The New History Concept

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ABSTRACT
This study employed the literature review methodology to examine the concept ‘New History’ and its significance to classroom practice. The concept of the process approach in the teaching of History has attracted the attention of academics the world over but its implementation has remained illusory. The paper advances that there is need to vigorously pursue the approach of new History through renewed methodologies and new assessment procedures which do not promote factual regurgitation. History teachers and historians of general persuasions should live to the expectations of a new dispensation and walk the new History talk. There is need to staff develop teachers to make them more conversant with the new paradigm before History learning degenerates into a monotonous memorization activity. The four corners of the classroom should be broken if History students are to be actors of the History play instead of them being indifferent spectators.

KEY WORDS: Epistemology, Old History, Body of Knowledge, Process Approach.

The concept ‘new’ History is marred with controversy but the wording of the concept has attracted every historian worth his or her salt. Others vehemently argue on behalf of the ‘new’ History movement even with scanty knowledge about issues involved and some still castigate the concept as a catch phrase that is just but hollow with nothing new after all. The truth, however, is that whatever the understanding of ‘new’ History, it has sent some shockwaves on the teaching of History in schools. It is the intention of this chapter to explore the epistemological and curriculum roots of the concept ‘new’ History, explain the meaning of the concept and discuss how the concept has impacted and should be implemented in the learning and teaching of History. The writer acknowledges that the concept ‘new’ History is relative and fairly ambiguous as ‘new’ History in Britain in the 1960s is still regarded as ‘new’ History in Zimbabwe today. The position of the writer is that, efforts should be made to use child centred methods without ourselves confusing each other with controversial terms like ‘new’ or ‘old’ history for definitions sometimes fail to give respect to time progress.

In most cases, the shortfalls of the existing status quo give rise to the need for new dimensions to knowledge. According to Chitate [2005], history can be viewed in two major epistemological forms. History as a body of knowledge; knowledge ‘that’ and history as a form of knowledge: knowledge ‘how’. History as a body of knowledge can be referred to as ‘old’ history and considering history as a form of knowledge is what is referred to as ‘new’ history. Freeman in Steele [1976:2] explains ‘old’ history as, “loading the child’s memory without ever appealing to the imagination.” The aim of ‘old’ history was the transmission of facts to memory without personal processing of information on the part of the student-knowledge out there. The child was expected to memorise facts and reproduce them when required. Curzon (1985:58) argues that, “knowledge is an active process...” Students learn best not by committing a body of knowledge to the mind but through participation in the process that makes possible knowledge generation. The concept of ‘new’ history was thus an attempt to make the child the centre of learning through the teaching of skills fundamental in historical thinking. The shift to teaching pupils skills instead of content only was a result of a number of factors.

The term new history is from Nouvelle Histoire, a French term which is associated with cultural history. It is also referred to as total history. The New History Movement gathered momentum in Britain from the 1960s when the Schools Council History [13-16] Project was started to examine the problems bedevilling the teaching of History. One of the major issues to be addressed was the issue of relevance of History as a subject in the curriculum. According to Steele [1976], most pupils regarded History as a useless subject that would not benefit them in real life situation. It is against this background that the concept of ‘new’ history emphasises on skills. Skills are lifelong assets that one may use even in other areas. Skills of selection, analysis, evaluation and empathy which are central to the ‘new’ history approach can be used in economics, politics and even in family life decisions. So by including skills to the content, this ‘new’ history concept was and is trying to make History more relevant.

The article by Mary Price (1968), “History in Danger” contributed to the rise of “new” History. The article created a sense of urgency by even exaggerating on pupils’ feelings towards History. According to Mcbride (1979), attacks on the teaching methods of History made it appear as the world was prepared to throw History into the dustbin. From this observation, one can argue that there was nothing fundamentally “new” but it was
simply a review of the teaching methods. The term was suggested as a panic bell for fear of extinction in a stiffly contested curriculum space. In as much as the article instilled fear, it was also meant to rally support for the subject through encouraging proper child centred methods.

Psychological discoveries were also a strong impetus for the “new” History approach. The work of Bruner (1961) proved that History could be taught at any level if proper methods were employed. More significance was now given to the needs of the child than to the sacredness of the content material. Piagetian insights also gave motion to the new History philosophy where good teaching was supposed to consider motivation of the child as central.

The nature of History as a discipline also led historians to contemplate new ways of teaching History. Bernbaum is Steele [1976] observes that the old method of bombarding pupils with words not explained through dictation of notes and confused the meanings of words. Peel in Steel [1976] argued that the same words carry concrete meanings in the minds of pupils so there is need to re-examine the role of language hence the concept of ‘new’ history.

The ‘new’ history concept was also applied to postcolonial African curriculum practice. In African curriculum practice, the concept was used to refer mainly to the change in the content of History. During the colonial era, pupils were taught mostly European history and that history was one of great men. Instead of concentrating only on the history of the great people: the social, scientific and intellectual progress of people became fundamental in new History. According to Jansen in Taylor [1994], the Zimbabwean History curriculum was changed in order to meet national requirements. Topics that were not found previously like the liberation wars were included because these were found to be more relevant.

From an exploration of the concept of ‘new History thus, made, it can be stated that the main thrust of the concept is on teaching methods. Dickinson and Lee [1986], aptly argue that the aim of the new History movement was to consciously improve pupils’ thinking abilities. The concept intended to shift from the view of treating the child as passive to that of being active and questioning. The concept of ‘new’ History also implied using psychological findings to promote interest in the subject. The use of proper language to ensure understanding more than memorisation is a pillar of the ‘new’ History concept. Relevance of content matter is an issue in the shift from ‘old’ History as local information is regarded as an enabling step in making the learner more active and involved. It also involves doing away with colonial methods and content that would create a docile student.

Gosden and Sylvester [1968;10], taking a leaf from the concept of ‘new’ History, argue, “learning has to do not so much with knowing as with discovering, not so much with receiving ideas as with using and developing them”. In the teaching of History, pupils should be allowed to discover more than to simply get information from the teacher. In teaching about the stone structures of Great Zimbabwe for example, pupils should be taken there to examine evidence instead of just telling them. The four corners of the classroom should be broken if the ‘new’ History approach is to be accomplished. Empowering students in decision making is a fundamental aspect of the “new” History concept. Coltham [1971: 6] states, “It is important to remember that concepts are mental constructs. No other person can actually give you a concept; you have to construct it yourself because it can exist for you only when it is made by your mind.” Coltham was actually elaborating on the psychological contributions to the “new” History concept. In the classroom, the History teacher should ensure that the enabling environment for pupils’ participation is ensured. Teachers of History should avoid dictatorial habits in the classroom where they always make opinions on behalf of pupils. Instead of telling pupils for example that Lobengula was illiterate, pupils should be allowed to suggest why Lobengula fell victim to imperialism. Even wayward suggestions should not be simply discarded without paying attention to reasons suggested by the pupils. When pupils make mental constructs they develop confidence. Douch in Steele [1976] argues that children should not see History as a film in which they are spectators but see it as a play in which they are actors. Methods like role-play, simulations and drama will help pupils to be players in History and not as spectators. Shumbayaonda and Maringe [2000; 22] portray ideas of the ‘new’ History concept when they articulate that, “We should, therefore, teach the children the process which enables them to generate knowledge. We should not teach knowledge itself.” Teachers should then guide pupils on the selection of topics to use as case studies instead of following the whole syllabus step by step. This approach will avoid boredom on the part of pupils and may save valuable time on the part of the teacher. In agreement, Sugrue [1997; 7] adds on the process approach, “it....seeks to give a more central role to learners. It may be said to favour learning more than teaching.” This is the whole concept of ‘new’ History-giving prominence to the child. If History is to be more interesting then the child should be allowed to turn and twist in historical thought.

The concept ‘new’ History challenges historians’ treatment of facts. Garvey and Krug [1985; 4] suggest, “Good history teaching has never limited itself to factual knowledge-imag ration and analysis are important.” History teachers have old notes which some other used while they were still in form one which they continue giving pupils with no changes. By simply reading a pupil’s notebook one can tell who the teacher is. The quotation above categorically points out that although notes may be important; it is the manner in which the notes are provided that is important. Lewis [1960] attacks the system of giving pupils too many facts as pedagogic suicide. Treating facts as sacred may not help pupils understanding. Guiding questions should be provided to pupils to help them in researching notes. That way they may exercise skills of selection, analysis and summarising.
According to Reiner [1961], the historical scholar is both research worker and historian. The concept of ‘new’ History requires that pupils work like proto-historians. Pupils should be allowed to carry out researches in and around the school using different ways of data collections like archaeology, written records and oral tradition. Instead of simply telling students that archaeology is laborious, it would be more informing for them to dig around the school to identify the sites of past hut. That way they may sweat and discover that the method is labour intensive. Pupils should experience history. The concept of ‘new’ History inspires teachers to include local history in their teaching. Steele [1976;52], observes, "As the modern trend in History teaching is to get the pupil, whatever his age, to work more in the style of the professional Historian, the advocates of local history feel their subject has a special case to be included." Steele’s observation is supported by Jordanova [2000] who argues that the environment provides learning experiences that may arouse interest in the subject. It may not be helpful for a teacher to labour in explaining the lifestyle of a peasant in Russia without first allowing students to examine local peasant communities to get insights of peasants’ styles.

The concept of ‘new’ History however, seem to have faced challenges when it comes to assessment. It is in this respect that the concept has been criticised for being the same old story of the past. In most cases assessment has remained content based thus undoing the skills approach suggested by ‘new’ History. Mapetere, Makaye and Muguti (2012) observe that in the current ‘O’ level History syllabus 2167, pupils may pass the final examination with at least a B grade without attempting part C of the question which applies skills enshrined in the new History concept.

The concept of ‘new’ History however did not suggest major new methods of assessment. According to Dickinson and Lee [1986], one of the strategies for the new view of History was of course the construction of new syllabi. Assessment has remained content biased and this has created a predicament for those teachers eager to take on board the ‘new’ History approach. Due to the demands of public examinations, teachers have found themselves going back to the ‘old’ method of content coverage.

Another problem that the ‘new’ history approach has created for the teacher is the actual meaning of ‘new’ History. A number of questions that demonstrate confusion and frustration have been asked. How ‘new’ is new history? Why ‘new’ History in the 1960s is still regarded as ‘new’ History today? In most cases, teachers are not informed of these curriculum developments and hence they fail to implement them or even sabotage them. Goodson in Dickinson and Lee (1986; 51) makes a revealing comment, The Supreme paradox of much of the recent curriculum reform movement was that in advocating more pupils participation in implementing such changes. The position of Goodson was actually localised by Chitate [2006] who observed that the failure to consult teachers in the ‘new’ history syllabus 2166 resulted in it being tissue rejected. The paradox illuminated by Goodson haunts the History teacher everyday. Many in schools pretend to use the ‘new’ history approach when colleagues supervise each other but quickly rivet back to ‘old’ history methods because they are unaware of what is involved.

Taruvungu and Moyo [2000] point out that the ‘new’ history approach has not meant much to history teaching due to resource unavailability. Some of the resources required in the concept are hardly in Zimbabwe. The economic challenges facing the nation make it a dream to organise a trip to Great Zimbabwe by bus. Efforts to computerise schools are in the direction of the ‘new’ history but most schools, even though having some donated computers are not electrified and those electrified are lucky to have power for two hours of the day due to power cuts.

The influence of essentialist education is also confusing teachers’ notion of new history. Some are preaching the back to basic concept where the teacher should reclaim the central position. The power of narrative seems to be gripping the teaching of history again in Zimbabwe the introduction of syllabus 2167 in a place of just 2166 just shows what may be coming on the horizon. In 2167 pupils who have the facts and who can simply expose them are enjoying a new lease of life. Relativity of ‘new’ history has made it difficult for teachers to have a uniform concept hence those who are now advocating for a return to content also regard the move as ‘new’ history.

The concept of new history is a phenomenon no one can ignore. Having its origins in Britain in the 1960s, it spread like wild fire to Australia and even post-colonial Africa. The meaning of the concept varied slightly from area to area but generally it was pivoted on the change from teacher and content oriented learning to child centred approach. Pedagogy in history has seriously been affected by the concept but more information workshops are necessary if history teaching should be overhauled. The term should be limited to the process approach to learning otherwise there might be confusion on what really constitutes ‘new’ history.

REFERENCE


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