

The Educational Experience of Undergraduate History Students: A National Assessment

By Stéphane Lévesque



In the coming weeks, an online questionnaire will be made available to history students across Canada with the goal of assessing the learning experiences of undergraduate students registered in history programs at Canadian universities. This national survey will complement international studies on students' learning experiences and historical consciousness conducted in Europe, the United States,

Canada and Australia by focusing on students currently enrolled in history classes at Canadian universities, and collect much needed Canadian-specific data that focuses on learning history at the university level. The project team, from the University of Ottawa, Dr. Stéphane Lévesque, PhD Faculty of Education, Principal Investigator, Dr. Kevin Kee, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Dr. J.M. McCutcheon, PhD Department of History will present results of this survey to the CHA and widely disseminate the results in 2017.

In the last 20 years, several studies around the world have investigated people's engagement with history. In the late 1990s, a European group, *Youth and History*, surveyed 32,000 students in no less than 27 countries on various aspects of historical consciousness and political attitudes among adolescents. During the same period, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen ventured into the popular historical consciousness of adult Americans in their national study *The Presence of the Past*. Their widely acclaimed report documented the active interest of Americans for history, but not necessarily for the "official histories" that have repetitively preoccupied U.S. politicians and officials in education. Following this study, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton devised their own inquiry into "how Australians think about, evaluate, and use the past" in their life. Closer to home, a research team of seven Canadian scholars under the lead of Jocelyn Létourneau at Laval University embarked on the first-ever bilingual assessment of adult Canadians' engagement with the past. Their report, *Canadians and their pasts*, offers powerful evidence of how the past – the familiar and intimate in particular – is intrinsically connected to Canadian citizens. Their findings raise important questions with regard to the role of master-narratives and official *lieux de mémoire* in the lives of Canadians. Perhaps more importantly, *Canadians and their pasts* suggested that education is the most determinant factor in explaining how people think about and engage the past critically.

Despite the value of all these studies, Canadian scholars and universities still lack a detailed, systematic insight into the edu-

ational experiences of students in history programs across Canada. With in-kind support of the CHA and support from the Faculty of Education's research unit "Making history/Faire l'histoire" and the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, this major national assessment of students' engagement in undergraduate history will provide much needed data to understand the experience of history students in and out of the classroom. This project is a collaborative undertaking, working with the CHA and history departments across Canada. Before the survey is widely disseminated, it will be piloted at several institutions to obtain feedback.

This project will present new and urgently needed results on the state of undergraduate students' engagement in history. In a digital age in which history departments in the so-called "Ivory Tower" are often accused of being fragmented and disconnected from real life issues, our project aims to (1) set out the larger context in which today's undergraduate students learn history; (2) document their own learning experiences and engagement; and (3) provide teachers, professors, administrators, and professional organizations with some top priorities and specific recommendations for the future of history teaching and learning in Canadian universities.

Using a letter of invitation, undergraduate students registered in a history program at various stages of their studies (1st year, 2nd/3rd year, and 4th year) will be invited to participate in the survey which takes about twenty minutes to complete. After accepting the online consent form, students will be invited to complete individually the questionnaire divided into a short form dealing with students' demographics and backgrounds and their experiences and engagement in history – inside and outside the formal educational environment. The long form questions will provide students with the opportunity to provide qualitative insights into their experiences.

The survey will have a series of key questions (combination of close- and open-ended) meant to capture students' own learning experiences and ideas in terms of "benchmarks" of educational engagement: level of personal engagement in historical activities; level of interest in various forms of history; trust in historical sources and versions of history; type of learning environment and interaction; and rationale for studying history. The draft survey will be available on-line with a bilingual invitation on the CHA website (www.cha-shc.ca). It will also be available via The History Education Network website (www.thenhier.ca), the largest organization dedicated to history education in Canada.

History in Class: Talking Parts

By David Frank, UNB

Yes, we give lectures and probably always will, especially if we remember that these are not rehearsals of textbooks or second-hand notes but more like performances of our own struggles to achieve historical understanding. And history classes will continue to encourage questions and discussions and offer a range of readings and assignments.

But here I want to give a few examples of role-playing exercises that I have used in Canadian history courses. My pragmatic working assumption has been that a closer engagement with historical information is a good thing. And that, if students are called upon to show what they can do with that information in class, they will do their best to rise to the occasion.

My hopes were encouraged in one course for students in the Faculty of Education, where the class were asked to make group presentations about books they read for written book reports. Most turned out to be panel discussions, but for Bettina Bradbury's *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (1993), one group performed a small domestic drama that went more or less like this:

Family members arrive home to tell the aged grandmother, seated in her rocking chair, about the events of the day. The mother returns from her cleaning work across town and hurries to prepare a meal for the family and the hungry boarders; one daughter comes in from doing errands and looking after her little brother; an older boy reports on an accident at work where a boy lost two fingers and adds that most of his own week's pay was deducted in fines; his sister returns from the cigar factory to say that she has been beaten by the foreman; the father comes in, sits down at the table and tells the family that he has been laid off for the season. Then the meal is served, and the younger brother suddenly jumps up from the table screaming and runs off to look for his pet pig.

All of this, or most of it, is in the book, though not everything happened in exactly the same way, and certainly not on the same day.

A variation on this kind of presentation became a regular feature in a large general interest course, Canadian History on Film. Students chose (from a list) a full-length feature film dealing with some aspect of Canadian history. Then they worked in small groups to prepare an analysis of the film for the rest of the class, answering five main questions, much as I had done in discussing films in previous classes. One question required some explanation of the story-line, and role-playing was one way to do it.

As a result, we saw students acting out talk shows and game shows; we saw them in combat gear crawling across the floor; we watched hockey players wondering whether they should form a union; we saw children describing traumatic experiences in residential schools; and one student performed a Gaelic song as if she was a character from Margaret's Museum. Everyone in the class filed a report on what they learned about each film; and the participants in the presentations later wrote full discussions on the core questions.

Many of us have likely done role-playing activities around the hardy perennial of Confederation, and I also incorporated this into my introductory survey in Canadian history. The month-long unit on the making of the Canadian state included lectures on British North America at midcentury and Confederation, and there were historical documents and readings and film excerpts as well. But the centrepiece was an imagined Confederation Conference.

These kinds of approaches may be less efficient than lectures or readings in delivering information, but the risks are no greater than in the traditional lecture.... Students appreciate opportunities to use their imagination and intelligence in class, and even to have some fun along the way.

Early in the process, each student received a new identity as a Father of Confederation, made up from a list of the thirty-six delegates who attended one or more of the historic conferences of 1864-66. They were then asked to prepare registration forms, and for this we relied on the entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. A few cautionary notes: surprisingly, one of the Fathers managed to elude the DCB; two of the fathers have an identical name; and in large enrolment classes, where we were divided into several working groups, it was fair ball to have multiple Tilley's, Tupper's, Galts and Browns, etc. With the registration forms in hand, we could call the roll of delegates, and the introductions gave us a rough demographic portrait of the Fathers (age, gender, birthplace, ethnicity, education, occupation/s, principal political activities), which among other things highlighted the notable absence from the room of numerous other residents of the British North America of the time.

After some preparation among delegations, the Fathers came together in a plenary session, and, under the watchful eye of the Colonial Office if not Her Royal Highness (cue the instructor

and teaching assistants), went on to debate and decide some of the key issues in the making of Confederation. These ranged from the composition of the Commons and Senate and the division of powers between federal and provincial governments through to the process of ratification and the naming of the new country, and a number of propositions were voted up or down.

Afterwards, there was a written assignment, as each student prepared a “Letter from a Father” (“their” Father) addressed to descendants of our own time. This small piece of historical fiction was expected to convey in some detail an understanding of the individual personalities and the historical forces leading to Confederation.

There are more examples. In *The Canadian Worker before 1914*, we imagined a “workers’ parliament” that convened to debate the condition of workers in British North America at mid-century. I pass over this one, as I have recently written it up for *Our Schools / Our Selves* (Fall 2015). In the companion course on *The Canadian Worker since 1914*, we gave J.S. Woodsworth the trial he never had. Although indicted on six counts of seditious libel in the wake of the Winnipeg General Strike, Woodsworth was never actually brought to trial. In addition to hearing a lecture on the strike and viewing interviews with some of the participants (from a 1959 television broadcast), students read the

indictment and relevant sections of the Criminal Code. Individuals gave evidence as historical characters of the time, handily introduced in Jack Bumsted’s book on the strike. I stood in as judge and delivered a charge to the jury. Students then wrote papers giving their verdict on each of the counts.

The biggest challenge in all of these cases was to allocate sufficient time in the course outline. A topic that professors might cover in one class, at least to their own satisfaction, might well take three or four classes to explore in the form of a role-playing exercise. Nor should we think that “not lecturing” reduces preparation time, as group exercises require the instructor to work out realistic tasks and anticipate challenges students will face. And the instructor needs to be readily available, especially outside class times, to provide coaching and reassurance.

These kinds of approaches may be less efficient than lectures or readings in delivering information, but the risks are no greater than in the traditional lecture. Let’s remember that our main responsibility is to draw students into the world of historical discovery and understanding. Students appreciate opportunities to use their imagination and intelligence in class, and even to have some fun along the way.



Carleton
UNIVERSITY

New member of faculty and cross-appointee: Candace Sobers, historian of international history and modern

international relations, specializing in twentieth century decolonization, movements of national liberation, and the global reach of Third World revolutionary internationalism, with a specific focus on African independence movements and United States (U.S.) foreign policy. Visiting Professors: Historian of Modern France Rebecca Pulju 2014-16 (History, Kent State), and historian of Canada’s First Nations, Jean-Pierre Morin 2015-17 (Civil Servant in Residence). New Adjunct Professors: Iain Badgley (archeologist at the National Capital Commission), Hal Goldman (Historian of the USA and longstanding contract instructor), Jean-Pierre Morin (Historian at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada), John Willis (Canadian Museum of History). On sabbatical for all or part of 2015-16: Michel Hogue, Susanne Klausen, James Miller, Jim Opp. The number of faculty is maintaining, the undergraduate enrolment is slightly declining and the graduate enrolment is steady. Dominique Marshall has been reelected Chair for three years from July 2016.

Special events this year include the Shannon Lecture Series on “*Performing History: Re-staging the Past*”, hosted by David Dean in the Fall 2015; the 2016 series on “*Health and Heal-*

ing in Historical Perspective” to be hosted by Susanne Klausen; the Underhill Graduate Colloquium of March 2016 on the theme “(In)Sites” spaces and places of history, with Northeastern University Historian Tim Cresswell as guest speaker; an exhibition of photos of the E.B Eddy complex by the Workers’ History Museum (Fall 2015) and, in collaboration with the Pinhey’s Point Foundation, exhibitions on “*The Pinhey Family at War, 1914-1918*” (Fall-Winter 2015-15) and on “*Songs of the Allies, An Ontario Girl’s Sheet Music from the Great War*” (Winter 2016).

Collaboration with new minors in Medieval and Early Modern Studies and Disability Studies; and Specialization in Global and Transnational History, within the new Bachelor of Global and International Studies degree.

Recent books published by members of the Department include Larry Black (distinguished research professor) *The Russian Presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, 2008-2012: The Next Step Forward or Merely a Time Out*; Shawn Graham (in collaboration), *Exploring Big Historical Data: The Historian’s Macroscope*; Norman Hillmer, *O.D. Skelton: A Portrait of Canadian Ambition*; Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People*; Susanne Klausen, *Abortion Under Apartheid: Nationalism, Sexuality and Women’s Reproductive Rights in South Africa* and (in collaboration) *A Canadian Girl in South Africa*, E. Maud Graham’s *Memoir*; Rod Phillips, *Alcohol: A History*.