

The challenge to be “evidence-based” in history teaching and curriculum design

Rob Siebörger
School of Education, UCT.

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At the same time as I began teaching history as a school teacher, the *Schools Council History 13-16 Project* was getting underway in England (see Cannadine et al. 2011:160-166). It was to become the masthead for a new movement in the teaching of history in schools. What it represented was far more than the traditional history-as-content or history-as-the-facts. It promoted the practice of history as well as the knowledge of the past: “...the practice of history is a specific activity of enquiry into evidence surviving from the past...” “Can such a view of history be taught in school, and if so can it also answer some of the educational needs of adolescents?” (Schools Council History Project 1976:18) was the pertinent question it asked and in later years attempted to answer – in the affirmative (see in particular Shemilt (1980)).

As all will readily acknowledge, when disciplinary concepts such as “evidence” are translated from their professional and academic use to be applied in school classrooms it is very easy for key elements to get lost or distorted in the process of adoption and simplification. G.R. Elton, in *The Practice of History* (1967:97) stated that “Criticizing the evidence means two things: establishing its genuineness, and assessing its significance”, aspects that all but the most advanced pupils would struggle with. The most common confusion encountered when this “new history” was brought into practice was between the historian’s sources and the historian’s evidence, something that also confused teachers and school textbook writers, who often were wont to use the terms interchangeably and without any disciplinary insight.

John Fines was one of the early advocates of history education based on evidence. He took pains to explain what it should mean in practice, in an essay entitled “Evidence: the Basis of the Discipline”:

Having established a question (or many questions) we go back to the primary, or first-hand sources, that is the information which comes to us untreated from the period about which we are asking. From the sources we select those pieces of information (that is, evidence) that will help us answer our question, and we must try to understand the evidence, weigh it, and see how far it can take us towards an answer.... The point in the model where the experience, skills and knowledge are most required is at the stage of processing the evidence. Learning to cope with the problems of evidence is challenging, mind-stretching, satisfying and it helps make sense of what is being studied.... (1983:21).

Working with the materials of the Schools Council History Project, its evaluation research studies and its examinations, Denis Shemilt went considerably further by proposing four stages in the way that adolescents deal with evidence. They were:

Stage I: Knowledge of the past is taken-for-granted... ‘Evidence equals knowledge’ and ‘The historian as memory man’ (1987:42).

Stage II: Evidence = Privileged Information about the Past... the realisation that historical truth is negotiable... the acceptance of ‘How do we know?’ as a sensible question... (1987:48).

Stage III: Evidence is a Basis for Inference About the Past... the concepts of evidence and information now fully differentiated and... begins to look for a method to guide his use of source materials (1987:52).

Stage IV: Awareness of the Historicity of Evidence. – At Stage I historical evidence is seen as given; at stage II it is something to be discovered; the stage III thinker sees it as having to be worked out by rational process; and at stage IV written history is beginning to be recognised as no more than a reconstruction of past events,... which makes visible connections and continuities, moralities and motives, that contemporaries would not have perceived nor perhaps understood (1987:56).

There was, thus, the basis of a pedagogy for evidence-based history in schools in England by the end of the 1980s. [Further substantial studies were by Dickinson, Gard and Lee (1978) and Rogers, 1979.] The issue of the confusion of sources and evidence had been answered by then and can be summarised from an introductory textbook, “What is Evidence?”:

Where does evidence come from?

Historians use historical evidence to construct a picture of the past. They find the evidence they need to do this in sources. A source is anything that survives from the past.... A source is not the same thing as evidence. A source becomes evidence if it is used to answer a question about the past (Hinton 1990: 4-5).

Knowledge of developments in England filtered through to South Africa. There was no formal manner for them to influence the teaching of history in schools but they were attractive to any who were seeking an alternative to the apartheid history curriculum and provided a useful body of practice to challenge the Afrikaner nationalist hegemony. In a published booklet critiquing a newly introduced history syllabus for schools in 1983, two university history educationists made suggestions of what an alternative syllabus would look like. They included in their list, that “...the syllabus needs to be so designed that the student is exposed at least to the following features of history as a discipline: the nature of historical evidence and of conflicting evidence;...” (Van der Berg and Buckland 1983:48). They made, however, little other mention of evidence-based history teaching and provided no practical proposals for how it could be introduced.

A new generation of school history textbooks (e.g. *History Alive*, *Discovering History*) emerged for the 1983 syllabuses, published by Shuter and Shooter, who had also published Van der Berg and Buckland’s booklet. They typically contained ideas from the new history in England and incorporated sources and the using of evidence, but in a largely uncritical fashion, repeating the early mistakes made in England. It was, however, only in the midst of the protests and boycotts of the mid-1980s that evidence-based history was launched as a formal alternative in South Africa, under the banner of “People’s history” by the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC). The work/activity book produced echoed the Schools Council History Project materials with its title, “What is HISTORY?” but the content betrayed considerable confusion over sources and evidence, as, for example, “Historians are constantly trying to get a clearer picture of what happened in the past – of what people did.... They begin by searching for the evidence which the past has left behind” (NECC 1987:9) In this instance “evidence” is clearly intended to be “sources”. Similar confusion exists later in the book, where “evidence” and “sources” are interchangeable:

From the work you have done so far, you have seen that detective work involves looking at various kinds of EVIDENCE. The historian usually divides the evidence into two kinds:

1. Primary Sources

Evidence which comes from the actual time of the people and events. These are called primary sources because they are first hand evidence (1987:14).

2. Secondary Sources

The second type of evidence which the historian uses is evidence which comes from historians who are writing about people and events at a later date. These are called SECONDARY SOURCES because they are second hand evidence though they are often based on primary sources (1987:17).

Interestingly, its reviewers/evaluators fell into the same trap: “A variety of evidence is presented, both primary and secondary, and from many different points of view” (Krige et al. 1992:12).

The first consciously evidence-based history curriculum in South Africa was the National Curriculum Statement in 2003. It made extensive mention of evidence and did not mistake sources and evidence, describing history as “A rigorous process of historical enquiry: [that] encourages and assists constructive debate through careful evaluation of a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view” (Department of Education 2003:9). Also, “learners will be expected to raise questions about the past, identify issues relating to the past, and use a range of enquiry skills in order to extract and organise evidence from a variety of historical sources of information (2003:11); “They will also be expected to compare and contrast points of view/perspectives of the past and draw their own conclusions based on evidence (2003:12) and “Engage with sources of information, evaluating the usefulness of the sources for the task, including stereotypes, subjectivity and gaps in the available evidence (2003:17).

This approach was continued in the curriculum revision of 2011, although the revised curriculum contains far less reference to evidence and procedural knowledge in general than the 2003 edition. History is defined as being, “about learning how to think about the past, which affects the present, in a disciplined way. History is a process of enquiry. Therefore, it is about asking questions of the past and using evidence critically about the stories people tell us about the past (Department of Education 2011:8). It explained historical sources and evidence as “History is not the past itself. It is the interpretation and explanation of information from various sources. Evidence is created when sources are used to answer questions about the past (2011:10) – an apparent echo of Hinton (1990). The nature of the approach was recognised in turn by its evaluators, “Thus the design principle is skills-based in that learners are assessed on their ability to engage with sources using a range of cognitive levels (from extracting evidence, to interpretation, analysis and evaluation) (Umalusi 2014:74).

In terms of the curriculum documents, history education in South Africa is now much more clearly “evidence-based” than it was before. But the transformation remains incomplete, as examinations and assessment do not follow this pattern (unlike the case in England where the Schools Council History Project developed its own examination concurrently with its research and development, examination trends have always lagged far behind the demands of the written curriculum. It is a shortcoming of the 2011 curriculum that it did not put in place a mechanism to show how the attainment of historical skills and the ability to understand and handle the concept of evidence (i.e. the procedural elements) should be built into the substantive knowledge elements of the curriculum.

Conclusion

What may have begun as a borrowing from England to produce a credible alternative history curriculum, with the best of intentions to replace the apartheid syllabus, has certainly developed beyond that and there are instances of certain examinations (in particular those of the Independent Examinations Board) and certain textbooks which today display an understanding of what evidence-based in history teaching ought to represent. There remains, however, the danger that this approach to history is only for the elite schools and that it is beyond the ordinary teacher, something I would strenuously argue against.

What, then should be influence of evidence-based history teaching be on transforming and de-colonising history teaching, its curricula and textbooks?

Decolonisation in history teaching implies not only a change in content but a critical engagement with the origin and application of the content. Evidence-based history has a very important role to play in this process and should be developed and strengthened accordingly.

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