

Engaging Students Using Local History and Perspectives

Meghan E. Cameron Ms

Cayuga Secondary School, meghan.e.cameron@gmail.com

Evan J. Habkirk Dr.

University of British Columbia, Okanagan, ehabkirk@mail.ubc.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cameron, Meghan E. Ms and Habkirk, Evan J. Dr. () "Engaging Students Using Local History and Perspectives," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 0 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol0/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies* by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Engaging Students Using Local History and Perspectives

Meghan E. Cameron, OCT¹

Grand Erie District School Board, Brantford

with **Evan J. Habkirk²**

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Current teachers of high-school history have a difficult task: They must find out where their students are coming from to connect them to the multi-faceted and complex story of Canada beyond the simple ‘narrative’ of great men and women, which should not be fully dismissed, but instead be told in all its complexity with local perspectives and knowledge. There is conflict. There is accommodation. There is assimilation. There is progress. There are set backs. All of these themes bring us to where we are now as a nation – one that seems cohesive, but more complex than the ‘mosaic’ trope of the 1960s. Yet, in order to do this effectively, teachers of history must do some of this groundwork as professionals. They must learn about their students, about the local history (even if it is not theirs), move beyond the trusty binder of tried-and-true resources, and their own frame of reference from when they were students and embrace the uncomfortable challenge of confronting their own biases and gaps in knowledge. They need to understand that there is always more to know and, most importantly, more than one way to know. Once they have determined who is in their classes, they must utilize something which is often overlooked and dismissed in high school history classes – local history, local approaches, and local ways of knowing.

For many students, the narratives found in traditional Canadian history are considered boring and unappealing. Unfortunately, this is where our current historical discourse is in Canada, specifically in Ontario where we teach. History in Ontario is often taught from the ‘grand narrative’ approach to understanding the nation, which has a focus on political history. Yet, recent developments and approaches to teaching history are changing these pedagogical

¹ Meghan Cameron has been a secondary school history teacher since 2002 with the Grand Erie District School Board. In that time, she taught at Brantford Collegiate Institute for over 10 years. In September 2018, she took the position of Department Head of Humanities at Cayuga Secondary School. Both schools sit on the Haldimand Tract, which is Haudenosaunee Territory.

² At the time of Habkirk’s involvement with this article, he was an instructor in the First Nations (now Indigenous) Studies Program at the University of Western Ontario and in the History and Criminology programs at Wilfrid Laurier University.

'ruts' teachers have been trapped in.³ Developmentally, students must see themselves in narrative before they can see and empathize with others.⁴ This is a form of historical literacy that requires students to recognize the importance of events in the past and how they impacted individuals and groups, forming a narrative that students can either accept or challenge. This is especially important when teaching histories outside the grand narrative.

Specifically, Calls to Action numbers 62 and 63 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) requires that the field of education "make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students" (7). For many teachers, this can only be done in collaboration with Indigenous knowledge-holders to ensure that appropriate content and approaches are created and employed. Working with local Indigenous people to develop materials appropriate to the historical context in which we live will help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers see each other in our collective history.⁵

In the first history class I taught⁶, I kept using the term 'we' to discuss Canadians as a homogenous group. A student sitting at the back, slowly raised their hand and waited for me to acknowledge them. When I did, they responded: "Ms. Cameron, I am not part of your 'we' you keep talking about." This student, who was a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, had sat patiently listening to the teacher wax on about the grand narrative of Canada, and never saw themselves in it, nor did they see how it was applicable or important to them. That was a defining moment for me in my teaching career. I felt as though I had failed them as a teacher and was not connecting with my students. I reflected, "If we do not teach in order to connect students to all of our collective pasts, then what is the point?"

Regardless of my formal education and training, I realized an important lesson: I was a student, with the students being *my* teacher. They taught me that students do not learn if they are not engaged and if there is nothing connecting them to what is being taught. They are not engaged unless they see how it is applicable to their lives in the present day. It is not that teenagers are ego-centric; but developmentally, they are at a stage that revolves around identity formation (Kroger, 1993, 364). Erik Erikson posits that identity, if formed during a stage called

³ Both Canadian and American academics have introduced the concept of 'historical thinking' which changes the narrative approach. See Wineburg (2001) and Sexias and Morton (2012).

⁴ Ages 12-18 (adolescence) is when a child develops a sense of personal identity, shaped by their understanding of occupation, sex role, politics and religion. This model was extended to include how a student sees themselves in their historical context (Kroger, 1993, 364).

⁵ For more on this process, see Habkirk (2018), Habkirk (2019), and Habkirk, this volume.

⁶ While this work and much of this writing was done in collaboration between Meghan and Evan, Meghan, as a secondary high school teacher, has taken the lead in this reflection. Thus, when "I" is used, it is to refer to Meghan's experience, unless otherwise indicated.

‘adolescence,’ needs historical context in this formation: “To enter history...each generation of youth must find an identity consonant with its own childhood and consonant with an ideological promise in the perceptible historical process” (Erik Erikson in Kroger, 1993, 363). Telling and sharing stories about the past is a part of who we are as members of the human race, but being open to the ways we come to these stories allows us all – student and teacher – to start telling more inclusive stories about the past.

Since that encounter, my teaching practice has shifted to reflect this pedagogical approach. I have worked to find out more about my local communities and have joined organizations such as the Great War Centenary Association of Brantford, Brant County, and Six Nations (the GWCA)⁷ in order to deepen my understanding of the local history and all of its complexities and how it can be woven into my teaching of a national narrative.

After becoming the chair of the GWCA’s education subcommittee, I was introduced to members of the Six Nations community, local community and academic historians, and then Ph.D. student Evan Habkirk, who is a collaborator on this reflection. Using the resources of the GWCA, the Woodland Cultural Centre, and research conducted by Habkirk,⁸ we were able to create Six Nations-specific lessons plans that were not only vetted by the Six Nations community at Grand River to ensure they complied with their community understandings, but contained information that would inform non-Indigenous students and teachers, while also providing content that Indigenous students could connect with and see themselves in. These Ontario curriculum-compliant lesson plans were designed to be used by local teachers and could be adapted for different grade levels and into single period or multi-day plans.

These lessons explored themes such as whether Six Nations men could legally be conscripted or whether the Six Nations were allies to the Crown or just ordinary Canadian soldiers; the plans also covered the history of Six Nations military and the 114th battalion, reflecting local narratives that were left unexplored by teachers who did not know these histories. This added level of detail made the history of conscription and other wartime experiences more than what was taught in the textbook. There were more complex narratives within local communities that were able to bring national narratives to life.

In volunteering my time and collaborating with members of the GWCA, I have learned so much about local understandings of the First World War, which allows me to better connect with my students through the history of my local communities during that time period. Researching local soldiers is the most tangible example of this. Taking students out of the classroom and into their communities, where other possibilities exist, is invaluable. Walking tours that investigate

⁷ See the Great War Centenary Association of Brantford, Brant County, and Six Nations. <http://www.doingourbit.ca> (2014)

⁸ Also see Habkirk, this volume.

monuments, historic buildings and places also allows students to connect with their local community through its history. In Brantford, Ontario, this is most effectively done in what is known as the “Heritage District” in which our famous Allward-designed Brant County War Memorial (known locally as the ‘Cenotaph’), the Bell Memorial (also designed by Sir Walter Allward), and local houses which still stand from the First World War era. Students who have done these tours now have a historical context for their own communities that they did not understand before. They are able to see themselves as part of a history at the local level and can be more connected to their own community.⁹ It is also important to connect students who are relatively new to the community to this local history as it provides context and a sense of membership through these artifacts and places that are often inconspicuous in their everyday lives.

Teachers in secondary schools tend to isolate themselves in their physical spaces (‘my classroom’) and their curriculum (‘my course’) which can limit a teacher’s ability to model life-long learning for their students. Partnerships in the community, particularly for history or curriculum which can be challenging, can help bridge the gap from their orthodox and traditional models of teaching to a model of constant learning and exploration.

Indigenous education and, more specifically, residential schools are an excellent example of connecting students to their communities. The Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School in Brantford was Canada’s oldest residential school, first opening in 1834 and closing in 1970. In 1972, The Woodland Cultural Centre was created on the site of the school and remains a memorial site for children who were sent to the school, with the Centre’s museum offering tours of the facility, led by guides who are survivors or family members of survivors. Recently, a community campaign has been conducted to “Save the Evidence” and maintain the building as a way to never forget this chapter of human history.¹⁰

Schools across Ontario have flocked to the Centre in order for students to learn more about residential schools; but I have found visits by local schools are less frequent. Many do not take the opportunity to use this site to augment their lessons and instead internalize the teaching about this chapter of history to their classroom. This trend is only starting to shift as more funding is making it possible for non-Indigenous teachers (of which there are a majority in the local school

⁹ For its public education and cross-community outreach, the GWCA was awarded the 2019 Veterans Ombudsman's Commendation Award for a local organization from the Canadian government.

¹⁰ This campaign was spear-headed by survivors of the school and has been driven by the Woodland Cultural Center. <https://woodlandculturalcentre.ca/the-campaign/>

board) to connect with Indigenous ‘cultural mentors’ who emphasize not only content, but ways of knowing and understanding from an Indigenous perspective.¹¹

Being part of this type of work has impacted my pedagogical approach. As a history teacher, I have recognized that I cannot be an expert in all areas of history. Cultural mentors and connections to local knowledge keepers have allowed me to ask questions about culturally appropriate content and approaches. This open dialogue marks a significant shift in the narrative of history education in Ontario. Indigenous education consultants, cultural mentors, and targeted professional development have attempted to change the way teachers approach these topics by emphasizing the power of local content, local history, and local perspectives. Bringing the community into the classroom is also a way of making history more tangible, more ‘real-world’ and applicable for our students who live in those communities.

¹¹ Historical Thinking concepts and Indigenous perspectives and content have often been taught as separate subjects/skill sets. Better integration of Indigenous ways of knowing with historical thinking can only be achieved if we bring community members together to share those areas of knowledge (McGregor, 2017).

References

- Great War Centenary Association of Branford, Brant County, Six Nations (2014).
<http://www.doingourbit.ca/>
- Habkirk, E.J. (2018) A model for open community engagement: Six Nations, the GWCA, and the production of wartime narratives. *Histories of anthropology annual 12*, 229-248.
- Habkirk, E.J. (2019, November 6) A year of inaction: Ontario education and the TRC. *Active history* <http://activehistory.ca/2019/11/ontario-education-and-the-trc/>
- Kroger, J. (1993) The Role of Historical Context in the Identity Formation Process of Late Adolescence. *Youth and Society 24*(4), 363-376.
- Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013) *The big six: Historical thinking concepts*. Nelson Education.
- McGregor, H.E. (2017) One classroom, two teachers? Historical thinking and Indigenous education in Canada. *Critical Education 8*(14), 1-18.
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015) *Calls to action*.
https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- Wineburg, S. (2001) *Teaching history and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Temple University Press.