Epistemology and practice: the case of history

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ABSTRACT

The very existence of history as a discipline is being threatened by a variety of factors, but, despite this threat, many historians still argue that it holds a key position in a dynamically changing South Africa. However, in order to secure this position, teachers of history will need to provide evidence that it has accommodated the current changes taking place in higher education. While a number of curriculum development initiatives have taken place in the discipline, in many cases, this has not been reflected by related changes in assessment practices, which still reflect a traditional epistemology. If the academic community is to believe that the discipline of history is serious about adapting to the current changes in South African education, history needs to provide evidence that its epistemologies are also adapting.

INTRODUCTION

Various humanities departments at universities in South Africa are facing the threat of closure. History, as a discipline, is also facing uncertainty. The very existence of history departments is undermined by various threats which include, inter alia, the following:

- the scant attention afforded to history as an independent subject, or dedicated learning area, in the Curriculum 2005;
- the declining numbers of students who choose to study history at tertiary institutions;
- high levels of unemployment in teaching; and
- the shift in focus to providing students in higher education with “marketable skills”, which tends to commercial and scientific disciplines.

Despite this threat, many historians still argue that history, as a discipline, holds a key position in a dynamically changing South Africa (see for example Van Eeden 1997, in this regard). However, to fulfil this important role, teachers in particular of history, and in the humanities in general, need to meet the challenges posed by a number of changes in the educational paradigm in South Africa, in a meaningful way.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EPISTEMOLOGY

In the context of this discussion, epistemology refers to theories of knowledge, which, although, not always explicitly stated, influence one’s orientation in the teaching and learning situation. Zietsman (1996:73) provides a rationale for considering the importance of epistemology in the conceptualisation of a discipline: “Your epistemology determines your view of the learner, how you develop instruction, how you organise your classroom. It does not say how to go about those actions: it pre determines them”. The same holds true for the way in which the epistemology of the discipline determines assessment practices.

Brickley (1994:17 21) provides a brief synopsis of the dominant traditional historical epistemology in relation to post modernism. He identifies both the positivist and empirical discourses of traditional historical studies and shows how they have influenced thinking about the teaching of history. He shows that the positivist discourse has resulted in the emphasis in history being placed on facts. The empirical discourse has resulted in the emphasis on a celebration of obtaining the truth about the past (ibid:20). The traditional epistemology of history also celebrated accuracy and the strive for objectivity which was achieved through a “scientific” approach to studying the discipline. (In sharp contrast, other historians, like for example, Kros and Vadi (1993) suggest that historians recognise their own subjecitivity.)

These positivist and empirical discourses of the traditional historical epistemology fail to acknowledge the constructivist movements in education. These movements suggest that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore concepts like truth
are not universal absolutes, but are, instead, relative and personal. In a constructivist tradition, Zietsman (1996:72) quotes Candy (1991:273) as saying: “We know reality only by acting on it. This means that knowledge is neither a copy nor a mirror of reality, but the forms and content of knowledge are constructed by the one who experiences it”. Brickley (1994:21) also examines the influence of the post modernism movement on historical studies, and questions what we mean by accuracy. He also challenges the possibility of objective historical truth.

There are however, a number of South African historians (like Sieborger and others) who have criticised the traditional epistemology of history from within the discipline. Writing in a local context, Kros and Vadi (1993) show that one of the great difficulties about challenging dominant conceptions of South Africa’s past has been the insistence that historians have arrived at their conclusions through the application of “scientific”, objective methods, and therefore suggest that they are not open to being challenged or disputed. The application of these “scientific” methods forms part of an epistemology that underlies what Muller and Taylor (1993:321) refer to as the “authoritarian canonization” of the discipline, where “syllabus plus textbook equals curriculum”.

However, there appear to be an enclave of historians who continue to support the traditional epistemology. For example, it is ironic that, in attempting to defend history as a dynamic “change agent”, Van Eeden (1997:104) falls back on a traditional epistemology, arguing that “Although some people would prefer to think of History as a subject/discipline that must be steered by the community or the political agendas of the time, this must not and cannot be the case. As acknowledged discipline/subject [history] world wide, which also involves in depth scientifically directed research and applied methodologies of writing and teaching (old and modern), its curricula- tion as well as the careful selection of content that present a representative, balanced view of events/people in a specific time slot, cannot possibly be carried out or steered by laymen”. In so doing, she entrenches the notion of the “authority” who selects the content of the curriculum in a non participatory and “scientific” way. In another exam- ple, a well known South African historian, Tempelhoff (1996:3) listed the following as essential qualities for historians, in a professional context: the “love of ... accuracy” and “truth” and “realism”.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

Over the years, history educators have made various attempts to meet the challenge posed by changes in South Africa in different ways. These include, inter alia, the following attempts:

- reconceptualising content laden syllabuses;
- acknowledging multiculturalism;
- adopting a “bottom up” approach to history in the follow of People’s History (Van Eeden 1997);
- developing a skills based approach to learning.

Because there is still the tendency in many curriculum development initiatives to narrowly equate curriculum with syllabus, assessment practices have often been excluded from this process of reconceptualisation. Furthermore, there have only been isolated attempts made to question the underlying assumptions about the ways in which learners learn, as are implicit in the assessment practices of many disciplines.

In theory, assessment and the curriculum share a symbiotic relationship, while in practice, assessment often drives the curriculum. A number of researchers have acclaimed the significant role that assessment plays in the academic life of students. Gravett (1996:76) for example, quotes Brown and Knight (1994:12) as saying “... that it is not the curriculum that shapes assessment, but assessment that shapes the curriculum and embodies the purposes of higher education”. Although many researchers and teachers agree that assessment is at the core of improving the quality of teaching and learning, historically, testing has been something that teachers have thought about after instruction was over (Popham 1987).

TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

The traditional historical epistemology, with empiri- cal, positivist emphasis, has had implications for assessment practices in the discipline. Sieborger et al (1993), for example, state that a belief in history (or any discipline for that matter) as a relatively fixed body of knowledge presupposes a particular selection of facts for assessment. This problem gains impetus when only one textbook is used as the prescribed textbook in a history course.

The traditional historical epistemology is also evident in various dominant assessment practices in the discipline of history. These include, inter alia, the following:
The traditional use of long essay type questions in the assessment of History. Each discipline has norms and conventions about how best to provide such evidence. History has traditionally used the long essay type question to evaluate the extent to which successful learning has taken place. Booth (1993:233) describes essay writing as at the “staple diet” of historians, and for that matter most humanities undergraduates.

A mark being awarded for each fact, which suggests that students make meaning of their world by rote learning a set of preordained “facts” that have been subjectively selected by someone in “authority”.

The tendency to promote factual recall due to a content laden syllabus (Kros & Vadi 1993:97).

The fallacious belief that the ability to work under unrealistic time restraints will provide evidence of successful learning in history.

The summative focus of most forms of assessment (in other words assessment undertaken for the purposes of making educational decisions, rather than for personal development).

The reliance on norm referencing rather than criterion referencing. (The difference between norm referenced assessment and criterion referenced assessment is best defined by example: the Olympic Games is definable as norm referenced in that the winner of the current year gets a gold, regardless of the winning time. In other words, competitors’ performances are compared and ranked. However, the qualifying rounds of the Olympics are criterion referenced in that competitors have to qualify by meeting certain criteria in order to compete in the finals.) This means that students in history are usually ranked by comparison to a norm group and this is usually the by product of the long essay type question mode of testing, where it is more difficult to establish a set of criteria against which the student will be pitched or “bench marked”. One of the problems inherent in the norm referenced approach is that ranking students in a normative way actually tells us little about what they have achieved or what they can do (Joffe 1993).

While most assessments are highly artificial in nature, this is often true of summative assessments in historical studies. Students are seldom provided with the kind of tasks that reflect authentic practice. The artificial nature of the assessments is exacerbated by the fact that students are, in many cases, not permitted to have reference material in examinations, and by the unrealistic time restraints demanded by examination conditions. Learning how historians reconstruct the past appears to be as important, if not more important than learning what other historians have already reconstructed. Developing assessors’ confidence in selecting authentic assessment techniques above traditional ones is important. Ramsden (1992:191) reminds us that “… it is rather easy to think up hard questions about specific information, procedures, and details. It is infinitely more difficult to construct questions that demand and reward an understanding of concepts, disciplinary or professional processes of thinking, and theory related evidence and procedures. It also takes more time to mark such questions. No wonder we sometimes beguile ourselves into thinking that imitation assessment is the real thing, especially in large undergraduate classes”.

Writing in the specific context of history, Sieboger et al. (1993:211) acknowledge that assessment, while having a negative “backwash” effect, still has the potential to “promote change by acting as a catalyst for new approaches”. Sieboger et al. (ibid) also propose that, in order to truly reconceptualise the history curriculum, assessment practices also need to move away from positivistic and empirical assumptions about learning, towards practices which acknowledge other epistemologies.

FURTHER IMPERATIVES TO CHANGE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES: THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY (SAQA) ACT

As unpalatable as it may be to some historians, there are also national imperatives to change assessment practices. These present themselves in the form of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995. While the move to an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) might not be regarded by some as espousing a constructivist epistemology, the recom mend assessment practices allow for a variety of epistemologies. For example, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Bulletin of 1997 (this publication by SAQA, as well as the SAQA act, are available on the World Wide web at www.sa qa.org), suggests that educators will, in future, need to show evidence of successful student learning in a variety of ways. It also highlights the necessity for a criterion based approach to assessment. Authentic assessments (ones that reflect the tasks that will be required of students in the “real” world) are also suggested by this particular publication.
CONCLUSIONS: MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT: ACCOMMODATING A VARIETY OF LEARNING STYLES

Recent literature has emphasised the need for more responsive and flexible modes of teaching and learning in the climate of new learning environments. If the academic community is to believe that the discipline of history is serious about adapting to the current changes in South African education, history needs to provide evidence that its epistemology is also adapting. This would be reflected by changes to all aspects of teaching and learning, including assessment.

In the quest to address inequities of the past, in terms of educational advantage, it is necessary for teachers of history to accommodate a greater variety of learning styles through a variety of modes of assessment. In this regard, this article challenges the notion that the essay is the best (and often only) method of testing historical understanding. It is inconceivable that only one method of questioning, in this case the essay method, can possibly provide evidence for most of the aims of history at the level of higher education. “A variety of assessment methods should be employed because multiple aims demand multiple methods and different assessment methods call forth different kinds of qualities from the students” (Gravett 1996:78). In order to broaden the range of skills, attitudes and qualities we assess, we need to broaden the types of assessment we use. “As well as broadening the scope of the curriculum, we have to broaden the range of contexts in which pupils can respond and teachers can assess. In effect, this may mean quite significant changes in what we regard as acceptable opportunities for pupils to show what they can do” (Joffe 1993:243). Acknowledging that assessments need to be both reliable and valid, a combination of assessment practices are needed to justify the claim that successful learning has taken place.

History educators need to find ways of accommodating a greater variety of epistemologies than was traditionally conceived. History will only be able to continue to justify its existence in the sphere of higher education if it can demonstrate that, not only is it a worthwhile discipline, but that it has accommodated the changes taking place in higher education.

REFERENCES


