

In search of history: Grade 10 learner's book

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In response to the recent changes in South African Education the Oxford publishers have unveiled their latest *In search of History* Grade 10 learners' book which tout as "the best source-based approach to studying History."

On the front cover is another seal of confidence declaring “National CAPS made easy.” Written by the same authors as its predecessors, this textbook retains old characteristics and matches them with new curriculum changes. The intended audience of the textbook are the school History learners. It therefore fits well in the field of History teaching and research as it is meant to be used in the classroom. Those who intend to read deeply on the topics covered in the textbook can use the textbook for background reading because moving on to other reference books.

With glossy colour covers that are the hallmark of textbook marketing, the textbook also has longer surface sheets, thus making it thinner and less intimidating. There is also use of blue highlighting colour inside the textbook to guide learners to important aspects of the issues under coverage. The presentation and format is to a larger extent appealing. In keeping with style in previous editions there is a balance between text and illustrations. There is enough text for the textbook user to follow a particular narrative and all illustrations have explanatory captions. Therefore the sources are not just there for cosmetic purposes. Although all the illustrations are in black and white, they are not all the same overused and reproduced images that textbook users tend to come across often. The illustrations include pictures, drawings, maps, tables, and statistical data. All these aspects are presented in a clear and logical manner not as jumbled up snippets of bit and pieces as was becoming a feature of South African History textbooks during the Outcomes Based Education period. The sources are acknowledged and there are suggested further reference books at the end. The index also makes the textbook user friendly.

Most of the content is as suggested in the CAPS document with the major themes being: The world around 1600; European expansion and conquest in the 15th to 18th centuries; the French revolution; Transformations in Southern Africa after 1750; Colonial expansion after 1750; and The South African war and Union. However, one Grade 10 theme as per the CAPS History document is missing – on Industrial Revolution and modern world economic system. The themes in the textbook are chronologically sequenced and create a narrative that learners can follow. There are a few cases of linking chapters such that the book follows an unbroken prose. The content in the textbook shows evidence of research by the authors to match the issues to contemporary research. There is reference to all types of historical research including archaeology and oral history especially regarding early South African History.

It is also contextualised, an example being the way slavery is presented within a context of Spanish conquest of America and Portugal and the destruction of the Indian Ocean trade. For controversial issues, such as the representation of Shaka, multi-perspectives are provided as recommended by the CAPS. There is an attempt to represent the ordinary people and women in key events such as the French revolution or the South African War. The themes are introduced through a key question, which is taken from the CAPS. The textbook also provides definitions of the major first order concepts such as revolution, propaganda and dictator. Conceptual understanding is essential and cases where slavery and slave trade are used almost interchangeably will confuse learners. The second order concepts are more implied than always obvious with the exception of empathy.

Another positive aspect of this textbook is the assessment activities. To start with, the presentation is not confusing, as the publishers do not throw activities in every little space available on the page. Instead the assessment is logically presented, coming after a sizeable amount of narrative and its supporting sources, meaning that learners can at least learn something before they are assessed. Different types of assessment activities are provided, such as, source based questions, matching, explanations, games, class discussions and newspaper articles. For most of these activities the textbook clearly explains if they are supposed to be individual work, pair work or group work. No time is provided though to guide the learners on how to answer the questions. Mark allocation is provided only for the major assessments at the end of each chapter. For the extended writing tasks, a generic rubric is provided at the end of the textbook. The questions come at various levels enabling all learners to think at a lower and higher order level. The textbook users are encouraged not to rely only on the textbook to answer some of the questions as they are asked to use their own knowledge. Unlike in the text, the second order concepts such as empathy and causation come up more explicitly in the assessment. An example is the empathy exercise on Shaka who in the text is presented as a contentious historical figure. More comprehensive assessment is provided towards the end of the textbook where the authors provide a sample end-of-year paper covering all the aspects the learners have to be aware of. In general the assessment is challenging but achievable.

Finally, the language is by and large appropriate for the grade. A glossary of new words and key words is presented, not at the back of the book, but exactly where they are used so that learners can make easy and quick reference.

Another feature that is useful for the textbook users is the skills support. Throughout the textbook, there are sections where the authors explain skills such as the use and study of sources and referencing. These are important skills which bridge the gap between school history and academic history. It would have been better though, if the skills support were put together in one section and learners would be referred to them throughout the textbook. The point is that referencing, for instance, is a vital aspect of studying and it should be referred to as early as possible and not only towards the end of the textbook. The way study skills and meanings of instruction words are explained together at the end of the textbook is a good example of how the skills support could also appear in the textbook.

Therefore the production of this new textbook is a welcome development. The textbook will be of great use to both learners and teacher as they apply the new CAPS system. It fulfils most of the roles a textbook should, such as providing appropriate and up-to-date information, develop historical skills and conceptual understanding. The book will be a valuable asset for South African schools.