

INTRODUCTION: FIFTY SHADES OF HISTORY TEACHING

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Several years ago I was invited to speak to an assembly of grade 8 students at a local middle school as part of events recognizing “Heritage Week.” I was in a bit of a tough spot for two reasons. First, I have long been cynical about themed months and weeks remembering the pithy poster that hung in a former colleagues office that posed the question: “If February is Black History Month and October is Women’s History Month what happens the rest of the year?” The stark answer: “Discrimination!”

Second, I have similarly high levels of cynicism for the idea of “heritage” as a focus for study in school seeing it as a poor and superficial cousin to the serious study of history. For me, heritage represented a focus on peaceful, patriotic, pleasant, but ultimately patronizing bits of our past.

Having caved in on my commitment not to participate in theme week celebrations, I decided I had to stand firm on another issue of importance, the insufficiency of heritage as a focal point for social studies class. I was going to work to disabuse the students and their teachers of the notion that celebrating heritage was a worthy educational endeavour. Part of my plan included illustrating the academic inadequacy of the Heritage Minutes produced by the Historica Foundation and, at one time at least, ubiquitous on Canadian television. These it seemed to me were perfect illustrations of the four Ps of heritage listed above.

I was introduced to a gym full of students and began by asking them if any could recount for me the narrative of one of the Heritage Minutes. The room exploded! Virtually every student was waving their hand wildly and calling out to be given the opportunity to share their favourite Minute. Each selection met with significant approval from a portion of the crowd. These kids clearly not only knew the Minutes, they loved them. Needless to say, the reaction threw my intended presentation significantly off course.

Reflecting on the experience later, I tried to imagine the response had I asked the students to share their favourite minute of social studies or history class. I had some sense of what that might have been like as I often ask the Bachelor of Education students I teach to do the same thing as an introduction to their social studies teaching methods course. These students have all chosen to be social studies teachers and most of them struggle to list three or four good memories of social studies class from their 16 plus years of formal schooling. The grade 8 students, I’m pretty sure, would have booed me out of the gym.

Reading Gillian Judson and Kieran Egan's piece for this collection helped me understand what happened in that middle school gym. The Heritage Minutes might be glossy and superficial but they tap into the two cognitive tools that Judson and Egan introduce; each one has both a clear narrative and a compelling hero or heroes. From the dashing Governor Frontenac staring down the English emissaries demanding his surrender in 1690, through Jennie Trout taking on the male bastion of medical education in 1875, to Mayor Jean Drapeau and the city engineers of Montreal creating new islands in the St. Lawrence River to host a world's fair in 1967, heroes and heroic stories abound. Rather than dismiss them, perhaps I should learn from them and recognize there are many ways into the world of the past.

In a recent essay reflecting on his more than forty years as a history educator, Ken Osborne (2012, p. 126) wrote, "The first obligation of history teachers . . . is to make their subject interesting, not by resorting to the strange and the extraordinary, but by revealing the past in all its many colours." It seems to me, that central to Judson and Egan's argument is that shaping history in narrative form around the heroic does just that; it makes the study of the past more interesting.

The other pieces in this collection take up that theme and show us something of what it is to reveal "the past in all its many colours." Rose Fine-Meyer, for example, writes compellingly about the centrality of narrative in the teaching of history. For her, however, the narratives that have dominated history classrooms, particularly, around the study of war have been overly narrow. She calls for attention to a broader range of stories and an expanded idea of the heroic. We should be telling not only the stories of battles and the soldiers who fought them, but also the narratives of civilian lives impacted by wars and the ordinary people who struggle for life and opportunity in the face of great calamity.

David Michael Scott joins Fine-Meyer in calling for attention to narratives that have been lost in the dominant account of nation building that has permeated school history. Drawing on the scholarship of Timothy Stanley, Scott exhorts teachers to include histories of, among others, Aboriginal Peoples and Canadians of non-European background. These groups have important stories of their own to be examined in developing a fuller understanding of Canada's past.

In his article, Fred Mason describes how he turned to enduring themes – what some might call the continuity of history – to organize a university level course on the history of sport. Driven by the desire to respond to Osborne's challenge and make history interesting to his students, Mason structured the course so as to help "students understand the historical context better, and see the relevance of history."

Cynthia Wallace-Casey takes us out of the classroom to consider what learning history looks like in a museum setting. While the setting compels a different structure on teaching and learning, the Obsornian imperative holds here as well. Wallace-Casey makes the case that in the museum context, like in the classroom, interest and enjoyment are prerequisites to a positive and productive engagement with history.

Finally, Katherine Ireland brings us back to Kieran Egan's work. In her masters research Ireland drew on Egan's imaginative framework to structure a unit for grade one students based around multiple narratives of peoples coming to Canada. Her work demonstrates both that the stories of these heroic people are interesting and that interest in these stories can lay a foundation for more analytical understandings of key elements of historical thinking – even for six year-olds.

As Osborne says, history comes in many colours and so, it seems, does history education. We are pleased to present you with a portion of that rich tapestry in this collection.

References

Osborne, K. (2012). A History Teacher Looks Back. *The Canadian Historical Review*, 93(1), 108-137.

Biography

Alan Sears is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. He has been a social studies teacher for 36 years working at all levels from primary grades to graduate school.