ON HISTORICAL LITERACY: LEARNING TO THINK LIKE HISTORIANS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Knowing history is more complex than mastering historical facts. It necessitates a particular mode of engagement with history. This paper looks at what it means to become historically literate using Canadian historian Tim Cook as an example.

RÉSUMÉ

Le fait de comprendre l'histoire est plus complexe que de connaître des faits historiques. Cela nécessite un mode d'engagement particulier avec l'histoire. Ce texte examine ce que comprendre historiquement signifie en utilisant l'historien canadien Tim Cook en exemple.

What should history students know when they graduate from high school? The *Ontario Teachers' Manual* for History of 1915 indicates that "history is usually called a 'memory' subject, and is accordingly often taught as a mere memorizing of facts, names, and dates."[2] Surely, for most educators today memorizing content knowledge is no longer an adequate answer to this fundamental question that has puzzled schools and society for over a century. Nowadays, there is widespread talks and beliefs in "critical thinking," "skills" and "literacy" as overarching goals of education. Yet, there is not always agreement as to what these mean. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has responded with a series of documents and reports, including resource packages to help students "develop as fully literate readers, writers, talkers, and thinkers."[3]

Despite the value of all these, much of what is currently available on "cross-curricular literacy" only serves to obscure fundamental differences in disciplinary expertise – or what my colleague Perry Klein refers to as content literacy.[4] To claim, for instance, that learning to read in mathematics reinforces the ability to read history suggests very naive epistemological distinctions between domains of knowledge and also flawed assumptions about text meaning.[5] As Sam Wineburg rightly observes, "in our zeal to arrive at overarching models of reading, we often ignore qualities of the text that give it shape and meaning."[6] Although sharing some common symbol systems, understanding in history and understanding in mathematics or in literature pose radically different challenges to the mind.

The process of disciplinary homogenization, which leads teachers to use a common *parlance* and set of strategies across subjects, prevents students from taking advantage of the disciplines. Here it is important to differentiate between "subjects" and "disciplines." Subjects are organized departments of knowledge devised for structuring schedules and assessing learning objectives. Disciplines consist of "approaches devised by scholars over the centuries in order to address essential questions, issues, and phenomena drawn from the natural and human worlds."[7] They include distinctive methods of inquiry, theoretical framework, networks of concepts and ideas, symbols systems and modes of representations. History, with all of these refinements, is that discipline which seeks to make sense of the past. History is not the past; rather it is the process and the result of making meaning out of bits and fragments of the past.

LITERACY AND DISCIPLINARY EXPERTISE

Literacy is the ability to read, write, and think critically about a range of media including print texts, images, and electronic texts. It is a cognitive and social practice, an "essential tool for personal growth and active participation in a democratic society."[8] Becoming literate is critical in this information age and it is no surprise that the Ontario curriculum places great emphasis on early literacy instruction and progression in reading and writing.[9]

Yet despite significant progress in students' performance in standard literacy tests (EQAO results

2002–2008), there is still no clear evidence of improvement in students' ability to read, write, interpret, or think critically in history. Part of the problem has been our inability to teach "historical literacy." For Tony Taylor, becoming literate in history necessitates "a range of abilities and understandings required to grasp the nature of history."[10] Thirty years of research in the field has shown that expertise in history – disciplinary competence – is counter-intuitive, best cultivated when students (1) understand history and (2) understand the nature of history.

Students come to school with powerful beliefs and stories about the past. These so-called "common-sense" ideas acquired at home, in the media or in everyday life experiences, are gradually challenged in higher learning by some more complex and scientific ones.[11] But does public education really challenge learners to replace these intuitive ideas with more warranted ones as produced by historians? A central principle of history education continues to be that students need a firm ground of knowledge about the past (around the community, the nation, democracy, etc.) to be competent – and ultimately "good" citizens.

But historical understanding is more complex than understanding the substance of the past, i.e., the stagnant pieces of facts. As Peter Seixas contends, students are exposed to a variety of conflicting historical accounts (inside and outside the school) and "need the means to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of these interpretations."[12] Transforming students' intuitive ideas and equipping them with the tools to make sense of the past necessitate what Peter Lee calls procedural knowledge – or "metahistorical" knowledge.[13] Unlike the substance of the past, this knowledge shapes the way we go about doing history. What makes historians experts is not only, or so much, their vast knowledge of historical periods but their sophisticated beliefs about history and critical use of key concepts like evidence, historical empathy, and narrative. Instead of naively asking "What is the best story to know?" historians face the complexity of the past with such fundamental questions as "How do we know about the past?" "Why did it happen?" "What was it like back then?" Questions of this sort engage historians in a research process of investigating past events and producing evidence-based accounts. This disciplinary enterprise is dynamic and never complete, subject to debate and revision.

FROM "READING" TO "KNOWING" HISTORY

The strategies to develop cross-curricular literacy are useful in helping students develop everyday skills to read, write, and interpret a range of media. With such techniques as decoding, skimming, making predictions, and reading between the lines, it is possible to comprehend and engage more efficiently in a variety of so-called fiction and non-fiction texts. Because of the kind of habits of mind it develops, cross-curricular literacy promotes what might be called "proto-disciplinary" knowledge, that is knowledge extending beyond common sense to include some general features of higher-order thinking.[14] At this level, for instance, students can read a variety of texts and make a distinction between a historical narrative and a novel or between "facts" and "opinions." But this type of literacy is largely inadequate to sophisticated understanding in history because it does not originate from the texts and methods of the discipline. One cannot read the development of the BNA Act in the same way as the development of DNA.[15] To illustrate my point, I will consider an example on World War I: *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War* by War Museum historian Tim Cook.[16]

In *Shock Troops*, Cook follows the Canadian fighting forces during the key battles of Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele, and the Hundred Days campaign. Through the eyes of the officers and soldiers who fought and died in the trenches on the Western Front, and based on newly uncovered archival sources, Cook "presents a new view of the Canadian Corps' battles in the Great War," looking with a refreshing eye at how this small but cohesive military force quickly earned the title of "shock troops."[17] In his study, Cook aims to reveal the largely ignored yet significant contribution of Canada's army as part of the British Expeditionary Force. Aware of the challenging task facing him, Cook is cautious to observe that "having read almost every book published in Canada on the war, and hundreds by international scholars, I am only too aware that even a two-volume history can present just a fraction of the nation's experience in the Great War.[18] To offer a compelling account of this unique experience, his analysis is based on over a decade of study of official and private documents, including letters, diaries, memoirs, artefacts, postcards, photographs, and artworks. "An understanding of the complexity of battle," he points out, "can be achieved only by consulting these multiple sources of information – not to mention walking the battlefields to explore the very ground upon which the soldiers fought."[19]

In history, understanding World War I and the contribution of Canadian soldiers requires more than recalling stagnant facts about war and battles. By themselves, facts alone would have no historical significance if they were not connected together by the historian in a narrative that seeks to represent the past by explaining what happened. "Historical intelligibility," Lowenthal reminds us, "requires that not only past events occurring

TABLE 1: General distinctions between cross-curricular and historical literacy

NROSS-CURRICULAR LITERACY (PROTO-DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE)	HISTORICAL LITERACY (DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE)
What are the different types of texts?	What is a historical narrative? How is it constructed?
What are the features of the text? (main idea, facts, opinions, information, details)	What is the argument of the author? Is it convincing? How is it supported by historical evidence derived from sources?
What process, event or subject is being explained?	What is the sequence of events? What are the causes/consequences? What historical period is considered?
What "good guess" can you make from this text/passage?	What does the evidence tell you about the events? When was it produced? What are the subtexts of the sources? How is the evidence corroborated with other sources?
What do you know about the topic?	How is the past different from the present? What was it like to be there?
What do you think of the text? Why?	What story should you believe in? On what grounds? With what reservation?

at particular times, but a coherent story in which many events are skipped, others are coalesced, and temporal sequence is often subordinated to explanation and interpretation."[20] The historian thus needs a set of disciplinary standards and tools to critically assess the significance of the selected events and the particular perspective and beliefs that he brings to the study – that is, his own positionality.

But unlike other types of stories, the narrative of history is dependent upon empirical evidence derived from sources that must be analyzed carefully with a deep sense of historical perspective and empathy. As Wineburg observes, "texts are not lifeless strings of facts… Words have texture and shape, and it is their almost tactile quality that lets readers sculpt images of the authors who use them."[21] In other words, historical texts do not speak on their own. They have their own subtexts as human artefacts with latent intention, motive and purpose. They must be selected, interrogated, contextualized, compared, and sometimes dismissed depending on the context or the argument presented by the historian.

Through careful empathetic reading of various Canadian, British and German historical sources, Cook is able to imagine – to re-enact – what it was like back then and make a convincing evidence-based argument on the unique Canadian system of waging war. In the second volume alone, he dedicates no less than 59 pages to footnotes and references; a key feature of historical writing that has somehow mysteriously disappeared from school textbooks. Concepts and ideas like "shock troops," "trench system," "No Men's Land," and "anticonscription crisis" emerge from a particular World War I context that Cook skilfully brings to life. This dynamic interplay between the texts and language of the past and Cook' own interpretative lens produces an account that avoids naïve presentist interpretations. Cook's account is more vivid and compelling than any textbook, yet measured and not fanciful like "Hollywood." Creative interpretation in history must be accompanied by legitimate use of the evidence. Textbooks belie historical sources by avoiding the hedging that historians make transparent in their writing.

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. Defining contextualized historical reading, writing, and thinking is more complicated than simply outlining a set of heuristics as so much depends on the questions, the texts, and the context. Still, it is possible to outline some of the questions that historians bring to the task:[22]

1. **Use of inquiry**: How do we know about World War I?
2. **Need of significance:** Why is it important to study World War I? The Canadian contribution to it?
3. **Role of self/identity:** How does my identity shape the way I engage with the past?
4. **Sense of empathy:** What was it like to be soldiers back then?
5. **Use of evidence:** What evidence do we have that Canadians were "shock troops" of the Empire? How "re-enactable" are the sources used? What perspective(s) do they (re)present?
6. **Importance of causation:** What were the causes and effects of the selected events?
7. **Connection to the present:** In what ways does the present shape the way we make sense of the war? How is the present in continuity with the past?
8. **Role of judgment:** Why should I believe in the argument presented by Cook? With what reservation? What is the moral of his story?
9. **Language of history:** How do we use and deal with the language of the past? How do we represent it?

10. **Use of historical narrative:** What is the organization and structure of a convincing story? How are historical narratives different from/similar to historical novels?

Helping our students learn to answer these (and many other such) questions provides one, perhaps the most effective way of introducing them to the power and limits of historical thinking (see table 1).[23] Schools are in a privileged position to challenge popular, intuitive ideas about the past that students bring to class with "an orientation to the past informed by disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument."[24] Of course, very few students will ever grow into historians like Cook, or even contemplate the profession, but introducing them to the "rules of the game" helps novices develop more sophisticated ideas and stories than provided by popular culture and other sites of memory. Faced with unfamiliar documents or conflicting accounts on an issue, students who have developed historical literacy are better equipped to read and question them and judge their merit than those who rely on the affordances of everyday life.

When we compare how students and historians engage with the past, we are in a better position to define *progression* in historical learning. School history is still dominated by a story-telling approach to the national past with approved textbooks that sanction what ought to be learned – or dismissed. They tend to be written in an authoritative voice without reference to the vary aspect of historical arguments: evidence. If we want our students to read history from a textbook or a blog differently and if we want them to become critical thinkers who can ultimately craft their own warranted stories of the past, we need to provide them with the means to develop historical literacy.

NOTES

[1] I owe special thanks to Stan Hallman-Chong and the members of the Literacy and History Working Group of the Ontario Ministry of Education for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] Ontario Teachers' Manuals, *History* (Toronto: The Copp, Clark Company, 1915), 38.

[3] Ontario Ministry of Education, *Literacy for Learning: Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2004), 1.

[4] Perry Klein, "Content literacy," *What Works? Research into Practice*, 13 (2008), 1-4. Retrieved May 4, 2010 from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/contentLiteracy.pdf

[5] As an example of this literacy trend, see the introduction of Ontario Ministry of Education, *Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches – Grades 7-12* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2003), 1-5.

[6] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 79.

[7] Howard Garner & Veronica Boix-Mansilla, "Teaching for Understanding in the Disciplines – And Beyond," in The *Development and Education of the Mind*, ed. H. Garner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 147. Original work published in 1994.

[8] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Literacy for Learning: Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario*, 5. See also Barbara Moss, "Making a case and a place for effective content area literacy instruction in the elementary grades," *The Reading Teacher*, 59 (2005), 46-55.

[9] Ontario Ministry of Education, *Literacy for Learning: Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario*, 5.

[10] Tony Taylor, "From History Horror Stories to Historical Literacy," *Monash Magazine* (2004), 2. Retrieved on May 5, 2010 from http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/monmag/issue14-2004/news/history.html

[11] See Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 172-175.

[12] Peter Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives,* ed. P. Stearns, P. Seixas & S. Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 25.

[13] Peter Lee, "Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, ed. S. Donovan & J. Bransford (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2005), 32.

[14] Garner & Boix-Mansilla, Teaching for Understanding in the Disciplines – And Beyond, 151. On the proto-disciplinary knowledge developed by students in history, see Sam Wineburg and Jack Schneider, "Was Bloom's Taxonomy Pointed in the Wrong Direction?" *Phi Delta Kappa,* 91 (December 2009/January 2010), 56-61.

[15] On parallel challenges facing students in the US curriculum, see Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past,* 79-80.

[16] Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918 (2 vol.)* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007-2008).

[17] Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918 (vol. 2)* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008), 8.

[18] Ibid., 7-8

[19] Ibid., 7.

[20] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 223.

[21] Sam Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy," *American Educational Research Journal*, 28 (1991), 507.

[22] The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking (www.historic.ca/benchmarks) is studying some of these key concepts (and set of related questions) as well as the ways of making progression in historical thinking.

[23] Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the 21st century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[24] Sam Wineburg, "Unnatural and Essential: The Nature of Historical Thinking," *Teaching History*, 129 (2007), 6.