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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

THE MAKING OF CLASS

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NOTES FROM THE OTHER SIDE: TEACHING HISTORY IN THE FRONT LINE STATES

by Neil Parsons

I hope to join you today. But who knows, maybe I can't. So here are notes of what I would have said a couple of months earlier.

I have been asked to talk from my experience in Zambia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Botswana, over the past 16 years. It began with university teaching, and continued into educational research, accompanied by writing senior and junior secondary textbook material and sitting on many curriculum development committees.

When I arrived in Zambia, it was little more than six years after independence. The University's History curriculum still assumed that students had been through the colonial educational system, knew little or no African or Zambian history and needed to have crash courses in them. Year I was 'Zambia and Neighbouring Areas from Earliest Times to the Present Day', and was taught by a team of four or five lecturers.

After a couple of years we changed this, because students had now had their fill of national(ist) history in secondary school, found it a little boring to face it again immediately, and needed new stimulation - as well as a new History course better integrated into the still developing Economic and Social Studies curriculum of the University. So we gave them a Year I course looking at major themes of three Third World areas that were very unfamiliar to them - the Middle East, India, and China. China was a big hit. The next year we substituted Latin America for India. Students could now progress to Year II, and to more conventional African/Western history, hopefully refreshed by the new perspectives.

The University of Zambia also offered degrees by correspondence studies. The idea had been that anyone, with very minimal qualifications, could have a crack at doing externally the same courses as(well qualified)internal students. At first we tried to give correspondence students the same Year I course as internal students - a unit by unit course of mimeo'd "lectures", supported by set books and by numerous extracts from other books and scholarly articles as reading. But our correspondence students were no green shoots straight out of school. They were mostly 30-45 year old primary teachers, with limited budgets, who wanted to upgrade themselves and join the burgeoning bureaucratic elite. Half dropped out during the year, and others failed the exam. So we were certainly supporting the elitist principle of education as a never stopping train from which the majority of passengers were thrown with dreadful injury at each station.

Most of our correspondence students were confused by all the scholarly paraphernalia that we threw at them. They tried to plagiarise it, completely ignored it, or more usually regurgitated common prejudices and what they had learnt in school themselves.

So we completely redesigned our Year I History course to de-educate and then re-educate correspondence students - to clear their minds of colonial cobwebs. We began the new course by attacking the preconception of "primitive" and "civilized" peoples, and systematically unearthed the prejudices of the colonial curriculum through "Bushmen" and "Bantu" to Conquest and Colonization. Thus one unit started by asking if white people had built Great Zimbabwe; the unit taught through ridiculing the idea. (While with internal students the idea was so alien that we had barely mentioned it except as an aside.)

In Swaziland I became involved in writing junior secondary materials for Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. It had started in 1973 when teachers from the three countries, at a History Workshop, resolved to replace the existing, transitional and semi-colonial History syllabus and textbook. That took another six years before the first book of a multi-authored Boleswa Junior Certificate History of Southern Africa (Heinemann, 1979-81) appeared.

The initial plan was for one teacher from each country to be given a year off to write the books. But no Ministry of Education would swallow that. And it also transpired that, left to their own devices, teachers were so unsure about the new scholarly history that they merely bowdlerised or Africanized the information in old colonial textbooks - rather than writing anything radically new in information and interpretation. So the academics began to hijack the writing and editing of the books - revealing that many of their concepts were pretty airblown when reduced to simpler language.

Frustrated with the interminable process of bargaining, and the compromises reached, I resolved to jump ahead and write a "new history" for senior secondary schools on my own. I started from the point of view of what I expected my students to have studied before they came into Year II at university. It had always frustrated me that, while I wanted to go beyond names and events into interpretations at Year II-III university level, I was always stuck with relating so much background narrative when teaching Southern African history. Students had never heard, say, of Clements Kadalie before. But I could not blame them, given the textbooks on Southern African history that they had had at secondary level. A further incentive to writing the book was the growing population of young Soweto refugees in Swaziland, who seemed to believe that the history of African resistance had begun with themselves.

The result of three or four years labour is called A New History of Southern Africa, published two or three years later by Macmillan (1982). It has half its original text and

illustrations, and now peters out north of the Limpopo instead of in Katanga/Shaba. Still it is a long book, and has been criticized for trying to cover "every damn tribe" south of the Limpopo - so that people everywhere can put their local history in wider context.

Since moving (back) to Botswana six years ago, I've written a (two part) junior secondary History textbook for Zimbabwe, and have participated in the death of junior secondary History in Botswana.

I was became marginally involved in the first ever History textbooks written and published for liberated Zimbabwe by the new Zimbabwe Publishing House. I was a reader for an upper primary text and then the first book of a junior secondary text. I was frankly disappointed by the manuscript of the latter, along similar lines to my frustration with the Boleswa Junior Certificate History. I suggested that an avowedly Socialist textbook should concern itself more with questions of Production and Struggle: these two catchwords were then trumpeted in the introduction while the text was largely unaltered.

When I was asked to write a rival textbook, for the new Zimbabwe lower secondary syllabus (from Australopithecous to Apartheid, with excursions to Ancient Egypt and the Industrial Revolution and Modern China), I therefore agreed. The challenge was how to focus on Production and Struggle, from a democratic Socialist (not social democrat!) perspective, while maintaining reader interest. The alternative, as I had seen, was to lard a conventional narrative with odd outbursts of complex Scientific Socialist terminology. The result, called Focus on History (College, 1985-86), has not yet been properly critiqued.

In Botswana, junior secondary History has been dissolved by bureaucratic fiat and integrated into a new Social Studies syllabus together with Geography and Development Studies. Protests by exponents of the three dissolved subjects have been followed by a creative struggle in rewriting the new syllabus. As first conceived, Social Studies was merely the splicing together of Geography and History - and getting rid of the supposedly subversive qualities of Development Studies, which had contrasted capitalist and socialist and African paths of development. Then, using a Nigerian precedent, we began to integrate Geography and History around stories involving local children, focussing on Environmental issues. That pretty well digested Geography, but left great gollops of raw History as well as globs of Civics and Culture.

Now we seem to be moving towards a more dialectical approach using the twin themes of Environment and Development - thus abstracting the major themes of the old Geography and History, and seeing them as continually interacting. Of course there are dangers of "environmental determinism", or of seeing development as a unilinear motor of progress, rather than facing the contradictions revealed. To paraphrase the historian

Terence Ranger at the Harare history conference in 1983, effective study of history can only rise out of exposing the (local, national, international) contradictions in society. In Botswana, questions of the environment (viz. Kalahari) envelope nearly all questions of development (viz. cattle) - and are at the root of class struggles past and present.

Botswana is presently moving towards universal education to junior secondary level (Standards 1-9 in local parlance), and the Social Studies curriculum is in a state of flux. The confusion of a new junior secondary syllabus angered teachers until the Ministry of Education began belated workshops in the districts. But there is now a growing consensus on the core of the syllabus, while recognising that adaption to local circumstances in each district is the next task.

Conclusions

The experiences related above seem to show that no syllabus, and certainly no textbook, is for ever, or for everyone. The curriculum as a whole has to be adaptable over the years, and to different constituencies notably age-groups and regional/cultural groups - while maintaining enough integrity to satisfy 'national' needs.

This implies the need for a progressive approach in rewriting syllabi by stages. To quote a Mozambican curriculum development officer to me in 1982, "First we had to nationalize the curriculum. That we have done. Now we have to socialize the curriculum. This we are doing. Next we have to internationalize the curriculum. But that's probably a long way off, in the 1990s."

One has to clear out the colonial cobwebs. But in so doing one must recognize that (through virtually no fault of their own) the cobwebs are in the minds of the existing teachers. "New men", or rather new people, do not come popping out of a revolution like robots. On the contrary one should make a virtue out of human fallibility, and learn by recognising and then building on from previous mistakes.

The other "lesson" that may be learnt from the above experiences is the need to adapt syllabi to different kinds of pupils or students. There are two separate questions to answer in each case - what to learn, and how to learn it.

What to learn is a politically vexatious question that must reflect the interests of those who set the syllabi. A dictatorial state will simply dictate the syllabus content - and in the most extreme case exactly how the syllabus should be taught lesson by lesson. The problem is how to preserve democratic initiative from the roots - students, teachers, parents, others - and to combine it with guidelines for some kind of national uniformity and for the students to progress onwards in an integrated system of education.

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'How to learn' often gets rather lost in the political bargaining in committees over syllabus content. It is partly a matter of what order to learn things in. Many syllabus writers have realised the danger of always putting the earliest history at the beginning of the history curriculum. It results in often the more complex history being studied in the most simple way. But I will not argue the point here. As Samuel Johnson once said, it doesn't really matter. It's like disputing which leg to put in which trouser leg, while all the while your bottom is cold and bare. While you dispute which of two things your child should learn first, the other child has learnt them both.

Most of the educational theory taught in teacher training is of not much practical use for History. History is a humanity appealing to the growth of intellect and imagination, rather than a mathematical-type subject testing so-called intelligence. The best way to learn about how to teach History is to observe what kinds of reading and other enjoyment sparks different people's intellects and imagination.

The historian Kieran Egan has pointed to the curricular fallacy of trying to start off small children with study of their homes and local communities, when what they want are fairy tales and dream worlds. Upper primary, on the other hand, is ripe for romantic History in tales of heroes and villains. Junior secondary is beginning to move into philosophical speculation about the meaning of things, why the world is as it is, or was as it was. While students become more skeptical about such total explanations by the time they enter college.

Political considerations may determine that the curriculum must have "expanding horizons" from household through local community through national and international levels. But that does not solve, and may well exacerbate, your problems in teaching the syllabus.

* * * *

The experience of other countries in Southern Africa begs questions for People's Education in South Africa tomorrow. As an outsider, my understanding of your situation is limited. But I assume that People's Education means popular participation in setting the syllabus, in teaching it, and in writing its texts; and that you are faced by the perennial problem of 'the people' versus 'the experts'. (Which isn't really a problem as long as they continually challenge each other constructively.)

The experience of other countries suggests the real problems come in the settling-down period a couple of years after the "revolution". When a bright new junior secondary syllabus was introduced in Zambia, old people were very happy to come into the classroom, or to talk to eager young interviewers, for the first year - and possibly for the second year. But they tired of repetition and began to boycott the new popular history, all for a quiet life. The only seeming alternative for schools was to bring a party hack into the classroom, whose main purpose was often to tell the kids that Independence had been the be-all and the end-all of history. And teachers, who after all also want a quiet life, all too often gave up trying too.