



The Role of History and Historical Thinking in the New Social Studies Program

Submitted by Dr. Amy von Heyking

Guiding Question:

• What does it mean to teach in ways that foster students' historical thinking skills?

Abstract:

• The new program of studies in social studies embodies a new understanding of history and its role within social studies. Its emphasis on "historical thinking," rather than the memorization of a particular set of facts about the past, provides opportunities for students to understand why and how our stories about the past are constructed. It means that students will be "doing" history, not just reading history.

History units in social studies have typically been grounded in the subject's decision-making model. Students researched the answers to questions like "What impact did the fur trade have on Canada?" What this model didn't acknowledge is the interpretive nature of historical inquiry: the "facts" are disputable; the events of the past are seen by different people in different ways; the sources we use to determine our accounts are open to debate. Instead, students were encouraged to "mine" the past to discover facts that can be used to solve current problems.

So what has changed? Alberta's new program of studies in social studies defines "historical thinking" as:

"a process whereby students are challenged to rethink assumptions about the past and reimagine both the present and the future. It helps students become well-informed citizens who approach issues with an inquiring mind and exercise sound judgment when presented with new information or a perspective different from their own."

History is not the story of the past. It is not a factual record of events that happened long ago. It is a form of inquiry that helps us construct an understanding of our lives (individually and collectively) in time. It is an

interpretive discipline, requiring that students determine the validity and credibility of evidence in order to analyze and construct narratives about people, events and ideas of the past. It uses evidence to build a narrative which has explanatory power. It requires a certain kind of thinking about the past and about the way stories of the past are constructed.

Benchmarks of Historical Thinking

- Establish the significance of people or events of the past
- Use primary source evidence
- Identify continuity and change
- Analyze causes and consequences
- Identify historical perspectives
- Understand the moral dimension of historical interpretations

This approach is a significant departure from past practices: the history taught in many schools has traditionally consisted of a single story. It has rarely, if ever, offered the opportunity for students to examine evidence and create their own stories. Understanding the interpretive nature of history is essential if students are to value the construction of valid alternative sto-

ries about the past and acknowledge the controversial nature of those constructions. History teaching that emphasizes what it means to "do" history helps students explore their own and their families' connections to the past, empowers them to consider significant themes and questions in history, encourages them to be critical readers or viewers of historical narratives, and acknowledges the diversity of questions of interest to historians. How can we do this?

Researchers, including Dr. Peter Seixas of the Centre for Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia, have identified six "structural" historical concepts that are the basis of historical thinking. (These have now been adopted as the framework for the national "Benchmarks of Historical Thinking" project by the Centre in partnership with Historica). They provide teachers with an entry point for deepening students' historical thinking in the sense that they can serve as a framework for historical inquiries and clarify what students should know and be able to do.

In brief, students should be able to:

- **Establish the significance of people or events of the past**

History is not a chronicle of everything that happened in the past. Historians make decisions about what is important; students need to be able

to distinguish between what is trivial and what is important. They need to explain, for example, why we care about certain events, such as the FLQ crisis, today.

- **Use primary source evidence**

Historians create narratives based on their interpretations of a wide range of primary source material. They must determine the validity and credibility of that evidence in drawing inferences about life, people or events of the past. Students should be examining the evidence in order to draw conclusions about the mysteries of the past. They might, for example, examine the transcripts of the trial of Louis Riel in order to come to their own conclusions about the credibility of the witnesses who testified and the fairness of the verdict.

- **Identify continuity and change**

Students should address how life has changed or stayed the same over time. For example, in their examination of the early fur trade, students might identify how the lives of the Iroquois and Huron were changed or stayed the same as a result of their contact with Samuel de Champlain.

- **Analyze causes and consequences**

Students often oversimplify the reasons for historical changes, seeing history as the record of accomplishments of a few important men.

Students should instead be challenged to identify the many and varied reasons – including social, political and economic conditions – for people’s actions in the past. So for example students should be encouraged to explore the many short- and long-term causes of the Holocaust, rather than seeing it as the result of the persuasive power of one hate-filled individual.

- **Identify historical perspectives**

Teachers should avoid asking students to imagine what it must have been like to live in the past. Rather than projecting their own ideas and values onto the people and circumstances of the past, students need support in order to view the past through the “minds and hearts” of people at the time. They should appreciate that there are many different perspectives on any given event in the past and often these are embodied in different kinds of evidence. Students investigating the reasons for the establishment of residential schools, for example, should explore the perspectives of government officials, government appointees such as Indian agents, the administrators and teachers in residential schools, the church officials responsible for the schools, and the many voices of aboriginal parents and children.

- **Understand the moral dimension of historical interpretations**

Historians understand how different interpretations of past events reflect different moral stances. They are careful when judging the people of the past to consider the different circumstances and norms of the time. Students should grapple with these difficult tasks and be challenged to determine appropriate actions to deal with the legacies of the past. For example, they might debate the wisdom of paying reparations to families of Chinese-Canadian descent who paid the head tax in order to immigrate to Canada; or, debate whether, given Emily Murphy’s support of eugenics, it is appropriate to celebrate her work for the political and social advancement of women.

The new program of studies in social studies offers teachers and students enormous opportunities to engage in historical inquiries that are intellectually challenging and emotionally engaging. History teaching that is structured around fostering students’ understanding of these six elements of historical thinking will be relevant, meaningful and powerful for our students. It will help them see themselves as historical actors: inheritors of the legacies of the past and makers of the future.

Annotated Resources, Web Sites, Books, etc.

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Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools, 3rd ed. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey, 2005.

This excellent book by two leading researchers reviews current research into the nature and extent of children’s historical thinking and provides detailed, practical teaching suggestions strategies, such as working with primary documents and integrating fictional literature.

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History. This website was created by researchers based at the University of Victoria, the Université de Sherbrooke and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto who work in the areas of Canadian history and historical methodology. It takes high school students through six unsolved mysteries in Canadian history, including the death of Peter Verigin in 1924 and a major fire in Montreal in 1734. Students become time detectives who must understand the context of the time and sift through all the evidence in order to draw well-defended conclusions about what “really” happened.

<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/indexen.html>

Letters from the Trunk. This website, created by the Archives Society of Alberta, provides students with the opportunity to learn about the experience of the settlers of the Canadian West by examining photographs, newspapers, posters and recordings that tell their story.

<http://www.ataoc.ca/archives/main.html>

Online Guide to Implementation, Alberta Education. This government website offers support material for the program of studies. Included are reviews of research, lists of children’s literature and critical challenges all intended to support the approach to history teaching outlined here.

<http://new.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca>

Teaching About Historical Thinking. Mike Denos and Ronald Case. Critical Thinking Consortium, Vancouver, 2006. This recent publication provides a detailed explanation of the six dimensions of historical thinking discussed here. Many case studies, teaching strategies and blackline masters are included in order to assist teachers in planning units of historical inquiry.

Biography:

Dr. Amy von Heyking is an Assistant Professor, Social Studies Education, in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Her areas of research include children’s historical understanding and history of curriculum. She has been a keynote speaker on the topic of historical thinking at several Alberta Education summer institutes to support the implementation of the new program of studies. Her presentations and support materials are available on the online guide to implementation. She has also conducted many workshops across the province and has published materials for teachers, including the Teaching with Dear Canada guides for Scholastic Canada.