

## The Exploitation of Public Representations in the Tuition of History in a Post-Apartheid South Africa: Ecosystem

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**ABSTRACT** For many decades South African education and the teaching of History in particular, has been characterised by desegregation in an effort to accommodate the diverse nature of society. During the apartheid era, the decentralisation of education provided racially defined communities the legal means to preserve their privileges, that the teaching of a 'segregated' History in South African high schools was more successful at meeting the demand for racial desegregation than for achieving the ideal of social integration. The above is an indication that throughout the country's history, segregation has been a constant feature of South African society and therefore, of its education. To date, consensus has not been reached regarding the most effective ways in which high schools should address the issue of utilising public representations in the teaching, as well as in the learning of History as a school subject in post-apartheid South Africa. In attempting to bypass the above-mentioned challenges, the article presents an explanatory study and focuses on the perceptions held by History students in the five Mangaung High Schools on the utilisation of public representations in the teaching of South African History. Furthermore, through the experiences and observations by these learners, the article argues that if History is properly taught, for example, by utilising public representations as focus evidence in the reconstruction of the past, this could be a helpful tool for the attainment of reconciliation and nation building in South Africa. Through the observation by the learners sampled for this project, the researchers were trying to establish the impact of utilising public representations in the teaching of South African History and how often this method is used by educators.

### INTRODUCTION

A frequent complaint of those familiar with the teaching of History has been that the subject is too often taught as content and not as process. This was due to the one-sided presentation of historical facts by educators who mainly used textbooks as the sole sources of information to impart knowledge to learners. Twala (2005) argues that teaching History mainly as content seems to be abetted by the popular notion that 'history' is a body of information recorded in the past and brought into the present. Consequently, the exposure of History learners to the importance of different public representations in post-apartheid South Africa could help in broadening their understanding and interpretation of the country's history. Generally, the teaching of History in South Africa has still to

absorb and reflect upon the remarkable impact of teaching methodology and cultural backgrounds which has influenced the educators in this subject in the past few decades (Twala 2003).

Consciously or not, in the past educators influenced the direction of History teaching. Prior to the democratisation period in 1994, history was used as an indoctrination tool by the then ruling National Party (NP) in South Africa (Allen 2000; Dean and Sieborger 1995). When the African National Congress (ANC) took over power as the ruling party in South Africa after the April 1994 elections, one of its priorities was to effect changes in the education system. Subjects such as History were revised. Since then, learners could have inputs on their education. Thus, the question of visiting public representations took centre stage in some of the Mangaung High Schools.

Without doubt, the paper notes that while South African historians have extended the field and the range of historical inquiry about the teaching of the country's history, little has been said about the relevance of public representations in the teaching of the subject. This was

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Please note that the authors experienced several of the arguments mentioned in the text and, consequently, wrote from first-hand experiences which explain why documentary proof is sometimes not supplied as reference.

evidenced by a number of studies conducted on the high failure rates, as well as the dwindling numbers of those taking History as a subject in South African high schools and higher education institutions (HEIs), (for example, studies of Direko 2001; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000; Schoeman 2006). Some of the reasons advanced were that History is factual, non-practical and boring subject. Furthermore, this was compounded by educators' attitudes in dealing with the apartheid content of history and other racial issues (Meier and Hartell 2009: 180). Emanating from the above, this article conceptualises perceptions and opinions by the Mangaung High School Grade 10-12 learners on the use of public representation to change the publicly held negative viewpoints about History and how it is taught.

Furthermore, the researchers contend that there is a lacuna in what is being taught and the depiction of historical events through public representations around the country. In fact, teaching History in South African high schools should be accompanied by excursions to public representations. The paper argues that there should be a link between what is taught in a History lesson and the virtual impact of what is displayed in public representations. This could enhance the understanding of the content taught in the classroom situation. Arguably, in the post-apartheid period, public representations should be used to fill this void. Institutions where public representations are situated have the responsibility to collect and preserve artefacts, monuments, museums and heritage sites, as well as making them accessible.

### **Unpacking Public Representations and the Importance Thereof**

South Africa has many institutions which could be categorised as public representation institutions. The well known ones include: museums, battle fields, monuments, grave sites, and sacred sites. In remembering the past in the post-apartheid period, protection and preservation of such sites for future posterity is crucial. In the Mangaung area for example, the following notable sites are in existence and could be visited by History learners: the National Museum; the Boer Museum; the Oliewenhuis Museum; President Brand Street; the Mapikela House; Bram Fischer's House; Hertzog's House; the

Wesleyan Church School; etc. All these sites depict the history of the area. For a broader understanding of South Africa's history, particularly the history of the area, when these sites are visited by both History learners and educators, it could be of educational value to reinforce what is learnt in the classrooms. Walsh (1992) argues the importance of the above when he asserts that this can also contribute to national patriotism.

### **Historical Background and Aims of the Study**

The dramatic changes South Africa went through in the past decade or so have been exciting, but also complicated and confusing. All the uncertainties and insecurities that learners experienced tended to wind up in the classroom, where the educator was the one who had to try to cope with them. Clearly, this was not an easy time to be a History educator. An obvious dilemma for History educators was precisely that the South African past was filled with political divisions and conflicts. There was also great disagreement about how that past was to be presented (Bam and Visser 2002).

Furthermore, both Bam and Visser (2002) argue that for too long in educational circles and in the wider society, History has been seen as a relatively unimportant subject which lacks any practical value. In some schools, as a matter of policy, academically promising learners were encouraged to take mathematics while the less promising, to take History (Bam and Visser 2002). However, the above explanation has a narrow and instrumental notion of education. The researchers argue that education is not only about preparing and training people for certain jobs; rather it is to assist them to live in a society.

The relationship between textbooks and the school History curriculum has been the focus of attention in South Africa after 1994. The announcement by the former Minister of Education, Prof Bhengu, in August 1994 that interim syllabi would be drawn up without necessitating the purchase of new textbooks, provoked an incredulous reaction from the History teaching profession (Sieborger and Reid 1995). Former South African Minister of Education (Prof Asmal) stated the following about the status of History as a subject in South African government schools: "History teaching today follows the pattern of the past; that is, rote learning, lack

of imagination, lack of excitement and, ultimately, a lack of interest among learners is the order of the day” (Asmal 2001: 3). Since its inception in 1994, the post-apartheid government has had to oversee the process of transformation in as far as the teaching of History is concerned. Therefore, the imperative to transform History content and the utilisation of public representations in this regard has become a transformational tool in attempts to address the imbalances and legacy of apartheid in South Africa.

In view of the above mentioned challenges, the aim of this study is thus to investigate, review and discuss the Grade 10-12 History learners’ perceptions in Mangaung on visits to public representations as a tool to enhance the understanding of history and make it exciting. However, it is hypothesised in this article that the use of public representations in the teaching of History could have an effect on a student’s ability to academically succeed. This approach is in line with the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Learning Outcome 4 of History for Grade 10-12. As suggested by Cross and Mkwanzitwala (1998), such an approach to education of visiting sites of historical and heritage importance could help in national reconciliation.

### Research Question

Research questions for this study are stated as: What are the perceptions of Grade 10-12 History learners with regard to the utilisation of public representations in the teaching of History? What is the impact of visiting public representations in attempts to reinforce History lessons in a classroom situation? To what extent are educators involved in encouraging their learners to visit such institutions?

### Theoretical Framework

As indicated above, public representations may include museums, monuments, symbols, and historical sites, etc. Interestingly, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for History Grades 10-12, Learning Outcome 4 stipulates that learners should be introduced to issues and debates around heritage and public representations, as well as being expected to work progressively towards engaging with them. In order to achieve this, links are drawn between different knowledge systems and the various ways in which the past is memorialised (DoE 2003).

The above statement indicates that instead of learners engaging only with the Teaching and Learning Support Materials (TLSMs), consolidation of what has been learnt should be reinforced by visits to public representations. In the TLSMs certain histories are excluded and silenced. The NCS has a national policy which has a political undertone which affects the education of the History learners in South Africa. In most cases, learners are being exposed only to one side of the coin. In order to gain a holistic understanding of what really took place, public representations could fill the void.

The NCS, as a policy employed by the Department of Education (DoE), stipulates what content should be taught in each grade and the assessment standards which should be followed. Koekemoer (2010) argues that while there is nothing wrong with this statement, the problem lies with the content included and excluded. The content prescribed filters down into the content found in the textbooks used to teach History in the classrooms. As indicated previously, textbooks are powerful tools for society, but are not usually complemented by other resources. Therefore, it is against this background that the utilisation of public representations becomes significant.

In 2012 with the introduction of the new curriculum, Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) document, the question of public representations is still entertained. The CAPS document on History values the importance of heritage in the teaching of History. As was the case with the NCS, History Grade 10 learners are still expected to complete an assignment on the value of heritage and public representations to enhance learning in the subject. The CAPS (2011) document, in line with the Preamble to the Constitution of South Africa, states that the aim is to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

As in most studies of this nature, in an attempt to respond to the research, a qualitative study was undertaken within the interpretative research paradigm. This particular research paradigm was chosen because the research was aimed at providing an in-depth description of the Grade 10-12 History learners’ perceptions

who visited public representations, as well as of their understanding of the relationship between the History subject content and what is depicted by such representations. Mertens (1998) argues that qualitative research entails an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the phenomenon that is being investigated.

The study uses the phenomenological approach in the research. According to Creswell (1998), the phenomenological approach is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of a particular situation. In most cases, the researcher has had a personal experience related to the phenomenon in question and wants to gain a better understanding of the experiences of others. By looking at multiple perspectives of the same situation, the researcher can then make some generalisations of what something is like from an insider's perspective.

#### Data Collection Strategy

This study used the descriptive and explanatory research approach in order to determine the impact of utilising the public representations to reinforce what is learnt in History lessons. The study was conducted using a sample of Grade 10-12 History learners in five of the Mangaung High Schools. Four of these schools are former 'Black only' high schools and one is a former 'Coloured only' school. The former three use English as the medium of instruction in the teaching of History. The latter is an Afrikaans-medium school. In 2010, 136 learners were used as a sample. A self-administered structured questionnaire was employed for data collection. Each learner was given a questionnaire to complete during one of the contact sessions. The questionnaires were distributed to learners almost a week before an excursion to public representations could be taken around the city of Bloemfontein. Although the schools visited these sites on different dates, the questionnaires were filled in and collected a few days after each excursion for analysis.

There were 114 (83%) fully completed and returned questionnaires and these were used for analysis. The number of returned questionnaires being 83% rendered the study a high degree of validity. De Vos (2003) contends that such surveys provide a means of measuring a population's characteristics, self-reported and ob-

served behaviour, an awareness of programmes, attitudes or opinions, and needs. This 12-item questionnaire sought to determine whether the lack of making use of public representations was due to a lack of learners' or educators' interest, learners' or educators' attitudes, a lack of inclusiveness of these public representations, or a lack of detailed information as presented in such public representations.

The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. Part 1 pertained to biographical information (name of the school, gender, age, how many years in a grade?). Part 2 had open-ended questions, on a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from 'strongly disagree = 5' to 'strongly agree = 1'. As indicated previously, the questionnaires were distributed to (n = 136) randomly selected Grade 10-12 History learners from (n = 4) high schools in Mangaung offering History in a Further Education and Training (FET) band. The schools were sampled as excellent, average and poor performing in as far as History is concerned. The (n = 5) History educators in these schools were helpful in coordinating the learners to take part in the research.

Table 1 shows the schools that participated in the study and the number of learners present.

**Table 1: Participating schools**

No.	Name of the school	Number of learners	Percentage(%)
1	Tsoseletso High School	45	33.0
2	Moemedi High School	22	16.2
3	Dr Blok High School	16	11.8
4	Atlehang High School	31	22.8
5	Lereko High School	22	16.2
Total		136	

In addition to the use of questionnaires, in 2011 individual interviews were conducted with other learners (n = 25) who were not initially requested to fill in questionnaires, but were part of the excursions to the sites. Five learners were interviewed from each school. Ten to fifteen minutes were taken for each interview. A tape recorder was used after permission was sought from the interviewees. Interview questions were predetermined by the researcher and addressed the following: the accessibility of the public representations; the attitudes of staff members in such places (for example, approachable, presenting historical events in an unbiased manner, a

welcoming atmosphere). With the interviews, the purpose was to listen to the voices of the learners in order to find authentic ways of improving the way History is taught. To elicit more information from the interviewees, sometimes follow-up questions were asked, depending on the answers given. From the interviews conducted, I analysed the quantitative and qualitative responses. Interestingly, interviews were used for the following reasons: they have an advantage over questionnaires because they provide room for probing, whereas questionnaires limit the respondent to the questions asked.

### Data Analysis

The analysis intended to identify underlying factors from the learners' responses on the impact of utilising public representations in consolidating and enhancing the understanding of History. The results show that visits to public representations can assist both History learners, as well as educators in making the subject lively. These dimensions were formulated based on the perceptions held by learners.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the demographics and the general information of the research participants. It should be noted that this reflects only information of the returned questionnaires.

**Table 2: Research participants (Study Groups)**

Gender (N = 114)	Percentage (%)100	Age(16-20 Years)
Male respondents (n = 43)	37.7%	Mean (Age)18
Female respondents (n = 71)	62.3%	Mean (Age)18

The statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 11 for Windows 2003). It is clear from the Table 2 that the majority of the respondents for this study were female History students with 62.3% with males representing 37.7% of the sample. The respondents' ages range from 16-20, with a mean age of the sample being 18 years.

Furthermore, the data consisted of transcripts and notes taken during interviews conducted with the participants. Marshall and Rossman (1999) claim that although data analysis may

be a relatively unstructured, ambiguous, and time-consuming process, it may also be creative and fascinating. Interviews were transcribed and analysed according to Giorgi (1975) phenomenological steps. First, each transcript was read to gain an overall sense of the whole. Secondly, the transcript was read to identify what transactions could have occurred during the interview, with each transition consisting of a separate unit of meaning, in order to access the deeper meaning of the responses received. Thirdly, any redundancies found in the units of meaning were eliminated, and the remaining ones interconnected. Fourthly, the participants' language was converted into the language of science. Lastly, the insights gained from conducting the study were synthesised into a description of the overall experience of the participants on their perception pertaining to the utilisation of public representations in teaching and learning History.

As the use of participants' voices in research is always very powerful, selections from the transcripts of interviews were used to ensure that their voices are heard. From the interviews transcripts and specific deductions could be made regarding the impact of the utilisation of public representations. In response to interview questions as to whether and how their knowledge of history had increased as a result of visiting the public representation sites, they all indicated definite improvements. Some examples are: "What we saw in the museums apartheid the life styles of the black people during the apartheid times reinforced what we learned in the classrooms"; "I was impressed to see the artefacts as displayed at the museum."; "The drawings and paintings of the bushmen made some sense to me as to how these people lived in the past". One student described her understanding of the purpose of such visits as follows: "The idea of visiting the museums and monuments should be enforced to History learners as this could enhance their understanding of history. By understanding each other's pasts as South African can assist in the creation of the culture of tolerance."

Interestingly, the perceptions of learners regarding positive, as well as negative effects of the utilisation of public representations in promoting History learning and teaching revealed that they regarded their interaction with the staff members of these institutions in a very positive way. Several participants indicated that they had

enjoyed the presentations of the curators in giving more information on what was on display. Some of the most positive effects experienced by the participants were related to the laws and regulations governing such institutions, on how people could submit any artefacts to be displayed. One learner remarked: *"I was not aware that we could contribute something in terms of what could be displayed"*. Learners' general opinions on their interaction with the staff members of the museums yielded mainly positive responses. Another participant responded:

*Looking at the amount of artefacts exhibited in the museums, it is clear that the apartheid government was serious about telling its own history through exhibitions. In order to bridge the racial divide in South Africa, we need more museums to depict an inclusive history of South Africa... The brochures given to us after the visits were also helpful.*

Yet another student opined:

*It is heartbreaking to note that in our townships or nearer our schools, we don't have these public representations. They are only situated in the so-called White suburbs. It is sometimes difficult for us to visit such places. We need more of such sites in our respective areas in the townships.*

### CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that the utilisation of public representations in the teaching and learning of History can be helpful in nurturing creative and deeper understanding of the subject. The article reported on the results obtained, with a pilot study that set out to determine the extent to which public representations could be used in the enhancement of History teaching and learning. A qualitative study by means of questionnaires (n = 114), semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with learners (n = 25) at five high schools in Mangaung was conducted. The results revealed that the utilisation of public representations have not yet become popular en route to consolidating what is taught in the History classrooms. Although the participants were enthusiastic about this attempt, there were some negative perceptions and observations by the learners. It was disconcerting to note that direct instruction without any consolidation of the lessons with excursions dominates the teaching and learning of History and that very little opportunity for excursions exists.

From the learners' responses it appears as if, to a certain extent, the learners enjoy History as a subject as educators make it 'fun' and 'interesting'. They also indicated that involvement during the teaching of History is indeed taking place. All of these responses support the idea that active learning was taking place, but the above indicated a reliance on direct instruction in the History classroom, and to a lesser extent indirect instruction; for example, visiting public representation sites.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative for educators to make an effort to incorporate visits to institutions such as museums and monuments, in order to improve their development capacity to understand History. It is therefore recommended that educators liaise and partner with such institutions. In addition to the above mentioned, experts from such institutions should be invited to visit schools to provide information on the value of utilising such institutions in the teaching and learning of History. If both educators and learners do not rise to the challenge, then History will indeed be seen as a 'dead' subject that is boring and dull, with few learners choosing it in Grade 10.

Further research studies should be undertaken to determine as to which factors influence the reluctance of History educators to encourage their learners to visit public representation sites. Other research could unpack other variables such as the management of the school, teaching styles and learning styles, the backgrounds of learners, and the locality of the schools that may have a direct effect on the performance of students in the study of History. However, it is also important to view the research findings with care. There were some limitations when undertaking this study. The first limitation was the time lapse between the excursions to the public representation sites and the time when the interviews were conducted. There was a lapse of about four months. The second limitation concerns the sample size. The study which used 114 students to fill in the questionnaires and 25 for the interviews was small in view of the fact that there were more than 750 learners taking History in those schools in Grades 10-12. Owing to the restrictive nature and time constraints of the study, not all learners could participate.

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