

THEN/HiER Graduate Student Project – Final Report

"De-constructing Cabinets of Curiosity: An Arts-based Inquiry Project"

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This arts-based inquiry project was intended to complement and extend upon my PhD research, regarding how a heritage community can assist middle school students in deepening their historical consciousness¹. This activity specifically related to the photovoice component of my research. It was intended to serve two purposes: a) to extend and disseminate my research to a broader public audience, by facilitating the development of a gallery-style photo

exhibition that illustrates students' abilities (through their eyes and in their words) of engaging in historical inquiry within a local history museum; and b) to reveal the nature of their ability to think historically in a museum setting.

Research Method:

Funds from the THEN/HiER Graduate Student Projects Program were used to cover the costs of purchasing 6 digital cameras, as well as printing students' photovoice images. I commenced this component of the research in February, 2013. Over the course of the following year (2014), the data was compiled, analyzed, and transformed into a dissertation. Photovoice was used because it



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has been identified by scholars (Strack et al., 2004; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Wilson et al., 2007) as a “powerful” photographic strategy for enabling youth to identify, represent, and bring about change in their communities (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, pp. 560-61). In the context of my research, I employed this method as a way of gaining insight into students’ relationship with artifacts (i.e. what artifacts they were attracted to in the museum; how they

interacted with these artifacts; what evidence they drew from such primary sources; how they corroborated this evidence with other sources; and how they reached decisions about the significance of each artifact).

For this project, 6 groups of 7th grade students (4-5 students per group) were provided with digital cameras to work independently (taking turns within their group) to document (through their own eyes) their experience of interacting with the museum artifacts over a period of 7 weeks. The resulting images provided valuable documentary data regarding students’ responses to the museum collection. They also served as a point of focus for think alouds and interview data collected during Phase III of the research. After each museum visit (3 visits in total involving photovoice), students’ images were developed into 4 x 6 snapshots. After, in the classroom, these snapshots served as visual points of reference for students to reflect and talk about their thoughts and experiences. They also provided students with access to the museum collection (since the artifacts could not leave the museum, nor could they be handled).



It was hoped that by engaging in these activities of historical inquiry, students would acquire a competency in historical interpretation, which manifests itself as the phenomenon of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 1994; see also Billmann-Mahecha & Hausen, 2005; Kölbl & Konrad, 2015). In turn, it was hoped that they would come to see museums, not as purveyors of the “truth” about the past, but as complex sites of learning that reflect the thoughts and ideas of those who created the exhibits and contributed to the collections.



In keeping with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2010), all individual identities have been kept confidential, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Findings:

The resulting photovoice imagery demonstrates ways in which students interacted with the museum collections.

When making personal choices about artifact research, participants were motivated by three primary factors: a) curiosity and wonder, b) personal identity or prior experience, and c) project assignment. The largest proportion of students (61%) based their choices upon visual interest in the artifact, which then provoked wonder and curiosity. Through adoption of material history domain knowledge, student participants became actively engaged in source-based historical thinking. This became evident in tangible ways, as students became increasingly more confident in their social role as members of the museum's community of inquiry.

Students also became familiar with the historical thinking concept of Evidence and Sources. As a result, upon completion of the 7 week study unit, all of the students were focussing their attention upon a specific artifact source, drawing evidence, asking questions, corroborating the source, and establishing interpretations—to various degrees—by employing a combination of description, inference, or comparison processes. These narratives were no longer simple then-versus-now statements, but were focussed upon the artifact—as a source of evidence to support their narrative claims.



Clearly as well, what was appropriated from the museum fieldwork experience was information drawn from observing their artifact, questioning the curators, and sifting through museum accession files. As a result, the largest majority of students (84%) organised their final (label-writing) assignments around an evidence-based description of their chosen artifact. This represents a significant change from the beginning of the unit, when none of the students described the museum artifacts, and only two students adopted a strategy for drawing evidence from the artifact source.



In addition, while more students (53% versus 30% previously) now incorporated bits and pieces of the official museum narratives into their claims, significantly fewer (5% versus 39% previously) integrated secondary narratives from elsewhere into their individual claims. It was now evident that students were formulating narrative reconstructions that were artifact-specific, and within each research-group theme there appeared to be no shared narrative claims.

When asked whether they thought their artifact belonged in a museum, and whether they thought it was important (or not), out of a total of 17 students who responded to this question, all but two indicated that they thought their artifact was important—and that it should be kept in the museum. Their reasoning for this varied from traditional narrative templates (3 in total), to exemplary reasoning (6 in total) about what the artifact represented, or genetic rationalisations (6 in total) that linked past with present. Within the typology of genetic reasoning, it was also evident that three of the students were engaged in more than simply rationalising significance. These students were digging deeper into the artifact source, to draw out evidence, empathise with the original owner, and establish historical significance.

Upon completion of the unit, which also involved writing a statement of significance for their artifact, it was evident that students were adopting patterns of significance that reflected their own experience of material history analysis. These statements were clearly focused upon students' chosen artifact source. In addition, although only 14 of the entire 24 student case study group actually completed this final assignment, these students were clearly employing genetic (72%), exemplary (24%), and critical (3%) narrative templates about how their artifacts helped them to remember Canada's past. Within these templates, there also emerged two distinct patterns of significance: (a) the artifact is important (or not) because of what it reveals about the past (55% of responses); or (b) the artifact is important (or not) because of what it represents symbolically (38% of responses). While these patterns of historical significance were not as robust as the guideposts described by Seixas and Morton





(2013, p. 12), it is important to note that students were not provided with any formal classroom instruction around the historical thinking concept of Historical Significance (Seixas & Morton, 2013, pp. 12 – 39).

Ultimately, on opening night of the *Museum of British North America* it was evident that students now perceived themselves as active members of a community inquiry. They demonstrated familiarity with the methods of historical

inquiry that curators use in museums, and were also aware of the problematic nature of historical research. Likewise, it was evident that all of the students had become intellectually engaged with the community history museum in three specific ways: (a) they were familiar with the museum collections; (b) they were focussed upon their research; and (c) they perceived their artifact as a valid source of evidence. Within their final museum projects, it was also evident that students were actively modelling the historical thinking concept of Evidence and Sources by describing² (96% student achievement rate), comparing³ (58% achievement rate), and—to a lesser extent—contextualising⁴ (38% achievement rate) their artifact source. In addition, through the process of their research, several students had discovered contradictions or gaps within the museum narratives, to which an equal proportion of the students either resisted or accepted the authority of the museum.



These findings are significant, because they indicate ways in which students' historical thinking was becoming more source-based over the period of the study unit. With repeat visits to the community history museum, combined with formal classroom instruction in material history domain knowledge, students' narratives became much more complex and artifact-specific. They were no longer sharing common narrative claims, but were re-constructing their own unique claims about the past; in

² What Seixas & Morton describe as "Sourcing" (2013, p. 47).

³ What Seixas & Morton describe as "Corroboration" (2013, p. 48).

⁴ What Seixas & Morton describe as "Context" (2013, p. 47).



turn, these narrative re-constructions represented hybrid responses that were unique to each student. These were based upon the physical context of where they encountered the artifacts; what other artifacts shared the same exhibit space; what understandings they gained from the volunteers; what they found in the artifact accession files; and what they found from consulting secondary sources.

Overall, students enjoyed being actively engaged with the museum collections. Through the experience of adult collaboration in artifact analysis, they learned how to dig deeper into the artifact source; draw out evidence; make comparisons; place artifact sources within a broader historical context; and construct their own

narrative claims. In this sense they were looking beyond the authority of the museum exhibition to question and construct their own narrative claims.

Final Project Outcomes:

The resulting 12 student canvases have been printed and are now being prepared for public exhibition within New Brunswick. Negotiations are currently underway with a provincial museum facility for an exhibit in 2015 (with an intent that the exhibition later travel to other community museums within the province). This will serve to disseminate the research findings throughout New Brunswick's heritage community. In addition, a portion of the research that accompanies this project has been accepted as a chapter for publication in the upcoming book *Creative Practices in Curriculum and Teaching in the 21st Century* (2015), co-edited by Dr. Mary Blatherwick and Dr. Jill Cummings (UNB).

APPENDIX A:

Study Background: This research aims to provide a rich portrayal of how a heritage community can assist middle school students in developing their historical consciousness. It explores the link between historical inquiry and historical consciousness at middle school level.

Research Procedures: Participants will include one 7th-grade class of students (24 in total), as well as a convenient sampling of adult volunteer members of a community history museum (5 in total). Data documentation will be collected in the form of a pre and post survey, four open-ended essay questions (pre and post); historic space mapping (Cutrara, 2010; Leinhardt & Gregg, 2002); material history artifact analysis; photovoice imagery; principal investigator observations (both journal entries as well as photography); and phenomenographic interview techniques. All participants will be actively involved in all three phases of the proposed research commencing in December 2012, and ending in April 2013:

Phase 1 (December 2012): I will work collaboratively with the classroom teacher, museum executive director, and museum volunteers, in preparation for the community history museum fieldwork experience, to ensure that students will be prepared to actively engage with the exhibits.

Phase 2 (January and February 2013): I will work with participants to engage students in the museum fieldwork experience (both inside and outside of the classroom). This will entail bi-weekly student visits to the museum, alternating with bi-weekly museum volunteer visits to the classroom - over a period of eight weeks. During this phase of the research, students will be invited to document their inquiry through historic space mapping, material history research, and photovoice. This will unfold as a sequence of activities (designed in collaboration with the teacher, museum executive director, and museum volunteers) - framed around two key questions: *How do curators do history in a museum?* and *How can I do history in a museum?* Students will also be asked to keep a personal journal of their experience (this data will not be analyzed as part of this inquiry) in order to generate reference notes for their project assignment in phase three.

Phase 3 (March and April, 2013): I will continue to work with the cooperating teacher to assist students in re-thinking their museum fieldwork experience through project-based learning. The primary objective of this phase of the research will be to enable participants to reflect upon their community history museum fieldwork experience, and to re-interpret their thinking about the past in ways that are meaningful to them. Students will be actively working in groups (during class time), working with their photovoice snapshots and preparing their projects. This will entail: working in thematically-based groups to analyze their artifact snapshots (using a material history framework for historical thinking), as well as organizing, critiquing, corroborating, and contextualising their artifactual evidence; establishing historical significance; preparing storyboards for their projects; writing artifact labels according to museum standards; preparing oral explanations based upon their original research question; and preparing for final exhibition day (approximately the end of April).

During this phase of the research I will also be collecting data through think alouds and interviews, intended to probe the phenomenological aspects of students' historical consciousness.

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