

# Historical Thinking in the Middle Years

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# Why teach history?

“ ... 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)

# Why did we teach history?

- To shape character
- To transmit a particular understanding of national identity
- To nurture specific intellectual skills

# History within social studies

- Social studies has been grounded in the social science inquiry model
- We “mine” the past to discover facts that can be used to solve current problems

# Changes in history education

- New understanding of history as a discipline
- Better understanding of cognitive capacities of children

# Historical thinking

“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)

# What is history?

- It is a form of inquiry that helps us construct our understanding of our own 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

# About constructivism

- Rejection of universal cognitive development theories
- We learn by constructing new understandings of relationships and phenomena in our world

# Importance of prior understandings:

“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” (Cooper, 1995, pp. 1-2).

## **Students' prior understandings may come from:**

- Family stories
- Visits to museums and historic sites
- Film and television
- Books (fiction and nonfiction)
- Commemorations

## Provide appropriate scaffolding

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.

# Elements of historical thinking

- Significance
- Epistemology and evidence
- Continuity and change
- Progress and decline
- Empathy and moral judgment
- Historical agency

(Seixas, 1996)

# Significance

- Determined by long-term impact
- Influenced by our current interests and values: the priorities of the present determine the questions we ask about the past and the nature of the evidence we use

# Challenges for students?

- Children as young as Grade Two can distinguish between “history” and “the past”
- By Grade Six, they are able to explain and support their definitions with examples, suggesting that historical events are often rooted in conflict and result in social change (Levstik & Pappas, 1992)
- Students are heavily influenced by their national identity in defining significant events (Yeager, Foster & Greer, 2002)

# Teaching about significance

- Discuss openly and often why certain people, events and ideas are included in the curriculum: have they had a long-term impact on our society? Do they reflect a current concern?
- Discuss what has been omitted
- Organize inquiries thematically rather than chronologically: “Movement”; “Impact of war”

# Epistemology and evidence

- Understanding the basis for claims to know about the past
- Students need to understand that historians draw inferences based on evidence
- How do we determine the credibility and validity of evidence? How do we use evidence to weave a narrative?

# Challenges for students?

- Lee & Ashby (2000) have found age-related progression of ideas about the nature of historical accounts
- Foster & Yeager (1999) demonstrated that students 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
- Barton (1997b) discovered that students ignored the evidence they had analyzed when creating their own accounts.

# Helping students use evidence

- Analyze primary documents such as photographs, artifacts, memoirs, newspaper accounts: what do you know for certain about it? What can you guess? What would you like to know?
- Compare and contrast historical fiction and nonfiction accounts
- Account for different interpretations of the same events

# Continuity and change

- “(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)

## Challenges for students?

- Students quickly grasp sequencing
- They are prone to constructing simplified narratives: students assume that change follows a uniform and linear pattern
- Students assume that problems are “solved”
- They need to be exposed to wide range of lifestyles and experiences in any given historical period

# Progress and decline

- Have conditions improved with the passage of time?

## Challenges for students?

- Many studies confirm that elementary children believe that history is the story of constant progress
- American children, for example, rejected any idea or event that challenged the dominant message of their studies: the nation has constantly progressed toward greater liberty and freedom for all (Barton, 1996)

# The traditional interpretation

“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)

## A different view

### 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.

# Empathy and moral judgment

“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.”

(Lerner, 1997, p. 201)

Empathy demands not that we ask students to imagine how they would have felt if ... but to appreciate how the people of the past felt differently.

# Challenges for students?

- There is little evidence that children 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

# Building empathy

- Historical fiction
- Role-playing, simulation
- Field trips

# Historical agency

- How and why things change
- Causation

## Challenges for students?

- Children have extremely simplistic notions of the reasons for historical change
- They see history as a record of the accomplishments of a few important people
- They have difficulty appreciating the social, economic and political context of change

(Barton, 1997a)

# Seeing ourselves in time

“We have inherited the legacies of the past; we make the future.”

“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.”

(Lerner, 1997, p. 201)

# Elements of historical thinking

- Significance
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## The nature of historical insight: seeing ourselves in time

- Teaching historical thinking skills requires deliberate and thorough preparation
- The “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

# Encouraging historical understanding; facilitating historical insight

- 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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