

**Book Review**

# New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada

Penney Clark, editor

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In my early days as a graduate student, I was invited to a function associated with the Governor General Awards for History. It was billed as a venue where researchers and educators could exchange notes about pedagogy and history. The guests of honour were those recognized as being the most successful history teachers in the country. I assumed, naively, that this arrangement would make it a cordial gathering where the professoriate would come down from their ivory tower to mingle with their allies in the trenches of high schools and elementary schools across the country. To my surprise, once the opening formalities were over, the event turned into a stern lecture by professors—many of who had never taught outside of the academy—about the poor quality of history education in elementary and secondary schools.

As an in-service secondary school history teacher and a graduate student in history, I found this exchange confusing, frustrating, and problematic. I would like to say that this event was an isolated incident. However, my own experiences in tower-trench relations over the last six years indicate that this kind of dialogue is often the norm and cuts both ways, with secondary and elementary school educators frequently painting academics as navel-gazers who have little interest in the realities of the primary or secondary classroom. If a conversation happens to transpire between these reluctant allies, it is too often uneasy and punctuated by a sense of mutual mistrust, if not outright hostility.

The History Education Network (THEN/HIER) has worked to create a forum for productive and mutually supportive dialogue between stakeholders. Thus, Penney Clark's edited collection, *New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada* (2011) filled me with a sense of excitement and trepidation. My initial concern resulted from examining the authors' biographies. Only two contributors indicated any classroom experience outside of tertiary education. Fortunately, their positionality was generally not a hindrance to producing accessible, useful, and academically rigorous content. As I read the chapters, it became clear that Clark and the other contributors did a nuanced job of writing what can easily stand as one of the most important and lucid collections on history education in Canada.

The first section focuses on historiography, while offering little new information for most academic historians, or history education scholars, grounds the later parts of the book in a shared understanding of content. Margaret Conrad's essay has the added utility for secondary and elementary school teachers of highlighting more recent trends in historiography. The one caveat is Conrad's decision to dismiss postmodernism by reducing it to "a form of scepticism"

about historical narratives (p. 45). Equally problematic is her tendency to collapse fundamental distinctions between the textually focused deconstruction of those scholars drawing on the work of Derrida and the broader focus on institutions and discourse by poststructuralist scholars influenced by the likes of Michel Foucault. This conflation is not only misleading but also unlikely to encourage secondary and elementary school educators, many of whom believe that the academy is busy professing trivia, to take new historical scholarly work seriously. In contrast, Michael Marker's chapter on Aboriginal perspectives of the past is a standout contribution. It offers readers thoughtful insights into Indigenous cosmologies and temporalities, while simultaneously providing concrete trajectories on how to implement these approaches in the classroom.

The next three chapters purport to investigate the meaning and consequences of focusing on historical thinking as the basis of history education and are similarly excellent for the introduction that they provide to the basic tenets of the historical thinking framework. Both chapters from Stéphane Lévesque and Peter Seixas offer thoughtful and useful insights into what it means to actually *do* history in a classroom. Lévesque's focus on the interconnectedness between procedural and substantive knowledge of history is a welcome corrective to the single-minded concern with content that punctuates a great deal of discussion on history education up to the present. Lévesque makes it clear that historical thinking is not a question of *what or how* we teach but of *what and how*. Seixas' focus on assessment is particularly useful for readers concerned with how historical thinking concepts translate into the classroom. Notable is his analysis of typical performance tasks used in schools and the extent to which they foster historical thinking. Textbooks and fictional journal entries come under fire for good reason because they tend to conflate historical thinking with rote memorization and empathy, respectively. Seixas' advocacy for more intellectually rigorous and higher order tasks based on comparative approaches to learning history is welcome and, as Seixas indicates, is supported by a growing body of secondary literature on cognition, which demonstrates the importance of teaching in what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development. As Seixas states plainly, "new understandings are constructed on the foundations of existing knowledge" (p. 143).

Yet, as Kent den Heyer's chapter rightly points out, there are some fundamental tensions that the construction of historical thinking as a disciplined form of inquiry glosses over. First is the failure of the models used by Seixas or Lévesque to adequately offer a way to think critically about the deployment of historical narratives in history courses. den Heyer argues forcefully that the generalized support for the malleable framework of historical thinking across the political spectrum is indicative of its tendency to be taken up in ways that focus on what Lévesque calls "procedural knowledge," (p. 134) which is then slotted into colonialist, racist, and sexist grand narratives about the Canadian nation. den Heyer seems to be focused primarily on how the concept of historical thinking is taken up in practice. In place of the focus on disciplinary knowledge, den Heyer offers a version of historical thinking that he calls a "disciplined ethics of truth" that historicizes the very act of thinking historically with attention to social and political contexts and the potential outcomes of historical analysis (pp. 164-167). This kind of reflexive and engaged thinking certainly qualifies as higher order; yet its place within historical thinking, like Seixas and Lévesque imagine it, requires further exploration. den Heyer's critique suggests a requirement to refine further distinctions between the wide array of thinking processes that are lumped together under "second-order," as some methods seem to demand greater disciplinary and cognitive proficiency than others (p. 164).

Amy von Heyking's work on historical thinking in elementary education, Tom Morton's

reflection on high school history, and Ruth Sandwell's contribution on teacher education highlight indirectly some of these issues in a variety of classroom contexts. von Heyking explains lucidly and authoritatively the opportunities and limitations of the implementation of historical thinking in the elementary classroom, especially the limits of proficiency for elementary students to master the "counterintuitive" aspects of thinking historically (p. 189). Morton's reflection on the challenges of infusing historical thinking in high school classrooms is informative, not least of all because the activities that he describes teachers using are reminiscent of the activities that Seixas describes as the "most basic" kind of exercise in historical thinking (p. 146). Morton acknowledges the problem with assignments such as student created videos focused on conveying the significance of the First World War. Students slip too easily into grand narratives of sacrifice or apply literature studies techniques in pursuit of "the moral of the story" (p. 201). Historical thinking, Morton seems to suggest, is not a simple matter of designing creative multimedia assignments to compliment quality educational resources. Rather, it relies on a fundamental rethinking of the high school history classroom to place critical thinking and the analysis of primary sources by students before any attempt to represent history as a form of narrative, lest the sources become mere window dressing to entertain the senses.

Sandwell's essay on creating effective courses for would-be history educators is a revealing examination of the challenges of teacher education. In addition, the essay reveals indirectly the stultifying effect on undergraduate students of much of the "talk-and-chalk" (p. 66) that passes for education in tertiary institutions and some secondary school classrooms. According to Sandwell, such practices leave even history majors displaying a "lack of engagement with the process of constructing historical knowledge" (p. 227). Thus, Gerald Friesen's chapter, which endorses the tried-and-tested tetrarchy of lecture-textbook-essay-exam as a means to foster historical thinking, seems peculiar and fundamentally out of touch with the rest of the collection. Only the essay portion of Friesen's introductory course would seem to fit within either Seixas' or Lévesque's conceptualization of historical thinking. This gap raises serious questions about the relationship between the typical approach to undergraduate education in universities, which provides advanced training in history to future primary, secondary, and tertiary instructors, and the challenges of teaching historical thinking described by educators in these environments.

The other two chapters that stand out are Kevin Kee and Nicki Darbyson's contribution on the role of virtual environments, including video games, for stimulating historical thinking and Carla Peck's essay on the role of ethnicity and identification on historical judgments. Kee and Darbyson's thoughtful piece on the promise of virtual environments to mobilize learners to take historical perspectives and make historical judgments will be useful for both educators and scholars of education and digital humanities. It helps to effectively bridge the gap between classroom contexts and the mediated world in which many students find themselves. They give concrete examples of how virtual environments can be used to help students reason about the past. Peck's study of the impact of ethnicity and historical judgments offers some important insights and implicitly highlights the impact of grand narratives in Canadian multiculturalism on the judgment of historical significance. Like den Heyer's chapter, Peck raises further questions about the role of narrative in fostering or hindering historical thinking, suggesting that this relationship requires further investigation. Furthermore, these are the only two chapters in the collection, aside from Marker's on Aboriginal education, that attempt to address the issue of engaging reluctant or marginalized learners. The limited attention that the

contributors give to students of such backgrounds is indicative of a wider issue with *New Possibilities for the Past*. It is a book that tries hard to position historical thinking as something open to all students at all stages. Yet there is little discussion or analysis of students who face barriers to education, whether in history or in other subjects. It is a very unfortunate and glaring omission given the focus on inclusion and differentiation that dominates current discussions about classroom education.

It is no small task to create a collection of collaborations in a history education network that speaks to educators and researchers ensconced in fundamentally different institutional contexts, whose daily practices are often informed by sometimes contradictory assumptions. Doing history and teaching history are too often treated as discreet subjects. The historian of education and the history educator are frequently at work in different worlds. For those who cross the boundary between them, they slip out of one costume and into an entirely different one. This book represents one example of the way that educational researchers might continue to rethink this separation between doing and teaching. For Clark and the majority of the contributors, to teach history means to do it, too. The collection suggests that for historians of all stripes and levels, how they research must directly inform how they teach. As a whole, the book offers a road map for practitioners and researchers at all levels in history education interested in exploring the successes of historical thinking as a pedagogical approach. It reveals also the directions that researchers and teachers may wish to further investigate, such as the connection of historical thinking to historical narratives, best practices in the classroom, and how to engage reluctant or marginalized learners. Consequently, *New Perspectives on the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada* is likely to remain one of the most cited books on history education in Canada for a number of years to come.

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