

The “how to” of History and Social Sciences teaching and training in the 21st century South Africa

Teaching History in a Multi-cultural school in South Africa.

What is History? TITUS WILLIAMS

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The word history is derived from a Greek word *historia*, meaning “enquiry” – a search for the truth. History is therefore not what happened in the past, but an interpretation of what occurred. (Mathews: 1992, 2) I therefore agree with the statement because by stating that what ever fact from what-ever source is exactly as it happened, one then offer yourself to severe criticism That in itself makes the work of the history teachers in multi-cultural schools more challenging. Whatever sources you, as a history teacher use should emphasis that it all has to do with interpretation and not the alpha and omega of what actually happened.

South Africa and its changes in a History context

South Africa has had some major changes in the past decade both on the political arena and in the education set-up. These changes had a great bearing on the teaching of history in schools. Teachers are now sitting with learners from different cultures, religions and different backgrounds. As a teacher the challenge is even bigger due to the different interpretations of history and historical events. Years before 1994, textbooks and resource material were all from a certain perspective of history both South-African and World history, which made it almost impossible for a teacher with another perspective or view to contradict the textbook or sources prescribed for the school or class. History teaching then was almost bound to get you in trouble with the Education authorities if you tried to portray different viewpoint. It could easily be seen as instigating the learners or even presenting them with untrue facts. Teaching themes such as uprisings or any event of racial or cultural conflict could land one into trouble. These themes provided debates and brought on a lot of questions, which some times let emotions flare up in class.

Different viewpoint or perspectives on same events

The older people in the communities used to have a different view on some of the controversial issues, for instance a learner might have heard a different opinion from his/her great grandfather or grandmother than what the teacher in the class presented. Although what those people at home give cannot be taken as authentic it might confuse the learners and they might think that the teacher is trying to inculcate a certain interpretation on them. For instance some historians have different viewpoints on why the “Voortrekkers” embarked on the Great Trek. Some writers or historians give reasons such as lack of identity, Afrikaners not willing to submit under any other authority,

others as lack of own land and others call just plain rebellion. The various interpretations might cause a lot of confusion and showing a lack of respect for the struggle of those people, whereas other might construe it as people who want to rule and not be ruled. The teacher as the facilitator therefore need to avail all these interpretations or sources and be prepared to accommodate these viewpoints when they facilitate and assess learners.

There are different interpretations on the death of Steve Biko. Some of these views can also be racially influenced. You might have a section in the class that construe Steve Biko's death as a act of protecting the country from terrorism, received from who-ever or what-ever source. Another section might view the same occurrence in a totally different view as an act of liberation from the past regime, also received from a different source. Learners these days read about things get information on other mediums such as internet, television documentaries, ect. The validity of these sources cannot be tested and accepted as 100% authentic as I have indicated earlier, but we as teachers need to evaluate all these viewpoints responsible These challenges will test the facilitating skills of the teacher on how to handle different interpretations, and also how he/she will assess different interpretations. Teachers in these type of situation need to be open-minded and sensitive to all these interpretations in order to keep a balance. The teacher needs to accommodate different viewpoints and emphasis the fact that history is a search for the truth and interpretations of what occurred in the past and not what happened. Learners need to be encouraged to explore more sources and try to form different opinions on the events of the past in order to debate these issues in class and to empower students of other cultural groups who might not have understood some of the events that took place. That will provide learners with the opportunity to understand and respect history.

Conclusion

History teachers need to come to the fore and help build the next generation, in such a way that the learners know where they come from and why certain decisions of the past have a bearing on the current state of affairs and the future. Learners should be guided in a way to learn to respect, to be sensitive and to accommodate different interpretations of history. History is therefore not what happened in the past, but an interpretation of what occurred.