

Good morning delegates, I would like to start by offering my congratulations, and sincere appreciation to the team at SPU for organising and hosting this first SAHT online conference. My particular thanks go to Dr Raymond Nkwenti Fru, who has worked tirelessly and patiently liaising with speakers and SASHT re this conference,. Thanks too for his past teacher and mentor, Prof Johan Wassermann for advising him behind the scenes.

History teaching in SA – midst Pandemic, populism, political fracturing and STEM.

The last two years in SA have seen much upheaval, due to local politics, continued populist trends here and abroad and an international pandemic. South Africa's already dire socio-economic state has worsened and our country remains deeply divided politically. Now more than ever, history informs not only how we understand our divided past but can assist our students in facing a difficult future.

In times of crisis, it is tempting for a ruling party to want to focus on its victories, and build a sense of revolutionary or historical triumph, out of the past, in order to build a patriotic identity. History can be used as a political tool in trying times. However, I would argue it is important to draw on history to understand the current schisms, rather than paint over the cracks. In building a patriotic history one will not only leave out some less attractive episodes, it may also lead to a history that not all students in the class can identify with, as it will glorify some at the expense of others.

Moreover, in an age of identity politics, there could be a temptation to add forgotten or marginalised groups as a tag on, rather than in an integrated way, to make sure that a State cannot be accused of silencing some, yet not really analysing the full contribution these people made .

Rather, I believe that teaching history in order to make students aware of social injustices, the social economic and political context , as well as the historical context, and then lead them to discussions where social injustices have been addressed, is I believe an empowering way of teaching History. This is what makes sense to me as a teacher, in tough times.

What have the main issues been in the past two years in SA schools?

Due to lack of economic transformation of rural government schools, students from poorer communities have been cut off from education during extended school closures, in a country where just 10 percent of households have an internet connection. Meanwhile historic underinvestment and the government's failure to address existing inequalities has resulted in many schools not having running water or proper toilets whilst struggling with overcrowded classrooms, meaning they cannot provide a safe learning environment amid the pandemic... the government has failed to ensure that schools in poorer communities have the additional resources they need to provide a secure learning environment. As a result, many have had to shut down repeatedly due to high COVID-19 infection rates. The toll on staff needs also to be recognised. By the beginning of 2021 it was estimated that up to 1,700 teachers have lost their lives to COVID-19, more than 300 alone during the recent school holidays. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/south-africa-covid19-pushes-inequality-in-schools-to-crippling-new-level-risks-a-lost-generation-of-learners/>

Food insecurity deepened as students could not access school feeding schemes during deep lockdown.

In Independent schools, blended learning happened, amidst increased mental health stresses of pupils in isolation, and the issue of transformation was raised more rigorously than before, with black SA students joining the international protests around the death of George Floyd and others, in the US at the hands of police, in 2020. While in SA at this time, 11 people who had been shot or killed by police or armed forces in South Africa during the early lockdown. The school protests around our country, challenging the lack of transformation in independent and ex-Model C schools in SA, spread during lockdown. Transformation remains a vital part of addressing racial, gender and sexual equity that is long overdue. These struggles are reflective of the haste with which our country moved forward after the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, causing deep anger in today's youth who feel the ongoing divide socially and economically needs to be further addressed.

Another scourge came to the fore during Covid in our society – gender-based violence. Once again, the media shone the spotlight on the danger of pupils who could not escape from abuse at home, during lockdown. "... campaigners stressed that the police force's gender-based violence hotline received 2,300 calls in the first five days of lockdown — nearly three times the rate prior to lockdown — showing that violence against women had gone up not down".

Our pupils found these reports deeply disturbing and felt helpless in the face of this issue. One of our Matric pupils, related the sense of being overwhelmed with social issues, at a time when she was already stressed by the virus, and her studies. Drawing on History she related that she felt what students in the 1960s must have felt – that there were so many issues to fight, and she wanted to be part of working for change, yet she also had to think of her own future and her studies to get to a point where she could make a sustainable difference. I was mindful of the life lessons these students were drawing from History – suddenly the activism of the Sixties was real to them, as they grappled to balance personal and political issues, at age 17 or 18 years old. The fact they were drawing parallels was evidence that their history lessons were meaningful – these girls had not yet left school, and were still minors, yet the weight of the world is starting to overwhelm them. They felt their elders had let them and the world down. Many of our historical lessons during this time discussed feminist struggles, working class struggles, and racial struggles, to make sense of the present.

For me teaching History and social justice have been inseparable in such times. Yet, it is interesting to look at the debate that in the UK in the last decade over the teaching of history. In the face of supposedly falling numbers in History students in the UK at GCSE and A levels, Min of education Michael Gove after appointing Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson to advise on a new History in 2010, restructured the curriculum into a celebration of history which was essentially a bid to look at what makes Britain great. . In an article, published in the guardian in 2010, Shama outlined the 8 topics of history he felt all UK pupils should know about, and he prefaced this with his motivation for the study of History:

In these economically and politically tricky times we need history's long look more than ever...Whatever else gets cut in this time of nicks and scrapes, incisions and mutilations, the cord of our national memory had better not be among the casualties. For even during the toughest trials it's our history that binds us together as a distinctive community in an otherwise generically globalised culture. Mother Teresa and Lady Gaga are multinationals; Oliver Cromwell and Margaret Thatcher are peculiarly ours. In a headphone world where we get to privatise our brains, it's history that logs us on to Our Space...

In a letter of response, Prof Colin Jones president of the Royal Historical Society wrote that he was heartened by Schama's plea

"not to neglect Europe and the non-western world". Yet he cautioned that Schama's way of presenting history that suggests an Anglocentric vision that offers a one-eyed view of the past.

..."For surely he will agree that schoolchildren need to know about the world in which they live and not just the country that they inhabit, and they need to understand history isn't only about "who we are", but also very much about who others are (and were), and how we differ from each other".

...The recent UK Ofsted report on history teaching quotes many students as saying how much they enjoy the way it sharpens their critical faculties. If History downgrades the transmission of skills for the rote learning of facts from the national patriotic narrative, history in the schools really will be in crisis. In addition, focussing on a lens of what made Britain great historically, was designed to instil pride amongst students in a supposedly shared national past, but would merely have accentuated how many students in modern multicultural Britain fail to recognise themselves in what is taught in school history lessons. The newly appointed education secretary, in September 2021, Nadhim Zahawi, born in Iraq and moved to UK in 1976, will be interesting to watch when it comes to what lens he envisages for the teaching of History.

We face a similar challenge to History teaching in our schools. There needs to be a continued balance of international and national history, with critical thinking and debate. We also need to cater for students that come from the African continent as a whole. We all await the new proposed curriculum and its stated Afro-centricity, and expectantly hope that the approach will be a multitude of voices and perspectives, stimulating debate. The restructured History curriculum in the making may also have been a response to dwindling history numbers, and a lack of knowledge of the patriotic struggle and its leaders, but in 2018, an article in the Daily Maverick showed a reverse trend: according to David Mills and Natasha Robinson, (Natasha Robinson is PHD Candidate at the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, currently conducting fieldwork in Cape Town, researching how students develop historical consciousness in the Grade 9 history classroom. David Mills is an Associate Professor of Pedagogy and the Social Sciences in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford) <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-09-03-youth-renew-interest-in-history/>

"In 2011, less than 15% of students who sat the matric exams chose to take history. That number has consistently increased each year, until last year almost 28% of matric students chose history (calculated from DBE technical reports). .. interest in history is not dwindling but significantly increasing...What explains this revived interest in history among young South Africans? A comparison with other post-conflict societies would indicate that these changing attitudes are not unusual. In fact, they follow a rather consistent pattern, moving first from discomfort to anger and then to interest...What these examples show is that South Africa is not unusual. It can take decades before a new generation of young people are willing and able to formally study their nation's contentious past. According to Historian Noor Nieftagodien, it is only when the past becomes distant that youth will become interested in learning about their history. As a country reinvents itself, its history becomes the study of another country".

South Africa seems to fit this pattern. Students are not showing a "dwindling" interest in history. Like other post-conflict generations, time provides distance and perspective. South Africa's students seem ready to re-engage with their history, right on time.

There is also the challenge of teaching History in an age of easy access to “facts” on the internet. Many parents still feel history is just facts that anyone can research and teach themselves. This brings to the fore the importance of teaching the interpretations of history in an era, and the historiography of that era. The importance of the lessons learnt from an era for today remain critical. History’s true value lies in how we apply the lessons from the past to our present and our future.

“The application of history, through essays and debate is really what we want the students to walk away knowing at the end of the day.

We should constantly be bringing it back to the human element and asking about the choices and the motives of the leaders and the populations that they influenced, for better or for worse.

They should compare the past to today’s news.

This resonates with the approach to teaching History as outlined in the “Facing History and ourselves” <https://www.facinghistory.org/>. And is echoed by a USA teacher, Lisa Olsen in a age of awareness website.

<https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/why-teaching-history-is-important-3a4c52c9908d>

Here history comes back to being a subject that leads to an awareness or development of social justice.

Some of the issues in the past may be traumatic, and the way we facilitate these discussions is important. In doing so, we are allowing students to relate to some of these experiences that might’ve happened in the past, as well as relating them to things that are currently impacting their communities during these times. Also When we teach history that involves discrimination, prejudice, white supremacy, or colonialism, we have to consider the impact of unconscious bias. Teaching history in an empathetic way starts to address another skill we as educators need to address; social and emotional learning. SEL refers to the essential skills and competencies we all need for life success. These include self-awareness, goal setting, self-regulation, empathy, social awareness, relationship skills, and problem-solving. One cannot teach issues of discrimination without being self-aware:

“As educators on the path of enacting a greater sense of belonging we must first examine our own power and privilege. This requires deeply looking at our identity and its many facets and the multitude of ways we are reinforcing oppressive structures. It involves unpacking how systemic racism affects different populations in different ways and employing a targeted universal approach that is inclusive of everyone’s needs but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginalized groups” (john a. powell). <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/design-challenges-for-civics-and-history-educators-78334a955416>

It is this study of history that will help students on the path of social justice for the current time, ie helping them to identify who has power, hegemony, who is left out, whether it be in the school’s institutional decision making processes or in broader life.

I am interested that there is a paper at this conference by Dr Nathan Moyo, about an embittered history in Zimbabwe's past and how to achieve national cohesion. Every year, I have a few Zimbabwean students in my Matric history class, and they tend to focus on this embittered history of Zimbabwe, the political fracturing and the oppression of certain groups in the fractured society. There is a hunger for more perspectives of the truth to be told, and it is difficult to achieve national cohesion without this.

Kopano More will deliver a paper at this conference about a traumatic history of forced removals that split his community, and his attempts at finding his identity by piecing together the history of this fractured group, of the Bakwena Ba Mogopa. The choices people make in this instance, whether to resist, collaborate, be bystanders, all had a lasting impact on the unity of this group.

IN the USA 27-29 August this year saw History teachers around America protesting with the Hash tag #Teach Truth , in which Teachers and allies across the country pledged to teach truth on the weekend of August 27 – 29, 2021. They made their pledges at historic sites to provide examples of the history that teachers are required to lie about or omit where the GOP anti-history bills become law.

Lawmakers in at least 27 states are attempting to pass [legislation that would prohibit teachers teaching critical race theory or the role of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and oppression](#) throughout U.S. history.

The debate over how school children are taught about slavery, civil rights and racism has become the most recent battle in the culture war between conservatives and progressives. And Republicans are gearing up to use the controversy as political fodder during the 2022 midterms...Kimberlé Crenshaw, executive director of the African American Policy Forum, was among those who helped popularize critical race theory in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to what she and others felt was a lack of progress following passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

She said Republicans are twisting the concept to inflame racial tensions and motivate their base of mostly white supporters.

“This is a 2022 strategy to weaponize white insecurity, to mobilize ideas that have been mobilized again and again throughout history, using a concept or set of ideas that they can convince people is the new boogeyman,” Crenshaw said.

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?popoutv2=1&version=20210920004.10>

Scholars and activists who discuss CRT are not arguing that white people living now are to blame for what people did in the past. They are saying that white people living now have a moral responsibility to do something about how racism still impacts all of our lives today. Policies attempting to suffocate this much-needed national conversation are an obstacle to the pursuit of an equitable democracy.

So I would like to end with a quote from Prof Steve Kantowitz of the University of Wisconsin- Madison.

To think like a historian demands two contradictory things of us: profound humility, and arrogance. Humility because we know that when we reconstruct the past, we are not actually putting the thing together as it was, not recovering a lost, eternal truth, but instead making meaning. And that's why the arrogance: because even though we know the limitations of our knowledge, we try to tell a coherent story about the past. A story that fits the facts as we find them, that addresses the meaningful contradictions, that is frank about the absences and uncertainties without retreating into hopelessness. A story that acknowledges the limits of our knowledge and our perspective, but that does not throw up its hands.

In this way, the historian's job is the same as that of the citizen.

Our world will overwhelm you with information. It can make you want to throw up your hands and leave the big questions to others—to the people already in power, or the ones with the loudest voices. Or it can make you want to choose sides in a black-and-white struggle of good and evil, to choose a team and carry out the plays its captain calls. Those seem to be quite different courses, but in a way they are both courses of surrender. They both ask you to surrender your judgment and your voice in exchange for peace and certainty.

To see the world as a historian is the best way I know to reject that surrender. The skills you have learned, the perspective you have gained, have forever changed you—not just as a student, but as a citizen. Now that you have that toolkit in your hands and understand what it can do, you will not easily be able to rest content with simple answers, especially when they flatter your own prejudices and assumptions.

From the Editor's Desk: Teaching History in the Time of COVID-19

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