

Teaching and learning history in the time of the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

This is an academic yet personal and subjective piece written to analyse and reflect upon personal experiences with regard to the teaching and learning of history under the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout this paper, I delve into my professional and personal experiences within different contexts, namely that of teaching history at a high school in a township called Soshanguve, and that of learning history as one of my modules in a postgraduate programme that I undertook at the University of Pretoria before and during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Keywords: Teaching; Learning; History; School; Outbreak; Pandemic; COVID-19; Time; Education; Experience; Lockdown; Reality; Curriculum.

Teaching history during a pandemic: COVID-19

I am a beginner history teacher at a secondary school called Botse-Botse, in Soshanguve. I teach Grade 10 History. As an insider of the events outlined in this reflective piece, the context of the paper relates directly to my experiences.

It was in early March 2020, a day like any other, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit South Africa, and it has impacted me to my core. Various departments of the state, including the Department of Basic Education (DBE), instituted drastic measures to curb the spread of the novel virus, COVID-19. Schools were closed, and this decision was informed by the warnings issued by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) and the World Health Organization (WHO). They highlighted the increased number of infections in South Africa, particularly amongst people without a travel history, thus indicating local transmission of the virus. Schools were identified as high-risk areas in terms of ease of transmission due to the close contact of large numbers of people.

In my brief 25 years of life, there are numerous experiences that could qualify as life changing. Every new experience was, at one time or another, the first experience. For good or bad, each instance changed the course of

my life. But the most transformative of them all has to be experiencing the teaching and learning of history during a critical time such as the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic was very sudden and unprecedented; it shattered our reality. Within a moment's notice, President Ramaphosa announced that we should leave schools and schools should close. While we were still processing the fact that COVID-19 had finally been detected in South Africa, the uncertainty of when and whether we would return to school was lurking. As such, one of the most difficult things I had to do in 2020 as a history teacher was to leave the classroom indefinitely and tell my learners, "I don't know" when they asked, "When will the schools reopen, Ma'am?".

Through social media, news reports, memorandums and circulars, we were instructed to leave schools indefinitely and encouraged to rapidly move to e-learning, although teachers had not received enough training and were ill-prepared. This meant that learners and teachers in many of the inadequately resourced public schools in rural areas and townships were likely to have a poor user experience. The integration of technology in education has been on the rise but it has created and continues to create a huge gap between those who have access to telecommunications infrastructure and those who do not: this means that the digital divide is widening and a structured environment is still needed to ensure inclusion.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has been a rude awakening in terms of representing the inequitable setting of our country's education. In many instances, I was concerned about spending more than a month away from learners and the instructional environment as more people tested positive for COVID-19, therefore I made various attempts to recreate the learning environment online.

In attempting to reach out to Grade 10 History learners, I have witnessed how the virus has exposed, if not perpetuated, the disparities between the haves and the have-nots. This situation has been in existence for a long time. During alert level 5 of the lockdown, I tried to conduct remote classes with Grade 10 History learners and that proved to be impossible because some of the learners did not have smartphones, while others could not afford data to log in consistently. Thus, the outbreak of the pandemic is a critical time in the history of education because it has forced us as teachers to reflect and it has brought about the need to improvise and adapt.

Over six months and five levels of the lockdown, the pressure on teachers to save the academic year has increased enormously. Our school has phased in different grades: Grades 8 to 11 were phased in, at up to 50 per cent capacity as the lockdown levels became less restrictive, while the Grade 12 learners were allowed back to the school environment in early June 2020 at full capacity, to ensure that they could write their final examinations, based on a complete and untrimmed syllabi. There is a need to sanitise learners every morning when they enter the school gate, screen their temperatures and ensure that they adhere to social distancing regulations throughout the day. Our school community has worked diligently with the assistance of the district to iron out issues of social distancing, hygiene and wearing of masks and there are posters on the walls to remind learners to cough into their elbows as well as to wash their hands frequently.

I can say that the pandemic has made me more empathetic and flexible, although I want my learners to complete their tasks, because at the end of the day there must be something against which to measure whether teaching and learning of the curriculum has been successful, and that takes the form of formal assessments.

I am not oblivious of the fact that learners may be exposed to a huge amount of unofficial history and that is what often sparks controversy in history classrooms. History is a controversial subject in nature and the controversy found in some of its topics is equally important for learners to consider. It is something that I eagerly looked forward to during the history periods because it has the power to initiate a conversation or stir a debate, highlighting the importance of critical thinking (Schul, 2018:17-29) and engagement in the learning environment. These are moments that I will never take for granted and they are not easy to facilitate remotely, even if one has access to the appropriate telecommunications infrastructure.

Learning history during a pandemic

Learning history did not stop for me when schools closed, it continued through the pandemic. I observed the pandemic as a historical event. I was able to notice certain things, such as the fact that our school does not have the means to deliver lessons online, apart from relying on WhatsApp to communicate with some of the learners who have access to smartphones. Due to the lack of infrastructure and resources, I found myself constantly wondering what I could do to ensure that the Grade 10 History learners

continued to learn. Furthermore, I caught myself thinking about which content in the history curriculum was important to be taught. Then I realised that I had to change a lot in terms of assessments and lesson planning.

I realised that the risk-control decision to “temporarily” close schools did not only affect our school. While some independent schools transitioned smoothly to full remote learning because in the previous years they had already begun using blended learning as a teaching and learning method, it was impossible for our school to do the same, because, apart from not having resources, our school closed multiple times due to the fact that we had to quarantine each time there was a confirmed case of COVID-19. So, we made little progress in terms of instruction at that time.

To keep myself sane throughout these times, I limited the amount of news I watched or heard about COVID-19. I stopped scrolling through online news feeds that had anything to do with the pandemic, because at times I felt that I was experiencing a case of information overload after listening to and reading multiple departmental memorandums and circulars such as a circular that came from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE 2020; 2020:1-5) stating that “in respect of educators, the last day for the first term would be Friday 20 March 2020, to allow for the finalisation of all outstanding administrative work”. This circular seemed to contradict the president’s pronouncement which was a directive to close schools on 18 March 2020.

In all honesty, I resented the fact that I was behind with my studies, given the fact that I could not register early on when the first semester started, nothing needed to be added to that. The announcement of the closure of schools and the end of contact lessons at the university in mid- March sent my emotions into a rollercoaster that my mind had a hard time comprehending. My life will never be the same. There are many different experiences in life that have changed a part of me as a person, but nothing has so profoundly changed my views and outlook on life as this pandemic – I now see the world from a new point of view.

The coronavirus pandemic has shaped my perception and thoughts on teaching & learning history under pressure or through unpredictable events, mostly because, although I knew some information about teaching under unforeseen circumstances or events, nothing could ever prepare me for anything as historic and life-changing as a pandemic.

Moreover, since I could no longer access the University of Pretoria Groenkloof campus, I believed that COVID-19 had disturbed my access to a safe and quiet study space. Despite the above-mentioned challenges, I remain very grateful for the support of lecturers from the University and that of my BEd Honours supervisor, Professor Wassermann, who used a lot of humour during our online collaborative sessions to help us get through the silent mental blocks we went through when we were unsure of whether we were coming or going as both students and mostly emerging history teachers. It was during such moments that I would question myself as to how I could do the same for my history learners, whom I knew relied on the physical space of educational institutions to learn.

To ensure that the Grade 12 learners at our school were not behind with the curriculum content that they had to cover, we started teaching from Monday to Sunday with no break in between, and this led to some inconsistencies, especially when it came to my studies. I could no longer rely on having the weekend as my time to catch up on my studies. Therefore, to ensure that I remained productive and effective, I had to learn to adapt to a new way of doing things.

Teachers and Grade 12 learners have not had quarterly school holidays post the return to school in June 2020, thus our school community continues to work tirelessly in alert level 1 to prepare and wrap up what is left of 2020 as the final matriculation examinations approached. Personally, I believe that I and many other educators have found ways to disarm anxiety through the pandemic. This transition did not happen overnight; it has been a rigorous process that took place one day at a time.

How times have changed. Learners from our school (Grades 8, 10 and 11) now go to school according to a “schedule”: two days in, in a six-day cycle, and four days away from school. Therefore, I am now constantly striving to be better at differentiating curriculums by means of small group instruction in order to be an effective history teacher. Thanks to the pandemic, class sizes have changed from huge numbers such as having more than 50 learners in a classroom, to having just 21 learners in a classroom due to social distancing regulations. I can now interact with each one, identify misunderstandings and misconceptions and provide immediate feedback in the history classroom. Furthermore, I have come to adjust my own misplaced perspectives about the history teachers’ work in the classroom.

As I have mentioned above, nothing could ever have prepared me or any other history teacher or student for the “new normal” brought about by the coronavirus. I found comfort in the fact that I had taken history as a major in high school and throughout both my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. I cannot say that in taking history I became 100 per cent capable of responding to the teaching and learning challenges brought about by the outbreak of the coronavirus, however, I can boldly state that I am constructively equipped to respond emotionally and mentally, to continue functioning in the “new normal” because of the historical skills (Bradstreet, 2017) I gained as a history student.

I have a greater appreciation for the subject because even during the outbreak of the coronavirus, the main things that I thought of were the historical skills drilled and engraved in my psyche by my third- and fourth-year history lecturer, such as comparison and contrast, contextualisation, synthesis, patterns of continuity and change over time, and empathy (Delk & Walker, 2016). I read more about how people survived during the Spanish flu and how life then compared to life now with this new virus, although the two (coronavirus and the Spanish flu) are two different things altogether. The truth is that both outbreaks are carefully acknowledged, noted down, received contemporary commentary and will be passed down in history classrooms to future generations.

The outbreak of the coronavirus is a very critical time in my life. As an individual who constantly engages with history on a daily basis (as a history teacher and a student), for some strange reason, at a certain point, I allowed myself to believe that writing this piece would be easy because it is a reflective paper that relies on me retelling details of my lived experiences. However, I have learnt that, that is not the case. A reflective paper is so much more than that – it requires one to get in touch with oneself, to look inwards and to relive each moment of an experience. Furthermore, that requires one to get in touch with the emotions and thoughts associated with that particular experience.

I believe the above-mentioned inner work has not been done though, because I and many other educators have had no alternative but to adapt to a “new normal” and as such we have not had a chance to really pay attention to different aspects of our well-being; specifically, our mental and emotional well-being. Hence, I have taken the opportunity to write this piece as a chance not only to reflect on teaching and learning history

during the coronavirus pandemic but also as an opportunity to really acknowledge the knock-on effects of the pandemic on me, to move forward and to develop strategies to enhance my level of resilience to ensure so that in future I “don’t just survive but I thrive”. The coronavirus pandemic has created a new direction for the major subject of my academic studies and for my career interests.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has not withered the passion I have for education and school history, rather it has made me want to re-cultivate it, and it has inspired me to understand that History is a very powerful subject – it is so much more than a dull recollection of past events. Learners learn it through interaction and engagement and that means that we now have to start innovating ways to make sure that learners can still engage with each other, because they can never learn through merely listening while a teacher lays out the content of a certain topic on an online classroom or platform.

The government has emphasised the right to basic education. However, in an attempt to practice the responsibilities aligned to this right, they have also exposed the lack of focus on emotional well-being. I often wonder, because of the uncertainty, isolation and anxiety, whether history learners are actively learning history, or have they fallen back into the habit of treating history as a memory discipline? As teachers, are we now just filling in hours? racing against time? because there are so many obstacles standing in the way of producing quality results this year.

Amongst colleagues and fellow history students from the University of Pretoria, we have often discussed how the pandemic was a blessing in disguise when it came to echoing issues of overcrowded classrooms and wondered if it would prompt change and progress in the education sector.

Overall, I believe that more needs to be done to change the current situation and achieve the fourth sustainable development goal, that is, to provide quality education (Sustainable Development Goals, 2012) without compromising mental and emotional well-being. We must practice mindfulness. The essence of this practice manifests itself in a subject like history as the historical skill, empathy. It will take a while to get there but the first step will be to level the playing field, because at times my thoughts would drift and I would wonder ;how much effort will the government put in to levelling the disparities of the haves and the have-nots in schools. As we adjust to lower lockdown levels, there seems to be a pattern of just

readjusting to the “normal” we lived through before COVID-19, with a focus largely on output. I do hope that there will be a consideration for the psychological and emotional realities of history teachers and learners.

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