A FUTURE OF HISTORY EDUCATION: HOW HISTORY'S METHODS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ITS FACTS AND NARRATIVES IN A POST-REALITY, ALTERNATIVE-FACTS, FAKE-NEWS SOCIETY[1]

ROBERT CASSIDY

Robert Cassidy is the director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and affiliate assistant professor of Education at Concordia University, Montreal. He was previously assistant dean of Academic Development at Dawson College and holds a PhD in Neuroscience from Georgetown University.

The Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) has focused its attention in this project on the impact of technologies on the teaching and learning of history. Particularly, it asks: How does the modern technology landscape — ranging from the Internet to mobile devices to search engines to social media, etc. — increasingly "challenge educators as to how best to reach citizens with key information"?[2] To get at this issue, ACS commissioned a survey amongst Canadians inquiring into their relationships with technologies, information, memory and history. In a subsequent forum, a room full of scholars from various disciplines gathered to synthesize the results of the survey and discuss their implications. Even more interesting than the answers given to a survey, however, are the questions asked. The ACS's survey questions probe at a principal concern: that technological advances, via effects on our memories, are potentially changing our relationship with history and historical information. In this essay, I'll briefly examine this concern through the lenses of education curricula to offer some thoughts on how the education sector might wish to respond.

To start, I'll characterize the concern like this: that in our embrace of this contemporary wave of technological advance, our cognitive capacity of memory will atrophy, and in its departure we will be left with forgetfulness; we will come to rely on and trust the information these technologies present us and cease to rely on and trust our own memory; these technologies do not present raw facts and information, but rather pre-interpreted narratives, answers to others' prior questions, pre-woven yarns, if you

1 The opinions expressed in this essay are solely the author's and do not represent those of Concordia University.

2 Jedwab, J. (2018). Technology, memory and knowledge. Presentation, ACS Historica Symposium, Toronto, November 2018.

will. And in our ability to conjure them, we will thus seem to know things, but it will be an illusion of knowledge; people will conjure vast amounts of information with ease, appear omniscient yet know very little; we'll have the appearance of wisdom without the reality. The fundamental premise of this concern is that these technological trends portend a deep shift in our knowledge of and relationship with history. With respect to education and curriculum, I will offer two potential responses that the education sector may consider.

The first is, nothing. We've been through this type of transformation before. In fact, the concern articulated above is simply an adaptation of Plato's ancient polemic against writing and handwritten books.[3] It is safe to say that we have intellectually survived and adapted to both writing and books rather well (and even to the Steve Jobs-esque contributions of Johannes Gutenberg), and not only are we OK, not only have books not degenerated us into a collection of vapid charlatans[4], but in fact we are all the better for it. So, a first response is to simply carry on, we'll adjust and be all the better for it.

There is, however, a grave problem with doing nothing. Technologies have indeed disrupted the social, cultural, cognitive and economic roles of information; they have changed the rules of the game. Perhaps related to these disruptions, the role and relevance of education in society are challenged as never before. Given that education has a special relationship to information, it is apparent to educational leaders, economists, policy-makers, and others that something needs to be done to make education a more viable solution to the problems — present and future — encountered by society at large.

A second response, given these imperatives, is a case for adjustment. Plato got it wrong back then: we weren't left with nothing; we adjusted in ways that liberated us from traditional ways of acquiring and using information. The ACS survey suggests that the advances in technology that people are experiencing today are contributing to noticeable changes in our relationship with historical information. The utility value of information (including historical facts) has changed. I suggest that the value proposition for education must shift in sync for education to be a solution to the degenerative effects of these tech-induced changes.

To frame the type of adjustment called for, it is important to see that the trouble comes not from the abundance and accessibility of information (e.g., historical facts that people no longer need to remember), but rather the democratization of that information base. Up to now, historians — those who professionally engaged in the scholarly community of history — held a privileged position in society and in this information economy. They were the gatekeepers of our historical facts, the curators and creators of our historical narratives, crafted with rigorous methods and held to conventionally accepted standards of verisimilitude. The fruits of this scholarship were tested within the scholarly community and communicated to the public via privileged and publicly sanctioned channels such as academic journals. Today, virtually anyone with Internet access can marshal "alternative facts" and

3 Ironically written down in a book entitled *Phaedrus*.

4 Stephen King's books aside.

spin patently false narratives that give the appearance of truth (historical or contemporary), by simply bypassing the methods and the discourse that give historians their rigor, reliability, and authority. Furthermore, people who control the Internet can deliberately and strategically serve up falsehoods to unwitting people looking for truthfulness.

New gatekeepers have been established. At the ACS forum, this was the evident discomfort. It is not the unprecedented access to information that is the problem — indeed, few would be uneasy if every Canadian had unbridled access to *The Canadian Encyclopedia* — but rather the democratization of information and the loss of our traditional gatekeepers to historical information and its sanctioned narratives. Indeed, in this time of alternative facts and fake news, information and narratives have become a politicized and corporatized weapon, and historians see right through this. So why doesn't everyone else? I suggest it is a failure of the education system.

Maybe you have a different experience of history curricula, but when I help my daughter study for her 4th-grade History tests, I play the role of a big, supportive flashcard. Right in line with what she will be tested on, we go through it over and over again: What year did Champlain found New France? Who was the first European to have landed in the Americas? Who did Cartier meet on his first expedition? And so on. She is taught to drink it in, to internalize it. Does she really care what European explorer did what and when? Not a smidge. But somebody else does, and so she must subject herself to it. She's not apathetic about the past, but these are not her interests or the answers to the questions she's interested in. In fact, nowhere is there even a slight invitation to think about this stuff, to question it, to examine whose story it is, what other stories might similarly be told. I cannot fathom that this is learning "history", any more than learning the parts of a cell is learning biology. And this is where, I believe, education has got it wrong, and keeps getting it wrong right up until university.

Given that historical facts are so abundant and so questionable, why are we not teaching kids (and adults) to locate, evaluate and adjudicate facts and stories? To engage in the methods of historians that have given them rigor, reliability and veracity? Education research could not be clearer about the value of memorization relative to higher-order thinking skills. The memory for facts is not, after all, a highly valued skill. The conjuring of facts is more a beginning to more important things than a worthy end in itself.

I'm not really in a position to characterize with any precision what those higher-order thinking skills are in History, only to point to them as more valuable than remembering facts. I look to the many historians, psychologists and educational researchers who have collaborated for decades to characterize what they call "historical thinking" or "historical cognition".[5]

Historical cognition is described differently by different researchers, but to name some of the skills coming from the research literature:

5 For this list, I draw upon the work of Peter Seixas (UBC), *The Historical Thinking Project* (historicalthinking.ca), as well as that of Stéphane Lévesque (UOttawa), Sam Wineburg (Stanford), Bruce VanSledright (UNC Charlotte), Pierre Nora (École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Denis Shemilt (Leeds Trinity University) and others.

- to evaluate and identify persons, events, etc., of historical significance

- to interpret past events in light of various competing ideologies

- to construct, analyze and adjudicate narratives

- to use primary source documents as evidence for the interpretation and creation of narratives

- to attribute causes to past events

- to manage ideological dilemmas created by equally favorable alternative interpretations

- to use empathy as a means to understand people, ideologies, motives, etc.

- to understand the processes of interpretation and how they manifest various ideological agendas, empathies and theoretical lenses

- to critically examine the interactivity between evidence and interpretation

- to synthesize interpretations in light of complementary points of view.

And there is much more. Historians and education researchers continue to collaboratively bring more clarity, more precision and validity to these intellectual functions. Yet, nowhere in this list is "remembering" historical dates or facts. There's nothing in this list that you can google your way out of. Thinking like an historian doesn't seem to be at all about remembering factual information.

As these higher-order skills are quite distinctive of history as a discipline, it seems that history has a particular role (responsibility?) to help society (i.e., non-historians) develop them through history education.

So how is history education doing? Well, for many Canadians, it is not until they reach the upper echelon of an undergraduate history degree that they develop these skills. The rest of us get bogged down imbibing historical facts, the narratives and interpretations of others — the products of historical cognition rather than the processes. In their lower forms, history curricula press students to adopt and regurgitate the narratives that are sanctioned by the state (for K-12) or by the professor (higher education). In their higher forms, the curricula challenge students to use historical thinking to analyze and evaluate others' narratives, and to create their own.

The needed adjustment in history education is a good rethinking of the very meaning of the "foundations" of history education. Universities must continue to push past our legacy curricula, constrained by chronological and geographical delimiters, and even social movements and other major changes of historical significance. We need to start thinking more deeply about the methods and habits of mind that lead to truth (or at least statements of truth that hold water). This calls for a transition away from history as a collection of facts about the past, with its fundamentals being the mastery of particular broad strokes of regions, time periods and movements that serve as the knowledge foundation for drilling down into more specifics. We need to think of history instead as the art and science of not taking accounts of the past at face value. We might re-imagine the fundamentals curriculum as the develop-

ment of the various skills and intellectual habits required to understand, challenge and evaluate these accounts or narratives. I would think history methods courses, labs and history problem sets might be in order, where students practise these rudimentary skills on various raw materials.

If we seek guidance as to how policies and programs need to respond to these technological changes, this would be my suggestion. Spend time to carefully map out what "historical cognition" is for Canadians, then put that in the curriculum as early as possible and develop it from childhood onward. This is certainly not a new call on the education system, but maybe now our technological advances will force us to take it much more seriously.

Technology is disrupting our use of information, and we have a good reason to ask our education systems to adjust, to take appropriate action to teach us how to think our way through it and emerge on the other side a better, more thoughtfully informed society. If historians are no longer the gatekeepers of history, can they train us non-historians to become our own gatekeepers?