African tertiary institution.

As part of the state's programme to incorporate teacher education colleges into universities, full incorporation of JCE into the university took place in January 2001, and JCE became the College of Education at Wits.[2] To date, the College teaching establishment has largely remained intact, and continues to work as an entity separate from that of the main university History Department. Our students still comprise a mixture of current Wits education students and the tail of the Higher Diploma in Education students who will graduate in 2005. All history classes comprise students from both degree and diploma groupings, as well as reflect the socio-cultural diversity of the University as a whole.

[1] According to a 'Matric Rating' given every student on entry to the College, History I and History II student groups in the B.Prim Ed streams both had an average rating of 21,5 points. History I students in the HDE group had an average points rating of 3,9. In History II there were only 5 HDE students, 4 with a –1 rating, 1 with 20 points. Source: University of the Witwatersrand SIRS SRB080P:1 classlists JCED 138, 238, 1024, 1025, 2104, (2002).

[2] Change in the higher education sector continues, and in 2005 the College of Education at Wits was amalgamated with the School of Education so that the organizational structure has changed substantially. The students in this study were taught under the pre-2005 regime. From 2003 the HDE and B.Prim Ed were replaced by one tertiary teaching programme, the B.Ed. Thus 2004 students in the study come from HDE, B.Prim and B.Ed programmes – all participating in the same History II course.

A product myself of many years of academic study in history at a South African 'English' University, I, along with my colleagues, have attempted to introduce our students to the rigours of academic history. **How do we help students to explore the complex nature of history as a discipline?** (What this means will be discussed in more depth later in the study). The requirement that College of Education lecturers be qualified teachers has meant that our approach to lecturing academic courses draws strongly on experiences as secondary school history teachers. The classrooms from which we have come, and to which some of our history students will be returning, have framed our thinking.

A strong influence on how we have approached history teaching was the 'New History' movement originating in the United Kingdom and best reflected in the work of the British Schools Council in the 1970s and 1980s. In outlining the origins and features of the New History, Martin Booth (1980) identifies the impact of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, and the work of Jerome Bruner as being seminal. Bruner argued that determining the structure of a subject was essential for effective teaching of the subject; and given an understanding of this structure, 'any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development' (in Booth, 1980:3).

Booth comments that:

> As a result of the intellectual climate and demands for structure and objectives, Coltham and Fines set out to define history's structure and objectives – to provide a framework to underpin the history syllabus. They attempt to answer the question, "What is history?" or in other words to give history a structure and then to provide specific objectives in both the cognitive and affective domains which would guide teaching and assessment (1980:3).

Generations of JCE and Wits history methodology students have been exposed to J.B.Coltham and J.Fines, *Educational objectives for the study of history*, since its publication in 1971. In particular their work brought a 'greater emphasis on pupil activity and the use of different kinds of evidence' (Booth, 1980:4), the employment of imagination and empathy in history learning, and new forms of assessment. These influences found their way into JCE history teaching, too; perhaps more so than into mainstream school history before the post-1994 changes.

Since 1994, new curricula, a heritage in schools of memorizing the 'facts' of history, and a crisis of declining numbers taking history for matriculation, have called for new ways of thinking about teaching tertiary students about history and its pedagogy. In facing these issues, we have much in common with those lecturing undergraduate history students whether or not they are going to become teachers. For those of our students who will eventually teach history (not many, as they are mostly primary school generalists), there has been an additional question: how will students ultimately help their learners to get to grips with history as an interpretative activity?

My participation in the M.Ed (Tertiary Teaching) at Wits University over the past two years has afforded me the opportunity to turn a reflective gaze on my own practice as a history lecturer. It has also provided some conceptual tools for making more explicit the tacit assumptions embedded in my teaching. I recognize that the History I and II courses clearly fall into a tradition of specialized or discipline-based academic teaching (Bernstein, 1973) with a strong emphasis on developing students' capacity to engage in historical debate and to write discursive essays. At the same time there is an attempt to create learner-centre pedagogy and to achieve 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1996) of teaching, student task requirements and assessment strategies.

My concern with enlarging student understanding of the practices of the historian has led to the harnessing of a teaching strategy not common in undergraduate academic courses: the local history assignment which I propose to examine in this research study. Here I discern an intervention in line with Lev Vygotsky's (1978) notion of mediated learning. The roots of the assignment lie in an O-level task which was part of the British Schools Council(BSC) 13-16 History Project, 1972-1988. The module 'History Around Us' required learners to 'use visible evidence as the starting point and involved visits to sites'.[3] The idea for my local history assignment was triggered by this BSC task but developed in totally different ways, both in focus and scope.

(See ***Figure 1***, p.5).

[3] The British Schools Council 13-16 History Project aimed to engage learners in doing what historians do. It has since become the Schools History Project (www.tasc.ac.uk/shp/whatis/whatis.htm).

Figure 1:

HISTORY II **LOCAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT** **150 marks**

Local history is the study of an area within one's experience - for example a school, a neighbourhood, town, city. The purpose of this assignment is to give students exposure to the history around us, an opportunity to investigate a local area personally, and to see whether the local reflects in any way the history of the broader South African society. In the process of doing this it is likely that students will contribute to a fuller local history of the Johannesburg area, which may then be used to construct local history projects for future learners.

Your task is to investigate what has happened to an area of your choice over a specified time period.

You will entitle it: WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO [BRAAMFONTEIN] - or the changing function of [Braamfontein] as reflected in one of its streets/blocks.

1. Photograph the street or block on which your assignment will be based. These pictures are to be presented as part of the assignment. [20]
2 What time period do you propose to cover?
3. Sources: you need to use primary and secondary sources.
   Primary Sources: which of the following, for example, are available?
   - buildings
   - street names
   - other significant names
   - physical layout of the area
   - other artefacts/objects
   - maps
   - diagrams
   - plans (municipal/other)
   - title deeds
   - letters
   - diaries
   - photographs
   - pictures/paintings
   - contemporary newspaper accounts
   - people/oral testimony
   - other primary evidence?

   Secondary Sources: compile a bibliography of books, journals etc used.

4. Write an essay of four to six pages (of text - excludes illustrative material) on how this area has changed in function over the period you have chosen. Don't forget to think about people of all races in the area, so that it may have multiple functions in some ways too.

   It is important that you refer to your photographs and primary sources in this discussion i.e. that you use your primary evidence as well as the secondary material you have chosen. The purpose of this assignment is to show that you are able to identify the changes commented on in the evidence you have found. That is why it must be used. (Please do not put into your assignment any sources which you have not actually used.)

   [50 - sources; 50 - interpretation = 100 marks]

5. Are there any ways in which you think that your assignment illustrates changes and issues relating to the broader history of South Africa? Give reasons for your answer.

   [15]

6. **Comment on what you have learnt about the construction of an historical account through doing this task.**

   [15]

Briefly, the task requirements of the assignment make it functionally necessary for students to engage in forms of activities characteristic of the work of historians as *researchers.* In this it differs from other tasks in their courses. Its purpose is to engage History II students with an on site investigation of how an area familiar to them has changed over time. There is a spatial dimension to their engagement, as they need to walk the streets taking photographs of remnants of the past seen in the physical environment. They are required to locate repositories of sources of the past of this area - human, visual and written. They are asked to create an account of changing function based on the data they have put together, and to reflect on how their local history mirrors wider processes and events in South African history. Finally, they need to consider what their engagement in local history has taught them about the construction of an historical account – i.e. the process of knowledge construction in this discipline.

Rationale

The activities outlined above are not typical fare in undergraduate courses, but the assignment appears to create benefits and opportunities for learning that traditional tasks do not. Students, including those who have had some difficulty with traditional academic assignments, have demonstrated a sense of empowerment and ownership of the knowledge produced. Many refer to their work as ‘research’ and suggest that others now see them as knowledge resources for their communities. They talk about having learnt to go to places and undertake practical tasks like tracing sources and conducting interviews of which they would never have thought themselves capable.

It appears to me that such identities, feelings of ownership and competence are not typically expressed or demonstrated by undergraduate students. To date, however, the significance of the local history assignment for the development of students’ identities as historians has been largely anecdotal. It has not been systematically explored or analysed. This provides an opportunity to engage in what Donald Freeman (1998) refers to as **inquiry driven teacher-research**. This study is thus presented as an inquiry into my practice as a tertiary history lecturer.

In addition, in the context of ongoing equivocation about how to structure and teach undergraduate courses, it seems to me that a systematic analysis of the local history assignment has implications for undergraduate history education more broadly and not only for history teaching to education students. The study is thus intended as a more rigorous investigation of the outcomes of the local history task in the context of current undergraduate history teaching at university. It aims to investigate a way in which undergraduate students may be given access to the interpretative aspects of the practice from which they are generally excluded and the effect of this on their identity as constructors of history.

Research context

The transformation of South African education in the democratic order since 1994 on the one hand, and globalisation and internationalisation on the other, have exerted strong, and at times countervailing, pressures on history departments and developers of history curricula in schools and tertiary education institutions (*Report of the history & archaeology panel*, 2002; Ensor, 2004; Muller, 2004). In 2002, it was reported in a major state-sponsored investigation into history education that, 'history education in the schools appear[s] to be on the rocks' (*Report of the history & archaeology panel*, 2002:4*).* One reason for this was national curriculum initiatives immediately after the 1994 elections to create an integrated curriculum with history as one strand in a social science learning area. This, it was feared, would lead to a loss of the distinctive identity of history as a subject in all but the final three years of schooling.

In addition there was a significant decline in students taking history at senior levels, in large measure because it was not seen to help with career paths. Outdated methods of teaching were also seen to be a factor (*Report of history and archaeology panel*, 2002). It is also likely that, since 1994, the loss of interest has resulted from a diminished need to invest in history as tool of resistance in South Africa. An important consequence of these factors is that there has been a significant decrease in numbers of students enrolling in history courses in tertiary education institutions (Cobley, 2001; Glaser & Dugmore, 2005; Lambert, 2002; Witz, 2004).

At the same time there has been a major restructuring of higher education institutions in South Africa. In the context of an increasing emphasis on competence based education and new modes of knowledge, as well as local pressures to transform higher education, there has been major faculty and programme restructuring at most South African universities (Kraak, 2000; Ensor, 2004; Witz, 2004; Worden, 2004). As a result of both loss of student numbers and institutional restructuring, most university history departments have engaged in an ongoing review of their undergraduate programmes.

The changing demographic structure of the student population at many universities since the 1980s has also posed new challenges, as well as new opportunities. History departments are dealing with students of a great diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds.[4] All of these have been factors in forcing history departments to rethink their approaches to tertiary pedagogy (Glaser & Dugmore, 2005; Nuttall & Luckett, 1995; Shay & Moore, 2002; Witz, 2004; Worden, 2004). There seem to have been two broad responses to restructuring: integration or specialization. Interestingly, proponents of each have in recent times shifted position, as they continue to grapple with the multiple challenges of university restructuring, demographic change and the attrition of history in particular.

It is neither the intention of this study to account for declining numbers of history students, nor to analyse attempts at rethinking university teaching strategies and course structures. It is, however, in the context of needing new ways to identify and reach the goals of an undergraduate history education that the research was carried out.

Outline of remaining chapters

Chapter two maps out the literature which guides the enquiry. It reviews work on the nature of history as a discipline, the classification of legitimate disciplinary knowledge by the academy and the forces shaping South African tertiary curricula. It

[4] Further changes in entry requirements have, however, by 2005 meant that some of the under-prepared students are now excluded from the programmes that began to adjust to their presence (Worden, 2004).

surveys writings on dominant forms of South African tertiary history pedagogy and finally presents core literature on situated learning.

Chapter three outlines the form of qualitative research engaged in, namely ‘inquiry-driven teacher-research’. Sources of data and an outline of analytical questions are provided.

Chapter four is a contextualizing chapter. In order to begin to understand the role the local history task might play in initiating students into the interpretative practice of the historian, I examine dominant practices in undergraduate history course design and pedagogy at a sample of three universities.

Chapter five engages in an analysis of student written and oral responses to the local history assignment. It investigates and describes their reported journeys through the complexities of constructing an historical account. It suggests ways in which the students can be seen to both take on the identity of an apprentice historian and engage in the interpretative practices of the historian.

Chapter six discusses the findings, and proposes avenues of further research opened up in the course of this investigation.