

Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: First Steps

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Although historical thinking has been the subject of a substantial body of recent research, few attempts explicitly apply the results on a large scale in North America. This article, a narrative inquiry, examines the first stages of a multi-year, Canada-wide project to reform history education through the development of classroom-based assessments. The study is based on participant-observations, documents generated by the project, and interviews, questionnaires, and correspondence with participants. The authors find impediments – apparently surmountable – in teachers' application of potentially difficult concepts, and in their organizational resistance.

Key words: assessment, historical thinking, history education, narrative inquiry

Bien que la pensée historique ait été récemment le sujet de nombreuses recherches, peu d'entre elles tentent explicitement d'en appliquer les résultats sur une large échelle en Amérique du Nord. Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit les premières étapes d'un projet canadien de plusieurs années visant à réformer les cours d'histoire en recourant à des évaluations basées sur les classes. L'étude s'appuie sur l'observation des participants, des documents générés par le projet ainsi que des entrevues, des questionnaires et de la correspondance avec les participants. Les auteurs identifient des obstacles – apparemment surmontables – à la mise en application par les enseignants de concepts potentiellement difficiles et notent leur résistance organisationnelle.

Mots clés : évaluation, pensée historique, cours d'histoire, recherche descriptive

In a recent issue of the *Journal of American History*, Richard Rothstein, researcher at the Economic Policy Institute and former education columnist for the *New York Times*, contributed an article provocatively entitled "We are not ready to assess history performance" (2004). Although his charge was aimed at large-scale, standardized testing of history in the United States, it is equally true across North America. Moreover, history assessment at the classroom level often lacks some of the qualities found in other school subjects.

What would readiness to assess students' history performance look like? What might good assessments contribute? And how, in the Canadian context, with its closely guarded jurisdictional boundaries, could both the will and capacity for good assessments of history performance be built from the ground up? This article addresses these questions through a narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), exploring the first year of the project *Benchmarks of Historical Thinking*, in which the authors played a central role

Considerable advances have been made recently to define both how students learn, and how educators can know what students know, articulated through the work of a series of committees under the auspices of the National Research Council (NRC) in the United States (National Research Council, 2000; National Research Council, 2001; National Research Council, 2005). Key principles from this work – widely accepted in educational research communities but still only sporadically implemented in practice – provided the foundation for the project.

The NRC Committee on the Foundations of Assessment set out three components to ground all assessments:

1. a model of cognition and learning,
2. assumptions about tasks which are "most likely to elicit demonstrations" of that cognition, and finally,
3. assumptions about how to interpret the evidence drawn from those demonstrations. (National Research Council, 2001, p. 20)

In making explicit these three components, the Committee laid the groundwork for what it hoped would be "a significant leap forward in the field of assessment" (p. 18).

Three aspects of the NRC model of cognition and learning, in turn, were central to our work:

1. New understandings are constructed on the foundation of existing knowledge and experience.
2. Factual knowledge and conceptual frameworks play essential roles in understanding (National Research Council, 2000, pp. 14-21).
3. "Different disciplines are organized differently and have different approaches to inquiry." (National Research Council, 2000, p. 155)

History education, itself, in Canada as elsewhere, has been the site of ongoing and contentious struggles over purposes and approaches. At one level – generally the one that grabs the attention of public media – these are struggles over *which story to tell*: who should be the heroes, who the villains, where is the beginning, and should the narrative trajectory be one of development and progress, conquest and loss, resistance and struggle, or compromise and accommodation? Ken Osborne (2004, 2006) has helpfully gone beyond the question of "which story should we tell," identifying three conceptions of what it means to teach and study history: the first centring on conveying a nation-building narrative; the second focusing on analysis of contemporary problems in historical context (more consistent with the school subject of social studies); and the third seeing history education "as the process by which students come to understand history as a form of disciplined inquiry and thereby learn to think historically" (Osborne, 2006, p. 107).

Although elements of all these approaches coexist in early twenty-first century school curricula, they have enjoyed a serial prominence, beginning first in the early twentieth century, and culminating with the third in the 1990s (sparking Jack Granatstein's [1998] polemic reaction, *Who Killed Canadian History?*). The project we initiated as well as the study which follows are both clearly aligned with Osborne's third conception.

The project involved articulating a theory of history education reform, utilizing the best international knowledge and experience, engaging teachers who could provide leadership, and catching the attention of history and social studies teachers' associations and provincial educational authorities.

THE BENCHMARKS OF HISTORICAL THINKING PROJECT

An overview of the Benchmarks Project will help to orient the reader. In 2006, the University of British Columbia's Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (CSHC), of which Seixas was director and Peck a doctoral student, partnered with the Historica Foundation to launch a

Canada-wide project to develop and implement classroom-based history performance assessments. Historica, a national non-profit organization founded in 1999, has as its primary goal the dissemination of Canadian history in both popular and educational forums. It is governed by a Board of Directors, most of whose positions rest less on formal history or education credentials than upon their success in business and politics and on their enthusiasm for the value of history. The Board also assembles, annually, a larger Advisory Council representing a diverse group of Canadians more directly involved in history and heritage. Throughout its existence, Historica has been attentive to, and been challenged by, the problems of a pan-Canadian organization fostering national pride and unity in a sometimes fiercely regionally and linguistically divided country. Historica and the CSHC (which was founded as a research centre to study these phenomena critically) thus made a somewhat odd couple.

In Phase I of the project (April 2006), we assembled an international symposium (the April Symposium) and used the insights of historians, teachers, and history education researchers from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada to define the basic parameters of the project. In Phase II of the project (August 2006), we convened a group of 14 individuals to form a Steering Committee (ourselves included) and to flesh out an assessment framework to provide guidance to local groups; this was the August Seminar. The individuals selected to sit on the steering committee were also designated as "lead-teachers" for their respective regions, with the expectation that they would recruit and work with a group of 10 to 20 teachers for work on the project. In Phase III of the project (September 2006 - June 2007), local assessment development teams, working with the August framework and led by the lead-teachers in their regions, began to develop tasks and rubrics, and to collect student work exemplary of different levels of competence. We have such groups working in two large urban centres (Toronto and Vancouver) and two rural areas (Selkirk, Manitoba¹ and a consortium of school districts in New Brunswick²).

ASSESSMENT AS A STARTING POINT

Assessment sends powerful messages about what learning is valued. As the National Research Council Committee on the Foundations of Assessment has noted,

With the movement over the past two decades toward setting challenging academic standards and measuring students' progress in meeting those standards,

educational assessment is playing a greater role in decision making than ever before. (National Research Council, 2001, p.1; see also Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)

Assessment is, therefore, a key component, driving what is taught and learned in classrooms. Classroom assessment in history lags far behind recent developments in history education research (e.g., Bain, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lee, 2005; Schweber, 2004; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). Much current assessment practice revolves around factual recall on multiple choice tests, composition skills on essays, and presentation and appearance of projects. None of these is unimportant, but if factual recall is the predominant mode of history assessment, then memorization becomes the core of the learned history curriculum. If English skills weigh heavily in history essay tests, then writing skills – not the tools of historical thinking – become the central curricular focus. If appearance and presentation are a substantial component of history project assessments, then that is where students' attention will lie. History students need both factual knowledge and composition skills, and appearance and presentation deserve attention, but these do not add up to history's distinctive disciplinary concepts and modes of inquiry (National Research Council, 2000).

At the outset of the Benchmarks project, English Canadian educational jurisdictions – like most in North America – had had no widely agreed upon definition of, or vocabulary for, historical cognition to shape assessments (or professional development or curriculum materials.) As a consequence, no systematic assessment exists, for example, of students' progression in their mastery of the use of primary source documents as historical evidence, nor of the interpretive nature of historical accounts. A comparable lack of attention in science classrooms to the nature of hypothesis-testing, observation, and the experimental method would be unthinkable (Seixas, 2002). Fortunately, the growing body of history education research provides the base for such assessment.

Also contributing to the shape of this project were the recommendations of the National Research Council Committee on the Foundations of Assessment report:

- Recommendation 3: Research should be conducted to explore how new forms of assessment can be made practical for use in classroom . . . contexts . . .
- Recommendation 7: Developers of . . . classroom assessments should create tools that will enable teachers to implement high-quality instructional and assessment practices, consistent with modern understanding of how students

learn and how such learning can be measured. (National Research Council, 2001, pp. 12-13)

Finally, the Board members of the Historica Foundation were attracted to the notion of assessment that could measure improvements in history education in a meaningful way.

For all these reasons, then, we articulated the project as one of assessment development, but, from the outset, we proceeded with the notion that assessment was closely tied to larger curricular and instructional reform. The first phases of the project have already demonstrated evolving and complex interrelationships among history assessments, research, official curriculum, instructional materials, and professional development.

BUILDING A MODEL OF HISTORICAL COGNITION: THE APRIL SYMPOSIUM

From the outset, we were determined to have a robust, research-based conception of historical cognition at the core of the project, including, as articulated in the NRC reports, its distinctive conceptual organization and modes of inquiry. This conception would have to be clear and communicable, while maintaining avenues towards complexity that could lead beyond any simplistic algorithms. To define this conception and to map a plan for the development and implementation of assessments, we convened 22 scholars and practitioners, meeting over two days, with 10 observers from funding bodies, both committed and potential. The composition of this group was key to the success of the founding event. In addition to the two co-authors, the group included two additional professors and a doctoral student associated with the CSHC, four Canadian academics whose work spans history and education, seven international consultants of similar backgrounds, and six school board and university representatives from three pilot districts (the fourth would be added after April.) Participants included Kadriye Ercikan, who was on the NRC Foundations of Assessment Committee, Sam Wineburg, who was on the NRC *How Students Learn* Committee, and Bob Bain, Rosalyn Ashby, and Peter Lee, each of whom contributed a chapter to that Committee's final report.

The April Symposium opened with presentations on the experiences and insights of three jurisdictions outside Canada, each of which had implemented history curricula and assessments with attention to histor-

ical cognition. Each presenter had played a major role in these projects, and each of their talks raised fundamental issues for the Canadian project.

British history education researchers Lee and Ashby traced the evolution of the current English National Curriculum from its predecessor, the Schools History Project (SHP). Two basic ideas from these projects were fundamental to the Canadian initiative. The first concerned *second-order historical concepts*, which Lee and Ashby (2000) describe as “ideas that provide our understanding of history as a discipline or form of knowledge . . . they shape the way we go about doing history” (p. 199). They distinguish between second-order or procedural concepts in history on the one hand, like *change*, *cause*, and *evidence*, and, on the other, first-order or substantive concepts, like *revolution*, *president*, and *nation*. First-order concepts are what history is about. Second-order concepts, often unarticulated by teachers, provide the tools for doing history, for thinking historically. Lee and Ashby have mapped the different understandings – and misunderstandings – that students have in relation to second-order concepts. This categorization leads directly to their second key idea: *progression* in historical thinking. The Committee on Foundations of Assessment specified a “cognitive model of students’ learning” to be the starting point for assessment (National Research Council, 2001, pp. 44-47). Lee and Ashby and their British colleagues have shown how students’ second-order concepts can become increasingly sophisticated: a model of student learning.

Although the English National Curriculum specifies second-order concepts as well as their attainment targets, history and social studies teachers in Canada commonly expect students to absorb them by osmosis, as they learn the substance of history (albeit at times overlaid with a generic critical thinking that is not discipline specific). A focus on students’ progression offered a possibility of circumventing the question that one confronts in a Canada divided by region, nation, and language: which story should we tell in our history texts and classes? It shifts the focus to students’ understanding of how to handle the *different and sometimes conflicting* stories of the past, the second-order problem of “accounts.” Provinces could continue to exercise their jurisdictional prerogatives in setting different substantive history curricula, but they might all sign on to assessments that targeted historical thinking.

The second presentation came from Shelly Weintraub, who has led history education reform in the Oakland, California, school district over

the past decade. In a talk entitled, *What's This New Crap? What's Wrong with the Old Crap?* Weintraub noted that teachers had to be convinced of the value of explicitly teaching for historical thinking. Once they had workable materials, models, and professional development, however, they signed on enthusiastically. In Oakland, she proceeded on several fronts over the years:

1. She organized reading groups for history teachers, where they met with working historians;
2. She developed new curricular support materials with teachers (after a disastrous local history textbook approval process denied history teachers access to any state-approved textbook);
3. She led a year-long process of defining history standards for the district; and finally,
4. She put those standards to work in district-wide assessments.

After three years of piloting the assessments, 80 per cent of Oakland history/social science teachers voted in favour of district assessments that would incorporate the notion of historical thinking built into the project. We noted, from the standpoint of a Canada-wide project, that it had taken three years to develop assessment in one school district. Just as important, however, Oakland provided a model of change that linked assessment to professional development and teacher-developed curriculum materials (Seixas, 2001; Weintraub, 2000).

In a third presentation, Tony Taylor and Anna Clark presented the Australian National History Project, of which Taylor is director. The Australian history reform project was an outgrowth of bitter, public "history wars" about which version of the national story should be taught in schools ("black armband" history that highlighted the crimes of colonialism vs. a triumphal national story) (see also Clark, 2006). Yet the Project's focus on historical literacy (through an "index of historical literacy" related to the English second-order concepts) generated support across the political spectrum, and managed largely to sidestep the political fire-fight.

We found important lessons for the Canadian project. The ferocity of the divisions over substantive history in the culture at large pointed – for those like Taylor and Clark – to the imperative that children be enabled through the school curriculum to participate thoughtfully in those debates. Merely learning one story would be inadequate preparation: they would either have to cleave to it on the basis of faith, or be tossed into a sea of relativistic bewilderment without a paddle. Understanding

the nature of historical interpretation and the use of evidence would provide a starting point. Politically, it might also provide a safe middle-ground for the project.

At the end of the first day, we introduced a draft proposal for a Benchmarks Framework that we had circulated prior to the April Symposium. We devoted the morning of the second day entirely to discussion of the document. All agreed that a series of second-order concepts would help to conceptualize historical cognition. There was less interest in pinning down the “correct” set of concepts than there was in crafting a framework that would make sense of all of them. In the end, the participants in the April Symposium agreed that the list of necessity would be a somewhat malleable construction, and indeed, we made considerable changes between April and August, when the document went out to the districts. The meeting was energized by the sense that an avenue was being opened up to bring a large body of international history education research and reform to bear on Canadian education. One participant noted in an e-mail after the meeting:

. . . What an effort! As I said before I left, there was a fabulous atmosphere in the room. It began with the way you conducted the intros . . . and continued thru the two days. That positive energy – not this or that list of terms – will be the lasting legacy of this launch. (Wineburg, personal communication, April 22, 2006)

DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT TASKS TO BRIDGE THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE AUGUST SEMINAR

If the April Symposium constituted an Advisory Board for the Benchmarks Project, the August Seminar constituted a Steering Committee comprised of lead-teachers from the participating regions. This meeting had three purposes:

1. to review the work of the April Symposium;
2. to familiarize lead teachers with the Framework to a level where they would be comfortable guiding groups of teachers in their own districts in developing assessment activities based on them
3. to develop a small number of model assessment tasks that would serve as guides for work in the districts starting in September.

The five days of meetings themselves provided a model agenda for the five professional development days that lead teachers would run in their districts during 2006-2007.

We provided participants with readings and a revised Benchmarks Framework document prior to the meetings. The first day included a morning of presentation and discussion of an overview of the six concepts that evolved from the April Symposium: (a) historical significance, (b) evidence, (c) continuity and change, (d) cause and consequence, (e) historical perspectives, and (f) moral dimension. That afternoon, Peck led participants through an extended task to explore the meaning of *historical significance*. Small groups worked with 30 laminated cards, each of which depicted (with text and visuals) an event in Canadian history. We asked participants to decide which 10 were the most historically significant, to develop a rationale for their choices, and to present their choices to the group. Peck also showed examples of students' responses to the task and their discussions of them. The exercise provided the lead teachers with their first opportunity to grapple with one of the concepts, to understand some of its challenges, and to start to consider the problems of shaping assessment tasks on historical thinking. To keep the project and level of work at a manageable level, we decided, for the first year of the project, to focus on developing tasks and rubrics only for the first three concepts outlined in the Benchmarks Framework.

Before beginning work on the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project, the lead-teachers reported a range of familiarity with the historical thinking concepts outlined in the Benchmarks Framework document.³ For instance, Rob Ferguson, a lead teacher from Vancouver, wrote,

I was familiar with many of the 'second-order' concepts as general ideas, but had not considered them in an organized, comprehensive fashion that could be applied to teaching in a systematic way. I found the idea of doing so quite exciting. (Rob Ferguson, lead teacher)

At the time, Ferguson was both a social studies department head and a graduate student of Seixas'. He had recently completed a graduate-level course entitled "Problems in Historical Understanding," for which the syllabus was largely based on recent history education research. Even with this background, he recognized that practical integration of the concepts into his teaching and assessment would be a challenge.

Stan Hallman-Chong, an Instructional Leader for the Toronto District School Board, had also immersed himself in the historical thinking literature. Hallman-Chong (2004a, 2004b), who has published articles in *Voice*, the magazine of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario,

explained how historical thinking concepts have impacted his teaching. He described his understanding of the concepts as follows: "I went through a number of phases with the concepts including using them in my own class and work-shopping them with teachers. However, my understanding has changed, deepened, become more uncertain, and become more secure again." The fluid nature of understanding the concepts cannot be overstated. While working with the lead teachers, our collective understanding of the concepts seemed in a constant state of flux. One minute a concept would seem clear and straightforward to all, and the next, obscure and difficult. Through activities, examination of assessment tasks, student work, and discussion, our collective understanding of the Benchmarks Project concepts advanced, retreated, and then pushed forward again.

IMPLEMENTING LOCAL CHANGE: THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNICATING COMPLEX IDEAS

When they returned to their respective regions in September, most lead teachers employed the five-day model of professional development that was established during the August Seminar in 2006 (the Ontario leaders used a slightly different version to fit with professional development models previously used there). The five days were spread throughout the 2006 - 2007 school year, enabling teachers in each region to come together for some concentrated work on the Benchmarks Project concepts and the development of assessment tasks. Although the three concepts we decided to focus on for the first year (historical significance, continuity and change, and evidence) seemed the clearest, many found it difficult to go beyond their usual practices when it came time to develop assessment tasks with one or more of these concepts at the core. Alan Sears, a professor of Social Studies education and a lead-teacher from New Brunswick, described his experience communicating the Benchmarks Project concepts to teachers:

I have been surprised at how complex and difficult these are to communicate to teachers. For many – perhaps most – it is a very different way to think about teaching history. At one level, significance seems the easiest to communicate but when we begin exploring the elements of significance it gets far more complex and teachers have difficulty thinking of activities that will push students to greater understanding of the elements or critical attributes of the concept. ⁴ (Alan Sears, lead teacher)

Linda Mlodzinski, a Social Studies consultant for the Ministry of Education in Manitoba, shared this concern: "The concepts are clear and communicable, and teachers understood the ideas easily. Difficulty arises in applying the concepts to the creation of tasks." Some teachers were more specific with their comments, with several focusing explicitly on the concept of historical significance. Hallman-Chong described his experience working with the teachers in his group: "There are many aspects of significance that teachers use innately." However, he also alluded to the difficulty in planning activities that effectively captured the various aspects of the concept. Rob Ferguson concurred:

As described on the website, it's clear, and it's also a concept I think people have an intuitive "sense" about. However, I think it is one of the more difficult ones in terms of assessing students' grasp of it. Clear examples of how students have woven it into a larger narrative will help with this. (Rob Ferguson, lead teacher)

Of the three concepts that we chose for the assessment developments in the first year, historical significance received the most attention. Teachers chose it as a focus for 18 of the 30 tasks under development. For this reason we have used this concept as a small case study of the kinds of difficulties that faced the project in communication, conceptualization, and translation.

Historical Significance: A Case Study

Educational research on the second-order concept of historical significance has focused largely on students' ideas about the concept (Barton, 2005; Lévesque, 2005; Levstik, 1999) or on the nature of the concept itself (Counsell, 2004; Hunt, 2000; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980) – or some combination of the two. A major goal of the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project is to develop assessment tasks and rubrics that are grounded in history education research, but which are also practical and useful for teachers. Even teachers who had been working with historical significance for many years struggled, at times, when designing tasks for their students.

In the first phases of the Benchmarks Project, we uncovered a number of difficulties with the concept. We wanted to avoid criteria for historical significance that would simply end up reproducing traditional textbook accounts of Canadian political history with powerful white men as the most significant. What kinds of criteria would allow students to articulate the significance of the Prairie sodbuster, the Depression-era

homeless, the Newfoundland fisher – none of whom wielded the kind of power that could make history-changing decisions? Over time, we also came to understand a distinction (which we will clarify below) between significance that had a particularly *historical* character from everyday significance or importance. We opened with the idea that the question of historical significance was a way to ask what and who, from the past, was worth being remembered and studied (acknowledging that we cannot remember and study everything and everyone.) Counsell (2004) and Partington (1980) provided our first articulation of criteria for historical significance:

- Remarkable: the event/development/person was remarked upon by people at the time
- Remembered: the event/development/person might have been important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group(s)
- Resulting in Change:
 - Profundity: the extent to which people's lives were affected by the event/development/person
 - Quantity: how many people's lives were affected by the event/development/person
 - Durability: how long people's lives were affected by the event/development/person
- Revealing: the event/development/person sheds light on enduring issues in history and contemporary life (August Seminar, 2006).

This list seemed overly elaborate, and through an examination of student work, we decided that the four criteria outlined above could be collapsed into two. Thus, we revised our criteria as follows:

- Resulting in change: The event/person/development had *deep* consequences, for *many* people, over a *long period* of time.
- 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.

Significant topics might meet *either* of these criteria but not necessarily *both*, we noted. We also included the idea that for either of these, stud-

ents could establish the historical significance of an event or person by linking it to other events in a historical narrative or argument (the August 18th, 2006, version of the Benchmarks Framework).

Two exercises that the teams developed highlight some of the challenges of translating these ideas into tasks for the classroom.

Grade-5 Exercise. One exercise asks grade-5 students to consider the importance of various customs and practices of the First Peoples of Canada. In the first task, having studied First Peoples cultural groups, students were asked to “use the significance criteria to discuss and determine cultural customs or practices of each First Peoples groups which influenced their ways of life.” The students learned about such things as the buffalo, canoes, and cedar (and so on) and how First Peoples used them. With the next step, students selected one item for each cultural group and explained the historical significance of the item to the cultural group using the criteria of “resulting in change” and “revealing.” Students were provided with a graphic organizer with headings as follows:

Name of First Peoples	Customs and Practices	Significance: a) Resulting in Change b) Revealing
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Figure 1: Graphic Organizer headings for grade-5, First Peoples of Canada exercise

Student responses (see Figures 2 - 4) indicate that the grade-5 students did indeed learn the language of historical significance and applied this knowledge to the study of the First Peoples.

Here we ran into the question of whether the buffalo were simply significant (meaning that they were important to the lives of people in the past) or *historically* significant. To satisfy the latter, students had to consider either why *we* should be remembering and studying the buffalo, or how the buffalo fit into a narrative of change that *we* should care

about. Although the “introduction of the buffalo hunt” or “the elimination of the buffalo hunt” would clearly be historically significant, “buffalo” themselves are not. “Fire” is significant, but not historically significant; “the invention of fire” is historically significant. On the other hand, we had to ask ourselves, would that really be a better question for grade-5 students than the one the teacher did ask? During our March 2007 meeting, we entered into a conversation around this issue. Like Counsell (2004), we found ourselves “striving to get closer to the meaning of the word ‘historical’ in ‘historical significance’” (p. 33).

Plains	Bison x	This Item I think is the most significant because the bison was their favorite animal.
<p>“This item I think is the most significant because the bison was their favorite animal.”</p>		

Figure 2: Example of a "Level 1" response in the Benchmarks Framework

Plains	Buffalo	I think the Buffalo is significant because that was the main food and they won't survive and maybe some will.
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Figure 3: Example of a "Level 2" response in the Benchmarks Framework

Plains	Buffalo.	-provided them with food, shelter, clothing and tools.
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Figure 4: Example of a "Level 3" response in the Benchmarks Framework

Grade-11 Exercise. The grade-11 exercise required students to select a historically significant event in the development of the welfare state in Canada. This task initially raised very similar questions to the grade-5 exercise. As it was first defined, the task was construed as one where students had to choose the “most significant social program” in Canada. Like the bison for First Nations people, this is a question of *importance*: how important is socialized medicine for Canadians? There was nothing particularly *historical* in the question: it has no particular temporal moment. The task was rewritten, asking students to “write a letter to Canada Post advocating the adoption of an image [for a stamp] that portrays a historically significant event in the development of one of Canada’s social programs.” During the task, students learned about a range of social programs in Canada. They were then required to select an event in the development of one program, using the criteria of historical significance to explain their choice and write their letter.

Students applied the criteria for historical significance with varying degrees of success. Some simply recounted the event in question, whereas others applied the criteria in sophisticated ways. Although too long to include in its entirety here, one effective letter explained how Tommy Douglas, as leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Saskatchewan, believed “that provincial resources belonged to the people and therefore should be developed for the benefit of the public, not for the profits of private investors.” Douglas, this idea, and the politics that grew out of it were historically significant in the development of medicare in Canada. In its argument for an image of Douglas on the commemorative stamp, the letter dexterously managed to employ all the criteria of historical significance as it traced the history of the development of medicare (excerpts below):

- *Resulting in Change* (Number of people affected): “Since the Medical Care Act was carried out in all provinces in Canada in 1972, all residents in Canada have entitled the right to access of government-covered general practitioner and specialist services regardless of age or condition or ability to pay.”
- *Resulting in Change* (Length of time): “This socialist party [the CCF] was the longest-serving government in the province’s history.”
- *Resulting in Change* (Depth of impact): “In addition, the success of the CCF in Saskatchewan had an important impact on Canadian politics. It manifested that Canadians [were] concerned deeply about their

welfare, and would support parties that have this concern. Following the medical service in Saskatchewan, even though the Prime Minister at the time, Lester Pearson, knew how expensive the health-care system maintenance would be, Pearson introduced a national health-care plan in 1966.”

- *Revealing*: “Most Canadians would say that Canada is not a socialist country. However, one has to take note that the development of our Medicare system is essentially based on the idea of government intervention to provide a better standard of life. Without the people and all levels of government’s acknowledgement of this idea, Medicare would never likely to exist in Canada.”

Although not stated explicitly, (i.e., “This is the most significant event because . . .”), this student seems to understand how the criteria for historical significance work.

COMMUNICATING REFORM TO A WIDER PUBLIC: NOVEMBER 2006 COUNCIL MEETING

The April Symposium had established that teachers would be the most important target audience of the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project. But it also noted the importance of ministries of education and history educators at museums and other public history sites.

In November of each year, *Historica* has an annual meeting of its Council, an advisory body with about 90 members drawn from education, academia, media, public history, and business. The *Historica* Board, who decided that the 2006 meeting should be devoted almost entirely to the Benchmarks Project, invited both co-authors and the Steering Committee members to lead certain aspects of the meeting. Our mandate for the meeting (from *Historica*) was to communicate the main tenets of the project to Council members and explore how Benchmarks could inform *Historica*’s other projects.

On the day prior to Council meetings, *Historica* regularly assembles representatives from each provincial ministry of education, those responsible for history and social studies education in the province, to discuss a range of common concerns. In November 2006, they devoted two hours of their meeting to the Benchmarks Project, with an overview of the Framework, a progress report on work to date, and discussion of the possibilities for activities within their jurisdictions. A few representatives expressed concerns: the First Nations Education representative from Yu-

kon asked how the concept of evidence would fit with Aboriginal ways of knowing. We acknowledged that some difficult issues would likely need discussion: although there was no question that oral testimony (and photography, art, fiction, or artifacts) should be considered alongside written documents, all evidence with the Benchmarks approach would be subjected to questions of attribution and contextualization, rather than providing literal truth. But the major sentiment was one of strong support, with comments like “we’ve been waiting for something like this for a long time”; the project was unanimously endorsed at the end of the day.

When the full Council met the next morning, the response was more mixed. The two-day meeting was largely devoted to a review of the Benchmarks Project to date, including presentations of its background, goals, the Framework, and some model tasks. Negative reaction came largely from two quarters: those who felt that the Council (and therefore the Historica) agenda had been unexpectedly hijacked, and a very few (who voiced opinions with disproportionate volume) who felt that Historica’s mission would be compromised by any move towards assessment or evaluation. Positive reaction came from those directly involved in schools and educational institutions. Most of these participants, like Ministry representatives, were aware of the challenges of assessing students’ progress in history, and embraced the Benchmarks Project as a potentially groundbreaking direction for Historica.

OTHER AVENUES OF DEVELOPMENT

Despite the somewhat lackluster feeling we were left with after the November 2006 Historica Council meeting, we remain enthusiastic and are encouraged about possibilities for dissemination of the Benchmarks Project to other stakeholders in the domain of education. The Benchmarks Framework has proven attractive and useful to Ministry personnel, textbook and materials publishers, social studies teachers’ associations, and others.

Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador are building the Benchmarks Framework into their current revisions of high-school history curricula. Ministry personnel in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia have expressed interest in taking part. Two publishers (Thomson Duval and Oxford University Press), aiming at the Ontario market, have built new grade-8 and grade-10 Canadian history textbooks around the Framework, while, on a smaller scale, the Critical Thinking Cooperative

has published *Teaching About Historical Thinking*, which provides classroom activities supporting the Framework. The latter was distributed widely in conjunction with keynote presentations on the Benchmarks Project at the Association for Canadian Studies conference in Vancouver in October 2007 and at the Ontario History and Social Science Teachers' Association conference in Toronto in November 2007 (Denos & Case, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Teachers have found working with a model of historical thinking challenging but rewarding. Ministry officials have generally been enthusiastic about the Benchmarks Project.

Phase III of the Benchmarks Project has generated 30 tasks geared to the teaching, learning, and assessment of historical thinking, with more on their way. In the process, we have begun to build the infrastructure for validation of the tasks and a broad discussion of levels of competence that can be expected for different age and population groups, with a Web site at <http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/>.

The regional and cultural diversity of Canada, where, like Australia, different interpretations of the past will continue to challenge each other in the public sphere, provides a particularly rich context for this work. In this kind of setting, differing perspectives on what is important, who is right, and what counts as progress provide the substance of public discourse. Rather than merely testing students on a single set of correct responses, assessment should measure how well equipped students are to participate in the debates that are sure to continue in multicultural, regionally fractured Canada.

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project is beginning to provide insight into how the processes of assessment development work at the level of teachers and classrooms. It also has broader implications for the development of the tools for "teaching for understanding" in an environment where many other demands compete for teachers' time and energy.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this work is its reception by those working most closely with the concepts (lead teachers and teachers in regions). Mark Perry, a teacher and university instructor of Social Studies education, has long used historical thinking concepts in his teaching at both the secondary and university levels. However, he notes that his involvement in the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project marks

“the first time in [his] teaching career that public school teachers of history have been offered a way to explicitly deliver best practice.”

Sharon Moolchan, the Social Studies Lead Teacher (K-S4) in the Lord Selkirk School Division, suggests that “the greatest promise [of the Benchmarks Project] is the thought of impacting the depth of student understanding of history.” Alan Sears develops this thought further:

I think the project has tremendous promise to reinvigorate teaching and learning in history. There is a growing consensus across the English speaking world . . . that constructivist approaches to teaching and learning offer the most promising practices for schools and school systems. The Benchmarks Project provides a substantial vehicle to illustrate how students’ prior knowledge shapes learning in history and how engagement with important questions around the concepts might foster conceptual change. (Alan Sears, lead teacher)

With the watchword of “accountability” in education making its way northward from the United States, one of two things may happen to history education in Canada: first, an inchoate social studies *mélange* may be pushed increasingly to the curricular margins, in favor of the eminently more testable mathematics, science, and literacy. Or, second, history education may be hardened into the memorization of increasing numbers of canonical facts. This Project envisions a third trajectory: it provides a way to achieve “accountability” for genuinely worthwhile learning of history by generating workable models of assessment of historical thinking within a conception of teaching for historical understanding. And through the door of assessment, the Benchmarks Project will provide the basis for the revision and supplement of provincial (as well as local and school-based) curriculum materials, assessment, and professional development.

NOTES

¹ Selkirk, MB has a large First Nations population. It was crucial to involve a wide demographic of students in this project.

² Quebec is in the midst of implementing a new history curriculum that incorporates aspects of historical thinking. Having stirred considerable controversy among Quebec nationalists in 2007, curriculum leaders were understandably reluctant to take on a pan-Canadian project of this nature. For that reason, the first phases of the project do not have Quebec district representation.

³The following discussion is based on a retrospective questionnaire that lead teachers completed in March 2007.

⁴Quotations in this section come from a questionnaire completed at a March Steering Committee meeting.

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