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Apprenticing undergraduate history students into interpretative practice through local history

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3. RESEARCH METHOD

Jonas Soltis (1990) identifies the primary purpose of qualitative research in education as being 'to inform our deep understanding of educational institutions and processes through interpretation and narrative description'. He points out that further dimensions have been added to this purpose, including 'qualitative evaluation' and 'qualitative critique'. The former entails an attempt to assess educational undertakings, while the latter 'brings qualitative methods to bear on our critical understanding of the politics and ideology of education in our time' (1990:249).

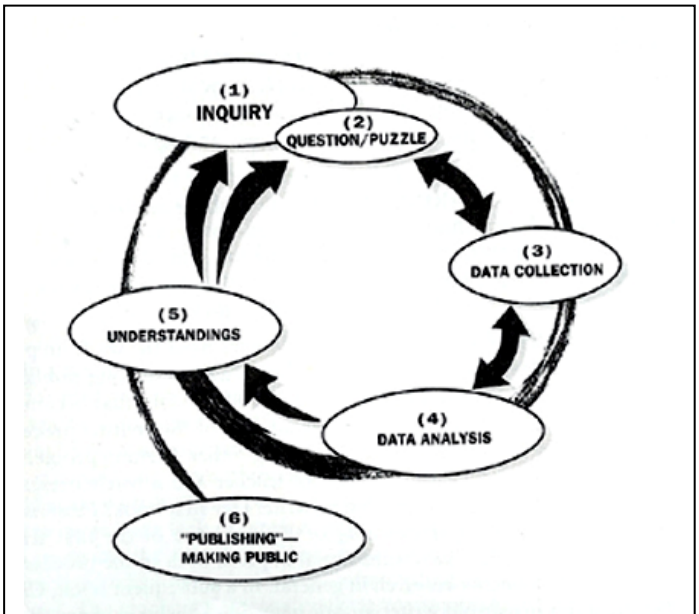
This study engages in the three elements of qualitative research: description, evaluation and critique. I set out to describe and, in a limited way, critique the prevalent forms of undergraduate history pedagogy at three South African universities; the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Western Cape and Cape Town (Wits, UWC and UCT). This is done first so as to contextualize the main focus of my investigation, the local history task. I then evaluate student participation in local history research as a way of enhancing their understanding of the practices of history and promoting their sense of identity as constructors of history.

In order to arrive at a position from which to describe, evaluate and critique, I engage in what Donald Freeman (1998) classes as 'inquiry driven teacher-research'.

> Inquiry is speculating about why something is as it is, why it happens or works (or doesn't happen or work) the way it does. It is a state of being engaged in what is going on in the classroom that drives one to better understanding …(1998:34).

He provides a framework for inquiry driven teacher-research in the form of a teacher-research cycle.

Figure 2



(Source: Freeman, 1998: 38)

Thus the inquiry 'unfolds into a **line of inquiry**, a chain of speculation, wonderings, questions or puzzles that can be transformed into a research plan and design' (1998:34).

In this instance**,** the object of inquiry is the role of a local history study in promoting students' capacity to understand and reflect on the interpretative practices of the historian. This investigation can be broken into a number of 're-searchable questions' (see page 26). The questions are informed by the theoretical framework provided in the literature review. These questions are then used both to guide the assembling of data and data analysis (Wolcott in Freeman, 1998). The final step is to present the understanding arrived at.

History pedagogy – interviews with lecturers

In the research, I engage in purposive sampling of tertiary history teaching at three universities. I chose UCT because my personal experience of being both an undergraduate and postgraduate history student there allows me to identify changes occurring there. I chose Wits because that is where I now work. I regard these universities as having similar traditions of history teaching and research, but having diverged in adapting to the recent pressures for change outlined in my introduction. The University of the Western Cape's student constituency has historically been different from that of Wits and UCT, and UWC's engagement with 'People's History' and their more overt experiments with and analyses of undergraduate history teaching seemed to provide an opportunity for illuminating comparison. This is particularly so as more recently they have chosen, to some extent, to conform to the mainstream classification of academic history.

I begin by analysing transcriptions of interviews with lecturers (two together from Wits, one each from UWC and UCT) significantly involved in the framing of undergraduate courses at each of the universities. In each case, I carried out a single semi-structured tape-recorded interview with the respective lecturers between September 2004 and February 2005. My focus was on what shaped their design of undergraduate history programmes and pedagogy and I began each interview with the question: ***What do you think are the major factors influencing the design of your***

undergraduate history courses currently? A second question that I worked with was: ***What aspects of the practices of the historian do you think that your undergraduate students are exposed to and how is this done?*** Because of the trajectory taken in each interview, the question was not always asked in exactly this way.

In analysing the lecturers' responses, I am guided by questions 1&2 and 4-6 (see p.26) and attempt to construct a narrative of their experiences in history curriculum design in recent years.

Engaging in the practice - student responses and interviews

The students whose work I investigate in this study had 5 ½ months (February-July) in which to complete the assignment. The first part of my analysis examines the written responses to question 6 of the assignment: ***Comment on what you have learnt about the construction of an historical account through doing the local history task.***

In my investigation, I work with the written responses of three students from earlier cohorts in History II – Sivuyile (1999), Rose (2002) and Jenny (2003) - whose narratives are very rich. In addition, I intended to use the written and oral responses of a further six students, these coming from the 2004 group of History II students. I aimed to achieve triangulation by following my analysis of the written texts of this group of six with a group interview of the same students. When, however, I invited students from the 2004 class to participate in a group discussion about their local history experience, there were more than six who were keen to participate and I did not feel that I could exclude any. As a result two taped interviews, each of about fifty minutes in duration, took place, involving six students in one (in September 2004) and four in the other (in October 2004).

The students represent a range of students from a typical 2nd year history class at the College. Of the final thirteen informants, seven are men and five are women. Four men are black, with rural origins, but current experience of living on the Witwatersrand. One of the men is 'coloured'; three men are white residents of Johannesburg or neighbouring metropolitan areas. Four of the women are white and

suburban, while one is black and a resident of Soweto. They were willing to have their work analysed and names included in this report.

Analysing the data

The conceptual framework set out in chapter two and captured in the following questions has guided my analysis of student responses. Questions 1 and 2 focus on core activities for historians in locating and interpreting historical sources. Questions 3 and 4 examine student awareness of how both they and the texts they produce are socially contextualized. Questions 5 and 6 probe their sense of agency and whether their identity is affected by their capacity (or incapacity) to organize their investigation.

1. What learning is there about the nature of the historical evidence and sources central to the construction of an historical account?
2. What learning is there about the nature of history as entailing interpretation of a variety of historical evidence? What sense is there of the problems of historical interpretation?
3. What evidence is there in student responses that learning is contextualized rather than decontextualized? (Place, people, time)
4. To what extent is there a sense that history is not an imaginary subject but about engagement with the world of everyday human experience? (This would include the sense that social issues, citizenship and heritage are both real issues and part of historical investigation). Whose history is being learnt?
5. Who has the control over the learning that is taking place? What sense of agency and competence exists on the part of the student? Who is setting the pace and sequence of the learning?
6. What do students feel they are learning? This includes identity and `knowledgeable skills'

The discussion of undergraduate history pedagogy at three South African universities is presented as a frame of reference for the major thrust of my research. In the next chapter, chapter four, I present my findings from the interviews with the university lecturers. In chapter five I outline in greater detail the purpose of the local history

assignment in mediating students' engagement with history. In chapter six I present my findings as to how the local history task has enlarged the capacity of undergraduate history students to engage in the practices of the historian.

On one level, validity of findings depends on the establishment of commonalties across the responses in interviews and writing. On a second level, validity will be established if there is coherence between students' responses and what I have set out to be the essence of the discipline of history. It is recognized that findings do not have predictive value, but it is hoped that this study will make a contribution towards offering a pedagogical activity that will be of use in teaching tertiary history to a range of South African students.