

TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

Teaching soft skills in the modern history classroom beyond the parameters of the formal school curriculum

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Introduction

The history classroom lends itself to teaching soft skills conducive to good citizenship, sound values and cognitive processes that are critical in the world of work. It is incumbent on the History educator to become an enabler of inter-disciplinary investigation, debate and the discernment of validity, reliability and usefulness of source material. This approach stretches the child's capacity to relate intelligently with the printed word, statements of opinion, irrefutable facts, statistical analyses and artistic interpretation of reality. Unleashed is the ability to intellectually interrogate topics of the moment and cerebral engagement with pertinent issues of the modern age. The curriculum facilitates "historical comprehension, chronological thinking, analysis, interpretation and research skills" (American Historical Association, 2022) (American Historical Association, 2022), all of which are effective tools for the educator to hone values pertaining to Human Rights, Dignity, Unity and Justice, and which all promote a humane and caring society. Furthermore, in pursuance of an adequately educated and erudite citizenry in an era of exponential growth in the realm of available information and sources that provide a conduit for that explosion of knowledge, it is the competent History educator's role to craft lessons to enhance logical reasoning ability, discernment between fact and fiction, and the proficiency to communicate the validity of their opinions cogently.

The formal curriculum as a starting point for the intellectual interrogation of information

In the introduction to his discourse *Twenty One Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari pertinently observes, “In a world deluged by irrelevant information, clarity is power. In theory, anybody can join the debate about the future of humanity, but it is so hard to maintain a clear vision”. (Harari, 2019: 1) The school history curriculum has been expertly crafted to address this point and, concurrently, to provide a platform from which the engaged educator may explore a multiplicity of peripheral skills that enhance the academic learning experience. The formal secondary school curricula provide a content selection deemed by teams of academics, secondary school pedagogues and education administrators to be relevant to the geographic and political context in which it is being taught. The selection of content is, of its very nature, a process influenced by the biases of those who engage in it. When taken at face value, it is a process riven by controversy. It is critical to note, though, that the context in which this material is delivered and presented in the history classroom largely determines the extent to which values and life skill outcomes are cemented in the cognitive domain learners’ traverse. These outcomes cannot be taught in a content vacuum. Still, the content selection need not inhibit the extent to which learners are taught to engage with and scrutinise source material. If the core history curriculum of an education authority is not obsessively prescriptive about the presentation of that material, those soft skills alluded to, namely, discernment, logical reasoning, the formulation of defensible opinions and the inculcation of sound human values, are still within the ambit of the history educator in the classroom to explore.

The injunction to history educators to make prolific use of primary and secondary source material to both elucidate and dissect the core content pertinent to the classroom presentation is a critical component of a well-constructed syllabus. It binds the educator to the primary content but opens a wide field of investigation and analysis. This approach to setting formal curriculum parameters opens a vast scope for intellectual enquiry, debate and the discernment of bias, level of accuracy and the interpretation of the chronicle of human development in a particular milieu. Concerning European imperialism, Andrew Marr points to that subjugation process as having come with “a huge dollop of humbug and self-seeking propaganda”. Furthermore, and more importantly, he states, “European societies become more open and more self-critical at just the same time as they were acquiring empires. They had advanced beyond the point where they could live on a diet of humbug without feeling ill” (Marr, 2012: 438). It is precisely through this skill of recognising

‘humbug’, propaganda and bias that the utilisation of multiple sources representing a range of opinions can be actively taught. In the modern age, the proliferation of social media, fake information, accurate facts, bizarre theories and prejudice serve to discombobulate an undiscerning audience. History pedagogy is ideally positioned to elucidate core content with these clashing sources and to teach the discernment required to analyse the material critically. The formal curriculum, if crafted soundly, implores the educator to adopt this teaching methodology.

The formal curriculum also addresses the use of assessment as a teaching tool. A source-based assessment provides scope for learners to effectively communicate their logical reasoning, analysis and interpretation of historical discourses. Selection of supporting information from sources, assessment of the relevance and usefulness thereof, and expressing their opinion about the biases and prejudices contained therein are all required in the assessment techniques stipulated by well-crafted syllabi. As an adjunct to that, paragraph and essay writing hone written communication skills by requiring cogent arguments to be proffered using articles and visual material presented in the assessment tasks. In addition, the learner can demonstrate an ability to present a coherent exegesis or argument in response to a proposition upon which an essay topic is based. The presentation of a thoughtfully constructed line of argument is the cornerstone of historical writing.

‘Soft skills’ beyond the formal curriculum

The London School of Economics explains succinctly on its website some compelling reasons for studying history pertinent to this context. It states that the aim should be “to widen the student’s experience and develop qualities of perception and judgement while fostering intellectual independence, sharpness and maturity” and also for their abilities to be “valuable for the graduate as [a] citizen and ... readily transferable to many occupations and careers”. (London School of Economics, 2022) The formal content is described in its online prospectus, and the intended aim for the student is to acquire the skills outlined as a consequence of the method by which they are taught to engage with that content.

In *The Lessons of History*, Will and Ariel Durant argue that the historian is challenged to assess, “Of what use have your studies been? Have you found in your work only the amusement of recounting the rise and fall of nations and ideas ... Have you learned more about human nature than the man in the street can learn without so much as opening a book?” (Durant, 2010: 11).

The informal curriculum, which extends beyond the framework of the formal syllabus, is

the history educator's gift to address. The history classroom is the venue for the investigation of required curriculum content. Still, it should serve as a cauldron in which ideas can be held up to scrutiny, discussion can ensue, and an exchange of opinions and perspectives is freely interrogated. The history educator ought to facilitate a process in which learners delve into the plausibility of arguments and assess the relevance and accuracy of the multitudinous array of sources that masquerade as inerrant fact on electronic media and the reams of text that fill the bits and bytes of the information space. Evaluation techniques need to be taught. Discernment can be taught as a critical skill for the 21st century to eliminate the thoughtless acceptance of intellectual dross that proliferates. The history learner should be taught the skill of sifting through the verbiage and giving credence only to factual, valid opinions that pass muster when held up to the light of intellectual scrutiny.

Curriculum design and History teaching methodology

Those who design the history curriculum ought to structure it to facilitate classroom teaching that not merely presents selected content or assessment formats that restrict pedagogy to the core curriculum. The vast array of knowledge and opinion available in the information space and easy accessibility has transformed history teaching from mere content sharing to inculcating a relevant skill set in the work world. Learners entering the realm of employment, entrepreneurship and, in a broader context, responsible citizenry need to provide those learners with the agency to navigate what Marr described as "humbug and self-seeking propaganda". Educators, for their part, need to stretch learners' intellect beyond the formal parameters of the curriculum by actively teaching the skills of discernment and analysis cum logical reasoning.

Conclusion

The modern history classroom is more than merely a conduit through which the formal curriculum is presented to a presumed attentive and engaged audience of learners. It is where soft skills must be actively taught to facilitate active participation in holding the information up to the light of scrutiny, assessing the validity of opinions and venturing beyond the formal curriculum. It is where engaged and involved citizens are taught useful life skills and sound values.

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