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Am I Canadian: Making Canadian History Personally Relevant to Students (and to Me)

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REFLECTION

Am I Canadian

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Teaching high school students history can be rewarding, but it can also be difficult. Many teachers struggle to keep students focused in class. While smartphones are commonly highlighted in the line-up of culprits that lead students' attention astray, this is not a reflection about phones; nor is it a reflection on social media, laziness, or any of the myriad scapegoats we like to blame for our students' lack of interest. The hardest part of teaching history is convincing everyone in the room (including me) that the material we learn is relevant to any of us.

I am a first-generation Canadian. Most of the students that I have taught over the last twelve years have been either first- or second-generation Canadians. All but eight of us – my past and present students and I – are immigrants ourselves, or are descended from immigrants. Every single one of us – my past and present students and I – struggles to define a personal identity that comprises such intersectional, contradictory concepts as gender, sex, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and culture, and all in relation to the place we now call home.

In that search for identity lies our common (mis)conception of Canadian history's irrelevance. We assume that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how Canadian history relates to us if we are still in the process of determining who we are. However, history is most useful at this juncture precisely because it can provide us with the materials we need to complete that identity construction process. Identity is predicated on memory: you construct your self based on what you choose to remember from your past. If history class is where the construction of the nation's collective memory – what Levy (2017) would call "heritage" – takes place, then history teachers play a critical role in the creation of a national identity: but it also means that history students can use their time in history class to craft the Canadian aspect of their own identities.

The connection between history and identity eluded me throughout my public-school years. From grades one through five, my family and I lived in California and I learned traditional American history: the significant men and the significant decisions they made, which had

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significant effects on the nation. After moving north of the border, I learned the same type of history, only this time about Canadian men and their significant decisions. As far as I was concerned, history meant memorization and regurgitation. Throughout my elementary and high school years, I learned names, dates, places, and facts without any social, cultural, national, or transnational context besides one: that these specific facts, remembered and re-told in this specific order, constituted what it meant to be [*insert nationality here*]. And throughout all of those history classes, I thought to myself, "What does any of this have to do with me?" It is a wonder that I became a history teacher at all.

My breakthrough occurred when I learned the concept of historiography. Once that first professor explained history as a series of choices, of interpretations – of a thing that one *did* – I realized that I had not seen myself in Canadian history throughout elementary and secondary school because my teachers had been showing me their selves: the historical facts, figures, and anecdotes that comprised the "memories" they had selected in order to construct their Canadian identities. Furthermore, their lessons and assignments had never invited me to do the types of history that might have led me sooner to the realization that history, like identity, is (repeatedly) constructed. I don't fault them for it. I don't even think they were doing anything intentionally malicious or exclusionary (at least, this is what I choose to remember about my old history teachers). However, this experience is what led me to choose to teach history differently.

When I teach history, the first thing I assess is the composition of my class. I spend the first few days of a new semester finding out who my students think they are, what they think being Canadian means, how they define their relationship to Canadian culture and politics, and their previous experiences with doing history. Using this information, I then tweak my units and assignments to provide my students with opportunities to make personal connections with Canadian history. For example, during the units in which we discuss the world wars, my students research the experiences and contributions of groups that have tended to be overlooked until recently (and which are more likely to include relatable people and situations) and then conduct seminars for the rest of the class on their topics; topics like: the women of the Special Operations Executive; Indigenous soldiers; Axis prisoners of war held in Canada; pacifist groups; or a group of their own choosing. The seminars allow the students to wield what Levstik (1995) calls the "transformative power of narrative" (p. 114), by having them choose a story to tell and how to tell it.

While Levstik argues that narrative mainly affects the reader in the way it "shapes the events and lives it depicts and embeds them in a culture" (p. 114), I would extend its impact to the teller of the narrative. By having students choose to research topics of personal interest, they are able to learn about Canadian history that is meaningful to them; when they craft and present their seminars, they forge a connection between themselves and their chosen aspects of Canadian history. They embed themselves in the culture by being active participants in the continuous negotiation and construction of the heritage that constitutes Canadian national identity.

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Unfortunately, high school students tend to want answers, not ambiguity. They can be uncomfortable providing their own interpretations of facts, especially if their prior experiences in history classes have been content-memorization driven. When they do provide interpretations, they do so hesitantly; their eyes flick toward me, seeking validation. The second-hardest part of teaching history is convincing students that, so long as their method is sound, their interpretations of history are both valid and useful. My students are usually surprised to learn that a multiplicity of possible interpretations of a given issue actually fosters a better, more nuanced understanding of that issue. Once they are comfortable with essentially assuming the role of historians, they engage more readily and more fully with the course – an outcome that echoes the findings of Clark (2009) in her research on Australian and Canadian history education.

This ability to see issues from a variety of perspectives is the benefit that studying history brings to the exploration and construction of identity. In Canada, where assimilation is not a condition of citizenship, this multivalent perspective allows us to avoid the trap of viewing the world dichotomously. Here, we don't have to choose between being Canadian or not being Canadian. Each of us is free to create a Canadian identity based on what we choose to remember from its history: the parts that connect to us, and us to the nation. Although some might decry this practice as contributive to the fragmentation of a monolithic Canadian culture, I would argue that such a culture was only ever a mythic construct. It may have been a valid interpretation of some people's Canadian identities, but it was never universal. By dispelling the myth of a definitive meaning of being Canadian, we free our students to fashion their own mosaics of Canadian identity. Rather than giving them a set number of pieces, we can help them choose the shards of Canadian history that they think best fit their own unique compositions.

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