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Unveiling The Tapestry: Nurturing Empathy and Perspective Through School History

Paul M Haupt

Retired History Educator and Vice-Principal

The Settlers High School, Cape Town

South Africa

Email: pmhaupt83@gmail.com

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Learners often experience history as remote. In a constantly progressing world, many of them view the past as a record of a primitive existence that preceded inventions and technologies that are commonplace today. In a TED presentation Patrick Allitt points out that the generations that lived through those changes considered their world as “not in the least primitive” (Allitt, 2019).

The history educator plays a seminal role in guiding learners to make sense of the world. The current generation is part of the continuity of history. What they view as the forefront of progress, when seen through the prism of hindsight, makes the past seem less primitive and remote (Allitt, 2019). History should be taught as an experiential exercise. The history educator must encourage learners to place themselves in the shoes of those who participated in the unfolding past (Ketchell, 2014). Teaching empathy opens a perspective and ability to understand the world and people. W & A Durant postulated that “total perspective is an optical illusion. We do not know the whole of man’s history” (Durant, 1968). The history educator can only present snapshots of the past. Being able to view the past through a lens of empathy, builds a gentler, kinder outlook on humanity. Robert Burns, reflecting on human perspectives, puts it as follows:

“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us

To see oursels as others see us!

(Burns, 1786)

The converse is equally valid: Would that students of history also see others as they see **themselves**.

As an accurate predictor of the future history has failed dismally. Attempts have been

made to apply lessons from the past. However, to what extent have the **correct lessons** been learnt? “History doesn’t teach us tidy lessons” (Allitt, 2019). Allitt cites examples of humanity having based critical decisions on erroneous conclusions drawn from past mistakes. Prior to the First World War technological advancements had placed subsequent combatants on a hair trigger alert. They believed whoever mobilised first would have an overwhelming and overpowering advantage. A war that was expected to conclude quickly, dragged on and left more than twenty million dead. Before the Second World War, the leaders of Europe attempted to avoid the mistake of rushing into combat. Appeasement of Hitler’s aggression precipitated an even greater conflagration after the Nazis had been allowed to rearm themselves and bludgeon their neighbours. That war left over sixty million dead. Erroneous lessons were repeated prior to the Vietnam War too. The domino theory was a refinement of a policy to eschew appeasement. Getting into conflict too early in that instance, led to a war of attrition from which the USA withdrew ignominiously.

Another failure to extract the correct lessons from history concerns the abuse of propaganda. During the First World War, stories about German atrocities abounded. Many of these stories made their way into sermons from the pulpit, giving them credence. Germans were portrayed as uncivilised beasts. A few years after the armistice most of these stories were debunked. The conclusion that could be reached is that people rushed to judgment. Seemingly “far-fetched” stories ought to be treated with caution by historians. When rumours of genocide against the Jews surfaced during the Second World War, these were met by disbelief. Liberation uncovered overwhelming evidence of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. In this instance the pendulum had swung too far in the opposite direction. Having been too credulous during the Great War, humanity had become too disbelieving during the Second World War (Allitt, 2019).

History is indeed not an accurate predictor of the future. Learners need to scrutinise historical evidence and temper their conclusions with awareness of the world’s complexity. The future unfolds in mysterious ways. Sensitise learners to the complexity of humanity; encourage appropriate questions. Neither be too credulous nor too sceptical. A first-person narrative in which learners don the boots of previous generations would enhance empathy, reason, knowledge, and debate. Any action is fraught with risk, but assiduous reasoning promotes a fortuitous outcome.

“History is written by the victors” is a truism. Progress is not a record of an unfolding higher virtue. Self-satisfying elevated morality is not an inevitable outcome. Good does not always prevail over evil. History rarely provides such satisfying outcomes.

Learners should grasp that the conflict is often between “right” and “right”. Soldiers

rarely believe they are fighting for a doomed cause. Were learners to empathize with *Wehrmacht* troops, they would understand that Nazi propaganda encouraged belief in the virtue of their cause. Both losers and victors in great human contests invoked God on their behalf with equal enthusiasm. Those losers were eclipsed by a morality that appears to self-evidently occupy a higher moral plane. (Allitt, 2019)

Tidy lessons from past mistakes need to be treated with caution, given humanity's complexity. Learners need to ask appropriate questions and analyse the rationale behind actions. They need to appreciate the intricacies of human behaviour. It is the educator's role to give children the wherewithal to educate themselves. In his book *Africa First* Jakkie Cilliers notes that in education models bequeathed to Africa "we find a commitment to **first teach learners how to learn**" (Cilliers, 2020). Classroom practices must foster a love for learning and provide the means to engage critically. History teachers should promote empathy, compassion, and critical thinking.

Unveiling the tapestry of a complex world is achieved by viewing it through various lenses.

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