

# BENCHMARKS OF HISTORICAL THINKING: A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT IN CANADA

PETER SEIXAS\*

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS  
UBC

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## INTRODUCTION

What should students know and be able to do when they are finished their years of school history? Surely, the accumulation of facts-to-be-remembered is not an adequate answer to the question. Many curriculum documents indicate “historical thinking,” but are not very helpful in unpacking its meaning for teachers and students. If not “more facts,” then what is the basis for a history curriculum that extends over multiple years of schooling? Whatever that is, in turn, should inform history assessments. Otherwise, we measure a journey along a road which we don’t really care whether students are traveling. General curriculum statements about the values of learning history are insufficient, unless those values inform our assessments. This document aims to define historical thinking for the purposes of shaping history assessments.

Ken Osborne notes: “...it is not clear whether or to what extent history courses at different grade levels are designed to build on each other in any cumulative way.”<sup>1</sup> British researchers and curriculum developers have been attentive to exactly this problem, defined as one of *progression*. Historical thinking is not all-or-nothing: fundamental to the definition is the notion of progression, but progression in what?<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have identified “structural” historical concepts that provide the basis of historical thinking. The Benchmarks project is using this approach, with six distinct but closely interrelated historical thinking concepts.<sup>3</sup> Students should be able to:

- establish *historical significance* (why we care, today, about certain events, trends and issues in history. Why are the Plains of Abraham significant for Canadian history?)
- use primary source *evidence* (how to find, select, contextualize, and interpret sources for a historical argument. What can a newspaper article from Berlin, Ontario in 1916 tell us about attitudes towards German-Canadians in wartime?)

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- identify *continuity and change* (what has changed and what has remained the same over time. What has changed and what has remained the same about the lives of teenaged girls, between the 1950s and today?)
- analyze *cause and consequence* (how and why certain conditions and actions led to others. What were the causes of the Northwest Rebellion?)
- take *historical perspectives* (understanding the “past as a foreign country,” with its different social, cultural, intellectual, and even emotional contexts that shaped people’s lives and actions. How could John A. Macdonald compare “Chinamen” to “threshing machines” in 1886?)
- understand the *moral dimension* of historical interpretations (this cuts across many of the others: how we, in the present, judge actors in different circumstances in the past; how different interpretations of the past reflect different moral stances today; when and how crimes of the past bear consequences today. What is to be done today, about the legacy of aboriginal residential schools?)

Taken together, these tie “historical thinking” to competencies in “historical literacy.”<sup>4</sup> This formulation is neither the last word on historical thinking nor the only way to approach it. As Patrick Watson wrote, in his report on the April, 2006, Benchmarks Symposium, (citing Niels Bohr) on physics and mathematics, “the achievement of a new formula was not, in fact, a movement towards *truth*, but rather the development of language that the research community could agree upon, as representing the objectives of the search.”

It is also important to note that these elements are not “skills” but rather a set of underlying concepts that guide and shape the practice of history. In order to understand *continuity and change*, for instance, one must know *what* changed and *what* remained the same. “Historical thinking” only becomes meaningful with substantive content.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING HISTORICAL THINKING

In order to think historically, historians, the public in general, and school students in particular must:

### ESTABLISH HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

*The principles behind the selection of what and who should be remembered, researched, taught and learned.*

The past is everything that ever happened to anyone anywhere. We cannot remember or learn it all. We put effort into learning about and remembering that which is historically significant, but how are those choices made? Students who do not think about significance may simply take what is presented to them (by the textbook or teachers) to be significant, without any further thought. Alternatively, but just as problematically, students may equate “significant” with “interesting to me.” The keys to more sophisticated notions of significance lie in being able to connect particular events or trends to others in a variety of ways. Thus, significant events include those that resulted in great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people (e.g., World War II). But there are other possible criteria for significance.<sup>5</sup> The problem of significance is complicated because it depends on perspective and purpose: what is viewed as historically significant may vary over time and from group to group.

#### ASPECTS OF SIGNIFICANCE:

- a) **Resulting in change** (The event/person/development had *deep* consequences, for *many* people, over a *long period* of time.)
- b) **Revealing** (The event/person/development sheds light on enduring or emerging issues in history and contemporary life or was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups.)

**Note:** Many topics will demonstrate *either* (a) or (b) but not necessarily *both*. Also note, for either of these, students can establish the historical significance of an event or person by linking it to other events in a historical narrative or argument. “It is significant because it is in the history book,” and “It is significant because I am interested in it,” are both inadequate explanations of historical significance.

#### AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- a) Demonstrate how an event, person or development is significant either by showing how it is embedded in a larger, meaningful narrative OR by showing how it sheds light on an enduring or emerging issue.

- b) Explain how and why historical significance varies over time and from group to group.

**POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:**

- a) Explain what made [X] significant.
- b) Choose the “most significant events” [e.g., in Canadian history; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; for new immigrants to Canada], and explain your choices.
- c) Identify and explain differences in significance over time or from group to group (e.g. Why is women’s history more significant now than 50 years ago? Why do Canadians consider Louis Riel significant, while Americans generally don’t?).

## **USE PRIMARY SOURCES AS EVIDENCE IN CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PAST**

This includes how to find, select, interpret, and contextualize primary sources. There are distinctions among forms of evidence, e.g., records, testimony, relics, demanding some different kinds of questions. Reading a source for *evidence* demands different strategies than reading a source for *information*. The contrast may be seen in an extreme way in the difference between reading a phone book (for information) and examining a boot-print in the snow outside a murder scene (for evidence). We don't ask ourselves, as we look up phone numbers, "who wrote this phonebook; why was it organized in this way" (unless, perhaps, we get a wrong number). On the other hand, with the boot-print, a trace of the past, we examine it to see if it offers clues about the person who was wearing the boot, when the print was made, and what was going on at the time. The first thing to establish here is "what is this indentation in the snow?" that is, "what is it?" History textbooks are generally used more like phone books: they are a place to look up information. Primary sources must be read differently. To make sense of them, we need to contextualize them and make inferences from them.

### **ASPECTS OF EVIDENCE:**

(Note: "author" here is used broadly to mean whoever wrote, painted, photographed, drew, or otherwise constructed the source.)

- a) Good questions are necessary in order to turn a source into evidence, the first question being, "What is it?"
- b) Authorship: the position of the author(s) is a key consideration.
- c) Primary sources may reveal information about the (conscious) purposes of the author as well as the (unconscious) values and worldview of the author.
- d) A source should be read in view of its historical background (contextualization).
- e) Analysis of the source should also provide new evidence about its historical setting.

### **AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:**

- a) Use several primary sources to construct an original account of a historical event.

### **POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:**

- a) Find and select primary sources appropriate for responding to historical questions.
- b) Formulate questions about a primary source, whose answers would help to shed light on the historical context.
- c) Analyze a primary source for the purposes, values and worldview of the author.
- d) Compare points of view and usefulness of several primary sources.
- e) Assess what can and can't be answered by particular primary sources.
- f) Use primary sources to construct an argument or narrative.

## IDENTIFY CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Continuity and change provide a fundamental way to organize the complexity of the past. There are lots of things going on at any one time. Changes happen at different paces at different times in history, and even at the same time in different aspects of life. For example, technological change might happen very rapidly at a time when there is little political change. One of the keys to continuity and change is looking for change where common sense suggests that there has been none and looking for continuities where we assumed that there was change. Students sometimes misunderstand the history as a list of events. When they see that some things change while others remain the same, they achieve a different sense of the past. They will no longer say, “nothing happened in 1901.” Judgments of continuity and change can be made on the basis of comparisons between some point in the past and the present, or between two points in the past (e.g., before and after the French Revolution). **Note: Because continuity and change are so closely tied to cause and consequence, student tasks may often join the two.**

### ASPECTS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE:

- a) Continuity and change are interrelated: processes of change are usually, continuous, not isolated into a series of discrete events.
- b) Some aspects of life change more quickly in some periods than others. Turning points, perhaps even tipping points, help to locate change.
- c) Progress and decline are fundamental ways of evaluating change over time. Change does not always mean progress.
- d) Chronology can help to organize our understanding of continuity and change (you cannot understand continuity and change without knowing the order in which things happened.)
- e) Periodization can help to organize our understanding of continuity and change.

### AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- a) Explain how some things continue and others change, in any period of history.
- b) Identify changes over time in aspects of life that we ordinarily assume to be continuous; and to identify continuities in aspects of life we ordinarily assume to have changed over time.
- c) Understand that periodization and judgments of progress and decline can vary depending upon purpose and perspective.

### POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:

- a) Place a series of pictures in chronological order, explaining why they are placed in the order they are.

- b) Compare two (or more) documents from different time periods and explain what changed and what remained the same over time.
- c) Assess progress and decline from the standpoint of various groups since a certain point in time.

## ANALYZE CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

Central to cause and consequence is the active role, or agency, that people (as individuals and groups) play in promoting, shaping, and resisting change in history. Causes are related to, but distinguishable from, motivations (or intentions) of any group or individual. They are multiple and layered, involving both long-term ideologies, institutions, and conditions, and short-term actions and events. Causes that are offered for any particular event (and the priority of the various causes) may differ, based on the scale of the overall historical narrative, and ideological perspectives and approaches of the historian.

### ASPECTS OF CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE:

- a) Human beings cause historical change, but they do so in contexts that impose limits on change. Constraints come from the natural environment, geography, historical legacies, as well as other people who want other things. Human actors (agents) are thus in a perpetual interplay with conditions, many of which (e.g., political and economic systems) are the legacies of earlier human actions.
- b) Actions often have unintended consequences.

### AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- a) Identify the interplay of intentional human action, and constraints on human actions in causing change.
- b) Identify various types of causes for a particular event, using one or more accounts of the event.
- c) Be able to construct counterfactuals (e.g., if Britain had not declared war on Germany in 1914, then...)

### POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:

- a) Examine an everyday event (e.g. a car accident) for its potential causes (e.g., the skill and response time of the driver, the state of health or drowsiness of the driver, distraction of the driver, violation of driving rules, the condition of the cars, the technology of the cars, the weather, the road signage, absence of traffic lights, the culture which glorifies speed, the size of the oncoming SUV, etc.)
- b) Analyze a historical passage, and identify “types of causes,” (e.g., economic, political, cultural; conditions, individual actions) that it offers as causes.
- c) Examine the relationship between an individual actor’s motivations and intentions, and the consequences of their actions.
- d) Create a schematic chart of the causes of [e.g., the Japanese internment] and explain their arrangement.

e) How might people at the time have explained the causes of [x] and how does that differ from how we would explain it now?

## TAKE A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

“The past is a foreign country” and thus difficult to understand. At the same time understanding the foreignness of the past provides a sense of the range of human behaviour and social organization, alternatives to taken-for granted conventional wisdom, and a wider perspective for our present preoccupations. Historical perspective-taking is the cognitive act of understanding the different social, cultural, intellectual, and even emotional contexts that shaped people’s lives and actions in the past. Though it is sometimes called “historical empathy,” it is very different from the common-sense notion of deep emotional feeling for and identification with another person.

### ASPECTS OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE-TAKING:

- a) Taking the perspective of historical actors depends upon evidence for inferences about how people felt and thought (avoiding presentism—the unwarranted imposition of present ideas on actors in the past). Empathetic leaps that are not based in evidence are historically worthless.
- b) Any particular historical event or situation involves people who may have diverse perspectives on it. Understanding multiple perspectives of historical actors is a key to understanding the event.
- c) Taking the perspective of a historical actor does not mean identifying with that actor.

### AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- a) Recognize presentism in historical accounts.
- b) Use evidence and understanding of the historical context, to answer questions of why people acted the way they did (or thought what they did) even when their actions seem at first irrational or inexplicable or different from *we* would have done or thought.

### POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:

- a) Write a letter, diary entry, poster (etc.) from the perspective of [x], based either on some sources provided by the teacher, or sources the students find.
- b) Compare primary sources written (or drawn, painted, etc.) from two opposing or differing perspectives about a given event. Explain their differences.

## UNDERSTAND THE MORAL DIMENSION IN HISTORY

Historians attempt to hold back on explicit moral judgments about actors in the midst of their accounts. But, when all is said and done, if the story is meaningful, then there is a moral judgment involved. Thus, we should expect to learn something from the past that helps us in facing the moral issues of today. One (but not the only) way that the moral dimension of history comes into play is through the legacies of past action: when do we owe debts of memory [e.g., to fallen soldiers] or of reparations [e.g., to victims of aboriginal residential schools]?

### ASPECTS OF THE MORAL DIMENSION:

- a) All meaningful historical accounts involve implicit or explicit moral judgment.
- b) Moral judgment in history is made more complex by collective responsibility and profound change over time. In making moral judgments of past actions, we always risk anachronistic impositions of our own standards upon the past.
- c) Historians often deal with the conflict between a) and b) by 1) framing questions that have a moral dimension; 2) suspending judgments in order to understand the perspectives of the historical actors; finally 3) emerging from the study with observations about the moral implications, today, of their narratives and arguments.

### AT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED LEVEL, STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- a) Make judgments about actions of people in the past, recognizing the historical context in which they were operating.
- b) Use historical narratives to inform judgments about moral and policy questions in the present.

### POTENTIAL STUDENT TASKS:

- a) Examine a historical issue involving conflict [e.g., attitudes for and against women getting the vote; why Canada admitted such a small number of refugee Jews 1933-39; the outlawing of the potlatch], identify the perspectives that were present at the time, and explain how these historical conflicts can educate us today.
- b) Students identify a moral issue today [e.g. Canadians' role as peacekeepers, private vs. public health care, protection of the environment], research aspects of its historical background, explain the implications of the history for today.

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<sup>1</sup> Osborne, K. (2004). *Canadian History in the Schools*. Toronto: Historica, p. 13.  
(<http://www.histori.ca/prodev/file.do?id=20688>, accessed 8/9/2006).

<sup>2</sup> Lee, P., & Shemilt, D. (2003). A scaffold, not a cage: progression and progression models in history. *Teaching History*, 113, pp.2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Ashby, R. (2005). The nature of levels and issues of progression in history: Notes and extracts for reflection, *PGCE Support Materials* (p. 7). England: Institute of Education. These have been radically transformed in the new British National Curriculum.  
<http://www.ncaction.org.uk/subjects/history/levels.htm> (accessed April 3, 2006) For Seixas' earlier formulation, see Seixas, P. (1996). Conceptualizing the growth of historical understanding. In D. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.), *Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning, Teaching, and Schooling* (pp. 765-783). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

<sup>4</sup> In earlier versions, the term "literacy" was used rather than "thinking." The April 2006 Benchmarks Symposium had discussed at length the connotations of these and other terms, without a definitive conclusion as to which should define the project. Further response to the term "literacy" since the Symposium points to its connections to E.D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy" and the connotation of a list of facts-to-be-learned in common. As this project does not aim to revise the factual *content* of provincial history curricula, "literacy" may convey the wrong message. On the other hand, deep literacy (e.g., reading for point-of-view and writing as argument) are central to the goals of the Benchmarks Framework.

<sup>5</sup> Counsell, C. (2004). Looking through a Josephine-Butler-shaped window: focusing pupils' thinking on historical significance. *Teaching History*, 114, 30-36.