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What makes a history exam?

"After yet another disappointing set of results for... History I am wondering what more we can do, and whether anyone else has the same experience? Some excellent and hardworking students have got at least a grade lower than they should have, and overall I would estimate our results are half a grade down. This year we have tried to revise in a really structured way - to no avail..."

A familiar refrain? This is, however, not a recent quote from a letter by a Cape Town history teacher, but a complaint of a history teacher in England on the Historical Association website, bemoaning her GCSE results in 2008.

What the two contexts have in common is that the history curricula and examinations are based, broadly, on similar criteria. The South African history curriculum follows the pattern of British ones (in expecting that candidates will display some of the skills and insights of learner-historians), as is the case in many other countries, though, by no means all.

It was clear even before 1994, that in the future no-one would be satisfied with the matric history exam as it had been up till then. The sets of trivial (guess what the examiner is thinking?) short questions and the essays that were usually learned by heart and provided no room for interpretation or difference of opinion, would have to go.

The present National Senior Certificate history exam has developed since then into a test of students' abilities to understand and use short pieces of source material (extracts, quotes, photographs, cartoons, etc.) about an historical event or period, followed by an extended piece of writing on the same topic, requiring discussion and debate about the history.

This is a much more sophisticated model of examining than in the past, and it necessitates far more than just "learning the facts" or answering multiple choice questions (methods which still prevail in many foreign school systems today). It has been made even more complex by the abolition of the previous differentiation between Standard and Higher Grade in 2008.

The same examination has, thus, to cope in a fair way with the large numbers of students who are just passing history and with the much smaller numbers who are excelling at it – a very challenging task, given the wide diversity of educational backgrounds in South Africa. Language skills loom large, because history, more so than any other subject apart from the languages themselves, is dependent on a good grasp of language and writing.

It should, therefore, come as little surprise that it is almost impossible to create a perfect history examination of this kind, and that there will normally be some variation in results from year to year. But big variations must be avoided and their underlying problems should be eliminated.

(Let me hasten to clarify lest an accusation arises, that none of what I have written above and consider below is related in any way to outcomes-based education at all.)

The following are some of the factors involved in the setting and marking of National Senior Certificate history examinations. All of these are vital. It is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education, which appoints the internal moderators and the panels of examiners and controls the setting of the papers and the production of the results, of Umalusi, which appoints the external moderators and quality assures the processes and results, and of the provincial education departments, which administer the examinations and conduct the marking of the scripts, to ensure that they are optimally performed.

A fairly obvious starting point is that the examination needs to reflect quite precisely the content and requirements laid down in the curriculum. This might seem straightforward and self-evident, but it is very easy for examiners and moderators to go astray at this point in their pursuit of a nice question or interesting source of information. Their quest to be original has always to be tempered by what candidates and their teachers will be expecting the exam to cover.

Next, the vexed question of textbooks. Twenty years ago it was often easy to tell on which textbook a history exam was based and teachers were usually afraid to use more than the examiners' chosen book. This is no longer the case and examiners now use a range of textbooks. But it is not easy to set questions that are covered well in all of the dozen or so Grade 12 textbooks currently available.

The key figure in setting the examination is the internal moderator, who has a dual role of training the examiners and organising their work, together with giving approval to the final papers. As a counter balance, there is the external moderator. The working relationship between the Department of Basic Education and Umalusi is crucial to ensuring that the external moderator has the independence and support to play the checking and quality assurance role effectively.

These appointments are essential to ensuring the level and credibility of the papers. Under the former Joint Matriculation Board, university academics were involved in the moderation and there is an argument that they should again be allowed to fill the roles, where suitable people are available.

As important as the writing of the questions and selection of the historical source material for the papers, is the drafting of the marking memoranda. This is a particularly difficult task in history, requiring skill and training. What is required is enough information to guide markers to evaluate the level of answers consistently, without being so prescriptive that there is not generous allowance for other relevant information, or for formulating novel arguments.

In the case of essay questions, great care is also needed in the construction of a marking matrix (or rubric(s)). As history examined in this way lends itself to such a wide range of answers and styles of writing, it is absolutely essential that the markers appointed in each province are given enough time for training in the marking of the papers.

This process, known as “agreement trialling” (or “standardisation” in bureaucratic parlance) involves markers marking the same scripts and comparing their results – and continuing to do so until a high level of agreement and consistency between them is established. It entails establishing both a sound grasp of the content knowledge and an understanding of the implicit historical insight and skills.

Marking the scripts is the Achilles’ heel of the history examinations, given the large number of scripts and the fact that each province marks independently. Umalusi’s oversight of these processes is a critical element. The appointment of markers should involve selecting teachers who currently teach matric history successfully, have had high performing students, are fluent in the language of the papers, and who have a wide grasp of the areas of knowledge in the questions they are allocated to mark.

Markers are also only as good as the data systems in place to record the marks, which should be adequate enough to track trends in both the patterns of marking by the markers, and the results achieved by the examination centres (i.e. schools) in time to enable corrective moderation.

Each school subject has its own knowledge structure, which places particular demands on the examining process. In history these are more complex than most, allowing multiple opportunities for inconsistency and error. The alternative, however, would deny the basis on which the present curriculum (and the forthcoming Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS]) is constructed, and return us to rote learning and “a mark per fact”.

Despite the serious problems encountered with the number of As awarded in some Western Cape schools in 2010, it is still worth the struggle to preserve the immense benefits of history taught and examined well. This will involve rigorously monitoring the entire National Senior Certificate examination process and striving for constant improvement.

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