

HANDS-ON ARTICLE

HISTORY EDUCATION: REACHING BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THE CLASSROOM.

A HANDS-ON DISCUSSION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RAPIDLY IMPROVING TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS IN HISTORY PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century the technological tools at the disposal of teachers have improved exponentially. In the current education environment, the History teacher can reach far beyond the confines of a classroom, and is able to engage with the content of a study of human behaviour in a way that touches the humanity of students. A teacher in a single classroom can challenge students' ability across an array of platforms and over an internet which both allows for the dissemination of ideas and the acquisition of information at a speed and with a reach heretofore unknown and unavailable to the pedagogue. In a rapidly changing and increasingly less predictable political, economic and cultural milieu, it is incumbent on the History specialist to instil in those who engage with the past, present and future, a humanity which transcends simplistic political demagoguery and narrow bigotry which is gaining traction internationally. The skills of discernment and thoughtful analysis of fact, opinion and belief that is the forte of an historian can counterbalance intolerance and a disturbing resurgence of inhumanity. The teaching of History can influence a generation to build a more caring and humane society and modern technology can enhance the ability of a teacher to engage with learners beyond the confines of their classroom.

Keywords: Technological tools; History pedagogy; Human behaviour; Humanity; Discernment; Counterbalance; Convergence.

Introduction

The dawn of the twenty-first century brought with it a huge degree of complexity. As if it were a portend of things to come, the apocalyptic predictions of the millennium bug (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) collapsing the world of computing and bringing an abrupt end to technological advances made in the preceding few decades, gripped the programming community in

a frenzied effort to produce “fixes.” This presage of a retreat into a new dark age bereft of the computing power that has enabled people to navigate the frenetic pace modern man had become accustomed to, came to nought. Moore’s Law which holds that computing power more or less doubles every twenty-four months (Moore, n.d.), galloped ahead unabated and both computing power and internet connectivity continued their inexorable advance, profoundly changing society. The world has become technologically integrated. The impact has been immense in all spheres, including economics, politics and the realm of inter-personal relations. The social dynamic has been altered and social media has become a widely used platform of communication.

The individual has gained instant access to a mass audience. The amateur journalist, news reporter and photographer have instant access to a world-wide consumer of unfiltered social media. A tweet storm in Thailand propelled a revolution. The Arab Spring erupted across North Africa and the Middle East on the back of this new social dynamic. Indeed, even the old world pundits of the political arena have been shaken as their algorithms faltered and their predictions came up short. Brexit was set in motion against the most solid predictions of unshakeable European solidarity. Then followed an election in the UK which propelled the likes of Jeremy Corbyn to within a whisker of the office of the First Lord of the Treasury. Across the pond the mighty USA elected the seemingly unelectable to rule by tweet. In France the Macron phenomenon swept into the Elysee at the helm of a newly formed organisation which has relegated the old establishment to the periphery. A resurgence of an angry Right and an angry Left is manifesting itself in almost every region. Uncertainty has become the new norm.

The contemporary History classroom must be a venue for investigation and discussion. It is in the safe environment of academic consideration that debates about the contentious topics of the modern age need to surface. The History teacher, to remain relevant and to keep the subject at the cutting edge of intellectual interrogation of our world, dare not shy away from the topics of the moment and the issues of our time – learners should feel that the classroom is a safe place to express their views. Although the History classroom cannot deal with all the issues affecting society, relevant points need to be openly addressed when the curriculum allows.

It is, in the midst of all the uncertainties, all the complexities, all the arguments and viewpoints, still incumbent on the History teacher to promote tolerance and a more humane and caring society.

For the first time in recorded history the teacher has at his/her fingertips technology which helps extend the teacher's influence and reach far beyond the physical walls of a classroom. This powerful tool could be placed in the hands of educators if there is adequate planning and efficient implementation accompanies it. An interconnected world of handheld wireless devices, the lightning speed of digital transmission via fibre optic cables, immense processing power in the smallest sliver of silicon – all of this is available at an exponentially diminishing cost. The reach is phenomenal and the classroom must become a force for good and a cauldron of fresh ideas, absorption of information and facts.

Technological tools of the modern classroom

The modern classroom has changed dramatically in the past few decades. Chalk and talk is being adapted to the world of the modern generation in many areas. Interest in a subject can be grasped and held if the participants in the process are addressed in a manner that we have grown accustomed to. As technology has crept into the daily experience of folk the world over, the convenience and ease of use, the variety of senses appealed to and the engaging mechanisms of conveying ideas and messages have converged on the classrooms of the next generation.

Didactics, and specifically History Didactics, has reached a stage at which the teacher and student are at the cusp of an increasingly dynamic future scenario. Delving into the past is worthwhile in its own right and can be enhanced by a judicious use of technology. These two elements must be juxtaposed. The critical need for this will be explained in subsequent sections of this discussion. Suffice it to serve at this juncture as a launching point to explore the types of tools available to the History teacher now.

Schools are ideally situated for both the private and state sectors to become actively involved in rolling out a key element that will enhance development. A developing nation, such as South Africa, need no longer be held back because the developed world is galloping ahead and taking care of its own interests, often at the expense and to the detriment of the under-developed or developing nations. One of the major “Game Changers” for the developing world is bound to be e-Education. If a nation aspires to the wealth and power of advanced nations, it needs to grasp the nettle and roll out connectivity and access to knowledge.

There is a case to be made for schools to spearhead this advancement. There is a school in every community (be it an urban middle-class community, a working-class neighbourhood or a rural farm environment). This extends the reach of a “Game Changing” strategy to every corner of the country and the possibility of equalising the access to knowledge, wealth, power and intellectual engagement with the issues of the day, has not yet been fully exploited. Technology can be a “great equaliser” and afford every citizen, wealthy and poor alike, at the pinnacle of academia and semi-literate alike, the opportunity to advance their own position in the world and contribute their hitherto untapped ability to make a difference in society.

State resources need to be poured into a comprehensive e-learning strategy which, coupled with the increasingly available high speed connectivity of fibre optic hardware, can turn schools everywhere into Wi-Fi hotspots, WAN and LAN hubs not only for the learners and teachers at those institutions, but also for the communities which surround them. The cost of a massive connectivity roll-out can, in the opinion of the author, be offset by the exponential growth in the economy that this strategy can precipitate, although this can only be confirmed if research is undertaken in this field. The reduction in poverty, the generation of employment and wealth will make its way back into state coffers and afford the opportunity to alleviate a myriad other social ills which plague communities across our land. The obvious security issues and the ills of unfettered social media should not deter this type of development, but serve as a challenge to engage minds and work towards strategies to overcome these potential hazards, as well as others which will no doubt arise. The challenge of finding solutions to problems is what energises lives. Were we to live in a “problem free” world without the attendant ills of unfettered social media, the purpose of intellectual engagement would dissipate and there would be little incentive to stretch the mind and the intellect and live a full and significant life.

In the classroom the role of the History teacher now takes on a whole new dimension. Not merely dispensing knowledge (Google is effective at a certain level in that respect), the teacher is not only a facilitator, but is unshackled by the need to pass on vast amounts of detailed factual knowledge, and can fulfil a role the History teacher has always had, but can now attend to in a more focused and intensive way. The impact of decisions past and present can be unpacked with greater clarity and a generation of empathetic and compassionate citizens could be enhanced. Discussion and engagement and the formation of relations between thinkers, students of the nature of the

human condition, and across generations can be forged in a History classroom with access to a realm of ideas hitherto compartmentalised.

It is critically important that sophisticated classroom management software is placed at the disposal of the responsible educator. From the teacher's laptop, hand-held device, or desktop computer, access to the devices in the hands of the learners must be provided and control over those devices when in classroom use should be in the hands of the teacher. At the flick of a keyboard switch all or some of the devices can be restricted or temporarily disabled. On the teacher's screen the displays of each of the learners should be available for responsible monitoring. Key phrases or words could be flagged and the educator alerted. Above all, firewall software needs to be in place to deter abuse and restrict access to questionable sites and material of dubious educational value.

Such sophisticated software is available currently that plagiarism can be instantly flagged and innovative ways need to be found to offset the huge cost of this software. The private sector and state need to find ways to collaborate and facilitate schools' acquisition of versions of these products which would be useful in their contexts. Device control can be monitored and restricted so effectively (and the software is being developed at such a rate that it is improving day by day) that examinations can safely be conducted using these hand-held pieces of equipment or laptops.

Textbooks are being made available electronically which enhance the learning experience (not necessarily as a replacement for books with actual paper and printed pages). The teacher can assign readings, get feedback on the length of time a student has spent engaging with the material, monitor the notes being made as annotated material, push useful video clips, referencing, notes and audio either self-recorded or downloaded from useful sites – with proper referencing and cognizance of copyright.

One of the most useful aspects of all of this is the fact that teaching material generated at local school level can be uploaded as resources for under-resourced schools and teachers. The e-Learning Portal in the Western Cape is making phenomenal strides in this respect. Sharing knowledge is one of the most enriching experiences any educator can engage in. Receiving criticism, critiques and comments is one of the most useful elements to encourage personal academic and intellectual growth.

The future of the development of technological tools which will be useful in the History classroom is exciting and ignites the passion of everyone engaged

in teaching. Their use must be encouraged, albeit with circumspection, given the pitfalls alluded to briefly.

What does this mean for the didactics of a History classroom? Simply this: it can place in the hands of students and teachers technology to gather knowledge, engage with it as individuals and as class groups, contribute new knowledge, perspectives and ideas to an audience beyond the classroom. Distance need no longer be a barrier; indeed, language is no longer a barrier. Instant translation of the spoken and written word is already available and astoundingly reliable.

Grappling with human behaviour past and present

History is essentially a study of people and society. It encompasses the entire range of human behaviour and is multi-disciplinary in the truest sense. Technology serves to enhance the delivery of the subject material to the student. The tools also enable deep delving into the content and thinking about the impact in terms of past, present and future interpretation and scenario planning.

Of the greatest importance, though, is the historian's ability to contextualise events, place them in a perspective that reflects the age in which they occur and ultimately draw insights from the past which enhance the future of humanity.

Teaching discernment

Cognizant of the complex nature of humanity, it is imperative that the history teacher is not merely the conduit of factual information and recorded knowledge. It is of paramount importance that the learners are taught not merely to learn about the past and the present, but that they are taught how to engage with knowledge accessed on the Web in a responsible and useful way.

The multiplicity of technological resources and the wide range of media makes this a daunting responsibility. It is critical that discernment is taught with great precision. A disturbing new phenomenon has reared its head on the social media platforms, namely, fake news. Along with this, it can be safely assumed, would be "fake history", "alternative facts" and phenomena of equally dubious validity which may be named equally euphemistically. As access to platforms is democratised, amateur journalists abound. The fellow with an alternative and malevolent agenda is able to publish with the same ease as reputable journalists and writers. How do we recognise the fake

disinformation and distinguish it from that which has a solid foundation? Cross-referencing? Finding alternative sources? Recognising the reputable sources as well as the possible satirical intent. The History educator must be at the forefront of teaching the kind of discernment which assists in avoiding these very dangerous pitfalls.

Despite the danger posed by false information, the benefits of the technology far outweigh the nefarious motives of those posting reams of nonsense.

Counterbalance intolerance and the inhumanity of man

One of the most significant challenges for the History teacher is teaching compassion with which to temper man's inhumanity to man. A study of the actions of people will unveil the most horrendous aspects of the human condition.

Conclusion

Like never before the History classroom has become connected to the world. The advantages are manifold and the benefits outlined. Pitfalls there are indeed. It is with great circumspection that the new technology has to be embraced.

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