

Stop thinking about tomorrow: Even in the era of COVID-19 History is teaching past and present

Reflections on teaching History during COVID-19

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Abstract

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has caused a crisis in education, with the digital divide becoming ever more prevalent in a society which is as unequal and fractured as South Africa. While ex-Model C and private schools made the transition onto online learning with comparative ease at the beginning of the first lockdown, the majority of students and teachers in South Africa were, and continue to be, faced with a lack of internet access and resources to allow for the continuation of teaching and learning. While headlines celebrated a ‘21st century revolution in education’ – essentially undermining the professionalism of teachers and calling into question the value of face-to-face interaction – the oft-neglected global majority continued to be marginalised. This is not to denigrate the innovative methods which teachers in both underprivileged and privileged settings have adopted in the face of the crisis, which range from compressing videos and sending notes via Whatsapp to spending hours on screen teaching synchronous lessons, but rather to highlight the challenges which deserve greater focus in the contemporary socio-economic milieu. For a subject such as History, this is an opportune moment not only to draw parallels to events such as the Spanish Flu (which too demanded the wearing of protective masks), but also to highlight issues of social justice which are emerging on both a local and global scale.

Keywords: Online learning; COVID-19; History education; Education inequality; Fourth Industrial Revolution; Social justice.

In the midst of South Africa’s lockdown period, Stephen Grootes – a well-known political journalist and regular contributor to the *Daily Maverick*, wrote an article in which he extolled the success of online schooling during the era of COVID-19, with the headline reading “Online learning to the rescue” (Grootes, 2020). Using terms such as “scalability” and “building capacity”, embedded in his argument was the *de rigueur* neoliberal rhetoric of 21st century education which privileges targets and

outcomes over an equal and socially just system of schooling. In a country in which 55% of the population live below the upper bound poverty line and 25% live on less than R561 per person per month (Business Tech, 2019), suggesting that online learning is the solution to South Africa's education crisis is more than just myopic: it is disingenuous. Grootes is not alone. Over the course of the past few months, in South Africa and abroad, post-apocalyptic visions of a post-Covid 19 "new normal" have seen a sudden increase in online schools catering largely for the moneyed minority. This poses a marked challenge for educationalists – and in this case, for History teachers – who are more than methodological beings behind flat screens, fighting for connectivity on Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams.

Over the course of the last decade, technology-driven teaching (or ICT integration) has become more than merely a buzzword used to describe schools with "savvy" smartboards adorning their classroom walls. In primarily private and well-resourced, mainly ex-Model C, schools, conferences and staff development workshops have been replete with sessions on digital innovation in the learning environment. Sessions on using interactive whiteboards and downloading mobile "apps" for Ipad are, by now, nothing short of anachronistic. It would, of course, be naïve to assume that multinational tech companies vying for access to the educational market is driven by altruism. In 2020, tapping into the youth's competitive spirit (or their consumer mindset), "gamification" is posed to be the next revolution – or so the "Ed-techpreneurs would have us believe. Even the contentious 2018 Ministerial Task Team report on making history compulsory bizarrely states that "History education should not be restricted to the written word because interactive digital media (playstation, mobile phones and video games) [...] can also be used to encourage students to empathise with people living in past eras (Department of Basic Education, 2018). It would seem that fundamentals such as access to textbooks and qualified teachers have fallen out of fashion. This is not, however, to argue *against* the use of technology in the teaching of History; rather, it is to question very assumptions upon which the lauding of technology as a panacea to all ills – one of the most fundamental of which, in South Africa, is the provision of consistent energy supply.

By the time the South African government imposed the "Level 5 lockdown" in order to control the spread of COVID-19 at the end of March 2020, over 1.5 billion students worldwide were affected by the closure of schools, which is equivalent to 87.4% of the global school enrolments (David et

al., 2020:2). Home-schooling, traditionally positioned at the margins of national education systems and often the subject of popular contention, has come to adopt new meaning in the stasis caused the pandemic. So, too, has the concept of the “digital divide”. In a society in which a school charging in excess of R150 000 per annum can sit merely a few kilometres away from a no-fee counterpart, the shift to online learning has done little more than to accelerate and exacerbate the glaring injustices of social stratification in the educational sphere. With a contentious examination system which is already skewed in favour of English and Afrikaans mother tongue speakers, the glaring that the large majority of South African Matric History students essentially lost four months of teaching and learning – with no adjustment to the final assessment – has further deepened pre-existing and entrenched inequities.

The fact that History teachers, along with their counterparts in other subjects, have had to face such immense challenges during the course of the pandemic has nevertheless given rise to both national and an international collegial spirit. International organisations such as EuroClio – the European Association of History Educators – and the British-based Teaching History – have established large banks of resources which have opened up communities of practice which transcend traditional borders. Online tools for communication, including the ever-present and “COVID-19 success story”, Zoom, have allowed for teachers in well-resourced schools to experiment with translating classroom activities to the digital sphere. This has, of course, not been without its limitations. Provoking spontaneous debate about the Causes of the Russian Revolution is no mean feat against blurry backgrounds and the sound of a Labrador barking in the background of the inevitable individual who has forgotten to mute the microphone.

What, then, of the silent majority, for whom data prices are exorbitant, connections are precarious and the provision of textbooks and notes beyond the school walls were essentially impossible during the “hard lockdown”? Those who, despite having had extremely limited access to educational resources, are still expected – against all odds – to complete a content-heavy curriculum? One of the most effective means of digital communication lies in smartphone mobile technology. By 2023, it is estimated that over 26 million South Africans will have access to internet-enabled cellphones (O’Dea, 2020). This is by no means a novel phenomenon. Various academic publications have highlighted the rapid proliferation of mobile technology

amongst young Africans over the course of the past few years, highlighting the potential – and the constraints - of using mobile-based technologies in the educational sphere in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, while the cushy convenience of logging onto Google Classroom, receiving packs of notes via email, watching data-heavy video materials and seeing the familiar face of a teacher on screen may be beyond the reach of most South Africa school-goers, the “wonders of Whatsapp” (the nexus of neoliberalism) have in some cases provided, at least for the time being, a viable alternative to traditional pedagogy.

Online South African zero-rated curriculum resources for History students remain limited, with the majority of educational websites invariably focusing on STEM subjects. Nevertheless, teachers who enjoy access to the internet and to a computer have a range of options available to limit data usage. Powerpoint presentations and videos can be compressed to free of charge using a number of different applications, and reams of notes saved in a PDF format can easily be reduced in size on websites. These methods are, of course, far from ideal: having to read notes or watch presentations on a phone with a screen averaging around 10 centimetres is challenging for the best of us – to say nothing of the price tag. Nevertheless, in recent years, companies have capitalised on a growing and captive market by introducing smartphones for less than R500. While there is no doubt that, in spite of the ululating cries of the Edtech-preneurs, this kind of technology is unlikely to replace conventional teaching, it has opened up potential opportunities for both teachers (and creative corporates) to utilise new technologies in what seem to be increasingly ominous prospects for education in South Africa.

It is, however, apposite to consider some of the benefits and challenges of teaching History in an online format, given what seems to be popular trends predicted by so-called “Fourth Industrial Futurists” (a neologism which hopefully will not qualify for the 2020 *Oxford English Dictionary*). With the terms “synchronous”, “asynchronous” and “blended” learning rolling off the tongues of even the least seasoned of acolytes of the online sphere, certain questions should emerge surrounding best practice. With excessive synchronous teaching (teaching and learning in “real time”) potentially contributing to learner and teacher exhaustion, current theories seem to point towards a blended model as an effective means of pedagogy. In a History classroom, a blended approach can easily incorporate both individual and collaborative learning. Flipped classroom activities,

prepared readings and scaffolded source-based and writing exercises can be complemented by direct instruction, targeted and differentiated webinars and tutorials. “Teacher talk time” in synchronous lessons can be reduced with short videos covering content in an asynchronous format, allowing for the much-needed focus on skills development in critical thinking during live lessons.

Nonetheless, where the global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in technology opening up innovative possibilities in the developed and certain sectors of the developing world, it has also highlighted the need for a socially just approach and responsible use of the medium to ensure equity. In South Africa, the lack of basic materials such as textbooks in schools precludes the achievement of the “technological dream”, however many tablets, robots and coding-enabled computers can be installed in urban and rural schools by the incumbent administration. Thus, a consideration of the teaching of History during the era of COVID-19 requires significantly more than a mere overview of available technologies to facilitate distance learning during the various iterations of the national lockdown. The past, as it were, cannot be abstracted from the present and, despite the omnipresent pressure to complete the curriculum, the flexibility of History to address issues of social justice has provides an opportunity for teachers and students to explore socio-political and economic structures of society through the a contemporary lens. The teaching of History in COVID-19 thus stretches beyond the obvious parallels to the 1918 Spanish Flu, although the century-old images of mask-wearing nurses and field hospitals would certainly enrich any comparative source-based exercise.

Ultimately, within the broad scope of the topics available to History teachers emerging from the context of the pandemic, it would be a great shame to relegate Marx and the nature of labour to the margins of the debate. As headlines declare “working from home is the new normal”, it appears easy – and indeed convenient – for the middle classes to forget that it is that a new definition for the working class could indeed be reduced to “those who are forced to go out to work”. Moreover, the collapsing of national frontiers under the aegis of global capitalism has, in recent months, rendered the labour market more precarious. To celebrate the flexibility of the internet in allowing for remote work is also to forget the relative dispensability of higher paid jobs. Outsourcing to lower-income countries no longer largely belongs to the realm of semi-skilled work, thus rendering a far greater number of jobs within a national sphere vulnerable

to foreign competition – jobs, in other words, are no longer protected. As a correspondent to Britain's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper remarked in July 2020, those in rich countries who celebrate the chance “to work from home” need to remember that “if their jobs can be done from home, then they can also be outsourced to India”.

To teach History during the era of COVID-19 is to do far more than just circumnavigate the obstructions to traditional classroom delivery. Yes, the availability of a wide range of innovative digital tools - from communication platforms to video compression programmes - has, amongst the better-resourced communities, allowed for content delivery to continue. This is, of course, by no means ideal: History is a subject which is best suited to discursive practices and debate, and mere content delivery is rarely pedagogically effective. In South Africa, no doubt as in dozens of other low- and middle-income countries, the majority have experienced educational exclusion over the course of 2020, further exacerbating extant structural inequality, and access to digital resources remains elusive. To teach History during the era of COVID-19, then, is to encourage students to explore the manifestations of historical trends which have presented themselves in the contemporary moment. It is to remain cognisant of the widening lacunae between the moneyed minority and the majority. It is, ultimately, to teach for a socially just society (without slipping into the trap of pernicious presentism) though the lens of historical consciousness.

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