

Commentary



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Saving history in Canada's schools

*Will a major national project reaffirm the place of history
in school curricula?*

Paul W. Bennett

Five years into a **\$2.5-million** seven-year Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) study known as “Thinking Historically for Canada’s Future,” funding support from 17 universities and 31 educational organizations has grown to exceed \$8.6 million (Lingley 2023). Given that sizable investment, the whole project would benefit from more public scrutiny. The project’s modest website provides a few clues, but it’s mostly a platform for sharing social studies research, in-house notices, and wallpaper for the funders (Thinking Historically for Canada’s Future 2024).

“Thinking Historically” was launched with great promise and has engaged thirty history and social studies educators in the first major review of K to 12 history and social studies in Canada since 1968. Project leader Carla Peck, a professor of social studies education at the University of Alberta, is passionate about that work, but, strangely enough, mostly absent from the public debate over saving history as an endangered species in our schools.

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The project is headed and driven by education professors very much wedded to prevailing thinking and contemporary trends in North American social studies education. The goal is not to resurrect a shrivelling subject discipline, but something else, as Peck told Brian Bethune in a recent *University Affairs* feature on dwindling history enrolments (Bethune 2024). Their goal, in her words, is to “understand how a critical historical thinking approach to teaching and learning history – and by critical, I mean analytical, not finding something wrong with everything – can support the development of critically minded citizens.”

“ *History as a subject in schools and universities is in crisis.* ”

Fine distinctions are important when it comes to delving into the state of history in today’s social studies curriculum. History as a subject in schools and universities is in crisis. The Dominion Institute and Historica Canada, sponsors of the Canadian History Report Card (Dominion Institute 2009; Historica Canada 2021), as well as most history department professors and high school teachers tend to favour “more history, taught better.” The key priority, reaffirmed since 2009 in the national Report Card reports, was to ensure that all high school students completed a required course in Canada’s history before graduation. Commitment to public policy geared to developing a sense of national historical consciousness has faltered over the past few decades. It is clearly complicated by Canada’s provincially autonomous educational framework and the challenges of forging a consensus on matters of cultural identity. With the exception of Quebec, little empirical research has even been conducted to connect the dots between historical consciousness and historical thinking (Clark 2018).

The “Thinking Historically” group views it all differently. Instead of focusing on presenting the case for a self-standing history course, it’s more about providing citizenship education or, as Peck told *University Affairs*, “teach more history, get better citizens” (Bethune 2024). For the social studies promoters, it is all cast in a different framework where “historical knowledge” is seen as more of an input into teaching the inquiry approach, sharpening critical-thinking skills, and nurturing student activism in civic life.

Many history professors and high school specialists question the effectiveness of such an approach in turning back the tide. That advancing tidal wave is most evident in the erosion of history-anchored curricula and in declining high school and university course enrolments.

Long before the late Peter Seixas established his Historical Thinking framework and Benchmarks of Historical Thinking (Clarke 2020), he described history as “a discipline cast adrift” in the British Columbia social studies curriculum (Seixas 1994). The founder of the Thinking Historically movement, it should be noted, supported the centrality of history in a social studies curriculum.

History as a subject always seems to be imperiled (Bennett 1990), even in Ontario with its more robust tradition of providing it with preferred status in the social studies curriculum (Bennett 2016). The problem was flagged in 1995 by the late Bob Davis in *Whatever Happened to High School History: Burying the Political Memory of Youth Ontario: 1945–1995* (Davis 1995). In Ontario, where history formed part of the core curriculum, Davis discovered that enrolment went from accounting for 11.4 per cent of all classes in 1964 to a mere 6.6 per cent in 1982. In addition to losing ground, history and social studies became afflicted with what he aptly termed the “skills mania” afflicting our schools (Davis 2000). Abandoning narrative history contributed to the decline by depriving our students of opportunities to engage with the larger national story and to develop a stronger sense of historical consciousness and collective memory.

Trilby Kent, the author of the 2022 book *The Vanishing Past*, concurs with Davis’s earlier assessment (Kent 2022). Davis and Kent highlight that since the early 1970s social history has not only squeezed out older forms of history (such as political and economic) but has also fuelled fragmentation and sectarianism. In her book and in the Bethune article, Kent makes a persuasive case that such changes undermined “the sort of story that draws children to history.” Much of it was driven by the turn away from teaching engaging narrative history and towards critical-thinking-focused pedagogy. “By the 1990s, ‘learning how to learn’ had all but replaced learning content,” Kent observes.

The Historical Thinking movement, launched by Seixas, never really gained as much traction among Quebec historians or history educators. History, memory, and collective consciousness have always found resonance in French-speaking Quebec. From the late 1990s onward, history education researcher Jocelyn Létourneau eschewed what he termed “historical studies” and focused

his research on how history shaped the historical consciousness of youth (Létourneau 2014). Instead of working on perfecting how to teach history, he conducted surveys in 2000 and 2014 to ascertain how history conveyed a narrative and discovered that young Quebecers exhibited a distinct and abiding sense of collective memory and consciousness.

More recently, University of Ottawa history education specialist Stéphane Lévesque has called into question the near exclusive emphasis on the “Seixas matrix” and pointed out the fact that “little policy has been informed by research about students.” Following the trail blazed by Létourneau, Lévesque and Jean-Philippe Croteau’s 2020 book, *Beyond History for Historical Consciousness*, examined what are termed “mythhistories” based upon a 2016 survey completed by 635 high school students in Quebec and Ontario (Lévesque and Croteau 2020). While it was a relatively small sample study, it did break with orthodoxy and made the case that history can be a potentially powerful force in shaping collective national identity. Teaching history, Lévesque and Croteau demonstrate, is not just about training students in historical thinking, but about “an essential cultural factor” – the “process of gaining narrative competence.”



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Meanwhile, J.L. Granatstein’s little red book – the 1998 national bestseller *Who Killed Canadian History?* – continues to reverberate (Stewart 2023), twenty-five years after it ignited a debate and a full-fledged movement to save history in our schools, universities, education ministries, and, most important of all, in the public square. That was revealed, once again, in a spirited series of essays on the state of Canadian history featured in *The Hub* (Speer 2024), including one from Donald Wright, the current president of the Canadian Historical Association.

One of Canada’s leading public historians, Trent University Canadian Studies professor Christopher Dummitt sees the writing on the wall (Dummitt 2024). The current “presentist and potted plant” approach to teaching history and social studies not only robs the subject of its broader appeal but can be repelling

if it is all cast within a history of victimhood and subjugation. The new national narrative will have no trace “of the fact that there really was a Canadian story amidst all this [oppressed] diversity,” he says (Bethune 2024). The implicit message, whether intended or not, is a story of an “illegitimate ‘settler colonial nation, steeped in a racist history.’”

History is also losing ground in the battle for students at our universities. The American Historical Association has identified enrolment decline in history courses as a critical problem and tracks the numbers, including trends in six Canadian universities (Brookins 2020). Prompted by fierce “culture war” debates, the AHA is also surveying educators to assess its impact upon the teaching of US history in American high school classrooms (American History Association 2024). From a peak enrolment in 2010–11, humanities enrolments at Canadian universities tumbled significantly until levelling out in 2016, according to data provided to *University Affairs* by Alex Usher and his consulting firm Higher Education Strategy Associates (Bethune 2024). History took the biggest hit as students turned away from “narrative” humanities.

The decline in humanities enrolment, Usher points out, has reduced numbers back to where they were around 2000, when universities still had “a functioning humanities system.” The STEM, health, and business enrolments, which have been growing through the twenty-first century, have boomed even while history majors have declined 35 per cent from more than 15,000 to around 10,000 (Bethune 2024).

The University of Alberta – where Peck’s Thinking Historically project is based – is a prime example of the disappearance of history courses. The U of A’s history department has seen a 40 per cent drop in faculty positions over the last 15 years, Ryan Dunch, chair of the history and classics department, told *University Affairs*. University history offerings have gradually shrunk over the past 100 years. National history supplanted an earlier British imperial version in the 1970s, then became subdivided into off into constituent parts – political, economic, labour, gender, and Indigenous. History majors dropped from 350 in 2010 to some 200 in 2015, Dunch said, and have rebounded a little to 255, aided by niche courses on the war of drugs and on plagues, diseases, and epidemics. History continues to occupy a smaller footprint on campus as in the schools.

Peck has been a fierce public critic of the two most recent attempts to inject more history into the Alberta Social Studies curriculum (Peck 2021). It’s a matter of urgent necessity in that province, where the current curriculum has

been panned in National History Report Cards issued by Historica Canada in 2009, 2016, and 2021 (Historica Canada 2021). On the most recent comparative assessment, conducted by York University researcher Samantha Cutrara, Alberta’s social studies curriculum was slapped with a D- grade, last among 16 provincial and territorial jurisdictions.

The initial 2018 Alberta Social studies draft, generated under the New Democratic Party government – which focused on teaching concepts and promoting student activism – was far more to Peck’s liking. Since then, on her professional blog and at public rallies, Peck has openly opposed the United Conservative Party (UCP) government’s plan to introduce a history-anchored, knowledge-building curriculum.

Peck and her Alberta allies have been relentless in bombing the bridge. A review of the “Alberta Curriculum Analysis” website, managed by the public critics, under the auspices of the Alberta Deans of Education (Alberta Curriculum Analysis 2024a), has links to over 70 opinion pieces, articles, and interviews, published from April 2021 to April 2024, all unrelenting in their criticism of every aspect of the UCP draft curricula. A dozen of the critiques are attributed to Peck, all focused on poking holes in the various iterations of the social studies curricula (Alberta Curriculum Analysis 2024b). Her teaching philosophy, posted on the website, emphasizes her “strong commitment to social justice” and to “engaging students of all ages” in “how to make the world a more equitable and just place to live” (Alberta Curriculum Analysis 2024c).

The Thinking Historically project group, except for Peck and University of Calgary social studies professor David Scott (University of Calgary 2024), are mostly drawn from education faculties outside of Alberta. Some are carry-overs from an earlier \$2.1 million HSSRC-funded project from 2011 to 2019, known as the Historical Thinking Network (THEN/HiER), which focused more explicitly on advancing and disseminating research in history education (Clark and Sandwell 2020).

Judging from public statements, Peck and many of her Thinking Historically colleagues remain committed to the conventional “social studies” framework based upon Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget’s stages of child development (Aukerman, Miles, and Peck 2024) and the deeply entrenched “expanding horizons” model underlying current elementary curriculum (Clarke, Sears, and Smyth 1990). Education professors adhering to this model tend to assume that all children progress through natural stages of social maturity,

and curriculum should begin close to home before introducing kids to the wider world. That's at odds with the latest science of learning research from University of Virginia cognitive psychologist Dan T. Willingham demonstrating that kids experience "cognitive spurts" and many can reach higher in the early grades (Willingham 2008).

Forty years ago, one of Canada's most respected education professors, Kieran Egan, took dead aim at the "expanding horizons" framework in his courageous 1983 essay, "Social Studies and the Erosion of Education." To the shock of many contemporaries, he claimed that much of elementary social studies was based upon a "flawed" psychological theory. To Egan, it amounted to little more than "socializing children," and eroded the foundations of a sound education (Egan 1983). It attracted the attention of University of New Brunswick education professor Gerald Clarke and a few colleagues who did propose a move away from "expanding horizons" to a greater focus on the world and places "distant in time and place" (Clarke 1990).

“*Today social studies experts in the United States are beginning to reject “expanding horizons” as an overarching integrative framework.*”

Today social studies experts in the United States are beginning to reject "expanding horizons" as an overarching integrative framework (Krahenbuhl 2019). The most recent policy statement of the National Council for Social Studies, issued in 2017, put it this way: "The 'expanding communities' curriculum model of self, family, community, state, and nation is insufficient for today's young learners. Elementary social studies should include civic engagement, as well as knowledge from the core content areas of civics, economics, geography, and history" (National Council for Social Studies 2017).

Peck opposed the introduction of a fairly rigorous, history-centred March 2021 curriculum (French 2021). That voluminous and incredibly detailed K to 6 draft was rooted in a core knowledge philosophy – exposing students to what was described as "a common cache of knowledge, which every child should know" rather than a mishmash of topics lacking thematic or chronological unity and embedded in a social studies framework.

Challenging primary students to engage with the origins of humankind and dig deeper into classic fables and legends was not deemed “age-appropriate” by the education professors. Many of the critics seem blissfully unaware that most young kids seem to come alive when exposed to medieval times in the form of legends, knights, and castles, and are intellectually stimulated by virtual museums featuring expeditions into new and exotic lands. Some students are so inspired by these stories, they choose careers in history and museums (Grollemond 2020)!

Peck is also attempting to shoot down Alberta’s latest history-centred March 2024 iteration. When it did not revert to the 2018 consultation consensus, Peck called the draft curriculum “profoundly disappointing” (Tran 2024). She claimed, once again, that a core knowledge curriculum “lacked age and development appropriateness.” Upon closer scrutiny, her critique amounts to ‘too much history’ is a bad thing. Exposing young children to the magic and myths of early civilizations was ruled out three years ago. Now, critics say, it’s simply too much to ask young Albertans to learn about enduring legacies (warts and all), core institutions like Parliament and the Supreme Court, or the origin of taxes.

History needs to be significantly upgraded in the Alberta social studies curriculum and revived elsewhere in Canada. A whole *mélange* of social studies courses is crowding out history in high schools in Alberta and in other provinces. It’s hard to imagine the Thinking Historically project making much of a difference, given the social studies focus of its director and its core Alberta supporters, exerting considerable influence in shaping its direction. Focusing exclusively on teaching and learning historical thinking skills may well have obscured the essential role of history education in building “narrative competencies” in students and shaping our collective historical consciousness. More public advocacy where it counts is needed if we are ever to achieve the goal of ensuring that all students complete a high school course covering Canada’s history in all its diversity and complexity, reflecting a range of perspectives (Dominion Institute, 2009; Zwaagstra 2012; Historica Canada 2021).

Searching for an appropriate historical analogy, the durable myth of Emperor Nero playing the fiddle during the Great Fire of Rome in 64 A.D. comes readily to mind (History.com 2024). Is it a contemporary example of “fiddling” while Rome is burning? Let’s hope – for the sake of history education – that the Thinking Historically project experiences a “history turn” in its final two years. **MLI**

About the author



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The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

The Honourable Irwin Cotler

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The Honourable Pierre Poilievre

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