



# Using a historical memoir to improve curriculum coherence in teacher education: The case of Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*

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## Abstract

Two of the recurring concerns identified in teacher education are a lack of curricular coherence and a schism between content and practice. In this article, we discuss a specific intervention that was aimed at addressing these two challenges as they relate to English and History specifically. We argue that through the use of a carefully selected historical memoir, much tighter coherence between these subjects can be articulated in ways that facilitate students' mastery of core concepts and skills across both these learning areas, as well as a richer appreciation of their implication for teaching practice. For the purposes of this article, we define curricular coherence as an experienced sense of connectedness within and across modules. Focusing on the use of Trevor Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime* (2016), we argue that engaging with a single historical text across multiple modules can improve curricular coherence and offer a more integrated approach to engaging with written texts and historical resources. With close reference to the Department of Higher Education and Training's Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications, we reflect on our experiences of integrating this memoir into an undergraduate Intermediate

Phase (IP) teacher education programme at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). We show how this memoir was integrated into four modules that form part of the second year of the degree, namely English for the Primary School, Social Sciences for the Intermediate Phase, Teaching Methodology for English, and Teaching Methodology for the Social Sciences.

**Keywords:** Curricular coherence; English literature; Close reading; Teaching comprehension; Teaching literature; History education; Literary studies; Born a Crime; Primary school; Teacher education; Social Sciences; South Africa; Life writing; COVID-19.

## Introduction

There are several challenges facing teacher education in South Africa. These include insufficient coherence across degree programmes (Seligman & Gravett, 2010; Flores, Santos, Fernandes & Pereira, 2014), superficial content knowledge (Taylor & Taylor, 2013; Taylor, 2019), inadequate preparedness for the demands of academic literacy in English (Kruss, Hoadley & Gordon, 2009; CHE 2013; Khumalo & Maphalala, 2018), and a lack of integration between content and teaching practice (Gravett, 2012; Yeigh & Lynch, 2017; Barends, 2022). While various important strategies have been developed to address these challenges, they have sometimes risked side-lining more complex and abstract conceptual critical thinking skills in favour of a narrowed down notion of teacher education (Kruss et al., 2009). In this article, we discuss a specific intervention that was conceptualised by three lecturers, which was aimed at addressing some of these challenges as they relate to History and English specifically. We argue that through the use of carefully selected historical textual resources, much tighter coherence between these subjects can be articulated in ways that facilitate students' mastery of core concepts and skills across both these learning areas, as well as a richer appreciation of their implication for teaching practice. Focusing on the use of Trevor Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime* (2016), we argue that engaging with a single historical memoir across multiple modules can improve curricular coherence, offering a more integrated approach to engaging with written texts and historical resources. In this article, we reflect on our experiences of integrating this memoir across four modules that form part of an undergraduate Intermediate Phase (IP) teacher education programme at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), namely English for the Primary School, Social Sciences for the Intermediate Phase, Teaching Methodology for English, and Teaching Methodology for the Social Sciences.

Graduates of UJ's IP teacher education programme are expected to be generalists who can teach multiple subjects across the curriculum. This is a recent shift away from subject specialisations in the IP, given the reality that many primary school teachers will at some point be expected to teach subjects other than what they would have specialised in (Bowie & Reed, 2016; Woest, 2018). However, this poses multiple challenges. Given that students in the IP programme are not required to have studied History up to Grade 12, many students lack content knowledge of the subject. This is part of a wider problem in which the public tends to have a very poor general knowledge of contextually specific historical events and figures (Roberts, Houston, Struwig & Gordon, 2021), let alone an understanding of the causal relationships between historical events that is necessary for meaningful

History teaching. In a recent study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), many participants were unable to describe recent events, despite their seminal place in South Africa's past. These included key events that feature prominently in public discourse, due to their association with public holidays and major landmarks (Roberts et al., 2021). Given the heavy demands put on an already full curriculum, university lecturers need to develop an integrative approach to History education, in which historical textual resources should be integrated across the curriculum. While the scholarship on curricular coherence in relation to Social Sciences in South Africa has often tended to focus on the decision to combine History and Geography into one subject (Kgari-Masondo, 2017; Iyer, 2018), there have also been great successes in using topics in Social Sciences as key sites for transdisciplinary coherence-building more broadly (Ferreira, Janks, Barnsley, Marriott, Rudman, Ludlow & Nussey, 2012; Jarvis, 2018; Kruger & Evans, 2018; Liftig, 2021).

The challenges around English language proficiency are similarly concerning, given the poor academic literacy levels among university students (Van der Merwe, 2018) and among in-service teachers (Allison, 2020), as well as the insufficient time afforded to English in the teacher education curricula at most South African universities (Bowie & Reed, 2016). English proficiency is required to teach English to primary school learners, and it is also the language of teaching and learning at the university. Therefore, poor English academic language proficiency has a serious negative effect on students' epistemological access and their meaningful engagement with learning content across their degree (Petersen, 2014; Millin & Millin, 2019; Ramsaroop & Petersen, 2020). This has particular salience in our context, given that 75% of UJ students report that English is not their home language (Van Zyl, Dampier & Ngwenya, 2020).

While curriculum redesign is an ongoing process, the particular intervention described in this article was occasioned by the sudden shift to remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift foregrounded important issues in curriculum design. For instance, while the English modules prescribe literary texts for close textual analysis, students were unable to borrow copies from the institutional library. This meant that we had an ethical imperative to ensure that textual resources could be repurposed across multiple modules. In addition, students reported severe challenges in balancing workloads and expectations for their different modules (Godsell, 2020; Fouche & Andrews, 2022). Therefore, we decided to encourage deep engagement with a single text of substantial length rather than over-burdening the students (many of whom were still navigating challenges of remote learning). Efforts to blend content in History and English are not new, given that close attention to written textual resources is a crucial skill underpinning both subjects. The

integrated use of content and language teaching offers a powerful resource for improving language skills (Carstens, 2013; Godsell, 2017; Kruger & Evans, 2018). Stoller (2002:2) in fact warns against seeing content simply as a “shell for language teaching”, and insists that “as students master language, they are able to learn more content, and as students learn more content, they’re able to improve their language skills”.

There are growing calls to blur the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge in the interests of decolonising education, which some have argued will foreground new transdisciplinary epistemologies (Gray, 2017; Davids, 2018; Wassermann, 2018b; Godsell, 2019). While we do not yet know where these debates will lead or what the outcomes of these interventions will be in terms of school-level curriculum policy, we do know that we need to be preparing our pre-service teachers to think outside of the disciplinary boundaries that have shaped much of their education.

Trevor Noah’s memoir, *Born a Crime*, uses the author’s own life and that of his parents to map a broader history of apartheid and the transition to democracy in the early 1990s. As a form of literature broadly classified as life writing, the memoir is something of a hybrid genre that is simultaneously rooted in factual events but is nonetheless an aesthetically stylised narrative. Ludlow (2016) argues for the importance of including biographical writing in History education, noting the genre’s capacity to inculcate empathy, communicate the complexity of historical discourses, and convey the everyday oppressions meted out by the apartheid regime, which are sometimes subsumed under master narratives. Wassermann (2018a) and Godsell (2016) also observe that pre-service History teachers often tend to think about South African history in terms of fixed moralist binaries – good and bad, moral and immoral. In this regard, Noah’s memoir offers a far more complex and layered depiction of the country’s past, pointing to complexities that may have been occluded by dominant historical narratives. There is also a concerning trend among many students to think about South African history as ‘ending’ in 1994 (Wassermann, 2018a), which negates the centrality of history-making in the present, as well as the entanglements between past and present. Erdmann (2017:14) writes, for example:

*Contemporary relevance as a category of the didactics of history teaching includes not only historical facts which might be deemed the causes of present-day problems and circumstances but also those which, on the grounds of the values or ideas inherent in them, are identical, equivalent, or contrary to present-day problems or notions.*

Noah’s text – as well as the South African memoir genre itself – is significant then for a

number of reasons: not only does it map a history from the colonial and apartheid periods to the present, but it also extends to the post-apartheid period and makes explicit connections between the racist social engineering of the past and the ongoing legacies of racialised inequalities in the present.

## Curricular coherence

Although a lack of coherence in teacher education degree programmes is often identified as a concern (Seligman & Gravett, 2012; Flores et al., 2014), different authors emphasise different aspects of this coherence: for some, coherence refers to an alignment between content, pedagogy and assessment (Bateman, Taylor, Janik & Logan, 2007; Sullanmaa, 2020); others emphasise the way in which content is sequenced (Davis, 2013; Sullanmaa, 2020) to ensure that the depth and complexity of engagement increases in logical increments across years; some note the emphasis on coherence in terms of compliance with policy guidelines and bureaucratic monitoring (Wood & Hedges, 2016), and still others conceptualise curricular coherence more broadly in terms of the connections across learning areas (Thijs & Van der Akker, 2009; Flores et al., 2014; Barrot, 2019). For the purposes of this article, and with this broader understanding in mind, we define curricular coherence as an *experienced sense of connectedness within and across modules*.

Our focus in this article is on coherence at the level of text, indicating how a specific historical resource can forge a sense of connectedness across concepts, skills and disciplines. Following Ruszyak (2015), our conceptualisation of curricular coherence is informed by the five domains of teacher learning set out in the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET, 2014) *Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ). This policy calls for an "integrated and applied knowledge [which] should be understood as being both the condition for, and the effect of scrutinising, fusing together and expressing different types of knowledge in the moment of practice" (DHET, 2014:9). The policy distinguishes between five domains of learning, namely *disciplinary learning*, *pedagogical learning*, *practical learning*, *fundamental learning* and *situational learning*. Disciplinary learning, according to the policy, includes specialised content knowledge that is necessary to teach a specific subject. Practical learning refers to an awareness of and competencies for actual teaching practice – "learning from and in practice" (DHET, 2014:10). Pedagogical learning focuses on "specialised pedagogical content knowledge, which includes knowing how to present the concepts, methods and rules of a specific discipline in order to create appropriate learning opportunities for diverse learners,

as well as how to evaluate their progress” (DHET, 2014:10). Fundamental learning, in turn, “refers to the generic knowledge and competencies that are not teacher-specific, but might be useful in the day-to-day work that teachers do” (Ruszyak, 2015:11). This includes digital literacy, academic literacy, and English language proficiency. With reference to situational learning, the policy notes that while “all learning [ ... ] should involve learning *in* context, situational learning refers specifically to learning *about* context” (DHET, 2014:11). In particular, this aspect of learning mandates a consideration of social justice issues such as poverty, inequality, racism, diversity and the ongoing legacy of apartheid. As we argue below, Trevor Noah’s memoir, *Born a Crime*, provides a flexible textual resource around which these core aspects of teacher education can be facilitated.



**Image 1:** Domains of learning - Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications **Source:** DHET, 2014. Adapted by authors.

## English for the Primary School

The purpose of this module, according to the official institutional curriculum, is “to guide students in developing their own English language competence and the requisite subject knowledge in English to enable them to support English language learning in the primary school classroom” (UJ, 2021: 42). While there are six English content modules in the

students' undergraduate degree programme, the focus of this second-year module is on how childhood is represented in African literature. The main outcomes are to improve students' academic literacy, critical thinking skills, and English language proficiency. The module explores different literary genres, including poetry, short stories, the novel and the memoir. The three weeks that focus on the memoir explore different aspects of the text:

- Week 4: Language and identity in *Born a Crime*
- Week 5: Genre, intertextuality and audience in *Born a Crime*
- Week 6: Gender in *Born a Crime*

Teaching in this module took place online and consisted of pre-recorded lectures, worksheets containing probing questions for online WhatsApp tutorial discussions, and various formative assessments in which students received individualised feedback on paragraphs and essays. The module was grounded in inquiry-based learning. A large body of scholarly literature exists on the specificity of inquiry-based learning, which is broadly conceptualised as a student-led process in which students use and analyse available evidence to respond to particular questions – whether action-based problem-solving or responding to analytical prompts that require independent ideas – allowing them to formulate responses that are grounded in that evidence and connected to disciplinary knowledge (Khalaf & Zin, 2018). The memoir was used to explain this pedagogical approach to students, drawing their attention to Noah's (2016:82) assertion that:

*If my mother had one goal, it was to free my mind. My mother spoke to me like an adult, which was unusual. [...] She was always telling me stories, giving me lessons, Bible lessons especially. She was big into Psalms. I had to read Psalms every day. She would quiz me on it. 'What does the passage mean? What does it mean to you? How do you apply it to your life?' That was every day of my life. My mom did what school didn't. She taught me how to think.*

By using inquiry-based learning and the textual strategy of close reading, this module emphasises three of the five domains of learning identified in the revised policy: disciplinary learning, fundamental learning and situational learning.

In terms of disciplinary learning, the unit on Noah's memoir allows students to revise and apply their prior knowledge of core concepts in the study of narrative texts. This includes elements of storytelling, such as characterisation, setting, themes, narrative perspective, as well as the critical vocabulary necessary to teach figurative language, such as irony,



hyperbole, symbolism and similes. Significantly, the memoir genre invites a particularly focused study on the relationship between narrative perspective and characterisation, which problematises notions of a singular and objective truth. For example, one of the questions included in the weekly worksheets for tutorial discussions illustrates the significance of using a narrative genre that is simultaneously historical and stylised as a literary work:

*A memoir is a creative work, and therefore we can analyse the written text to see how a character is developed over time. Remember that even though the book is based on the author's life, he is still just a character in the book. Look at the given extract and consider the simile that is used. Explain the comparison and consider how this gives us insight into how this experience ... made him feel.*

In this way, the contingencies of narrative perspective are emphasised, and the focus on characterisation (as a concept in English literary studies) gestures to the limitations of authorial 'truth' that is so central to historical thinking (Van Eeden, 2016). What is more, this module also shows students how to think about the purpose and audience of a given piece of writing, which is an important idea set out in the national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) guidelines for English teaching in the Intermediate Phase (DBE, 2011a). In this, the module facilitates advanced insights that contribute to disciplinary learning by exploring questions of intertextuality. For example, students were required to respond to writing prompts such as the following:

*The narrator describes his friendship with one of the other boys in Chapter 4: "We started talking and hit it off. He took me under his wing, the Artful Dodger to my bewildered Oliver" (Noah, 2016:70). Many readers will not know who "the Artful Dodger" or "Oliver" are. Do some independent research. You will discover they are characters from a famous novel. What is the relationship between the Artful Dodger and Oliver in this other novel, and how does it support the idea that the narrator felt "bewildered" here?*

Similarly, students' disciplinary learning was advanced by focusing on concepts such as foreshadowing and non-linearity in narrative structure, as well as writerly strategies for contextualising information for foreign readers. In emphasising principles of purpose and audience when analysing written texts, students were asked to respond to short questions such as the following:

Noah (2016:33) writes that “[m]y mom and I used to go to Joubert Park all the time. It’s the Central Park of Johannesburg – beautiful gardens, a zoo, a giant chessboard with human-sized pieces that people would play”. Why would the narrator describe the public space as “the Central Park of Johannesburg”? What does this suggest about who his intended readers might be?

While disciplinary learning is embedded throughout the teaching of Noah’s memoir, the module also emphasises core aspects of fundamental learning, including academic literacy and English language proficiency. This is done through ongoing tasks in which students must engage in close reading of the literary work and write structured paragraphs and essays in response to specific questions. Close reading refers to “the detailed analysis of the complex interrelationship and *ambiguities* (multiple meanings) of the verbal and figurative components within a work” (Abrams, 2005:189). Integrated throughout the module are short writing tasks that require students to practise and demonstrate advanced comprehension and composition skills. For example, in one instance, students were required to respond to the following writing prompt:

*Focusing on Chapter 9 of the memoir (“The Mulberry Tree”), write a carefully structured paragraph ... in which you discuss how Noah uses an anecdote about a childhood experience to introduce a discussion of complex social issues. Your paragraph should make reference to the chapter’s non-linear structure. You should engage with specific quotations from this chapter to support your answer.*

This type of question requires students to pay close attention to the written text, demonstrate inferential analytical skills, and prepare a narrowly focused and well-structured response to a question. In other instances, students are given short extracts from the memoir and are required to pay careful attention to the communicative function of different language conventions and examples of figurative language. Extended exposure to complex written texts and guided strategies to encourage comprehension at both a surface and inferential level are key strategies to improve English language proficiency and precise academic literacy skills.

While critical thinking skills are not explicitly named in the revised MRTEQ policy as an example of fundamental learning, they surely form the foundation of all academic inquiry and professional teaching practice (Fadel, Bialik & Trilling, 2015; OECD, 2019). With particular reference to the importance of critical thinking as a key 21<sup>st</sup> century competency,

Barrot (2019:148) writes that the concept “focuses on the ability of learners to collect and/or retrieve information, organize and manage information, evaluate the relevance, quality, and usefulness of information, and generate accurate information through the use of available resources”. One of the core objectives of the module is to elevate ideas to a more abstract level to encourage students’ critical thinking skills. Lectures on the relationship between language and identity, for example, engage with these ideas in the abstract, requiring students to consider how the memoir itself theorises these relationships. Identity is approached through the seminal work of Stuart Hall, and students are required to think about identities as being constructed “through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (Hall, 1996:213) rather than in fixed narrow terms of racial, ethnic and gendered identities that students so often bring to the classroom. Students are guided in their analysis to show how the memoir complicates and challenges static notions of identity. These include prevailing beliefs that multilingualism inevitably results in social cohesion, that Afrikaans is only associated with apartheid-era white supremacy, and that hegemonic English is an apolitical and neutral language somehow separated from colonialism and privilege. The relationship between language and identity is thereby problematised, and students are required to find textual evidence to support their arguments. In this, the module aims to mitigate concerns that teacher education sometimes subordinates complex conceptual thinking – what would otherwise form the basis of a general liberal arts education (Dumitru, 2019) – in favour of a “descen[t] into technicist professional training” (Kruss et al., 2009:96).

While close reading that foregrounds contemporary language politics is valuable to facilitate fundamental learning, it is also valuable for what the revised MRTEQ policy calls situational learning: that is, learning about context. Therefore, while the memoir’s exploration of language politics offers opportunities for students to improve comprehension, composition and critical thinking skills, it also gives students contextual knowledge about how language politics works in the context of South African schools. In a comparable way, and similarly important for situational learning, close reading of the memoir gives students opportunities to reflect on the machinations of gender stereotypes as these play out in the South African context. These include representations of adolescent sexuality, fatherhood, and gender-based violence. Even in this, though, the purpose of the lectures is not to impart information about gender in a utilitarian sense, but to encourage students to develop their own interpretations of how the memoir theorises a more progressive and empowering understanding of gender. In one writing task, the students were required to respond to the following writing prompt:

*A dominant stereotype in society is that men are violent, aggressive and assertive. Identify one character who confirms this stereotype and one character who contradicts it. Find at least one quote to support your view in each case.*

In this way, the module encourages situational insights at the same time as it models practical ways to teach comprehension skills in the IP. As one of the lecturers points out at the outset of the specific unit that focuses on *Born a Crime*:

*As we work through the content for this unit, we should remember that our focus is on how this specific memoir explores these ideas. Our analysis of gender in this book does not require knowledge from other modules. It is how this memoir explores the theme of gender that is relevant to our study. We are training ourselves to find evidence in the text to support certain analyses of the book.*

In a more sustained formative assessment opportunity, the students were expected to write an essay:

*With close reference to Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, write an essay in which you agree or disagree with the following statement: ... *Born a Crime* shows us that it is essential for boys to have male father figures in their lives in order to become responsible, respectful and caring young men.*

Almost without fail, the students wrote essays that argued that the memoir re-centres Noah's mother as a source of discipline, guidance and parental support. Given that the father figures in the memoir are either emotionally absent or outright abusive and homicidal, this memoir facilitated students' situational learning about gender-based violence, toxic masculinities and female-centred domestic kinship structures.

## **Teaching Methodology for English**

*Born a Crime* was incorporated into the first few weeks of this teaching methodology module. This module pays particular attention to the practical and pedagogical learning domains:

- Week 3: Language across the curriculum
- Week 4: Language learning theories and language teaching methodologies

As part of a discussion of language across the curriculum, Noah was identified by the lecturer as an exemplar when discussing the concept of translanguaging (Makoe, 2018; Mazzaferro, 2018). This pedagogical learning is an essential aspect of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) for English language teaching. By this time, given their engagement with the memoir in other modules, students would not only be aware of the communicative possibilities of translanguaging – beyond the more limited notion of code switching and bilingualism – but also, because of Noah's pre-eminent status, see it as inspirational. As part of this module, students were directed to a specific chapter of the memoir titled "Chameleon". While this chapter was examined in close detail in the module English for the Primary School to facilitate comprehension skills, in the Teaching Methodology module it was used to demonstrate how translanguaging works in practice. With reference to this chapter, Noah was positioned as a positive language role-model, a highly successful person who could leverage his multilingual abilities in different contexts. The discussion of the PCK of translanguaging also contributed to the students' practical learning, as classroom discussions allowed students to identify the pedagogical possibilities of translanguaging in their own IP classrooms.

Pedagogical learning and practical learning were further intertwined in a more focused discussion of another chapter titled "Valentine's Day". This chapter was used to show students how various literacy and communicative skills and activities can be developed around a specific theme, and how a single chapter from a book can be used as the anchor around which a series of IP English lessons can be developed. Students were shown how to use the chapter to meet the requirements for different parts of the English curriculum as set out in CAPS (DBE, 2011a). For instance, students were shown how to use the chapter "Valentine's Day" as a resource to teach vocabulary and comprehension skills, practice transactional and creative writing skills, read and speak aloud, debate and discuss social ideas, and compare and contrast genres of writing. This was visually demonstrated to students by presenting them with the following extract from the Grade 6 English (Home Language) CAPS document, indicating how many of the selected topics in the curriculum could be taught by using one chapter from Noah's book (Image 2).

GRADE 6 TERM 1				
SKILLS	LISTENING AND SPEAKING (ORAL)	READING & VIEWING	WRITING & PRESENTING	LANGUAGE STRUCTURES & CONVENTIONS
WEEK 5-6	<p><b>Listens to a story</b> (Choose from contemporary realistic fiction/traditional stories/personal accounts/adventure/funny/fantasy/real life stories/historical fiction)</p> <p>Text from the textbook or reader/s or Teacher's Resource File (TRF)</p> <p>Summarises story with support ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands and uses questions, e.g. Why do you think...? Why doesn't...? Recalls experiences and events in the right sequence ✓</li> </ul> <p><b>Practises Listening and Speaking</b> (Choose one for daily practice)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performs a poem ✓</li> <li>Plays a language game ✓</li> <li>Gives and follows instructions/directions ✓</li> <li>Discusses a topic ✓</li> </ul>	<p><b>Reads a story</b> ✓</p> <p>(Choose from contemporary realistic fiction/traditional stories/personal accounts/adventure/funny/fantasy/real life stories/historical fiction)</p> <p>Text from the textbook or reader/s or Teacher's Resource File (TRF)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-reading, predicts from title and pictures ✓</li> <li>Uses reading strategies, e.g. makes predictions, uses phonics and contextual clues ✓</li> <li>Discusses new vocabulary from the read text ✓</li> <li>Answers questions on text ✓</li> <li>Identifies title, setting and plot ✓</li> </ul> <p><b>Does comprehension activity on the text (oral or written)</b> ✓</p> <p><b>Practises reading</b> ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reads aloud with appropriate pronunciation, fluency, pacing and expression ✓</li> </ul> <p>Reads personal recounts, e.g. a diary/diary entries ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discusses main idea and specific details ✓</li> <li>Identifies features, e.g. format, salutation, etc. ✓</li> </ul> <p><b>Reflects on texts read during independent/pair reading</b> ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expresses own opinion ✓</li> </ul>	<p><b>Writes for personal reflection</b>, e.g. a diary using a frame ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses the frame correctly ✓</li> <li>Uses an informal style ✓</li> <li>Selects appropriate content for the topic ✓</li> <li>Tells the events in the correct order ✓</li> <li>Uses connecting words ✓</li> <li>Uses appropriate grammar, spelling, punctuation and spaces between paragraphs ✓</li> </ul> <p><b>Records words and their meanings in a personal dictionary</b> ✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writes sentences using the words or explanations to show the meaning, etc. ✓</li> </ul> <p><b>+ Writes a poem (Week 9-10)</b></p>	<p><b>Spelling</b></p> <p>Spells familiar words correctly, using a personal dictionary ✓</p> <p>Uses knowledge of alphabetical order and first letters of a word to find words in a dictionary ✓</p> <p>Words starting with g and followed by -e, -i or -y, start with g even though it sounds like j, e.g. germ ✓</p> <p><b>Working with words and sentences</b> ✓</p> <p>Builds on use of personal pronouns (e.g. I, you, it, us, them) ✓</p> <p>Understands and uses verbs to describe actions ✓</p> <p>Builds on use of prepositions that show position (on, under, above) ✓</p> <p>Uses connecting words to show addition (and) and sequence (then, before) ✓</p> <p>Uses question forms, e.g. who, what, when, which, why, how ✓</p> <p>Capital letters for proper nouns, for titles and initials of people ✓</p> <p><b>Vocabulary in context</b> ✓</p> <p>Words taken from shared or individually read texts ✓</p> <p>Homonyms (words that are pronounced or spelled alike but have different meanings, e.g. flour/flower) ✓</p>

## Image 2: CAPS for English (Grade 6, Term 1)

**Source:** Glietenberg, S. 2020. A very brief introduction to language learning theories and language teaching methodologies. [Teaching Methodology for English lecture]. [Online]. University of Johannesburg, August 2020.

## Social Sciences for the Intermediate Phase

The focus of the English and English Methodology modules reveal how all five domains of learning can be addressed using a single text. The same is true for the modules that focus on History content and History teaching. While the English content module emphasises close attention to the text itself, History teaching approaches the text differently and emphasises the entanglements between the authors and readers of historical resources, and the salience of context in shaping these. As Godsell (2016:2) writes about teaching History:

*When taught well, history as a subject should explain that we all experience the world through the lens of who we are and where, and when, we live. This requires academic and analytical literacy. Although students sometimes possess the basic interpersonal skills, these can falsely indicate language and subject proficiency. Students rather need deep comprehension that comes with perspective taking, academic language and analysis skills.*

Thus, while English and History lectures about the same historical text can facilitate mutually reinforcing skills – broadly conceptualised in this article as fundamental learning – History education requires that greater attention be paid to the context of the historian, student or school learner. History should not only be thought about in terms of content, but should rather be seen as the confluence of content, critical thinking skills and a recognition of the positionality of both the authors and readers of historical resources (Godsell, 2016). Noah's memoir is incorporated into the teaching of this module over two weeks:

- Week 1: Working with historical sources
- Week 3: Leadership in historical contexts

Teaching took place through online lectures, weekly quizzes and WhatsApp discussions, and was grounded in the principle of historical contextualisation. Van Boxtel and Van Drie (2012) describe historical contextualisation as a large historical system that needs to be described, analysed and evaluated in terms of its social, economic, cultural and political context. The aim of historical contextualisation is to allow students to think and reason like historians by looking at various sources of information from multiple perspectives. The use of multiple perspectives encourages students to find contradictory evidence about specific events and to interrogate notions of truth.

The memoir was used as a resource to explore historical contextualisation. For example, students were asked to consider the implications of Noah's (2016:4) assertion that:

*The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other. Apart hate is what it was. You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all.*

This quote was used as the point of departure for students to share stories about their families' experiences of apartheid, and allowed the students to compare these narratives to research from other sources. Historical contextualisation was foregrounded, as the group of students provided multiple perspectives, drawing on personal narratives as well as research about economic, social, and physical features of apartheid – all the while blending both factual disciplinary learning with an awareness of the contingencies of historical narratives.

Through the use of historical contextualisation, the history aspect of the module emphasises two of the five domains of learning identified in the revised policy: disciplinary

learning and situational learning. Disciplinary learning allowed the students to revise their prior knowledge and address misconceptions of core concepts in the study of South African history. This includes the history of apartheid laws, the effects of Bantustans, historically significant places, the implications of language on history, and histories of citizenship. For example, in a chapter titled “Run”, Noah introduces the topic of Bantustans, while a chapter titled “Chameleon” conveys specific information about the statutory production of racial categories and their material consequences. Chapters titled “Born a Crime” and “The Second Girl” were used in the lectures to discuss Bantu education, which led to a discussion of the Soweto Uprising of 1976. In this way, the memoir was used to examine different topics that significantly contribute to disciplinary knowledge about South African history – such as dates, sequencing of events, and the specific implications of certain laws – and to gain a general understanding of how apartheid manifested in the daily lives of people. Students completed weekly quizzes in which they had to explain the *historical* factual basis for certain rhetorical statements that Noah makes. For instance, one of the questions from the weekly quizzes asks the students to use the concept of Bantustans to explain Noah’s assertion that “You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all” (Noah, 2016:4).

The memoir was also used as an entry point to discuss coloured identity. Linked to the memoir’s problematising of the notion of a singular coloured identity, the lecturer sought to model to the students how to make ideas that are expressed in historical texts ‘come alive’ for learners. In one instance, the lecturer presented herself with four different hair styles and textures (Image 3). This challenges students to think about how colouredness is problematised in the memoir, and how this idea could be introduced in an IP classroom. Race is explored to emphasise historical facts of legislated discrimination while also pointing to a multiplicity of perspectives about the experiences that these laws produced, thereby resisting any simplistic reproduction of racial categories in the present.





**Image 3:** Screenshots from a Zoom lecture showing lecturer

**Source:** Bennett, T. 2020. *Born a Crime* [Social Science for the Intermediate Phase 2B Lecture]. [Online]. University of Johannesburg, 02 September 2020.

Disciplinary learning is further advanced through a critical discussion of leadership in South Africa. Noah's portraiture of Nelson Mandela is used as a point of departure for this. The following quotation from the memoir was read alongside other sources to guide a discussion on Mandela's leadership attributes:

*Nelson Mandela once said, 'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart'. He was so right. When you make effort to speak someone else's language, even if its basic phrases here and there, you are saying to them, I understand that you have a culture and identity that exists beyond me. I see you as a human being (Noah, 2016:236).*

Presenting multiple sources that introduce students to Nelson Mandela as a contested historical figure – beyond the sometimes one-dimensional idealisation in public discourse (Hassim, 2019; Berninger, 2020) – is an important part of disciplinary learning, especially because it is a prescribed topic in the CAPS guidelines for the IP Social Science curriculum (DBE, 2011b). Significantly, it is important for students to be able to reflect on the historicity

of sources and how specific authors construct Mandela on a textual level. The awareness that Noah's description is only one account of Mandela is important, as it foregrounds the contingencies of narrative and the importance of identifying the multiplicity of perspectives that is central to historical thinking. Noah's own seemingly contradictory perspective on Mandela forms part of this discussion. In one instance, Noah (2016:12) describes Mandela's "release [as] a crucial moment in the dissolution of apartheid because he was one of the most prominent activists against the white supremacist regime". However, later in the memoir, Noah (2016:120) articulates the limitations of this view when he writes that

*[c]olored people had it rough ... You've spent all your time assimilating and aspiring to whiteness. Then, just as you think you're closing in on the finish line, some ... guy named Nelson Mandela comes along and flips the country on its head. Now the finish line is back where the starting line was, and the benchmark is black.*

The emphasis is therefore not only on content knowledge but also on the ability to take a critical approach to the textual sources of this knowledge. As Godsell (2016:2) writes: "unless critical thinking is taught as a fundamental part of history as a subject, teaching history can be counter-productive to students learning". Thus, while the integration of Noah's text into the lesson on leadership was geared towards disciplinary learning, it is also underpinned by a focus on independent critical thinking skills.

The module also contributed towards situational learning. This was done through ongoing online discussions, where students had to be self-reflective in relation to the narrator's experiences. Students debated how Noah's memoir applied to their current contexts. The following prompt was used to guide the discussion:

*South Africa is such a diverse nation. Think about your family background and the themes that have already been discussed. Does this quotation apply to the context of your life? "For all that black people have suffered, they know who they are. Colored people don't" (Noah, 2016:116). Race and racism are still controversial concepts in South African history. Think about the stories you heard from your families about apartheid. How have these stories shaped your version of apartheid history?*

Grounded in curricular contextualisation, this sort of activity prompt "helps students [...] relate the educational tasks with their knowledge and everyday experiences", which is essential for making tighter connections between theory and practice on the one hand, and

“allows students to give meaning and value to what they learn” (Mouraz & Leite, 2013:2), on the other. This sort of discussion requires students to be reflective about how they think about controversial issues in history.

## Teaching Methodology for Social Sciences

This module focuses on topics such as designing and delivering lesson plans, selecting suitable learning material, the CAPS curriculum, teaching methods, barriers to learning, and learning from and in practice. Noah's memoir was used as a resource during two weeks of the module:

- Week 2 and 3: Thinking like a historian through resources in History

Foregrounding theories of inquiry-based learning and experiential learning (Oxendine, Robinson & Wilson, 2004), student teachers engaged with Noah's memoir as a resource to learn about the different historical skills that are required by a History teacher. Inquiry-based learning simultaneously promotes historical content knowledge and historical thinking skills by facilitating the discovery of knowledge (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Reisman, 2012; Voet & De Wever, 2017). The student teachers were required to blend various sources for analysis in order to formulate and support their claims about historical content. In online lectures and WhatsApp discussions, students were required to reflect on their own experiences and – in a far more explicit way than in the Social Science content module – reflect on how their experiences and these pedagogical approaches would inform their own teaching. In one example, students were given the following extract from the memoir to guide a discussion on the importance of History as a school subject: “Learn from your past and be better because of your past, but don't cry about your past. Life is full of pain. Let the pain sharpen you, but don't hold on to it. Don't be bitter.” (Noah, 2016:66).

This statement is a striking proposition, and any lesson about colonialism or apartheid will always be potentially emotionally triggering. However, teachers are required to prepare learners to be democratically active citizens by voicing their opinions and engaging with opposing views (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Furthermore, teaching controversial issues in History is not only about how *controversy* is sparked in the content, but how *procedural thinking* is introduced in the curriculum (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018). For instance, the Social Science curriculum in CAPS emphasises the importance of concepts such as multi-perspectivity, chronology, cause and effect, and change and continuity (DBE,

2011b). The discussion about teaching topics related to apartheid modelled for students how to become reflective practitioners by expressing their opinions about apartheid, while considering their own biases and inherited notions of history. Teachers are expected to cultivate awareness of their own biases by reflecting on their identities and perspectives, and planning how to create unbiased educational environments (Nieto & Bode, 2007).

The pedagogical and practical learning domains were closely intertwined in this module. The “learning from practice” envisioned in the MRTEQ policy’s formulation of practical learning emphasises the selection and use of teaching resources as core competencies (DHET, 2014:10). By using Noah’s memoir as a resource, the lecturer demonstrated how a series of History lessons that link directly to the CAPS guidelines could be created from one historical resource. What is more, the pedagogical strategy of being a ‘devil’s advocate’ – a discursive mode in which one adopts a position that is counter to the dominant perspective, in order to facilitate further discussion – was modelled for students throughout the teaching of this memoir.

The memoir and other sources of information created multiple perspectives that student teachers used to debate notions of truth, which they linked to their own future classroom practice. The inevitable – though pedagogically crucial – result from the debate was the realisation that while the memoir is based on actual events in history, it is only one source of the past, and an avowedly subjective one at that. This emphasises the subjectivity of historical narratives, which would later be reinforced by focusing on characterisation and narrative perspective in the English content module. Given that it is essential to include multiple genres in History teaching to emphasise the multiplicity of perspectives (Bharath & Bertram, 2014), our use of the memoir across the module was not to elevate Noah’s account above others but rather to model how to approach these historical texts as a historian. A sustained interrogation of a single text also shows students how to think about other genres of writing, such as the prescribed History textbook, outside of its assumed status as an authoritative text – a recurring concern in History education (Hickman & Porfilio, 2012; Ramoroka & Engelbrecht, 2015; Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018).

## **Student responses: A snapshot survey**

Students’ responses to this intervention were overwhelmingly positive. While a more detailed study of the effectiveness of this intervention is necessary, an initial survey was sent to all students. While only about a third of students participated in the study ( $n =$

30), it provided promising data about how students experienced the use of *Born a Crime* across multiple modules. While 60% agreed or strongly agreed that studying the module had helped them see explicitly the connections between the English content and English methodology modules – a figure increasing to 70% for the Social Sciences modules – an impressive 100% of students agreed or strongly agreed that: “Studying *Born a Crime* across more than one module has shown [them] how [they] can use a single literary text to teach multiple learning areas in [their] own classroom as a future educator”. Given prevailing anxieties about what was expected in their formal curriculum, especially during remote teaching necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dube 2020; Godsell, 2020; Iyer, 2020; Bunt, 2021), it is significant that 90% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they clearly understood what was expected of them in the four different modules where the memoir was used. They also acknowledged by a considerable margin (87%) that the three lecturers who taught these modules used very different teaching strategies. This suggests a successful modelling of teaching *in practice* – an essential component of teacher education programmes (Urbani, Roshandel, Michaels & Truesdell, 2017; Acquah & Szelei, 2018; Hunde & Tacconi, 2018) – as students were aware of the different ways that the same historical and literary text can be taught, depending on the specific curricular outcomes and lecturers’ individual teaching styles. This indicates that practical learning was integrated into all four modules even where it was not identified as a priority outcome in the original planning. Student teachers should be aware of the different teaching styles that different people use so that they are better equipped to navigate the differing demands of the classroom, and to draw on a broader repertoire of strategies that are necessary when they are in-service teachers (Romylos & Balfour, 2018).

In addition to the responses described above, which illustrate the successes of modelling an integrated approach to curriculum design, the sustained use of the memoir by different lecturers revealed that a historical memoir that is studied in depth can also contribute to content knowledge about the history of South Africa that is not reductive (Godsell, 2016; Wasserman, 2018a). Our teaching of the memoir set out to deliberately *complicate* binary and simplistic ways of understanding the country’s past. For instance, the vast majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that studying *Born a Crime* had improved their understanding of the history of apartheid (87%); that studying the memoir had “made [them] realise that race is more complicated than [they] had previously thought” (90%); and that studying the memoir “made [them] realise that the relationship between language and identity is more complicated than [they] previously thought” (93%).

## Conclusion

The purpose of our intervention was to identify a single historical resource around which different aspects of content and skill could coalesce. In this article, we have offered an approach for curricular coherence that functions at the level of the text, prioritising an experienced sense of connectedness. We have argued that through the use of a carefully selected historical memoir, curricular coherence can be advanced in significant ways. Importantly, this particular memoir is grounded in factual details of the country's past, while also demonstrating aesthetic sophistication and stylistic complexity, thus lending itself to analysis on the level of both historical fact and narrative style.

While we have focused our analysis on the use of *Born a Crime*, the use of one historical text across multiple modules is not limited to this example, of course. In fact, some may feel that Noah's text specifically has limitations for classroom practice because of its inclusion of scatological language, for example. However, many historical texts blend historical factuality with aesthetic stylisation in a way that can facilitate learning across modules. We have argued that curricular coherence can be advanced across modules in a way that addresses all five of the learning domains identified in the MRTEQ. This is important, given that one's disciplinary knowledge *and* a sense of confidence in being able to teach that knowledge are both important for teachers' professional identities (Romylos, 2021). While disciplinary, situational and fundamental learning are advanced most explicitly in the English and History content modules, and pedagogical learning is the focus of the two teaching methodology modules, it is also clear that practical learning has been infused across all four modules through ongoing modelling of diverse teaching practices.

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## Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (Sem 2-2020-106).

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