

OWNING UP TO THE PAST

Rob Siebörger
School of Education
University of Cape Town

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Conferences like this are good opportunities to present research that has been conducted and to share ideas about ideas and trends in teaching history. But they also provide a chance to reflect on our roles as history teachers and history educators.

This is a personal attempt to begin a reflection and to invite others to engage with me in it. It is a beginning... tentative and uncertain, but something that I've realised that I owe to myself and to the people I've taught and worked with. As such it's not yet a paper, but a statement and a request.

My sense of wanting to own up to the past comes from my involvement with the *Turning Points in History* project (2004-2005) of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and what was then the South African History Project in the Department of Education. *Turning Points in History* has, incidentally, just this week been awarded the UNESCO prize for Peace Education in 2007, which I believe is due recognition for what has been a very important effort to create a new history for our schools, one that is representative and one that we can be proud of.

My part in *Turning Points* was to write the teacher's guide to the series of six books, to create (with the assistance of Penny Berens) a set of classroom modules and worksheets to illustrate how the books could be used, to assist in the production of a CD, and to conduct workshops on the books (seven in all, covering Education departments from all the provinces).¹

The workshops were the high point of this for me. They gave me the chance to share my ideas about history teaching with a wide range of people across the country (some of you amongst them) and I thoroughly enjoyed meeting others, hearing their stories and listening to their debates, arguing with them and going to places in the country I had not visited before. Of all the things I have done professionally in the last twenty years, they have been some of the most rewarding. The reward of them continues: I often come across people who say to me that they were at one of the workshops and how much they had enjoyed being there.

Two year ago I began to write an article about the experience with the title, “Training to transform?”. In it I summarised the workshops as follows:

When they were first conceived the workshops were not thought of as training workshops. Their purpose was to inform about the *Turning Points* booklets and CD and to publicise them. The first workshop was planned and introduced in this manner. It soon became evident, however, that the participants welcomed the opportunity to interact with a history educator who was outside the education departments, that they knew very little about the newly released National Curriculum Statement for FET (2003), and that they valued the space provided to raise and discuss the problems that they faced.

The workshops were all rated very highly by participants in the post-workshop feedback. What was it that contributed to their success? The following come to mind:

- Starting with the content undoubtedly made these workshops different from those to which participants were accustomed. It made a big difference that each participant had a set of booklets, which served as resources for discussions and activities. The workshops were, thus, about history first, rather than teaching or outcomes-based education.
- The activities were perceived to be meaningful and they were varied. Each of the activities was in effect a taster, as there wasn't enough time to develop it in any detail. This contributed to keeping the interest levels high and making sure that there was something for everyone, without being too much of anything – much the experience of a satisfied conference goer who has enjoyed tasting a variety of different sessions and presentations.
- Providing suggestions for what to do about problems such as learners not being able to write essays. I was conscious at times of a “let's ask the expert” mentality, which carried with it putting me to the test. If I could provide practical advice, participants would be prepared to listen to me. So, after the first workshops I focussed more on trying to provide the practical ideas that I was being asked for. In future workshops, I would work in time for participants to also share among themselves.
- Not least was the way in which the opening turning points in your life activity set a tone for the workshops. It created openness between participants and the participants and me, and made the workshops much more personal than they would otherwise have been

The reason why I couldn't complete the article, however, was that I didn't know how to write the section about myself as a presenter, in other words how to reflect on my role in presenting the workshops. This is what I wrote:

I began the workshop by trying to build the links. The initial, ice-breaking, activity of all the workshops was an invitation to members of the groups in which they sat (usually six to eight people) to describe to each other a significant turning point in each of their lives and then to choose one of these stories to report back to the workshop as a whole. I began by relating what I thought was an important turning point in my life and explained that the turning points could,

e.g., be personal, family, political, something that they had done or had been done to them, academic or professional.

The life-altering turning points I chose to use as examples from my own life were academic and professional. I told some about how I had been influenced by a professor of history as a first year undergraduate student to see South African history for the first time from a viewpoint that was not Eurocentric, and of the excitement of the discovery of realms of the past I had previously only been dimly aware of. Others I told of how I had changed jobs from being a lecturer in an all-white teachers' college to teaching at a university with students of all races and what this had meant for me. Another instance I recounted was when I was able to visit all schools as a teaching practice supervisor (not white schools only) for the first time. I might also have spoken about when I was first approached to write a history textbook, or the year I had spent in England doing a masters degree in history education, and how it had shaped professional growth.

In all the workshops participants needed no encouragement to begin telling about their turning points, so for the next 30 minutes there was an intense buzz of conversation. People often found points of resonance and frequently identified with speakers, establishing common bonds very quickly with strangers. A wide range of experiences were presented during the report backs. Many concerned experiences of apartheid, but they ranged widely. A mother related that her turning point was when she had children – nothing had been the same since then! As in this case, there was often a great deal of humour.

I usually concluded this part of the programme by drawing attention to the variety of turning points and how they differed according to the perspectives of the tellers, explaining that this was the attitude they needed to have towards the booklets. Almost always I had to end conversations before time. I had a sense that the participants had valued both opportunity to talk about an important aspect of their lives that possibly they seldom spoke about, and that it would have been very useful to have followed these discussions with more on oral and family history – which was not on the programme.

Was I the right person to conduct the workshops? There was no doubt in my mind that I was well placed to present the workshops. I had written the guide and modules, I had a good working knowledge of the new curriculum and had been involved in its construction, and I had run many training workshops before. But it wasn't that simple. The participants were, with very few exceptions, black South Africans, while I was an older, white, professor who had been around in the apartheid years. For the first workshops, I was accompanied by the former director of the South African History Project, and I was conscious of the difference it made to be to be assisted by a younger black South African. It felt like a return to the past to have workshops on turning points in South African history being presented by a white South African. I also wondered whether a university professor was the right person.

The issue, however, was never raised with me, nor was I ever conscious of it being spoken about. In contrast, I was received warmly by many participants, and often felt at home among people that I'd sometimes met before, or, occasionally, had previously been students of mine. Our histories were different but there were many things that we had in common. Did that make everyone comfortable with me and did it erase suspicions? I doubt it, but it didn't interfere overtly with the training.

Recently I have returned to thinking about the role that my race plays in these situations, prompted partly by being interviewed by someone wanting to write about *Turning Points*, and by the suggestion that I read Wendell Berry's book, *The Hidden Wound*².

The wound that Berry, a white American, describes is racism, something that has paradoxically both brought suffering to him and to which he has contributed. At the start of the books he says, "I want to know, as fully and exactly as I can, what the wound is and how much I am suffering from it."

I also want to know about the wound brought by race and all that goes with it in my life and I want to own up to it. Most of all, and this is the reason for presenting this to you, I want to have the space and the freedom to be able to talk about race and the teaching of history in an open way. I'm not always a good listener, but I need to hear what is told me about myself and my identity and the part that race plays in that. So, I want to use this to invite conversations about race in history education – in facilitating and teaching history, in the writing of learning and teaching material and in doing research about the teaching of history.

A few quotations from Berry provide pointers for how these kinds of conversations can go and what owning up to the past might involve for me. I'd like to use them to make some impromptu closing remarks.

But more important, *within* the language [of prejudice and segregation] there was a silence, and emptiness.... It seems to me that for most of my life I have been involved in the filling out of this hollow, or this silence, both consciously and unconsciously, both willingly and unwillingly (page 19).

I am trying to establish the outlines of an understanding of myself in regard to what was fated to be the continuing crisis of my life, the crisis of racial awareness – the sense of being doomed by my history to be, if not always racist, then a man always limited by my inheritance of racism, condemned to always be conscious of the necessity *not* to be racist, to be always dealing deliberately with the reflexes of racism that are embedded in my mind as deeply at least as the language I speak" (pages 48-49).

The crucial difference between our [i.e. the American] society and others that have been divided by class if not by race, is that in our self-protective silence up to now about the whole problem, we have not developed the language by which to recognize the extent or implications of the division..." (page 92).

Note: I am not suggesting that race is not something that South Africans speak and write about and that there are not many South Africans who have confronted it directly, only that it's not something that

I've personally found it easy to talk about, and that I think conferences and workshops like this would be much better if we spoke about it and its role in our professional lives, rather than observing a polite silence.

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- 1 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation *Turning Points in History*. Johannesburg: STE publishers, 2004. The Turning Points series of books and materials are available in both English and Afrikaans. (See: http://www.ijr.org.za/publications/copy_of_teach/turning-points-in-history-series-1)
 - 2 Wendell Berry: *The Hidden Wound*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989.