THINKING THE WAR OF 1812: NOTES ON STUDENTS' HISTORICAL IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at some Canadian students' ideas about the War of 1812. Using empirical data and relevant literature in history didactics, it proposes an innovative model of progression in thinking historically about the past. It discusses the implications of this model for history education and historical literacy.

Ontario students spend considerable time learning *about* history. By the time they graduate from high school they have learned about the Roman Empire, the coureurs des bois, medieval societies, feminism, the Holocaust, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, September 11 terrorism and, of course, the War of 1812. Their courses also make explicit references to notions of "historical thinking," "literacy," and "inquiry". But, as in many jurisdictions, current history programs in Ontario do not necessarily develop in any progressive way beyond the mere chronological accumulation of facts. The result is that students have no structured opportunity to develop their abilities to think critically about history, at least not in the way curriculum guidelines are designed.

For a number of years now, a group of Canadians scholars, curriculum designers, and educators have been paying serious attention to this very issue, as defined in terms of *progression* in historical thinking. It is Peter Seixas (2006) who instigated the movement with the national project "Benchmarks of Historical Thinking" in 2006 (www.historicalthinking.ca). Relying on decades of British research in the field, the project represents an attempt at adapting the English educational experience *à la canadienne.* It offers educators not only a language to talk about historical thinking but a platform for researchers to investigate students' progression in historical learning (Peck & Seixas, 2008).

PROGRESSION IN HISTORICAL THINKING: FROM "EVERYDAY IDEAS" TO "POWERFUL IDEAS"

Progression has a specific meaning in history didactics. Commonly used in French and European literature, the notion of "progression" implies a sequence of learning developments (see Perrenoud, 2002; Ministère de l'éducation, loisirs et du sport du Québec, 2009). When applied to historical learning, progression indicates a particular way of *developing more powerful ideas* about history. As Lee and Shemilt (2003) observe from the British educational context:

> *Progression was juxtaposed with "aggregation" to emphasize that progress in history could be more than an increase in the amount of information pupils could recall... Research suggested that children's ideas about history and about the past changed as they grew older and that it was possible to view these changes in terms of development. (p. 13)*

For years now, a small but growing number of studies have documented novice-expert engagement with the past. They have highlighted the fundamental differences in how historians and students conceptualize the discipline and "do history". They have provided the scholarly community with a more robust framework of what expertise in history looks like as well as some targets for what might be accomplished in class. "The differences in each group's approach," Wineburg (2001) discovered, "can be traced to sweeping beliefs about historical inquiry, or what might be called an epistemology of text" (p. 76). What makes historians experts, then, is not only or not so much their vast content knowledge but their "historical literacy" (Lévesque, 2010).

But developing historical literacy is not all-or-nothing: fundamental to the definition is the notion of progression (Seixas, 2006). Lee (2005a) has developed a conceptualization of history particularly useful. He argues that unlike intuitive ideas developed in everyday

life, sophisticated historical thinking requires an understanding of two complementary features of historical literacy: first-order substantive knowledge of the past and second-order meta-historical knowledge.

The first type of historical knowledge focuses on the substance of the past. It is what history is about – the content. Substantive history has traditionally been framed in narrative form, with all the epistemological challenges of such "emplotment". The second type of historical knowledge, referred to as meta-historical, concentrates on the concepts and vocabulary that provide "the structural basis for the discipline" (Lee, 1983, p. 25). These concepts are not what history is about – the substance. They are, rather, background conceptual tools needed for the study of the past as a discipline and the construction of historical accounts. The Historical thinking project has identified the following meta-historical concepts: evidence, historical significance, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective (empathy), and moral judgement (Seixas, 2006). Without these concepts, it would be impossible to make sense of the substance of the past, as "they shape the way we go about doing history" (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 199).

As Lee (2005b) contends, insofar as the ideas students hold "are more powerful than others, we may talk about progression in the way [they] understand the discipline of history" (p. 37). Once we start thinking in terms of first-order and second-order knowledge, we can more precisely and accurately (1) measure students' preconceived ideas about history and (2) find ways of gradually extending these ideas and make them more sophisticated.

PROGRESSION THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES: THE BATTLE OF QUEENSTON HEIGHTS, 1812

As the development of powerful ideas about history is continuous and counter-intuitive, it is important to start from students' own ideas. On a curricular level, doing so may help reduce the tendency of imposing generic assessment models typically framed around vague attainment levels such as "limited knowledge of" or "some knowledge of" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 18). In this article, I will present results of a digital investigation with a class of students (n=29) enrolled in a senior history elective (Grade 12) in one large southern Ontario school. Students were provided with a brief synopsis of the task, the battle of Queenston Heights on the Niagara River, and spent three additional classes completing the activity individually in a computer lab. Using a primary source account of the battle from a Canadian militia officer (Archibald McLean), a historical map of the Niagara region, and a web simulation (www.virtualhistorian.ca), students had to recreate a visual representation of the battle based on a famous British painting produced by T. Sutherland in England in 1836 (see Figure 1). They then had to compare and contrast their visual representation with the original painting (which they could only see after recreating the battle online). Following are three samples of students' responses to the activity. They offer a range of performances based on their ideas about history and of the concept of "evidence" in particular. I will discuss them according to the progression model presented above (see Table 1). For conceptual clarity, I have delineated three levels of progression: realistic, relativistic, and criterialist (see VanSledright, 2010, pp. 64-67).

Table 1: Progression model in historical literacy

EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES TOWARD HISTORY	CHARACTERISTICS AND GENERAL IDEAS
Realistic stance	"History" and the "past" are the same. The present provides a window to the past. History is fixed in time by authorities. There is a true story of the past "out there". How we know the past is answered by direct access to witnesses (authorities). Sources are treated as factual information, some are accurate and others not. Historical understanding is equated with getting the right story of the past and reporting it truthfully.
Relativist stance	"History" and the "past" are not the same. How we know the past is answered by reference to the residua left by predecessors. History is the story of the past from a particular perspective. Differences in perspectives are due to personal opinions, biases, or loss of information/residua from the past. Historical understanding is relativist, sources are "illustrations" and personal interpretations are as legitimate as diverse. No use of disciplinary tools to arbitrate between competing interpretations of the past.
Criterialist stance	"History" and the "past" are not the same How we know the past is answered by critical use of residua in the form of "evidence". Historical evidence must be contextualized and questioned as part of an inquiry process. Reliability is not fixed or tied to proximity of the events. Sources can yield different inferential statements depending on questions asked. Historical understanding is based on criteria and tools to make evidence-based accounts. Accounts are contextualized and provisional, opened up to review and change over time.

THE REALISTIC STANCE

Students who hold a realistic view of history see the past as a directly accessible window from the present. To the question "how do we know the past?," they naturally invoke direct access to witnesses of the events in question. As Saïd observes, "history is information and personal accounts". From this perspective, history and the past are the same since representations of the past are emanating directly from the actors of the time. In the student's

Figure 1: Virtual Historian War of 1812 Recreation activity



http://www.virtualhistorian.ca/vh10/english/War1812_Queenston_e/postcard.html

explanation below, differences between his recreation and the painting of 1836 are due to factual mistakes in accurately recording and using the information about the battle. "The differences of my painting and the original," Clara confesses, "could be because perhaps I did not read the Letter of Archibald McLean thoroughly enough and did not get all the details I needed to…". So it is no surprise that Clara spent considerable time explaining exclusively factual details between her representation and the one of 1836.

From this realistic stance, the battle of Queenston Heights only happened in one true way. The difference in how we (re)present it is a simple factual problem that can be resolved by going back to witnesses of the battle. In her explanation, accuracy is tied directly to the authority and proximity of witnesses to the event. "It [painting] was also probably more accurate," she admits, "because the artist who created the painting may have been at the event, or may have known someone who was there". In the face of such different versions of the battle, students

like Clara confront an epistemological impasse. The past is given and historical perspective completely ignored. There is no contextualization of the events in a particular social context of the time, nor is there any realization that our contemporary views are shaped by our own modern conditions.

Clara's analysis of her work

The Battle of Queenston Heights

5. Explain the similarities and differences between your work and the one of 1836.

My painting is similar to the historical painting produced in 1836 in regards to the placement of subject matter. Both paintings have the American troops coming from the left side (the American side) and invading the right side (the British side), as it occurred in the historical event. The American troops are crossing the River at Queenstown. Most of the Americans were killed in the boats, hence the American soldiers drowning in the river in my painting. The Americans arrived at the bottom of the mountain and climbed up it, as seen in both paintings. They charged the British and got possession of the mountain. But the British, with the help of the Indians, snuck up from behind the Americains who tried to escape down the mountains. This resulted in the victory of the British at Queenston Heights. All of these events are present in the original painting, but my painting only includes up to where the Americans climb up the mountain. My painting does not include Indians, nor does it include the British victory over the Americans. Also, the subjects of the original painting are much more proportional to the background while the subjects of my painting are not proportionate. (1)

6. What could account for these similarities and differences? (interpretation, use of different sources, bias, positionality, etc)

The differences of my painting and the original could be because perhaps I did not read the Letter of Archibald McLean thoroughly enough and did not get all details (2) I needed to, one specific example being including the Indians in my paintings. Also, maybe in 1936 when the painting was created the artist did not have as much information about the historical event at Queenston Heights, so they may have left out some parts. (3)

7. Is the original work of 1836 necessarily "more accurate" the yours? Explain your answer.

The original painting of 1836 is more accurate than mine, mostly because of the proportion of the subject matter. There was not even enough room to including the same number of boats in my painting as were included in the original. It was also probably more accurate because the artist who created the painting may have been at the event, or may have known someone who was. (4)

1. Differences between the two paintings are discussed exclusively in terms of factual differences (mostly omissions) in figures and armament and graphic design.
2. Differences emerge from poor copying of original source facts.
3. Some recognition that original painting might not be accurate due to time elapses since event.
4. Accuracy of painting is tied up to the proximity to the event. Being a possible witness makes it more accurate.

The realistic stance does not recognize the key concept "evidence" for making sense of the past. When students ask themselves how we know the Battle of Queenston Heights?, it does not naturally follow that they will think of sources as relics and records proving some evidential clues about the past. The assumption that the past is given makes historical sources "bearers of information". In this view, historical sources are treated like an encyclopaedia. They are not questioned for what they are, but only read for the factual information they present. For these students, there is a true story "out there" and accurate sources will tell exactly what happened. Historical understanding is only a matter of tracking the correct sources of information.

THE RELATIVISTIC STANCE

Once students realize that the past is not given but only retrievable through the *residua* left by predecessors, they can develop different ideas about history. To the question "how do we know the past?," relativist students turn to the necessity of accessing and reading what was left – the sources. This epistemological stance does not presuppose that history and the past are the same. Students know that what happened is reported by various sources. They also acknowledge, as a result of this, that there is no single true story fixed by the past. As Anna tells us, "There are many witnesses of the battle, and it would be assumed that it was viewed from different perspectives".

The challenge, from this standpoint, is not to remain truthful to the witnesses but to decide what perspective to adopt. Consider the explanation from Alan below. "There are many different accounts of historical events," he maintains, "and since it happened in the past, it is very hard to accurately decide who is absolutely correct".

Alan's analysis of his work

Work of 1836

The work of 1836 depicts many American boats approaching the shores of Canada, with many men making it ashore alive. The letter from Archibald McLean states that very few people made it alive to the Canadian shore. The painting from 1836 also depicts American boats approaching the town, but the letter only describes American men sneaking up to the shore right under the cliff. My painting attempts to show these changes in the number of people who made it alive and the location of getting to the shore. Another difference between my paint and the one from 1836 is that the painting from 1836 does not clearly show the Indians coming to the aide of the British on the top of the hill. My painting attempts to show this, although the Indians are very large and do not really make it into the picture. The painting from 1836 does not clearly show that the Americans had taken the top of the hill; it just looks like they were trying to climb to the top when they were attacked. The letter from Archibald McLean tells his story of how he and other officers were told to go retrieve the top of the hill, which had been taken over by Americans. (1)

These differences occur due to the possible biases of the creator of the painting. They may have heard someone else's version of the battle, instead of the letter Archibald McLean, which accounts for the differences in the painting. Another factor which may influence the artist of the painting is their nationality: American or Canadian. Depending on which one they were, they might portray it as one side being stronger that the other. (2)

There are many different accounts of historical events, and since it happened in the past, it is very hard to accurately decide who id absolutely correct. While the work of 1836 is not correct, it isn't incorrect either, It depends upon the perspective of the person viewing the work of art. (3)

1. Differences between the two paintings are compared in reference to the original source letter. The letter presents one story of what happened during the battle.
2. Differences explained in terms of "biases" of the creators. Personal factors such as nationality shape the interpretation of story.
3. Accuracy is tied to individual perspective. Very hard to tell which story is more accurate.

The critical problem for relativist students stems from the belief that history is only about someone's perspective, about someone conveying his or her opinions on past events. The differences in the accounts are the result of "distortion" such as biases, lies, and allegiances (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 212). Students, at this stage, know very well from personal experience that everyday stories can be twisted in order to suit particular agendas. So many naively impose this common-sense view of story-telling on school history. In the case of Alan, for example, the discrepancies between his work and the one of 1836 "occur due to the possible biases of the creator of the painting" and "their nationality". Being Canadian, American, or British would, in this view, inform his own representation of the battle.

Although relativist students have more sophisticated ideas about history than their realistic peers, they are still confronted with the concept of "evidence". Historical sources are not questioned in terms of their *provenance*, their *nature*, and their *reliability*. They primary function is to serve as "illustrations" of particular assertions and interpretations (Dickinson, Gard, & Lee, 1978). The painting of 1836 is an illustration of British interpretation of the War of 1812 in the same way the first-hand account of a local soldier at Queenston Heights represents the Canadian version of the battle. In either case, the *residua* contain some facts and opinions, thus making it very hard for us to decide. This understanding of sources rests on the belief that the reliability of a source is fixed rather than dependent upon the questions we ask. These students were unable to see that history is not about arbitrarily choosing between different voices from the past. "Relativists," VanSledright (2010) contends, "possess few strategies or tools for discerning better histories from others because they lack criteria for deciding and hold a weak conception of evidence" (p. 66).

THE CRITERIALIST STANCE

Some students in our study recognized that knowing history is more complex than choosing between different stories that best suit our wishes. When asked "how do we know the past?," these "criterialists" shifted the focus from personal bias to the nature of history as an inquiry process. For Teresa, "history is the study of the past. The past never changes but the interpretations we make of the past do". Unlike the previous groups, these students accept that accounts present different points of view because they are reconstructions of the past based on interpretations of the evidence.

Consider the explanation given by Tim below. "No one envisions history the same," he contends, because "my painting is representative of my own interpretation of the battle that I got from other parts of the [computer] site". Here, Tim recognizes that the sources he analyzed for his recreation were not only different but informed his own interpretation of the battle. Different questions and different sources can lead to divergent interpretations. Criteria and tools allow historians to make evidence-based accounts. More than this, it is in the nature of historical accounts to be incomplete and provisional. As Tim confesses, "unfortunately I was unable to place the First Nations people in the pictures [sic] as I was unaware of their position in the battle". Tim knows that "Indian

warriors" were key to the success of the battle. But he admits that his interpretation of the sources did not help him infer their position during the fight. This is a significant acknowledgement of historical thinking.

Tim's analysis of his work

The war of 1812: the battle of Queenstown Heights questions

1. The original painting displayed on the website resemble the painting that I constructed. They both shared similarities such as the positioning of the American boats heading towards the town and towards the steep cliff. The British soldiers are positioned at right, top of the hill. Because the boat and people sizes on the painting program are disproportionate it is quite hard to paint an accurate picture of the battle. My painting conveyed there were more American soldiers then British. I unfortunately was unable to place the first nations people in the pictures as I was unaware of their position in the battle. In the actual battle of Queenstown Heights I imagine there were a lot more American boats, more cannons and more of an attack in the narrows of the battle site. (1)

2. The individual who painted the original picture had a dissimilar interpretation of the battle then I. No one envisions history the same. My painting is representative of my own interpretation of the battle that I got from other parts of the site. (2)

3. The original work isn't more or less accurate then mine. He had limited recourses and therefore this took away from the accuracy of his painting. I had access to a lot more resources then him and by having this access I was able to recreate a more detached and precise portrayal of the battle. (3)

1. Differences between the two paintings are presented in terms facts and design. (Realistic position) Sources do not tell everything. Lack of clues from the source on First Nations is recognized as a limit.
2. Differences explained in terms of perspectives and use of sources to create interpretations.
3. Accuracy is not a question of proximity. Access to primary sources lead to more accurate portrayal.

Another important feature of the criterialist stance is the categorization of sources as evidence for particular inferences. For realist students, sources are "pictures of the past". They convey in a truthful way what really happened. For relativists, however, sources are "illustrations" presenting personal perspectives. Because of this we can never know the past for sure, so there is no point in looking further. For criteralists, the use of sources is different. Historians are not simply forced to choose between different stories. They can (re)create their own account of the past using an inquiry process which may lead them to arrive at conclusions different from the sources used. This disciplinary process, which calls for "sourcing heuristic" (Wineburg, 1991), makes it possible to compare and contrast sources and arrive at sound judgements about their value and ultimately their authority.

With the criterialist stance also comes the notion that we, as 21st century agents, can potentially know more about the past than witnesses themselves. This is the realization of Tim's sourcing activity. "The original work [of 1836]," he writes, "isn't more or less accurate then [sic] mine. He had limited resources… I had access to a lot more resources then [sic] him and by having this access I was able to recreate a more detached and precise portrayal of the battle". Criterialists are aware of the fact that perspective matters, but they also know that historical perspective makes it possible to look at the past with detachment. Sources are not simply "biased;" they must be placed into the particular context in which they arise and be judged accordingly. This implies temporarily suspending our own preconceived ideas to read the "subtexts" of sources as rhetorical human artifacts with hidden latent meanings (Wineburg, 2001, p. 65). Through this disciplinary mental process, it becomes possible to ask questions and generate knowledge from sources; knowledge that actors themselves might not have been aware of.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In his influential book *The Unschooled Mind*, Gardner (2004) convincingly argues that very early in life people develop explanatory frameworks and powerful ideas about the world. This "intuitive understanding," proves to be extremely serviceable to explain everyday experiences. So when kids reach formal schooling age, they do not enter their classrooms as empty vessels. They have already acquired powerful stories about the world and the past. These ideas can be extremely useful and charming but they can also create considerable challenges to new learning simply because intuitive ideas from everyday life do not always work very well in the context of school history. Formal schooling is supposed to challenge common-sense ideas and replace them with scholastic ones. But do they? In history education, one would think that by the time students graduate from high school they should have acquired extensive knowledge about their culture and society and powerful ideas about the collective past.

Despite 12 years of formal schooling and courses in the field of history, many students have problems understanding the nature of history as a discipline. For Gardner, intuitive ideas developed early in life remain durable even after extensive exposure to scholastic thinking. Progression in disciplinary understanding is, therefore, not entirely an age-related factor. Students do not automatically get smarter in their thinking as they get older. At the Grade 12 age level, students' ideas about history fluctuate considerably. Even

students who offered more sophisticated answers presented many inconsistencies in their explanations. More than this, the findings from this study reveal that individual students' own ideas about history are "decoupled" (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 213), that is, their understanding of certain concepts can be sophisticated while their understanding of other concepts is very naïve. This was particularly evident in students' explanations of the differences between their recreation and the painting of 1836. For example, they could spend considerable effort explaining how history is based on historical perspectives but naively conclude that there is only one true story of the battle.

The complex literacy practices required for creating a personal, usable history for 21st democracy have to be developed regularly and progressively. Models of progression in history, as the one presented here, cannot guarantee successful achievement for every student at the very same pace. This would be beyond any theory of history education. But they can provide students and teachers at least three additional means of actions: diagnostic assessment, course planning, and school history accountability. They can offer a structure of historical knowledge with a characterization of particular types of substantive and meta-historical concepts that provide the basis for developing more powerful ideas about the past. Models cannot (and should not) be regarded as encompassing the totality of knowledge in history. Students' own multifaceted sophistication cannot easily be captured by such progression models which present ideas in clear delineated ways. Nonetheless, they can be useful to further students' understanding of some aspects of the disciplinary structure of history. They provide teachers with a distinctive language and set of tools necessary for developing historical literacy practices that are currently lacking in our curricula, approved textbooks, and even educational parlance. As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, discussion on historical thinking and models of progression can help Canadians in general, and kids in particular, acquire more powerful ways of representing the past for present-day orientation.

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