



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

Volume 44, Number 1

Fall 2016

President's Message



The summer of 2016 was filled with events that rocked the status quo and brought change around the globe. The reshaping of our world also affects both our sense of citizenship and our individual and collective identities. In the past months we have seen political upheaval in Turkey, terrorist acts across Europe and the Middle East, and a vote by Great Britain to leave the European Union. In the United States, racial tensions and violence have marked a summer of discontent fanned by the celebrity-driven candidacy of Donald Trump, who has broken all the rules while giving nightmares to the political class. Obama's historic presidency is also coming to an end, and the

battle to define his legacy has already begun. Soon the United States will either have its first female president or it will have Donald Trump. While it is hard to know how he might govern, Trump's criticism of NAFTA concerns many Canadians, since over 70 per cent of our exports go to the US. Amidst all of this, the central banks of the world have been working overtime to maintain stability and encourage growth in this time of change.

Change is also happening closer to home. On the national front, as we gear up for our 150th birthday celebration as a nation next year, the Trudeau government is working on electoral reforms that could fundamentally change our democratic system. These reforms, the makeup of the cabinet, changes to the tax code, legislation on medically assisted death, the prospect of marijuana legalization and a more international focus have all contributed to a shift in Canadian identity. The Harper years have ended, and a new

style and tone has arrived in Ottawa. In Alberta, Rachel Notley's government continues to legislate a more progressive approach to public policy, while facing criticism from the right at every step.

One proposal by the provincial government of particular interest to teachers is the updating of all K-12 programs of study over the next six years. This announcement came as a surprise to many, since it seemed as though we were already

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undergoing a curriculum redesign process. While the initial press release provided few details, the government did say that there would be opportunities "to provide feedback on the development of new curriculum through hundreds of face-to-face meetings and an online survey planned for this fall" (Alberta Education 2016). As social studies teachers we all need to be part of these conversations. As professionals who know more than anyone else about teaching the subject, it is important that we help to create the changes we want to see within social studies education in Alberta.

With this in mind, the ATA Social Studies Council continues to work to ensure that the collective voices of social teachers are heard in the curriculum changes being made. Over the last two years the Social Studies Council has engaged with teachers across the province through numerous activities and initiatives. Last year, the council recruited Larry Booi and Hans Smits to develop a survey on the current state of social studies in Alberta. Nearly 500 teachers responded with their views on the subject, which we hope will be considered in the

development of new curriculum. In November last year, the council additionally helped organize a Renewing the Promise of Social Studies in Alberta event, for which more than 100 participants assembled in Red Deer to consider the data of the survey and provide feedback. This June, the Alberta Teachers' Association helped sponsor an event at the University of Calgary entitled Re-examining Foundations in Social Studies Education in Canada: An Invitation to Dialogue, where over 50 teachers assembled to listen to and deliberate with a number of speakers who provided their thoughts on key issues, opportunities and challenges in social studies today.

To continue these discussions, in this issue you will be able to learn more about two of the presentations. Hans Smits shares findings from the social studies survey, and Lori Gale presents her thoughts on what a competency-based approach in social studies looks like in practice at Robert Thirsk High School, in Calgary. As the new social studies programs are developed, we will be identifying further opportunities to participate in the process and we encourage you to join us.

In other council news, we are all getting excited about our fall conference, in Edmonton at the

River Cree Resort and Casino from October 13–15. The council continues to work on engaging with more members through networking and collaboration, while advancing diversity, equity and social justice. We invite everyone to get more involved in the Social Studies Council and help ensure that social studies teachers have a powerful collective voice in our profession.

It is clear that we are living in a time of change and that we face many important challenges. Still, as social studies teachers we know that while there are challenges in the world, because we live in Alberta we have many things to be thankful for and have many reasons to feel optimistic about the future. Social studies teachers need to keep providing context and perspective on the host of issues facing the world. It's what we have always done, and our students and colleagues count on it. Keep up the great work, everyone.

John Tidswell

Reference

Alberta Education. 2016. "Alberta Updating Curriculum to Better Prepare Students for Future Success." Available at www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=429254F30CF8B-FC56-7936-ADA544AE037D475C or <http://tinyurl.com/hpzae3k> (accessed September 20, 2016).

Effective IMMEDIATELY, your annual no-cost specialist council membership will no longer expire in August. Instead, it will continue year after year until you change it. To register or change your council membership, log in at www.teachers.ab.ca with your ATA website username and password.

Specialist councils are your source for conferences, networking, publications, resources, workshops, online communities and professional development.

Editor's Note



In June of this year the Government of Alberta announced that over the next six years it plans to implement a new K–12 curriculum framework for six core subject areas, including social studies. Alongside a continued focus on Aboriginal and francophone perspectives, the government plans to develop grade-specific programs of studies that focus on developing core competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration and creativity. The government has earmarked \$64 million to realize this curriculum redesign process, which will include the development of new resources for teachers, and extensive professional development.

A number of issues are raised when we, as a social studies community, consider the implications of this curriculum redesign initiative. The first of these concerns what role educators who teach the subject with young people every day will have in the development of these new programs of study. Connected to this question are issues related to the limitations of the current program of studies and what elements we would want to see continued. Questions

also emerge concerning how we can best prepare teachers for the changes in orientation and outlook that this curriculum redesign process heralds.

Within this issue of *Focus*, several contributors have provided rich insights into these questions. In an extremely illuminating piece, Hans Smits outlines the results of a social studies survey completed by some 500 teachers from across the province. The results of the study show that social studies educators in Alberta are committed to promoting the program's goals of fostering active and engaged citizenship and the recognition of diversity, including Aboriginal and francophone perspectives. The survey additionally showed that teachers are committed to forms of pedagogy that promote inquiry and critical thinking. However, the survey also points to classroom and curricular conditions that make it difficult to realize these aims. If the program of studies contains too much content and too many outcomes to address, it can be very challenging to deeply engage the core aims of social studies. Teachers also pointed to the reality that conditions like class size can hinder their abilities to faithfully carry out the animating vision of social studies in Alberta. These findings thus provide a clear roadmap for Alberta Education to follow as it begins the curriculum redesign process.

In an equally compelling piece, Lori Gale from Robert Thirsk

High School, in Calgary, outlines the various ways her school is trying to address some persistent issues in education that make it difficult for meaningful and relevant social studies education to flourish. Through designing rich tasks that are worthy of students' time, with real-world application, Lori highlights how social studies education can move from an overemphasis on the passive absorption of information that occurs in some classroom contexts toward meaningful demonstrations of competencies and understandings. While some people argue that such a shift can jeopardize the acquisition of important foundational knowledge, Lori demonstrates how such an approach can ensure this aim, while also promoting student engagement as well as more authentic assessment practices.

As we move into the new school year, I encourage everyone to attend the 2016 Social Studies Council conference, at the River Cree Resort and Casino on October 13–15. This will be an excellent opportunity to continue these conversations and further strategize as a community how we can play a meaningful role in shaping social studies practice in Alberta. To this end, Carla Peck, PhD, from the University of Alberta, and I will be hosting a focus group interview session to further discuss themes that emerged in the social studies survey. We hope you can join us!

David Scott

Fall Social Studies Council Conference

The countdown is on for the 2016 Social Studies Council conference at the River Cree Resort and Casino, taking place October 13–15. The theme of the conference is “Advocacy, Activism, Action,” which speaks to what many professionals consider to be at the heart of social studies education. The conference commences on Thursday evening, October 13, with the President’s Reception, followed by a viewing of the film *Elder in the Making*, produced and directed by Calgarian Chris Hsiung. On Friday morning, October 14, the opening keynote message from Dwayne Donald is entitled “Curriculum, Citizenship, and Sacred Ecology: A Call for ‘Real People.’” Dennis Edney, speaking on “The Rule of Law in an Age of Fear,” will deliver the Saturday morning closing keynote. As an added benefit, the conference intends to show off local Edmonton attractions through Friday afternoon excursions prior to the Friday night banquet and evening entertainment.

A full schedule and registration link are available online on the conference website, https://event-wizard.com/AAASocial_Conference/0/pages/85248/.

Make sure to reserve your accommodations at the River Cree Marriott through the Accommodations tab on the website to secure the reduced conference room rate.

We are excited to see you there!

Joy Wicks
2016 ATA Social Studies
Conference Director

2016 Social Studies
Conference





**Edmonton Marriot at
River Cree Resort and Casino
October 13-15, 2016**

For More Information Visit us at:
https://event-wizard.com/events/AAASocial_Conference/

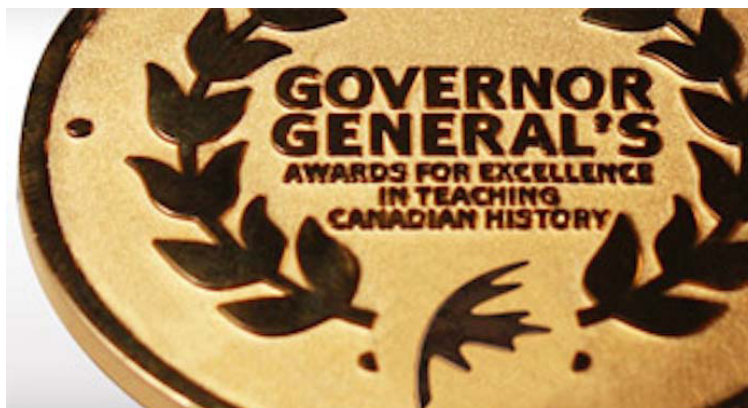
 @social_aaa

Celebrate Canada 150 with Exceptional Teachers in 2017!

Canada's History Society is looking for exceptional Canadian history teachers for the 2017 Governor General's History Awards. Next year will be a tremendous national celebration and this is your opportunity to participate. The awards are presented each year to educators for innovative and unique teaching projects in the classroom that help young people connect with the past. Projects should be original and creative, and have a strong foundation in historical thinking and inquiry-based learning.

Whether you have been teaching in the classroom for three years or thirty, the society is seeking to celebrate leadership and innovation in teaching our young people about Canada's past. We welcome submissions from elementary, middle and high school classroom teachers. The six teaching recipients will travel to Ottawa in the fall of 2017. The award includes an individual prize of \$2,500, a school prize of \$1,000 and a trip for two to Ottawa to attend the awards ceremony at Rideau Hall.

In addition to the awards ceremony, recipients also participate in the Canada's History Forum, where they will have the opportunity to discuss important topics in Canadian history with leading writers,



historians, museum professionals and public officials. The trip concludes with the History Makers dinner celebration, at which all of the 2017 award recipients will be recognized.

Self-nominations for the award are encouraged, as well as team-teaching submissions and schoolwide projects. We also encourage you to discuss your proposal with staff at Canada's History before submitting it so that we can help you put forward the best proposal possible.

Canada's History presents the Governor General's History Awards each year. To learn more about the awards program and past recipients and to review the submission guidelines visit www.CanadasHistory.ca/Awards.

*Joel Ralph
Director of Programs,
Canada's History*

Rethinking Social Studies Education



We are living in a time when there has been a significant shift in the ways that educators are thinking about their work and their students. Amid such times, I am fortunate to work in a building where the focus of teaching is in providing dynamic, real-world experiences for students. Robert Thirsk High School opened in September 2013 with a mandate that included a focus on high school redesign. We were, and are, highly aware of the need for students and teachers to feel the comfort of some schooling traditions, while also pushing forward with new ways of teaching and learning that move beyond the limitations of older traditions that no longer work for our students. In a recent blog post, Will Richardson identified nine “elephants in the room” that speak to some of the approaches to education that no longer work. I want to discuss a few of these, and to elaborate on how the team at Robert Thirsk High School attempts to tackle them.

Role of knowledge/content: As Will Richardson states in his post, a great deal of research has found that most students tend to forget the majority of the content that they encounter in their classes. There are a number of factors that contribute to this phenomenon,

including the fact that students frequently have difficulty retaining information that is delivered to them passively, rather than when they are encouraged to uncover knowledge via research and immersive activities. This concern does not negate the need for teachers to engage in direct instruction of course, but it does precipitate the need to engage students in a variety of different ways.

One of our most important goals at Thirsk is to ensure that students are able to do work that challenges them and allows them to participate in charting a course for the completion of their tasks, as well as ensuring that they are afforded the opportunity to participate in real-world activities. An example of such a task is our Cornell Box task, which our Social Studies 20 classes completed last year. This is a task that was adapted from some colleagues in Lethbridge; it required students to research an episode of ultranationalism and then, once a fairly substantial amount of research had been completed, generate a thesis statement as well as a design brief that would be reflected in their final product. The final submission of a box contained whatever items were appropriate to coherently and concisely communicate the essential information that supported students’ thesis statements. Students were also responsible for writing an artist’s statement that provided a rationale for the decisions they made in the creation of their Cornell Box. By

engaging in multiple steps towards the completion of their Cornell Box, they became extremely well versed in the episode of ultranationalism for which they were responsible and were also able to communicate verbally, visually and in written form.

Promoting student engagement:

Richardson has also identified student engagement as an issue facing educators today. In a major study surveying more than 32,300 students in schools across Canada, Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) found that poor levels of “intellectual engagement” (p 17) is a pervasive problem in all provinces, particularly at the high school level. For example, in language arts and math, intellectual engagement levels for Canadian students drop from an average of close to 60 per cent in the elementary school years to below 37 per cent at the high school level. Because we are aware of these realities, student engagement is of vital concern to us and essentially drives the concept of task design and assessment at Robert Thirsk. Our “Tell Them from Me Survey” results indicate that our students are intellectually engaged to a greater extent than the national average: 59 per cent of our students stated that they are interested in and enjoy learning, compared to the national average of 43 per cent across subject areas.

We attempt to achieve student engagement in a number of ways, including the concerted attention to task design focused on creating

rich tasks, which, as reflected in the Teaching Effectiveness Framework (Friesen 2009), are worthy of students' time and attention. These tasks focus on providing students with multiple entry points, ensuring that the variety of ability levels are taken into account. Looking at the Cornell Box Task, students were given the option to select the events that they would research, as well as the methods to research their events. Further, through their design brief, as well as the final product, they were afforded opportunities for self-expression and creativity.

Rethinking assessment:

Another area Richardson asks us to rethink concerns how assessment has traditionally taken place in many schooling contexts. Our approach to assessment at Thirsk is to develop a focus on learning, rather than on the percentage grade that is typically associated with assessment. In order to achieve this we have several structures in place, including using outcomes assessment. The misconceptions about outcomes assessment are numerous but, in a nutshell, the practice at Thirsk is simply one that provides a complete and specific picture of student achievement. In a typical mark book one might see several

assessment categories—perhaps tests, quizzes and assignments. When a student looks at his or her mark, it may not be clear how it was achieved. It might be that the student did fine on assignments, but the test mark is low. However, communicating that a student is unsuccessful on quizzes or tests tells little about the specific outcomes that were a struggle. In outcomes assessment, I organize my mark book to reflect the four related issues in each social studies course, and the tasks would reflect the specific outcomes dealt with on each. So rather than saying to a student “You struggle on assignments,” I can say “You did well when we looked at classical liberalism, but you struggled when we discussed the transition to modern liberalism.” It is much more specific.

In addition, Thirsk teachers also assess students in a number of competencies. These competencies live in the front matter of each program of studies, and may form a core part of the upcoming curriculum redesign happening in Alberta. The competencies identified by Alberta Education include problem solving, collaboration, management of information and critical thinking, among others. At Thirsk we typically designate

30 per cent of our assessment value to competencies and 70 per cent to outcomes. Each task assesses the competencies that fit best with the desired learning outcomes for that particular assignment. The goal for the integration of competency assessment is to help students develop the skills embedded in each program of studies. This focus forms a key part of our concerted effort to ensure that students develop the skills necessary to be engaged, contributing citizens both while at school and once they leave.

We are happy to share our stories and our work, and we are also more than happy to work with other social studies teams who wish to move in these directions. We feel that we are in the beginning stages of this process, and are continually looking to evolve our work and approach in collaboration with others.

Lori Gale

Lori Gale is a social studies and community learning leader at Robert Thirsk High School, in Calgary.

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The Future of Social Studies in Alberta— The Voices of Alberta Teachers



The current Alberta social studies program has been in place for well over a decade. Citizenship and identity are at the centre of the purposes of social studies, with pedagogic emphases on inquiry, critical and historical thinking, and the recognition of diversity, including Aboriginal and francophone perspectives. The recently published study *The Future of Social Studies—The Voices of Alberta Teachers*¹ affirms the broad support from teachers at all grade levels for a social studies program that has inquiry, citizenship and diverse perspectives as defining purposes of social studies.

With support from the ATA and the Social Studies Council, the study represents the results of an online survey conducted in June 2015. Nearly 500 teachers, from Grades 1 to 12 responded to a questionnaire and to four questions that elicited over 1,600 written comments. The purpose of the study was not simply to elicit opinions about the social studies program nor to focus solely on classroom conditions. Rather, the aim was to explore the complex relationships between the program of studies, which mandates content and suggests

approaches to teaching and learning, and social studies as enacted and experienced in classrooms. The study thus provides a compelling account of social studies teachers' perspectives on the current program of studies: what should be retained and what should be changed. Further, from the perspectives of classroom practice, teachers identified conditions that get in the way of good teaching and learning and conditions that would encourage good social studies practice.

Overall, the results of the study suggest that teachers in Alberta share a strong commitment to the goals of social studies, but certain qualities of the program of studies and conditions and obstacles can deter fuller realization of its fundamental purposes. The study reminds us that the program of studies is only part of a fuller understanding of curriculum. As Ted Aoki evocatively put it, there is a difference between the curriculum-as-plan, such as the program of studies, and the curriculum-as-lived, the complex and vibrant world of classroom practice.² *The Future of Social Studies in Alberta* confirms the importance of the role of a program of studies in outlining and framing the purposes of social studies, but if there is too much prescribed content and too many outcomes, a program can get in the way of attending more deeply to achieving the goals of social studies. Likewise, what

makes social studies work in classrooms requires attention to the conditions for learning, such as class size and support for inclusion, and the ability of the teacher to work collaboratively with colleagues, to have autonomy in planning and to exercise professional judgement about what best works in particular classroom situations.

With the announcement that there will be a review and revision of programs in Alberta, *The Future of Social Studies* signals the imperative to heed the voices of teachers as an integral contribution to developing great social studies curriculum, and that a program of studies must be thoughtfully conceived and constructed to support great teaching and "great schools for all."³

Hans Smits

1 Alberta Teachers' Association. 2016. *The Future of Social Studies—The Voices of Alberta Teachers*. Edmonton, Alta: The Alberta Teachers' Association. The study was conducted on behalf of the ATA Social Studies Council by Larry Booi and Hans Smits. The monograph is available from the ATA, and the results of the survey are available on the Social Studies Council website, <https://ssc.teachers.ab.ca>.

2 Aoki, T. 2005. "Teaching as Indwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds." In *Curriculum in a New Key. The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, ed W Pinar and R Irwin, 159–65. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

3 Alberta Teachers Association. 2015. *Renewing Alberta's Promise: A Great School for All*. Edmonton, Alta: The Alberta Teachers' Association.

GWG jeans were an icon of popular culture in a bygone era. They were produced in the Great Western Garment Co (GWG) factory, a feature of the Edmonton landscape for nearly 100 years. The factory had an interesting history, including many enthralling stories. These stories of immigrant experiences, working women, cross-cultural relationships, corporate innovation, a creative union and globalization are some of the features of *GWG: Piece by Piece—A Resource for Alberta Teachers* that is now freely available to view and download at www.afle.ca.

performed by Juno-nominated Alberta songwriter Maria Dunn. The performance features video footage of women who worked at GWG interwoven with songs inspired by their stories. The link to the complete ballad on YouTube can be found on the Aspen Foundation website under Teaching Resources. The 11 songs in the video ballad can also be accessed from YouTube individually by name. This video ballad is an excellent hour of home entertainment whether or not it is to be used in your classroom.

studies curriculum. These projects and lessons identify Alberta learning outcomes, learning competencies, key concepts and inquiry questions for each grade. Lessons at the lower grade levels are cross-curricular, integrating drama, music, art, English language arts and mathematics. Each project and lesson is based on a song or songs in the *GWG: Piece by Piece* video ballad.

Gary Hansen



Diversity • Equity • Human Rights Diversity • Equity • Human Rights

Specialist councils' role in promoting diversity, equity and human rights

Alberta's rapidly changing demographics are creating an exciting cultural diversity that is reflected in the province's urban and rural classrooms. The new landscape of the school provides an ideal context in which to teach students that strength lies in diversity. The challenge that teachers face is to capitalize on the energy of today's intercultural classroom mix to lay the groundwork for all students to succeed. To support teachers in their critical roles as leaders in inclusive education, in 2000 the Alberta Teachers' Association established the Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee (DEHRC).

DEHRC aims to assist educators in their legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to protect all students and to maintain safe, caring and inclusive learning environments. Topics of focus for DEHRC include intercultural education, inclusive learning communities, gender equity, UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network, sexual orientation and gender variance.

Here are some activities the DEHR committee undertakes:

- Studying, advising and making recommendations on policies that reflect respect for diversity, equity and human rights
- Offering annual Inclusive Learning Communities Grants (up to \$2,000) to support activities that support inclusion
- Producing Just in Time, an electronic newsletter that can be found at www.teachers.ab.ca; Teaching in Alberta; Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.
- Providing and creating print and web-based teacher resources
- Creating a list of presenters on DEHR topics
- Supporting the Association instructor workshops on diversity



We are there for you!

Specialist councils are uniquely situated to learn about diversity issues directly from teachers in the field who see how diversity issues play out in subject areas. Specialist council members are encouraged to share the challenges they may be facing in terms of diversity in their own classrooms and to incorporate these discussions into specialist council activities, publications and conferences.

Diversity, equity and human rights affect the work of all members. What are you doing to make a difference?

Further information about the work of the DEHR committee can be found on the Association's website at www.teachers.ab.ca under Teaching in Alberta, Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.

Alternatively, contact **Andrea Berg**, executive staff officer, Professional Development, at andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca for more information.



The Alberta Teachers' Association

www.teachers.ab.ca

Five great reasons to get (or update) your online ATA account now!

Please encourage teachers you know to get or update their ATA account. Here are some reasons to share with them on why they should do this.

1. Receive bargaining updates

All collective agreements between ATA bargaining units and their respective school jurisdictions expire August 31, 2016. As new negotiations get under way, regular updates and other information critical to keeping you informed of developments regarding bargaining will be posted in the Members Only section of the Association website. To gain access to the Members Only section, you must have an online ATA account.

2. Use ATA library online resources and databases

The ATA library has an extensive collection of books, periodicals, videos and other materials for teachers focusing on educational research and professional development. Library services and materials are available in both French and English. An online ATA account is necessary to log in to our catalogue to reserve books or videos.

3. Vote in ATA elections

Provincial Executive Council conducts the business of the Association and is made up of 20 members, 18 of whom are elected by you. To vote in Association elections, you need an online ATA account.

4. Get no-cost ATA specialist council memberships

As a benefit of ATA membership, active members are entitled to join one specialist council of their choice at no cost. Active members must have an online ATA account to select and join the specialist council of their choice.

5. Print your own ATA member card

The Association is launching online self-serve membership card distribution. With an online ATA account, you will have the convenience of printing your own ATA member card from the Association website when you need it. ATA member cards are useful when your identification as a teacher or member of an association is needed to attend events, receive discounts or be eligible for other offers from retailers and service providers.



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