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Apprenticing undergraduate history students into interpretative practice through local history

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Appendix A

While history has had a variety of meanings and uses across (human) time, it can be said today that in an established general sense it means an organised knowledge of the past …History is a distinctive and well-established academic discipline with its own methods and discourses. Its field of study is potentially limitless, in that it encompasses the totality of past human experience. Among scholars who study history there can be differences and even controversy between some who regard it as an account of an actual past, and others who view it as an entirely imagined or constructed past.

History shares with literature, art, history of art, and other laboratories of the spirit and the mind, a preoccupation with exploring the many wonders and contradictions of the human condition. In common with archaeology, history turns on the movement of time and space, which provides us with a sense of unfolding process, teaches us about the workings of cause and effect and, quite simply, enlightens us about the past. While history may naturally be written in this way of that way, the essential concerns of good history focus on:

- a representation of the past through clear narrative, explanation and analysis;
- a careful and systematic study of important processes such as power or economic interest over time, with a strong emphasis on change and continuity, and on how and why change occurs in human societies;
- a critical evaluation of sources and evidence on the past;
- a recognition of the importance of cultivating empathy with varying experiences of the past;
- a fostering of vibrant and healthy critical debate between differing perspectives, interpretations and representations of the past; and
- a recognition of the study of the past as a continuing process with definite implications for the future; requiring exploration of, and debate over how, the historical past relates to the present and the future.

Report of the history and archaeology panel. (2002). Pretoria: Ministry of Education, 14-15.