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One Classroom, Two Teachers? Historical Thinking and Indigenous Education in Canada

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Abstract

Recent reforms to social studies and history education in Canada include greater attention to Indigenous perspectives on the past, and explicitly developing the skills of historical thinking. The convergence of these two reform movements raises many questions about the relationship between them: Can they be taught at the same time? In what ways do they complement or conflict with one another? This article illuminates literature on Indigenous histories and historical thinking—their intersections and divergences—in order to identify questions, conflicts and limitations produced in the encounter between these two approaches. It concludes with preliminary suggestions as to how educators may proceed, including first becoming more aware of these very tensions. I advocate for the development of communities of practice, drawing on specialists in historical thinking and Indigenous knowledges within and outside schools, to work towards supporting history classrooms inclusive of both historical thinking and Indigenous perspectives.



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Introduction

Two recent movements have concurrently—but separately—called for significant changes in how social studies and history are taught in Canadian schools. The first is the movement to better incorporate Indigenous perspectives, knowledges and pedagogies in school programs, and specifically within social studies/history curricula. Although advocacy for Indigenous education is by no means limited to this, a prominent example is the recent call to teach students about the history of the Indian Residential School System (TRC, 2015).¹ The second is the movement to reform history education, and the teaching of history within social studies, towards inquiry-based approaches that engage students actively in historical thinking. The Historical Thinking Project led by Peter Seixas has significantly influenced education toward this end (Seixas, 2009).² The purpose of this article is to support educators in considering the relationship between these two movements, and to identify the questions, tensions and possibilities that are likely to arise for education communities participating in both at the same time.

The success of an educational movement is often measured in policy and curriculum changes, and in these cases there is evidence of change in nearly every Canadian jurisdiction. However, because education is a provincial/territorial responsibility, large reforms can never be taken for granted. And, neither movement is uncomplicated or without its associated questions and controversies (for history, see Clark, 2011; for Indigenous education, see St. Denis, 2011). Curricular changes usually result from the convergence of political advocacy and academic publishing, both of which take considerable time. They also rely on ongoing partnerships and negotiation in teacher education programs, with policy-makers in provincial/territorial governments or school boards/districts, with practising teachers in schools, and with those who lead in-service training and professional development.

The extent to which these reform movements have accomplished their goals is a matter of debate, and certainly varies from place to place, and in different grade levels and subject areas. Sustained and effective change depends on educators seeing good models—models that cover the spectrum from lesson plans to pedagogies to assessment rubrics to strategies for overcoming objections from teachers, parents or other stakeholders. Educators must become comfortable with and receive support for using new ideas and tools. Even then the work is not over, because with implementation comes identification of all the adjustments, growing pains, and unintended or unforeseen consequences of change within the ecologies of diverse schools and schooling contexts.

To date, there has been little overlap between the Indigenous education and historical thinking reform movements. Connections between the two are not evident in academic publishing, with few exceptions (den Heyer, 2009; Marker, 2011; Seixas, 2012). According to Indigenous scholar Michael Marker (2011) the encounter between history and Indigenous knowledge in classrooms has not been a positive one for Indigenous students in the past. Beyond neglecting to include Indigenous content, and even beyond including Indigenous content that is stereotypical and misrepresentative, “the deeper problem is that the categories of what counts as

¹ This call was first taken up as a mandatory curriculum topic in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories (Daitch, 2014), and more recently in other jurisdictions.

² The activities of The Historical Thinking Project are well documented through annual reports and resources available on the website: <http://historicalthinking.ca/>

history do not often correspond with the ways that traditional indigenous communities make meaning out of the past” (Marker, 2011, p. 97). Further, Marker points out, “the deeper perspectives of Aboriginal peoples in regard to their understandings of the processes of time and the principles of their knowledge systems are usually missing” (p. 97). Now that expectations are increasingly established for integrating Indigenous knowledges and historical thinking into K-12 school programs, teachers are becoming caught in a space of tension that neither movement anticipated. Indeed, the success of the aforementioned movements may depend on the ability of educators to navigate both at the same time.

Finding one’s way through territory that feels unfamiliar, and presents what may feel like incommensurable demands, may begin with identifying common understandings and shared questions about the context. The guiding questions of this article, then, are: What is the relationship between Indigenous approaches to history and the emphasis in social studies and history education on historical thinking? Can the relationship be characterized by common points of contact and contention in epistemological premises and goals? What implications does this relationship have for social studies and history educators, and the students they teach?

First, I review literature on Indigenous histories and disciplinary historical thinking respectively, developing an understanding of each area of specialization on its own terms. Then I discuss how each may change when integrated into schools, because schools are institutions with purposes that differ and exceed the source contexts (Indigenous communities/families and university-based history departments). I identify some of the questions, conflicts and limitations produced in the encounter between these two fields. Lastly, I offer some preliminary suggestions as to how educators may proceed to adapt their programs with the goals of historical thinking in mind, while remaining respectful of Indigenous imperatives for school learning. I advocate that educators involved in Indigenous education and history continuously participate in deepening their understanding of each field, without smoothing out or ignoring the distinctions between them. Answers to complex and sometimes incommensurable challenges will likely be developed on a case-by-case basis, responding to particular learning contexts, places and relationships.

One Classroom, Two Teachers? An Example

The following scenario is intended to illustrate the potential difficulties and dilemmas posed by bringing together discipline-based history education and Indigenous education in the same classroom, and by extension, why it is worth considering how these two approaches come together rather than addressing them discretely.³ Imagine the teaching focus is on land claims history—understanding how oral testimony given by Inuit Elders informs historical studies of land use. The testimony is mobilized to substantiate claims of occupation, by submitting it as evidence to the state during negotiations. Following an introduction to the context of land claims negotiations and agreements, students are asked to consider how oral testimony is assessed as a primary source. To familiarize students with the process and experience of receiving Inuit oral testimony, a social studies teacher (Teacher 1) wants to arrange for a visit from a local Elder. The teacher in question does not have a close relationship with the community Elder, so they ask their colleague who teaches Inuit language (Teacher 2), and knows the community better, to collaborate by facilitating the Elder’s visit. This involves inviting and preparing the Elder,

³ Thanks to Sean Murray for helping me imagine this scenario.

modeling a respectful engagement with the Elder during the visit and inviting a few questions from students after their remarks.

On the mind of Teacher 1 during and after the Elder's visit are the critical inquiry questions students will need to consider in applying the Elder's stories to their land use study. For example: What knowledge did Inuit Elders collect and submit as evidence in establishing a long-term relationship with particular locations in the Arctic? How do we know whether they shared "real" memories or "mythical" stories? What criteria will we use to assess whether occupation was continuous? How can we establish exactly how long Inuit inhabited particular locations, when the Elder did not fix their stories with exact dates? What corroboration can we seek to be sure the Elder's various stories are actually about the same location, and are remembered correctly?

These questions are not the same questions that Teacher 2 has on their mind. Teacher 2 looks forward to discussing questions such as these with students: What do the place names and vocabulary used by the Elder tell us about how they know and relate to this land? How does the land shape what people do here? How do the stories of this place connect with what we know about other places close by? What is most significant to remember about this particular place, when you visit it in future?

These two sets of questions are derived from different assumptions about the way knowledge circulates, and the verifiability of knowledge—including the relative necessity or value of verifiability to begin with. They are sourced from different epistemological foundations. Can both sets of questions, introduced by Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, be effectively taken up with students in the same classroom? Can both teachers recognize the respective value, and potential overlap, between their differing lessons—or must each take their turn while the other is out of the room? How can the dissonance between these two stances be bridged skillfully and respectfully in one classroom for young learners?

Answers to these questions must be responsive to and situated with the contexts, communities and individual strengths that shape any particular teacher's practice. They are not easy, obvious or universal. It may be rare to encounter, or become, a teacher who is as comfortable with historical thinking as with Indigenous ways of knowing, let alone bringing them together in one lesson or unit. Supreme Court of Canada case law sheds light on how challenging it can be to reconcile differing versions of history, especially when sourced from different epistemologies. Recognizing this challenge, it remains a disservice to learners when educators do not model openness to both approaches in the same classroom.

I believe it is possible for educators to usher students into familiarity with the distinguishing features of both Indigenous and historical thinking systems for making meaning from the past. They can also lead students toward approaches that draw careful, respectful comparisons, and shed light on connections between differing interpretations or narratives. The ability of educators to teach both approaches, sometimes together, initially hinges on familiarity and practice. The inevitable tensions and tough questions that emerge will never be entirely predictable, nor reconcilable. They can, however, be more respectfully navigated by teachers who understand, and are supported to continuously inquire into both approaches—including why they sometimes differ and diverge.

Indigenous Education and Approaches to History

Canada has a long, and ongoing, history of disrespectful treatment towards Indigenous peoples. This mistreatment has often been facilitated through schools, whether by removing children from their families with the goal of total assimilation, or by miseducating non-Indigenous children about the First peoples of these lands. In response to this, multifaceted Indigenous education reform projects consist of many different purposes, goals and pedagogies (Kanu, 2011; Madden, 2015). These range from providing safe, healthy and equitable school conditions (Angus, 2015) to achieving better educational outcomes, employment readiness and lifelong learning for Indigenous students (CCL, 2009), to nourishing the learning spirit (Battiste, 2013), to breaking down stereotypes that fuel racism amongst non-Indigenous students (St. Denis, 2007), to advancing reconciliation following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). The scope of this article does not allow for a description of all the ways schools are being called to change relationships with Indigenous communities through processes of inclusion, program enhancement, reconciliation, decolonization and antiracism. I place emphasis on the single subject area of social studies and history, while recognizing that any Indigenous initiative in public schooling is differently inflected with theories of curriculum and pedagogy that operate within, and extend far beyond, subject area boundaries.

Indigenous and ally⁴ scholars, Elders and knowledge holders teach that Indigenous approaches to making meaning from the past differ from those of the discipline of history. And, Jo-ann Archibald (2008) reminds educators that, “[i]t is important to appreciate the diversity among Indigenous cultures and to recognize that there are different story genres, purposes, protocols, and ways to make story meaning” (p. 83). There is no singular way to teach and learn Indigenous histories, just as there is no singular Indigenous experience with the past. This variability is rooted in the ecologies of cultures—how culture is produced from, and between, the conditions of language, place and practice, among other influences. Also, Indigenous ways of making meaning from the past have dimensions of continuity but do not remain static. They exist within the pervasive impacts of colonization, Indigenous communities’ responses to assimilative influences, and their agency in choosing ways of adapting to contemporary conditions.

Educators are encouraged to remain cognizant of the importance of starting with the history of the land on which their schools are situated, and the community or Nation with whom they are in relation. They may also move towards a view of Indigenous experience that exceeds the borders and boundaries imposed through colonization, such as those of nation states. Local histories are the point of departure for learning because they, “provide the template for [Indigenous] expressions of identity and self-determination” and the “detail and complexity that break down the persistent stereotyping of the ‘Native other’” (Marker, 2011, p. 108). This situatedness makes Indigenous approaches to the past dissimilar from disciplinary logics, that usually emphasize more uniform, universal or standardized techniques regardless of location. Acknowledging diversity and situatedness, elsewhere (McGregor, 2014) I have drawn from the literature what I hope are some careful generalizations about differences between Indigenous and disciplinary approaches to the past. These include, for example:

⁴ I recognize diverse and locally situated interpretations of what it means to claim, or be attributed with, the status of an ally scholar. In general, I refer to scholars who do not have Indigenous ancestry themselves but who work closely in relationship with, and following the guidance of, Indigenous communities towards the educational or research goals articulated by those communities.

- Narrative templates, and narrative competencies associated with such templates, can differ substantially;
- Oral and written practices depend on the speaker/author positioning or locating themselves, acknowledging their ancestry or tradition and education, how they came here (or to do this work), and how they fit into local understandings of identity;
- Temporal arrangements are not necessarily chronological, linear or progressive, but rather emphasize cycles or circles;
- Land can be positioned as a source of knowledge;
- Relationships (including with animals) are embedded in an ecological web, where humans are not necessarily dominant, frequently mediated by spiritual understandings; and,
- Many Indigenous scholars point out that the processes and events of colonization/ decolonization are a crucial context within which histories and memories should be acknowledged to reside, whereas non-Indigenous Canada still frequently neglects this context.

Indigenous knowledge relies on openness to, and the credibility of, orality for a continual (re)making of meaning in the present, including sharing memories, testimony and story. Memory work in Indigenous traditions is a practice often connected to place that can facilitate recognition of the presence of the past, moral lessons for individuals, as well as collective, cultural continuity. Susan Dion (2009) focuses on the relational processes of constructing and sharing histories in pedagogical encounters:

As a form of remembrance storytelling, our (re)telling practice draws on a discursive tradition in which history is something more than a chronology of events. In our approach, the study of history is concerned with understanding who we are, our relationships with others, and the kind of world we want to create. (p. 27)

Indigenous history education is old in the sense that Indigenous peoples have always educated their youth about the past, and the people, places and traces that belong to it. It is also new, because only recently are such practices being institutionalized—naming, describing, categorizing, and comparing them in academic terms and contexts. Up until recently, Indigenous approaches to history were largely excluded from historiography, meaning the primarily university-based processes of defining historical methodology. Brownlie (2009) explains the reluctant reception to Indigenous knowledge in most academic history as an attachment to rational foundationalism and normative Euro-western/Enlightenment epistemologies, and that: “academic history has been most receptive to Aboriginal influences that are easy to accommodate in the existing forms, epistemologies, methodologies, and interpretive frameworks” (p. 36).

Within this section I have tried to offer a few brief insights into the ways Indigenous approaches to history are different from academic history, to point in directions educators may look to learn more, to encounter difference, to reconsider their assumptions. However, a direct comparison through this article is ultimately an impoverished offering, to the extent that it is so

simplified, time-limited, lacking in embodied experience or relationship, and coming through me (I do not carry Indigenous knowledge; I only have experience learning from it). All Canadians would benefit from sustained education in Indigenous ways of engaging with the past. One article, one teaching resource, or one hour-long presentation by an Elder-in-residence cannot tell us what we need to know. Developing such understandings takes time, it takes relationship building, it takes openness to recognizing and bracketing our assumptions, and it takes practice in learning to listen differently. All the while, we must acknowledge that “western epistemic dominance” (Kerr, 2014) is pervasive in schools and universities, and always affects our ability to recognize, decipher and participate in the adapted Indigenous knowledge traditions that occur inside them.

Historical Thinking in History Education

The idea of historical thinking dates back more than a century, and research into it as a paradigm for history education dates back several decades in Britain and the United States (Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000). In Canada, promotion of historical thinking is a more recent development (Clark, 2011; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2009). The Canadian movement to reform history education through historical thinking can be largely attributed to the leadership and contributions of Peter Seixas, who refined six historical thinking concepts and developed numerous tools to support their implementation in schools (Seixas & Morton, 2013). The concepts are: establish historical significance; use primary source evidence; identify continuity and change; analyze cause and consequence; take historical perspectives; and, understand the ethical dimension of historical interpretations.

The historical thinking approach to history education resists teaching a set of fixed narratives for student consumption. It is predicated on the idea that the stories we tell about the past—histories—are not facsimiles of the past, but rather constructions arrived at through imperfect human processes of interpretation. The more students know about these processes, the better they can participate in them, and eventually influence the stories produced by them.

Historical thinking engages students in using second-order procedural concepts derived from the discipline, such as establishing historical significance or taking historical perspective (Lee & Ashby, 2000). The concepts illustrate how historians go about doing history, much as the scientific method illustrates how science is pursued. Second-order concepts are taught in tandem with, or as a vehicle for, first-order concepts rooted in historical contexts, such as “Canadian confederation” or “women’s suffrage.” Ideally, historical thinking concepts are taught explicitly, scaffolded over time and according to student cognitive development. The goal is for students to understand and apply the concepts through constructing and evaluating historical accounts with increasing skill. Therefore, students learn both historical knowledge (i.e., Canadian history) and advance through increasingly sophisticated understandings of how historical knowledge is made, and remade.

Seixas (2000) argues that history education should teach learners to use “standards for inquiry, investigation, and debate” (p. 34) that prevent them from “uncritically accepting any particular version” (p. 33) of the past. Pedagogically, this moves away from lessons that are content-heavy, designed for knowledge recitation, nationalist in tone, and oriented towards heritage promotion. Seixas (2006) advocates that a disciplinary approach should inform history education not only to teach students about the past, but also to give them the necessary skills to

navigate contemporary issues as citizens in a complex world. History education reforms should help students “acknowledge that contention over the meanings of the past is an ongoing feature of contemporary culture,” and facilitate “participation in the critical interpretation of the past” (Seixas, 2006, p. 14).

This means beginning lesson planning with powerful, authentic questions for student inquiry, developed by the teacher in relation to 1) the historical context or topic, 2) the evidence available, and 3) one or more of the historical thinking concepts. The lesson proceeds with activities that engage students in developing understandings of the past informed by primary sources, and forming reasoned judgements about the meaning of the past.

The strength of this movement, both pedagogically and in persuading school stakeholders of its value, is its derivation from the academic discipline of history. Historical thinking is said to give students access to authentic procedures for knowledge construction. As such, that relationship with the discipline is intended to remain dialogical. Seixas’ historical thinking concepts are conceived as subject-specific processes, just as math and science rely on subject-specific problem solving processes. Establishing historical significance, then, is pursued following terms and criteria informed by historians’ questions and techniques, referred to by Seixas & Morton (2013) as “guideposts.” Educators should be careful, then, conflating historical thinking with recent reforms around generic critical thinking or 21st century learning skills. Likewise, this model does not suggest that any and all definitions of historical significance are equally relevant, powerful or acceptable; in this model, it is the discipline that provides the litmus test.

Seixas’ historical thinking concepts were streamlined following many years of consideration, consultation and revision with historians, history education researchers, teacher educators, classroom teachers and museum educators. Notwithstanding Seixas’ invitation to an ongoing dialogue about the concepts,⁵ they are increasingly—unquestioningly—reified amongst teachers as the singular avenue towards historical thinking. As second-order concepts, they are used as if they are universal. They are also often conflated with historical consciousness, which, as I suggest elsewhere (McGregor, 2015), raises a different set of questions.⁶ However, historical thinking need not be exclusively equated with Seixas’ six-concept model, and nor should the model itself be considered immutable. The concepts defined by Seixas—like any other such model—remain open to critical intervention and change. Indeed, much as the discipline of history is a contested space, so too should historical thinking remain a vibrant space for debate. And, at another level of variability, we should not assume the model is being adopted with uniformity. Diversity and adaptation occur in the interpretation and application of Seixas’ concepts alongside other historical thinking approaches, both “officially” at the curriculum

⁵ For example debates have surrounded the use and understanding of the terms and concepts: moral/ethical, historical agency, historical empathy and progress/decline.

⁶ In my view (and, although I cannot speak for him, my discussions with Seixas would suggest he agrees), it is a misunderstanding to assume that by learning any number of historical thinking concepts students will then “have” historical consciousness. Metacognitive processes, like understanding the procedures by which historians make meaning from the past, undoubtedly nurtures the potential for historical consciousness, but it is not limited to that. Rather, historical consciousness implicates how *all* knowledge is conditioned by factors such as, but not limited to, historicity—a changing, moving relationship with time; contingency and situatedness; culturally diverse forms of drawing meaning; and, the varied purposes and uses of history and memory (including political, judicial, personal/identary) in contemporary society.

policy level (see for example Duquette, 2014; Osbourne, 2011), and “unofficially” at the classroom level.

I support the historical thinking approach as part of the solution to improving history education. I have witnessed how it “generates powerful understandings” of the past (Seixas & Morton, 2013). In my view, the significant value of this work by Seixas, and other scholars in historical thinking (Bain, 2005; Lévesque, 2008; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001), is how they render the discipline of history more transparent and accessible for teachers and students. Thanks to their work, school stakeholders have the opportunity to see, and to discuss, the opportunities and limitations of teaching history based on the discipline, as well as the ways it may complement or conflict with other approaches to engaging with the past. For teachers, perhaps especially those who do not have strong background in history themselves and find teaching history overwhelming, this approach provides a framework by which to proceed. As I will illustrate below, the historical thinking framework also raises many questions when it comes to considering the place of Indigenous peoples and knowledges.

Schools are Complex Institutions

Frameworks for defining, mobilizing and applying what counts as “knowledge,” or for determining what we understand as truth and whether or not there can be multiple truths, are always at work in schools. How these frameworks are understood in spaces like universities is not how they will be found in schools, as they become increasingly streamlined—at best—or made utterly anaemic—at worst. This ongoing making and unmaking of what knowledge is and does in particular spaces, according innumerable ecologies of purposes and actors, is what I refer to as the institutionalization of knowledge. When knowledge comes inside institutions (and networks of institutions), it is increasingly enculturated and enculturating in a two-way transaction that produces new outcomes, and that may leave both knowledge and institutions constrained. For example, historical thinking is applied within the same institutional constraints that every other school initiative faces—public schools have goals for history that are different from university-based practicing historians.

Teaching historical thinking in schools does not necessarily mean that all students are trained to become “mini historians.” Second-order concepts in history education are said to give students an approximation of the tools and terms for engagement that reflect the best match between disciplinary practice and the goals of a public education in a democratic society. Seixas (2006) describes the challenge, and significant opportunity, of history education as helping learners, “make sense of who they are, where they stand, and what they can do—as individuals, as members of multiple, intersecting groups, and as citizens with roles and responsibilities in relation to nations and states in a complex, conflict-ridden, and rapidly changing world” (p. 21). Whether or not these goals for public education are appropriate or realistic (e.g., what kind of engagement schools actually facilitate, and whether or not such engagement is in any way ‘democratic’) is an important question, but not the focus here. My point is that this vision of history *education*—more often than not mingled with social studies and citizenship learning goals in schools—may certainly differ from an historian’s purposes for history.

Secondly, the ties between historical thinking and the discipline of history are also a source of critique. While disciplines are sometimes mistaken as static, incontrovertible methods in pursuit of truth, they are historically- and culturally-situated human constructions like any

other way of knowing. A system of knowledge at any given time reflects the strengths (or possibly, the lowest common denominator) of those people whose work has been included and recognized in contributing to its development. Academic and institutionalized systems of knowledge have, to date, largely been shaped by men of European ancestry who speak European languages, come from industrialized and formerly (and/or currently) imperialistic nations, and participate in intellectual traditions largely based on liberalism and rationalism. While there is diversity within categories such as “Western” or “European” thought, and great inroads to the academy have been made by scholars who were formerly marginalized, to argue that these systems reflect the “best” way of constructing knowledge is contingent on recognition of this potentially limited “sampling.” As Kerr (2014) argues, we need “to make visible the cultural locatedness of Western European knowledge making practices” and “the presumed epistemic neutrality underlying these practices and colonial forms of continued domination” (p. 91). Using a discipline as a litmus test for what is taught in schools offers teachers strengths, but it also introduces rigidity that may not reflect the people or place in which history education is occurring.

In parallel, teaching Indigenous knowledge in schools will not make all students “Indigenous knowledge holders.” School initiatives or lessons can give students an approximation of activities that reflect Indigenous histories, practices, languages and conceptual orientations. However, Madden (2015) points out that traditional models of teaching, “are often modified significantly when translated for use in universities and schools,” as “an Elder might lead up to 40 teachers at one time compared to two or three learners, within time/space constraints that are much more rigid than they would be in a traditional teaching and learning context” (p. 7). Usually, and perhaps ideally, Indigenous education occurs on the land/water, through intergenerational and ecological relationships, with opportunities to use language authentically and beyond the constraints of 45-min periods. What Madden (2015) calls “pathways” towards Indigenous education are also informed and shaped by decolonizing, antiracist and place-based theories that may, or may not, align with Indigenous goals for schooling sourced from local communities. The vision and outcomes of Indigenous education accessible in *schools* may certainly differ from what, and how, Indigenous Elders would like to see youth learning. And, these goals are equally affected by western epistemic dominance, as outlined above.

Both reform movements aim towards enhancing student exposure to ways of thinking that they can engage from their own position, for their own purposes and to bridge difference in their lives with creative, skillful means and ethical conduct. These aims are tempered by the constraints that pedagogical and curricular design inevitably brings to bear in school contexts and for school audiences. Schools are always situated within an ecology of social, political, cultural and economic purposes, influences and goals that shape what is taught, and how. Again, this is an opportunity and a responsibility. Educators and stakeholders can revise approaches to history education and Indigenous education in schools, and they must do so in order to respond to their students. Doing so thoughtfully, and in ways that account for the commitments of both educational movements, is challenging work.

Classroom Clashes Between History and Indigenous Education

What happens when history, as it has typically been taught, and Indigenous knowledges come together in schools? In this section I summarize insights from scholarly publishing that

deals specifically with Indigenous knowledges and history classrooms in Canada, with an emphasis on Indigenous authors. Among other scholars, Marker (2011) claims that history classrooms can be damaging for Indigenous students: “When Aboriginal students are told that their cultural interpretation of history is not the correct one, the hegemony of this moment is often internalized. This deteriorates the ability of indigenous communities to organize around their own epistemologies” (p. 100). Marker calls teachers to new ways of understanding history, which will “necessarily entail sacrificing some conventional ways of teaching Canadian history” (p. 111). This is intended both to be more inclusive towards Indigenous perspectives and in order for all students to “imagine alternative ways to structure the societies of the future” (p. 111).

Perhaps some educators would object, saying that schools are more inclusive than Marker gives them credit for. That may be true for some classrooms in some schools, but the extent to which that reflects systemic commitments to decolonizing curriculum remains questionable. St. Denis (2011) argues that the impact of multicultural policy on education is to reify colonialism, anti-Aboriginal sentiments and veiled resistance to acknowledging the sovereignty, history, culture and perspectives of Aboriginal people in school curricula.

Dion’s (2009) research demonstrates in more detail what happens when attempts are made to reform history education in elementary classrooms towards Indigenous goals, showing that providing Indigenous counter-stories is not enough. She identifies a lack of awareness on the part of teachers and students regarding their involvement in ongoing injustice, and an attachment to dominant versions of history that silence Indigenous experience. Dion (2009) finds that teachers’ capacity to depict difference in history education is highly mediated by discourses of professionalism that emphasize, “teaching well, pastoral care, and citizenship education” (p. 178).

The premise of Donald’s (2012) work is that Aboriginal experience is disregarded in educational institutions because of a “logic of naturalized separation based on the assumption of stark, and ultimately irreconcilable, differences” and “[t]he intention is to deny relationality” (p. 91). Accordingly, to do the work of decolonizing education requires naming and confronting colonial relations between Canadians and Aboriginal peoples in the past, and the lineages and legacies that have informed the present. He takes the conversation beyond counter-narratives and alternative pedagogy towards pursuit of ethical relationships. Donald models how one might go about questioning Canadian colonial myths that have fuelled a teleology and national ideology (perpetuated in schools) that place Aboriginal peoples “*outside* accepted versions of nation and nationality” (2012, p.100, emphasis in original).

If the discipline of history, and history education in schools, has routinely discounted Indigenous knowledges and peoples, how and why should it be changed? Teaching history differently can allow students—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to understand the historical formations of present relationships, including the associated formations of colonization, Eurocentrism and resulting inequities. It may support them to better resist when history is used in service to perpetuating colonizing relations. For example, treaty education (Tupper, 2011; Tupper & Cappello, 2008) may help undercut the tendency for Indigenous communities to be misframed as demanding “hand outs” from governments, instead bringing awareness to the failure of governments in implementing the letter and spirit of treaties and agreements to which we are all party, or failure to finalize agreements at all (as in much of British Columbia, and Canada’s national capital region). And, improving history education may help students come to know the past for the purposes, and in ways, advanced and centred by Indigenous peoples.

Can the historical thinking approach be our silver bullet, the uniting force that can bring two teachers together in one classroom? Seixas (2012) argues, “[o]nly with a populace able to read and share stories across borders, across difference, can we shape a future together” (p. 17). Adopting a historical thinking approach to history education advances learning goals that can be beneficial for Indigenous students and communities, just as for other Canadians. Particularly with further dialogue, as will be discussed below, historical thinking may provide a vehicle for increased Indigenous participation in making meaning from traces of our shared past. The active engagement of Indigenous peoples, knowledges and prerogatives in history education must, however, be predicated on an acknowledgement of the ways that disciplinary practice—such as historical thinking—has neglected, marginalized or directly conflicted with Indigenous education. Attending to these limitations may feel uncomfortable for educators, or may seem to weaken either history education or Indigenous education. I argue that these limitations exist even as we push them to the sidelines, and failing to acknowledge them only deepens the possibility of misunderstanding.

Some Limits to Historical Thinking, and Questions for Consideration

Carla Peck’s (2011) research demonstrates clearly that students’ ethnic identities shape how they determine what is historically significant, and yet teachers may not take this into account. Peck says, “curricula focus on how learning Canadian history can help students understand their own identity as ‘Canadians,’ but do not seem to engage students in questions about how their own identity helps them understand, or may influence, their understanding of Canadian history” (p. 318). Samantha Cutrara (2009) also argues that the disciplinary historical thinking approach fails to recognize that students are differently implicated by what they encounter in the history classroom, depending on their identities, because of over-emphasis on rational, disciplinary, skill-oriented pedagogies. It overlooks the potential for students to engage with the imperial legacy of racism and colonialism that continues to shape Canada in the present.

Similarly, Kent den Heyer (2011) critiques the disciplinary approach because it does not centre contemporary ethics, social action, and subjectivity, nor facilitate student affirmation:

It is as if the historical procedures identified as relevant for student study have been extracted in labs from historians who lack hopes, fantasies, or racialized, gendered, classed, and desiring bodies and who also lack political intelligence. Given this level of abstraction, students have little opportunity to consider the complex reasons behind the distribution of some but not other histories. (p. 157-158)

By continuously normalizing European Enlightenment frameworks of historiography, whether passively or intentionally, historical thinking may perpetuate the conditions by which anything else appears to come “after” it. Therefore, Indigenous traditions of engaging with the past may be measured against a Eurocentric baseline of cognitive, linguistic, ethical, procedural and other criteria, or potentially rendered only a “belief” system. This need not be the case in schools, but it likely will be if we do not attend more carefully to how history is taught. I am keenly aware that non-Indigenous scholars, researchers and teachers are almost never expected to do the mental gymnastics of defending their knowledge using systems of criteria and expression that

they did not contribute to creating, as Indigenous scholars, Elders and teachers regularly are. Extending epistemic recognition to Indigenous knowledges and peoples, as Kuokkanen (2007) has called for in universities, is a crucial part of curricular reform.

Another constraint of historical thinking, and education broadly speaking, lurks just below the surface of this discussion and must be briefly acknowledged. Providing learners (whether they be adults/educators or youth/students) with information, stories, testimonies or other forms of evidence from, and about, the past does not *guarantee* learning outcomes in alignment with teaching objectives, especially when it concerns histories bearing “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). As Roger Simon (2004), Lisa Farley (2009) and Ann Chinnery (2010) have shown, history education pedagogies and their productions unfold in ways that differ from, and exceed, the intentions of the pedagogue and transitive calls they may have in mind. As I have learned (Madden & McGregor, 2013), pedagogy demands humility about the potential for direct, predictable or parallel change to deep structural and individual formations of self and society. This is not to suggest teaching history is a futile endeavour, or one in which we may casually defer responsibility. It is, rather, to place a footnote on any pursuit of certainty surrounding reliable strategies by which to soothe our anxiety about the inherently dynamic and proliferating process of teaching and learning. While not the focus of this article, addressing questions like these necessitates facing the obstructions and refusals that come with experiences of difficult knowledge, negotiations of difference and the unknowability of the past.

Historical thinking derives from a long history of disciplinary practice, and represents an effort at resisting teaching a singular body of knowledge or a grand narrative. However, we must also resist representing historical thinking itself as a fixed, universal or uncontested system for constructing knowledge. Historical thinking comes from a particular group of people, in particular places, with culturally situated understandings of the past, of the flow of time, and of meanings derived from human experience. And, inherently, disciplinary approaches to knowledge construction restrict what counts as knowledge and what counts as valid ways of assessing that knowledge. Hence, why one piece of writing counts as “history” whereas another is “literary analysis.” There are multiple ways of resisting and negotiating such restrictions and multiple implications for individuals and groups of people over time. This lack of consensus in history and historiography cannot be overlooked in education. Indeed, it is useful to have tools and techniques for finding our way into and out of such conflicts. Conflict may be what students find most engaging and most useful in becoming critical thinkers. So while historical thinking models have been consolidated and adapted specifically to improve history education in public schools, educators and their students must continue to think critically about such models, especially as they apply to diverse local contexts or situated historical questions.

Implications for Educators and the Future

den Heyer (2009) described the emphasis on Aboriginal perspectives in the Alberta social studies program as anxiety-producing for teacher educators and teacher candidates. Few have personal or formal educational background in the area, therefore it “positions most teacher candidates as students just at a time when they seek to adopt the familiar stance of the teacher” (den Heyer, 2009, p. 344; see also Kerr, 2014). Alongside those who sincerely seek support in teaching Indigenous histories is the ongoing tendency towards “strategic ignorance” (Tupper, 2008) with regard to the experiences of Indigenous peoples amongst non-Indigenous Canadians. This tendency must be unsettled and shifted with haste. How can we proceed when we know this

is the case for so many educators, now and in the future, when it comes to Indigenous education? Is this anxiety also (but perhaps differently) true for learning to teach historical thinking?

Educators would benefit from assistance with choosing sources, stories and pedagogies that facilitate respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge and historical thinking. This necessitates orientation and ongoing professional development with colleagues, professional reading and research. Alan Sears (2014) draws on theory in cognitive development to make the argument that moving from the “periphery” to the “core” of historical practice is crucial to history educators’ understandings of themselves in teaching the discipline. A parallel could be made with the Indigenous education professional learning community; that continuous movement from the margins to deeper understandings will support teachers’ ability to introduce students to increasingly complex questions about Indigenous experience. Our available frames for teaching will be extended if and when communities of practice connect educators with specialists outside schools, such as researchers in historical thinking and Indigenous Elders. This continuous movement to the “core” depends not only on practice, but also on inviting teachers to think about the epistemological basis of historical thinking or Indigenous knowledges, how they differ or converge, and how each system can be utilized in the classroom. Educators can then advance the ability of students to understand each system or approach, and discern creative ways of connecting them—in contrast to being passive knowledge recipients.

Development of communities of practice could be supported by a think-tank and network, much like The History Education Network (www.thenhier.ca), but focused on the alignment between history and Indigeneity. Those who teach teachers about historical thinking and Indigenous education might work together to increase the transparency of their own approaches to constructing knowledge, and the extent to which such systems are textured with tensions and contingencies. Perhaps they can constructively take up the layers of difference, potential conflicts, and many questions inherent in teaching both historical thinking and Indigenous knowledges in the same classroom. Drawing from historians, history educators, Indigenous and ally scholars, and my own experience, I propose several questions that deserve greater consideration in such communities of practice, questions that may even be adapted for discussion with students:

- What is the role of identity in the production of, and responses to, histories? (of the historian/person sharing the story, and their right to share it at the correct time, of the people in the story in question, of the listener-learner)
- What unique insights into the past can be accessed through memory and oral history, and how do they relate to other types of primary sources?
- How do histories differently represent responsibility and agency in the past, and produce responsibility/agency in the present?
- How does understanding the intended use/purpose of histories become relevant to understanding their construction? (political, social, antiracist, etc.)
- Under what conditions is it useful to acknowledge that we are uncertain about the past and its meaning, and what implications does *not knowing* have?
- How does acknowledging the historicity or situatedness of any given system within which histories are constructed help us navigate between more than one system?

Conclusion

The relationship between Indigenous approaches to making meaning from the past, and historical thinking, in schools, has not been well defined or mapped to date. Due to the differing origin of each knowledge paradigm—a discipline in the case of historical thinking, and an ancestral, place based, and often political affiliation in the case of Indigenous approaches—there are distinctions in the structure of each approach to knowledge. These differences, oversimplified and misunderstood as they may be when deployed, produce a greater likelihood of neglect, clash or conflict between paradigms. It is almost as if one classroom of students must learn historical thinking and Indigenous education from two different teachers, while sorting out for themselves the gaps and overlaps. Each approach to constructing knowledge must be adapted for schools because of other demands on education: teacher and student identities, adapting content to be developmentally or locally appropriate, combining history education with social studies, citizenship goals and other institutional conditions. It is crucial to begin considering how each of these educational reform movements may necessitate adaptation in relation to each other.

The implications of *not* undertaking this deep consideration include continued marginalization of Indigenous students and Indigenous epistemologies in public schools, and particularly from history and social studies. It risks the perpetuated misrepresentation or separation of Indigenous peoples, perspectives and imperatives from an integrated curriculum. The implications further include continued failure to teach other Canadians about the experience of Indigenous peoples, as called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). Educators would fail to give students the thinking skills necessary to navigate complex relationships and experiences of sameness and difference. At this time there are many questions and few answers. I hope educators may work together to address these questions, in order to strengthen each educational reform movement for the benefit of all Canadian students.

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