Exploring an historical gaze: A language of description for the practice of school history

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Exploring an historical gaze: A language of description for the practice of school history

CAROL BERTRAM

This paper brings a sociology of knowledge lens to the practice of school history. It is set against a backdrop of curriculum reform in post-apartheid South Africa, which has embraced a competence curriculum with a strong focus on the generic skills (outcomes) that learners should develop at school. This study argues that history as a discipline has both specialized substantive knowledge and specialized procedural knowledge. This paper describes the specialist nature of history knowledge as understood by those in the field of history education and maps this onto the work of Dowling in mathematics education. As the discipline of history is recontextualized into the school classroom, teachers and textbook writers will vary the degree of specialization of both procedural and substantive knowledge in order to make the knowledge accessible to learners. I suggest that having a clearer descriptive language for the domains of school history practice can support educators in making more conscious decisions about how best to move learners into the specialized domain where they begin to develop an historical gaze, and thus gain epistemological access to powerful knowledge structures.

Keywords: competence curriculum; history curriculum; historical thinking; disciplinary knowledge; South Africa

Introduction

This paper emerges from a study of the recontextualization of the South African high school history curriculum. One finding was that the informal and formal assessment tasks required of learners were not always clearly specialized to history, that is to say it was not clear why such a task was located in a history classroom (Bertram 2008). The paper aims to develop a language of description which will enable us to describe how the practice of school history is specialized (or not) at the levels of both substantive and procedural knowledge. It connects with the strong tradition of pedagogy and curriculum research in South Africa which draws on a sociology of knowledge perspective (Harley and Parker 1999, Taylor 1999, Muller and Taylor 2000, Hoadley 2007), which engages with the nature of everyday knowledge and school knowledge. This research suggests that exposing children to everyday, local knowledge at the expense
of disciplinary knowledge does not aid in bringing about epistemological access to powerful knowledge structures (Young 2008).

The context of the paper is informed by the processes of ongoing school curriculum reform in post-apartheid South Africa (Jansen 1999, Chisholm 2005, Hoadley 2011). To use Bernstein’s (1996) typology, the curriculum design is essentially a competence curriculum. The first post-apartheid reform movement (called Curriculum 2005) collapsed the boundaries of knowledge and placed an emphasis on group work, relevance, local curriculum construction, and local choice of content (Department of Education 2002; Hoadley 2011). The first review of this curriculum stated that the reform is underpinned by three principles: a learner-centred pedagogy, an outcomes-based approach to assessment and to lesson planning, and an integrated approach to knowledge (Department of Education 2000). The focus on the integration of knowledge has resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between disciplines and between everyday knowledge and school knowledge. A competence-based curriculum model does not assume that knowledge is unimportant, but it does focus on generic skills and competences and thus neglects the distinctive ways in which different kinds of knowledge are produced and validated (Harris and Burn 2011).

In the light of this, the paper engages with the implications of a competence curriculum model in the subject of history. Integration suggests that some kind of specialization must exist in the objects being integrated, and this paper interrogates what it is that makes history a specialized discipline at school. It develops a language which enables us to describe how knowledge integration within a competence curriculum model impacts on the practice of school history in South African schools at a time of curriculum reform.

The paper begins by describing the ways in which researchers in the field of history education describe the specialist nature of history knowledge. It then maps these concepts onto Dowling’s (1998) work on the domains of school mathematics practice in order to describe possible domains of school history practice. The purpose is to describe four domains of school history practice which include the esoteric domain, where both the substantive and procedural knowledge are specialized through to the public domain where neither the substantive nor procedural knowledge are specialized. This language of description does three things: it provides a clear description of how school history is specialized as a discipline, it describes the various domains in which substantive and procedural knowledge can be specialized or not, and thus describes possible pedagogies of access into the specialized domain.

**History as a specialised discipline**

The overarching concepts informing the field of history education at present are those of historical thinking and historical consciousness (Wineburg 2001a, Lee 2004, Seixas 2004, Lévesque 2008). Seixas (2004) suggests that the term ‘historical consciousness’ implicates historiography, collective memory, and history education, and aligns with the definition
presented in the journal *History and Memory* which is ‘the area in which collective memory, the writing of history and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge’ (p. 10). Historical thinking focuses particularly on how students can engage meaningfully with historical sources to make sense of the past. VanSledright (2009) suggests that it was researchers in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s who first identified a set of tools and practices that were used by disciplinary historians, with the premise that school students would need to learn how to use these tools and practices if they were to develop deep understandings of the past. This focus on developing disciplinary historical thinking is in contrast to the understanding of school history as memory-history which is about narratives often used for nation-building purposes (Lévesque 2008), or to teaching history as a ‘grocery list’ of facts (VanSledright 2002). Wineburg’s (2001a) work shows that being able to think historically and practice doing history is more crucial to making sense of the past than having memorized a grocery list of historical details.

While there is a common-sense understanding that history is simply learning about what happened in the past, Lee (2004) argues that this is not so. First, this is because ‘what happened’ is not a given, and, secondly, because research evidence increasingly suggests that ideas in history are counter-intuitive, and thus not common-sense. Lee (2004) makes the distinction between substantive concepts and the metahistorical or second-order concepts that are central to the discipline itself. He suggests that the latter are the organizing ideas that give meaning and structure to our ideas of the discipline of history. These are the ideas about the nature and status of historical accounts, evidence, understanding and explanation, time and change that frame the way in which we make sense of the past. The difference between substantive and procedural knowledge can be seen as one between the substance or ‘content’ of the past (the what happened when, where, how, and why) and the procedural concepts for structuring or giving coherence to events in history (Lévesque 2008).

Similarly, Dean (2004) suggests that history is made up of two complementary, inter-linked strands, which are content and process. She draws on Schwab (1978), who described these strands as (a) syntactic or procedural knowledge, which is knowledge about conducting historical enquiry or ‘know-how’ knowledge, and (b) substantive or propositional knowledge which represents the statements of fact, propositions, and concepts of history, which are constructed as a result of the procedural investigations carried out by historians.

Seixas (1999) alludes to these ideas in the notion of ‘doing the discipline’ of history where he describes historians opening out their own processes of knowing to history teachers. He states ‘this kind of content incorporates a way of knowing, as does historical practice itself’ (p. 332). Essentially, both the knowing and the doing of history, the substantive and the procedural concepts are absolutely vital for thinking historically. It is essential for students to both master the claims (the substantive historical knowledge) made by historians as this constitutes the foundation of historical thinking, and to master the procedural knowledge (Lévesque 2008: 27). VanSledright (2002) argues that for teachers to be able to
practice history in a school classroom requires both deep substantive knowledge of the subject matter as well has deep procedural knowledge.

Lévesque (2008) builds on this work with a detailed description of a set of five inter-related procedural concepts that foster historical thinking. His assumption is that students must be able to work with and apply these procedural concepts in order for them to understand an unstable past (VanSledright 2009). Lévesque describes these concepts as making judgements about historical significance, ideas about continuity and change, progress and decline, the application of rules governing evidence, and the use of historical empathy. These procedural concepts that develop historical thinking have much overlap with the six benchmarks of historical thinking put forward by Seixas (2006) for assessment in Canada. These are: establishing historical significance; using primary source evidence; identifying continuity and change; analysing cause and consequence; taking an historical perspective, and understanding the moral dimension of historical interpretations. If students do not work with these concepts then they cannot understand history and how it works.

Historian John Tosh describes the work of the professional historian as opposed to popular ‘social memory’ like this:

Professional historians insist on a lengthy immersion in the primary sources, a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions and a rare degree of empathy and imagination. Popular historical knowledge, on the other hand, tends to a highly selective interest in the remains of the past, is shot through with present-day assumptions and is only incidentally concerned to understand the past on its own terms. (Tosh 2006: 12)

Tosh suggests that professional historians engage in a deep reading of primary sources, which is informed by a particular way of thinking, and encompasses an ability to understand the past in its own context and to approach it with empathy and imagination. Again there is strong synergy with the historical thinking that is described by Seixas and Lévesque (2006). Similarly, Leinhardt (1994) shows that historians understand their work as holistically encompassing a deep engagement with primary sources as well as the use of this evidence to construct a convincing case.

Wineburg’s (2001b) empirical work gives insight into one of the procedural concepts that informs historical thinking by studying how students and historians interact with original historical evidence. He gave eight historians a set of documents about the Battle of Lexington and asked them to think aloud while they read these. The historians comprehended the text ‘to embrace intention, motive, purpose and plan—the same set of concepts we use to decipher human action’ (Wineburg 2001b: 67). When eight high-achieving high school students did the same task, many of the students failed to see that the primary texts were in fact socially constructed for a particular purpose. The students also did not read the source of the document before reading the text; the text’s attribution was not that important, whereas for the historians what is said is inseparable from who said it and under what circumstances.

Thus, we can see that there are certain procedures that inform how historians interact with original evidence, most notably linking any
primary text to its author and the context in which it was written, reading the subtext of the document, and understanding the text in its original context. This kind of in-depth reading of sources can only happen with an in-depth knowledge of the context and time in which they were written (Wineburg and Schneider 2009/2010). This kind of historical thinking is not a natural process, but must be learned.

Thus, historical thinking consists both of a deep substantive knowledge of time, space, and place, and of procedural knowledge of how to interrogate sources in the time and context in which they were written, of grasping continuity and change, cause and consequence, of taking a historical perspective, and establishing the historical significance of an event. The specialist ways in which history uses the language of time, chronology, and explanations of cause and effect (Coffin 2006, Martin 2007) are key to both the procedural and the substantive knowledge. Seeking to understand and explain what happened in the past certainly draws on ‘generic’ skills such as reading and comprehension, but these are not enough. Thinking historically means appreciating the chains of cause and consequence that explain how and why certain events happen, recognizing that these ‘causal events’ may be both intentional and unintentional (Harris and Burn 2011).

The South African school history curriculum (Department of Education 2002, 2003) makes it clear that the vision is for learners to learn to think historically and to be able to ‘do history’. However, as historical knowledge is recontextualized to school level, there is evidence that teachers work in different ways with the substantive and procedural concepts. For example, a textbook may focus on the procedural concepts and minimize the substantive concepts. Or a teacher may focus only on the substantive knowledge and content of history and not on the procedures and the ways of thinking that underpin the practice. This paper presents a language of description that describes the different domains in which substantive and procedural knowledge can be specialized or not in the practice of school history. The purpose is to develop a language of description which can describe various domains of the practice of school history and can describe how these domains provide access to the specialized domain. It does so by bringing a ‘sociology of knowledge’ lens to the concepts of specialized history knowledge and historical thinking.

A detour via mathematics education

In order to engage with these ideas of specialized procedural and substantive knowledge, I will describe the work of Paul Dowling in mathematics education in order to explore the ways in which the practice of school history can be mapped onto his mathematical domains.

Dowling (1998) uses the term ‘activity’ for both knowledge and practices, and developed a theory which he initially called social activity theory, and later social activity method and constructive description (Dowling 2009). He uses this theory to engage with various cultural practices, modes of authority action (Dowling 2009), and teacher/student
identities (Dowling and Brown 2009) to name a few examples. Here I draw on his language of description that describes the transmission and acquisition of mathematical knowledge. Dowling (1998: 135) describes four domains of school mathematics practice. Working with the concept of classification, he considers the strength of classification as varying according to two dimensions—classification of content (what is signified) and classification of mode of expression (signifiers, which in mathematics is a highly symbolic language). He recently replaced the term classification with ‘institutionalization’ to refer to ‘the extent to which a practice exhibits an empirical regularity that marks it out as recognizably distinct from other practices’ (Dowling 2009: 13).

This means that the content can either be strongly institutionalized (i.e. easily recognizable as mathematical) or weakly institutionalized (where content is not easily recognizable as mathematical). Mode of expression too can either be strongly institutionalized (the language is unambiguously mathematical or symbolic) or weakly institutionalized (the language is relatively unspecialized or not strongly mathematical). These relationships give rise to four domains of mathematical discourse, which Dowling describes in tabular form in figure 1.

The esoteric domain is recognized when the texts are mathematically specialized or institutionalization is strong in terms of both expression and content. It is this domain that is ‘conceived as casting a gaze beyond itself. The gaze lights upon external practices, which are recontextualized by it’ (Dowling 1998: 136). What this means is that the esoteric domain casts a mathematical gaze onto an everyday, domestic activity such as shopping, and uses this activity for itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C+</th>
<th>Mode of expression</th>
<th>C-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C+</strong></td>
<td><strong>Esoteric domain</strong></td>
<td><strong>Exprressive domain</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(universe of highly specialised abstract mathematical statements)</td>
<td>(universe of mathematical statements which are unambiguously mathematical in content, but are couched in relatively unspecialised language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eg. Solve for x: 18x+92 =137</td>
<td>e.g. Here is a machine chain. What is its output? 3 - ( \sqrt{2} \times 8 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Descriptive domain</strong></td>
<td><strong>Public domain</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(universe of mathematical statements which appear from the language in which they are couched to be mathematical, but where the content is not so.)</td>
<td>(universe of statements which are not unambiguously mathematical, either in terms of the content that they refer to, or in the language which is used to do this)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. A café orders p white loaves and q brown loaves every day for r days. What does the expression ( p+q \times r ) tell you?</td>
<td>e.g. What is the bill for buying 1 kg of bananas at R7 per kilo and a bag of oranges at R10 per bag?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In this instance C+ and C- stand for strongly and weakly classified. Dowling has since replaced this term with institutionalisation (strong I+ and weak I-).

Figure 1. Dowling’s domains of mathematic practice (from Ensor and Galant 2005: 292, adapted from Dowling 1998).
The example in figure 1 of the public domain shows that the mode of expression is not unambiguously mathematical, nor is the content (What is the bill for buying 1 kg of bananas at R7 per kilo and a bag of oranges at R10 per bag?). This is not to say that the public domain is not useful. Dowling (1998) argues that the public domain is a crucial component of the practices of an activity as it is the domain or ‘portal’ through which the apprentices must enter the activity. In other words, the public domain plays a key pedagogic role. Pedagogically it is important to start with local knowledge in order to gain access to the esoteric domain. However, if learners remain in the public domain, they don’t gain access to powerful disciplinary knowledge.

Another form of recontextualizing happens when the gaze combines non-specialized forms of expression with specialized content, which would be referred to as the expressive domain. In the descriptive domain, the specialized expression (where p and q stand for loaves of bread) is imposed upon the non-specialised content (the context of a café).

From his research of mathematical textbooks in the UK, Dowling (1995) concluded that excessive use of the public domain means that learners are in fact not inducted into the speciality of the discipline of mathematics. He maintained that a set of textbooks written for ‘lower ability’ learners had far less text within the esoteric domain compared to the set of textbooks for ‘higher ability’ learners. Dowling believes that gaining mastery of the esoteric domain (where both content and mode of expression are clearly mathematical) equips one with a mathematical gaze with which one can look out upon the world, and ‘see’ mathematics in it (Enstor and Galant 2005). Thus, this language of description allowed Dowling to critically compare practices in mathematics education.

Mapping the practice of school history onto mathematical domains of practice

To what extent is the mathematical domain of practice relevant for the practice of school history, which has a very different knowledge structure to mathematics? Mathematics has a very obvious mathematical language of symbols and figures, whereas the language of history is more implicit. However, we have already established that history comprises specialized procedural knowledge and substantive knowledge and I suggest that these can be mapped onto Dowling’s ‘mode of expression’ and ‘content’, respectively. I do not suggest that procedural historical knowledge is exactly the same as the ‘mode of expression’, which in mathematics is a highly symbolic language. However, I do argue that it can play the same role in an attempt to describe domains of school history knowledge using the dimensions of institutionalization, or degree of specialization.

Historical procedural knowledge includes understandings about historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy (Seixas 2006, Lévesque 2008), and lastly the specialist ways of engaging with historical evidence. VanSledright (2009: 435) describes these as ‘knowledge-in-use structures’ that historical investigators use to make
better sense of the past. If these procedures are weakly institutionalized with respect to historical procedures, then they would comprise generic cognitive skills such as reading for meaning, comprehension, comparing and contrasting, analysing, and synthesizing. If they are strongly institutionalized, then these procedures are explicitly historical in nature.

Substantive knowledge maps onto Dowling’s content domain. Strongly institutionalized historical knowledge focuses on the substance of the past, on knowing the propositional knowledge that has been put forward by historians, often in narrative form. It is impossible for student to understand or make sense of procedural knowledge if they have no knowledge of the substance of the past (Lévesque 2008). It also means developing a sense of period, or an understanding of a particular era or human society (Dean 2004). This substantive knowledge is often distinguished by specialized language of the past, such as *fiefdom, serf*, which are words we no longer use; by abstract nominalizations, such as *colonialism, revolution, monarchy*, and by the language of historical time, such as *era, century, French Revolution, pre-colonial, medieval* (Husbands 1996). Historical knowledge is different from everyday knowledge in that it is usually distant from personal experience, may be based on semiotic representation, uses abstract and technical meanings, is built up consciously, and presented logically and systematically (Painter 1999).

Figure 2 shows how we might map the practice of school history onto Dowling’s domains. In order to make these domains more concrete, and to illustrate the relevance of the framework, I use exemplars that have been collected over the past 5 years from public examination papers, school assessment tasks, or from textbooks written for the new curriculum in South Africa.

In the top left hand quadrant are esoteric practices that are strongly institutionalized, and encompass both specialized substantive and specialized procedural knowledge. The kind of assessment tasks in this domain have clearly historical content and specialized language and procedures where learners are required to engage with the sources in an historical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantive knowledge</th>
<th>Procedural knowledge</th>
<th>Generic (I)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specialised</strong> (I+)</td>
<td>Esoteric</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(content clearly historical; language specialised, and specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking)</td>
<td>(content clearly historical; language specialised but generic procedural knowledge)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generic</strong> (I-)</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialised; specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking)</td>
<td>(content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialised; generic procedural knowledge)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Domains of practice for school history.
way, using historical thinking. In order to engage with questions in this domain, learners need to recognize the time and place that the sources represent and need to have some substantive knowledge of the particular era. They also need to have procedural knowledge in terms of how to engage with primary sources, to recognize bias, audience, purpose, etc. Essentially this esoteric domain represents activities and practices where historical thinking is fostered.

An example of a task that requires both specialized knowledge and procedures is taken from the 2010 National Senior Certificate examination paper. Students are expected to engage with historical sources critically (specialized procedural knowledge) and draw on their substantive history knowledge.

Kenyatta has been characterized both as the ‘leader to darkness and death’ and a ‘great African statesman’. Use the sources given and your own knowledge to critically assess the above statement. (Department of Basic Education 2010: 5)

The expressive domain is where substantive history knowledge is specialized but procedural knowledge is generic (weakly institutionalized). An example is an assessment task that requires learners to read primary sources or texts that are clearly about historical events (which seems to suggest specialized content); however, the kinds of questions that are asked of these texts tend to be generic, comprehension questions that do not require a deep understanding of the era, nor an understanding of the constructed nature of the text.

In the section on the Mfecane, learners were given an excerpt from a diary written by a missionary (Department of Education Grade 10 exemplar paper 2006). The writer of the diary entry describes how homes had clearly been quickly abandoned; some were destroyed and even a child had been left behind. The question takes a quote from the diary entry and asks:

‘The child was a mere skeleton, unable to stand from weakness’. Explain your response to this kind of child abuse.

In this task, learners are required to interrogate a primary source document (the missionary’s diary), so it appears to be requiring historical procedural knowledge. The historical source appears to be strongly institutionalized regarding historical knowledge. However, the question is asking learners to read the source from a human rights perspective of the 21st century, rather than taking a historical perspective and engaging ‘a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions’ (Tosh 2006), which is how historians would read such a source. Although the source itself is produced in a particular time and space, and by a particular actor (a missionary), the learners are not required to draw on any historical knowledge about this era. Rather, they are asked for their own opinion on a relatively modern construct ‘child abuse’, which is a context-dependent response. Thus, they are not engaging with historical thinking.

Tasks within the descriptive domain would comprise specialized procedural knowledge, but generic substantive knowledge. An example of
such a task would be to ask learners to research their own family history. They would use historical procedural knowledge and historical ways of thinking to engage with the task, but the substantive knowledge remains very local. This task would become more specialized if learners are required to connect their own family history with world events. Another example would be a task that requires learners to act as ‘detectives’ searching through everyday evidence, such as the contents of a handbag, where the purpose is to learn particular historical skills of interrogating evidence, while the content is not historical.

Tasks in the public domain comprise both generic procedural knowledge and everyday substantive knowledge. The following examples are taken from a local textbook. In the history section of a Grade 6 Social Science textbook on the history of medicine, the section begins with a task which asks learners to identify why a range of people in a picture are not feeling well, they then need to talk to one another about the last time that they visited a doctor. This is followed by an activity comprising pictures of people disposing of rubbish and washing their hands, and learners need to discuss in their group how we can stop germs spreading.

Here the substantive knowledge is not specialized, as the first task is a generic task about identifying possible reasons that imaginary people are sick, the second task is a domestic activity of visiting the doctor, and the third task appears to be located in the field of health and hygiene rather than in history. The language is not specialized to history. Neither is the procedural knowledge specialized, as the learners are required to talk to one another which is a generic skill in the ‘public’ domain. Only if this is used as a starting point for an entrance into specialized knowledge does this have a place in a history textbook. Otherwise learners will remain in their own local and everyday experiences.

Domains of practice as an analytic tool

I suggest that these domains give us an analytic tool and a language of description to interrogate the kinds of tasks that history learners are required to perform at school. Although both specialized substantive and procedural knowledge is integral to the development of historical thinking, these strands can come apart when the practice is recontextualized to the school classroom. Particularly when the official curriculum takes a strong focus on the development of generic skills and outcomes, the speciality of thinking historically can easily get lost. The domains of practice for school history provide a language of description that enable us to more clearly see and understand the different ways in which this happens.

I do not suggest that all school history tasks must only be located exclusively in the ‘esoteric’ domain, since it is important to make links with learners’ everyday knowledge and knowledge of other subjects, particularly in the primary school. Dowling (1998: 136) suggests that the public domain is the portal through which apprentices must enter into the esoteric domain. Thus, pedagogically, history educators can make more conscious decisions about how to move learners from the public domain
(where procedural knowledge is generic and substantive knowledge is
everyday). They may move through the expressive domain where the
main focus is on specialized procedures and thinking, or through the
descriptive domain where the main focus is the substantive knowledge.
There also may be times when it is more appropriate for teachers to focus
on substantive knowledge rather than procedural knowledge. However, as
learners progress from primary to high school, they need to be more spe-
cifically inducted into the esoteric domain of thinking historically that
embraces both the substantive content knowledge of history and the
procedural knowledge.

It is also true that the purpose of school history in South Africa and
elsewhere is not only to induct learners into the discipline, but also to
support the principles of transformation, democracy, human rights, and
social justice (Department of Education 2003). The question is, of
course, how does history do this? Harris and Burn (2011) argue that his-
tory’s essential contribution to citizenship education derives from the spe-
cialized substantive and syntactic concepts that underpin the discipline.
Thus, the way to realize the broader aims of transformation is in fact to
induct learners into the specialized ways of thinking historically. When
learners gain mastery over both history content and specialized proce-
dures, they take a small step into the specialized practice of the discipline,
and thus develop ways of thinking historically that are needed for citizen-
ship. As learners gain mastery over the esoteric domain, they will develop
an historical gaze. Bernstein (1996) suggests that acquirers of any disci-
pline develop a tacitly acquired ‘gaze’, which means that they learn how
to ‘recognize, regard, realize and evaluate legitimately the phenomena of
concern’ (p. 170). Maton (2010) suggests that a ‘trained gaze’ is one that
anyone can acquire, since it is learned through being trained in the meth-
ods and procedures of the knowledge.

A study of the implementation of the new high school curriculum in
South Africa in 2005–2006 (Bertram 2009), and a study of Grade 6 his-
tory textbooks (Bertram and Bharath 2011) seems to indicate that the
impact of the curriculum’s strong emphasis on procedural outcomes, on
‘doing’ history, and on source-based assessment is that not sufficient
attention is being paid to the development of substantive history knowl-
edge. An analysis of a selection of school-based assessment tasks from
three Grade 10 (learners aged 15) classrooms in 2006 showed that many
questions required very little historical knowledge to answer them. Most
source-based questions were merely comprehension questions. Many of
these assessment tasks seem to take the form but not the substance of
history enquiry (Bertram 2008). They were located in the expressive
domain.

There are teachers in South Africa who are finding it difficult to work
productively with both the procedural and substantive history knowledge
that is vital to develop learners who can think historically. This may be
because the South African curriculum is currently organized around pro-
cedural outcomes rather than knowledge-based outcomes.2 Shalem
(2010) shows how the assessment standards described in the Grade 5
(learners aged 10/11) history curriculum (such as analyse and synthesize
information, communicate historical knowledge) are generic and under-specified in terms of the logic of the discipline. Educators who themselves are not strongly inducted into the specialization of history and historical thinking may easily work with sources in quite generic and often technical and fragmented ways that in fact do not require much substantive historical knowledge and do not support the development of historical thinking. The implication is that many learners are not trained into an historical gaze where they gain access into both specialized procedural and substantive history knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has used the work of Dowling on mathematics education and domains of practice as a starting point to explore the domains of practice for school history. It has described the kind of specialized procedural and substantive knowledge which underpins the discipline of history and has mapped these onto Dowling’s domains of practice. In the esoteric domain it is possible to see that both the procedural and the substantive knowledge are specialized. In history this means that learners are engaging with sources as historical documents and/or are engaging with the language of time, chronology, cause, and effect and, in terms of content, the context, place, and space are clearly historical. I suggest that these four domains of history practice give history educators a language of description to describe and analyse historical assessment tasks in order to ascertain the ways in which tasks do (or do not) foster historical thinking and an historical gaze.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. This is the Zulu term to describe the upheavals in southern Africa in the early 19th century.
2. This is changing, as a revised official curriculum called the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements is being introduced in selected grades in 2012. This curriculum is no longer organized around learning outcomes and assessment standards.
References


