

USING HISTORY TEXTBOOKS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MAURITIUS

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I have been teaching history for five years and I teach Form 1 – 3 (lower secondary school).

History provides an essential input into the entire system of education, bringing out the link between human beings and various areas of knowledge and their significance for individuals in society as they progress and interact. History teaching in schools also helps students to develop a sense of values and to resolve ethical and moral problems since it focuses primarily on cultivating humanism. In Mauritius, history is taught both at primary and secondary level. However, the curriculum limits itself to the Dutch, French and British period. Modern history is taught on a much smaller scale. At present, history is being taught as one of the three components of Social Studies in lower secondary as prescribed by the New National Curriculum Framework for Secondary. Social Studies is taught as a compulsory subject in Form 1 to 3 and comprises three distinct learning areas: History, Geography and Sociology.

Since 2010, I have been teaching history where both local and world elements are introduced at lower secondary level. The main topics featuring under history that I teach are: Ancient Civilization, Discovery / Voyages, Pre-Colonial Indian Ocean, The European, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British in the Indian Ocean.

The content of history as an academic discipline forms the focal point and core of arts. Therefore, teaching history with a sociological background is quite challenging and this result in a heavy reliance on the textbook. So, the prescribed textbooks at school have proved to be an excellent teaching aid in my situation. Nevertheless, I do not use the textbook as the only resource but as a guide and not as a mandate for instruction. I normally, modify, change, eliminate or add to the material in the textbook and my lessons are supplemented with outside readings and information from other sources, especially before introducing new lessons/topics. I usually use other textbooks available on the local market since they are all based on the National Framework of the Ministry though there are different publishing houses and authors. For instance, at Form 1 level, the second chapter deals with Ancient Civilizations which is new for beginners at secondary level. Hence, I normally supplement information from books available in the school library before introducing the lesson.

Yet, the organised units of work with a balanced, chronological presentation of information in the prescribed textbook provide me with an excellent guideline to prepare my plan of work and lessons. Moreover, it is important to note that resources and information in our textbooks are carefully spelled out in detail. Questions are set to assess understanding and the lessons provide all the answers. However, to avoid students seeing learning as an accumulation of correct answers or simply a collection of facts and figures, I regularly set higher level and problem solving activities that require creative thinking as homework or research work.

I also advise students to learn the difficult and important concepts which are defined at the end of each chapter to ensure good understanding. I often organise small quiz sessions to encourage students to participate actively in class lessons. On the other hand, students are also expected to supplement their understanding from books at the library and the internet.

History as a subject can become very dry and boring when taught only from a textbook. Consequently, I find it important to mould the curriculum around active, engaging, hands-on lessons that create an environment facilitating learning. New lessons are not just formally introduced using information from a textbook as I use a variety of techniques such as storytelling, simple questioning and brainstorming activities to check pre-requisite knowledge. To ensure full participation, volunteers are requested to mind map all the answers on the board. Following class discussion, I then use text, visual and

graphic information from the textbook to supplement explanation. Most of the time, a student-centered approach and cooperative learning are preferred to traditional classroom instruction because I have observed that students who engage in cooperative learning learn significantly more, remember longer and develop better critical skills. So, I regularly adopt methods such as group work and working in pairs. To ensure a sound learning environment, I give short and simple instructions followed by a check for understanding to ensure that all students identify themselves with the task at hand and that lesson objectives are clear. However, there is often flexibility and in case students do not understand I reinforce explanation and instructions.

I constantly act as a facilitator so as to provide students with opportunities to learn and use related content and skills in other subjects. For example, I use history vocabulary and reading material in language lessons and incorporate instruction in how to read non-fiction materials into history lessons. Similarly, in their art class, students can make use of past events from history to create tableau. Through integrated learning, I provide students with multiple opportunities to reinforce and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a range of settings. For example, research and communication skills encourage connections among many subject areas. Students are often required to communicate their research findings through written projects and oral presentations which help them develop skills required for language subject.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) also provide a wide range of tools with a unique capacity to extend and enrich students' learning in history as well as teachers' instructional strategies. Therefore, I encourage students to use ICT to support their learning through internet websites to gain access to archives around the world.

To further create an interesting opening which sparks students' interest, visits to local museums, archaeological digs and other historical places are organised with the help of my colleagues from the department of Social Sciences. This helps students to develop a better understanding of various aspects of history when they can see and experience realistic depictions and actual historical facts they are studying.

For evaluation purposes, I normally use role play, class presentation, feedback from students, summary of main facts/features and written assessment as the main tools to assess students. It is noteworthy that the activities and summary at the end of each unit in the textbook helps me greatly in assessing students'

performance and understanding.

Teaching history involves teaching students to analyse historical evidence, to consider perspective and context and to go beyond the written word. Therefore, teachers themselves must understand the “know how” of history and possess a deep understanding of what history is. This involves the fostering of a deep knowledge of the discipline. But it is to be noted with great concern that very few teachers in Mauritius have a specialisation in history. Hence, this poses challenges for teachers as most teachers responsible for teaching history are either specialised in Social Studies or Sociology. As a result there is a heavy reliance on textbooks as resources available to teachers are very limited. Most lessons are conducted within the four walls of the classroom, as arrangements for a film show require a rigid hierarchical process to be planned because not all secondary schools are equipped with an audio-visual room.

Moreover, an average of 35 minutes per week is allocated for history class which is very limited to successfully meet the lesson objectives. In addition, despite being on the plan of the Ministry to teach history at School Certificate (SC) which is Form 5 or O level, history is still being taught only from Form 1 to Form 3 except for some private secondary schools such as Mahatma Gandhi Institute where history is being taught at School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) level (A levels) but with very few students. Therefore, students show a lack of interest in history as it is not a career oriented subject.

Role play which I normally use as a teaching strategy is limited to the classroom setting which allows limited space for performance. We also have many on-line resources but computer and internet facilities at school are inadequate. Consequently, students have to rely on the affordability of their family to access such facilities. Besides, field visits too, have become less frequent as permission is not easily granted.

Though teaching history has proved to be quite challenging for me, I must say that the five years of experience and support from the department of Social Sciences have proved to be valuable in my teaching career. I also look forward to continue with on the job training whenever I get the opportunity so as to build my capacities to serve my students.