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Apprenticing undergraduate history students into interpretative practice through local history

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2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter I will map out issues in the existing literature which will guide my more focused inquiry into what is happening in South African university history curricula and which will assist in answering the questions:

- *How does participation in a local history assignment advance the development of second year history student's capacities to engage in and reflect on the practices of the historian?*
- *What understandings of history as an academic discipline have informed the teaching of history in undergraduate years of study in some South African universities?*

I deal with the second question first, and the review begins by setting out an understanding of the discipline of history. It then examines how the creation of an undergraduate history curriculum entails reshaping of the discipline. This raises the issue of what currently counts as knowledge in South African university history education. The review then surveys writings reflecting the dominant forms of undergraduate history pedagogy in South Africa before finally moving to examine key literature on situated learning, and identity and practice.

The discipline of history

Hirst (1974) argues that the forms of knowledge that are known as disciplines have developed over millennia. These should be seen as

> the complex ways of understanding experience which man has achieved, which are publicly specifiable and which are gained through learning… To acquire knowledge is to become aware of experience as structured, organized and made meaningful in some quite specific way and the varieties of human knowledge constitute the highly developed forms in which man has found this possible (1974:38 & 40).

Particular conceptual, logical and methodological features thus characterize the disciplinary boundaries.[5] Jerome Bruner refers to these as the 'deep structures' of a knowledge area (in Stenhouse, 1975:86). He argues that the disciplinary specialist is

[5] I recognize that Hirst's is a liberal paradigm and that Bernstein, who introduced the notion of boundaries, works within a socio-historic paradigm. They do, however, share the conception of disciplines being 'distinct' (Hirst,1974:41) or 'insulated' (Bernstein,1973: 88) from one another, and so bounded.

someone who understands these deep structures, and by implication is able to pass these on in the context of the content of the discipline without explicit statements of what the skills and concepts are. This is an issue to which I will return in my discussion of history and pedagogy.

The nature of history as a discipline is a matter of ongoing reflection and debate among academics. The positivist and modernist/ post-modernist preoccupations and divisions evident throughout the social sciences are a feature of current historiography worldwide (Jenkins, 1995; Tosh, 1991;Evans 1998). Positions are taken – from regarding history as an engagement with a real past, to seeing it as contending narratives of the past. A dominant voice is that of Hayden White, whose position (as set out by Jenkins, 1995:19) is that 'historical work is a verbal artifact, a narrative prose discourse, the content of which is as much invented – or as much imagined – as found'.

Richard Evans accepts that postmodernists have shifted historians' attention to new issues and that 'in the light of postmodernist criticism it is no longer possible to maintain a simple view of economic and social causation in history'.
Yet, he maintains:

> Ultimately, in fact, the documentary and other remains left by the past do place quite strict limits on what it is possible to write about it. Within those limits historians are always going to disagree and take differing views. We do not select arbitrarily from the documents in order to support our own arguments. Lurking at the back of every historian's mind is a still small voice that pipes up whenever we discover evidence that runs counter to our dearly held views and interpretations and tells us to change the argument. Suppressing the evidence, or worse still, falsifying it, is a cardinal sin which cannot be forgiven in a historian. (1998:29).

This debate among British historians is echoed in South Africa where modernist paradigms of both liberal and revisionist historians are being challenged by the postmodernists. Alan Cobley's overview of the state of South African historiography (2001) highlights the point that after 1990, historians in South Africa have been to some extent 'left without clear political agendas' (Nuttall and Wright, 1998 in Cobley, 2001: 618). The climate of reconciliation in the 1990s was conducive to the forsaking of social history and explanatory macro-narratives dealing with social-economic causality. Instead there has been a shift to the more personal narratives of consciousness and identity. Cobley seeks to find some meeting point between the

two, and aligns himself with Shula Marks, a doyenne of South African historical research. She writes:

> …there is perhaps no need after all to weigh up documents against dreams, archives against ancestors: they are both …'history', **if by history we understand the multiple ways people have of possessing and performing the past.** I remain too much of a materialist to believe that the cultural historians can escape socio-economic causality; nor do I think we escape the demands of making political and moral judgments by an escape into free-floating repertoires of signs. I cannot help but feel that there is another kind of historical amnesia – and a flight from politics by the white intelligentsia – in …total cultural relativism …
> (1996, in Cobley, 2001; **my emphasis**)

Hers is a position with which I identify. It is also embraced by the current classification of history in the *Report of the history and archaeology panel to the minister of education* (2002), endorsed by the National Department of Education.[6] Whatever the view of the truth-claims of the historian's product – the historical account - there remain processes which form an essential part of every historian's practice.

Hirst (1974:41) identifies the following as distinguishing features of a developed form of knowledge or discipline: its possession of 'central concepts', a 'distinctive logical structure' … 'expressions and statements …that can in some way be tested against experience…in accordance with particular criteria that are peculiar to the form', and its own 'techniques and skills'. An outline of the conceptual, logical and methodological features of the discipline might be as follows. History is an engagement with the human past using as its particular conceptual tools notions of *cause, change, continuity, consequence, chronology, situation* and *evidence* (Nichol, 1999:12). Historians who themselves are contextualized and 'ideologically informed' (Shay and Moore, 2002:313) engage with the past in order to produce imaginative reconstructions of this past. The 'historical explanation' produced thereby, with its particular forms of conceptual linkages, may be seen as the particular logic of history (Hirst, 1974). The practices of citing and referencing evidence open the explanation to some form of external verification. It is in challenging or extending the interpretation contained in the historical explanation, that a core notion of history as a debate about the past is carried forward.

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[6] See Appendix A for an extract from this *Report.* Seven of the eleven panel members who put together the report are practising, and mostly senior, university academics. Thus it may be said to representative of a significant classification of history.

The task of historical construction outlined above has been labelled the ‘interpretative task’ of the historian by Suellen Shay and Rob Moore (2002). They make a broad distinction between this and a second ‘adjudicative task’which involves ‘appraising and responding to secondary sources’ (2002:313). This distinction is very helpful in attempting to understand what aspects of the discipline are emphasised in undergraduate history teaching and is a differentiation to which I will return.

As Hirst (1974) also points out, there are tacit elements to a discipline which are not easily labelled and learnt. Giles and Neal refer to students of history gaining an ‘historical sense’ or:

> a longer perspective or wider viewpoint from which to understand and evaluate themselves, their contemporary world, and indeed the nature of man (in Fines (ed) 1983:170).

These elements are acquired gradually which makes the notion of an apprenticeship in historical practice important, and this too will be further developed below.

Having outlined something of what the discipline of history entails, I will now examine how it is reshaped in the making of a curriculum.

History, the curriculum and pedagogy

Classifying undergraduate history

As much as the nature of history as a discipline is a matter of contestation, so too is the function of the undergraduate curriculum. This was very apparent in South Africa in the years of resistance to apartheid, and is also evident as higher education curriculum framers respond to new national education policies and demographic changes among other pressures. This discussion will be framed by Basil Bernstein’s sociological analysis of the operation of the ‘pedagogic device’ (1996) but I will move to the work of South African educational researchers on the local specificities of curriculum development in higher education.

Bernstein provides a useful lens for examining what is taught in undergraduate history courses and why this may be so. The pedagogic device constitutes the sum of all the

activities causing the transformations of an academic practice into a school subject, and, relevant in this instance, undergraduate forms of a tertiary academic subject.

Bernstein puts forward the concept of distributive, recontextualizing and evaluative rules to describe how the pedagogic device operates.[7] Distributive rules refer to the way in which those with power within society play boundary-creating roles. These include the state and dominant class interests which, for example, influence the shaping of curriculum and the financial constraints within which tertiary institutions operate. Also included in the creating of boundaries or 'classification' of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in the classroom is the academy and its creation of the parameters of legitimate disciplinary discourse. The degree to which academic subjects are insulated from each other rather than integrated with each other is indicative of boundary strength (Bernstein, 1973).

As I seek to investigate the way in which history is taught as an academic subject to undergraduate students, the work of Paula Ensor and Johan Muller, two University of Cape Town academics working within a Bernsteinian paradigm, is of relevance. They have studied significant changes since the 1990s in state higher education policy and university management priorities in South Africa and point to strong external pressures on the academy in the definition of curriculum (and research) agendas. Theirs is a valuable contribution for, as Ensor herself notes of worldwide practice, 'the structuring of undergraduate curriculum is rarely written about, except in the most general terms' (2004:348). It is into this vacuum that I am also attempting to insert my discussion.

The context of the mid-1990s was one in which there were twin pressures on higher education institutions:

> to prepare South Africa for participation in a sophisticated global economy … and to render higher education more responsive to the local needs and challenges of a country pulling itself away from its apartheid past, in the context of very real resource constraints (Ensor, 2004:341)

Ensor notes that the pressures of globalisation and democratisation were accepted among policy makers and university managements, but how they should be responded

[7] Recontextualizing involves reordering and resequencing knowledge, while the evaluative rule refers to assessment practices which reinforce the subject classification.

to, 'hotly disputed' (2004: 341). In line with Bernstein's distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' discourse (2000)[8], Ensor notes that two dominant discourses contended in the subsequent 'project of higher education curriculum reconstruction in South Africa since the early 1990s: the credit exchange and traditional disciplinary discourses' (2004:355).

The credit exchange approach to curriculum (or more fully, the credit-accumulation-and-transfer-discourse) has been seen by its advocates as promoting greater flexibility and relevance to the place of work. (This view is held more in official circles than in the academy). It is seen as undermining an inherently conservative stranglehold of disciplinary forms of knowledge and advocates 'disaggregating traditional extended university courses' (344) and allowing students to construct their own curricula according to their vocational or professional needs. This would be made possible as higher education institutions offered a multidisciplinary array of modules, the outcomes of which are clearly stated. Relaxed rules of combination and portability of credits to and from other institutions is regarded as a further way to achieve qualifications relevant to the place of work.

Ensor is highlighting what has become known as the 'Mode 2 Knowledge Debate' (Kraak, 2000) in international debates about knowledge production in a globalising world.

> A new mode of knowledge production has emerged, which Scott and Gibbons *et al* term 'Mode 2'. It is fundamentally different from disciplinary science and research as we know it today – what they term 'Mode 1'. The new mode of knowledge production is intrinsically trans-disciplinary, trans-institutional and heterogeneous. In short, Mode 2 is problem-solving knowledge (Kraak, 2000: 9).

In Ensor's study, features of a curriculum defined by disciplinary discourse include the notion of:

> apprenticeship into powerful ways of knowing: of modes of analyses, of critique and of knowledge production. Emphasis [is] placed on mastery of conceptual structures and modes of argument which form the basis for the production of new knowledge (2004:343).

[8] Bernstein proposes that the distinction between 'school(ed) and …everyday common sense knowledge' is identified in their being realized respectively through a 'vertical discourse' and a 'horizontal discourse' (2000:156-157).

Her conclusion is that the disciplinary discourse has remained the dominant discourse, with strong influences of the credit exchange discourse on curriculum restructuring.

Muller (2004:8) outlines a 'dual governance/managerial revolution' which has included restructuring of faculties and departments delivering courses, as well as radical curriculum reform in some tertiary institutions. The replacement of disciplinary majors by integrated programmes of study is part of this. Muller argues that the state has been less responsible for the change than management, in the drive for the 'relevant' tertiary education described by Ensor above. This is especially because of management's concern that South African graduates be able to take their place in a global economy as well as with the marketability of the institutions' programmes in an increasingly costly and competitive higher education environment.

Ensor and Muller point to a widening range of stronger classifying agents in the reconfiguration of subject boundaries, notably the state, university management and the market. The space in which academics are deciding upon programmes is changing. There is a diminution of the 'necessary distance' (Muller, 2004:11) between management and state on the one hand, and academics on the other, in deciding on research and pedagogic priorities. In this there are some pressures to become more like secondary schools where the curriculum and teaching are more directly shaped by those with power in political, bureaucratic as well as academic domains (Muller, J & N.Taylor, 1993).

Ensor and Muller's work is thus very useful as I seek to answer the research question: *What understandings of history as an academic discipline inform the teaching of history in undergraduate years of study at a tertiary level?* While Ensor and Muller have pointed to general trends, I seek to find out what have been the overriding considerations in the realm of university history curriculum development.

Undergraduate pedagogy

Bernstein (1996) indicates that the recontextualizing rule operates when the discipline or practice of something like history is selectively reordered for the classroom. In the process of being relocated from the field of historical production to the lecture room

or pedagogic site, disciplinary discourse is reshaped, refocused, and abstracted, resulting in what Bernstein regards as an imaginary subject. Just as woodwork is very different from carpentry, so is pedagogised history from the practice of history. It is this notion of 'decontextualization' that I will employ in looking at whether the local history assignment creates opportunity for more contextualized learning.

University history departments are places where producers of knowledge are located, a significant portion of their time devoted to research and writing. At the same time they are usually tasked with responsibility for pedagogy. The boundaries between knowledge production and recontextualization are thus weaker than in a school where the teacher is unlikely to be a researcher. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the programme usually presented to undergraduates and that offered to post-graduate students who move more regularly out of the classroom into the field of historical production. Bernstein (1973) makes the point that full access to a specialized discourse is usually reserved by their teachers for those who have acquired sufficient expertise.

Ensor remarks that the lecturers in her study who see themselves as teaching a distinctive disciplinary discourse see themselves as experts who need to control the apprenticeship into the discourse:

> … A further important feature of disciplinary discourse is its underlying assumption that students, the to-be-apprenticed, enter the university with sets of experiences that are different to the knowledge forms into which they are to be inducted. In this respect, the disciplinary discourse rests upon explicit, vertical pedagogic relations between adepts and novices, with the rules of selection of curriculum content and of evaluation residing in the hands of academics. Associated with these vertical relations is the foregrounding of disciplinary content and the backgrounding, relatively speaking, of individual student needs and experiences (2004: 343).

This is not to deny that history courses initiate undergraduate students into important features of academic history. I have alluded in the first part of this chapter to work by Shay and Moore (2002). Their study investigates the intentions and expectations of history pedagogy and the texts produced by first year history students at UCT. Shay and Moore observe that through the undergraduate curriculum history students are required to engage in firstly 'an interpretative task' and secondly 'an adjudicative task'. Shay and Moore found that the second task was what UCT history course focused on in 1997 the year of the study, and it seems to me that this has been and

probably still is a feature of many undergraduate history courses at South African tertiary institutions.

What then are the core elements of these two aspects of historical process? The interpretative task of the historian involves what Shay and Moore refer to as 'an apprenticeship in the theoretical frames of reference informing the application of historical methods' (2002:313). It also entails application of historical methods. This is the construction of a new historical account on the basis of original research alluded to earlier as the core of the discipline. I will elaborate further on the steps involved in engaging in this task in my analysis of the local history task in chapter five.

The adjudicative task of the historian draws on

> the understanding that historical accounts are interpretive representations, and as such are contextual and ideologically informed constructions (Shay & Moore,2002:313).

Apprenticeship in the adjudicative task of the historian is a necessary part of acquiring the discourse. For practising historians this is deeply internalised, for undergraduate students an understanding still to be acquired. The adjudicative processes involve reading a range of historical texts, and in that reading, learning to recognize the variety, and often-contradictory nature, of these narratives. Shay and Moore further identify the apprentice historian's adjudicative task as learning to recognize how historians construct history and learning to 'participate in the debate' by practising 'these same historical methodological skills by constructing positions and arguments' (2002:282) in their own writing. These skills include retrieval of relevant information, analysis, judgment and evaluation of which is the better argument and why; citing and referencing; avoiding plagiarism. I see this as moving students into a position to engage with the interpretative task, but the skills are used to weigh up secondary texts and students are asked to position themselves in relation to these alone.

In chapter four, my discussion of current practice at the three universities will investigate the way in which these adjudicative practices are being taught. The published literature on tertiary history teaching in South Africa includes analyses by lecturers at both the University of Natal (now University of Kwazulu-Natal) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) of their work with undergraduate history students. Work on essay-writing, journaling and introducing students to academic

debates (by Nuttall & Luckett, 1995; Liebowitz & Witz, 1995; Lalu & Cornell, 1996; among others) has demonstrated use of imaginative teaching strategies. These methods help students to engage, in the long term, with tasks which fall within of the bounds of adjudicative practices.

As yet no analyses exist of the recent South African experiments with academic history as part of integrated programmes. An area where the boundaries of conventional academic history were challenged in the past was in the UWC People's History Project (1987-1991) (Minkley and Rousseau, 1996). I will refer more fully to their engagement of undergraduates in primary research in chapter four, but its demise raises interesting questions about the definition of academic rigour. I am interested in exploring whether the local history assignment is able to embrace two concerns – engaging students in primary research while retaining or even promoting rigour, however this is conceived. My piloting of the assignment suggests that the lack of rigour in terms of referencing and footnoting is compensated for by promoting thinking about the nature of history in new and complex ways.

When Bernstein (1996) examines how the content of a discipline is taught, he offers the concepts of a regulative discourse and an instructional discourse. The former determines ordering principles like pacing and sequencing of learning. In this is embedded the instructional discourse. Thus, for example, the shift to modularization has important implications for tertiary instruction.

In undergraduate pedagogy, curriculum content is usually chosen by the lecturers and delivered through formal lectures, tutorials and assessments. Bernstein employs the notion of 'framing' to analyse how the relationship between pedagogue, learner and content is played out. The more the teacher/lecturer controls the learning process, the stronger the framing. Weaker framing allows the acquirer or student greater control over the processes of learning and therefore greater agency in structuring their own learning. Another relevant aspect of framing is that:

> Variations or changes in framing produce variations or changes in the rules regulating what counts as legitimate communication/discourse and its possible texts (Bernstein, 1990: 36).

Where undergraduate history courses direct students to engage in reading scholarly texts and writing, competence is generally judged by the extent to which students achieve mastery of the adjudicative task and its textual realization, the academic essay. My investigation of what has been written by South African history lecturers about their undergraduate teaching shows that a major topic is student essay-writing (Nuttall & Luckett, 1995; Shay & Moore, 2001 for example). Competence is not generally measured in terms of expertise to research and construct historical accounts from primary sources. The local history assignment does however, seek to engage students in this second process; i.e. significantly, these processes are both the object of activity for the history assignment.

Shay and Moore's study outlines the kind of problems many students have in writing a typical analytical essay.[9] Plagiarism and inappropriately overloaded footnoting signal difficulty in processing the texts. Students try to assume an academic voice and instead construct accounts described as 'authorless', 'disinvested' and 'bland' (2002:299). The dilemma the students face is, 'how to authoritatively assert their own voices in relation to the authority of the canon' (2002:290). This can become a largely disempowering engagement with texts whose genesis and intention they do not understand. While it is not desirable that teaching students to write these sorts of essay be abandoned, there may be additional ways to assist students in finding their own voices. Thus the study investigates the extent to which engaging undergraduate students in the interpretative task (in this case, through the local history assignment) may offer them opportunities to participate in invested, meaningful activity. Does this allow them to assert their own voices and affirm their identity, not only as acquirers of knowledge, but also as constructors of knowledge?

Situated learning

The notion of 'apprenticeship' is one that is widely used by educational theorists from a range of theoretical perspectives (including Hirst, 1974; Bernstein, 1973; Gee 1989,2001; Lave & Wenger 1991). They are united by the sense that tertiary

[9] Generalization from Shay and Moore's study is limited by the fact that this was 'applied to a "bridge year" course which was on the way to transforming to something else in the programme maelstrom' (N.Worden, email, 1 April 2004). Their findings ring true of many of students who have weak academic foundations, nonetheless.

education involves socialization, induction, and enculturation into a disciplinary practice or discourse community. Bernstein's work can be used to analyse which aspects of academic apprenticeship students are offered, and from which they are excluded. The social practice theory of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) presents strong arguments for including students in 'the community of practice' so that they learn from participating as 'legitimate peripheral participants' (1991:29) in tasks which are part of the actual practice. Lave (1993 & 1996) refers to this as situated learning. Knowing is a relationship and not knowledge acquired. Mastery comes from participation in tasks which are part of the actual practice, 'without didactic structuring and in such a fashion that knowledgeable skill is part of the construction of new identities of mastery in practice' (1993:64).

James Gee (2001) locates what he refers to as 'discourse acquisition' in the same realm of activity as Lave and Wenger's community of practice. For him, a discourse is 'a combination of *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing*' (1989:7). Acquiring a discourse is more than learning a body of knowledge. It is 'a sort of "identity kit"' (1989:7) – a taking on of a recognizable role, as for example in becoming a linguist. He further argues (2001) that it is <u>being recognized</u> as a certain kind of person in a given context that confers the identity.

The theory of learning held by history lecturers, the recontextualizers, plays a crucial role in the pedagogical processes – whether students are seen as 'blank slates' or, as with Lave, Wenger and Gee, as constructors of knowledge. In an Australian study of twenty-six university teachers teaching different first year courses, Martin *et al* found that:

> teachers' intentions concerning what it is that students should learn, in a particular context, is closely aligned with teachers' expectations of how students do learn and how they can be helped to learn through teaching (2000:388).

The work of Vygotsky (1978) on semiotic mediation in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been crucial in the development of social theories of learning which take seriously interaction between learners and more capable adults or peers. So too has the work of neo-Vygotskians such as Bruner, who introduced the concept of scaffolding (Moll, 1990), James Wertsch (1991) on the ZPD, and the privileging of 'text-based realities' in formal education, and Marianne Hedegaard (1990) on

mediating learning of specialised or 'scientific concepts'. All of these contributions are helpful in investigating the role of the local history task in mediating learning, and I will refer to them more fully in my task analysis in chapter five.

South African teachers of tertiary history have clear ideas of what their discipline entails, as discussed in the opening section of this chapter. I suspect that most base their pedagogy on a Brunerian notion of the structure of the discipline, but that is a matter for further investigation. There is some evidence of history teachers in the United Kingdom and Australia trying to apply Piaget's stages of development theory at school level (for example, R.N.Hallam, 1971; J.B.Biggs & K.F.Collis, 1982; J. Nichol, 1995) but this has not been taken to any formal level in tertiary history education.

In the absence of clearly articulated learning theory informing tertiary history teaching, the work of Lave and Wenger, and of Gee, is very suggestive. They invite an examination of what constitutes situated learning or discourse acquisition for undergraduate history students that includes both interpretative and adjudicative tasks in the apprenticeship. How is the 'knowing different' from that of other undergraduate history students? What identity does a student engaged in situated learning take on that is different from that of other undergraduate history students?

Implications

To sum up, the literature suggests an investigation of the specific forces currently shaping the classification of undergraduate history by South African academic historians. It also raises the question of how their conception of the discipline influences undergraduate history pedagogy. To what extent do they open up or close down opportunities for their undergraduate students to engage fully in the practices of the historian? Finally, the literature on situated learning invites an investigation of the advantages of structuring undergraduate pedagogy in new ways – specifically in this piece of research, as an exercise in local history.