

Historical Thinking in the Middle Years

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“ ... the history courses which I don’t even remember must have had an impact because, as a result of what they taught me, I grew up with a whole set of misconceptions about the country which I have spent much of my adult life unlearning.” (Francis, 1997, p. 13)

We have been teaching history in Alberta schools since 1905. Whether it was taught as a separate subject or integrated into citizenship or social studies classes, there have been at least three reasons to teach history to Alberta’s children: to shape their character (to teach moral lessons); to transmit a sense of identity (create a collective memory); and, to nurture specific intellectual skills.

For example, in the early part of the 20th century, elementary school children were directed to learn about the distinguished men of Canadian and British history:

“Discussion of the chief excellences and defects in their character [will] teach moral discrimination and ultimately ... derive principles of conduct.” In other words, we told the stories of important men to help children learn important moral lessons from the heroic and not so heroic conduct of the great men of the past.

In the early part of the 20th century, we taught history to nurture children's patriotism: "Children should appreciate the greatness of the British Empire of today and our privileges as citizens of that empire."

And we taught history because it cultivated certain mental faculties: it exercised memory, developed the imagination and taught critical judgment.

Lest we think that things have changed too much, let's remember that in our "old" program of studies we still incorporated history into social studies for much the same reasons. There were for example, important attitude objectives that were supposed to be met by learning about the people of Alberta's and Canada's past. Though our program called on students to have an "appreciation of and tolerance toward the decisions made by people [Albertans] in different times and different circumstances" rather than simply judging them as morally virtuous or morally corrupt.

The program still required that children have "pride in our country," but specified that they should appreciate "the accomplishments of many different racial, ethnic and linguistic groups," and recognize Canada's bilingual and multicultural identity. History teaching, therefore, remained essential in creating a kind of collective memory among Alberta's children.

The intellectual skills associated with history teaching were somewhat more difficult to identify in the program, given their integration with the social sciences. There are general critical thinking skills identified: drawing conclusions based on evidence, seeing events from different perspectives. But there was little there that was identified as the unique responsibility of history instruction, except perhaps the skills associated with

making sense of time and chronology. No wonder this seemed to take centre stage in our history units.

There was one other problem in our integration of history within social studies and it has to do with social studies' use of the social science inquiry model. Teaching units in social studies were generally developed around this problem-solving or decision-making model: we understand the problem; develop research questions; gather, organize and interpret information; develop a solution. Students researched the answers to questions like, "Why did people settle in Alberta?" or "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. We have certainly convinced a generation or more of children of the validity of this approach. When I ask my students – preservice teachers – why we teach history in schools, the most common answer I get is, "so we avoid the mistakes of the past," an answer that most serious historians would reject.

So what has changed? Why is there a new understanding of history within school programs? Two important things have happened in the field of history education since our current program was developed in the 1970s: (1) educators have a new understanding of history as a discipline, and (2) we have a better understanding of the cognitive capacities of our students. These two changes have resulted in new history programs throughout Europe, the United States and Canada. We see this in Alberta's new program of studies in social studies. Historical thinking is acknowledged as a

unique kind of thinking, not simply included in generic “higher order” or “critical” thinking skills. History’s unique identity as an art (and its connection to the arts) – rather than a social science – is better acknowledged. Its critical and multifaceted role within citizenship education is better defined.

The new program 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.” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 9)

So if we are expected to cultivate this historical thinking, what do we mean by history? Well, history is not *the* story of the past. It is *not* a purely 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, construct and assess narratives about people, events and ideas of the past. It uses evidence to build a narrative which explains why and how things have changed.

This approach is a significant departure from past practices: the history taught in many schools has traditionally consisted of a single story or narrative. It has rarely, if ever, offered the opportunity for children 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 stories about the past and acknowledge the controversial nature of those constructions. Creating this opening – the opening to come to historical understanding – helps children 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. Can our students do this?

I mentioned two changes in history education. One is the acknowledgement of this critical and interpretive nature of history; the other refers to advances in our understanding of children’s cognitive capacities.

The earliest examinations of children’s cognitive development within the context of history seemed to indicate that the subject was largely meaningless to students until the age of fourteen. Using Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, researchers concluded that students under the age of sixteen could not be expected to cope with abstract concepts or tasks, such as hypothesizing beyond what is readily apparent in source material or synthesizing material drawn from different sources. Researchers now have largely rejected universal cognitive development theories. There are no “stages” through which individuals simply mature. Instead, they define learning as a reordering of prior knowledge according to “scripts” which are domain specific. In other words, learners use their prior mental structures when confronted with something new, even something contradictory to their previous understanding. Learners need to raise their own questions

and generate their own hypotheses. Teachers can help support students' constructions of new understandings. What does this mean for history teaching?

This means that teachers need to acknowledge that students do indeed bring considerable prior understandings to the learning of history. British researcher Hilary Cooper (1995) reminds us that:

“the past is a dimension of children’s social and physical environment and they interact with it from birth. They hear and use the vocabulary of time and change: old, new, yesterday, tomorrow, last year, before you were born, when mummy was little, a long time ago, once upon a time. They ask questions about the sequence and causes of events: when did we move here? Why? What happened in the story next? Children encounter different interpretations of past times in nursery rhymes and fairy stories, family anecdotes, theme parks, films and pantomime. They encounter historical sources: old photographs, a baby book, an ornament, a statue, a church, maybe a closed-down factory or a derelict cinema being replaced by new roads and flats ... before children start school there are many contexts in which they are implicitly aware of the past” (pp. 1-2).

One interesting observation, however, must be made here. Researchers have found that the academic history children learn in school typically does not intersect very closely with children’s pre-existing history domains, ie. children may have considerable background knowledge about ancient Egypt, Biblical history or about the middle ages for example, but cannot place this within the context of the school history they learn, and so keep these as “separate spheres.” It also means that many misconceptions are never

addressed. For example, children used what they imagined to be historical episodes (in films like *Lord of the Rings*) to help them interpret historical documents and photographs. All this is just to emphasize that opportunities to share prior understandings should be incorporated into every history unit.

A new understanding of children's cognitive capacities also suggests that we shouldn't underestimate what children can do. Many studies support the claim that students can develop sophisticated historical thinking within an appropriate context of active engagement with source material, exposure to alternative accounts and teaching that scaffolds children's emerging understandings and skills. It is helpful, therefore, to examine the specific elements of historical thinking that define this domain, review current research in order to determine the extent and nature of children's work with these elements, and suggest ways in which teachers could engage students in meaningful tasks that would build children's understandings in history.

Although there are different explanations of historical thinking, Peter Seixas's (1996) six elements provide a coherent framework for analyzing historical thinking. They also provide teachers with an entry point for deepening students' historical thinking.

Significance

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. In some cases, historical significance is determined

by an event's or idea's or person's long-term impact. But this alone is not sufficient to determine historical significance. Historical significance is also determined by our current interests and values: the priorities of the present determine the questions we ask about the past and nature of the evidence we use. The CBC contest, "The Greatest Canadian," sparked lively discussion and debate over just this question. The choice of Tommy Douglas, widely championed as the creator of Canada's public health care system, is a powerful illustration for children of the extent to which history embodies the viewpoint of the present.

Research suggests that even children as young as second grade can distinguish between "history" and "the past" (Levstik & Pappas, 1992). By grade six students are able to explain and support their definitions with examples, suggesting that historical events are often rooted in conflict and result in social change. However, teachers must be deliberate in their discussions with children about historical significance. Researchers stress the important opportunities available to teachers to engage students in discussions about why some events, people or ideas are included in school history curricula and texts, and why others are omitted. Why devote all of Grade Four to the study of our province? (I think we're the only province that actually does this). Why in Grade Seven should we learn about the "key figures in the French exploration and settlement of North America." What are we leaving out?

One way to help students see the significance of the people and events they are learning about, is to organize inquiry units around big ideas or topics of continued relevance, rather than organizing the units chronologically. I would, for example, hate to see teachers use the outcomes listed in the program as a checklist of questions to ask one

after the other. Rather, I can see organizing the Grade 4 year around the idea of “movement”: people moving from within Canada to the province, from other countries, moving from country to city. This is a constant in our history – something we’re still seeing and experiencing. How does the experience of migrating or immigrating now compare with those experiences in the past? You need to find those conceptual “anchors” for your inquiries so that students see and appreciate the significance of the events they’re learning about.

Epistemology and Evidence

Another important element of historical thinking involves understanding the basis for claims to know about the past. For example, how do we determine Champlain’s role in the conflict between the Huron and the Iroquois? What evidence do we have? How reliable is this evidence? How can we explain historical accounts that offer different, even contradictory, interpretations of events in the past? Children should not be left with the impression that there is one true story of the past. Nor should they think that historians make things up. Children need to understand that historians draw inferences based on evidence; some inferences are better than others; some evidence is more credible.

Researchers suggest that this element of historical thinking – determining the credibility of evidence, weighing different kinds of evidence, understanding how historians use evidence to weave different narratives – is difficult for children. For example, British researchers Lee and Ashby (2000) found age-related differences when children aged 7 to 14 were presented with rival accounts of the same historical event.

The youngest children were more likely to believe the accounts at face value: they argued that the accounts were not so much different in content than in the vocabulary they used. When obvious contradictions in the claims contained in the accounts were pointed out to them, they assumed that one narrator had more information or the other was mistaken. Older children were more likely to see the accounts as authored by people with particular biases, and some understood that accounts would differ according to the questions historians asked or the nature of their investigations.

Foster and Yeager (1999) demonstrated that students dismissed all primary sources as “biased” and insisted that “mixing sources would yield a definitive truth” (p. 311). VanSledright & Kelly (1998) found that students judged the validity of a source by the amount of information provided, ie. Its length, rather than by criteria associated with its origin, author or bias. Barton (1997b) after working meticulously with students in analyzing primary sources, was astonished when the students ignored the evidence they had analyzed when creating their own accounts.

While children may have difficulty with the nuanced and varied interpretations of historical evidence, they are quite comfortable recognizing and accepting multiple perspectives in literature, for example. They can appreciate the differing perspectives offered by characters in novels. They can debate varying interpretations of stories they listen to or read. They need to understand that history is simply another narrative form, but one based on the use and interpretation of evidence. How do we encourage this understanding? First, by having students read or view primary source material. Children can examine photographs, analyze physical artifacts and interview elders in order to

create accounts about the past. In a Grade 4 unit about immigrants to their community, they could draw inferences from an immigrant's trunk full of objects. Who do you think this belonged to? What do you think this person was like? Where were they from? Why might they have brought these objects with them? An activity like this requires children to make tentative assumptions based on the evidence they have and generate questions to guide further inquiry.

Critical reading of historical fiction can also be useful. But since students at this age are most familiar with narrative as a fictional, ie. invented, form, they need explicit instruction in and opportunities to examine the evidence upon which historical narratives are constructed. They should, for example, use source material to determine which episodes in a story or novel are likely to be true and which are invented by the author. They need to compare and contrast historical fiction with nonfiction accounts.

Encountering contradictory accounts (creating cognitive dissonance) is probably most important. How do you account for the fact that these historians might have interpreted this event differently?

Continuity and Change

Understanding change over time is central to historical thinking. So, too, is the need to recognize the constants that continue through time.

Middle years students are becoming more comfortable with time concepts such as decades and centuries. They are learning to identify historical eras and place them in sequence. But sequencing activities do not by themselves aid students' understanding of change and continuity. Students need to understand that that "(1) change is continuous

and always present; (2) change affects people in different ways; and (3) change can be recorded and become a record of the past” (Seefeldt, 1993, p. 147).

Students should not just be sequencing events (putting events on a timeline for example). They are prone to construct simplified narratives that distort history and sometimes timeline activities can exacerbate that tendency. Studies show that students assume that historical change follows a uniform and linear pattern: aboriginal people were here; immigrants came to North America, they lived in small cabins, they built cities. They assume that aboriginal people disappeared – or were insignificant - after this initial era. They are confused by evidence of “pioneer” life well after the establishment of cities in some parts of the country. Students also tend to believe that once a “problem” had been solved it is no longer an issue. For example, they believe that once women’s suffrage was achieved, women were equal and no longer faced discrimination. Students should constantly be comparing the experience of men and women, urban and rural residents, and upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic classes in every era they study. “Moreover, students should learn about the relationships among these groups, so that they see historical societies as consisting of many connected groups rather than as idealized stereotypes of explorers, settlers, and so on” (Barton, 1996, p. 74).

Progress and Decline

These concepts address the crucial questions of whether or not conditions have improved with the passage of time. School textbooks typically convey an underlying positive message of physical, intellectual and social advancement. Many studies suggest that students believe that history is the story of constant progress, that life – whether in

terms of political participation, technological advantages or amount of leisure time – has always improved over time. In fact, when American children were asked to identify the most important events in their country’s history, they rejected any idea or event that challenged the dominant message of their history studies: that the nation has continuously progressed toward greater liberty and freedom for all (Barton, 1996). Lest we think the Americans are unique in this regard, here is an excerpt from a text about Alberta’s history used in Gr. 4 classrooms:

“Alberta is a land of promise that has been fulfilled – the promise of golden grain, of sweet-scented lumber, of sleek cattle, and oil and gas. It is a land of promise that gives according to the effort of each person.

“Above all else, Alberta is people ... It is every Albertan who gave the sweat of his or her brow to make the promise come true. It is a tribute to a people who were, and who still are, brave enough to follow a dream” (Bohnec, 1979, p. 70).

I’m not suggesting that life hasn’t improved over time, or that children be turned into cynics, but I am suggesting that thinking historically means challenging this assumption: life has improved for whom? In what ways? In what ways has it deteriorated? What concerns or difficulties might we face that people of previous generations didn’t face?

If I were helping students investigate the stories of immigrants to Alberta, for example, we would examine the propaganda and promises that drew people here, and then examine evidence of people’s actual experience, positive and negative. For

example, we'd listen to the song "The Alberta Homesteader" which consists of 8 pretty depressing verses describing an immigrant's life on the farm:

The Alberta Homesteader

1. My name is Dan Gold, an old bachelor I am

I'm keeping old batch on an elegant plan

You'll find me out here on Alberta's bush plain

A-starving to death on a government claim.

7. You may try to raise wheat; you may try to raise rye

You may stay there and live, you may stay there and die

But as for myself, I'll no longer remain

A-starving to death on a government claim.

Challenging the dominant messages of continuous progress is necessary for a more balanced understanding, a more complex understanding of change.

Empathy and Moral Judgment

Historian Gerda Lerner states that meaningful historical study, "demands imagination and empathy, so that we can fathom worlds unlike our own, contexts far from those we know, ways of thinking and feeling that are alien to us. We must enter past worlds with curiosity and respect" (1997, 201). Historical empathy does not require that we ask students to "identify with" the people of the past. It is actually

counterproductive to ask them to imagine how they would have felt if they lived in the past. This requires that they project their own ideas into the past; that is called “presentism.” Indeed what we want to encourage is the appreciation that the people of the past thought and lived very differently than we do.

We do not want students to judge the people of the past as stupid or racist or ignorant. We seek explanation, if not exoneration. It would be unfortunate if Grade 4 students learning about the racist attitudes and immigration policy of the late 19th and 20th century simply dismissed Canadians of this period as evil, or if they came out of their study of the colonial period thinking the British and the French were just greedy. We want them to articulate the many and varied perspectives of the people of these past times. There is actually little hard evidence that students can do this. Their strong tendency to see history as progress over time means that they are quick to judge the people of the past as ignorant.

But we want to cultivate empathy; we want to encourage an appreciation of the multiple perspectives of the people of the past. How do we do this? Historical fiction can help students get into the minds and hearts of people in the past – as long as they’re critical readers of that fiction. Role-playing and simulation can also be helpful. It doesn’t have to be ambitious. Some of the most effective strategies I used with children were very simple: drawing the outline of a pioneer shanty on the floor in the classroom and experiencing how small it is. The problem with role-playing is of course that students shouldn’t just be projecting their own attitudes into the past; they need to base their role-playing on evidence, so these experiences need to be carefully prepared. Many historic sites offer terrific simulation experiences for students.

The paradox of empathy is that it involves confronting difference at the same time that we recognize a common humanity that transcends time. Yes, the people of the past had flaws, and while we try to learn from those flaws, we have the humility to know that we too will make our own mistakes. Examining the people of the past allows us to recognize something familiar at the same time acknowledging that times have changed in profound ways.

Historical Agency

The final element in Seixas's account of historical thinking refers to causation: historical agency is concerned with who makes things change and why. Research suggests that elementary children have extremely simplistic notions of the reasons for historical change. They tend to see history as a record of the accomplishments of a few important people. For example, they might assume that Sir John A. Macdonald was responsible for the confederation of the British North American colonies. Students at this age level have difficulty appreciating the social, economic and political factors that lead to change; they do not understand the role of social and political institutions (Barton 1997a).

On the other hand, understanding that the actions of people in the past have an impact on us today, and appreciating that our actions will have consequences for future generations is history teaching's essential contribution to citizenship education. Thinking historically does not just mean thinking about the past; it involves seeing oneself in time, as an inheritor of the legacies of the past and as a maker of the future. As historian Gerda Lerner says, "It gives us a sense of perspective about our own lives and encourages us to

transcend the finite span of our life-time by identifying with the generations that came before us and measuring our own actions against the generations that will follow ... We can expand our reach and with it our aspirations” (1997, p. 201). History teaching should challenge children to make a difference in the future of their communities.

Conclusion

Teaching for historical thinking skills requires deliberate and thorough preparation. Seixas’ elements of historical thinking can provide a framework for questions, activities, but are not sufficient. Ultimately children must be encouraged to reach understanding or insight about life in the past and about the nature of historical narratives.

In order to nurture historical understanding or facilitate historical insights, students need to see the relevance of their historical inquiries and engage as much as possible in hands-on activities that allow them to explore the ways people lived in the past. They need a chance to share their understandings at the beginning of historical inquiries, to develop their own questions about the past and examine evidence in order to develop their conclusions. History teaching that focuses on encouraging understanding or facilitating historical insights will create citizens who are critical thinkers, and who look to the future with imagination, empathy and hope.

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