

# IN THE BEGINNING.... WHERE TO START IN HISTORY TEACHING?

*Rob Siebörger*

*University of Cape Town*

This paper originates in two separate professional experiences I had last year. The first occurred while I was presenting workshops to curriculum advisers and teachers on the *Turning Points in History* series of booklets and CD. It was that, on more than one occasion, I was confronted by strident disagreement when I said that one had to begin with the content (“Content and contexts for the attainment of the Assessment Standards”), not the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards when planning to teach history. The second took place when I disagreed with the majority of the members of a committee about the way in which unit standard qualifications should be constructed in history. I maintained that when one studied history, the historical content had to be foregrounded, rather than the method, “skill” or purpose of studying the history.

In both cases I argued that planning that began with the outcomes and assessment standards/criteria was antithetical to history – that if one began with them one ended with something that was not history. As I explained in e-mails I wrote at the time, “it’s never the skills that make the history, it’s the history that is explored, developed etc. by means of skills”, and “[i]t does not work successfully to write content in the form of outcomes, and it does not work to make the outcomes on their own decide what the content should be” (Siebörger 2005a and b).

## **How did the problem arise?**

A reconstruction of the curriculum history of history in England provides insights into how outcomes [referred to as Attainment Targets in England] and assessment standards [Levels in England] have been developed in history and into their relation to the content knowledge of history.

In 1971, at the height of the popularity of the objectives movement in curriculum development and lesson planning, Jeanette Coltham and John Fines wrote *Educational Objectives for the Study of History. A suggested framework*. Their definition of an objective very closely resembles present descriptions of learning outcomes, namely, that it describes “what a learner can do as a result of having learned; ... what an observer... can see the learner doing so that he can judge whether or not the objective has been successfully reached. And... indicates what educational experience he requires if he is to achieve the objective.” (1971: 3-4). They divided the objectives for history into four aspects: the motivational behaviours of learners (A), the acquisition of skills and abilities (B), the content of historical study (C), and the results, or satisfaction, gained as a result of studying history (D), and they showed in a diagram how these aspects related to each other (1971: 4-5). As noted by the Historical Association Curriculum Development Project, the important contribution made by Coltham and Fines was that they “laid out for the first time a full set of objectives against which pupils’ attainment in history might be assessed” (2005:14).

Developments soon after this moved in a direction that Coltham and Fines would not have foreseen. The Schools Council History Project, which was set up in 1972, produced a radically changed curriculum for history for 13-16 year olds. The curriculum endeavoured, first, to make history a useful and interesting subject for adolescents through the type of content selected, and, secondly, to improve the methods of teaching and assessing history through understanding the nature of history as a discipline and using what it called “historical skills” to develop abilities such as analysis, judgement and empathy. The skills they identified, based on Coltham and Fines’ (B), were: 1 Finding information; 2 Recalling information; 3 Understanding evidence; 4 Evaluating evidence; 5 Making inferences and hypotheses and 6 Synthesis (SCHP 1976: 41-42). While Coltham and Fines had shown how all the objectives for history (A, B, C, D) are related to each other, an unfortunate consequence of the popularity of the Schools Council approach to history (also referred to as “the new history”) was that “skills” came to be seen as opposed to “content”, and books were published on “skills” which had no content basis – as if history skills could be taught by themselves. This di-

chotomy between skills and content was entirely false, as the purpose of developing the skills was for assessment, and, “[a]t no point have those who advocate the assessment of historical skills denied or downplayed the importance of historical content” (Historical Association 2005:15).

The next significant event was the development of the National Curriculum in England in 1989. A History Working Group was given the task of recommending a framework for school history. They were required to “propose attainment targets [or outcomes] grouped within profile components and supported by programmes of study” (DES 1990:5). The particular difficulty they faced was how to satisfy the government of Margaret Thatcher that their curriculum framework emphasised the importance of acquiring a sound knowledge of British history and to ensure that this knowledge could be assessed. Simply put, the government wanted ‘the facts’ of history to be taught and assessed, while the Working Group believed that historical knowledge was much more complex than this, and included knowledge as ‘information’ (basic fact, dates, etc.), as ‘understanding’ (evidence about facts and how to explain it), and as ‘content’ (the subject matter, period or theme). The Working Group’s solution and final recommendation was as follows:

...we have concluded that the best, and indeed the only, practical way to ensure that historical knowledge as information is taught, learned and assessed, is by clearly spelling out the essential historical information in the programmes of study and assessing it through the attainment targets. The programmes of study carry the same statutory force as the attainment targets and teachers are required to teach the knowledge contained in them. The attainment targets measure pupils’ ability to demonstrate their acquisition of that knowledge expressed through their historical understanding and skills (DES 1990: 7-8).

So, the Working Group produced a curriculum comprising programmes of study that provided the details of the content in units (e.g. Victorian Britain; The Roman Empire, etc.), and four Attainment Targets, which were history skills (Understanding history in its setting; Understanding points of view and interpretations of history; Acquiring and evaluating historical information and Organising and communicating the results of historical study) (DES 1990:115). Since 1990, almost all countries that have introduced outcomes-based history curricula have followed this pattern, and

the RNCS for GET and NCS for FET history are designed in the same way.

The problem, thus, arises from a misunderstanding that history skills are more important than historical content knowledge itself.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of outcomes and Assessment Standards in history is to ensure that the history is properly assessed, not to define what history is studied. I find no comfort at all in that I warned of this potential problem in March 1997, when I wrote (Siebörger 1997):

Within the present parameters of OBE one can no longer justify geography and history in terms of their specific skills or outcomes - they have become generic. We are forced now to say that the reason why they have unique, essential value is because of the content they convey

### **What happens when planning history lessons**

A lesson taught by Angeline Naidoo on slavery at the Cape to Grade 7, excerpts of which are included in Siebörger, Weldon and Dean (2005), serves as an example of planning in history.

In this case the teacher began by considering what would be appropriate for Grade 7s to learn about Cape slavery (part of the History Knowledge focus, Department of Education 2002: 60), given that a maximum of three hours of class time would be available. She next checked to see what resources she had at her disposal to teach the lessons. Then she had to decide how to introduce the topic, what to focus upon and how to conclude it. The following table illustrates these decisions:

**Table 1: Content knowledge planning**

Appropriate content knowledge	Resources	Sequence of lessons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What it was like to be a slave</li> <li>• How slaves were treated</li> <li>• Resistance by slaves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cape Town telephone directories</li> <li>• Picture of slave auction</li> <li>• Improvised drama of auction</li> <li>• Story of Galant (1825)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction: Names of slaves – what it was like not to have own name – telephone directories. 40 mins.</li> <li>• Experience of treatment – auction –study picture 40 mins, drama 40 mins.</li> <li>• Example of resistance— Galant 60 mins.</li> </ul>

Having established what history the lessons would cover, the teacher turned to the Learning Outcomes and Assessment standards to provide guidance on methods of teaching the lessons and on how the history could be assessed. She reviewed the Grade 7 Assessment Standards to chose appropriate ones and then considered what assessment activities she could use, as illustrated in Table 2, below. (Note that the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards in history are designed to be used in conjunction with each other, and teachers need to combine Assessment Standards in assessment activities rather than use them individually.)

It is clear from this example that the choice of Assessment Standards and assessment activities is dependent on the content knowledge chosen by the teacher. The history taught, therefore, provides the context in which the Assessment Standards are employed. This is both a strength and a weakness. The strength is that, as the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Activities are derived from the nature of history as a discipline (as seen from Coltham and Fines and the SCHP above), as long as one teaches history systematically one will find many opportunities to do justice to all the Assessment Standards set for a grade. The weakness is that choosing which Assessment Standards and assessment activities to use is not necessarily an easy activity and requires insight and experience of a teacher. (This is why good textbooks are essential as models to help train teachers to see how they can make the best choices.)

**Table 2: Assessment Standard planning**

Possible Grade 7 Assessment Standards for the lessons	Assessment Standards selected	Key questions	Assessment activities
<p><b>LO 1 Historical enquiry</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compiles and organises information from a number of sources to obtain evidence</li> <li>Uses information from sources to present well-thought-out answers to questions</li> </ul>	Uses information from sources to present well-thought-out answers to questions	<p>How important are people's names?</p> <p>What effect did auctions have on the lives of slaves?</p>	Pupils put themselves in the position of someone (slave, owner or someone else) in the story and write a
<p><b>LO 2 Historical knowledge &amp; understanding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describes reasons for and results of key events and changes</li> <li>Explains why certain aspects of society in different contexts have or have not changed over time</li> </ul>	Explains why certain aspects of society in different contexts have or have not changed over time	In what ways are some people still treated as if they are slaves?	
<p><b>LO3 Historical interpretation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognises that value systems influence the way events are interpreted</li> </ul>	Recognises that value systems influence the way events are interpreted	Why is a slavery system not allowed today? Can we understand slavery properly if we don't know what it was like?	

What would happen if one were to plan lessons beginning with the Assessment Standards instead of the content knowledge? At first glance, this would not seem to constitute a major problem, as the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards have been carefully constructed to convey the key processes involved in doing history. The NCS History Learning Programme Guidelines explain that

there is a cycle of historical enquiry in the first three Learning Outcomes, as follows (and the same may be observed in the RNCS):

### **Learning Outcome 1**

- posing/asking questions of the past
- collecting sources which learners interpret by extracting, organising, analysing, and evaluating relevant information in order to address the question. Relevant sources can be located either by teachers or learners, depending on the context of the enquiry.

### **Learning Outcome 2**

- using the conceptual framework in historical analysis and interpretation

### **Learning Outcome 3**

- constructing an answer (piece of history) to questions raised based on evidence from the sources
- communicating findings in a logical, systematic manner (Department of Education 2005a: 13).

There are, however, two very serious consequences of such an approach. One is that, if it were to be adopted, it would completely destroy the logic, sequence and emphasis intended in the design of the content curriculum. (It is worth noting here that both the RNCS knowledge focus and NCS content and contexts have drawn praise internationally for their innovation in the discursive manner in which the content knowledge is presented and for their attempts to transform the understanding of school history in South Africa.) Not only would one lose the benefit of the thought, research and consultation that has gone into the knowledge focus/content and contexts of the curricula, but there would also no longer be any sense of a national curriculum, as each school and teacher would choose the content according to which Assessment Standard they wished to work with at any time. (This would also make it almost impossible to provide common resources such as textbooks and other learning materials.)

An equally critical consequence is that one could end up teaching what cannot be described as history (it might be ‘Integrated studies,’ or similar). Implicit in the nature of history is that one studies the past for the sake of the past. Investigation and enquiry (or weighing evidence, interpretation, analysis and communication, etc.) are not undertaken for their own sake, but in order to be able to reconstruct what happened within a particular context and time in the past.

### Discussion

History is, to the best of my knowledge, one of the only Learning Areas/subjects that has no content knowledge in its Assessment Standards (apart from LO 4 in the NCS, the Heritage outcome) - Life Sciences follows a similar pattern. Planning in history, therefore cannot be approached in the same way as planning in other subjects.

It is regrettable that the Learning Programme guidelines for history for both the RNCS (Department of Education 2003b) and the NCS (Department of Education 2005a) are ambiguous on the issue of whether planning in history begins with content knowledge or the Assessment Standards, as the following table illustrates.

**Table 3: Planning procedures in the History Learning Programme guidelines**

	Quotations that support planning that begins with content knowledge	Quotations that support planning that begins with Assessment Standards
<b>RNCS Social Sciences History (Department of Education 2003b)</b>	(a) This Learning Area emphasizes the construction of knowledge by encouraging learners to ask questions and to find answers about society and the environment in which they live at the same time developing the principle of social justice. The enquiry approach provides an approach to questioning, investigating and finding answers... p. 22	(a) The Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards for History and Geography set out in the Social Sciences Learning Area Statement will be your starting point in designing a Learning Programme. The knowledge focus can then be divided into topics or themes around which teaching and learning can be focused. p.36

	<p>(b) 2.4.1 Broad Principles of Working with Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards: LEARNING OUTCOMES — Knowledge Framework which creates the context — ASSESSMENT STANDARDS. p.23</p> <p>(c) In both, History and Geography it is expected that any learning activity will draw Assessment Standards from all of the Learning Outcomes since these are considered to be integrated. For example, in dealing with the History topic Early African civilisation (Egypt/Nubia) in Grade 5, you would need to consider what knowledge focus/ concepts you need to cover. p.37</p> <p>(d) As outlined above, you should select relevant Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards for each topic. p.37</p>	
<p>NCS History (Department of Education 2005a)</p>		<p>(a) Planning for the teaching of History in Grades 10 to 12 should begin with a detailed examination of the scope of the subject as set out in the History Statement...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarify the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards.</li> <li>2. Study the conceptual progression across the three grades.</li> <li>3. Identify the content to be taught. p.24</li> </ol>

As can be seen from the above information, it appears that at a crucial point in the both the RNCS and the NCS Learning Programme guidelines, teachers are advised to begin with Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards, but whenever practical examples are given about how planning should be done, reality returns and the advice is that content knowledge must be decided before the Assessment Standards.<sup>2</sup>The Subject Assessment Guidelines for NCS History leave no room for ambiguity, however, and clarify the intentions of the Department in the

following explicit statement:

In the National Curriculum Statement, assessment activities will be derived from the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards and the content will provide the context for assessment. Planning will begin with the allocation of content [my italics] (Department of Education 2005b: 7).

The issues raised here are not new or unique. They were addressed by Denis Shemilt in 1980 in the landmark evaluation study of the Schools Council History Project, which established the success of the project. Shemilt pointed out the following regarding the planning of lessons: “Well-prepared teachers encountered few problems, but it is important to note that more planning is needed than may first appear”, and “the critical operation is the organization of time and materials around [the] objectives. There are many ways in which this may be done. The teacher may, for instance, underscore conceptual lessons as they appear in the story; or he may first establish a synoptic overview of the factual narrative...” (1980: 80). He provided an example of how a teacher planning lessons on the history of Medicine would first decide how to allocate and sequence the content knowledge and then would need to detail the specific objectives [Assessment Standards, in our case] that he wished to include.

I conclude with a comment about the second of the experiences related at the beginning of the paper. The issue raised on that occasion was that it was inappropriate to give history units titles that were “skills” rather than descriptions of content. In other words, that units should have titles like “Investigating the history of trade unions in South Africa”, rather than “Investigating continuity and change”. The concern was the same as the concern with lesson planning, as the reason given for the “skills” titles was that the titles of units should correspond to their outcomes. The consequences of such an approach are also the same, as without a content description in the title of the unit there is effectively no content framework for the history and no context in which the outcomes and assessment criteria can be attained.

## References

- 1 A technical reason for why the misunderstanding that one begins planning with content knowledge not learning outcomes and assessment standards has occurred is that in the Grade 10-12 National Curriculum Statement for History, the Content and Contexts for the Attainment of Assessment Standards is mistakenly placed after the Assessment Standards, whereas in the Grade R-9 Revised National Curriculum Statement for Social Sciences, the Knowledge Focus is correctly before the Assessment Standards, as it is in England's National Curriculum.
- 2 G Weldon, who chaired the NCS History committee, explains that, "in both documents [the RNCS and NCS Learning Programme guidelines], the contradictions came when generic sections were inserted into the subject and Learning Area documents during the editing processes". An example of the inappropriateness of this procedure in the NCS History Learning Programme Guidelines is the statement, "[t]he content is identified by analysing the ASs of each LO" [!] (Department of Education 2005a: 18). She also states that an explicit 'History Planning Route' was dropped from the Guidelines before their publication. It had included the following: 1. Content Focus topic; 2. Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards; 3. Key Questions... (Weldon 2006).

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