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# S·A·L·O·N

## President's Message, January 2023

Since our last issue of Salon in April 2022, we have been busy! I'm excited about this issue on the theme of historical thinking, since it was the work on historical thinking that brought many of us together in the first place, and it feels like a full circle moment as we are really launching our network.

We held a director's meeting in Winnipeg in August with the support of our partners at Canada's History Society and with the support of the Canada History Fund from Heritage Canada. We elected a second vice president, Jennifer Williams from Alberta, who will be assisting with communications and providing her strong leadership to our national team. We established working committees: governance, finance and communications to undertake our core operations, and we planned for our fall conference season, where we had a presence at eight provincial and territorial conferences in conjunction with the launch of our website.

Our partnerships have been expanding rapidly and we are excited to be able to provide consultation services for our partners (old and new) to develop resources and supports that will meet the needs of social studies educators across Canada. We have been happy to partner with Defining Moments Canada, the Korean War Legacy Foundation, The Aga Khan Foundation Canada, The Collaborative, the Diefenbaker Centre Canada, and Samara Canada. I'm looking forward to seeing the results of our collaborations and to establishing future partnerships where we can be of service and where our goals align.

At our fall conferences this year, we were able to send 12 SSENc directors to a neighbouring province to share what we've been doing at SSENc, to launch our website, to share the work of our partners, and to share the drafts of the [Canada's Participation in the Korean War](#) lessons in workshops, thanks to additional funding from the Academy of Korean Studies. We are still planning to publish a print edition of this collection of inquiry resources in 2023, but the draft lessons are available now for teachers across Canada to try out this year, the final year of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War. As our veterans pass



Photo: SSENc/RESSC in Winnipeg

away, we are committed to ensure that their stories are not forgotten and that teachers have the tools and resources to share those stories with their students and help them to inquire using historical thinking to uncover the past and hopefully share it more broadly in their own schools and communities.

Sincerely,  
Rachel Collishaw  
President

## First Hand Experience with Trusted Canadian Resources

While working on creating this issue of Salon we learned that Dr. Peter Seixas died in Vancouver on October 9th. We want to express our sadness for the loss of this giant in social studies education and our condolences to his friends and family.

This issue of Salon will be focus on the important topic of historical thinking. We will be utilizing the framework developed by The Historical thinking Project (HTP) developed under the leadership of Dr. Peter Seixas. This approach has been adopted by curriculum developers, publishers, and educators across Canada and around the world. The HTP is built around six integrated historical thinking concepts. These “Big Six” help students gain a better understanding of any historical event or topic they are studying. Since they will be referenced throughout this issue, here are the six historical thinking concepts.

1. **Establish historical significance:** How do we decide what is important to learn about from the past?
2. **Use primary source evidence:** How do we know what we know about the past?
3. **Identify continuity and change:** How can we make sense of the complex flows of history?
4. **Analyze cause and consequence:** Why do events happen, and what are their impacts?
5. **Take historical perspectives:** How can we better understand the people of the past?
6. **Understand the ethical dimension:** How can history help us to live in the present?

There are many sources of information to help you become more literate with historical thinking. Two of the most helpful are the book *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* by Seixas and Morton (2012) and the website <http://historicalthinking.ca/>. Hopefully this issue of Salon will also give you some ideas to get started in historical thinking.

*John Tidswell*  
Member of SSENCR/RESSC



Photo: Birthday Balloons

### Your Birthdate in History: Rich Learning of Historical Significance in a 3-Grade High School Split Class

Teaching Social Studies in a remote rural school has its unique challenges. Our class consisted of 18 students in grade 7, 8, and 9 with a wide range of literacy levels and school engagement. A content focused approach would have been an unrealistic expectation for both teacher and student, and questionable whether it would lead to a successful semester. As social studies teachers in diverse, multi-age rural classrooms, we can meaningfully manage both content and broader learning goals by reframing our course plans using an ‘Historical Thinking Approach’.

Using the historical thinking lesson ‘Your Birthdate in History’ as a starting point, students investigated significant events that occurred around their birth date throughout history. As students inquired into their date of birth, they were guided through the concept of historical significance. Sources were limited to specific websites and texts to prevent the use of general ‘Google searches’. After collecting a series of significant events that occurred on their birthdate, students were then challenged to decide on the single most significant event that happened on that date using the following criteria:

Does your event:

- Result in deep, long-lasting change that influences many people?
- Reveal something about the past?
- Shed light on contemporary issues or is relevant to us today?
- Belong to a larger, meaningful narrative?

Using guiding teacher language such as, “this is what you believe is most significant,” increased student engagement and helped them have the confidence to complete the assignment. Students demonstrated their learning by creating a small poster, a brief presentation to the class, and a differentiated writing assignment using the prompt, ‘this is the most significant event on this day because...’ Outcomes ranged from the release date of a Beatles #1 hit song (with a QR code linking audience members to the song) to the disaster at Chernobyl. Presentations were exciting, students were able to speak to their event with detail, and they sparked further discussion regarding what constitutes a significant event in history.

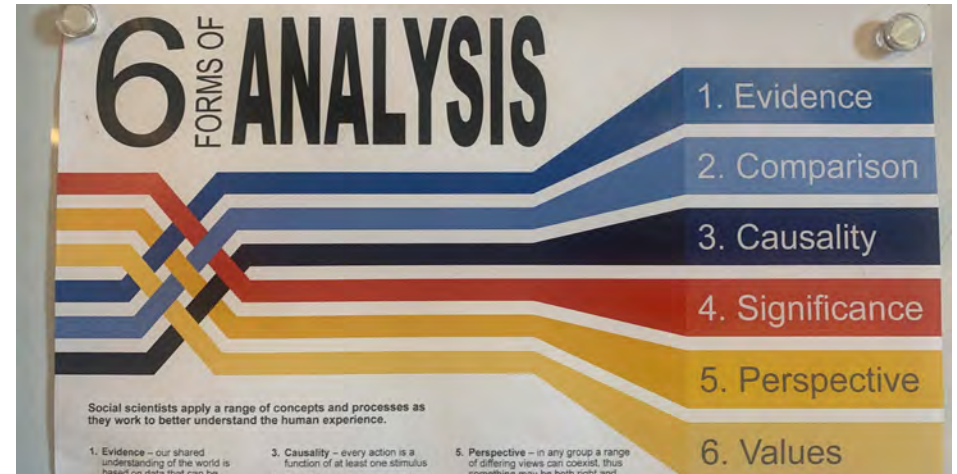
The “Your Birthdate in History” is an accessible project with multiple entry points and a high ceiling for our diverse classrooms. In our class, it was used as an introductory assignment at the start of the semester to isolate and deeply explore the concept of historical significance. We allowed students to explore any historical event; however, their project could be narrowed to a specific region or time period such as the lesson plan described by the historical thinking project ([historicalthinking.ca/lesson/687](http://historicalthinking.ca/lesson/687)). The students were inspired by this rich learning approach. Their inquiry then effortlessly acted as a springboard for class conversations about what is and is not included in history texts. More importantly, this setting maximized student engagement and pride as students shared their work and respectfully listened to others.

*Jeremy Staveley is a teaching vice principal in a small K-12 school in rural Yukon.*

### The Atlantic Bubble Reconsidered

In 2018 Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) rolled out the first of three courses that would make up a new Social Studies high school curriculum, one that represented a significant pedagogical shift. Traditionally, students entering Grade 10 chose between History or Geography and followed that discipline through graduation. Breaking from past practices, the new courses will explore a more integrated approach to Social Studies education: one that focusses on its inherent process skills, on “how to do” Social Studies rather than “what content to study”.

The recent passing of Dr. Peter Seixas prompted many tributes from those who had the pleasure of knowing him. We did not but are happy to say that his fingerprints are all over our new curriculum. Each of the three core high school courses share a common unit dedicated to “Integrated Concepts and Process Skills”, and Dr Seixas’ “Big Six” are explicitly taught and applied in various contexts. The courses themselves are thematically organised and anchored by inquiry-based investigations, but each uses a different lens for honing those



*Photo: 6 Forms of Analysis*

critical analysis skills: Civics/Economics, History, and Human Geography (respectively).

So what does this look like in practice? We use mini lessons to teach the Big Six early in the term so that students have a fair understanding of how each can be used to analyse an issue. Armed with prior knowledge (and some helpful organiser templates), students are ready to start using those tools for analysis to tackle multifaceted problems. One popular activity we use is easily adapted to any general or specific curriculum outcome and incorporates not only critical analysis but also democratic principles and communication practices. We invite students to explore a controversial issue before voting on a response. For example, in the early stages of Covid, NL joined with the Maritime provinces to form the “Atlantic Bubble” in what was technically a violation of the Canadian Charter but also qualified as justifiable in times of crisis. By providing students with some links to the W5 of the story and a [graphic organiser](#) guiding them to consider the “Big 6” implications of the decision, students were able to gather and organise information upon which they could form a reasoned judgement. The questions included in the organiser act as a shorthand to remind students how to use them and this activity is easily scaffolded for differentiated instruction by including only 1-3 of the Big 6 and/or having small groups focus on only one before sharing with the class to collectively achieve a more thorough analysis. (We often do this with our vocational groups, encouraging discussion along the way).

There are many extension opportunities as students may debate their position, promote a call to action via poster/podcast/speech, or dig deeper into one of



the competencies by finding [examples of conflicting perspectives](#) on the issue (which went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada they discovered!). We used [Feedback Frames](#) for this activity, and students enjoyed dropping their disk (vote) in the appropriate slot as well as the visual reveal at the end. The vote could be tallied on any number of media, but there was something about physically getting up and voting, on holding that physical representation in their hand, that made the act of voting more personal and significant.

*Jill Kennedy and Jacqueline Rocket are teachers in Newfoundland*



*Photo: The Heritage Cubes*

### Heritage Cubes, An Engaging Project

When we were asked to present a project that would allow students to implement any of the components of historical thinking, specifically the use of sources, the Heritage cubes exhibition project came to mind. To illustrate this, a student's research experience that particularly impressed me will be shared.

First, it is important to indicate that the Heritage cubes exhibition is a project resulting from participation in a photography contest: Capture your heritage. From the work done for the contest, the students are led to elaborate a travelling exhibition (municipalities and schools of the Rimouski region) which highlights their view on the heritage of their region. This enhances the meaning of their participation in the contest, recognizes their commitment and raises awareness among the population of the territory about the importance of the contribution of the past to present-day communities.

This project is even more important as Quebec is increasingly faced with the challenge of preserving its heritage. Students are engaged in a reflection that leads them to determine what is part of heritage, to identify how it defines us, to discover what it can teach us, to reflect on the relevance of its preservation, etc. To answer these questions, students are asked to document the object in their photograph. Each student documents to provide context for the chosen heritage object and explain why it is important. The sources used are varied but are generally limited to gathering testimonials and using various books. This year, one student took the experiment much further. Surprising information about regatta races held on a local lake in the 1950s and 1960s led him to verify the memories of elderly people. To do so, he obtained access to the archives of his municipality and unearthed various documents including press clippings. What joy and pride he had when he shared these finds confirming that the lake has indeed hosted regatta races.

Finally, the experience of participating in the competition and the exhibition project allows students to apply various markers of historical thinking, including historical significance and evidence. Their reflections give meaning to the learning of history. One of them concludes his reflection on heritage and the importance of preserving it by saying that "what makes a nation is its heritage, its language, etc."

[A video presentation of the project made by a student.](#)

*Remi Lavoie is a teacher in Rimouski, Quebec*

*Photo: Press clipping showing the regatta on a local lake.*



## BC Teacher Sees the Benefits of Historical Thinking

Across Canada many provinces have embraced the ideas of the Historical Thinking Project and embedded them into their curricula. In British Columbia (BC) the new Social Studies curriculum emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills that are key to the discipline. The skills selected are based on the six historical thinking skills identified in the Historical Thinking Project. As a result, students in BC are continually building these skills throughout their social studies education.

One teacher who sees the benefits of these changes is Carly Wenner who teaches Social Studies in Vancouver. She was first exposed to the ideas of historical thinking at the Historical Thinking Summer Institute hosted by the University of British Columbia (UBC) back in 2015. She has studied various approaches to historical thinking, including the one used in Advanced Placement (AP) history courses and the Netherlands Historical Reasoning model, and sees useful elements in each of these systems. She is currently enrolled in a Master of Education cohort at the UBC that is made up of practicing social studies teachers and focuses on historical inquiry. With the benefit of her considerable research, she continues to develop strategies that provide engaging ways for her students to learn social studies.

*The Historical Thinking Project | Canada's History*



Wenner believes that one of the most important benefits of incorporating historical thinking skills is that they provide an excellent structure around which to build lessons and units. Since the curricular competencies for BC Social Studies are the historical thinking concepts, teachers can directly evaluate the competencies as accessible outcomes. In her Social Studies 8 class, which covers history from the 7th century to 1750, each unit is built around one overarching question that is tied to one of the “Big Six” thinking skills. So, for example, the overarching question in one unit explores the significance of the silk road on the development of Afro-Eurasia. Teachers can utilize the language and criteria associated with the concept of historical significance to evaluate students’ work. By working with these skills students assemble evidence to help them respond to the overarching question. This helps ensure teachers focus their assessment on the demonstration of skills and competencies.

Wenner also discussed how the historical thinking skills are interwoven. For example, if students are exploring cause and consequence, they will need to examine different perspectives about what is most significant. As Wenner says, “you can’t weigh which causes were more influential without talking about significance first.” Exploring multiple perspectives often requires analysis of primary source evidence to understand these perspectives. For a student to make an ethical judgement they need to consider different perspectives. The opportunity to use multiple historical thinking skills happens more often when students become confident with these skills, and they can better call on the appropriate skill at the appropriate time. Ultimately these skills allow students to be able to construct their own arguments. Wenner finds that students enjoy the arguments and debates in history and that these can be very motivating. Students learn that evidence is a powerful tool in their debates and that using historical thinking skills is essential to support their arguments.

*John Tidswell is a member of SSENCR/RESSC*



## 10 Common Misconceptions about Historical Thinking

Over the past fifty years, historical thinking has become a standard in the theory and practice of history education in Western Europe and North America before spreading globally. Since the inception of the Historical Thinking Project in 2006, historical thinking definitions, concepts, and frameworks have been included in history and social studies curriculums in most provinces and territories in Canada. All major Canadian textbook publishers have published textbooks that include historical thinking concepts, numerous history and social studies organizations have developed learning resources that focus on historical thinking, and countless Historical Thinking Summer and Winter Institutes and professional learning workshops have been held online and in person across the country.

I was first introduced to historical thinking in 2006 when I was given a copy of *Teaching about Historical Thinking* (I still have my original copy filled with post-it notes and dog-eared pages), which was written by Mike Denos and Dr. Roland Case and based on the historical thinking framework conceived by Dr. Peter Seixas. Since this initial introduction, I have worked with historical thinking concepts as a secondary school history and social studies teacher, a PhD student, a teacher educator working with teacher candidates and graduate students in a Faculty of Education, a curriculum and learning resources developer, and a presenter at teacher professional learning workshops and institutes. In these varied experiences, I have encountered several common misconceptions about historical thinking, which I hope to clarify below.

### 1. Young students cannot think historically because they don't have enough historical knowledge.

- Numerous researchers have shown that even the youngest school-age students have knowledge about what happened in the past and ideas about how we know what we know about the past, some of which is accurate, and some is not. Peter Lee (2005) argues that it's essential that educators know what ideas students have about both the content of history, but also how we know about the past so that any misconceptions they might have can be addressed.

### 2. There is widespread agreement about the key concepts that constitute HT.

- Historical thinking has a complex and contested nature, and there are several conceptual models and approaches to historical thinking that include some of the same but also different historical thinking concepts. Sam Wineburg (1999) identified four heuristics—sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and close-reading to provide teachers

with practical tools for teaching and assessing students' historical literacy and historical thinking about evidence. In Canada, Peter Seixas' (2009) defined historical thinking in terms of six historical thinking concepts: historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension. Scholars have also called for more focus on additional historical thinking concepts, including historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2018) and historical interpretations/narratives (Chapman, 2017).

### 3. Historical thinking concepts = skills.

- Teachers often describe historical thinking concepts as skills, but I think they are better described as competencies. According to Roland Case (2020) competencies refer to the ability to perform effectively in a broader range of activities than skills. There are dozens of specific communication and literacy skills, but competencies refer to the ability to successfully complete an interconnected cluster of products or performances. Similarly, each historical thinking concept is comprised of interrelated disciplinary knowledge, dispositions, and skills. For example, Seixas and Morton (2013) identify five or more "guideposts" that outline the disciplinary and skills for each of the six historical thinking concepts included in the model. Competencies also emphasize authentic performance tasks that require students to make decisions about the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are most relevant and useful for addressing real-world historical problems and issues. For example, asking students to decide the most appropriate response to a controversial historical statue in their community requires them to draw on a wide range of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions focused on different historical thinking concepts including evidence and interpretations, historical perspective, and ethical judgments.

### 4. Historical thinking "skills" are more important than historical content knowledge.

- There has been an interminable debate amongst history and social studies educators about skills versus content. Advocates of teaching skills argue that historical information can be looked up on their phones, and students should be taught the skills to identify and analyze historical information rather than learn historical information. Those who argue for the importance of content knowledge maintain that students need to learn foundational knowledge before they can think historically about it. This debate is based on a false dichotomy. Thinking historically without historical content is meaningless, if not

impossible, and learning historical content without understanding how it is produced can undermine students' understanding of both the nature of history and historical content.

**5. Historical thinking helps determine the objective truth about the past.**

- Objective truth in history is a slippery and contested idea. A historical statement or assertion is believed to be objectively true if it meets truth conditions free from individual subjectivities (e.g., perceptions, emotions, or imagination). There are indisputable historical facts, but doing history requires more than establishing historical facts and organizing them into narratives. The past is gone and cannot be recreated, and historical narratives are constructed by humans with diverse subjectivities. It is impossible to definitively prove that any interpretation of the past is the “objective truth.” Historical thinking focuses on teaching students to analyze and interpret historical evidence to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct historical narratives. The goal is not to establish objective truth, but to negotiate plausible solutions to the problems, tensions, and difficulties that are inherent in doing history and raised by historical thinking concepts. What events and people from the past are important to learn about? What caused historical events to occur and what are the consequences? Which interpretations of the past are most plausible? How do we make sense of similarities and differences over time? How do we understand what people thought and believed in the past? How should we respond to injustices and heroic actions in the past?

**6. Historical thinking is apolitical and uncritical.**

- Several scholars have criticized historical thinking for being depoliticized and uncritical in that it fails to address the relationships between power, knowledge, ways of knowing and the social relations, identities, and subjectivities they help foster and normalize (Cutrara, 2009; Parkes, 2009; Segall, 2006). Critical scholars have also challenged historical thinking approaches for not being sufficiently attentive to the ways that students' cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, and disability identities shape their historical understandings (Crocco, 2018; Segall et al., 2018). Historical thinking can undoubtedly be used in an uncritical way that reinforces current inequalities and injustices, but it also has the potential to make important contributions in terms of conceptualizing the tools, processes, and ways of thinking that help students make sense of who they are, where they stand, and what they can do—as individuals, as members of multiple, intersecting groups,

and as citizens with roles and responsibilities in relation to nations and states in a complex, conflict- ridden, and rapidly changing world.

**7. Teachers and students shouldn't judge the past by the standards of the present.**

- When discussing historical injustices, some people argue that we shouldn't judge those in the past using standards of the present. Interestingly, the same argument is not applied when discussing people in the past who deserve to be honoured in the present. Surely it's important to understand the historical context, perspectives, values, worldviews, and beliefs of people in the past before making judgments. At the same time, we are inescapably located in the present, and it is impossible to avoid making judgments about the past. Every time teachers make a decision about what to teach about (or not to teach about) they are making judgments about the past. When we make ethical judgments about past transgressions, it is important to understand what occurred before, during, and after the historical event; the social, political, cultural, and ethical norms that existed at the time; the circumstances, constraints, options, and motivations that initiated or limited historical people's actions; and the values, beliefs, attitudes, and intellectual frameworks that different people held about what was considered ethical (Gibson et al., 2022).

**8. Historical information = historical evidence.**

- Historical evidence refers to the relevant, credible inferences that are made from primary and secondary sources that are used to answer a question about the past. Historical information only becomes evidence when it is used to respond to a historical question. If students list dates, or recall facts about past events they are presenting information, not evidence. Historical information becomes evidence when students employ it to offer an interpretive conclusion, explanation, or judgment. For example, the statement that the Canadian government collected \$23 million in head taxes from approximately 81,000 Chinese immigrants is historical information. The statement becomes evidence when it is used to make a conclusion or argument. For example, claiming that descendants of Chinese immigrants deserve compensation from the Canadian government because \$23 million in head taxes were collected transforms information into evidence.

**9. Primary sources are more useful than secondary sources for teaching historical thinking.**

- Primary sources are original or first-hand in terms of time and access



to the historical topic being investigated. Secondary sources are second-hand in that they are produced from evidence drawn from other primary and secondary sources. Determining whether a source is primary or secondary depends on the question being asked. A statue and plaque built to commemorate a significant historical event is a secondary source if the question is focused on what happened during the battle, but a primary source if the question is focused on what the people who created the statue thought about the historical event. During professional learning sessions I regularly ask pre- and in-service teachers if primary sources are more useful than secondary sources for teaching historical thinking? In most cases participants say that primary sources are more useful because they were created at or close to the time and location of the topic being investigated. Occasionally participants respond with “neither” or “both,” which are both plausible answers. All primary and secondary sources need to be closely scrutinized and analyzed in relation to the historical question and purpose of our investigation, and so neither is fundamentally more useful. Alternatively, both types of sources are useful because responding to a historical research question requires analysis of both primary sources and the interpretations and narratives included in secondary sources.

#### 10. Teaching students to analyze primary and secondary sources involves determining whether the sources is biased or not.

- There are two main problems with analyzing primary and secondary sources for bias. Firstly, bias is often used synonymously with perspective, point of view, and opinion, which is problematic. Bias is defined as “prejudice in favour of or against one thing, person, or group, usually in a way considered to be unfair.” Perspective is a particular attitude or way of regarding something, and point of view is the position from which something is considered or evaluated. People’s opinions are shaped by their point of view, perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and values, but they are not biased unless they unfairly prejudice or favor something over another. Having an opinion does not indicate bias, unless evidence is unfairly judged or particular perspectives and opinions are excluded. The second issue with having students analyze evidence for bias is that it impedes their historical thinking in that it reinforces the problematic understanding that there are unbiased sources available, and biased sources should be avoided or discarded. In many cases, the most “biased” (prejudicial) sources are often the most interesting and useful sources because the provide

important insights to the attitudes, belief, and worldviews of those who created them. Additionally, asking students to identify bias in some types of primary sources makes no sense. For example, one cannot ask whether primary source traces, remnants of the past that were not created to describe or explain the past) such as natural records (e.g., fossils and culturally-modified trees) and artifacts and documents (e.g., tools, and train schedules) are biased. Rather than teach students to identify bias, a more helpful approach is to invite students to source and contextualize the source to make inferences about who created it.

My purpose in this article is to share some of the misconceptions I’ve encountered throughout the nearly two decades I’ve been working with historical thinking. My hope is to deepen educators’ understanding of historical thinking and help them avoid making some of the mistakes I’ve made. If there are other misconceptions you’ve had or experienced, please share them via email ([lindsay.gibson@ubc.ca](mailto:lindsay.gibson@ubc.ca)) or twitter ([@lsgibson](https://twitter.com/lsgibson)).

[Bibliography for 10 Common Misconceptions](#)

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*Photo: Historical Thinking*

