

A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE 2011 SASHT CONFERENCE

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I was not a part of the pre-conference trip to Freedom Park, but, by all accounts, it was not only well supported but of great interest to those who went – so full marks to all those involved in organising that. The next morning (Friday 23rd September) the conference began in earnest with a welcoming word from the chair, Prof Elize van Eeden. She briefly recapped the Society's life history before introducing Prof Martin Trümpelmann, one of the founders of the SASHT, to take us on a trip down memory lane. He spoke not only of the society itself but also of the early days of the publication *Yesterday & Today* – better known in its early days as *Gister & Vandag*. As a long time member of the Society and a contributor to the publication, I particularly enjoyed these memories.

Master of Ceremonies, Patrick McMahon, then laid out the guidelines for proceedings and the serious side of the conference began. The Unisa Dean of Students, Convy Baloyi, spoke of how history shapes us and models us and how we need to be aware of the challenges of the future and how its history – our present – can influence the next generation. He stressed the need to be conscious of our history in order to preserve it as part of our heritage.

Ms Siobhan Glanvill of Wits gave an interesting new view of youth expectations and what she called the “burdens of the struggle”. With the help of cartoons and other visuals she showed us that the youth see things differently, and her presentation was followed and complemented by that of Karen Horn from Stellenbosch talking of the context gap between youth and historical consciousness. Certainly, I was reminded that between myself and my learners is a vast chasm not merely a generation gap. Stimulating presentations which certainly sparked a new look at teaching methods and ideas for those of us in secondary schools.

The session continued with Prof Johan Wassermann (University of KZN) looking at the issue of controversial aspects of the school history syllabus and ways of dealing with these controversies. In discussion afterwards, it was agreed that some areas that were controversial are no longer seen that way by the learners. Controversies change and we need to be alert to the fact that what we as educators might believe is controversial, is not to them as it is now too

remote from their experiences.

Dr Pieter Warnich of North West University spoke of a project undertaken to develop a socio-cultural conscience through a primary school history programme. It was an interesting concept which by careful planning was able to enjoy some success among the learners. Sceptics may argue that the socio-cultural conscience is likely to be short lived but having been planted, revival is always possible.

A welcome tea break was followed by a presentation from South African History Online by Ms Varushka Jardine showing what useful resources are available from this internet-based virtual classroom. The days of chalkboards seem impossibly distant; yet, they were not that long ago. This was followed by Prof Ackson Kanduza of the University of Botswana with a fascinating talk linking the political roles of Kenneth Kaunda and Steve Biko as youth roles in history. I would never have thought to look at them together, but he made a good case for doing so and altered the way many of us thought of these two men.

Marshall Maposa of University of KZN spoke on the role of history textbooks in constructing an African consciousness. I wonder if the panel reviewing our new textbooks had any such ideas in their minds when judging suitability of texts. He gave an interesting talk which showed just how careful one must be in writing textbooks so as to be fair and non-judgmental. This was followed by Dr Chitja Twala of the Free State University telling us of the notorious Three Million Gang from the Kroonstad (Maokeng) area. The story was told with humorous illustrations and illustrated gang culture from a different perspective than the usual direct condemnation of gangs without any attempt to understand why they existed.

Mrs Annie Chiponda of University of KZN returned to the question of history textbooks looking this time at the way in which they tended to portray women and what message this sent to the youth. Unfortunately, her research did not include the latest textbooks which have largely changed the way they show the roles played by women in history. Nevertheless, it was an interesting talk.

Lunch came as a welcome relief from the bombardment of information, but was a brief respite before we were again hard at it exploring the use of an assessment-centred learning environment in enhancing historical knowledge and skills. This was led by Dr Boitumelo Moreeng of the Free State University; but perhaps failed to take sufficient cognizance of the general "Is it for marks?" attitude of the modern materialist learner.

A series of workshop sessions followed. The Durban Holocaust Centre in the person of Mrs Janine Hamilton then spoke of how they use the story of the holocaust to teach choice and responsibility to children at the centre. Perhaps the most useful aspect was teaching children that in any sort of confrontational situation there are four roles: perpetrator, victim, bystander and upstander. The

need to be upstanders rather than bystanders is easily shown by the horrors of Nazi Germany and the dictum of it being sufficient for evil to triumph that good men do nothing.

Tea was followed by Mrs Rika Odendaal-Kroon (Rand Girls' High School) who reminded us that it is tough teaching teenagers and how to use their own "teenage tools" to help discipline them. The modern trend of electronic communication via Facebook, Twitter and other social networks does change the way they think, and we need to tune into their wavelengths in order to communicate and discipline where required. Ms Dee Gillespie of Jeppe Girls' High looked more at having fun in history lessons and used some variations on the familiar group teaching techniques.

The workshops were followed by the Society's AGM, and then Prof. Rosemary Moeketsi, Executive Dean of the College of Human Sciences at Unisa, shared some thoughts on youth and history including bits from her own youth. The keynote address followed after this with Dr Noor Nieftagodien of Wits talking on Youth in history, youth making history: See the title of his article, "Challenging dominant historical narratives for alternative futures". It was both interesting and thought provoking and by keeping it short, he maintained the interest and impact. We then adjourned for the gala conference dinner.

Dinner was good and we went our various ways to bed so that we could be ready for a relatively early start on Saturday when Dr Gail Weldon and Prof Rob Siebörger spoke of the development of the FET history CAPS curriculum. Part of the issue in development were the constraints placed on them so that there was no chance of a radical new syllabus. After tea the focus shifted from the curriculum to "What makes a good matric paper?" with a panel of Dr Weldon of the Cape Education Department, Prof Siebörger of UCT Education Dept, Dr Sureen Seetal of Umalusi and Patrick McMahon of Crawford College. I am not sure if we were any wiser after the presentation than before, but the views were interesting and certainly opened up discussion around the issue.

We then moved to the only parallel session of the conference, and not being able to split myself, I had to miss Taking Freedom Park to the people (Bongane Mkhize), History as evidential study in teaching the holocaust (Ms Nokuzola Bikwana) and Museums as centres of support for history teachers (Andrew Barclay & Dr Boitumelo Moreeng). Those who attended this session regarded it as very complimentary.

I was at the other session with Prof. Van Eeden and the exchanging of current trends in the teaching of history, an erudite and interesting paper followed by the much lighter talk, with DVD accompaniment on dramatization techniques in the teaching of history by Simon Haw, a former subject advisor. Haw's presentation was followed by a look at the problems facing Zimbabwe in the teaching of history there by Gilbert Tarugarira of Midlands State university, Zimbabwe. They were three very different presentations but all both interesting and informative.

Lunch was followed by a look at the Society's website and comments on how we want to develop it, led by Patrick McMahon and Paul Haupt, both of whom are still active in the high school history classroom. The conference then closed (remarkable on schedule) with a summary of its papers and appeal, and a look ahead to the teaching of history to the 21st Century youth and a promise of what awaits us in Stellenbosch at the 2012 conference.

PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS ON THE 2011 SASHT CONFERENCE

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HIGH POINTS

1. The excursion to Freedom Park, which was a revelation to me and something I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. It was a pity that the whole conference couldn't go and that it had to happen before the conference started.
2. It's rare in my experience to have conferences that adhere to their conference theme, or where organisers are able to plan systematically around it. This was a very pleasant exception. It succeed well in sustaining the theme.
3. SASHT conferences have been relatively slow to transform from being places where whites present and black participants contribute from the floor. This conference marked a turning point, with a large number of presentations by black participants.
4. The presence of four high school learners changed the atmosphere in the room – a very welcome breath of the classroom.
5. I thought the challenge to each region to stage one regional event in the following year was an excellent one, and I look forward to hearing about them next year.
6. More than at any other time, the Society is coming to grips with policy issues and taking a stand on them: curriculum, examinations and textbooks. It's a very good development and ought to characterise the society in future.

DOWNSIDE

1. Very few local teachers (beyond the regulars attended). These conferences depend on attracting teachers from schools in the region where they are being held. It was a great pity that it did not happen this time.
2. Resort conference. I am not convince that this is a good idea and not in favour of something that makes the conference more expensive to attend. (Relate to 1.)
3. The reality is that history is going to be a “2nd level” subject in FET; therefore, we need to concentrate our attentions on GET, where all learners have to do history. There was almost no emphasis on GET at the conference, and this needs to be corrected. [Make primary school history teaching a theme of a future conference?]

I know nothing about the textbook screening process relating to history. I have heard that only four books were approved. I mentioned to Gail and Simon that I could offer to do an independent evaluation of the Grade 10 books to provide a counterpoint. I'm not sure whether it is a good idea or not, but, if it is thought to be, it would work best if the SASHT were formally to ask me to do it, and would arrange with all the publishers who submitted books to send copies of their books (and teacher books) to me.