



FOCUS NEWSLETTER

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Message from the President



On behalf of the ATA Social Studies Council (SSC), I wish you all a great 2017/18 school year. It feels to me like the world we live in has changed

quite dramatically since we started our last year. We all know that change is happening faster, with technology disrupting numerous industries and making it harder for us to know what challenges and opportunities await our students in the future. As social studies teachers, we are also witnessing other kinds of disruptions, including challenges to the international order, the renewed appeal of extreme ideologies, the reassessment of historical narratives and monuments, and concerted attacks on the fourth estate. It is the attack on the media and the ubiquity of fake news that is perhaps the most disconcerting for those of us tasked with explaining and providing context on historical events and contemporary issues. How are we, as social studies

teachers, meant to respond in this age of post-truth?

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary recognized *post-truth* as the word of the year, which they defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹

While we have long seen strong emotions associated with various ideologies, today these emotional responses seem to be leading many to suspicion and negativity toward objective truths. As passions heat up, it often seems that we can't even agree on terms of reference. Across the media landscape there is a greater willingness to embrace highly suspect facts, which is perhaps best epitomized by the prevalence and popularity of flat earth theories that seem ubiquitous these days.

As social studies teachers, we are tasked with preparing students to better navigate this post-truth world. Many of us would respond that the key is to explore the world through the use of facts and reliable data. However, this is not as easy as it seems. When the Internet arrived,

it seemed we were entering a brave new world where everyone would have access to endless knowledge and that this would bring about more understanding of and empathy with each other. But while the information does exist and is easily accessible, more empathy has not always been the outcome. Instead, current algorithms used in search engines tend to deliver users more of the same. Our browsing history informs our searches and contributes to ideological silos and echo chambers where beliefs are

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1. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

A Wealth of Resources for Social Studies Educators

Did you know that [LearnAlberta](#) offers hundreds of resources designed specifically to support Alberta's K–12 social studies program of studies? These include a wide range of [critical challenges \(Défis d'analyse critique\)](#) providing classroom activities, in both English and French, aligned with thematic topics at every grade level. Many of the critical challenges include links to a [Modelling the Tools \(Enseigner les outils\)](#) component that offers detailed teaching suggestions and support materials that illustrate how teachers might develop the critical thinking skills and competencies with wide applicability in the social studies curriculum.

Additionally helping to develop competencies required for living and working in the 21st century, specific [Modelling the Tools](#) lessons include learning how to build consensus, how to interpret images and how to assess a website's credibility. To aid teachers in developing critical thinking in social

studies, LearnAlberta also has support materials ([Ressources pédagogiques](#)), online and ready-to-use instruction and assessment materials such as developing effective arguments or comparing significant events. A summary of critical challenges can be accessed at no cost by visiting <http://learnalberta.ca/content/ssocirm/html/summariesoftheccs/index.htm>.

For those of you working within French immersion or francophone classroom environments, *Résumés des défis d'analyse critique* can be found at <http://learnalberta.ca/content/esrm/html/summariesoftheccs/index.htm?grade=0>.

In addition to the above resources, Alberta Education consulted and collaborated with over 500 First Nations, Métis and Inuit community leaders and elders to create the instructional resource *Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum*: <http://learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/>. Through videos,

images, documents and oral sources this incredibly rich digital resource hopes to

- increase teachers' understanding of the expertise and knowledge within the rich and diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures in Canada;
- strengthen teachers' confidence to help students learn from First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives; and
- encourage teachers to explore instructional approaches that honour indigenous perspectives.

For those looking for additional knowledge into Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous Canada is a massive open online course (MOOC) offered by the University of Alberta that highlights national and local Indigenous-settler relations from a historical and critical perspective. Go to <https://ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada>.

Editor's note: websites were accessed on October 10, 2017.

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continually reinforced. As educators it is essential that we are aware of this, and encourage students to examine events and issues from the perspective of others—especially those they do not agree with.

Most important, we need to help our students develop critical thinking skills by which they can become critical consumers of media. Our students need to examine their own beliefs and values and recognize who is shaping them and why. As part of this process, we need to help students question unsupported assertions and reject those who reduce complex issues

into simple slogans and provocative Twitter messages. They need to be suspicious of corporate messaging and how self-interest shapes this messaging. Our jobs as social studies teachers are more important than ever. The problems the world faces today are social studies problems, and we all need to play our part in finding solutions. Good luck to all of you in these challenging times.

Looking ahead to ATASSC events this year, you may have already heard that we will not be having a conference this fall. We will be holding our annual general meeting

on November 18 at the FNMIEC Conference at the Deerfoot Inn and Casino in Calgary. We encourage you to consider attending this conference to gain valuable professional development in an area of study that is so critical to social studies. Many of our council members will be attending the entire conference, which runs from November 16–18. You also have the option of attending just the Saturday (November 18) to get a taste of the conference and also attend our AGM at the end of the day. I look forward to seeing many of you there.

John Tidswell

Message from the Editor



In the president's message, John Tidswell highlighted the challenges facing social studies educators in a post-truth era.

Concurring with this belief, in a recent article entitled "History Educators in a New Era," Peter Seixas, from the University of British Columbia, asserted that "This is a dangerous moment, globally, for the liberal arts, education and research, for democratic values generally, and for history and history education specifically" (2017, para 1). He went on to argue that liberal democratic traditions, such as the rule of law, a free press, and notions of truth, that went largely unquestioned for so long, have increasingly come under attack across the Western world. Populist political agitators now present "alternative facts" to describe provable falsehoods (eg, the size of the crowd at the inauguration of President Donald Trump). This trend has led social studies educators to reconsider what our role should be in this era of alternative facts.

Responding to this question, Seixas offers two key pieces of guidance. The first concerns a renewed attentiveness to the historical narratives we teach to our students. In this regard, he challenges the singular focus of many university professors and historians on the flaws and problems with traditional narratives, and the need to examine the dark side of our national past. In the Canadian context, this has included the ways official government policies, aided by

popular public support, served to perpetuate racial segregation in schools, the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, racialized immigration restrictions, anti-Semitism, the mistreatment of Chinese immigrant railway workers, and the displacement and internment of Japanese Canadians (see Lund 2006, 38). In order to counter the alt-right's apocalyptic view of the world, Seixas argues for, in place of a focus on such stories, a new appreciation for a *qualified* narrative of progress, opportunity and open democracy, which has historically been central to the social studies classroom. He writes:

This does not mean shuffling systemic racism, colonialism, homophobia, and gender inequality back into obscurity, much less silence, but it does call for remembering the promises and obligations of democratic rule ... and the moral virtues and qualities of character that enable both good leadership and active participation in a democratic state (Seixas 2017, para 7).

Seixas also asks educators to reconsider the problem of historical interpretations. With the rise of the disciplinary movement in history education, many educators have sought to help students question the stories told in textbooks. While acknowledging the credibility of such sources, educators have worked to help students appreciate that what they are reading is only one interpretation of what happened in the past, as many other historical accounts are equally valid and possible. Seixas continues to see this work as central to social studies and history education, but he argues

that we also need to help students "understand the *limits* of interpretation, the *constraints* that bind what we say to the evidence that we have, and the importance of *defending* interpretations that are supported by the weight of evidence" (para 5). In making this claim, Seixas challenges educators to move beyond the role of the disinterested observer who gives credence to a wide range of meanings, but refuses to advocate any single one. Some interpretations of the past are clearly better than others, and there is a need to make this clear to our students.

Schooled as I have been in a university setting that has drawn into the question the idea of truth and the validity of grand narratives, I don't necessarily agree with everything Seixas puts forth in this article. However, the argument he presents provides the groundwork for an important debate about our responsibilities as educators in an age where the notion of basic facts can no longer be taken for granted. I invite us, as a social studies community, to continue this conversation in the coming months as we navigate this new world with our students.

David Scott, PhD

References

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- Seixas, P. 2017. "History Educators in a New Era." *Public History Weekly*. Available at <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/5-2017-20/history-educators-in-a-new-era/> (accessed October 10, 2017).

Do You Need More Social Studies in Your Life? Get Involved at the Regional Level!

Edmonton

Your Edmonton Regional Social Studies Council hosts two events every year to provide social studies teachers in the Edmonton area with opportunities to enhance their practice and network with like-minded educators.

During the 2016/17 school year, in November we held a screening of Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis's documentary, *This Changes Everything*. We viewed the film after a light supper and ended the evening with a question-and-answer panel. Teachers discussed the issues illustrated in the film and how and when to use this resource in a social studies classroom. In May, we hosted a tour of Rutherford House, where we had the opportunity learn more about Alberta's history. An entertaining and educational U of A Ghost Walk followed the tour. We ended the night with snacks and drinks at the Sugarbowl.

If you have not previously been invited to our regional council events and would like to be included, please contact me.

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Studies Council*
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Calgary

This year we have a few ideas for activities to inspire our teachers. In the fall, we are organizing a night at the Marda Loop Justice Film Festival—we can send out more details once the film lineup has been finalized. In the spring, we are



hoping to do a Jane's Walk to rediscover some local neighbourhoods. Other ideas include a wine-and-cheese networking night where education students can meet with more experienced teachers. We are also considering hosting an informal discussion with Gwynne Dyer. If anyone has other ideas and would like to help us organize inspirational activities for the social studies community in the Calgary area, please contact me.

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Studies Council*
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Central Alberta

This past year I focused on networking and "learning the ropes." I attended Summer Conference 2016 to help me in the transition into this position. During the coming year, I am looking at a few activity options. The Lacombe Historical Society and the Lacombe Museum do historical walks. The Red Deer Native Friendship Society

offers numerous events including craft nights. I am also hoping to talk to education students at Red Deer College about our council. If you have other ideas about events we could host to bring the social studies community together, please contact me.

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Northern

We are in the process of reviving the Northern Regional Social Studies Council. During the 2017/18 school year we are planning to host at least one and hopefully two events in Grande Prairie. Current ideas on the table include film screenings, guest speakers or even a museum tour. If there are further ideas or a desire to help plan an event, please contact me.

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An Update on the Curriculum Renewal Process, from Alberta Education

Alberta's provincial kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) curriculum, or programs of study, is defined as what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do in each subject and grade. Alberta Education is currently developing future provincial curriculum in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, arts and wellness education.

To assist teachers in their planning, future curriculum will include changes to design and content. In addition, common principles and standards are guiding what will be addressed in future curriculum. This includes a common design for curriculum, with a focus on competencies, literacy and numeracy that are grounded in subject content. These common elements are outlined in *The Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Provincial Curriculum (Programs of Study) (The Guiding Framework)*.

Future provincial curriculum will include some common elements:

- *Subject introductions* that describe the spirit and nature of each subject and explain why the subject is learned
- *Scope and sequences* that outline what students will learn (scope) and when they will learn it (sequence)
- *Essential understandings*, or big ideas, that are broad statements that frame what students will learn
- *Guiding questions* that help create engaging and challenging learning opportunities for students
- *Learning outcomes* that state what students are expected to know,

understand and be able to do in each subject and grade, incorporating competencies and built on a foundation of literacy and numeracy.

Alberta's curriculum development process includes three interconnected phases: shaping, developing and implementing. We are currently in the developing phase. To help in this phase of the process, Alberta Education established curriculum working groups (CWGs) in the six subject areas—made up of ministry staff, K–12 teachers, postsecondary professors and instructors, inclusive education and early learning specialists, and educators—to begin development of draft K–12 subject introductions and scope and sequences that align with *The Guiding Framework*.

After the CWGs developed draft subject introductions and scope and sequences, the next step was sharing them with Albertans for review. The feedback collected from the spring 2017 provincial curriculum survey will help refine the draft subject introductions and scope and sequences and inform the drafting of kindergarten to Grade 4 learning outcomes, beginning in fall 2017. [The cycle of developing and reviewing](#) will continue through to December 2022, the target for completion of the future K–12 programs. Timelines for implementation of future provincial curriculum have yet to be determined, and current curriculum remains in effect until new curriculum is approved and implementation timelines have been set.

Alberta Education will continue to analyze current curriculum, review up-to-date research on teaching and learning, examine what other jurisdictions are doing, address government commitments to include First Nations, Métis, Inuit and francophone perspectives, and review current and previous work with stakeholders. Over the next six years, we will also continue to gather input from stakeholders, partners and the broader community as an integral part of the K–12 provincial curriculum development process. Information on additional opportunities to be involved in curriculum development will be posted on the Alberta Education website.

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A Conversation with Lindsay Gibson on the Curriculum Renewal Process

Lindsay Gibson is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta.

Interview by David Scott



What has been your involvement in the curriculum rewriting process?

I am a member of the social studies curriculum

working group (CWG) established by Alberta Education to write the revised K–12 social studies curriculum. The working group includes K–12 teachers from across the province, academics and representatives from various stakeholder groups relevant to social studies curriculum (eg, museum educators from various museums). Since October 2016, we have met 17 times, including a three-day meeting in July.

How does the process in Alberta compare with the curriculum renewal process you were a part of in British Columbia?

I was also part of the team that wrote (and is still writing) the British Columbia social studies curriculum, so it has been fascinating to compare the curriculum renewal processes in the two provinces.

In terms of similarities, both provinces initiated a process of simultaneous curriculum revision in all major subject areas, which is no small task considering the scale and scope of what is required to accomplish this. Prior to bringing the CWGs together to begin writing

the curriculum, both provinces conducted extensive research into curriculum design and constructed a common architecture and framework for all six subject areas that established common principles and standards to guide the curriculum design process.

The Alberta curriculum design process is more streamlined than it was in British Columbia, and the timelines and deadlines are tighter. In British Columbia we began the writing process in 2012 and the redesigned K–9 social studies curriculum was not officially implemented until September 2016, while in Alberta we started in October 2016 and the Alberta the K–4 curriculum is scheduled for ministerial approval in December 2018.

The curriculum writing team in British Columbia was much smaller (approximately 15–20 K–12 teachers), whereas in Alberta the CWG is more than double this size. The benefits of the large Alberta social studies CWG is that it includes a diverse collection of individuals and groups from all over the province, which undoubtedly gives voice to people and regions typically left out of the curriculum development process. The downside is that curriculum writing is a complicated process of negotiation and compromise, and such a large and diverse group can make this process more time-consuming and difficult. However, I think the benefits of having such a large group outweigh the limitations.

Alberta Education has a large curriculum department and there are many employees who have been involved in organizing the curriculum redesign process to make sure things run smoothly. In British Columbia, the neoliberal policies of the Liberal Party reduced the curriculum department in the Ministry of Education to a small group of people. There was only one Ministry of Education official responsible for the social studies curriculum design process, and as a result, the writing team had much more freedom to design the curriculum in any way we thought best as long as it fit within the confines of the common framework that had been established.

Given your background with historical thinking, what are your thoughts about how things are unfolding to date?

I have worked with the Historical Thinking Project (<http://historicalthinking.ca/>) since 2008, I organize an annual Historical Thinking Summer Institute (<http://bit.ly/2w11z5t>) in a different Canadian city each year, and my research at the University of Alberta focuses on various aspects of historical thinking, including curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. Clearly, I am a strong believer in the importance of history and historical thinking in the social studies curriculum. While it looks as though the “Big Six” historical thinking concepts as conceptualized by Seixas (Seixas and Morton 2012) will be included in the revised social

studies curriculum, it remains to be seen how they will be articulated and how prominent a place they will have. This is one of the areas that I am advocating for in the curriculum writing process. In the revised BC and Ontario curriculum introduced in the last few years, these concepts feature prominently. At the same time, I recognize that Alberta has a long tradition as a “social studies province” and this is very important to many teachers and citizens. Furthermore, I understand that curriculum design is a negotiation and that other members of the CWG might not share my views about the importance of history and historical thinking.

In my opinion, one of the things missing in the Alberta curriculum meetings thus far has been important conversation about the nature of social studies. What disciplines are included in social studies? Should all the disciplines receive equal attention and treatment in the curriculum? What is the relationship between and among the various disciplines included in social studies? Deciding whether a social studies curriculum is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary has important implications for its design. A multidisciplinary approach treats the different disciplines that comprise social studies as separate but mutually supporting. An interdisciplinary approach integrates the knowledge and methods from the different disciplines into a synthesized approach that still draws from aspects that are unique to each discipline. A transdisciplinary approach focuses on creating a fully unified approach that goes beyond disciplinary perspectives.

Roland Case from The Critical Thinking Consortium (<https://tc2.ca/>) has shared a framework that illustrates how Seixas’s “Big Six” historical thinking concepts can be integrated into both an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary framework of

“social studies thinking concepts.” So far, this proposed framework has not received much attention from Alberta Education, but I am hopeful that it will receive more consideration as the curriculum is fleshed out. I am not advocating that this framework be implemented as is, but perhaps it can be adapted to capture the important disciplinary knowledge, concepts and methods that are common to the different disciplines included in social studies.

What do you see as the biggest differences between the current curriculum and the proposed curriculum changes?

This is a very good question. Alberta Education’s rationale for embarking on the concurrent curriculum redesign in all subjects is that the curriculum was in need of updating, especially considering that, depending on the subject, the curriculum ranges in age from 8 to 30 years old. This is an understandable rationale, but I am concerned that the principles guiding the social studies curriculum revision are not clear to the members of the CWG, Alberta’s teachers, students, parents and members of the general public. Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action is clearly a priority for updating the social studies curriculum, but beyond this important aspect, it is not clear what aspects of the previous social studies curriculum are to be retained, and what aspects will be changed.

As you know, in 2015 the ATA conducted a comprehensive survey of K–12 social studies teachers in Alberta, and the 2016 summary report, entitled *The Future of Social Studies—The Voices of Alberta Teachers*, identified several foundational elements from the current social studies curriculum that teachers felt were important to keep, and several changes that need

to be made. At this point in the curriculum redesign process, I am unsure of the degree to which the teachers’ recommendations are a priority. For example, social studies teachers expressed concerns about “too much content to be covered” in the various knowledge outcomes; the negative impact of various aspects of assessment policies and practices; and issues of repetition, appropriateness and topic organization in the scope and sequence. Although a draft scope and sequence was released in May 2017, it is still too early to determine the degree to which these issues will be addressed. As the curriculum design process continues I will continue to advocate for issues that have been highlighted by Alberta social studies teachers as being important.

What is clear is that this new curriculum will be “concept” and “competency” based, but it is still unknown what this will actually end up looking like. One issue I have raised is that there appears to be a lack of clarity among Alberta Education and members of the social studies CWG about the distinction between procedural and substantive concepts that will be included in the curriculum. I am not going to get into an extended explanation about the distinction between the two, but I will say that I am not sure whether this distinction works well in social studies (or other disciplines for that matter), and I worry that it will cause headaches for teachers once the curriculum is implemented.

What are you most excited about in the new curriculum?

I’m most excited about the next steps in the curriculum design process. It’s one thing to outline the draft subject introduction and scope and sequence, but it’s another thing to actually begin writing the essential understandings, guiding questions and learning outcomes.

As someone who loves to design curriculum, the exciting part is when you start to see the curriculum take shape.

You were in the news recently responding to comments that Jason Kenney made about the curriculum rewriting process. Can you elaborate on what claims he made, and your response?

Yes, my friends have been making fun of me for receiving so much media attention in the last few months. One even asked me when my *Mansbridge One on One* conversation was going to air. As an academic who specializes in social studies education, I feel that one of my responsibilities is to speak publicly about issues related to social studies education.

Jason Kenney, who hopes to be elected leader of the newly formed UCP, and David Staples, a columnist for the *Edmonton Journal*, have been very vocal in their criticism of the curriculum re-visioning process in general and the social studies curriculum specifically. Their two concerns focus on what they perceive is a lack of transparency in

the composition and membership of the social studies CWG, and a lack of history, especially Canadian military history, in the draft curriculum scope and sequence. I won't go further into the details of the debates, but I have included a few articles below for your reference.

Articles Critical of the Curriculum Renewal Process:

"Will Our New Social Studies Curriculum Be Written by Experts or Ideologues?"

<http://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/david-staples-will-our-new-social-studies-curriculum-be-whatever-hillary-clinton-supported-in-the-last-election>

"We Need to Teach History, Not YouTube Clips, Says Veteran Teacher"

<http://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/david-staples-we-need-to-teach-history-not-youtube-clips-says-veteran-teacher>

"New Social Studies Curriculum Pushes Social Change, Not History"

<http://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/david-staples-new-social->

[studies-curriculum-pushes-social-change-not-history](#)

Articles in Response to Such Comments

"Volunteers Overhauling Alberta's Curriculum Fear Becoming Subjects of Witch Hunt" <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/alberta-curriculum-overhaul-being-politicized>

"Kenney Engaging in 'Dog-Whistle' Politics in Critique of Curriculum Revamp, Professor Says"

www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/kenney-dog-whistle-critique-curriculum-revamp-1.4241078

"Opinion: There Is No Battle Between Change and History"

<http://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-studying-history-is-learning-about-people-living-their-lives>

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