Moral judgments in the history classroom: Thoughts of selected novice history teachers

Marshall Tamuka Maposa

University of KwaZulu-Natal: Edgewood Campus

maposam2@ukazn.ac.za

Abstract

History is laden with contentious issues and the history teacher has to negotiate how to handle such issues in almost every class. One of the propensities of both history teachers and learners is to make moral judgments over the historical issues that they engage with. Indeed, history is a subject that invariably carries the burden of civic education and nation-building and this can be done through identifying right from wrong. In this article, I present the thoughts of selected novice history teachers (who have been in service for at most 3 years) in relation to making moral judgments about the past in the classroom. The teachers identify the historical themes that they have considered making moral judgments about. They also explain the approaches that they have contemplated in this challenge. I then utilise Wineburg's (2001) framework on moral ambiguity to explain the implications of the teachers' views. I conclude that while South Africa's history is flooded with moral references that make it almost impossible to avoid making judgments, the history teacher needs a usable framework that they can rely on for teaching all contentious issues.

Keywords: Moral judgments; Values; School history; Novice history teachers; Pedagogy; South Africa.

Introduction, focus and rationale

The history classroom can be a hotbed of contentious issues if one considers the argument that virtually all nations have historical topics that are contentious in some way (Low-Beer, 1999). This leaves the history teacher with the unenviable task of guiding the learners to ensure that the goals of the teaching and learning process are achieved, while making sure that they do not lose control of the class. The purpose of school history is not uniform across countries. However, it can be argued that history is a subject that carries the dual burden of civic education and nation-building – depending on the nation that incumbent governments want to build. Civic education and nation-

building, amongst other things, entails providing for learners a framework that they can use in identifying right from wrong so as to become responsible citizens. While societies are guided by various ethics and moral codes inspired by religions and cultures, at a national level the values that determine right from wrong are enshrined in the constitution. For example, the preamble of the South African constitution emphasises the aim to "establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: 1). The implication of such a statement is that any South African citizen who acts contrary to the promotion of the identified values can be judged to be acting in the wrong. Therefore the constitution plays a crucial role in providing a moral compass for the citizen of the nation state.

The values of the constitution may then be cascaded into the education system through the curriculum documents. Indeed, in South Africa, the contemporary curriculum documents promote values whose roots can be traced to the constitution. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Further Education and Training (FET) History is based on knowledge, skills and values that are worth learning. It goes further to state that school history plays a part in promoting democratic citizenship by:

> *... understanding and upholding the values of the South African Constitution; encouraging civic responsibility and responsible leadership … ; [and] promoting human rights and peace by challenging prejudices involving race, class, gender, ethnicity and xenophobia* (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 7).

Evidently, the role of school history is not limited to just the development of academic knowledge, but it extends to the growth of a responsible citizen who engages with what is right and wrong from the study of history. It is partly for this reason that history teachers and learners voluntarily, and sometimes involuntarily, make moral judgments as they study the past.

It is on this basis that I set out to understand the thoughts of novice History teachers with regards to making moral judgments in history. At a personal level, the findings from this small scale study are important for me to be able to critique my own thoughts on why I am in the field of history education. More importantly, at a professional level, this study was critical for me – as a history educator who trains history teachers – to be exposed to the thoughts of novice teachers who are still negotiating their own teaching based on the training that they have received. According to Gorman (2004) and Oldfield (1981) issues of making moral judgments in history are more difficult for the

novices and the expectation is that they are able to grapple with such issues as they mature more in the field. I should also add that South Africa is a post-conflict country that is still navigating new societal values after years of colonialism and Apartheid and therefore, the teachers and learners still have burning issues to deal with (Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2012).

The debate that gripped South Africa over the removal of the statue of former Cape Colony Governor Cecil John Rhodes is ample evidence of how South African history is riddled with controversies. For example one headline read: "Cecil John Rhodes: As divisive in death as in life" (news24 Online, 2015-06-01). This national debate was dominated by opinions on whether Rhodes was a good or evil person. Using the Rhodes debacle as an example, history learners are often encouraged to learn from the past, but it should be understood that such learning would mean that they have to make moral judgments about the past if they are to learn what/who was good or bad. I therefore set up this study to find out the history topics that the novice teachers concede making moral judgments about; the reasons why they make moral judgments and the approaches they follow in doing so.

Literature review

The key concept at the focus of this study is moral judgments in history. This literature review will show that some scholars like Gorman (2004) and Gibson (2011) prefer to call them ethics in history while others deal with value judgments in history (Bentley, 2005). The debate on moral judgments is not a new one in history. In fact, it was at the epicentre of debates in history education about a century ago with Mandell Creighton and Lord Acton as the central characters. Herbert Butterfield was to join in and become another key scholar on this issue (Butterfield, 1931). As early as 1951, Child bemoaned the paucity of moral theory and singled it out as the reason for the contention between scholars such as Lord Acton and Herbert Butterfield. Child (1951) uses moral judgments and value judgments as two interchangeable concepts, but clarifies that what makes moral judgments is consideration of the human factor. In other words, it is impracticable to make moral judgments on events and institutions because they are not human. Gibson (2011:1) further endorses the argument that moral judgments should not be confused with moralising by explaining that, "To make ethical or moral judgments about individuals or a society is not the same as reporting one's

subjective responses to that morality". Therefore moral judgments are not the immediate statements of praise or blame that one makes as soon as they are exposed to particular phenomena, but are the end product of a process of historical enquiry (Oldfield, 1981). Therefore in this article, I will referring to as moral judgments what literature also refers to as value judgments or ethics judgments.

Various contentions have been identified in the debate on moral judgments in history. One of the key scholars, Lord Acton, led the school of thought that argued that historical characters (especially leaders) and events should be judged on a particular moral evaluation (Zagorin, 1998). Opposing this view was Mandell Creighton, but more so Herbert Butterfield, who argued, amongst other things that historians should not busy themselves with making moral judgments about the past (Vann, 2004). Therefore, while acknowledging the negligible neutrality there is, the debate on moral judgments has been dominated by either advocates or detractors.

One position advanced, comes from advocates for making moral judgments on historical accountability. They contend that the historian should be guided by certain professional morals and therefore should take past people to task for the decisions they made. Vann (2004) categorically states that a history teacher should take a position about the evil nature of historical experiences such as slavery and fascism, otherwise he/she might be interpreted as condoning them.

Some historians argue that it is actually impossible not to make moral judgments (Low-Beer, 1967; Gorman, 2004). Their argument is that all humans have a moral compass within them and they cannot run away from it. In fact, Tsan Tsai (2011:1) claims that "our moral and historical views are interdependent," meaning that the former influences the latter and vice versa. This would mean that it is as futile to avoid moral judgments as it is to avoid bias, regardless of our attempts. It is also argued that the language that we use is laced with evaluative implications, which makes it difficult for us to avoid moral judgments (Oldfield, 1981). Acknowledging making moral judgments therefore strengthens historical understanding because if history is about the past, present and future, then historians should take lessons from the past in order to understand the present and the perceived future.

It is crucial to understand, as Babbage (1964) notes, that the nature of history is at the centre of the debate on making moral judgments. If history is viewed as objective as scholars such as Gorman (2004) imply, then moral judgments

can be applied, but if it is subjective, then making moral judgments becomes complicated. On this basis, Butterfield (1931:1), had this to say about Lord Acton, who was a Whig historian:

> *It is the natural result of the Whig historian's habits of mind and his attitude to history – though it is not a necessary consequence of his actual method – that he should be interested in the promulgation of moral judgments and should count this as an important part of his office.*

Labelling Lord Acton according to political ideology shows how the study of history goes further than mere academic pursuit of knowledge.

The argument against making moral judgments has been based on a number of reasons. To start with is the debate over universalism and/or locality of morals. Universalism refers to moral absolutes while locality implies moral relativism (Bentley, 2005). Moral absolutes are problematic if one considers differences in that moral compasses are not based on one fundamental. Differences in, amongst other things, cultures and religions, may mean different moral compasses. It does not mean though, that people within the same culture or religion will share the same view. For example, both Herbert Butterfield and Lord Acton were Christians, – albeit the former was Protestant while the latter was Catholic – but they were not on the same side (Child, 1951). If he had to make moral judgments, Butterfield separated the historical act from the individual and emphasised that it is the act that has to be condemned and not the individual (Bentley, 2005). This was a key aspect of his debate with Lord Acton, who according to Murphy (1984) went too far with his assumptions and exaggerations.

There are also problems with quantification of what constitutes acceptable good or acceptable evil. For example, is a historical character who is responsible for the death of two people morally acceptable than one who is responsible for the death of millions of people? If one were to apply religion to moral judgments, as was done by Herbert Butterfield (whose moral compass was Protestant Christianity), then one "sinful" act can be equated to many. In other words, everyone in history is a "sinner" and can be judged negatively for some action that they took. This argument is even extended further; that no one has a right to be making moral judgments about another.

Another related issue concerns determinism versus chance in the historical process. To explain, a determinist understanding of the historical process would imply that historical agents are limited in their historical agency because fate or other forces play a part. Similarly, accepting the role of chance

in determining history means that some historical events cannot be fully attributed to historical characters (Oldfield, 1981).

Historians also have to consider presentism while making moral judgments about the past. The difference in time entails that it may be anachronistic to apply the morals of the present onto the actions of the past, especially a past during which the present-day morals did not exist. Gorman (2004) argues that whose morality forms the basis of judgement is not the issue; rather it is about admitting that historians have an obligation to use the historical narrative in order to show social responsibility of historical knowledge. Nevertheless, Gaddis (2002) maintains that our present-day values will always be within us and therefore it becomes ahistorical to try and use our values to make judgments about the past. This view is linked to the argument raised by Bentley with reference to Herbert Butterfield, that moral judgments "must itself be seen in relation to time and circumstance" (2005:67). However, the scholars against making moral judgments argue that we will never know enough about any event, which is why even eyewitnesses can come out with conflicting versions of the same event (Clark, 1967). The versions then get even more varied when later-day historians try to interpret historical sources. According to Child (1951), it is most complicated to make judgments on the motives of historical characters because they are difficult to discern.

Historians also have to negotiate teaching without indoctrination if they are to pass moral judgments. History has been a tool for indoctrination over time in the name of good morals and values which is why teachers are regularly warned not to impose their view on their classes (Richards, 2007). Therefore the scholars against making of moral judgments argue that it tampers with historical understanding. According to Vann (2004), the more the moral judgments, the weaker the historical narrative and hence the poorer the historical understanding.

Finally, according to scholars such as Oldfield, (1981), Cracraft (2004) and Megill (2004) historians should not get involved in making moral judgments since they have no training in it and, in fact, it is not really their job. Butterfield (1955:79) stresses this point by referring to the making of moral judgments as "the most useless and unproductive of all forms of reflection". This is in spite of Gorman's contention that "Historians and moral philosophers alike are able to make dispassionate moral judgments, but those who feel untrained should be educated in moral understanding" (2004:103).

Literature has shown that the voice of the school of thought against the making of moral judgments is louder than that of the advocates. Still, the debate rages on – more than a century after it started – and history teachers have to find a way to deal with it in their classrooms. Wineburg (2001) gives an example of a history class where the teacher is faced with moral ambiguity and eventually suggests three scenarios which can be used as a framework for teaching about moral judgments. The first scenario entails the teacher owning up to his moral views and speaking to the learners like a fellow human being who has views on what is good or bad. The second scenario entails involving guests to come and speak about controversial issue under discussion so that the teacher's viewed are not imposed on the learners. The third scenario is when the teacher does not offer any judgment but gives the class readings and a task so that they express their views independent of the teacher's influence. This is the framework I used in trying to understand the approaches that the novice teachers recommend for use in the history classroom.

Methodology

This was a small scale qualitative study whose focus was on revealing and understanding the thoughts of novice teachers who also happen to be enrolled for the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Honours degree in History Education. I therefore worked in the interpretivist paradigm with a view to understand the socially constructed reality of the thoughts of participants (De Vos *et al.,* 2005). The methodology that I employed was narrative inquiry since my focus was to gather the thoughts of the participants based on their experiences in the history classroom with relation to what they were learning in their B.Ed Honours programme. The premise on which I worked was that narrative enquiry enables the participants to manifest their thoughts through stories that they tell without my interruption (Trahar, 2009). I refer to my sample as novice teachers since they were all within their first three years of teaching experience. The participants also happened to have been exposed to and discussed issues of moral judgments in history in one of their core modules. They therefore had an idea about some of the key issues on moral judgments. Therefore I practiced convenience sampling and ended up with a sample of eight novice teachers (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; De Vos *et al*., 2005).

Employing narrative inquiry to gather data I gave the novice teachers an open ended questionnaire on which they would write their narratives in

accordance with the tenets of qualitative research. The point was to avoid interviewing them since the power dynamic between me as an academic and them as students would have interfered with the trustworthiness of the data. The questionnaire expected the participants to firstly reveal if there are themes/topics in history that they would make moral judgments on. If so, they would then have to give reasons as to why they would make moral judgments while teaching such themes. Finally they had to provide an explanation of the approach they recommended for teaching their chosen topic.

I analysed the data through a qualitative content analysis. I already had three questions which the participants answered, namely: Is there a theme/topic that you would make moral judgments on? Why would you make moral judgments on the identified theme/topic? Which approach would you recommend in teaching the identified theme taking into consideration your position on the making of moral judgments? I used the answers to these three questions as guidelines in coming up with the key themes from my analysis. Within each theme I practised open coding of the data to come up with categories that I present below.

Findings

Choice of themes/topics

All the participants agreed that they have made moral judgments and will probably keep on doing so when teaching particular topics. The themes/topics that the participants identified were as follows:

- Pseudo-scientific racism (Participant A)
- Nazism and the Holocaust (Participants C, D, E)
- The My Lai Massacre (Vietnam) (Participant B)
- Wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Participant F)

There is need to explain a few issues concerning the topics that the participants chose. Pseudo-scientific racism and Nazism and the Holocaust fall under one theme in the South African School History curriculum. The choice of the My Lai Massacre was not surprising as one of the articles that we had worked with in class referred to it. It is worth noting then that the participants decided not to choose an overtly South African contentious issue. Although I did not ask them why they did not choose a South African topic this choice can be understood as avoidance of contentious issues that are directly linked

to South Africans such as Apartheid. Still worth noting is the fact that the student who chose the "Wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo" is actually Congolese.

Reasons for topic choices

The participants gave varying reasons informed by personal, religious, legal, collective norms, social responsibility and historical consciousness. One participant can be said to have given personal reasons for her decision on the topic that she would use to teach moral judgments. For example, in reference to the Holocaust, Participant E argued that "although it happened years ago it still cannot be justified; it is acceptable to make moral judgments … as it is not okay to kill regardless of doing it as obeying orders or not". The participant did not state the moral compass for judging the immorality of the Holocaust. She also did not make a moral judgment on Hitler only but all who participated, willingly or otherwise, in the Holocaust.

One of the moral compasses given by the participants is religion. With reference to the My Lai Massacre, Participant B emphasised "questioning the act of violence" and felt that learners can use "their moral compass not only mentally but through beliefs such as 'God'". Participant A (who chose pseudo-scientific racism) argued for the importance of the "religious perspective" and Participant D (who chose the Holocaust) supported this view by pointing out that "religion can also play a big role when one would not be able to think". Although the three participants did not explicitly declare their religious affiliation, they revealed how they relied on religion in making moral judgments.

A human rights perspective also came out with two participants referring to laws and conventions. For example, Participant A, who had earlier mentioned his religious influences, stated that,

> *I feel that it is important today to make moral judgments on such inhuman behaviour and human rights violations…. It was unlawful to implement sterilisation policies on other human beings; it is against the United Nations charter of human rights.*

Still on Nazism, Participant C had this to say: "Hitler trampled on human rights on a large scale and defied conventional and ethical norms of war". Evidently the two participants prefer to refer to legal documents as their moral compasses, including human rights documents that were penned after

the said historical event.

Another perspective that emerged from the data was the reference to collective societal norms. This is evident in such a statement: "Hitler is regarded by many people today to be the embodiment of evil" (Participant C). This means that he also bases his moral judgments on what collective society says about historical events or characters. The participant goes further to show that he refers to present-day society and not necessarily the views of the society contemporary to the historical event by claiming that "Hitler's actions during WW2 is *(sic)* regarded as one of the most immoral acts by present day's society". This would mean that teachers and learners take educational standpoints on the basis of what present-day collective society says.

Social responsibility also seemed to be driving some of the participants' decisions to make moral judgments. For instance, both Participants A and B regarded it as their duty to "raise awareness" about racism and violence which they consider immoral. Meanwhile Participant F considered it her responsibility to "address social, economic, and political problems within society". The participants therefore seem to view themselves as more than teachers, but also as activists who partake in building a fairer society.

Two participants demonstrated that they had not forgotten their primary task as History teachers and they were of the view that making moral judgments actually aid historical understanding. According to Participant A, if moral judgments are made, "learners are no longer unconnected from the past and today actions". Participant C was more explicit claiming that moral judgments help learners understand:

> *... ethical issues about human nature, blind loyalty and wilful ignorance. All the concepts above are relevant to many conflicts in the world today and also to many South Africans in both apartheid and post-apartheid.*

Approaches to teaching moral judgments

I had asked the participants to state their approaches to teaching the identified topics on the pretext that their approach would show if they allowed the leaners to make judgments for themselves. This was based on Wineburg's (2001) framework of three scenarios which, as explained in the literature review, offers teachers approaches to dealing with the making of moral judgments.

The students suggested various ways of helping learners to make moral judgments. One of the main suggested strategies was the teaching of empathy. Seven of the eight participants felt that teaching empathy is a key to making moral judgments about the past. Participant D further pointed out that the use of games and role play can enhance empathy skills that in turn help develop making moral judgments. Although Participant F did not mention empathy he suggested the employment of a "leaner-centred approach" exemplified by strategies such group work whereby learners would make their own judgments as groups then report to the rest of the class.

The participants also suggested that there are other key issues that should be taught. For instance, Participant A argues that the History teacher should "make sure they *[learners]* understand the concept of democracy and the UN Charter on human rights". This shows that the participant would encourage learners to make moral judgments about the past on the basis of the present norms. Participant C who also exhibited presentism by referring to the present-day norms, however contradicted himself when he claimed that it is important to highlight "time and context" in order to "compare present and past norms".

Another strategy that was suggested is the use of "parents, peers and other unofficial sources which students can rely on" (Participant C). This reveals the thought that learners need to be guided by others in making moral judgments about the past. Only one of the participants as noted earlier seems to suggest explicit learner-centeredness. The only other similar suggestion came from Participant A who, after suggesting that the learners should learn about democracy and human rights, then suggested that the teacher should "expose learners to different sources so that they can make their own moral judgments".

Discussion

Five key points of discussion can be extrapolated from the findings presented above. The first one is that the participants stress on the importance of making moral judgments about the past since all of them gave a topic that they would make moral judgments on. Even though they did not seem to be making extreme judgments, the participants can still be argued to be falling within Lord Acton's school of thought that moral judgments should be made in studying the past. They all subscribe to Vann's (2004) view that there are

some topics on which the teacher has to make a stand. Only one suggested an alternative pedagogy of bringing in guests to class as per Wineburg's (2001) second scenario. They mostly see it as their duty to teach the learners what is good from bad which means that they would take Wineburg's (2001) first scenario where the teacher owns up to their own moral views speaks to the class not just as a teacher but a fellow human being who cannot hide their own moral compass, such as religion. While this frees up the teachers from pretending not to hold a view, the danger is that making moral judgments for the learners may end up being laced with indoctrination based on the teacher's convictions. It was evident that the participants used different moral campuses and not just the national constitutional values as endorsed in the history curriculum.

The second discussion point is that the participants find it easier to make judgments on topics distant from their lives. Only one participant was an exception – a teacher of Congolese origin choosing to make moral judgments on the wars in the DRC. This was a crucial finding in that he was, incidentally, the only participant who suggested the application of Wineburg's (2001) second scenario of bringing in guests to class. Therefore all the participants did not want to apply moral judgments on topics that they personally relate to. The choice of distant topics can be understood to be evidence of the complexity of making moral judgments or teaching controversial issues. The closer to home and more recent the issue is the more personal it becomes, hence the more contentious it is (Low-Beer, 1999). Making moral judgments about a local issue might seem like making moral judgments about yourself as well and so it is easier to choose a distant issue. This distancing can also be understood in the light of the fact that the participants also made moral judgments on both the acts and the people of the past, unlike Butterfield's (1931) suggestion to condemn just the act, if ever one had to. Judging people and not just their actions, may be more difficult if one considers that history learners tend to align themselves with historical populations (for example, some African teachers may find it difficult to condemn some Africans for participating in the slave trade).

Thirdly, the reasons that the participants gave for making moral judgments are more civic and personal than pedagogic. The weak emphasis on historical concepts such as time and context and the stronger focus on civic issues, such as raising awareness and human rights, reflect the teachers to be conducting a civic duty more than a pedagogic one. Therefore there was evidence of the

participants' own historical views being interdependent with their moral views (Tsan Tsai, 2011). Failure to link the moral judgments to historical concepts gives evidence that the participants are still struggling to come up with a balance between the two. If one considers Vann's (2004) argument, it can be claimed that since the participants emphasised a lot on moral judgments, they may teach a weak the historical narrative which can lead to poor historical understanding for their learners. This was also the crux of the argument by scholars such as Butterfield (1931), Oldfield, (1981), Cracraft (2004) and Megill (2004) that it is not the job of the historian to be focusing on moral judgments lest they neglect what they consider the more important job of the historian – historical understanding. Therefore, the findings of this research reveal a weakness of the first scenario of teachers owning up to their moral views (Wineburg, 2001).

Fourthly, it was evident that the participants are entangled in presentism. An example is the continual reference to the concept of human rights to a time before the Human Rights Charter was passed by the United Nations. Evidently, "time and circumstance" as raised by Bentley (2005) were not made adequate reference to. The findings are evidence of Gaddis' (2002) point of view on how our present-day values will always be within us and we end up using them, knowingly or otherwise. Nevertheless, the participants could justify their thoughts with Gorman's (2004) argument that it is not a major issue on whose morality history is judged as long as there is evidence of social responsibility of historical knowledge. The argument by Gorman (2004) therefore supports the view that the teacher should own up to their moral views in order to help the learners make judgments (Wineburg, 2001).

Finally regarding the teaching approaches, the participants overtly suggest learner-centeredness on one hand while covertly submitting teacher-centeredness on the other. To explain, while they acknowledge the importance of learners making decisions for themselves, they also view themselves as the more knowledgeable partner who can teach and raise awareness about human rights, fairness, violence and other social, political and economic injustices. These approaches are in contradiction since the participants seemed to be imposing their moral judgments on the learners, in spite of their claim that learner-centeredness would be the best approach. What this reflects is that they seem to realise that the contemporary South African education system emphasises learner-centeredness – and this is not surprising since they have only recently completed their teacher training. However, they are embroiled in the

tension that they also know that post-apartheid education should contribute to identifying and correcting the wrongs of the past. This tension is therefore also evident in the framework that I used for this research (Wineburg, 2001). In fact, the choice of approach is not a simple one and may be influenced by other factors such as the topic under focus, the capabilities of the teacher and the nature of the learners in question. The teacher's experience may therefore be crucial in helping them to navigate the challenges they face in dealing with moral judgments in the history classroom.

Conclusion

This small-scale study shows that debates on the making of moral judgments in history are as relevant today as they were one hundred years ago. The study set out to find out and understand the thoughts of novice teachers with regards to the making of moral judgments. The results show that the novice teachers are still grappling with this issue – something that is characteristic of their lack of experience. As far back as 1951, Child (1951) lamented the lack of theory on moral judgments in history. I argue that the participants in this study showed that, even today, novice teachers need to learn more on the theory of moral judgments. However, it is important to remember Wineburg's (2001) warning that even in the hands of an exemplary teacher, the issues at the heart of history teaching can easily take a life of their own, defying our best and most valiant attempts to fix their course. Therefore I conclude that there is a need for history teachers to be always aware of the balance between their civic responsibilities and their pedagogic duties. Indeed, moral judgments are difficult to escape, but if they are to be encouraged as a benchmark for historical literacy, teachers need to be aware of the frames of reference that they are using and their consequences.

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