THE CLASSROOM IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF TEACHING DIGITAL NATIVES

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While we tend to consider technology and its relationship with history in the context of how we use it to learn and communicate about the past to future generations, it is equally true that technology itself has influenced history and the way we remember the past today. There has been less time spent thinking about this latter phenomenon, an area of research that could be very helpful in informing how we might better understand present-day technologies and how they are influencing historical thinking and knowledge among youth today.

Academic and public historians spend a great deal of time talking about the absence of a master narrative in Canadian history. This hasn't always been the case. For the most part, the major narratives that have emerged throughout Canadian history have been technology-driven. From the time of European contact throughout much of the 19th century, settler colonialism was the predominant theme. As new forms of transportation and communication technologies fuelled the steady recruitment of migrants and resettlement across the country, so too emerged a story of the emergence of an improbable nation, bound together by innovation and ingenuity.

The story shifted in the 20th century as American social and economic influence and dominance began to flow across our borders. With the advent of television, telecommunications and other innovations, the narrative focus became the Americanization of Canada and trying to define what it meant to be Canadian in an increasingly continental context.

As the emergence of the Internet and social media in more recent times opened up possibilities for the creation of new communities of interest, we appear to have entered a new era in Canadian history. Here, multiple platforms and fragmentation of audiences are causing an emphasis on inclusion and adding

in "other histories," which inevitably has also led to the Decolonization movement and the deconstruction of the Empire, as we have known it. These developments have cultivated a period in which a single master narrative simply does not exist.

Since so many of today's technologies are still fairly new, it is very difficult to imagine just exactly how they will shape the history of tomorrow. There is much to be discouraged about in terms of the impact of these technologies, particularly among young people, but there are also some truly exciting opportunities for the teaching of history, as well.

First, the bad news. The most pervasive tendency with the advent of Twitter and the 24/7 news cycle is "presentism", by which I mean that today's society seems to be easily distracted by what is dominating the headlines and social media feeds of the moment. For many young people, history refers to anything that has dropped out of the screen of their Twitter feed. For others, history is something that has to be "really old" — like something that happened over 100 years ago. As with youth from any previous generation, they typically do not look to history to inform their thinking about contemporary issues, and seem genuinely surprised when historical events are referenced to illuminate modern-day challenges. On the other hand, unlike any previous generation, it could be argued that the realities faced by present-day youth are vastly different and more complex than anything any other previous generation has had to deal with. The pace and scope of societal and technological change has been unprecedented – and continues to accelerate. So who can argue with the assumption that history will not be able to provide significant insights into the realities young people currently face and the future ahead of them? Is it possible that history has never been more irrelevant?

The second challenge is the sheer volume of unfiltered information available, and the potential for "Fake History." The democratization of information in this digital era has enabled anyone to become a writer, producer and distributor of content. We all welcome the opportunities this has provided to tell other histories or tell them more fully. We also know that not all of that information is always factual, and without proper training, it makes it difficult for young learners to identify reliable, authoritative research sources. I recently asked a group of young people to tell me about their go-to sources for Canadian history. Like all of us, everything today starts with a Google search. Where that takes them is likely to be determined as much by the level of interactivity and attractiveness of the web links offered as the quality of the content itself. Google dropped its scholar filter years ago from the main website, so even when high school students know to prioritize scholarly references, they are likely to be buried pages deep down on the list of search engine results.

Information and entertainment are inextricably blurred in the digital universe. History content thrives in a wild variety of forms including video games, reality TV shows, Facebook quizzes and YouTube videos. Obviously, when the power of these new media are combined with strong content — as in key Canadian history projects such as the *Historica Canada Minutes*; the CBC series *Canada: A People's History*; and the collaborative website Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History — the impact is significant for both formal and informal teaching in Canadian history. However, this type

of collaboration between popular media producers and content experts is rare.

Lastly, the antisocial nature of social media is a particular challenge. On the one hand, young people have access to more information in an instant than all previous generations did combined. Increasingly, today's youth are filtering and curating that information, sometimes by themselves. At other times, it's done for them based on what else they search and look at online. In a world where it has never been easier to connect to more people or discover alternative viewpoints regardless of geography or background, people's actual social media interactions are getting narrower and narrower, limited to the perceptions, beliefs and values they already possess. And so, while we may be in the middle of an historical era that is preoccupied with deconstructing master narratives and championing greater inclusivity in the telling of our stories, it is not necessarily leading to a broadening of perspectives of any given individual's knowledge of or interest in those histories.

Despite significant challenges to the "future of history" in this technological era, there are a couple of big reasons to be optimistic.

These recent advances in technology enable us to immerse ourselves in the past, enabling and empowering some of the more challenging historical thinking skills such as understanding the dimensions of continuity and change, and empathy for the social values in a given time period. Whether you are able to revisit a time and place through virtual reality, or explore different events and outcomes in a video game, there is no denying that today's tools make it much easier to make the past far less of a foreign land for today's learners. The human experience has never been linear; however, that is how we have represented it to future generations for the most part. Today's technologies permit young learners to see everything in layers, explore alternative views, and delve deeper into aspects of history that interest them. Being able to approach the past in much the same way as they tackle contemporary life offers the potential for a quantum shift in young people's ability to connect with history, as well as a better chance to appreciate its relevance in resolving present-day challenges and issues.

Secondly, the skills taught as part of a sound history education have never been more relevant. We tend to focus a lot on outcomes related to the teaching of history content, when in fact the historical thinking skills we are developing have much broader application and benefits. The ability to analyze sources and assess bias, for example, are essential to strong media literacy. Being able to consider multiple perspectives when assessing a given situation and to have empathy for those with other experiences will help with resiliency and adaptability in an increasingly complex society and workplace. Indeed, the seven top skills that Google looks for in candidate employees are rooted at least as much in historical thinking than in the science-math STEM skills basics. These include:

- Being a good coach.
- Communicating and listening well.
- Possessing insights into others (social awareness)
- Empathy and support toward colleagues

- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Connecting complex ideas

The value and relevance of teaching history has never looked brighter, and yet, how our history is taught remains the biggest risk. Youth today are fundamentally different than any generation that preceded them. Being digital natives, they cannot imagine a world in which you couldn't get an instant answer to any question. Memory means something different. They are more globally connected, and think more deeply about world issues and how they are affected by those issues. Even "meaning" means something different for young people than it used to. Their world is highly interactive, often utilizing multiple technologies as part of a single experience. Engagement, to younger Canadians, means something different, too.

Older generations are inclined to downplay these differences and believe that every younger generation feels they have bigger burdens than the last. There is something fundamentally different about how this generation is developing — socially and intellectually — and yet our school system has not changed its methods for nurturing that development in any significant way in the past 100 years. What we have to teach young Canadians has never been more relevant, but there has to be more effort made to bridge the divide between the world inside the classroom and the world youth live in every day. Academic experts and educators have a lot that they can contribute to the content and production of popular history programming, and media producers would welcome it so long as we don't keep trying to mould it into a classroom tool. History classes could be a lot less boring if we did a better job of integrating these technologies into the classroom; either by unpacking the productions that exist as part of an assignment; or better yet, empowering youth to create their own using the research and critical thinking skills they are taught.

Returning to the question of a master narrative: it will be difficult for a new one to emerge in this new, fragmented universe without more resources invested in guiding people through the fragments and connecting these worlds together. Young people are already weaving their own narratives. History thrives in a variety of ways in their world – Ancestry.ca, Game of Thrones, Call of Duty, even Back in Time for Dinner are all testaments to this.

It's the classroom that has become a foreign country. Here, everything is different.