How Should History Be Taught When Confronted by Social Uncertainty? Investing in Diverse Narratives as a Path for History Education

Aaron Stout

Uncertainty is a staple of life in the modern world. The media continues to report on challenges such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, poverty and unemployment, systemic racism, Indigenous concerns and the need for reconciliation, and political polarization.

At the heart of all these issues are questions about what it means to be a just society. How might we, as a society, face these issues?

Unfortunately, many people do not know where to start.

In the largely neoliberal Western world, we have bought into a story about individualism, which promotes the potential of individuals to look after themselves. Yet the problems we face are beyond the ability of individual people to confront. When we consider issues that touch on the fundamental composition of society, we face questions that have deep historical roots, encompass generations of people and are global in scope. These issues cannot be solved in the confines of one's home—or even within the narrow mandate of a four-year political term.

To address the significant challenges of our time, we must learn how to struggle with complexity and consider the common good.

Whereas the study of ethics provides fertile ground for debating what is right and wrong in society, the study of history provides the human context necessary for deliberating on agency and social justice in these uncertain times. The study of history allows students to encounter difference, to understand the colonial structures of society, and to weight the influence of the underlying concepts of progress and individualism (Cutrara 2009; Marker 2011).

Yet the efficacy of history education is dependent on how we conceptualize the discipline. History, as a school subject, is inherently misunderstood by many students, teachers, academics and curriculum writers.

These misunderstandings about history education are blatantly clear in the province of Alberta, which has been working toward sweeping curriculum revisions across subjects from kindergarten to Grade 12.

From 2005 to 2009, Alberta implemented, in stages, a new K–12 social studies program of studies with an issues-based and inquiry structure that prioritized multiple perspectives and intentionally placed skill development at its core (Alberta Education 2005–07; Gibson and Peck 2018).

Beginning in 2009, Alberta's Progressive Conservative government conducted numerous interviews with education stakeholders and then published *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* (Alberta Education 2010). This document outlined a progressive approach to education that was continued under the Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) government, which came into power in 2015.

The 2019 election brought the newly formed United Conservative Party (UCP) into power. The UCP sought to undo the progressive approach to education and, instead, embraced reactionary dialogue about the values of traditional education. The subsequent publicized disputes about

the nature of social studies education revealed diverse assumptions about what history education should be.

From these disputes, often referred to as the history wars, I would like to examine key misconceptions that undermine the role of history education in developing "engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens" (Alberta Education 2005–07, 1).

The first misconception has roots in the belief that content transmission is the most effective way to teach history. In this pedagogical structure, teachers provide students with the content they need to know, through strategies such as lecturing, note-taking and textbook reading, in order to convey a predetermined view of the past. Although curricula across Canada do not prescribe this rote approach to learning history (Alberta Education 2005–07; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education 2018), some politicians and teachers continue to demand that students learn predetermined content.

In October 2020, French (2020) reported on reactions to leaked drafts of the UCP's curriculum proposals. That August, then education minister Adriana LaGrange had revealed that a "core knowledge" approach would be applied to Alberta's curriculum revision. French's article quoted Michael Zwaagstra, a teacher in Manitoba, who argued that prioritizing core historical facts would ensure that "students have enough common knowledge so that they are able to engage with the world around them [and] understand some of the basics of our country." Conversely, Amy von Heyking, an education professor at the University of Lethbridge, asserted that "the expectation that students memorize lists of facts is contrary to everything we know about meaningful learning."

Simply presenting facts is not only uninspiring for students but also an ineffective way to learn. In 2007, Ipsos Reid and the Dominion Institute (2007) surveyed young adults (18–24) on what they knew about Canadian history through a 30-question exam. Subsequently, they reported that 82 per cent failed the exam, which was designed to check for basic knowledge.

These results are similar to an experiment conducted in the United States in 1917 (Bell and McCollum 1917), in which 1,500 students were tested on their "ability to answer factual questions about historical personalities and events" (Wineburg 2005, 190). On average, all age groups scored below 50 per cent.

There is little evidence to suggest that students retain historical knowledge through the content transmission method. This pedagogical misconception trivializes history education.

Another misconception about history education is that students should be required to learn an approved historical canon so that they may become knowledgeable citizens. This perception emerges when public figures, academics and institutions argue for an essential nationalistic narrative.

Recent years have seen much discourse in Alberta around whose history is important. In 2017, Jason Kenney, then a UCP leadership hopeful, criticized the NDP's draft social studies curriculum, saying that it left out the military history of Canada (Champion 2019; Graney 2017). The next year, Staples (2018) bemoaned the proposed curriculum's lack of nationalistic language, stating, "There's not one explicit reference to Albertans or Canadians, let alone any notion that there's value in teaching Alberta history or Canadian history."

Subsequently, drafts of the UCP's social studies curriculum, leaked to the media in 2020, proposed that young children "learn about feudalism, Chinese dynasties and Homer's Odyssey," as well as memorize a "lengthy list of names, landmarks and events," while stating that learning about residential schools would be "too sad" for young children (French 2020).

This debate is not new. In the late 1990s, Canadian historian J L Granatstein (1998) published *Who Killed Canadian History?* In that book, "he accused social and cultural historians of undoing the coherence of the national narrative" (Seixas 2009, 26). The act of uncritically propagating a colonial nationalistic narrative, which perceives present structures as normative, perpetuates "binary notions of insiders/outsiders" (Anderson 2017, 5). If teachers are to take seriously the increasingly pluralistic nature of society, history education must present alternatives to the master narrative in order to critically deconstruct it.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC 2015) outlines an urgent need for all students to revisit the colonial structures of the past. As the preface states,

> Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. (p vi)

A history curriculum that represents colonialism as the norm will continue to cast Indigenous people "as victims

of progress and as unwilling to adapt to the social transformations of the nineteenth century" (Marker 2011, 109).

The content studied in history classrooms is important. When curriculum writers and teachers choose content that embraces multiperspectivity, a pluralistic impression of Canadian society emerges. This approach allows students to "explore these hidden dimensions of our collective stories safely, ethically, and collaboratively" (Cutrara 2009, 100).

Additionally, the portrayal of history as a fixed collection of facts or a single stable narrative does not accurately reflect the fundamental characteristics of the discipline. Burton (2005, 8) asserts that because of the problematic nature of the preservation of archives and historical accounts, historical narratives embrace the subjective aspects of "selection, interpretation, and even creative invention." Segall (1999, 371) argues that "history—a process of inscription rather than description—the emerging literature in critical history has shown us, is active, not passive. Hence, its study requires contestation, deconstruction, and action, not passivity, blind acceptance, and retention."

Historians realize that an objective account of the past does not exist (Novick 1988). Therefore, history is a collection of various accounts, some in conflict with others. The role of the historian is to ask questions, seek evidence and construct arguments about the past. Historians use their expertise to assess and collect available artifacts, archives and oral histories to weave a coherent narrative that addresses their inquiry (Seixas 2017). As time passes, historians ask different questions, find missing perspectives and construct different narratives.

The way we approach the past is not immutable; it is dynamic. Commemoration controversies, such as the removal of public monuments to John A Macdonald (*Globe and Mail* 2018), reveal the necessity of revisiting our understandings of the past in light of the inquiries of the present (Gibson 2017).

I raise these misconceptions not because they are unique but, rather, because they are pervasive. History has been, and continues to be, a subject that reinforces a nationalistic narrative and a colonial way of thinking. Our students face the tension of learning about a colonial past while living in an emerging postcolonial world. As examples, in the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter movements orchestrated protests across North America, calling for a recognition and dismantling of structures of institutionalized racism, and nonprofit organizations and media outlets report on the federal government's broken promises to provide safe drinking water on many reserves in Canada (Gerster and Hessey 2019). If students are to understand and connect with the many diverse voices in society, we must rethink how they engage with the past.

History education is essential. As Osborne (2003, 585) states, "Issues of identity, heritage, and citizenship, all rooted in competing conceptions of the past, have become the stuff of politics." History has the potential to connect students to the complex world they currently live in, but their level of engagement depends on how history is portrayed.

Barton and Levstik (2004, 35) argue that "students will be best prepared for democratic citizenship if they receive a broadly humanistic education." In postsecondary education, history is considered a humanity, as history centres on the establishment of human societies, primary evidence is created by human hands, and history endeavours to retell human stories. Yet my postsecondary students reveal that, in K–12, their experience of history revolved around absorbing content. This is a reality that K–12 teachers also comment on.

In 2015, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA 2016) surveyed social studies teachers across Alberta on the state of social studies education. Most of the teachers believed that much of their class time was dedicated to presenting information for students to acquire, with few opportunities for an in-depth investigation of topics. Teachers perceived this pedagogical approach as being necessary, given the amount of content in the program of studies. As one teacher articulated,

> The Grade 7 curriculum is bogged down with too many knowledge outcomes. I have to make the decision to teach them all poorly or to teach some of them well. Alternative: I would like to see fewer outcomes in the Grade 7 social program of studies, as the time allotted to the course is insufficient to cover them in the depth they deserve. With the amount of content that needs to be covered, it becomes difficult to work in as much critical thinking process work as should occur. (pp 33–34)

If teachers conceptualize history as a humanity, then they need to reframe how history education is experienced by students. To portray history as a humanity, teachers need to reconceptualize what *humanism* means.

For my purposes, I describe humanism as an approach to education that seeks to appreciate the voice, creativity and potential of human beings.

Barton and Levstik (2004) explore the concept of humanism through a few lenses. Classical humanism embraces a philosophical approach that seeks to underscore human perfection, romantic humanism looks to the inner world of the individual, and democratic humanism encourages the deliberation of social justice. These perspectives

all hold in common an appreciation for the agency, integrity and actions of humanity.

Nussbaum (1998, 40) suggests that a humanist education encourages students to see agency and dignity in their own lives and to live an "examined life" in which they are "self-aware, self-governing, and capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings."

Barton and Levstik (2004, 229) argue that humanism fosters a passion and concern for the world that are essential not only for education but also for democracy:

> Without care, we could not possibly engage [students] in humanistic study: Students will not bother making reasoned judgments, expanding their views of humanity, or deliberating over the common good if they don't care about those things. All our concerns—whether as historians, teachers, or students—must originate in the present, because that's all we have; anything we know or believe about history derives from the questions we ask in our own lives today.

Getting students to care about people in the past is a challenge for teachers. It requires an awareness of the power of diverse narratives, as well as historical context. When teachers select individualized historical perspectives that are significantly different from the dominant narratives, students come face to face with the experiences and lives of others.

As revealed by their responses to the ATA's (2016) survey, social studies teachers in Alberta are calling for a curriculum that allows them to honestly incorporate and explore multiple perspectives with their students. As one teacher said,

> If the high school social studies curriculum is going to seriously address issues from a multiple perspectives approach, then it needs to be prepared to accept controversy on VERY sensitive issues in the classroom: for example, Aboriginal history and government policy, multiculturalism, immigration policy, racism, religion, social issues around social progressivism versus conservatism and government policy, sex, sexuality, and gender rights and issues. All these issues are mentioned in the high school social studies textbooks, especially in the SS 301 approved resources, yet they are very often addressed in only the most superficial, politically correct or sanitized manner. Either truly robust multiple-perspectives resources for both students and teachers must be made available in basic-level resources, or teachers will be under-resourced and, potentially, vulnerable to professional conduct attacks. The current focus on issues and inquiry as well as the multiple perspectives are central to learning. (pp 32–33)

Encounters with "the other" have the power to disrupt students' individualized perspective of themselves and, by extension, their group. Farley (2009) characterizes this process as the movement from illusion to disillusion. Once students can encounter the perspective of another, they are ready to embrace a "re-illusion" (p 544) that attempts to resolve the discord. Encountering narrative tension and seeking to resolve it requires humanist attributes such as respect and concern (Nussbaum 2010). Active encounters with the narratives of others develop empathy in students, and empathy can lead students to care (Endacott and Brooks 2013).

Whereas developing care is an externalized reason for a humanist approach to history education, Nussbaum (1998) argues that an interest in the lives of others is an extension of our own humanity. Referencing the Roman philosopher Seneca, she argues that a humanist education frees students to "take charge of [their] own thinking, leading to a Socratic, examined life, and becoming a reflective critic of traditional practices" (p 40). Realizing that the examined life goes beyond individualistic self-examination, she expands:

> Seneca goes on to argue that only liberal education will develop each person's capacity to be *fully human*, by which he means self-aware, self-governing, and *capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings* [italics added], no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin. "Soon we shall breathe our last," he concludes in his related work, *On Anger*. "Meanwhile, while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity." (p 40)

The essential aspect of humanism is the encounter with other people, other perspectives and other world views. The humanist seeks to understand not only themselves but also others. In this construct lies an assumption that although people might live in different times or places, worship different gods, or hold different values, a shared humanness binds them together. Rather than perceiving people as objects or statistics, a desire to seek this shared humanity brings meaning to the past and the present.

Finally, adopting a humanist approach to history education is a corrective to instrumentalism. When historical narrative is used to illustrate a concept, theme or principle, the people involved become faceless actors or literary objects, rather than expressions of human agency. In this use of historical narrative, the study of history becomes an impersonal view into the past.

Conversely, a humanist approach takes a primary source at face value. Although it is important to confirm the veracity of the narrative through other sources, the voice of the

narrative is powerful in itself. Through encountering the voices and experiences of people of the past, students in the present can relate to the past rationally, emotionally and imaginatively.

Thayer-Bacon (1998) argues that critical thinking is often misunderstood as a purely rational process. She writes,

> Reason and imagination do the invaluable jobs of generating and critiquing, but they rely on imagination and emotions to help them. If we forget about our imagination and emotions, we forget about what motivates and inspires us and helps us achieve beauty, goodness and truths. All inquiry begins with emotions and imagination. (p 141)

In educational settings, students are often encouraged to distrust the role of emotions and imagination in thinking processes. In history classes, in particular, they are warned to beware of how presentism (the tendency to view the past through the lens of the present) can distort impressions of the past.

This warning is appropriate, but balance must be sought. Embracing an uncritical presentism can distort our impressions of people in the past, but recognizing our shared humanity can deepen our appreciation of human agency and actions. Therefore, a humanist approach that recognizes the rational, emotional and imaginative capacities of people will consider the study of history as a way to encounter other people who possess passion and dignity.

Given that a pedagogical approach centring on the deliberation of human agency in historical accounts can be defined as a humanist pedagogy, I would like to consider the implications for history teachers.

At the heart of a humanist pedagogy is the content teachers select for their students. Teachers should present students with narratives and accounts that offer a window into an issue or a period in time. These narratives become the starting point for historical inquiry.

Early in my career as a social studies teacher, I was required to teach the concept of national interest. Alberta's social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005–07) specified the use of the First World War as a case study. So I prepared presentations on the causes of the war that reflected the secondary sources I had consulted, and I adapted and developed various textbook reading guides to support my lectures. I also borrowed some Risk game boards so we could re-enact the historic event. During the class, I delivered a lecture that outlined the geopolitical causes of the war in an interesting and informative way. As a result, my students discussed the various geopolitical countries in an anthropomorphized way, seeing them as primary actors in the drama. Many students were engaged in the content and the facts, but others were lost in the barrage of information.

An alternative approach would be to begin with the specific experience of a soldier in the trenches and then extrapolate to the geopolitical forces engulfing him. The Canadian Letters and Images Project website (www.canadianletters.ca) is an archive of personal letters that can be useful for this.

For example, read soldier Harry Morris's letter to his family, written on April 5, 1917 (www.canadianletters.ca/content/document-1972). The letter expresses the tension of the war through the experience of the individual. Although a personal account such as this may lack objective distance, it can reveal human intention, feelings and experiences and offer a uniquely human gateway into the past. Reading from a primary source allows students to enter into a dynamic experience and welcomes them into the historical inquiry process: Why was Morris in such a terrible situation? Why were bombs exploding all around him? Why was he relieved to hear that his injury would send him back to Canada?

Stories from or about individual people not only engage students but also foster deep discussions about concepts such as social justice. In their argument for a humanizing pedagogy, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) stress that students must experience human voice and agency. Stories that humanize (or dehumanize) provide a context for critical engagement.

As an example, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) share Thandi's story. At 14 years old, in South Africa, Thandi was required to write an exam to gain entrance into secondary school. Unfortunately, her family was unable to pay the exam fee. Not writing the exam would, effectively, halt her education. In her narrative, Thandi confesses that she was depressed. When she went outside to be alone, her fellow students ran out to get her and brought her before the teacher. The teacher listened to her story and then paid the exam fee for her. Thandi expressed what that gesture meant to her: "The teacher has given me an opportunity and I grabbed it with both hands. At secondary he followed me and checked my work all the time, and I did not want to disappoint him" (pp 81–82).

Through this short narrative, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) provide a window into the difficulties of poverty, the human act of charity and Thandi's resolve. The narrative, again, raises a number of questions: How does this story reflect political and social apartheid in South Africa? What was Thandi's race? What was education like? What opportunities were open to people? We want to know Thandi's experiences because we have heard her voice. Her story invites students to ask critical questions in a quest to

understand. Rather than a primary source being an addition to a generalized narrative, beginning with a specific story invites students to relate to concepts such as poverty, discrimination and injustice.

Although an individualized narrative can offer a window into the broader historical context, as well as raise important concepts and themes, teachers should intentionally include the multiple perspectives present in a historical topic or period.

Nussbaum (1998, 43) states that people "who cultivate their humanity need a further ability to see themselves as citizens of some local, regional group—but also, and above all, as human beings, bound to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern." The study of history can enable us to embrace a complex view of society.

Van Nieuwenhuyse (2017), in his critique of Eurocentrism, argues that multiperspectivity is essential in the study of history. History education must reflect the tensions of multiple cultures and competing interests in a single context.

Consider how teachers portray colonialism to their students. The narrative of settlers discovering the New World is fraught with problems and inaccuracies. Teachers have a responsibility to highlight the diverse and contradictory perspectives that surround colonial expansion. This involves looking closely at the interconnection and competition experienced by Indigenous communities with the arrival of settler populations. As I have written elsewhere,

> The goal of this approach is to arrive at a discussion of the distinctions of "us" and "them" and potentially arrive at a new "us." This pedagogical theory intentionally contrasts diverse perspectives in history education as a way to explore a broad understanding of human action and intention. (Stout 2019, 126)

As students become aware of conflict, struggle and compromise, they can grasp that current attitudes are informed by antecedents that must be encountered in all their complexity. This humanist encounter with difference allows students to think about the past and present with greater complexity and make sound judgments about the construction of our current society.

In addition to the intentional selection of humanizing content, a humanist approach to history education embraces a critical-thinking approach that values metacognition and imagination.

Nussbaum's (1998) articulation of humanism stresses the value of seeking to understand others in a globalized context.

Endacott and Brooks (2013), explaining the development of historical empathy, assert that students should approach the past through a dual-dimension conceptualization of empathy. They propose that students cannot easily empathize with historical perspectives without engaging in three key considerations:

- First, students need to contextualize the narrative historically. This requires developing a "deep understanding of the social, political, and cultural norms of the time period under investigation as well as knowledge of the events leading up to the historical situation" (p 43).
- Second, students need to construct the perspective they are trying to understand through appreciating a shared humanness. This involves "understanding of another's prior lived experience, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to understand how that person might have thought about the situation in question" (p 43).
- Third, students are encouraged to develop an affective connection, which the authors summarize as "consideration for how historical figures' lived experiences, situations, or actions may have been influenced by their affective response based on a connection made to one's own similar yet different life experiences" (p 43).

Thus, developing empathy for those in the past involves more than just comparing experiences. It also requires critical thinking.

Critical thinking can be defined as reasoning through an issue or a problem to arrive at a reasonable judgment. This intellectual approach embraces metacognition, references intellectual standards, centres on authentic issues and is open to reassessment (Nosich 2012). A focus on critical thinking reinforces essential dispositions, such as open-mindedness and fair-mindedness, that enhance one's ability to engage with complexity (Bailin and Battersby 2010).

Barton and Levstik (2004, 36) make a direct connection between critical thinking and the study of history: "For the study of history to be humanistic, students must be involved in weighing alternatives, determining significance, and reaching conclusions." Students need to be engaged with the problems of history and exposed to the messy or contradictory narratives, the inevitable silences, and the lack of conclusive evidence. The hope is that students, in struggling through this complexity, will be able to construct reasoned, well-supported judgments.

Critical thinking does not occur in a vacuum; it resides in a cognitive domain. A critical-thinking approach can be applied to the rules of scientific inquiry in the same way it is applied to historical inquiry. Each domain has guiding principles that govern how one conducts inquiry, gathers evidence and demonstrates conclusions. This competency-based approach is recognized as historical thinking.

In Canada, the historical-thinking approach has become dominant in history education (Lee 2004; Seixas 2017; Seixas and Morton 2013). This pedagogy is designed to engage students with the procedural concepts, or considerations, historians use to construct and critique historical narratives (Seixas and Morton 2013). Historical-thinking concepts have been included in some provincial curricula in Canada (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education 2018) and continue to be referenced in academic literature (Lévesque 2011, 2016).

Studies have revealed that a pedagogical focus on historical-thinking procedures coincides with students developing more-complex understandings of the concepts of evidence and perspectives and of historical narratives as being constructed (Barton and McCully 2010; Lee and Ashby 2000).

If history education revolved around understanding the construction of historical narratives alone, the historical-thinking approach would be sufficient. However, Barton and McCully (2010, 174) urge teachers to also make history relevant to their students:

> For history teaching to fully meet students' needs, the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills is not enough. Teachers should be conscious of fostering particular dispositions in students through which to frame their engagement with history, however complex and challenging it appears. This would involve making more direct connections between past and present.

This connection between past and present allows students to conceptualize and construct a personal connection to history (Endacott and Brooks 2013; Rüsen 2004).

Further, Cutrara (2009) raises the criticism that the historical-thinking approach overemphasizes "neutral" procedures, while the power relationships and colonial presuppositions embedded in historical-thinking concepts themselves are left unexplored.

Therefore, although historical-thinking concepts can reveal the complexity of historical narratives and encourage students to think critically about the nature of evidence, they themselves can be overemphasized and not appropriately scrutinized. If history education is to embrace a humanist approach, students of the present need to relate to the narratives of the past. They need permission to imagine. Emotions and imagination are essential.

Nussbaum (2006) discusses the importance of literature and the arts as vehicles for exploring and expressing humanist perspectives.

In their consideration of the use of historical fiction in the classroom, den Heyer and Fidyk (2007, 145) define *historical agency* as "an imaginative capacity for shaping intentions, forming choices, and undertaking actions." Historical fiction presents students with a researched historical context in which characters express their intentions, actions and limitations. As students invest in the story and the characters, they have the opportunity for "explorations of beauty, goodness, nobility, and their opposites" (p 150). Although historical fiction may contain historical inaccuracies, the medium, nevertheless, allows students to recognize the agency of people in the past and relate it to their own agency in the present.

For teachers who oppose the use of historical fiction, effective primary source narratives or well-written nonfiction narratives can also be powerful avenues for fostering the deliberation of human agency. Embracing a history education pedagogy that invites students to relate imaginatively and emotionally to historical characters reinforces the argument for fostering historical empathy.

Endacott and Brooks (2013, 45) summarize the value of introducing students of the present to people of the past:

> Historical empathy can ultimately promote a dispositional appreciation for the complexity of situations faced by people in the past and the need to act for the good of others. . . . As a cognitive and affective endeavor, historical empathy can help students develop a stronger awareness of needs around them and a sense of agency to respond to these needs.

History classes can be structured to give students permission to engage their imagination. Students can read and create historical narratives, while embracing an appreciation for the guiding principles of evidence and historical context (Seixas and Morton 2013).

Cronon (1992, 1372), commenting on his own process of writing history, recognizes "the immense power of narrative while still defending the past (and nature) as real things to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it cease being history altogether." If history education reflected meaningful encounters with people of the past, students' imaginations would be as essential as their intellect. Such an environment could engage students in meaningful inquiry and deep conversations about identity and society.

Earlier, I discussed the ongoing debates about history education in Alberta. More than just an academic exercise, discussions around what history students learn and how they learn reflect presuppositions about society.

During curriculum revision, the Alberta government appointed advisors to offer recommendations about how the proposed curriculum should be revised (Appel 2020; Climenhaga 2020; French 2020). The social studies advisor was Chris Champion. In a short piece he wrote for *The Dorchester Review*, Champion (2019, 105) commented on

the focus on including multiple perspectives in Alberta's social studies program of studies:

> The ongoing fad is that we need "more" First Nations "perspectives." Far from being new, this must date from at least the 1970s if my own repetitive West Vancouver experience with *oolichan*, cedar masks, and trickster stories is any guide. The plug must be pulled on the deplorable *agitprop* of the "KAIROS Blanket," which brainwashes children into thinking of themselves as "settlers" stealing the land—the kind of "truth and reconciliation" that is not evidence-based but relies on "knowledge keepers" to "foster truth."

These remarks disregard the perspectives of those who were disinvested of their land, language and way of life. Instead of considering Indigenous perspectives, Champion argues, children should memorize "our stories" and be educated with "Classical, European, and US history because North American societies are offshoots of Europe's" (p 105).

I vehemently disagree with Champion's take. What troubles me most, however, is that his misconceptions about history and society are resonant of the perspectives of others. The Alberta government appointed a person who holds dismissive views about those different from him to provide input on the provincial curriculum that will influence diverse students for the next decade.

Further, Champion's views reflect neither a deepening respect for the complexity of Canadian society nor a realization that there never has been a homogeneous norm in Canadian history. The colonial nationalistic narrative was constructed, and minority perspectives are not prominent in that narrative because they were intentionally excluded.

Axelrod (1997) notes that early education systems in Canada were instrumental in assimilating immigrant and Indigenous populations under the lofty goals of unity, loyalty and duty toward the British Empire. I am deeply concerned that a curriculum based on content memorization and a nationalistic narrative will similarly undermine the vision of a complex society comprising many stories and perspectives.

Contrary to Champion's (2019) view of education, Augie Merasty's (2017) residential school memoir demonstrates how a humanist connection with the past can change people's perspectives.

Merasty reached out to an English professor, David Carpenter, to help him write a book about his experiences at St Therese Residential School, in Saskatchewan. Through the memoir, Merasty conveys the complexities of his residential school experiences, his struggles later in life and his love for those around him. Merasty and Carpenter tell a story that recognizes the complex nature of residential schooling in remote communities, as well as the diverse experiences of children.

In the postscript, Carpenter (2017) reflects on his 14-year collaboration with Merasty and how he allowed his own "white-guy guilt" (p 79) to create a divide between him and his friend. He describes what it means to have a humanist encounter:

> This brings me to the ultimate reward of writing and re-reading Augie's story: I've discovered that it's not just a narrative about victims and victimization, not just a tale of woe in which Euro-whites attempted to force their will on Indigenous people, not just a story that highlights the differences between "us" and "them." This book is also about the things that bring people together. When you strip away the outside appearances, you are left with the common humanity of people locked in a classic struggle to save their children from the evils of coercion, abuse, and cultural extinction. Sometimes I am dogged by questions about how reconciliation might work in a permanent and meaningful way in our country, and when I do, I think about Augie's people, who are always willing and able to show me the way. (p 80)

A humanist encounter with history is an encounter with the people and contexts of the past. History can introduce us to new people who live in a different time. History can encourage us to ponder the world and appreciate complexity. These encounters have the power to be both rational and emotional. As a result, this pedagogical approach has the potential to promote historical empathy, as the present collides with the narratives and contexts of the past. Ultimately, history can remind us that we have so much in common with each other. Through mutual dialogue and understanding, society can be a place where we discuss and deliberate the common good.

References

Alberta Education. 2005–07. *Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Program of studies. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education. https://education.alberta.ca/media/3273006/social-studies-10-12-program-of-studies.pdf.

———. 2010. *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans*. Steering committee report to the Honourable Dave Hancock, Minister of Education. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9780778586104.

Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). 2016. *The Future of Social Studies—the Voices of Alberta Teachers*. Edmonton, Alta: ATA. https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/COOR-101-11%20The%20Future%20of%20Social%20Studies.pdf.

Anderson, S. 2017. "The Stories Nations Tell: Sites of Pedagogy, Historical Consciousness, and National Narratives."

Canadian Journal of Education 40, no 1: 1–38. http://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/2143.

Appel, J. 2020. "Proposed K–4 Alberta Social Studies Curriculum Update Denounced by Experts as Racist." *Toronto Star*, October 26. www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/10/26/proposed-k-4-alberta-social-studies-curriculum-update-denounced-by-experts-as-racist.html.

Axelrod, P. 1997. *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800–1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bailin, S, and M Battersby. 2010. *Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Barton, K C, and L S Levstik. 2004. *Teaching History for the Common Good*. New York: Routledge.

Barton, K C, and A W McCully. 2010. "'You Can Form Your Own Point of View': Internally Persuasive Discourse in Northern Ireland Students' Encounters with History." *Teachers College Record* 112, no 1 (January): 142–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811011200102.

Bell, J C, and D F McCollum. 1917. "A Study of the Attainments of Pupils in United States History." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 8, no 5 (May): 257–74. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0074477. Cited in Wineburg 2005, 190.

Burton, A. 2005. "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories." In *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed A Burton, 1–24. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carpenter, D. 2017. Postscript to *The Education of Augie Merasty: A Residential School Memoir*, new ed, by J A Merasty. Regina, Sask: University of Regina Press.

Champion, C P. 2019. "Alberta's Little History War." *Dorchester Review* 9, no 1 (Spring/Summer): 104–5. www.dorchesterreview.ca/blogs/news/alberta-s-little-history-war.

Climenhaga, D. 2020. "Handpicked UCP Advisors Call for Mention of Residential Schools to Be Erased from Primary Grades' Social Studies Curriculum." *AlbertaPolitics.ca*, October 22. https://albertapolitics.ca/2020/10/handpicked-ucp-advisors-call-for-mention-of-residential-schools-to-be-erased-from-primary-grades-social-studies-curriculum/.

Cronon, W. 1992. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *Journal of American History* 78, no 4 (March): 1347–76. https://doi.org/10.2307/2079346.

Cutrara, S. 2009. "To Placate or Provoke? A Critical Review of the Disciplines Approach to History Curriculum." *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 7, no 2: 86–109. https://jcacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jcacs/article/view/22717.

den Heyer, K, and A Fidyk. 2007. "Configuring Historical Facts Through Historical Fiction: Agency, Art-in-Fact, and Imagination as Stepping Stones Between Then and Now." *Educational Theory* 57, no 2 (May): 141–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2007.00249.x.

Endacott, J, and S Brooks. 2013. "An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy." *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8, no 1: 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-01-2013-B0003.

Farley, L. 2009. "Radical Hope: Or, the Problem of Uncertainty in History Education." *Curriculum Inquiry* 39, no 4: 537–54. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00456.x.

French, J. 2020. "Education Experts Slam Leaked Alberta Curriculum Proposals." *CBC News*, October 21. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/education-experts-slam-leaked-alberta-curriculum-proposals-1.5766570.

Gerster, J, and K Hessey. 2019. "Why Some First Nations Still Don't Have Clean Drinking Water—Despite Trudeau's Promise." *Global News*, September 28. https://globalnews.ca/news/5887716/first-nations-boil-water-advisories/.

Gibson, L. 2017. "Thinking Historically About Canadian Commemoration Controversies." *Active History*, December 4. https://activehistory.ca/2017/12/thinking-historically-about-canadian-commemoration-controversies/.

Gibson, L, and C L Peck. 2018. "The Place of History in the Alberta Social Studies Curriculum." *Active History*, May 9. https://activehistory.ca/2018/05/alberta-social-studies-curriculum/.

Globe and Mail. 2018. "Grappling with John A. Macdonald's Legacy." Editorial. *Globe and Mail*, August 10. www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-globe-editorial-grappling-with-john-a-macdonalds-legacy/.

Granatstein, J L. 1998. *Who Killed Canadian History?* Toronto: HarperCollins.

Graney, E. 2017. "UCP Leadership Hopeful Jason Kenney Talks Curriculum, Qualifications." *Edmonton Journal*, August 8. http://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/ucp-leadership-hopeful-jason-kenney-talks-curriculum-qualifications.

Ipsos Reid and the Dominion Institute. 2007. "What Do Young Adults Know About Canadian History? 10 Year Benchmark Study." News release. www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/2007-11/mr071108-1release.pdf.

Lee, P. 2004. "Understanding History." In *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed P Seixas, 129–64. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Lee, P, and R Ashby. 2000. "Progression in Historical Understanding Among Students Ages 7–14." In *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed P N Stearns, P Seixas and S Wineburg, 199–222. New York: New York University Press.

Lévesque, S. 2011. "What It Means to Think Historically." In *New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada*, ed P Clark, 115–38. Vancouver: UBC Press.

———. 2016. "Why Should Historical Thinking Matter to Students?" *Agora* 51, no 2 (June): 4–8.

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning. 2014. *Grade 11 History of Canada: A Foundation for Implementation*. Winnipeg, Man: Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning. www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/history_gr11/document.pdf.

Marker, M. 2011. "Teaching History from an Indigenous Perspective: Four Winding Paths up the Mountain." In *New*

Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada, ed P Clark, 97–112. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Merasty, J A. 2017. *The Education of Augie Merasty: A Residential School Memoir.* With D Carpenter. New ed. Regina, Sask: University of Regina Press.

Nosich, G M. 2012. *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*. 4th ed. Boston: Pearson.

Novick, P. 1988. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M C. 1998. "Cultivating Humanity." *Liberal Education* 84, no 2 (Spring): 38–45.

———. 2006. "Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education." *Journal of Human Development* 7, no 3: 385–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880600815974.

———. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ontario Ministry of Education. 2018. *The Ontario Curriculum: Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6; History and Geography, Grades 7 and 8.* Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/social-studies-history-geography-2018.pdf.

Osborne, K. 2003. "Teaching History in Schools: A Canadian Debate." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35, no 5: 585–626. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000063544.

Rüsen, J. 2004. "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development." In *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed P Seixas, 63–85. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Segall, A. 1999. "Critical History: Implications for History/Social Studies Education." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 27, no 3: 358–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.1999.10505885.

Seixas, P. 2009. "A Modest Proposal for Change in Canadian History Education." *Teaching History* 137 (December): 26–30. www.jstor.org/stable/43259415.

———. 2017. "A Model of Historical Thinking." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no 6: 593–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1101363.

Seixas, P, and T Morton. 2013. *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts.* Toronto: Nelson.

Staples, D. 2018. "In New Social Studies Curriculum, There's No Such Things as Albertans." *Edmonton Journal*, July 18. https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/david-staples-in-new-social-studies-curriculum-theres-no-such-things-as-albertans.

Stout, A P. 2019. "The Purpose and Practice of History Education: Can a Humanist Approach to Teaching History Facilitate Citizenship Education?" Master's thesis, University of Lethbridge. https://opus.uleth.ca/handle/10133/5650.

Thayer-Bacon, B. 1998. "Transforming and Redescribing Critical Thinking: Constructive Thinking." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 17, no 2–3 (June): 123–48. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005166416808.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). 2015. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Winnipeg, Man: TRC. https://nctr.ca/publications-and-reports/reports/.

van Nieuwenhuyse, K. 2017. "Using Multiperspectivity to Break Through Eurocentrism." *Public History Weekly* 5, no 9 (March 9). http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2017-8597.

Wineburg, S S. 2005. "The Psychological Study of Historical Consciousness." In *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*, ed J Straub, 187–210. New York: Berghahn Books.

Zinn, D, and C Rodgers. 2012. "A Humanising Pedagogy: Getting Beneath the Rhetoric." *Perspectives in Education* 30, no 4 (December): 76–87. https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC128202.

Aaron Stout is a former high school social studies teacher and current instructor in the Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge. He continues to collaborate with the social studies community and seeks to bridge connections between inservice and preservice teachers. His academic work focuses on history education, well-being in education, and the use of literature to support inclusion and citizenship education.