

# Towards Developing a Historical Consciousness

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WITHOUT DEVELOPING A REFLECTIVE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, students may naively believe that one historical account is false, while another is true. The objective should not be to adopt the correct version of events, but to acquire historical literacy. Secondly, the goal of history education should not end with romanticizing or condemning historical actors. Instead, we should help students understand why real people chose certain actions given specific historical circumstances. Such understanding requires empathy, acquiring multiple perspectives, and investigating divergent versions of the same event. Finally, students should create a personal construction of history based on experience. The following activities illustrate the necessity of these principles and the pitfalls of ignoring them.



LESSON PLANS

“To empathize with people of the past, we need to know their circumstances, and the era in which they lived. We need to know the mood of the time, the conflicts and the feelings of the different actors.”

Too often our texts fail to develop empathy because certain groups are not depicted as real people acting on their own behalf. Aboriginal peoples especially are presented as ahistorically situated, not acting on, but only reacting to, their environment, and their victimization.

### Activity

Read *Canada Revisited: Aboriginal Peoples and European Explorers*. Answer the following questions.

1. Pages 26 to 28 and 124 to 130 are stories about two groups that lived in Canada long ago, Vikings and the Siksika. How is each group described? Create a chart to show the similarities and differences in each group.
2. Who were the important people in each group?
3. What do you know about the important events in each group?
4. What are the differences in the way the two groups are described?

#### QUESTION 1 – students’ response Vikings

- explored far places
- wore tunics and real clothes
- used metal tools
- traded with other people

#### Siksika

- just travelled to look for food
- wore furs and skins
- used every part of the buffalo
- looked around to find things

#### QUESTIONS 2-3 – students’ response

Students listed up to five names and five dated events describing the Vikings. They could not find any names of Siksika persons or any events bearing dates.

#### QUESTIONS 2-3 – students’ response (paraphrased)

The Vikings are depicted as agents who made extraordinary choices. As historical agents, they are seen as real people. We can also ask and answer the following questions:

- What were the issues that challenged the group?
- What was the mood of the people?
- What were their particular hopes and fears?
- How did leaders rally their people?

Conversely, texts portray the Siksika as a group who just happened to exist, rather than as recognizable persons. They are not agents making specific decisions. Instead, they are creatures melded into their environments, reacting only to the most basic of needs.

This led to the question “How did the two groups change?” The class replied as follows:

- The Vikings responded to challenges with a series of deeds. For example, they ventured to distant places when faced with a shortage of land.
- The Siksika, however, experienced no extraordinary changes. They probably still live in the same way as they have been living for thousands of years.

Clearly, one cannot empathize with people who lack all manner of agency. Conversely, my students gained understanding of and empathy towards historical actors in other contexts. Knowing that students can more easily do this by playing roles that are well supported with information, we began with the European characters described in our textbooks and performed the following drama. Later, we will see another form of drama used to gain an understanding of Aboriginal peoples.

### Drama Activity

#### ACT OUT THE DEBATE ABOUT THE TREATY OF TORDESILLAS.

Read pages 143 to 147 of *Canada Revisited*.

There is a dispute amongst European nations about which should have a monopoly over the newly found lands. The class will enact the debate.

- As a whole group discuss the following ideas. Why would Spain and Portugal want to have a trade monopoly over the newly found lands?
- In small groups, prepare the arguments of the European nations.
- One group will advise the Pope, who is the referee in this treaty process.
- Spain and Portugal will argue their cases first.
- Why would Spain and Portugal think that they have exclusive rights to the newly found lands?
- What expenses have Spain and Portugal incurred as a result of finding these lands?
- Other nations make arguments for inclusion in the treaty.
- What could be their arguments against exclusive rights?

After observing the skits performed by fellow students, the class discussed their insights. Through drama, they posed the following possibilities:

- Some countries felt entitled to new lands because they had spent a good deal of money to finance the expeditions.
- Other countries argued that they should all share the new land because sharing was a good thing for Christian countries to do.
- Some countries argued that if Spain and Portugal gained exclusive rights, they might use their wealth to threaten other European nations.

Ordinarily, these ideas would be too complex for 10-year-olds to comprehend. Often such details are listed and students simply memorize and recite them for tests. On the other hand, acting out the historical drama was easy for the students. Because they were play-acting, not answering test questions, they were comfortable making inferences. When they reflected on their dramas through writing newspaper reports, most displayed a complex understanding of the Age of Exploration. They were able to explain the European explorers' milieu, as well as the political games, moralistic arguments, and material temptations that guided their enterprises.

Once historical empathy was practised, the class was ready to question the legacy of the European attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples. The objective was to help students make critical judgments about history. To avoid simple moralistic and anachronistic conclusions about Europeans, I immersed my class in the sixteenth century Vatican debates over human rights.

To experience the multiple perspectives of Europeans, the class first played the part of the Dominican friars, whose mission was to protect the indigenous peoples in the Spanish colonies. The actions of these priests are well documented in the writings of Bartolome de las Casas and *Re-thinking Columbus*. Once briefed, the students were asked to act the roles of opposing historical characters and to debate the inhumane treatment of the Native people by their conquerors.

These activities helped students understand the pluralism of European interests existing during this era. Students came to appreciate that not all Europeans were insensitive toward Native peoples. This sympathetic awareness allowed the class to conduct a balanced investigation into controversial and genocidal actions. Refraining from making judgments about Europeans in general also shows students that moral judgment is not historically relative. Within every epoch, people took risks and stood up against injustice.

Cultivating a sympathetic attitude, even when it results in moral outrage, can be a valid educational goal. To help students become active members of society, education should address complacency. For example, one student who expressed a fatalistic view of history said, "If Columbus had not enslaved the Natives, someone else would have." Bringing out the story of the Dominicans provides an alternative to historical fatalism. We learn that atrocities are often challenged by protest. Witnessing the history of protest shows it to be a legitimate reaction against injustice. It also illustrates the diverse obligations of citizenship.

Developing historical consciousness is not only about investigating moral issues; it is also about historical literacy, i.e., exploring truths by juxtaposing divergent versions of the same event. But what of those events that are without documented alternative perspectives?

Traditional historians have paid little attention to Native history, partially because few written records remain. With little or no alternative accounts to study, it appears impossible to develop proper historical consciousness about Native peoples. Must we limit ourselves to a single version of history, even when that version was written by outsiders?

The primary chroniclers of Native history were the French Jesuits. These historians were openly hostile to First Nations' beliefs and customs. Hence, accounts of the "massacre" of the Wendats by the Haudenenshoni may have been biased. To find an alternative account of this period, we can emulate the work of ethno-historians.

As Bruce Trigger, the renowned authority on Iroquois history, says "Only rarely is enough historical evidence available ...to permit historians to understand behaviour at the individual (level). ...On the other hand it is possible to do more at the level of the interest group. ...Common interests cut across ethnic divisions and united various Indians and Europeans in opposition to their own people."

According to Trigger, the main Wendat interest groups were the factions dividing the peace and war chiefs, each vying for prestige. Next, there were the traditionalists, who favoured old customs, such as communal sharing. Opposition came from those who sought to make individual profits. There was also competition between power groups, for example, the woman, versus the ambitious young men.

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