Edmonton Public Schools

ENHANCEMENT OF HISTORY PROJECT

ABSTRACT

To help students leave school with an understanding and appreciation of the historical development of Alberta, Canada, and much of the world, the "History Project" was undertaken in 1998 by the Edmonton School Board. Courses were specifically developed for students in Grades 7 through 11. Stuart Wachowicz describes how the project took shape and its desired impact on students.

"In the field of observation, chance favours the prepared mind."
— Louis Pasture

The above quote from an eminent scientific pioneer underscores the truth that creativity and innovation are functions of the mind that already possesses relevant knowledge. In other words knowledge precedes understanding, and enables recognition of discovery. This is just as true in understanding our world today and to grapple with decisions that will determine our future. Historical knowledge sets the context and reveals implications for political and many other decisions that will need to be made. This paper will focus on a major project undertaken by the Edmonton Public School Board, to help ensure its students would be historically literate.

In much of North America today the design of school curricula, especially as it relates to courses like Social Studies, is premised or structured on the supposition that if students are taught various process skills in thinking, research and the like, the student will be able to construct meaning about different issues without the systematic development of a knowledge base pertinent to the issue at hand. Such educational philosophies have led to curriculum which frequently does not build a chronological framework for students, nor does it always provide a systematic development of the core knowledge related to the topic. Student constructed meaning on issues where they may not understand some of the context of the period, or the interrelation of events (cause and effect) can render the student's opinion incorrect, without the student ever knowing.

To help students and their teachers address this issue, and to help more graduating students leave with an understanding of the historical development of Alberta, Canada, and much of the world, and an appreciation of the forces, events and issues that continue to shape our world the "History Project" was undertaken in 1998. The project was to have three primary components: Curriculum Development, Resource Development and teacher professional development.

Curriculum Development:

One of the first steps in the project was to establish a partnership between the school district and the Department of History and Classics of the University of Alberta. A team from both organizations began the development of a series of courses for junior high (grades 7 to 9). The first courses were designed to build historical and geographic context to help enhance the learning of the Social studies curriculum for the matching grade. In addition the courses were also to develop an appreciation of the chronology of Canadian history or of the topic of study. Dr. Rod McLeod, Dr. Andrew Gow and Dr. Richard Connors were the primary contributors in the production of the following course:

- Grade 7: Survey of World History (prehistory to 1485)
- Grade 8: Survey of World History (1485 to the 20th Century)
- Grade 8: Canada – Pre-confederation (Contact to confederation)
- Grade 9: Canada – Post confederation
- Grade 9: Women's History: Contribution of Women to Society – 1500 to Present

STUART WACHOWICZ

Stuart Wachowicz is the director of curriculum for Edmonton Public Schools. Prior to that he served as a teacher and principal of Youngstown School, a k-12 school in south eastern Alberta for 22 years. His area of expertise lies in curriculum construction for k-12 programming, with a special focus on mathematics, history, literacy development, Aboriginal education and second languages. The curriculum unit has also overseen Canada's largest and most systematic development of history curricula and supporting resources for secondary programs.

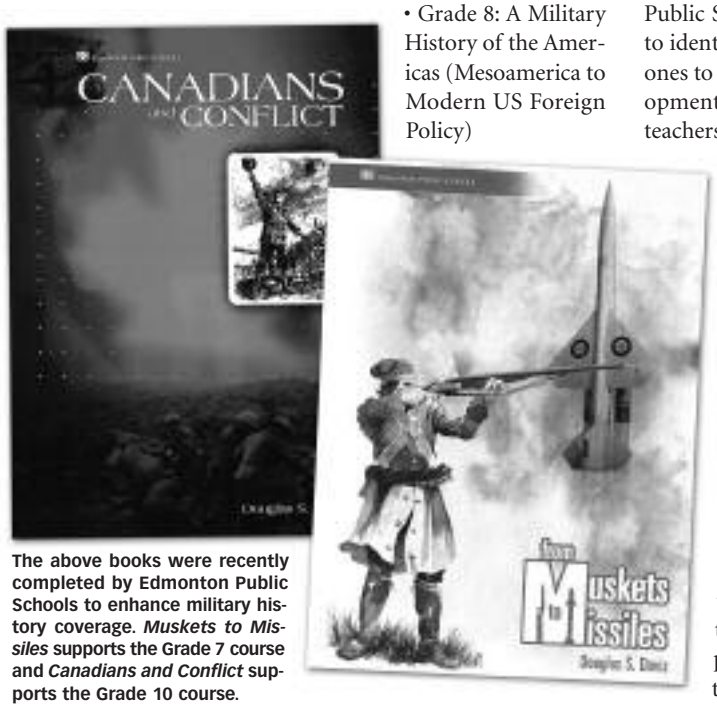
By 1999 the courses were in place and resources were identified to help get pilots of the courses underway. The reaction from teachers and students was very positive, and especially positive from parents. Students in these pilots faired extremely well in their Social Studies courses, being able to discuss and analyze issues in greater depth and with more sense of context.

It was at this time that the district moved to establish Acadamie Vimy Ridge Academy. This was designed as an alternative program within the district that would place a great deal of emphasis on Canadian Studies, with particular effort to ensure students knew and had an appreciation of the role Canada's military has played and is playing in the defense of our way of life, and in maintaining peace in dangerous locations. It was found that no school curricula appropriate to grade level existed in the nation for this purpose.

Again we turned to our partnership with the professors at the Department of History and Classics. Dr. Rod McLeod and Dr. Richard Connors began the work of leading the development of two junior high and two senior high courses in Military History. The courses were not intended as a glorification of war, but rather to examine the question in the context of the modern and ancient world, "What is the role of the military in societies, and to what extent and when are they necessary?" Students are to become aware of the socio-economic, political, and strategic considerations of societies of the past and today, enabling them to study and analyze the role of the military in modern democracies. The courses also take care to enable students to become knowledgeable of the enormous contributions Canadians have made, at home and in the theatre of war.

The Military History courses that have been developed and implemented are as follows:

- Grade 7: War and Society in Canada and the World (1750 to the 20th Century)
- Grade 8: A Military History of the Americas (Mesoamerica to Modern US Foreign Policy)
- Grade 10: Canada and War in the Modern Era
- Grade 11: Military History of the Ancient World to the Gunpowder Revolution



The above books were recently completed by Edmonton Public Schools to enhance military history coverage. *Muskets to Missiles* supports the Grade 7 course and *Canadians and Conflict* supports the Grade 10 course.

Resources

Prior to the implementation of the Military History courses our research showed there were no texts or books written at the junior and senior high school level that would adequately support the elements covered. It thus became necessary to commission the writing of suitable supporting resources. To this end Douglas Davis, a teacher of considerable experience and qualified historian, was brought on staff to do this critical work. Over the past three years five books have been completed, some of which are already in use in a number of other school jurisdictions.

- Muskets to Missiles – Supports the grade 7 course and a French translation is in production.
- War in the West – Supports the grade 8 course (History of the Americas)
- Canadians and Conflict – Supports the grade 10 course (Available in English and French)
- Sargon to Suleiman – Supports grade 11 – Ancient World (well likely by International Baccalaureate instructors.)

In addition to the above, a new book is scheduled to be launched this fall, entitled *Canada's Warriors.* This is a much overdue history of the tremendous contribution and sacrifice made by Canada's Aboriginal soldiers. It is a remarkable and true story, and will be available in English and French.

Professional Development

The third prong of the History Project, and a vital one, is to ensure that teachers who are charged with teaching history or Social Studies are knowledgeable of the subject matter they are asked to teach. To this end Edmonton Public Schools again partnered with History and Classics to identify a series of history courses, and even create new ones to help teachers who want to access additional development. The district's Staff Development unit provides teachers with the tuition for the courses, and helps ensure the courses will be available at times convenient for cohorts of teachers to study. Two courses were recently designed to help district Social Studies teachers develop a historical and geographic background that will better prepare them to teach the new provincial Social Studies curriculum. These courses are well received by teachers and enrollment is strong.

The History Project initiative of Edmonton Public Schools has provided high quality curriculum and resources, which have been reviewed and verified by experts in the field. We have had many strong reviews on the program from leading historians around the country. Our staff has opportunities available to no other teachers in the nation, to study history and its related disciplines, with tuition paid for by the district. All this is for the purpose of strengthening our educational capacity to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

The intent of the project is to create a greater level of historical literacy among all students. This will yield not only more students wanting to study history at the post secondary level, but it will yield a population that will be more aware of events and forces that are shaping our province, our nation and our world. Young citizens will be cognizant and more understanding of the issues, implications and possible solutions. Hopefully our work will contribute people to a society who will, in the words of Francis Bacon: "*Read not to contradict and confute, not to believe and take for granted… but to weigh and consider.*"

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