# Reflections on the Practice of Teaching and Learning Historical Thinking
## *A Self-Study in a Redesigned High School Social Studies Classroom*

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## Abstract

History education in high school, along with the ways in which teachers are engaging secondary students in the learning of history, is a topic of great importance in our current society. Historical thinking is among the key benchmark skills and practices that students are expected to develop in high school social studies, according to the Alberta K–12 program of studies (Alberta Education 2005), but how this mode of thinking is delivered to students is something with which many teachers wrestle. Grade 10–12 social studies educators in Alberta are faced with additional challenges in teaching historical thinking as they engage in a process of high school redesign (Alberta Education 2017). I was curious as to whether engaging in this redesign paradigm shift would entail changes to my practice in relation to the opportunities I provide for students to engage in historical thinking. As part of a graduate course at the University of Calgary, I designed a self-study research project to better understand whether a redesigned learning environment is one that is conducive to the development of historical thinking in students. My observations during this project suggest that incorporating opportunities for student engagement with historical thinking concepts in a redesigned high school classroom require continued, intentional effort, and will not occur naturally. This article provides the background context and a report of the findings of my self-study research, as well as discussion of the impact redesigning pedagogical approaches in task design and instructional design can have on the teaching and learning of historical thinking for social studies teachers in high school classrooms in Alberta.

## Reflections on the Practice of Teaching and Learning Historical Thinking

Historical thinking is discussed in the social studies program of studies under "Dimensions of Thinking" (Alberta Education 2005) and is identified as a benchmark outcome in which students should demonstrate proficiency by the end of Grade 12. The teaching of historical thinking is fundamental to providing students with the supports they need to become not only successful social studies students but also engaged, active citizens. This is valuable, as Wineburg (1999) stated:

… the study of history is so crucial to our present day and age, when issues of diversity dominate the national agenda. Coming to know others, whether they live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium, requires the education of our sensibilities. This is what history, when taught well, gives us practice in doing. (p 93)

As a high school teacher in Alberta for 17 years, I have made the deliberate integration of historical thinking into my pedagogy a focus throughout my career, but I developed much greater interest in it during my graduate studies at the University of Calgary. I became aware of Seixas and Morton's (2013) work *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*, which describes six historical thinking concepts and how teachers could incorporate these into their practice. I wondered if changes to my practice as I engaged in high school redesign would provide more natural opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking. Rather than explore historical thinking through the lens of benchmark skills strictly as defined in the program of studies (Alberta Education 2005), I made use of Seixas's model of historical thinking as a conceptual framework. This framework provided a research-informed model that aligned with the high school redesign effort to promote concept-based instruction. Specifically, I focused on four of the six historical thinking concepts described by Seixas and Morton (2013), which are historical significance, use of primary source evidence, continuity and change, and cause and consequence. Proficiency in these concepts involves designing an inquiry-based learning environment, and this is consistent with pedagogical changes suggested in Alberta Education's (2017) *Mastery Learning* high school redesign document. To understand how I provide opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking, I used self-study as a research methodology framed through the work of Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009), who defined it as "the study of one's practice in order to improve it" (p 100). Through the process of moving to an inquiry-based learning environment, I sought to carry out less explicit teaching and instead began to act as a facilitator and guide as students explored course material. I hypothesized that this environment would naturally lead to more opportunities for engaging in historical thinking. I made detailed observations and reflections on how I assumed certain tasks and instructional decisions might naturally create learning opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking concepts.

# Background

## Engagement with Alberta High School Redesign

The reason to engage in this reflection on my practice came from the increasing interest of many jurisdictions in Alberta to promote high school success. High school redesign is an Alberta Education initiative to support success by identifying nine principles that encourage high school teachers to more intentionally assess learning outcomes of their programs and provide opportunities for students to engage in learning that reflects the subject discipline as it is practiced by professionals (Alberta Education 2017). Nine principles form the core of high school redesign:

- Mastery learning
- Rigorous and relevant curriculum
- Personalization
- Flexible learning environment
- Professional learning
- Meaningful relationships
- Home and community
- Assessment
- Welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment

As the first of these principles, *mastery learning* states that there is a growing need for teachers to become familiar with how to incorporate opportunities for students to gain proficiency in thinking that mirrors that of professionals in the field. I chose to focus on this one principle to frame my reflections because of researchers such as Darling-Hammond (2014) and Ercikan and Seixas (2015), who indicate that the authentic assessment of disciplinary thinking is crucial to the development of 21st-century learners. I believe a deep understanding of this paradigm shift is of particular importance to social studies teachers in Alberta, because we are directly engaged with discovering the best ways to teach history and to engage students in discussions about the relevance of historical understanding to their ability to become informed and active citizens.[1] As historical thinking is directly identified in the program of studies as a benchmark process, I designed my research to determine if some of the changes I was making to my learning environment might affect students' opportunities for engaging in historical thinking.

## Context

My school is located in a large urban centre in Alberta. It has a student body of close to 1,800 learners ranging from Grades 10 through 12. The school has from its inception been focused on the process of high school redesign through professional learning, implementation of technology and design of learning spaces. As a learning leader on our social studies team, I wanted to model pedagogy that embraced the spirit of high school redesign and provided a rigorous attention to the program of studies, both to allow students to have the greatest chances for success in their studies and to allow for open and collaborative discussion with other teachers in my department and the wider school about possible paradigm shifts in instruction. The design of my research as a self-study was intentional to provide a starting point for this discussion.

# Literature Review

Historical thinking is itself a subject of debate as to its definition, its purpose and how students should engage in it. Adding complexity to this debate is the placement of history in social studies. Seixas (2017) calls it a "tug of war" (p 593) between the promotion of a national vision and the creation of engaged citizens. Clark (2011) identifies a debate in the teaching of history between those who argue that knowledge of the past leads to a national identity and sense of citizenship and those who propose that historical epistemology should be studied first. Parsons and Beauchamp (2012) discuss this in their work on competency education in Alberta. They advance the idea that the content in the curriculum of various disciplines, including social studies, needs to be explored through the use of discipline-specific skill sets. To this end, Alberta Education (2016) describes historical thinking multiple times in its document describing competency education in social studies and directly links it to the expression of critical thinking. These documents, however, do not provide a clear definition of what historical thinking actually entails. The Alberta social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005) does not clearly articulate a definition of historical thinking either, but states that students should become able to think historically by developing the skills of analyzing, discerning, interpreting and evaluating in the context of historical evidence across cultures, through multiple sources and narratives, and through identifying patterns of change over time. Osborne (2011) identifies the

fundamental questions of historical thinking as, "How do we know what we think we know? How reliable is our knowledge? What does it really tell us, and why does it matter anyway?" (p 72). In exploring historical thinking, Peck and Seixas (2008) describe two ways of going about the teaching of history. One focuses on the content, which they identify as first-order concepts. This is what teachers will often focus on through direct instruction. Peck and Seixas (2008) include examples of *nation* or *revolution* among these concepts. The other way is what they describe as second-order concepts. These, Peck and Seixas (2008) claim, "provide tools for doing history, for thinking historically" (p 1021). Peck and Seixas (2008) note that these second-order concepts are often not directly explained or explored by teachers. They indicate that there is an assumption among educators and curriculum writers that students will simply become adept at these concepts as they engage in learning the content of the first-order concepts. Gini-Newman (2014) supports the idea that this assumption exists and claims that students must be explicitly taught to think conceptually. This way of teaching thinking, he argues, requires an explicit language for engaging and assessing student understanding. Seixas and Morton (2013) developed this language through a model for historical thinking that suggests that students should demonstrate growth in six second-order concepts:

- Historical significance,
- Primary source evidence
- Continuity and change
- Cause and consequence
- Historical perspectives
- Understanding the ethical dimension of historical interpretations

Erickson, Lanning and French (2017) claim that when teachers create an inquiry-based learning environment with tasks that allow opportunities to engage with these types of concepts, students will develop proficiency in them.

I believe that despite the importance of the debate about how to define historical thinking, the matter of how to provide opportunities for students to engage in this type of conceptual thinking is also critical. Gini-Newman (2014) and Erickson, Lanning and French (2017) support the idea that a conceptual understanding of the discipline of history aligns with the paradigm shift of moving from direct instruction to a focus on mastery learning as it becomes less about what is being studied and more about how students are thinking about what is being studied. Clark (2011) recognized

a gap in the literature about the nature of what actually happens in social studies classrooms to facilitate the teaching and learning of history and historical thinking. My self-study is intended to make a contribution to filling this gap. My findings indicate that I fell victim to the assumptions identified in the literature, as I anticipated that in applying the principle of mastery learning to facilitate historical thinking without providing students with a language to demonstrate their understanding, students would naturally be drawn to second-order conceptual thinking.

## Research Methodology

My initial idea was that by engaging in the paradigm shift of high school redesign and adopting a focus on mastery learning, I would naturally create more space in the learning environment for students to engage in historical thinking. I wondered if I designed tasks and implemented them in a way that highlighted the skills (analyze, interpret, evaluate and so on) described by the program of studies (Alberta Education 2005), would students have opportunities to naturally engage in the second-order concepts of historical thinking that Seixas identified? Fundamentally, this research is focused not on measuring student improvement or the value of an intervention, but on identifying specifically whether I was efficacious in providing opportunities for students to engage in the work of the discipline of history in a redesigned high school setting. This step is critical for understanding where I might best engage in further research to incorporate interventions, assessments or tasks that improve students' understanding of historical thinking concepts.

As stated above, Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) discuss how intentionally reflecting on practice allows teachers to improve. Self-study is a reflective form of research in the social sciences that creates this opportunity because the researcher is also the subject (Samaras 2011; Loughran 2007; LaBoskey 2004). Though conducted by an individual teacher/researcher observing and reflecting on their practice within a very specific context, the intent of a self-study is to share the findings and thus connect to others around them, because the sharing of these findings provides an open insight into the classroom. As Friesen (2009) indicates, teachers improve their practice through sharing with their peers. In choosing to use self-study as a research methodology, I am highlighting the areas of growth in my practice to others who, I trust, will be able to gain insight into their own incorporation of historical thinking in their classrooms, and perhaps

engage in a dialogue to determine best practices. This deep reflection into my practice has provided me with invaluable insight into how I can continue to improve my teaching in ways that are in line with the principles of high school redesign and that provide opportunities for students to engage with historical thinking.

I conducted my research through the use of a research journal, as recommended by Samaras (2011). Journals are defined by Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) as a place to reflect through free-flowing writing, exposing the thoughts, interpretations, feelings and ideas concerning observations of practice by the researcher. I was able to capture reflective moments and make observations of my own practice in the implementation of a task in Social Studies 30-1 that I anticipated would require students to engage with the concept of historical significance. I chose a convenience sample, because this particular group of students was the only level of instruction that I was currently providing. As previously stated, I was not focused on gathering data on students' level of comfort with historical thinking, but rather on how I was responding to the paradigm shift of high school redesign. I made these observations during the first semester of the 2017/18 school year. My journal reflections were made in late September through early October. The high school redesign principles (Alberta Education 2017) recognize that it is most difficult for teachers of Grade 12 courses to take perceived risks in pedagogical change because of the pressure of the diploma exam. Feeling that this could be the case for myself as well, I focused on a short period of time early in the semester for my reflections.

### Historical Thinking in My Classroom Redesign

The elements I specifically focused on were my instructional design and task design. By *instructional design*, I mean the actions I take to facilitate learning. By *task design*, I mean the decisions I make in planning and executing lessons. In recording my notes in my research journal, I reflected on how elements of my practice allowed for opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking.

The most significant change I made to my practice with the adoption of the principle of mastery learning is to shift to a social-constructivist, dialogue-based environment as described by Kim (2010). This environment involves little explicit teaching, and multiple daily tasks focused on group work, feedback and discussion. This redesign is why I wanted to study whether opportunities for engaging in historical

thinking concepts were present in my practice and if this shift had an impact on my ability to provide opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking. I reflected on how my task design and instructional design within this environment allowed for students to naturally and independently engage in discussion of four of Seixas and Morton's (2013) second-order historical thinking concepts. I noted how I allowed students to use primary source evidence, to gain an understanding of the historical significance of the actions or ideas of particular individuals, to understand how moments in the past have a cause and consequence and to realize where continuity and change can be identified in studying the past. I focused on these four concepts because they seemed most likely to be evident in my teaching at that particular point in the course and due to the time allotment for this study.

# Findings

## Overall Findings

As discussed in the literature review, Gini-Newman (2014) claims that students do not arrive in a learning environment with disciplinary thinking skills in place but, rather, that they must be explicitly taught to think in a conceptual way. This self-study indicated that there is a significant amount of truth to that statement as it applies to my own practice. By reflecting purposefully on the extent to which I provide opportunities for students to demonstrate historical thinking concepts, I was made explicitly aware of the surface-level understanding I had of what is necessary for historical thinking to take place. In pursuing an answer to Clark's (2011) question of what happens in social studies classrooms to facilitate historical thinking, it became apparent that though I designed tasks that I initially thought would provide students with natural opportunities to engage in historical thinking, my own perceptions of when this would happen hindered their development. My inquiry-based learning environment allowed me to create robust tasks designed to align with mastery learning, and while they were intellectually engaging, my tasks did not explicitly provide students with a language for historical thinking. This led me to conclude that my task design and instructional design did not naturally lead to student engagement with historical thinking and that it is crucial for teachers to provide students with a language for historical thinking they can use to focus their inquiry.

## Observations on Task Design to Facilitate Primary Source Evidence and Historical Significance

In an example of a task I designed, students were given the inquiry question, "To what extent did events of the 19th century influence the thinking of political philosophers?" Traditionally, I might simply have lectured on the historical background of political ideologies. Applying the redesign principle of mastery learning to the topic, I used a group discussion format for conversations about source material. I distributed the following quote, from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, about checks and balances between executive, legislative and judicial power:[2]

> When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner. Again, there is no liberty, if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive.

*Figure 1. An example of a source document given to students for collaborative sharing.*

Students had a short period of time to engage with peers and create a graphic depiction of how these checks and balances might work in practice and state why the author of the source might be concerned that each branch of government could keep each other accountable. Students were able to collaborate quickly and naturally and then present their findings from where they sat rather than "taking the stage." Previous to this, students had completed reading and discussion of the ideas of prerevolutionary thinkers in France. My anticipation was that they would be able to use their knowledge of the context in which a primary source was written to form an understanding of why a particular individual might make certain suggestions for how society should be governed. I assumed that while students were discussing the political ideas in the source, they would naturally enter into debate about how the source showed evidence of the time in which Montesquieu lived and how that may have influenced his ideas. I observed after this task, however, that

> Students described their process of reasoning why their model of checks and balances worked, but struggled to understand why Montesquieu himself

would have been particularly in favour of these. Most missed discussion of the section of the quote "… apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws," and were not able without prompting to understand the fears Montesquieu had. When I specifically pointed out what he might have been feeling, they were quick to connect it to the political situation in the Ancien Regime … but most seemed satisfied with getting their diagram completed. Though discussion occurred, groups did not engage each other and the space required the presence of a teacher to encourage dialogue connected to primary source evidence. (Journal entry October 19)[3]

In this primary source analysis activity, the design of the learning space allowed opportunities for historical thinking skills to be gained, but I did not provide students with the language to articulate what they were doing.

## Observations on Instructional Design Shifts to Facilitate Thinking About Primary Source Evidence and Historical Significance

Regarding the understanding of primary source evidence, Seixas (2017) paradoxically commented, "We cannot understand the context unless we already understand the context" (p 599). What he means is that it is quite difficult for students to grasp the situation in which a primary source was written or created. Most historical documents were not meant to be found by social studies students centuries later—they were simply something used at a particular time in the past. The historical thinking concepts of using primary source evidence and historical significance are connected to my instructional design choices in promoting mastery learning. Lazonder (2014) identifies the need for scaffolds in inquiry learning to engage learners at their own pace, and I chose to use the flipped classroom model to allow for this.[4] I reflected on the opportunities for students to engage with historical thinking concepts in my adoption of Sams and Bergmann's (2013) flipped classroom model and the decision to regard the textbook as one possible resource among many secondary and tertiary sources for the course. The approach I adopted sought to allow for investigation of multiple sources and removes the impression that there is a specific keeper of knowledge. Baepler, Walker and Driessen (2014) identify the usefulness of the flipped classroom in shifting the focus from teacher centred to student centred, because lectures can be viewed

online at a student's own pace and classroom time is for face-to-face dialogue. Sams and Bergmann (2013), as well as Hertz (2012), describe shifting from a traditional instructional model to a flipped classroom as a way for teachers to reflect on practice, as Dewey suggested, because they are changing the way things have been done and asking if this meets the needs of their students. Self-study allowed me to make full use of this reflective practice. Seixas (2017) states

> … the historical questions that drive the inquiry of the texts set up [a] web of problematic tension involving the relationship between past and present … These are not questions that would have occurred to the historical peoples who will be investigated in order to arrive at satisfactory answers for today. Thus, working with primary sources is never merely a technical problem to be guided by a few algorithms. Rather, it calls into question the complex web of relationships between past and present, and thus between the historical discipline and everyday life. (p 599)

My instructional design strategies of flipping the classroom and removing textbooks as the guide to source material allowed for much greater freedom in how I was able to engage students in both learning by using primary sources and understanding the historical significance of an event. My anticipation with this next task was that, because of this, they would naturally ask why a particular individual's view should be considered historically significant and if there were other views they could seek out. Instead, I observed that

> Knowing that students have had an opportunity to view a video on D2L and look at the PowerPoint notes I would traditionally have gone through with them provides me with a confidence that I will not miss something critical. I realized today that in looking at a quote from Edmund Burke I had not actually told the class the term *conservatism*. From the information they had viewed about Burke the night before, they were still able to read the source and discuss the inquiry question "Why would Burke support the American but not the French Revolution?" They asserted that it was because in the American context, the revolution has preserved many of the traditional values of European society, such as class and private ownership of wealth, where the French had, to a greater extent, done away with these. They argued after reading the line "Liberty does not exist in the absence of morality" from *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that Burke's views were aligned [more] with those of the American crafters of the Declaration of Independence than the

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. (Journal entry October 10)

Through use of the flipped classroom model, I observed that the students came to make hypotheses on their own that these two primary documents were significant to understanding some of the origins of liberal thought and that Burke was correctly placed on the right side of a political spectrum without me ever having taught a traditional lesson on conservative values. What was missed was a natural questioning by students of why Burke was historically significant at all. Without directly identifying a language for historical thinking concepts, the changes to my instructional design did not of themselves incite students to inquire into historical significance. The flipped classroom model provided me with the opportunity to guide students into developing competence in historical thinking, but my reflections indicated to me that students were not naturally engaging in the second-order concepts of historical thinking.

## Observations on Task Design for Cause and Consequence and Continuity and Change

Koh, Tan and Ng (2012) assert, "Teachers who aim for authentic student performance create assignments or assessment tasks that call upon students to construct their own meaning or knowledge through in-depth disciplined inquiry. The tasks are related to real world problems that have meaning and applicability beyond academic success in school" (p 136). They indicate that teachers are "designers of learning opportunities" (p 137) and that "the preparation of students to become critical thinkers, productive workers, and lifelong learners in the new knowledge-based economies requires classroom assessment to move towards constructivist learning approaches to promote students' higher-order thinking" (p 138). Friesen (2009) argues that teachers need to design learning that is intellectually engaging and meaningful, starting with prior knowledge and focusing on teaching conceptual thinking in order to provide students with the ability to flourish in a knowledge economy. Koh, Tan and Ng (2012) say that "authentic assessment tasks should provide students with more opportunities to make their own hypotheses and generalizations in order to solve problems, arrive at conclusions, and/or discover new meanings" (p 140). For Seixas (2017), the historical thinking concepts of identifying continuity and change and analyzing cause and consequence are related to this type of authentic and meaningful work in which students of history should be engaged. Seixas says that "historians assume not that

continuity reigned, but that continuity and change co-existed, and the puzzle is to figure out how much of each there was, for whom, in any particular period in the past" (p 600) and that "concepts or customs that were assumed to be continuous, are probed for change over time" (p 600). In designing tasks allowing for rich conversation, the re-examining and possible rejection of previous ideas as well as a spiralling, nonlinear epistemology, I tried to provide opportunities for students to engage in these historical thinking concepts. An example of this was designing a task for students to explore the historical development of economic liberalism from the industrial revolution to the present. I began by having them engage with a CBC *Ideas* podcast describing the changing nature of work (Eisen and Kelly 2017). My anticipation of the historical thinking in which students would engage is captured in this journal reflection made during planning:

> Today I had a discussion with a student about the ability of laissez-faire capitalism to provide security for workers. The [CBC] podcast I heard a few nights ago was very intriguing and something I think students would have strong feelings about, since it is their future and jobs that are being changed through the adoption of automation. It could work as a hook. I wonder if the ideas of classical liberalism and the perspectives of the speakers on the podcast can be combined into a task where students think about the cause and consequences of adopting an economic system in a society? (Journal entry September 27)

The suggestion of the host was that automated robots are causing a change in the way work is done, creating a second industrial revolution. Faced with this initial provocation, students were asked the following inquiry question: "To what extent are modern economies prepared to deal with the changing nature of work?" Students were tasked with identifying the main types of modern economic systems and connecting these to the ideas of an industrial revolution era economic philosopher. They had to listen to the various perspectives of the guests in the podcast, who had differing views on the way economies had adapted to changes in technology they faced over time and how modern economies might react to automation based on these observations of change over time. They had to link the ideas of at least one of the guests to the development of solutions that ranged from allowing the free market to create new jobs, to government regulation of automation, to union activism. This task asked students to develop the background context (cause) and respond to an inquiry question regarding perceived direct and indirect consequences. The podcast made connections

between the first industrial revolution and the new one surrounding automation. The task allowed students to link the economic theories of classical liberalism and reactions to classical liberalism with modern economic theories and to identify possible areas of continuity and change in how these ideas were put into practice in response to conditions of the 19th century compared to those of the 21st century. The task involved discussion and modelling, because their perspectives were shared back to the larger group at various points throughout to gain feedback. I assumed this task would engage students in a study of continuity and change in examining the longevity of ideological beliefs, and would also challenge the claims of modern practitioners that they are following a particular ideology. On one occasion during this task, I observed that

> Students are skipping through the podcast to mine it for key information rather than listening to the full discussion. How can I encourage them to think about the connections rather than for the "right answer"? (Journal entry October 3)

And on another occasion,

> I intended the task to allow students to explore the changes in economic ideologies that occur in response to historical contexts but they seem content with identifying and naming and less concerned with exploring and contrasting the context of the ideas. I wonder if they are having difficulty thinking about the fact that it was people who caused these systems to function and not the case that the systems are detached from people? Did my design allow them to truly look for continuity of economic ideas through different historical contexts or was my inquiry question not explicit enough? I think they have a good idea of how economic conditions drive new thinking, though, and this is allowing them to ask questions of how different systems such as capitalism might need to be adjusted to incorporate changing circumstances. (Journal entry October 5)

This inquiry is an example of my assumptions that students' engagement with second-order historical thinking concepts would naturally occur in a task that asked them to use research skills to look at historical developments. Upon reading my reflections, however, I find that I did not specifically ask students to use these skills or describe them in any detail. My practice has changed in my planning and thinking about tasks from the perspective of historical thinking, but I do not consistently offer students opportunities to engage in the vocabulary of historical thinking or to articulate the skills they are learning. I will also allow that my

own lack of full comprehension of historical thinking concepts was made apparent through this reflective self-study. In most of my reflections, though I internally wonder if they are beginning to think historically I do not yet directly provide students with opportunities to discuss their thinking or to become cognizant of historical thinking concepts.

## Discussion

Through a self-study of my instructional design and task design as I move to apply the principles of high school redesign to the teaching and learning of historical thinking, it became clear that my practice creates opportunities for second-order conceptual understanding of history, but they are not explicitly named and taught. My design is consistent with the inquiry-based learning environment that is conducive to historical thinking (Seixas and Morton 2013), but I need to be more deliberate in describing the skills to students so that they can articulate them.

Various student comments were recorded in my reflections. Some of these indicate that while they were not, perhaps, becoming articulate in historical thinking, they were nonetheless intellectually engaged. Because I was not consistent with giving students the language they needed to directly understand historical thinking, it is possible that through engaging in high school redesign and adopting principles such as mastery learning, I underwent a paradigm shift and the students did not do so to the same extent. While many students commented that they had enjoyed certain tasks, I recorded this note at the end of September:

> Today a student asked me, "When will we be moving on to the learning in social? We don't really do anything. The other class is already writing their second test. Are we behind?" (Journal entry September 29)

This troubled me; I realized that designing a space where students were comfortable to dialogue with each other still did not encourage them to lose their preconceived idea of what it meant to learn history or social studies. They were pleased with the environment, but they felt concern that they were not engaging in traditional learning and might be disadvantaged. To mitigate this, I note in my reflections of the same day that

> I did not give them direct language such as "You are learning how to think in an important way that we call understanding historical significance," but rather I placated them by saying, "You are learning the same things as the other class but aren't ready for a test yet." (Journal entry September 29)

I have noticed that in adopting the high school redesign principle of mastery learning in relation to historical thinking, my assessment of students learning is based on fewer tasks, which are summatively assessed after many formative feedback loops. This is supported by Koh, Tan and Ng (2012) as they discuss a shift in pedagogy from quantity to quality by using authentic assessment practices. I still use traditional assessments such as multiple-choice tests and essays, but students appear to do well on these traditional assessments as well and have deeper conversations around why they were challenged by particular questions rather than asking why their mark was low. My research here did not focus on assessment, but it has led me to ask very meaningful questions about how to assess historical thinking if I do not provide clear language for students to use and if I do not fully appreciate the concepts myself.

## Significance

I have learned a great deal about where my practice has changed and where it needs to improve to become more intentionally focused on providing students not only with opportunities to engage in historical thinking concepts but also to become articulate about their ability to discuss these concepts. Teachers who are engaged in high school redesign and wonder about assessing outcomes and competencies are encouraged to look at my practice and reflect for themselves as to how teaching historical thinking will change when engaging in a transition from traditional methods of instruction and task design toward the principles of high school redesign.

## Conclusion

To teach historical thinking, it is crucial that teachers have a clear grasp of what they are trying to have students understand. Just including historical research in a task does not generate a discussion of cause and consequence. Teachers must design tasks that intentionally focus on teaching the language necessary for articulation of historical thinking concepts. The flexible and dynamic nature of the redesigned high school learning environment is exactly what is needed for this type of task design to take place. My reflections indicated that students were engaging in critical thinking related to historical knowledge; with inclusion of direct teaching of a language to articulate historical thinking concepts, the learning environment would

be conducive to their ability to think conceptually about history.

Through this reflective process, I have become aware of the need for articulating the exact disciplinary critical thinking skills that I want students to become strong in; this has improved my practice significantly. I suggest that the field of self-study be more widely discussed among history educators, because it is deeply helpful in highlighting and refining practice. I have come to understand that the next step to move my practice forward is to help students to become articulate in their expression of historical thinking. My self-study is offered as a model for how engagement with historical thinking can happen in social studies classrooms in Alberta, but there needs to be intentionality to allow for meaningful articulation of conceptual understanding on the part of both teacher and students.

## Notes

1. In Alberta, the study of history is integrated throughout the social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005). Teachers are tasked with helping students become skilled in historical thinking in such ways as "sequencing of events, the analysis of patterns and the placement of events in to context to assist in the construction of meaning an understanding" (p 9). An understanding of history and an ability to think historically are identified as being necessary for students to actively engage in Canadian democracy. There is not an emphasis on the learning of first-order thinking concepts as defined by Seixas and Morton (2013), although the specific outcomes for some Division I and II grades engage students in understanding their community and national identity through study of specific historical events. In high school, the study of history is part of larger inquiries into globalization, nationalism and ideology. Study of specific historical events, such as the Cold War or the French Revolution, is undertaken to provide context for these wider inquiries. There are six strands of social studies that highlight the various disciplines it comprises (Alberta Education 2005). The strand Time, Continuity and Change links elements of the general and specific outcomes for the various grade levels (K–12) to the learning concepts of "Considering multiple perspectives on history, and contemporary issues within their historical context" (p 6). The study of history as defined by this strand is aimed at helping students "understand and appreciate the social, cultural and political dimensions of the past, make meaning of the present and make decisions for the future" (p 6).

2. Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, completed *The Spirit of Laws*, a treatise on political theory, in 1748. A reprint of the 1752 translation into English by Thomas Nugent is available at https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/montesquieu/spiritoflaws.pdf.

3. This and subsequent journal entries are from the author's research journal, referred to above in "Research Methodology."

4. Sams and Bergmann's (2013) flipped classroom model posits that if students use time at home to view recorded lectures, videos or notes, they can spend time in the classroom on inquiry-based learning. Students access traditional explicit teaching individually, through a digital platform at their own pace. Students engage in tasks involving the practice of the discipline in the classroom in the presence of their teacher.

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