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Teaching second-order concepts in Canadian history: The importance of "historical significance".

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Abstract

This article addresses the second-order concept of "historical significance" and attempts to answer the question of what criteria are used to make decisions about it in history and school history. Specifically, it explores the way Francophone and Anglophone students ascribe significance to selected historical events in Canada and discusses the implications of this study for history students and educators. The necessity of (re)considering how officials make decisions about historical significance in the school system is also examined.

What makes a Canadian event or character historically significant to study? How do historians, teachers, and students make their selections between the "significant" and the "trivial"? What prompts individuals and groups to identify with certain events and figures and not with others? Traditionally, English Canadian historical monographs and school textbooks have carried the implicit message that historical significance should be ascribed to white middle- and upper-class British males in positions of power or authority. Understandably, French Canadians have had, for their part, a high suspicion of such a hegemonic definition of Canadian historical significance, for obvious political and cultural reasons. Historian John Dickinson (1996, 148) has summed it up as this, "Canadian historiography has never been unified, and the two linguistic traditions are as different from one another as from foreign historiographies."

Nowadays, with greater recognition of the "French fact," the empowerment of previously marginalized groups, and a redefinition and enlargement of the field of history, answering the question of Canadian historical significance remains highly problematic. Recent studies (Barton 2001; Barton & Levstik 1998; Epstein 1998; Seixas, 1994; Yeager, Foster & Greer 2002) indicate that the concept of "historical significance" appears to be shifting and politically contested. "Standards of significance," Seixas (1997, 22) contends, "apparently inhere not only in the past itself, but in the interpretative frames and values of those who study it - ourselves." Teachers, students, and people in general, no less than historians,

confront the study of the past with their own mental framework of historical significance shaped by their particular cultural and linguistic heritage, family practices, popular culture influence, and last, but not least, school history experience.

The school community is an official site where some forms of common history are explicitly introduced to students. In Canada, as in other jurisdictions, the selection of historical events and characters to study as well as the design of curricula and textbooks rely on the notion of historical significance. In one way or another, Ministries of Education do (voluntarily or not) make distinctions between what they perceive as historically significant and trivial, and between what is "approved" and "ignored." In the same way, students do not passively absorb what is mandated by the Ministry or presented by their teachers and textbooks. Rather, they filter and sift, remember and forget, add to, modify, or reconstruct their own framework of historical understanding (Wineburg 2001).

Clearly, the result of this complexity has serious implications for school history. Because of the potential disparity between the official versions presented in class, what professional historians may think, and the vernacular stories of the collective past commemorated at home or in their community, students are faced with contradictory and puzzling accounts of their past. And if not well addressed in class, these collisions and contradictions can lead novices to be highly suspicious of historical study. With these concerns, one wonders how Canadian students respond to such contradictions. Are there differences between Anglophone and Francophone Canadian students, as suggested by Dickinson? What criteria do they use to adjudicate between the significant and trivial in Canadian history?

Historical significance: the second-order concept

Growing evidence suggests that learning history is far more sophisticated (and fascinating) than remembering a pre-digested set of historical dates, events, and figures of the collective past - the so-called traditional "content" of history. Historical thinking implies the ability to use such first-order knowledge to (gradually) engage in the practice of history, i.e., the disciplinary inquiry into the past using historical sources and agreed-upon procedures within the domain. Preparing students to make informed decisions or to understand different perspectives cannot be accomplished by telling them what to learn and think. To be able to understand, for example, why World War I is important to Canadian identity or what makes Louis Riel a "traitor" for some English Canadians and a "hero" for the Métis demands more intellectual rigueur than remembering a story of the past, which typically appear to students as socially uncontested and historically self-evident. The ability to make sense of competing accounts of the collective past or divergent selection and meaning ascribed to historical events is crucial if we are, as educators, to help students prepare for the complex world they (will) encounter outside the classroom. But, as Wineburg (2001, 7) observes, "historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development."

One way of accomplishing this challenging task is to render more explicit the second-order concepts of history, such as *significance*. Unlike first-order concepts (i.e., events and stories of the past), these concepts implicitly arise in the act of doing historical inquiries. They are not the "content" of history *per se* but are necessary to engage in investigations and to anchor historical narratives (or interpretations) of the past. Because they are seldom discussed in text or presented in the works of historians, they are largely ignored in school history. Students typically receive no instruction on how they operate or how to employ them in historical

inquiries. Yet, without these concepts it would be impractical to seriously engage in the study of the past. As Tim Lomas (1990, 41) argues, in trying to make sense of history, "[o]ne cannot escape from the idea of significance. History, to be meaningful, depends on selection and this, in turn, depends on establishing criteria of significance to select the more relevant and to dismiss the less relevant." For Lomas, historians necessarily use (implicitly or explicitly) certain criteria to decide between the significant and the trivial. But what criteria?

To this day, it is not entirely clear, even within the history community, what criteria are accepted as valid for determining historical significance. There has been very little research on this second-order concept of history, even in England where it is formally part of the new school curriculum. As part of a larger study on Francophone and Anglophone students' understanding of historical significance, I reassessed the whole notion of historical significance by distinguishing three (simplified) communities that largely define the domain(s) within which constituents (historians, policymakers, teachers, and students) define *their* historical significance (see Figure 1).[1] As a general rule, professional historians have (often implicitly) addressed questions of significance by employing a set of at least five disciplinary criteria outlined by Phillips (2002):

Importance: Refers to what was considered of primary influence or concern to those who lived the event, irrespective of whether their judgements about the importance of the event was subsequently shown to be justified. Key importance questions include: Who were/have been affected by the event? Why was it important to them? How were people's lives affected?;

Profundity: Refers to how deeply people were/have been affected by the event. Key profundity questions include: Was the event superficial or deeply affecting? How were people's lives affected?;

Quantity: Refers to the number of people affected by the event. Key quantity question include: Did the event affect many, everyone, just a few?;

Durability: Refers to how long were people affected by the event. Key durability questions include: How durable was the event in time? Was the event lasting or only ephemeral?; and

Relevance: Refers to the extent to which the event has contributed to historical understanding or meaning-making supported by evidence. Comparisons and analogies are more complex and lead to better appreciation of the past. Key relevance questions include: Is the event relevant to our understanding of the past and/or present? Does the event have a sense or signification to us?

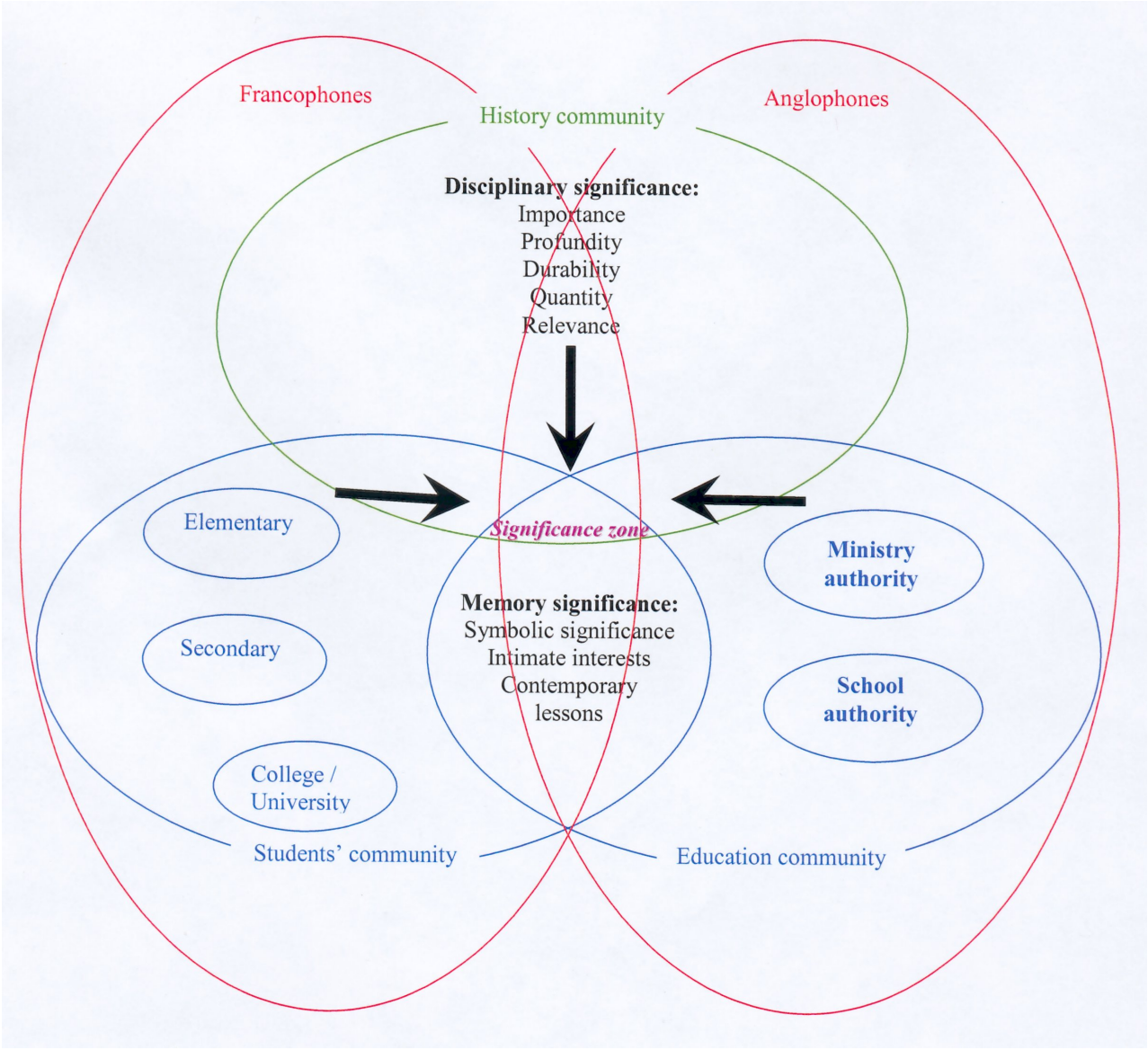
Yet, these familiar criteria in historiography have never been fully articulated outside the history community. The result has been the development or usage of other criteria by Ministries and school history members; a sort of *bric-à-brac* of standards, many of which are

driven by present-day commemoration, or what I call "memory-history." Instead of advancing historical knowledge and understanding, these "memory significance" criteria have a collective memory function, designed to tailor the collective past for present-day purposes. More specifically, they can be seen as identifiable contemporary reasons for ascribing significance to events of the past. They help explain how and why people from the education and public communities establish few disciplinary connections of significance with the collective past. These types of "memory significance" are (at least) threefold:

Intimate interests:	Use of personal, family, religious, cultural, or ancestral connections to the event to ascribe relevance (e.g., I was there, so it is relevant to me);
Symbolic significance:	Use of particular events for present-day national or patriotic justification (i.e., this is our national holiday so it is relevant to me);
Contemporary lessons:	Use of historical events to draw simplistic analogies in order to guide present-day actions, usually away from the "errors" of the past (e.g., the Great Depression shows what happens when the economy is over prosperous).

These factors of "memory significance" largely used by the public and education communities, coupled with the five criteria of "disciplinary significance" employed by professional historians, demonstrate the complexities of understanding how students themselves relate and connect to the past. Because people belong to different communities (see Figure 1), notably the background cultural/linguistic communities that historical actors participate in from generation to generation, historical significance is, therefore, not a fixed concept, but "one that can mean diverse things to various people in different eras" (Yeager, Foster & Greer 2002, 200). And, this has particularly important consequences for how Canadians from different communities look at their national past because disciplinary, political, cultural, and educational forces do influence the version(s) of history conveyed to students in school.

Figure 1



Francophone and Anglophone students and historical significance

Studying Francophone and Anglophone students' conceptions of historical significance is useful for at least two reasons. First, paying closer attention to their conceptions can help clarify the extent to which students' development of historical thinking is shaped by the (different) school communities they inhabit. In other words, what students see as historically significant in Canadian past, and the reasons they offer for their selection, does not occur *in vacuo*. Rather, it is to varying degrees shaped by their classroom teaching and school community. Since Francophone and Anglophone students are educated in different school systems, their understandings of historical significance can potentially highlight how this second-order concept is (similarly or differently) employed by them. Second, studying students from these two groups helps us look at and compare the unclear environmental influence of family, language, and culture on students' understanding of their national past. Growing evidence (see Barton 2001; Epstein 1998; Létourneau 2004; Seixas, 1997) suggests that class, ethnicity, culture/language, and popular culture are important factors in students' decisions between what they perceive as important and trivial in history.

Results (see Table 1) from the study conducted with 78 high school students in Ontario show

that the most significant events selected by students are the establishment of Canada (Confederation, 1867), the participation of the colony/country in international conflicts (War of 1812 and World War I), granting of democratic rights to women (Women's right movement, 1920s) and the adoption of Canada's maple leaf flag (1965). The most recent event (September 11 terrorist attacks, 2001) came fifth, followed closely by a number of other more distant historical events dealing with wars and conflicts (World War II, Canada and peacekeeping), social movements (Underground railroad), socio-economic issues (Great Depression), and French-English relations (Franco-Ontarian Resistance). Results in Table 1 revealed that students selected events on a large temporal scale, ranging from the 16th century (Discovery of Canada) through to the 18th (Fall of New France), 19th (Confederation, Underground railroad), and 20th century (World Wars, Great Depression, Canada and peacekeeping, Canadian flag, Referendum).

However, the breakdown of results by school community presents more divergent selections. If the first two most significant events (World War I and the Canadian flag) offer comparable results (17 and 15 respectively for Francophones compared to 20 and 17 for Anglophones), other selected events present more contrasting views, which can be explained by school and cultural/linguistic divides. The War of 1812, the Franco-Ontarian Resistance, Canada and peacekeeping, and the 1995 Referendum, for example, were approached very differently depending on whether the informants were Francophone or Anglophone. Only three students in the Francophone school system selected the War of 1812 as opposed to 24 on the English side. As a total, this contrasting result represents only 8 percent of Francophones' selection compared to 60 percent for Anglophones. At the other extreme, 17 students in the Francophone school system chose the "Franco-Ontarian Resistance" (for a total of 45 percent) as opposed to two students on the Anglophone side (for a total of less than 1 percent).[2]

Table 1
Most significant events in Canadian history

Historical Events	Total Responses	Total (M)ale	Total (F)emale	Total Franco	Total Franco (M)	Total Franco (F)	Total Anglo	Total Anglo (M)	Total Anglo (F)
World War I, 1914-1918	37	26	11	17	9	8	20	17	3
Canadian flag, 1965	32	20	12	15	8	7	17	12	5
Confederation, 1867	32	10	22	12	5	7	20	5	15
Women's rights, 1920s	30	8	21	17	2	15	12	6	6
War of 1812	27	16	11	3	0	3	24	16	8
September 11 Attacks, 2001	27	12	15	18	7	11	9	5	4
World War II, 1939-1945	26	14	12	16	8	8	10	6	4
Underground Railroad, 1840s	21	9	12	8	0	8	13	9	4
Great Depression,	20	10	10	10	5	5	10	5	5

1930s									
Franco-Ontarian Resistance, 1916	19	7	12	17	5	12	2	2	0
Canada and peacekeeping, 1956-1957	18	13	5	4	2	2	14	11	3
Fall of New France, 1759	14	8	6	4	1	3	10	7	3
Discovery of Canada, 16th century	14	9	5	4	2	2	10	7	3
1995 Referendum	12	4	8	10	3	7	2	1	1
Québec Act, 1774	9	7	2	2	1	1	7	6	1
Patriation of Constitution, 1982	8	4	4	6	3	3	2	1	1
Oka crisis, 1990	5	2	3	4	1	3	1	1	0
Free trade agreements, 1988	5	2	3	2	1	1	3	1	2
Colonising the west, late 19th century	5	3	2	1	0	1	4	3	1
Rebellion of 1837-1838	5	2	3	2	1	1	3	1	2
Migration of Loyalists, 1776-1783	4	1	3	2	1	1	2	0	2
Red River Rebellion, 1869-1870	3	1	2	1	1	0	2	2	0
Quiet Revolution, 1960s	3	1	2	1	0	1	2	1	1
October crisis 1970	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0

Equally interesting is the personal explanations students offered for their selections. Of the total text units coded (for each respective group), Anglophone students were more inclined to use disciplinary criteria (65%) than their Francophone counterparts (59%). The latter group, however, used more frequently criteria of memory significance (41%) than the Anglophone group (35%). More specifically, Anglophone students were more likely to use "importance" and "relevance" (disciplinary significance) and "symbolic significance" (memory significance), while Francophone students used more frequently "duration" and "quantity" (disciplinary significance) and "intimate interests" (memory significance).

So what can be inferred from this study? Clearly the discrepancy between students of the two language groups when selecting and justifying events of Canada's past must be considered carefully. If certain events and criteria offer comparable results, others clearly support Dickinson's notion of two historiographical traditions in Canada. School history can help explain the various/divergent selection of events by students from the two language groups. Official documents allow teachers flexibility in their selection and interpretation of Canadian history, especially in the Francophone curriculum which has a complete section on "*Les Franco-Ontariens*." However, official documents cannot account for students' justifications of the events selected. In both school systems historical significance is an implicit tool used to present Ministry's expectations and justify textbook selections, not a second-order concept of history to be studied in class.

As such, it is unlikely that Anglophone teachers have more successfully stressed its meaning and conceptualization than their Francophone counterparts. In fact, no teacher reported having taught explicitly the concept in class. If one refers back to my earlier model of communities of historical significance (Figure 1), we are then left with a much more limited influence of school and history communities on students' disciplinary justification. What this suggests is that students by and large made their selection and justification within their own particular community without necessarily knowing or recognizing the influence of the community on their selection. Francophone students, for example, were more likely to use "intimate interests" than Anglophones precisely because the minority culture in which they find themselves endorses such connectedness to the collective past – a Canadian past that was traditionally tailored by British Canadian authorities. Anglophone students, on the other hand, used their higher dependence on notions of "relevance" and "symbolic significance." Being members of the dominant linguistic group, they more frequently referred to the positive effects of the selected Canadian events (national symbols) than Francophone students. Studies conducted in the U.S. support this argument (see Epstein 1998).

My study also leads me to believe that Francophone and Anglophone students employed different criteria of significance not so much because they were taught to intelligently do so, but because the minority/majority cultural world in which they live pushes them to make such decisions. This is not to say that these high school students have no agency, but, as Wertsch (2000, 40) observes, "individuals and groups always act in tandem with cultural tools." The process by which students internalize particular conceptions and events of the collective past is shaped by both their own sense of their selves (i.e., individuality) and their implicit (or explicit) acceptance and endorsement of the values, traditions, behaviours, and experiences of their cultural community (i.e., socialization).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that without a defensible conceptualization of historical significance, it becomes extremely problematic for teachers and students to articulate their own selection and conception of the collective past. So far, the notion of historical significance, and the disciplinary and education criteria to define it, have largely been overlooked in both history and history education. The result has been the imaginative *bricolage* of various understandings of historical significance by stakeholders, many of which are purely driven by present-day commemoration of what I call "memory-history."

High school students need direction and guidance on this complicated historical terrain. They must (re)consider the implicit and explicit interpretative frames and collective values used to

make sense of the past. Often, the criteria they employ to make the selection and justification of the collective past are shaped by the cultural communities they inhabit without understanding how the conceptual tool of "historical significance" operates and could inform their decision. If we, as educators, ignore this second-order concept, as well as how students from different communities relate to events of the collective past, our history teaching is likely to fail to address students' misconceptions and misunderstanding of the past. Historical thinking is, indeed, an *un*natural act.

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[1]I owe special thanks to Bruce VanSledright (University of Maryland) and teacher participants in the Historica Summer Institute 2004 for their insightful comments and

suggestions for (re)structuring the model of historical significance presented in Figure 1.

[2]The "Franco-Ontarian Resistance" refers to the struggle of Franco-Ontarians for the recognition of their collective rights in the province, notably in education. Following the adoption of the infamous Regulation 17 by the Ontario government in 1912, which virtually eliminated French language education in the province, the francophone community engaged in long confrontation with the authorities for better recognition and acceptance. The struggle culminated in an altercation with police authority in Ottawa in 1916. Regulation 17 was finally amended in 1925, but it continues to serve as a defining element in the ongoing resistance of Franco-Ontarians against assimilation.

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