



TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

Controversial Issues in History Education: Takeaways from an International Collaboration between the University of Pretoria (South Africa) and Leipzig University (Germany)

In this edition of *Yesterday & Today*, the “Teachers Voice” section focuses on international collaboration between History Education students of the Universities of Pretoria and Leipzig. Often, international collaborations are at the level of academic staff, especially undergraduate students, who do not have an opportunity to engage with each other. This initiative attempted to challenge the existing status quo. In so doing, the academic staff members introduced the pre-service history students to each other. They had to set the agenda then and initiate courageous conversations on teaching controversial issues in their respective countries. Below is a report from the perspectives of the academics and pre-service history students involved in the initiative. Hopefully, this can stimulate other institutions to share similar conversations between students from the Global North and Global South.

The views of the academic staff involved

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The purpose of the South African and German student collaboration was to understand how preservice teachers teach a controversial past in the subject of history. The online

student exchange program, initiated in November 2023 between the University of Pretoria (South Africa) and the University of Leipzig (Germany), produced valuable lessons for students to understand their complex pasts, rethinking the approach to teaching history in different contexts. Fifty university students from both countries convened on digital platforms, forming groups to discuss topics ranging from colonial legacies to the Holocaust to refine their pedagogical practices.

The complex histories of South Africa and Germany have been marked by periods of contention and conflict. Germany's pivotal role in the events of the First and Second World Wars has left an enduring global footprint. The events will continue to be historically significant for future generations. These events have imparted distinct lessons as crucial reminders for potential conflicts. Likewise, South Africa's tumultuous past is characterised by its struggle against apartheid and colonisation. South Africa's internal conflicts, racial disharmony, and sanctions from other countries resulted in the 1994 democratic elections. Within the new democratic framework, many new challenges arose and continue to exist. Unresolved conflicts persist in history classrooms, especially when historical memories are revisited when we teach about the past. The Pretoria-Leipzig exchange offered us ways to learn from each other by sharing our experiences in different contexts.

These two nations, akin to others, grapple with framing, comprehending, and teaching their pasts. Historical narratives within educational curricula are subject to a constant battle between educational objectives, societal perspectives, and historical scholarship. Consequently, the narratives presented in the curricula reflect not only historical content but also the prevailing socio-political interests. Given this scenario, those who teach history are exposed to differences of opinion and controversy, which spill over into classrooms of a heterogeneous learner population. Our collaboration offered preservice teachers ways to discuss, learn, communicate, and share. Our students' reflections from this process also provide insight into what they took away from this process.

From the dialogue, students understood the need to acknowledge historical injustices, embrace multiple perspectives on issues, and create inclusive classrooms that encourage critical thinking and empathy. We train preservice teachers about the nature of history teaching and how historical sources play a significant role in constructing narratives. The constructed nature of history shifts away from the former content-heavy understanding of history. While there are still relevant facts in history, how these facts are constructed from evidence forms a crucial part of the methodology of history. An evidence-based method or inquiry offers significant benefits as knowledge derived from various sources, including oral testimonies, written documents, and archival material, are pitched against each other. This

may become contentious, where established narratives become tentative and questionable. Multiple narratives exist around the same event or issue, and how the teacher manages them is a skill included in teacher training programs. In the process of evaluating evidence, material can be contentious and unreliable. Material is available in textbooks and source-packs and can be internet-derived. Textbook content can be approved but other materials can enter the classroom. That is where the history teacher establishes a framework for soliciting valuable evidence and where respectful dialogue can occur from corroborating evidence into reasoned interpretations.

At university, we train preservice teachers on how to use and understand curriculum documents and how to approach controversial topics. We also understand that individual teacher philosophies govern teaching practices and learning outcomes. These may vary significantly from one practice to the next, overtly or covertly shaping the approach to teaching these controversial issues. By enhancing preservice teacher awareness, we transmit the necessity of being open to debates and deliberation, thus equipping them with skills to approach history classes tactfully and diplomatically. At the University of Pretoria, we incorporate the possibility of teaching these controversial issues with confidence in the training of our students within the PGCE and B.Ed history methodology programs. We teach them to approach and address issues of controversy with respect and integrity. The learners benefit from their educators, and society is generally impacted as they transition. The collaboration was thus an investment as we target the education of society through our preservice teachers and the learners they will teach.