

PRIMARY SCHOOL

**CRITICAL THINKING IN HISTORY:
A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

*Salim Akoojee
Transvaal College of Education
Laudium*

History teaching should aim at the development of critical, reflective and independent thinking individuals. At first this aim appears as an idealistic purpose characteristic of academic journals rather than a clearly defined goal. This paper suggests that critical thinking is not only a desirable and an attainable goal but that it is a realistic and necessary one. This is necessary if history teaching is to contribute to the transformation of our society and the individuals within it.

It is understood that existing textbooks do not deal fairly with all participants in history (CEPD, 1994). It is therefore necessary to examine ways in which existing textbooks can be used creatively for this purpose. Teachers and students therefore need to develop a critical stance towards textbooks. In order to enable students to read present texts critically, it is necessary to understand the basis on which they are flawed. They offer a narrow, fatalistic, one-dimensional view of historical events and figures. One that does not encourage, or at the worst discourages, critical thinking. The narrative provided by these textbooks suggests that the account they provide is comprehensive and that it is the only one that is valid. The conception of history implied in these texts needs to be systematically discredited. This implies that students will need to be taught about the way in which history is produced. This view is supported by the principle agreed upon during the July and November History Conferences held in 1993:

Skills and content should be seen as inseparable. The history curriculum should be based on an awareness of how history knowledge is produced. History is not a set of given facts. The process of history production should be made clear to students.

(Sieborger, 1994:3)

If it is agreed that 'history production' is an important goal of history teaching, it is necessary to develop

creative ways of engaging with the textbooks available at present.

A criterion for critical thinking in history requires that students question the basis of the 'facts' and the purposes that they serve. This will enable students to engage with the one-dimensional view provided by most traditional texts. This exercise requires that students interrogate the texts more rigorously so that the silences become transparent. This suggests not only that the point of view of the author be determined but that textbooks be criticised on the basis of what they say. This can be done by analysing what these authors left out (the silences) in providing that particular point of view. This exercise requires that more questions be raised about the authenticity of sources and the viewpoints provided. This will provide a voice for the groups that are not mentioned, stories that are not told and the perspectives deliberately ignored.

The move to teaching 'critical history' using traditional textbooks requires that teachers begin a campaign for what I call 'de-mystifying' the textbook. This involves the somewhat difficult task of questioning existing textbooks: a procedure that can be particularly devastating for students who were traditionally instructed to 'learn it, don't question it'. Once students understand that a very 'ordinary' person has written the text, and that this person has very 'ordinary' perceptions and biases, the traditional awe and respect for texts and their respective authors disappear and the seeds of critical thinking are planted. And once planted, they need very little encouragement for fertile growth. This needs to be done with the caution that accompanies historical writing.

The second task on the road to critical thinking is to provide students with the skills required to systematically criticise texts. These skills involve inter alia:

1. the distinction between fact and opinion

2. the question of selection of facts
3. the interrogation of the writer (with the warning and understanding that name and ethnicity by no means indicate a particular bias)
4. questioning the validity of certain 'facts' and the basis on which this can be done.

The interrogation of these textbooks is a necessary means and, I would add, a necessary prelude in preparation for the alternative textbooks that are already becoming available.

THE METHODOLOGY

As pointed out earlier, the skill of reading or summarising must not be regarded as the end but rather as a means to a more important goal: that of critical awareness in history. Although the major portion of this part of the paper deals with 'reading for understanding', it needs to be understood that 'understanding' is an important precondition for effective critical analysis. Students need to realise that reasoned judgements cannot be made in the absence of appropriate factual information. Furthermore, a particular writer's point of view cannot be ascertained on the basis of an inadequate reading of the text.

Careful reading of history as a skill also intends to overcome the criticism that a skills-based approach is necessarily distinct from one that is content-based. The content is to be **used** to engage in critical thinking. The content in effect is our point of departure. This is necessary if we are to avoid the exclusive focus on skills at the expense of content. A tendency according to Kros & Vadi (1992) of some educationists is to 'eviscerate' history (quoted in *History Matters*, 1993). This method is designed to reveal not only the way in which history is 'produced' but the way in which it is written. An understanding of how a particular writer structures his work represents an important basis for analysis. Analysing both the structure and content of textbooks should enable students to understand that the writing of history is not an objective and neutral exercise.

The method of reading and understanding history outlined here is designed for use with the 'content-based' textbooks used at present in most South African schools. It is premised on the understanding that most teachers use texts that are not geared towards the development of effective critical thinking skills. It therefore becomes necessary for the teacher to enable students to engage critically with these texts. Each of the stages outlined in this part is premised on important

questions that need to be addressed prior to advancing to the next stage.

Stage 1: TITLE

This stage involves a detailed understanding and analysis of the subject, theme and period. Every word and phrase in the title must be understood before reading any further.

This stage forms the most important part of the reading. It must be stressed that everything within the particular chapter must in fact be related to this heading/title. Students need to clarify for themselves what they are expecting to find out in the course of the next few pages. If they cannot do this clearly enough, then they should continue to Stage 3 (detailed reading of the Introduction) to clarify this aspect.

Titles can either be short, ('The free burghers') or long ('The way of life of inhabitants of the Cape in the 18th century') (Chengalroyen et al., 1984:54). While the first title is vague, this should be clarified in Stage 2 and Stage 3. In the case of school texts, however, the short titles are sometimes explained by the syllabus. The section on the Eastern Frontier, for instance, may appear under South African History of the 17th and 18th century. The long titles, on the other hand, clearly define the subject, theme and the period (see example Appendix B).

Stage 2: SUB-HEADINGS

Most chapters in either school texts or academic journals have sub-headings that define the way in which the topic is handled. Stage 2 involves understanding how these sub-headings link with the title that has been analysed in Stage 1.

Thus in the case of the Eastern Frontier the writer may have chosen as one sub-heading the 'Lifestyle of the Xhosa and frontiersmen' in the 17th Century. Students should be encouraged to write down the sub-heading and attempt to link this with the overall title. If it has something to do with the period prior to the conflict, this will be clarified later on.

At the end of this stage, students should have developed a framework of understanding, i.e. a means by which they could understand the detail that is the subject of Stage 3 and Stage 4.

Stage 3: INTRODUCTION and CONCLUSION

This stage ought to clarify Stages 1 and 2. Students should identify clearly how the title (Stage 1) and sub-headings (Stage 2) are reflected in the Introduction. They need also to ensure that every 'difficult' word is

understood and that the sentences link with the framework that has been developed.

At the end of this stage, students should also be able to identify the point of view of the writer in terms of the subject. The writer of the chapter on the Eastern Frontier might be providing a point of view that is, for instance, consistent with the white colonialist perspective. If so, students also need to be asking themselves throughout whether there is an alternative point of view to the one provided. This can be done by questioning the view that the author is presenting.

Stage 4: PARAGRAPHS

The analysis of individual paragraphs forms the most important part of this method. Paragraphs form the building blocks of the written mode and their analysis is therefore the most important element in successful reading.

It is important to understand that paragraphs are written for certain purposes. Students need to learn to identify these differing purposes. In order to do this the characteristics of paragraphs need to be determined. There are two essential features of each paragraph: the main or principal idea and supporting details.

There are various ways in which to determine the main idea. The first and easiest is to pick out a 'topic sentence'. The topic sentence is one that summarises what the writer is saying in that paragraph. Some paragraphs, however, do not have a clearly defined topic sentence. It is then necessary to formulate the main idea by joining sentences to get a 'sense' of the paragraphs. One way in which this can be done is by asking what the writer is saying in this paragraph about the sub-heading (see Stage 2). The next step is to formulate this main idea in both statement and question form to ensure that the writer's ideas are clearly understood (see example Appendix B). The questions formulated can be used effectively for study purposes to help outline the essence of the section being dealt with.

It is important at this stage to write down the main idea of the paragraph and the way in which it links with the other elements (See Appendix B: paragraph 2). Thus, for instance, the writer may be identifying the weapons used by the parties on the frontier, or the way in which the conflict began. Students should be encouraged to provide a progressive summary of all paragraphs. In statement form, they could write as a paragraph heading, 'Weapons used in the conflict', and then identify the weapons, poison-tipped arrows and bows, guns, knives, etc. as supporting details. As a question, the following could be an option: 'What were the weapons used by the participants?'

Once the main idea is determined, the supporting details can be worked out. A reasonably reliable test of the 'topic sentence' or main idea is to attempt to link the supporting details with the main idea. Self-testing is therefore a crucial aspect of this exercise.

In this way a progressive summary will be developed which will enable students to identify what the writer is saying. By using key words to identify the supporting details and ensuring that students write down the main idea and the way in which the paragraph links to both the title and sub-heading, students will be able to understand the section dealt with.

Stage 5: ANALYSIS

It is at this stage that students will be able to identify what the writer's views are with regard to the subject. It is important to read the introduction and conclusion again to enable understanding of the writer's viewpoint.

The completion of this stage is underpinned by the view that all history is subject to the historian's pen and that there is no one complete story (Carr, 1961). This stage of analysis and criticism cannot take place without clearly understanding 'what' was written and 'how' it was written (i.e. how paragraphs were structured).

SOME NOTES ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION

1. The method, according to my students' cursory comments, is time consuming. This is unfortunately a necessary stage in development. The time taken is likely to be reduced with continuous implementation. It needs to be clearly understood that this is a necessary first step in constructive analysis. As students go along, they may well find that the stages will be automatic, in other words, without deliberative thinking.
2. The method outlined needs to be implemented under supervision to be effective, especially at primary and secondary level. Understanding the methodology without implementation is like separating the theory and practice of riding a bicycle. Despite the knowledge of all the theory of riding, one is unlikely to be able to ride merely by 'knowing how'. There will be numerous pitfalls, problems and sometimes even hard painful lessons that need to be learned.
3. There is a need for students to compile their own hand-written notes. This will enable systematic study. At the end of the reading, a summary should be constructed. In other

words, it is necessary for students to be able to see, at a glance, what was written and how.

The method was designed on the basis of my experience of teaching college students. It is premised on the understanding that students will improve their own reading (and writing) when they analyse the writing of others. While this guide does not represent a definitive procedure for teaching writing skills, it is directed at getting students to analyse the writing of others so that they are encouraged to evaluate critically not only 'what' is written but 'how' it is written for maximum effect. Far too often the culture of 'perfection' has been instilled in students. This tends to prevent meaningful critique. There is a need to encourage students to read history, or any other material for that matter, critically so that the objective of a critical thinking nation is realised. This objective is likely to serve as the only effective deterrent by civil society for the abuse of power.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A

READING FRAMEWORK

STAGE	WHAT TO ANALYSE	WHAT TO ASK?
1	TITLE	What is the Subject, Theme and/or Period under discussion?
2	SUB-HEADINGS	Do I have a FRAMEWORK that fits in with the TITLE? How are SUB-HEADINGS arranged? (e.g. typesetting, underlining, numbering, etc.)
3	INTRODUCTION	Does it explain the TITLE? How does it explain the meaning of the FRAMEWORK?
	CONCLUSION	Does it explain the TITLE? Does it explain the meaning of the FRAMEWORK?
4	PARAGRAPHS	What is the MAIN/PRINCIPAL IDEA? How does this MAIN/PRINCIPAL idea link with the SUB-HEADING, and then with the TITLE? What are the SUPPORTING DETAILS? Are all the SUPPORTING DETAILS consistent with the MAIN IDEA?
5	ANALYSIS	What is the POINT OF VIEW OF THE AUTHOR as regards the TITLE (Subject, Theme, Period?) What has been included/not mentioned? Why? How has the author written the material for maximum effect?

PARAGRAPH 2

MAIN IDEA

STATEMENT FORM: Types of white settlers.

QUESTION FORM: How could white settlers be differentiated?

SUPPORTING DETAILS

- townsmen
- wine & wheat farmers
- cattle or stock farmers

3.2 **CONCLUSION**
NO CONCLUSION FOUND

STAGE 4 PARAGRAPHS

ONE EXAMPLE ... (ref. p. 54)

SUB-HEADING: **The Senior Officials**

PARAGRAPH 1

MAIN IDEA: MAIN SENTENCE - "In the beginning, they regarded themselves as being more important than the colonists ... this attitude slowly changed".

STATEMENTS FORM: The first Senior Officials change.

QUESTION FORM: Why did this group include all officials?

SUPPORTING DETAILS

- first Senior Officials, governor, members of Council, rich merchants
- brought European fashions
- temporary residence at Cape
- officials could become governors
- results in changed status for officials

PARAGRAPH 2

MAIN IDEA MAIN SENTENCE - No main sentence.
First sentence points out that they (senior officials) lived extravagantly.

STATEMENT FORM: Clothing of Senior Officials (at the Cape in the 18th Century).

QUESTION FORM: How were Senior Officials dressed (at the Cape in the 18th Century)?

SUPPORTING DETAILS:

- lived extravagantly
- men's hair long, wore wigs
- feathered, wide-brimmed hats with high crowns
- knee-length coats
- knee-length velvet or satin breeches bound with large bows & tight stockings
- bright waistcoats & silk shirts
- large buttoned coats, bright colour (red, yellow or blue) with large bow
- shoes, shining buckles or knee boots

STAGE 4: ANALYSIS

These are some questions that could be asked.

4.1 QUESTIONS ON STRUCTURE

1. Why are Senior officials discussed first? Is it correct to do so?
2. Are the paragraphs appropriately structured? What aspects do not necessarily fit in each of them?
3. Look at all the sub-headings identified in the 'Framework' in Stage 2. Do they all fit in with the title of the chapter? What does this tell us about the way in which this chapter is written?
4. Why is there no conclusion to this chapter? What is the effect of this?
5. How is structure related to the point of view of the writer of this chapter?

4.2 QUESTIONS ON CONTENT

1. Why have the Khoikhoi been excluded?
Are the writer's reasons for their exclusion justified?
 2. Why is there a distinction between company officials and settlers? Do you agree with this distinction? Explain.
 3. Read the account below and answer the questions that follow:

One Senior Official believed that his clothing was not extravagant because he could afford them. He stated that people who could not afford them accused him of being extravagant because they could not afford to buy them.

3.1 Do you agree with this official?
3.2 What does this tell us about the point of view of the author of this book?
 4. What about women in the Cape? - look at the framework (Stage 2). Account for this.
 5. Is the distinction between settler and official necessary? For whom? To what end?
 6. What is the effect of NOT mentioning the number of Khoi at the Cape?
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