

proverbs: an innovation in pedagogy

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Abstract

This article is in the area of pedagogy. It propagates the use of proverbs in the teaching of history and explains both the advantages of the proposed method and its procedural aspects. In explaining the use of proverbs approach to teaching history, the article provides a specimen lesson plan on 'Lozi Economic Activities' and fully illustrates each of its stages. The author also makes it clear that the method is more suited to the junior secondary level of the Zambian Secondary School system generally and particularly to those areas or topics of the syllabus that deal with the activities of the country's ethnic groups. The article begins by reporting that the method being propagated was successfully tried with the University of Zambia Secondary School (UNZA-Sec) class in the 1990s.

Introduction

It is on historical record that the main force behind the colonization of Africa was economic. Contrary to their religious teaching: "Thou shalt not covet," the Europeans of the Industrial Revolution era, viewed the resources of Africa with enormous lust and greed. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and other European countries found the earlier and indeed, informal means of expropriating Africa's wealth no longer tenable. Political control was then considered imperative not only to ensure markets that were free from the competition of other powers but sources of raw materials for their national industrial undertakings as well.

While effecting their political control over the continent however, which made them realize their economic wishes, the Europeans directed their attention to another sphere of African life too. They waged war on African beliefs, traditions and values. Everything African was considered primitive, devilish or undesirable. And with the aid of their advanced technology generally and their military superiority over the African peoples in particular, they managed to undermine and or destroy a great deal of the continent's cultural heritage. This cultural war was mainly aimed at a mesmerization of the African mind, which would ensure Africans' perpetual submission to the colonizer and hence the latter's continued exploitation of the content's material and labour resources.

Just as the Africans fought for the political emancipation of the African continent, so too did they fight and continue to fight for the decolonization of their way of thinking and the revival and/or rehabilitation of their culture. This they believe will restore their self-respect and dignity, promote their development, as well as contribute to human knowledge and well-being. These sentiments are a usual feature in the speeches and writings of many an African statesman,

politician, scholar, etc. Among the earliest African intellectuals to give expression to them was Dr. Edward Blyden, then President of Liberia College, when he addressed the college in 1881 thus:

We must not think that the Anglo-Saxon methods are final, that there is nothing for us to find for our own guidance and that we have nothing to teach the world ... When we receive impressions from without we must bring from our own consciousness the idea that gives them shape; we must mould them by our own individuality ... Let us depend on it that the emotions and thoughts which are natural to us command the curiosity and respect of others far more than the showy display of any mere acquisitions which we have derived from them, and which they know depend more upon our memory than upon real capacity ... Let us do our own work and we shall be strong and worthy of respect; try to do the work of others and we shall be weak and contemptible.

(Blyden, 1881).

While this kind of speech must certainly have been rare on the African continent at the time, its spirit grew and continues to manifest itself all over the continent at present.

Professor Ki-Zerbo (1960) wrote of the need for education “in Africa” to be “African” and that it should be “based on an infrastructure of special culture and grounded on the special exigencies of African progress in all fields.” His notion that African education is a “galvanizer of African values” was echoed by Nyerere (1968) when he wrote that education in Tanzania ought to be for the promotion of that country’s “socialist values” viz : self-reliance, cooperation and egalitarianism.

Besides prominent personalities like the ones cited above, the call for cultural revival has been made by many others, too numerous to mention. There have been calls for the revival of such African practices as communal interdependence for instance, respect for the old and/or care of the old and incapacitated as was the case under our extended family system. While some such calls appear in literal works of scholars and academicians others are found in publications of people with humble education and written in local languages.

It should be noted too, that this drive for cultural restoration and/or promotion has not been confined to individuals. Rather, it has been the concern of organizations (private, governmental and inter-governmental) as well. The Black Consciousness Movement’s struggle in South Africa during the early nineteen seventies testifies to this contention; as does the existence of “The Centre for Bantu Studies” in Dakar Senegal.

It is my belief in this spirit, as well as my desire to contribute to its demands, that this paper is being written. It is a pedagogical based paper, propagating the application of African proverbs to modern history teaching. The method was tried on University of Zambia Secondary School (UNZA-Sec) class pupils in the 1990s and is very much suited to the junior secondary school level of the Zambian educational system.

The Meaning of Proverbs

The word proverb has been variously explained by different authors. Milimo (1972) has referred to them as “summarized expressions of short, easily memorable stories which our “forebearers”

devised as...means of teaching about life.” Basic to this definition is the shared view that proverbs are instructional statements. Ocitti (1973) subscribes to this when he says that proverbs were used to convey moral lessons to children and so does Sumbwa (1993), when he assigns to them a guiding undertaking.

Besides their instructional character, proverbs are also noted for their duality of meaning (i.e. the literal and figurative meanings) and their having arisen out of people’s experiences.

Current Methods in History Teaching

History teaching is carried out through a variety of methods. These include the oldest method called the lecture, activity based ones such as map-study, picture-study and note-making; as well as those involving simulation and drama, project work, radio broadcasts, film viewing, seminars and workshops.

By no means exhaustive, this large array of pedagogical approaches to the teaching of the subject implies a number of facts. First, the issue of historical methodology has received a great deal of attention. Second, no single method is suited to the effective transfer of all manner of historical knowledge and/or skills from one person to another. Third, not all methods are suited to every kind of learner. Fourth, some methods are cheaper and/or simpler to apply than others.

Aside from these facts, it is a matter of common sense that this avalanche of teaching methods arose from the need to facilitate and improve learners’ learning. The involvement of the learner in the teaching/learning process ensures three basic things.

(i) Sustenance of Learner Motivation

The variety of activities pupils are involved in when using these methods prevent boredom. They ensure that learners are alert and active for much of the time, if not throughout the duration of the lesson. This helps them follow what is taught with a high degree of concentration.

(ii) Meaningful Learning

Meaningful learning is another benefit which activity methods bestow upon the learners. This advantage arises from the employment of teaching resources and/or aids by teachers who apply these methods. For instance, presentation of pictures illustrating the burning of villages by slave raiders, the axing to death of a captive who failed to walk the long distance to the coast due to illness or fatigue, or the whipping of some captives on board a ship is much more meaningful to the learner than simply talking about these things. This is because it enables the learners to have a better perception of the horrifying occurrences of the slave trade than if they were to entirely depend upon the teacher’s narration and their imagination.

(iii) Durability of Leant Material

By involving the learner in lessons, activity methods do not only prevent boredom or greatly reduce it as stated above, but they also ensure that what is taught has a lasting imprint on the learner’s mind. This is because the active role the learner plays in learning, enables him/her to find out some of the material content himself/herself. These twin issues of pupil involvement in a lesson and pupil discovery of facts,

constitute a solid foundation for the knowledge gained, which make it more durable than that obtained through the passive medium of the lecture.

With this brief analysis of existing methods, one might question the necessity of proposing another method. This is because of the multiplicity of existing methods and the profound effectiveness of most of them. Notwithstanding this, however, proposition of the proverbial method is immensely justified; as will be seen from the next section.

The Case for Utilizing Proverbs in History Teaching

The multiflicity of methods currently in use in the teaching of history, requires justification to be made for any new method one may propose for use in teaching this subject. It is in this regard that this section has been written. It discusses the reasons why the proverbial method is worth utilizing in teaching the subject to pupils.

The first is that a proverb constitutes a historical document. Like pictures, maps and written documents (primary/secondary) a proverb bears historical information of some kind. Since some of this information is of great relevance to some of the topics in the primary and secondary school history and social studies syllabuses, I consider it necessary that this potential tool of learning be utilized.

Secondly, this method is worthy of application since it has the advantages that apply to other activity methods. A good example is that of pupil involvement. Like other activity methods the proverbial one has great scope for pupil involvement. Indeed, it can be argued that its scope or capacity in this regard is far much greater than that of any other method. This is because unlike the other methods, the proverbial one is so simple and straight forward (in one respect) that it does not entail much comprehension and/or interpretation on the part of the learner before he/she can effectively participate in the learning process.

Reference to this method as being “simple and straight forward in one respect” has an important implication, which in turn accounts for yet another significant argument in favour of its use. The implication here is that the method, though simple has some measure of complexity, bearing upon the hidden nature of the moral/philosophical meanings of the proverbial statements it employs. This complexity implies that the pupils on whom the method is applied, simultaneously get involved in exercising their cognitive skills of thinking and reasoning as they learn. In view of this, and owing to the fact that the development of such skills are among the functions of history teaching, the worthiness of the “proverbial method” in this respect cannot be over-emphasized.

Another good reason for advocating this method is that it is both correlative and integrative in character. The former implies the possibility of linking the order of teaching History with that of other subjects like Zambian Languages and Geography; while the latter points to that of teaching History concurrently with one or two other subjects.

Three Zambian curriculum subjects that could be correlated or integrated with history when applying the proverbial method are Zambian Languages, Geography and Religious Studies. In addition, non curriculum subjects exist which may equally be taught together with history, e.g.,

issues pertaining to customs, beliefs, morals, etc. Although these aspects of our culture are not catered for in the school curriculum, there is no reason why a history teacher cannot integrate them in teaching whenever chance arises. Nobody will blame one for teaching the importance of patriotism and national unity for instance, or any values designed to discourage un-desirable tendencies in society.

The promotion of self-learning is another advantageous aspect of this method. Once pupils have learnt the discernment of historical material from proverbial statements, they will automatically become capable of learning historical material that come their way through proverbs. They will learn, for instance, that the Logbara were cultivators by simply looking at their proverb: "The absence of the hoe is the joy of hunger." Similarly, they will tell that these people were pastoralists and that they used their cattle for dowry payments, by a mere look at their other proverb: "A baby girl means beautiful cows." Because self-learning is of great aid to memory and the retention of knowledge, it should be obvious as to why this aspect of the method makes its application imperative.

This method is equally recommended for its accuracy of information. Proverbial material has a high degree of accuracy. This is because proverbs are experiential in nature, i.e., they arose from men's observations of their surroundings. This means that the literal meaning of proverbs point to definite occurrences in the history of the societies in which they are used. A pertinent example is the Chewa proverb: "If the cock is all wet, there is no sale." This undoubtedly shows that the Chewa reared chickens and that one of the things they did with these was to sell them either to fellow Chewa or foreigners like the Chikunda with whom they came into contact.

The last but by no means the least of the factors necessitating this method is that of cost. Whereas most other methods depend upon the procurement of expensive resources such as textbooks, atlases, stencils or duplicating paper (not to mention radios, projectors, film-strips and other more costly resources), the proverbial one is not that costly. What one requires for a lesson is only a few proverbs (3-5) which one could list on five to six sheets of paper for purposes of group work or even on the chalk board in the absence of paper. That a school head may need to purchase a few proverbial books to facilitate the use of this method cannot be denied. However, this does not invalidate the cost argument. For, unless the books sought are for use in other departments, their number is likely to be very small and so will be the amount of money to be spent on them.

The importance of costing in one's life cannot be over-emphasized. This is because the less one can spend on one item the greater is the chance of saving for the purchase of other items. It is partly in this vein that the propagation of this method should be looked at. Zambia, like many other African countries has liquidity problems. A discovery of cheaper methods in many aspects of her life (including pedagogy) will facilitate her savings for other expenditures.

The Application of Proverbs to History Teaching

The success of any method depends largely upon the proper manner of its utilization. A teacher using a map as a main resource of his/her lesson, for instance, is certain to achieve good results if the map he/she uses is clear (i.e., not marred by unnecessary detail), relevant and appropriate to the lesson at hand and if he/she asks questions that are good and relevant. A teacher's

achievement of good results will equally be facilitated by his/her amplification of the answers his/her pupils give to the questions he/she poses. It is important to note too, that even the unfairly condemned lecture method can achieve greater yields if its ingredients, viz : the teacher's enthusiasm, variation of voice to minimize boredom, gestures and what I might term "harmless" exaggerations are taken into account during its employment – as was the case in African traditional education. Kapaale (1984) testifies to the latter when he declares : "Yet if teachers could use the telling teaching method with the same interest as indigenous teachers did, they could make their lessons as interesting to pupils as those conducted in indigenous settings."

What has been said above is very true of the proverbial method. It cannot and indeed, should not be expected to succeed unless it is properly applied. And proper application of this method, i.e., one that will enable pupils gain maximum benefit from it, depends upon the following guidelines:

- (a) Teacher's determination of a topic suited to the method
This is important because not all lessons can be taught using this method; nor are there proverbs that are suited to the teaching of every topic in any country's history curriculum.
- (b) Teacher's choice of relevant proverbs to the topic of study
The proverbs to be used in the lesson should be well suited to the essential facts of the lesson. For instance, although the Lozi proverb : "A basket of food is a basket of life" is suited to a lesson on "Lozi Industrial Activities," since it indicates the people's involvement in basketry," it is not in any way relevant to one on "The Food of the Lozi people." Its irrelevance to the latter lies in the fact that, despite its reference to food, the proverb does not specify any kind of food the Lozi people eat or could have substituted on in the past.
- (c) Use of few proverbs in any given lesson
Since the proverbial method involves class discussion of all the provided proverbs, it is necessary to keep the number of proverbs as small as possible. A range of 3 to 5 proverbs is recommended for use in any given lesson. Any number in this range is, I believe, sufficient to provide the basis for any lesson, particularly because there is ample scope for bringing in other material in the lesson through probing or direct exposition when this kind of method is applied.
- (d) Provision of only one proverb for each fact in the lesson
Usually, our Zambian and indeed African languages in general have two or more proverbs relating to one historical fact concerning a particular ethnic group. For instance, the Logbara proverbs : "No digging no food," "the absence of the hoe is the joy of hunger," and "a naked hoe does not dig a field" – all point to the historical fact that these people were farmers or cultivators. It is advisable when teaching about the economic activities of these people to use only one of these proverbs to teach this fact. This will facilitate the use of other proverbs to teach other facts.
- (e) Presentation of the proverbs to pupils in their English literal translations
This ensures their comprehension by all the class members even if they were from different ethnic groups.
- (f) Ensuring pupils' awareness of the symbolic meanings of the proverbs being used, This enables to know the moral or virtuous teachings those proverbs embody.

(g) Presentation of other pertinent facts of the lesson not inherent in the proverbs.

(h) Preparation of a lesson plan to guide one's lesson (see specimen lesson plan below).

Specimen Lesson Plan for a 'Proverbs' based lesson

Teacher : Timothy Nzala

Subject : History

Grade : 8A

Number : 40

Date : 16/06/2012

Time : 9:20 – 10:00

Topic : Lozi Economic Activities

Objectives : By the end of the lesson PSBAT :

- a) Name four economic activities of the Lozi.
- b) Give at least one proverb for each economic activity the Lozi were involved in
- c) Write short notes on the Lozi economic activities

Teaching Aids :

- i) List of proverbs and accompanying questions
- ii) Chalkboard

Introduction : Teacher asks revision questions on the origins of the Lozi such as :

- 1. What three main explanations are there for the origins of the Lozi?
- 2. Which of the traditions is generally accepted and why?

Teacher. then informs pupils of the day's topic and writes it on the chalkboard. He tells them that the lesson would be taught with the aid of proverbs.

Body of the Lesson

| | Content | | Method/Activities |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Material in the proverbs | 1 | Teacher arranges pupils in groups and gives them proverbs to study and answer accompanying questions |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">i. To advance a weak argument.ii. A pioneer in business usually succeedsiii. Every worker ought to be rewarded | 2 | <p>Class explanations of the real meanings of the proverbs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">i. To catch a barbel fish by the tail.ii. The first cow drinks clean wateriii. He who touches meat cannot be without blood on his fingers. |

| | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 | <p>Fishing</p> <p>a) In Zambezi river, its tributaries and in fish pans</p> <p>b) Nets, spearing and scooping</p> <p>c) Both men and women although much of this work was done by men</p> | 3 | <p>Class identification of the economic activity portrayed in proverb 1.</p> <p>a) Where did the Lozi kill the fish?</p> <p>b) What methods were used for fishing?</p> <p>c) Was fishing done by men or women?</p> |
| 4 | <p>Cattle keeping</p> <p>a) Man's job</p> <p>b) Milk, meat and skin clothes and blankets</p> | 4 | <p>Class identification of the economic activity portrayed in proverb 2.</p> <p>a) Was cattle herding a man's or woman's job among the Lozi?</p> <p>b) What benefits did the Lozi get from their cattle?</p> |
| 5 | <p>Hunting</p> <p>a) Man's job</p> <p>b) Lechwe, duickers, wild beast, etc. For food</p> <p>c) Snake bites and attacks by lions and leopards.</p> | 5 | <p>Class identification of the activity portrayed in proverb 3</p> <p>a) Was hunting a man's or woman's job?</p> <p>b) What animals do you think were hunted by the Lozi and why?</p> <p>c) What dangers do you think faced Lozi men as they hunted.</p> |
| 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivation and gathering • Basketry, pottery and wood carving • Salt making by men who knew the trade. • Fat and cooking oil making | 6 | <p>Class to suggest and then discuss other economic activities not portrayed in the proverbs.</p> |
| 7 | See questions and summary sheet | 7 | Teacher asks pupils some questions to help build the chalkboard summary. |

Conclusion : Pupils copy the chalkboard summary.

Follow up : Pupils to find proverbs that portray Lozi economic activities besides those dealt with in the day's lesson.

Self evaluation :

Questions and Summary Sheet

a) Questions

1. What were the main economic activities of the Lozi?
2. What sex was mainly involved in cultivation?
3. What sex was mainly involved in hunting, fishing and herding? Why?
4. What benefits did the Lozi get from their cattle?
5. What other economic activities were the Lozi involved in?

b) Summary

1. The main economic activities of the Lozi were the growing of food crops, hunting, fishing and cattle keeping.
2. Growing crops was mainly done by women.
3. Hunting, fishing and looking after cattle were mainly done by men because these activities were dangerous in some ways.
4. The Lozi got milk, meat, manure and skins from their cattle. They used the milk and meat for food, manure to make their gardens fertile and skins for wearing and for covering their bodies at night in order to keep warm.
5. The other economic activities of the Lozi were :
 - i) Gathering fruits and tubers for food.
 - ii) Making pots and baskets.
 - iii) Wood carving.
 - iv) Salt making.
 - v) Fat and cooking oil preparation.

Proverbs for group discussion

- a) Study the following proverbs and give :
 - Their real meanings
 - The people's activities they portray
- b) List of Proverbs
 1. To catch a barbel fish by the tail
(Kuswala ndombe kwa mahata)
 2. The first cow drinks good water.
(Komu yapili inwa mezi amande)
 3. He who touches meat must have blood on his fingers.
(Mukwatakwati wa nyama koolwa kanyinga kumunwe)

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the issue of pedagogy. It propagated the use of proverbs in the teaching of history and explained both the advantages of this proposed method and its procedural aspects. The method is suited to the junior secondary sector of the Zambian Secondary School system generally and to the area dealing with the activities of the country's ethnic groups in particular.

It is hoped that readers will find the proposal appealing and that they will try to make use of it when teaching topics to which it is suited.

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