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MAKING HISTORY MEANINGFUL

HACIENDO LA HISTORIA SIGNIFICATIVA

FAZENDO A HISTÓRIA SIGNIFICATIVA

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ABSTRACT: This article is a reviewed version of the presentation made in the VIII Simposio Internacional de Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales en el ámbito Iberoamericano and XVI Seminario de Didáctica de la Historia, Geografía y Ciencias Sociales organised by the Instituto de Historia of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso on 2018. Students do not see the value of History in their life. The author starts presenting a brief description of the BC Heritage Fairs in Canada as an example of how teachers can make history meaningful for their students. Then it goes straight to present The Historical Thinking Project, its history, an explanation of the Big Six Historical Concepts and how they can help teachers to construct narratives with the students so they can see history as a meaningful subject.

RESUMEN: Este artículo es una version revisada de la presentación hecha en el VIII Simposio Internacional de Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales en el ámbito Iberoamericano y XVI Seminario de Didáctica de la Historia, Geografía y Ciencias Sociales organizado por el Instituto de Historia de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso el año 2018. Los estudiantes no ven el valor de la Historia para sus vidas. El autor comienza con una breve descripción de las Ferias de Patrimonio en Canadá que son un ejemplo de cómo los docentes pueden hacer la historia significativa para sus estudiantes. Luego, va directamente a explicar el Historical Thinking Project, su historia, una explicación de los Seis Grandes Conceptos Históricos y cómo ellos pueden ayudar a los docentes a construir narrativas con sus estudiantes para que puedan ver la historia como una asignatura significativa.

RESUMO: Este artigo é uma versão revisada da apresentação feita no VIII Simpósio Internacional de Didática das Ciências Sociais no contexto ibero-americano e no XVI Seminário de Didática da História, Geografia e Ciências Sociais organizado pelo Instituto de História da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Valparaíso em 2018. Os alunos não vêem o valor da história para as suas vidas. O autor começa com uma breve descrição das Feiras do Património no Canadá que são um exemplo de como os professores podem tornar a história significativa para os seus alunos. Então, ele vai diretamente explicar o Projeto de Pensamento Histórico, sua história, uma explicação dos Seis Grandes Conceitos Históricos e como eles podem ajudar os professores a construir narrativas com seus alunos para que eles possam ver a história como um assunto significativo.

Many students do not know why they should learn history. In a study of English students' views on why they study history, most answered that history was useful but they had considerable trouble explaining their reasons. Researchers classified almost half of the answers as "undeveloped" or tautological. Many students were puzzled with answers such as "I don't really know but some people really enjoy it" or "They don't tell us why."[1]

There is also a perception common in many countries that school history, especially national history, is boring and repetitive. A grade ten student in Toronto said, "The first time we learnt it, it was sort of interesting, but then every year they seem to keep teaching it and it gets really boring."[2] Newspapers bemoan student ignorance of history.

That said, there is considerable research evidence that many students do know a good deal about the past. It may, however, be piecemeal or confused. Moreover, student knowledge of the past – family history, for example – is often a mismatch with what educators think they should know such as politics and war. Although the lamentations of boredom and ignorance may be exaggerated, there is much that history educators can do to make history more purposeful, engaging and useful for navigating a complex world.

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[1] Harris, R. & Haydn, T. "Children's Ideas about History and Why They Matter," *Teaching History*, 132, 45.

[2] Clark, A. "A Comparative Study of History Teaching in Australia And Canada: Final Report" (Monash University, 2008), 5.

STORIES[3]

So how can teachers help students see learning history as meaningful? "Tell stories," say many critics. I was once the coordinator of a program called Heritage Fairs that asked students to tell stories about Canadian history in a public forum but there was more involved than just telling. Here are examples of stories from students whom I interviewed.

Isaac told a story about a memorial site not far from his home. The site is on the farm of the late Charlie Perkins who trained fighter pilots during World War One and survived horrific injuries himself. When he returned to his farm east of Vancouver, he chose a huge Douglas fir tree on his land to create a memorial to the young pilots he had trained who had died. Years later highway engineers planned to cut the tree down for a new highway, and according to legend Charlie defended it sitting in his lawn chair with a rifle. The Minister of Highways eventually visited Charlie and agreed to change the route of the highway to skirt the memorial. For years afterwards, drivers could see the massive fir with three small flags, a white cross and the sign: Charlie's Tree.

Analiese used several stories in support of her inquiry into the question "Should the government apologize for the treatment of the immigrant children?" The children were orphans or from poor families, some as young as eight, who were brought from England to Canada a hundred years ago for a better life. Sadly, they often suffered neglect and exploitation as cheap labour or worse. One of these stories was that of Analiese's great grandmother.

Olivia told stories about "Indian Residential Schools", the church run schools where Indigenous children, whom we call First Nations in Canada, were forced to attend and where they were often abused emotionally, physically and sexually. Her central story was that of her grandmother who had attended one of these schools. In my conversation with her, Olivia was quite articulate in linking her grandmother's story to a larger narrative of what she called "cultural genocide."

Each year in my province of British Columbia students in schools across the province tell stories like these to the public at a Heritage Fair. The teacher begins by guiding students to choose a topic and develop an inquiry question.

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[3] Use of story and narrative as interchangeable is common in both popular and scholarly writing and I will use story and narrative as synonyms throughout this article.

Although there are variations from teacher to teacher, most require students to interpret primary sources and explain the historical significance of their topic. In my interviews, students admitted to frustration in doing their research, but by the time they created a display of their research and presented to an audience, they were engaged and proud of what they learned. The audience at Fairs includes fellow students and adults at schools, museums and community centres where they are also interviewed by judges for a wide range of prizes. A few students from different regions in the province are chosen to attend a summer history camp that includes the even larger Provincial Fair, last year at the Royal British Columbia Museum, our major provincial museum.

What do the Fairs offer as possible ways to make history meaningful? Stories are one answer. The projects of Isaac, Analiese, and Olivia used stories to weave together various threads – schools and family, poverty and power, wars and trees – in a coherent and familiar format. Unsurprisingly, their stories also had limitations. For example, Isaac told a charming local story but only poorly connected it to the "big picture" narrative of a war that killed sixteen million people including 60,000 Canadians.

Meaningful history teaching should also be purposeful. The Heritage Fairs website lists several: encourage young people to develop their own opinions and values based on a respect for evidence; to see history around them; to appreciate the diverse experiences of people in the past; and to connect local and family stories to larger narratives.[4] However, listing them and mentioning them from time to time is not sufficient. Teachers need to articulate their purpose and help students see how learning activities relate to it.

There were other meaningful elements of the Fairs program including the role of an authentic audience, student choice, and in-depth research. These three students, like many others, chose a topic with family or community connections. The protagonists in their stories were real people, not abstractions. For Olivia her project also connected to her sense of identity. Both her and Annaliese's topics involved ethical questions. Indeed, Heritage Fairs students frequently choose controversies to explore.

Because stories of the past are such a powerful device for making meaning, story has been called a teacher's best asset. Cognitive psychologists sometimes

[4] BC Heritage Fairs, http://bcheritagefairs.ca/about/#about, accessed 15 June, 2018.

refer to stories as psychologically privileged, meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material. Narratives help students organize historical events, people, and changes into coherent cognitive structures in a format that helps them understand and retain what they learn.

A shared story also encourages a common identity and social cohesion. This is the purpose, of course, of the national story. For most of the 19th and 20th centuries school history programs were based on the teaching of a nationalist grand narrative. In Canada education is a provincial responsibility. English Canadian provinces told a story of the progress of European resettlement. Québec had a different national story tied to the Catholic Church and the struggle of francophones to survive as a distinct people. Both tried to instil a common identity and an attachment to the nation. Progression in learning and its evaluation were based on the accumulation of factual knowledge about the narrative.

Both teachers and historians know well that to be coherent and meaningful stories must simplify. They include and exclude. For example, the traditional national storyline excluded, marginalized or stereotyped women, minorities and the poor. Pedagogy was passive and unreflective with little place for critical questions. Historical thinking was a foreign country.

As a student I lived this traditional history education. Much of class time was spent copying notes the teacher had written on the black board. After graduation I discovered that these notes became the textbook for the entire province, its title *A Nation Developing* reflecting the story of national progress.

Only three women were mentioned in *A Nation Developing* and two of them were English Queens who never set foot in the country. The Indigenous people, the Musqueam, who lived two kilometres from my school, were not mentioned at all.

The most damning criticism of the traditional history education in Canada was that it didn't work. By the 1970s it had clearly failed to instil a patriotic devotion to the country amongst francophone Québecois. The province voted in favour of a separatist government and in a subsequent referendum came close to voting to secede from the rest of Canada.

Canada's grand narrative is still an important part of the curriculum in Canada but the storyline has shifted. Up until mid-twentieth century it was a settler,

assimilationist, colony-to-nation storyline. In the 1960s it began to move to a more inclusive narrative of progress towards a nation of human rights with a tolerant, multicultural mosaic. This approach has been criticized. For some it is because it continues to emphasize Europeans while others critique a perceived overemphasis on the negative, what Australians call "black arm band history". Nonetheless, in a multi-cultural democracy like Canada promoting a shared inclusive identity is a meaningful purpose. The country has also begun a national campaign to reconcile with the country's Indigenous people for its sad history of oppression and education is an important part of this reconciliation. Greater attention to multiple identities also gives a greater opportunity for students to consider competing narratives as I will discuss later in this paper.

A "big picture" or grand narrative, of course, need not be a national. The main point of a narrative is to make memorable connections of knowledge, questions and concerns and the point of being big or grand is to give a larger perspective. There have been some exciting scholarly discussions about using historical frameworks, giving students provisional overviews that they refine over time as they learn more. Many Canadian teachers have experimented with thematic frameworks involving the development of human rights or immigration.

Beyond the grand is "Big History", developed by David Christian who was inspired by the Annales school of French historians and their emphasis on the "longue durée". And Big History is long: from the Big Bang to the birth of our modern world via themes such as the origin of Homo sapiens and the beginning of agriculture. Along the way it synthesizes history, biology, chemistry, astronomy, economics and more into nothing less than a unifying narrative of life on earth.

Big History is also popular. David Christian's TED talk, "The History of Our World in 18 Minutes," has been watched by over 8 million people. In 2011 Bill Gates decided to support Christian and a team of educators created the Big History Project for American secondary schools, what the website calls "a social studies course that runs on jet fuel."

To what extent could such a beyond-grand narrative make history meaningful? A larger time scale could help students understand a narrative such as climate change, one of the most historically significant topics of our time, a theme that struggles to find a place in a national narrative.

However, think back to the in-depth inquiries of the Heritage Fairs students. What kind of an inquiry question could they explore in a Big History approach, one that they could actually answer? What would be the family or local history connection? What would be the primary sources for the Big Bang? At this large scale would students see individuals of the past as real people that students care about?

Just telling stories as a way to learn about the past can be too cozy, too limiting. Isaac, Annaliese, and Olivia did more than this. Their projects were meaningful because they also "did history": they followed the steps of inquiry, interpreted primary sources and explained the significance of their research. In countries around the world, education leaders, teachers, museum curators, and public historians are embracing inquiry and historical thinking as a way to give greater meaning to history education.

HISTORICAL THINKING

As our population becomes increasingly more diverse and previously silenced people demand a voice, students are faced with multiple stories often competing ones. In history class students should answer the question "What's the story?" but to be truly meaningful they should also answer, "What other stories are there? Why should I believe this story? Why tell this story?" In other words, we want students to recognize diverse accounts of the past and the often hidden but influential stories that shape the present, decide which accounts are the more plausible, and construct their own stories based on evidence.

In the words of the 2014 annual report of the *Historical Thinking Project,* students should "be able to sift the wheat from the chaff, to find truths amidst a cacophony of politically and commercially motivated messages, and to contribute, in their own voices, to democratic discussion."[5]

The Historical Thinking Project was the catalyst for the widespread adoption of historical thinking in school curricula across Canada. Its model for historical thinking centres on six concepts or competencies: historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, perspective taking, and the ethical dimension.

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[5] Seixas, P. & Colyer, J. "From the Curriculum to the Classroom: More Teachers, More Students, More Thinking: A Report on the 2014 National Meeting of The Historical Thinking Project", 3.

If Historical Thinking Project were to be told as a story, the protagonist would be Peter Seixas, professor emeritus of the University of British Columbia and the founding director of the Historical Thinking Project. He developed these concepts based on his research and that of many international scholars. They were subsequently refined over many years in consultation with historians, history education researchers, teacher educators, museum educators and classroom teachers. The concepts reveal problems, tensions, or difficulties because we do not have direct access to the past. It no longer exists. History can only be an interpretation based on the traces left behind. Historical thinking is the creative process that historians go through to interpret these traces and construct the stories of history.

What follows are some ways that the invocation to "tell stories" can be hitched to historical thinking to teach students how "to find truths amidst a cacophony of politically and commercially motivated messages, and to contribute, in their own voices, to democratic discussion." (An obvious caveat: there are no easy or definitive ways to teach students how to do this. Teachers matter – a lot.)

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The problem inherent in this concept is straightforward but often unexamined in the history class: we can't remember or learn everything that ever happened. The past is infinite. So what stories of the past should we tell? What should we pass on to our children? "Historical significance" involves the principles behind the selection of those stories.

Although there are several reasonable criteria for selection, the Historical Thinking Project decided on *results*: deep, long-lasting change and *revealing*: light shed on issues in history or contemporary life. However, events, people and trends meet the criteria for significance only when they occupy an important place in a narrative.

Exploring a photograph, film or a textbook to discover the creator's idea of significance can engage even surprise students. As students develop their sophistication in analyzing significance, they can also appreciate how it can vary according to an individual or group's perspective and open the door to alternative narratives.

History becomes personally meaningful when students connect their personal and local stories to larger narratives. A focus on family and community history may neglect critical thinking (what young person will challenge Grandmother's memory) or be unaware of the larger narrative so the guidance of a skillful history teacher is vital.

Above all, answering the often unvoiced, but always meaningful question about significance, "What are we studying this?" can establish a purpose. Students should not be left in doubt about the reasons why they are required to learn a topic.

EVIDENCE

The past is gone. We do not have direct access to it. What stories of the past should we believe? How do we know what we know?

For students to evaluate narratives, students need numerous and diverse sources and skill in analyzing them. Historians are especially adept at this: squeezing meaning from the hodge podge of fragmentary evidence that the past has left us.

The on-going controversy over manipulation of social media, reliability of websites and algorithims of search engines has broadened the importance of the concept of evidence. The idea that knowing equals downloading and confirmation bias leave students susceptible to "fake news". A 2016 study of American teenagers reported that 80% to 90% of them had difficulty distinguishing between real and fake news.[6] Students can only challenge dominant accounts of the past and come to their own conclusions, if they learn that claims must be supported by evidence and that historians often disagree over interpretations.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Making meaning out of the huge, infinite past requires vast simplification. A timeline, especially an illustrated one, can be a good beginning made more memorable if students construct it as a story. Historians, however, also use

[6] Wineburg, S. & McGrew, S. (2016, November 1). Why students can't Google their way to the truth. Education Week. www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/02/why-students-cant-google-their-way-to.html.

other devices such as the ideas of turning points, progress and decline and periodization to make sense of the pace and direction of change.

All of these can help students construct their own stories of change. For example, students can use the internet to compare timelines of different countries or different themes to identify different interpretations. Given sufficient data they can decide for themselves what are turning points, debate why progress for one group may be decline for another, and consider alternative time periods.

CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

Causation is as fundamental to history as it is to any storytelling. Much like a good story, the element of puzzle in a good inquiry question can engage students.

However, the simplifications inherent in story-telling can be barriers to historical thinking: For example, students tend to personalize history and see change as a result of the actions of a small number of determined actors. Students also tend to limit their thinking of the causes of historical events to the immediate antecedents. They expect accounts to be composed of causal links but the links should be quick, clean and obvious. History is a story but a simple one.

Teachers can use student familiarity with narrative, however, to make connections and move towards more sophisticated understanding of cause and consequence by giving students real historical situations and human dilemmas – drawing on emotions, what matters to people of the past, the choices they faced, the conditions. Students predict the consequences of decisions, the probable narrative, and then test their version against alternative narratives and varied sources.

Teaching students progressively more sophisticated vocabulary such as *factor* or *exacerbate* and assigning nuanced tasks such as concept maps can help make student narratives more subtle, more complex.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

"Any good history begins in strangeness,"[7] argues historian Richard White reflecting on the often vast difference between the conditions and worldviews of people today and those of people in the past.

A few details can highlight that strangeness to engage students: Why did so many Canadians cheer when Britain announced it was going to war in 1914? Why did they enthusiastically join the army to fight so far from home in a war of little strategic importance to their country?

If students study a variety of sources, they can come to appreciate the diversity of people of the past and the diversity of their narratives. Students are often surprised to learn that many Canadians opposed the war. Soldiers fired on civilians demonstrating against conscription in the army killing four.

Taking the perspective of people of the past is necessary for history to be meaningful. Many ideas and practices of the past do not make sense for modern students and they can be quick to judge practices such as stupid. Until students examine the cultural context that shaped the perspective of people in the past, their actions have no meaning. Students need not only to know both what that context was and why it explains the actions.

A greater challenge is for students to understand how their own worldviews shape their beliefs and actions. The teacher needs to help students understand that when they look or read a primary source, they are also "shaping" it, that is, applying the cultural values, standards and experiences of their own world.

For students to be agents in their own learning means that the teacher recognizes the ideas about the past that they bring to class from family, the media or collective memory. Such ideas can be helpful to teachers, but they can also be at odds with how historians think about the past.

ETHICAL DIMENSION

The ethical dimension addresses the question, "How can history help us to live in the present?"

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[7] Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories* (New York, 1998), 13.

The first element of this dimension is to recognize that there are messages – implicit and explicit – in the various stories that surround us: in film, websites and textbooks. Beyond this, understanding the ethical dimension can help us address the best way to respond to the difficult past such as the story of colonization and what Olivia called "cultural genocide". A fair assessment of the ethical implications of history can inform us of our responsibilities to remember and respond to the sacrifices and injustices of the past. These include becoming informed so that one can remember, memorialize, and take action.

At the end of a talk I gave in 2018 in Valparaiso a member of the audience asked me about the worrying trend for the citizens of many countries to hold favourable views about authoritarian government. I want to elaborate on the too brief answer that I gave then on how teaching historical thinking, especially the ethical dimension, can be meaningful by supporting democratic values and behaviours. This is especially relevant to Chile. A recent report on the results of a survey of Chilean students found that a large number had a poor understanding of the transition from military rule to democracy. Many students expressed a common simplification inherent in history-as-storytelling: the transition to democracy, was seen as rapid and automatic.[8]

Because many stories can be told about the past and because stories hold such power, history is destined to be controversial, even more so when survivors and perpetrators share the same country and the events are in the recent past. Nonetheless, there is empirical evidence that a range of positive citizenship outcomes can come from engaging students in thoughtful discussion of controversial issues where students explore different sides and feel comfortable expressing their opinions. These outcomes include support for democratic values, voting, and confidence in the ability to influence public policy. Moreover, students are drawn to ethical questions of justice just as they are drawn to stories that have a personal connection. Meaningful historical thinking is entwined with ethics and emotions.

Most of the criteria for making history meaningful apply to teaching the transition from military rule to democracy: it can help students understand contemporary Chile; it touches many families and local communities; and the controversy about power, values and memorialization can encourage students

[8] Maria Sánchez-Agusti, Nelson Vásquez-Lara, and Gabriela Vásquez-Leyton, "Understanding the Processes of Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy. A Survey among Secondary School Students in Chile." *International Journal of Historical Learning and Research,* 13.2, 28.

to be actively engaged in deliberations that are characteristic of democratic society.

That said, many teachers avoid emotive and controversial history. They may feel that certain issues are inappropriate for particular grades or wish to avoid causing offence or insensitivity. It takes pedagogical knowledge to allow open discussion but not dominance by the few or worse, an unproductive free-for-all. Teachers need encouragement, guidance, and support especially if they fear challenges from parents or community groups.

CONCLUSION

Narrative matters. The inherent structure of a story with causal links and elements of puzzle make it an important tool to weave the disparate threads of people and events into a memorable and engaging tapestry. Beyond this, a story can humanize people of the past, make abstract ideas concrete, raise ethical issues and instil curiosity to explore a topic further.

Meaningful history teaching also requires students to "do history": develop their own questions, wrestle with evidence, decide on significance, much as the three Heritage Fairs students did. Through similar activities, students can identify and evaluate narratives around them or construct their own.

Connections is still another element in building meaningful history. These include not only the causal connections of a narrative but also connections to students' family or community history so that students see themselves as part of history. Connections include imaging the "human" past, using evidence to picture real people faced with dilemmas or challenges.

The history teachers' challenge is to harness the glorious power of stories and, at the same time, to challenge those stories. We must simplify the past using story, but then complicate it through historical thinking.