



# Teachers Voice

## Experiencing teaching history during Work Integrated Learning (WIL) / Teaching Practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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One aspect of history education that was radically impacted on by COVID-19 was the annual WIL/Teaching Practice undertakings by pre-service history teachers. In this, the July 2021 edition, we have tried to capture some of the experiences of pre-service history teachers related to this key aspect of their professional development. This was done by means of a series of short autoethnographic-like pieces in which prospective history teachers of six southern African universities have shared their experiences.

### **Mckinley Storm Reekie**

University of Pretoria

The History classroom has greatly suffered under the COVID-19 pandemic as many teaching strategies have had to be altered or completely disregarded to accommodate for social distancing rules. This pandemic has shown me how heavily I relied on group work for activities, and it has made me aware of how important group work is in history for learners to not only grasp concepts but enjoy the subject.

Throughout my teaching practical, more challenges became apparent in the history classroom; groupwork was frowned upon, sharing resources between students was prohibited, and the school promoted hybrid learning, which meant that some students were on Zoom and others were physically in class. Hybrid learning became one of the biggest challenges in the classroom as both my mentor teacher and I had to prepare our history lessons to accommodate for learners in class and online, thus making any creative lessons quite hard to implement and incredibly time-consuming. Due to these lessons being difficult to implement, I found that the history teachers often opted to just read through the textbooks with the young learners and then asked them to do the activity that followed. This type of teaching method discourages students and promotes parrot-learning. I overcame this challenge by creating Kahoot! quizzes and a history bingo game to stimulate the learners. Learners online and in class could participate and it encouraged learners to pay attention to what was being taught. The response to these activities was heartening

and resulted in satisfying marks on their history cycle tests. Thus, I would advocate for the teaching method of gamification in the history classroom because it makes the lesson more enjoyable for the learners.

Furthermore, the pandemic highlighted the technological gap between well-off schools and poorer schools, which influences the way in which learners are able to learn history. The school I attended for my practical was a well-off school and every learner had access to a device, which made teaching history easier as the teacher could share sources on Google classroom and every learner would have access to these sources. One of the social science teachers came into contact with a Covid-positive person; however, this did not hinder their lesson as they were still able to teach via Zoom and give activities on Google classroom. With the increasing demand for technology in schools, due to the pandemic, I have seen the benefits of integrating technology into the history curriculum as technology can be used to give access to sources and examine them as well, which has increased the learners' understanding of content as they have interacted more closely with sources. Thus, I found that the integration of technology into the curriculum was not only beneficial in the history classroom but in most subjects.

Therefore, in the history classroom, groupwork was marginalised by integrating more technology into the curriculum and thus keeping the social distancing protocols in place to prevent the spread of Covid, while still keeping the subject interesting and interactive. My attitude has changed towards teaching history as I have had to come up with activities and lessons to accommodate for COVID-19 protocols which has given me a greater respect to teachers who have been doing this since the beginning of the pandemic and who have been keeping the learners eager to learn.

## **Nondumiso Ngcobo**

University of KwaZulu-Natal

As part of my training, I did my first teaching practice at a secondary school in Mpumalanga Township, Hammarsdale. I taught history classes to Grades 10 and 11. Since we are in the time of COVID-19, my experience of teaching history had so many challenges. However, I also adjusted and did the best I could to make the experience worthwhile.

The school strictly followed all the COVID-19 protocols placed by the government regarding how the institution should function and the number of learners allowed per classroom. The learners were divided into small groups and attended according to shifts

based on their group timetables. However, teaching during a period of COVID-19 was still risky. The learners seemed tired of wearing masks and sticking to COVID-19 protocols. I also struggled to speak for long under my mask, and the learners would also complain that they could not hear me properly. I had to change from wearing a mask to a face shield which is less effective against COVID-19.

Since the history class had huge numbers, the rule of alternating attendance became a challenge for me because I ended up with multiple history classes that I had to teach. This meant that I had to repeat the same thing in almost all the classes that I took, which was an exhausting, time-consuming, and even boring, experience. Curriculum coverage was impacted negatively as the teaching practice time was rather short. This was made worse when my mentor gave me a Grade 11 class that had just moved from agriculture to the history class, meaning that they had no strong background in history.

Unfortunately, the school already had limited learning resources, partly because of lack of funding and also because of recurrent vandalism from outside gangs and thieves who steal textbooks, stationery and even laptops. Preparation for teaching history was challenging since it required a lot of reading, yet access to my university library was limited because of COVID-19 restrictions. I was unable to print notes for the learners because the school did not have enough stationery. Learners did not have personal textbooks and had to share. As a result, most of my history lessons were teacher-centred which required me to do a lot of talking while learners just sit and listen.

In spite of all these challenges, I noticed that I conscientised the learners about the value of history, as was shown by their curiosity and from the kind of questions that they asked in class. This was a positive experience for me in the history classroom. I left teaching practice having learnt about classroom and time management, how to do some of the paperwork, how to create worksheets and other tasks and how to assess following different cognitive levels. These are lessons that I will take with me even after COVID-19.

## **Zintle Dlungwana**

University of KwaZulu-Natal

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to many disruptions and deaths across the country, I had to do my teaching practice. I had both negative and positive experiences in the history classroom. It was also an experience in which I learned from my history learners, other teachers, and even support staff at the school. I also realized how the community in

which the school is based plays a large role on how the school operates.

I did my teaching practice in a senior secondary school. I had not visited the area, let alone the school itself, before. My first impression of the school was that it was quite neat and inviting, with flowers and plants in front of the classrooms. However, I quickly picked up evidence of learner indiscipline, as they were outside the classrooms during teaching hours. This was confirmed throughout my experience as the learners came to school late and over half of them did not attend the assembly prayer in the morning. Furthermore, there were a lot of cases of learner sickness in this school, including paranormal cases of some learners seeing things, screaming, and running away. All these problems, in addition to the COVID-19 situation, left me terrified and overwhelmed. However, the teachers – especially my mentor history teacher – were very nice and friendly to me, and they treated me like one of their own. The measures that were in place in response to COVID-19 were that before you were able to enter the gate you had to be screened to check your temperature and sanitize your hands. You also could not enter the gate without a face mask this – this was compulsory and very strict. Life did not continue as usual.

The school lacked teaching resources, particularly ICT. This made teaching very difficult, but I understood that the school was based in a rural area plagued by poverty and poor infrastructure, leading to learner underachievement. I accepted the challenge to improve learning in this school and to encourage learners to fall in love with history, just like myself. I was given Grade 10s, who were doing the French Revolution, and a Grade 11 class. The classes were full and on rotation. Monday it was Grade 10 then Tuesday Grade 11. Only Grade 12 came to school every day. I think this was a good idea in response to COVID-19, as learners did not come to school simultaneously to avoid the spread of the virus. I used methods such as class discussions, debates, and question and answer sessions. The resources I mainly used were pictures, charts, and the textbook, and I tried to be creative especially for visual learners. Implementing these methods and resources during COVID-19 was very difficult. For example, social distancing and the fact that learners were wearing masks made it very difficult to hold successful debates. Some students also made noise, and it was very difficult to identify where the distractions were coming from. Overall, it was very fulfilling to see my learners excited when I entered the classroom, such that some even asked that I do extra history classes, as they understood what I was teaching. I took this as evidence of the fact that the learners were falling in love with the subject. These are the positive experiences I had because even when I gave the learners tasks and tests, they passed impressively, showing that learning had taken place.

I also had bad experiences linked to COVID-19. Some learners in my history class were

very chaotic because they were wearing masks and knew that it was not easy to recognize them. It was also very hard to practice methods such as role play, since we had to avoid the spread of the virus. We also could not go to the computer lab to explore extra information or search for alternative explanations to what learners found difficult to understand. My own role as a researcher and scholar was also affected by the COVID-19 protocols, as I could not go to archives, and did not feel safe to be in the public libraries in search for more information.

To sum up my experiences of teaching practice experience, I experienced some negative issues as a result of COVID-19, and these compounded the already-existing issues in the school. However, I learnt so much from teaching real kids, and interacting with teachers, the principal, and the school environment as a whole.

## **Palesa Nqana**

Sol Plaatje University

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 a lot has changed: many have been forced to adapt to the new culture of doing things, especially in the academic space. This brought many challenges to the teaching and learning process, in particular, in relation to emergency remote learning being introduced in universities.

Doing history in the time of COVID-19 has been extremely challenging, as it took away the opportunity for me to be the best history educator I can be, but it also opened-up room for improvement for me as a teacher. As the quote says, “where there’s a problem, there’s always a solution”. We were now forced to adapt, and must create new strategies of learning and teaching, because COVID-19 is now our new norm – the chances of things returning to how they were before seems to decrease with each passing day. Teaching history has been impacted a lot by the COVID-19 situation. History lessons are full of engagement, where we would have very meaningful class discussions that add to or advances the knowledge of an aspiring history teacher, but under the COVID-19 rules this has changed completely. We have had to move from traditional contact lessons to online lessons, which became quite challenging for me, as I love engaging in lessons. I prefer to ask if there is something I do not understand and contribute my input where I feel it’s necessary. With online lessons, this became more challenging, as strictly-timed lessons and technical issues limited us.

As much as COVID-19 has brought challenges to the teaching and learning of history, it has also brought us opportunities or ways in which we can improve. For instance, it has

helped teachers and learners to quickly familiarise themselves with remote teaching and learning, something that would be of necessity in the near future. COVID-19 has forced teaching and learning to be done remotely, which has allowed learners and students to maintain and still have access to learning materials and extra help thanks to online platforms such as televisions, telephones, and video conferencing, where they can easily engage with others to enhance their knowledge in the subject.

The current predicament has highlighted the need for schools and universities to adopt the improved, modern ways of teaching and learning, in order to ensure that each and every learner is able to get the best out of History, preparing both teachers and learners for the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution as far as academics are concerned.

### **Dylan Muller**

Sol Plaatje University

To say that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on education would, quite possibly, be the understatement of the century. Teachers have had to adapt in ways which they may never have even considered, and student teachers, such as myself, and many others, have not been spared from the same challenges. Adaptation has been the key focus over the last year and a half, and for a subject such as history, adapting has proven to be a bigger challenge than I could have ever expected. History is a subject that relies quite heavily on engagement, and in a period in our history where face-to-face engagement has been limited, I, personally, have found teaching the subject to be quite challenging.

Earlier in the year I had the opportunity to physically go to schools for the purpose of observing classes. However, I was presented with the opportunity to teach several history classes ranging from Grade 9 to 11 and this was a good, albeit short, experience. This too, unfortunately, was not without its own challenges. Due to social distancing protocols, learners would come to school on alternating days. As a result of limited teaching and learning time, and the fact that the school did not want student teachers to use up “valuable time”, I often found it impossible to completely work through a specific unit. This was extremely disappointing, as I wanted to test my own limits as a teacher and my ability to adapt to difficult circumstances.

Following this short stint at school earlier in the year, another school visit, with the sole focus on presenting lessons in real classroom environments, was planned. However, due to COVID-19, this had to be cancelled. To take its place, we were required to present “virtual

lessons” in which we record ourselves presenting a lesson to an imaginary class and for someone majoring in history. I found this to be hugely disappointing. During the planning and presenting of my virtual history lessons, I oftentimes found it difficult to stay positive, as I felt that this was not what history teaching was supposed to be. Teaching a laptop screen just did not provide the experience I was looking for, as I had no learners to engage with, no learners to answer questions or to ask me questions, and no one to provide their own points of view or spark a healthy debate. The very essence of what history education is about was missing, and this proved to be a challenge which I found difficult to work through.

Ultimately, I have always maintained that a good teacher should be able to adapt to any situation which is thrown at them, and I reminded myself of this to try and present the best virtual history lessons I could. My hope is that sometime soon I will have the opportunity to get back into physical classrooms so that I may experience the true essence of history education.

## **Mlindi Manqina**

University of Johannesburg

Teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is far from normal. When I was doing my WIL, I had to quickly learn to adapt to the new normal, as frustrating as it was. The first challenge was realising how much content the learners have missed in the previous year during lockdown. I found that the school had closed in March and only opened later in the year, and that they had no online programs, as it could not afford to have them. This then made it hard to introduce new content, as I would have to always go back to the previous year’s content and try to catch the learners up. In Grade 10, conducting a lesson about the French Revolution meant that I would also need to go back to Grade 9 content to explain concepts like democracy, or summarising a Nazi Germany unit because I wanted the learners to be able to effectively see different systems of government. For Grade 11, as we were dealing with Capitalism in the USA, I realised that the basics of what capitalism is have been missed, and I had to incorporate Grade 10 knowledge. This was very hard for me because, when planning lessons, I would have to also incorporate things from the previous grade just to give learners context.

The other challenge was that the school was operating in a rotational schedule to minimise the number of learners that come to school. This meant that classes were divided into two and each group was given a set of days to attend school. This was very frustrating

for me as progress was slow. I had to teach the same lesson more than once. The skipping of days also made it very hard to track progress, because learners would forget what they did two days ago when they last came to school. To mitigate the risk of having learners using the “off day” as a holiday, I would give them extra work to have them use the day productively. This was a good idea, but practically, it did not work. That is because the school is in an informal settlement, and I quickly learnt that the socio-economic environment that most of the learners live in is not conducive to learning. This challenge meant that it would take a week for me to get through content that would normally take two days.

Furthermore, group activities had to be minimalised. History is characterised by allowing learners to debate and voice their opinions, so I had to adapt the way I conduct discussions. To try and obey COVID-19 protocols, I would have the learners discuss with learners who were seated at the desk next to theirs. This allowed learners to engage with each other without infringing COVID-19 restrictions. This resulted in the class being a little noisy during these discussions because of the distance between learners, and because the learners had to raise their voice, as they could not hear each other with the masks on. As frustrating as the noise was, this was the only safe way that debates and discussions could take place. It was obvious then that group works would be very hard to coordinate. This was troubling for me because, through my course, I have learnt that learners also learn from each other. Finding alternative ways to coordinate group works then meant that I would have to rearrange the desks to form a group circle. All learners would sit at their own desk in the circle and complete the task that was given.

## **Thulo Atang**

National University of Lesotho

There have been a number of constraints when doing teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Education faced a lot of challenges as a result of the abnormalities brought on by the pandemic. But the Covid-19 pandemic has not only impacted education – our entire lives have been impacted by this pandemic. The purpose of this contribution is to discuss my experiences of teaching history during Teaching Practice in Lesotho.

On one hand, there was an issue of lack of resources. In addition to the difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lesotho government had introduced an integrated curriculum, the response to which was very problematic. There were no teaching aids, such as textbooks and other ICT facilities, and the government used Covid-19 as an



excuse to not address that problem. As a result, the learners depended heavily on the teachers. In addition, if the teacher recommended that students use the internet as a source of information, many lacked funds to buy data. The teacher consequently became the sole source of information. Indeed, the lacking resource availability hindered the teaching of history, as the recommended learner-centred approaches were difficult to employ.

To avoid the spread of Covid-19, other creative teaching methods were not employed in the teaching of History. For the effective teaching and learning of history, different teaching approaches should be employed within a lesson, however, during the pandemic, feasible teaching methods were limited, and often facilitated teacher-centred as opposed to learner-centred approaches. For example, group discussions, where learners will learn from each other, were prohibited in an attempt to minimise contact and reduce the spread of COVID-19 virus.

Field trips were also prohibited. Field trips are highly recommended in the teaching and learning of history, as the learners are able to make sense of what they learned in the classroom, seeing and experiencing history, as opposed to only listening to stories of the past. Covid-19 has limited or removed this as an option. For example, when teaching learners about San and Khoikhoi, the expectation is that the teacher will organise a field trip where learners will visit the caves where the San paintings are found. However, due to COVID-19, fieldtrips are totally prohibited.

In the teaching and learning of history it is of great importance for the teacher to know the learners by name. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this was very difficult, as learners come to school on alternating days so as to limit the number of learners in class. For example, where I conducted my teaching practice, the Grade 8 learners interchanged with the Grade 9 learners, further compounding this issue. When learners realised that their teacher did not know their names, they became demotivated, and lost interest in the subject, as they assumed that their teacher did not care about them, which was not the case.

On the other hand, teaching smaller groups of learners was advantageous, as the teacher was in the position to know the strength and the weaknesses of all learners. That enabled the teacher to employ different teaching approaches in the teaching of history to best suit the individual learner. The smaller numbers of learners in the class also enabled the teacher to create enough time for all the learners, and made the classroom experience more manageable

In conclusion, the challenges of teaching history during the COVID-19 pandemic include the lack of resources, restrictions on other teaching strategies, absence of field trips, and an increased difficulty for to get to know their learners by name, which can be

demotivating for learners. However, by limiting the number of students in a classroom to avoid the spread of Covid-19, teachers are able to bond with and get to know the learners on a one-to-one basis. COVID-19 compels innovation and creativity because, at the end of the day, teaching and learning of the History subject must continue.

## **Rasoeu Rakoa**

National University of Lesotho

In Lesotho, every year hundreds of student teachers descend on schools for a few weeks of practical exposure in the classroom. They observe, prepare, and teach lessons, and are mentored by teachers. This period is a highlight of their degree, as they find themselves experiencing first-hand the fulfilment and challenges of being a member of the profession. Some months into the pandemic, schools started to open gradually, and student teachers were permitted to enter schools.

Theories of teaching and learning had to take on a new shape, and new questions challenged me as the student teacher. For example, history is a very debatable subject, but collaborative learning was not easy to arrange under conditions of social distancing. The masked situation also changed concerns about classroom distractions, and learners' excitement for learning could not be relied on in an atmosphere of anxiety.

Over and above the challenges of history classroom teaching, I had to face the reality that teachers did not have time to give me much advice, and the school meetings were minimal and even the staffroom was empty because of the limited numbers of people that can gather in any given space. History teachers were working hard to complete the curriculum as well as provide learners with support for well-being and mental health.

During my time as a history student teacher, I saw many challenges that I believed were brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that learners spent almost a year at home because of the lockdowns made them more relaxed, but they came back not understanding English and it was difficult for them to respond to some of the topics we dealt with from the historical subject. One learner, for example, would raise a hand as a sign of giving a response, but to fail to express him/herself using English.

Moving on, the other issue was the one of fear. Some classes were packed in such a way that you would find 40-45 learners in a class, and I was concerned about the circulation of COVID-19, and even afraid that it might affect me. Sometimes I would avoid giving a lot of classwork as a form of assessment, because I was scared that handling their books may

expose me to greater risk.

In addition, in a classroom where the teacher moves around, the teacher can retain a certain amount of order. Due to the pandemic this was not allowed, and students became more relaxed, often losing focus. Some of the experiments in class required a learner assistant, but that was also not possible due to the fear of possibly spreading Covid-19. The fact that I refrained from touching anything in the classroom also shows how uneasy I was in delivering my content.

In closing, the school management and other teachers did welcome me warmly. The learners were also cooperative and respectful. They honoured my presence from the first day to the last. That made me feel proud my profession.

