Using graphic organisers to teach History

Lucille Dawkshas
Spine Road High School
Cape Town, South Africa
ldawkshas@yahoo.de

Abstract

The reality of teaching History in government schools in South Africa is that the subject is many times the "dumping ground" for students not performing well in other subjects. Many learners are not in the subject by choice and are consequently disinterested. Classes are filled to capacity or overfilled - the biggest class I taught had 68 learners. So, naturally, if we do chalk and talk or the textbook marathon, we lose the learners. The challenge is to make History fun, to make it relatable and to get learners involved. It is in this vain that I have used and developed teaching tools that in my view succeed in achieving the above. Evidence of this is that I get a bunch of disinterested learners in Grade 10 and by the time they get to Grade 12, they have been transformed to interested Historians, loving and acing the subject. The results, both in terms of marks and attitude towards the subject, are so good, that my fellow teachers from time to time approach me to ask: "How did you do it? We know the quality of learner you work with, how?" In this article I will share "how" I do it.

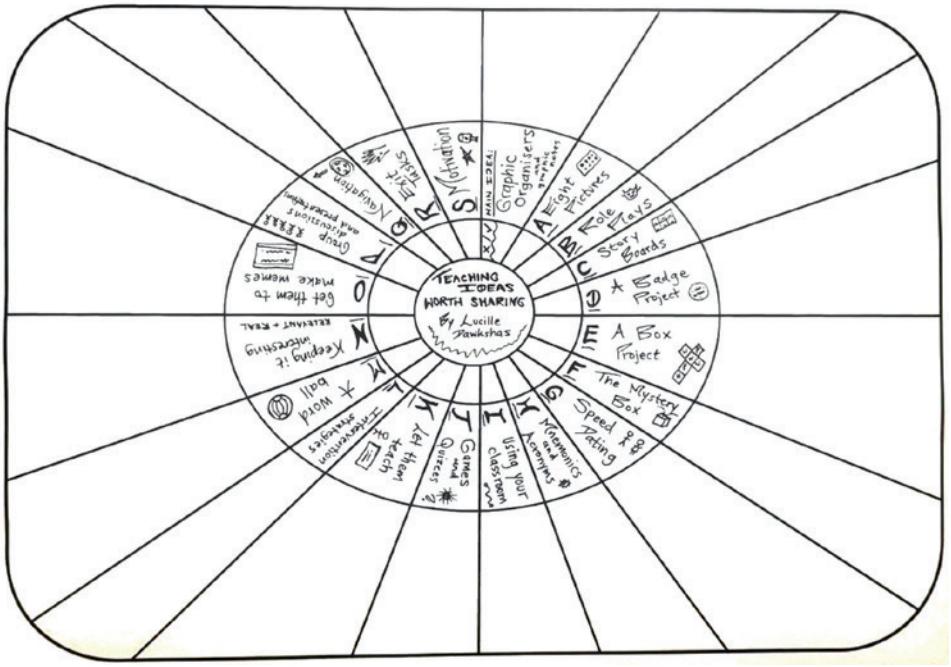
Keywords: Make History fun; Teaching tools; Teaching ideas; Methodology; Best practice; Didactics; Graphic organisers; Visual learning.

In October 2018, the South African Society of History Teaching (SASHT) conference was held at the Mowbray Campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Cape Town. Two teacher friends had suggested that I present a workshop, sharing some of my History teaching ideas. This I did. The feedback from the conference attendees was very positive. But it was one idea that I had touched on that delegates were interested in learning more about. So, in late September 2019 I flew to Johannesburg to present at the SASHT conference held at the University of Pretoria. The focus of the presentation was the use of graphic organisers in the History classroom.

What are graphic organisers? They are basically empty mind maps that can be used to organise a particular topic. As such the learners fill in the historical detail, as they learn. My use of graphic organisers was born out of three issues:

- If learners have nothing to do while you teach, you lose them.
- In my experience learners equate learning with writing things down.
- Learners have at least six subjects, all of them loaded with content knowledge, as a result they tend to lose oversight.

Image 1: Graphic organiser used when presenting teaching ideas to teachers



Source: Designed by author.

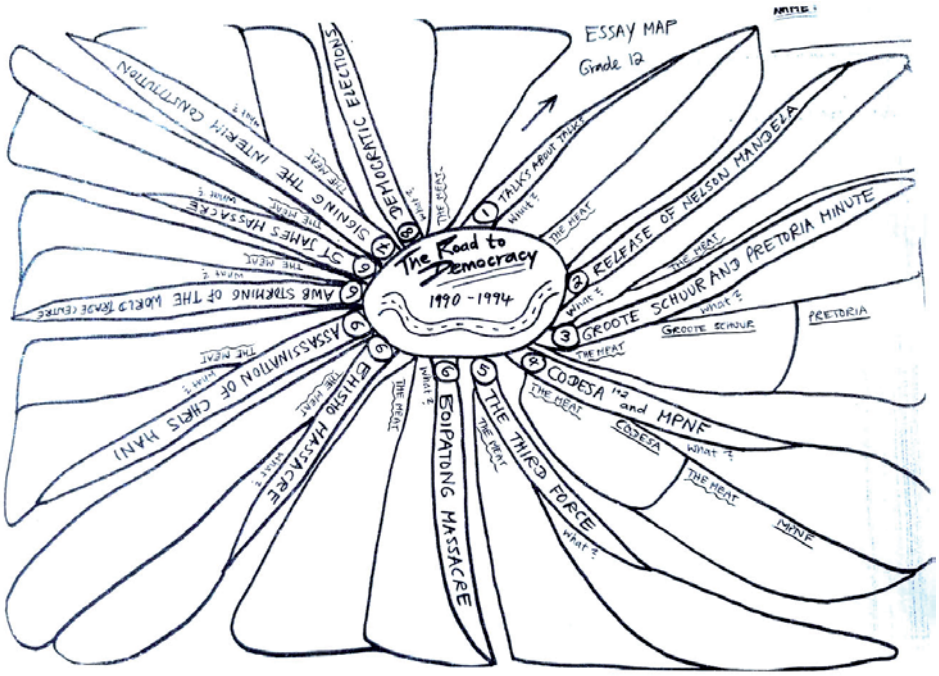
This is the graphic organiser I use to demonstrate and share other teaching ideas. In the workshops I've presented, each participant receives one. They indicate if they would use this idea in the empty space in the middle. In the outer open spaces, they take notes on each idea, where they could use it etc. while I present the ideas. Similarly, in a classroom context, learners start with the graphic organiser, filling in details as we go along.

In my experience a graphic organiser gives them the oversight they need. Furthermore, completing the graphic organiser gives History learners a sense of ownership, since they created it. As such it is much more than notes handed to them. It is also a key tool to study from, as it acts as a topic summary of the theme covered. A graphic organiser, because it is in the form of an image, supports spatial memory. Although it is a simplistic teaching aid, I have found that my History learners love it. So much so

that if we are studying a topic without a graphic organiser, they request one. The construction of the graphic organisers is determined by how the topic is organised, the metanarrative engaged with, and the proposed line of argument followed. Ultimately, graphic organiser are tools to organise historical content.

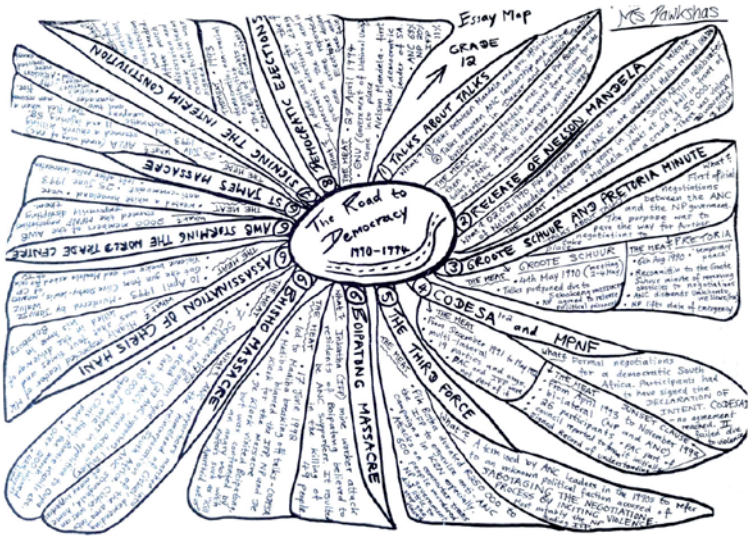
Below is an example of a graphic organiser for the Grade 12 topic – The Road to Democracy, 1990-1994. As a History class we start with an empty mind map, like the one below. I'll teach a section, for example 'Talks about talks' while the learners listen. They are then given the opportunity to take notes on what they think is important here, using the PowerPoint slides. Then we move on to the next part, moving clockwise around the 'empty mind-map', filling it up.

Image 2: Example of an incomplete graphic organiser – The Road to Democracy 1990-1994



Source: Designed by author.

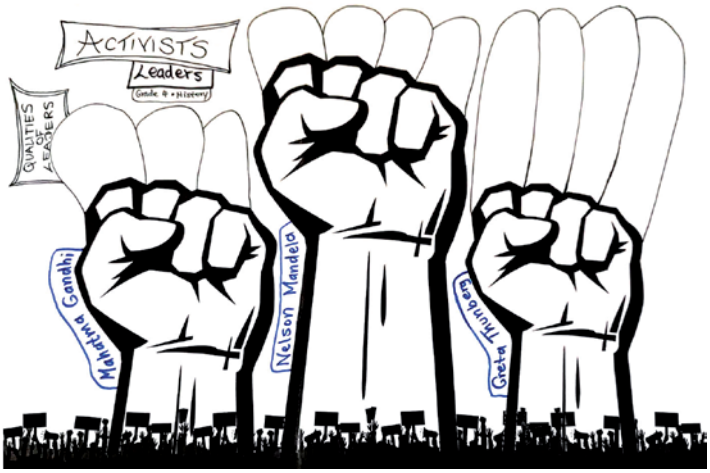
Image 3: Populated graphic organiser - The Road to Democracy 1990-1994



Source: Designed by author.

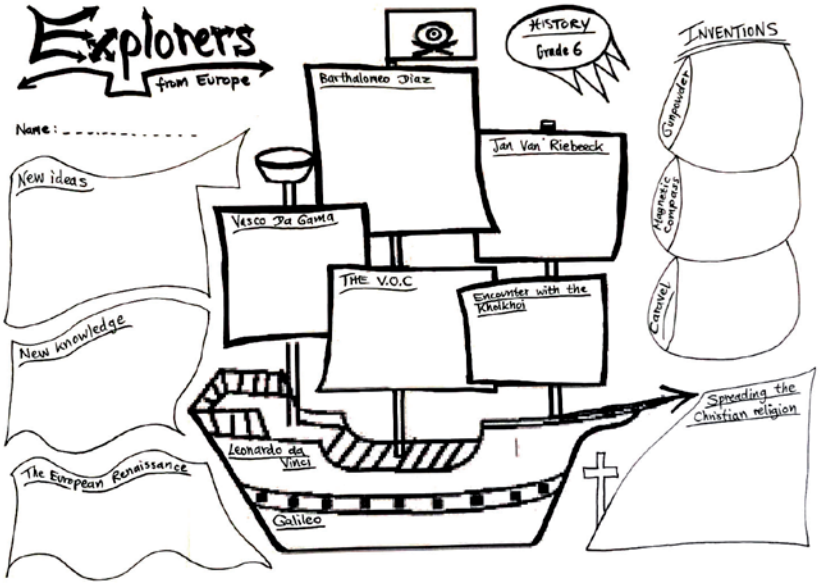
What I have found is that graphic organisers work very well across all grades. Below find examples of various graphic organisers. I have not used the primary school ones myself, I created them for a workshop I presented, so I'm sure there's room for improvement. The concept is always the same – it's a tool to collect information and have an overview of a topic.

Image 4: Grade 4 – leaders and activists



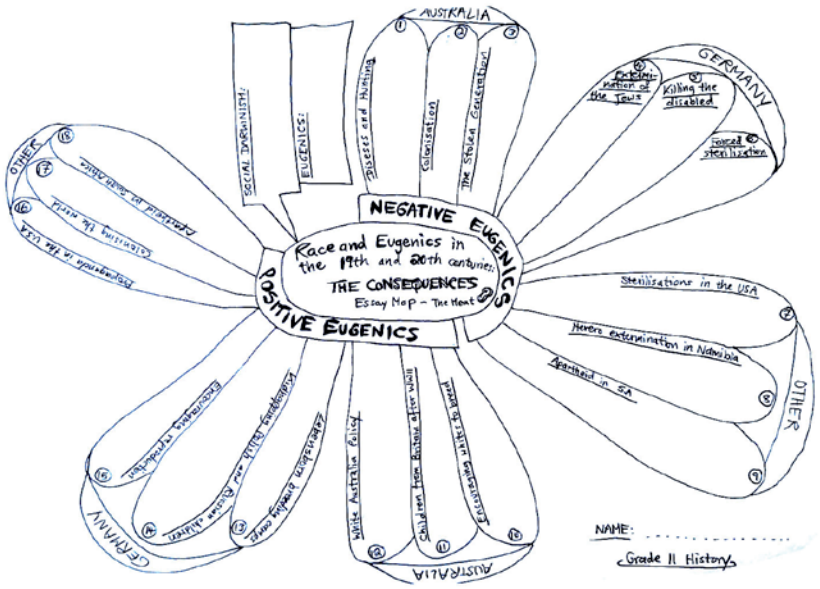
Source: Designed by author.

Image 5: Grade 6 Explorers



Source: Designed by author.

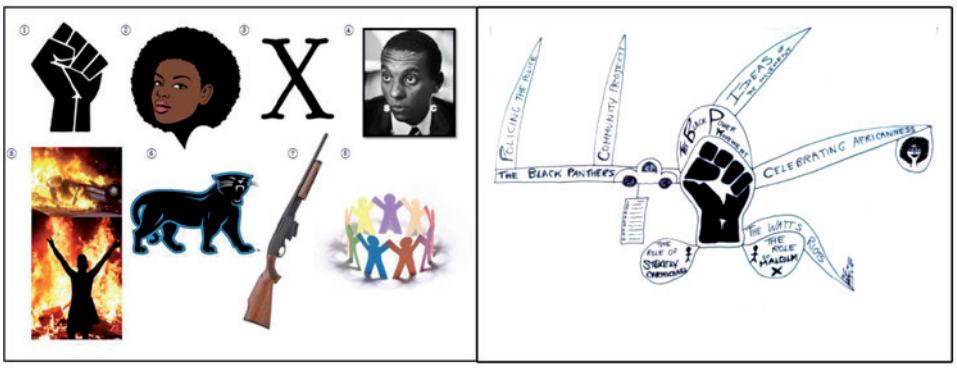
Image 6: Eugenics in Grade 11 (Race and Eugenics in the 19th and 20th centuries)



Source: Designed by author.

I have also augmented my use of graphic organisers successful with what I call the "Eight Picture Summary". For most topics I teach, I have eight pictures that symbolise the key parts of what will be taught. I taught at a township school for five years, where quite a number of the learners came from the Eastern Cape. Their English language abilities were not very strong and as a consequence they would get lost in the sea of historical language used. The challenge was how to bring across the content of an entire topic without overwhelming the learners. Since a large number of learners are visual learners, and since we live in a visual age, I developed the "Eight Picture Summary" as a visual learning aid. I would start off with the eight pictures, the aim being to give learners an overview of the topic. Thereafter I would get into each picture in greater detail. In every lesson we would go back to the eight-picture summary. I would call on learners to tell me about the pictures and how it relates to the topic we have studied. Before a test or the exams, we go back to the eight-picture summary for revision. The learners would also get a mini copy of the eight pictures to take home to be used to explain the topic to a family member. In some instances, the eight-pictures also link to the graphic organiser. Each picture is represented in the graphic organiser or corresponds to the same numbering on the page.

Image 7: Eight pictures for the Black Power Movement and the corresponding graphic organiser



Source: Designed by author (Image on left).

Besides these two tools, I'll use role plays, story boards, games and quizzes. I've also used badge projects, box projects, speed dating as historical figures, a word ball, getting them to teach, making historical memes, group discussions, presentations and many more. History is fun

and they look forward to it.

The graphic organisers and the "Eight Picture Summary" are in my view excellent ways to get the historical content across to learners. While historical thinking skills, such as causality, multiperspectivity, empathy and critical analysis are important, they will not be possible unless the learners understand the content. In my view the nuances of History follow an understanding of the metanarrative. So, the criticism of these methods are that their primary focus is to 'get the content across', the minimum we as teachers are trying to achieve. But this is an important foundation when you then aim to teach skills, nuance and critical analysis. It's a faster way, a more organised or efficient way, than wading through a textbook and copying down a copious amount of notes. I would like to build in analytical tools in future. In the Nationalism graphic organiser, for example, learners check a box of whether the nationalism in each case study is civic or ethnic nationalism and then have to decide if it's more helpful or more destructive. This ties in with their argument in the essay they later write.

Another criticism is that it simplifies complex history. I think it depends on the teacher here, to zoom in and out of history and to complexify it where necessary. I think most of my students understand that History is not black and white and there's a lot more to it. With the confidence gained in the subject, through methods mentioned above, they are interested to learn more and understand better.

I fully accept that my article is nothing ground-breaking, it is just the sharing of practice. History teaching ideas worth sharing. I hope it has led to either insight or inspiration in other History teachers.