

## TEACHING CONCEPTS FROM STANDARD 6 TO STANDARD 10

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### INTRODUCTION

The term "concept" is indefinable. Although this essay provides several interpretations, ranging from the Historical to the Psychological, the term "concept" has been treated throughout this essay in terms of the "generally understood", i.e. less scientific, less complex, and less metaphysical. I have not dealt with the concept of a concept, which may well be justified in this case. However, two reasons for adopting a simplistic interpretation of a concept, are:

- 1) That it is a concept in terms of students aged between 13 to 18 (Standards 6 to 10) and studying History at these levels, that is of direct concern in this essay, and
- 2) Because it is possible to lose sight of the aim of this work, in pursuing too deeply the platform on which it is founded.

But there is such a direct relationship between History and concepts, the subject being made up almost entirely of "broad categories" and "generic terms", that it is impossible to ignore the psychology of students in the above-mentioned Standards, in relation to their ability to conceptualise. It cannot be stated forcefully enough that, to discuss concepts and the teaching thereof, without any knowledge, understanding, or mention of the student's level of conceptualisation at a particular level of development and in relation to the curriculum and intellectual demands made by it, would render this whole exercise meaningless. The relevance of concepts relies just as much on the student's ability to conceptualise it, as it does on the teacher's ability or inability to teach it.

In this light, the second part of this essay outlines the syllabus for the Standards 6 to 10, and extracts those parts that the teacher will readily admit as being concepts, rather than facts, such as "revolution", "war", etc., before looking at those which can only be seen to be concepts after some thought, e.g. "win", or "lose".

It is in this grey area between what is clearly a concept, and what can only be seen after "some thought", that the History Teacher is exposed to giving his own subjective interpretations in highlighting this point. In this way, it becomes clear that the impact of a concept is in its illustration, rather than its substance: "Concepts are general because of their use and application, not because of their ingredients", Dewey says. The teacher's ability to clarify a concept not immediately recognisable as such, e.g. the term "poverty" is a concept and not, as is first thought, simply a noun, will depend on the distinction he himself sees in the word/concept. Paradoxically, the more subtle the distinction between the word and the concept, the more vivid the illustration of this point is likely to be. It is in this area that teaching History probably becomes most difficult, with the potential also, of becoming the most meaningless for the student.

### CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS A CONCEPT?

Gunning talks of "central concepts", Piaget of "object concepts", Lloyd of "Objects of thoughts . . . abstract and general ideas and those factors in con-

sciousness which we call concepts". The list is endless. Yet, what all educationalists and educational psychologists seem to agree on is that a concept is intangible. It rests in the mind as a kind of trigger word, without precise shape or form itself, its use releases either emotions and/or a series of words tautologous to, or descriptive of, the concept itself. Can the History teacher control the emotional response to a concept, even if he might be able to, with the aid of a dictionary or historical examples, alter a student's lexicon in relation to a given concept? This implies in the student a stimulation/response pre-conditioning, which in some cases can be overcome by the study of History, but with regard to established concepts that are well-entrenched in the media or academic world, such as the concept "justice", it is doubtful whether History alone can redress the overwhelming imbalance and distortion attached to this concept.

In essence, a concept represents the transfer from object, sensory recognition to subject recall. It was a cornerstone of the English philosopher, Berkeley's philosophy, that it was not possible to have an idea without it being related to anything prior to it; in other words, an object. This object has "concrete qualities", and it is from these that the concept is forced. Where the History teacher might be at a disadvantage in regulating the recognition of some of these concepts, because the subject sense the student has attached to them is firmly rooted before he reaches the History classroom, and probably long before he even reaches school, the teacher is very much at an advantage when it comes to others. Because History is essentially a conceptual subject, (if it was not, it would be a true Science in that it would be regulated by concrete certainties – and the only certainties available to the Historian are dates: the natural consequence being that the learning potential from such historical certainties, as for scientific ones, is absolutely minimal), it has the opportunity to introduce students to concepts which he has never considered before. The student's mind is totally without prejudice in these often crucial areas, enabling balanced historical conceptualisation to take place without mental resistance always encountered when challenging pre-instituted thoughts – the American philosopher, A.J. Ayre, calls these the "Web of Belief" on which an individual's thinking is established and structured. To unattach one thread of the "web" brings the whole structure, and the personality, crashing down.

It is in this area of "safe" concepts that the History teacher can work to the greatest benefit of the student and the subject. Examples are numerous: "industrialisation", "progress", "advanced", "depression", are all key concepts which are inseparable from the Modern History syllabus. Yet, these concepts hold important possibilities for properly enlightening a whole period of History, which itself might be teachable on account of well-established, and believed to be well-understood, concepts of "revolution", "improved society", "emancipation", for example.

The fact is that all concepts rely on initial "sensory" perceptions, i.e. touch, sight, hearing, providing them, and History, with enormous educational im-



plications, (discussed in the last section of this essay).

But it also means that a "concept" once formed, can never be anything else but a concept — or, more comprehensibly, a broad definition. In other words, the Standard 6 – 10 student, having grown beyond mere recognition of objects by virtue of physical sensory perception, and having made them into "subject" concepts, neither he nor anyone else can reverse the process.

In this respect, one can talk of Gagne's Cognitive Hierarchy, De Block's "Taksonomy", but with one important additional point. It is not reversible. That is to say, once the student has developed his knowledge and intellectual capacity to such a degree that he can "problem solve" (Gagne's highest intellectual ability), or has begun to "live" his knowledge or intellectual appreciations, à la De Block, the student cannot return that same body of knowledge to its lowest level, i.e. signal learning or mere facts.

In practical terms, the senior school student no longer just sees an orange, he sees a "fruit". But it also means that he is on your side, in the teaching process. Mentally, he is ready to accept "concepts" and, in fact, according to Bruner, Lloyd and Piaget, prefers them. This reflects the tendency and necessity, in History, to generalise, which obviously can be self-destructive, if taken to extremes. It also confirms the Gestalt theory, which hinges on the individual's desire to overcome the tension created by the dissonance between what he knows and what he does not. This is behind the compulsion to grasp totalities of understanding, and a desire for the structured whole, which is exactly what a concept is.

## CHAPTER II: WHAT IS THE HISTORY SYLLABUS STANDARD 6 – 10?

Concepts are inescapable, and not just with reference to the student's learning needs. Page 1 of the Transvaal Education Department Syllabus, covering all 3 Grades (Lower Standard and Higher) and all Standards (6 – 10), lays down the demands expected of every History teacher, irrespective of the Grade and Standard, at which he may be teaching.

Firstly, he/she must have "a perspective" of the subject, History. Elaborating, the Syllabus explains, this perspective as the ability to "lay connections" between content, breadth, course, division and meaning, of History as a subject. A perspective, then, is the first concept confronting the History teacher and the student. It is clear that such a broadly defined interpretation of perspective which, by inclination as much as by semantics, tends towards and inability to say precisely what a perspective is; it cannot possibly be descriptive in terms of actual content, actual course, actual division and actual meaning of the subject.

"Perspective" is a general term, and its place on Page 1 of the Syllabus gives almost unlimited freedom in the use, application, and teaching of other concepts in the course of a History lesson. In other words, the perspective can be a thematic perspective, i.e. Social History or Military History; or an all-embracing perspective, in which all themes — military, social, political, racial — are expected to be brought across in the course of a lesson. The only limits to this "perspective" appear to be dictated by the teacher's discretion, his personal feelings/inclinations, the examination paper and, more important, the syllabus itself. Without appearing to correct or add to this first and foremost demand made on the History teacher, i.e. that he has a "perspective" of his subject, it is felt that this perspective should be more clearly related to

the curriculum itself, if it is to have any meaning.

The clearest indication of the parameters which are meant to apply to this perspective come under point 2 — the translation of the syllabus; that the course is intended to give the child a clear picture of the important characteristics of the modern world as formed by the past. This, taken in relation to the need for a perspective, sufficiently confines the latter to an intelligible interpretation of the limitless concepts which are going to confront the student in the course of his study of History.

But there is a serious drawback to this relationship between past and present.

There is clearly no problem with the concepts dealt with in Standard 5's General History syllabus; "Development", "Communication", "Writing and Publishing", in conveying an understanding of old and ancient civilisations. The ancient to modern perspective is easily understood and passed on to the student in relatively simple ways — see yesterday's script and look at today's; see yesterday's clay tablet and look at today's paperback or hard back book. The thread of change — physical, visual, intelligible — is obvious; the connection between then and now is easily made.

Naturally, the concepts become a little more complicated, less tangible, less easily visualised and defined, as the child progresses through the school. In Standard 6, he will have to understand the meaning of the "Modern World", without ever being able to understand completely why it is modern, given the concrete base, i.e. dates, on which he has built up his historical perspective of past and present up to this point. It is not possible to provide a fixed date for the beginning of the "modern world", which will not involve the introduction of other concepts well beyond his ken — and probably that of the History Teacher as well.

At this point (Standard 6), History can become a little arbitrary and artificial to the child who is now expected to take a static position in time — i.e. the now, the modern time — to be able to visualise the "then" as the "past". But it is just this "fixation", this static, chronological inflexibility, which is now so despised by modern teachers, educational psychologists and social reformers, who urge that History Teachers must reflect the world outside the classroom — the changing world, flexible, adaptable, etc. It also mitigates against the fundamental goals of the subject — to "form" the child in all respects; this "forming" implies "growing", "development", yet the child can only understand himself and the modernity of his times in relation to the past, by a separation between the two; something the very themes — "Wars in the Modern World" (General History Standard 7): happenings which, to the end of the 18th Century contributed to the forming of the Modern World" (General History Standard 6), and "Internationalism in the Modern World" (General History Standard 7), demand.

In other words, the child can only understand the concept of "modern" if he has a clear idea of "past". At some stage, a division has to be drawn for him. Of course, the crux of the problem, as the teacher appreciates, is yet another, even more confounding, concept — "relativism", ("comparativism" being avoided). But the implications of resolving the Standard 6 child's difficulty in grasping concepts of time by "relativist" answers, in other words, by explaining that Ancient Times were Modern Times, during the Ancient Times, or, by saying that, in the Year 5000,



the 1980s (which we understand to be the age of enlightenment), may well be referred to as the Age of the Barbarian, are fraught with even greater difficulties, across an almost limitless front.

Nevertheless, it is just this relativist approach which modern educationalists adopt at exactly the stage of a child's development – the "abstract-idea" stage, according to Piaget – when he most needs platforms on which to make purposeful and intelligent abstractions.

The point being that, if relativism is accepted as the basis for answering and reconciling the child's concrete needs, he remains formless. (Forming can only take place against a fixed point or with a fixed point in view. Relativism on this question – which is also currently argued as the basis for means-testing – leads to the moral and psychological absurdities which now pass for progressive "Age of Science" living). For this reason, dates in History and happenings related to them, i.e. the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902 (Standard 7 S.A. History); the Rebuilding and Unification of South Africa, 1902-1910 (Standard 9 S.A. History); The Reform of South African Society, 1820-1850 (Standard 8 S.A. History), are so critically important.

It cannot reasonably be argued that there is no place for relativism in the History Syllabus, and that the student should be protected from it: but it can be argued, and is argued in this essay, that the relativism take place only within and, on the basis of, strictly defined and accepted parameters. Evidently, some concepts are not nearly as contentious as others – nobody will argue too strongly the Concept of a "National State" (Standard 9, European National States and the Rise of New Powers); or "The Renaissance" (Standard 6 General History), or that of Nationalism, Reform, Afrikaner Republicanism, British Imperialism, etc. – all of which make up the Standard 6 – 10 History syllabus.

The strict parameters which must be accepted in the teaching of these concepts are those classified as facts – the criticism of which leaves History very vulnerable to manipulation by propagandists and social reformers (usually the same thing). For example, that the Great Trek did take place in 1832, involving a specific number of people, who held particular views, as expressed in first-hand documents, i.e. Primary Sources. These are the parameters. It can be said that the Great Trek is not a concept. But the fact is that it introduces a number of concepts, such as Dissatisfaction, Justice, Emigration, the first ever practice of what would come to be called in Gandhi's pre-Independence India more than 100 years later, Satyagraha, Aggression, etc.

The interest in the theme to be taught invariably lies in the concepts which it introduces, rather than the one on which it is apparently founded. For example, British Imperialism (Standard 9 S.A. History), as a concept, will not arouse the debate, argument, and difference of opinion, as consideration of its effects. Again, its parameters must be drawn. Firstly, that Imperialism is defined in a particular way; that examples of the exercise of this particular philosophy can be found in a particular period of history, and practised by particular governments at a particular time. Only when such parameters are drawn up, can other concepts – usually of a moral flavour – be handled intelligently and the original concept of Imperialism be properly broadened and appreciated. So, too, with the Development of Industrialisation and Capitalism, 1789 – 1850 in South Africa (Standard 8, S.A. History).

In sum, the topics included in the Standard 6 – 10 Syllabus, for all grades of student, are, given the aim and purpose of History as defined in the first pages of the Syllabus itself, fertile ground for the successful development of all that is intended. But this depends almost entirely on the subsidiary concepts which naturally flow from themes which handle political ideas or ideals, as well as seemingly more innocent subjects, such as the Treaty of Paris, International Events 1945 – 1970.

It is in this grey area between what the Syllabus concept intends, and what is carried out within its framework by means of introduced and then teacher-defined concepts, that the real forming of the student takes place.

### CHAPTER III: WHAT CONCEPT TO TEACH

Concepts have immense propaganda value: Ian Kernshaw, in his book, "The Nazi Dictatorship", illustrates this well. He discusses the "development" of the concepts of Fascism and Totalitarianism, in terms of "sophisticated typologies" – in other words, in terms of a "type" associated with the word itself. It is undeniable that in 1989 – in fact, since the '30s, the "Totalitarian Type" carries a negative connotation like no other. In short, while there is no universally accepted meaning of Totalitarianism, it is almost universally regarded in the blackest light. Why? The concept itself has undergone many transformations in public/national imagery until it became the "negative" and "ideological instrument" of today. In everyday terms, among everyday people, the concept "Fascist" frightens.

Today, that is what it is meant to do. It is received with hostility in the classroom and outside, despite the very real gulf – as Kernshaw points out – between the concept of Fascism, for example, and the theory. The latter, very few people know, and even fewer understand; while the former forms a part of every good citizen's "hate" lexicon. The result, says Kernshaw, is that it is "as good as impossible to treat Totalitarianism and related concepts as 'neutral scholarly analytical tools'". In other words, with any degree of subjectivity.

These concepts – others in the Curriculum St. 6 – 10 include "Revolution" – are "ideologically loaded", while the apparent "safe" concepts, like "Change" and "Development" (and others in Syllabus 6 – 10, e.g. Independence, Power), Kernshaw points out, are so vague that they only become intelligible when attached to a determined political or ideological standpoint. That is to say, what "Change"? What "Development"? Only in the selection and application of supportive ideas does "Change" take on a meaning – but by that time, you have cast a shadow, or a virtue, over the concept itself; it is no longer, then, safe or neutral.

Historians are very conscious of the importance of concepts. For example, Daniel Boorstin, in "The Americans", in attempting to analyse and explain the early development of America (not in the Standard 6 – 10 Syllabus), talks of a unified value system – something, he says, Historians claim early Americans were looking for. But, he adds: "One cannot unify such a society by mere concepts, however refined and subtle, however vivid to a few philosophers and theologians"<sup>(1)</sup>. He goes on to quote Henry Adams: "The attempt to bridge the chasm between multiplicity and unity is the oldest problem of philosophy, religion and science, but the flimsiest bridge of all is the human concept . . ." The problem is that the only purpose a concept can properly fulfill, in fact the reason for using it, is because it defies a clearly



reducible definition. The concept is, by definition, all-embracing; it is a sort of compromise with a conclusion at the end of the rainbow – it cannot, must not, ever be found. Its ambivalence is its strength.

#### CHAPTER IV: TEXTBOOKS AND CONCEPTS, STD. 6–10

In spite of all that has been said so far, Dennis Gunning, in his "The Teaching of History", considers as unequivocal the importance of "concept" learning in the process of teaching History; he supports Bruner's idea of "characteristic" concepts. In other words, the learning of an idea/event, and all that is related to it; the student thereby creating for himself his own concept (is that what is wanted in the History class?). To Gunning, the "primacy of concept learning" is a fundamental law to learning History.

But, as stated, concepts defy precision and, therefore, unity of meaning. Will the History teacher be aware of, and tolerate, a variety of disparate views/interpretations of a concept, about which he sees no argument whatsoever? The following is a list of such concepts taken from a complete range of textbooks currently used by History Departments in Secondary Schools, from St. 6–10: Freedom, Rights, Communist Fascism, Progress, Liberation, Occupation, Liberal, Rising, Economic War, The State, Colonialism, etc. Gunning considers concepts to be "ideas"; but therein lies the root of the problem for the school teacher. Ideas are flexible and often arbitrary, just what Gunning goes on to say that concepts are not. Concepts do "describe" classes or groups of things, people, feelings, actions or ideas, having something in common", just as Gunning says. But, with respect to him, more important than the concept itself, is what binds its individual parts; and in so establishing this, one can deprive the original concept/idea of all meaning. For example, is it helpful to speak of "leadership" in terms of "parents", "Lenin", "Communism", "Chambers", "Bus Driver" and "Football Team Captain", so that one can gain a better understanding of "revolution", which has "leadership" as its goal? That is to say, all the above-mentioned elements have something in common, namely, "leadership", but does the use of any of them assist in the definition of "political leadership", for example? Yet, the problem is deeper still.

The power of a concept is not even so much in terms of related elements which define it, but, more importantly, what the teacher says these elements are, which can be related to a particular concept. For example, does any teacher, anywhere, introduce "Lenin" in terms of a "Bus Driver", a "Bank Manager", or "Traffic Policeman", simply because all these three have something in common, namely, "leadership" (and again, I have to disagree with Gunning, in his claim that nouns, especially names – he uses the example, "Napoleon" – are not concepts. "Napoleonic" is clearly a concept, having wide, and intelligible meaning, well beyond the individual himself. This is exactly so with "Lenin", which is merely an abbreviated form of "Leninism", which is most definitely, like "Napoleonic", a concept). To take the argument further, is it realistic to define "Communism" by reference to a game of Bridge, because they both represent "systems"? The point being that, in relation to the student's reference framework which, by virtue of age, will/ought not to be as wide and deep as the teacher's, it is the teacher who will introduce the common denominators of each idea/word used, in support of a theme which is in the process of being

taught. There is no such thing as a concept a priori, as Gunning suggests. The teacher (and, nowadays, media and Governments) create the concept; never the child, or the word itself. It is excessive practice of this prerogative which has resulted in the preponderance of clichés, in both student and, respectfully suggested, each thought. The idea that "Nazi" is tyranny, slaughter, aggression, bully, stupid, persecution, etc., while "Communist" is freedom, sharing, happy, love, courage, tolerance, is the result of education concept-building. It is the authority, School, Education Department, Teacher, Media, etc., which has chosen to link "Communism" with "sharing" and "benevolence" and "philanthropy", and not with Stalin's purges, psychiatric hospitals, and "Nazi" with "persecution", and not, for example, with full employment. There is nothing in either of these terms themselves which ought to pre-empt a characterization either way, except by means of conditioning.

#### CONCLUSION

It is the open-ended nature of any language to have the power within it (and in the people who use it), to change, adapt, expand and shrink, their vocabulary and meaning attached to words. From this, it is clear that, as far as thinking is concerned, dependent as it is on language (by means of which all teaching is carried out), nothing is certain, no suggestion too bizarre, and no conclusion irreversible.

From all that has been said of concepts, their nature and their formation in the classroom, it is obvious that the world of the classroom and the school, can quite easily become a place of image and illusion – of preconditioned, automatic responses to trigger words, and which will have as its foundation conceptualized groupings of ideas, feelings, words, peoples, etc.

On the basis of such classifications, Man's two basic impulses – love and hate – will depend. The teacher's role in creating these classifications – these "concepts", especially in the History class where access to critically-important social values, and habits, are confronted, cannot be underestimated.

It can only be said that, in many countries of the world, a war is being waged, not just over the world's concept-creating machinery, e.g. newspapers, television, etc., but also over its educational establishments.

When the ideologues talk of "changing the world from the bottom up", i.e. from grass roots level, they refer specifically to the creation of a new language, and meaning of it. To talk simply of propaganda, in relation to the power of concepts, is too simple.

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