INTRODUCTION: TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY IN ONTARIO

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OHASSTA is pleased to partner with the Association for Canadian Studies to produce a special edition of the *Canadian Issues* publication on the theme of "Canada's Diverse Histories". This publication provides insights into current debates over how best to deal with issues of diversity in constructing the Canadian historic narrative. It seeks to address some key questions around diversity and history teaching.

Does historical content matter when you teach history? Whose history is and should be taught in high schools, given that it may be some students' last experience with the subject in a curriculum?

The theme "what is history" offered by this edition's contributing authors speaks to the important ongoing debate about national histories. Exploring the notion that history is not one story, but many, and that our own identities may play a role in the way we construct history, provides interesting insight into the discipline.

How well are our teachers prepared to address issues of diversity in the history curriculum? Most teachers who teach high school history in Ontario have completed at least two history courses in university. Pre-requisites for teaching history range from completing a minimum of two courses at the University of Toronto (three courses is the current requirement), to five courses at several other Ontario universities. There is considerable focus on content and story, with the expectation that the undergrad will know how to analyze and make connections. However, the challenge most teachers face in their 21st century classrooms is the fact that the lecture model does not produce the desired degree of understanding of history, culture, or historical context among the students.

One way to engage high school history students is to use narratives that students can easily identify with and then have the student express what they mean personally. Although Canada's history of conflict and engagement in war is usually well covered – one might say overly covered – several other important stories simply make it into the classroom. The more that alternative and diverse narratives are introduced into the classrooms, the more likely the students are to become engaged in their own history. There is no reason for teachers *not* to include the histories of women's experiences, workers' experiences or immigrant stories. As Carla Peck has noted in her essay, "Studying the relationship between ethnic identity and the construction of historical narratives can help students, teachers and researchers understand some of the reasons why people have different interpretations of the past."

Over the past year at the same time that I have been teaching at the University of Toronto, I have had the opportunity to visit several of the province's history classrooms. I observed that the province's compulsory grade 10 history course, whose lesson plan begins in 1914 results in class that continue to study World War I well into the semester (Ontario, Canadian and World Studies 2005, p.45). As Phil Ryan noted in this edition of *Canadian Issues*,"Beware Shared memory", "Canada's military history is an effort to bring together two solitudes that we cannot bridge any other way. War and memory are as closely linked today at they ever were… the apotheosis of Vimy Ridge, which has morphed from a generally forgotten battle to represent "the birth of a nation" (Ryan).

A second approach to engaging the high school student in history is by creating opportunities that encourage students to demonstrate their learning in a diversity of performance tasks. These can include the traditional essay or test, but can further extend to creative ventures that incorporate drama, art, and technology, effectively allowing them to "do" history. "A classroom filled with student posters may suggest that students have engaged in meaningful learning. But it is the process of student learning and the cognitive engagement rather than the resulting product – that distinguishes projects from busywork." (Larmer John and Mergendoller, 2010).

The process of "doing" History does not require the History teacher to be an expert, but rather to co-learn with the students as they investigate and explore big issues , not topics. We are now beginning to recognize the

complexity of culture, and the way events have shaped different stakeholders, groups and individuals.

Ideally, how much do history teachers know about the context and current debates around Canada and history? What level of knowledge should we expect from them? These are all questions without clear-cut answers. As Stéphane Lévesque notes, "Developing historical literacy necessitates a particular mode of engaging with history – both in terms of evidence and narrative. When students are challenged to think like historians they must tackle a series of essential questions that cannot be answered with classroom texts and cross-curricular literacy skills" (Lévesque).

Historical literacy and historical thinking are both required in our classrooms today. Developing these skills requires a collaborative effort on the part of both teacher and student. In their reflections on citizenship and history, Christou and Sears explore the question of which specific skills are needed. "Notable was the depiction of history in education in terms of dispositions and outlooks rather than skills or merely content. These dispositions included a detachment from immediate pressures, a willingness to search for comparisons and analogies, a readiness to subject emotions to reason, consideration of multiple perspectives in issues, and weighing the forces of continuity or change. The importance of these outlooks for educators committed to the development of an active and critical approach to pedagogy is in no small part because the concept of mindedness is used in appealing to habits of mind and human life as opposed to retention of data or dexterity with particular skills." (Christou and Sears)

Another way to engage students is to incorporate the identities, values, and experiences of reflecting their diverse backgrounds. The study of history requires more than a desire to engage students in the process of looking at the past. Students' curiosity and involvement will increase if they see a reason to know and understand more about historical events, people, and communities. As Fine-Meyer identifies, "The experiences of Canadian women were absent from nation building narratives that embraced the achievements of elite and public men. Political and military leaders, lawmakers and industrial giants helped shape the national polity." If students do not recognize themselves in the history being taught, they will not care. This is supported by Sadlier's question, which asks, "how is it that we have managed to further a part of a Canadian narrative that has managed to exclude Canadians who were here from the earliest times?"

For her part, Markus provides insight into the ways in which artists are responding to the question of "whose story," by retelling historical narratives in new forms. "Archival footage, stories about lived history and artefacts carefully preserved, provide artists with the information and messages to create symbolic testimony. The result is art work that provides visual evidence of evolving identities and relationships with a Canadian experience and culture." History is not static, but a lived experience of the present and the past.

In determining what the next steps history teachers might take to strengthening their approach to teaching history, Mackenzie draws on the example of confronting issues of historic redress. He suggests, "Perhaps the best way to examine and evaluate the issues surrounding apologies and redress in the classroom would be to borrow a technique employed in the study of international relations, among other disciplines – the "case study" method. That would prompt questions about the justification or evidence employed for each claim, as well as consideration of the context and the content of the original decision-making, including purposes and anticipated results, as well as the validity and likely impact of remedial action. It could also demonstrate that these questions are complicated and that consequently the answers are not simple."

So, how do we help our students become engaged with History and encourage them to make connections between the past and present? Leora Schaefer and Margaret Wells recommend that, "students think about the question of legacy and how history is preserved, interpreted and taught to future generations. In the latter parts of their study, Facing History classes often examine the role of monuments and memorials in a society. "They are the signposts of past wrongs we don't want to repeat in the next generation," wrote one student about the role of monuments in promoting historical memory. "We need to know what happened in the past to clearly understand what we face in the future." Through this interaction between past and present, students can derive meaning and become active, informed, and engaged thinkers.

Teaching History in the 21st century means that students are taught the critical and historical thinking skills that will allow them to make historic knowledge and learning relevant to their future endeavours. Students need to be encouraged to explore the content that engages them and enables them to develop a critical perspective when it comes to the past and future. Historians from schools, faculties of education, and universities can work together to make History in the 21st century meaningful by incorporating the multitude of perspectives and voices that shape our stories.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Larmer John and Mergendolle, J.R. "Essentials for Project-Based Learning." *Educational Leadership*, 2010: 34-37.