

History Education in Canada: A Profoundly Immodest Proposal

By Adam Chapnick

Does history matter? Historians certainly think so, but sometimes it can seem like we're in the minority. History departments across the country are struggling to meet enrolment targets, and the common mantra that the future of our society depends primarily on science, technology, engineering, and mathematic graduates remains popular in Canada and around much of the developed world.

Objectively, a degree in history is a legitimate pathway to a successful and fulfilling career, not to mention a life as an engaged citizen. Indeed, Statistics Canada reports that 90% of humanities BA graduates are earning an average of nearly \$50,000 per year within three years of graduation. Anecdotally, however, a history degree doesn't get you further than a minimum wage job in retail or food services.¹

What causes the disconnect? I think that part of the problem is our classes: not the content, per se, but the titles. In spite of a remarkable transformation in the way that we understand the purpose of history education at the conceptual level – consider Peter Seixas' excellent work, summarized in a previous issue of this *Bulletin*² – we continue to advertise our undergraduate courses, and design our degree programs, in a manner that cannot help but reinforce all of the negative stereotypes.

When I think back to my own undergraduate education, for example, I recall two classes more than any of the others.

The first was a second year course in medieval history. Frankly, I don't remember anything about the time period, but I will always recall the moment at which I finally came to understand the role and importance of primary evidence in constructing an effective argument.

The second was a fourth year seminar on either the First or Second World War (I'm not sure which one.) Once more, the content hardly mattered. It was the requirement to write a 4000 word research paper every third week, and to review that paper with my professor one-on-one that changed me. You could not complete that class successfully without learning how to research and write.

In both cases, my learning experience was by design. The medievalist was committed to teaching us how to use primary source evidence effectively. And the world war specialist wanted us to

learn how to conduct serious research. Yet anyone browsing these classes from their listing on the equivalent of today's departmental website (then known, I believe, as the "departmental handbook") would have thought differently.

To them, "The Medieval Panorama" or "Studies in World War X" would have suggested little more than a series of lectures and discussions about a specific period of history (an understanding of which would do relatively little to support the specific skills that graduates require beyond the ivory tower).

While the last decade has seen tremendous progress in our ability to capture and describe what Seixas terms "historical consciousness," and move beyond the idea that history is merely about names, places, and dates, we continue to think about our classes in such terms.

Why not call the medieval course: "Understanding Primary Evidence through an Introduction to Medieval History"? Why not "Professional Historical Research Through the Lens of the First World War"? What about "Understanding Research Ethics Through the History of Sport" or "Weighing Contradictory Evidence Throughout Modern Western Civilization"?

History departments claim to teach communication skills, but which ones? And in what courses? It's hard to tell from the transcript that our students might provide to a prospective employer. How might an outsider determine whether I've been exposed to all six of what Seixas calls the "benchmark concepts": establishing historical significance, using primary source evidence, identifying continuity and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking historical perspectives, and understanding the ethical dimensions of history?

Rather than designing courses, and indeed undergraduate degree programs, based on chronology, geography, and thematic subject matter, is it not time to build a curriculum (implicitly and explicitly) around the skills that an education in history provides? Would it not make more sense to emphasize exposure to a diversity of historical methods than time periods?

Such transparency should be good for everyone. History departments would be able to articulate the skills that their graduates have acquired. Instructors would have a better sense of what their students already knew about history when they arrived in their classrooms. Students would have access to language that better captures the purpose and value of a liberal arts education. And parents, employers, donors, and even history education's critics would be better able to appreciate the skills, knowledge, and values that history graduates have to offer.

¹ Sarah Jane Ferguson and Shunji Wang, "Graduating in Canada: Profile, labour market outcomes and student debt of the class of 2009-2010," (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 14 November 2014); See also Adam Chapnick, "Arts advantage: Why enrolling in the liberal arts is smarter than you think," *Literary Review of Canada*, May 2015, 3-5.

² Peter Seixas, "The Historical Thinking Project," *Bulletin* 40, no.1 (2015): 31-32. See also his "A modest proposal for change in Canadian history education," *Teaching History* 137 (December 2009): 26-30.