

BE PASSIONATE ABOUT HISTORY - MARKETING HISTORY TO LEARNERS AND PARENTS

Robert King

This paper is a simple hands-on approach to the marketing of History, a subject which is under attack from all sides. There are two questions upon which we need to focus.

Firstly what does History, as a subject on the school curriculum, have to offer prospective learners and secondly what do we, as teachers of History, have to do engage and stimulate our learners?

In the Durban Girls' High School Subject Package booklet for Grade 9 learners History is marketed as follows:

"I like History but I'm not going to take it for Grade 12 because it won't help me in my career."

Sounds familiar? Perhaps the following explanation will help to dispel this common misconception:

- Modern methods of teaching History emphasise that History is a discipline and not a mass of dates and facts
- History develops logical thought and sound judgement while providing an essential background of culture and general knowledge
- A study of History encourages critical thinking
- Learners are taught to detect bias, not to accept facts at face value and to examine critically all information that is presented to them.

A proper study of History also encourages in learners:

- The ability to make decisions by weighing up available evidence
- Skills in research
- The ability to present in a meaningful, concise way, the information they have discovered through research.

The skills involved in History are also required for many subjects studied at tertiary level. The disciplined approach required in History

would be a distinct advantage to any learners who aim to pursue tertiary study. (Former pupils attest that the skills they developed in History at school have helped them more than any other school subject to handle the change over to studying at university).

All companies or institutes are faced with problems at various times. Any problem is half way to being solved if its origins can be traced, something which a History learner will be accustomed to doing. As History is the study of mankind in the past, a proper study of History can yield an understanding of people, to a depth not provided by many other school subjects. This is obviously very useful for any learner who wishes to enter a people-related career (teaching, law, politics, the diplomatic corps, journalism, psychology, management, medicine, tourism and the travel industry, beauty therapy, the arts and even that of the cosmetic surgeon and many more). All careers that need skills in dealing with people.

Wouldn't you, as an employer, appreciate a prospective employee with these skills?

But what of the actual course content? Will it be relevant for learners' future careers? Yes, and yes again! General History in Grade 12 covers a study of the emergence of the United States of America and Soviet Russia as major world powers; the circumstances leading to World War II and the subsequent Cold War which shaped the mindset of the world for four decades.

A study of Africa since 1945 reveals the involvement of the world powers in the continent. It also provides an understanding of the problems, challenges and changes being faced by our continent.

Relevant now? OF COURSE!

And what of South African History? The period 1924 to 1994 highlights the horrors of racism and the iniquity of Apartheid. We are teaching a generation who never grew up under Apartheid's horrendous laws. They too must know what happened. Apartheid must not be forgotten so that people will not make the same mistakes again.

History too has great intrinsic value. Ultimately our purpose at school

is to educate learners to prepare them for adult life in which a career is only a part. In these changing times is it not important for our children to learn what has happened in the past and hopefully, as the new generation, avoid making the same mistakes? A study of History goes a long way towards preparing our youth for the future and assisting them to understand the present within which they operate.

My learners are erudite and able to make their own decisions which do not necessarily reflect my views.

In preparing this paper I decided to ask the Grade 10, 11 and 12 learners why they selected History as a Matric subject.

Important and repeated again and again in this survey was the ability of teachers in Grades 8 and 9 to be passionate about teaching their subject, their skill in making History interesting and the ability to *sell* the subject to their learners. This means there is a great responsibility on lower school teachers to *sell* History. This is a factor that might be out of your control. However, you can encourage lower school colleagues to give of their best. They are laying the foundations for the future survival of the subject.

In spite of my Principal's reservations, I insist on teaching at least one class from every grade in the school. My Principal is quite correct, it places a heavy load on any teacher who is also involved in the onerous tasks of lesson preparation, teaching and marking in the upper school. On the positive side it gives one hands on knowledge of what is happening in every grade and contact with learners at every level in the school.

Word of mouth is a valuable tool in our efforts to sell History. Learners talk among themselves. If they say that History is fascinating and fun, part of the battle is won. This reputation extends beyond the school into the community and helps to win over parents to permit their children to choose the History option, especially if the learners are taught well, stimulated, have obviously become educated in the true sense of being knowledgeable, skilled and have developed sound attitudes.

Also high on the learners' lists of why they chose History was the fact that it helps them with their other subjects. Top of that list was English. Learners said that History helped them write better essays, provided them with enhanced vocabularies, helped them to be logical, analytical,

objective and to avoid bias. They felt better able to participate in activities such as debates, teach-backs and they felt they were generally better conversationalists. In fact these aspects apply to any language that a History learner takes at school.

I personally believe there should be greater contact between teachers of language subjects than presently exists. As a University lecturer I discovered that students who majored in English as well as History often achieved much higher marks in English.

In History you need an extended vocabulary to succinctly explain historical concepts. Consequently History expands vocabulary. History also teaches valuable skills in summarizing information and so makes learning easier, encourages concentration, hones memory skills and time management during tests and examinations. These are valuable skills needed in all fields of study.

Other subjects that were perceived as being facilitated by the study of History were all subjects requiring the writing of essays, including Geography and the Arts.

Equally important from my survey was the aspect of learning life skills. We live in a complex country in an equally complex world. We are struggling with the legacy of Apartheid and having to learn to deal with our very new democracy. Consequently we need to know where we come from, how to handle the world we live in and to how to attempt to shape the future.

History enables us:

- To have a greater understanding of and love for our country;
- To be more interested in other people;
- To listen to others and communicate with our fellows;
- To accept and respect other cultures and be empathetic;
- To be more compassionate and humane;
- To understand the difference between right and wrong;
- To help us deal with difficult moral decisions;
- To be more aware of current affairs both nationally and internationally; and according to my learners, History should teach us not to make the same mistakes again and again.

To make History a viable subject option we must:

- Make it interesting;
- Make it pertinent;
- Make it available to all;
- Make it entertaining – give command performances before every class – and it is exhausting;
- Make our learners laugh – one learner said she had to have one class a day to look forward to;
- Tell interesting anecdotes – they help learners remember the salient facts;
- Encourage learners to read and find the wealth of material to be that can be gleaned from the media, books and websites;
- Refer to set works studied in English;
- Encourage learners to ask questions;
- Encourage your learners to express and share their views – you learn as much from them as they learn from you;
- Get your learners to listen to other people's standpoints and to try and understand their views;
- Follow the media ourselves and keep up to date with national and international events;
- Draw comparisons between what learners already know and events that happened in the past;
- Use what is happening in the world today to help explain past events;
- Remember History is about story telling – the first histories began in oral praise songs;
- Get learners to ask elderly family members about their lives and the major events that happened in their life times. (The Grade 12 Oral History assignments are doing a valuable service in not only teaching History skills but they also encourage learners to find out things for themselves and to record events and viewpoints that would otherwise be lost. Often less gifted learners come up with the most interesting topics);
- Play games with your learners:
 - do role plays (girls love dressing up);
 - let them interview the people in the drama of History;
- You need to be available to your learners to make History popular

and accessible. Be there before school, at breaks and after school to answer questions and give extra lessons. Teach them that leaving a space and saying I don't know is not good enough. They can always come and ask you. I know too few avail themselves of these opportunities.

- Start a History Society and invite speakers who can talk on aspects of the syllabus. This is particularly valuable when teaching Apartheid. I have more speakers among parents than can be accommodated at times. In this way parents are being involved in the learning process.

We all have to sell our subject if it is to survive. Don't be complacent and wait for others to save the subject. We can all play our parts but above all BE PASSIONATE!