

# **TEACHING WAR IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM: CHALLENGING DOMINANT NARRATIVES**

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That students come to history class with established notions of the past is well documented. Jocelyn Letourneau (2006), in his research on young Quebecois students, and Keith Barton (2001), in his work examining students living in Northern Ireland, both demonstrate the ways in which collective memory can shape students' understanding of their past. This article draws on my work as an educator to reflect on the ways in which students' prior knowledge is bolstered by traditional textbook narratives and traditional pedagogical methods. These narratives and pedagogical methods enhance rather than broaden what students learn about war.

Students are already familiar with narratives about war that they have gleaned from a variety of sources: family experiences, films, video games and mass media. They bring a wealth of pre-conceived ideas about war with them to class, and teachers often reinforce these popular narratives with stories about battles and war heroes. However, do these military narratives, so central to course studies, shortchange student learning and obscure the broader consequences of war? Should the study of war only emphasize battles and soldiers or do teachers also have an obligation to engage students in critical inquiries about the impact of war, which complexifies the depictions of war found in most textbooks and within mass media?

The majority of Canadian history textbooks continue to concentrate a significant portion of the text on glorifying war. The Ontario mandatory grade ten history course, for example, begins with a study of the First World War, followed by an interwar examination, and a study of the Second World War. Therefore the first few months of studies are taken up entirely with a study of war. One history textbook begins the "War to End All Wars," with a full page photograph of the Vimy Monument digitally embedded with ghost-like soldiers carrying guns and bayonets, moving around the monument (Quinlan, Don et al 2008). The chapter focuses on standard military topics: dreadnoughts, trenches and battles (Ypres, Vimy), accompanied by military maps. The next section, "The Air and Sea Wars" features Canadian fighter pilots and the third, "Total War," explores tanks, poison gas, U-Boats and machine guns. "The Home Front," section features a small photograph of women in a munitions factory and information about censorship, rationing, war production and conscription. Women, families and peace advocates are significantly marginalized or omitted from the text. The examination of war, heavily influenced by portrayals of cultural representations found in popular media, films and video games, is rarely challenged in textbooks.

In my work to expose the inequities still present in history curricula in schools, especially in terms of a fair and balanced inclusion of women, it is still unclear to what extent new pedagogical methods in history education will translate into more equitable course studies. Textbook publishers support an ever more popular national focus of war within a militaristic context as governments provide funding for the development of resource materials. (See: “The Fight For Canada,” War of 1812, Government of Canada (<http://1812.gc.ca/eng/>). Examinations of war rarely provide messages about how war might be avoided. Therefore, a more holistic examination of war is not facilitated.

Stepping beyond traditional examinations of war takes knowledge and practice, and involves some risk. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) reflect on the ways in which history teachers in the U.S. often reject events that illustrate a lack of unity/or consensus in U.S. history studies. Debates about the role of war narratives in history teaching in Canada, and internationally, are part of broader discussions about what history to teach and why (Taylor and Guyver, 2012). Supporting or rejecting stories that challenge national unity and progress are often at the core of these debates. (Granatstein, 2007) Ian McKay and Jamie Swift (2012:15) warn of glorifying the heroes who fought wars in order to strengthen our notions of national identity. He questions new government materials where “the images of war are profoundly romantic.” Educators need to ask why we teach war to children, and for what purpose?

A study of war is complicated and contested. Therefore, educators need to evaluate carefully whether their narratives allow space for their students to think critically about war and its consequences on a deeper historical and ethical level for a critical analysis of the military-industrial complex. Numerous scholars have argued that teachers should frame their lessons using a strong social justice lens by focusing on the human and environmental costs of war and encouraging their students to be agents of peace within their communities. I am suggesting that teachers consider examining war holistically, by broadening their focus to include the effects of war on humans and the environment. The senseless destruction of cities and landscapes causes the death of countless living things, resulting in problems for future generations. Civilian lives are deeply altered. Examining some of these areas provides a more realistic study of war.

One way to incorporate broader narratives is to employ alternative lenses. If women and families became the lens through which to study war, how might the study of war be altered? It might focus on the ramifications of the war, the social and economic impact on society that has personal resonance for students, such as its impact on children and on food production. A focus on women, families and the environment might allow for a deeper study of the ways in which war affects ordinary citizens.

Patricia Crawford and Sherron Killingsworth Roberts argue that the daily and immediate impact of war and conflicts on children worldwide are now staggering: bombed homes, diminished earning power and related poverty, refugee status, forced conscription, and the death or serious injury of family members. ([Childhood Education, suppl. International Focus 2009 85. 6](#) (2009): 370-374. UNICEF estimates that over 1 billion children live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict; most suffer from significant poverty. Many children themselves are soldiers. The UN estimates

that the number of children associated with armed groups or armed forces is more than 250,000. (UNICEF, Progress for Children Report, 2009). This should provide educators with the appropriate context in which to introduce a more thorough and honest exploration of war.

Wars are difficult to fully understand. It is quite disappointing, then, that Canadian student textbooks and resource materials continue to portray war within neatly packaged military summaries. But by reducing war to constructed battle narratives, educators lose an important opportunity to engage students in a full study of war, one that includes the experiences of ordinary citizens to whom the students can relate. Without considerable thought about pedagogical approaches, teachers may inadvertently be presenting an ever-more unrealistic portrayal of war: one that confirms media depictions that war is necessary, glorious and nation-defining.

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### **Biography**

Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer is a Sessional Lecturer in the Masters of Teaching program, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto where she teaches social studies, history and geography. For the past 3 years she has also run a women's history talk series [herstoriescafe.com](http://herstoriescafe.com).

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