BRINGING DIVERSE GROUPS TOGETHER TO ENRICH HISTORY EDUCATION[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article traces important turning points that have affected history education in Canada over the past decade. These have included the 1999 "Giving the Past a Future" Conference, which took place amid a climate of despair about the state of history teaching and learning; greater availability of resources; and increased attention to research on students' historical understandings both within Canada and internationally. Finally, the author discusses the formation of The History Education Network / Histoire et éducation en réseau (THEN/HiER), a pan-Canadian organization which intends to facilitate cooperation among the various constituencies involved in history education.

What a difference a decade can make. In January 1999, the Association for Canadian Studies and the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada jointly sponsored the "Giving the Past a Future" Conference. It was billed as the "largest Canadian conference ever on the teaching and learning of history," and, with a reputed 750 people in attendance, no doubt was. The conference took place amid a climate of despair about the state of history teaching and learning and even the place of history as a subject in the school curriculum. In a 1996 issue of the journal *Canadian Social Studies*, guest co-editors Alan Sears, Gerry Clarke and Andrew Hughes of the University of New Brunswick, pointed out, with decided understatement, that there was "an undercurrent of concern running through many of the articles" (p. 14). Eminent historian and history educator Ken Osborne expressed dismay that in the climate of school reform in his province of Manitoba, "Science and technology hold the spotlight, together with a narrow definition of literacy, while social studies, history, geography, and the arts and humanities in general, are ignored or downgraded" (p. 28). Osborne concluded with the pronouncement, "the downgrading of history… is neither an aberration nor an accident. It is part of a wider move to sweep the very idea of democratic citizenship aside" (p. 30).

Who Killed Canadian History? by historian Jack Granatstein, a short, but best-selling polemic, had recently been published. Granatstein laid the blame for the demise of Canadian history at several doors: the presence of the interdisciplinary subject of social studies, which has resulted in a diluted version of history in many provinces; the narrow research focus of many historians; an overemphasis on teaching skills, rather than content; and the success of determined interest groups in getting their agendas into the curriculum, resulting in a fragmentation of the national narrative accompanied by an overemphasis on negative aspects of our history. The spectre of four surveys of Canadian history knowledge, conducted on behalf of the Dominion Institute, on which Canadian young people performed dismally, also haunted the conference. Many speakers responded to Granatstein's charges. Historian Veronica Strong-Boag of the University of British Columbia boldly declared, "I stand before you as one of the killers of Canadian history." (In fact, over the next year or two there was a cottage industry of articles in which people elaborated upon their murderous intents.) Strong-Boag and others emphasized the importance of bringing multiple narratives to the fore. The debates were lively. As historian Desmond Morton remarked at the time, "No-one [will] confuse this conference with a funeral."

This conference marked a turning point in Canadian history education. It was the first of a series of biannual conferences sponsored by the Association for Canadian Studies in which academic historians; history educators in faculties of education; historians in museums, archives and historic sites; curriculum policy-makers and practicing history and social studies teachers come together to debate issues related to history teaching and learning and to learn from one another. Lynton R. (Red) Wilson, who was Chairman of the Board of Bell Canada at the time, chose the conference as the venue for an announcement that he would donate $500,000 from his personal funds to establish a foundation to promote effective Canadian history teaching in schools. This marked the beginning of Historica, which has produced instructional plans, sponsored a series of summer institutes for teachers led by prominent history educators, sponsored the popular Heritage Fairs and developed the Historica Minutes.

A second turning point is the increasing availability of resources useful for teaching history. *Canada: A People's History*, the CBC/Radio Canada filmic depiction of Canadian history, has an important place on this list. But the list also includes the increasing array of digitized primary sources available on archive and museum websites. While history teachers do not always find them as accessible and usable as they would like, they are certainly more accessible than the actual artifacts and hardcopy documents they represent. The McCord Museum in Montreal stands out as an exemplar of approaches that public history sites can take to the organization of their digital resources for teaching purposes. The Great Unsolved Mysteries of Canadian History site is a model in the way it provides opportunities for students to examine digitized primary sources and interpret their content in order to shape their own arguments and create their own accounts of events pertinent to the mystery to be solved. Other new resources that are becoming increasingly visible are graphic novels on historical topics.[2]

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The third development worth noting is the history education research community that is beginning to thrive in this country. The catalyst was Peter Seixas' 1996 article, "Conceptualizing Growth in Historical Understanding," published in *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*. Seixas articulated a framework for the field of history education involving the second-order historical concepts: significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy (perspective-taking) and moral judgment, and agency. While there has been extensive research in the United States on how students develop historical understandings (Barton 2001; Davis, Yeager and Foster 2001; Wineburg 2001; VanSledright 2002), as well as in the United Kingdom and other countries (Portal 1987; Dickinson et. al 1995; Voss and Carretero 1998; Lee and Ashby 2000; Dickinson, Gordon and Lee 2001; Lee 2004; Ashby, Gordon and Lee 2005), it has just begun to flourish in Canada. Seixas' current and former graduate students are working with this framework in interesting ways. Stéphane Lévesque (2008) at the University of Ottawa is explicating and extending the framework; Kent den Heyer (2003) at the University of Alberta, is exploring questions of historical agency; and Carla Peck at the same institution is completing a dissertation study in which she explores the influence of cultural background on students' understanding of significance. Amy von Heyking (2008), at the University of Lethbridge, influenced by Seixas' work, is doing empirical work in elementary classrooms, also around questions of significance. Interesting work is going on in Quebec around questions of historical consciousness (Laville 2004) and memory (Létourneau and Moisan 2004; Létourneau 2006).

What is needed now is an intellectual space where people representing the various constituencies involved in history education can communicate in ongoing and fruitful ways. The newly formed History Education Network/ Histoire et Éducation en Réseau (THEN/HiER) aims to fill this void. It is a pan-Canadian network devoted to history education reform from kindergarten through postsecondary schooling.[3] THEN/HiER's 28 partner organizations include those with a pan-Canadian or international scope such as the Canadian Historical Association, Historica, the Association for Canadian Studies, the Critical Thinking Consortium and the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness; three major museums, the McCord, the Museum of Anthropology and the Glenbow; as well as

provincially-rooted organizations such as provincial social studies and history teachers' associations, the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and the Ojibwa Cultural Society. International partners are the National Center for History Education, Australia and Institut universitaire de la formation des maîtres (IUFM), site d'Arras, France.

The aim is to promote research, dialogue and collaboration across constituencies. This presents a challenge. On this point, historian and history educator Ruth Sandwell (2006) has remarked that, "From the vantage point of elementary and secondary school history teachers, the work of professional historians in the post-1960 period has been increasingly 'academic' in the worst sense of the word: irrelevant, pretentious, and frequently unreadable. For historians, the work of history teachers has been seen as, at best, facile and irrelevant, and at its worst a more or less benign form of government propaganda" (p. 6). As recently as the 1960s and '70s, historians actually authored history textbooks that were authorized by provincial ministries of education for use in schools. However, over time, university tenure and promotion policies have increasingly worked against this practice. What has been lost in the process? We cannot expect to find in textbooks the latest historical insights when those at the cutting edge of research are not involved in their development. Desmond Morton, one of the few historians to participate in textbook authorship in the past thirty years, found it a discouraging experience (personal communication, Fall, 2008). The task of the network will not be easy.

Finally, as the headmaster in the film *The History Boys* put it so aptly, "I am corseted by the curriculum." Provincial curriculum policy provides the framework for what is taught in classrooms. Ultimately, if THEN/HiER intends to have an impact on classroom practice, it needs to be involved in provincial curriculum development.

The Association for Canadian Studies Conference in October, 2008 was THEN/HiER's first opportunity to present in a national forum. The composition of the THEN/HiER panel was intended to at least partially represent the composition of the network. The question which the panel was asked to address was: "What is the shape and place of historical thinking in high schools?" Each panelist addressed the question from his own perspective.

Peter Seixas, historian and history educator, listed a number of questions representing the second-order concepts discussed earlier and then presented his view of the kind of history program which would enable students to be able to handle such questions in sophisticated ways. High school history teacher Mark Perry contended that almost everyone agrees that it is good idea to teach historical thinking as opposed to isolated historical facts, reading a passage from the Foundation Document of the four Atlantic Provinces to support his point. He cautioned, however, that, even though it is generally considered a good idea, it is not being taught in high schools. He pointed to two reasons for this: the absence until recently of a language to articulate ideas related to how students acquire historical understandings and teacher education programs that do not engage pre-service teachers in creating the tasks of historical thinking. Historian Gerry Friesen took another tack, emphasizing the importance of what he called "wonder." He cautioned that students should not spend all their time on ideas like cause and consequence because they may lose the sense of wonder about what they are learning. He pointed out that the students in his university level history courses have a number of opportunities to engage with primary sources and suggested that the same approach be taken in secondary schools. In the end, the three panelists all pointed to the importance of providing ways for students to actively engage with history in their classrooms, whether those classrooms are in a high school, the history department of a university or a teacher education program.

We don't really know a great deal about how teachers teach or students learn, or the contexts in which they do so. Until we know more about what actually goes on, it is difficult to work towards doing these things better. Researchers need to address questions such as: How do teachers go about teaching history? *Who* teaches history; and by this I mean, for example, what are their qualifications, gender, ethnicity? How are pre-service teachers being prepared to teach history? What are school district hiring practices? What approaches are taken in the professional development experiences that are available to teachers? Then, we need to ask how students actually go about learning history. What actually happens when students use primary documents? What questions do they ask? How do they make connections? Do they draw on contextual information which they already know or can access? How does cultural background (substitute gender, age, ethnicity, region, socioeconomic status) influence how students understand history? Other questions are: What is the role of resources, print and digital, in history classrooms? How are new technologies used? What happens when they are used? "Is Google Making us Stupid?" as a recent article in *The Atlantic* put it. These lead to questions such as: How *should* we teach history? How can we *best* assess students' historical understandings and progression in their acquisition? How can we *best* prepare pre-service teachers to teach history? What are the *best* ways to inform teacher practice?

I can't help but think that we are on the brink of change. There are historians and history educators (sometimes one and the same) in many institutions across the country asking the same question: How can we improve school history? The pace of research is picking up not only in Canada but on a global level (Tutiaux-Guillon 2005;

Grever and Stuurman 2007). New and better resources for teaching history, both print and digital, are becoming available every day.

Recently, in the *Winnipeg Free Press* Ken Osborne again commented on the state of history education in Canada. This time, after commenting on the work that is going on, he concluded that:

> It will take time for this and other work to reach every history classroom, but change is underway. Ten years ago, some of us feared our schools were abandoning history altogether, either by making it an elective course or by burying it in a social studies mish-mash. No longer. History is back and it shows promising signs of being taught better than ever before. In my more light-headed moments, I almost wish I was back in the classroom again. (28 September, 2008, B4)

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NOTES

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[2] See Cromer, M. and P. Clark. 2007. "Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History." *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 35, 4, p. 574-591.

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