

# **A BIG STEP FORWARD**

## **HISTORICAL THINKING IN PROVINCIAL CURRICULA, ASSESSMENTS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**A Report on the Toronto Meeting  
February 18-20, 2010**

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**Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project**  
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**Benchmarks of Historical Thinking**

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# **“A Big Step Forward: Historical Thinking in Provincial Curricula, Assessments, and Professional Development”**

**A Report on the Toronto Meeting, February 18–20, 2010**

## **1. Executive Summary**

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project began in 2006, with a partnership between the Historica Foundation and the University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. The Benchmarks Project was designed to foster a new approach to history education—with the potential to shift how teachers teach and how students learn, in line with recent international research on history learning. Paradoxically, at the same time, the approach does not involve a radical shift in the history or social studies curriculum. It revolves around the proposition—like scientific thinking in science instruction and mathematical thinking in math instruction—that historical thinking is central to history instruction and that students should become more competent as historical thinkers as they progress through their schooling. Historical thinking requires “knowing the facts,” but “knowing the facts” is not enough.

Over the next two years, piloting of the Project was undertaken in a variety of locations across Canada. By the end of 2007, expressions of interest in the project from additional districts, from ministries of education, from social studies teachers’ associations, and from publishers were beginning to outstrip the capacity of the virtually non-existent project infrastructure. Early in 2008, Historica and the CSHC successfully sought additional financial support from the Department of Canadian Heritage to assemble a national meeting to plan the next step: a strategic “scaling up” of the capacities of the Project. The 42 participants explored four components of educational change: a) curriculum revision; b) resource development; c) professional development; and d) assessment. Discussion generated recommendations reported in *“Scaling Up” the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking* (April, 2008).

In early 2009, in response to the needs identified in the *Scaling Up* Report, the Department of Canadian Heritage committed a major funding contribution to the Benchmarks Project to March 2011. Additionally, The History Education Network/Histoire et Éducation en Réseau (THEN|HiER) provided funds for the 2010 national meeting as well as a follow-up in 2011. At the 2010 national meeting, delegates discussed the same four components of educational change. Within these, five target areas were highlighted. The Benchmarks team will use these recommendations to prioritize major projects and initiatives for the coming year.

## 2. Introduction: Aims and Rationale of “Benchmarks”

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking offers a dramatically new approach to history education — with the potential to shift fundamentally how teachers teach and how students learn.

Paradoxically, at the same time, the approach does not involve a radical shift in the history or social studies curriculum. It revolves around the proposition — like scientific thinking in science instruction and mathematical thinking in math instruction— that *historical thinking* is central to history instruction and that students should become more competent as historical thinkers as they progress through their schooling.

Why this approach and emphasis on historical thinking? Why now? For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, history programs in Canada (like those in other countries) aimed at transmitting knowledge of a coherent national story — in English Canada, within the framework of the British imperial legacy (less so in Québec). Such programs did not necessarily place the teaching of *thinking* at the centre of their educational objectives.

In a world shaped by new technologies that have revolutionized access to and exchange of information, migrations that have upended older demographic profiles, and new demands for recognition and rights of previously silenced peoples, history is more contentious than ever. Debates over land claims, national borders, origin stories, and collective historical crimes, guilt and reparations are everywhere.

The past is no longer a single narrative of national, political progress. Students need to be equipped, by the end of their high school years, to take an active part in these debates: to be able to sift the wheat from the chaff, to find truths amidst a cacophony of politically and commercially motivated messages, and to contribute, in their own voices, to democratic discussion. History education can play a key role.

Competent historical thinkers understand both the vast differences that separate us from our ancestors and the ties that bind us to them; they can analyze historical artifacts and documents, which can give them some of the best understandings of times gone by; they can assess the validity and relevance of historical accounts, when they are used to support entry into a war, voting for a candidate, or any of the myriad decisions knowledgeable citizens in a democracy must make. All this *requires* “knowing the facts,” but “knowing the facts” is not enough. Historical thinking does not replace historical knowledge: the two are related and interdependent.

## 3. A Brief History of the Project: 2006-2009

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project began in 2006, with a partnership between the Historica Foundation (Canada’s leading national organization devoted to the promotion and improvement of history education) and the University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (CSHC—which supports research on historical consciousness and history education). With funding from the Canadian Council on Learning and the Department of Canadian Heritage, an international symposium of historians, history education scholars and teachers convened to map the contours of a project which would capture state-of-the-art international research on teaching and learning history and make it a potent force in Canadian classrooms. From the discussions at that meeting, a foundational Framework document was written, defining “historical thinking” around six historical thinking concepts (HTCs)(Appendix I).

Over the next two years, work was undertaken in a variety of locations across Canada to put flesh on the bones of the Framework. Teams of teachers in four pilot districts (Vancouver, Selkirk MB, Toronto, NB consortium of districts) engaged in professional development around the HTCs, wrote classroom materials and assessment rubrics, piloted these in their classrooms, and selected student exemplars. A website ([www.historybenchmarks.ca](http://www.historybenchmarks.ca)) was developed for feedback during development, as well as publication of the classroom materials and student exemplars for a wider audience. The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC2) published *Teaching About Historical Thinking* (2006) using the Benchmarks Framework. In summer 2007, a weeklong Historica national summer institute (45 participants at University of Winnipeg) developed further materials. At the same time, a number of commercial publishers began to integrate the Benchmarks ideas into new textbooks and teachers' guides.

The Benchmarks Project was first presented to representatives of all provincial and territorial Ministries of Education at a meeting preceding the Historica Council meeting in Toronto in November, 2006. An update was presented the following year, October, 2007. The ministries responded positively but expressed the need for more information and support if they were to be able to work productively with the ideas.

As a result of escalating opportunities for development and dissemination, but significant limitations to funding and personnel, Historica and the CSHC successfully sought additional financial support from the Department of Canadian Heritage to assemble a national meeting, whose goal was to discuss and plan strategic "scaling up" of the capacities of the project. In February, 2008, 42 participants gathered in Vancouver. They included representatives from provincial and territorial ministries and departments of education, major history and social studies textbook publishers, Historica and Canadian Heritage personnel directly involved in the project, teachers who had been leading the pilot districts, and history education scholars from across Canada. The participants explored four components of educational change: a) curriculum revision; b) resource development; c) professional development; and d) assessment.

Discussion generated recommendations reported in "*Scaling Up*" the *Benchmarks of Historical Thinking* (April, 2008). Through 2008, work in local districts, with textbook publishers, and several ministries continued. At that time, major funding (\$2.1 million) was announced for The History Education Network/Histoire et Éducation en Réseau (THEN|HiER), a pan-Canadian history education network under the directorship of Dr. Penney Clark, also based at UBC's Faculty of Education, opening up the horizon of possibilities for the reach of the Benchmarks Project.

In early 2009, in response to the needs identified in the *Scaling Up* Report, the Benchmarks Project received additional funding to March 2011 from the Department of Canadian Heritage for:

- a full-time project coordinator to support and promote the Project
- enhancement of the Benchmarks website
- additional national meetings to bring together ministry of education representatives and other key education stakeholders and
- identification of gaps in historical knowledge and understanding among young people

With the new funding, we formalized an Executive Steering Committee, consisting of Penney Clark (UBC), Carla Peck (University of Alberta), and Peter Seixas (UBC), for consultation on all major decisions.

In June, 2009, after a national search, Jill Colyer was hired as project coordinator, met with the Executive Steering Committee, and set up a national office in Kitchener, Ontario, within striking distance of Toronto.

At the same time, the Historica Foundation was undergoing its own changes, and merged with the Dominion Institute in September 2009. This shifted the partnership configuration in regards to personnel, priorities and logistics. After a series of meetings, by mutual agreement among the newly formed Historica-Dominion Institute (HDI), the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the CSHC, we re-organized the institutional partnership, enabling the Canadian Heritage funding contribution to flow directly to UBC, without the involvement of HDI.

#### **4. 2010 National Meeting: “A Big Step Forward”**

The 2009-2011 funding contribution agreement with Canadian Heritage required 25% of the budget to be provided from other sources. THEN|HiER filled this requirement by committing funding for two national meetings, the 2010 event entitled “A Big Step Forward: Historical Thinking in Provincial Curricula, Assessments and Professional Development” as well as a further national meeting to be held in 2011.

The meeting, which took place February 18–20, 2010 in Toronto, included 60 invited participants from across Canada. A sumptuous reception, funded by the Interchange on Canadian Studies, provided a welcome on the first evening. Participants included representatives from all but two provincial and territorial ministries, representatives from each of the major history and social studies textbook publishers, personnel from the Department of Canadian Heritage, teachers who have been providing leadership in the pilot districts, leading history education scholars from across Canada, representatives from partner organizations, and the presidents of a number of provincial history and social studies teachers’ associations. There were seven francophone and three First Nations/Inuit/Métis representatives.

On the morning of the first day presentations summarized developments since the 2008 national meeting, specifically in regards to recommendations generated at that meeting. Jill Colyer reported on her activities as coordinator. Tom Morton, senior researcher with the Project, summarized his examination of historical thinking in provincial curricula. Linda Mlodzinski and Renée Gillis, from the Manitoba Ministry of Education, presented their work on curriculum reform in that province; Carla Peck explained her professional development consortia-based initiative in Alberta; and Lindsay Gibson surveyed his local initiative in Kelowna, BC. Penney Clark outlined the ways in which THEN|HiER’s initiatives are complementing and supporting the work of the Benchmarks Project.

After Peter Seixas outlined the goals for the meeting, participants assembled in four groups to address accomplishments, challenges and needs, paying particular attention to the question of First Nations, Inuit and Métis perspectives within the context of the Benchmarks project. The groups were heterogeneous in terms of geographic region and education sector. One of the four was conducted in French, while the other three were in English. They addressed the interrelated problems of a) curriculum, b) professional development, c) resources, and d) assessment.

On the second day, Noni Mate of 7<sup>th</sup> Floor Media presented the new Benchmarks Project website, after which the groups re-assembled to consider how to respond to the challenges and needs they had articulated on the previous day, with action at local, provincial and pan-Canadian levels. The project coordinator and Benchmarks Executive Steering Committee have reviewed and prioritized the recommendations that resulted from the meetings and will use them to guide major activities and initiatives in the coming year.

## 5. Curriculum<sup>1</sup>

Provincial and territorial control of education in the country results in a very different focus for history programs across the country. Some jurisdictions promote competency-based instruction that focuses on process, while others have more of a content emphasis. This means that curriculum documents are quite diverse, and it can be difficult for one province or territory to use documents from another as a direct model. Nevertheless, it does help to know what other jurisdictions are doing, as curriculum revision proceeds.

A number of ministry documents have incorporated historical thinking into their program framework and/or course requirements. A couple of these documents explicitly encourage the use of historical thinking concepts, while others only do so implicitly. It would be helpful to be able to see documents and drafts on a web-based platform.

There was a sharply divided response to Tom Morton's draft curriculum review presentation. Some people welcomed it as the beginning of pan-Canadian communication about historical thinking in the curriculum, but many felt that they were being publicly criticized for curricula that were in the process of revision and that preparation of such a review document requires more communication with the ministries. It was presented and labeled as a draft only, with an invitation for feedback and a promise of modification.

Regardless of sharing the processes of curriculum revision across ministries, some fundamental challenges remain.

- Ministries still require more in-depth explanation of the historical thinking concepts, and specific ways to incorporate them into new documents.
- Ministries need to be able to train writers and teachers in historical thinking, and currently do not feel there is enough qualified staff to do so.
- Curriculum departments struggle with whether or not they should introduce one particular historical thinking concept before the others, or whether all the concepts are of equal importance. Is there a logical or pedagogically recommended sequence? Could the historical thinking concepts be placed in a circle with evidence (or accounts/narratives) in the middle?
- It would be helpful—some would say it is necessary—to have more empirical evidence about the progression of historical thinking through the years. What should we reasonably expect from students, keeping in mind their diversities, as they progress through the grades?

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<sup>1</sup> The observations and recommendations in the four following sections are based on notes recorded at the meetings, summarized and edited by Lindsay Gibson, as well as participants' comments on evaluation forms completed after the conference.



- Aboriginal perspectives may (or may not) be compatible with historical thinking as articulated in the Benchmarks documents. We need opportunities to discuss this thoroughly, perhaps with a conference of FNMI educators.

## 6. Professional Development

Professional development (PD) was universally identified as an area of crucial importance. Continued cuts to education budgets make it very difficult for ministries or boards of education to provide PD in a systematic, ongoing, and widespread way.

With or without ministry support, we will need to develop processes for bringing teachers together to develop, share, and revise resources. We need models for professional development at the local level, but also for provincial and national Summer Institutes. High quality videos of best practice (in professional workshops as well as classroom teaching), along with exemplary lessons and materials, would assist at all levels. One way to initiate these tools would be to convene a cadre of experts to create exemplars and blueprints for sustained professional learning. The following additional recommendations emerged:

- Target faculties of education so that new teachers, and teachers upgrading their qualifications, can be exposed to the Benchmarks methodology. THEN|HiER would appear to be ideally positioned to help accomplish this.
- Involve more teachers by linking the Benchmarks to a broader area of critical inquiry and literacy. Spell out the links among historical thinking concepts, critical thinking and literacy. This is particularly important in jurisdictions where the subject is “social studies.”
- Benchmarks website: provide more curriculum connections to the lessons (to which provinces’ and territories’ lessons they are applicable?).
- Support the development of local leadership for professional development teams, using the Kelowna model, or others.

## 7. Resources

Teacher and student resources that explicitly incorporate historical thinking can play a key role in the development of historical thinking. While a number of publishers have done this on a small scale, to-date no revolutionary products that break from the traditional models have been created. As in the categories of curriculum and professional development, there is a need for more expertise in historical thinking within publishing teams. It will be important for teachers and educators who have been working with historical thinking in their classrooms to maintain involvement in publishers’ initiatives as they develop. At the same time, there appears to be an explosion of opportunities in on-line resources, documents and images from a number of federal agencies and museums.

The following recommendations were also made:

- THEN|HiER should be a major resource in coordinating information about and access to materials, providers and developers.
- Promote change in the nature of resources (incorporate technology, attend to diversity in audiences and challenge the “grand narratives” of history). Aim for multi-format, multi-

vocal historical episodes representing a range of perspectives, attentive to developmental concerns. Beware of too much focus on print.

- Produce materials not only in French language, but also created from French cultural awareness and perspectives (and perhaps translated into English).
- Establish a review process for resources, to insure high quality products.

## **8. Assessment**

New ways of teaching history will have to be accompanied by new ways of assessing history learning. Assessments should support and promote learning while providing information for reporting how well students are doing. As well, we need system-wide assessments to monitor uptake by teachers and improvement in student competencies.

Rubrics have been central to the models of assessment in the Benchmarks project to date. Taking these further will require a much clearer sense of progression across grade levels for each of the historical thinking concepts. At the same time, the dissemination of the use of rubrics for assessing students work will be enhanced by the development of some generic rubrics (not tied to particular lessons or tasks) for each of the historical thinking concepts. These should be included on the website.

Beyond both classroom and provincial assessment, there is a need for research on a different order: what are teachers doing in their history classrooms? How and when do they tackle historical thinking (if at all)? Is it feasible to design research to track students' competencies and progression in historical thinking? Groups also recommended:

- Focus on formative assessment, but also...
- Teachers need to be able to convert competency in historical thinking into summative data for the purpose of reporting. Newfoundland and Labrador Ministry of Education is working with this challenge, developing summative (and formative) assessment tools for their provincial exams.
- Beyond rubrics, a range of tools might be useful, including checklists and criteria for each of the historical thinking concepts.

## **9. Strategic Action Planning**

The long list of challenges and potential initiatives on many fronts may seem daunting. However, the fact that we have a full-time project coordinator puts us in a much stronger position for follow-up than two years ago. Specifically, between March, 2010 and February 2011 (when we will hold our next invitational meeting), the Benchmarks Project Coordinator will:

- Organize the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Summer Institute in Ottawa to train educators in historical thinking and help to develop a cadre of experts who can participate with ministries and others requiring such expertise.
- Revise and update the Benchmarks web site to allow for sharing of lessons and assessment tools that promote historical thinking.
- Work with THEN|HiER in coordinating outreach to faculties of education.
- Work with provincial teaching associations to improve outreach to classroom teachers.

- Continue to develop initiatives with ministry representatives and partner organizations.
- Organize the next Benchmarks national meeting in February 2011, to gauge progress and map the next steps.
- Develop promotional materials beyond the website, in the form of conference banners, classroom posters.
- Prepare grant applications for project funding after March 2011.

From the meeting discussions and subsequent evaluations by participants, several key items stood out from all the others, either as needs or opportunities or both:

### ***9.1. High quality exemplars***

Across all of the areas of concern, we need to develop and provide *excellent, highly polished* examples of what the best looks like, whether these are lesson plans, classroom resources, models for professional development or assessment tools, and whether they appear as video, print, or web-based media. “Yes, we’re interested, we’re excited, but how do we do it?” is a common response.

### ***9.2. First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI)***

While the question of the fit between the Benchmarks approach and Indigenous’ understandings of history was raised, the Toronto meeting did not lead to sustained, thoughtful exchange on this issue. Expressions of concern from First Nations, Métis and Inuit representatives at the meeting, from textbook publishers, and from ministry officials in the midst of curriculum revision all spoke to the urgency of addressing this question. Perhaps a meeting for FNMI educators could address it. It should also be a significant theme in the Summer Institute.

### ***9.3. Francophone materials and support***

Two factors conspire to make the francophone dimension of the Benchmarks Project weaker than it should be. First, Québec has a strong, new curriculum with the most sophisticated approach to historical thinking of any province in Canada. It thus has less need of the Benchmarks initiative, which might just confound its approach to history education. Secondly, neither the Benchmarks director nor the coordinator is fluent in French. Countering these weaknesses, there are very strong francophone participants, who have expressed ongoing commitment to the project, in spite of the relative lack of resources for them to draw on. It will be crucial to support these participants as a key priority over the coming year.

### ***9.4. Ontario***

Ontario is in the midst of a history/social sciences curriculum revision process. There are many strong supporters of the Benchmarks approach among the stakeholders in the revision process. If Ontario moves in the direction of the Benchmarks articulation of historical thinking, then it could provide important critical mass for reform efforts elsewhere. For this reason, support for Ontario initiatives should have a high priority in the coming year.

### ***9.5. Research***

For the purposes of curriculum design and assessment, big questions remain as to progression in competency that teachers should expect. There are other big questions around what kinds of professional development activities enable teachers to embed historical thinking systematically into their teaching. Finally, at a system-wide level, we don’t know what kind of impact the

Benchmarks project is having on a) curricula, b) teachers' planning, or c) students' learning. All of these are viable topics for research, and require us to get started, if we are to have longitudinal data over the next several years. Research initiatives at UBC involving Peter Seixas, Kadriye Ercikan and Tom Morton, as well as by Carla Peck at the University of Alberta, have begun to tackle some of these, but there is a wealth of opportunities for graduate students and other scholars to participate.

## **10. Meeting Evaluations**

A post-meeting evaluation form was completed by 27 of the invited participants (see Appendix V) and provided important information for this report. Asked how helpful the meeting had been, on a scale of 1-5, the vast majority (21) rated it highly (4 or 5), another 3 rated it 3, and one a 2 (one did not provide a number). As always, ministry personnel expressed particular gratitude for the opportunity to meet with each other. In general, there was an air of realism about the constraints on time and resources, combined with excitement and optimism about the possibilities for enriching the teaching and learning of history over the coming years.

## **11. Conclusion**

After four years of operation, the Benchmarks Project definitely occupies a role in Canadian history education. The vocabulary of "historical thinking concepts" has had an initial impact across the country, with resonance in ministries, publishing houses, schools and university history departments. It provides a central theme in the survey volume edited by Penney Clark, *Cliffs and Chasms: The Landscape of History Education in Canada* (UBC Press, forthcoming).

Of course, go to almost any school, anywhere in Canada, and many, most, or perhaps all of the history/social studies teachers will be totally unfamiliar with the project or its materials. Nevertheless, we have taken "a big step forward": developing a national office, hiring a project coordinator, planning a summer institute, teaming up with new partners, initiating classroom research, and continuing to develop resources that will invigorate the teaching and learning of history across Canada. The centrepiece for these efforts is the national invitational meeting, which enables us to touch base, compare notes, hear concerns, and plan next steps. We hope to see you all again next year where we will again push the *potential* impact of these ideas towards greater actualization.

## **12. APPENDICES**

- I. Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: A Framework for Assessment in Canada (2006)
- II. Participant List
- III. Meeting Agenda
- IV. Post-meeting questionnaire
- V. Select Bibliography

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

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AUGUST 18<sup>TH</sup>, 2006

### 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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<sup>1</sup> Carla Peck (UBC) was instrumental in helping refine the historical thinking concepts described in the Benchmarks Framework. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the participants of the April and August 2006 symposia.

- 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.



## Appendix II. Participant List

### **Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project National Meeting Réunion nationale du projet Repères de la pensée historique**

**18-20 February / février 2010  
Crowne Plaza Hotel Toronto Airport**

#### **PARTICIPANTS**

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## Appendix III. Meeting Agenda

### **Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project National Meeting "A Big Step Forward: Historical Thinking in Provincial Curricula, Assessments and Professional Development"**

**18-20 February 2010**

**Crowne Plaza Hotel Toronto Airport**

## **AGENDA**

### **Thursday, February 18, 2010**

Arrivals

7:00 pm Welcome/reception in Bronte Room

### **Friday, February 19, 2010**

8:00 am Breakfast in Regent Room

9:00 am Welcome (Regent Room)

- Peter Seixas, Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness
- Penney Clark, The History Education Network/Histoire et Éducation en Réseau (THEN|HiER)
- Brent Toles, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, "Thank you" to Interchange on Canadian Studies

Introductions around the room

10:00 am Benchmarks

- A. Goals of the project, review of 2008 "Scaling Up" meeting recommendations (Peter Seixas) [15 minutes]
- B. Developments since 2008: local, provincial, national (Jill Colyer, Benchmarks Project Coordinator) [10 minutes]
- C. Provincial curricula—through the lens of Benchmarks (Tom Morton, Benchmarks Research Associate) [10 minutes]
- D. Questions and comments [10 minutes]

10:45 am Break

11:00 am Benchmarks, continued

- E. The view from the local district (Lindsay Gibson, Kelowna, BC Benchmarks Lead Teacher) [10 minutes]
- F. The view from the province (Linda Mlodzinski and Renée Gillis, Manitoba Ministry of Education) [10 minutes]
- G. THEN|HiER: a major opportunity (Penney Clark) [10 minutes]
- H. Goals for the meeting (Peter Seixas) [10 minutes]

- I. Questions and comments [15 minutes]
- J. Instructions for small groups (Carla Peck, Benchmarks Advisory Group) [5 minutes]
- 12:00 pm Lunch (hotel restaurant)
- 1:00 pm Small group sessions
  - Mixed groups: Ministry reps, publishers, academics, teachers in all groups
  - The agenda should cover four areas: a) curriculum; b) assessment; c) professional development; and d) materials development.
  - Discussion should address: a) accomplishments; b) challenges; and c) needs in these four areas.
  - Attention should be given to the question of First Nations, Inuit and Métis perspectives within the context of the Benchmarks project.
- 3:00 pm Break
- 3:15 pm Reports [10 minutes each x 4] and plenary discussion
- 4:30 pm Review (Peter Seixas)
- 6:00 pm Dinner (hotel restaurant)

### **Saturday, February 20, 2010**

- 8:00 am Breakfast (Regent Room)
- 9:00 am Two major projects:
  - Ottawa Summer Institute (Peter Seixas)
  - Website (Noni Maté, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor Media)
- 9:30 am Summary report from Friday's sessions: Challenges and Needs (Carla Peck)
  - How to respond to the challenges and needs identified during Friday breakout group sessions
  - Strategic action planning (small groups) – one year plan (to February 2011) and two years beyond (2011-2013)
  - A. Fostering local initiatives
  - B. Furthering provincial agendas
  - C. Coordinating, Canada-wide (CMEC as an avenue of development? THEN|HiER? Canada's National History Society? Summer Institute? Other?)

(Note: coffee will be served during this session at 10:45).
- 11:30 am Report back [10 minutes each] and summation
- 12:30 pm End of meeting/lunch
- 1:30 pm - 3:30 pm Break-out rooms (with coffee service) available for follow-up meetings, as per interests and requests of participants.

## Appendix IV. Post-meeting questionnaire

### **Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project National Meeting Post-meeting Evaluation**

Please return to Ulrike Spitzer, [ulrike.spitzer@ubc.ca](mailto:ulrike.spitzer@ubc.ca)

Note: Within a short time, we plan to launch a website discussion forum on the issues raised in the meeting. In the meantime, we appreciate your responses here.

1. Name and position:

2. What do you see as the major challenges or impediments to incorporating a Benchmarks approach in your programs and materials?

3. What would best help you meet those challenges?

4. What should be the highest priorities for the Benchmarks Project for 2010-2011?

5. How helpful was the national meeting in Toronto, from the perspective of your position?

Not at all helpful

Somewhat helpful

Extremely helpful

1

2

3

4

5

6. Do you have any recommendations for the meeting that we will hold in February, 2011?

7. Do you have any comments on how your province's curriculum was presented in the curriculum analysis done by Tom Morton?

8. Other comments:

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