

Teaching and learning History in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections of a senior school history teacher

Marjorie Ann Brown

Roedean School, Parktown, Johannesburg, South Africa

MABrown@roedeanschool.co.za

Abstract

Teaching history during lockdown at an elite private school during the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges and opportunities to draw on history and to learn new technologies. Challenges went beyond the content of history and included mental stress amongst students as a result of isolation but also empathy for victims of deepening poverty and police violence. Opportunities included international and local webinars, conferences, staff development and increased online resources.

Keywords: History; Technology; COVID-19; Poverty; Webinars; Resources.

When South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown started on 26 March 2020, I was teaching a Grade 11 class about the Wall Street Crash (1929) and the Depression in the United States of America (USA) (1930s). I was never more mindful of history unfolding before our eyes. We moved immediately to online teaching without missing a day. Most teachers and learners at our school were fortunate enough to have electronic devices like computers and smartphones. The school provided teachers with airtime (data) if they did not have uncapped Wi-Fi at home. Learners could generally access devices and Wi-Fi, but bursary students were given iPads and a dongle with airtime. Teachers had just a few days of warning – from 23 to 26 March 2020 – in which to receive information technology (IT) lessons on how to use Microsoft Teams® and other platforms and mobile apps. Teaching during COVID-19 then began in a mad scramble, with our hearts in our throats.

Comparing the USA and South Africa

Each day, the Grade 11 learners shared information about the loss of their families' jobs resulting from COVID-19 and the response of the USA government to this health disaster which threatened to destabilise that

country socially and economically. President Donald Trump's stimulus package (The White House, 2020) was noted with interest; here was an equivalent of former president Franklin D. Roosevelt's welfare handouts to "prime the pump". The White House announced on 27 March 2020:

President Donald J. Trump is signing bipartisan legislation to provide relief to American families and workers during the coronavirus outbreak. The President worked with Congress to secure bipartisan legislation that will provide emergency relief to families and small businesses that have been impacted by the coronavirus. This unprecedented relief package totals more than \$2 trillion. The CARES Act provides much needed economic relief for American families and businesses who are hurting through no fault of their own.

The report went on to say that the aid given to small businesses would be to bolster the economy:

This legislation will strengthen our economy by providing needed financial assistance to America's small businesses and workers. Small businesses that have been hurt by coronavirus will receive the help they need to survive and prosper. This legislation provides small businesses and non-profits comprised of 500 or fewer employees with almost \$350 billion in partially forgivable loans.

This was interesting from the outset as it was a Republican government focusing on aid, albeit to keep the economy buoyed.

The class had been watching the trade tariff wars between China and the USA just before lockdown. Since 2018, the dispute has seen the USA and China impose tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of one another's goods. President Trump has long accused China of unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft. In China, there is a perception that America is trying to curb its rise as a global economic power (BBC News, 2020).

Having studied President Herbert Hoover (USA president 1929–1933) and the imposition of trade tariffs, several learners voiced the opinion that President Trump did not seem to learn from history, considering the damage done by trade tariffs in the USA during the 1920s. Now his stimulus package of aid to USA families seemed to indicate that he did indeed pay attention to the past, even if he did not wear a mask. As our lockdown continued and the banning of alcohol and tobacco was announced, I wondered if our government officials should take a course in the history of prohibition in the USA and the subsequent rise of mafia control of the illicit alcohol industry. Watching the rise in alcohol- and tobacco-related criminality in

an already crime-ridden South Africa, one could only wonder whether there were links between some state officials and this lucrative network, just as there were state links in 1920s USA between Washington officials and gangsters of the speakeasies (illegal drinking holes) and bootleggers (illegal liquor sellers). The students had studied prohibition, and it made for some interesting conversations, especially in the light of the outcry from South African associations and councils trading alcohol. In July 2020, with the second ban on alcohol, one journalist summed up the downside of this decision as follows:

Whilst there is no denying that the sale of alcohol had an immediate, tangible effect on the ability of hospitals to handle the surge in COVID-19 cases, the fact that the decision was taken without any form of consultation with industry organisations is far from ideal. After all, in a country with a skyrocketing unemployment rate, and an economy deep into recession, an industry with a value chain that affects almost a million South Africans should at least be involved in some sort of discussion with the relevant government decisionmakers. As we have seen with the trade of illicit cigarettes, any gap in the market is quickly filled by those who trade outside of the law, and you can bet it won't be long before neighbourhood WhatsApp groups are once again filled with people punting wine for extortionate prices (2Oceansvibe News, 2020).

This decision therefore created fertile ground for discussions regarding the health, economic and criminal factors to consider when deciding to limit the sale of alcohol in South Africa.

USA history has been an important curriculum focus of discussions in my virtual classroom during this pandemic. Protests were being held across the country in response to the police involvement in the death of an African American person, George Floyd. His death followed a fatal police incident in Louisville, Kentucky, in which Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African American woman was shot to death in her apartment by officers in March 2020. In February 2020, two armed White men shot and killed Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man, while he was jogging in his Georgia neighbourhood. During lockdown, a White woman called the police about a Black man who was bird watching in Central Park in New York. The subsequent protests and international focus on a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement deeply affected the learners in my school.

On 1 June 2020, I was asked to conduct online discussions with the learners on the issues of Black Lives Matter and the deaths during lockdown. Here, I discussed the roots of racial violence in the USA, linking it to slavery,

reconstruction, the Klux Klux Klan (KKK), Jim Crow laws, inner city Black poverty in the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Power movement, and the attitude of President Trump to inner city Black poverty today.

I started my conversation with the following introduction:

The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis has spurred protests against police brutality from Memphis to Denver to Los Angeles, and students and teachers nationwide and internationally are processing the week's tragic events without the in-person community of being at school. As a South African, you may have a range of responses to this brutal murder. You may feel overwhelmed by the situation. You may feel it is happening in a far-off place and that South Africa has so many issues of its own that are pressing. You may feel you don't have enough of the facts and that your own challenges right now are more important. OR, you may feel you identify with the incidents taking place in the USA because of your passion for social justice, your own personal identity, and maybe a feeling that you can empathise due to feeling silenced, oppressed, or under-represented yourself in some way.

Many of the girls in the online discussions were history students but some were not. I had been asked to conduct the discussion with all learners in each of the Further Education and Training (FET) grades. Some matriculation level girls had the benefit of having studied the Civil Rights Movement in history, but the Grade 11s and Grade 10s had not yet learnt about this, so the discussion had to include a lot of the USA's past history of racism. The discussion then turned to South Africa and focused on the 11 people who had been shot or killed by police or armed forces in South Africa during lockdown. A brief discussion ensued about why these deaths seemed to attract less attention and less outcry. Why, in a country where there are a majority of Black citizens, did Black lives seemingly also matter little, especially in the township areas where poverty prevailed? A discussion on internalised racism followed, including the impact of racism in our society, and how this played out in some institutions which still exacted brute force on people of colour. The importance of teaching Social Darwinism and race was once again highlighted as a critical aspect of the syllabus – and one which should be taught to all learners, regardless of whether they take history as a subject or not.

The school protests around our country challenging the lack of transformation in independent and ex-Model C schools in South Africa spread during lockdown. Transformation remains a vital part of addressing racial, gender and sexual equality that is long overdue. These struggles

are reflective of the haste with which our country moved forward after the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), causing deep anger in today's youth who feel that the ongoing divide socially and economically needs to be further addressed. I was proud of the history learners who could reflect on race, identity and intersectionality by drawing on the past struggles of women and people of colour across the world.

As poverty deepened in our country and the inner-city projects that our learners had supported closed during lockdown, we worried about the lack of teaching in the inner-city schools: the inequality in South Africa was highlighted once more. COVID-19 made the growing inequity starker, with the extra pressure having been placed on poor people of colour, who as breadwinners lost jobs and because school feeding schemes ceased to operate during lockdown. Before lockdown, there were three projects we supported as a school in the inner city. Learners from several schools also visited our school once a week, or every afternoon in the case of our academy.

We became painfully aware that many of the learners had been sent home for lockdown without textbooks. In 2015, the High Court had ordered the Department of Basic Education to provide textbooks to every child in school, yet many schools still did not have an adequate supply in 2020 before lockdown and learners shared books in school. At lockdown, therefore, learners were at home without the resources to continue their studies. This was in spite of the 2015 court decision, which was reported as follows:

... the Supreme Court of Appeal was emphatic: by not delivering textbooks to all ... learners, the Department of Basic Education and provincial department had violated learners' rights to basic education. It's the strongest judgment yet that all learners, especially the disadvantaged, have a constitutional right to textbooks (Daily Maverick, 2015).

Our concern for these learners grew as the reports of hunger spread. Many learners depended on school feeding schemes in South Africa and when schools were closed there was no feeding taking place. There are an estimated 10 million children in South Africa who rely on school meals to survive.

The State was lobbied by the formidable force of the NGO Equal Education and a COVID-19 task team made up of "civic organisations, trade unions, organisations of informal workers, faith-based organisations and community structures in South Africa" (Equal Education, 2020), the

latter being a collection of organisations on a scale not seen since the 1980s' UDF and COSATU anti-apartheid alliance. This new alliance called on “all people, every stakeholder and sector, to contain infection, reduce transmission and mitigate the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 virus”. Under pressure from this civil society front, the State announced that the Child Support Grant would be increased during lockdown as a welfare measure:

On 21 April 2020 President Cyril Ramaphosa, announced a social relief and economic support package of R500 billion to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on households. The following social assistance has been introduced to assist South Africans desperately affected by COVID-19:

Child support grant beneficiaries will receive an extra R300 per month in May 2020 thereafter an additional R500 per month from June to October 2020 will be received;

All other grant beneficiaries will receive an extra R250 per month for the next six months; and

A special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant of R350 a month for the next six months (the “SRD Grant”) has been introduced (Lexology, 2020).

In terms of the Child Support Grant, this meant that R300 per child would be added in May 2020 only, making it R740 per child. From June until Oct 2020, this grant reverted to R440 per child, but each caregiver received an additional R500 regardless of the number of children for whom they received a grant.

Here was another opportunity for a history lesson. I was personally struck by the extension of the child support grant, as I had been a member of the Lund committee as a young Black Sash (Blacksash.org.za, undated) representative in 1995–1996 when we formulated the grant that would assist the most vulnerable children in South Africa, of all races, according to need. Under the new post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa, the grant started in 1998 at R100 per child month and was provided for children in need aged 0-5 years. Now, it is for children aged 0-18 years and is R440 per month. This grant replaced the Single Mothers' Grant that White single mothers had received during apartheid. When we were lobbying for the then new Child Grant, we had been focused on many child-headed households due to AIDS. The continued poverty in South Africa has meant the grant has served more and more vulnerable children; today, over 10

million children receive it, and it is hailed by UNICEF as “one of the most comprehensive social protection systems in the developing world” (UNICEF, n.d.).

This was a good example of how post-apartheid resources could be spread across the racial divide and how the most vulnerable could be catered for.

We were aware, however, that many of the inner-city learners were not recipients of the child grant, as they were not South African citizens and thus would not benefit from this state action. For our learners, this was another learning curve; many inner-city learners, who were children of refugees or economic migrants, were vulnerable at a time when the school feeding scheme would have at least given them a meal a day. Now, with schools shut, there was nothing.

Our learners’ response to this was incredible; they sprang into action, collecting food during the month of May for the families we could track through the project coordinators and the local church. They also collected blankets and started making masks. A tutoring scheme was developed by the Grade 10 and 11 learners from our school, for learners from the academy programme who were at home. Our learners would help by WhatsApp, email and phone, sharing resources, online sites and knowledge with these learners who would be stressing about their future.

Another scourge in our society was exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown – gender-based violence. Once again, the media shone the spotlight on the danger of learners who could not escape from abuse at home during lockdown:

... campaigners stressed that the police force’s gender-based violence hotline received 2,300 calls in the first five days of lockdown – nearly three times the rate prior to lockdown – showing that violence against women had gone up not down (Global Citizen, 2020).

Our learners found these reports deeply disturbing and felt helpless in the face of this issue. Speaking to one of our matriculants, she related the sense of being overwhelmed with social issues at a time when she was already stressed by the virus and her studies. Drawing on history, she related that she felt what students in the 1960s must have felt, that is, there were so many issues to fight, and she wanted to be part of working for change yet she also had to think of her own future and her studies to get to a point where she could make a sustainable difference.

I was mindful of the life lessons these students were drawing from history. Suddenly, the activism of the 1960s was real to them as they grappled to balance personal and political issues – at age 17 or 18 years. The fact that they were drawing parallels was evidence that their history lessons were meaningful; these girls had not yet left school and were still minors yet the weight of the world was starting to overwhelm them. They felt their elders had let them and the world down.

Educational webinars

I was also asked to participate as an educator and member of the Varkey Foundation Global Teacher network (Global Citizen, 2020) in national and international educational webinars during the COVID-19 lockdown. The response of teachers around the world has varied. Education departments have also responded differently. In a resource-rich country such as the UK, textbooks and weekly packs of homework were delivered to schoolchildren along with vouchers for poorer families, and online teaching took place for learners with access to a digital device. This contrasted with countries like Sierra Leone, where learners in rural areas had no textbooks and no devices. Here, some teachers contributed to lessons on the radio and raised money to buy radios for schools where learners could listen to lessons while trying to practice social distancing.

In South Africa, the vacillation of the Department of Basic Education and its tussle with teachers who felt unsafe in many schools due to overcrowding, lack of running water and flush toilets, has led to a sense of uncertainty for learners. Most were not sure whether the school year would be completed, or whether they would have to repeat the year. Most independent schools, meanwhile, were able to teach online during lockdown; they also transitioned to blended learning, as some students returned while others remained isolated.

A particularly insightful publication, *Maslow Before Bloom* (Teacher Task Force, 2020), written by five teachers from Canada, the USA and Philippines, raised the issue of wellbeing during this very stressful time. They considered how online teaching needed to address the stress of learners first, how examinations should matter less, and how education should be more creative. They emphasised that core units in a curriculum should be kept but the rest shaved to make the process of teaching in a pandemic more realistic and sustainable. Many countries in the northern

hemisphere – where schools closed in June for the summer break – shed end-of-year examinations.

In countries like Chile, little schooling took place as learners did not have devices. Teachers in my network continued to phone their learners regularly and took them lessons in lesson packs every fortnight. In India, a particularly creative teacher gave her lessons using WhatsApp and song.

At our school, it was decided to trim the mid-year examinations, but we still had some form of assessment. Matriculants wrote mid-year examinations as usual and wrote preliminary examinations in September, but the Grade 11s wrote a shortened assessment and the Grade 10s only wrote examinations in some subjects. It was interesting to experience a blended-learning approach, with some girls at home and some at school. During examinations, some wrote from home and some wrote at school. The importance of thinking flexibly and having the learners' well-being as a priority informed this approach.

Staff development

Alongside the threats, COVID-19 has led to many opportunities. There have been many great offers of online courses and resources, provided free due to the pandemic. The Gilder Lehrman Trust offered free seminars and I signed up for a series of discussions on the Vietnam War.

Jacana Media offered webinars on various topics, including discussions by University of Cape Town professor Howard Philips on his book *Plague, Pox and Pandemics*, and there were discussions by a variety of authors on South African history. The Historical Association of the UK offered free resources to teachers online during this time.

On the South African front, I have been busy creating profiles of South African women who played important roles in the country's past, but who do not feature in the current curriculum and history textbooks. This work is done as a member of Asinakuthula (asinakuthula.org, 2020), a collective of female history teachers and researchers. The name of the organisation was inspired by the poet Nontsizi Mqgqetho, who, in the 1920s, stated in isiXhosa, "Asinakuthula umhlaba ubolile" – we cannot keep quiet while the world is in shambles.

Another wonderful project that I was able to tackle during lockdown was composing articles for the Teach Rock website started by USA rock musician

Stevie van Zandt. Teach Rock is a standards-aligned, arts-integration curriculum that uses the history of popular music and culture to help teachers engage students. Together with a music teacher, I have profiled the role of music in the struggle in South Africa (Teach Rock, 2020).

Resources for students

For students in state schools, a range of publishers have offered free online resources and many support materials abound on the web. The South African Society for History Teaching (SASHT) executive discussed the importance of starting a link on the site of resources for teachers and students (SASHT, 2020). There is a sense that teachers and students have had to embrace online learning, and this has meant a change in the “new normal”.

However, for some learners, it has meant that they have been left behind and the challenge of addressing the lack of resources in some South African schools continues. The challenge will be for all teachers to rally and lobby government for equal services, including vital resources like cheaper airtime. This is a global issue that many countries face. The other looming issue is mental health and well-being; I have participated in many international webinars on this issue. In South Africa, educational psychologists and counsellors are few, yet the state of stress in our youth is increasing daily.

I have been fortunate to be able to continue teaching history relatively uninterrupted during COVID-19 yet the life lessons and stresses that have arisen amongst the learners at my school has been profound. But this also impacted on other aspects related to history teaching and learning.

SASHT Conference

The annual SASHT conference was not able to be held at Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, in September 2020 as planned. The SASHT executive decided to attempt to hold webinars instead, on three History curriculum topics. I elected to coordinate the topic of teaching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The invitation stated: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a part of the Grade 12 CAPS-History curriculum in South Africa. It forms part of the broader section, “The coming of democracy in South Africa and coming to terms with the past”.

Within the current global climate, this section raises a number of difficult questions. How do we as history educators navigate the challenges of this particular period in our history in the light of tensions that endure in South Africa post-apartheid? Some believe that the TRC led to South Africans being told to reconcile too quickly. Consequently, perpetrators have seldom, if ever, had to account for their actions or be granted amnesty. Questions remain. How much of this blame is correctly laid at the door of the TRC? How much is to be levelled at the failure of the NPA to prosecute? The pressure today is to lobby the NPA to re-open cases such as that of Ahmed Timol and get justice. In the context of Black Lives Matter, many of the youth have rejected the TRC and feel it did not achieve the truth that was needed for reconciliation.

Teaching this topic is difficult, and the discussion held by SASHT sought to assist teachers in answering some of these questions and navigate this difficult terrain in their respective classrooms. A panel of speakers included Piers Pigou, former investigator for the TRC; Mary Burton, former TRC commissioner and past president of the Black Sash; Leah Nasson, teacher and executive member of SASHT; and Imtiaz Cajee, nephew of Ahmed Timol and author of *The Murder of Ahmed Timol: My Search for the Truth*. There was quite a good attendance for this webinar and the interview was able to be recorded and posted on the SASHT website – an advantage of the online format. How this will affect future conferences remains to be seen, but blended learning and teaching is now the order of the day.

References

- The White House 2020. President Donald J. Trump is providing economic relief to American workers, families, and businesses impacted by the Coronavirus. Briefing issued March 27, 2020. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-providing-economic-relief-american-workers-families-businesses-impacted-coronavirus/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.
- BBC News 2020. A quick guide to the US-China trade war. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.
- 2Oceansvibe News 2020. SA alcohol industry “blindsided” by booze ban as Dlamini-Zuma explains reasons. Available at <https://www.2oceansvibe.com/2020/07/14/sa-alcohol-industry-blindsided-by-booze-ban-as-dlamini-zuma-explains-reasons>. Accessed on 9 August 2020

Daily Maverick 2015. Supreme court of appeal: Textbooks are a constitutional right. Greg Nicolson, 3 December 2015. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-12-03-supreme-court-of-appeal-textbooks-are-a-constitutional-right>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Equal Education 2020. Joint statement: A programme of action in the time of COVID-19 – A call for social solidarity in South Africa, March 24, 2020. Available at <https://equaleducation.org.za/2020/03/24/joint-statement-a-programme-of-action-in-the-time-of-covid-19-a-call-for-social-solidarity-in-south-africa/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Lexology 2020. COVID-19 relief for the most vulnerable: Increase in social grants and the provision of social relief of distress grants, April 30 2020. Available at <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=25186006-2018-458c-b36b-22c58158c468>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

UNICEF, n.d. The South African child support grant impact assessment. Available at https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/The_South_African_Child_Support_Grant_Impact_Assessment.pdf. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Global Citizen 2020. Murders of South African women surge as 9-week lockdown eases. Available at <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/gender-violence-covid-19-lockdown-south-africa/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

South African Society for History Teaching, 2020. Available at http://sashtw.org.za/?page_id=2250. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Phillips, H 2012. *Plague, pox and pandemics: A Jacana Pocket History of epidemics in South Africa*:168. Jacana.

Websites

Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-providing-economic-relief-american-workers-families-businesses-impacted-coronavirus/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.2oceansvibe.com/2020/07/14/sa-alcohol-industry-blindsided-by-booze-ban-as-dlamini-zuma-explains-reasons/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-12-03-supreme-court-of-appeal-textbooks-are-a-constitutional-right/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-safrica-hunger/south-african-children-face-hunger-as-school-closure-halts-free-meals-idUSKBN22J1UL>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://equaleducation.org.za/2020/03/24/joint-statement-a-programme-of-action-in-the-time-of-covid-19-a-call-for-social-solidarity-in-south-africa>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=25186006-2018-458c-b36b-22c58158c468>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/The_South_African_Child_Support_Grant_Impact_Assessment.pdf. Accessed on 9 August 2020.

Available at <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/gender-violence-covid-19-lockdown-south-africa/>. Accessed on 9 August 2020.