

What does it mean to think historically?

“What does it mean to think historically?” This is the question that I explored during my four week THEN/HiER Visiting Doctoral Student study internship at the University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. From September 13 to October 8, 2010 I was graciously welcomed by faculty, students and staff of the university’s Department of Curriculum & Pedagogy. The primary purpose of my visit was to collaborate with scholars in the faculty, as part of preparation for my second comprehensive exam relating to historical thinking in the classroom.



Arriving on campus (well laden with academic publications to occupy my time), my study term was subsequently organised around three discussion papers: 1) morals and ethics in history; 2) historical thinking within a classroom; and 3) historical thinking within a museum setting. In achieving these study goals, I met with my supervisor, Dr. Peter Seixas, on a weekly basis and defended each paper.



The timing of my visit coincided with the arrival of visiting scholar, Jocelyn Létourneau of the Université Laval, who had been invited to give the Michael Cromer Memorial Lecture at UBC. In conjunction with this engagement, he was also asked to speak at Simon Fraser University. His presentation, entitled “*This past that doesn't want to pass on: 1759 and the future of memory in Quebec*,” provided a framework for discussions about how societies re-member the past through adoption of public history narratives. In the case of Quebec, and controversies which developed around the 250th commemoration of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (marking the fall of New France in 1759), Létourneau described the existence of an ideological divide that is rooted in holding onto a negative collective memory. In this sense, Létourneau questioned whether it is beneficial for societies to hold onto such “old rallying points,” when the underlying intent is to perpetuate distinct identities. Instead, he proposed, should not the challenge for historians be to continually re-open the past to new analysis and debate—thus moving beyond established interpretations that serve narrow partisan interests? In this context, “thinking historically” means thinking beyond existing historical narratives, to question accepted ideologies. This is something that many agreed that classrooms should be encouraged to do more often.

In conjunction with this lecture series, I also participated in an invitational faculty/student seminar co-hosted by the Simon Fraser University Institute for the Humanities and UBC’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. Led by Dr. Létourneau and moderated by Stuart Poyntz, the topic of this seminar was ethics in history. As an extension of his two lectures, Dr. Létourneau drew heavily upon his experiences of studying under the German

theoretician Jörn Rüsen, and emphasised the historian's role in "making sense of the past." With this societal function, Létourneau reasoned, there follows associated responsibilities for making ethical and moral choices. Frequently, he noted, historians are faced with conflicting (and troubling) interpretations about the past. There are often many divergent narrative paths to be taken. As a historian, which will you choose? How far will you go? What is more important to you? Are you willing to present any evidence at any cost to humanity? For Létourneau, his own research has led him to ponder these very same questions; and it is evident from his words that he is driven by a very deep and personal sense of responsibility to future generations of Canadians: "I have to do history in order to make it possible to move into the future," he so sincerely stated, "because these are our kids."



As part of my study visit, I was given an opportunity to observe various methods classes in social studies curriculum and instruction. These were taught by Dr. Peter Seixas, Lindsay Gibson, Andrea Webb, Stephanie Anderson, and Ashwani Kumar. One of the highlights of my observations included a special presentation by Roland Case (of The Critical Thinking Consortium TC²) on the topic of embedding critical thinking in secondary level social studies. This included participating in a practical exercise about designing questions that evoke critical thinking.

Critical thinking is defined as a way of teaching that challenges students to *think* rather than *absorb*. Roland Case attributes this methodology to the theories of Benjamin Bloom, which differentiate between lower-order (fact-based information) thinking and higher-order (critical analysis) thinking in this way:

A person is thinking critically only if she is attempting to assess or judge the merits of possible options in light of relevant factors or criteria.

Within the framework of historical thinking as it is commonly practised in Canada through the *Benchmarks of Historical Thinking*, this definition is also applicable, because the Benchmarks concepts are analytical in a somewhat similar way. What sets historical thinking apart from critical thinking in general, however, is the factor of time. Historical thinking requires a temporal orientation that incorporates layers of complexity across time; while critical thinking is rooted predominantly in the present.

During my four week stay at UBC, I was able to meet with museum education specialists, Dr. David Anderson and Viviane Gosselin (Curator of Contemporary Issues, Museum of Vancouver). I also augmented my studies by participating in a library workshop about

digital tattooing (our digital presence in cyberspace), and attending a guest lecture with Dr. Richard White of Stanford University on the topic of spatial history.

Undoubtedly, the intellectual benefits of being able to study on another campus in another region of Canada are immeasurable. Overall, this experience enabled me to examine my dissertation research from an entirely different perspective. Much like Lewis Carroll's Alice, I have been provided with a new "looking glass"—a way of standing outside of my region and reflecting upon my view. Such a lens is invaluable to any academic.



I wish to thank THEN/HiER for granting me the opportunity to visit and collaborate with scholars at the University of British Columbia's Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. Thank you to all who made my stay on campus so intellectually rewarding—in particular, Dr. Peter Seixas, Dr. Anne Marie Goodfellow, Lindsay Gibson, and Ulrike Spitzer, who provided an immensely stimulating learning environment.

Sincerely,
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