WHY TELL STORIES? ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING NARRATIVE THINKING

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on narrative thinking and its importance for the historical education of youth. Based on an analysis of three perspectives on storytelling in history (realistic, postmodern and polythetic), the author demonstrates how teachers can promote the development of narrative thinking in students in a seven-step process.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall 2012, historian Eric Bédard (2012) published his popular book *L'histoire du Québec pour les nuls*. The book, which quickly became a bestseller, tells the story of "a people who overcame difficulties and hardships, overcame discouragement and resignation. The story of a dream, that of French America, a great trial, that of the British conquest, and most importantly, the story of a long and patient reconquest that will lead Quebecers to reclaim their territory, economy and political life" (p. 1, translated) According to the author, "it's not just a history book, it's a story, our story. […] It is a story, and it can also be a sort of cheat sheet. Basically […] it's like a course for the general public" (Bédard in Guy, translated, 2012, p. 1).

Since its publication, the book has got people talking. It has sparked interest as well as controversy. For Jocelyn Létourneau (2013), Bédard's *L'histoire du Québec pour les nuls* oversimplifies the interpretations of the past "as if he was telling a story of the past that was obvious, leading the reader amidst obvious or apparent certainties" (p. 170, translated). Not only is the story structured around constituent referents of

this French people, some ready-to-think components of the collective memory, but his narrative gives the reader a teleological vision of a "people conquered but still alive" (Bédard, 2012, p. 73, translated). However, others admire the exercise in education which the author was able to accomplish. Jean-François Nadeau (2012) compliments Bédard for writing in a "clear and accessible language. […] The story is peppered with anecdotes, but it is mostly a succinct and effective summary for curious individuals who would not know where to start to learn about history" (p. 12, translated).

As an educationalist, this recent saga surrounding the publication of a popular history book is a source of interest and questions: what sort of connection exists between *narration* and historical *reality*? Is history basically a *narrative*? These questions are not only relevant to our work, but essential to our students' learning of the discipline. In attempting to answer these questions, we can analyze the issue from three different perspectives.

The first perspective suggests that historical reality is inherently narrative from the beginning. The purpose of history – and therefore of the historian – is to report as accurately as possible the account of events as they have occurred. This is the "realistic" view of history that gives students the role of taking in the historical narrative, the story of what has really occurred. The second approach argues instead that the realities of the past are meaningless. It is the historian who, through his/her retrospective view, imposes order through a narrative that has a beginning, a plot and an end. But historical reality has no beginning or end in itself. Events occur with no specific direction. And since the past no longer exists, there is no way to validate the accounts of historians. This is the "postmodern" view of history, which seeks to deconstruct narratives as objects of manipulation and power. The last approach is based on the previous two and argues that history does not exist by itself; it is (re) created by the historian. But this narrative is based on a conceptual framework of historical knowledge, that is to say, a proven means of casting a critical eye on the past. This is the "historian" view of history, where students are required to examine the past critically and ultimately develop their own narrative and polythetic views of the past.

In the following pages, I will try to present each approach and show how they are useful to our role as history teachers in schools.

THE REALISTIC VIEW OF HISTORY

The narrativization of events as an intertwining of occurrences related to each other by causes and effects has long been recognized as a unique and even spontaneous means of understanding reality. Some psychologists such as Jerome Bruner speak of a "natural mode of thought" developed early in a child's cognitive process. As he relates, "We know very little about how narrative thinking develops in childhood. What we do know, of course, is that the ability to comprehend stories develops or is present very early. This is sometimes offered as support for the deep structure argument" (Bruner, 1985, p. 100).

In the field of history, some also believe that the story is the best way to examine and to understand the reality of the past. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1983) argues in this regard that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative way" (p. 17, translated). It is through the story that time acquires its value and meaning for individuals. In the words of Antoine Prost (1996), "all history is narrative, because explaining is storytelling" (p. 245, translated). The idea that the realities of the past are intrinsically narrative has its origins in mythological stories of ancient Greece, for example in the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. But it is the work of modern historians, like Whig historian George Macaulay Trevelyan, which really propelled this conceptualization of history, by outlining the fundamental differences between fictional narratives and authentic stories. While the former present plausible events (*the likelihood*) in the form of stories, the latter describe historical reality as experienced by its witnesses. Far from being an imposition or a distortion of the events recounted and linked together, the narrative is the extension of "real" events, as experienced and narrated by witnesses (Carr, 1986). In this perspective, the narrative presents the events in the form of a point of view that arises from human experience, i.e., our ability and willingness to occupy the position of narrator in our own personal lives. Stories, in this sense, are "lived before they are told," according to Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, p. 197).

The argument that the past comes to us in narrative form provides a powerful way to learn. First, students are exposed to the narrative early in their cognitive development. Research shows indeed that the use of narrative facilitates the capacity to construct representations of reality. Young people are more likely to capture events and retain information when it is presented as a narrative (Mandler, 1984; Egan, 1989; Voss & Wiley, 2000). Although some facts are often overlooked in the students' narrative, the narrative structure remains largely intact. This is what Barton and Levstik (2004) argue when they state, "Even when people make mistakes in their retellings, they tend to leave the overall structure intact – that is, they misremember the details, but they don't retell the story in the wrong order, nor do they leave out essential elements […]" (p. 133). The use of narrative in history makes it thus possible to capture and organize the complex realities of the past in a coherent manner, with the help of an educational tool which is familiar to young people.

In addition, using narrative history can effectively mobilize a certain memory in the community. Since memory is a matter of what has existed and has been lived, narrative history allows people to remember yesterday without having to develop new ways of understanding the realities of the past. As pointed by Bédard (2012), "I'm attempting here a synthesis of the most significant events in the history of Quebec. At least those selected by the collective memory" (p. 2, translated). From this perspective, young people can easily place themselves in this destiny of the group to which they belong and thus carry the legacy of this memory.

Narrative history also allows the creation of a coherent vision of personal and collective identity. It follows a number of principles which stabilize identity, in relation to time (Rüsen, 2005):

- The narrative is intimately linked to the relationship with memory. It mobilizes the experiences of the past, engraved in collective memory, so that the experiences of the present can be coherent. For example, we find in *Histoire du Québec pour les nuls* a structure that puts into perspective the "national" present in Quebec's so-called evolution of destiny: 1. New France; 2. Conquered but still alive; 3. Survival; 4. The Quiet reconquest; 5. Province or country?
- The narrative organises the internal unity of time dimensions (past, present and possible future) by a notion of continuity, thereby adjusting the past to possible intentions and expectations. For example, *Histoire du Québec pour les nuls* traces the historical evolution of the Quebec people in a possible vision of the future, "A province or country?"
- The narrative serves to establish its creator's identity and audience: By using the concept of continuity, it can convince the audience of the permanence and stability of the group in a history in evolution. For example, *Histoire du Québec pour les nuls* uses modern concepts of "nation" and "Quebecer" to present the early settlers and their Canadian descendants, "nation of the New World, Quebec was founded by adventurers, missionaries, men and women who wanted to improve their lot."

THE POSTMODERN VIEW OF HISTORY

The idea that the reality of the past is inherently narrative is challenged today, because the narrativization of events raises many epistemological problems. Many critics argue that the past has no internal coherence that can be verified and validated. Events occur randomly in the vastness of human history without any real specific destiny. Historical facts, as alleged by Lowenthal (1985), are timeless and disconnected from each other before being ordered into narration by historians. Witnesses of history do not have a teleological view of the events they experience, only an experience of successive occurrences. It is the historian who imposes, by hindsight, the direction of the story. For Hayden White (1981), "the notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries." (p. 4)

For postmodernists, the historian's personal orientation biases his/her narrative and the ability of the audience to understand the realities so described. It is the historian that poses retrospective judgments about the significance of privileged events which he/she then places in a cause-and-effect relationship in the literary form of narrative. "It's to be able to punish the wicked that the narrative is committing mischief," said Ricoeur (1984, p. 64, translated) about the teleological view of the historian. Louis Mink (1970) agrees, arguing that

"stories are not live but told […]. Life has no beginnings, middles and ends […] narrative qualities of history are transferred from art to life" (p. 557). Historians thus produce from these acts *plausible* narratives based on personal choices which are influenced by culture, literature and morality. The historiographical enterprise is therefore only an attempt to impose "a meaningful form (or narrative) onto a meaningless past" (Harlan in Seixas, 2000, p. 27). Historians thus produce credible narratives, not by their method or way of thinking, but to the extent that they impose their expertise as "regulatory function in relation to the public past" (Bennett in Seixas, 2000, p. 29).

The postmodern critique has serious implications. First, it highlights the constructed nature of historical narratives. The historian produces an interpretation of the past from a retrospective vision that gives a sense of coherence and direction to history. To make the past intelligible, the narrative is necessarily reductive since it magnifies certain events over others. Thus, in Histoire du Québec pour les nuls, why talk about the crisis of conscription in 1942 but not the battle of Dieppe in 1942? These kinds of questions demonstrate the interpretive nature of history and the danger, as Ricoeur (1984) noted, of "closed alternatives" (p. 64), i.e., the regressive need for temporal finality, blind to other possible alternatives.

The postmodern critique also underlines the importance of history in our lives and the power historians have in shaping our view of history. Since we are mobilizing the experiences of the past to understand the present, it is important to understand the social and identity functions of narratives. Because the stories of the past have historically served several functions besides that of "telling the truth," including the promotion of patriotism and the furthering of political causes. In this vein, it is interesting to see how history was presented in Canadian schools in the last century. Notions of racism, colonialism and progress directly influenced the actual logic of history. One may wonder to what extent these ideas are still present in our collective memory.

THE POLYTHETIC VIEW OF HISTORY

The third perspective is based on the previous ones. It is based on the idea that the narrativization of events is generated by the historian. It is indeed him/her who assembles the story and not the past that dictates it. However, it argues that the narratives are not mere literary forms that impose a predetermined order on an incoherent and insignificant past, as it is claimed by postmodernists.

To explain this approach, a little musical analogy is required. We all have heard a song that deeply marked us upon hearing it for the first time. For proponents of narrative history, this song is the narrative of historical reality. When we listen, we are able to live, to remember and even anticipate the notes of the melody. In other words, we are in synchronization with the music and occupying, at the same time, both the position of the narrator (composer) and the reader (audience). With the passage of time, it is possible that some musical notes are lost. The role of the historian is then to recreate the original melody while trying to replace the lost elements or eliminate background noises that create distortion. For postmodernists, there is no such song but a mere set of notes. Rather, it is we, the audience, who enter them in our consciousness as a particular melody that, over time, seems familiar to us. Since many of us share the same melodic imagination, we convince ourselves of the reality and the merits of this "song" which thereby acquires a new collective significance. For proponents of the polythetic view, the musical notes we hear are arranged to form a song. However, the melody can be multiple and variable depending on the audience. In other words, it is possible, in the very structure of the song, to perceive or imagine notes that might lead the reader (audience) to hear variations of the melody. These notes are not purely imaginative, they do exist in the real world.

To return to our narrativization of the past, the polythetic view of history argues that historical accounts are not fictitious forms of imposing meaning to a chaotic past. As Jörn Rüsen (2005) reports, narrative and objectivity are not in principle opposed. The narratives we develop are valid insofar as they are limited by our human experiences, our historical sources, our relationships with others and our notions of what is possible and feasible in the real world.

Once we understand that the narratives are not just "truth" or "fiction," it becomes possible to envisage a narrativization which is valid in historical terms. To do this, it is necessary to use what might be called "historical thinking" (Lévesque, Denos and Case 2013),

i.e. the reflexive mode which is a particular way of thinking about the historical reality beyond the common uses of memory. Among the components of this thought (Martineau, 2010), we find:

- a historian's attitude of openness to the diversity of perspectives, humility and distance with regards to the past and to the witnesses of history.
- a historical method of thinking human reality underpinned by a process of inquiry and meta-historical concepts (causes, consequences, perspectives, continuity, change, etc.).
- a language of history to explain intelligibly and in a lively manner our view of the past in narrative form.

As educators, the polythetic view of history offers many learning opportunities (Shemilt, 2000). It enables students to structure their relationship to the past in the vastly known form of narrative. In this sense, it involves the appropriation of a meaningful vision of the past using an effective tool, cognitively speaking.

The polythetic view also provides the ability to maintain a variety of narrative interpretations of the same past, thereby reopening the "closed alternatives" of reductive narratives that nourish the collective memory. Through historical thinking, students can better understand the polyphonic nature of history and the future opportunities which are emerging for them.

Unfortunately, in his extensive research, Létourneau concludes that young people gradually develop a narrative vision of their society that is expanding and becoming more complex over the years but remains largely stable in its structure and regime of truth. "It seems difficult," he argues in a text with Sabrina Moisan, "to redirect a well seated and structured narrative of the past rooted in a selection of raw facts, which feeds a large number of social discourse and which is part of a narrative intertextuality in which are also encrusted texts written by historians" (Letourneau & Moisan, 2004, p. 352, translated).

Given this situation, Létourneau (2014) rightfully places history education at the heart of opportunities for moving forward. However, few teachers to date involve narrative thinking to structure their visions of the past. In the current school system, the intention to teach takes the form of a curriculum that does not allow young people to narrativize the history of their society. It is therefore difficult for them to mobilize their scholastic knowledge for present-day historical orientation. Students therefore find themselves in a sort of "meaninglessness" to the extent that their real-life narratives, the ones they develop from their fluctuating and meaningful life experiences, are not included and discussed in the history education they receive in school.

This finding is especially disturbing given that learning is recognized as a particular activity of knowledge construction that builds upon students' previous knowledge and (pre)conceptions. Inviting teachers to use narrative thinking could encourage young people to reflect on their views of history, to make narrative interpretations based on the critical examination of sources and to be open to diverse points of view. But how can we get youth to develop polythetic stories by narrative thinking?

USING NARRATIVE THINKING

Let us refer yet again to *L'histoire du Québec pour les nuls* in order to find out how teachers can bring their students on the path of learning narrative thinking. A teaching approach in seven steps (under the acronym "SAPPIRI") is here suggested:

1. Start from the prior knowledge that youth develop during to their long-life learning experience by asking them to produce a brief explanatory narrative of the theme explored in the classroom (e.g., Tell me the story of the Conquest as you know it).
2. Analyse the students' narratives to highlight the missing elements and nodes of intrigue (e.g., the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the French vs. English). Identify the elements of convergence/divergence between the various narratives from specific criteria (starting point of the story, events/actors mentioned, group composition, use of the term "we," etc.).
3. Present excerpts in class taken directly from the narratives to highlight the diversity of points of view among students. Enrich these excerpts by quotations extracted from primary and secondary sources (e.g., Memoirs of Montcalm, report of Admiral Charles Holmes, excerpts from *L'histoire du Québec pour les nuls*).

4. Place students into small working groups and ask them to assess the historical validity of these different excerpts. Invite them to rank the excerpts in order of importance (from the most valid to the least valid) according to their personal evaluation of sources (e.g., 1. Memoirs of Montcalm; 2. Report of Admiral Holmes). Remind them that they need to justify the reasons for their selection and use evaluation criteria for the validity of sources (e.g., the position of the witness, the approach taken, the reported facts, etc.).

5. Initiate a discussion with the class about the validity of sources to get students to compare their assessment of the excerpts. Then, present your own evaluation of sources to guide students in their learning (e.g., compare the order in which students placed the excerpts with your own assessment and explain what could explain this convergence/divergence). Emphasize the need to use assessment criteria to decide on the validity of a source (e.g., contribution to the aim pursued, its telling of the time, etc.).

6. Require from students that they rewrite their narrative of the theme (e.g., Conquest) using various sources presented in the activity. Remind them of the importance of producing a historical narrative supported by relevant sources, which will allow them to justify their point of view.

7. Invite students to compare their original narrative with the final narrative they produced in order to determine which one is the most valid and relevant. Bring them to understand that beyond this exercise, their narrative must be *useful* to the extent that they can take ownership and use it as a means to understand the past as well as for personal guidance. Remind students that narratives are inevitably provisional and subject to reinterpretation.

In conclusion, history teachers can do better in taking into account what students have learned inside and outside the school because their *real-life* knowledge, based on a series of formative experiences, plays a key role in the narrative vision of youth. In this sense, history education must better align the curriculum prescribed by the authorities with the real-life curriculum of young learners, who learn from various structured and structuring experiences, whether or not these are under the control of an educational intention (Perrenoud, 1993). Narrative thinking aims to provide young people with the intellectual tools necessary to create better historical narratives, which they can then use to orient themselves in time and to meet the challenges of a complex, diverse and increasingly global and multicultural world.

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NOTES

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