Can Power Point enable History learners to "do History?"

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Abstract

The use of technology in History teaching is not a new phenomenon, but its impact has been varied depending on the context, teachers and, more importantly, the nature of the innovation. For years, I have come across the "history is boring" comment ad nauseum. For some History teachers, the adoption of technology in the classroom might seem to be the antidote to this problem. One of the most common pieces of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to be used in the classroom is Microsoft's Power Point program. A common, but not necessarily proven assumption is that if the History teacher employs this program then the classroom will be set alive with learner participation and enjoyment. The contention in this essay is that the technology in the History classroom is what the teacher makes it – implying that on its own Power Point can not create an active teaching and learning process. To be more specific, from a constructivist point of view, History teaching and learning is an interactive process whereby the learners are expected to "do History," that is, to practice the construction of their own histories with the guidance of the teacher and it is up to the teacher to create a particular learning atmosphere and culture in his/her history classroom.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to discuss the merits and demerits of using Power Point in the light of the fundamental argument of constructivism which advocates for History learners to "do" rather than simply "know" History. The first part of the paper will briefly describe the methodology used in amassing information and this will be followed by a short explanation of the fundamentals of constructivist History. In discussing the topic under focus, I will firstly thrash out the arguments brought forward by the critics of Power Point. After that I will then consider its value and give examples of how teachers can take advantage of these to enable their learners to practice History

rather than learn it. For every issue under discussion recommendations will for given which History teachers can take note of so as to critique and improve their own practice.

Methodology

This paper was produced as a result of qualitative research which was mainly conducted as a desktop investigation of the use of Power Point in History Education. It is therefore basically a review of literature that was found in relation to the use of Power Point. During the research, I realised that much as these sources are useful, there is a disturbing dearth of sources which directly refer to the South African context, since most of the sources used were predominantly produced in North America and Europe. It should be acknowledged from the onset that this state of affairs is sad, but not surprising since most schools still struggle to provide basic resources such as furniture and textbooks. To make this literature more relevant, I made use of reflections on my own practice in the History classroom at both secondary and university level. One can therefore note that the methodology used is a combination of literature review and personal reflection. The reflections will be used to elucidate the arguments from scholars in an attempt to suggest to History teachers (myself included) the positive use of Power Point. Reminiscence

Constructivism and "doing History"

The post-Apartheid curriculum in South Africa was influenced heavily by constructivism. It is for this reason that this paper focuses on pedagogy from a constructivist point of view. Constructivism has a lot of variations and one should avoid generalising. Vianna & Stetsenko rightly point out that it "represents a heterogeneous body of theoretical approaches across different disciplines that has forged diverse alliances, as well as both attracted and antagonized vast audiences within these disciplines."[1] Vygotsky views learning from a different, though not totally antagonistic, but rather complementary constructivist perspective. Vygostky here implies that "the quantity or contingency (e.g. moving to less intervention after success and to more intervention after failure) rather than the quality (i.e. content) of teaching and adults' assistance

in general plays a major role in development."[2] This means that the History teacher's role is not only manifested in the imparting of knowledge, but rather more importantly in helping the learners to construct their own knowledge. Piaget and Vygotsky can be said to concur on that the learner is not an empty vessel who comes to class to be filled. Instead the learner will be at a certain stage of development and the teacher faces the challenge to facilitate further development in an active process. Their main argument is that learning is an active process during which learners construct their own meanings cognitively through trial and error.[3] The teacher thus retracts from being the dominant individual in class and plays a facilitation role. In History teaching and learning this would imply providing as much sources as is necessary so that learners will be given a chance to make their own interpretations and conclusions.

Constructivist theory in History Education has been promoted by theorists such as Jerome Bruner, Martin Booth and Denis Shemilt who have tried to apply Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories to History Education. Bruner's theory was more inclined to Vygotky's and his argument was that in the process of learning the learners develop around three stages of enactive representation ("learning by doing"), iconic representation ("learning through connected images") and symbolic representation ("learning through symbols").[4] The implication of Bruner's theory is that the teacher should be able to make use of such representations to help learners through a scaffolded process of constructing their own knowledge. In this way History can be taught to any student of any age if the correct methods are applied. Booth concurred and added that historians use adductive instead of deductive or inductive reasoning meaning that they cite evidence to explain the historical process[5]. He also added that "if pictorial materials were used a high level of causation could be established[6]" (Hemming, p. 3). The point is that if opportunities are given for history learners to undertake interpretive work of predominantly primary historical sources, then they can develop sophisticated understandings of the past. These constructivist ideas were used by Denis Schemildt and developed in an effort to change history curriculum in Britain through the Schools History Project. Although there seems to be diversity of ideas propounded by different constructivists, these ideas can be reconciled and used as a general framework of how the history teacher can practice a teaching and learning process that

enables the learners to "do History." The South African History curriculum policy evidently adopts constructivism and states that "Learners who study History use the insights and skills of historians."[7] It is in this context that this paper will attempt to discuss the effectiveness of the Microsoft Power Point application in facilitating active history learning.

Advocates versus detractors

Just like most forms of ICT, Power Point has received varying responses from history classroom practitioners. This program has made its mark in well-resourced contexts and is now a common feature at conferences, presentations, workshops and presentations. However, the viability of this program in History Education, particularly in lectures and lessons has to be scrutinized more. History is a unique subject with unique practice and outcomes, thus historical learning should not be judged from the perspective of other subject disciplines. Power Point was not originally meant for the History classroom and it was adopted for use in the humanities well after being adopted in the Maths and Science rooms[8]. In using this program one should therefore understand both the background of Power Point and the nature of historical learning. According to Maxwell, Power Point can be examined from the points of view of two polarised positions: the advocates and the detractors[9]. The use of Power Point by the History teacher does not necessarily guarantee a good and memorable learning experience for the learners. In the wrong hands, Power Point can easily become the new blackboard and school History will retain its wrongfully labelled "boring" tag. The attitude that Power Point is not of great use for presentations in general and in the classroom in particular has been pronounced by the detractors of Power Point. However, the advocates try to prove that Power Point can be an essential teaching tool for the History teacher which can be used to great effect in promoting active learning. In the light of these opposed standpoints the History teacher must be wary of the criticisms and bring the best out of the technology to help the History learners to process and construct new knowledge and skills in History.

Criticism of Power Point

It should never be taken for granted that all the History teachers in well-resourced schools value Power Point as support material. In fact, it is in such contexts where the fiercest critics are found. This criticism might be resultant from different factors, however it can not be denied that wrong use of the program by certain teachers strengthens the detractors' voices. The first and basic mistake that the users (or misusers) of Power Point tend to make is to "cram the slides with text"[10]. When this happens, the slides end up being just like the notes teachers write on the blackboard in the much condemned rote-teaching style or in the contexts were there are not enough textbooks. In another way, the slides become nothing but electronic pages - something that the learners can otherwise access on their own from electronic resources - or worse still, just like the textbook that they have. DenBeste rightly points out that, "If Power Point is used as a textually heavy application; one could just as well create handouts or overhead transparencies".[11] My experience has been that the most widespread teaching method that is employed in cases where Power Point slides contain a lot of wording, is reading the words aloud. In this way the teacher will be abdicating their real responsibilities of ensuring that History learners are given the chance to be critical and therefore come up with interpretations and constructions of their own. The learners are in this way made passive recipients of "historical knowledge" from the teacher. This is in direct contrast to Levi Vygotsky's argument that the "growth of understanding is a collective process."[12] Reading slides aloud means that there is no teacher-learner and learner-learner dialogue. If learners can not be allowed or helped to construct their meanings of knowledge, then they will not move out of their "zone of proximal development" signifying no learning. This clearly demonstrates that if Power Point is not used correctly, learners will not develop the skills of historians.

The effort to give learners a lot of information textually tends to force the History teacher to prepare a presentation which consists of too many slides in the process limiting the flexibility and creativity of the teacher.[13] This is more so if the teacher follows the readily provided templates by Microsoft. This in turn leaves the History teacher with no chance to digress or explain concepts that learners are struggling to grasp. The teacher will become a slave of his/

her own Power Point creation principally in the fear of running short of time. I have always felt that if my slide show is cut short as a result of using up the prescribed lesson time, it leaves me with a poor outlook because the lesson does not get to the conclusion stage. That is the reason why Maxwell goes to the extreme and advises that Power Point should never be used as a lesson outline, because teachers will rush to go through the content instead of ensuring that learning has taken place.[14] Support for this idea is put forward by Haydn who points out "one of the things which many pupils find difficult about history is that it is so vast and seemingly unmanageable" and this can lead to learners just accumulating information uncritically.[15] History is supposed to develop learners' critical skills, but in such circumstances the historical skills are sacrificed for content coverage. Thus one might be tempted to dismiss Power Point as inadequate when it comes to historical learning, yet it is the teacher's pedagogy which makes it seem ineffective.

Those who condemn the use of Power Point draw attention to even more disadvantages in addition to the above. Well intended efforts by the History teacher to select and give learners the most important information might also be viewed as denying the learners the chance to develop historical skills such as "sifting and selecting, organizing and classifying, prioritizing and discarding and synthesizing and marshalling information."[16] As a result Power Point can simultaneously – and at two extremes – "dominate" and "trivialise" content because in trying to simplify the text, there might end up being an oversimplification. Tufte argues that in this way Power Point "weakens verbal and spatial reasoning."[17] The argument is that History learners end up not learning the standard written communication skills and neither will they develop the requisite understanding of the concept of space. It is in such circumstances whereby Power Point is viewed as a program that can neither do wrong nor right to the extent that the importance of the History teacher's exploitation of the application comes to the fore. Only the History teacher can make the technology as useful as he/she wants depending on the planned outcomes of the lesson.

Advocacy for Power Point

The above criticisms of Power Point should not necessarily be taken to

imply that it has no place in the History classroom. Neither should it be viewed as "new wine in old bottles" or the new chalkboard. If it is used well, just like any tool, it will reward the consumer well. The advocates of Power Point argue that its main advantage is the simplicity it gives to History lesson preparation and delivery. As already noted, most schools that afford Power Point can afford various other resources for the teachers. Power Point, as a single facility, substitutes a plethora of other forms of technology and media that the History teacher would have to carry into the classroom. These include ordinary slides, tape recorders, books, maps, overhead and slide projectors and VCRs.[18] It would be inconvenient, if not practically impossible, for the teacher to gather all these and drag them into one lesson and manage to use them without looking rather confused. Gallagher & Reder remind us that Power Point has the capacity to make the learning environment smarter and more professional, in the process increasing the value of the learning course of action.[19] For learners to be able to "do History," they have to be exposed to a wide variety of sources and more so to primary sources and if the teacher is able to incorporate different forms of ICT using Power Point, learners will get the chance to analyse, interpret the sources and construct their own historical understanding.

   In the context of few primary resources Power Point can prove to be very useful. One might add that Power Point saves a lot of time and helps in saving collected primary resources. After the initial effort of collecting relevant sources the teacher will not have to bother about filing paperwork. All I do is to find the saved presentation and adjust it according to the variables that affect the learning process, such as the ability of the learners. As argued by Bruner, knowledge can be represented "iconically" whereby learners work with visuals to construct knowledge.[20] Once the History teacher has collected the useful primary sources, Power Point can be used to great effect in teaching in a learner-centred way. It is possible to spend an entire lesson on one or two slides with learners working on the source/s provided.

   Revisiting the issue of text from another perspective; if the teacher limits text on the slide show, then the learners might be afforded the chance to "do History." While extreme detractors would call for a complete "ban" of the bullet point, a more useful rationale is the limit of text.[21] A leading constructivist, Dede, is quoted to have asserted that, "It isn't that assimilation of knowledge

isn't a good place to start, because it is hard to investigate something unless you know about it. But assimilation is a terrible place to stop."[22] The implication of this argument is that definitely the History teacher should at times take the time to "provide" information and explain certain concepts – especially the abstract ones – if the learners are going to make sense of them on their own. However, if information is indiscriminately passed down to the learners they will not develop the vital skills of research, investigation and construction of historical knowledge. Therefore, while Power Point can be used by the History teacher to "present" information it should still be used sparingly, as should any other teaching aid. Its role should not only be limited to presentations if History learners are to develop skills and attributes of historians from the classroom.

In making cautious use of the bulleted slide shows, the text should be of an easy to read font and a "six times six rule" has been forwarded by Maxwell, whereby each slide should have at most six bullets and each bullet should have an average of six words. The number of the slides should be limited as well, an average presentation having about 15 slides with the teacher using up three minutes per slide.[23] The point is that the learners should not always be focused on the slides, but they should at times focus on what the teacher is trying to convey. In this way, the learners give attention to both the slide show and the teacher. Where weak and exceedingly teacher-centred pedagogy is employed, the learners might end up just copying down the text on the slides as notes. Out of habit, even in cases where there is limited text on the slide, the learners may – instead of listening to the teacher after copying down the text –just wait rather impatiently for the next slide. Such a process will not empower the learners with critical historical skills. Fro the constructivist perspective, the teacher should therefore ensure that the slide show is accompanied by interactive History activities so that the learners are always engaged.

There is also a temptation for the History teacher to get carried away, when creating a slide show, with the features provided on the Microsoft Power Point program, dozens of which, according to Maxwell, are not always useful."[24] It is thus urged that the teacher should limit the amount of animated text, sounds and fancy transitions such as spirals, bells and whistles. The History teacher should not be engrossed in uncritically utilizing the design templates as they are, because they might end up limiting flexibility – since they are not

ready-made for History education in the first place. While ICT or any other modern teaching aid can be an integral part of history teaching it should not stifle the teacher, but it should retain characteristics of "a chameleon-like tool that can be used with almost any content"[25] The teaching and learning of History is unique in its own way and therefore the History teacher can not consume wholesale a template made for general conference presentations.

Opportunities for the History teacher

Possibilities abound for the History teacher to be innovative with the Power Point program. The teacher can add audio and video clips, nevertheless bearing in mind that the main guiding factors will be computer memory and educational content. Audio and video clips can be very useful sources especially when teaching History to the present day cohort of learners who are literary gripped by the ever ubiquitous forms of ICT. In endorsement of the use of such primary sources in History lessons, Henry argues that video clips on Power Point "speak of historical periods more eloquently than even the most accomplished historian … they bring forward dramatic human interaction of particular times and places."[26] The downside to this is that teachers might be inappropriately tempted to only use the combination of Power Point and audio and visual clips to keep the class awake or – as most would pronounce – "under control." While technology can definitely be of great help in retaining learner attention, it should always be borne in mind that the clips should not be only of entertainment value without helping in equipping the learners with important historical skills.

Power Point can also be a very useful tool for learners to actually "do History" while simultaneously affording the History teachers an assessment opportunity. In a well resourced school, teachers can ask their learners to do historical research projects and then present their findings in Power Point format. Randall asserts that Power Point can be most effective if teachers use it "as a means of teaching effective research and source analysis techniques, and the need for clear expression of findings."[27] Since it will be a project, by the end of their presentation, learners will be equipped with a lot of historical skills such as analysis evaluation, communication, synthesis, historical enquiry, critical thinking and empathy. For such a project the learners know they have

little space so "Power Point requires well-structured thinking and selection of the most essential information."[28] On top of that the conclusion of a well

prepared project gives the learners a great sense of achievement. According to DenBeste, the good thing about Power Point is that "given proper guidance and a sufficient amount of time, the Power Point project can allow even mediocre students to excel."[29] This will no doubt increase their interest in the subject and this in turn leads to more participation in class which in fact is what Vygotsky refers to as active learning in a social context.

It does not mean, however, that Power Point project presentations have in themselves the power to make learners "do History." In fact, learner Power point presentations can be one of the most dreary classroom activities a History teacher might ever experience. Ultimately the teacher has to play a great role in making it successful. The learners need constant monitoring from the teacher beginning with explicit explanation on the project followed by checking on learner progress in the form of scrutinising the draft projects. I have discerned that learners have a tendency to grasp computer skills quickly, at times at a better rate than the teacher. While monitoring and assessing learners, the History teacher "also becomes a student as the children discover new procedures and instruct the teacher in their use."[30] If the teacher does not give the learners time and supervision, then the projects might fail. At the same time while the History teacher has a role to play in bridging the digital divide, he/she must not turn into and ICT teacher. Harrison reveals that in several lessons, use of Power Point is characterized by emphasis on product rather than process, and this occurred at the expense of historical thinking.[31] Learners may thus waste time experimenting with fonts, clip art, bells and whistles and experimenting with the features found on the program rather than doing History. The onus is on the History teacher to always keep in mind whether he/she is teaching History through ICT or teaching ICT through History.

Power dynamics

Finally, it must be noted that the growing use of technology in the teaching and learning process has given rise to new power relations in the classroom. The teacher now has to find ways of negotiating his/her position with the

learners, the discipline (History), the education system, the community and most importantly ICT itself. Power Point is one of the more ubiquitous and commonly used types of ICT in history education. If used in a constructivist approach which proclaims learner-centred teaching and learning, suddenly it might seem to be a threat to the teacher's position in class which for centuries had remained unchallenged. However, the History teachers should know that they still control the learning and teaching process and can conduct it in the way that they believe is relevant to the needs of the learners whilst within the framework of the curriculum. It is not surprising then that a lot of History teachers who have access to technology in their school still choose not to use it. In reference to the growing use of technology in history classrooms Riel contends that, "The power is not in the tool, but in the community that can be brought together and the collective vision that they share for redefining classroom learning."[32] If the teacher uses Power Point as an instrument to promote cooperative learning, every one in the classroom will end up the winner. In addition, as Maxwell argues, Power Point is not the end in the learning of History and can serve as "a supplementary point of interest."[33] It may, nevertheless be a useful means to an end. This point of view is corroborated by DenBeste who claims that in her classroom practice, she does not allow Power Point to "replace classroom discussion."[34] Maybe if History teachers do not adopt a Luddite attitude towards this programme, but rather accept it and try to bring the best out of it, then teachers could reap the emancipatory benefits of Power Point.

Conclusion

One can note that Power Point is one form of ICT which is mostly used in History teaching in schools which can afford ICT. The situation in South Africa still leaves a lot to be desired; however those teachers that have access to ICT should start questioning the use or lack thereof of Power Point. It offers a wide range of features which can both be very useful or redundant in creating an active learning situation. If the History teacher decides to employ this application merely as a presentation program, it will end up being just another chalkboard, or rather an OHP that offers colour. If examined from the constructivist standpoint, History teachers can not afford to hang on to the

traditional teacher-centred approaches, but new technologies must be made use of to suit the critical aims of studying History. My acceptance of Power Point and use of it without restrictions has made me realise how liberating this application can be. As Martin Booth rightly concludes, history teachers should not be "wedded to techniques which deaden rather than inspire."[35] Maybe it is because of the fear of failure to use Power Point correctly that we still have the detractors.

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the use of Microsoft Power Point in the age of "doing History" in the classroom. The literature reviewed and my personal experiences in class have made me come to the conclusion that Power Point can indeed enable History learners to "do History." However, this is only possible if the individual History teachers are committed to helping their learners practice historical skills in class. This argument was reached after discussing the merits and demerits of Power Point and an analysis of the opportunities for the History teacher to make the application work according to his/her wishes. It is unfortunate that only a minor percentage of History teachers enjoy such opportunities in South Africa because of the digital divide. It should be noted that the methodologies adopted for this research do not adequately cover the issue under focus in relation to the local context. This is in addition to the noted absence of literature from Africa. Therefore further research needs to be done on the use of Power Point and indeed other forms of ICT in South African History classrooms.

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