

What is history? Views from a primary school teacher education programme

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This article focuses on how history as a concept is understood by first-year BA Education students. Students were asked to respond to the following questions: 'what is history?', 'what is history to you?' and 'who writes history?' Verbal and written consent was obtained from the students to participate in the study. Their answers demonstrated a concept of history that is imbued with a spatial and temporal as well as ideological and moral position. This article argues that, through the data, it seems that for these students the concept of history emerges as an object that is given a moral value, rather than history being seen as having value as a knowledge or skill set. I draw parallels between my findings and Donovan and Bransford's work on how history is learnt by primary school students in the United States. There are clear similarities between the primary school understandings recorded in Donovan and Bransford, and first-year university understandings that emerged in the data of this study. This article argues that if history is understood as moral, as 'good' or 'bad', critical thinking and analytic skills which learning history can imbue are vastly diminished. Furthermore, this article uses Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' to consider the implications of how the participating students understand what history is.

Introduction: The concept of history

The question of how people understand 'history' is complex. It involves interrogation of both what a concept is and what 'history' is. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the deep philosophical debates about the nature of the concept.¹ For the purposes of this article, we will take the definition:

Concepts are the constituents of thoughts. Consequently, they are crucial to such psychological processes as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision-making. (Margolis & Laurence 2014:1)

Thus, the concept of history encompasses how history is thought of, how it is learnt, what is remembered about it and what decisions are made about it.

It is important to interrogate how students who will become teachers understand 'history'. There is widespread literature on teaching history in South Africa,² including the journal *Yesterday and Today* published by The South African Society for History Teaching since 1983. However, not much exploration has been done into how teaching students understand the very concept of history. This is important because how education students understand history frames how history is understood and taught in the school classroom. Examining how history is understood by education students also assists in investigating what points must be stressed when teaching first years. A similar case study was done in regards to heritage and how heritage was understood by teachers within the subject of history, but this did not investigate what those teachers understood 'history' was (Moreeng 2014).

In a larger project, beyond the scope of this article, it will be important to merge their understandings with studies of how children learn to understand what constitutes the subject of history in the school classroom. This article grapples with ideas of how pre-service teachers understand history through examining the process of a 6-week first-year history module, 'What is history', and working through students' answers to questions such as 'What is history to you?', 'What is history in relation to the present?' and 'Is history important?' The students' engagement is also explored to show how their understandings of history are steeped in ideology. On the basis of the data collected, I argue that history is understood by the students from a moral point of view, as either 'good' or 'bad'. History, for these students, is thus ideologically imbued with a moral function.

1. For a summary of these arguments, see Margolis and Laurence (2014).

2. For example, used in this article see Kekana (1989), Van Eeden (2016), Moreeng (2014) and Maposa (2015) among others.

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I furthermore make the argument that unless critical thinking is taught as a fundamental part of history as a subject, teaching history can be counter-productive to students learning.

I use the term counter-productive with an understanding that teaching history assists students (both in university and in school) in understanding their relationship to the world. It imbues them with the ability to research, analyse and process information. In particular, the subject of History requires the students to learn different ways in which the world is experienced and lived, as explained in the concepts of subjectivity, positionality objectivity and truth.³

When taught well, history as a subject should explain that we all experience the world through the lens of who we are and where, and when, we live. This requires academic and analytical literacy. Although students sometimes possess the basic interpersonal skills, these can falsely indicate language and subject proficiency. Students rather need deep comprehension that comes with perspective taking, academic language and analysis skills (Lin, Lawrence & Snow 2015).

Students use their current understandings of the world to understand the past. This became apparent in some mistakes that arose in students' tests. Several students confused 'Bantu Education' with 'Ubuntu education' and wrote about 'Bantu-stands' rather than bantustans. 'Ubuntu education' could be used to describe a moral project more suited to the ideological weight students give to history when it is described as 'good' history (see below) than the toxic apartheid education project whose effects we are still fighting today. The students, however, are more familiar with the term 'ubuntu' and associate education as positive; thus, it makes more sense to pair education with 'ubuntu' rather than 'bantu' education. The students who made this error sometimes had a correct understanding of 'Bantu Education' and had just misnamed it, or sometimes had a completely mistaken idea of the apartheid education project. Either way, the mistake is an evocative one.

Some students also substituted 'bantu-stands' for 'bantustans'. This was done again with both positive and negative associations: some students had the correct understanding of bantustans as an apartheid separate development strategy, but some students wrote about the 'bantu-stands' in a way that evoked space where 'bantu could stand', one lovingly attributed these spaces as 'created for us by Mr Steve Biko' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016). Here then were spaces also where people were 'standing for' something, and this was seen as a positive. This article explores the meaning of these kinds of understandings.

History as map

First-year students entering into the course mostly, unsurprisingly, exhibit a common sense understanding of

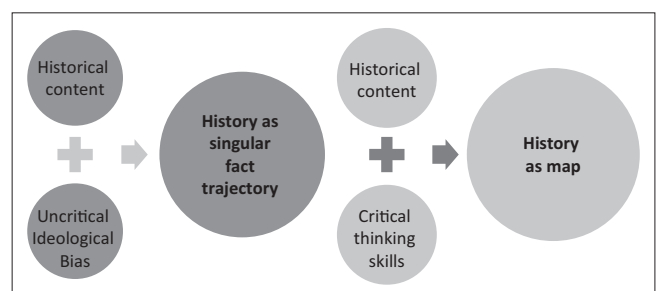
3. See, among others, Blee (1998), Hart (2002), Hofmeyr (1994), Massey (2005), Portelli (1998) and Trouillot (1997).

history. This was evidenced particularly through an understanding of the concepts of bias and truth, which replaces an understanding of positionality, subjectivity and objectivity that require an interrogation of how the subject (student) understands the world.

When students engage the idea of history as content of uncontested fact, this limits critical engagement with sources and types of knowledge (Bain 2006). This is particularly problematic when ideological positions are disguised as 'factual' history, and both taught and thought uncritically. A crude example of this is a high school student who was taught that under capitalism, there are free elections and freedom of religion, while under communism, there are no elections and there is no freedom of religion (M. Msimang 2016, pers. comm., 20 July 2016).

The critical thinking skills that are developed through learning history do not require a post-modern ability to divorce any idea of truth – rather they require a neo-Vygotskyian (Henning 2012) understanding that everything is mediated by signs and symbols, and different factors get in between the subject and the object that is acted upon. In this case, many students seem to understand history as a subject in itself – rather than an object created by subjects. Thus, how students learn what history is can mediate their understanding of their world. The idea that history is logically linear follows from the view that there is one history that is absolutely true and goes one step further towards entrenching the ideology contained in the 'History'. This leads to the implication that the ideological climate we are living in is the only logical and true way to live. Apart from the fact that this in itself can be dangerous, this flattens what students can learn from history as a subject both in university and in school.

The importance of teaching history lies in the potential to teach students different ways to 'orientate' (Ahmed 2006) themselves in the world, to teach history as map, rather than history as fact. This places pressure on the history teacher to find the right balance between content and theoretical engagement with material to equip the students with the thinking skills to research and engage with historical content. Figure 1 displays the author's interpretation of what goes into reading and teaching history as a singular fact trajectory, or what goes into reading and teaching history as a map.



Source: Ethnographic research in the SOSINA 1A class, 2016

FIGURE 1: Different ways of presenting history, and their outcomes.

Ideological bias as presented in history manifests in presenting who is 'good' and who is 'bad'. It can be as extreme a cliché as the case of the victor writing history, or how South African history was portrayed under apartheid (Godsell 2015).

Methodology

The data in this article are drawn from a 6-week course called 'What is history', which I taught at the University of Johannesburg in 2016. There were 136 students in the class. Of the students in the class, 73% were women. The ages of students ranged from 30 to 18 years old, with the majority being between the ages of 18 and 23. They come from a mix of urban and rural background, from all over the country. Students' consent was obtained verbally and in writing for their participation in the research, and a full ethics application was completed through the Faculty of Education. Students signed consent forms to allow their data to be used anonymously for this research. The course was for first-year students enrolled in the degree 'Education for the Intermediate Phase', and it was taught in the first 6 weeks of the year. This means that these students were generally in their first few weeks of university education, bright-eyed, so to speak. On the first day of class, I asked who in the class actively did not like history, and the majority of the class put up their hands. This was helpful for the study, as it meant that I understood from where their point of engagement began and that it was my job to convince them of the importance of history both as a school subject and as a skill set.

There are four sets of data used in this article. The first is the ethnographic data gained from my teaching the class. The second is journal entries that the students were asked to write week by week. The third is their final assignment – a journal entry submitted at the end of their course. The fourth data set, upon which this article most relies, is from a test the students wrote 3 weeks into the course. I have decided to foreground these data because of the timing of the test: 3 weeks into the course. The students not only had been exposed to the ideas of history I was trying to teach but also were still in the middle of the course and so had ideas of history still influenced by their previous experiences and understandings. The questions asked in the test were simply 'What is history in relation to the present?' and 'What is history to you?' With this I was trying to assess whether the points I had been attempting to teach – especially the focus on 'history in you', my stressing the point that history is more about the present than it is about the past – had had any impact. The ethnographic material is also important as the texture of the classes, and the discussions we had in class, informed my understanding of where the students were, particularly in terms of resisting or understanding the concepts about which we spoke.

I coded the data, sorting the responses into five categories: time, history as either good or bad, history as a 'teaching'

object, race and racism and 'what is history'.⁴ From these categories, I sorted the data to find the most common or uncommon expressions. Again, most of these students had not done history as a matric subject and thus only had exposure to what history is or isn't through indirect methods.

I have then closely examined the context and texture of the answers (De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006). I have taken into consideration the fact that English is the second or third language of most of the students in this course. I have analysed the data based on content, rather than syntax or grammar.

One concern in viewing the data is my own positionality in terms of how the students experienced the class. The class was composed of predominantly black students, and I am a white teacher. In a South African classroom discussing history, this has the potential to skew any results, if the students feel as if I expect certain answers. I attempted, as far as possible, to express in class that it was an open space for discussion around the topics we were learning and that I welcome different opinions and debate. The data seem to indicate that the students felt free to express their opinions, particularly about whether they liked history or not and also about issues of race in South Africa. Nevertheless, I am aware of the race and power dynamics in the class.⁵

I am considering my own positionality and bias in this study – as the teacher, I have experienced the classroom space in a specific way, and my own aims, to convey a certain idea of history, have impacted on what I took from the class ethnographically (Berger & Luckmann 1967). As I am discussing ideology as a concept,⁶ rather than dissecting any particular ideology, I do not consider my ideological position critically relevant for the study. I am always vigilant of my positionality permeating the classroom, and in this way, I am self-aware in the data analysis.

Theoretical framework

There are several interlinked theoretical lenses for this article. They combine feminist theory, historical theory, Education Studies literature and discourse theory (Berlant 2011; Donovan & Bransford 2005; Trouillot 1997). I do not have space in this article to bring discourse theory into the discussion of each point; however, the theoretical concept underpinning my analysis is expressed by Anna de Fina *et al.* (2006):

narrators build shared representations about who they are by creating story worlds in which identities are characterised in common ways and routinely related to specific actions or reactions. (p. 351)

4. I derived these categories through grouping together the themes most commonly emerging in the students' answers.

5. Because I am using the data anonymously, I am working from anonymous test papers and so cannot analyse the data more individually along gender, age or other categories, although I hope to do this at another point in this project.

6. 'Concept' is a complex and contested term: 'Concepts are constituents of thoughts. Consequently, they are crucial to such psychological processes as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision making' (Margolis & Laurence 2014). This is the uncontested definition of concepts, and it is with this – albeit vague – idea of constituents of thoughts that this article poses for the idea of 'concept'. Thus, what ideas and thoughts make up the idea of history.

The story world that is created is a *then* South Africa, a *now* South Africa and a *future* South Africa. The actions and reactions are often linked to what it means to be a person in each of these story worlds and how students navigate between them. The feminist theoretical framework also deals with what it means to be human in these spaces. Lauren Berlant's 'Cruel Optimism' – which presents situations in which the object of desire is an active impediment to the subjects well-being (Berlant 2011) broadly frames my thinking on why the students have developed their particular orientation towards an understanding of history. As Blumer argues through symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1986), people construct their interactions towards things – so how and why have the students constructed these particular understandings of history? As with history itself, my analysis of this comes from the students' experience of their present and their desires and hopes for the future. The concept of 'cruel optimism' provides a useful heuristic device for thinking through the construction of these ideas of history. Berlant (2011) writes:

Cruel optimism is, then, like all phrases, a deictic – a phrase that points to a proximate location. As an analytic lever, it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life', which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. This is not just a psychological state. The conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the 'technologies of patience' that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions of the cruelty of the *now*. (pp. 27, 28)

Berlant's study is based in the United States, and I am wary of applying United States-based theory onto South African social situations. However, the promise of 'the good life' and some aspects of how unachievable this is for the population en masse is applicable more globally and is also relevant to South Africa. What emerged from the data was often history given as a motivating factor towards a 'good life' – a *then-future* – or was given as additional motivator, or pressure, to overcoming the *now*. One of the study's participant students writes:

'History is important because it can motivate a person in doing well or becoming a better person. For instance the history in South Africa can influence most Black Africans to study hard, to ensure that they have a bright future, and to ensure that they do not experience what their grand-grandparents experienced.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

As explored above, if history is not presented as a complex map, an understanding of history develops purely as one singular, progressing, factual trajectory. This intensifies the inescapable pressure of the *now*. The 'bright future' referred to above supposes that people have access to the resources to overcome the structural inequalities caused by a complex and ever-present history/present (Barchiesi 2011; see, among

others, Hartman 1997). Students' ideologically laden understanding of history seems to present history either as contributing to this 'bright future' or detracting from it.

The temporality that Berlant argues also applies to a static, concrete, but ideologically imbued history: the concept of a first, 'bad' *then-history*, which progresses into a 'good' *then-history* that informs a *now-present*. Both the 'good' and 'bad' *then* have the possibility to affect the now – thus, the importance of the ideological framing of the *then-history*. Analysing how students learn looking only at their grasp of 'fact' obscures insight into how understandings of history are constructed. An uncritical understanding of the present, based on a simplistic understanding of history, does not allow students to interrogate possible reasons for continued complex present situations, in themselves, their societies or most importantly in their own students.

My secondary framing uses concepts that Michel-Rolph Trouillot explores in 'Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History' (Trouillot 1997). Trouillot's book combines a critical analysis of history itself through a rich narration of historical content. He argues that global thought paradigms, as well as global power structures, influence what history is 'thinkable' and so what history is written and accepted as canon (Trouillot 1997). The important concept for this article is the existence of many histories, like many paths and contour lines on a map.

This article also engages with the research presented by Donovan and Bransford in 'How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom'. As one of their three foundational principles, they write 'new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences' (Donovan & Bransford 2005:4). In order to construct the new understandings, it is crucial to investigate what the foundational understandings are. This follows from a broadly constructivist theory of learning (Scott & Hargreaves 2015:37–38). I argue that where the foundational understandings are imbued with ideology, this will impact all new understandings built.

'What is history?': Questions and answers

The first-year students in the group sampled for this article appeared to engage a moral understanding of history rather than one that more systematically engages critical thinking skills about the historical texts or information sources.⁷ The areas where critical thinking skills have been incorporated into their understanding of history generally involved strong ideas of 'truth' and 'fact' that are entangled with ideological bias. The process of making meaning of history was most effective when it began with minute processes of the self: history in me, history in my home, the history I am making, the history I will make. Donovan and Bransford (2005) write:

7. Robert Bain writes of the importance of teaching the investigative aspect of History and teaching students to be sceptical of texts and information sources (Bain 2006). This is one of the key aspects of critical thinking that can be gained from learning history.

Students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom.

There are various ways of creating proximity to history for the student. This will be further explored in another article. This article explores different cues that students have picked up as personally significant, in the classroom, and in their everyday lives, as either positive or negative 'aspects' of history, or as entry points into a history that are important to them. This informs what these students think history is. These cues are important because they offer an understanding into how these teaching students relate to history and how they learn historical concepts. They combine an idea of self, a perception of the past and a lens of the present that is generally not interrogated. Importantly, many of these students had not done History as a subject in high school, so their sense of history had been absorbed through everyday interactions with their worlds. The sense of ideology with which history was imbued comes from a societal construction (and perhaps from primary or early high school curriculum) rather than one strictly taught in school.

Figure 2 illustrates what arose in the data as comprising the answers to the question 'What is history?'. There are several aspects that go into the three facets represented above: 'Ideas of self', "Perceptions of the Past" and "the Present". For the purposes of this article, I will first be focusing on 'perceptions of the past' and the 'idea of self', although these are both created through the lens of the 'present'.

The presentation of history as static, or unchanging, has been challenged again and again.⁸ There is also broad literature on power dynamics in the production of history, and how the way the past is presented often reflects more about the present knowledge paradigms than about the past.⁹

Presentism, history and ideology

'History is more about the present than it is of a past. Is it mostly about what we see from the past and it is repeating itself over and over again timelessly.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

'Presentism' Lyn Hunt (2002) writes:

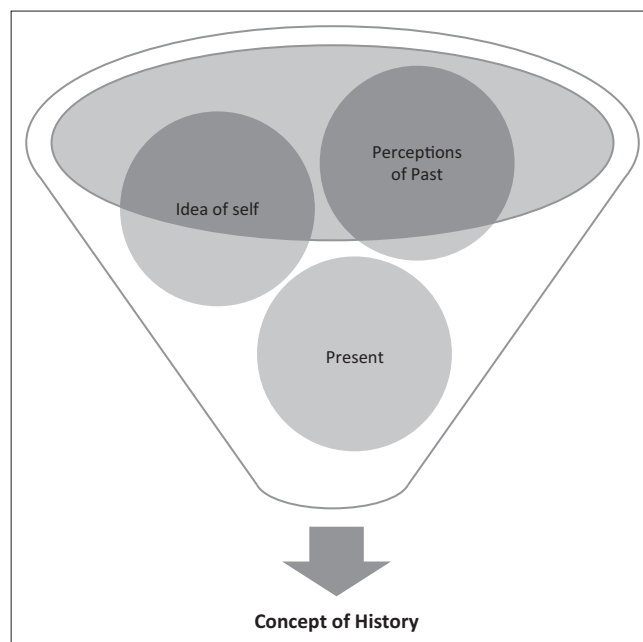
besets us in two different ways: (1) the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms; and (2) the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.

Presentism is seeing the past through the lens of the present, without taking into account the way that view might influence that history.

As the student points out above, history is always more about the present than it is about the past. The way we understand

8. Among others, see Baderoon (2014), Gqola (2010), Massey (1995), Pohlandt-McCormick (2009) and Portelli (2012).

9. The text I used to introduce these topics to the class was Trouillot (1997).



Source: Ethnographic research from the SOSINA 1A class, University of Johannesburg 2016

FIGURE 2: Concept of history.

history is necessarily filtered through the lens of who we are, where we live, how we live and, importantly, when we live. Thus, in South Africa, our struggle and apartheid past are important in our history, as they are still so close in our present. Beyond this, we live in a democratic society, where free elections are held and valued, where we have a progressive constitution and the wounds of systemic, structural racism are open and bleeding.

The current ideology we live in permeates how we see the past and what gets defined as 'good' or 'bad'. I use the above example to explain what I mean by the ideology that permeates how history is learnt. This is an example. This is true of all places and all times. History also only contains what is 'thinkable' in a society at a time. This combines with the students' current understanding of what history is.

As the student points out, history is more about the present than it is of 'a past'. This alludes to the multiple pasts that are flattened and straightened in any one history. The present is the thing that makes one past more relevant than another one. However, through the data in the test answers, it became clear that the present is a very powerful lens through which the students perceive and understand history.

A student's idea of self also has a significant impact on understandings of history. The students often wrote about roots, rootlessness and needing to know where you come from. A significant number of students located history in their own lives by pointing out that they are making history in their families as they are the first people in their family to finish school and/or to attend university. This both roots history in the present and extends it into the future. This opens the question of where, exactly, history is located in these students' learning. This will be dealt with below.

Presentism is what history is supposed to be able to best guard against; however, it impacts most how we experience and mediate our understandings of history. For first-year students, the immediacy of the new university environment, with its expectations and challenges, could heighten the sense of the importance of the present. At the same time, this increases the sense of the importance of history: 'History is all the factors in relation with time that make up the current present' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016). Donovan and Bransford (2005) point out that:

Students bring to school tacit ideas of what history is, and that we must address these ideas if we are to help them make progress in understanding what teachers and historians say about the past. (p. 32)

Concepts such as 'citizenship', 'good citizenship', 'freedom', 'democracy', 'progress' and 'hard work' are given in the data as reasons why history is important. These are ideologically rooted concepts, important in our present day society. The ideology of the present time needs to be examined if history is to be taught in a way which ideology can be recognised, if not untangled.

'Good' history and 'Bad' history

'The past is kills our future.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

'I feel that if a person does not know his/her history then they are at a terrible loss.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

The above quotes express aspects of an argument students made in their responses to the question 'What is history to you?' This question required self-reflection. The responses were often in the form of an argument the students were framing: history is either a good thing or a bad thing. If it is a good thing, it is something to be proud of, but also generally something unique to 'us' (us being either the individual person, or South Africa). If it is good, it has the power to teach, heal and be an example. The moral position of 'good' is also ideologically located. It is located in a specific historical narrative. When students write about history as 'good', they generally write about how much people sacrificed, or how much we have grown as a country and the need to appreciate that. The 'good' is also aimed at making people appreciate the sacrifices and history in a specific way: by being a 'good citizen', by working hard, celebrating the history of the anti-apartheid struggle and, importantly, the uncontested victory of that struggle. 'Good citizenship' and 'good history' requires a celebration of a national history and a compliance with what the nation needs from its citizens: participation in its national narratives.

Interestingly, when students write about history as 'bad', it is around the same moral orientation as 'good' history. The idea is that the wounds of history are in the past – they have ceased affecting the present, and the only way that they can impact the present is if history is unearthed, discussed in a way that re-ignites pain. In this narrative, the war and the wounds are stronger than the victory:

'But history can also have a bad influence to other people, it can develop hatred between people, for example even today most Blacks hate/blame white people for what happened in the past.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

The above quote shows another form of presentism that indicates how closely the immediate South African past is tied to the complexities of the present. If hate and blame are so close to the surface, it is surely more to do with the present than with history. The version of the present that offers the possibility for 'the good life' requires a specific, linear, triumphant version of history. I argue that Berlant's 'cruel optimism' is relevant here.

As Berlant argues, however, the cost of letting go of the idea of 'the good life' or as a student phrased it 'a bright future', that is attainable *now* is too high. It would involve giving up on a dream of a possible future. Thus, the complexities of the past are relegated to a 'history' that can be partitioned off, or 'left alone' as it was phrased in class, so it will not impact on the possibilities of the *now*.

This form of presentism undercuts one of the conceptual tools and skills that history necessitates: empathy and understanding that the way we feel and think about the world now is not how people felt out or thought about the world in the past. Donovan and Bransford (2005) write:

In history we must empathize with ideas we might oppose in the unlikely event we came across exactly the same ideas in the present. If understanding people in the past required shared feelings, history would be impossible. (p. 46)

Here 'History' is divorced from the present and only has an effect on the present when people know about it. Also, 'History' seems only to exist when and as it is imbued with a moral value. It needs to be imbued with a moral value in order to either be justified or dismissed. When history is assigned a moral value, it judges narratives of events of the past either as either 'good' or 'bad'. However, what emerged from the data was that students took this one step further and judged history itself as either 'good' or 'bad'. History itself then becomes a moral debate and leaves no space for critical thinking and analysis of veracity (Van Eeden 2016). Sometimes these narratives are balanced and combined, but this also still contains the ideological weight and value. One student wrote: 'It does not necessarily have to be political to be history or something that holds horrid, solemn memories, but also something to celebrate about' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016).

This seems a fairly standard understanding that history contains both 'good' and 'bad' elements, events and people. However, the evidence in the data suggests that history itself was assigned a moral value by students. It is important – but beyond the scope of this article – to look at what things influence what kind of moral value students assign to history. Moreeng (2014) has done this work with regards to heritage.

Where is the past? Linear time and the proximity of history

Students also have ideas about how we know about the past. If they believe, for example, that we can know nothing unless we were there to see it, they will have difficulty seeing how history is possible at all. They will think that because we cannot go back in time and see what happened, historians must just be guessing or, worse, making it up. (Donovan & Bransford 2005:31)

As a historian, I am particularly bad with dates. I use this in my lessons to stress that history is about more than dates. However, it is important for students of history at all levels to have an understanding of the breadth of history and the sequence of historical events. This shapes an understanding of the concept of causality and how events and actions influence other events and actions. The primary school curriculum in South Africa ensures that students cover histories from a range of different time periods, from the first democratic elections in 1994 to the ancient kingdoms of Egypt, Mali and Mapungubwe.¹⁰ This national curriculum focuses on everyday life in these societies, to present ancient peoples as humans that learners can identify with. This notwithstanding, there is a sense that students in the study have two distinct 'locations' for history: one immediate, close, ever-present and so accessible, and one distant and removed, a history that appears to only live in textbooks that teach 'world history' with no reference to who the students in the classroom are.

Both these locations arise in the seemingly opposing ideas of disembodied 'historians', as well as the potential for everyone to be a historian. The location of history as immediate was expressed again and again in response to the question 'who writes history'? While many students labelled people who write history 'historians', there was a diversity of opinion over who exactly historians were/are. As we had spent time in class stressing that everyone has their own history, and have their own stories to tell, many students chose the answer 'we are all historians'. This is helpful in building an idea of the past of the world from the student's own pasts; however, it does locate history very firmly in the immediate past. The sense that history is located in the immediate past is heightened when several students continued their answers by saying 'history is written by those who were there'. Thus, history is located in people's heads, but then history is a finite thing that moves and fades as people die and memories are lost. This sense of the immediacy and finite nature of history is a problem for teaching students the breadth of the material they will need to be teaching in the curriculum. It also impedes the teaching of critical thinking skills that allow students to apply conceptual tools both to our society today and to Ancient Societies. If history that is seen as interesting and relevant to students only stretches back as far as living memories, the information upon which we construct our world is very limited. It puts great authoritative weight in the

narratives of 'people who were there' rather than collecting different memories, or different sorts of data, and as well as the need to sort out for themselves what information is reliable and why (Donovan & Bransford 2005):

Younger students in particular are likely to assume that history is just known; it is simply information in authoritative books, such as encyclopedias. Forced to consider the question of *how* we know, they may slip into an infinite regress (bigger and better books) or assume that a witness or participant wrote down what happened on 'bits of paper', in diaries, or in letters, or even carved it into the walls of caves. The assumption that the past is given on authority makes any encounter with multiple sources problematic. If sources are simply correct or incorrect information, all we can do is accept or reject what is proffered. Sources either get things right, or they do not. (p. 55)

So, for these students, history is immediate, following us, tied to us by what we have lived through and only reliably available from people who have lived through it. This means that history – our immediate history, told by people who experienced it – is likely to be permeated by ideological perspectives. For the students to discern between ideological perspectives of everyday historians, and the ideological paradigm of post-1994 South Africa that results in a sense of 'good' history and 'bad' history, students need to understand the historical concept of positionality. This outlines that each person understands the world through their own lens, which is constructed out of a complex conglomeration of factors. This is important in this article, as history, immediate or distant, is taken as flat and factual. If students do write about positionality, then they generally write about people consciously distorting history for their own ends, rather than people's worldview influencing what history is 'seen':

'Historians can merely be me and the next person. It is usual that people from the higher places or power structures are the ones whose decides what to be told or not. People are likely to be scared to raise their opinions as sometimes these "historians" hides the truth and only tells or writes what suits them individually.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

The Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and both World Wars are the events that emerged in class when I asked the students to get into groups to discuss what they considered 'the most important events in history'. With the exception of one group, the events that emerged were events that in the students' perceptions had limited impact on South Africa, but they saw as impacting the world as a whole. The events emerge from a specific historical narrative, one that is also quite close to what is taught as high-school history syllabus and that is generally from a European – or broadly Western – perspective. In their written assignments though, when asked 'what is history to you?', students wrote about events in their families, in their immediate communities or in South Africa.

Therefore, history, as expressed by the students, is an ideologically imbued immediate sense of the past, where your perception of the present renders the past either 'good' or 'bad'. Alternatively, History is Western-centric and

10. See National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and Curriculum and Assessment Policy document, available from <http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalCurriculumStatementsGradesR-12.aspx>

divorced from a sense of who the students are and the immediacy of their lives. Both these locations of history are constrained in the 20th century.

History and citizenship

An example of the ideological and moral imperative perceived or drawn from 'history' is found in citizenship. History is often referred to in the data as offering a template for how to be a 'good citizen'. This – while important – is more a present concept than a historical one. Most students wrote as if 'history' is what brought us to democracy, and either we have arrived there or we hadn't. For example, either:

'A few decades ago an African person was not a free man even on their own homeland, being treated like the inferior party which we were viewed as, having to live a life of fear and weariness.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

Or:

'We people are still divided by race, language, culture, and most importantly by where we live.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

Taking this one step further, 'bad' history is something that can threaten the democracy that we have arrived at:

'To me history is just the thing of the past. I believe that everyone does make history every moment he/she breathes. History to me, I think, is less important because I think what happened in the past should stay in the past. It destroys young people in a way that they try to become heroes just like the people they read about.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

'Instead of people trying to live at their own pace, they are forced to live on a pace of old lost icons. History is said to change people's lives but is that happening now? If you say 'yes' I will perfectly disagree with you. What we are seeing today because of history is a disgrace in my face. It makes me think that in the future we should not tell our children about the past, we should just tell them about the future.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

The dissolving of the promise of the 'good life' achievable *now* is blamed, by students, on history being 'bad'. People's behaviour is blamed on history, and here history is teaching bad behaviour, rather than providing a guide for how to be a 'good citizen', as some students referred to history as doing.

The link between history teaching and citizenship is contested by numerous scholars.¹¹ In the current national curriculum, citizenship is taught as part of history.¹² The data indicate that when students understand history as 'good', they often refer to it as teaching people to be better people, and teaching them to be good citizens.

The flattened ideological framing of history as 'good' or 'bad' strips history of the conceptual content needed for students to learn meaningfully, as discussed above. Without that conceptual link, history is merely a fact repository with no learning-meaning. Donovan and Bransford (2005) describe

11. For a summary of arguments, see Lee and Shemilt (2007).

12. See the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

the importance of the link between factual and conceptual knowledge:

This essential link between the factual knowledge base and a conceptual framework can help illuminate a persistent debate in education: whether we need to emphasize 'big ideas' more and facts less, or are producing graduates with a factual knowledge base that is unacceptably thin. While these concerns appear to be at odds, knowledge of facts and knowledge of important organizing ideas are mutually supportive. (p. 14)

History as active, history as teaching, history as 'progress'

There is some evidence from research that students tend to think of the direction of change as automatically involving progress. (Donovan & Bransford 2005:44)

The previous section dealt with how most of the students tried to make an argument for or against history. I have examined the reasons they gave for history (and whatever it was perceived to contain) being 'good' or 'bad'. However, taking this one step further, many students argued that history is needed, necessary or essential 'to teach us'. The most expected occurrence of this was the trite 'history teaches us not to repeat the mistakes of the past'. One student writes:

'from a moral perspective we would not be able to learn from man's mistakes if history were to be viewed as unimportant. We would only repeat mistakes and remain stagnant in man's progressiveness.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A, 2016)

Unpacking this, it requires a moral and ideological position to be clear about what the mistakes were. We can unfold the maps of 'history' and, depending on the path chosen, different twists and turns will appear to be diversions from that path. There are clear horrors: various incidences of genocide, for example. However, the nuances of how those events are conceptualised (such as what is or isn't considered genocide) place different emphasis and ideological weight on different 'mistakes'. The holocaust is considered genocide, while the slave trade or the genocide of the aborigine peoples in Australia (to name two of many possible examples) are not. This slipperiness of the past, and so how ideologically dependent any history is, is generally not grasped by students who understand history as a single factual narrative:

'History ... is a type of force that contributes much to our present. As people we are living under this force and it also makes sure that as human beings we focus on the future rather than being stuck in a single place.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

In this case, history is an actual force that pulls forward, towards the future, and counteracts the 'stickiness' of the present:

'The contribution of history to our present is much of a thing in two parts: History always detects our future, for instance, history can haunt you for your whole life. It destroys while it tries to build. Sometimes we find people saying to us 'We always learn from our previous mistakes'. Yes, this is true, but why does it sometimes turn out to be a nightmare.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

Here History has the power to turn the present either into a learning experience or a nightmare. It has a looming present that is in itself haunting and inescapable.

Truth and linearity

'History can be written by anyone who has a story to tell but not all that is said or revealed is factually or the whole truth. After all history is only one side of the story.' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016)

In the above quote, the student acknowledges some of the slipperiness of the past. They are, however, compelled by an understanding that supposes that 'fact' is what reveals 'truth'. The idea that history is one side of the story begs the question what the other side of the story would be. This is close to the idea that there are many histories, revealing different narratives, and that each historical narrative expresses a particular ideological point of view. This is a difficult concept for student in the classroom to grasp. Donovan and Bransford (2005) explain:

Everyday ideas about a past that is given can make it difficult for students to understand basic features of doing history. For example, how is it possible for historians to give differing accounts of the same piece of history? Students' common sense tells them that the historians must be getting things wrong somewhere. (p. 36)

In a class titled 'the danger of truth, the usefulness of fact', my students had a discussion about what the difference is between history and a story. The conversation began with the students stating the difference as the idea that history is 'facts that are recorded' and a story is 'something someone says'. We used the example of the Apartheid propagandised version of South Africa's history that is still popular in some right-wing circles: the myth that South Africa was empty at the point of colonisation in 1652 and that 'black' and 'white' arrived in the country at the same time and met in the middle (Information Service of South Africa 1973).

This, as a basic exercise about sources, also resulted in a disruption of students' ideas about truth and the solidity of history (Trouillot 1997). Part of this lesson was about research and verifying information. Part of it was about positionality; how we all speak and see from our own position, and this results in things people say being 'true' to different degrees, and sometimes they cannot be aware of different realities that exist outside the one they live in.¹³

Although we had had this discussion in class, students are still understandably attached to the idea of history as true and measurable. They have learned history as containing one truth, and that truth is also linear and progressive: colonialism progresses to apartheid which breeds the liberation struggle which progresses towards democracy. Again, to an extent this has validity; however, the

13. This is not as abstract as it sounds: it refers to the paradigms people live in. The discussion we had in class centred around how privilege could make you completely unaware of someone else's reality, or how living in one space and assuming that everyone lived that way can obscure your relation to others in your own country and elsewhere.

progression narrative is sticky¹⁴ because traced back it is embedded in a narrative where both colonialism and apartheid were terrible but logical steps in the course of history bring us to this point today. The progress narrative also leaves us in a sticky position now: at the end of the 'good' democracy, there should be nothing for us to do but thrive and prosper. Again, this is a way that 'history', ideologically loaded, performs the function of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011). 'Cruel optimism' means that the object of desire (in this case 'good history') actively obstructs achieving that desire. If we take history as ideologically loaded, either as 'good' or 'bad', in the progress narrative, it performs the function of keeping us from examining histories critically, to examine the structural problems that keep South Africans, and others in South Africa, from achieving 'the good life'.

As the discussion on the difference between stories and history progressed, we moved slowly away from ideas of absolute truth, and one place where all of history was 'recorded truthfully'.¹⁵ As we traced backwards from what kind of sources are used to record 'facts', speaking about different methods of recording information, and who exactly we get our information from, we moved closer to a discussion of stories. The students were initially very sceptical of the idea that stories were also history, could also be history, no matter who was telling them, and that not everything written could be trusted: 'Some people write what they believe could have happened or what they are told and you find that those people writing history are not historians' (Student of SOSINA 1 A 2016). The students relied on 'historians' or 'people who were there at the time' as an authority to tell them the 'truth'.¹⁶

Part of the work of the class has been to instil in the students the belief that they are also historians, both in the sense of writing and recording the history that is in the making in their own time and in the sense of being able to use their skills to dissect different types of knowledge, discern different types of facts and so build their own reliable truths.

Conclusion

This article has explored how the students participating in the student view history. It has made the argument that students give history itself both a moral value and the ability to influence events and people either positively or negatively. I have argued that this is detrimental to the critical thinking skills and analysis that history, when taught well, can give students (Donovan & Bransford 2005):

Some students behave as if they believe the past is somehow just there, and it has never really occurred to them to wonder how we know about it. (p. 37)

14. I use sticky to indicate a point that is both problematic and difficult to dislodge or work around.

15. Incidentally, it appears that most students assume that this place where everything is recorded truthfully is 'Google'.

16. For more on veracity in teaching history, see Van Eeden (2016).

The group of students in the study locate history as a definitive place, sometimes close, sometimes far, sometimes forgettable and sometimes inescapable. However, with this, the students use history – what is learnt in class and their prior knowledge – to make sense of their own lives. They use the historical content to make meaning of what is happening in the country and what they want or believe they can achieve in their own lives. This indicates that critical thinking skills are associated with the way history is learnt and understood. Ideological climate and learning is also deeply rooted in how history is learnt, taught and understood. Understanding how apartheid systematically and ideologically destroyed lives and livelihoods is crucial for understanding where we are today. The data indicate that the students understand history as either a good or bad thing that has the power to make South Africa a good or bad place in the present and in the future and each individual a better or worse person. I have also argued that this understanding, in fact, contributes to what Berlant defines as ‘cruel optimism’, where the object of desire interferes with the possibility of achieving that desire.

The data also show a focus on individual hard work to achieve a ‘good life’, with history both as a pressure to make use of today’s freedom and as a facilitator of today’s rights. As history is located in the past – to return to an earlier quote – it can no longer be touched and so the pressure to be good citizens, to work hard and appreciate the good ‘history’ is disguised in the impression of history as a universal and true repository of the past. To return to Berlant the view of the pressure to ‘fix’ and ‘live up to’ the history of the country – as presented through a model of good citizenship – could be detrimental to the ability of an individual to live up to those expectations. In a democratic South Africa, structural oppression and the legacy of colonialism have a serious impact on individual’s abilities to engineer their own lives. In terms of the learning of historical concepts, it is important to be able to divorce ideological trajectories from an idea of what history is. This will allow students to assess their past and present and open up maps for various futures, based on various (factually based, well-analysed) versions of the past.

To have history as an ideological tool is always dangerous. To have history as an unwitting ideological tool – one that is pretending to be inanimate, fixed and scientifically proven – is more dangerous still. And to have this unconsciously as part of how student teachers learn what history is most dangerous. It drastically reduces the potential for history as a school subject to develop critical thinking skills for school learners.

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