

## TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

# ChatGPT in the history classroom – a position paper of a township school teacher

**Clive Mekhoe**

Progress Comprehensive High School,  
Soweto  
South Africa

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This paper focuses on my thoughts on ChatGPT and history teaching at the secondary school level. I am a history teacher in a township school in Pimville, Soweto. The learners in the school come from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, mainly from nearby communities such as Kliptown, Freedom Park, and Eldorado Park. Because of the home language offered in the school where I work, we have learners who travel from as far as Vlakfontein and Lawley, more than 30 kilometres from the school. Most of the places mentioned above are peri-urban areas, and many of the learners are foreign nationals from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. In light of the above, there are numerous contextual factors, mostly social and economic, that impact on the use of artificial intelligence (AI). When one looks at the initial stages of the implementation of crude AI, I would argue that the Department of Basic Education did not have history as a subject in mind when they started their initiatives around the digitisation of curriculum content. The focus was primarily on mathematics and physical science because of the high failure rate and shortage of skills in these fields. So, the initial phase of the implementation of an AI policy was focused on applications (apps) that would help through scaffolding, moving from the known into the unknown. Many of those apps contained videos of different topics being explained. As these ideas progressed, the issue of smartboards was introduced to try and ease the teachers' burden. I cannot fault the thinking, but the problem was that many of us saw the smartboard initiative as something that, for a large part, was the shifting of the burden of township teachers "from paper to the screen". This is because, conceptually, the idea of digitising teaching needs to include open-source educational websites and applications where the teacher can set tasks and tests.

The Department of Basic Education argued that their thinking was long-term and that smartboards with just textbooks loaded onto them and video capabilities with no internet connection were enough. Consequently, from the middle of 2017 until now, many schools like mine are still stuck with smartboards that are not being used to their full potential. It is in this context that ChatGPT is entering our township world.

Personally, I think ChatGPT itself is a good idea, but not for my school context. I say this because CAPS history is generally applied verbatim in what I would call overly processed information. Differently put, we spoon feed learners with the Grade 12 examination in mind. We are told to give them specific information for specific questions for them to obtain a minimum pass of 30 per cent. In such a context—but I am unsure about this—ChatGPT can advance education when pre-existing essays are often the norm. Likewise, I wonder about ChatGPT and the research assignments that Grade 12 learners must complete. Currently, the thinking is that we must tell learners to use the internet to access historical evidence for their tasks. History teachers augment this by giving them articles and helping with basic referencing techniques. The result is always the same: copying verbatim from the internet because they are used to being spoon-fed and often lack linguistic and critical thinking skills. In this context, I am wondering if ChatGPT will help or hinder and hamper a broken system even more, should ChatGPT take hold in township schools like mine. This is because of infrastructure and socioeconomic challenges many township schools face. Most township schools have not been upgraded from the apartheid spatial planning situation. These schools are pressured by the continual growth of residential areas. The result is that you have, on average, 65 or more learners in a classroom and most of them sit on twin desks. In short, space and equipment are a challenge to all involved in schools like mine. Accommodating ChatGPT and other forms of AI in such a system, at the bottom end of the digital divide, will be challenging. There would be a need to extend the structure of the classrooms for the school to incorporate AI infrastructure. This will, however, not eradicate the main challenge, which is socioeconomic. Most learners in my school come from very poor backgrounds and rely on a feeding scheme which is administered every day during break, and it does not necessarily reach all.

So what does this all have to do with ChatGPT and AI? Well, everything. How can it be used in schools and communities without the most basic resources and funding? In light of the above history, using ChatGPT and AI to gain a dishonest advantage are the least of my concerns. I think it is a concern for schools in leafy suburbs.