



DUNDAS
MUSEUM &
ARCHIVES

DISCO

“I learn!”

HISTORICAL THINKING

“The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.”

— George Orwell

Historical thinking is not only a *pedagogical* approach to teaching history, but more importantly, a *philosophy* of teaching history. This approach to education revolves around the proposition that *historical thinking* — like scientific thinking in science instruction and mathematical thinking in math instruction — is central to history instruction and that students should become more competent as *historical thinkers* as they progress through their schooling.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

— George Santayana

This observation by the Spanish philosopher and Harvard professor is often quoted. But there is another perspective on the consequences of not knowing and thinking about our past: we seriously compromise our capacity to improve upon the present and create a better future. Of course we can learn from past mistakes; but we can also learn from past successes. Comparing ourselves to our ancestors reveals many differences; at the same time, there is much that remains the same.

Curriculum Documents

The overall vision as expressed in The Ontario Curriculum (2013) is:

The social studies, history, geography, and Canadian and world studies programs will enable students to become responsible, active citizens within the diverse communities to which they belong. As well as becoming critically thoughtful and informed citizens who value an inclusive society, students will have the skills they need to solve problems and communicate ideas and decisions about significant developments, events, and issues (p. 6).

This vision clearly establishes a link between learning and thinking about history and the formation of responsible and active citizens who can shape the future. Everything we do today has consequences for the future.

A Definition of Historical Thinking

Perhaps the best way to understand just what historical thinking is might be to contrast it with *historical knowledge*. It is one thing to know about an historical event or figure: “Sir Isaac Brock was killed by an American musket ball at the battle of Queenston Heights on October 13th, 1812.” But to bring to this event historical thinking is to ask questions about it; meaningful, thoughtful, probing questions: did Brock willfully expose himself to danger? Why would he do such a thing? Who took over command? Why don’t we know anything about him since it was he who clearly led the British to victory? What role did this battle play in the larger scheme of things? Was it significant? Why? What are the sources of information about this battle? Are they reliable or biased?



Sir Isaac Brock is shot and killed at Queenston Heights

History Is Created!

“History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

— Winston S. Churchill

There is a truth to Churchill’s quip that is overlooked at the peril of the teacher and student of history: *history is created!* While Brock’s death did, indeed, occur on that date and at that location and under those circumstances, the telling of it is *created*; it is a story. Historical thinking asks what is told as well as what is not told; it looks for biases in the telling and seeks evidence to support what the teller relates.

Historical Thinking Concepts

Developing historical thinking in young historians involved six distinct but closely interrelated concepts. To think historically, students need to be able to:

1. Establish *historical significance*
2. Use *primary source evidence*
3. Identify *continuity and change*
4. Analyze *cause and consequence*
5. Take *historical perspectives*, and
6. Understand the *ethical dimension* of historical interpretations.

Taken together, these concepts tie “historical thinking” to competencies in “historical literacy.” In this case, “historical literacy” means gaining a deep understanding of historical events and processes through active engagement with historical texts.

For a more detailed explication of what each of these concepts entails, an excellent resource is *The Historical Thinking Project*: <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts>

Education at the Dundas Museum and Archives

The education programs offered by the DMA emphasize historical thinking. In considering the various topics - First Nations to first settlers! The Niagara Escarpment formation to the Town of Dundas incorporation! The War of 1812 to The Great War of 1914! The Heyday of the Desjardins Canal to The Great Depression! – students are challenged, through the concepts noted above, *to think historically*.