

## HANDS-ON ARTICLES

### THE PAST: SOME ORAL MEMORIES AND ITS UTILISING IN HISTORY TEACHING

*EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS FOR LEARNERS TO DELIBERATE ON after having read the oral history contributions of both Proff Rosemary Moeketsi and Betty Govinden:*

1. Depict the author's memories of her childhood world and way of living and understanding history and her world;
2. How did the author's childhood world transform from the perspective of being an adult?
3. What are the core value(s) of History for the author?
4. Identify three historically related facts that the author has utilised and respond more extensively on their historical meaning and context.
5. Debate the value of being educated in your mother tongue.

### “THE FACE OF THE FUTURE” (BORROWED FROM MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S SPEECH BEFORE THE YOUTH MARCH FOR INTEGRATED SCHOOLS)

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In 2009 I was invited to the conference of the Southern African Historical Society to say something and to propose the toast. I obliged. Here am I tonight invited to participate in your conference which is for (South African Society for) History Teaching. I wish I knew why I keep on receiving these

invitations to History conferences, because History was never my favourite subject at school.

Many years ago when I was 15 years old and in Matric, I did/studied/ was taught the subject, History. The good thing that your invitation has done, is to challenge me to reflect on what happened back then. I still remember how the subject was very neatly divided into two distinct sections: European History and South African History in such a way that the one didn't seem to have anything to do with the other. The European part was larger, about 70% of the syllabus, maybe because it dealt with several countries. What we were taught seemed to focus more on wars, hardship, the resultant liberation and then migration; static events that happened and ended in the past and didn't seem to have any impact on the future. The emphasis seemed to have been on very fine detail where names of the victors and victims were emphasized. Such names still come to mind: Otto von Bismarck, Benito Mussolini, Rasputin the Mad Monk, Hitler, Jan van Riebeeck, Simon van der Stel, Vasco da Gama. Linked to these names was a strong geographical focus that included unusual place-names, names of mountains, valleys, gorges and rivers.; and of course, more torturous was that the names and the places were associated with specific dates, 1652, 1815, 1869, 1883! The dates mainly referred to the births and deaths of the characters. Further than that, I remember nothing.

To compound an already complex situation, the subject was taught in Afrikaans, *Geskiedenis*. Mr Mahlase, my *Geskiedenis* teacher, was quite fluent in Afrikaans, I thought. A kind man, polite and likeable; he seemed to know what he was doing; he was authoritative in delivering the content that sounded more like uninteresting and boring stories from a very remote past. The most that we did was to listen as attentively as possible and to ask questions but only for clarification. Although at some stage some of us had the sneaky feeling that the South African history depicted the Africans as inferior, under-handed, barbaric, violent, I don't remember us debating the facts, engaging with the content or even expecting other perspectives to exist. I'm also not sure whether the teacher was interested in developing in us any critical intellectual skills to interrogate and engage such content. I think it was because we battled so badly with the medium of instruction that we focused only on grasping the content rather than critiquing and interrogating the subject matter. This made History a painful subject to learn.

I remember the teacher working from two books the titles of which I can't recall because the books were referred to by their authors, Van Jaarsveld and

Fowler and Smit. My desk-mate and I, and so did some of my class-mates who could afford to buy those text-books, bought and shared the two books between ourselves.

At the end of the year, many of us scraped through. As can be seen, I learnt nothing at all, and of my class-mates, I can't think of anyone who did anything with those History lessons.

Later in life, in 1973, I found myself teaching Afrikaans to Matriculants, a task I was not qualified for, but which I did for 13 years and ended up doing expertly with excellent results. Those days, you couldn't enter university without Matric English and Afrikaans among other subjects. I must have reacted to the need for more and more of us to, at least, pass Matric because while others fought Apartheid with stones and neck-laces, I fought it by teaching Afrikaans to Matriculants, a subject loathed by students and teachers alike, stigmatized as the language of the oppressor but indispensable for further studies and a financially promising future.

When June 16th dawned and South Africa was literally set alight, I was in class teaching Afrikaans. June 16<sup>th</sup> was not because students were taught Afrikaans. Students hated being taught IN Afrikaans: *Geskiedenis*, *Wiskunde*, *Natuur en Skeikunde*: those were my Matric subjects.

June 16<sup>th</sup> was brought about by the youth of South Africa; the youth who couldn't stand what many of us had endured, the systematic deprivation and denial of knowledge by the government of the day; the youth who thought very little of their parents who had availed themselves to be abused by the Apartheid System. June 16<sup>th</sup> was the beginning of the end of an abominable era; a revelation of what could be.

I'd like to talk about 1994, but with your permission may I go back to when I started school? I was four when I first entered the class-room; yes, a bit too early, because I wouldn't be separated from my elder sister who was about seven and of school going age. I remember everyone being presented with two books from which the teacher read and the class repeated after her; which was nice. I had opened both books on the same page one. There was a picture of a black cat sitting on a mat. The sentence below the picture must have read "The cat sits on the mat" because that's what the teacher asked us to repeat after her, twice, thrice and with our eyes closed, memorise the sentence "The cat sits on the mat". What struck me was that there were two books, same picture, and same cat sitting on the same mat. What was the fuss? I thought.

Why two books for the same cat sitting on the same mat; the mat is on the floor? So I discarded the second book only to evoke/ elicit the ire of the teacher when next she came for more reading and discover that I had “lost” the second book because I did not need it. I only realized years later that the second book was in fact in Afrikaans. At four, I was fed two foreign languages; a practice frowned upon by linguists who recommend that the first additional language be introduced a few years after having started school.

Then came 1994 and South Africa was emancipated from the throes of the repressive forces of Apartheid. Ideals such as democracy, human rights the rule of law, civil society and economic freedom were introduced.

For me, and probably for many of us, to appreciate the new South Africa and to face the challenges of the future, I had to grapple with such question as who I was, where I came from and where I was headed. I had to be real about my strengths, my weaknesses, my aspirations, my dreams.

### **Who exactly are we? What future will we leave for generations to come?**

I found that reading biographies and auto-biographies provided the necessary knowledge that I so yearned for: Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela; Desmond Tutu; De Klerk; Tsafendas; among many others. Each one sketched the history of South Africa from their own perspective in a manner that continues to enrich my knowledge of my country, its people, its cultures, its weal and woe. Alister Sparks’ trilogy remains an invaluable source of South Africa’s modern history for me.

As I conclude this short story, please note that I have entitled it “The Face of the Future”, a phrase borrowed from Martin Luther King Jr’s address to a gathering of 26000 American Youth before their March for Integrated Schools on 18 April 1959. I reflect on the phenomenon history and note that although it represents the entire human experience linked to a chain of events that belong in the past, it is our present, our face, and indeed it determines and influences the future. History is a strange continuity and what’s exciting is that we all continue to contribute to the making of this History. For students and scholars, therefore, History is the integrated study of those past human and non human events from the vantage point of the present.

We [South Africans] are a nation in the process of re-building ourselves; of reforming and re-forming our identity. For that reason, we depend on our teachers of History to use all sorts of exciting methods to help us know

who we are and to acknowledge our past, however acrimonious that past can be. We trust our scholars and teachers enough to know that the teaching of History is done objectively from all possible perspectives and that it refrains from propagating lopsided ideologies that do nothing but promote a single, narrow, socio-political and cultural thought.

As we continue to redress the ills of our past, I hope that we are careful not to gravitate to the extreme opposite end where focus is solely on what was undermined by the Apartheid system, which is the struggle for liberation, Robben Island and “Exile”. The History that we teach ought to be balanced, comprehensive, and inclusive, with South Africa at the centre and in the context of the rest of the world. This is a History that is bent on unifying a nation torn apart by its past; a History that aims to leave a legacy for generations to come; That kind of History is our heritage; a History that will encourage and support students as they “vigorously debate, dissent, disagree and discuss”.