

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

SKILLS-BASED TEACHING

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After some experimentation with the skills-based approach in Natal, it has become clear that in teaching and learning history we need to integrate knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes instead of isolating them out. However, although these are integrated for the pupils, teachers need to know about these elements in isolation before presenting them holistically.

Let us consider concepts first of all. Because a concept is difficult to define and understand, it is not surprising that teachers have tended to shy away from considering them. Dennis Gunning describes them as "ideas, usually expressed in words, to describe classes or groups of things, people, actions or ideas having something in common."¹

Educationalists seem to agree that a concept is intangible and that it rests in the mind as a kind of trigger word, without precise shape or form itself. The debate is a complicated one² but for our purposes it may be convenient to group concepts into two broad categories (a) abstract e.g. rebellion, revolution or (b) concrete e.g. peace treaty. History has a number of important concepts:

Cause and consequence, change, development, continuity, time, conflict and co-operation, empathy, equality and inequality, evidence, motivation, significance, similarity and difference.

It is important when teaching history to bear in mind that it is probably inappropriate to tell students that they are studying a certain concept. It is better to let the concept emerge through study.

As far as skills are concerned it is important to develop these at primary school level first.

Studies have revealed that even at the age of four, young children have the ability to be persistent and

logical thinkers and large-scale research has shown that children aged only six can begin to understand such concepts as sequence and evidence, if suitable strategies are used.

By the age of nine there is a great leap forward when pupils are able to form more complex logical arguments and are even capable of abstract thinking. Part of this intellectual development depends on a course structure which is specifically designed to develop skills and concepts. If pupils are encouraged to solve problems by open-ended discussion, exposed to exciting stimulus material in the form of pictures, photographs and documents, invited to empathise with historical characters and taught how to work out, define and refine thoughts and ideas, then success will be achieved.³

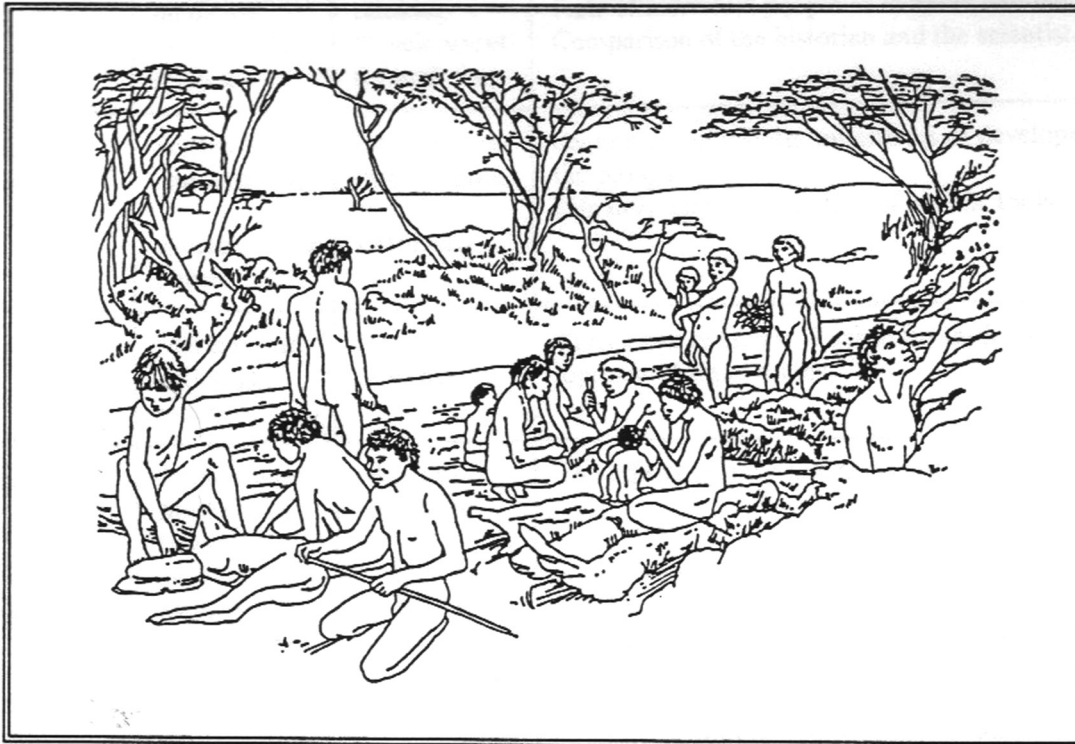
In primary school pupils need to understand that history is essentially about people, about time past and that it is based primarily on the use of sources from the past. Within these broad areas of study, it should be possible for the teacher to introduce a number of skills appropriate to primary school pupils. In the limited space available, I would like to comment briefly about the use of sources at primary school level.

One of the most rewarding source-based exercises is the analysis of the overturned dustbin. This can either be presented to the pupils in pictorial form or the teacher can bring an actual dustbin, having filled it with carefully chosen objects which reflect the lifestyle of a certain group or class of people, to the classroom. Pupils use the objects in the dustbin to draw conclusions about these people and so begin to exercise historical skills.

A local history study of the school, a nearby church, bridge, road or public building is another way of introducing pupils to interesting historical sources. Rather than introduce pupils to complicated sources at primary school we should use pictorial material more often. For example, if we are

teaching Early Man to Std 2 pupils, we can use the following illustration to acquaint pupils with basic historical skills. After supplying pupils with a brief

background to Early Man in Africa, we can use the picture and ask the following questions:⁴



1. Do you think the people shown in the picture would have found it difficult to find food? Did they share their food?
2. Why are they not wearing clothes?
3. Did they have a family life? Were they fond of their children?
4. What kinds of weapons and tools did they use?
5. Where did they sleep at night?
6. Why are they called hunter-gatherers?
7. Why is the campsite next to a river?
8. Did men and women have different jobs to do?
9. What do you think the man on the right is looking for in the trees?

In order to integrate knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes teachers could be introduced to the following matrix which seeks to make the whole history teaching process understandable. This example is taken from a new Std 5 history textbook due to be published this year.⁵

KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS MATRIX

CHAPTER	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	PARTICULAR KNOWLEDGE/ SKILL TO BE DEVELOP
Introduction	Nature of History Civilisation	Sources; Evidence Time	Types of sources: archaeological, oral, written; primary secondary. Evidence: its incompleteness; the historian as a detective. Knowledge of terms; sequencing of dates and periods; use of time-line.

Communication	Writing Printing	Use of sources Development through time	Detective work using Sources. Development in different geographical areas; technological change; effects of printing on literacy
Science	Astronomy medicine mathematics science	Scientific thinking Development through time	Contrast religious beliefs and scientific thinking. Role of individual people as thinkers and innovators. Comparison of the historian and the scientist.
Agriculture Industry	Settled life and farming; climate, water, power	Development through time and place Empathy	Sequencing of events; milestones of development; the plough. Life in Ancient Egypt. Use of metals, tools.
Trade	Markets and exchange; money	Interpretation of sources.	Knowledge of terms. Reason for trade and development of trade routes.
Transport	Trade routes; Methods of transport	Map work. Causation	The effects of trade and transport developments.
Religions	Monotheism Christianity; Islam	Reliability Mapwork	Test for the reliability of sources. Origin, nature and spread of Christianity; the organisation of the early Church
Voyages of Discovery	Exploration	Causation/ motivation and consequence. Mapwork, empathy	Multiple causation. Technological development. Role of individual explorers. Life on board ship.

Before moving on to skills at high school level I believe it is important to consider the area of attitudes and values. If we assume that society requires history in order to prepare for a better future, there is the implication that moral judgment have to be made about past societies in order to do this. An attitude can be defined as a feeling or disposition to think or act in a particular way in relation to oneself and to other individuals or groups in society. A main feature of history is its power as a vehicle to clarify a range of attitudes. History has the power to transmit the attitudes and values that a democratic society finds important. However we should remember that these values are promoted implicitly rather than in an overt fashion.⁶ The success of how these attitudes and values are promoted depends on a sound knowledge of the nature of the discipline and on the methods used by the teacher in the classroom. Some of the attitudes and values which history can promote are:

Concern for and co-operation with others, critical awareness, diligence and dedication, honesty, initiative, perseverance, responsibility, self-discipline, self-respect, tolerance.⁷

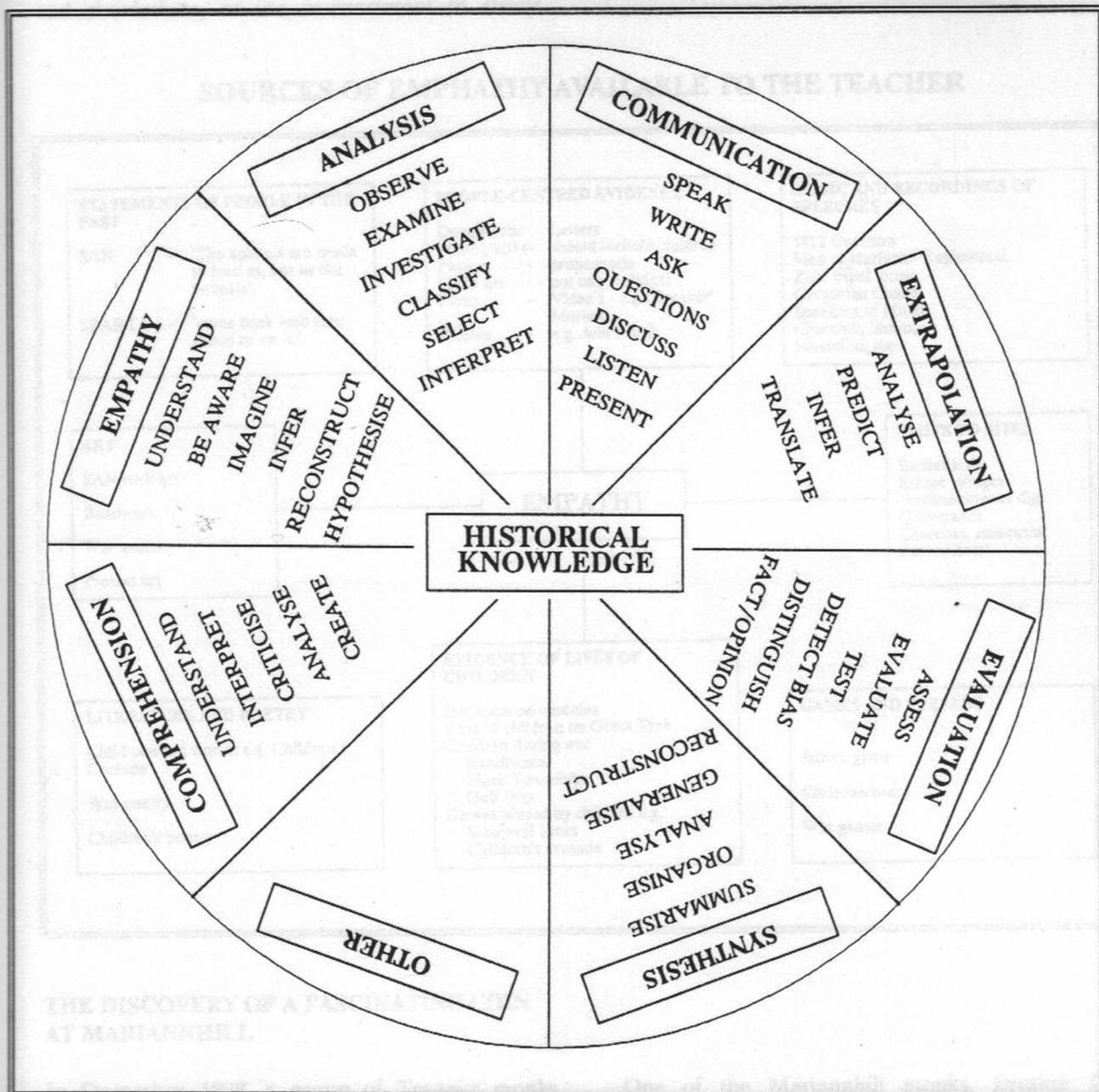
Let us return again to the question of skills. A major problem at high school level is that owing to over-detailed syllabuses, the factual load becomes very heavy and teachers invariably resort to content-based teaching. Although actual background is important, at high school the emphasis should be shifted increasingly to an analysis of source material. The teacher should, however, continue to ensure that an active, pupil-centred, empathetic approach is pursued.

I believe it is important that we concentrate on seven major skills: those of comprehension, analysis, evaluation, synthesis, extrapolation, empathy and communication. Within these broad

categories a great number of subsidiary skills can be addressed. The following diagram illustrates this.⁸ What is important to realise is that we need

to balance the implementation of skills with factual information, something which was not done with the Schools Council Projects.

A SKILLS CIRCLE



Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of all the major skills mentioned but I would like to pay some attention to empathy.

The advantage of an empathetic approach is that it promotes motivation to learn and makes the subject alive and exciting. In Britain the Primary History Association's firm belief is that empathy is

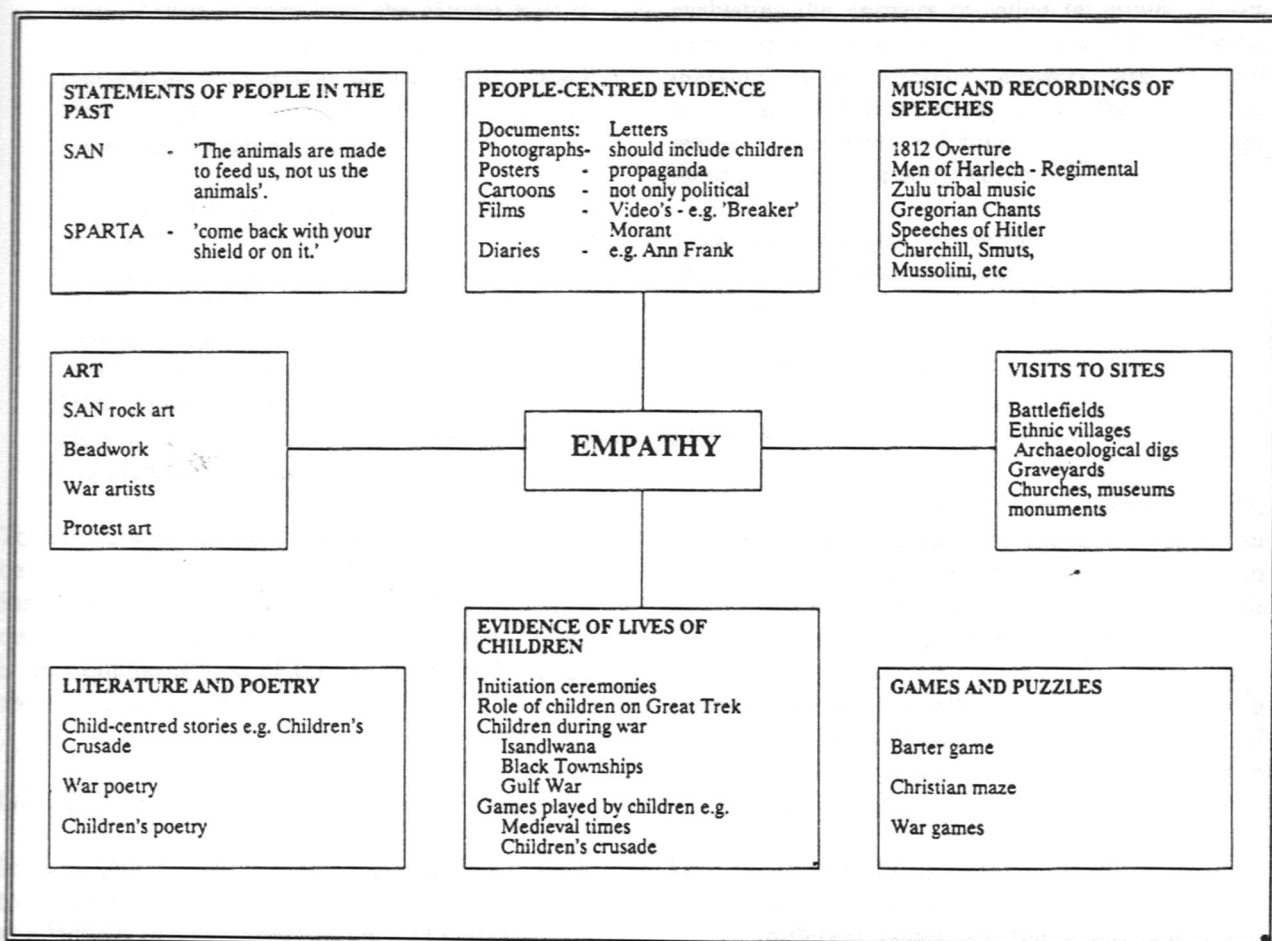
the key to motivation.⁹ Brenda O'Brien defines empathy as "an insight which extends beyond the question of what, when, how and why into a contemplation of the intellectual and emotional life-pulse of the people that occasioned or experienced the historical event/process under study."¹⁰

Teaching for empathy is not easy and requires a good deal of preparation on the part of the teacher. It also requires a lively, interesting manner and a good deal of imagination.¹¹ This should not deter us, for the rewards are well worth the effort. The approaches which teachers can use to engender empathy speak for themselves. They include the use of music, sound, roleplay and drama, games and simulations, on-site re-enactment of events,

discussion and debate, projective exercises, and decision-making. Sources on empathy are readily available as the following diagram illustrates.¹²

The following is an example of an interesting empathetic exercise based on the discovery of a coin at Mariannahill Monastery in Pinetown, Natal, and is linked to the history of the Phoenicians.¹³

SOURCES OF EMPATHY AVAILABLE TO THE TEACHER



THE DISCOVERY OF A FASCINATING COIN AT MARIANNHILL

In December 1898, a group of Trappist monks were busy digging a well in the gardens of their monastery at Mariannahill in Pinetown, Natal, when they made an amazing discovery. About half a metre down, in sandy soil, they discovered an old bronze coin. When experts examined it later, it was discovered that it was a Jewish coin minted during the rule of Simon Maccabeus, some 140 years before the birth of Christ! The monks also found Stone Age tools in the same area.

One of the Mariannahill monks, Brother Otto Meder, explained:

"The engravings [on the coin] are still fairly strong in relief. The coin can only have passed through human hands for a short time. This circumstance suggests that the coin must have come to Natal by way of the sea route. Seafarers of ancient days may have known the bay which is not too far away and which forms an ideal harbour or landing place."

We know that the Phoenicians, who originally lived in the area from which the coin came, were great seafarers and that they may have opened up a sea route around Africa by 600 B.C.

1. Why was the discovery of the particular coin such a surprise?
2. What does the discovery of Stone Age tools tell us?
3. Imagine that you are the coin. Tell us the story of your journey from the Middle East to Pinetown. You may wish to describe the journey as a land trip across Africa rather than a voyage by sea. In your story use the following as a guide:

Who was carrying the coin and for what purpose?

The kind of transport used on the journey.

Adventures on the way.

Arrival in Natal.

Meeting with inhabitants of early Natal.

How the coin changed hands.

How it ended up under the layer of soil at Mariannhill.

To encourage teachers to implement empathy-based exercises in the classroom, we in Natal have, for several years now, included empathetic questions in the Matriculation history paper. Here is an example of one of the questions and a good answer from a pupil.¹⁴

QUESTION

Imagine that you are involved in the incident which took place at Bulhoek. Describe your experiences and feelings in a short paragraph. (14 marks).

ANSWER

I was watching on the outskirts of Queenstown when the police came. I knew that it would come to this because the Israelite group had been squatting outside our town, Queenstown, for over 3 years at Bulhoek. The police stood there demanding the group to move but they didn't. Their leader was standing on a box shouting, which I could just make out, telling them that God was coming, to have faith in Him and that their God would protect them. When the police demanded that they must remove themselves for their action was illegal, the tribe attacked the police with assegais and knobkerries. I

felt scared because I knew that the police could only respond to them in defence with the firearms they carried. The tribe was shot at and I had to turn away as so many were dying and being wounded. I felt angry that our Prime Minister Smuts had ordered the police to so ruthlessly attack the tribe but wondered what choice he had as this tribe had broken the law of South Africa which required them to live in a segregated area not near Queenstown which belonged to us whites.

One of the biggest problems with empathy is evaluating the answers provided by pupils. After some experimentation we arrived at the following marking guide whereby answers are marked according to levels or perception on the part of the pupils. Even then we found it necessary to adapt these guidelines for some answers:¹⁵

There are really four past worlds:

- (a) the past as it actually was;
- (b) the past as those there at the time saw it;
- (c) how they said it was; and
- (d) how we see it today.

LEVELS

Level 1: uses knowledge to describe a way of life; not an empathetic response. "People in the past were stupid because they failed to adopt better courses of action." i.e. their actions are seen as unintelligible.

Level 2: "everyday empathy"; some awareness of a specific situation but seen in terms of modern values and ideas or relies on hindsight.

Level 3: "restricted historical empathy". Candidate understands the role of hindsight and of different values, attributes and beliefs but does not deal with the wider context, e.g. "all Arabs are terrorists".

Level 4: "contextual historical empathy" where the thinking and feelings of individuals within the group may be shown. The situation and the overall context should be woven together to produce a coherent overall account.

Although empathy may be difficult to evaluate and time-consuming to prepare lessons for, it is an approach which makes history alive and interesting. It enables pupils "to walk in the shoes of others" and so develop a respect and tolerance for fellow South Africans.

If we combine and integrate this approach with an emphasis on other skills, concepts, values and attitudes we should be able to save our discipline before the demands of the "new" South Africa threaten to overwhelm us.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See D Gunning, *The teaching of History*, 1978.
- 2 For an interesting article on concepts see J Verblow, "Teaching concepts from Standard 6 to Standard 10", *Yesterday and Today*, No. 19, April 1990, pp. 11 - 14.
- 3 See J. Mathews et al, *Discover history, A Pupil-centred approach to history method*.
- 4 *Ibid*
- 5 The new Std 5 history textbook is being published by Shuter and Shooter in 1992.
- 6 See J Nisbet and J Mathews, new Std 5 history textbook, Shuter and Shooter, 1992.
- 7 See D Gunning, pp. 177 - 179.
- 8 See J Nisbet and J Mathews, new Std 5 history textbook, Shuter and Shooter, 1992.
- 9 See *Times Educational Supplement*, 14 December 1990.
- 10 B O'Brien, "An examination of the role of empathy in the teaching of history", *History News*, No. 35, March 1991.
- 11 See J Mathews, "Empathy in history teaching", *History News*, No 31, June 1988.
- 12 See J Mathews, "Teaching history in the "new" South Africa: an empathetic approach", Paper delivered at an in-service course for high school teachers in Durban, September 1991.
- 13 See J Nisbet, J Mathews et al, new Std 5 history textbook, Shuter and Shooter, 1992.
- 14 Natal Senior Certificate History Examination, Higher Grade, December 1991
- 15 The marking guide was compiled by J Nisbet of Hilton College.