

Training history teachers for a new curriculum: The *Turning Points* experience

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Abstract

This paper is a first attempt at professional reflection as a history educator about in-service training of curriculum advisers and teachers. It relates selected insights into the process of training and thoughts about what the experience might mean for training in history teaching, my role as a history educator and the nature of history education.

Introduction

At the end of 2003 I was asked to write a teacher's guide to a series of six booklets that had been written under the title *Turning Points in History*. The purpose of the series was to provide high school teachers (Grades 10-12) with a new perspective on South African history, and a new way of thinking about significant moments in that history. The booklets and guide were published in March 2004 by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and the Department of Education. Their publication was followed by an dissemination phase, when it was decided to develop 12 lesson modules to illustrate the teaching approaches employed in the teacher's guide and in the new National Curriculum Standards (NCS) for History Grades 10 to 12 (see appendix for its outcomes-based structure) (Department of Education 2003). The modules were included on a CD together with the text of the booklets and a number of other features.

It was decided that two-day training workshops on the booklets and CD would be held for curriculum advisers and invited teachers, initially in four provinces and then for all nine provinces. I conducted these workshops. This paper is an attempt to reflect on that training.

Aspects of the training workshops

I have chosen a number of aspects of the workshops to describe and reflect upon, in order to consider how the combination of these aspects contributed to the success and usefulness of the workshops.

Turning points in the histories of the participants

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. There were always people who were keen to begin telling their story and 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.

Beginning with the content knowledge

The CD contained a multimedia introduction to the *Turning Points* booklets that was the logical place to start the rest of the workshop. It presented an overview of the content of each booklet beginning with the earliest history of South Africa, and provided information about the authors. The introduction was then followed by an analysis that I made of the content of the booklets in relation to the knowledge required by the NCS, to show where they could be used for in each grade.

This meant that the initial focus of the workshop was on the history itself and not about either the curriculum and its apparatus, or teaching approaches. Queries and discussion were about the significance and interpretation of historical questions such as whether it was correct to describe Arab trade with the east coast circa AD1000 as the “beginnings of globalisation”; the usefulness of “Zulucentric” and “anti-Afrocentric” explanations of the Mfecane (the political change and its accompanying wars and migrations in southern Africa that began in the late eighteenth century); and the validity of comparisons drawn between the development of Afrikaner and African nationalism the first half of the twentieth century.

Beginning with history meant that whatever followed in the workshops was seen as a means to achieve a better understanding of the past, rather than a new gimmick to teach or assess something or a way of understanding the new curriculum documents. It also, almost inevitably, resulted in a [usually heated] debate from the floor about whether the nature of outcomes-based education did not dictate that when one teaching history one should decide on the outcome being taught before deciding on what content to teach. My argument was that the purpose of the outcomes was to enhance historical knowledge and understanding, rather than provide a specific skills focus around which history was constructed (i.e. that the historical narratives would always be of first importance and first in the lesson planning sequence).

Interpreting the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards after activities

I next outlined the way in which the *Teacher’s Guide* had been written, because it would serve as the reference for all the activities that followed in the workshop. As the curriculum content in the NCS was arranged chronologically, the six *Turning Points* booklets fell quite neatly into the three grades: booklets one, two and the first chapter of three: Grade 10; booklets three and four: Grade 11 and booklets five and six: Grade 12. A chapter of the guide was devoted to each of the booklets. Part 1 of each chapter concerned the history content, Part 2 the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards. My method in writing the guide had simply been to begin with Learning Outcome 1, Assessment Standard 1 and to work systematically through to the final Assessment Standard, providing an example (if I could find one) of how the booklet could be used to assist the development of learners towards the outcomes and standards. A crucial explanation was that, while this was a simple way to explain and illustrate the Assessment Standards, teachers should be aware that they would seldom use one Assessment Standard at a time. When teaching history it was inevitable that one would incorporate more than one standard in a lesson.

For many of the curriculum advisers and teachers it was the first time that they had worked closely with the outcomes and standards, and I quickly realised from the glazed look on many faces that they did not make much sense to the participants, though I had tried to explain the wording. It was apparent from the first occasion that the only way to engender an appreciation of the practical application of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards was to engage in the activities and exercises contained in the lesson modules and *after* each to discuss what Assessment Standards had

been addressed in the process. It did not take very long for most to catch on to this and to become adept at identifying the standards.

Simple, non-resource dependent teaching approaches

I realised when the 12 lesson modules were developed that there was no point in being too ambitious in the activities as no purpose would be served if teachers used them without understanding their intention. On reflection, I acknowledge there was an element of wanting to “teacher proof” the modules. I would defend the decision by arguing that if something can be grasped in an elemental way it, it is easy to extend it. Thus, there was usually a moment in the workshops when I explained that just because the activities were ones that could be used equally well in the primary school, they were not necessarily inappropriate to the top of the high school.

What, I confess, I had not given much thought to when writing the guide and the modules was the situation in schools where there was no electricity and the chalkboard was virtually the only resource beyond textbooks. The *Turning Points* booklets were intended as teachers’ rather than learners’ books, and it did not take long before someone in each workshop asked how the books could be used in his or her school(s). This made me realise how serendipitous it had been to base the modules on activities that were, in the main, not resource dependent. Many of them had been constructed in tables to be completed by individuals or groups involving, for example, an analysis of factors in more than one situation, comparison and contrast of perspectives, similarity, and question generation. The tables could easily be written on the chalkboard. It was also pointed out that, although not ideal, there is much that a teacher can do by reading written sources to a class. One of the activities that produced intense group debate at every workshop was to rank in order of importance a list of ten major events under the heading, “Which were the major turning points in the 80s and 90s?”. Participants were first asked to work in pairs and then to try to find a group consensus. They found it almost impossible to accomplish the task, given the range of opinions present. It was a contrived activity but it generated intense debate, much of which was well substantiated. The point was well made to all present (including me) that a meaningful activity that can be based upon the Assessments Standards is not dependent on resources.

A further example of a simple activity that led to much debate was a common set of questions on the question, “Which heritage symbols represented the period of transition in the 1990s?” At surface level it was a primary school activity involving the national anthem, coat of arms, the flag, iconic photographic images and sport. But the questions asked involved higher levels of discourse (e.g., “What ideology(ies) explains this symbol? You will need to discuss the reasons for designing or choosing the symbol in this way.”). At one workshop I asked participants to tell me whether they thought it was a Grade 12 activity not. One curriculum advisor replied that at first he had thought it was a primary level activity but after they had completed it, he was convinced it was Grade 12 level.

Debating

The most memorable experience of all the workshops was the debate usually held at the start of the second day. Participants were divided into two teams at the end of the previous day and given the rules by which a debate would be conducted. The motion of the debate was “It was internal pressure rather than external pressure that brought an end to apartheid”. Despite the fact that the inclination of most was always to favour the internal side the debates were almost always very even and the external side won on a number of occasions (a group of adjudicators was usually appointed to judge the debate). The debate was structured in such a way that it was necessary for teams to substantiate points made and they were rewarded for doing so. Most of the contests engaged the participants completely. They were very lively, and references to the debate often continued long after it had been completed.

The debates had a number of consequences. The main one was to awaken interest in the rest of the workshop. People who had not taken an active part until then were far more likely to be drawn in, and to feel that they were involved. The debate also created an ideal opportunity to explore the application of the Assessment Standards, as many still only associated them with written responses. Some were obvious but other standards were hidden to most. Importantly from the perspective of the workshop programme, the debate opened preparatory discussion for the next sessions on written work, as it demonstrated the importance of adequate preparation and practice by a history class before receiving a written assignment, and an example of developing the debate into a written activity was provided.

Activities to scaffold writing skills

As the vast majority of South African Grade 12 learners are assessed in English (which is not their home language) improving writing skills was a major preoccupation of the curriculum advisors and teachers, and most despaired of doing anything about it. The whole workshop could easily have been devoted to writing in history, and in retrospect it is a major regret that not more time could be set aside for it. Participants were introduced (and it was not more than that) to two strategies for improving writing skills: using writing frames (in a lecture format) and Christine Counsell's (1997) zone of relevance card-sorting activities (in group activity).

In the first task using the zone of relevance participants had to decide what information (on small cards) was relevant to the question posed, viz. "Why were student protests so important to the collapse of apartheid?" This was not a straight forward assignment and many must have had "aha" moments when they realised that some information that was relevant to the topic was not relevant to the question. The card sorting was also very useful in clarifying how to organise information and how to choose the main and minor points. For many it appeared that this had been their first significant exposure to training on how to develop learners' essay writing skills.

The following is an initial attempt to reflect on the significance of the workshops.

The workshops as training

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 Standards, 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, as the workshops progressed, I focussed more on trying to provide the practical ideas that I was asked for.

- 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.

Being a history educator

The workshops were unique experiences for me. I had never done anything that combined all of these elements before and they stretched me in many directions. They were reminders of the multifaceted competencies that are required for conducting training workshops. It was not enough to know and understand the NCS thoroughly, I needed to be able to facilitate reflection, to be able to think of practical teaching solutions, to stage manage a debate and to inspire a desire to try out new approaches. None of these is a natural strength of mine. The workshops made me realise how important it was to develop these skills.

The nature of history education

The development of Learning Outcomes for the Revised National Curriculum Statements (Grades R-9) and NCS (Grades 10-12) has shown how different the various subjects and learning areas of the school curriculum are. The nature of history as a discipline informs the nature history education. The workshops provided two cases that illuminate (and reinforce once again) what history education involves.

The workshops demonstrated the separation of the historical knowledge content specification from the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards [which follows the example of the English National Curriculum and many other similar curricula internationally], and is, to my knowledge, the most complete example of this in the RNCS and NCS. History education is all about how one teaches and assesses in a way that optimises the potential of both lists of specifications.

The workshops emphasised the importance of the need to create activities that enable participants to enhance their 'second records' (see Nichol and Dean 1997) in order to enable them to teach history successfully. The booklets provided a first record, the activities enhanced the second record. History education explores the dialectic between the two records.

References

- Counsell, Christine (1997) Analytical and discursive writing at Key Stage 3. London: The Historical Association [on 'zone of relevance' and sorting criteria].
- Department of Education (2003) National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General): History. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Nichol, J. and Dean, J. (1997) History 7-11. Developing primary teaching skills. London: Routledge

Learning Outcome 1: Historical Enquiry: *The learner is able to acquire and apply historical enquiry skills.*

Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. Formulate questions within a topic under study.	1. Identify issues within the topic under study (e.g. imperialism) and ask critical questions about the issues.	1. Formulate questions to analyse concepts for investigation within the context of what is being studied (e.g. globalisation).
2. Identify and select sources of information from those provided to answer the question.	2. Categorise appropriate/relevant sources of information provided to answer the questions raised.	2. Access a variety of relevant sources of information in order to carry out an investigation.
3. Extract relevant information and data from the sources and organise it logically.	3. Analyse the information and data gathered from a variety of sources.	3. Interpret and evaluate information and data from the sources.
4. Engage with sources of information to judge their usefulness for the task, based on criteria provided.	4. Evaluate the sources of information provided to assess the appropriateness of the sources for the task.	4. Engage with sources of information, evaluating the usefulness of the sources for the task, including stereotypes, subjectivity and gaps in the available evidence.

Learning Outcome 2: Historical Concepts: *The learner is able to use historical concepts in order to analyse the past.*

Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. Explain historical concepts such as empire, liberty and democracy.	1. Use historical concepts such as imperialism, nationalism and fascism to structure information about a period or issue.	1. Analyse historical concepts such as postcolonialism, globalisation and socialism as social constructs.
2. Identify the socio-economic and political power relations operating in societies.	2. Analyse the socio-economic and political power relations operating in societies.	2. Examine and explain the dynamics of changing power relations within the societies studied.
3. Explain why there are different interpretations of historical events, peoples' actions and changes.	3. Explain the various interpretations and perspectives of historical events and why people in a particular historical context acted as they did.	3. Compare and contrast interpretations and perspectives of events, people's actions and changes in order to draw independent conclusions about the actions or events.

Learning Outcome 3: Knowledge Construction and Communication: *The learner is able to construct and communicate historical knowledge and understanding.*

Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. Understand and convert statistical information (data) to graphical or written information.	1. Handle and draw conclusions from quantitative data.	1. Identify when an interpretation of statistics may be controversial and engage critically with the conclusions presented by the data.
2. Plan and construct an argument based on evidence.	2. Use evidence to formulate an argument and reach an independent conclusion.	2. Synthesise information to construct an original argument, using evidence from sources provided and independently accessed in order to support the argument.
3. Use the evidence to reach a conclusion.	3. Use the evidence to substantiate the independent conclusions reached.	3. Sustain and defend a coherent and balanced argument with evidence provided and independently accessed.
4. Communicate knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways – written, oral, enactive and visual.	4. Use appropriate means of communicating knowledge and understanding suited to a designated audience.	4. Communicate knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways including discussion (written and oral), debate, creating a piece of historical writing using a variety of genres, research assignments, graphics and oral presentation.

Learning Outcome 4: Heritage: *The learner is able to engage critically with issues around heritage.*

Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
1. Give an explanation of what is meant by heritage and public representations and of the importance of conservation of heritage sites and public representations.	1. Analyse public representations and commemoration of the past (e.g. monuments and museum displays).	1. Explain ideologies and debates around heritage issues and public representations.
2. Explain what is meant by knowledge systems, including indigenous knowledge systems.	2. Identify debates around knowledge systems.	2. Compare the ways in which memorials are constructed in different knowledge systems (e.g. monuments, ritual sites including grave sites).
3. Identify ways in which archaeology, oral history and indigenous knowledge systems contribute to an understanding of our heritage.	3. Analyse the significance of archaeology and palaeontology in understanding the origins of humans.	3. Investigate the relationship between archaeology, palaeontology and other knowledge systems in understanding heritage.

