

President's Message



Echo chambers—since the 2016 US election, I have been thinking about this quite a bit. The impact social media has on every aspect of our lives is overwhelming. Even in just the last five years my teaching has changed, as I now spend a fair bit of time teaching students about media literacy and how to spot the truly fake news and how to find the most reliable sources of information. However, the reality is even I don't take the time to go beyond the headlines, which only give a partial picture.

When journalist Doug Saunders (2018) asked decision makers in various political parties around the world what worried them, they repeatedly said it was that voters

have abandoned absorbing information from traditional media in favour of sound bites on social media sites. And the so-called discussions (aka Twitter fights) between opposing ideologies on social media often do not change anyone's mind; instead, they just reinforce strongly held views.

And while the initial dream of social media may have been a utopian global village, it has made us more tribal instead. The prevalence of social media is tipping countries like the US, Hungary and Italy toward the marginalization of not only minority groups but the government as well. And the algorithms designed to keep us hooked take us to even more extreme ideas, as sociologist Zeynep Tufekci had experienced. She described watching a Trump speech on YouTube only to be directed to increasingly extreme white supremacist sites, and when she watched a speech by Hillary Clinton, she was directed to more videos that eventually led to left-wing conspiracies (Saunders 2018). The Five Star Movement in Italy bragged that their popularity in the 2018 Italian election came primarily from using social media to spread conspiracy theories that resonated

with citizens struggling with economic and social issues.

But this is our reality. We forgot that we became the commodity. "If the product is free, the real product is you" (Wente 2018). Organizations are going to use any information they can to get the advantage they seek, and having biased stories that resonate in our echo chambers are a great way to keep us hooked. Recently at a PL session, the speaker reminded me of a study where people who identified as right or left wing were given a list of items to remember; the researchers found that those who identified as right wing remembered right wing items better and vice versa, showing that our brains are attuned to the message we seek.

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And I have to admit that I am willing to be lured into my echo chamber because it is more comfortable. For generations we have known that people lean toward a confirmation bias when seeking out information. Luckily, I have someone who pulls me out. Ideologically my father and I are on opposite sides of the spectrum. In addition to this, I have to often remind myself that the “moral certainty of my rage must be met with humility about the limits of our knowledge” (Klay 2018). As professionals, we need to seek out differing opinions to understand our world better. As Canadians, we

are so fortunate to have the access to information limited to other people around the world, but it comes with a responsibility. As individuals, we need to avoid being trapped in our own echo chambers, which are digitally balkanizing our society. And the classroom is the best way for us to combat that balkanization in our communities.

References

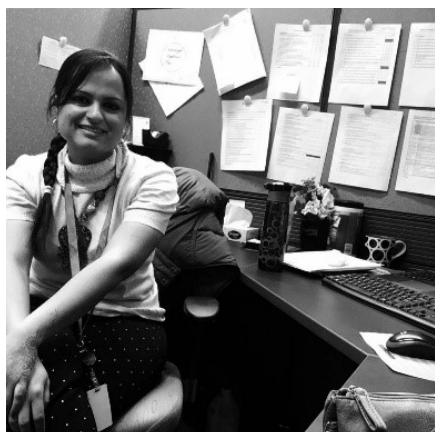
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Jennifer Williams

Letter from the Editor



It’s a pleasure to “meet” you all. My name is Sana Waseem, and I am your new *Focus Newsletter* editor. I will begin by introducing myself a little more. My journey as a teacher began many years ago when I was volunteering in a Grade 5 classroom, and long story short, a student said I was making a

difference in her life. That was the aha moment. Suddenly my life’s purpose felt very clear, and I went on to pursue my education degree as a result. I worked in British Columbia for a few years before moving to Alberta. I now teach at a small elementary school in Calgary during the day, and I am a proud dog mom by night. In my spare time, I enjoy creating all kinds of art, arts and crafts projects, reading, playing the piano and being involved with the ATA. I am very excited to be here and hope I can fill the shoes of our previous editor, David Scott.

As I mention Dave’s name, I’d like to take this moment to acknowledge his fantastic work. On behalf of the entire Social Studies Council, I would like to thank Dave for all his wonderful work on the newsletter over the years. He has been an

integral part of our team and we are sad to see him leave. We wish him all the best in his future endeavours!

If you have any feedback or suggestions for future newsletters, please feel free to reach out to me any time.

Make a great day!

Sana Waseem



Activism and Art

Social Justice Education Through Street Art

If graffiti changed anything, it would be illegal.

—Banksy

This quote by world-renowned street artist Banksy was the impetus for the project entitled Street Art and Social Justice that a dedicated contingent of students at Next Step High School in Sherwood Park embarked on last year. Banksy has made a career of creating and staging thought-provoking pieces of graffiti and street art that reflect a social commentary on various issues facing society and the globe. This project, funded by the Aspen Foundation for Labour Education, had similar goals—have students create engaging art pieces that promote awareness and encourage change.

To generate interest and provoke inspiration among the budding street artists, students were first introduced to various types of street art forms including spray paint graffiti, stencil making, sticker art and wheat paste posters. These were

the art forms that some prominent street artists used to get their message across and were modelled after in this student project. Some of the artists the students explored were Banksy, Shepard Fairey of OBEY Clothing, Mr Brainwash and thinkITEM, a local Edmonton street artist who came into the school to work with the students.

Having some knowledge of these street artists and art forms, students then discussed what defines social justice and what constitutes a social justice issue. The social studies teacher took on this task as she led the students on the path to the issues that included poverty, racism, gun control, death penalty, global warming, sexism and domestic violence. Identifying these issues then allowed each student to research it and build an image library in order to collect pictures to create their art pieces.

The completion of this library signalled the beginning of the creative process, led by local artist Adrieen Koleric (aka thinkITEM).

He tasked the students to choose one or two defining images and use these to decorate their works, which included an album cover, pin pack, sticker pack and T-shirt stencil. Students worked on this collection of pieces over two months and once complete created a portfolio of sorts in the school for all to see.

Overall, this project was very engaging and interesting for the students. It raised awareness on some issues, generated some interesting discussions and gave them a sense of pride in their work. In the words of one student, “I learned more about how graffiti and art can be a unique way to express an opinion and learned about the many important social issues and saw how my peers visualized them.” Many thanks go out to Gary and the Aspen Foundation for funding such an enjoyable project. You can find more information about the grants in support of social justice learning and other resources at www.afle.ca/.

Kristian Basaraba



Some of the album covers on display in the school.

To the Election and Beyond!

Engaging your students in the federal election has never been easier! Leading up to voting day on October 21, you can have your students participate in Student Vote 2019. Students follow the campaign, learn about the issues and cast a ballot in a parallel student election for future voters. Postelection we'll be there to support you in helping

your students make the connection between the election and Parliament. This fall, Elections Canada is launching a new resource: *Digital Skills for Democracy*. In this small-group activity, students learn fact-checking skills for citizenship in an offline scenario simulation. Right after the election, check our website for classroom ideas to connect the

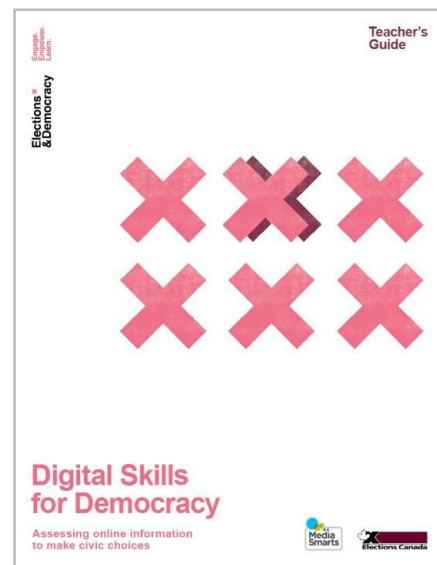
election to the new Parliament! And beyond the election, you can use all of our free resources designed to engage students in democracy at any time. Our suite of resources includes *Does Voting Matter?*, *Civic Action: Then and Now*, *Voting Rights Through Time*, *Elections by the Numbers*, *Geography of Elections* and *Mapping Electoral Districts*. Each resource is designed to take one class period and will engage students in active small-group discussions, and can be used to springboard to deeper inquiry in social studies, math and language arts classes. All of our resources are available in French and English, and we have specific language-learner versions for students in immersion classrooms. Our free resources are available to order at any time at electionsanddemocracy.ca.



Over 1 million students across Canada will be participating in Student Vote 2019 in all 338 federal ridings. Are you registered yet?



All of our resources engage students in small groups to learn about elections and democracy

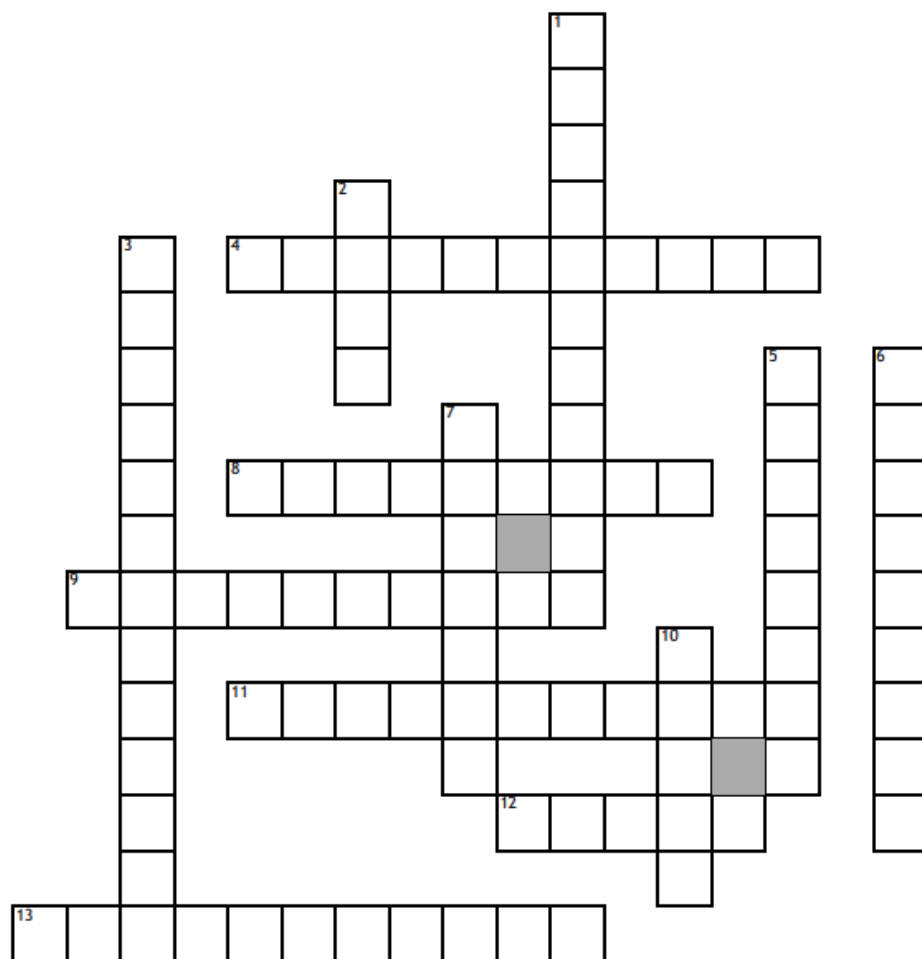


Our newest resource, created in collaboration with MediaSmarts, is available now to order and/or download from electionsanddemocracy.ca.

Rachel Collishaw and
Elections Canada

Are You Smarter Than a 12th Grader?

Test Your Knowledge of the K-12 Social Studies Curriculum!



Across

4 Usually introduced in Grade 4, this is the study of the buildings, containers and other usually buried objects that belonged to people who lived in the past.

8 Introduced at kindergarten, this is a group of people with commonalities that may include culture, language, values and beliefs, interests, practices and ways of life, history, or geographically defined shared space.

9 Studied extensively in Grade 12, _____ is the political and moral philosophy of individual freedom and equality.

11 This humanistic revival of classical art, architecture, literature and learning that originated in Italy in the 14th century is typically studied by Grade 8 social studies students.

12 Also known as the Royal Proclamation, the Treaty of _____ signed in 1763 to mark the end of the

Seven Years' War, is typically studied by Grade 7 social studies students.

13 Typically studied in Grade 9, this economic theory is specifically concerned with the purchase and/or use of goods and services.

Down

1 In Grade 11, students explore the complexities of _____, the process of identification with one's own nation and support for its interests.

2 Studied in Grade 6, this is the correct abbreviation for the French-Canadian Association of Alberta.

3 In Grade 10, students explore historical aspects of _____ as well as the effects of _____ on lands, cultures, human rights and quality of life. This is the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.

5 Legal documents between government and a First Nation that confer rights and obligations on both parties.

6 A long narrow building typically associated with Iroquois societies and studied by Grade 6 students in Alberta.

7 Grade 3 students in Alberta learn about this country in addition to Peru, Ukraine and India.

10 As part of the Grade 2 social studies curriculum, students learn about these Indigenous peoples who live in coastal regions of the Canadian Arctic and in Greenland.

See page 7 for the answers.

Regional Updates

Central Alberta

This past year was quiet due to changes in the Central Alberta Regional. Suzanne Annable (nee Williamson) stepped down as regional president, and Laura McDonald stepped up to fill the role. Suzanne and Laura operated a booth at the Central Alberta Teachers' Convention during the two days in March. This was very successful as many people stopped by the booth to chat about the Social Studies Council. Laura is set to take over and plan events starting this fall.

Suzanne Annable

Northern

We have a new and exciting year upon us once again. As social studies teachers there is a plethora of world events that play right into our teaching. Whether it is trade disputes or changes in governments, these issues help strengthen and support our learning outcomes. Our subject area is diverse, interesting and perhaps at times a little daunting. Therefore, networking with others in the same subject area is paramount. The Northern Regional conglomerated in Grande Prairie on September 27. This was the first event of many planned for this year. Please join us for connecting, cuisine, interlinking and illuminating conversations.

Nik Selwood

Southern Alberta

Hi, my name is Shelley Kirkvold, and I am looking forward to

taking on a new role as the Southern Alberta Regional president. After attending the June meeting, there was no doubt that this council is made of people whose passion for social studies and supporting teachers is at the forefront. Their goals mesh well with my passions of professional development, sharing resources and best practices, collaboration and infusion of First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives.

Here's a little about myself. I have been teaching social studies for 10 years at Catholic Central High School in Lethbridge. I have had the opportunity to meet great students and experience some incredible things through teaching. Some highlights include being a member of our division's Walking Together team, attending the Teachers Institute on Canadian Parliamentary Democracy in Ottawa, and planning and taking students to Vimy 100 and most recently to Germany, Poland and Czech Republic. These opportunities are life changing. On a personal note, I have been married to Terry for the last 30 years; we share three children and four grandsons. Let's just say, life is good.

Please e-mail me at kirkvoldshelley88@gmail.com if you would like to be included on an e-mail list and receive updates on upcoming events in Southern Alberta. Also, look for us at our table at SWATCA.

Shelley Kirkvold

Calgary

Last year was a year of change for Calgary. Jennifer Williams, the former Calgary Regional president, became the Social Studies Council president. Meanwhile, I, Sana Waseem, took over as the Calgary Regional president and *Focus Newsletter* editor. We had some good events and outreach in the Calgary area last year. We were at the Specialist Council Carousel at Mount Royal University, had a wonderful workshop by Facing History and Ourselves, and enjoyed a fun paint night to celebrate being Canadian (just in time for Canada Day).

This year, we will continue to provide many exciting events throughout the year and hope to see you there, whether it's to engage in professional development, network with other professionals or simply to have fun!

Have a question, event idea, want to volunteer or just want to get to know me a bit more? Feel free to contact me anytime at swaseem.edu@gmail.com.

Ciao4now!

Sana Waseem

Edmonton

Big changes are also in the works for the Edmonton Regional. Rachel McLeod is stepping down, and Marlon Kaup will be taking over as the new regional president. He is excited to continue the work Rachel has been doing and will be planning exciting events for the year. Please welcome Marlon!

New Executive Members

Conference Director

Please welcome Jennifer Majak-Gill as our new conference director! Jennifer is a high school social studies teacher with the Rocky View School Division and brings with her a vast knowledge of event planning. She is excited to be on the council and jumped right into her new role. When she's not teaching or spending time with her loved ones, she can be found hard at work organizing our 2019 conference in Airdrie, as well as

planning ahead for our 2020 conference.

If you would like more details about our conferences, or just want to say hi, please feel free to e-mail her at atassconference@gmail.com.

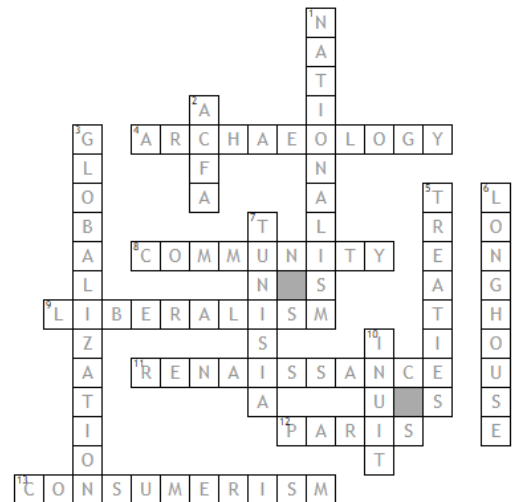
Secretary

Hi, my name is Lorne Maier. I teach senior high social studies at J R Robson School in Vermilion, and I am a newbie on the Social Studies Council (SSC) filling the secretary role. I enjoy travelling

with my wife and kids whenever we get the chance; our latest adventure was in Italy and Greece this summer, which was both hot and amazing! Climbing the Acropolis and seeing the Parthenon up close in 40+ degrees Celcius was difficult but memorable and totally worth it. I am excited to be on SSC executive and look forward to working with some cool teachers from across Alberta. Look for me on Twitter (@bigdaddyteacher) and Instagram (jrrsocial).

Lorne Maier

Are You Smarter Than a 12th Grader? Check Your Answers



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The Alberta Teachers' Association

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