

# FOCUS NEWSLETTER

A publication of the Social Studies Council of The Alberta Teachers' Association

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## President's Message

Today's Social Studies Council business is as exciting as I have known it to be. Allow me to clarify. Last year, Aaron Stout initiated an in-depth review of council activity and membership needs. As part of this process, Aaron launched an online survey to find out how the Social Studies Council can better serve our membership. Currently, the review is in full swing. Once we have the results, we will publish them in future issues. Suffice to say, we now feel more connected to our members and can develop initiatives and new directions that will truly serve social studies teachers in Alberta. I invite each teacher connected to social studies to consider getting involved in your professional association. There are opportunities to help organize social studies conferences, share classroom ideas in the newsletter and get involved at the regional level.

These are interesting times for Alberta social studies teachers. Consider the following: if the government is willing to reduce the weight of the provincial diploma exams from 50 to 30 per cent of a student's total mark, how could social studies professionals propose even more meaningful changes to governmental assessment policy? In this issue, you will find a number of viable and innovative responses to this question including insights from Kent den Heyer, from the University of Alberta, and work by Lori Gale and her colleagues, at Robert Thirsk High School, in Calgary, who initiated a social action project with all 450 of their Grade 10 students. Whether you are a full- or part-time elementary, junior high or high school social studies teacher, we must ensure that our voice as a professional association becomes a part of shaping future

government policy initiatives. In the coming months, I invite you to add your voice to the work of our council.

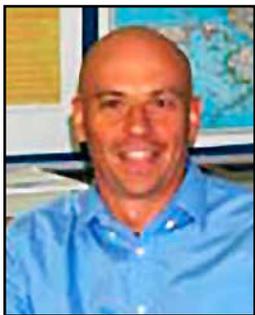
If you would like to get involved in any capacity, please contact me at [rolandhz@me.com](mailto:rolandhz@me.com).

*Roland Zimmerman*

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# From the Editor



David Scott

As the new editor of *Focus*, I would like to thank the Social Studies Council for giving me the opportunity to keep social studies teachers throughout Alberta up to date on the latest happenings and developments in the field. I take over from Craig Harding, whose advice and support is much appreciated. I wish Craig well as he takes on his new role editing the council's *One World in Dialogue* journal, which provides an important space to explore new ideas to inform and shape social studies practice in Alberta.

Over the last three years, I have balanced my time between completing my doctorate and teaching social studies methods courses to preservice teachers in the Werklund School of Education, at the University of Calgary. Teaching these courses has caused me to reflect on what the next generation of social studies teachers needs in order to prepare them for teaching in the Alberta context. After giving this question a great deal of thought, I have concluded that part of my role is to prepare them to negotiate two curricular

worlds: what the late scholar and educator Ted Aoki (2005) called the *curriculum-as-plan* and the *curriculum-as-lived-experiences*.

The first of these, the *curriculum-as-plan*, comes to us from outside the classroom. As professionals, we are responsible for carrying out the provincially mandated curricular directives outlined in the Alberta social studies program of studies. Having taught this program at the Grades 8 and 9 levels for four years after teaching in BC for four years, I tell my preservice students that they are lucky to be working with one of the most innovative social studies programs in the world. Although the Alberta program's emphasis on promoting good citizenship mirrors the language of most other social studies program documents, it brings clarity to this term by asking teachers to help "students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world" (Alberta Education 2007, 1). To give this vision for citizenship life and purpose, the program argues that students "construct meaning in the context of their lived experience through active inquiry and engagement with their school and community" (p 5), whereby "the infusion of current events, issues and concerns is an essential component of social studies" (p 5). As can be seen, the front matter of the program calls on social studies teachers in Alberta to move away from passive forms of citizenship education, toward approaches to inquiry where students engage in deliberation and strategic potential actions

related to issues of concern in their communities.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, this rhetoric provides a laudable and ethical vision for social studies education. However, Ted Aoki cautioned us to also attend to another curriculum world concerned with the lived reality of being face to face with young people every day. The *curriculum-as-lived-experiences* is a world alongside students like Andrew, with his dishevelled shaggy red hair as he arrives late again for class; like Amy, who is always the first one to finish her assignments, then wants to spend the rest of class texting her friends; like Elias, who only recently arrived in Canada after spending the last four years in a Jordanian refugee camp and is struggling with basic English; and like 34 other students who are all not universally on-board with the ministry's mandates for inquiry-based learning and active citizenship. The *curriculum-as-lived-experiences* call on us to not engage the Alberta program as if each class and community of students were the same but to realize that the students themselves hold part of the key of how the ideals of this program should be brought fourth into the unique life world of our classrooms.

Throughout this newsletter, you will find rich examples of educators across Alberta doing just that. Reflecting principles found in Sharon Friesen's (2009) often cited, *What did you do in school today? Teaching Effectiveness* document, these examples—although varied—share many common characteristics: (1) asking students to undertake work that is worthy of their time, personally

relevant and deeply connected to the world in which they live; (2) tackling problems, issues or questions that are of real concern; (3) providing creative mediums for students to represent their learning; (4) creating ongoing opportunities for class dialogue and discussion; (5) weaving informative feedback loops to help refine and enhance works in progress; and (6) organizing public exhibitions to showcase student work.

Taken as a whole, these educators provide an inspiring model of how we can live creatively within the tension of the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived-experiences. I invite you to contact me to share your stories, lesson ideas and resources that would further help us, as a social studies community, navigate these two curriculum worlds. You can contact me at [scott@d@ucalgary.ca](mailto:scott@d@ucalgary.ca).

## Note

1. For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, see Scott, D, and L Abbott. 2012. "Trying to Make the Mission Statements of Social Studies Curriculum Inhabit My Social Studies Pedagogy and Vice Versa." *One World in Dialogue 2*, no 1: 8–18.

## References

- Alberta Education. 2007. *Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education.
- Aoki, T. 2005. "Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T Aoki." In *Chapter 6: Teaching as In-Dwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds*, ed W Pinar and R Irwin, 159–66. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
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David Scott



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# Robert Thirsk High School Grade 10 Social Action Project

Recently Gordon Dirks, the minister of education, announced that the weighting of the Grade 12 diploma exam would be reduced from 50 to only 30 per cent of a student's final grade. This decision highlights the assessment spaces that become available when the focus shifts from high-stakes standardized testing to modes of assessment that evaluate the extent to which students develop such key competencies as problem solving and engaging as

active and ethical citizens in their communities.

Robert Thirsk High School, in Calgary, is one of the many schools across Alberta that has embraced this shift in thinking about what assessment in social studies could look like. Led by Lori Gale, one of the school's community learning leaders, all Grade 10 social studies teachers at Robert Thirsk invited their 450 students to participate in a social action project. Working in groups of five to six, students were asked to identify an issue of concern, research the topic, learn more about organizations addressing this problem, then create an action plan to work in their communities to actively address this issue. The students chose a wide variety of issues to become involved in including animal rights, hunger, water scarcity around the world, depression and anxiety, and positivity

around sexual orientation. The project ended with a celebration evening at the school complete with a band, representatives from various organizations like the Mustard Seed and the Calgary Food Bank, senior citizen attendees from a local retirement home, along with hundreds of parents.

As Lori explained, the project's goal was to get the students engaged in their community as active and ethical citizens, and develop specific competencies like learning how to collaborate, manage projects and solve problems. "I think one of the things that made this project relevant for students is that they were given the choice of identifying an issue that mattered to them. Having students participate in a celebration night that allowed them to show off what they had done to a huge audience was also really meaningful."



*Grade 10 students at Robert Thirsk High School, in Calgary, present their social action project to community members at a celebration evening.*

Abby Shmyrko, a Grade 11 student who took part in this project last year, stated that it was the first time she had ever considered applying the competencies that she always heard about in class. Tackling the issue of hunger in Calgary, Abby and her group raised money and volunteered over 25 hours at a number of organizations including the Interfaith Food Bank and the Mustard Seed. She acknowledged that the majority of students were less than enthusiastic to begin with, but once they got started it was contagious. Asked how her group made sure everyone participated, Abby explained, "When you are engaging in problem solving, negotiation and bringing up meaningful ideas, you can't have one person sitting to the side." She went on to say that this project required a huge personal commitment but was really worth it in the end as volunteering in the community brings out a different side of yourself: "It gave me an opportunity to give back and learn about an issue that is easy to ignore. I learned that 867,948 people across Canada accessed a food bank last year, which really shocked me."

As can be seen, this social action project allowed social studies teachers at Robert Thirsk High School to evaluate the extent to which students really were acting as ethical and active citizens in their communities; competencies that no paper-and-pencil diploma or PAT exam, however well designed, has the ability to assess. If you would like to learn more about this project, contact Lori Gale at [lmgale@cbe.ab.ca](mailto:lmgale@cbe.ab.ca).

## Fostering Collaboration Through the Centre for Global Education



*Terry Godwaldt*

Fulfilling the mandate of the Alberta social studies program to engage students with contemporary issues, where they are positioned as potential agents of change, can seem like a daunting task. It can be hard to find student-friendly resources, for example. Ideally one wants to connect students with experts, who can speak meaningfully to the issue, but such experts can be hard to find when your networks are limited. Generating guiding questions that will hook students into an inquiry can be challenging. If students are blogging, it can be hard to find the time to provide meaningful feedback to literally hundreds of individual blog posts. You know that organizing opportunities for students to share their work in a public exhibition will greatly increase engagement, but this requires a great deal of time and coordination.

Seeing the need to aid teachers in addressing some of these challenges, in 2006 Terry Godwaldt

started the Centre for Global Education (CGE). Based out of Edmonton, CGE has teamed up with TakingITGlobal to work with teachers and students worldwide to explore global issues, whereby students have the opportunity to identify solutions that can shape a better future. Each interdisciplinary, project-based unit provides students with a series of inquiry questions to work through. Along with other resources, CGE provides a specially designed virtual classroom component where students deepen their understanding of these questions through insights from people on the ground working to address particular problems. In addition, teachers and schools that partner with CGE are linked with a team of global expert mentors that provide students with authentic and timely feedback on online postings they are asked to complete. At the end of each project, taking part in international conferences, students present their findings to experts in the field.

Through their Global Encounters program, here are some of the recent issue-based inquiries that students in Alberta have been involved in:

- Middle East in Transition (live from Palestine and Egypt)
- Treadlightly: Live from the United Nations Conference on Climate Change
- International Video Conference on Mental Health
- World Aids Day Video Conference (live from Africa) Global Dignity Day

If you would like to learn more about programs that the Centre for Global Education offers, visit <http://tcge.tiged.org> or contact Terry Godwaldt at [info@tcge.ca](mailto:info@tcge.ca).

# Galileo Educational Network Collaborates with the CBE

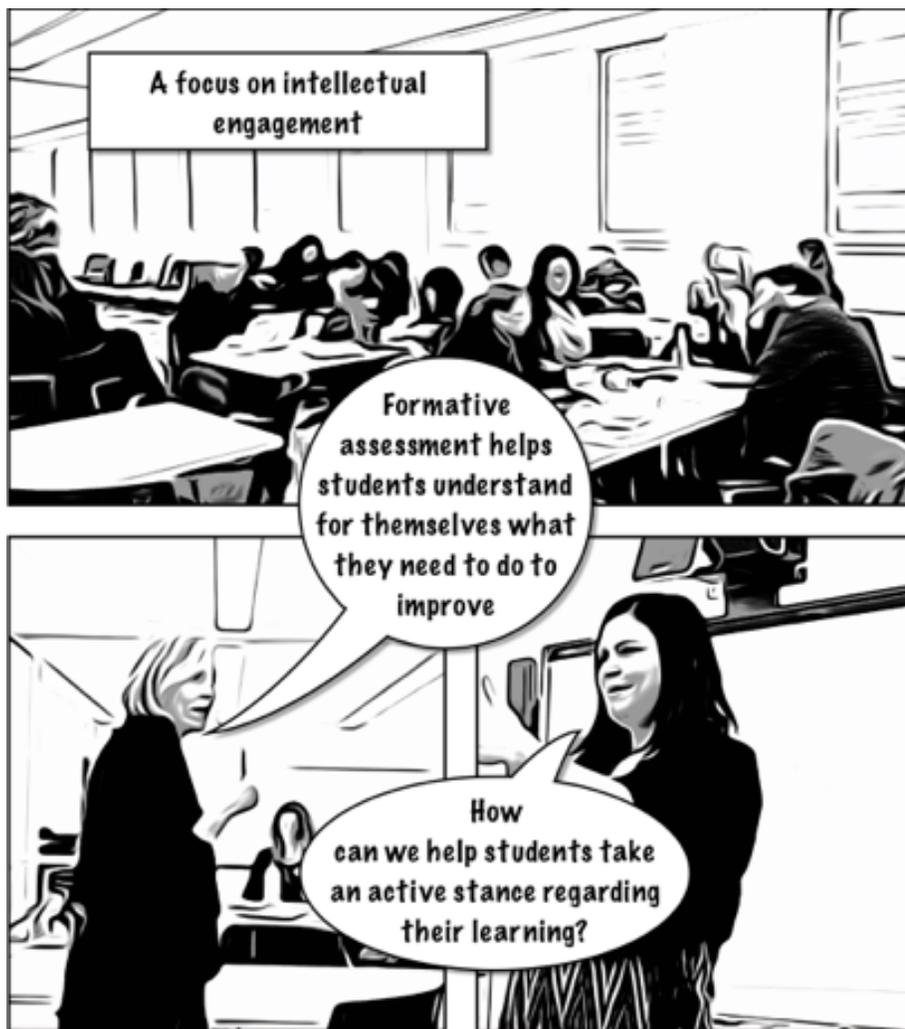
Inquiry-based teaching and learning practices hold a central place in the social studies program of study and the Alberta educational landscape. The program of study argues

that social studies is “an issues focused and inquiry-based interdisciplinary subject” (Alberta Education 2007, 1) where students “construct meaning in the context of their lived experience through active inquiry and engagement with their school and community” (p 5). This kind of language is mirrored in the ministry of education’s recent Inspiring Education policy framework (Alberta Education 2010). Calling for the design of learning to enable students to become engaged thinkers and ethical citizens, with an entrepreneurial spirit, students are invited to

collaboratively create new knowledge as they learn how to “think critically and creatively, and how to make discoveries—through inquiry, reflection, exploration, experimentation, and trial and error” (p 19).

Informed by recent research in the learning sciences, the Galileo Educational Network, based out of the Werklund School of Education, at the University of Calgary, has been working with teachers and students to help realize this vision for education. According to their disciplined-based inquiry rubric (2014), discipline-based inquiry is clearly distinguishable from discovery learning approaches where students are given little or no direction and support. According to Galileo’s rubric, students are engaged in discipline-based inquiry when the learning has been thoughtfully and intentionally designed to reflect the following:

- The inquiry emanates from a question, problem or issue significant to the disciplines and connects students to the world beyond the school.
- The study requires students to observe and interact with exemplars and adults with relevant expertise particular to the field under study.
- Ongoing assessment is woven into the design of the inquiry study, and students receive timely, descriptive feedback in order to deepen learning and strengthen the quality of their work.
- The study requires students to communicate what they are learning in a variety of ways that contribute to their community.



Recently the Galileo Educational Network partnered with the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) to support the work of social studies learning leaders at the junior high and high school levels. A key outcome of this partnership was to support the learning of teachers to be able to design rich tasks and assessment processes in an effort to sponsor greater student engagement. The services of Galileo were enlisted to help cultivate research-informed, evidence-based practices for teaching and learning. Within the high school cohort, Candace Saar and Barb Brown have been helping social studies leaders envision learning environments that more closely mirror how disciplines within the social sciences, such as political science, history, geography and social activism, are undertaken by professionals within these fields.

Social studies tasks are intentionally designed to enable students to encounter junior

versions of how the various disciplines operate outside of schools. Through role-play simulations and other learning activities, students examine contemporary political or controversial issues that require them to take a position and defend it from one of the various perspectives being represented. These types of rich tasks expose students to discipline knowledge, methods, purposes and ways of operating in the world. An example of this is the social studies learning leader who was supported in designing a study that enabled his Grade 11 students to encounter history in much the same way as a historian might. Students were invited to engage with primary source documents from World War I personnel and challenged to create biographies about local heroes. Through examining primary source materials, students were engaged and inspired to uncover the stories behind the documents. This

inquiry provided students a means with which to develop a deeper understanding of Canada's role in WWI and its enduring impact on Canadian identity (see this video and write-up for a further explanation of the project: <http://galileo.org/cbe/canadian-identity/>).

If you would like to learn more about this discipline-based study, the Galileo Educational Network or this partnership with CBE, please visit their website at <http://galileo.org> or contact Brenda Gladstone at [gladston@ucalgary.ca](mailto:gladston@ucalgary.ca).

## References

- Alberta Education. 2007. *Social Studies, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education.
- . 2010. *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education.
- Galileo Educational Network. 2014. *Rubric for Discipline-Based and Inter-Disciplinary Inquiry Studies*. <http://galileo.org/rubric.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2015).

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# The Changing Landscape of Assessment in Alberta: An Interview with Kent den Heyer



*Kent den Heyer is associate professor and program area leader in social studies in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta.*

1. How significant is the change in weighting of the 30-level diploma exams from 50 to 30 per cent for the social studies teaching community in Alberta?

On the one hand, the change of weighting is significant because it acknowledges teachers' professional capacities to assess for learning rather than simply

ranking students based on grades. On the other hand, we in Alberta require a cultural change to view any standardized test as but one indicator of what students can do with the information, skills and experiences they acquire in school.

For example, a key intent and feature of the new PATs (Grades 3, 6, 9) is not just weighting but also timing. Now they are to be administered at the beginning of the school year with the hope that teachers can use information gathered diagnostically to better address students' needs. It will be a shame if they are used instead, as the Fraser Institute does with other standardized tests, to rank schools against each other, conveniently ignoring socioeconomic influences that the research suggests is incredibly important in determining student success.

If these are indeed diagnostic tools, another question I have is, Do we need to spend the huge financial and time outlay to test every student in Alberta? Why could we not, for example, give PATs to five schools in urban Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, rural Alberta and schools serving First Nations populations? Using these categories to collate findings, we could share with all teachers what has been found so as to inform their judgments about what shortcomings they might need to look for with students. We get the information we need, save money and decrease the unreasonable demand on classroom time teachers always face!

2. When Gordon Dirks, the minister of education, made this announcement some people, including those in the media, argued that phasing out high-stakes standardized testing would be ultimately detrimental to students. What do you think of these claims?

Of course, there are those who think that what they suffered or excelled at during their K–12 schooling 20 years ago should be a requisite experience for all students as this will prepare the next generation for what these adults today understand as their real world. There are two related variations of this theme: kids need to know the real-world basics and be prepared for the real world of work to help Canada compete in an increasingly competitive global knowledge economy. Both are complete bunk clichés.

If we want to seriously think about Canada's economic competitiveness, we should have a vigorous adult conversation about how best to balance competing economic interests, appropriate taxation levels and so on. Blaming any competitive disadvantage on teachers and kids in underfunded schools rather than those who actually hold power over policy is, to be kind, disingenuous.

Standardized tests, which test standardized knowledge very well, make so little sense in this era when most adults over 40 could not even name the dozens of new job descriptions that have emerged in economy in the last 15 years, let alone the 15 apps that have been invented while we chat, and a few of which will birth new industries.

Then why do those who claim we need more diverse knowledge-based education for the unpredictable future always claim that we, therefore, need to standardize knowledge as we have always done throughout the 19th and 20th centuries? Very curious! Nothing now is standardized either economically, politically or even in personal relationships. Here is the real world: according to the newest scientific reports, the glaciers that feed the rivers from which we in Alberta drink, feed our crops and use for industry will cease to exist in under 100 years. What can Grade 10 science, geography, social studies and economics tell us in relation to this real world, and what kinds of assessments might we imagine where kids connect basics in these areas to something that really matters?

3. What possibilities are open for social studies teachers in Alberta if we move away from high-stakes testing toward evaluating particular competencies organized around Inspiring Education's 3Es of 21st-century learning (engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial citizens)?

Immediately, we have an obvious contradiction between assessment standardization, or more accurately, one-fit-suits-all grading regimes and the 3Es. Rather than standardized testing, a very 20th-century idea supposedly necessary for 21st-century competitiveness, we

should recall the late Stanford University scholar Elliot Eisner and his work on educational "connoisseurship."

As I understand his work, Eisner asks, if we needed advice on which piece of art we should spend our inheritance on, how would we know someone is an expert whose judgment we should trust?

We would assume that we could trust people's judgment in this decision who have a history of evaluating works in their area of expertise; we would expect that they could publically explain and justify different criteria for their judgments and why one criterion in specific cases matters more than in another case; we would expect a capacity to offer comparative judged value; and, finally, we should expect that connoisseurs make judgments objectively, that is, independent of any other consideration other than the task given and the need for informed judgment.

With standardized exams, the only people who can enhance their connoisseurship are the test-makers and graders, a very small elite discussing a relatively small factor in what affects students' real-world success compared to healthy communities, involved parents, meaningful forms of assessment wherein students might take pride in their work. In contrast, we can look at the work of people like social studies teacher Robert Gardner and principal Dale

Storeyko, at McNally High School, in Edmonton, or mathematics teacher Dave Martin and humanities teacher Joe Bower, in Red Deer, developing forms of assessment that involve discussions between students and parents, as well as public deliberations in the community about what makes for quality work within a particular area. These public and deliberative forms of assessment are much more meaningful and helpful than paper-and-pencil tests that largely evaluate rote subject matter understanding without indicating what students can do with such understanding given any number of personal social challenges we collectively face.

So why not, for example, have students use formulas learned in math and chemistry, theories of biointerdependence learned in biology, Alberta geography and effects of globalization on prices of water, gas, oil, along with studies in urban development in social studies to have students produce public presentations addressing a question like, What is a wise way to think about water and its usage within changing global climate and economic dynamics in Alberta? If you live in southern Alberta, this question is very real world! Evaluating what students produce in response to this question would require all involved to increase their connoisseurship about what makes a piece of student work an A versus a C.

# URLs of Interest

## Editor's Picks

### The Council Home Page

[www.atasocialstudies.ca](http://www.atasocialstudies.ca)

An excellent source of information related to social studies. Check out dates for upcoming conferences.

### Alberta Social Studies Discipline-Based Inquiry Projects

<http://jessicabrown3.wix.com/inquiry-projects>

This site offers 15 unique inquiry projects created by preservice teachers specializing in social studies education in the Werklund School of Education. Aligned with a specific grade level in the Alberta social studies program, each inquiry provides a series of learning sequences, supporting resources and assessment rubrics. Thank you to Jessica Brown for building this website.

### Canadian Social Studies

[www.educ.ualberta.ca/css](http://www.educ.ualberta.ca/css)

Canadian Social Studies is a refereed journal published quarterly online at the University of Alberta. It is a journal of comment and criticism on social education and publishes articles on curricular issues relating to history, geography, social sciences and social studies.

### One World in Dialogue

<http://ssc.teachers.ab.ca/publications/Pages/OneWorldInDialogue.aspx>

*One World in Dialogue* is a professional journal of the Social Studies Council published for social studies teachers. This peer-reviewed journal seeks to explore new developments in the literature toward promoting professional development for social educators in the field.

## Discipline-Specific Sites

### The Galileo Educational Network Association

<http://galileo.org>

The Galileo Educational Network is dedicated to improving student, teacher and leaders learning through creating and researching 21st-century learning environments. See the following link for examples of highly innovative and interesting discipline-based inquiry projects in the Alberta social studies and humanities classroom:

<http://galileo.org/classroom-examples/classroom-examples-high-school-humanities>

### The Historical Thinking Project

<http://historicalthinking.ca>

The Historical Thinking Project was designed to foster a new approach to history education in line with the most recent international research on history learning. This site provides excellent resources and lesson plans for teachers.

### The History Education Network (THEN/HiER)

[www.thenhier.ca](http://www.thenhier.ca)

The History Education Network is a collaborative network that provides educators the opportunity to keep up to date with the latest research, developments and events in the field of history education. Check out their blog at [www.thenhier.ca/en/node/1043](http://www.thenhier.ca/en/node/1043).

### Canadian Geographic

[www.canadiangeographic.ca](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca)

This website has an online mapmaker tool that allows you to create a map of the country or region and layer various human and physical features onto it.

## Organizations

### Aspen Foundation for Labour Education

[www.afle.ca](http://www.afle.ca)

Toward creating knowledgeable and engaged citizens, this site provides instructional supports to educate young Albertans about social and economic issues affecting workers and the benefits of cooperative action through labour and social justice organizations.

### Alberta Legislative Assemblies Educational

[assembly.ab.ca/visitor/teachers](http://assembly.ab.ca/visitor/teachers)

The Alberta Legislative Assembly's website provides a wealth of educational resources for teachers, especially for Grade 6 but also for Grades 9 and 12. This website is immensely valuable.

## Grade-Specific Resources

### Alberta Education Sites

[www.learnalberta.ca](http://www.learnalberta.ca)

[www.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca](http://www.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca)

These sites provide social studies lessons and resources directly linked to grade-specific subject levels. Check out their summaries of critical challenges across grade levels: [www.learnalberta.ca/content/ssocirm/html/summariesoftheccs/index.htm?grade=7](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ssocirm/html/summariesoftheccs/index.htm?grade=7)



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