“Doing history?”: Assessment in history classrooms at a time of curriculum reform

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Abstract

Curriculum reform in South Africa has embraced outcomes-based education for a decade now. This paper examines curriculum reform in the subject of history. The new National Curriculum Statements for History (Grades 10-12) describe learning history as a process of enquiry where the emphasis is on *doing* history. The curriculum documents make it very clear that ‘learners who study history use the insights and skills of historians’. This paper describes different approaches to history learning in schools, and asks what it means to ‘do’ history. Using an analysis of formal history assessment tasks in three high schools and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education November exemplar exam for Grade 10 in 2006, I argue that learners are mostly required to extract information from sources rather than engaging with sources ‘as historians would do’. It also appears that learners are not being required to demonstrate a strong and in-depth knowledge of history. The data were collected in 2006 which was the first year that Grade R 10 teachers were implementing the new curriculum. Thus it provides a snapshot of how these teachers understood the demands of the assessment tasks at that time, and also raises questions about the new reform.

Introduction

South African curriculum reformers embraced outcomes-based education as a way of moving away from rote learning which characterised much of bad apartheid-era education (Morrow, 2000). The vision was for a school system that developed learners’ understanding and application of concepts. The nature of outcomes-based education is to break down skills and knowledge into learning outcomes and assessment standards that are measurable.

The tensions inherent in the outcomes-based reform path adopted by South Africa are summarised by Kraak (1999) as the tension between a radical learning methodology and a behaviourist assessment technology. Lubisi argues that outcomes-based assessment is not inherently behaviourist, but that assessment can be interpreted either in atomised and discrete ways or in more integrated, holistic ways (Lubisi, 1999). While this may be so, experience seems to show that outcomes become more and more atomised and

behaviourist in the attempt to make them more explicit, transparent and understandable by everyone. Although this is not the intention of curriculum planners, the nature of OBE is such that it can easily ignore the structured nature of formal knowledge while focussing on outcomes (Allais, 2006).

This paper describes the case of curriculum reform in the History Further Education and Training (FET) Grade 10–12 (schools) curriculum. An analysis of assessment tasks in three schools and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education exemplar examination suggests that the history curriculum's strong focus on source-based assessment means that learners are not assessed for a substantive knowledge base. The paper is structured as follows. I present two different traditions of teaching history in school, and show that the new South African curriculum has embraced a history as enquiry approach. I then examine history as a discipline and what it means to 'do history' as historians do. It becomes clear that for historians, knowledge and procedure cannot be separated. 'Doing history' embraces both the procedures and the knowledge. An analysis of some assessment tasks for Grade 10 learners in 2006 indicates that learners are mostly required to engage with sources at a superficial level (that is, to extract information from the sources) and are not required to display substantive knowledge of content.

History as a school subject

History curriculum development in South Africa has been influenced by Britain. Traditionally, history at school has been seen as a narrative of events that have happened in the past, history as a number of facts that are presented in a chronological way, history as 'what happened'. The focus here is on *knowing* history. This 'great tradition' approach dominated history teaching in British schools for much of the twentieth century where the role of the history teacher was to give pupils the facts of historical knowledge. The pupil's role was to receive the body of knowledge, which was clearly defined, chronologically organised and framed by high politics. History was taught for largely intrinsic and cultural reasons, predominantly the "acquisition of a relatively complex knowledge about an assumed shared national political culture" (Husbands, Kitson, and Pendry, 2003, p.9).

The Schools' Council History Project developed an 'alternative tradition' in Britain in the 1970s (Schools Council History 13–16 Project, 1976). This approach to history teaching had quite different assumptions about the role of the teacher, the selection of content and the purposes of teaching history. The

alternative tradition emphasised constructivist models of learner engagement with the past, a world history and the experiences of a variety of groups and a focus on historical skills. History aimed to introduce children to historical ways of thinking, to the reading and interpreting of source materials, to recognize bias and to the skills of inquiry and critical thinking. The focus is on *doing* history.

The enquiry approach was influenced by thinking at the time in the philosophy of education, which emphasised the importance of learning the *procedures* of the discipline at school. It drew heavily on Paul Hirst's theory of academic disciplines as forms of knowledge. He believed that the disciplines constituted fundamentally different ways of knowing (Hirst, 1973). It was not sufficient that learners learn facts constructed by historians but they should learn the skills that historians use. The Schools' Council History 13–16 Project introduced students to the nature of historical evidence, the nature of reasoning from evidence and the problem of reconstruction from partial and mixed evidence (Wineburg, 2001).

This 'alternative' approach to history was adopted in South Africa in some independent schools and some House of Assembly and House of Delegates schools in the early 1980s, particularly in the Transvaal, Natal and Cape (Siebörger, Kallaway, Bottaro and Hiscock, 1993; Van den Berg and Buckland, 1983). Shooter and Shuters (publishers in Pietermaritzburg) published a new series of textbooks, called *History Alive* in 1987, which included far more source-based activities (Morrell, 1990) than other textbooks, which tended to be content-heavy. However in the majority of classrooms it was the case that many teachers taught facts from prescribed books as if these were true, and education departments assessed history pupils to assess how many facts they knew (Sishi, 1995).

While many embraced the idea that it was necessary to teach history as a 'mode of enquiry' rather than as a 'body of knowledge' (Dickinson, Gard and Lee, 1978), not all scholars accepted that the purpose of history at schools was to teach students the historical skills of enquiry. British historian Geoffrey Elton argued that the purpose of school history was not to produce research scholars, but rather that schools should concentrate on encouraging interest and some understanding of the past (*ibid*.). Similarly, Kros and Vadi argue that the Schools' Council Project was based on a skills approach with a "rather erratic and incoherent content" (1993, p.101). They argue that a skills-based method can lead to students focusing on random historical events that are not situated in their context of space and time.

Changes to the South African history curriculum since 1995

These two approaches to teaching and learning history form the backdrop to changes in the history curriculum in South Africa. Any curriculum reform can focus on changing knowledge, pedagogy or assessment. The apartheid-era curriculum was criticised for being too content-heavy and for being ideologically biased towards an Afrikaner nationalist perspective on the past. The first wave of curriculum change happened soon after the new democratic government took power, when syllabus documents were 'cleansed' of blatantly racist and sexist content (Jansen, 1999; Seleti, 1997). Here the focus was on changing content.

The Interim Core Syllabus Std 8–10 (1995), which was the 'cleansed' apartheid syllabus, stated that history was a 'mode of enquiry, a way of investigating the past which requires the acquisition and use of skills'. While it makes mention that history is more than just facts to be learned, there was still a strong focus, particularly in the assessment, on history as content.

In 2006, the Interim Core Syllabus was replaced by the National Curriculum Statement for History (Grade 10–12) (Department of Education, 2003). This document changed content, pedagogy and assessment. In terms of knowledge, there is a move away from a Eurocentric history to a strong emphasis on the world, and on South Africa's place in Africa. I do not engage with the nature of the historical knowledge in this paper. The curriculum also changes in terms of pedagogy. The emphasis on historical enquiry skills is much stronger:

> Learners who study history use the insights and skills of historians. They analyse sources and evidence and study different interpretations, divergent opinions and voices. By doing so they are taught to think in a rigorous and critical manner about society (Chap 2, p.10).

This emphasis is seen most clearly in the first learning outcome: "The learner is able to acquire and apply historical enquiry skills". The Assessment Guidelines for History put it very emphatically:

> History is a process of enquiry into past events leading to the writing of history. History trains learners to identify and extract relevant information from authentic historical sources, analyse and organise that information, understand various points of view and interpretation in history, synthesise information and present and defend an argument based on the information gained during the process of enquiry (Department of Education, 2007, p.7).

The Learning Programme Guidelines (Department of Education, 2005) state that the approach 'emphasises *doing history*, which entails introducing the historian's craft (how historians work) in the classroom' (original emphasis). None of these documents nor the learning outcomes (listed below), explicitly mention that learners need to *know* history, although this is inferred in Learning Outcome 2 and 3 in that one must have knowledge in order to be able to *use* historical concepts and *construct* and *communicate* historical knowledge.

In addition to the outcomes, the NCS lists the 'content and contexts for attainment of the assessment standards'.

The Learning Outcomes for Grades 10–12 History:
Learning outcome 1
The learner will be able to acquire and apply historical enquiry skills.
Learning outcome 2
The learner is able to use historical concepts in order to analyse the past
Learning outcome 3
The learner is able to construct and communicate historical knowledge and understanding.
Learning outcome 4
The learner is able to engage critically with issues around heritage.

What does it mean to 'do history'?

The curriculum documents for both the GET (General Education and Training band) and the FET emphasise that learners should do history and know how historians work. I now want to turn to this issue and examine how historians work. What are the insights and skills of historians? I draw on Bernstein's work on knowledge structures here. Bernstein (1999) argued that some disciplines have a hierarchical or vertical knowledge structure. These depend on a previous knowledge base before proceeding up the hierarchy of understanding (Bernstein, 1999). Theory develops through integration, towards ever more integrative or general propositions. A hierarchical knowledge structure is motivated towards greater and greater integrating propositions, operating at more and more abstract levels (Bernstein, 1999). For example, in physics, the knowledge structure is hierarchically structured towards integrative laws which may finally culminate in one grand unifying theory of everything. Development of the discipline is seen as the development of theory that is more integrating, more general than the separate subordinate theories.

In contrast to vertical knowledge structures, which focus on integrating propositions, Bernstein (1999) suggests that a horizontal knowledge structure consists of a series of specialized languages with specialized modes of interrogation and criteria for the construction and circulation of texts. Horizontal knowledge structures consist rather of a series of parallel incommensurable languages (Muller, 2006). History would be seen as a horizontal knowledge structure. Its specialty comes from its mode of interrogation and the criteria for the construction of historical texts, rather than a search for a theory that encompasses all others. Martin (2007) suggests that history would be characterized as a horizontal knowledge structure because it is not hierarchically organized and learning new knowledge does not rely on previous knowledge. But this does not mean that content is not important or that content can be selected in completely arbitrary ways, as chronology is still a key ordering principle in history.

Thus, history's specialty does not come from the vertical sequencing of its content into ever simplifying analytic abstractions; rather its specialty comes from its mode of interrogation and the criteria for the construction of historical texts. Historian John Tosh describes the work of the professional historian as opposed to popular 'social memory' like this:

> Professional historians insist on a lengthy immersion in the primary sources, a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions and a rare degree of empathy and imagination. Popular historical knowledge, on the other hand, tends to a highly selective interest in the remains of the past, is shot through with present-day assumptions and is only incidentally concerned to understand the past on its own terms (2006, p.12).

Tosh seems to be describing both procedural knowledge – that of a deep reading of primary sources, as well as a way of being and thinking. This is a historical gaze, which encompasses an ability to understand the past in its own context and to approach it with empathy and imagination.

Dean (2004) suggests that history is made up of two complementary, inter-linked strands, which are content and process. She draws on Schwab (1978) who described these strands as (a) syntactic or procedural knowledge, which is knowledge about conducting historical enquiry or 'know-how' knowledge and (b) substantive or propositional knowledge which represents the statements of fact, propositions and concepts of history, which are constructed as a result of the procedural investigations carried out by historians.

Wineburg's (2001) empirical work is to understand how historical thinking really works by studying how students and historians interact with original

historical evidence; how they come to understand history. He gave eight historians a set of documents about the Battle of Lexington and asked them to think aloud while they read these. He noticed how they comprehended a sub-text, "a text of hidden and latent meanings" (p.65). For the historians, even those not reading in their specialist area, "(T)he comprehension of the text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose and plan – the same set of concepts we use to decipher human action." (p.67) When historians were asked to rank the relative trustworthiness of the documents, they ranked the excerpt from an American history textbook last.

Wineburg asked eight high achieving high school students to do the same task. Many of the students rated the textbook excerpt as the most trustworthy, failing "to see the text as a social instrument skilfully crafted to achieve a social end" (p.69). The students also did not read the source of the document before reading the text; the text's attribution was not that important, whereas for the historians what is said is inseparable from who said it and under what circumstances. Wineburg surmises that one of the reasons these students had so little sense of how to read an historical text, is that textbook texts dominate the history classroom, and these are often written without any indication of judgement, interpretation or uncertainty.

Thus we can see that there are certain procedures that inform what historians do, most notably linking any primary text to its author and the context in which it was written, reading the subtext of the document and understanding the text in its original context. Texts are seen as "slippery, cagey, and protean, reflecting the uncertainty and disingenuity of the real world" (Wineburg, 2001, p.66). This kind of in-depth reading of sources can only happen with an in-depth knowledge of the context and time in which they were written. Leinhardt (1994) shows that historians understand their work as holistically encompassing a deep engagement with primary sources and the use of this evidence to construct a convincing case. This gives us some understanding into what it means to do history or to think like an historian.

Bernstein suggests that the acquirers of a particular discipline develop a tacitly acquired 'gaze', which means that they learn how to "recognize, regard, realize and evaluate legitimately the phenomena of concern" (Bernstein, 1996, p.170). Following Dowling's (1998) work on a mathematical gaze, here I suggest that an historical gaze is to gain mastery over both substantive history content knowledge, and its mode of expression. The substance of historical knowledge is to know what key events shaped the past, and how these events did so. A knowledge of these events cannot be separated from a knowledge that these

events are interpreted in different ways by different people for different purposes. Mode of expression can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it is knowing about the specialist ways in which history uses the language of time, chronology and explanations of cause and effect (Martin, 2007; Coffin, 2006). Secondly, history is specialized by the procedures that historians use to read primary sources. For history learners it is about understanding that these 'key' historical events are interpreted and understood in different ways at different times, by different people.

Thus I would argue that there are at least three inter-linked areas that are vital in order to induct learners into the specialty of school history, or to begin the development of an historical gaze. The first is a deep knowledge of the key events that have shaped our world and a knowledge of how these events are interconnected. The second area is knowledge about the ways in which history relies on chronology, time and explanations of cause and effect to create its narrative. The third area is an understanding of how historians read primary sources and an understanding that sources can be read in different ways, by different people at different times. These different readings give rise to the construction of different interpretations and different stories.

Substantive knowledge and procedural knowledge are inter-twined. The argument of this paper is that by focusing so particularly on the *doing* of history, there is a danger that not sufficient attention is being paid to knowledge, chronology and explanation. This becomes particularly clear in the area of assessment, as this study shows.

Curriculum change and teacher practice

Thus far I have described two approaches to teaching and learning history and have shown that the FET history curriculum has chosen the enquiry-based approach. Learners need to do history using the skills and insights of historians, and I have shown what the work of historians is. Curriculum documents signal the official discourse for content, pedagogy and assessment. According to this official discourse, 'what counts as history' in South Africa has changed. The legitimate text[1] for history is now an ability to interpret and analyse sources and not to remember a number of facts. I now turn to how

[1] For Bernstein a text is anything which attracts evaluation (which could be no more than how one sits or how one moves) (Bernstein, 1996, p.32). Thus a text is what is considered acceptable behaviour as well as written or oral work that is evaluated.

these curriculum requirements are understood, interpreted and worked out by selected history teachers by focusing on assessment tasks.

One of the things that research has shown over the past two decades is that curriculum reform is not a simple technical process, as much as policy makers wish it were. Teachers interpret, change, ignore, and selectively choose how they will implement centralised curriculum policy edicts (Ball and Bowe, 1992; Cohen and Ball, 1990). What probably does act more decisively to change teachers' practice is assessment demands, particularly when these are strongly centralised and regulated by the state, as seen in South Africa's national assessment standards and learning outcomes.

Assessment is a key area of an outcomes-based curriculum, with the requirement that learners can meet particular assessment standards in particular grades. The obsession with assessment is seen clearly in the curriculum documents, as 60 per cent of the NCS history policy document covers the topic of assessment and the Subject Assessment Guidelines (SAG) is a 37-page document which gives details on how assessment is to be conducted in the FET band. The SAG makes clear what a history test should look like, with a focus on sources, source-based question and then a knowledge question.

I argued earlier that there are at least three aspects that are vital for learners to be inducted into the discipline of history. These are firstly, a deep knowledge of key events, secondly, a knowledge of how history texts are produced with a focus on chronology and explanation and thirdly, a knowledge of how historians read primary sources. I analyse a range of written tests set by three history teachers and by the Department of Education, and explore to what extent these tests focus on these areas. The curriculum requires that learners "use the insights and skills of historians and analyse sources and evidence and study different interpretations, divergent opinions and voices" as stipulated in the FET History National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2003). The question is to what extent do assessment tasks require this of learners? This is the key research question of this paper.

Methods

This paper draws on empirical data in the form of Grade 10 assessment tasks set in three different KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools in 2006. The schools were purposely selected to represent a purposive sample of three functional co-educational high schools in KwaZulu-Natal. They represented a range of

schools in terms of their previous administration and the socio-economic status of the learners, using school fees as a proxy measurement of this. Each school represents a case study, and although they may be typical of other similar schools, essentially can only represent themselves. The selection of schools was opportunistic. The school names are pseudonyms.

Enthabeni High School was previously administered by the Department of Education and Training. The school is located in a rural area, about 20 kms from the nearest town. The staff and learners are all black African. The matric pass rate was 88 per cent in 2004. In 2005, the fees were R150 per annum. Lincoln High was previously administered by House of Assembly and is located in a middle class, mostly white suburb. The student body is racially diverse. The matric pass rate has been 100 per cent for a number of years. In 2005, the fees were R7 000 per annum. North Hill High was previously administered by the House of Delegates. The majority of the staff is Indian, but the learner body is now approximately 80 per cent black African and 20 per cent Indian. The matric pass rate has been 98–100 per cent over the past three years. In 2005, the fees were R700 per annum.

The assessment tasks

The data set for this analysis are the tests written by Grade 10 learners in the three selected schools in 2006, as well as the exemplar paper for Grade 10 released by the KZN Department of Education in November 2006. Three tests are analysed each from Lincoln and North Hill.

The tests set by the teachers at North Hill and Lincoln and the DoE were in line with the demands of the new curriculum and the tests at these schools were designed using the guidelines given by the Department of Education's Assessment Guidelines. Tests are framed by one of the key curriculum questions (for example 'How did the Industrial Revolution affect the working class in Britain?' or 'What is the connection between the Atlantic slave trade and the accumulation of wealth during the Industrial Revolution?'). The tests consisted of three or four sources with a number of short questions (usually worth 30 marks), followed by a piece of extended writing worth 20 marks. Some examples of the extended writing required are: write a letter to a newspaper as a liberal reformer in Britain; write a speech made by Necker, France's Finance Minister to persuade the King to tax the nobles.

The two tests from Enthabeni were not designed in this format. One Enthabeni

test was a comprehension exercise based on an extract from the textbook, and the second was a list of recall questions. These are not included in the analysis as they do not contain any source material. It is worth noting that these learners were not exposed to the new style of test during the year but then had to write the DoE exemplar paper in November 2006. It is probably fair to surmise that these learners would not have had the recognition rules for the new legitimate text.

Analysing the data

The tests were analysed using the following two questions:

1. What are learners required to do with the source?

Each question in each test was categorised according to what learners were required to do with the source. The History Assessment Guidelines (Department of Education, 2007) list three levels of questions for working with sources in Grade 10.

Level 1: Extract relevant information and data from the sources. (1a)* Organise information logically. (1b) Explain historical concepts. (1c)
Level 2: Engage with sources of information to judge their usefulness for the task (my understanding of this is the source's usefulness for answering the key question). (2a) Identify the socio-economic and political power relations operating in societies. (2b)
Level 3: Explain why there are different interpretations of historical events, people's actions and changes. (3a) Understand and convert statistical information (data) to graphical or written information. (3b)

*I have added the sub-categories in each Level (1a, 1b, etc.) to enable more fine grained analysis.

It is not clear if these levels are hierarchically organised. One assumes that the levels indicate increasing levels of cognitive complexity, but it is not clear, for example, why converting statistical information is a higher-level task than identifying the socio-economic and political power relations operating in societies.

The Learning Programme Guidelines (Department of Education, 2005, p.50) note that learners might be asked the following questions about sources:

- Obtaining direct information from the source.
- Questions requiring learners to show their wider knowledge of the period dealt with by the sources.
- Straightforward interpretation of the sources – what is being said by the originator of the source? What are the originator's views/ opinions on the issue?
- More complex interpretation involving more than one source – this looks at aspects such as subjectivity/bias and reliability.

If we compare this information from the LPG to the levels described in the SAG, it is clear that the SAG levels do not provide a description for learners being required to show their wider knowledge of a historical period or context, nor do they provide a description for learners being required to interpret or analyse a source. In fact it appears that SAG levels do not describe the kind of question that requires learners to engage with sources looking for inconsistencies, for motivation, reading 'between the lines' (Wineburg, 2001).

Although the levels of questions described by the SAG have shortcomings, I decided to use these to analyse the questions in the tests and exams, as these are the official guidelines. Each question was categorised as either Level 1, 2 or 3, and then for each test the percentage of marks per category was calculated. However, there were some test questions which could not be categorised according to these levels. These were a range of questions which required learners to recall knowledge, to show empathy, to compare sources, to analyse cartoons, to interpret the meaning of a source or to express ones own opinion based on the evidence, the Bloom's Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson, 2005).

2. Are the sources contextualised?

A second set of questions was asked of each historical source that was used in the tests. These were about the detail of contextual information that was made available about the source. Is it made clear who produced the source (name, occupation, possible bias)? Why was a source produced and for what audience? When was the source produced? These questions are vital in order to assess the nature and value of the source material. Obviously if the source given to learners is not placed in context, they will not be able to ask any questions about its reliability or bias.

Findings

1. What are learners required to do with the sources?

The findings are presented in the following table, and then discussed overleaf.

Table 1: Analysis of source-based questions used in selected tests and exams Grade 10, 2006. Percentage of marks per category.

		SAG Level 1	SAG Level 2	SAG Level 3	Other*	Total
North Hill	Test 1	1a 81% 1c 6% **87%**	0	0	13%	100%
	Test 2	1a 53% 1b 7% 1c 10% **70%**	0	0	30%	100%
	June exam	1a 56% 1b 13% 1c 5% **74%**	0	0	26%	100%
	November exam	1a 63% 1b 13% 1c 7% **83%**	2a 7%	0	13%	100%
Total average		**78%**	**2%**	**0**	**20%**	**100%**
Lincoln	Test 1 Slavery	1a 8% 1b 12% **20%**	0	3a 10%	70%	100%
	Test 2 Ind Rev	1a 38% **38%**	0	0	62%	100%
	November exam	1a 35% 1b 7% 1c 1% **43%**	2a 2%	3a 18%	37%	100%
Total average		**34%**	**2%**	**18%**	**56%**	**100%**
Dept of Education National Senior Certificate Grade 10 2006		1a 40% 1b 16% 1c 8%	2b 2%	3a 5%	29%	100%
Total average		**64%**	**2%**	**5%**	**29%**	**100%**

*Other: these questions required learners to recall knowledge, to show empathy, to compare sources, to analyse cartoons, to interpret the meaning of a source or to express one's own opinion based on the evidence.

The percentage of questions categorised as Level 1 was 78 per cent for North Hill tests, 43 per cent for the Lincoln tests and 64 per cent for the DoE. Thus for North Hill and the DoE paper, the majority of questions, fall into Level 1, and of these, most are Level 1a which is 'Extract relevant information and data from sources'. Essentially these questions are little more than a comprehension exercise. Examples of these kinds of questions are 'In Source 3, why were the Trekkers able to travel so deep into the interior?' Source 3 is an extract from WB Boyce 1838, *Notes on South African Affairs*. The answer is clearly given in the text of the source.

The North Hill and DoE tests have only 2 per cent of questions at Level 2 and North Hill has none on Level 3. Lincoln has the highest percentage of questions at Level 3a, which is 'Explain why there are different interpretations of historical events, people's actions and changes'. These are the questions that actually require learners to engage with the source as an historical document and to evaluate the usefulness of a source, to analyse its particular bias, the reason it was written and the audience for which it was written, to read 'between the lines' or compare two different perspectives on the same event. So for the most part learners are simply not expected to think about the source as an historical document, they are simply texts on which one is asked some comprehension questions.

The percentage of questions that could not be classified according to the SAG levels was 20 per cent for North Hill, 56 per cent for Lincoln and 29 per cent for the DoE paper had 29 per cent. These were questions that required learners to analyse a cartoon, to compare sources, to show empathy with a historical person, to interpret what a source may mean, or to show understanding of historical concepts or times. The cognitive demand of the Lincoln tests was higher because the majority of questions were in this category. The tests set by the Lincoln teacher were different from the others in that a number of questions required learners to have knowledge that could not be extracted from the source.

Contextualising and referencing the source

Only eleven (15 per cent) sources of the total of 72 sources which were analysed were fully referenced in that the learners were given the name, the occupation of the writer, the purpose for which the source was produced and the date it was produced. For real historians this information would be absolutely vital, because it enables one to know if the person producing the source was an eyewitness to the account or not.

The following example of referencing comes from a source in the DoE November exemplar paper:

> This is a source from Olaudah Equiano's autobiography. He outlines some of his experiences when he was kidnapped from a village in Nigeria and taken aboard a ship to America.

An authentic historical researcher would need to know when this autobiography was written. Was it from a diary written at the time he was captured? Or was it a memoir written some years later and under what circumstances. Without that information, it is very difficult for learners to evaluate the usefulness or reliability of this source. One source learners are given (Lincoln November 2006) is simply labelled 'A letter in the *Courier*'. Important information such as who wrote the letter, and when it was written is missing, therefore one cannot to the trustworthiness of the source.

An example from a North Hill test is a short source that is labelled 'This extract is a description of one working class house in Britain during the Industrial Revolution'. Learners are then asked to evaluate 'how reliable is this source to an historian studying the living conditions of the working class in Britain during the Industrial Revolution'. What is not clear is how learners measure reliability since they are not told who wrote the description, for what purpose it was written, and when it was written.

In the Lincoln tests sometimes learners are given no information about a source because they are expected to recognise it and then answer questions about it. For example, they are given a picture of the Tennis Court Oath and asked to name the event to which the picture refers. They are being assessed on their knowledge of the historical period.

Wineburg (2001) showed that historians used the 'sourcing heuristic', the practice of reading the source of the document before reading the text, nearly all the time, while for students the text's attribution carried no special weight. However, for many of sources analysed, students are not given much detail about the text, so it is difficult to see how they could approach the text 'like historians'.

Other themes that emerged from the data

A present day perspective

Some questions read the source with present-day eyes, which is not the way an historian would read a source. An example is the question based on a diary by a missionary in 1923 in the section on the Mfecane in the DoE paper. The diary entry describes how homes had clearly been quickly abandoned; some were destroyed and even a child had been left behind. The question asked of learners is:

> 'The child was a mere skeleton, unable to stand from weakness'. Explain your response to this kind of child abuse.

The source is being seen from a present day perspective, rather than in its own contemporary context. Tosh (2006) suggests that there are three principles that underpin historical awareness as distinct from social memory. The first is the recognition of the gulf that separates our own age from all previous ages. So the first responsibility of the historian is to understand the difference of the past. The second principle is that the subject of enquiry must remain in its contemporary context. The third aspect is the recognition of historical process, which means understanding the relationship between events. An historian would understand this source in its context and thus would not name the child's condition as 'child abuse' but would understand it as a consequence of people abandoning their homes in confusion and haste. Perhaps the mother thought the child was with her father and vice versa? This question is not an 'historical' question at all. A 'personal response to child abuse' would seem to be more appropriate to a Life Orientation classroom. How is a learner to understand the 'legitimate text' for this question?

Use of the same set of sources

What was also striking about these sets of tests and exams was that the same set of three sources and questions was used for the Mfecane in both schools and the DoE paper (these included the diary excerpt and question about child abuse as detailed above). Similarly the set of sources about the Industrial Revolution that included the newspaper article entitled 'Ignorance', the photograph of child miners and the census excerpt was used in the DoE paper, and a North Hill test. Obviously these had appeared in an official exemplar somewhere. This does raise the question of learners seeing the same sources

repeatedly, and when it comes to extracting information will become progressively easier, particularly since many questions require simply extracting information from a source. It also points to the fact that the number of primary sources accessible to teachers is limited.

Discussion

There is certainly a shift to what *look like* enquiry-based assessments in these 2006 test and exam papers. Test papers contain a number of different kinds of sources and look different to tests that require learners to remember a number of key concepts and facts and to arrange these in coherent arguments. It is interesting to note that Lincoln and North Hill were using sources in tests before 2006, while Enthabeni was not, and continued not to do so in 2006, until learners were given the DoE paper in November. However, it seems that it is the form of the tests that has shifted more substantially than the substance of the tests (Saxe, Gearhart, Franke, Howard and Crockett, 1999).

The data show that the North Hill and Lincoln teachers understand the concept of source-based questions differently, and have designed quite different kinds of tests. The North Hill tests require learners predominantly to extract information from sources and to organise this information (78 per cent of all questions). The Lincoln tests require learners to draw more on their conceptual knowledge and to engage with, analyse and interpret sources. The DoE examination also has the majority of questions categorised as Level 1 (64 per cent), but there are some questions requiring analysis and interpretation.

None of the assessment tasks have followed the 'official' weighting provided by the SAG, which is that 30 per cent of questions should be allocated to Level 1, 40 per cent to Level 2, and 30 per cent to Level 3. Given that the SAG levels in fact do not have descriptions for analysis, interpretation and comparison of sources, it is a strength that the papers all displayed some questions which required these competences. However, it is problematic that the majority of questions in the DoE and North Hill papers were at Level 1, and that there were very few at levels 2 and 3.

It does not appear that learners are being assessed on whether they have a good understanding of the key events, their chronology and their causes and effects. The North Hill learners are also not really interrogating evidence and questioning different interpretations of the past. The most common assessment task involves answering comprehension-type questions based on a range of

history textbooks and sources. Thus it appears that learners are neither 'doing history' (that is, interrogating sources as historians do), nor are they being required to have a firm knowledge of historical events. Overall few of the sources were properly contextualised and learners were seldom required to engage with them as *historical* documents.

The data show that particularly the North Hill teacher and DoE officials are struggling to design meaningful source-based questions that actually do require learners to think and work like historians. The teacher at Enthabeni had not set any source-based tests for her Grade 10 learners. My observation of a four-day provincial FET workshop for history teachers in 2005, showed that the majority of the teachers at that workshop were not able to design appropriate source-based questions. If one has never done this before, this is not surprising. The assumption at the workshop appeared to be that it was enough to name the shift from 'knowing history' to 'doing history', as if naming it would bring it to be (Bertram, 2008). But most teachers are not historians and their own experience of learning history at school or at university[2] will vary as to whether it enabled them to develop a disciplinary gaze. If history learners in schools are to 'use the insights and skills of historians, analyse sources and evidence and study different interpretations, divergent opinions and voices' as the NCS envisions, they need teachers who are able to do these things. These are more than just 'skills'; they are ways of thinking and being which cannot be developed in a four day workshop.

The very strong focus placed on *doing* history may have had the unintended consequence of sidelining *knowing* history, or substantive and propositional knowledge. With an exception of some of the Lincoln test questions, there was certainly little focus in these tests on assessing whether learners had a good understanding of historical events, chronology or cause and effect relationships. When executed poorly, an exclusively source-based approach can lead to the marginalisation of history knowledge. Of course, the reform is new and this analysis was of 2006 tests set in the first year that the new curriculum was implemented in the FET band. It remains to be seen if things change in subsequent years as teachers become more familiar with the requirements of the curriculum.

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[2] A survey of the teachers at the FET history workshop showed that 12 of 18 had a university degree, and 15 had studied history for three years at college or university. Yet still many were unable to design appropriate source-based questions. Possibly their history education was very much in the 'history as facts' model. It must be noted these teachers were teaching in urban or township schools. A survey of rural history teachers would probably show fewer had a university degree.

This study raises questions about whether history assessment should be so completely focused on source-based questions, as intended by the NCS for History. It is undeniable that learners should understand that no history is 'true', that history is an interpretation of the past, and that different people will understand the past in different ways. Similarly, learners should be able recognise bias and think critically about what they read. In terms of skills of investigation, learners should understand what procedures historians use to write history. But there are a number of ways to achieve these things, of which a source-based approach is only one. In their book about history for a new South Africa, Bam and Visser (1997) suggest a number of different approaches to history, such as open discussions, problem solving, oral history techniques, role playing, using objects and analysing sources.

Bernstein (1996) suggests that as pedagogic discourse appropriates various discourses, unmediated discourses are transformed into mediated, virtual or imaginary discourses. He gives the example of children doing woodwork at school. He says that a real discourse called carpentry is transformed into an imaginary discourse called woodwork at school. So too, school history is an imaginary discourse that is recontextualised from a real discourse practiced by historians. History at school is not the same thing as academic history. The official curriculum suggests that good history teaching should promote non-discrimination and to raise debates, confront issues and address current social and environmental concerns (Department of Education, 2005). We need to think more about how to teach history so that learners build a strong foundation that enables them in the future to do history as a historian would.

Conclusion

The new FET history curriculum statements have whole-heartedly embraced an enquiry-based approach. This source-based skills approach dovetails beautifully with the assessment policy of outcomes-based education. However, few of the questions in the Grade 10 assessment tests analysed here required learners to use the insights and skills of historians. Historians read sources in in-depth ways, reading between the lines for bias and nuance and taking careful note of the context, author and purpose of a source. Few of the questions in these tests require learners to read sources in this way, and they were seldom asked to engage with a source as an historical text.

There are obviously things to be gained by the enquiry-based approach,

namely that learners gain an understanding of history as a human construction, that interpretations of what happened in the past shift and change and that they learn to read historical texts with a critical eye. However, there are signs that learners are not being assessed on these historical skills, which seem to have been replaced by generic skills and comprehension. Neither are they being assessed on a deep substantive knowledge of history. It will be important to continue to analyse history assessment tasks to see if this trend continues or not.

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