TOWARDS THE COACH
in the History Classroom

BY Chad Gaffield

DURING THE CLOSING DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, A FALSE DEBATE DISTRACTED PUBLIC DISCUSSION IN CANADA ABOUT THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN SCHOOLS AND IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS DEBATE ADDRESSED A SEEMINGLY STRAIGHTFORWARD QUESTION: HOW MUCH HISTORY SHOULD STUDENTS LEARN? UNFORTUNATELY, THOUGH, THIS QUESTION DIRECTED ATTENTION AWAY FROM SERIOUS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY DURING THESE YEARS. THE PUBLIC DEBATE ONLY RARELY DID JUSTICE TO THE CONTINUAL RETHINKING OF CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES AND DELIVERY POSSIBILITIES IN LIGHT OF THE «NEW SOCIAL HISTORY» OF THE 1970S, THE «LINGUISTIC TURN» OF THE 1980S, AND THE COMPUTERIZATION OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES IN THE 1990S. AS A RESULT OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS, HISTORIANS HAVE BEEN MOVING TOWARD A FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF THE CURRICULUM. PARTS OF THIS NEW PERSPECTIVE SURFACED IN THE DEBATE ABOUT HOW MUCH HISTORY STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN BUT, OVERALL, PUBLIC DISCUSSION ASSUMED THAT THE ISSUE WAS A QUESTION OF QUANTITY RATHER THAN SUBSTANCE.

The scholarly rethinking of the history curriculum in recent years has been redefining course objectives. Rather than designing the history curriculum for the purpose of transmitting to students the interpretations of leading historians, educators are now exploring how courses can help students discover the past for themselves. In my own case, an analogy from sports encouraged me to make the transition from seeing myself as a «content provider» to seeing myself as an «historical coach.» In the history courses I took in school in the 1960s, we read about history, talked about history and wrote about history; we never actually did history. If I had learned basketball in this way, I would have spent years reading the interpretations and viewpoints of great players, watching them play games, and analysing the results of various techniques and strategies. Instead, though, I was soon dribbling a basketball and trying to shoot it into the hoop after just a few instructions. In my history courses, by contrast, I did not begin to do any historical research until the end of my undergraduate years, and even in master's seminars, the focus was still on learning about the various viewpoints of historians rather than directly coming to grips with the past. In basketball terms, I began in earnest to play the sport only at the doctoral thesis level.

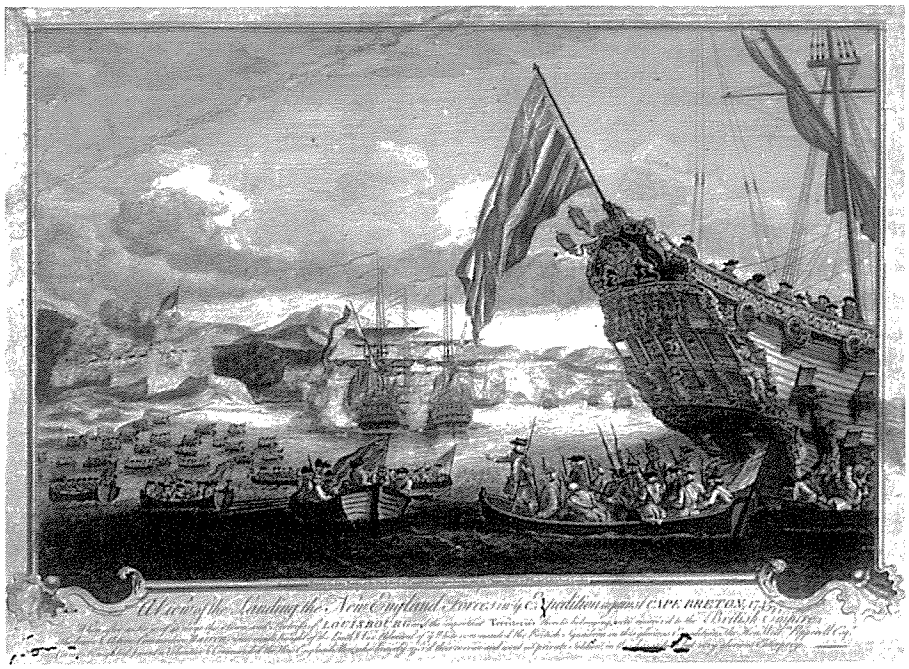
At the core of the conventional history curriculum is a division between the interpretations of historians (called «secondary sources») and historical evidence (called «primary sources»). Until recent decades, the assumption has been that students must first acquire a solid familiarity with secondary sources before attempting to study primary sources. Indeed, the media debate of the late twentieth century was sparked by growing public concern that Canadians had forgotten or had never learned the major research findings of the leading historians. Some observers lamented that school children, university students and the general public could not often recall the names of those individuals and events considered by well-known historians to have been the key features of Canadian history. However justified was (and is) this concern, it ignored the fact that scholarly research was undermining the established pedagogical assumptions about primary and secondary sources. An increasing number of historians were moving away from seeing themselves as simply interpretation-providers or fact-identifiers for students, and were moving toward a role much like a coach.

In the new educational setting, teachers and professors focus on helping students discover the past by developing historical perspectives in keeping with the evidence and with their own sense of themselves as well as with previous research results. For this purpose, students at all levels are increasingly working with both primary and secondary sources; in terms of the sports analogy, they are being coached while they try to dribble, pass and shoot the historical ball. Within this process, the learning of accepted «facts» (such as the identity of Prime Ministers) is required but is seen as a step along the path of historical understanding rather than as something to be valued for its own sake. More importantly, though, the learning of specific

kinds of information occurs within the student's own discovery of the past and thus «facts» are contextualized and made significant as part of the development of historical understanding. In this sense, the new approach does not simply focus on the question of how much history should be taught but also on how it is learned.

The advantages of engaging students in the discovery of primary and secondary sources relate to student motivation, cognitive processes, and current scholarly conceptualizations of the historical discipline. In terms of motivation, every educator knows that a desire to learn something plays a key role in determining educational success. However, recent research results suggest that, however well-acknowledged, motivation is even more important to achievement than previously considered. These results emphasize more than ever that it is the extent of demand for knowledge by students rather than simply the amount of knowledge supplied to students that will determine educational outcomes. In other words, the more that students want to learn about the past, the more they will do so (assuming, of course, they have the opportunity).

The emphasis on student motivation is encouraging the discovery approach to the use of primary sources in the history curriculum. As the authors of the National Standards for History in the United States concluded, «perhaps no aspect of historical thinking is as exciting to students or as productive of their growth in historical thinking as 'doing history'.» This conclusion is increasingly being reached at all educational levels even in graduate programs. One example of student interest in undertaking historical research comes from the University of Kentucky where Professor William W. Freehling gave his graduate seminar students the chance to design their own course. The students immediately seized on the chance to tilt their program away from the analysis of secondary sources so that less time would be spent on «picking writers apart.» In the students' own course design, «they wanted less historiography. They wanted more history.» The students argued that «Without a secondary source telling us what to think about primary sources, we could cultivate our own understanding of the evidence, both independently at home and collaboratively in class....Does historiography have its place? Certainly. But too much historiography suffocates the original documents. Let *us* read the contemporaries — let *us determine* for ourselves what they believed.»



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Happily, the enthusiasm of students for «doing history» in addition to reading about it dovetails with the increasing enthusiasm of cognitive psychologists for active learning. Researchers have now shown that individuals learn much more effectively as a result of combined instruction and doing. To use the sports analogy, coaches have found that a novice advances much more rapidly if a little instruction rather than a complete description is immediately followed by attempts to perform the skill. Researchers have found that this combined instruction-doing approach allows the individual to acquire the established wisdom of the coaching experts while, at the same time, to assimilate this wisdom according to their own personal characteristics. Conversely, too much instruction before attempted implementation undermines creativity, and makes the individual less able to adapt to even slightly changed circumstances. In terms of the history curriculum, this approach supports a balanced primary-secondary source focus at all educational levels. The belief is that students will be more enthusiastic, will learn more about previous research findings (including those famous names and dates!), and will contribute more to their own and society's historical understandings.

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Primary sources have, of course, often been used in the history classroom. Their role, however, has characteristically been quite different from that now being developed in both schools and higher education. The familiar excerpts in textbooks and books of documents or even the full reproduction of sources such as constitutions have certainly been used to illustrate or support

the interpretations offered in lectures or secondary sources; however, teachers rarely use them to engage students in actual historical research. Even in the well-established courses that privilege the writings of famous individuals (such as «The Great Minds of Western Civilisation»), students are usually encouraged to see themselves as receptacles of historical information rather than as engaging in historical research in order to create understandings for themselves.

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In addition to the pedagogical priority given to historians rather than history, the predominance of secondary sources is also explained by the conventional difficulty of getting student access to primary sources. This difficulty is one of the reasons for the long-standing success of published collections of documents designed to supplement course textbooks. Fortunately, though, computerization is now revolutionizing access to archival material. During the past two decades and especially since the mid-1990s, the massive amount of primary source material that has been digitized for immediate remote use has encouraged teachers and professors to help students do history. In the Canadian context, recent government initiatives promise that the speed of this development will continue accelerating for at least the decade. It remains to be said that the vast majority of primary sources will never be easily available to history students; no more than a tiny fraction of archival holdings will ever be digitized. However, for a rapidly increasing number of history classes, computerization is now affording the possibility of genuine research within the learning process.

How will students acquire the skills required to examine primary sources? The most unpromising possible answer to this question relates to the dreaded methods courses that have played a small and unappreciated role in the conventional undergraduate history curriculum. Few professors or students enjoy these classes because they are not really seen as history courses. Rather, they usually focus on learning to use the library, to create bibliographies, and to write term papers that use secondary sources to support a thesis statement. Indeed, the «methods» involved have little to do with real historical research. Thus, such courses would be a poor example of how students could best learn to examine primary sources. Moreover, it would seem unwise (given the problems of methods courses) to develop specific classes on how to do history. Rather, the most promising approach appears to involve an integrated and constant attention to both primary and secondary sources throughout the curriculum. Students will certainly benefit from instruction and guidance in the use of both types of sources but, just as a coach continually helps an athlete interrelate theory and practice in learning a sport, all history educators might best see themselves as responsible for both methods and content.

But are inexperienced students really capable of undertaking genuine historical research?

If we judge by the reports of an increasing number of teachers and professors, the answer is resoundingly positive. At the school level, the most well-known indicator of student interest and ability to engage in historical research is the Historica-funded annual Historical Fairs for which students develop their own research projects under the guidance of teachers. The potential of such initiatives for the not-too-distant future is indicated by the work of University of Ottawa doctoral student John Bonnett and his colleagues at the National Research Council and in Ottawa high schools. Under Bonnett's leadership, curriculum units for high school students are being developed in which students use primary sources to create Virtual Reality images of nineteenth-century buildings along Sparks Street in downtown Ottawa. In their work, students build their own historical understandings as they confront pieces of historical evidence that inevitably offer inconsistent or contradictory information. For example, a visual image suggests that a certain building is a specific height but a fire insurance map states a different height. Was the photograph doctored? Was an error made on the fire insurance map? Is it possible for each document to accurately reflect the perspective of its creator? Which secondary sources shed light on these issues? By coming to grips with such questions, students learn both about the past and about how to think about historical change. And they do so actively by engaging in their own discovery guided within a structured curriculum unit.

Innovative projects such as John Bonnett's and major efforts such as the Historical Fairs build upon a long tradition of using primary sources in history and social studies classes even in elementary schools. In fact, students are still more likely to see primary sources in schools than in undergraduate programs. This pattern is changing, however, as more and more professors recognize that changes since the 1960s have undermined the view of students as containers awaiting content and of history as a Truth to be revealed. Professors are now reforming the curriculum to enhance the student's intellectual process of historical knowledge-building. Courses are now seeking to help individuals develop understandings of the past in keeping with the historical evidence and in keeping with themselves. In other words, both teachers and professors are increasingly acting like coaches dealing with athletes. As this approach becomes more widespread, we can hope that public attention will focus on historical discovery rather than on the memorization of selected names and dates. We can also hope that the real debate can begin in earnest about the need for adequate financial support for genuine engagement with Canada's past.

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