Deepening historical consciousness through museum fieldwork: Implications for community-based history education

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"It's not just my teacher, it's the truth! It's in my history book!"
A.J. Soprano. (Chase, 2002)

Dissertation Abstract

This case study explores the link between historical thinking and historical consciousness at middle school level. Over a 14-week unit of study, one entire class of seventh-grade students (n=24), along with a group of adult community history museum volunteers (n=5), engaged in historical thinking with a museum collection in New Brunswick (Canada). Regarding historical thinking, the inquiry focused upon historical narratives, evidence, and sources—since these concepts are often encountered within informal learning settings such as community history museums. Indirectly, the concept of historical significance was also relevant.

   Drawing from an episode of a fictional television series, I first set the stage for my research by illustrating the fragile process through which a young person might construct meaning from the past. In the fourth season of *The Sopranos* (Chase, 2002), Anthony Soprano Junior ("A.J.") sits in the kitchen of the family home, reading aloud to his mother. The topic of discussion is Christopher Columbus, and the reading source is Howard Zinn's revisionist publication *A Peoples' History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (1980). When the family patriarch "Tony" Soprano enters the scene, we are provided with a brief glimpse into their family dynamics. As the breakfast discussion proceeds, A.J.'s father becomes extremely agitated, as he realizes that his son's version of history challenges his own well-established beliefs about the "brave Italian explorer." "Your teacher said that?" he asks his son, to which A.J. replies: "It's not just my teacher, it's the truth! It's in my history book!" Such a scenario, although fictional, provides an excellent illustration of the learning dynamics that can exist both inside and outside of a classroom. In this instance, as the student struggles to understand Christopher Columbus, he must juggle conflicting interpretations, both past and present, as well as weigh available evidence, in search of his own perception of *truth*: Was Columbus a criminal or a hero? Is his father right? Is his teacher right? Is the history book right? Wherein lays the *truth*?

The problem, as illustrated by this fictional scene, is that A.J. may never find the *truth* about Christopher Columbus. At best, according to theorist Jörn Rüsen, he may reach a contextual perception of the life and times of the explorer, recognizing that times have changed, and drawing personal meaning that is relevant to the present as well as the future. At worse, he may simply choose to accept his father's well-established beliefs about the "brave Italian explorer"—or his history teacher's criminal interpretation—as an unquestionable obligation to perpetuate a particular belief system. Likewise, as A.J.'s father struggles with generational differences between what he was taught in school about Christopher Columbus, and what his son is currently learning in his classroom, we are presented with a metaphorical question as to whether A.J.'s father, in light of his son's revisionist thinking, might be capable of changing his own well-established beliefs about his "hero." Inevitably, in the Soprano household the heavy hand of *truth* is dealt by the father, as the scene concludes with these weighty words: "He discovered America, is what he did. He was a brave Italian explorer. And in this house Christopher Columbus is a hero. End of story" (Chase, 2002). This is how I have framed my research problem.

Research design

The methodology adopted for this inquiry was informed by a sociocultural perspective. As a result, research procedures were framed around Falk and Dierking's (2000, 2013) *Contextual Model of Learning,* as well as Rüsen's (1987; 1993; 2004) typology of historical consciousness. The ultimate intent was to map out any changes that may have occurred over time regarding participants' relationship with their past, present, and future. This perspective seemed most fitting for the inquiry, since one of the greatest challenges associated with developing a research design for a community history museum often rests with identifying learning. As Wertsch (2002) has pointed out, what works well in the controlled social environment of a classroom may not produce equally valid data results in the differently-controlled social environment of a museum (see also Eakle & Dalesio, 2008; Foreman-Peck & Travers, 2013). Given such a distinction, Falk and Dierking (2000, 2013) have developed a *Contextual Model of Learning* that identifies four broad contexts for data analysis: personal, sociocultural, physical, and temporal (Allen et al., 2007, p. 229). This model has been widely used by researchers in science museums as a way of trying to make sense of how visitors learn in an informal learning setting (Allen et al., 2007; Kydd, 2005; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Anderson et al., 2007). While Falk and Dierking's model is not specific to middle school students nor community history museums per se, I considered it to be broadly applicable to my research design because it recognizes (regardless of age or discipline) that"[l]earning begins with the individual. Learning involves others. Learning takes place somewhere" (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p. 36), and learning continues over time (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 12). This model was also relevant to my research question, since it recognized the tacit nature of learning in a museum that manifests itself as historical consciousness.

My method choices were guided by current pedagogy surrounding historical thinking. In Canada, several notable scholars have spearheaded historical thinking as a disciplinary (domain-based) approach to history education (Clark, 2011; Duquette, 2011; Gibson, 2014; Létourneau & Moison, 2004; Lévesque, 2008, 2011; Osborne, 2006; Peck, 2009; Sandwell, 2005; Sandwell & Von Heyking, 2014; Sears, 2014; Seixas, 1996; Seixas & Morton, 2013). One of the central difficulties associated with teaching historical thinking in a history museum, however, rests with disciplinary distinctions within the domain of history. Since history museums are primarily keepers of artifacts (three-dimensional, non-literate objects), the object-based (material history) epistemology most often employed by museum curators cannot be considered the same as other approaches to historical inquiry (Corbishley, 2011,

2015; Hood, 2009; Jordanova, 2012; Létourneau, 1989; Thatcher Ulrich, 2001). Because of this distinction, I adopted a material history framework for historical inquiry (Elliot et al., 1994; Smith et al., 1985) that enabled students to *do* material history—as curators do in history museums. Such an approach required teaching students how to "read"—and critically analyze—objects for the evidence that they contained.

My method choices were also guided by distinctions between historical thinking and historical consciousness. As Duquette (2011) and others have argued (Charland, 2003; Laville, 2003; Rüsen, 2005, 1993; Seixas, 2004), the phenomenon of historical consciousness is not the same as the act of historical thinking—although the two are very closely related. This is because while the latter is explicit, the former is tacit. Likewise, while historical thinking can be evaluated and assessed against specific concepts of historical inquiry, historical consciousness cannot. To this end Jörn Rüsen (1987; 1993; 2004) has proposed a typology of historical consciousness that identifies four broad categories that reflect differing beliefs about the nature of historical knowledge: traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetic.

All of these factors combined ultimately led me to adopt an instrumental case study method (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005) that provided opportunities to explore pragmatic applications for historical thinking and historical consciousness within a community history museum. This method choice also provided opportunities to explore the phenomenological meanings that participants drew from the lived experience of participating in a 14-week unit of study. The single-case design (Yin, 2009) was bounded by the context of time (one formal study unit), as well as by the formal arrangement of a classroom (one seventh-grade class) and a specific community history museum fieldwork experience. The case contained two embedded units of analysis: students participating in the experience of community history museum fieldwork as part of their studies (n=24), and adult museum volunteers participating in the same experience as facilitators (n=five).

My central research question was: **"How can a heritage community assist middle school students in deepening their historical consciousness?"** Within this overarching question there were three procedural sub-questions:

1. Can formal classroom instruction, adopting *The Historical Thinking Project* concepts for historical thinking, enable middle school students to think historically about the narratives they encounter within their community history museum?

2. Does participation in history museum fieldwork activities deepen the historical consciousness of these students?

3. Does student collaboration with older members of this volunteer heritage community deepen the historical consciousness of the older members themselves?

Given the challenges associated with conducting research within an informal learning setting, combined with required precision associated with establishing (and adhering to) a case study protocol, it was also necessary to break my research procedures down into three distinct phases:

- **Phase one (four weeks):** Collaborating with the classroom teacher, museum executive director, and museum volunteers as preparation for the community history museum fieldwork experience; documenting participants' entry positions regarding historical thinking and historical consciousness. Research instruments adopted for this initial phase included the *Canadians and Their Pasts* survey (Conrad et al., 2013)— administered to both adult and student participants—as well as one in-depth (open) group interview with adult participants, and student written documentation assignments.

- **Phase two (four weeks):** Documenting participants' engagement with the community history museum fieldwork experience—as active and independent learners. Research instruments adopted for this phase included student historic space mapping of the museum exhibits, as well as material history object analysis documentation, adult-student think alouds, student artifact label-writing activities, and in-depth (open) adult group interviews following each museum visit.

- **Phase three (six weeks):** Providing time for the learning to be independently re-interpreted and re-visited as a new experience. Phase three research instruments included student material history object analysis activities, as well as development of a classroom museum, and in-depth (structured) student group interviews. As a final exit activity, all participants (adults and students) were asked to again complete specific portions of the *Canadians and Their Pasts* survey (Conrad et al., 2013).

During the first two phases students visited the community history museum four times, and the museum volunteers visited their classroom four times. During the final phase students remained in their classroom, working independently of the volunteers and the museum.

In order to situate this case study within a larger Canadian context of research regarding historical consciousness, the *Canadians and Their Pasts* survey (Conrad et al., 2013) was adopted as both a before and after point of comparison. All survey data was analyzed quantitatively against the larger *Canadians and Their Pasts* (provincial/national) survey, as well as coded qualitatively against the *a priori* theoretical framework of Rüsen's (1993) typology of historical consciousness.

Written documentation was analyzed qualitatively according to a two-cycle coding technique (Saldaῆa, 2009). First Cycle analysis involved descriptive and in vivo coding; this was followed by a Second Cycle of analysis using a pattern coding technique intended to identify narrative templates and patterns of significance. These narrative templates were then compared against Rüsen's (1993) typology of historical consciousness.

Interview data was transcribed and analyzed qualitatively according to a similar two-cycle coding technique (Saldaῆa, 2009). First Cycle analysis involved descriptive and in vivo coding; Second Cycle analysis involved a critical discourse method (Gee, 1999) that focussed upon social roles as an expression of group-identity and social goods as a way of thinking about the past. Second Cycle analysis also involved coding against Rüsen's (1993) typology of historical consciousness.

Ultimately, all of the data collected during each of the three phases of the inquiry was triangulated against each of the three procedural sub-questions, according to Falk and Dierking's (2000, 2013) *Contextual Model of Learning*. In so doing, all of the data sets were de-constructed according to four learning contexts (personal, sociocultural, physical, and temporal), then re-constructed in response to the main research question.

Key findings

One of the central premises surrounding historical thinking is the belief that students can be empowered to "read the texts that structure their lives" (Seixas, 2001, p. 561; see also Conrad et al., 2013; Levesque, 2008; Nokes, 2013; Seixas & Morton, 2013; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). In this case study, historical thinking commenced with students actually examining the narratives that they encountered within the museum. They then sought to investigate the artifact evidence and sources behind such narratives, and eventually reinterpreted their findings as exhibit projects. In so doing, students extended their purview beyond the authority of the museum, and as such independently focussed their attention upon

a specific artifact source—drawing evidence from that source, asking questions, corroborating the source, and making inferences that were evidence-based. As a result, students came to recognise complexity in interpreting the past, and slight shifts in historical consciousness became evident within their beliefs about knowledge. These findings provide strong evidence to support Seixas' (2001) assertion that students can indeed be empowered to "read the texts that structure their lives" (p 561).

Through the adoption of a series of scaffolding tools designed around a Material History Framework for Historical Thinking, students who participated in this inquiry became actively engaged in: (a) discovering and deconstructing the narratives that they encountered within the museum, (b) analysing the artifact sources behind such narratives, and (c) reconstructing their own narrative claims. In turn, students' social roles transformed from passive listeners to active participants. Through collaborative use of the same set of scaffolding tools, adult participants became engaged in (a) responding to students' questions, and (b) modelling historical thinking. In turn, adults' social roles transformed from information-transmitters to collaborative agents. Adult participants also developed a sense of empathy for the students as historical researchers. Ultimately, the authority of the museum was challenged in a constructivist way, and the community of inquiry was opened up to include students as active members. These findings are significant because they indicate ways in which the students were actively adopting social roles as members of a community of inquiry. They were no longer sharing common narrative claims about the past, but rather pursuing more complex avenues of inquiry and re-constructing their own claims—within the parameters of the museum.

In examining the historical templates that students constructed, it was apparent that they continued to formulate hybrid narratives (partly their own and partly that of the museum) for remembering the past. Over time, however, these narratives for remembering Canada's past shifted away from what Rüsen (2005) has described as a traditional template—reflecting "consent about a valid common life"—toward an exemplary schema, "reflecting peculiar situations to regularities of what happened" (p. 29). Similarly, students' narratives for remembering New Brunswick's past also shifted away from traditional templates, toward a genetic "acceptance of different standpoints within a compromising perspective of common development" (Rüsen, 2005, p. 29). Within these transitions in historical consciousness, students' narrative re-constructions remained implicitly shaped by the museum. As such, their historical claims were based upon the physical context of where they encountered the artifacts, what other artifacts shared the same exhibit space, what understandings they gained from interacting with the museum volunteers, what they found in the artifact accession files, and what they found from consulting secondary sources.

By comparison, adults' narratives for remembering the past remained largely unchanged over the 14-week unit of study. Adult participants entered into this inquiry with firm narrative beliefs about what they wished to remember about Canada's past and New Brunswick's past. Participation in the fieldwork experience seemed to have no apparent effect upon these narratives. Participation also did not seem to impact adults' pre-existing beliefs about the authority of sources, or the constructed nature of historical knowledge. Nevertheless, participation did seem to bring about meaningful changes in adults' perceptions regarding students' abilities to think historically about the past.

Conclusion

Overall then, returning to the introduction of this abstract, where we sat in the fictional kitchen of the Soprano family, Tony and A.J. Soprano illustrate two distinct modes of

historical consciousness—traditional and exemplary. They also serve to illustrate my original research problem. As the findings from this case study suggest, had the family patriarch and his son participated in a museum fieldwork experience such as this, Tony's traditional belief about Christopher Columbus probably would not have changed all that much. What might have changed, however, is his tolerance for an alternative perspective on the subject. Given such a script revision, A.J. may also have understood that *truth* lies not in any singular narrative, but in his own ability to carefully examine, compare, and contextualise the evidence behind such narrative claims. In this sense, simply confronting his father's historical *truth*, with yet another piece of textbook historical *truth*, would not constitute sophistication in historical thinking. Instead, as this case study suggests, in order for the two generations to actually listen and learn from each other, both the adult and student would have to relinquish their positions of authority. This is an important first step in enabling historical thinking within a community history museum.

By opening up the community of inquiry—as happened in this case study—students were empowered to challenge and re-write the claims that they encountered within the community history museum. While the experience did not lead many students to relinquish their trust in the authority of the museum, many adopted more sophisticated strategies for investigating and exploring the narratives that they encountered. They also came to place their trust in multiple sources of information about the past. Through participation in the museum fieldwork experience students began to realise the challenges historians face in piecing together (and validating) remnants of the past. Ultimately, through the lived experience of historical thinking with the museum, *history* became something that students envisioned *doing* for themselves. It was this sense of intellectual freedom…wonder…and discovery…that made the community history museum fieldwork experience so enjoyable for all involved.

These findings have implications for classroom teachers, museum educators, and history education researchers. They also point to the need for further empirical research regarding how museum exhibits can be opened up to enable alternative perspective-taking and more critical thinking about the past.

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Acknowledgements

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