

HANDS-ON ARTICLES

NOSTALGIA, MEMORY AND HISTORY TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

“... there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one’s own life” (Hobsbawm, 1987:3).

Nostalgic writing, as a cultural phenomenon, allows the writer to occupy the present whilst searching in the experienced past for a historical narrative. The writer seeks a specific narrative, one which connects the recorded past to his/her lived experience.

This article explores the use of nostalgic writing in pre-service teachers as they attempt to define the “length of the twilight zone”. By allowing the pre-service teachers to engage in nostalgic writing the writer finds that through personal reflection they are able to experience its limitations and seek to remedy this myopia through the development of a historical gaze.

Using Svetlana Boym’s (2001) concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia the article shows how pre-service teachers are enabled to plumb the depths of their own twilight zones. In doing so they identify areas of anxiety which shape and mis-shape the lenses with which they view the recorded past.

Keywords: Heritage; Memory; Restorative nostalgia; Reflective nostalgia; Identity; Symbolism

Introduction

Every year, in many schools around our country novice history teachers enter classrooms and set about practicing their craft. Within the walls of those classrooms teachers, both novice and experienced, give credence to the intended curriculum through their enaction and assessment of it.

The thrust of this article is to look beyond the constructs of the curriculum and framework within which these teachers operate. For regardless of the ideological gaze of the teacher, or the academic layering to which he or she has been exposed, at the centre of this matrix is an individual with his or her

own experiences who is attempting to negotiate a space, a “twilight zone” where shadow and shape are linked in a dance of interpretation tempered by academic rigor but not conceived by it.

So the manner in which teachers, novice and experienced, reach understanding with regard to cause and consequence, or selecting sources, or determining the rigor with which perspective is either provided or interrogated is subject to their mediation of this twilight zone. EJ Hobsbawm (1987) foregrounds a space, a “twilight zone” in which positions have to be mediated and negotiated because of a compromised gaze. This has significant consequences for learners bereft of a strong second register who find themselves in a class guided by a teacher who stumbles in this zone.

History teaching and memory

In a history class, even where learners are engaged in activities congruent to the aims of the official curriculum, their gaze is being shaped primarily by the selection made by the teacher. Content (topic and related events), the sources foregrounded and the narration thereof is largely determined by the teacher. This is because it is the teacher who places the learner into a relationship with the content and sources through the activities (what learners must know) and tasks (what learners must do) prescribed during the lesson.

History, as a school subject, is characterised by a move away from a received narrative to one where source work is an unmissable component of class activities (Seixas, 1993). The learner, when using the tools of the historian, sifts through a variety of sources trying to find reliable evidence from which to construct a probable narrative. However, if the sources provided by the teacher reflect a single perspective it is unlikely that the learner would be able to construct a narrative which does justice to the complexity of events and concepts.

It becomes problematic and unhelpful, when using sources which reflect multiple perspectives, to employ polarising concepts such as “collaborators” and “perpetrators”. These concepts, for example, are not sufficient to serve as constructs of a narrative which allows the reader neither to determine the cause of these actions nor to determine ethical considerations of these actions. And, yet, those who lived through periods such as the protests in South Africa during the 1980’s clearly understood the use of these terms: to those who lived through the Trojan Horse-event, or were present during the Battle of Belgravia these terms are well understood. So when teachers, novice or experienced, select content based on their own lived experience,

their memories, they run the real risk of exposing their learners to activities which are not necessarily history.

Restorative and reflective nostalgia

Svetlana Boym (2001) has developed two concepts of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. When employing restorative nostalgia the view of the past is characterised by an attempt to protect an absolute truth – a received narrative. Cause and consequence are easily identified whilst ethical responses are shaped from a singular perspective. It is also characterised by a yearning for the restoration of a homeland lost, whether it be real or imagined.

On the contrary, reflective nostalgia tries to bring the absolute truth into doubt. It attempts to instil a less subjective approach to selection of content and pedagogy employed by teachers. According to Boym (2011), restorative nostalgia acknowledges the imperfections of narration and, critically, that the past cannot be restored. The reader or viewer is situated firmly in the present trying to draw, from an interrogation of the past, possible reasons which would explain the state of affairs shaping their current landscape.

The consequences for teaching are enormous when considering the impact either restorative or reflective nostalgia holds for the content to which learners are exposed. With restorative nostalgia learners will not be engaged in history. It is through reflective nostalgia that learners open themselves sufficiently to a plethora of sources from which evidence can be used to construct a narrative.

Foregrounding nostalgia

Whilst working with pre-service teachers, tension between history and memory was made manifest when observing how they selected and sequenced knowledge to produce, at times, very different narrations of events: especially those events through which they themselves had lived. It was evident that awareness of academic layering and rigor is not enough to negate the embryonic residue of their remembered past: how they remembered the past was informing their selection of content which would serve as sources and evidence of a particular narrative.

In an attempt to reveal the influence of memory and nostalgia on practice I chose to expose my students to the guile and seduction of personal reflection. Students were required to use nostalgic writing as an extreme form of subjective memory. They had to write about a person, space or event and

through their writing reveal its significance. I was expecting the students to delve into the “personal” and write with a degree of personal reflection not previously required of them. This was evident from the questions which they posed. They were concerned by the usual demands of academic writing. “What about referencing?”, “Are we able to decide for ourselves on whom we want to focus?” Their questions reflected a degree of understanding of what history is which was congruent with the general view the history community: history was an enquiry-based activity.

I chose to model for them an example of nostalgic writing. I showed them a photograph of a beautiful, rural landscape and allowed them to imagine the space and quality of life which they associated with it. This activity drew them into an animated discussion of possibilities and limitations. I then chose to reveal my relationship with the landscape in the photograph, that it was the place of my childhood and that the significance of the space lay way beyond the beauty of the rolling hills. It was intimately connected to the construction of my identity. This significance they understood when I read to them a piece of my own nostalgic writing which articulated, in minute detail, how the winding river and rolling hills shaped my identity.

This is the task which I gave them to complete for class the following week:

Write a piece of nostalgic writing entitled:

A place of significance OR A significant day OR My Grandmother (OR suitable alternative)

Length: 1 page, Word count [350 – 400 words], Total: [50]

What they wrote

Students wrote with a sense of freedom albeit with a degree of artistic licence. The adjectives and adverbs contained in their writing displayed intent to show personal association with the significant space or person: not the accuracy of narration.

There were two broad themes which emerged:

1. Nostalgia with regard to significant people
2. Nostalgia with regard to places

It was notable that students from rural areas focused on significant individuals, someone who was the cornerstone of the family. Or it was someone who made it possible for the student to pursue higher education.

There were several submissions from students who identified themselves as coming from urban areas. For them significance was expressed as places visited: a holiday home or a house in which they grew up before the fortunes of the family changed.

Students wrote nostalgically about these themes placing themselves, unapologetically, at the centre of the narrative. They foregrounded their sense of loss or appreciation of a specific meeting of time and place (the past) from a location within the present.

Very few submissions were based on significant events which could have served as turning points in the history of South Africa or the world. I was disappointed by this as it would be a window on how these novice teachers would remember and ultimately recontextualise events through the lenses of their memories.

What they discovered about their writing

Students actively encouraged each other to write and complete this assignment. One student explained to a fellow student how she experienced the assignment. “Jy moet krap, jy moet diep krap.” (You have to dig...dig deep). They discovered that their narrative, though unique and significant to themselves, was often a variation on a theme. Other students had similar experiences, visited similar places and shared similar losses. They realised that both their achievements and emotional trauma were not unique.

They discovered this because they insisted on reading their stories of significance to each other. This was done in small groups to allow for maximum participation. One student expressed her intention that this was an activity she would employ in her own classes one day.

What I discovered about their writing

This activity served not only its intended purpose but had an unintended consequence too. In reading their essays I was alerted to the manner in which they placed themselves centrally through the act of memory. In written feedback for each essay I showed them how through word choice they used the “power of the signifier” to allocate roles to characters in their stories.

In addition, many had written in a mode of nostalgia similar to restorative nostalgia, especially when making a significant person the subject. Descriptions were flowery and few attributed weaknesses to their subjects. There were a notable few who wrote with a clear sense of reflective nostalgia. Their writing expressed an awareness of the present as a consequence of the past. It was this past they were interrogating.

I became aware of the immense personal journeys many students had undertaken to reach university. Many had to delay their studies for various

reasons ranging from parents passing away and having to take over the household to giving birth or simply lack of funds. I also discovered to what extent command of English was a limiting factor in their ability to express themselves: a barrier to learning. The writing sorely required editing. Though intention and significance was clear many sentences and paragraphs were constructed clumsily. I would not have noticed this were it not for the subject matter: a subject of their choice.

How does this link with teaching and learning history?

It was my intention to alert students to the way in which people approach events of the past. History is an unnatural act (Wineburg, 2001). By having students become aware of the universality of their narrations this assignment succeeded in encouraging them to look for stories similar to theirs. It opened up a plethora of alternatives in terms of thinking about the past. The events of the past were also populated by people other than themselves: it was not just about them.

What I would do differently

I would do this assignment differently next time. I would still require students to immerse themselves in glutinous nostalgia and experience the seduction of foregrounding their own experiences at the expense of a multi-perspective gaze. But I would change certain aspects:

1. I would not do it as an assessment. This diluted their focus. I would just let them write and in this way they become co-constructors of content for the class. Their generated content will help to contextualise the theory to which I will expose them.

2. Rather than just reading their stories to each other I will have them tease out aspects of historical thinking in these narrations. To what extent is perspective lost or limited in such a narration? How accurate or complete are the descriptions contained therein?

3. I was disappointed by the lack of submissions on an event through which they had lived. As a consequence I would in future divide the assignment into two sections. Firstly, they would have to account how they all remember a particular event. I would identify the event. This would allow me to see to what extent they allow memory to corrupt their historical gaze. Secondly, I would then have them identify a significant individual or space. In this way they and I would see to what extent they allow restorative - or reflective nostalgia to shape their respective historical gazes.

Conclusion

When I peruse the worksheets drawn up by student teachers on topics such as the uprisings of the 1980's, uprisings through which I lived as a university student, I am struck by the mechanistic way in which the content is presented to learners. I look for the excitement, the uncertainty, the terror and perhaps even the smell of tear-gas that characterised that period for me. I am aware that my expectations are shaped by a knee-jerk reaction to engage in restorative nostalgia: to somehow ensure that the intimacy of those moments is never lost, that each drop of blood spilled is accounted for.

But I am also aware that my responsibility extends to ensuring the development of a sound historical gaze: one which is characterised by, amongst others, the seeking of multiple perspectives, use of a variety of sources and becoming aware of change and continuity- in short, reflective nostalgia.

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