

Reconsidering Canadians' Ignorance of History
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The first thing I did upon my arrival in Edmonton was buy a polar shirt on Whyte Avenue because, at the beginning of May, the Oilers's city was colder than my hometown of Montreal. The big news in town was the results of the provincial election. The New Democratic Party had just defeated the Progressive Conservatives, who had governed Alberta since 1971. Nearly every conversation I had in Alberta addressed the results of that election. In other words, I had a chance to do some "experiential learning" of a historical change.

Some things do not change in the public discussion about history education, such as saying that Canadians don't know enough history after finishing school. Part of my research is to historicize the discourse about the ignorance of history with three broad questions: When, how, and why do Canadians repeatedly tell themselves that they are ignorant about history? I presented my historical research at the University of Alberta in a talk organized by my host, Kent den Heyer.

On May 19, I presented my research findings to sessional teachers after attending their meeting on the challenges of teaching social studies courses with teacher candidates. That meeting highlighted the importance of collaborative work among sessional teachers to face challenges such as students' responses to an activity developed by Kent den Heyer and Laurence Abbott. Published in *Curriculum Inquiry* (2011), the activity encourages pre-service teachers to re-write what they already know about history. This activity's originality encouraged me to come to Alberta.

During my presentation, I provided original data about large-scale surveys that quiz Canadians about their knowledge of history. The oldest survey I could get my hands on was published by Macleans in August 1945, with the title "What Canadians Don't Know." Since then, these kinds of surveys contain again and again this question: "Who was the first Prime Minister of Canada?" Survey after survey, about half of Canadians polled could identify Sir John A, but recent results show that this number is now up to 75%. Interest groups use these surveys to manufacture the ignorance of history discourse and ultimately to get their message heard. Visiting the archives of the University of Alberta was helpful to support that argument.

The Mel Hurtig fonds contain documents about his *Canadian Awareness Survey* (1975) that was cited by Jack Granatstein in *Who Killed Canadian History?* as prime evidence of mass historical ignorance. In the archives, by looking at the original pilot study of that survey, I found that the majority of the 300 students polled (77%) could identify the first PM of Canada. Hurtig didn't include a John A. question in the final version of the survey, which was distributed to 3,500 Canadian students, probably because it did not spark enough ignorance. Since the questions chosen effectively sparked ignorance, the survey received national attention that allowed Hurtig's interest group, the Committee for an Independent Canada, to spread its message about the Americanization of Canadian culture that has supposedly caused historical ignorance.

I also presented these results at the University of Calgary following an invitation from David Scott, the newly hired director of student experience at the Werklund School of Education's

community-based B.Ed. program. I first met David in 2013 when he visited Université Laval as a THEN/HiER visiting doctoral student. In Calgary, Dave and I worked on a joint presentation for the THEN/HiER panel at the Canadian Historical Association Congress in Ottawa on June 3, 2015.

The backdrop of my doctoral project is the discourse on the ignorance of history and the norms it reinforces about the obligation to know and memorize history. I seek to understand how pre-service teachers navigate that norm. Do they know, with certainty, what they find relevant about Canada's history? Answering that question could give teacher educators clues about why pre-service teachers don't know historical facts (they don't find a particular fact relevant), targets of intervention (the fact was ignored but deemed relevant to know), and areas of real concern ("knowing," with certainty, incorrect facts). I'm currently completing my comprehensive exams.

My host in Alberta inspired me to include a pedagogical part in my project. He advised me to assess pre-service teacher prior historical knowledge, and then, use the assessment results as a teaching tool, asking them questions such as: "What can we afford to ignore about Canada's history?" In den Heyer's words: "Let the assessment do the teaching."

Dr. den Heyer's pedagogy encourages pre-service teachers to experience an "encounter" – the start of an inner dialogue – with the limits, situatedness, and emotions embedded in their historical knowledge. Mostly framed within a single Canadian "grand narrative" perspective, that historical knowledge lacks perspective. This pedagogy is relevant in the context of the Alberta social studies curriculum, which mandates that teachers include Francophone and Aboriginal perspectives on Canadian history.

To witness the "encounter" pedagogy, I attended two lectures given by Dr. Dwayne Donald to pre-service teachers. From an Aboriginal place-based perspective, Dr. Donald invited the class to walk near the Saskatchewan River, where he shared stories that were related to the various sites we observed. With his calm tone and demeanour, he was a model for preparing pre-service teachers to face "encounters" with contentious issues relating to the ownership of Alberta's land.

My conversations with Dr. den Heyer helped me understand Dr. Donald's pedagogy. It also made me aware of the importance of preparing students to face a "bear" – vocal or inner resistance – when they are confronted with their lack of historical perspective or knowledge. Finally, these conversations introduced me to the shortcomings of the popular historical thinking concepts. These concepts don't foster student's capacities to (re)narrate what they already know.

I thank my host Kent den Heyer and his wife, his colleague Dwayne Donald and his wife, and Carla Peck, all of whom I had the chance to play croquet with on a sunny Sunday afternoon. During my two-week stay out West, I had also the privilege of meeting Laurence Abbott and his wife and daughter, graduate student Catherine van Kessel, and Dave Scott, his wife and daughter. I express gratitude to THEN/HiER for their financial support.