

Does it really matter that Canadians lack a factual knowledge of their collective past?

In its most recent online survey, Historica Canada, the organization behind the country's Heritage Minutes, tested over one thousand respondents on their factual knowledge of Canadian history using true or false questions. The results were not great. According to Historica, two-thirds of those who completed the survey got a failing grade. That is worse than last year when sixty-two percent of participants failed a similar survey.

But does it really matter that only nineteen percent of this year's respondents knew that the first recorded instance of dressing in costume on Halloween in North America was documented in Vancouver in 1898? In the age of Google and Wikipedia, when facts can be checked so easily, does one really need to know when the Indian Act was signed or the name of the first woman to be elected to the Canadian House of Commons? (These were not questions, by the way, that were included on Historica's online test). Isn't it more important to think well?

There will be those who will argue that it is much more important to be able to think creatively than to know a bunch of facts. Albert Einstein perhaps captured this sentiment best when he stated that: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." But according to Daniel Willingham, a Harvard-educated cognitive scientist who writes books and articles about how to improve one's learning and teaching abilities, Einstein had it wrong because a solid factual knowledge is a prerequisite for thinking outside of the box. "[T]he cognitive processes that are most esteemed—logical thinking, problem solving, and the like—are intertwined with knowledge," Willingham writes. "It is certainly true that facts without skills to use them are of little value. It is equally true that one cannot deploy thinking skills effectively without factual knowledge." Thus, according to Willingham, factual knowledge matters because it determines how fast one can acquire new knowledge on a specific topic. In short, the more one knows, the faster one learns.

This is supported by various studies in experimental psychology. In one such study, which was undertaken by J.P. Van Over-schelde and A.F. Healy, the participants were divided into two

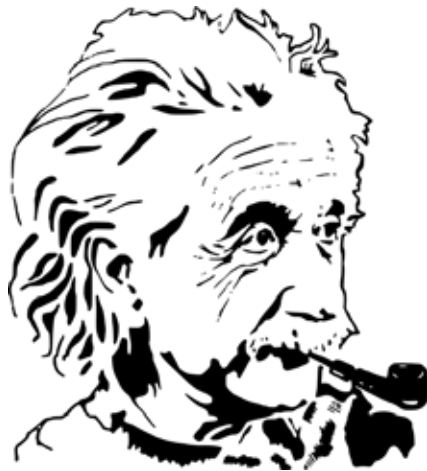
groups. The first group was given the opportunity to learn more facts on the topic. Then both groups were tested on how fast they learned new facts, that neither group knew, on the same topic. The study demonstrated that the first group absorbed the new facts faster than the second group. Other studies have showed that a prior factual knowledge on any given subject allows one to retain more new information about what has just been read or heard on the subject.

Don't get me wrong. There is much more to the study of history than knowing the facts. Also, there is much more to being a good citizen than knowing if the Jolly Jumper was a Canadian invention (on the Historica quiz) or when the North-West Rebellion took place (not on the quiz). In fact, in my opinion, the how and the why are more important than the where and the when. That is to say, a factual knowledge might be a prerequisite to innovative thinking in many other disciplines, but what is most important in our field is an interest and understanding in the various interpretations of the past. Canadian history is not a collection of "official" facts.

Rather it is a collection of competing "truths" and narratives. The special thing about Canada is that – unlike in many nations around the globe where there is a mistaken belief that the past can be synthesized into a single, standardized chronicle – these competing "truths" are allowed to stand side by side.

I understand what Historica is trying to do. Among other things, it is attempting to show that our past is not as dull as dishwater. As Historica's Chief Executive Officer, Anthony Wilson-Smith, recently stated: "It drives me crazy, this idea that Canadian history is boring. No, it's not. People just haven't bothered to look closely enough at the real human stories and quirky things that have happened here." But rather than test us on our knowledge of quirky things, Canadians might be better served descending into the bog of conflict, and learning the many "histories" that compose our collective experience.

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Albert Einstein*