

HANDS-ON ARTICLES

“NOT JUST TO KNOW HISTORY BUT TO DO HISTORY”

Barry Firth

Crestway High School, Cape Town

barryfirth29@gmail.com

Introduction

This is an article about learners’ attempts at doing History based on a panel discussion and presentation held at the annual South African Society for History Teachers (SASHT) conference on 4-5 October 2012 in Somerset West, South Africa. These learners were recruited from the Crestway High School and Fairmount High School. Both schools on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape serve the learners from similar socio-economic backgrounds. These similar challenges have led two history teachers to seek ways in pooling resources and creating opportunities for learners to engage in activities requiring the application of historical skills; those generic proficiencies also crucial to the historian. I refer to generic skills such as using sources as evidence, identifying point of view, understanding ethical dimensions and understanding cause and consequence, to mention a few.

This panel discussion is an attempt to share with you those moments when we, the educators, realise that despite all the challenges, learners can be trusted to develop a historical gaze, to think historically and ultimately to do history. However, this does not come automatically. What is required is scaffolding, specific to the skills required and the understanding of concepts in History.

Methodology

The History Association of Fairmount High School participated with five other schools in a workshop run by the Constitutional Literacy and Service Initiative (CLASI). The purpose of the workshop was for learners to

investigate and discover for themselves the unrecorded histories of individuals who escaped the gaze of popular history. These learners were entrusted with the task of using the tools of the historian to gather evidence and using that evidence to construct a narrative that could withstand the rigorous interrogation normally associated with history writing. The list of individuals to be interviewed was provided by CLASI. All of the individuals, identified by CLASI, were individuals who lived and worked in the areas familiar to the learners.

This involved them doing a preliminary search of available documents and public storage (libraries/ archives etc.). Then they developed questions suitable to the information they sought. This was done over weekends over a period of three months. Several interviews were held, conducted by these proto-historians. This included follow-up interviews. The result was a successful exhibition held at the District Six's Homecoming Centre in Cape Town on Heritage Day, 24 September, 2012. The exhibition ran until the end of October 2012.

Application

The History Association of Crestway High School then undertook an exercise for the sake of the upcoming SASHT Conference in Somerset West to deconstruct the narratives presented at the exhibition. An opportunity was provided at Crestway for the two Fairmount learners to share the narrative which they had constructed. The Crestway learners then had the opportunity to inquire from the proto-historians how they went about constructing the narrative. The educators present guided the inquiry away from making judgments but rather to establishing reliability and thoroughness of research and associated findings.

At no point did Crestway's learners challenge the Fairmount learners: This opportunity was saved for the SASHT Conference. What they did was to develop questions that interrogated the motives of both the subjects and the constructors of the narratives. What was extremely exciting was that the learners did not limit their engagement to the received narration. Instead they focused on the proto-historians and their subjects as aggregations of bias and ulterior motives.

Images 1-4: SASHT Conference

Image 1: Elme and Sharisha facilitating the interaction between constructors and deconstructors



Image 2: Fiona Nefdt explaining to the plenary her experiences as a history educator



Image 3: Sydney Ndzongo (second from left) questioning Chad Crowley on his method of gathering information



Image 4: Left-right: Sharisha Steenkamp, Jordan Peters and Chad Crowley



Source: SASHT (Photographer WJ Meiring, 3-5 Oct 2012)

Hands-on-moments at the SASHT conference

The conference provided the opportunity for the two Fairmount proto-historians to again deliver their narrations. One of the subjects, Emil Jansen, was also present and observed the deconstruction of the narrative surrounding him. This was an unexpected privilege for learners to have a history audience as part of the subject of their historical quest. Jansen's presence kept both the constructors and de-constructors of the narrative careful and cautious. Herewith some of the questions posed to the constructors:

- How did you go about gathering evidence?
- Why do you trust his/her version of events?
- What proof did you find to support his/her narrative?

- Is it possible that you only looked for good things about your constitutional hero?
- The question which struck me as a most authentic response to a received narrative was the following question:
- Is Emil Jansen racist? This question came from a learner who had heard Emil speak at her school. She understood him to be saying that the exclusion of coloured people from meaningful political activity was as a result of black South Africans dominating the political landscape. The proto-historian, who conducted the research, was at pains to point out that Jansen's track record at no time spoke of racism. Instead, it spoke of a deep commitment to community involvement and poverty alleviation. Members of the audience also tapped into this point and required the learners to negotiate the minefield of historical construction and accountability. They discovered that statements, critical and complimentary, required sound evidence in order to substantiate a particular point of view.

As an aside, at no time did Jansen feel the need to defend himself publicly. He allowed the process of letting learners express their concerns and develop their voice, to continue.

Conclusions

Hands-on moments such as the example discussed, not only provide practical opportunities to deal with a theme or phenomenon in History, but allow learners of History to become informed on how difficult it can be to research and record History and how easy stereotyping and labelling can be formed as perceptions. Concisely covered then, the following observations were made:

- Learners can do history;
- Learners can appreciate the complexity of constructing a narrative based on sound evidential research;
- Learners appreciated that narratives are indeed just constructions that reflect the views (bias and prejudices) of the constructors;
- Four learners who participated in this deconstruction of these local historical characters appreciated that profound leaders in history like N Mandela, FW de Klerk, Napoleon Bonaparte, Shaka and Zwide are also the result of someone else's research construction.

The last point is especially important. These constructions by professional historians are sophisticated narratives which sometimes may be embedded

in vaguely cloaked 'ism's not immediately visible to naïve learners and educators. These constructions, perhaps efficiently and cautiously packaged, may speak to needs of identity of those who read and consume uncritically the authoritative statements of the historian.

Finally, without the time consuming scaffolding provided by the facilitators at the District Six Museum, these learners would not have been able to see beyond the veneer of the narrative. Even then, there is no final answer as narrative because more sources always allow for a revision in interpretations.

History classrooms are spaces where learners are constantly confronted by one narrative after the other. Not enough attention is given to procedural knowledge and as a result the dominant substantive history swamps the senses of learners, like those we teach on the Cape Flats: Largely unsophisticated readers not alert to the subtleties of text and images. And when that happens they are not doing history.

The learners' performance at the conference was a memorable experience. My colleague and I take strength from what we witnessed. To conclude, we as history educators decided to embark on the following:

- Investing in contextual procedural history to a greater degree without neglecting the exciting, interesting and engaging stories that makes the consuming of history so enjoyable;
- Continue arranging dialogues between the history societies on topics ranging from local to issues of universal concern. Key note speaker Dan Sleight's comments on the local value comes to mind.
- To continue to demand of our learners to attempt to *do* history. We must not lessen our expectations of them: If scaffold sufficiently content can expose the tools of the historian. It enables learners to dabble in the dark art: *doing* history.

With thanks to:

Constructors:

- Jordan Peters - Fairmount High School (Grassy Park)
- Chad Crowley - Fairmount High School (Grassy Park)

De-constructors:

- Miche Maarman - Crestway High School (Steenberg)
- Quinton Jane - Crestway High School (Steenberg)
- Ursula Jacobs - Fairmont High School (Grassy Park)

Facilitators (Both from Crestway High School):

- Elmé le Roux - Crestway High School (Steenberg)
- Sharisha Steenkamp - Crestway High School (Steenberg)

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