

# THE POWERFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND HISTORY LEARNERS IN THE FREE STATE PROVINCE

Boitumelo B Moreeng & Erna du Toit

*Faculty of Education*

*University of the Free State*

moreengbb@ufs.ac.za & dutoiter@ufs.ac.za

## ***Abstract***

*The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement for History (2011) encourages an active and critical approach to learning. This principle requires History teachers to structure learning environments that will enable active learner participation and meaningful learning. This article reports on a quantitative research study conducted in schools in the Free State Province to establish the extent to which History learners are exposed to the different characteristics of a powerful learning environment (PLE) as espoused by both De Corte and Masui (2004) and Donovan and Bransford (2005). Findings revealed that History learners are exposed to the different aspects of PLEs, albeit at different levels.*

**Keywords:** Powerful learning environment; Teaching and learning of history; Learner-centredness; Constructivism; Enquiry-based approach; Active learning.

## **Introduction and problem statement**

In recent years, the school subject History has been subjected to continuous scrutiny aimed at establishing itself as a dynamic subject with regard to knowledge construction and skills development. In Britain, Scotland and the United States, History teaching underwent changes that resulted in approaches requiring learners to “do” history by stressing the development of an investigative method of learning that involved the framing of questions, subsequent research and the presentation of findings (Hillis, 2005:341; Timmins, Vernon & Kinealy, 2005:25).

After 1994, South Africa adopted a new approach to the teaching and learning of history, one that emphasises a learner-centred curriculum linked to expectations of higher cognitive skills development. Factors that led to the change in the way history is taught in South Africa received attention in

several papers that focused mainly on the teaching methodology, assessment in History and the content covered in History papers (Meyer, Blignaut, Braz & Bunt, 2008; Warnich, 2008; Siebörger, 2007). The “doing” history approach encourages learners to actively engage in enquiry-based approaches to learning and problem-solving activities and to interact with various primary sources in constructing knowledge that can be communicated to the teacher and other learners (DBoE, 2011; DoE, 2003). Booth (2001:487) concurs by advocating an approach that seeks to view content and skills development as being interdependent and where skills are sharpened in relation to the substance of the subject.

A broad spectrum of research has been conducted on the problems identified in history teaching and learning in South Africa (Twala, 2003; Asmal, 2001; Van Eeden, 1999; Kapp, 1994). One of these problems is the teacher’s ability to present history in a meaningful way. The Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the NCS (DoE, 2008) revealed that South African teachers, including History teachers, were still experiencing problems in adapting to the required changes in teaching methodology and strategies. Le Grange (2008:403), on the other hand, argued that fundamental pedagogies and Christian National Education together provided the justification for authoritarian educational practices in South Africa, which sought to explain the relationship between teachers and learners as a vertical one. This, in turn, resulted in a classroom environment characterised by fear and a lack of innovation. A study conducted in the Free State by Moreeng (2009) revealed that 43% of the History teachers in the province had more than ten years’ teaching experience, which puts them in the category of teachers possessing the kind of knowledge described by Le Grange.

Therefore, in this study, the researchers opted to employ previous research on powerful learning environments (PLEs) in an attempt to enhance the quality of History teaching and learning within the South African context. This study seems to concur with De Corte and Masui (2004:36) who stated that, in order to address the needs and requirements of effective History teaching, PLEs should be structured. These PLEs should elicit from learners those learning processes that facilitate the acquisition of productive knowledge and competent learning and thinking skills. Furthermore, they have to create appropriate instructional conditions to induce learners to produce those learning activities and processes that are able to facilitate a disposition conducive to productive learning and problem solving.

Pursuing the argument further, it can be stated that the kind of environment envisaged for the “doing” of history needs a decidedly revised kind of pedagogy; one that seeks to establish a more horizontal type of relationship between the teacher and the learners. Freire envisaged this in the early 1970s and termed it “dialogic pedagogy”. In the latter kind of environment, the relationship between the teacher and the learners is based on love, humanity, hope, faith, confidence and respect (Freire, 1970). The authors are of the opinion that the latter kind of environment will provide a platform for making learning more meaningful to History learners. In addition, Heeden (2005:186) suggests that, by asserting the role of the teacher in the new environment as decentralised, learners are empowered as they engage with the learning material.

### **Powerful learning environments**

Powerful learning environments are places where the curriculum, instruction and the learning contexts come together to elicit in learners the learning processes that facilitate the acquisition of productive knowledge as well as competent learning and thinking skills. These environments have to create appropriate instructional conditions to invoke in learners the learning activities and processes which will facilitate a disposition of productive learning and problem solving (De Corte & Masui, 2004:365; Finnán, Schnepel & Anderson, 2003:392). Eggan and Kauchek (1999:451); Kyriacou (1991:10) and Fraser and Walberg (1991:x) maintain that PLEs are purposeful, task-oriented, relaxed, warm, supportive and has a sense of order that makes learners feel welcome and free to participate in class. PLEs have the potential to develop learners’ self-concept and self-regulation which, in turn, motivates them to learn (Muthukrishna, 1998:145, Purkey & Novak, 1996:25).

A PLE comprises four basic, interconnected characteristics, namely being learner-centred, knowledge-centred, assessment-centred and community-centred (Donovan & Bransford, 2005:12, De Corte & Masui, 2004: 367). The learner-centred learning environment aims to ensure that any activity in the classroom begins with paying close attention to learners’ ideas, knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which provide the foundation on which new learning begins (Donovan & Bransford, 2005:12). This also includes the pre-conceptions that learners have regarding the subject matter (Bransford *et al*, 2000:23). In this regard, learners’ expertise, age and cognitive abilities are important (Paas & Kester, 2006:282; Konings, Brand-Gruwel & Van Merriënboer, 2005:647). Therefore, learner-centredness entails paying

attention to learners' backgrounds, cultural values and abilities (Donovan & Bransford, 2005:13). Learners' prior knowledge and experiences self-regulate strategies (Schelfhout, Dochy & Janssens, 2004:179).

In addressing the knowledge-centred learning environment, emphasis is placed on what is taught, why it is taught and how knowledge should be organised to support the development of expertise, as well as the features of competence or mastery (Bransford *et al*, 2000:25). Furthermore, knowledge should not be taken as a list of facts and formulas that are relevant to their domain. Instead, learners' knowledge is organised around core concepts or big ideas that guide thinking (Bransford *et al*, 2000:16). Phillips (2004:214) maintains that historical knowledge includes historical imagination, historical literacy, the knowledge of finding information independently, and the capacity to turn this information into an exciting and challenging piece. The use of a multi-perspective approach is supported by De Wet (2000:183), because it guides the learners towards critical thought, accommodating others' views, and being tolerant and responsible. This is very important, especially in a multicultural country such as South Africa, because it will address the need for critical thinking and progress in responsible citizenship. In the process, learners will extract, classify, sort and assess the information they receive (Phillips, 2004:214, Husbands, Kitson & Pendry, 2003:79).

A community-centred learning environment deals with classroom management. It requires the development of norms for the classroom and the connections to the outside world that support core learning values. Learning is influenced in fundamental ways by the context within which it takes place. Every classroom operates with a set of explicit or implicit norms or cultures that influences interactions among individuals. This set of norms, in turn, mediates learning (Donovan & Bransford, 2005:12; De Corte & Masui, 2004:367). The norms that are established in the classroom have strong effects on achievement. These norms may support students in revealing their pre-conceptions about the subject matter, their questions and their progress towards understanding (Bransford *et al*, 2000:25). Learning activities in a community-centred approach seek to develop a sense of community, where learners might help one another to solve problems by building on one another's knowledge, asking questions and suggesting answers

Assessment is a central feature of both the learner-centred and knowledge-centred classroom. According to Glasgow and Hicks (2003:89), one of the challenges in the classrooms is the absence of a direct link between

instructional goals and assessment. Teachers tend to see assessment as separate from the teaching and learning process. Therefore, assessment should be used as a teaching and learning opportunity to improve learning, rather than to solely evaluate learners.

Assessment is defined as the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information to help teachers, parents and other stakeholders determine learners' progress and evaluate their performance (DoBE, 2011:5; MacMillan, 2006:7–8; Donovan & Bransford, 2005:16; De Corte & Masui, 2004:367; Bransford *et al*, 2000:25). Kotze (2002:76) asserts that the focus of assessment changed with the advent of the outcomes-based approach. Learners are no longer required to acquire knowledge alone, but are also expected to demonstrate skills and values. The emphasis has now shifted towards the application, activity and development of contemporary education in South Africa. Therefore, the focus of assessment in history should be on measuring the process of learning as much as the end results and should further provide opportunities for feedback (De Corte & Masui, 2004:367; Bransford *et al*, 2000:24).

Learning environments can be viewed from three theoretical perspectives, namely a behavioural/empiricist view, a cognitivist view and a pragmatic view. Learning environments organised from a behavioural perspective are structured with the goal of learners' accumulating a maximum amount of information and procedural knowledge. These PLEs are designed to support interactions in which information can be transmitted efficiently from teachers, textbooks and other information sources to learners. When conceptualised from a cognitive perspective, PLEs are designed to provide learners with the opportunities to construct conceptual understandings and abilities in activities of problem solving and reasoning. The basic premise of the pragmatic view is to encourage participation in social practices of enquiry and sense making. Those learners who become engaged participants learn to partake in the activities that constitute their schools' practices of learning. Learners acquire practices of learning by participating in classroom and homework activities; however, the practices they acquire may not be those that are intended or valued by the teacher, the school or society. Practices are learned as individuals participate in activities of the community (Greeno, Collins & Resnick, 1996:28).

Research on PLEs has been widely conducted with a focus on various aspects of how to enhance learning. Hopkins (2000) emphasises the impact that PLEs

have on school improvement, whereas Schelfhout *et al* (2006) evaluated the extent to which a PLE is created during internships. On the other hand, Elen, Clarebout, Léornard and Lowyck (2007) paid attention to the students' views regarding student-centred and teacher-centred learning environments, while Gerjets and Hesse (2007) addressed PLEs within technology-based learning environments. In this study, the researchers sought to determine the extent to which History teaching is addressing the different characteristics of PLEs in order to enhance learning.

### **Constructivism as a conceptual framework**

Gerjets and Hasse (2007:3) consider the concept 'powerful learning environments' to be an embodiment of the key ideas of a constructivist approach in the teaching and learning situation. It is based on the belief that learners should be guided to construct knowledge that is meaningful and useful in their own lives, and the emphasis is mainly on "how" learners learn and not "what" they learn (Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe, 2004:5). A PLE framework is further grounded on the belief that the success of the teaching and learning activity stands or falls by the teachers' ingenuity to create a classroom climate that is conducive to active learning through which learners construct their reality in social exchanges with others (Freire, 1972:46).

In the words of Flanik (2011:414), constructivism is "epistemologically pluralistic" because it is based on the premise that knowledge is shared among all involved – be they teachers or learners – and, in the process, learners get to construct their own perspective of the world through individual experiences, schemes and interaction with the world. Powell and Kalina (2009:241), in support of Flanik, differentiate between social and cognitive constructivism: the former refers to creating knowledge as a result of the interaction with the social environment and the latter refers to learners' ability to internally create meaning on their own. The process of constructivism is enhanced by the fact that learners actively construct their own knowledge by comparing what they encounter in their physical and social world with their existing knowledge. Moreover, Powell and Kalina (2009:241) and Killen (2007:8) concur by stating that the basic premise of constructivism is that knowledge is constructed and that understanding is expanded through the active construction and reconstruction of mental frameworks. According to Yilmaz (2008:36), the learners actively construct meaning and understanding during

every learning process. The constructivist learning paradigm encourages learning enquiry that can translate into learners' having opinions and views about the content they are exposed to (Blaik-Hourani, 2011:231).

Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge and learning. Social constructivists view these as social concepts which rely on active human interaction with other individuals and the environment. Without social interaction with more knowledgeable people, it is impossible to acquire social meaning of important symbol systems and learn how to use them. The proponents of the constructivist approach hold that, what is known and understood among individuals, is the result of an agreement and sharing of information and ideas about what is regarded as valuable.

While learners will be creating knowledge, they will acquire various skills, including critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration, which will allow and encourage multiple perspectives as they are culturally based. Furthermore, these skills enhance learners' ability to be responsible for their own learning (Bay, Bagceci & Cetin, 2012:344; Blaik-Hourani, 2011:231;). In this study, both forms of constructivism – cognitive and social – will be employed to gain insight from the literature and the responses of the History learners.

## **Research design and methodology**

### ***Research aim***

The primary aim of this study was to determine the extent to which history learners are being exposed to the different characteristics of PLEs, viewing it through a socio-cognitive constructivist lens. This knowledge will add to help the different methods teachers can use in order to create or strengthen the creation of a PLE. In doing so, the researchers focused on and adopted the Flemish notion of a PLE – as espoused by, among others, Donovan and Bransford (2005) and De Corte and Masui (2004). This notion views the characteristics of PLEs, as mentioned previously, as a community-centred, assessment-centred, learner-centred and knowledge-centred classroom.

The study is based on research that can be described as both exploratory and applied. Exploratory research is relevant for this study in that it explores the use of constructivist approaches to the teaching and learning of history

(Fouché & De Vos, 2005:106). Applied research, on the other hand, will enable the researchers to ultimately aim at formulating guidelines for the structuring of a PLE for the teaching and learning of history in Further Education and Training (Fouché & Delport, 2005:108–109). Thus, the knowledge acquired by means of the literature study, and the data gathered by means of the questionnaire, will enable the researchers to determine the extent to which the different characteristics of the identified/specific learning environments have been implemented (Maree, 2007:59).

### **Data-collection technique**

After an intensive literature review, the researcher designed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to collect data for this study; the main focus being that of establishing the extent to which history learners in the Free State were being exposed to aspects of a PLE. Reliability was ensured by conducting a pilot study involving five History teachers, ten History learners and five History subject advisors from the Free State (Strydom, 2005:205–215). At the time, some of the subject advisors had been monitoring and supporting history teachers on the proper implementation of the curriculum for more than ten years. Subsequent to this exercise, comments were invited regarding how questions are asked and what aspects are covered in the questionnaire. The practice of conducting a pilot study among colleagues with relevant experience is supported by Strydom (2005:207) and Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (1990:428). In the present study, the comments from the teachers, learners and history subject advisors were taken into consideration in making changes and amendments to the final questionnaire. The questions in the learners' questionnaire required the respondents to choose the appropriate response from a list of possible answers and also to indicate their choices by choosing answers from the Likert-scale options. The researchers delivered 59.5% of the questionnaires to the targeted schools and the rest (40.4%) were mailed.

### **Sampling**

The ideal sample size would be all History learners throughout the Free State. Therefore, all learners taking History as a subject were selected to participate in the research. The researcher used criterion sampling because the respondents had to be history learners and would thus be in a position to respond to questions relating to their subject. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011:156)



and Yegidis and Weinbach (2002:190) support the abovementioned view in maintaining that purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants who possess rich information regarding the purpose of the study. Of the 199 schools offering History in the Free State, 84 schools participated in the study, while 800 learner questionnaires were issued, of which 697 were returned. The number of schools used in the study translated into 42.2% of the sample drawn from the population of 199. Representativeness in terms of diversity, background, location and resources of the different areas and schools was considered. This spread was necessary because the different districts have unique conditions that might add value to the study.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis in this study was performed by means of descriptive statistics in order to quantify the characteristics of the data, to determine their centre, how broadly they were spread, and how one aspect of the data related to another (Pietersen & Maree, 2007:183). Descriptive statistics are relevant for processing the nominal and ordinal data that deal with proportions, percentages and ratios.

The main focus of the research was to establish the frequency of aspects that relate to the structuring of a PLE for the teaching and learning of History. The researchers later presented their own interpretation of the data that had been collected and analysed. Raw data were computed by the Statistical Analysis Division of the Department of Computer Services at the University of the Free State. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Primer (SPSS) was used for computation purposes. The responses in the form of raw data were processed by determining the frequencies, the mean and the standard deviation (SD) in respect to all the questions expressed in percentages.

### **Presentation of results**

The questionnaire responses revealed the extent to which learners were being exposed to the different characteristics of a PLE. In the following paragraphs data from learners will be presented.

## A community-centred learning environment

The following table presents the extent to which history teachers addressed issues of a community-centred environment.

Table 1: History learners' responses with regard to a community-centred learning environment

	1		2		3		4		5		Mean	SD
	Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently		Usually		Almost always			
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%		
Q. 58	35	5.0	117	16.9	43	6.2	119	17.1	376	54.2	3.99	1.321
Q. 62	62	8.9	126	18.2	59	8.5	135	19.5	309	44.5	3.73	1.414
Q. 68	84	12.1	102	14.7	54	7.8	151	21.8	302	43.5	3.70	1.451
Q. 71	49	7.1	126	18.2	55	7.9	213	30.7	249	35.9	3.70	1.311
Q. 75	221	31.8	115	16.6	68	9.8	111	16.0	174	25.1	2.86	1.614
Q. 76	376	54.6	102	14.7	54	7.8	80	11.5	76	11.0	2.09	1.440
Q. 78	313	45.1	117	16.9	59	8.5	55	7.9	146	21.0	2.43	1.608
Q. 83	125	18.0	262	37.8	73	10.5	117	16.1	112	16.1	2.75	1.366
Q. 84	118	17.0	273	39.3	58	8.4	125	18.0	112	16.1	2.77	1.367
Q. 85	68	9.8	197	28.4	75	10.8	176	25.4	173	24.9	3.27	1.367
Q. 86	92	13.3	217	31.3	76	11.0	155	22.3	149	21.5	3.08	1.391
Q. 87	42	6.1	194	28.0	68	9.8	193	27.8	190	27.4	3.43	1.316
Q. 88	141	20.3	259	37.3	64	9.2	95	13.7	128	18.4	2.72	1.417
Q. 90	112	16.1	182	26.2	67	9.7	120	17.3	209	30.1	3.19	1.505

Source: BB Moreeng, 2009. Structuring of a Powerful Learning Environment for the teaching and learning of history in the Further Education and Training Band in the Free State Schools, p. 198.

Responses to questions 58 (71.3%), 62 (64%), 68 (65.3%), 71 (66.6%), 85 (50.3%), 87 (55.2%) and 90 (47.4%) indicate that learners usually/almost always view their teachers as being patient, courteous and respectful (question 58). Question 62 asked whether students feel free to ask their teachers questions in and out of the classroom, while Question 68 asked whether they believe that their teachers use information from the library, newspapers, the computer and other people. Question 71 asked whether they agree that their teachers walk around in class to provide guidance to them, while Question 85 asked whether they are allowed to discuss ideas with their friends, and Question 87 asked whether they are willing to listen to their classmates' advice. Finally, Question 90 asked whether they are allowed to share resources and books with other learners.

Responses to Question 86 reflected a balance between rarely/sometimes and usually/almost always. A total of 44.6% and 43.8% of the responses indicated that they respectively rarely/sometimes and usually/almost always give their opinions during class discussions. In contrast, responses to questions 75 (48.4%), 76 (69.3%), 78 (62%), 83 (55.8%), 84 (56.3%) and 88 (57.6%) indicated that learners were rarely/sometimes exposed to books, dictionaries and other resources (question 75), artefacts (questions 76), visiting historical places (78), helping other learners with their work (question 83), receiving help from other learners (question 84) and doing group work (question 88).

### A knowledge-centred learning environment

The following table presents the extent to which history teachers addressed issues of a knowledge-centred learning environment.

Table 2: History learners' responses with regard to a knowledge-centred learning environment

	1 Rarely		2 Sometimes		3 Frequently		4 Usually		5 Almost always		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Q. 59	23	3.3	63	9.1	61	8.8	178	25.6	367	52.9	4.16	1.122
Q. 60	30	4.3	90	13.0	67	9.7	220	31.7	283	40.8	3.92	1.190
Q. 64	31	4.5	56	8.1	70	10.1	215	31.0	320	46.1	4.07	1.135
Q. 67	33	4.8	62	8.9	64	9.2	179	25.8	354	51.0	4.10	1.177
Q. 72	80	11.5	189	27.2	82	11.8	165	23.8	176	25.4	3.24	1.391
Q. 77	77	11.1	131	18.9	73	10.5	174	25.1	232	33.4	3.51	1.408
Q. 82	92	13.3	228	32.9	114	16.4	152	21.9	99	14.3	2.91	1.290

Source: BB Moreeng, 2009. Structuring of a Powerful Learning Environment for the teaching and learning of history in the Further Education and Training Band in the Free State Schools, p. 200.

Responses received for this category indicated that learners were exposed to most of the aspects of the knowledge-centred learning environment. A mean value, which ranges from 3.24 to 4.16, and an SD, which ranges from 1.122 to 1.177 for questions 59 to 77, indicate that the majority of the learners were, to a large extent, usually/almost always exposed to the knowledge-centred learning environment. The responses from questions 59 (78.5%), 60 (72.5%), 64 (77.1%), 67 (76.8%), 72 (49.2), 77 (58.5) strengthen the abovementioned statement.

The responses from questions 59 (78.5%), 60 (72.5%), 64 (77.1%), 67 (76.8%), 72 (49.2) and 77 (58.5) indicated that learners usually/almost always received clear instructions and explanations with regard to their work (Question 59); that they received help from their teachers to organise information and to understand the relationships among various topics (Question 60); that they observed as the teacher demonstrated how tasks were supposed to be done (Question 64); were encouraged to come up with different answers to the questions (Question 67); were allowed to work individually on group activities (Question 72) and received a demonstration on how the sources should be analysed (Question 77). Responses to Question 82 (46.2%) indicated that learners rarely/sometimes used different sources to create their own definition of concepts.

Responses received in respect of this category indicated that learners were exposed to most of the aspects of a knowledge-centred learning environment. A mean value ranging from 3.24 to 4.16 and an SD ranging from 1.122 to 1.177 for all the questions displayed in table 2 indicate that the majority of the learners were usually/almost always exposed to a knowledge-centred learning environment.

### A learner-centred learning environment

The following table is a reflection of learners' exposure to aspects of learner-centred learning environment.

Table 3: History learners' responses with regard to a learner-centred learning environment

	1 Rarely		2 Sometimes		3 Frequently		4 Usually		5 Almost always		Mean	SD
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Q. 61	40	5.8	94	13.5	67	9.7	187	26.9	304	43.8	3.90	1.262
Q. 65	35	5.0	109	15.7	65	9.4	148	21.3	336	48.4	3.92	1.288
Q. 69	91	13.1	122	17.6	37	5.3	154	22.2	289	41.6	3.62	1.488
Q. 70	41	5.9	90	13.0	53	7.6	189	27.2	319	46.0	3.95	1.261
Q. 73	35	5.0	104	15.0	68	9.8	212	30.5	273	39.3	3.84	1.236
Q. 74	76	11.0	140	20.2	71	10.2	159	22.9	246	35.4	3.52	1.424

Source: BB Moreeng, 2009. Structuring of a Powerful Learning Environment for the teaching and learning of history in the Further Education and Training Band in the Free State Schools, p. 202.

The responses to this category of questions, namely 61 (70.7%), 65 (69.5%), 69 (63.8%), 70 (73.2%), 73 (69.8%) and 74 (58.3%), indicate that learners usually/almost always received explanations of difficult material/ideas from their teachers (Question 61); that they received attention from their teachers when they did not understand (Question 65); that they received explanations of concepts and terminologies in their own languages (Question 69); experienced their teacher pausing during the lesson to check whether learners were still following (Question 70); received an indication that their teachers were interested in the answers provided by learners (Question 73); and related what was happening in class with what is happening in their communities (Question 74).

### An assessment-centred environment

Table 4 depicts the extent to which learners were exposed to an assessment-centred learning environment.

Table 4: History learners’ responses with regard to an assessment-centred learning environment

	1		2		3		4		5		Mean	SD
	Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently		Usually		Almost always			
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%		
Q. 63	41	5.9	94	13.5	57	8.2	213	30.7	284	40.9	3.88	1.250
Q. 66	20	2.9	64	9.2	63	9.1	177	25.5	367	52.9	4.17	1.108
Q. 79	278	40.1	180	25.9	65	9.4	83	12.0	83	12.0	2.29	1.407
Q. 80	209	30.1	167	24.1	57	8.2	114	16.4	143	20.6	2.73	1.543
Q. 81	136	19.6	220	31.7	65	9.4	138	19.9	127	18.3	2.85	1.427
Q. 89	295	42.5	204	29.4	59	8.5	70	10.1	62	8.9	2.13	1.309

Source: BB Moreeng, 2009. Structuring of a Powerful Learning Environment for the teaching and learning of history in the Further Education and Training Band in the Free State Schools, p. 203.

In responding to the questions in this category, learners indicated that they were not always exposed to an assessment-centred learning environment. Responses to questions 79 (66%), 80 (54.2%), 81 (51.3%) and 89 (71.9%) reflected a mean less than 3, ranging from 2.13 to 2.85. This indicates that learners are rarely/sometimes exposed to the aspects of an assessment-centred learning environment such as being allowed to choose the topic that they want for assignments and projects (Question 79); being allowed to mark their own work (Question 80); allowing other learners to mark the work (81); and

the teacher helping learners to choose topics that they want for assignments and projects (Question 89). These aspects will, therefore, require attention in order to enhance learners' exposure to an assessment-centred learning environment.

Responses to questions 63 (71.6%) and 66 (78.4)% indicate that learners are usually/almost always exposed to regular feedback after engaging in an activity and are asked questions by the teacher to establish how much they know about the topic.

It can be concluded from the data obtained on the different learning environments that learners are widely exposed to a learner-centred learning environment. However, there is a need to improve learners' exposure to a community-centred learning environment, a knowledge-centred learning environment and the assessment-centred learning environment.

## **Discussion**

Data from Table 3 indicated that learners were indeed exposed to a learner-centred learning environment, but the extent of the exposure could be enhanced by extending the manner in which teachers are explaining the general and historical ideas, terms and concepts during the lessons. Learners further revealed that their teachers were giving them individual attention to enhance the progress of each learner in class. In attending to learners' individual cultural and linguistic needs, respondents indicated that their teachers usually used vernacular to explain concepts that they do not understand in English. In addition to the issue of language, respondents revealed that their teachers took time to pause during the lessons to check whether all learners were gaining insight from the presentation. History teachers also seem to do well in relating what learners are doing in the classroom to what is happening in their communities and societies. As alluded to earlier, the characteristics of PLEs are interconnected. Therefore, this positive exposure to a learner-centred environment has an impact on how learners will experience other characteristics.

Responses with regard to a community-centred learning environment revealed that the learners were usually/almost always exposed to the environment that is characterised by respect among all those involved, which allows for free participation. Addressing and enhancing the extent to which learners are exposed to the community-centred environment, might

assist in addressing even the broader aims of teaching History in schools such as encouraging mutual respect, peaceful co-existence, tolerance and reconciliation, and fostering reconstruction and development (Van Eeden, 1999:21). Bay *et al* (2012:344) also validated the presence of values such as respect and collaboration among learners in enhancing the quality of the learning environment.

Table 1 further reveals that History learners experience their teachers and peers as being supportive and willing to participate in classroom discussions. Respondents, furthermore, expressed that they are allowed access to a variety of sources and resources, as acknowledged by Papadopoulou and Birch (2008:270). This adds value to learning within a social constructivist perspective, as discussed earlier, where learners are said to create new knowledge or to refine their current knowledge through engagement with the learning material, interaction with people around them and exposure to historical sites and places.

A knowledge-centred learning environment is aimed at equipping learners with subject knowledge that they can use to construct new meaning and to demonstrate the required skills (Van Wyk, 2009:104). Data from Table 2 show that learners were exposed to an environment where they were receiving clear instructions and explanations on how to formulate and organise information. In this way, they receive the opportunity to gain insight from what they were learning and to be able to present it meaningfully (Bransford *et al*, 2000:16).

Respondents further indicated that their teachers helped them to establish the link between the different themes and topics being studied. History teachers also seem to be doing their bit with regard to demonstrating to learners how the different sources should be analysed and interpreted. A balance between content knowledge and skills development is, therefore, established, as espoused by Donovan and Bransford (2005:12). The respondents had a positive experience of their teachers' attempts to expose them to most aspects that seek to make the presentation meaningful. This is supported by Riding, Grimley, Dahraci and Banner (2003:166), who suggest the use of presenting comprehensive explanations, providing complete background knowledge and avoiding the use of high-density concepts.

Even though History teachers seem to be addressing most of the characteristics of the knowledge-centred learning environment, there is a need to improve on the following aspects, which learners indicated that they are rarely exposed to. Learners want teachers to strive for increased exposure to activities which

allow them to individually work on activities that might have been covered during group work. This will allow learners to individually engage in cognitive construction of what they are exposed to during group work (Powell and Kalina, 2009:241). History teachers are also requested to demonstrate, as they teach, more of the skills that learners are supposed to learn, especially when it comes to sources that learners are exposed to for the first time. Learners also require increased exposure to a variety of sources as this will enable them to make more sense of the content being studied (Riding *et al*, 2003:166).

A strong link can be established between a knowledge-centred learning environment and the assessment-centred learning environment, especially when the latter is conceptualised as assessment for learning aimed at enhancing meaning and mastering skills. From Table 4, it can be deduced that history learners are not adequately exposed to an assessment-centred environment. Learners indicated that teachers do not afford them the opportunity to choose topics for their assignments and projects. Thus, there is not enough engagement and collaboration between teachers and learners with regard to how the required historical content and skills can be developed (José & José, 2009:333). When learners are not encouraged to participate in and contribute to the formulation of assessment activities, their ability to construct knowledge and meaning might be compromised as they could miss an opportunity to add to and understand the multiple perceptiveness of history (Blaik-Hourani, 2011:232).

Furthermore, learners' responses revealed that they are rarely engaged in self- and peer-assessment practices. This has a negative impact on learners' ability to regulate and manage their learning and also influences the quality of constructed knowledge. Self-assessment might lead learners to refine that which creates meaningful knowledge when they follow a process of identifying their shortcomings and constructing knowledge actively and purposefully. In this way, they will engage further in cognitive constructivism. Feedback from peers is also an important factor because it allows learners to tap into the knowledge of their peers in a socially constructive mode, and to create and modify their knowledge and skills (Powell & Kalina, 2009:241).

Learners revealed that they do not receive enough guidance on how to respond to essay questions and source-based questions. These are the two most important forms of questions in History tests and examinations. Learners' ability to construct appropriate responses to both types of questions might be limited due to the lack of input from other informed role players such



teachers and capable peers (Bay *et al*, 2012:344).

Some of the positive issues revealed by the learners' responses include that they are usually exposed to regular feedback after engaging in an activity and are asked questions by the teacher to establish how much they knew about the topic. Receiving constructive feedback after engaging in an activity is valued by authors such as De Corte and Masui (2004:367) and Glasgow and Hicks (2003:95) because it assists learners in assessing their mastery of content and skills and in identifying errors of knowledge and understanding and the ways of addressing them. Through effective feedback and questioning techniques, learners can be assisted in the construction of meaningful historical knowledge and the development of skills.

## **Conclusion**

The results provided in tables 1 to 4 point the fact that history learners are exposed to the different aspects of learning environments, albeit to a differing extent. Learners responded very positively to all aspects of a learner-centred learning environment; however, there is a need to improve on the extent to which learners are exposed to a community-centred learning environment, knowledge-centred learning environment and an assessment-centred learning environment.

The structuring of a PLE that addresses knowledge and skills requires a concerted effort, especially from the teacher, who has to intentionally bring certain skills, values, expertise, characteristics, qualities, procedures and resources into the classroom. The literature on how History should be taught leads one to conclude that aspects such as the teaching methodologies, approaches and strategies used during History lessons need to be improved to meet the unique demands of "doing" history. The suggested improvements will result in the enhancement of the quality of the learning environment to one that is structured to encourage dialogue between History teachers and learners. A balance between enhancement of skills and construction of knowledge will be a dominant feature of an environment that is conducive to history teaching.

The unauthentic word, as Freire (2004:126) asserts, is a word that is unable to "transform reality". In an environment that does not constitute action, reflection automatically suffers and transformation of teaching and learning is compromised accordingly. A PLE for History teaching, therefore, seeks

to promote the pedagogy of dialogue: one that engages in critical thinking, perceives reality as a process, speaks the truth, is encountered by people, and exists in the presence of love for the world and for humankind in humility, faith in humankind and hope.

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