



Reimagining history teaching in the digital age: Engaging “disengaged” learners through critical pedagogy and generative artificial intelligence

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the teaching of History in secondary schools in rural and township contexts in South Africa, focusing on persistent learner disengagement within an increasingly digitised educational landscape shaped by the rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence. Drawing on constructivism, critical pedagogy and creativity as an integrated theoretical framework, the paper interrogates dominant pedagogical practices and historical narratives that continue to shape History classrooms amid rapid technological change. It offers a reflective and analytical discussion informed by existing scholarship, curriculum and policy documents, emerging debates on AI in education and the author’s professional experience as a History educator. It argues that traditional, teacher-centred approaches are increasingly misaligned with learners’ digital realities, limiting historical consciousness, critical thinking and relevance, advocating for a pedagogical reimagining of History teaching that foregrounds curiosity, creativity, humour, ethical digital literacy and the inclusion of multiple perspectives, positioning generative AI as a mediating tool rather than a pedagogical threat. By reconceptualising the roles of teachers, learners and knowledge resources in the 21st century History classroom, it contributes to ongoing debates on how History education can be made more inclusive, meaningful and socially responsive in the context of deepening technological and educational inequalities, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Research Article



Keywords:

history education, generative artificial intelligence, creative pedagogy, critical thinking, rural and township schools

Received: 16.02.2026

Accepted: 04.06.2026

Published: 08.08.2026

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To Cite This Article

Nyathi, P.A. (2026). Reimagining history teaching in the digital age: Engaging “disengaged” learners through critical pedagogy and generative artificial intelligence. *Turkish History Education Journal*, 1, pp. 217-236.
<https://doi.org/10.17497/tuhed.1890436>

Introduction

In many parts of the world, History is valued not only for transmitting content knowledge but also for its role in cultivating critical thinking, civic identity and a capacity to interpret change and continuities over time (Haste & Bermudez, 2017; Mursidi & Alit, 2025; Westberg, 2021). While History as a subject is internationally significant, its teaching and learning in South African secondary schools continue to face numerous challenges, including limited resources, uneven teacher preparation, learner disengagement and widespread perceptions of the subject as irrelevant or burdensome (Fufa et al., 2024; Nyathi, 2026). Masooa and Twala (2014) challenge the idea that modern society is driven solely by the need for science and technology. They emphasise that History should not be overlooked, as it significantly shapes how



individuals and societies develop and evolve. These challenges are particularly evident in rural and township schools, where historical, social and economic inequalities continue to shape classroom realities in an increasingly digitised educational environment. Some learners perceive History as containing irrelevant narratives disconnected from their lived experiences and not relevant for their career paths (Khoza & Dube, 2022). These perceptions raise critical questions about how historical knowledge is constructed, selected and taught in contexts marked by both material deprivation and rapid technological change.

This paper uses these perceptions as a point of departure to critically reflect on the relationship between pedagogical practice and learner disengagement in 21st century History education. As Stephen Ambrose (2002) famously argued, students do not hate History; they hate the way it is taught to them. This observation remains highly relevant in contemporary classrooms, where History teaching is often dominated by traditional, teacher-centred approaches that prioritise content coverage and memorisation over inquiry, dialogue and critical engagement (Chimbunde & Brown, 2025; Fufa et al., 2024), even as learners increasingly interact with digital platforms and generative AI outside the classroom.

These local dynamics echo a wider international conversation about the place of generative AI in History teaching, specifically, rather than in education generally (Jones, 2023; Meadows & Sternfeld, 2023; Sternfeld, 2023). Pope and Ma (2024), drawing on interviews with university-level history educators, found that academic historians are already grappling with how to incorporate generative artificial intelligence tools critically into the discipline’s teaching rather than treating them solely as threats to be policed. This concern has been taken up at the disciplinary level internationally, as the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence in History Education produced guiding principles for the field (American Historical Association, 2025), following a dedicated forum on artificial intelligence and historical practice convened by the American Historical Review in 2023. These developments suggest that the tensions this paper explores in the South African context are part of a broader, still-unsettled international reckoning within the History education community about how the discipline should respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by generative artificial intelligence.

Conventional approaches to History teaching often fail to address the realities of the 21st century, including rapid technological change, expanding access to information and the diverse identities and experiences learners bring into the classroom. The emergence of generative AI tools has further exposed the limitations of pedagogies that position learners as passive recipients of historical knowledge rather than active meaning-makers. Internationally, bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have called for a human-centred approach to generative AI in education. It emphasised ethical standards, data privacy and adequate teacher preparation (Miao & Holmes, 2023). These concerns resonate directly with the paper’s argument for ethical digital literacy. A History teacher working a decade ago faced a markedly different pedagogical landscape from that of today’s teachers, who must now navigate digital technologies, generative artificial intelligence, curriculum constraints and heightened demands for relevance, ethical engagement and inclusivity.

Despite its recognised civic and social importance (Dimalig & Lomorda, 2005; Moga et al., 2025; Masooa & Twala, 2014), History as a school subject often receives limited material, pedagogical and institutional support which constraints its capacity to fulfil these functions effectively, a constraint felt with particular force in South Africa, given the country’s complex past and ongoing struggles with inequality, identity and social justice. However, despite its recognised importance, History as a school subject often receives limited material,

pedagogical and institutional support, which constrains its capacity to fulfil these civic and social functions effectively.

Persistent tensions in History education persist between content-driven curricula and pedagogies that emphasise inquiry, interpretation and critical engagement. As Fufa et al. (2024) demonstrate, learner disengagement often stems from pedagogical practices that prioritise memorisation over meaning-making. Similarly, Chimbunde and Brown (2025) argue that History teaching in postcolonial contexts remains burdened by conventional approaches that exclude learners' lived experiences from historical narratives. This literature underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that make History relevant, dialogical and responsive to contemporary realities, including the increasingly digital conditions under which historical knowledge is accessed, produced and interpreted. Against this backdrop of pedagogical tension and learner disengagement, scholars have begun to explore the potential of digital technologies, and more recently, generative AI, to reimagine teaching and learning in History education.

Within this broader context of pedagogical challenge and digital transformation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a significant area of scholarly and educational interest. AI is not a new phenomenon. The term was coined by John McCarthy in 1956, while its conceptual foundations can be traced back to the 1930s through the work of Alan Turing, whose contributions laid the groundwork for modern computer science (Dewa, 2024). Turing's (1950) seminal question, posed in *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, of whether machines could emulate human intelligence, remains central to contemporary debates about the role of AI in human cognition and knowledge production. His proposal that a machine could be considered intelligent if it convincingly simulated human responses anticipated many of the epistemological questions now confronting education, including how knowledge is generated, interpreted and authorised, questions that lie at the core of History as a disciplinary and pedagogical practice.

The evolution of digital computing, particularly the development of advanced silicon chips capable of processing vast amounts of data, catalysed the emergence of AI as a transformative force across multiple sectors, including education (Dhawan & Batra, 2020). Despite its long-standing presence in technological discourse, AI continues to evolve rapidly, with meanings and implications that vary across disciplines and contexts (Hutson et al., 2022). In education, this evolution demands a reimagining of AI not merely as a technical tool, but as a socio-technical phenomenon that reshapes pedagogical practices, epistemic authority and learner engagement.

One of the most significant recent developments in this evolution is the rise of generative AI. In educational contexts, AI has sparked intense debate. Some scholars caution that its use may undermine academic integrity, diminish critical thinking and weaken learners' intellectual autonomy (Pisica et al., 2023). Others argue that, when ethically integrated, generative AI can enhance teaching and learning by supporting creativity, inquiry and higher-order thinking (Dogru et al., 2024; Mhlanga, 2023; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). These competing perspectives, often framed as dystopian versus utopian, reflect deeper anxieties about the relationship between human cognition and machine-generated knowledge (Bearman et al., 2022).

For History education, these debates are particularly consequential. Unlike disciplines that prioritise fixed answers or procedural accuracy, History is inherently interpretive, narrative-driven and contested. Historical knowledge is constructed through the evaluation of sources, the weighing of evidence and the interpretation of competing perspectives. Generative AI tools, which can produce multiple narratives, summaries and interpretations of the past events,

therefore directly challenge traditional teacher-centred models of History teaching that rely on authoritative textbooks and singular narratives. Rather than viewing this challenge as a threat, this paper argues that generative AI exposes longstanding pedagogical limitations within History education and creates opportunities to re-engage learners through inquiry, dialogue, multiperspectivity and critical reflection.

Research indicates that the integration of AI in education is shaped by institutional policies, pedagogical orientations and learners’ beliefs about technology (Ma et al., 2024). Learners tend to engage more meaningfully with technologies that align with their values and learning preferences, while cultural and contextual factors influence adoption and use. In History classrooms, where learner disengagement is often attributed to perceptions of irrelevance and rigidity, generative AI has the potential to disrupt these patterns by enabling learners to explore historical questions, simulate alternative perspectives and connect past events to contemporary issues.

However, as Hutson et al. (2022) note, there remains a limited understanding of how AI is used in classroom pedagogy. In History education, this gap is significant. While generative AI tools can personalise learning and support diverse learner needs, their pedagogical value depends on how teachers frame their use. History educators, therefore, face a dual responsibility: to understand the capabilities and limitations of generative AI and to equip learners with the historical thinking skills needed to critically evaluate AI-generated content.

Ethical concerns surrounding authorship, originality and bias further complicate the integration of generative AI (Hidayanto & Eitiveni, 2025; Meishar-Tal, 2025; Owidi et al., 2025). AI-generated historical narratives are derived from existing data, which may reflect dominant perspectives and historical silences. Generative AI also raises important ethical and societal concerns, particularly in African higher education, where resources are scarce and regulations often lag behind technological advances. The lack of transparency in algorithmic decisions, the risks of misinformation, and the potential reinforcement of cultural and linguistic biases threaten universities’ main goal: fostering critical, independent thinking (Owidi et al., 2025). These concerns echo longstanding debates within History education about whose histories are told and whose voices are marginalised. From this perspective, generative AI does not introduce entirely new ethical dilemmas; instead, it amplifies existing challenges, making them more visible and urgent in the History classroom.

Instead of presenting an empirical investigation, this paper interrogates why traditional approaches to History teaching persist despite profound changes in learners’ epistemic and technological environments. It also explores how the subject can be reimagined to better engage learners in contemporary contexts. Grounded in constructivism, critical pedagogy and creativity, the paper calls for a paradigm shift towards teaching approaches that position History as a dynamic, dialogic and socially embedded discipline. By situating generative AI as a mediating force rather than a pedagogical threat, the paper contends that History education can be re-envisioned to foster learner engagement, historical consciousness and ethical digital citizenship, particularly in under-resourced rural and township schools in South Africa.

Guided by these concerns, this paper addresses two critical questions:

- Why do traditional approaches to History teaching persist despite the profound shifts in learners’ epistemic and technological environments?
- How can History teaching be reimagined, drawing on constructivism, critical pedagogy, creativity and the ethical integration of generative artificial intelligence, to better engage learners in under-resourced rural and township schools in South Africa?

Method

Research Design

This paper is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates constructivism, critical pedagogy and creativity in education to interrogate how historical knowledge is produced, mediated and engaged with in the 21st century classroom. As a conceptual paper, it does not report empirical data but instead constructs its argument through critical engagement with scholarly literature, curriculum and policy documentation, and the author's own reflective practitioner insight, as detailed in the *Data Sources* section below. This design allows the paper to move between theoretical, policy and experiential perspectives to interrogate the persistence of traditional pedagogies and to reimagine History teaching for under-resourced South African classrooms in the age of generative AI.

Data Sources

The study draws on three interrelated sources of insight, namely (i) scholarly literature on History education, pedagogy, curriculum studies and emerging debates on digital transformation and generative artificial intelligence in education; (ii) critical engagement with key South African curriculum and policy documents, specifically the History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for grades 10–12 (DBE, 2011), which is read analytically for its stated learning outcomes, assessment orientations and gaps in relation to digital and AI-integrated pedagogy; and (iii) the author's reflective engagement as a former History teacher and a current academic in higher education working at the intersection of pedagogy, curriculum and technology.

Literature Search and Selection

The literature was selected through purposive engagement with peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and policy documents relevant to History education, digital pedagogy, and generative artificial intelligence in education. Sources were identified through database searches on Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and JSTOR, using key terms including "History education", "AI in Education", "critical pedagogy", "constructivism", and "learner disengagement". Literature published from 2018 onwards was prioritised to ensure currency, while seminal foundational works were retained for theoretical grounding.

Analytical Procedure

The conceptual analysis proceeded in three stages. First, recurring themes and tensions in the History education literature were identified, particularly those concerning disengagement, pedagogy and digital transformation. Second, these themes were examined against the South African CAPS curriculum to identify structural alignments and misalignments. Third, the author's professional observations as a History teacher were used reflexively to contextualise abstract arguments within the material realities of rural and township classrooms. This approach, which combines literature, curriculum and reflexivity, constitutes the analytical pillar of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism emphasises that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience and reflection (Ardiansyah & Ujihanti, 2017; Mugambi, 2018), positioning History learning as an interpretive, meaning-making process rather than the passive absorption of fixed facts. Within this framework, historical knowledge is understood as provisional, contested and shaped by context. This view is increasingly significant in digitally mediated learning environments where information is abundant and algorithmically curated.

Critical pedagogy foregrounds the role of education in interrogating power, ideology and social inequality (Lamsal, 2024; Taff & Lazzaro, 2025). Applied to History education, it encourages learners to question dominant narratives, examine whose histories are privileged or marginalised and understand how the past is used to legitimise present social arrangements. This approach fosters historical consciousness and positions learners as critical citizens capable of engaging with social injustices and critically evaluating knowledge claims produced by both human and artificial agents.

Creativity, understood as both a cognitive and pedagogical process, enhances learner engagement by fostering imagination, curiosity and divergent thinking (Frueh, 2024; Roy, 2013). In the History classroom, creativity enables learners to explore multiple perspectives, empathise with historical actors and draw meaningful connections between the past and the present through dialogical, multimodal and inquiry-based learning activities that resonate with contemporary digital cultures.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for History teaching that promotes active learning, critical inquiry and historical empathy in technologically evolving educational contexts. This framework underpins the paper’s argument that History education in the 21st century must move beyond rote learning and authoritative transmission toward dialogical, reflective and transformative pedagogical practices that equip learners to navigate complex historical narratives, digital knowledge systems and the ethical challenges associated with emerging technologies, such as Generative Artificial Intelligence.

Results

Aligning the South African history curriculum with 21st century digital and generative AI pedagogies

The South African History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Grades 10 – 12 is the official guide for teaching and learning in secondary schools, outlining content, learning outcomes and assessment standards that shape classroom practice (DBE, 2011). Although the history curriculum in CAPS History ensures a structured progression of historical knowledge, it mainly reflects traditional, teacher-centred methods that emphasise memorisation, linear timelines and recall of events. Some teachers believe that teaching history reflectively is significantly more challenging than simply teaching facts, which is comparatively easier and straightforward (Chimbunde & Brown, 2025).

These methods, while historically effective, increasingly clash with the needs of 21st century learners who, as demonstrated throughout this paper, interact with information through dynamic, digital and interactive environments. Notably, the CAPS framework offers limited guidance on incorporating digital literacies, multimodal engagement and modern technological tools, such as generative AI, into the History classroom. This is not surprising, given that generative AI emerged well after the CAPS framework was developed. However, it is now necessary to revise it to align with these new developments.

The CAPS document acknowledges that plagiarism, including cutting and pasting from the internet, is a particular problem in History and that learners must be trained to provide proper references (DBE, 2011). Building on the concern raised above, this challenge has been significantly amplified by the rise of the generative AI tools, which enable learners to produce polished text without engaging in historical thinking. Specific CAPS learning outcomes that are most affected include source-based analysis (for instance, the Section A of examinations in grades 10–12 is source-based), essay writing and research assignments, all of which require

learner-generated cognition and originality. As a result, traditional methods such as essay writing and take-home source tasks lose validity unless restructured. However, CAPS principles remain relevant if teaching shifts towards process-oriented, contextualised, oral and critically reflective approaches that foreground historical thinking over textual production.

In light of the limitations identified above, a close examination of the curriculum reveals further opportunities and constraints for fostering students' historical awareness and critical thinking. CAPS specifies that learning in Grades 10 – 12 should demonstrate the ability to analyse historical sources, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple viewpoints, skills articulated across the curriculum's assessment standards. For example, the Grade 11 CAPS History curriculum requires learners to examine the causes and consequences of significant 20th-century events through the analysis of primary and secondary sources. Similarly, the Grade 12 curriculum requires learners to construct historical arguments supported by evidence, a skill that directly aligns with the paper's call for inquiry-based and critical pedagogy. However, prescribed content and assessment techniques often prioritise content delivery and factual memorisation, leaving little room for the inquiry, problem-solving or creative exploration that 21st century learners increasingly require.

Consistent with the concerns raised thus far, the rise of digital technology and generative AI presents both a challenge and an opportunity for CAPS-aligned History education. As previously noted, the current curriculum does not explicitly support integrating AI-driven tools that could facilitate simulations, interactive timelines, source analysis and diverse perspectives. In addition, ethical and critical engagement with digital sources, such as identifying bias and misinformation, is largely missing from the framework. These gaps further underscore the need to review the curriculum to align with these new developments. History teaching should be reimagined to equip learners not only with content knowledge but also with digital literacy, critical thinking and ethical judgment for a world increasingly shaped by technology and AI.

In light of the gaps identified above, the review of CAPS in light of these changes involves finding entry points for digital and AI-enhanced teaching strategies that complement existing learning goals. For example, students could use AI-powered simulations to test hypotheses about historical events, explore marginalised viewpoints or co-develop digital projects that integrate research, analysis and creative expression. Teachers should also utilise digital platforms to facilitate discussions, guide inquiry and model ethical use of generative AI. By aligning curriculum aims with 21st century pedagogical tools, and building on the critical and constructivist principles discussed throughout this paper, history teaching can move away from rote memorisation towards active involvement, empathy and responsible citizenship.

Therefore, placing CAPS within the context of the digital revolution and generative AI creates an essential link between educational policy and classroom practice. These considerations emphasise the need, as this article argues, to reinterpret curriculum expectations to promote constructivist, critical and creative teaching methods.

Reimagining history teaching in the 21st century classroom

The method of history in the 21st century. How History is taught matters as much as what is taught. Traditional methods that cast the teacher as the sole authority and learners as passive recipients of knowledge persist in many classrooms. This paper argues that such methods are increasingly misaligned with the needs of 21st century learners and with the epistemological nature of History as an interpretive discipline.

The teaching of History today should therefore foreground inquiry, problem-solving and multimodal engagement, enabling learners to critically analyse historical narratives, assess sources and construct knowledge meaningfully. Generative AI tools, when integrated ethically, can support these methods by facilitating simulations, alternative perspectives and access to diverse primary sources. For example, learners could use AI-driven timelines or interactive historical reconstructions to test hypotheses about events, explore multiple interpretations and critically reflect on whose stories are represented and/or silenced. In this way, 21st century methods of teaching History move beyond rote learning towards a constructivist, critical and creative pedagogy that fosters historical consciousness and equips learners to navigate complex socio-digital landscapes.

Drawing on the author’s professional experience teaching History in a South African township secondary school between 2016 and 2022, these pedagogical considerations should also be understood within the contexts of structural inequality and resource constraints. During this period, many learners, often characterised as “disengaged”, were in fact responding to limited access to textbooks, digital tools, and diverse historical resources. In such environments, teacher-centred approaches frequently emerged not as a preferred pedagogy but as a practical response to systematic limitations, including overcrowded classrooms and uneven access to learning materials. Opportunities for inquiry-based and dialogic learning, central to constructivist and critical pedagogical approaches, were therefore constrained, often resulting in uneven learner participation and apparent disengagement. These observations are significant for the integration of generative AI into History education. While such technologies hold potential to enhance engagement, creativity, and access to knowledge, their impact is likely to be uneven across different educational contexts. In under-resourced settings, generative AI may simultaneously offer new opportunities while reproducing existing inequalities in access, digital literacy, and critical engagement. This underscores the need for a context-sensitive and critically informed approach to the adoption of generative AI in History classrooms.

Teaching paradigms in history are evolving, prompting educators to adopt innovative methods to engage and inform students (Marpelina, 2024; Marpelina et al., 2023). Marpelina et al. (2023) propose integrating Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) as an effective solution, enabling educators to connect traditional and modern approaches more seamlessly. Since the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (Gen-AI), there has been significant discussion about its potential to transform education (Dhawan & Batra, 2020; Lim, 2025; Nguyen, 2025; Patel & Ragolane, 2024; Saal et al., 2025). Lim (2025) asserts that historical sources are more than texts from which to extract facts; they are windows into the lives, beliefs and conflicts of people in history. Analysing these sources is an active, interpretive process, a conversation across time that requires learners to connect their perspectives with those of historical figures.

Given the enduring significance of historical education, how can history be taught effectively in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence? Teaching history should evolve by blending traditional humanistic approaches with digital literacy and critical, context-aware engagement. This calls for a re-evaluation of teaching methods, assessments and classroom practices to ensure that students can interpret, analyse and critique both historical materials and digital texts. The following suggestions outline ways to improve history instruction in the AI era (Lim, 2025).

Lim (2025) argues that, far from diminishing its importance, the AI era makes history education more crucial than ever. Writing from an Indian perspective, Gupta (2024) noted that the field of pedagogical knowledge has recently seen the widespread adoption of information

and communication technologies on an unprecedented scale. History is often viewed as a collection of facts that must be memorised to perform well in examinations (Gupta, 2024).

Digital technology hampers students' ability to develop essential skills such as intelligent guessing and forming hunches, which are crucial for historical thinking. To gain new insights into old sources and analyse new ones, students need to trace sources, read carefully, follow clues and make connections. However, internet technology often prevents students from engaging with the nuances and core principles of history. Instead, it fosters ahistorical attitudes, leading learners to view historical facts as absolute and disconnected from one another (Gupta, 2024).

The 21st century history teacher. As learners explore history through social media and digital tools, educators are crucial in helping them develop objective understanding and critical thinking skills (Marpelina et al., 2023). Modern technology allows learners to engage more actively in learning, while teachers develop new approaches, methods and models (Marpelina, 2024). History educators are responsible for teaching students essential digital literacy skills. They should help learners learn how to effectively find and evaluate historical information online, distinguish reliable sources from unreliable ones and critically analyse digital content (Marpelina, 2024).

Marpelina (2024) recognises that although the digital revolution has enhanced historical education, it also brings complexities. Therefore, history educators should teach learners to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources, select high-quality online content, promote collaboration across digital platforms and address the ethical issues frequently encountered in digital spaces.

Moreira et al. (2022) argue that history continually influences people's daily lives, either in a serious and insightful manner or through false or manipulated information for particular interests. As a result, understanding perceptions of the world, cultural values and the meanings and changes of time becomes an essential task for History teachers. This is particularly significant in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical narratives remain deeply contested and where teachers must navigate between official curriculum and frameworks and the lived memories of their learners and communities.

Haupt (2017) emphasises that today's History classroom should serve as a space for inquiry and dialogue. Within a secure academic setting, discussions of controversial issues of the modern era need to emerge, be addressed and be debated critically (Haupt, 2017; Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018). To stay relevant and ensure the subject remains at the forefront of intellectual debate about our world, History teachers must confront current topics and pressing issues, creating a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to share their opinions.

The role of the History teacher in the classroom now expands significantly. Instead of just delivering knowledge, the teacher acts more as a facilitator. Freed from the necessity to provide extensive factual details, the teacher can focus more precisely and intensively on the core aspects of history, fulfilling a longstanding role but in a more dedicated manner (Haupt, 2017).

The 21st century History teacher should not be merely a transmitter of content but a facilitator of inquiry, dialogue and critical reflection. Chimbunde and Brown (2025) admit that teaching history in postcolonial societies is complex and challenging, particularly for conventionally trained educators. New developments require teachers to adapt. This is even more challenging for a History teacher in post-apartheid South Africa, who is expected to

address sensitive and controversial issues in the role. This role requires pedagogical creativity, openness to multiple perspectives and the ability to connect historical content to contemporary issues. The 21st century History teacher is less a transmitter of facts and more a facilitator of knowledge, dialogue and inquiry. They guide learners in critically interrogating historical sources, integrating multiple perspectives and using digital tools, including generative AI, responsibly.

Teachers also play a key role in navigating ethical and social dimensions of AI, helping learners critically assess algorithmic biases, source credibility and the construction of historical narratives. In rural or under-resourced contexts, teachers may need to creatively adapt resources, scaffold learning digitally where possible and model historical thinking that transcends rote memorisation. By adopting constructivist, critical, and creative practices, teachers can transform disengaged learners into active participants who co-construct knowledge, explore historical dilemmas and develop ethical digital citizenship skills in a technology-mediated society.

The role of the learner in the history classroom. While scholars view Generative Artificial Intelligence as a disruptive technology (Ng et al., 2025), it also offers revolutionary opportunities to transform long-standing teaching and learning practices. This dual character, disruptive and generative, is particularly relevant for History classrooms, where learners are expected to develop critical historical thinking while navigating AI-generated content. This technology boosts participation, effort, study habits and task completion, while also encouraging students to self-regulate and dedicate more time to homework. Furthermore, it enhances students’ understanding of the material and their self-perception (Ng et al., 2025). This technology may assist educators by generating multiple explanations from different perspectives, employing a step-by-step method and enhancing existing explanations with additional details. If students find a concept confusing, the AI can generate a simpler summary to aid understanding. Likewise, instructors can provide their current explanation and ask the AI to simplify it, add more examples, or break it down into steps. However, all these should be done within ethical means (Mollick & Mollick, 2023). Ng et al. (2025) emphasise that it is crucial to recognise the limitations of generative AI, including its failure to grasp real-world contexts and the potential for inaccurate outputs. They also highlight challenges such as diminished critical thinking skills and excessive reliance on AI, which may have serious implications for History education, as it seeks to foster critical thinking.

In the 21st-century History classroom, learners should be positioned as active meaning-makers rather than passive consumers of historical knowledge. Their experiences, questions and interpretations are central to developing historical understanding and critical consciousness. Learners should be co-creators of knowledge, engaging critically with historical texts, debates and digital sources, including AI-generated content. Their role extends beyond memorisation to questioning dominant narratives, exploring alternative perspectives and reflecting on the ethical implications of historical knowledge. Learners develop historical empathy by placing themselves in the shoes of historical actors, and they cultivate critical digital literacy by evaluating AI-generated information, spotting bias and synthesising knowledge from multiple sources.

Engagement is further enhanced when learners are encouraged to collaborate, experiment and present historical interpretations through creative approaches, whether through digital storytelling, simulations or debates. In under-resourced rural and township schools, where access to digital devices may be limited, such approaches may need to be adapted creatively. For instance, teachers can facilitate oral simulations, peer-based debates and community history projects that draw on local knowledge and memory. In this way, History

could be made personally meaningful without requiring digital infrastructure. This is consistent with the paper's broader argument that learner engagement is not solely a function of technology but of pedagogical approach and relational trust.

Generative AI and the teaching of history in South African secondary schools

The integration of digital technologies and generative artificial intelligence presents both opportunities and challenges for History education. When applied critically and ethically, these tools can improve accessibility, foster creativity and increase student engagement. Despite growing global interest in generative AI, there remains a notable gap in the literature on its use and implications in South African secondary schools. Existing scholarship largely focuses on higher education, leaving the basic education sector under-theorised. This omission is particularly problematic for History education, as secondary school learners are increasingly exposed to generative AI tools long before entering tertiary institutions. The absence of focused research on how generative AI is understood, regulated and pedagogically integrated in South African secondary schools reflects a critical oversight in both educational research and policy.

This paper argues that, much like their counterparts in higher education, secondary school learners require structured guidance on the ethical and critical use of generative AI. In History classrooms, such guidance is particularly important, as learners must grapple with bias, evidence, interpretation and narrative construction. As learners transition to higher education and broader civic life, they need to be equipped not only with digital literacy skills but also with historical consciousness and ethical reasoning to interrogate AI-generated knowledge. AI is no longer on the periphery of everyday life; it now plays a significant role in many areas such as work, healthcare, and education. This progress has sparked widespread public debates about the opportunities and challenges AI presents in various societies worldwide (Gnambs et al., 2025; Hinojo-Lucena et al., 2019).

Bates et al. (2020) suggest that the use of AI in education remains preliminary, owing to limited institutional demand. In South Africa, this reluctance is evident across schools and universities, where generative AI is often met with caution or outright resistance. Nevertheless, generative AI appears not as a temporary trend but as a permanent technological shift likely to shape education for generations. For History education, this reality necessitates proactive curriculum thinking that anticipates a future in which learners routinely interact with AI-generated historical content.

The emergence of tools such as ChatGPT has intensified these debates. Built on transformer-based neural networks, generative AI platforms can produce coherent historical narratives, summaries and explanations, raising fundamental questions about authorship, authority and historical truth (Mhlanga, 2023). These developments challenge history educators to rethink assessment practices, source evaluation and the teacher's role as the sole arbiter of historical knowledge.

In South African secondary schools, the integration of generative AI is further complicated by persistent inequalities in access to digital infrastructure. Many rural and township schools still lack reliable internet connectivity and basic technological resources (Ntsobi & Mwale, 2024; Nyathi, 2025). Without targeted interventions, the incorporation of generative AI risks exacerbating existing educational inequalities, privileging learners in well-resourced schools and marginalising others.

Bias in AI systems is an additional concern. AI models trained on skewed or incomplete datasets may reproduce discriminatory narratives and reinforce social injustices (Akhtar et al., 2024). In History education, this raises urgent questions about how AI-generated content may

perpetuate colonial, sexist or xenophobic perspectives if left uncritically examined. However, this risk also presents a pedagogical opportunity. History classrooms are uniquely positioned to expose, interrogate and challenge such bias by teaching learners to critically evaluate sources, question dominant narratives and recognise historical silences.

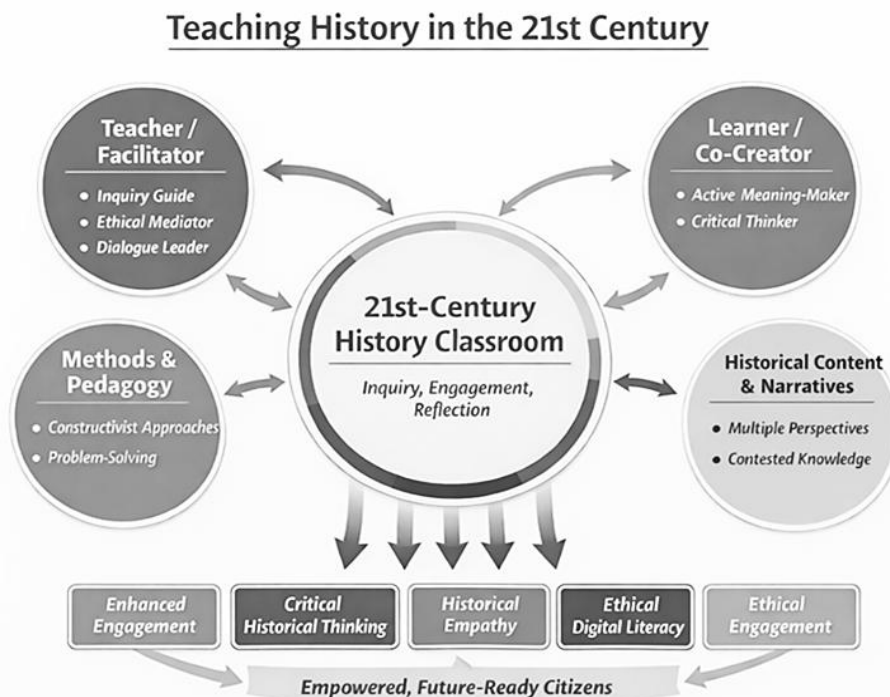
When integrated thoughtfully, generative AI has significant potential to enhance History teaching in South African secondary schools. AI-driven tools can support differentiated learning, help learners engage with complex historical texts, and foster deeper inquiry into historical questions (Saal et al., 2025). For learners with diverse needs, including those in special education contexts, generative AI may offer more personalised and inclusive learning experiences.

As a result, this paper argues that integrating generative AI into History education requires more than technical adoption. It demands a holistic, ethically grounded approach that foregrounds historical thinking, critical pedagogy and creativity. Curriculum designers, teacher education programmes and policymakers must therefore consider how to embed AI literacy, ethical reasoning and historical inquiry throughout the History curriculum, ensuring learners are prepared for a technologically mediated future without sacrificing the democratic and emancipatory aims of History education.

Therefore, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning of History in South African secondary schools. In doing so, the paper challenges the notion that History is merely a collection of disconnected past events and argues for its ethical, civic and educational significance in shaping informed, critically conscious and socially engaged citizens (see Figure 1). The paper positions History education as a critical site for cultivating historical consciousness, ethical reasoning and responsible digital citizenship in contemporary society by situating History teaching within the realities of the digital revolution and the growing presence of generative artificial intelligence.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model for Teaching History in the 21st Century Classroom



This model demonstrates how the teacher, learner, methods, digital tools and historical content interact to promote engagement, critical thinking, historical empathy, ethical digital literacy and the development of informed, empowered and future-ready citizens.

Perspectives and fallacies

Persistent fallacies about History, such as the belief that it is irrelevant, boring, or merely about the past, continue to shape learners' attitudes and pedagogical practices. For instance, Abd Hamid et al. (2019) note that "History education is also seen by some individuals, teachers and students as subjects that are not important to learn." They further argue that a focus on memorising events and learning about civilisations leads students to view History solely as memorisation, thereby diminishing their interest in learning. This paper interrogates these assumptions and calls for a reconceptualisation of History as a dynamic, future-oriented school subject rather than one often burdened by fallacies and unexamined assumptions.

Common fallacies include the belief that History is a fixed collection of facts, that engagement is solely a learner issue, or that digital tools such as AI are inherently harmful. These perspectives obscure the structural, pedagogical and technological dimensions that shape learner disengagement. Critical engagement with these fallacies is essential. For instance, AI-generated content may appear to "do the thinking" for learners, but when used ethically, it can enhance inquiry, foster multiple perspectives and reveal bias in historical narratives. Similarly, the assumption that rural or township schools are incapable of innovative History teaching neglects the creativity and resourcefulness of teachers and learners in these contexts. These fallacies obscure the real pedagogical work required to teach History meaningfully in the digital and generative AI era. Addressing them requires deliberate curriculum reinterpretation, pedagogical reform and ethical guidance.

Recommendations

History should not be relegated to the margins of the curriculum or treated as a static record of past events. Instead, it should be positioned as a dynamic, interpretive and socially relevant discipline that equips learners to understand the present and imagine alternative futures. This paper recommends pedagogical approaches that foreground creativity, critical inquiry and multiple perspectives, and encourages curriculum developers and teacher education programmes to support innovative History teaching practices aligned with contemporary realities, particularly the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the growing presence of generative AI in educational spaces. These technological advances cannot be ignored if South African youth are to participate meaningfully in a globally connected, knowledge-driven society.

There is a need to reinterpret and realign the CAPS History curriculum with emerging developments. Curriculum developers should revisit assessment instructions to incorporate process-oriented tasks that are resistant to AI-generated responses. For example, these could include oral history projects in which learners interview community members, portfolio-based assessments that document the research process, and in-class source-based discussions that require real-time historical reasoning. These assessment reforms would protect the integrity of History learning while aligning with CAPS' stated commitment to source analysis, evidence evaluation and historical argumentation.

Reforming assessment policies will ensure that the integrity of assessment outcomes is protected. However, this responsibility cannot rest solely with teachers. Continuous Professional Development programmes must equip History teachers with practical AI literacy, not merely awareness of AI risks, but hands-on experience with generative AI tools for lesson

design, source generation, and counternarrative exploration. For example, teachers could be trained to use generative AI to produce alternative historical perspectives, such as a first-person account from the perspective of a colonised person or a victim of a particular historical event, and then guide learners in critically interrogating the AI’s account for bias, omissions, and historical accuracy. This kind of pedagogical modelling transforms the teacher from a gatekeeper of knowledge into a co-researcher of historical truth.

Training history teachers should develop skills and strategies to humanise pedagogy, enabling students to understand the connections between different ways of knowing and thinking. This, in turn, will empower students to assess their capacity to effect change in the world. Humanising pedagogy, as a form of decolonisation, opposes deficit-based teaching methods that undervalue the cultures, literacies, and languages of diverse student groups (Chimbunde & Brown, 2025). In practice, this means incorporating oral histories, community narratives, and indigenous knowledge systems into History lessons alongside CAPS-prescribed content. For instance, when studying the history of resistance in South Africa, learners could be asked to collect oral testimonies from family members or community elders and compare them with textbook accounts. This task would build historical empathy, source criticism, and a personal connection to history simultaneously.

Equally, learners should be trained to approach generative AI tools not as shortcuts but as aids to their learning and as a means of introducing them to new perspectives for engaging with historical data. A practical framework for ethical use of generative AI in the History classroom may include (i) a source interrogation protocol in which learners identify the training data assumptions underlying any AI-generated historical account, (ii) a comparison task in which learners contrast AI-generated summaries of historical events with primary source accounts and scholarly interpretations, and (iii) a reflection task in which learners articulate the differences in perspective, tone and emphasis between human-authored and AI-generated historical narratives. Such a framework would embed critical thinking, source analysis and ethical reasoning, the core skills of historical inquiry, directly into the process of engaging with AI.

Lastly, policymakers, teacher education institutions, and school managers should collectively create enabling conditions for this pedagogical reimagining. This includes advocating for equitable access to digital infrastructure in rural and township schools and developing clear school-level policies on the ethical use of generative AI. Teacher education institutions should ensure that pre-service History teacher education explicitly addresses AI literacy, critical digital pedagogy, and decolonial approaches to the curriculum. Without such systemic support, the burden of innovation will continue to fall disproportionately on individual teachers, many of whom already operate under significant material and professional constraints.

Conclusion

The study of History remains imperative for present and future generations. When taught creatively and critically, History can foster informed, reflective and socially responsible citizens capable of engaging meaningfully with the complexities of the modern world. As this paper has argued, the teaching of History in South African secondary schools requires a critical reimagining to remain meaningful, relevant and socially responsive in the 21st-century classroom. Persistent learner disengagement, particularly in rural and township contexts, cannot be addressed by minor pedagogical adjustments alone but demands a fundamental shift in how History is conceptualised, taught and assessed.

Drawing on constructivism, critical pedagogy and creativity, the paper has demonstrated that traditional, teacher-centred approaches and curriculum practices are increasingly misaligned with learners' lived realities and the rapidly evolving digital landscape shaped by Generative Artificial Intelligence. Through a critical engagement with the History CAPS curriculum, the paper has highlighted both its enduring strengths and its limitations in responding to contemporary technological and epistemological shifts. Rather than positioning generative AI as a threat to History education, the paper has argued that it offers an opportunity to foreground historical thinking, ethical reasoning and critical digital literacy, provided it is integrated thoughtfully and responsibly.

Therefore, History education should move beyond rote memorisation and authoritative transmission towards dialogical, inquiry-based and ethically grounded pedagogies that empower learners as active meaning-makers. By aligning curriculum, pedagogy and assessment with the realities of the digital age, History can reclaim its central role in cultivating historically conscious, critically engaged and socially responsible citizens. The challenge facing History education is not whether generative artificial intelligence will reshape teaching and learning, but whether educators will harness this moment to reclaim History as a critical, ethical and socially transformative subject.

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Ethics Declaration:

This paper is conceptual in nature and does not involve collecting primary data, human participants or empirical fieldwork. Therefore, formal ethics committee approval was not required for this study. The paper draws solely on existing published scholarship, publicly available curriculum and policy documents, and the author's professional reflective experience as a History educator. All sources have been appropriately cited and acknowledged in accordance with applicable copyright and academic integrity standards. The author confirms that this work has been prepared in compliance with all relevant ethical guidelines governing academic research and publication.

Funding:

No external funding was used to support this research.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest

Statement of Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI):

The author declares that the conceptual model (Figure 1) in this manuscript was developed with the help of ChatGPT (GPT-5.2, OpenAI) as a supportive tool for generating ideas. The author is fully responsible for the theoretical framework, interpretation and scholarly content.

Grammarly Pro was used only for language editing and proofreading. No AI tools were used to substitute for scholarly judgment.

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