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MOVIE MAKES MAGIC!  
KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
THE VALUE OF HISTORY AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT IN  
AN AGE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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***Abstract***

In this article the focus is on the value of History for a society dominated by the natural sciences and technology. This domination may lead to the questioning of the value of a subject like History where the demand is for “bread and butter” subjects which will enable learners to gain financially from the world of work. Against this background, questions such as the following arise: Is there still a place for the social sciences? If the answer is yes, what is the possible value of History in a society driven by financial forces and technological developments? Can technology be utilised to convey the importance of History? What is the possible contribution of technology towards the enhancement of the value of History and acquiring a sound historical and critical understanding of both the past and the present?

**Introduction**

Contemporary society is dominated by the demand for science and technology, but the role and place of social sciences must not be underplayed as they have an important role in shaping and moulding people and the societies in which they live. The focus in this article will not be on how technology can be utilised in the History classroom, but rather on what the possible values of History as a school subject are in an age in which science and technology seem to dominate. The first section revisits the content of an article published by the author in 1991 when he reflected on the value of History as a school subject in a multicultural society (see Carl, 1991). This is followed by a reflection on the possible value of History as a school subject in an age of science and technology.

## **Contextualisation: Possible values**

### ***Introduction and statement of the problem***

There can be no doubt that since 1994 the South African curriculum scene has seen some of the most extensive changes in many decades. There has been an explosion of knowledge and technological development and demands are being made to include most of these changes in the school curriculum. The question remains, however, to what extent History is still a relevant and important subject at school level.

Carl (1991 (1-5) wrote that the school curriculum should address the needs of society by remaining relevant. The school should deliver skilled learners that are able to cope in the world of work, but in the process the role of History as an emotive subject which tries to shape and mould learners should not be negated. He indicated a number of possible values which were particularly relevant at that point in time. After recent reflection on these values, which are discussed in the sections to follow, it became clear that they are just as valid for 2010 as they were for 1991, 19 years later.

### ***Lessons from the past***

As early as 1966 Wesley and Wronski (1966:51) asked whether History could indeed add value and provide lessons from the past. This question is still relevant, because people often ask whether History can really contribute towards a greater understanding of the current context. Can lessons still be learned from the past, and can what was applied in a specific time context, be applicable to the present? It is suggested that the mistakes of the past should rather act as “warnings” so that more informed decisions can be made and the same mistakes prevented (Reeves, 1980:3; Carl, 1991: 2). This could prevent the same mistakes from being made and contribute to more effective decision-making. From the above one can deduce that by taking note of the past, people could come to realise that mistakes are not restricted to specific time contexts and that although the time, society and conditions may differ, the same mistakes may occur again.

### ***Explaining and understanding the present***

Closely linked to the previous value, is the view that the present can be better understood by studying the past (Elton, 1967: 48; Carl, 1991:2). Making

links between the past and the present can enable one to gain a broader and more holistic perspective and understanding of the past. In this way, learners can come to a greater understanding of current events or conditions through investigating how conditions developed over the years. Therefore, learners can have a better understanding of how technology developed, how it impacts on mankind and how it affects their own lives at present. From the above one can deduce that learners can thus develop certain historical skills to study the past in order to understand the present.

### ***Predicting or “forecasting” the future***

In 1980 Reeves (1980: 11-12) claimed that History can assist man to get a better grasp on the present, as an understanding of History helps one to make better judgements and predict the future. As early as the 1960's, Wesley and Wronski (1966: 452) argued that the past can act as a guide for the future. There is, however, doubt whether the future can indeed be forecast. There are too many variables, since societal, economic, political and temporal conditions may change and there is no certainty that things will happen the way they were planned. The past may assist one in gaining better insight and understanding contexts better, but it is generally impossible to forecast situations and outcomes accurately. Carl (1991:3) is of the opinion that insight into the past can mostly provide guidelines for future decision-making.

It is too difficult to predict the future because of numerous variables – the rapid changes in science and technology bear witness to this aspect.

### ***Self-understanding of existence***

People are the result of their history. Learners must be able to comprehend where they come from and develop an understanding of their existence. History is more than just the study of cause and effect; a greater understanding of the present and where one comes from may lead to a more critical and clearer understanding of social responsibilities. Humankind is much poorer without this self-knowledge and understanding (Carl 1991: 3).

### ***Source of values***

One has to make value judgements in society today because certain norms

and values apply. The study of History can assist learners in determining what these values are and assist them in making the required value judgements, based on an analytical and objective process. Without our telling them what is right and wrong, they are guided to make their own judgements (Carl, 1991: 3). From this can be deduced that this approach is of the utmost importance within a knowledge- and technology-driven society.

### ***Perspectives***

History can guide learners to see trends and processes in a broader, holistic perspective and to understand them. Through History they come into contact with other cultures and societies and in this way they gain a more holistic understanding of the contemporary world and their place in this broader context. This will prompt them to ask, for example: How do I fit into the big picture of a nation that is characterised by diversity of such an extensive nature? Learners should see trends and occurrences in perspective so that they are able to link the past and the present (Carl 1991:5). Kapp (1986: 507) refers to the cultural maturing process where learners can develop more respect and understanding for other cultures. This may enable learners to form their own opinions and perspectives within this broader framework.

### ***Obtaining knowledge and self-knowledge***

The study of History does not only lead to acquiring more general knowledge but also self-knowledge. The quest for more knowledge can be satisfied as learners can do their own investigations and in the process acquire self-knowledge. Opinions and judgements must be based on knowledge obtained through investigation and verification and not perceptions. It must be a search for the truth. Personal-individual investigations provide the opportunity to develop skills in working with abstract concepts and analysing knowledge. One needs to have self-knowledge in order to know and understand others and thus the study of History should not be just for the sake of acquiring general knowledge (see Carl 1991:4-5). As early as 1970 Marwick (1970:12-13) proclaimed that society needs knowledge as it enables them to know themselves better, which in turn enables people to gain insight into their own development. Self-knowledge is just as important as general knowledge as it enables one to fulfil one's role in society in the best possible way.

### ***Critical awareness and thinking skills***

History can contribute towards the development of critical awareness in learners, as there can be no quest for truth unless it is sought in a critical way. Learners need to be guided to be intellectually curious, to question trends and occurrences in a positive manner, to weigh up both the positive and the negative aspects and to distinguish between facts and generalisations. It is through the curriculum that the teacher is faced with these challenges to develop such a critical awareness and History can make a contribution in this regard.

Schoeman (2006: 25) is concerned that “[h]istorical amnesia is not a cure for South Africa’s problems; it is just another disorder”. She quotes Bam and Visser (2002:6) who state that “History is the only school subject where one can think things through”.

### ***Summary***

In the previous paragraphs some of the relevant issues the author described in the 1991 published article were revisited to reflect whether the values it endorsed are still currently applicable. Schoeman (2006:40-44) reaffirms these values by recommending that the development of a historical consciousness, the identification of bias, the ability to show empathy, the development of literacy skills and critical thinking skills, should be a high priority.

One can only deduce that what was valid 20 years ago still applies to a society characterised by rapid scientific and technological developments. History has the value that it can mould and shape people, despite the context and time. There should be a continuous reflection on what the possible values are and how they can contribute to society.

### **The history curriculum, science and technology**

Within the context of the South African school curriculum, the Department of Education (2003: 9-10) regards the following as being the value of History:

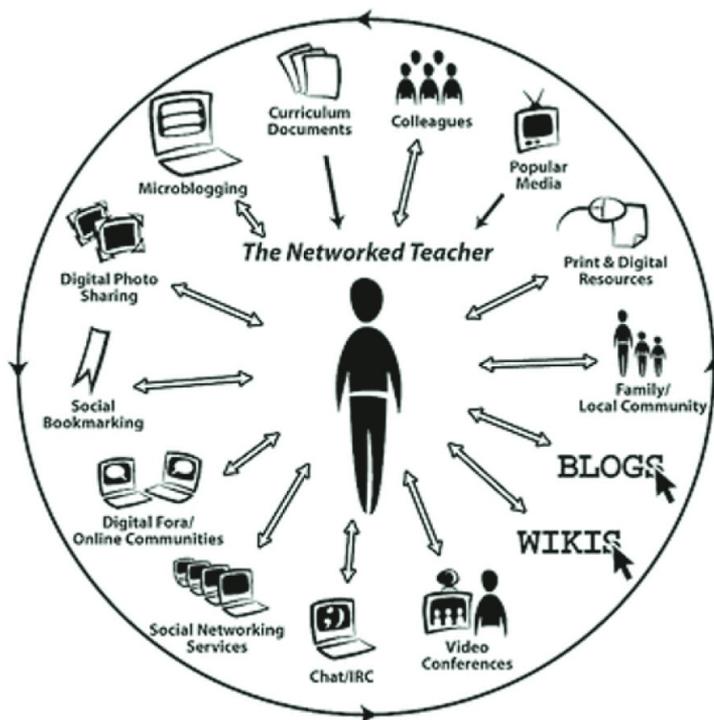
- History as a subject helps to build the capacity to make informed choices in order to contribute constructively to society and to advance democracy;
- It enhances personal empowerment;
- It promotes an understanding of human agency;
- It develops knowledge that as humans we have choices to change the world for

the better;

- Through the rigorous process of historical enquiry we are taught to think critically about society and to support democracy as a vehicle for human rights;
- It provides increasing conceptual knowledge as a framework of analysis in order to interpret and construct historical knowledge.

These values described in the Curriculum Statement clearly link with the values identified from the literature, but one gets an indication of the challenges when one is confronted with the content of the following figure (Figure 1) which attempts to give an indication of the world of the teacher in a technological society. Couros (2006) refers to the Networked Teacher in this regard.

**Figure 1: The networked teacher**



(Source: Pachler, Daly & Turvey 2009: 6, as quoted from Couros A. 2006). Permission also granted by Couros, 22 April 2010.

In the light of the above, the following statement by Woelders (2007: 363) is appropriate: “[B]ecause of the media-dominated culture in which we live, many educators recognize that many of our students’ ideas about

the past are constructed through the historically-themed film and television programmes that they watch.” The History teacher has to take cognisance of this phenomenon and accommodate it; otherwise the true value of History will not be achieved.

Weinstein (2001: 27-28) contends that today’s classroom is less than ever isolated from the cultural environment and that one cannot ignore the pervasiveness of electronic media. He claims that “[w]e should acknowledge film and television as the great history educators of our time. Film is unmatched in its capacity to provide ‘emphatic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood and lived their lives.’”

By taking only two examples of electronic types of usage in the History classroom, one is able to gain an understanding of the complexity of the challenges faced by History teachers. A brief look at the use of film and PowerPoint gives one a glimpse into the complexity.

Film is fun and it can involve learners/pupils in history and increase their enjoyment of the subject. Weinstein (2001: 30-31) emphasises this notion of involvement in the following way: “As they progress, they might be confronted with the profound question that faces historians: ‘How do we determine the truth about the ever-changing past?’ Looking at the past through the prism of a film, poses intriguing questions: Does it deviate from the ‘true’ history? How is history spun, adapted and adjusted to accommodate audiences and times?” He says that learners can gain an increased appreciation of the power of mass media to shape perception and to affect the interpretation of the past. He argues that learners should be enabled to be more discriminatory in processing the images and information bombarding them every day. Learners can develop a sense of critical visual literacy which is so vital in today’s emerging high society. They can identify anachronisms and inaccuracies and develop a keen and sophisticated understanding of the vocabulary and symbols and images. One could ask the following questions: Which criteria should be used to determine the legitimacy of the sources? How do the view and substance of history change from one period to the other? (Weinstein 2001: 30-31). The question then is: How do we change our teaching so that these goals or intentions are indeed achieved?

As an example, Weinstein (2001: 40-42) describes the importance of using film correctly as it can contribute to developing learners’ creativity and their imagination. He explains how it helps learners to get an insight and understanding of the “sweep and movement of history” (the stories of people

of their successes and accomplishments), how it helps learners to understand the movement in time (“no other medium can manipulate time in as kinetic a fashion as film”) and how the popularity of film can contribute to a greater interest in history. Film interprets history and this may lead to a greater interest in history (Weinstein 2001:42). However, the author also warns that the film artificially recreates reality and that one should not be uncritical, but interpret what one sees. He says that “one should not simply watch a film, but ‘read’ it as a text” (2001: 42).

O’Connor (December 1988: 1200-1201) is of the opinion that one should consider the contribution of visual evidence to understanding the past. He cites as an example that many Americans are learning more of their past and their history through the media. Technology should not be discarded, but rather utilised to better understand the past. It is not just the written word that contributes to understanding the past and the trends of bygone eras, but films and television, for example, could also contribute to this process (O’Connor 1988: 1207). He points out that many living-room discussions were stimulated by the media and people started talking about their history and heritage as never before. The use of films should not be regarded as a simple matter, as “the subject demands some awareness of theory and a recognition of the need to understand a film or television program as one part of a much larger, complex and ever-changing culture” (O’Connor 1988: 1203).

Woelders (March 2007:363) says that “because of the media-dominated culture in which we live, many educators recognize that many of our students’ ideas about the past are constructed through the historically-themed film and television programmes that they watch”. The challenge will be how to guide learners so that they understand that these views are not skewed but positively formed and shaped. Weinstein (November 2001: 41) aptly states that one should develop visual literacy, as media is also literature: “The filmmaker writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen.”

The use of PowerPoint presentations is also one way of presenting History to learners, but this form should not be used uncritically as there are inherent dangers. Maxwell (November 2007: 55) disagrees with Tufte’s view that “PowerPoint is evil”, but “concedes with the validity of Tufte’s criticism. Tufte (2003) argues according to Maxwell (2007:55) that “... PowerPoint tends to be disrupting, dominating and that it trivializes content”. Maxwell’s argument is that one should simply impose a new style on PowerPoint to

prevent this from happening and “ignore the programme’s annoyingly counterproductive attempts to ‘help’ its users format slides”. Users should have a clear understanding of what they want to achieve with PowerPoint and what they want to get out of it. They have to be flexible and creative, but that requires a strategy for effective teaching (Maxwell November 2007: 55). With the overuse of the bullet format, PowerPoint can undermine the notion that history consists of content and fuller texts. Maxwell (November 2007:55-56) argues that PowerPoint is at its most effective when not used as bullet-point summary but that it must rather be a summary which complements the lecture or presentation. More comprehensive text should thus complement the spoken lecture.

One can deduce, therefore, that even the use of PowerPoint may undermine the achievement of the goals of History as the use of summary-style texts may impact negatively on learners’ interpretation and understanding of history. Perhaps one can conclude with O’Connor (1988: 1209) view regarding the teaching of History:

[T]he goal of history teaching ... must go beyond simply informing people (chronicling events or passing on the traditions of a culture to new generations) to giving people the wherewithal to think out important issues. It should be therefore be a given that we teach our students to use audiovisual sources as stimuli to thought. (Emphasis by author.)

Maxwell (1988: 1205) further argues that the moving image that people see must not be uncritically accepted, but that viewers should examine and assess it within a particular context (“ ... what it meant to people who saw it at the time ...”). O’Connor (1988:1209) concludes by stating that “all history classes should be lessons in critical thinking”.

## **Conclusion**

From the discussion it is perhaps clear that the use of science and technology pose complex and interesting challenges to achieve the goals of History. However, the creative and responsible use of media and technology can still contribute towards among others:

- the development of values and goals like making informed decisions, based on a study of the past;
- helping learners to study the past so that they have a better understanding

of the present and where they come from;

- having a clearer self-understanding of their existence and their co-existence with other in specific contexts;
- helping, through a study of the past, to identify values that may assist one in making sound value judgements;
- identifying trends and processes so that one can have a more holistic perspective on the present and where they fit in the broader world;
- obtaining more self-knowledge to enable one to understand where one comes from and to co-exist with others;
- assisting learners to develop and acquire a more critical awareness and critical thinking skills, and
- helping learners to develop a historical consciousness through the development of visual literacy.

A society dominated by science and technology does not necessarily have to result in negative implications for the role and place of the teaching of History. In fact, science and technology can be utilised to contribute to a better understanding of the past so that today's learners can make a positive contribution to their own destiny and the future of society.

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