

ACHIEVING RESULTS IN HISTORY AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER: A LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Maxine F Gibb

Matriculant, 2013

National Senior Certificate

maxine.faron.gibb@gmail.com

Abstract

Matriculating in December 2013 from a co-educational government school in the Western Cape, the writer was the top student in the National Senior Certificate examinations for History in the Province. She shares her personal experience, by providing insight from a learner's perspective, on the importance of studying history. She further shares her opinion on how a learner's achievement can be directly affected by a teacher's input and method of teaching. Based on her experience, she comments on the traits present in a superior teacher, teaching methods and techniques which she found effective in her learning experience, and what aspects of teaching contributed to her academic success, passion for history and its utility, and development as a person.

Keywords: Matric results; History learner; Methods and techniques; History teaching; Traits; History teacher.

Introduction

I, like thousands of other South African learners, wrote the final National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams towards the end of 2013 and waited anxiously for the day on which our results would be released. On receiving them, I was shocked to hear that I was the top History learner in the Western Cape Province in the NSC exams. Achieving the seemingly impossible made me reflect on all that which had contributed to my result in History.

My interest in history and subsequent achievement in the subject can be largely attributed to the instruction of my teachers. I believe that interest in a subject is motivated by two factors: how well a learner performs in the subject and the teacher who teaches them the subject. The two are closely related more often than not. A teacher can educate in a manner that either encourages the learner's interest and confidence to flourish, or in a manner

that slowly chips away at the interest until the learner eventually despises the subject. My personal experience was that of me having a general interest in history that was cultivated by exceptional history teachers, over a period of five years. This ultimately developed into a deep appreciation for the subject and a skill-set that groomed me for success.

When looking at the ten traits of highly effective teachers as identified by McEwan (2002), I find there are few areas where my most effective history teachers were lacking in traits. McEwan categorises the ten traits of highly effective teachers into personal, teaching and intellectual traits. I will illustrate in what way I found my most effective history teachers to have reflected these traits, and what few traits I found them to be lacking in, so as to provide a theoretical framework for what I think is a highly effective teacher who achieves results despite demographics (McEwan, 2002). In this article, I am going to discuss what I interpret the importance of studying history to be, so as to provide a context in which I can focus on specific techniques I believe are effective in teaching history. Some of these specific techniques are techniques which I personally experienced as effective, which I will include under the broader concepts of personal, teaching and intellectual traits to which they link.

The importance of studying History

I believe history is one of the most important subjects that a learner can choose and the benefits of studying this subject have proved themselves to me time and time again. The valuable essay writing skills and critical analytical thinking that I have learnt from History has aided my performance in other subjects while having a widespread knowledge of the world and the society in which I am placed provides the necessary awareness I need to form my own identity. Our history forms part of our incredibly important heritage, without which we cannot contextualise ourselves within society nor make educated and informed decisions.

Upon leaving the protective bubble that was my school environment, my foundation in history was the most beneficial of all my subjects. While travelling to the United States on my gap year I realised that without having studied history, I would have been uninformed about a number of important topics of discussion, past world events or even events in my own country. If taught effectively, History can transcend the prescribed curriculum and cultivate an interest in the world, politics, current affairs and social issues.

There is again debate in South Africa as to whether history should be a compulsory subject in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase of schooling, as opposed to it being an elective subject, which it is at present. This debate around history being taught as a compulsory subject is a very important discussion to have as it directly challenges the importance of History as a subject. The concern expressed by advocates against History as a compulsory subject is that History has the potential to be taught as a means of promoting a kind of “patriotic nationalism”, in the mould of Christian Nationalism under Apartheid policy. This in no way resonates with my experience as a learner of history. The curriculum I studied during high school was, in my opinion, incredibly balanced between different aspects of South African history and world history. This enabled me to learn how South Africa, in turn, was affected by world politics and world events. The future generation of politicians, teachers and leaders need to be taught this broad context, so that they develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of globalisation. Similarly, we need to learn about our South African past so that we can understand our heritage and the role we play within that context. As long as history is being taught in a non-biased manner where the learner can critically assess events and issues, History as a compulsory subject can only benefit learners. My view is to an extent subjective, in that it is informed by my own experience of the history classroom. My time spent in America gave me the opportunity to assess the high school history curriculum in the USA and compare it to our own. I think that what I learnt was one of the most well put together, comprehensive curriculums that can be taught under the one umbrella of History over five years. It has given me a fundamental understanding of the context our world and societies find themselves in today.

Personal traits

McEwan’s understanding of a teacher’s effective personal traits refers to traits that indicate character and personality. These are described as a teacher being passionate, positive and authentic whilst demonstrating care, respect and fairness in their relationships with learners. An effective teacher also possesses a trait whereby their leadership qualities positively affect their learners (McEwan, 2002).

I experienced that my most effective history teachers had a genuine connection with their students, and an air of authority and leadership that demanded a level of respect. The history teachers with whom I had a

friendly, relaxed and honest connection towards were the teachers I was most comfortable to engage with. I felt I could participate in class discussions, ask questions or clarify information that I was confused about as well as approach them one-on-one about a mark I received on an essay or if I needed some advice. Creating this kind of environment for learners is important because when a learner does not feel comfortable enough to engage, it inhibits them from reaching their full potential. I was intimidated by teachers who were overly formal or impatient and I would thus hesitate to take full advantage of the opportunities to clarify areas where I was confused or to engage in class discussions. By making sure that a learner never feels that he/she have asked a stupid question or feels afraid to speak up in class, a history teacher will start to cultivate a genuine connection with their learners. Being approachable, supportive and encouraging is a sure way to achieve this.

There is a delicate balance between having authority over a class and being authoritarian. A history teacher should cultivate a classroom environment which encourages debate and discussion, where learners can have fun and enjoy the learning experience, but not an environment that becomes disruptive and is counterproductive. I have experienced both environments in a history classroom and have thoroughly enjoyed the excitement that can grow out of an interesting and heated debate but have also experienced how considerably more difficult it can be to learn effectively in an unruly class. Teachers should not have to shout or lose their temper on a regular basis to assert their authority in the class. The majority of learners will follow instructions and take the work seriously when it is time to do so if they respect their teacher. If a history teacher does not take his or her work seriously, neither will their learners. If a history teacher is unprepared, does not respect their learners or is in any way hypocritical, it is unlikely they will be respected by their learners in the way that is necessary for a productive class environment. Additionally, the passion that a history teacher has for their profession and the subsequent amount of effort that they put into their teaching can be sensed by the learners they teach. This, I believe, gives momentum to a learners' subsequent performance and, in my case, helped me excel in history.

Teaching traits

According to McEwan (2002), the teaching traits are the traits most likely to get results. They are what a teacher does in an effort to improve the results of their learners. The teaching traits are described as a teacher's ability to

effectively manage time and organise the classroom, their unique style in teaching and their instructional effectiveness (McEwan, 2002). The following traits and techniques are some practical efforts I experienced as being effective in teaching history and eventually leading to improved results.

Time management

I think the most effective teaching traits are a history teacher's time management in covering the curriculum and their ability to return marked assessments and projects in a timeous manner. The reason why I think this trait is more important than one might originally assume is that I have encountered teachers who do not manage time properly. They get side-tracked too often, spend time disproportionately on different sections that then results in the teacher neglecting content later on, or rushing to complete certain sections. This lack of effective time management causes undue stress on learners. By staying on top of the work and returning assignments promptly, a history teacher gives comprehensive instruction on the curriculum and allows the learners to cope better with the work load, as well as understand the work better. My most effective history teachers were quick to return assessments and were more often than not able to provide time for revision, having managed their time properly. These traits in my history teachers significantly lowered my stress with regards to being assessed in history.

Style of teaching

Another effective teaching trait I regard as being beneficial is a history teacher's unique style of lecturing and instructing the class. The ability to engage learners in class discussions or to get them to listen to large amounts of information is determined by each history teacher's individual style of communication and teaching. As identified by McEwan (2002), incorporating humour into lessons and being visibly passionate about teaching are effective teaching techniques. Along with these techniques, my most effective history teacher's made use of personal anecdotes and incentives for learners, all contributing to their unique style of teaching.

Teaching techniques

I believe history teachers need to have a certain amount of tenacity when teaching a class of learners with varying abilities and interests. A history teacher needs to reinforce an idea more than once in order for all of the learners in the class to conceptualise it. Thus it is very important that a history teacher provide enough time for revision before assessments. A particularly useful tool in revising content, and to place it in context when first introducing a new section, is to use a timeline to visually conceptualise events chronologically over a period of time. This helps broaden the picture and shows learners visually how certain events are linked. I think learners are often concerned with covering the necessary content that they will be assessed on, and therefore feel comforted by having a consolidated source from which to study. Summarised notes, mind maps and timelines were useful as a foundation upon which I based my studying.

Incorporation of media sources to enhance learning

Visual media sources such as dramatised films on history, documentaries, illustrations and political cartoons can effectively enhance learning in the classroom. Films like *Schindler's List* help develop an understanding of the holocaust both intellectually and emotionally. Zapiro cartoons are excellent depictions of the political and social climate in South Africa and are useful to use in history lessons, for example, in understanding the changing responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process as it unfolded. I was once shown an animated PowerPoint presentation depicting the events of World War II upon first learning about it. It stood out for me because it helped me comprehend the links between the superpowers, the geographical locations and how the war was fought. It gave me a visual image to later recall certain facts. Various forms of media are able to summarise and display often complex or detailed concepts in a relatively shorter period of time, whilst also displaying the content in a way that is easier to conceptualise, and reinforces the work being studied, either chronologically or in a more abstract manner. I do not think history teachers should become dependent on media as their primary resource to teach but should use it as an aid to enhance understanding and as an extended teaching and learning tool to keep learners engaged. In a study by education psychologist Salomon (1979) he concludes that when presented with both verbal and visual forms, students are able to more easily learn new and abstract concepts. This supports my belief that by

displaying the same information in many different ways via visual media and in conjunction with explanations from history teachers, learners are more likely to understand and remember it. My experience is that this exposure to many different perceptions of historiography, as well as the emotional nature that is synonymous with certain types of media, cultivates a more poignant connection and real understanding of events.

Another example of this benefit was being exposed to media interpretations of Apartheid, such as documentaries on actual Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials and how South Africa transitioned from Apartheid into a democratic country. This signified a turning point in my true understanding of apartheid. What was once a “concept” and theoretical idea, became a real human experience after hearing about personal accounts of hardships, wrongdoings and violence brought on by Apartheid. The current generation being taught history were born into a democratic South Africa and have no first-hand experience of Apartheid. Thus the exposure to various media sources applies to all of history being taught, as the theory and words on a page need to be contextualised as a human experience. Furthermore, I think this exposure creates a culture of empathy, sensitivity, understanding and a better ability to judge bias. The use of different media sources in the classroom can benefit both learners and history teachers as it keeps learners more engaged in the topic and makes the learning experience at times more fun and diverse experience. I believe that media is an incredibly powerful tool that can be used in a positive way to enhance the learning process. I also believe my exposure to media sources whilst being taught history prepared me to skilfully interpret the source-based questions during my final NSC history examinations.

Instruction and assessment of essay writing

I think that an emphasis on writing essays should be started as early in the teaching and learning process as possible. At my high school, we were introduced to the construction of written arguments in paragraph form in Grade 8, and started constructing extended written pieces, in the form of essays, in Grade 9. Being able to crack the essay was a decisive moment in my studies. For the majority of learners, writing essays for assessment is a daunting task. The success of an essay relies as much on its construction and argument as it does on recalling the content. Making sure that learners are

able to execute essays as a kind of second nature will dramatically improve a learner's achievements.

I think it is important that history teachers be consistent and fair in marking essays across the history department. Despite the use of a marking matrix for assessing essays, the subjective influences in teachers assessing essays can be discouraging for some learners whose marks on their essays fluctuate. Many learners are competitive and thus do compare the marks they obtain for assessments, including their essays, with their peers. I think this type of formative reflection and competitiveness can be productive because learners are able to see what skills they are lacking in conveying a certain answer that they thought they had answered sufficiently. For example, learners can compare how their argument weakened their essay despite the content being present. However, it is also frustrating for some learners when comparing the marks given on essays by what the learners may perceive as being a lenient marker versus a stricter marker which translates into a lower average for essay marks. My school experience led me to believe that the form of moderation taking place did not seem to translate into all history teachers marking with the same rigour. Learners would benefit more from a form of moderation that is done more frequently and reflects a more fair and realistic assessment of essays across the board.

Impact of overseas history excursion

I was lucky enough to be part of a history tour to Eastern Europe in June 2012. The trip focused mainly on World War II, the Holocaust, the aftermath of both, and the Cold War – all of which, especially the latter, were significant for my final NSC History exam. In retrospect the experience of the tour and all of the knowledge that I would not have gained had I not been a part of it, truly strengthened both my love for history and my understanding of it. To see the infinite depth of history as well as all that I had yet to learn was humbling. The immensely fun journey of travelling through eight different countries on another continent with fifty of my peers was juxtaposed by the incredibly sobering and emotionally jarring experience of visiting Sachsenhausen, Terezín and Auschwitz-Birkenau. No textbook can even begin to convey the reality of such an incomprehensible event such as the Holocaust in comparison to standing in an actual gas chamber or on the ground where its victims once stood. I believe this tour helped broaden my

view and aided my ability to understand and therefore write on the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR's effect on South Africa in the final NSC exams. I would encourage any history teacher to embark on similar expeditions of a field trip nature with their learners as it creates interest in the subject and broadens the horizons of the learners.

Structure of the layout of a History classroom

Reflecting on my five years as a History learner, the majority of them were spent in classrooms where there were desks placed in a peripheral format (U-shaped), and I think this made a contribution to the effectiveness of the classes. In comparison to a traditional layout, this U-shaped layout of the class is better for use in a History classroom. The students have a good view of the teacher and the front of the class whilst also being able to face each other. As a result, the class feels more like a history group as there are fewer separations by rows. This layout creates more of an open environment and thus is more conducive to creating a climate for critical discussion and debate amongst the class. This physical change in layout can be seen as a kind of resource for history teachers in creating a better environment in which to teach.

Intellectual traits

According to McEwan (2002), intellectual traits demonstrate a teacher's knowledge, curiosity and awareness, and are described as the way in which a teacher thinks. Effective teachers poses comprehensive knowledge of their subject's content and an ability to assess what is expected of learners within their instructional setting. Their intellectual traits enable them to teach their learners strategically, reflect on their personal teaching methods and adapt to the changing landscape of their profession (McEwan, 2002).

Intellectual traits are, in my opinion, also significantly important in getting results. My history teachers who had extensive knowledge of the content they taught, which was above and beyond the textbook content, influenced me in a way that made me more likely to achieve better results. The more information and context I was given, the more I could understand and remember the work. This kind of comprehension is also vital in constructing a powerful essay. A learner is less likely to have flaws or mistakes in their essays, or will be better able to understand and interpret an abstract source, such as a political

cartoon, if they have a wider knowledge of the subject. Understandably, with limited time to teach a set amount of work, a history teacher's choice of what additional information, anecdotes and narratives to include is subjective. More experienced or knowledgeable history teachers have a natural instinct for choosing what extra information is relevant and will aid their learners in better understanding the work. I think that history teachers who have many years of experience are familiar with the curriculum, have nuanced strategies and plans to teach it and are effective in preparing learners for exams. They are also able to teach them the necessary skills and content to the point where success in the exam is inevitable. Novice teachers should therefore make use of opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues.

The Pygmalion effect

I believe an important intellectual trait for a history teacher to have in order for them to be an effective teacher is their awareness of the impact they have on their learners. One of the many ways in which a teacher has a significant impact on the success of a student is revealed by Rosenthal in *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968). Rosenthal performs a psychological systematic study to gauge the influence of a teacher's expectations on a learner's success. Rosenthal gave a class of learners a standardised IQ test, but misled the learners and teachers to believe that it was a special Harvard test of "Inflected Acquisition" that would be able to determine if a learner was on the verge of an 'intellectual boom'. Rosenthal then selected a portion of the learners at random and told the teacher that these selected few were expected to have a sudden growth in IQ. The study showed that over a period of two years, the learners who were expected to have a growth in IQ, did in fact have an increase in IQ when given the same standardised test. Through more research Rosenthal noticed differences in the teacher's moment-to-moment interactions with the learners that affected a learner's progress overall. Essentially he proved that positive expectations yielded higher achievement, and lower or negative expectations yielded worse results. He named this phenomenon the *Pygmalion effect*: "When we expect certain behaviours of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behaviour more likely to occur" (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985:36).

The fact that a teacher's expectation of a learner can actually manifest into better results, or potentially worse, is astounding. It shows the significant influence that a teacher can have on a student and the subsequent responsibility

that this places on a teacher. If a teacher sends positive expectation messages, their learners will be more likely to engage and succeed (Tauber, 1999). Knowing this, it is important for history teachers to be aware that if they have preconceived notions of whether or a not learner can or will succeed, it can negatively impact a learner. Even if a learner has not excelled in the past, a teacher's role in actively having positive expectations could improve the learner's performance. I believe the action based on this knowledge lies with a history teacher's metacognitive, communicative and reflective abilities, as described by McEwan (2002).

According to McLeod (1995), the *Pygmalion effect* does have repercussions in a classroom. Teachers' low expectations cultivate a negative environment that prevents them from expecting higher standards from learners. Teachers should avoid complaining or expressing grievances to each other about individual learners or groups of learners, as this culture of failure becomes the prevailing attitude amongst the teachers (McLeod, 1955). Having low expectations can also effect actual teaching, as teachers are less inclined to challenge learners or pose complex questions if they feel their learners are not clever enough to respond. They anticipate simple answers and get low performance in return (Rhem, 1999). The clear correlation between expectations of learners and their results indicates how effective high expectations can be and the influence a teacher has in inspiring students to succeed. In my experience, I believe that my history teachers' tangible belief in me contributed to my success in the subject. The acts of encouraging me, spending additional time answering my questions or advising me, acknowledging the high standard of work that I did and then still motivating me when I was not meeting my full potential, all affirmed my history teachers' belief and confidence in me. The expectation for me to succeed surpassed my own expectation and led me to perform in a way that I believe I would not have been motivated to do had I been expected to perform poorly by my history teachers and peers.

Conclusion

After reflecting on what influenced my interest in History, I can greatly appreciate that without the effective teaching as reflected in the theoretical framework of McEwan's traits for a highly effective teacher, including the positive expectations of my history teachers, their knowledge and experience in exposing me to relevant media forms and excellent instruction in constructing source-based answers and essays, I would not have achieved the success that I

did. I believe that because my history teachers were in most instances able to satisfy the traits set by McEwan, I was able to obtain the top mark for History in the Western Cape for the NSC exams. My history teachers educated me in a manner that made my interest and confidence in history flourish, giving me the skill set I needed to achieve what were to me unimaginable results.

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