REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT UNSOLVED MYSTERIES IN CANADIAN HISTORY PROJECT: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

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ABSTRACT

The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project, winner of the 2008 Pierre Berton Award for Canadian History, is an on-line archive and pan-Canadian history education project that invites users to 'solve' a real life mystery using evidence from the past. In this article, the project's Educational Director reflects on the ways in which the twelve mysteries that comprise the project, and the extensive educational support available to teachers and students, have worked as part of a larger international movement in history education to teach history as an active process – history as doing – rather than history as a product to be consumed.

The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History was started in 1997 by John Lutz and myself, with Peter Gossage joining us as co-director in 2004. The idea behind the series is simple: give students an engaging, real-life mystery to solve from Canada's history, provide them with the clues (historical evidence in the form of written documents, photographs, maps, 3D reconstructions, and artifacts) and some contexts with which to solve it, and in the process they will put into practice key elements of historical thinking – and enjoy it. Because the co-directors selected mysteries that highlighted significant issues, themes and events in Canadian history across the country and from 1000 to 1960, students also learn a great deal about Canadian history specifically from the series. The series is now complete, with 12 mysteries, each with at least 100,000 words and hundreds of images. GUMICH (as the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History is affectionately known) provides as well many kinds of educational support for students from elementary school to graduate school, though most is directed at high school students. Teaching support includes teachers' guides with detailed lesson and unit plans, as well as exemplars of and discussions about how and why to use primary documents to teach history. There is also an entire website of MysteryQuests, containing 30 webquest styled short lessons relating to each of the sites, that GUMICH created in partnership with TC2 (The Critical Thinking Consortium).

The medium of the World Wide Web, the inherently mysterious, often gory and horrible nature of the subject matter, and the appeal of using 'real life' historical evidence work together to draw students to the sites, and to engage them in learning about history. But these websites work at other levels as well: most significantly, they sidestep or even subvert the "consume and regurgitate" model of history instruction that continues, unfortunately, to describe too much history education, particularly at the secondary level. (Sandwell, 2005a) For the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History sites allow students to *do* history in the way that more closely resembles historians' practice (and I'll say more about why this is important a little later): historians use a variety of primary documents (the evidence or primary sources) and some contextual materials (secondary sources),

to interpret an event or issue. It is this history-as-process-of-inquiry aspect of the site that first drove us to create the site as a way of teaching history; it is this aspect that has, I believe, continued to give the site its punch as a way of teaching history. And it is, perhaps predictably, the aspect of the site that has also given me, as educational director, the greatest challenge throughout the ten-year project.

Let me back up a little bit, to the creation of the site. When we first imagined the site, we were intrigued by the apparent dissonance between using late 20th century technology to investigate a mid 19th century murder. What John and I had originally liked about the technology, however, was the ways in which it 'fit' with some important 20th century ideas about history. Earlier ways of teaching history, through lectures and textbooks, were first developed in the 19th century, when teaching history was generally understood to be the teaching of "just the facts", plain and simple. Few questioned that history was a chronicle of events about great men and important public events. But history has changed a lot over the years, and so have historians. (Symcox, 2002; Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1998) History no longer regarded by historians as a thing, or a fixed body of knowledge known as facts, or any other kind of product. Instead, it is now generally recognized as an active, broad ranging, more inclusive dialogue among people who, sensitive to race, class, gender, sexual preference, and regional differences are interested in interpreting evidence from the past. History, furthermore, is not simply based on just any evidence, or any past, but on what seems important to the historian as part of the wider society. History involves multiple perspectives, ambiguity and dissonance. It also involves some very particular disciplined approaches to evaluating evidence, to building reasoned arguments, and to making persuasive claims about the past. (Létourneau, 2006). Historical knowledge is not absolute, neutral or objective, in other words. Because it is created by people who can only draw inferences from the traces and accounts left behind in order to come to reasoned judgements about things that no longer exist (Seixas, 1993), historical knowledge is necessarily theoretically situated, historically contingent and open to reform.

The most significant change in what historians have been doing for the past twenty years may simply be their openness about the real nature of their work; for historians have been acknowledging within their own communities for well over fifty years now that history is not a positivist science (Carr, 1961). Historians are now making the tentative and contingent processes of *doing* history increasingly transparent to their audience. As a result, history can no longer be considered a one-dimensional, authoritarian and positivist declaration by an eminent historian about what "really" happened. It was this sense of openness, the idea of process and the building of knowledge through active collaborative inquiry that first led us to develop the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project by means of an on-line medium. For it was this kind of knowledge, this kind of history-as-process of interpretation, that we thought was particularly well suited to the World Wide Web.

The structure of the web promised a more democratic, non-authoritarian and dialogical engagement with evidence and for a variety of reasons. Before the World Wide Web, historical documents were usually cloistered in specific archival places where access was limited by traveling distance to the archive, by the need to preserve the valuable documents inside, and by an arcane filing system that, in practical terms, limited access to specialists only. Once the web had made a wide range of archival materials accessible to everyone, we believed it was but a short step from free access to free engagement; the World Wide Web made it possible for everyone to see the documents for themselves, and to come to their own conclusions. And the HTML links on the web promised a new, non-linear path for interpretation; for the organizational structure of web pages allows students to follow a complex idiosyncratic and varied pattern of historical exploration, rather than trace out one plot line, or the pattern of causation imposed by someone else. The World Wide Web provided the space for the evidence-based critical enquiry that defines history, and we believed that all it would take would be a little help from us to transform history education.

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But if the project began with our interest in the deceptive dissonance between using late 20th century technology to investigate at mid 19th century murder, what

we have discovered over the last few years as we have expanded, developed, refined, and received feedback on the sites, is a very different, and very real dissonance: we have uncovered a surprising gulf between historians and teachers' ideas of what history *is*. Students and teachers tend to use this 20th century technology to give students what is essentially a nineteenth century, positivist view of history – history as a product rather than a process of knowledge (Sandwell, 2005b).

To many of those using the sites, it has been the idea of history as a process of critical inquiry that has, at times, stood out as their most problematic aspect. This problem has been clear in the evaluations of the site. Most students reported that they found the site interesting and engaging – at first. But as they delved more deeply into the sites, and really tried to 'solve' the mysteries, they were increasingly frustrated by the seemingly impossible demands that it placed on them to critically engage with the material. The demands seemed impossible because many of the students had simply not encountered a kind of learning that was rooted in a disciplined and reasoned interpretation of empirical evidence, and yet resulted in inconclusive, fragmented, and often contradictory conclusions. Many of the students surveyed commented that the sites should include "time lines" that outlined for them the "key events," explaining what "really happened," instead of confronting them with a variety of evidence that many experienced simply as confusing. The process of critical enquiry that we had carefully brought to the forefront of their learning experience of history-as-process was even seen by some students as an unfair complication that the creators of the site were superimposing on an otherwise coherent and straightforward chronicle of events, preventing them from easily finding the single interpretive conclusion that they identified as history – the right answer, in other words. It became clear to us that students identified the process of evidence-based critical enquiry itself as something that was *extraneous to*, rather than an *essential component of*, history.

Frequent requests for a "clear" timeline and "answer sheet" demonstrated that many students missed the main lesson of the site: that historical knowledge, like any social knowledge, rests on the active process of interpreting relevant and complex evidence in an informed and reasonable way in the contexts of ongoing discussions with others. Students and teachers too often not only lack the *contexts* – historical and historiographical – to turn these primary and secondary documents into history, but they also lack the *experience* to confidently negotiate an analysis of primary documents in order to come up with a reasonable, well supported interpretation of the evidence. Many students, indeed, seem unaware of the necessity of interpreting evidence at all, seeming to believe instead that history rests on some kind of "immaculate perception" (Wineburg, 1991). Much of my work over the past five years has been working with teachers and other history educators to develop materials that provide users of the sites with the support that they need if they are to use the Mysteries websites effectively, as they build disciplinary habits, methods and ways of historical thinking.

It is not, of course, only our website that has documented the difficulty that students encounter if they are asked to apply 'critical inquiry' to primary documents in the study of history in secondary classrooms. In spite of a rising tide of document based enquiry exercises, Millson (2002), Van Sledright (2003) and Barton (2002, 2005), Sandwell (2003) have demonstrated the considerable difficulty that students have in the critical evaluation of evidence. As Keith Barton has noted "rather than evaluating information from multiple sources, students move directly to search engines to find the sites they thought would give them all the necessary information to accomplish the task." (Barton, 2002) Even more disturbing, in one study where students were given an intensive and successful training session where they were taught a series of discrete tasks relating to critical analysis of historical documents, when they had to bring these together into an original historical analysis, instead of using the skills they had mastered, students were still much more likely to a) give an answer that they thought that the teacher wanted or b) justify any explanation that came to mind by saying "I just kinda know" (Barton, 1997).

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The question that reasonably arises at this point is, am I, at the end of this long, complicated, pan-Canadian, collaborative and interdisciplinary project, disappointed? The answer is no. It is not in spite of this problem, but because of it that I am even more convinced of the value of using primary documents in a focused, contextualized way as a key strategy in teaching history and enhancing historical understanding. And this is not simply because the Great

Unsolved Mysteries Project has been awarded two significant awards in the past year, at the completion of this project: the Pierre Berton Award for Canadian History, and the American Merlot (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) "History Classic" Award.

To date, the real measure of its success has been teachers' enthusiasm for, and use of, the sites. For, in spite of the complaints – the legitimate complaints that students and teachers have brought to me about working with primary documents in general, and the Mysteries websites in particular over the years, about over-crowded curricula, impossible demands on their time, of their own poor training in history education, of the lack of teacher support, and of functionally illiterate and under-ambitious students – in spite of all these problems, teachers at all levels, but particularly in high schools, have nevertheless embraced the spirit of this project. And they are changing the way they teach history to include on-line primary documents and reasoned, evidence-based thinking. They are making changes not only because using primary documents is "more fun" than teaching and learning from the textbook (which it is), but also because teaching history as a process (history as a mystery that needs to be solved) is working better for them as a way of teaching historical thinking and knowing. Many of the teachers using the sites believe that students really are making some movement towards the genuine critical inquiry that is too often missing from their provincial curricula.

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While all three co-directors are pleased to accept that the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project is a success on the basis of anecdotal evidence from teachers, on the basis of statistics of website usage (millions of hits), requests for Teachers Guides (thousands) and the awards for the site, none of these however is a substitute for the detailed research that history educators need to do relating to just what, exactly "historical thinking" is, how to measure its increase, and whether teaching history-as-process, as the Mysteries Project has tried to do, *really does* work to improve historical understanding. The co-directors of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History are hoping that some of the work in this area, such as that being done by researchers such as Dr Peter Seixas and Christian Laville, will be applied to the Mysteries' project, and its efficacy evaluated.

I am not yet satisfied that the sites are working well enough to fulfill the promise of history education in a participatory democracy in a post-modern world. In order for our students and our citizens to get the most from what history education has to offer, we need :

1) better undergraduate training in history for our history teachers, training that includes the active aspects of doing history: using primary sources, and discussing how to do this through instruction in historiography and methodology
2) we need better teaching training in history at teachers' colleges
3) we need better and more attention to history teaching in the high schools

It is important here to clarify just what the promise of history education is. Or, to phrase this differently, Why teach history at all? I would argue that history does not just allow us to learn lessons from certain events in the past, or just to think critically. For as well, the process of historical thinking allows us to exercise our ability to engage in a particular kind of critical inquiry and reflection about complex social, human, phenomena over time. As Linda Levstik and Keith Barton describe it, we need to teach history "for the common good" (Levstik and Barton, 2004). Historical thinking provides exactly the kind of complicated and compassionate process of understanding and kind of knowledge that we need to understand our contemporary world. How do we know what accounts in the media make sense in terms of evidence and interpretation? How do we evaluate the significance of a particular event in our own lives, or in the lives of others? How do we find the language to talk about the kind of world we want for humanity? History provides an excellent education in learning to negotiate that difficult terrain lying between absolute truth on the one hand, and complete relativism on the other. History provides the best way of exploring and mobilizing 'truth claims' in the service of a better, more just and equal society. This is the kind of knowledge and understanding we need more of if we are to understand complex and collective social relations and work actively to improve them. The process of historical inquiry – the dialogue among people about evidence from the past – is, I would argue, the best way to explore who we were and are, and how we can turn ourselves into who we want to be.

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NOTE

[1] Parts of this his paper were adapted from Ruth Sandwell, "School History vs. the Historians," *International Journal of Social Education*, vol. 30, nº. 1, Spring 2005, 9-17.